

The Imaginative Force: Individual and Collective Healing for Nature.

By Nanda Currant

How each person's work in the world takes shape is often of great interest to one another. People often ask how I created the work with performance/community arts in nature, what inspired this kind of work in my life. I began working in this fashion when I was a home school consultant/teacher for the school system in California. I wanted to combine my love of nature, art, psychology, and service in a yearlong project with children, and adults in local community. This work, and the various performances are described in the Guide I completed, "Bringing Nature to Life."

Later on in a small rural community by the Gila River in Southern New Mexico I developed a body of work based on the Gila River in a second Guide, "Riverworks" which focuses on four performance themes on rivers. In my work in New Mexico I apply and take this earlier work in education, and bring it into conservation work, and the community at large as a town event; The Gila River Festival; but the seed for doing this kind of work begins much earlier in my life; both in my childhood explorations with my father out in nature, and as a young art therapist.

The twists and turns in creating our direction in life is often made out of discomfort—a sincere desire for change, and not unlike the river, we need a healthy turbulence to breathe ourselves into existence. I feel what did not allow me to rest in life in one particular direction is what brought me to the work in home schooling, and the eventual healing work through performance art in nature. Underlying all this work is a belief in the imaginative force that is not about cleverness but a holy longing for something authentic from the Self, and the experience that all people, especially young people, flourish under the opportunity to fathom their own uniqueness.

What I do in my work with others and over the years shaped itself out of what did not fit, and a heart's desire. We have to make our own vessel but it is always made out of the clay that comes from a source we all share, and held for a millennium. I believe this material for shaping in our

life has a deep mythic origin in our psyche, and is a natural tendency in all of us, a psychic stream always moving us towards ourselves.

Recently I read a story in Karen Armstrong's book "The Buddha". It is classic tale about the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Mara rushes in at the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment and tries to prove he is the true teacher. Mara brings soldiers to bear witness for him as proof of his enlightenment, and also rides in on a tall elephant towering over the Buddha as he sits under the tree. The Buddha only has his experience, he has no witnesses or soldiers or even followers. The Buddha leans down, and he asks the earth he has walked upon to bear witness for him. The earth rumbles and shakes, Mara tumbles from his position of sterile machismo to the ground, and the elephant kneels before the Buddha and the soldiers flee.

The Buddha with his gesture of touching the earth changes the course of history in many important ways. He is a Prince, royalty, and is the first to be this humble, and ask for help in this fashion. He also brings nature into the picture as a power, a force that can represent itself in religious philosophy on equal ground. The Buddha uses his hands and not weapons or power to contact the earth. It is a simple gesture but like most simple gestures we overlook their impact too easily.

I find the work I do with others often made up of simple gestures and choices that are right in front of us. We ask nature for help, and believe there is a voice to hear if we stand in the presence of the wild openly, and receptively. In our performance work, poetry is our language like a bird or the wind, and not as a recitation. We often embody our story in dance, and song because the images and words are born from our sensate surroundings and the movement of nature.

My work continues from that early work in California in art therapy, and education into a larger community collective. It still involves each person's images, poem, and story but weaves together into a resonant myth and metaphor in our community we all can share in performance, and since I have moved to New Mexico my work deepened around the Gila river and the issues facing it's future as the last free flowing river in the southwest.

This story is about some of my personal building blocks that formed when I could not even see the structure, and even today the form evades me but the work becomes clear, mists over and appears again.

The starting point of any adventure can at times feel arbitrary but often it is an event, which throws our lives into another part of ourselves than where we thought we were heading. In my case the death of my mother changed my work. I was teaching art in the schools in Eugene, Oregon when I got word my mother was dying.

Eugene, Oregon

Driving all night under a full moon suspends time. I keep seeing the world around me as blue, the blue snow, and the blue trees and moisture on the road. Everything is crystalline and glistening a few days before Christmas while I am heading south to be with my mother who is dying of cancer. She insists after the summer ended that I go back to teach, and not stay with her and my father, so it has been only a few short months since she had surgery and slid towards death.

