PART 1

Discourses of Ecology and Learning
CHAPTER 1

When Lake Erie Is Polluted, We Are Too

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Abstract

We live in times of profound crises: ecological, political, material, educational, spiritual and epistemological. A virus stalks the earth, and we are struggling as to how best to respond and understand. We are suffering from an epistemological malady of narrow, solipsistic thinking, under mantras like 'evidence-based practice'. We separate ourselves off, as humans, from nature, from each other and even from ways of knowing. We find difficulty in creating deeper, psychic, intersubjective, social, ecological and spiritual sensibilities towards ourselves and our behaviors as well as myriad relationships. What is Lake Erie to us, what are we to Lake Erie? This chapter is about the power and ubiquity of turning away, of denial and the death wish, alongside the potential power of stories, and dialogue, to create interconnectedness and awareness of what we are called to do, and learn, in such times.

Keywords

systemic theory – psychoanalysis – macro, meso and micro worlds – resistance to knowing – stories

1 Introduction

There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that the basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rooted parasite through the tissues of life, and everything gets into a rather peculiar mess. When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise “what interests me is me, or my organisation, or my species”, you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system – and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity
We live in difficult times, when the coronavirus stalks our lives, and we feel vulnerable and deeply dependent on each other. We are finalizing this chapter still in lockdown, painfully aware that the world can go on without us. So, we are even more persuaded now, that a healthy life is not simply about solipsistic human beings but has to do with the air we breathe, the soil we use and the water and food that sustains us. There is a need for the human species to de-centre and take responsibility for the health of a whole ecosystem called Planet Earth, threatened by deforestation, global warming and melting ice caps. The ecological crisis – and now this tiny virus – seems to invite us to reflexively learn our way to a holistic sensibility and a whole set of new relationships with diverse others, with the natural world, and with our own possible complicity in the present ecological insanity. It might include questioning economic and behavioral assumptions about capitalism's illusions of infinite growth, colliding with a groaning, fragile, depleted creation.

In this chapter, we reflect on the dominant epistemology, which has narrowed to very linear, overly narcissistic and reductive assumptions, even worse than in Gregory Bateson's time. Unbridled consumerism has increased individualism, exploitation of the poor, and the narrowing of education to economic instrumentalism. It serves the needs of capitalism, rather than encouraging citizens to learn, recognize and cope with the impending ecological, democratic, and cultural crisis. Neo-liberalism fuels an 'ecology of bad ideas', and our world, as researchers, is not exempt from this. In fact, research, education, and learning, as values per se, are dismissed or marginalized by functionalism and marketization. Academics are called to demonstrate that they, we, have an ‘impact’, quantitively, no matter if much of what is meaningful in our job is lost. Objectification and obsessive quantification make it impossible to recognize the wholeness of a phenomenon, or our experience. Even the worlds of music, poetry and art seem to have lost their educating power and healing potential, for many, in a rapacious, frequently insane world.

This crazy context, shaped by linear presuppositions, produces pathologies and shortcomings, particularly in and through education. Evidence Based Education is the dominant paradigm of sense making in many countries; it too easily becomes an undisputed discourse nurturing acritical and falsely neutral positions regarding ‘evidence’. It disempowers theory and subjective experience, our whole selves, in fact, separating theory from practice and subjectivity from objectivity. This insanity is especially damaging for adult education and learning. Adults are constantly building theories by telling stories about their
experience, and so do we. In this historical moment, more so than ever, we feel the need to develop a satisfying theory/narrative of who we are, as individuals, researchers, and as members of the human species; and about the ground on which we stand, the quality of the air and ideas we breathe, and how much we nurture those around and beyond us, as academics and a research community.

Stories are ways to reconnect. Nowadays, dis-connection is evident in the construction of material and symbolic walls between groups, keeping the other, the migrant or people of a different colour, as well as difficult thoughts and feelings, at bay. The separation of ‘us’ and ‘them’, based on religion, ethnicity, ideology, paradigms, or whatever, builds closed communities creating a limited understanding of the human condition and its manifestations. The need to define one’s own ‘field’ or territory nurtures defensive strategies vis-à-vis the stranger, who becomes like an intruding body (West, 2016). Even coronavirus is in a certain sense our creation, thriving destructively because of negligence in how we prepare our food, how we might slaughter other species, and how we might fly, hubristically, from one place to another, without fear of the consequences. The wildlife market of Wuhan sold snakes, bats, beavers, badgers, cats, foxes, lizards and scorpions in an unregulated trade that played to people’s naive belief in their health benefits, without regard to microbiological evidence (Yu, 2020).

