



the Heart of the Matter

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Reinventing Ourselves

The ideal of a human habitat within a natural setting of trees and fields and flowering plants, of flowing streams and seacoasts and those living forms that swim through the waters and move over the land and fly through the air—a world of nontoxic rain and non-contaminated wells, of unpolluted seacoasts with their fertile wetlands—the ideal of a human community integral with such a setting, if properly understood...would seem to be our only effective way into a sustainable and humanly satisfying future.

--Thomas Berry from The Dream of the Earth (1988)

Lately, I have been studying the eco-philosopher, Thomas Berry. On November 7 and 8, the faculty spent our retreat at The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World (CEINW), located at Timberlake Farm, just outside of Greensboro. The Center exists to educate, retrain, and realign teachers and children of all ages with the natural world. Its core philosophy and inspiration come from Thomas Berry (who just celebrated his 96th birthday). The Center's tag line captures CEINW's purpose in two words: Behold nature!

The faculty, after camping the evening before, had a whole day to enjoy the spectacular tract of land where the center resides and to be one with nature during solo time. After singing our blessing, we ate a lunch primarily of ingredients grown on the land, and spent the afternoon learning methods for helping children to behold nature. This was the first time the entire faculty had visited the Center, but eight of us had participated in a one-day

training there last year with Tobin Hart (author of *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*), and this year four of us applied for, and were chosen, to do a two-year program with CEINW, called The Inner Life of the Child.

Thomas Berry is regarded by scientists, environmentalists, and spiritual leaders as a visionary. Berry has the gift of seeing with macro-vision. His writing expresses a deep understanding of where, as a human race, we stand in evolutionary time, and where we are going. The vision in the quote above, of a natural habitat for humans called Earth, might sound too romanticized today, but hopefully, it grabbed you as true, or even as Truth.

Myth and mysticism are highly valued at RMCS – as metaphorical teaching tools, as archetypes of the human psyche, and as aspects of religious versions of Truth and of cultural variety. Although one may see the Dream of the Earth – humans in complete harmony with nature in a pristine environment— as mythical in our current age, Berry reminds us that only 200 years ago (a blip in

time) the myth of a mechanized world, where humans plunder nature to successfully control it, was merely a myth. Furthermore, he frames our present view of the world, our fascination with industrial, technical society, as a myth that cannot be fully realized. For it was a myth that it would bring us “heaven on earth,” and ironically, it has achieved the opposite effect. *“This irony is best expressed, perhaps, by the observation that our supposed progress toward an ever-improving human situation is bringing us to wasteworld instead of wonderworld... (1988).”*

Berry, despite his apocalyptic view of human progress, is not nostalgic about the past, nor does he suggest we abandon ourselves. Instead, he is extremely optimistic about our future. He proposes a shift in consciousness – an alignment between nature, spirituality, and science, where we “recognize ourselves not simply as a human community, but as genetically related to the entire community of living beings, since all species are descended from a single origin.” The language Berry uses to describe the shift in consciousness that will rescue earth is biocentric. He urges us to move from an anthropocentric sense of reality to a biocentric norm of reference.

In our human-centered, anthropocentric, mindset, we have reinvented the world, and quite literally changed it, right down to its chemical nature. We have wiped out an untold number of species and even changed the atmosphere surrounding the globe. Now we will have to reinvent ourselves, as a species, to regard ourselves as living within a community of, and in communion with, nature.

Reinventing the human. What a grand undertaking! Yet, it is something we can have the opportunity to do every time we raise a child.

Berry’s vision –of humans and our habitat completely in harmony with one another— is a

vision we, ideally, want to instill in our students at Rainbow Mountain. In fact, I believe I’m not giving children nearly enough credit when I say “instill in them” an appreciation for the natural world. Just as children are born with a high spiritual sensitivity (gaze into the eyes of a newborn), I believe that children are *of nature*, and naturally in tune with it. Rather than instilling in children an appreciation of the natural world, we are merely trying to *preserve* it. Of course, even by preschool age, most of our children have spent their lives apart from nature, perhaps never having seen the moon move all the way across the sky or never having grazed on wild food in the wilderness. Their tactile senses – what they have touched, rubbed against, and explored with their mouths, are primarily man-made items (except, hopefully, for contact with their mother).

