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## **Ecopedagogy: Learning How to Participate in Ecological Consciousness**

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# *Ecopedagogy: Learning How to Participate in Ecological Consciousness*

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**Abstract:** This paper is the result of an inquiry into ecological consciousness through a participatory paradigm. The dialectical relationship between institutionalized education and consciousness is central to this inquiry's focus. This exploration into ecological consciousness has led to the following question: How can institutionalized education be designed, delivered, and experienced in a way that nurtures ecological intelligence, ecological consciousness, and more importantly, ecological activism? The 'sense of self' is a central theme within the paper, and led to the conception of *intraearthal* and *interearthal* relationships as a way of communicating our need to identify as being *in* Earth. The author utilizes an arts-based approach of integrating photography as a means for exploring and communicating the topic. The paper arrives at the conclusion of the vital nature of an ecopedagogy that is highly experiential by design and delivery. The overall inquiry also leads to a place of acknowledging the challenges of nurturing an ecological sense of self within modern sociocultural contexts that can be systemically ecocidal.

**Keywords:** *Ecological consciousness, ecomind, ecopedagogy, ecoliteracy, ecocidal, ecocentric, experiential learning, environmental education, Earthly wisdom, Anthropocene, self-realization, intraearthal and interearthal, ecological sense of self, participatory paradigm, psychology of place*

## **Ecopedagogy: Learning How to Participate in Ecological Consciousness**

Considering the current dire state of our world (e.g., climate change, ecological crises, mass extinction, social injustices, etc.), the need for a collective consciousness rooted in democratic participation and ecological intelligence has

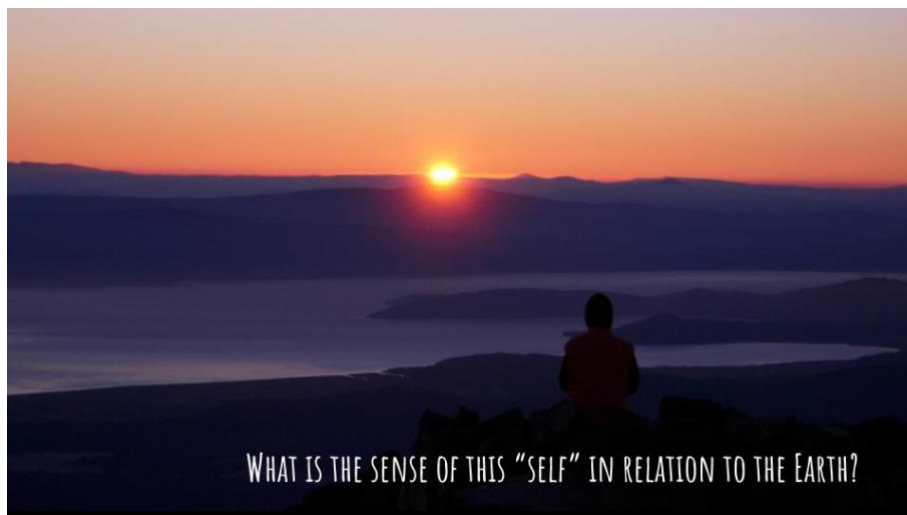
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never been more vitally relevant or salient! We, humans, need to foster a civically engaged form of ecological consciousness, sooner than later. This paper utilizes a transdisciplinary approach to the exploration of some of the literature associated with developing an ecological consciousness. I will explore the following four different topics: 1) The relationship between the conception and sense of “self” with the embodiment of an ecological consciousness. 2) The influence of the psychology of place and ecological thinking, upon ecological consciousness. 3) Some experiential practices for developing ecological consciousness. 4) The relationship of an ecological mind and the embodiment of Earthly wisdom.



### Self & Ecological Consciousness

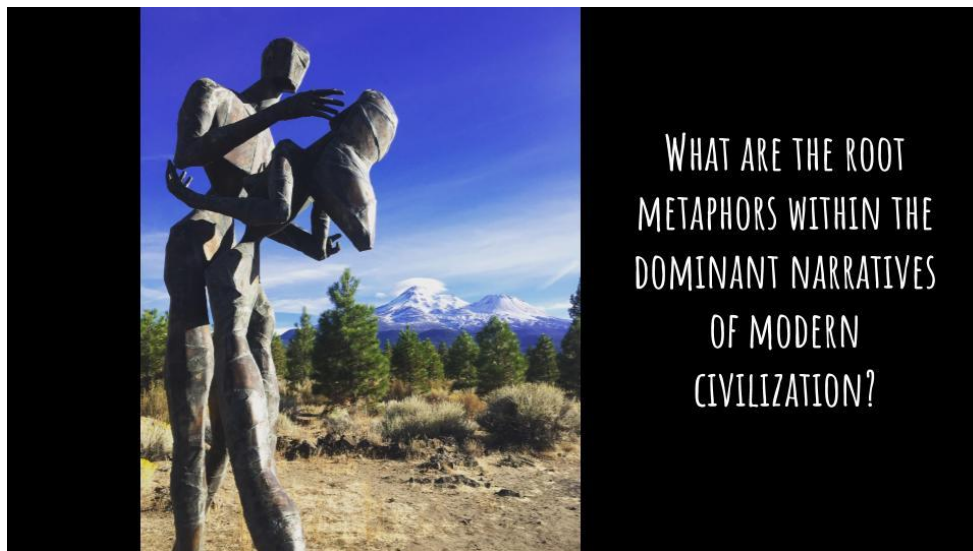


What does it mean to have a “self”? Answering this existential question is beyond the scope of this short paper, but I do think it is important to establish some

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sort of framing as to what is meant by a sense of self. Within the context of this inquiry, the use of the term “self” is a window into the world of consciousness, into the vast experiences of being human in relationship with the Earth. Our particular sense of self (e.g., individualistic, collectivistic, etc.) is going to have direct influence upon the types of consciousness we live our lives through. Our unique sense of self carries with it the seeds of environmental consequences.

When it comes to exploring the relationship between the self and ecological consciousness, different scholars use different terminology to describe this realm of human identity and identification. In *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*, Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow (2003) note how there was a healthy debate among the book’s contributors and editors with respect to the use of “environmental identity” versus “ecological identity.” I personally agree with the contributors who leaned towards the use of *ecological identity* due to its implying “self in relation to nature, or the self as part of an ecosystem, as well as avoiding the confusion caused by the fact that ‘environment’ can include the built and even the social environment” (Clayton & Opatow, 2003, p. 12). Clayton and Opatow ended up siding with the contributors who saw *environmental identity* as having a “more intuitive meaning for the average individual, relating more clearly to what are known as ‘environmental issues’” (2003, p. 12). I’m making note of this decision and distinction, because through my recent exploration into this particular topic, I’ve noticed how important these nuanced areas of linguistics are with respect to understanding the complexities of the vast potential environmental consequences of any particular sense of self.



For example, in *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*, Mitchell Thomashow (1996) explains how fundamentally

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different the “preservation” and “conservation” environmental attitudes are when it comes to the actual real-life consequences of these different types of “environmentalist” perspectives (pp. 43-48). The potential stark difference between these two types of ecological identity—conservationists managing the consumption of ‘natural resources’ as opposed to preservationists working to preserve the Earth in its own right of being by helping to shift the cultural values, assumptions, and beliefs that label the Earth a pile of resources to be exploited—reveals fundamentally different types of ecological consciousness. What does it mean to develop an ecological consciousness? Well, what exactly do we mean by ecological consciousness? What is the sense of self and its relationship to the ecosystems that it is nested within?