Driving sixteen hours straight, it is dawn when I arrive at the hospital. As I enter her room she is asleep and peaceful. I simply sit by her side and place my hand on her wrist and lay my head against her side and fall asleep. After a while I feel her stir, and she is looking at me and gestures to her neck where she has a small gold cross, like the one I have around my neck given to me at my baptism. I no longer am a catholic, neither is she, but we wore these crosses as a way to feel each other over the distance. She cannot talk with all the tubes in her mouth but I begin to read to her a letter I wrote on my steering wheel on the way down to see her. It is words about my love, ways I could have been a better daughter, how I love her, and how lucky we have been to be able to become even closer during this time. She lifts her hand and taps me, as if to say it is not necessary.

In a short while my father appears in the room. He has a hard time leaving my mother for very long but we have a little time with just She and I together. He is distraught and holds to the fact that she is not dying but she is and within the next two days. After one lucid evening where she sits up while being with my Father alone, they talk together but during

the night she falls into a coma, and she dies on Christmas Eve while I hold her in my arms. I feel that this evening is her parting gift to my Father.

During the time my mother is ill I have many dreams. Often the dreams present images of what is going on in her body in unexplainable events. My family wants to hide what is actually happening while I am far away teaching but in the dreams I am given an accurate reading of the pain and nature of the illness. I have not had such a profound experience of this kind since that time but these experiences shift my interest in art as a gallery artist to art in terms of healing, and what lies at the depth of our personal images. In time I will begin to understand our collective images, and this eventually plays out in my work in performance art, and nature.

A new voice opens inside of me. Out of this experience I pursue a degree in counseling, and leave my teaching job, and study with a wonderful woman, a Jungian therapist, Edith Sullwold, who directs Turning Point, a resource for children and families with serious illness. In that work I help people in coma, with cancer, Crone's disease and Lou Gerhrigs disease. I learn a great deal about the psyche. While working in Turning Point I do sand tray work, art therapy and movement work.

Los Angeles, California

Edith has a gathering energy. She drew us into her fold, and work with counseling. I have never met anyone like her. Her ideas came forth spontaneously as she touched the person's images and dreams in their presence. She had a strong academic background and a good logical mind but the work with others was of its own source. The wisdom her audience derived from it was immense. She died and left a legacy in my work with children. She shared with me a vision of the creative heart, and mind. She knew that when given the chance, the creative spirit in each person has a way of teaching the soul how to live from it's true nature. She did her best to have each person trust their work as individuals, and to respect that same quality in others their "otherness". I am forever grateful for her presence in my life, and she is sorely missed. I did a small film of some of her ideas but it cannot touch upon the unique work she did with others as she did this work in person.

My private practice work in counseling helped my work develop in understanding other's images in healing but I did not like being a

therapist. Edith helped me find a way to enter into the healing process so that I did not have to be anything but real and myself but I still wanted to work more in education, and to help what was naturally creative in others, and help nature itself.

As my feelings change around the direction of my work I start to tell myself how I want to work in community, and not just privately. I still want to have that one to one time with people but get out of the business of therapy. It took me years to work into, and out of forms to arrive at my own sense of work in home school education, and the performance work on the river.

In home school education I can counsel, educate, help the natural world, and remain an artist at heart in the process. The personal way each person inhabits his or her frog or bird or piece of the wild feels to me both a personal healing, and collective ritual for healing not just for our selves but nature. In time I can see how the mythic dimension of this work helps construct positive myths to take us into the future rather than the constant dissolution of life we see all around us in some very narrow stories.

Forms are strange. If you do art and make a living as an artist the whole shape of what the identity is begins to define you, and like a well-intended marriage soon the marriage governs the relationship and you are lost as people unless you reclaim your own purpose in relating as individuals in life. I found myself breaking form in the hopes of finding a shape that felt more fitting and fuller.

Leaving an office environment for counseling I begin to work in my garage. Making a puppet set out of cardboard, planting a garden with the children, having a studio space with the adults for huge messes makes practicing in counseling more natural for me. This afternoon baking is what is called for by one child, and food he will finally share with his mother in clear and empowering ways about himself takes the shape of varied Mandalas in pancake form.