By the age of three, when children enter preschool at RMCS, Berry would probably argue that they are already “addicted” to our industrial world and all of the protection it affords us from nature and the human condition with its discomforts, its spontaneity, and its unpredictability.

The word “addiction” has a powerful connotation—one that should give the reader significant discomfort, but Berry’s use of the word is intentional, and in his view, not exaggerated. As he puts it, “the mythic power of the industrial vision” is too powerful to escape, just as an addict cannot escape his addiction. *“Mythic addictions function something like alcohol and drug addictions. Even when they are obviously destroying the addicted person, the psychic fixation does not permit any change, in the hope that continued addiction will at least permit momentary survival. Any effective cure requires passing through the agonies of withdrawal.”*

Ouch. All of us, each of us, are addicted to our industrial technological world, with our cars and our temperature controlled spaces, our lit-up nights, and all of the other polluting, life-force

depleting habits, gadgets, and structures we partake in. It sounds and feels so hopeless. But it isn't.

Nature is a powerful regenerative force, and humans, as a species are very clever. There is hope. Imagine if all the children in America were being raised by parents like Rainbow Mountain parents, and all the schools were like RMCS. I think we would all be very excited about our future.

What is it that RMCS is doing to reinvent ourselves – to reunite our species with the rest of the natural world? There are many, many answers, but I'd like to summarize three main points.

First, and quite simply, we are giving children an excellent education, one that includes knowledge of facts, processes, and systems. We need our children to be well-educated and highly skilled, so they can work within our society to implement change and progress toward an integral earth-human community. They need imagination, so they can imagine something greater. Creativity, so they can create the art and culture of a healing society. Service learning and philanthropic experience so they know how to, and are in the habit of, nurturing others. Critical thinking so they can solve problems. Research skills and resourcefulness, so they can find information; and organizational skills and presentation skills, so they can make their case plausible and present it persuasively.

Second, we are helping children to revere nature as something sacred; something that they do not dominate, but that they steward with a sincere, mutually respectful relationship. Personally, I feel that developing an affinity for nature is deeply important, for we will only protect what we love.

RMCS has developed and adopted many strategies for helping urban children nurture nature, and not just appreciate it as something

beautiful, but to have a deep spiritual relationship with it. Every class varies, and there are far too many examples to list, but here are some examples of how teachers incorporate nature into their classroom. In Centering, a pine cone, rock, leaf, or a stick might be passed around the circle so every child can experience it with all his senses and honor it. Children in some classes have individual altar boxes where they can keep a shell, a beech nut, or another object they cherish as holy. The changing of the seasons is celebrated with story, song, and ceremony. Children choose animal totems for themselves and mascots with positive qualities to represent their class. Myths are told, acted, dramatized, and retold. Earth, air, fire, and water are honored as the elements of life and taught as an integrating curriculum in the early years. We venture out of the city when we can to the apple farm, to Muddy Sneakers hikes, camping trips, and the like. We plant and eat greens out of our school garden.

Finally, these experiences are coupled with an appreciation for nature in the content of our curriculum. Science, especially life science, is a larger part of the curriculum than in traditional elementary schools, and it is taught experientially. In social studies and history, we study people of many cultures, and their connection with the earth. We especially learn about the people of Appalachia, and how they lived off the land, and, of course, the native people of this area and how they walked in beauty.

All of these experiences, and more importantly, the attitude of respect for nature at RMCS, develops a lasting kinship with nature that can be very intense for some of our students. In fact, when conducting scientific experiments that involve animals, Rainbow teachers have to be sensitive to the feelings of compassionate students. Last year, the fourth and fifth grade conducted an experiment with brine shrimp. The shrimp were divided into groups, with each group placed in a different habitat in order to determine where they could best hatch and survive. Brine shrimp aren't even as big as the head of a pin. They literally look like specks of

sawdust. I could just barely see which ones had hatched if I took my glasses off and squinted with concentration. I have to admit, since I couldn't even make out any features, I hadn't been honoring them as living beings, yet one child was crying because they weren't *all* receiving the best habitat.

Finally (and this is implied and entwined in the first two points), we are educating children holistically. We want our children to become holistically healthy human beings. We want them to realize their full potential in every realm, and we especially want to nurture their spiritual lives. We want them to find their Nirvana.