The initial inquiry into an ecological consciousness through a participatory paradigm has led me to a horizon where I see a vast complexity within the realms of identity—human identity, more-than-human identity, and ‘nature’ identity—and this sea of possible selves and others, opens a doorway into the infinite diversity within ecological consciousness, within the experience of being in relationship with the Earth, within our *intraearthal* and *interearthal* relationships. We are *in* Earth. Our illusion of separation leads us to think we are *on* Earth.

### Psyche of Place & Ecological Thought

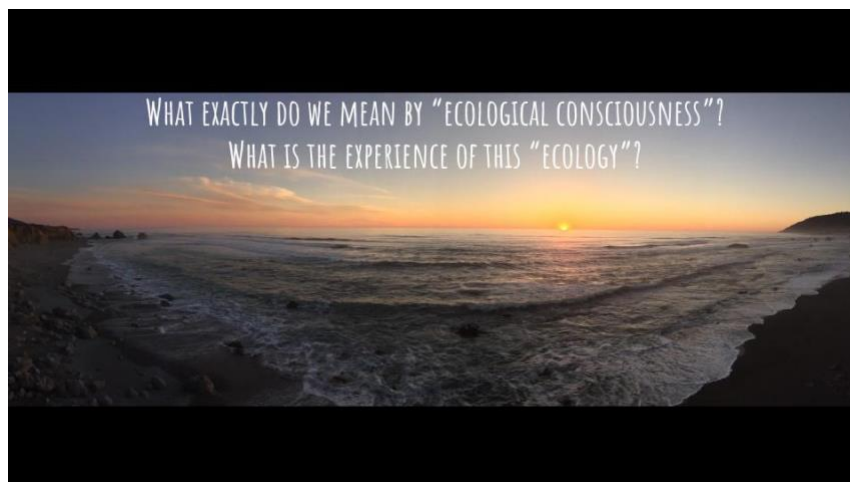
This section inquires into the influence of the psychology of place (Chalquist, 2007) and ecological thinking (Morton, 2010), upon ecological consciousness, an ecological way of experiencing (James, 1890) being human *in* Earth. The following two texts are utilized in support: 1) Craig Chalquist’s (2007)



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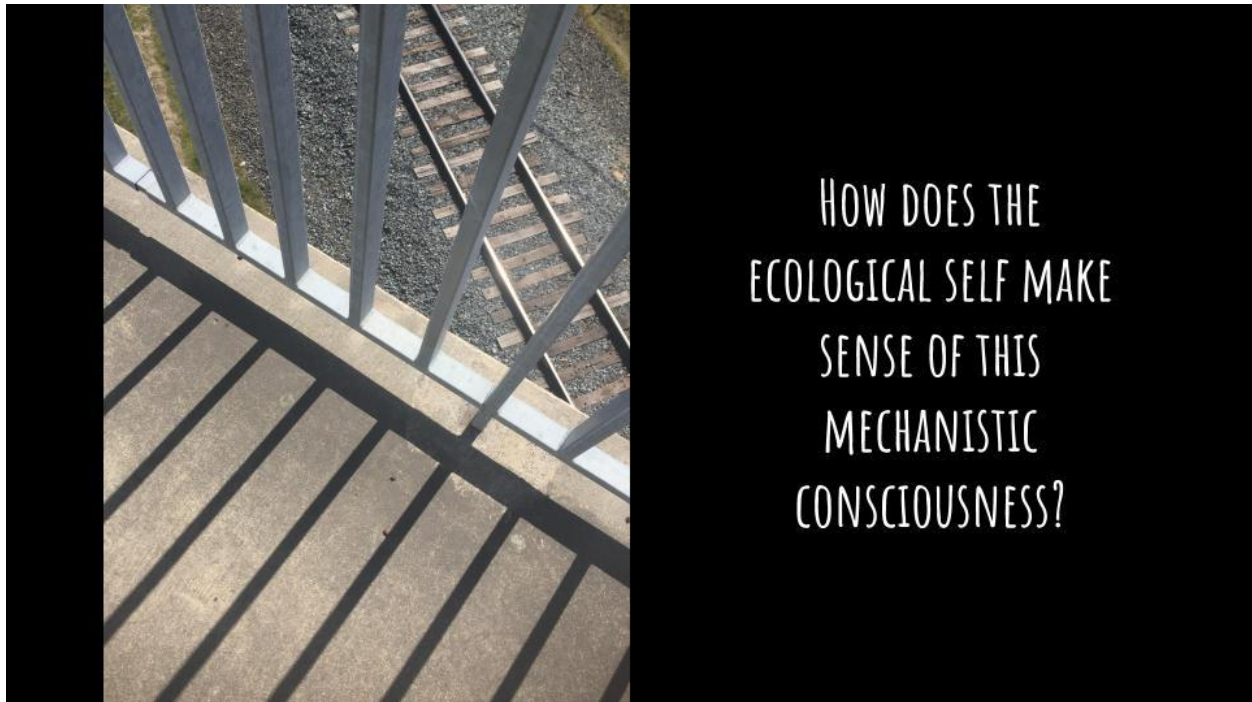
*Terrapsychology: Reengaging the Soul of Place*, and 2) Timothy Morton's (2010) *The Ecological Thought*. I intend to explore the ideas within these two texts and relate them back to my developing inquiry into how institutionalized education can be designed in a way that nurtures ecological intelligence (e.g., ecoliteracy) as well as ecological consciousness (experiencing being *in* Earth). It is my belief the future of humanity is greatly dependent upon our collective ability to create educational systems and curriculums that nurture a sense of place as well as ecological thinking; our future is calling for an institutionalized ecopedagogy that can radically critique the ecocidal nature of modern societies and cultures (Bowers, 2011; Fassbinder, Nocella, & Kahn, 2012; Kahn, 2010). Witnessing the ecological crises leads to the questions: What is the purpose of education? What is a relevant education within the Anthropocene? How can the academy embrace an ecopedagogy while finding new balance and meaning with academic freedom?

**Ecological Thought:** In the face of ecological crises, what does it mean to think ecologically? How is the concept of 'nature' getting in the way of ecological thought? If everything truly is interconnected, then does that mean each thing (including beings) is actually less of a 'thing'? Is the sum of the parts less than the whole? These are the types of questions that Timothy Morton (2010) raises in *The Ecological Thought*. Morton invites the reader into a place of consciousness that experiences being "human" as a strange state within a mesh of complexity. Some of the main ideas within this text are: the necessity for "thinking big," where Morton points to the limits of acting locally (e.g., recycling) in a world filled with interconnected global problems (pp. 20-33), and what he terms "the mesh" and "the strange stranger," where he utilizes the metaphor of Indra's net from Buddhist teachings to discuss how strange everything becomes, including ourselves, when we realize the vast sea of inextricably interconnected relationships we are entangled within (pp. 38-47).



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In an era of ecological crises and catastrophe, “the best environmental thinking is thinking big—as big as possible, and maybe even bigger than that, bigger than we can conceive” (Morton, 2010, p. 20). This framing of “thinking big” and even bigger than we might envision as possible, is at the heart of Morton’s thinking and represents the challenge he is offering to the reader to truly experience a fundamentally different reality than the ‘modern civilized’ mind is currently creating. Morton (2010) is not suggesting to ‘think outside the box,’ because “[t]hinking big means that the box melts into nothing in our hands” (p. 31). These powerfully lucid words of Morton’s are not hyperbole! These words are truer than any anthropocentric form of consciousness could comprehend. On face value, “thinking big” could sound like some catchy reductionistic bumper sticker, but it is much more complex than that. For example, if living in denial of climate change and the ongoing mass extinction can be seen as living through a ‘thinking small’ form of consciousness, then accepting these ecocidal truths is a beginning of thinking big.