As we said, stories have the power to reconnect. But denial and repression of troubling thoughts can be strong: we often refuse to face the consequences of what we do. Our stories are not neutral. They reveal hidden presuppositions. And, to repeat, when we fail to recognize Lake Erie’s groaning, or Polar Icecaps melting, or the extinction of species, we deny our own biology, experience, our potential to learn and ethical responsibilities to self, others and a whole world (Formenti & West, 2018).

The power of disconnection is central to psychosocial, including psychoanalytic thinking, as it is to systemic thought. We learn to tell disconnected stories and we come to deny our capacity to know, at a social, political, cultural, ecological and personal level, maybe because of fear and anxiety that understanding is too difficult or attempts to learn frighten and expose us to ridicule. We fear rejection in our closed communities. It may be easier to indulge the desire for instant gratification, and immediate answers; while experience might feel too difficult to process – especially if we are isolated. So, we may be frightened of the truth of our actions, because, child-like, we do not want to be disturbed or face the consequences of what we do. Knowing, in such terms, is a difficult business and we easily escape into a kind of Oceanic bliss of ignorance and or forms of religion or ways of seeing that offer superficial comfort but do not challenge us in any depth.
In this chapter, we reflect on this context, and argue for a situated ecology that encourages openness of thought and feeling, through storytelling, and a concern for diversity and dialogue. At the heart of good education, we claim, is a freedom to tell our stories, and to think about them collectively, in the company of others. Stories have the power to reconnect, to offer a thick and meaning-full representation of reality, bringing together the micro, i.e. the local and subjective, with the meso level of interacting systems, such as families and other institutions, including schools and universities; and the macro, i.e. history, the socio-cultural and ideological contexts and meta narratives shaping what we say and do. A narrative power enabling us to weave wider, reflexive understanding of self and culture, an ecological sensibility too, maybe even wisdom (Fraser, 2018; Tisdell & Swartz, 2011). Or not, as the case might be, in capitalism’s worship of greed and Mammon (McCarraher, 2019).

Stories convey implicit values and perspectives, our epistemology, our ways of thinking and acting; they are shaped by ongoing interactions with the environment at large, natural and social. Shaped, to greater or lesser extents, by what McCarraher (2019) calls the seductions, illusions, and even enchantments of Mammon: capitalism as the all-pervasive religion of modernity. By listening to our stories, and interrogating them, we can re-create a good epistemology, celebrating complexity, circularity, and participation in a cycle of life rather than avaricious consumption. Stories are an antidote to dis-connection, to linearity, and to the closure of heart and mind.

2 Wrestling with Dis-Connection

We face a world which is threatened not only with disorganization of many kinds, but also with the destruction of its environment, and we, today, are still unable to think clearly about the relations between an organism and its environment. What sort of a thing is this, which we call ‘organism plus environment’? (Bateson, 1972, pp. 448–449)

Half a century after this was written, the human species is witnessing pandemics, ecological catastrophe, war, terrorism, mass migration, increasing inequality and poverty, desperation, and political ugliness, worldwide. Our insane epistemology – what Freud and Klein labelled, if in slightly different ways, the death instinct, Thanatos above Eros (Bainbridge & West, 2012) – has created the conditions for the extinction of human life, polluting the spaces where we live, our relationships and minds. Ideas are very concrete, they produce effects, out there and inside us. This is what education should take as a primary
concern. What is the human condition? What enables us to flourish? What inhibits human flourishing? How did we arrive at a point of such desperation? What can we do about it? And what has it all to do with adult learning?

The dominant Western metaphor of control and conscious purpose is born out of being in thrall, addicted, stuck, while also imagining that we can be omnipotent. Surrendering might be required to regain mental health and groundedness: as in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (Bateson, 1972), admitting vulnerability, and accepting a greater power, to enable us to manage our addictions. Philosophical and spiritual leaders as well as depth psychologists have often articulated the importance of a language of meaning, of real belonging, of hope amidst the fears, limits, conceits and defeats of life. Acknowledging our vulnerability, and yet finding power, recognition, glimpses of larger truths and ethical responsibility, could constitute moments of existential, embodied as well as relational transformation, even of transcendence. But these are hard won, individually and collectively, over a life.