The day before, one child washes herself clean in the sprinklers while her cowboy boots fill with water after abuse issues and silence. Another child makes a grave next to my cat that dies right before her appointment. The

grave is for the grandparents who died, and she has been unable express the pain of their death while living in fear during the night.

There are many stories like these, and I feel that the unique outcome is about creating something that did not fit a model of a session of art therapy, not even the materials or place. The casualness of the garage, the unimpressive office, and the fact we could move in and out of many options shapes their own means to express their hardest places.

When I left southern California one of the young people I worked with found several small plastic bottles in the garage piles, and fills them each with a message that she asks I drop along beach as I drive up the coast. Each message is about people loving one another, and peace for the world. She works painstakingly on each note, and spells everything perfectly. She came to me in part for severe learning issues. I took her bottles with me as I travel to the north; leave them along the beaches and cliffs as I head up to begin another life.

Home school Education Santa Cruz, California

Home schooling found me on my doorstep. The phone rings and a woman asks if I do art work with young people, and would I do some independent classes. Ruth came over and talks with me for three hours. I not only taught art for her sprouting program but teach in the school system again but this time I help people home school. I have no idea what home school is about and learn that it is a grassroots movement in education and deep down home school is an attempt to change the path of education.

“Just read some of these books” Ruth Bothne said, and get to know the materials in the resource center. I run my fingers on the books in her house, and could not help but think about my garage; how my home like her home offers an interaction with change in a relaxed, resource filled space. I meet with my families as well as plan things I want to offer, and in time I find a way to combine my love of nature with theater, and visual arts, and healing in The Theater of Restoration. We accomplish a variety of community work to restore tracks of land or a wetland area, build blue bird houses, and we become in touch with what is wild in our own nature and creative spirit.

I continue to meet with each family in their home, and encourage them to come to our center as a base to get materials and to attend some group classes to create a visible community that can interface with one another. In one group class I meet one of my best friends Patrice Vecchione, a fine writer, and teacher while she is teaching poetry to kids before many can read or write. It is the best way to give them language skills. They find their own words, and if they could not write they could dictate to us, and we would write their wonderful images down like eager secretaries.

The paper work got fancier for the state but the students and families still could be themselves. The teachers begin to act as a bridge between the families, and the district policy which allows something still of their own character and way of studying to emerge. As teachers we learn policy, develop methods, and find good ways for them to test or go to college early. We create tools to help them with special needs but the key lies in designing our own criteria based on our population of learners not to follow a standard menu of options.

What I like most about this work is I feel like I am in someone's living room, and often am in his or her homes. The way we set up the center at school, how we relate to the families is like we are at home, and it provides warmth and a sense of place where all could meet. We expand our reach into the school system, and students move in and out of the regular school day taking a class or two, and junior college to take classes on a part time basis. The last two years of high school often are spent not only earning their high school diploma but also getting their associate arts degree from the local junior college.

One boy I work with does not write but he can type, and now has a job doing computer work, in fact he is a highly valued member of the company. He could have been slotted in special education classes all the way through school but instead by working with other means, and methods he is able to develop skills which later transfer to working on a keyboard.

Students find an in road to their own gifts. At times students in home school can be seen as misfits but more often than most they were just the right fit for what is missing in education and in our culture.

I like watching the friendships that develop over time in theater groups, community work or defining projects with other students. A social climate of debate, and inquiry is the mainstay of the work and lots of time for questions rather than just learning answers. Young people have time to develop a conscience not just for themselves but the world around them, and they become visible in the community at large.

Maybe because these students are not thrown into the arena of constant peer pressure, and because they can go into one thing in depth rather than skip over lots of subjects, they have a chance to become forthright, and determined beyond the quick production line of schoolwork. Students need to learn how to compete but in an atmosphere of mutual support, and a chance to live more in shared values, and not personal showmanship for reward.

Nothing is perfect but I feel after fifteen years of working in home school programs and alternatives that this mix and match approach far exceeds what we call public education. I see a chance for young people to become themselves in a trusted space, and not have to go through learning as if it is a task. They learn survival skills, fun, and celebration, and if the program is keenly aware of a larger world outside of a classroom, they can find out how to be in it, and not outside of it. The main core of this kind of approach to education is community building. It is not just a service for people to learn on their own but a way to participate and be involved in the contents of a book while still reading.