By connecting, or preserving children's natural connection to the spiritual, we are building sustainability. Why? Because we are helping children create lives where the natural world, people, and their daily lives are interconnected and working together. Much of the reason our current society has become so toxic is because our lives have become compartmentalized. Many Americans have even developed different ethics and values for different parts of their lives. For example, one ethic may apply at church, but a different one in the work place. Work, family, and spiritual beliefs too often don't connect, and the natural world is often completely cut off in an attempt to shield us from its discomforts. However, when we cut ourselves off from the natural world, we are also disconnecting from its spirit, and our very own soul.

By educating children holistically, we hope they will naturally grow up to live high quality lives, where they practice integrity in all aspects of their interconnected realms. The waters of the soul run deep. As children connect with their souls, they connect with one another, and with nature. They honor the creator and creation, together. Like their ancestors, they, too, will walk in beauty!

Behold Nature!

An Activity for Children and Parents

While at our faculty retreat at the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World, we engaged in a lovely activity that you may want to do with your child the next time you are on a hike, camping, or simply enjoying your own backyard.

The instructions are simple. Without using any words, you and your child point to things in nature you like, and take a moment to behold them together.

For example, at our retreat it was a radiant fall day, and my partner, JoDana, used her fingers to imitate the leaves falling. I noticed how peaceful the sound was and how the light reflected off the autumn colors. She traced her fingers along a winding, fuzzy vine that I also touched. We stopped to drink in the fresh air and smell the pungent odor of decay. We were mesmerized by the clouds moving across the sky, and found peace under a golden umbrella-shaped tree.

The beauty of this activity is in its simplicity. It wouldn't be the same if we were allowed to speak. Eliminating speech helped engage the right side of our brains, opened our hearts, and heightened our senses, including our intuitive sense. Within minutes, I was experiencing the magical sensation of being one with nature. It was very much like a visit to the "other side" or taking a trip into fairy land. By the end we were all happy and dreamy.

This activity promotes not only a harmony with nature, but also a bonding between humans. Enjoy!

Hope in Hard Times

We are returning to our native place after a long absence, meeting once again with our kin in the earth community. For too long we have been away somewhere, entranced with our industrial world of wires and wheels, concrete and steel, and our unending highways, where we race back and forth in continual frenzy.

---Thomas Berry (1988)

Many of us, for years, have been pointing out that our culture --- the way we live our lives -- is not sustainable.

Sustainable, a term I first heard in the eighties associated with agriculture, has since developed into a buzz word. After a while it was hard to remember what sustainable really meant. Last spring, when our economic collapse was becoming more apparent and imminent, RMCS middle school teacher, William Harwood, was poignant, "I'm not sure why so many people are surprised that our economy is declining. When we declared our current society was unsustainable, that meant that it...well...couldn't be sustained, right?"

I'd like to provide hope that we can use our current economic crises as an opportunity to turn sustainability into more than a word. Let's make it a phenomenon.

There are many aspects of our society that breed unsustainability. The economy is only one. How can a culture that puts economy, rather than spirituality at its core, be sustainable? How can a culture that measures happiness according to the material wealth of our economy be sustainable? Especially when the measure of worth of the economy is based on how many goods and services are sold, or how much money is exchanged? Unfortunately, the formula translates into how much of our natural resources are plundered.

Yet it is the only way of life most of us know. As Thomas Berry put it, harshly, in my previous article, we are addicted to it and therefore, unlikely to dramatically change our ways with sheer willpower and perseverance. We inherited this way of life from our parents. Those of us who have enrolled our children at RMCS, envision leaving

our offspring with a greater inheritance.

We are adaptable

Take heart. Sometimes we are gripped with fear of the horrific things we can *imagine* occurring as a result of our current crisis.

Take heart, for none of them are worse than the *unimaginable* things predicted if we don't change our ways.

The unknown is very scary. We can't help but wish for a return to what we knew -- a spunky economy that provided us present-day comforts and convenience... while driving us to the brink of extinction. I can't promise that what is ahead is going to be easy or pleasant, but at least it looks like we will have no choice but to move forward. It's time to evolve.

Take heart. We are adaptable. In fact, if Darwin's theory applies, we are an amazingly adaptable species or we wouldn't be alive today. We will land upright, on our own two feet.