Both Freudian psychology and Bateson’s epistemology expand our notion of “mind”, the former inwards, the latter outwards. “And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger” (Bateson, 1972, p. 461). We need to re-think then, the individual mind, as “immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent in pathways and messages outside of the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem. This larger Mind [...] is immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology” (p. 461).

How does a lake ‘think’? How do ‘I’ or ‘we’ think? Every system – a human being, a forest, a society – has its epistemology. Bateson tried to challenge his interlocutors by interrogating theirs. In this, he was an educator. His method was abductive, based on stories and metaphors, since ‘thinking in terms of stories’ (Bateson, 1979, p. 14) is what we do when we try to (re)connect to the world around us. A satisfactory theory of adult education and lifelong learning must re-compose meaningful pictures of the whole, celebrating connections, fostering creative, generative compositions of stories, of ideas in relation to them, and levels of understanding transcending micro, meso and macro demarcations. Interdependence, not separation, is the key feature of living. The ‘unit of learning’ is a whole formed by organism–plus–environment (Bateson, 1972); hence any individual change depends on other changes in the larger system. And vice-versa.

As researchers and adult educators, we have had a long-term and passionate engagement with narrative and auto/biographical methods. We practice auto/biographical research in different ways, since we are different: a man and a
woman, from different roots, learning paths as well as cultures. Our prime task is chronicling and theorizing struggles to learn, in professional, higher, and adult education and community contexts (Formenti & West, 2018). We have recently explored concepts like lifelong and transformative learning, over a three-year journey – a kind of pilgrimage – to consider what these terms might mean. Transformation is an overused word and is easily commodified. In our writing, we asked if transformation is a kind of consumerist illusion, a marketing trope. Are we really transformed or more likely seduced by a new car, a mobile phone, a new outfit, or partner, or even a degree? Transformation might, on the other hand, be a lifelong, lifewide quest for meaning, truth, agency, and authentic selfhood. It might have to do with taking responsibility and accepting our obligations, in Simone Weil’s (1952) terms, long before our rights.

But are we able to transcend who we are? To leave behind the child, or the particular man or woman we have been? Are we able to let go of obsession, addiction, narrow epistemology, cultural presuppositions, and to question inherited values and why we act as we do? Or, for that matter, to engage with unconscious fears, anxieties and delusions? There could be a strong case for pessimism, here, alongside an optimism of the will, in our struggles to know; maybe life and learning are a mix of both. Knowledge is a difficult business, never complete. It may partly have to do with acknowledging our limitations and the defensive postures of hubris, omniscience and omnipotence. Negative capability, in the poet Keat’s phrase, learning to live in doubt and uncertainty, might be crucial to transformative experience, as strange as this might sound (Formenti & West, 2018).

We rely on dialogue to celebrate our diversity, and compose a richer, more embodied and relational understanding of the stories we tell (Formenti, West, & Horsdal, 2014), not least to make a difference in the world where we live (Formenti & West, 2016); maybe to heal our hubris, narrowness and disconnection. Our epistemologies are different, rooted in systemic theory (Laura) and psychoanalysis (Linden): but difference can be a trigger for reciprocal learning. All the great adult educators (Paulo Freire in South America; Raymond Williams and R. H. Tawney in the UK; Danilo Dolci and Aldo Capitini in Italy) and myriad feminists (Barbara Merrill, Luisa Muraro, Adriana Cavaro and Edmee Ollagnier) – insist on a dialogic pedagogy, rooted in lived experience and – here lies a difficult word – love for the other. They understood that adults learn with each other, by sharing stories about their experience, hence multiplying their possible meanings, and challenging and teaching each other in the process. When we search for a higher order learning, a perspective transformation, or psychological integration, we need another’s point of view to be able to question and change our own. But the relationship must be one of
mutual respect, of acceptance, equality, of listening. Which is problematic, not granted once and for all. For Paulo Freire and Tawney, drawing respectively on liberation theology and Anglicanism, there is a potential divinity in the other, however obscure and disguised (Leopando, 2017; West, 2017). Education, in Martin Buber’s (1922/1937) terms, is a perpetual search for I/Thou relationship at all levels, with others and in the symbolic world.

