

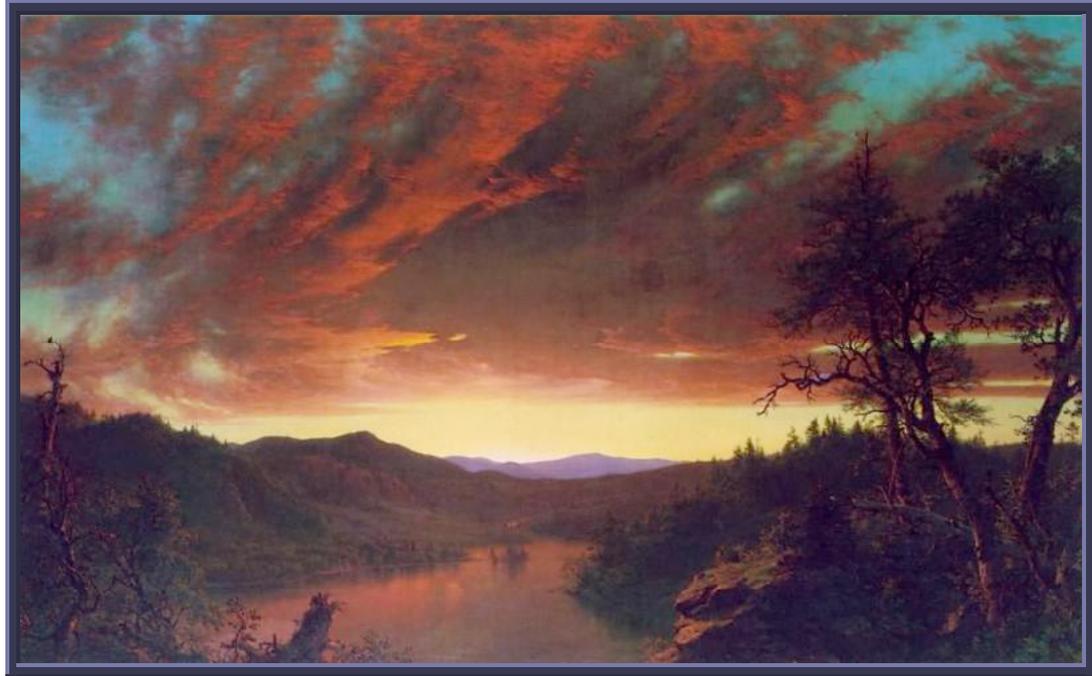
# The Earth is Our First Teacher: Discovering Language and Place

By: Rebecca Chamberlain

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*Twilight in the Wilderness*

Frederic Edwin Church, 1860

*When we can understand the animals, we will know the change is halfway. When we can talk to the forest, we will know that the change has come.*

--Andrew Joe, Skagit (Clark 141)

## **The Great Change:**

Elders, like Andrew Joe from the Northwest, have generously shared language, stories, and teachings from the earth. They know that from time to time, the earth has gone through great changes. From the time when “Mountains Were People,” to stories of the tree-people, animal-people, salmon-people, and bird-people, to the great change or “shimmering--” where myth-time ends and our present world begins--there is a meeting between imagination, language, and the natural world. The creatures around us are speaking—the earth is teaching—but do we have the ability to listen?

We are all aware of our earth’s ecological troubles. Many of us grieve the loss of species due to our human activities. Most of us value nature and an ecologically sustainable environment and work on ways to solve this problem, yet we often feel depressed, hopeless, and guilty about the ways we still contribute to it. This touches us deeply on the psychological and spiritual level. What can we do to respond to the challenges we face? What is the relationship between psyche and nature? How do shifts in language and perception affect our view of nature? How can we reactivate our primary bond with the natural world, so the earth is indeed, our first teacher?

For many years, Pauline Hillaire, Lummi Elder, and I have taught courses together in environmental and cultural education. Through traditional stories, songs, teachings—and through

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our work as writers, storytellers, and naturalists, we ask, “What does it mean when the elder’s say the earth is our first teacher?” Pauline says, “How does one even begin to address this? It is so comprehensive—it includes every part of life!” When we try, modern people often feel severed from the past, from the earth, and from traditional teachings. How do we recover a sense of intimacy with the earth?

Young Chief, of the Cayuse, objected when Governor Stevens insisted that Native tribes sell their land at the Walla Walla Council of 1855. He invokes the ground he stands on—a living being--the source of life. He asks if the earth has anything to say concerning these events.