As painful as the economic downturn is, perhaps it is helping us prepare for another major shift. Anthropologists, historians, and spiritual thinkers peg the last major shift as occurring about 400 years ago, with the dawn of the scientific age. The Age of Enlightenment brought us much, yet it also brought us to the edge of extinction. The next shift -- a second coming, the new age, or whatever term one may call it-- is widely prophesied by virtually every culture and religion, both ancient, recent, and reformed. Some pinpoint the shift as occurring right about now. In fact, the Mayans, whose uncanny accurate calendar calculations astonish contemporary mathematicians, pinpoint the shift as occurring in 2012.

Whether we see such a shift as the dawning of

something new, or the damning of something old, is up to us. (With a chuckle, this reminds me of one of our RMCS parking lot bumper stickers that reads: *Non-judgment day is near!*) Personally, I may be an optimist, but I am in agreement with many experts and spiritual leaders, when I predict that the shift will take humans to a higher level, bringing us back into communion with nature and closer to the heart.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.

Children always know what is real. Unless their parents are imparting fear regarding the economy, they aren't worried about it, because it isn't even real to them. To them it's pieces of paper, and numbers floating around. Children know what's truly important in life. In Centering time at school, for example, they aren't wishing for a renewed economy. They are envisioning peace, harmony, and love.

The big point is that our happiness cannot be inextricably linked to the economy. We've been fooled into thinking that it is; but plenty of research proves that our happiness has little to do with the economy, or even with our individual material wealth.

Obviously, if you've just lost your job or had your house foreclosed on, you're not going to feel too happy, and almost everyone, no matter what their situation, has a certain amount of anxiety right now. But, over all, we've been getting richer and richer for decades, while at the same time developing more psychosis, higher levels of depression, and seeing increased suicide and divorce rates. So what *does* make us happy? Study after study concludes the same thing: other people. Eric Weiner, author of *The Happiness Index Bucks Financial Woes* has combined research and developed a formula for measuring happiness in countries and communities. The essence of happiness has to do with warm, caring, trusting relationships.

Tragedy, whether it be a blizzard, earthquake, or tsunami brings people together. We know this from experience. An economic disaster is no different. It requires people to look beyond their

self interests and relearn how to work together. Like one adaptive parent at RMCS commented, "We'll just move more people into each house!" Communal living brings people together.

Further indication of how people work together and share more during hard times is that people are actually *more* generous with what money and resources they have during hard times; we don't have to look way back to the Great Depression for such data. Before our very eyes, people donated record-breaking amounts of money to president-elect Barack Obama's campaign, in the midst of the greatest economic downturn any of us younger than 80 have ever seen.

Also, right here at RMCS, the annual campaign is off to a better start than it was last year. As the Rainbow Mountain Foundation (RMF) volunteers planned and prepared for this year's annual campaign, I was amazed by their optimism. They know that times are hard economically, but they also know that we *have* to raise \$60,000, and they believe that our cause – educating children who are prepared to lead us into a sustainable future – is more pertinent than ever before. I've been so impressed by their generosity, as individuals. RMF volunteers have been hit by the economic plunge just like everyone else, yet as a group, they have donated more this year than last year, not to mention the volunteer hours they commit. During hard times, people remember what is most important.

Staying on Message

As times change, our purpose, our message, remains the same, like an anchor we can hold onto. For 31 years our mission - to provide children with a community-centered holistic education that fosters a connection to all beings and to the earth - has provided a strong foundation for our children and our community. Now more than ever, it makes sense. Whether we are struggling to pay for it, or preparing lessons plans for it, it's a challenge — but we're doing it together. Now, more than ever, we appreciate the community that nurtures us at Rainbow. Our children feel the love and support around them, and they feel secure. *Thank you* for always remembering what is most important in the lives of our children.

The Importance of Educating in the Social Domain

In my article *Hope in Hard Times*, I summed up extensive research indicating that having warm, caring, trusting relationships are what makes people happy.

Last year, in our community circle titled *How Does Rainbow Mountain Children's School Prepare Our Children for the 21st Century?* we summarized the results of national and international research on what makes people successful in the marketplace, and the results were similar: people who know how to get along with other people have the most success.

Research within schools has shown that the time spent on social curriculum – on team building activities, class meetings, character studies, and the like, which promote social skills—is not time *taken away* from academics. By training children how to get along with one another, they can actually focus better on the academic tasks they have to complete because they are less distracted by, and less anxious about relationships with their peers. At RMCS, we take it one step further. As a holistic school, our social curriculum isn't an "add on." It's completely embedded, and it's regarded as being at least as important as the other domains: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

How Can We Nurture Our Collaborative, Loving Community?