It is a shame that districts often try and shape this kind of work by its standards rather than let standards develop out of good work. There is an exchange that can happen between district and alternative programs that is not simply about dealing with at risk students but with supporting parents and students that want to find their way and add to public education. As Thomas Berry has said—the universe is a collection of subjects not an object. His view of the universe is my view of education.

We are in need of a sturdy foundation to stand on nowadays that is both honest, hard working and primarily local in outlook and I think educational movements like home school try and return us back to that kind of building. The home school movement tries to recover what learning is all about; knowledge, not merely facts and career paths, and it comes at a

time when we may die from too much information and not enough earned wisdom.

I watch students grow over the years, and follow a generation or two of students from youth to graduation. It is like being a parent as well as a teacher. It is rewarding, and complete even if the work is never finished. I responded to doing this kind of work because I am an artist at heart. I knew that in art I have to always just work, and find my way. In art it is not a matter of what is sold or not sold; it is a matter of spirit and exercising it in expression. I have to live in a creative model of learning in order to apply this understanding to each child's personal theme, in this way, they have a chance to develop into their own unique content. Context and content are a life long endeavor, and to have a chance to approach this early on in life is invaluable and necessary to survive the image molding culture we offer to young people in general.

Performance Art

My own personal artwork changes from private artist to public work through performance. I still make visual art but what I create relates to themes I develop with the families about the natural world. If we do a performance about frogs, and the wilderness then the imagery is relevant to both the poetry and content of the scripts. I find a context for the content to come alive in, and do group shows with my own work, parents and students. I also do solo shows that I feel take others into what it feels like to be a migrating bird or a small frog. The latest theme I have focused on is "The Heart of Nature." I see the river of life and the river of the land flowing through my body, various species and all that surrounds me. The heart is filled with leaves, or it flows out onto a scene or a tiny bird is resting on the heart or it might be a figure in relation to a leaf or a seed. I feel how we are the body of nature.

In the past I did a series of photos called "Crane Dancers" and I found an old book of Russian ballerinas and juxtaposed them with Sand hill cranes and also migrating snow geese. I feel that if you lose the outer bird you lose the inner dancer. We may even lose the ability to dream the dream of the crane or even know what is appearing in our dreams because they no longer exist in the wild.

Learning, education, therapy, being an artist never works for me by itself, and it is the movement between and within all of them that motivates my work in life. My personal dance movement work as a process in Continuum with Emilie Conrad D'Oud and later in Inner Dance with Val Loeffler is the closest shape shifting form that tracks the process of creating viscerally. It is still my practice today. Landing in home schooling makes this kind of moving like sense since it involves everything at once or one thing deeply over a long period of time that penetrates and expands.

All the performances I do with the community take place out in the natural world in order to draw attention to a particular area needing attention or healing. I have a deep desire to tap resonant images, and metaphors that move others to see their connection to nature, and their own nature in a way that forms union, and not disparity in them.

Often in education there are desperate parts, very little wholeness. I see in therapy too much distance between healer and healing, in art too much product and personal identity and in science the danger of being in a gated community. I want the performances to be about the students conveying their strongest sense of the unknown in the wild, and the magical place where they find the heart of nature, the grace of life, the constant cycles of change and renewal. I want them to find themselves in word and deed.

The attempt to unite art, expression, community, and the natural world made simple sense to me. The studies on a subject through a theme like communion or elemental wisdom keep the study broad enough but also eventually narrows itself down to what is fire, or wind or migration for each person. This effort moves the educational model forward into more specifics, and studies. Drawing from a large variety of materials for reading lets us bounce off of any idea as a starting point for developing the scene for a script, a poem or a song or simply a chant.

Certainly all images come from a collective pool but individually they decide uniqueness. The decision is made when the person sees his own reflection, inspiration, and love in his or her symbol. In this way they are guided to their particular understanding, their own dream, and action in reality. How they are wrought and shaped are from their own individual forces. Often whether we make masks of frogs or shrines of elements did not matter. Everything is always a starting point.