Morton (2010) points out how much of our culture of denial (Bowers, 1997) is actually creating “some functioning fantasy that will do for now, to preserve our sanity. Yet this is radically impossible...” (p. 32). A significant theme of distortion within the fantasy of mainstream environmentalism and the sustainability movement is the illusion of individual action through ‘green’ practices like

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recycling (Morton, 2010, p. 32). This is not to suggest we should not be recycling. Rather, “recycling and other forms of individual and local action could also become ways of fending off the scope of the crisis and the vastness and depth of interconnectedness. These responses fit contemporary capitalist life” (Morton, 2010, p. 32). Waking up to the potential limits of ‘green’ practices like recycling, as well as to how they can become possible barriers to true sociocultural transformation towards ecocentric societies, is the type of “thinking big” that the ecological thought brings to one’s consciousness. Thinking big also allows for ecological consciousness to include the vast interconnections between living beings as well as between living and ‘non-living,’ and this is what Morton refers to as “the mesh.”



To illustrate the strangeness of the complex mesh of existence, Morton (2010) notes, “[i]f everything is interconnected, there is less of everything. Nothing is complete in itself. Consider symbiosis” (p. 33). Morton (2010) goes on to give multiple examples of how organisms, including humans, bacteria, and viruses, all have co-evolved and are constantly in a process of mutual becoming and co-arising (pp. 33-36). These examples of interbeing (Hanh, 1998) tell an ontological story of being transpersonal and trans-beingness that truly bend the egocentric mind of the encapsulated sense of Western self, which believes in individual autonomy, agency, and free will. Morton goes on to explicate how strange it all becomes—especially through an ‘individual’ sense of self or beingness—when we accept how

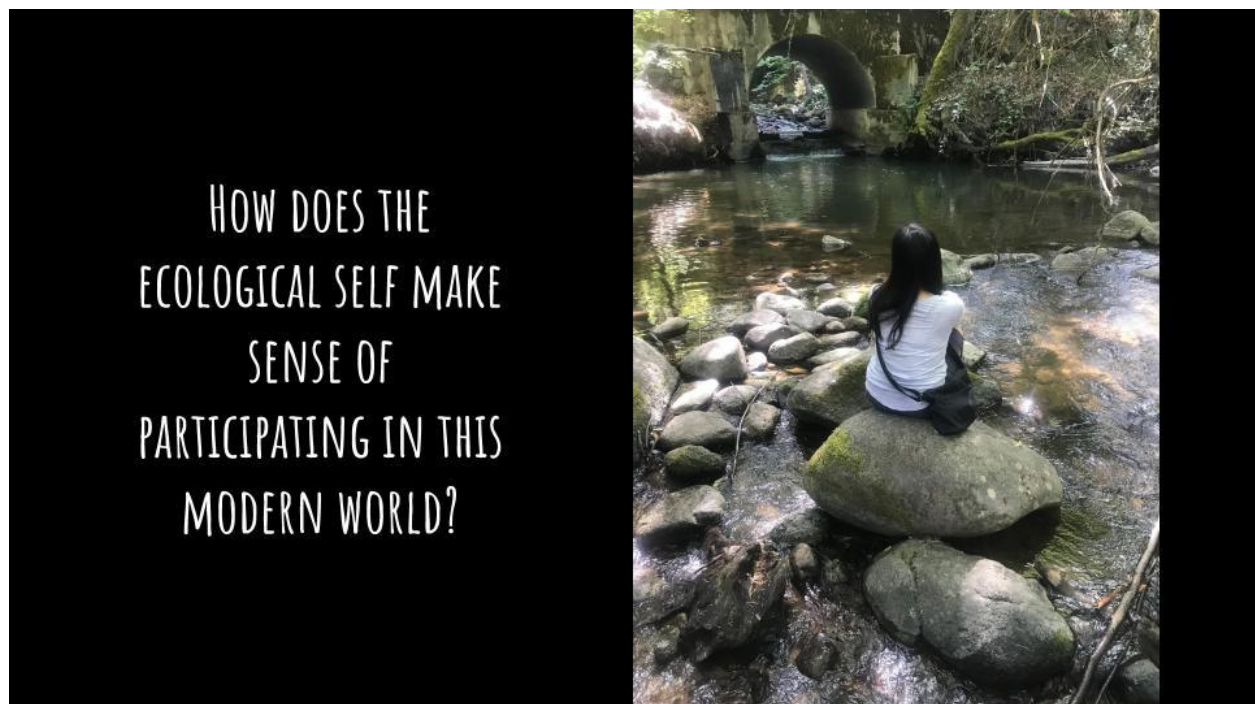


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inextricably interconnected all of existence truly is. Morton's (2010) ideas of thinking big, the mesh of existence, and the strangeness of strangers (including our relationships to ourselves), all lead to a fundamentally different sense of place within humanity, the Earth's biotic community, as well as the unfolding universe. It would appear *the ecological thought* (Morton, 2010) is a central characteristic of a psychology of place, of a placed-based psyche.

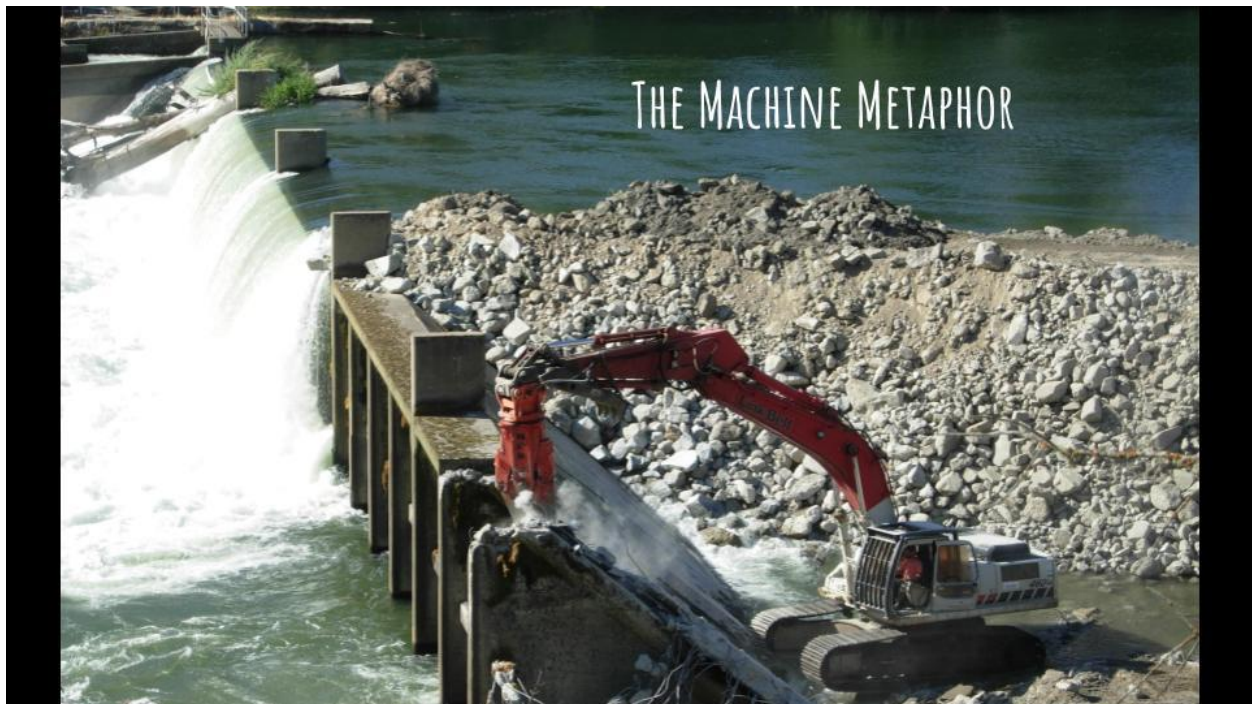
### Psyche of Place

In *Terrapsychology: Reengaging the Soul of Place*, Craig Chalquist (2007) explores the ecopsychological relationships between self and environmental surroundings (e.g., 'natural' or built). One aspect of Chalquist's (2007) text that especially resonates with my inquiry is the idea a place can be "a physically active being" that can be attuned to through interpersonal skills like deep listening (p. 4). The voice of the Earth (Roszak, 2001) can be heard. This particular view of terrapsychology aligns beautifully with my inquiry into ecopedagogy, and specifically within the context of teaching experiential education (e.g., outdoor adventure leadership). I hear the call of the future as requiring an ecopedagogy that liberates students of all ages from the oppression of the banking style of education (Freire, 2000), as well as enables the classroom—inside or outside—to become a creative community for transgressing (hooks, 1994) the ecocidal norms of the 'modern civilized' world.



