Learning from a Pandemic

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Come,
curl up in my lap and
let us listen to the words of trees and leaves and
worms
then
let us dance butterfly steps
together with earth’s breath
in celebration
and joy
Learning, as we twirl,
— we are all connected.

I sit at my computer facing west.

It is 6:30 p.m. August 4 and the sun’s angle
makes me squint. I pull up the blind to protect
my eyes. Rain hasn’t fallen much since June 15.
I’m slow to move. I feel foggy-brained; maybe
it’s because of the heat and the smoke from the
33 wildfires blazing in BC covering more than
500,000 hectares. While COVID cases are receding,
the effects of the last fifteen months linger
like the forest-fire smoke above my head. I hold
on emotionally and physically to the light breeze
that is making its way through the screen door
while the leaves of the Japanese maple stir.

As an educator I bring my past with me no matter how hard I try to shake elements of it off. Former ways of being and doing often diminish the now-presencing of teaching and learning. I am unused to seeing the mathematical beauty in the spiral of the snail’s shell or the veins on the oak leaf. The snail’s shell is beauty and math and more, especially when not artificially separated into these categories. I often need children to remind me of this greatness which shows up in their eyes as they look at these beings with me. When I am tired, especially when COVID seems endless and fires rage near me, I begin to see the sun, in its pinkness beyond the haze, as something other than itself. I press upon this life-giving force, my need for tranquility, and fail to see “it is regarding me, it is on my behalf that it beckons attention and devotion and affection, and, well, words.”

I practice learning to focus my attention in order to see the alphabet, something preschool children are on the edge of exploring, as a lively place of possibility attached to a world of beings. How do I keep the rich, somatic experience of sense-making that is reading connected to life-times of stories full of warnings and celebrations told on cycles of inbreaths and outbreaths? How do I respond respectfully to the landscapes of language as “windows opening on to a more-than-human field of powers” during these times of isolation and constraint?

John Dewey wrote that education is “a process of living and not a preparation for future living.” Yet, I am being asked, directly by families, to make up for lost time as though the pandemic was yet another hurdle to be jumped in order that their child be admitted into one school over another.


Teaching and learning requires loving attention. This is not simply an idea, nor even a feeling, but a tapping into the energetic potential of the heart center of the body, allowing ourselves playful access to ever-larger patterns of energy and space.\(^4\)

I am called to respond to teaching and learning with my ongoing practice of staying open and welcoming to possible relationships, both seen and unseen. When I understand that the past is not yet finished and the future is not only mine,\(^5\) and when I understand that the earth is a complex interconnected web of beings each speaking in their own ways, then I am called to thoughtfully and intentionally walk outside the walls of the classroom with children—rain and shine. How do I learn to be outside with them in ways that don’t separate the classroom from the forest and city streets? How do I come to see all these spaces and places as opportunities that call my imagination into being?\(^6\)

Opportunities
Are not plain,
clean gifts.
they trail dark
and chaotic
attachments
their unknown backgrounds,
luring us
further.
One insight leads to another;
one invention suggests another variation; more
and more

As a 60-year-old cancer survivor, the thought of death from COVID seems incongruous with my last few years of living. I want time to engage with the Earth and that is challenging as fires rage at East Gate in Manning Park 63 kilometers from my home and when flash floods have swept through the western states of Rhineland leaving death and destruction. I find myself lost at times in these contexts of fires, floods, and a pandemic. Maybe this sense of disorientation is why \textit{Isolation}\(^7\).

\(^4\) This found poem was taken from a reading of Anne C. Klein, “Body as Vehicle,” in \textit{Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment}, ed. by L. Friedman and S. Moon (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997), 146.
\(^7\) Written permission has been granted by the child’s parents for the purposes of this article.
I long to press an almost weightless armload of layered and crumbled red cedar bark against my dusty shirt. I want time to watch and listen to children as they play their games and build their forts. The Earth seems as though it is being put into question—yet, how do I put myself into question? Or, how do I embrace my vulnerability in the world as a way of understanding myself within it? What are the conditions of my interpretations?