We have questions, however, about this. We work with stories, and cultivating an ecological epistemology is far from a given in narrative, life history or auto/biographical enquiry: stories are easily de-contextualized, objectified, simplified, even narrowed down to counting how many metaphors are used; or stories are reified, used as if they were ‘true’. So, we decided to juxtapose, here, our narratives and perspectives to show how they shape our theory and practice of education and research. More specifically for this book, we use a rich narrative ground to interrogate our choice of life history and auto/biography and its power in considering the construction and re-construction of meaning, identity, knowledge, values and even selves.

3 Laura and Questions of Ecological Loss

The ecological narrative, today, is of loss. Many people are feeling the effects of the ecological crises, alongside Covid-19, which has brought death to many families in places like Lombardy where I, Laura, live. I remember doing biographic work, almost twenty years ago, in an Alpine village. I met a group of 10–12 elders once a month for two years, telling and writing stories to create a local archive of memories. Those old men and women were deposits of traditional practices and ideas, of a form of wisdom indeed. They mourned their lost childhood, the appearance of the land, of the woods, when the paths uphill to the mountain were clear, and daily care for water and animals a necessity. They were even nostalgic for the cold winters during the Second World War. They kept saying this or that had disappeared. They were fully aware that those changes were irreversible. In some cases, there was self-blame and shame. They were witnessing the invalidation of a long-standing, inherited transgenerational knowledge, and they felt they had not been good enough in passing it on to new generations, with a coherent sense of culture. It hurt.

The loss of a space where we can flourish brings solastalgia (Galway et al., 2019), like being homesick while still in the self-same place. For me, it goes back to my father, the youngest child of a miller. At six, he was given a sheep to care for. And years later, when he had already enthusiastically embraced modernity, he still loved the woods, animals, and they loved him. I can recognize, now,
that he suffered solastalgia: he kept telling stories of what was before. Is this a deep family reason for my addiction to stories? Was telling stories, then, a form of healing and is it the same now?

Our personal experiences of the environment are shaped by biographical, relational, cultural, economic and social factors. There is often no space to talk about our feelings. We can even lack the words to give them voice. How can we name ecological losses, particularly when they are so ambiguous – since civilization undoubtedly brings advantages? This question becomes more urgent with climate change and species extinction. What might be the role of education, of learning, as a resource of hope? Some of us are changing our habits, caring for garbage and energy, bringing more attention to the life of plants and animals, listening to our bodies. But what of our psyche? And soul? How is our mental health and well-being influenced by such changes and the narratives, practices and assumptions that surround them?

A new branch of psychology studies the impact of climate change on mental health (Clayton et al., 2017), signalling an increase of depression, suicidal ideas, post-traumatic stress, as well as feelings of anger, hopelessness, distress, and despair. The Alpine area where I worked has the highest rates of suicide in Italy. Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) coined the term ‘ecological grief’ to address feelings related to experienced or anticipated loss in the ecosystem, especially when meaningful landscapes are submitted to irreversible change. They undertook research with Inuit people in Arctic Canada and farmers in Australia, in locations where climate and environmental changes are dramatic: they found commonalities despite the differences as people struggle to cope with ecological loss and the prospect of an uncertain future. They grieved in fact for lost landscapes, ecosystems, species, or places that carry personal or collective meaning. If you are living off agriculture, or hunting, as many peoples in the world do, you may be worried for your future. But there is more: living in contact with the land is part of life, within as well as without. For Indigenous peoples, the land is foundational to their way of life and values, hence for mental health and cultural belonging, as Chan shows in her chapter in the present book. Climate change – and before it, industrialization and the exploitation of finite resources – can make activities like hunting, fishing, or cultivating impossible. The impact is more than economic: it is cultural, and there is anger, sadness, frustration, and hopelessness when life is disrupted. It is unbearable to see something you love – your farm, your favourite place, your world, maybe a link with ancestors – blown away.

But what happens when one is already disconnected? People like me, who go to the mountains for a holiday, who maybe have a pet, but never learnt the bond of dependence with ‘Mother Nature’. Can I go on thinking that I do not
depend on the land for my living? Many people experience ‘the land’ as exotic, an ‘other’ place, to which they do not belong. If we have no relationship, or a very mediated one, can there be ‘grief’?