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Chalquist (2007) defines terrapsychology as “the study of the presence, or soul, of place” (p. 7), and this particular operationalizing offers another avenue for my inquiry into helping others develop an embodiment of ecological consciousness that experiences an animate Earth (Harding, 2006). The ecopedagogy my inquiry is headed towards is based upon a living Earth, and terrapsychology offers another inquiry method for exploring one’s intersubjectivity with the presence of the living Earth. Chalquist’s (2007) “book opens up the question of whether the uncanny aliveness of the locations we inhabit may well be the rule rather than the exception” (p. 9). Chalquist (2007) offers a welcome disruption to the status quo of Cartesian consciousness when he notes, “[i]t is as though *what the conscious mind is trained to see as nonliving places and things, the unconscious reacts to as animated presences and metaphors*” (p. 9, emphasis in original). Our current culture of ecocide requires the masses to be oblivious to the presence and soul of a place, of the living Earth. If the masses actually awoke to the aliveness and presence of the Earth, how could they continue to support such a self-destructive network of sociocultural systems?



### **A Thought as Big as the Earth**

When I integrate the ideas from Morton (2010) and Chalquist (2007), I arrive at a thought as big as the Earth, a thought that is alive with Earth-based wisdom, presence, and soul. This thought as big as the Earth is not a return to what once was a harmonious relationship with nature, because the illusion of ‘nature’

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never was what the ‘modern civilized’ mind thinks it to be. Morton (2010) claims we must have an ecology without ‘nature,’ because this type of compartmentalization—nature over there and culture over here—is too small of thinking for a truly ecological consciousness. If we are ever to create a peaceful relationship with the Earth it will require a radical transformation of how we view education—formal and informal—and how we collectively answer the question: What is the purpose of education? A thought as big as the Earth does not include confusion or debate about what education should be like in the face of ecological crises and catastrophe. A thought as big as the Earth understands that all education should stem from an ecopedagogy, which necessarily nurtures an ecological identity (Thomashow, 1996) and honors the psychological influences the Earth has upon the human psyche and overall wellbeing (Clayton, & Opotow, 2003). As I move forward with my developing inquiry, I ask: How can I envision an ecopedagogy that invites students to have thoughts as big as the Earth? How can an ecopedagogy be informed by a terrapsyche that actually hears the voice of the Earth and the cry (Vaughan-Lee, 2016) of the traumatized land and waters?

### **Experiential Practices of Developing Ecological Consciousness**

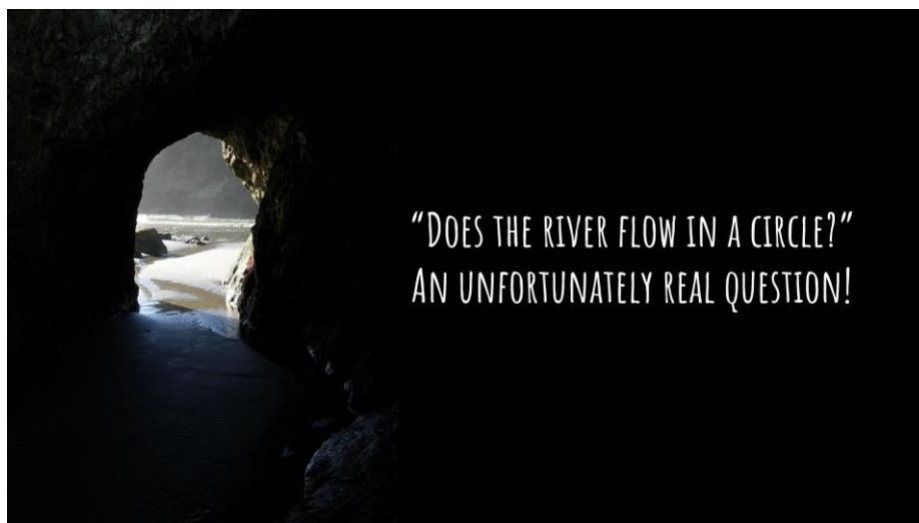
This section inquires into the relationship between experiential practices and development of ecological consciousness. The primary support is from the following two texts: 1) Christopher Uhl’s (2013) *Developing Ecological Consciousness: The End of Separation* (2nd ed.), and 2) Henryk Skolimowski’s (1994) *Ecoyoga: Practice & Meditations for Walking in Beauty on the Earth*. This section explores the ideas within these two noted texts, and relates them back to my developing inquiry: How can institutionalized education be designed, delivered, and experienced in a way that nurtures ecological intelligence, ecological consciousness, and more importantly, ecological activism?

It is my belief the future of humanity, and maybe even most life *in* Earth, is greatly dependent upon our collective ability to create educational systems, and curriculums, which nurture ecological consciousness through experiential practices, and not exclusively through abstract intellectual means. Humanity’s future is summoning an institutionalized education based upon an ecopedagogy (Kahn, 2010), which assumes all education should grow out of an ecological framework; ecoliteracy should be the foundation of all learning. If humans are to have a future *in* Earth, our education must give us the ability to radically critique the ecocidal nature of modern societies and cultures (Bender, 2003; Berry, 1999; Bowers, 1997, 2011; Fassbinder, Nocella, & Kahn, 2012; Freire, 2000, 2004; Gazzaniga, 2011; Gilligan, 1993, 2011; Glendinning, 1994; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2004, 2010; Illich, 1970; Kahn, 2010; Kimmerer, 2013; Marcuse, 2002; McLaren, 2015; Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; Shiva, 2015; Thomashow, 1996, 2002;

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Toulmin, 1999). Being a conscious participant within the ecological crises can lead to these persistently reemerging questions: What is the purpose of education? What constitutes a relevant education within the ecocidal Anthropocene? How can the academy embrace an ecopedagogy while finding new balance and meaning with the institutional norm of academic freedom?

There is a growing body of research and literature on how vital our connection to the ‘natural world’ truly is (Arvey, 2018; Clayton & Opatow, 2003; Selhub & Logan, 2012) as well as experiential practices that can help us become/stay integrated as complex beings of Earth (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Chalquist, 2007; Clifford, 2018; Goodwin, 2016; Harding, 2006; Jordan, 2015; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Li, 2018; McGeeney, 2016; Miyazaki, 2018; Skolimowski, 1994; Thomashow, 1996, 2002; Uhl, 2013; Vaughan-Lee & Hart, 2017). The fact this premise—Humans need regular and intimate contact with the ‘natural world’ that embodies a life-sustaining relationship—even needs to be made, is an alarming symptom of how normalized our illusion of separation truly has become. As Uhl (2013) points out, the old story of “economism” (pp. 177-203) does not serve our needs for creating/maintaining life-sustaining cultures. Through the use of the rational of “externalizations” (e.g., externalizing the true costs of goods and services), this old story is directly responsible for our illusion of separation from the ‘natural world’ and the resulting ecological crises of the Anthropocene. I intentionally note the collective disconnection as an “illusion” because humanity is, and will always be, directly connected to the ‘natural world’ through our sociocultural systems and built environments. In other words, we can build a world that “appears” to be independent from the rest of life on Earth and Earth’s systems, but we still are connected through how we impact the rest of the Earth’s biotic community and the entire biosphere.





