

Beings of the Earth

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After a career as an experiential and adventure educator, Rick was one of the co-founders and is the current chair of the PhD program in Sustainability Education. As a deep ecologist and ecopsychologist, he seeks to integrate experiences in nature with ways to bring these insights and perspectives into our daily lives and institutions.

Experiential Education embodies all that is good, true, and beautiful in educational reform. From Outward Bound to the tiniest Montessori classroom; from the growing network of service learning programs to locally-based community education efforts; educators are seeking the means to catalyze a profound transformation in the ways we engage learners to address a broad spectrum of concerns from environmental issues to economic sustainability to social justice and equality.

There is nothing new in this process. Its roots go back to the earliest days of human society where peoples came together to share the knowledge that had been accumulating for millennia. Once language had developed and stories were told, the rich tapestry of our collective experience began to take on a shape and form. We learned it was better to listen to the lessons of our elders than repeat what they had learned through trial and error. Once we honored that which had come before, we could move on to new explorations of what it means to know.

Much of this is intuitive rather than fact based, emerging from a common wellspring of shared history and insight. Ancient religions, nature-based awareness, and cultural practices and traditions helped sculpt a matrix of understanding built upon common sense and creativity. Literature and science all became a groundswell of inspiration and integration that guided our knowledge of underlying patterns of meaning that have led us to where we are today. And it is this structure that gives us insight into what is next.

We are learning, slowly but inevitably, that estrangement from the land, and from our roots, does not lend us greater capacity to shape our own fate. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Our attempts to translate what we know at heart into numbers and details separates us from the very essence of who we are as living and breathing creatures of the earth. There is more truth to a handful of soil than the mass produced detritus of our mass produced civilization. This can be experienced on multiple levels.

At the core is our very first experience of what it means to be beings of the earth. We are born into a world that is alight with wonders from the deep azure of the sea to the rich hues of a sunrise or impending storm. Our existence is based on our interpretation of these natural wonders, be it fluctuations of the weather, changes in the seasons or trends over centuries, be they human-caused or nature-caused. Even the tiniest flower enlivening our landscape elicits an incandescent sense of awe. Artists have long sought to capture this sense of wonder and impermanence through poetry and images. Our lifeblood is linked to these immaculate pictures of perfection of beauty immortalized.

At the next level, to speak of the “beautiful” means to capture an underlying sense of what gives purpose to our existence. To imagine this vanishing before our eyes suggests a loss of soul that is very much tied to the land. Yet, on a daily basis, we forget the fundamental lessons and allow this threat to our being balloon amidst overdevelopment and evisceration of that which speaks to our spirits. We all know what sacrifices we make on the altar of civilization. And there are very

good reasons for these sacrifices: expediency, efficiency, expansion. But as we have extended our tendrils of growth and expansion into the forests and deserts, we have taken what is whole and broken it down into fragments that now only hint at the whole.

Finally, this takes us back to what defines our existence and provides us with an educational vision for the future. In many spaces and places we are in a “take-back” mode to reclaim what is ours to behold and insure it is there for those who follow. This is the reality and purpose of experiential education in all its many forms and expressions. Without a return to direct experience and the ability to acknowledge and integrate this fundamental core into our daily lives, we face a desperate future. We need programs in schools and colleges that engage students in field-based learning; we need efforts to engage people in community efforts involving schools and gardens; we need profound educational transformation at all levels if we are to create a future of hope and improvement. The many and diverse articles in this issue of the JSE represent just a cross section of the perspectives and applications that define this broad based approach to learning that is grounded in our history as a species. It may have taken millennia to assume its present form, but the articulation of this approach brings this movement into the present and, hopefully, into its application in every aspect of our society.

As I proposed in the beginning of this essay, this process takes us back to what we each know at heart... that there is a greater truth and a greater good embodied in all these explorations, expressions, inspirations, and proposals. We must undertake a reform of learning structures as imposed by a progressive and growth-oriented society. But if change is the medium, then this begins with individuals and their values. This must then progress to the communities in which we live and inform our efforts to open a dialogue about what makes our lives truly meaningful. Finally, we progress to how we manifest this in the external world through the social structures we are willing to challenge and how we bring nature back into our daily lives through re-envisioning how we live and build our environment. These are the great explorations that this issue of the JSE hopes to open up for our future consideration. Enjoy!