I wonder if the ground has anything to say?  
I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said? ...  
...I hear what the ground says...  
The ground says “It is the Great Spirit that has placed me here...”  
The ground, water, and grass say,  
“the Great Spirit has given us our names.  
We have these names and hold these names.  
Neither the Indians or whites have a right to change these names.”  
The ground says... “It was from me man was made...” (Kip,1855)

Young Chief acknowledges an ancient compact that Indigenous people share with the earth. Who--better than the earth—could bear witness to the changes forced on the land and indigenous people during the turbulent events and treaty signings of the nineteenth century?

Today the earth again faces great change: global warming, expanding global markets, new technologies. We are caught in the web of our political policies, and the effects of our industrial society. Still, it is the living earth that bears witness to our lives.

## **Hearing the Voices Of the Earth:**

A few years before Young Chief delivered his speech, a young Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, was writing at Walden Pond. He was spell-bound by the voices and choruses of the land, and he delighted in discovering the patterns and connections between living things. He said, “No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly...The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit...The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit--not a fossil earth, but a living earth...” (“Walden” 288-290)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a few miles from Thoreau, in Concord, also felt that nature was his teacher. He says, Nature gives us the “...sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited. (It) educate(s) both the Understanding and the Reason...Every property of matter is a school for the understanding...” (“Nature” 19) To Emerson, education from the natural world is not about finding answers, but asking questions; not about empirical knowledge, but about imagination and discovery. “...The best read naturalist who lend an entire and devout attention to truth, will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility.” (34)

To Emerson, “Nature is the symbol of spirit.” The symbolic power of language is based in its relationship to the land. He says, “The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history; the use of the outer creation, to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation. (13)...All spiritual facts are represented as natural symbols. The same symbols are

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found to make the original elements of all languages. This immediate dependence of language upon nature...never loses its power to affect us. (15)

How did we get to the point in our thinking that we give the earth no voice? Philosopher, David Abraham, continues to explore the relationship between language, consciousness, and nature. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, he explains how language evolves from the interconnected relationships between humans and the “more than human” world.

If human discourse is experienced by indigenous, oral peoples to be participant with the speech of birds, of wolves, and even of the wind, how could it ever have become severed from that vaster life? How could we ever have become so deaf to these other voices that nonhuman nature now seems to stand mute and dumb, devoid of any meaning besides that which we choose to give it?

If perception, in its depths, is truly participatory, why do we not experience the rest of the world as animate and alive? If our own language is truly dependent upon the existence of other, nonhuman voices, why do we now experience language as an exclusively human property or possession (91)?

Our modern consciousness is divided. Many people feel conflicted, alienated, and alone. Globally and nationally, we see the effects of cultural and economic wars. On the one hand, indigenous peoples, mystics, natural history writers, environmental philosophers, and thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau, advocate for a deep connection with the earth. On the other hand, global development, colonialism, manifest destiny, corporate and industrial policies, and other exploitive aspects of the Western tradition threaten our future. Our curiosity and spiritual longing is diminished by an intellectual tradition that values analytical thought over creativity --and standardized education over the arts, imagination, and experiential learning.

The trend to exploit the world around us is seen by some as part of human nature. However, this clear separation of humans from a relationship to the earth as first teacher can be traced back to Socrates (as well as other influences) who says, “...I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do” (Abram 102). The policies that evolved from this kind of thinking— disregarding the earth and cultures that live close to the land—have resulted in exploitation and deep philosophical divisions.

Emerson, Thoreau, and the other Transcendentalists were writing to an American audience that was deeply divided prior to the Civil War. They took on the social and cultural issues of their time, recognizing that policies of colonialism (expansionism), racism (slavery), and sexism (women’s suffrage) were unacceptable. They also understood that the economic shortsightedness of the American marketplace was unsustainable. As Thoreau says, “a culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man, --a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, (is) a civilization destined to have a speedy limit” (“Walking” 655).

Elsewhere he writes, “What’s the use of a fine house if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on” (20 May 1860)? “...Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forests and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape and make it more and more tame and cheap. A people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand! (“Walking” 632-633).

As Thoreau suggests, we must get back to our source. A walk in the woods or a pilgrimage into nature restores us. However, we rarely have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in nature with the sustained awareness of indigenous people. Though we have lost much of our natural sensitivity to the natural world, when we spend time in nature our senses

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become open and balanced. Sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, and intuition begin working together to interpret the multiple voices of living things: animals, insects, birds, the rustle of leaves and trees, the howl of wind and storm, the laughing voice of a creek, a booming crack of thunder, shale sliding down a mountain slope, bees humming in summer. Slowly we become grounded in our bodies, and are open to nature's mystery. Thoreau says that we feel most alive when we experience the wild. "In wilderness is the preservation of the world" (644).