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Note: “Does the river flow in a circle?” is a question I’ve been asked, multiple times, over the years of working as a river guide. This question reveals a level of ecological illiteracy that is at the heart of the illusion of separation that many modern humans live their lives through.

So, the question is not “Are we connected to the ‘natural world’?” Rather, it is “How are we connected, and what are the experiences (consciousness), qualities, and consequences of these connections?” How do we create educational systems that nurture a deep awareness about what type of ecological consciousness we are choosing to foster? How do we get more of us to question the greater purpose of education? One answer to these questions is to normalize experiential practices designed to develop ecological consciousness, which will help to foster the deep ecology cycle of “deep experiences... [lead to] deep questioning... [lead to] deep commitment” (Harding, 2006, p. 51) to living through an ethic of care for our life sustaining Earth.

### **EcoYoga: Yoga of Being Ecological**

In *Ecoyoga*, Skolimowski (1994) describes a “yoga of being” (p. 9), an ecophilosophical approach to experiential practices that focus on “grace, health, and hope” (p. 11). Early in the text, Skolimowski (1994) discloses he once received feedback on his work from a man who questioned the lack of experiential practices supporting Skolimowski’s ecophilosophy. Skolimowski (1994) took this feedback to heart and then wrote *EcoYoga* with the intention of giving the reader a structure that weaves philosophy and experiential practices together in an ecological manner. In fact, it is more accurate to frame *EcoYoga* (1994) as a yoga of relating, because much of what Skolimowski is offering is a framework for how we ought to be relating to ourselves, to one another, to the more-than-human worlds, to the living Earth, and to the larger living Cosmos. Skolimowski’s (1994) *EcoYoga* is filled with practical ideas about how to live in grace with each other and Earth, and with respect to making good ideas real, he notes, “[g]ood ideas must become a part of our blood, so to speak, they must live in us and everything we do” (p. 14). I see this acknowledgement getting at the heart of why experiential practices are absolutely necessary when it comes to educating for ecoliteracy and ecological consciousness, because our extremely complex ecological and social crises are the manifestations of a lot of bad ideas (e.g., never-ending economic growth through the Western idea of ‘progress’) that have “become a part of our blood.”

A central theme of Skolimowski’s (1994) *EcoYoga* is living in reverence for all of creation, and along with this reverent approach to life, Skolimowski offers practices to expand one’s sense of self through empathy. Skolimowski (1994) explains, “[w]e practice the yoga of Empathy, or the yoga of Identification: by



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unifying with the elements we come closer to ourselves” (p. 23). This “yoga of Empathy” practice is the embodiment of understanding the dialectical nature of our becoming Earthlings, because it invites us into realizing that our bodies come from the Earth and will return to the Earth. We are Earth bodies. Our beingness is embodied from the Earth. This practice of extending empathy beyond the blinders of anthropocentrism, this “yoga of Identification,” is an experiential practice of becoming more mindful and self-reflexive members of the Earth’s biotic community.



I have experienced this particular practice in empathy as a deep experience (Harding, 2006), an expansion of my sense of self, and this expanded identification leads me to asking deeply critical questions (Harding, 2006) about: How is it we can continue to educate ourselves in a manner that perpetuates the illusions of separation—Cartesian consciousness—from one another and from the Earth? When I consider how much suffering there is in the world, for example, the ongoing mass extinction, I ask: What does a relevant education truly mean? These deep experiences in practicing empathy for the more-than-human worlds and the Earth, and the subsequent deeply critical questions, lead me to an ecological consciousness where I am deeply committed (Harding, 2006) to protecting the living Earth; I am deeply committed to protecting the dignity of all life on Earth; I am deeply committed to protecting the innate human right to an education that is Earth-based and honors the future generations right to a livable planet.

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Skolimowski's (1994) *EcoYoga* offers many experiential practices, and I think there are few more powerful than the "yoga of Empathy... the yoga of Identification..." because this practice alone could help the masses hear the voice of the Earth (Roszak, 2001) and feel the cry of the Earth (Vaughan-Lee, 2016) as opposed to just thinking about it or hearing about it on the 'news.' If we are going to create educational systems and curriculums based upon an ecopedagogy, we will need to infuse these teachings with practices that help strengthen people's ability to empathize with the real pain our ecocidal sociocultural systems are causing upon much of life on Earth and the living Earth. We will need to help people unlearn their sociocultural conditioning of domestication (Uhl, 2013), and to rewild their body, mind, and spirit (Peterson, 2015). Educating for an ecological consciousness requires us to educate our hearts as much as our minds. In fact, an ecopedagogy designed to nurture an ecological consciousness must actively work to dissolve the artificial separation between the intelligence of the mind and the wisdom of the heart, because our ecological and social crises are direct manifestations of the decontextualized 'intelligence' of the modern mind and the neglect of the wisdom of our heart, which beats from the soul of the Earth (Sabini, 2002). Developing ecological consciousness requires this type of heart-mind practice of feeling-thinking beyond the myopic sense of self that our current institutionalized education is helping to perpetuate.

### **Developing Ecological Consciousness: Experiencing Deep Connection**

In *Developing Ecological Consciousness*, Uhl (2013) sets out to offer a science-based approach to seeing the Earth "through the eyes of wonder, gratitude, and awe" (p. xiv), then paints a dire picture of the ailing health of the Earth, which he hopes will inform the reader about how our old story of "economism and separation" (pp. 177-203) is leading us down a dead end pathway, and concludes the text with a plan for "birthing a new story" (pp. 205-241) that reminds me of *The Work That Reconnects* from Macy & Brown (2014). Overall, I appreciate Uhl's (2013) work and find his approach to be an effective strategy for offering a structured plan for developing ecological consciousness. However, he does seem to have a somewhat romantic perspective upon Native American cultures, and refers to them as a single People, as opposed to a vast diversity of different cultures made up of fallible human beings. Nevertheless, Uhl's (2013) text is a valuable contribution to my inquiry into how best to design an ecopedagogy infused with experiential practices intended upon nurturing ecological consciousness.

When I compare and contrast Uhl's (2013) work with Skolimowski's (1994), I appreciate how they both elucidate the theme of relationships being the essence of life and key to developing ecological consciousness as well as an Earth-based philosophy for living a sustainable life. Uhl (2013) and Skolimowski (1994)

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both guide the reader to the understanding that the Earth is one's larger body, which I find to be a critical realization with the development of my own ecological consciousness (Peterson, 2015). Through my own experiential practices, I've experienced an expanded sense of self where I felt this human body move through me (Peterson, 2015), through my larger sense of ecological self.

One of my favorite experiential practices that Uhl (2013) offers is an invitation to question and experience: "Sunset or Earth roll?" (p. 7) where the reader is asked to acknowledge the archaic nature of the use of the term "sunset" because this type of language only perpetuates an illusion of separation between humans and the Cosmos. Uhl (2013) offers the obvious fact that the sun does not actually move during a sunset, but the face of the Earth is rolling away from the light of the sun. On the surface, this experiential practice does not seem like a profound one, but I have experienced this particular practice to be transformative. Observing the Earth-roll, in the morning and evening, through the observation of shadows growing shorter (morning) or longer (evening), allows me to see the horizon rising as opposed to the sun falling.