I have been doing research with Silvia Luraschi using sensobiographic methods (Murray & Järviluoma, 2019; Formenti & Luraschi, 2020), walking together with participants, using senses, and evoking biographical memories about the place. This way of doing research nurtures my sensitivity to the land, to the changes occurred in the area where I live. The stories reveal how people are structurally coupled with their physical environment. We ask them to choose ‘a place of the heart’, and the relationship between inside and outside is immediately evident. No matter if you do not have an ecological education, or you were not born there, you still feel the wounds. Knowing, being sensitive, means mourning: is this why so many people prefer not to know and keep anaesthetizing themselves? Is it possible that we underestimated the psychological effects of distancing ourselves from nature? We need more research to understand our relationship to the landscape, to the more-than-human environment, and what we learn by and through our relationship to it.

We are connected to our environment, no matter how conscious we are, and when this bond is threatened, we react in different ways, to be understood at a micro, meso and macro level. These feelings are healthy: not ‘symptoms’ of insanity, but the sign of a connection. The real insanity, as Bateson said, is disconnection. A collective experience of ‘ecological grief’ could bring a strengthened sense of commitment to the places, ecosystems, and living beings that inspire, nurture, and sustain us. I believe that the global pandemic will exacerbate this need.

3.1 Linden, My Space

I, Linden, am a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, a researcher and adult educator. Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, believed in the principles of the Enlightenment, of the importance of reason’s triumph over illusion but was aware that empiricism often lacked a language to explain mental phenomenon. Science he observed had little or nothing to say about sexuality, for instance, towards which not one ray of a hypothesis had penetrated this dark hinterland (Symington, 1992). Freud heroically wrote about this taboo subject, shocking the bourgeois world of his time (Kahr, 2020). Yet Freud was something of a romantic and returned, despite himself, to classical and other literary myths, to explain clinical phenomenon, famously the Narcissistic and Oedipus complexes.

How we are caught in our own idealized image, locked into empty worship of self, closed to life, love, others and experience. Freud thought the infatuation in one’s own person, including one’s genitals, could helpfully draw on the
Greek myth of the beautiful youth dying of self-infatuation, and in the process, killing love, represented by Echo. The narcissist loves what s/he is, and was, and would like to be (Gay, 1988). Or, in the case of the Oedipus complex, we get trapped in the triangle of traditional parental relationships: captured and enraptured by the mother, for instance, against the father whom we might learn to hate. What Freud had in mind, (his ideas developed over time), was ubiquitous evidence of sibling rivalry, rivalry between mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and even death wishes against other members of the family. This was the stuff of myth and literary tragedy. Such dynamics find expression in the rivalrous academy, and in education, in our ambivalence towards teachers, knowledge and our rivalries with other students. Transformation, from a psychoanalytic view, has to do with engaging with the unconscious, with what is difficult to see and acknowledge – like our sexuality or competitiveness – and to release some of the energy consumed by repression. It is a choice for life over death, Eros over Thanatos, learning over denial.

One trouble with psychoanalysis has been a tendency to stick too rigidly to the micro, and maybe meso level, although Freud wrote about culture too (Freud, 1919/2009). The micro-level is insufficient, if important, when thinking about sustainability in our lives and our relationships to others and a fragile earth. The other dimensions, one way or another, get in the way of seeing things afresh and more openly: whether familial, socio-cultural, economic, political, psychological, spiritual or ecological. There is no clear boundary between external and internal worlds, the social and psychological, the human and non-human. I use a psychosocial/cultural as well as historical frame in the search to understand others, and myself. I am increasingly aware of how modernity's religion is called capitalism, with its passion for unregulated growth, which evokes destruction, despoliation and profound feelings of anger and loss.

What lies 'out there' – the 'context' – shapes the internal world as well as vice versa. All that we know is a product of our perception, which is mediated by the body, by cultural presuppositions, by previous learning. I am a product of a profound disassociation with the natural world called industrialization. As I write these words, I feel torn by complex, confused auto/biographical feelings: partly of anxiety about Coronavirus, but also of loss alongside memories of the ugliness of the industrial revolution, with its many benefits, too in reducing domestic drudgery, as Raymond Williams (1989), the adult educator and cultural historian, forcefully reminds us. I grew up in a city landscape disfigured and polluted by unregulated mining, pottery manufacture and iron and steel production. I was surrounded by slag heaps, as well as new housing estates that embodied, after the Second World War, a spirit of a New Jerusalem. A world of trade unions, cooperatives, workers education, municipal confidence, and
socialist politics, much of which has dissipated. It was a world of a reactive commitment to nature, too: of ramblers’ associations, cycling in the countryside, and a love of gardening and ecological beauty, in the presence of ugliness. Not on everyone’s part, for sure, but many. Now, biographically, I see a different kind of ugliness and neglect in this post-industrial city, called Stoke-on-Trent, in the English Midlands, like many other similar places, wounded by over-rapid deindustrialization, neo-liberal austerity, poverty, individualism and the decline of the welfare state. Basically, by lack of care.