This is our chosen essential question, or theme, for the school year. Right now is the traditional time of year for giving thanks, and giving gifts. Some time around the holiday break, a volunteer from the Rainbow Mountain Foundation might be giving you a call. If you haven't already donated to the annual campaign, please remember that it takes everyone to make the campaign a success. When we contribute to our fullest potential, we feel a deeper connection to our community, further strengthening it.

Resources for this Heart of the Matter

Benedict, Gerald. (2008) *The Mayan Prophecies for 2012*. London: Watkins.

Berry, Thomas (1988) *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books

Bourgeault, Cynthia (2003) *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming and Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Myers, David. (2000) *American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Happiness Index Bucks Financial Woes by Eric Weiner (accessed December 1, 2008)
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php>

The RMCS Preschool: Awarded Prestigious Five-Star Rating!

By Marlo Bester-Sproul, RMCS parent

Imagine having over thirty preschoolers under your care each and every day. Being responsible for not only each of their mental, emotional, moral/social, physical and spiritual needs; but also the far more rudimentary ones. Sixty small hands that must be washed and dried repeatedly throughout the day, thirty sleep mats that must be clean, covered and a specific width apart, and thirty lunch bags whose individual contents must each conform to a strict set of guidelines: there must be milk (regardless of whether the child drinks it), there must be a napkin on which to set all food, there must be one portion of fruit, vegetable, carbohydrate and protein and though dried fruit is acceptable only fresh vegetable is allowed. Each and every lunch bag must be labelled with the current date, any water bottles left behind at the end of the day must be thrown away, a spare set of clothes must be kept at all times, etc, etc, etc.

It's a lot to remember, and – no doubt – even more to enforce.

But this is just a glimpse of all the guidelines RMCS' preschool staff must take on board each, and every day. Along with, of course, the myriad of things that come with little people: perpetually runny noses, scrapes requiring Band-Aids and – of course - hugs, and multiple-child negotiations that would try even the patience and diplomacy skills of Nelson Mandela.

So, it's no small thing that not only does the preschool staff do the exceptional job it does, each and everyday, but that it also manages it so successfully that it has now been awarded the State of North Carolina's highly respected, and much-coveted, five-star ECERS rating.

“It was an incredible process,” Judith Beers, Preschool Director at RMCS, told me.

The ECERS, otherwise known as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, was developed at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute of the University of North Carolina. It was designed to enable teachers to create developmentally appropriate learning environments for preschool and kindergarten aged children. Its scale is used to develop and quantify quality

standards in not only the US, but Canada and abroad.

The ECERS assessment is not required by state law; it is performed on a voluntary basis. However, in order to offer its community the strongest preschool program possible, RMCS chose to undergo the gruelling assessment.

Newly revised, the updated ECERS-R (the R is for revised) covers seven subscales in total: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language-Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure and – last but by no means least - Parents and Staff.

More broadly speaking, while the original ECERS was comprised of three core components: Compliance, Staff Education, and the overall Program itself, the updated ECERS-R has been narrowed down to two: Staff Education and the Program. In the past, the Preschool Program at RMCS had received high scores on Compliance and the overall Program, but had fallen a little short on the Staff Education component. However, thanks to Judith and the rest of the staff's perseverance and hard work the Preschool Program was able to bring the last piece up, and exceed expectations. In order to achieve this, Judith underwent some intensive administrative testing and portfolio work. She also worked hard towards creating some core materials for the Program, including the *Parent Handbook* and the *Staff Preschool Handbook*; both of which went towards earning RMCS' Preschool Program the valuable quality point. Additionally, the entire preschool staff had to assemble all transcripts and undergo further training.

Earning the ECERS' five star rating is no small accomplishment; particularly when you're trying to juggle Kleenex, Band-Aids, Multiple-Child Negotiations and the All- Important Hug. A big thanks to Judith and entire Preschool Staff for going above and beyond, and for doing what they do each - and every - day.

Note regarding last Heart of the Matter:

When discussing the rationale behind our calendar, I mentioned that the preschool, because it is also a day care facility, remains open during faculty training days. It's important to point out that the preschool teachers have to receive extensive training every year as North Carolina preschool professionals. It's amazing how much knowledge they have regarding child development! ~ Renee