Though literacy, technology, and other tools can supplement our ordinary perceptions, we can't mediate direct experience of the wild through books, media, or other artifacts of modern culture. In order to understand nature intimately, we need to experience it directly.

## **Stories and Education:**

In indigenous cultures, it is often the person who has learned directly from the land who becomes a strong community leader. Songs, stories, dreams, language and teachings all emanate from relationship to the earth. There is a sense that when the earth speaks, we are responsible to it. Those who have the capacity to listen to the voices of the earth are able to engage cooperatively for the good of all beings.

Oral storytelling, along with song and ritual, is an ancient medium that connects people to each other and the places they live, bringing to life the varied voices of the landscape. Myth-telling invokes multiple senses and gives people heightened awareness of both inner and outer worlds. It explores both the past and the present--giving meaning to and shaping our lives.

Vi Hilbert (*taq'šəblu?*), Upper Skagit elder, shares Lushootseed stories and language that hold ancient, residual knowledge of the earth's teachings. She encourages people of all backgrounds to remember and tell traditional stories, and often shares her belief that as legends are told, they educate us. She both challenges and gives people freedom to think for themselves; to look deeply into the stories and decode their symbolic meanings. She says, "Stories are the elders way of teaching." Her definition of *s'əyəhub* (Legend/Myth/ Story) explores the relationship between humans, myth, and nature. Without the stories, how would we learn to conduct ourselves on the earth? She says:

*taslaḵdub ʔə kʷi tuyəlyəlab tiʔə? s'əyəhub tuʔal tudi? tuhaʔkʷ, yəxi liʔal s'əyəhub  
tiʔə?gʷədəxʷəshaydubs ʔə kʷi ləʔəḵ ʔaciʔtalbixʷ tuʔcad əlgʷə, ʔəscəl kʷi ʔusqʷibil ʔə  
tiʔə? sgʷaʔs swatixʷtəds,ʔəscəl kʷi gʷəsəshuys ʔal tiʔə? suʔibušs ʔal tiʔə? swatixʷtəd.*

Our ancestors remembered these old stories from a long time ago, because the legends were what carried the teachings, that coming generations would know where they were from, how their earth was prepared, how they should conduct themselves as they walked on the earth (33).

It is essential that stories and traditions--that contain intimate knowledge of the natural world—are passed on to each generation. In our fast-paced, consumer society—few children have the opportunity to bond to nature. Richard Louv, in *The Last Child in the Woods* speaks of a kind of nature deficit disorder—a developmental dysfunction that occurs when children no longer have the freedom to explore nature, let alone learn the lessons the earth has to teach them.

Edith Cobb speaks of the ecology of the imagination. Nature is endlessly varied and compelling. Her research shows how children, who explore and interpret its complex interactions and connections through unstructured play, and through their own observations, tend to be more flexible and creative (Louv 93).

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Maria Montessori devoted her life to developing holistic education. She recognized that it had to include all aspects of the child's potential—and had to be connected to the earth and cosmos.

The stars, earth, stones, life of all kinds form a whole in relation with each other, and so close is this relation that we cannot understand a stone without some understanding of the great sun. No matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe. The laws governing the universe can be made interesting and wonderful to children, more interesting even than things in themselves, and they begin to ask: What am I? What is the task of humanity in this wonderful Universe? (Swimme 1996)

Today it is more important than ever for students to be grounded and connected imaginatively to the world that is evolving around them. Whether they become storytellers, poets, philosophers, psychologists, physicists, or environmental scientists shaping policy or solving global-warming, respect for the earth as our first teacher prepares them for the important work of the twenty-first century. Contemporary education cannot just teach young people to compete in new economic and technological markets, without also engaging them with meaningful stories and direct experiences with nature. Otherwise they will be severed from their root.

Brian Swimme, Ph.D in Astrophysics and Mathematics, uses his knowledge astronomy and cosmology to tell the universe story. He believes that our imagination and intellect must engage with both science and storytelling in order to discover the meaning of our place in the universe.

One of the most essential tasks of education is to teach the sense of the whole. With a sense of the whole, which can also be called a cosmic sense, a person can see how all the strands of life are part of a greater fabric, and how the details of one's own life have a significance that reaches out to include one's community of life and even the entire planet. (1996)

Albert Einstein chafed at the boundaries of standard education, and expressed his need for imaginative reflection. He must have understood that the earth was his first teacher when he said, "Look deep, deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better (*Nature*). Our task must be to free ourselves... by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty" (*Compassion*).

## **The Flesh of Life:**

It's not enough to study nature objectively. We must recover intimacy with the natural world if we are to understand what it means for the earth to be our first teacher. This is as important for modern scientists as it is for political and spiritual leaders. We must remember, as Walt Whitman reminds us, that we are the very flesh of nature.