It was a world where adult education was once strong, created by committed men and women who dreamt of a better world and strived for a meaningful well-lived life. Their stories have been of forms of education, different to now, where groups of learners constituted microcosms of a better social order, even of the Kingdom, where beauty or truth could be experienced, however fleeting and contentious. Where organized religion still held some sway and the churches, especially the non-conformist, provided hope and spirit in the difficult business of adult education (Goldman, 2013; Rose, 2010; West, 2016, 2017). Questions were asked such as, how can we create a better socially just world? What does history have to teach us? Does life have meaning? Why is there suffering and death? How can we pursue happiness? What is the ‘good enough’ life? Why do events so often feel beyond our control? And what of hate as well as love in our relationships? And what of taking better care of the land, the soil, the water where we live? Questions like these still matter.

Psychoanalytically, I am well aware of the difficult business profounder forms of learning can be. Knowledge is often resisted as well as embraced. Troubling thoughts are often repressed, alongside the feelings that prompt them, but anxiety is ever present, even if anaesthetized by alcohol or other drugs. If in Freud’s fin-de-siècle Vienna, anxiety surrounded sexuality, and dangerous desire in a rigid bourgeois world, in our world, it might have to do with narcissism, fuelled by capitalism’s seductive enchantments, false gods, and antipathy to thought. There can be antipathy to thought even in educational contexts, where the cash nexus shapes interactions with students, who, as customers, demand an easily digested product. Zygmunt Bauman (Formenti & West, 2018) has written of the seductions of junk food, of cheap, easy to digest educational sound bites, of a conspiracy against troubling thoughts. Keep it simple, get the grades, sell the institution. Creation groans.

The neglect of the spiritual dimensions of human experience also matters. Secularism, at least of an overly rational kind, may be insufficient when interrogating profounder forms of learning. It is interesting that Paulo Freire – so central to radical struggles to learn, in many parts of the world – is often secularized and stripped of his fundamental grounding in liberation theology. Irwin
Leopando (2017) writes of how Freire had a deep sensibility towards the divine in everyone. His convictions were rooted in faith, not least in a God coming down to earth in solidarity with the poor. This God died the most brutal of deaths, on a cross but transcended this, mythopoetically, in ways signifying life, strength, and solidarity in the face of hubris and brutal, raw power. Suffering as strength, learning as transcendence: here lie ways to revitalize and sustain education practice. R.H. Tawney, the British adult educator, saw glimpses of the divine in the other too, while Raymond Williams, the humanistic Marxist, was spiritual in his attachment to dialogue and I/Thou dynamics in good adult education practice. Tawney and Williams may in fact have had more in common as educators than what divided them ideologically (West, 2017). What may be happening in our time is a kind of re-sacralization of our relationships with one other, and with the ecologies of which we are a part. Extinction rebellion and other forms of activism are forging a new language of I/Thou-ness, to encompass the other and otherness, diverse species, forests, mountains, oceans, lakes, and the air we breathe. The health of Lake Erie matters in these terms to our own well-being, to our livelihoods as well as to the fish and diverse species that rely on clean water in a profoundly interconnected eco-system.

4 Weaving Our Ideas Together

An image of a golden thread helps both of us to weave together fragments of knowledge about ourselves, unconscious life, and the other, of what s/he represents, as well as to appreciate the wisdom of nature. This resonates with Bateson’s idea of the sacred as a celebration of wholeness (Bateson & Bateson, 1987). Something not excluding science, mathematics, technology, or conscious purpose, or for that matter reason, but woven together with aesthetics and ethics, unconscious, narrative, mythopoetic and spiritual imaginations. An epistemology of the sacred reasserts certain values and insights lost in the Enlightenment’s embrace of positivism and narrow empiricism: if there lies an element of the sacred in all human beings, maybe other species, perhaps in the natural world too, in the sense of an astonishing, connected but vulnerable whole, then this is worthy of recognition and respect. It becomes easier to compose universal ethics emphasizing responsibility and obligation, a sense of shared sacredness, and the unacceptability of oppression, objectification, commodification and environmental abuse.