**Living and Dying**

Entangled
Connected
Infected

I reach out in love.
In rage.

I reach out for help
to know myself in this often taken-for-granted life.

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Isolation was taken long before COVID-19 sent us scrambling for answers about what roles we play in witnessing, questioning, and advocating for enlivened spaces of learning. The little child pictured here was in the throes of a game of mythic proportions. She loves games and stories of life and death, good and bad. Two of her peers sent her to jail to make amends for her bad behaviour. She was only allowed freedom when she had finished reading the stack of books she leans against.

The “punishment” was not because she painted her body with black paint, but seemed handed out for no specific transgression at all—other than she had been bad. Her defeated look, a result of the banishment, was part of the game. This photo asks me to wake up to question what children believe school and books and rules are all about. COVID didn’t bring me to this place, but it has given me the opportunity to think carefully and critically about where I want to go from here in my world of work with preschool children.

Last year, mid-March, before the pandemic captured the city, I was just settling down in my home in a small community in the Cascade Mountains near Manning Park, British Columbia (B.C.) to write my thesis when the novel coronavirus numbers began to rise sufficiently to warrant many Vancouver-based child care centres to close their doors. From the beginning of the pandemic in British Columbia, child care was declared an essential service. Providers were not ordered to close but were also not ordered to stay open. The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges. Early childhood educators received most of the up-to-date information through nightly news rather than directly from government offices. Staffing shortages before the pandemic were a problem—but with the pandemic, staff members stayed at home to care for children who could no longer attend school. So many early childhood educators seemed frayed and exhausted and yet the global pandemic had not reached its peak.

As the founder and director of a stand-alone child care program, I felt buried under Provincial Health Orders and WorkSafe requirements. My everyday, open landscape of toys and tables and fingerpaint was being replaced by measured spaces that limited the number of people in any one area. Posted graphics greeted people now. Children, too, were learning how to read these signs to see how many of them could play together in a space. Learning the legal language of

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8 Gadamer explains that our traditions shape our understanding and this calls me to explore the conditions of my interpretations as broadly as possible. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition (London, UK: Continuum, 2004).
policies and step-by-step procedures became my immediate concern if I was going to keep the child care centre open.

I shared these requirements with parents in writing and by Zoom meetings. Parents were understandably upset. Some shared their anger over lost child care spaces and fought over the definition of essential services. The child care workers felt they were being placed in compromising situations that they couldn’t bear and four of the six employees stopped working at the centre.

I was thankful for daily video conferencing that allowed me to talk to the child care workers, children, and parents as I worked from home as recommended. Mostly I listened. The child care workers shared concerns about their ability to meet the physical distancing recommendations with young children. They worried over how they would wash and sanitize the many things a child touches in a day. They wondered about their own health and safety. Navigating the pandemic seemed daunting and the fear of the unknown was at times overwhelming.

Our child care program stands on the outskirts of Pacific Spirit Park. The area includes forests, beaches, bogs, and creeks in an area of over 2000 acres. Trails abound. The educators looked happy playing hide-and-seek off the marked trails, and building forts. The loss of most of their peers was just one of the many adjustments the children had to make for three months. Forest-based activities invited the children to rest into the guidance and care of the educators rather than being overwhelmed by all that was going on around them.

At the end of March 2020, I walked into the child care centre and what I saw took my breath away. On the floor were 3-by-6-foot rectangles marked out in masking tape. The early childhood educators required the children to use these marked spaces at least part of the day so that personal distancing might be maintained in accordance with health guidelines. Shelves held plastic baskets, each with a child’s name. The baskets held toys, colouring pens, and personal balls of playdough each child brought from home, and that they alone played with, in order to reduce cross-contamination. Tables, too, were divided by lines of masking tape to remind children to keep a physical distance. These lines and baskets were the face of fear. Neither the children or child care workers were wearing masks and their smiles tested my ability to hold multiple perspectives at once.