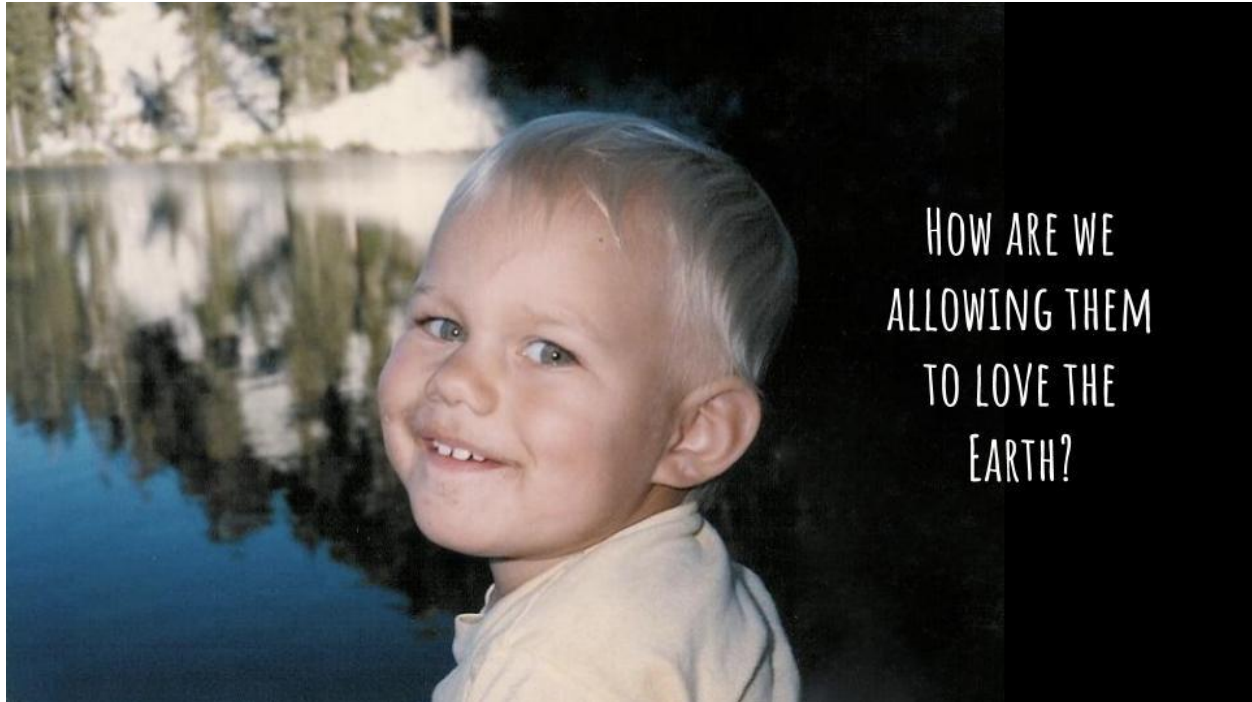
This type of deep experience is not a semantic one. Seeing the Earth-roll is a deep somatic experience. Experiencing the Earth-roll is a perception and orientation based on a more authentic relationship to the Earth and the Cosmos. Experiencing the Earth-roll, as opposed to the sunset, grounds my consciousness in how the Cosmos works as opposed to how it appears to work, and this type correction of

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perception is at the heart of the illusion of separation driving our ecological and social crises.

### **Becoming Ecological is Deeply Relational**

Uhl (2013) and Skolimowski (1994) are helping me to see how I can design an ecopedagogy that is much more than a curriculum in ecoliteracy, because ecoliteracy without the *feeling for the other* that “yoga of Empathy” (Skolimowski, 1994) brings to the student, will not transform consciousness in a deep relational way. In other words, designing an ecopedagogy intended upon transforming modern society to become ecocentric requires helping the student experience a deeply connected relationship with the Earth that only empathy can foster. How can we care for another, if we do not love the other? How can we love the other, if we do not know the other?

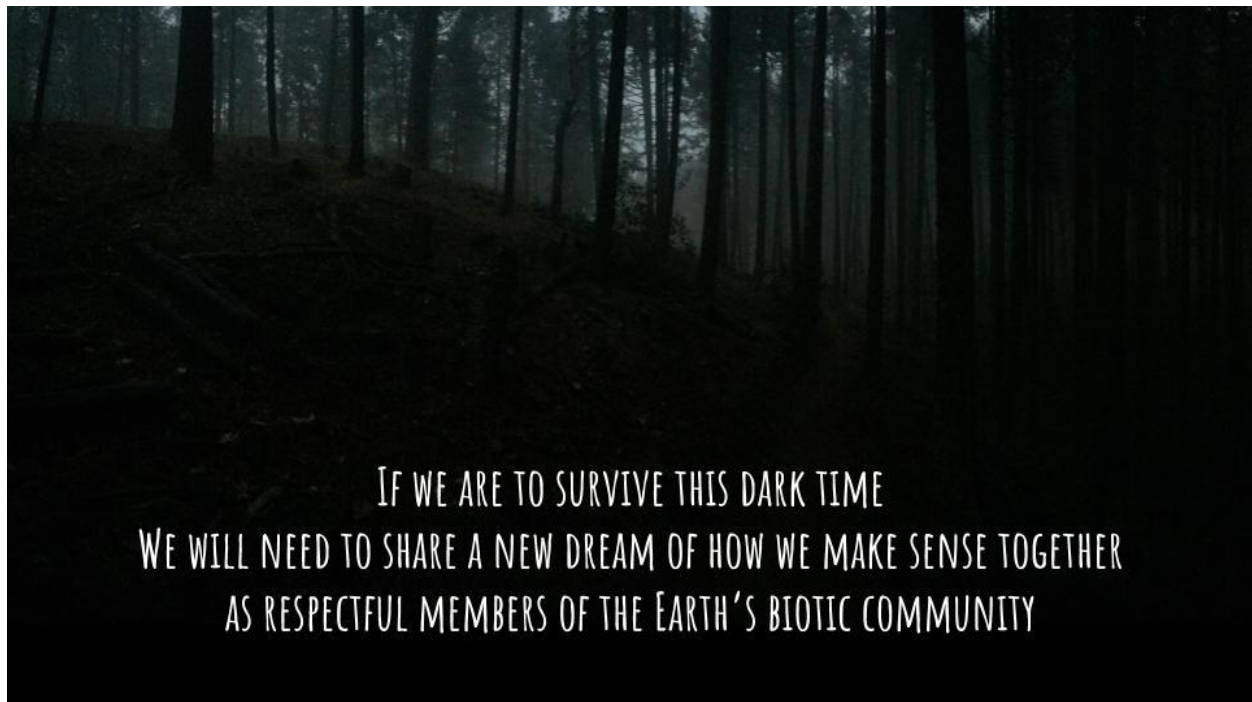


Becoming ecological will be the ultimate outcome of an ecopedagogy when we approach traditional ecological knowledge from a balanced perspective, and not one filled with romantic blind-spots (e.g., romanticizing indigenous cultures), because we need to learn from the ancient cultural wisdom of the past, but bring it into the scientifically informed present in order for us to have any sort of livable future. If we continue to neglect the needs of the future, what does that reveal about the purpose of our current dominant forms of education? What kind of world will we make (Loy, 2010) with our new stories of education?

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### Ecological Mind & Earthly Wisdom

**The ecological mind.** In *EcoMind: Changing the Way We Think, to Create the World We Want*, Frances Moore Lappé (2013) invites the reader into questioning several commonly held assumptions about environmentalism and the ecological crises. Lappé (2013) questions if collective transformation can happen through shifting our frame of reference upon viewing ‘nature’ and ‘human nature.’ Lappé (2013) offers seven “thought traps” that she claims are contributing to our collective inability to act upon making the systemic changes we need to while facing the challenges of the Anthropocene.