We have tried to celebrate the possibility of many truths, including subjective truth, so often silenced in evidence-based mantras. Rituals, metaphors, and poetry are relevant here: they can heal the splits of inner and outer, objective and
subjective truth, by conveying experience that includes elements of mystery, that cannot easily be communicated in words. Presentational knowledge (Heron, 1996) can liberate our complex, lifelong struggle to understand, including ourselves. What does it mean when Lake Erie is poisoned our psyches are poisoned too? What is happening when a pandemic threatens us all? What does it mean for a species to be annihilated or a rain forest desecrated? There is a sense of tragedy on an epic scale here. But we can recover feelings of awe, mystery, epistemological desire, and transcendence by taking time to notice, to see eternity in the palm of a hand, in Blake’s evocative phrase. And through participation in enactments, rituals and ceremonies of resistance and healing, including in adult education. These are not optional extras, but fundamental necessities in the struggle to protect a whole fragile ecology and ourselves. We need myths to teach humility, and our place in the sacredness of a fragile earth, replete with goodness but also danger. Myth and ritual can inspire us to action, to keep us keeping on when everything seems hopeless, and others are contemptuous of what we do.

5 An Enhanced Form of Selfhood

We also need to recognize the limits of individual minds. Deeper collaborative learning is necessary, including re-evaluating the relationships among us, and with the more-than-human world. And in facing our shadows, and capacity for evil, the death wish, and destruction. In our relationships, in our work, we often witness violence and destructiveness, even in university committees redolent with petty spite and competitiveness. It has to be faced and challenged, not avoided. Openness and reflexivity, and encounters with darkness are important disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991). Sometimes learning of a higher order, as Bateson noted, is like a ‘conversion’, which Buddhism terms an ‘awakening’, Jung, ‘individuation’, and other psychoanalysts, ‘integration’. Encounters with the suffering of a lake, the Amazon ablaze, or Covid-19’s power – are painful but essential to profounder forms of learning. We mean by this to seek qualities of learning that embrace both life and death, the damage we do alongside the possibilities of reparation. It is an intellectual, imaginative, reflexive, emotional, practical, material, relational and spiritual transformation of perspectives. It is a kind of soul work.

Here lies a task for adult education: the nurturing of qualities like curiosity, emotional openness, critical and self-reflexivity, responsiveness, respect, the capacity for listening and cooperation. Such qualities need good enough, shared spaces to grow. They depend on experiencing (in childhood and adulthood) the good enough love of the (m)other, the attentiveness of a teacher/
educator, the presence of a loving, caring but also curious and courageous group of fellow pilgrims on a quest for enlightenment. To retain hope in such a task, we need faith to imagine that reparation and healing are possible, however difficult our fragile lives and ecologies can seem. An agentic, questioning, challenging, authentic and empathic selfhood, formed in the company of others, can be reborn in adult education, a women’s group, a sensobiographic walk, in community action, in psychoanalysis or in respectful research.

6 Conclusion?

Our dialogue has brought us to a complex, changing and fragile landscape. Our different perspectives have been helpful in composing deeper understanding of adult learning, education and the ecology of life, and death. Our quest is limited by who we are, the experiences we have had, the languages we speak, and the hidden perspectives we enact. But we are determined to learn our way to a better place, with the help of our ESREA Network, via our writing and encounters with the darkness as well as sweetness and light of being human.

Transformation might lie in questioning our relationships and the stories we have inherited from our families, groups, and wider cultures, as well as in our growing relationship to diverse eco-systems and a whole planet. Maybe it is too late, and pollution and destructiveness, as well as thoughtless globalization and worship of capitalism, have gone too far. Maybe it is wiser to be a pessimist in such times. We disagree with this, at least in part. As researchers, adult educators and human beings, as mothers, fathers, grandparents, sons and daughters, we recognize a responsibility to struggle and to seek a re-connection of what is pathologically separated: selves, souls and ecologies; minds, hearts and bodies; the social, cultural and the psychological; the conscious and unconscious, human life and the ‘natural’ world. The auto/biographical narrative research we do offers glimpses into the complex stories of learners, including our own, and heroic struggles to face the damage done, and to consider how this might be repaired, individually and collectively. The ESREA Life History and Biography Network itself represents a whole and vital ecology of learning and life, to inspire us on our way.

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