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It is summer 2021 and I have learned to ride the spasmodic waves of the pandemic. I have quiet conversations with friends and family and take walks on the beach or in the forest listening to whispers of air and light. I gaze at the curvy streaks that the spiral-shelled snail left this morning on the window. My eyes trail the crisscross movement. There are open spaces of sway and little tightly woven clusters of trails. I see possibilities while imagining Snail’s life beneath the canopy of the trees.

Sometimes I feel like Snail—all slow and meandering.

Understanding takes shape along the journey.

Other times, ideas and feelings gush and spray my face and throat often in the same way the garden hose got me this morning—full of surprise, annoyance, and laughter. My hair escapes the clip as I lean into the bushes, reach for the spout, and rethread the hose securely. As I water the plants, parched after weeks of sun, I think about how the pandemic has whipped me up, dried me out, and blew me into hiding.
The children have set up a hospital in the forest. They find a space beside a decaying cedar against which they lean sticks and twigs to create walls and a roof. Leaves and rocks are gathered, and one child is off in the distance digging into the earth with a stick to find a special medicine while an early childhood educator is told to lie down because she is their patient. The children sometimes confer with one another, other times there is a cacophony of directions about what will make the patient healthy. The patient is called upon to “drink this” and “take your medicine.” As I stand and listen I am learning to be a better witness to the play. I am yearning to be awake to the worlding of this place filled with rocks and twigs and leaves that the children seamlessly navigate. I want to learn to attend to the scuttle of the mice and squirrels and feel the vibration the woodpecker leaves behind in the tree above. I want to delight in the mosses and molds beneath my feet.

How do I express what I am coming to know about myself, my teaching, this forest, and this classroom? Donna J. Haraway writes of how the coalitions of peoples and critters facing this [geophysical and geopolitical] storm is critical to the possibilities of earth powers of resurgence.10

Kin-making:

How do I begin to be part of the earth’s renewal?

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We shape the world not by theories and views but by our very attitude to one another. The world’s hue is made large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure.

A demand has been placed upon us.12
How will I respond?

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9 All photos in this article are taken by my colleague Cata Baeza Hidalgo. She has given me permission to use them in this article.
12 This is a found poem based on Knud E. Logstrup, *The Ethical Demand* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 19 and the Ojibwe story Mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life).
Notice the child’s abandonment of rubber boots and the muddy pants that suggest a few tries at this position. Imagine this child choosing this just-right branch over other branches. Imagine staying in that position for a long time as this child did—content and feeling the moist sky-soil beneath your head. Here is the open-heartedness of teaching and learning which comes as a gift, having moved toward us without our beckoning. Our role is to be open-eyed and present.¹³

I begin to feel the weight being lifted through writing, conversation, and critical reflection of my practice. I feel that “[a] wild patience has taken me this far…”¹⁴ and I know that I can draw on this energy now as I near what appears to be a slowing of COVID-19 here in British Columbia. Shops are opening up, face masks are worn less often, and laughter is spilling from restaurants. Two of our early childhood educators are in India. They will be there for the foreseeable future, so we talk together weekly about curriculum; the stories I’ll tell the children and the stories we are becoming more adept at hearing the children tell as we watch their play. We want to regain a sense of our footing in our lives. I’ll start by paying attention to the blackberries and thimbleberries that ripen my experience of the forest beside the child care program. I will take time to attend to children’s laughter vibrating in my throat.

Arms stretch skyward holding brilliantly coloured sun hats - buckets for swirling leaves.
Placing my ear to the ground my awareness of the ever-so-slight turn of the seasons Grows¹⁵.

Kate McCabe founded Creative Minds Early Learning Centre in 1982 and more recently, designed a place-based Early Childhood Education Certificate Program for adults who will work with preschool-aged children. She is near the end of writing her doctoral thesis, which is entitled “Walking Backward Out Into the Wild.”

¹³ This found poem is based on my reading of Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Press, 2013) 23–24.


¹⁵ Many thanks to Renata Aebi and Dr. Lynn Fels who gave advice on the first draft of this article.