The thought traps that Lappé (2013) identifies are as follows: 1) “no-growth is the answer!” 2) “‘consumer society’ is the problem” 3) “we’ve hit the limits of a finite earth” 4) “we must overcome human nature to save the planet” 5) “to save our planet, we have to override humanity’s natural resistance to rules” 6) “humans have lost the connection to nature” 7) “it’s too late!”

Through the application of complexity and a challenge to either/or’ thinking, Lappé (2013) also offers ways of reframing these thought traps in order to create “thought leaps” that are meant to help create new mental models more aligned with ecological reality and less determined by distorted social constructions. These cognitive reframings Lappé (2013) offers are based upon the premise that we see the world as we think it is as opposed to how it truly is. Lappé (2013) suggests the



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creation of an “ecomind” requires our collective ability to challenge many of the held assumptions about who we are as a species. Lappé’s (2013) “thought leap” strategy utilizes the power of language as an influencer of cognitive patterns and behaviors. For example, the thought trap of “no-growth is the answer!” is reframed (thought leap) by challenging the unsustainable nature of the current dominant meaning ascribed to “progress” and by pointing out that what is commonly referred to as “growth” is actually a form of “waste and destruction” (Lappé, 2013, p. 22). Lappé (2013) points out how the current environmental movement’s rhetoric about “no-growth” does not land well with most folks, and actually is a disservice to the larger environmental movement towards creating a sustainable world. Lappé (2013) suggests we use terms like “flourishing” and “genuine progress” (p. 42) as opposed to growth and progress, because flourishing and genuine progress can be rooted within a life-sustaining culture whereas growth in the corporate profit sense is decontextualized from ecological degradation (e.g., externalizing the true cost of goods/services).

Overall, I appreciate Lappé’s (2013) work, and find it useful for making practical links between the power of language within common environmental discourses and the mental models that are created by the stories we tell ourselves (Loy, 2010; Stibbe, 2015). When it comes to thinking ecologically, thinking through an “ecomind,” Lappé (2013) offers the following:

Since ecology is all about interconnection and unending change, creating patterns of causation that shape every organism and phenomenon, “thinking like an ecosystem” for me means living in the perpetual “why.” It’s keeping alive the two-year-old mind that accepts nothing simply as “the way it is” but craves to know how something came to be. It’s understanding that all organisms emerge with specific potential, including the human organism, but its expression is enormously shaped by context. (p. 174)

The emphasis upon asking “why” is exactly the type of critical attitude we need to employ on a collective level if we are to survive the ecological crises we have created. The ecomind requires us to question the mental models (e.g., assumptions, values, and beliefs) that we utilize on a daily basis within our modern lives. The ecomind understands the dialectical development between humans/non-humans and their contexts (e.g., physical, psychological, social, cultural). The ecomind is established in complexity and systems thinking that the mechanistic and deterministic worldview does not appreciate or value.

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### **Earthly wisdom: Expanding the sense of self-realization.**

In *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, Alan Drengson and Bill Devall (2008) edit a powerful selection of essays from one of the most important minds in deep ecology and ecological consciousness, and that being the Norwegian ecophilosopher, Arne Naess. For the scope of this paper, I'll be focusing upon the essay titled *Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World* (Naess, 2008, pp. 81-96), and how Naess' conception of "self-realization" relates to the development of ecological consciousness. I've chosen this particular essay because of its focus upon the "self" and how the process of self-realization within an ecological framework can lead to an ecological sense of self that actually transcends the individualistic sense of self, which can be seen as being at the root of our ecological/social crises. What does the 'sense of self' have to do with Earthly wisdom? What is wiser than authenticity in self-conception?

In the introduction to *Ecology of Wisdom*, Drengson & Devall (2008) address the deeply personal and embodied nature of ecological wisdom (Earthly wisdom):

As Naess makes clear, ecological wisdom is not just knowledge and information. It involves intuition and insight that energizes our spirits, minds, feelings, and senses with unified understanding. It gives us an embodied sense for our ecos and place. (p. 40)

From an ecological consciousness standpoint, Naess' conception of "self-realization" is the embodiment of what it means to be ecologically wise. What does Naess mean by an ecological sense of self-realization?

Naess suggests that an ecological self is the natural consequence of a developmental maturation of being human. If human development is nurtured to its full potential within a healthy relationship to the Earth, then an ecological self is the mature manifestation of being human, naturally. The ecological self is the result of "comprehensive maturity" (Naess, 2008, p. 81), which Naess refers to as being "all-sided" within the network of relationships that constitutes a healthy ecosystem. An important aspect of this comprehensive maturation is the fulfillment of each being's—human and/or more-than-human—unique inherent potentials. Self-realization is going to look different depending upon where (e.g., bioregionalism, cultural relativism) and when (e.g., historical/evolutionary context) it is being experienced. With respect to the unique expression of self-realization, Naess (2008) notes the following:

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The meaning of life, and the joy we experience in living, is enhanced through increased self-realization, that is, through the fulfillment of potentials that each of us has, but that are never the same for any two living beings.

Whatever the differences between beings, increased self-realization implies a broadening and deepening of the self. (p. 82)

I appreciate Naess' use of the terms "broadening and deepening" with respect to the self, and see this as the expansion of the sense of self that is experienced when one identifies as belonging to the Earth's biotic community. This expansion of the self—the ecological self—comes through the process of identification beyond the narrow parameters of the human ego or even the human community. Naess (2008) makes a vital connection between the process of identification—with other humans or with other members of the more-than-human worlds—and the life-sustaining characteristic that is "compassion and, among humans, solidarity" (p. 84).

Circling back to the relationship between Earthly wisdom and the ecological self, I appreciate how Naess (2008) explicates how the identification with the broader world leads to a lessening of the need to live a morally driven life. How can we harm the world when we see ourselves in it, when we identify with all of life? Looking to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi as an exemplar of compassion for others and the practice of nonviolence, Naess (2008) offers the following about the natural shedding of external morals through the experience of the ecological self:

Through the wider Self, every living being is connected intimately, and from this intimacy follows the capacity of identification and, as its natural consequences, practice of nonviolence. No moralizing is needed, just as we do not need morals to breathe. We need to cultivate our insight: The rock-bottom foundation of the technique for achieving the power of non-violence is belief in the essential oneness of all life. (p. 90)

I find the realization that an ecological self requires "no moralizing" quite refreshing, "just as we do not need morals to breath," when we are self-realized in relationship to the Earth, we do not need some moral code handed down to us as to how we ought to live a life of Earthly wisdom.

### **Realizing the Ecological Self: Birthing the Authentic**

This exploration into ecological consciousness through a participatory paradigm has revealed some insights, but more importantly, it has lead to further questions. Exploring ecological consciousness has lead my overall inquiry to the following: How can institutionalized education be designed, delivered, and