It is always worthwhile in this work to start with a poem, a piece of literature, and a fact about the natural world, and take that into a medium. Some days it might be working with things found in the woods, another it might be making a birdhouse or a backdrop for a scene we have not fully written. Sometimes creating the backdrop makes the scene much clearer as characters or dialogue. There is always a certain amount of trust necessary in doing this work and a certain amount of anxiety since none of us really knows where we are headed. I work sometimes for days on a lesson plan or on a particular theme, provide the materials for a collage or story, but I always know it depends on the input I receive from the group. Who steps into the story out loud influences the others to ignite. To begin to bring an active place in their thinking and feeling alive is wonderful but the beauty is it is not all up to me, and I have to run with the ball along with them.

Home School Education and Charters

Home schooling is a fine medium for performance work and service to the wild. It is a natural way to be in the community rather than be stuck in a building from morning until afternoon. It requires the outside world to relate to young people all through their life. One group of young women put together poems about their lives. I work out the budget, and do some fundraising so that they can have an anthology, "Butterfly Dreaming: Making Our Wings". We do a reading in a local bookstore and it is the first time they sell books of students like this and hold a collaborative reading for an event at the bookstore; usually it's just a single author. People crowd around and hear poems about anorexia, parenting, friendship, first love, hopes, fears and it is an exciting evening. Some of the young women have already graduated and inspire the young girls who are still in school as they share the stage with them, and share their work together.

Education must be more engaged in life for it to survive, and for students to thrive. Districts are losing funds, education is often not addressing the issues of our time, and communities are not involved with their young people. Charters are being formed with whole districts being under them, part time school and part time home schools are sharing campus life in colleges, and more of this needs to happen. More city and junior colleges along with universities have to open their doors to home schoolers. Charters need to exist on these campus sites, and not just in public

school buildings. We waste more money on maintaining terrible facilities rather than make smaller beehives all over the community where students can meet and work next to factories, on campus, by natural history museums. I do not necessarily feel we need the prison-like buildings that shuffle students, and teachers from room to room. We need better facilities but not necessarily in the form of a school building.

River Work

When I leave California and move to the Gila Valley in New Mexico I work within two environmental groups UGWA and GCC. My focus is on the river and the migrating songbirds, and sand hill cranes. There are many issues surrounding the last un-dammed river in the southwest. I work with another woman Allyson Siwik to create the first annual Gila River Festival. We put our skills together to create an event that combines the arts, culture and science. We gather two hundred volunteers, and make enough funds to break even and get issues, ideas, and feelings about the river reach about four hundred people. I personally formed a reader's theater group that both writes, read poems and stories on the theme "River Voices and River Bodies". Children, Spanish speakers, rap artists offer material that enhance this theme. We have movement and music at the readings. We also have an invitational art show on the river and proceeds from the show help fund the groups working to educate others about the flood plain and its health, and the value of the wild river. This is followed by another performance the following year, "Along the Banks" and portrays life and people along the banks of the river. We have flood stories, baptism, death, frogs, herons, and fishing, come to life along the banks.

I see performance now as a community healing ritual and the progression for me from one on one with our inner and outer nature in therapy to working with one metaphor deeply as a collective group for a period of time for me evokes a creative process of healing, and not just each person's voice but a group voice. It is also about service, creativity and what people now consider eco-psychology.

It is never easy being the token artist when there are causes at hand in conservation, and science to save a river but art is often the mediating force, the glue that brings both meaning and soul to what we are all trying to save or help. The artist can seem insubstantial in a meaty

debate about issues but if you sit there long enough you will find you are essential.

Closing

I hope some of these ideas and experiences of my life, and work forms interesting ways to see art, education, performance, and service to the wild. I have a guide that offers exercises and poems for each one of the performance pieces we did over several years, "Bringing Nature to Life" it focuses mostly on performance art to help the natural world but describes some of the work done with young women, and references for developing your own stories. I also completed a second guide about the river entitled "Riverworks," consisting of four performances with exercises and poems for each section.

I am available for speaking, consultation, and residency work on community arts or performance art projects and like working with other communities. I can be contacted at hearth@cruzio.com.