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*We are nature, long have we been absent, but now we return,  
We become plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark,  
We are bedded in the ground, we are rocks,  
We are oaks, we grow in the openings side by side...  
We are what the atmosphere is, transparent, receptive, pervious, impervious,  
We are snow, rain, cold, darkness, we are each product and influence of the globe, We have  
circled and circled till we have arrived home again, we two,  
We have voided all the freedom and all but our own joy.*

(“We Two”)

A Carrier Indian recognized this intimacy with nature when he told Diamond Jenness, that in old times, people married into animal tribes. Men learned from their animal wives. They didn’t store knowledge in books; they lived it.

We know what the animals do, what are the needs of the beaver, the bear, the salmon, and other creatures, because long ago men married them and acquired this knowledge from their animal wives. Today the priests say we lie, but we know better. The white man has been only a short time in this country and knows very little about the animals; we have lived here thousands of years and were taught long ago by the animals themselves. The white man writes everything down in a book so that it will not be forgotten; but our ancestors married animals, learned all their ways, and passed on this knowledge from one generation to another” (Abraham132).

My sisters and I had a childhood rich in discovery of the natural world. Growing up on Whidbey Island, we roamed the forests and beaches with freedom that is rarely given to children today. Beginning at twilight, we were on quests that led us bush-whacking along deer trails, wandering tide-swept beaches, and sleeping under the summer stars. We played with four varieties of snakes, a number of species of frogs, and we made medicinal “remedies” from bracken-fern and Douglas fir pitch. We regularly saw seals, sea lions, salmon, and dogfish.

The beach we grew up on is called Indian Point, on Honeymoon Bay, in Homes Harbor. It is where the Skagit Indians set up summer hunting camps. When I first met Vi Hilbert, I told her about the beach. She said, “The spirits of my ancestors were teaching you as you were growing up.” My family and I believe this to be true. Each of us has stories about how we’ve been touched by this place.

One stormy Thanksgiving, an hour after dinner, my sister Bonny and I begged to go to the beach. Our Father gave his permission, explaining to the surprised guests that we were part “polar bear.” Before long, we were wildly bouncing over large waves on inner-tubes, laughing in the wind and frigid water. Our guardian, Mrs. Plants, waved us back to the beach—just as a pod of Orcas passed the area we were swimming. We stood on the beach, watching the Orcas frisk by. We could practically feel the blast of their breath when they breached twenty feet away.

The exhilaration and wonder of this adventure is indelibly etched on our lives. Though we have different ways of expressing it, these kinds of experiences gave us a sense of personal competence, and of belonging to great mystery. Yet I wonder how many children today could have such an experience?

Most children, or their parents, live with chronic fear for their safety. There are threats of abductions, legal implications, and safety concerns. There are new rules and restrictions in our civil society. Remote forests and beaches have become private developments. Parents are so vigilant about their children’s well-being, that most of them haven’t had the opportunity to be

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exposed to nettles, thistles, cold, and other minor discomforts that we accepted, adapted to, and even “cultivated.”

The other day, I was talking to a talented young girl who was a self-proclaimed “video-gamer.” She told me that more than anything, she would rather be indoors playing videos, such as “Masters of War,” where she gets a bounty for the animals and enemies she kills, and earns points to raise her rank and status. I asked her, “Isn’t that mean?” She said, “No, it’s educational.” Depends on what kind of education you’re going for. I’d love to see her on an outdoor adventure.

I don’t speak nostalgically of the past. I believe that nature’s magic is available to the children of each generation. If we approach the earth humbly and respectfully, we will hear its voice.

Thoreau speaks of a remarkable November sunset that lit a meadow with such brilliance that it turned a drab day into paradise. It was the kind of light that can “shine into your minds and hearts, and light up our lives with a great awakening light.” He said, “this was not a solitary phenomenon, never to happen again, but...would happen forever and ever an infinite number of evenings, and cheer and reassure the latest child that walked there, more glorious still” (“Walking” 663).

There is great power in our past and in our future. The earth is generous, and always renewing itself. To experience it we need to be alive to each moment. We have to remember, and tell stories that bring the world to life around us. We have to be willing to swim with Orcas, and to “marry into” plant and animal tribes. When this happens, we will once again know what the elders mean when they say, “the earth is our first teacher.” And like Andrew Joe says, the great change will have come.

*When we can understand the animals, we will know the change is halfway. When we can talk to the forest, we will know that the change has come.*



*Flight of the Eagle* (1856).

Robert S. Duncanson, African American Painter (1821-1872)

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