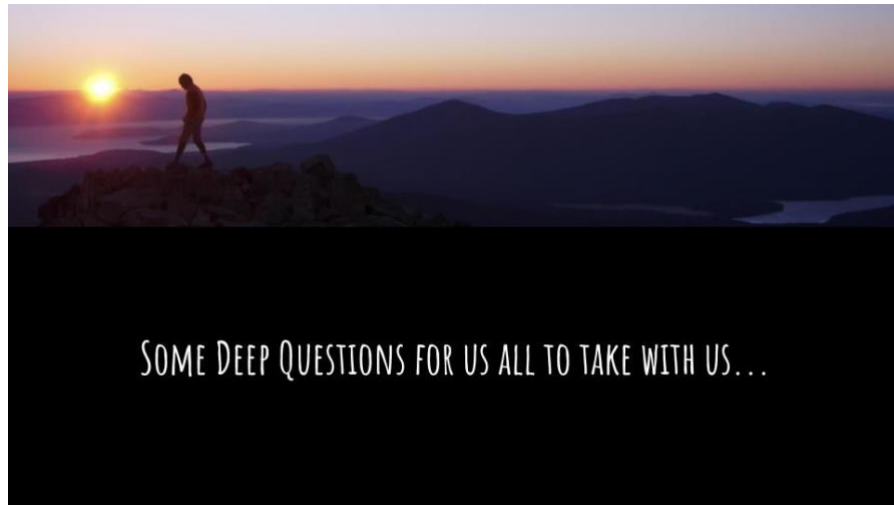
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experienced in a way that nurtures ecological intelligence, ecological consciousness, and more importantly, ecological activism? The insights I've gained from this experience of living the questions about ecological consciousness have led me to a place of seeing myself as being pregnant with an emerging sense of ecological self, and I'm wandering through the darkness of modernity wondering how to nurture this ecological fetus within me. What is the proper gestation for this emerging ecological self and its ecological consciousness? There seems to be a real risk of birthing this developing self prematurely, but there also is a real sense of urgency with needing to bring this new sense of self into the dying world. Is this emerging ecological self, this infant of ecological consciousness, ready to live in a world filled with ecocide?

This question about the readiness of the emerging ecological self comes from the realization that there is an irony about embodying an ecological consciousness in an ecological world filled with so much pain, suffering, and death, because the more open the self is to becoming ecological, the more the trauma is experienced. There are defense mechanisms (e.g., recycling) to keep the self encapsulated within the Western individualistic sense of self, because to truly live an authentic life, to self-realize in the Naess (2008) conception, is to willingly birth one's true self into a burning fire of pain that is the ecocidal truth of modernity. However, this painful birthing of the ecological self must happen if we are to have a future with the living Earth. This painful birthing of the ecological self requires us to learn what it means to practice *intraearthal* and *interearthal* relationships. Our collective process of self-realization will lead us to, and come from, an ecopedagogy rooted in experiential practices and learning about what it means to be respectful and dignified members of the Earth's biotic community.

This ecological self-realization will help us to shed our need for external morality, because we will awaken to the experience that we cannot continue to destroy ourselves through the more-than-human worlds. Our self-realization will free ourselves from these Cartesian consumer-chains and laws based upon the illusion of separation. This ecological self-realization will draw us further into deep experiences, deep questioning, and even deeper commitments to love the living Earth.

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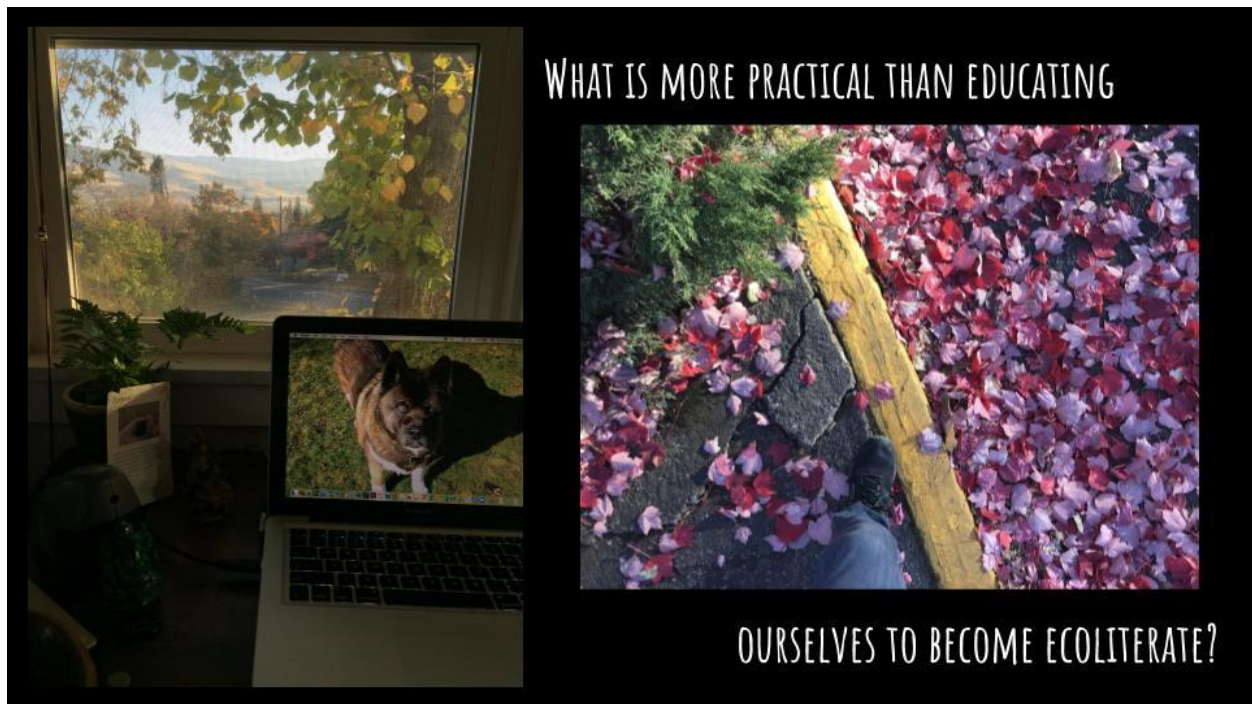
I'm not a parent, and I do not know what it is like to fear for the future of my child, but this is changing for me. This unborn ecological infant-self that is developing within me is bringing a new sense of responsibility to my experience of being human. I have a sense of tension within me. A sense of hope for this emerging ecological self, and a feeling of fear for the short future this new self may end up having. I have a new sense of empathy, and solidarity, for parents of all kinds. I can relate to being conflicted between hope and fear, and not knowing what the future will bring to my emerging infant-self. It must take a lot of courage to have children in this world where a future is so uncertain, and I can relate to this need to be courageous, because to truly give birth to an ecological self in an ecocidal culture means to open one's self up to the experience of love and loss, to joy and horror, to hope and despair.





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This exploration into ecological consciousness through a participatory paradigm has challenged me to realize my own participation in the illusion of separation between humans and the more-than-human worlds. I've had to face my own attachment to the concept of 'nature' and how there cannot be an authentic ecological consciousness with this space, this place, outside of being human. I've also had to face the need to let go of being human, because just as 'nature' is keeping us from becoming truly ecological, so too, being 'human' is keeping us from knowing our true selves, our self-realization as being *in* Earth. Now more than ever, I see the need to become ecological through the terrifying threshold of posthumanism. I've realized the paradox of becoming self-realized as being a process of becoming post-human. I'm seeing ecoliteracy in an entirely different light, a post-human light of humility and reverence for all life. Maybe becoming ecoliterate really means to shed our humanity for a more humane way of being members of the Earth's biotic community?



This exploration into ecological consciousness has brought me face-to-face with the vital need to ground this emerging ecopedagogy in the field of experiential practices designed to help the 'individual self' unlearn the ways of ecological isolationism and alienation that are the consequences of educational systems that foster abstracted ways of knowing, being, relating, and doing. Now more than ever, I see the vital practicality of an ecopedagogy that is explicitly designed to help liberate the student from the bondage of being human, from the conceptual

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framework that is perpetuating the ecocidal systems of modernity. Education must find its way to liberating us all from illusion of separation that is at the root of the Anthropocene. How can ecopedagogy help to foster a consciousness that understands ecoliteracy is a basic human right? Will the normalization of an ecopedagogy lead us to freedom from the need of basic human rights?



What is the purpose of an education? What constitutes a relevant education? How do we educate ourselves past the limits of this being human? These are the questions I'm sitting with, and I hope you will too.

Thank you for joining me.

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