

## What if Teaching Went Wild?

Anthony Weston  
*Elon University*

### I

Officially we acknowledge that of course we are animals, that of course we are living beings among other forms of life on a vast and still largely unknown planet, and therefore that of course we are putting ourselves as well as much of the rest of the living world in danger as we appropriate and consume more and more of that world for our own ends. Whether we actually believe or feel any of these things in our heart of hearts, however, is quite another thing. Many environmental thinkers have argued that by and large we still do not.<sup>1</sup> In the philosophical and religious tradition, think for instance of the pervasive influence of Platonism and Christian Neo-Platonism, according to which true reality is perfect and unchanging, and “this” world (with the word “this” always a form of derogation) by contrast deficient, degenerate and degenerating, unreliable and ultimately unreal. It is of the very essence of God—of sacredness, divinity, intrinsic value, say it how you will—to transcend “this” world. The implications are drawn very clearly in the old church-camp song:

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through.  
 My treasures are stored up somewhere beyond the blue.  
 The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door,  
 and I can't feel at home in this world anymore!

Or think of how automatically we use the word “animal” to mean *other* animals—how natural it still seems to be to speak of “humans” and “animals” in the sense of humans *versus* (other) animals. A roomful of adults, directly asked “Are you animals?,” knows the right answer, but most young children, up through elementary ages, deny it. I think the children are truer to the underlying cultural messages. This world is *not* our home; we are not really animals; and what goes around... well, goes *away*, and will not come back to haunt us.

Consider also how thoroughly humanized are most of the spaces in which we live and work.<sup>2</sup> Few other creatures show up in them, except maybe a few potted plants or a very limited range of thoroughly domesticated animals. The shape of those spaces itself has been rigorously geometrized, unlike the more organic shapes of natural things and spaces, and often highly simplified (blank walls, square rooms). “Our” spaces are also usually and insistently filled with wholly human sounds (radio, TV, sometimes even our own voices). The result of all of this is to convey, perhaps again primarily subliminally, a sense of the world itself as profoundly human-centered. What lies outside this cocoon is “coded” (as anthropologists would put it) as insignificant, and probably vaguely threatening too. Young children are again a good indicator: the darkness and quiet of the night, for instance, once a kind of vast and soothing entry into more-than-human realities, has been so insistently eradicated that many children now are unable to sleep without a light or without TV or radio in the background (increasingly this is also true of many adults) and are uneasy, or worse, in the possible company of wild animals.

Given these views of our place in the world, it is no surprise that we have come to the cusp of environmental crisis. A civilization committed to disconnection, whose denizens deny their own animality, who do not see themselves as part of larger living systems, who do not know in their bones that what “goes around” will eventually come *back*, is likely to end up in trouble sooner or later, probably sooner. It is this sense of disconnection that makes it possible for us to so ruthlessly exploit Earth, this that reassures us (again, often below the cognitive level, on a level more unspoken and visceral) that we ourselves are not threatened by the degradation of larger living systems. It is otherwise an almost inexplicable fact that we are so willing to foul our own nest: it seems that only a basic refusal of acknowledgement that it *is* our “nest” could explain it. Indeed I would argue that, considered philosophically, this insistent kind of felt disconnection is not the root of environmental crisis but, most fundamentally, is the very crisis itself.

## II

All of this sets a clear agenda for change. We must rediscover ourselves in connection with the rest of Earth: we must reacknowledge ourselves as animals, come to feel ourselves as parts of larger living systems after all. The task of environmental education, then, very broadly speaking is to address our disconnection, reverse it, to re-situate us, to welcome us home.<sup>3</sup> That is the urgent agenda.

The practical question is: how? But this question, it seems, usually does not detain us for long. We all know how teaching is supposed to go. An Environmental Education movement is already well underway—there is even a thirty year old academic journal in the area—and there are model curricula, standard courses, and reams of course materials. The usual courses offer thorough introductions and in-depth explorations of many aspects of the ecological crisis, along with good doses of natural history, evolution, maybe even local ecology projects. It may well seem that environmental education has (already) “arrived.”

But there are reasons for worry. Much of this I have spelled out in another place, so I offer only the briefest summary here. The implicit general model of education in environmental education, as in most areas of education—almost always just assumed without question, just taken for granted—is what the critical philosopher Paulo Freire archly labelled the “banking” model, or what is colloquially dubbed the “mug and jug.” Teaching is supposed to be information-transmission; the teacher is transmitter; talking is the primary mode—usually the only mode in fact. One way or the other, we *tell* students that they belong to the Earth. We aim to fill them up with information that backs up this point. All of this is done honorably, often admirably well, and on an increasingly large scale. And (we might well ask) that is what teaching *is*, is not it?

That all of this has its critics is well known to philosophers of education. Critics such as Freire, John Holt, Ivan Illich, and many others have assailed its essential passivizing and disempowerment of students, and its reduction of life to “information.”<sup>4</sup> Much of the criticism can be linked to analogous though less dramatically-made points in John Dewey’s philosophy of education, especially Dewey’s insistence on the necessity of active learning and the urgency of integrating school/

learning and life, rather than separating school from what he called the “great common world” either physically or intellectually.<sup>5</sup> All of these criticisms apply to environmental education on the standard model just as much as to any other kind of education. In fact, some of the critiques arguably apply even more strongly to environmental education than in many other cases. After all, for one thing, environmental education is about *nature*, and therefore archetypally is about the “great common [not just human] world,” so that to try to teach *this*, of all things, in the classroom, as another book subject in its own separate curricular and thoroughly human-centered architectural niche, is (to adapt a line of Dewey’s) to make the very place where children are sent to discover the Earth the one place in the world where the Earth barely shows up at all. One of my students recently put it poignantly: “Our current system does not emphasize our connection to the natural world. We are supposed to read about natural wonders, but at the same time are discouraged from experiencing them.”

Some years ago my friend Bob Jickling set up a conference on “Environment, Ethics, and Education” at Yukon College in Whitehorse, Yukon. In the lovely Canadian spirit of acknowledgement of indigenous First Nations, the event opened with a morning-long visit by a number of local tribal elders, speaking of how they teach their own young. In discussion a member of the audience asked about the possibility of elders coming into the schools to speak of these things. The general response was that it did and would not work. The setting was too artificial—neither elders nor students felt (or were!) at home; the students “asked too many questions,” they did not know how to listen (to their elders, to each other, to themselves, to the birds); and, most crucially, students could not join any ongoing work (the hunt, food preparation, celebration) in the context of which real learning could take place. Everything was reduced to an episodic encounter or “presentation,” and to words. And none of this is surprising. School *is* an artificial setting; talking and presenting and questioning are its favorite methods; ongoing work has no place there. The elders, in their typically understated way, were therefore telling us that our schools cannot teach love for the Earth. Not because we cannot make the words part of the curriculum, but because precisely by doing so we obscure and undercut what the words actually mean. The worry (to put it generally) is that importing the usual modes of teaching into environmental education risks reproducing the very disconnection from the larger world that was the problem in the first place.

In environmental education there is an additional problem, familiar to all of us. Naturally the most accessible kinds of information, the most teachable as well as the most “newsworthy,” and the stock-in-trade of every activist desperate to shock the rest of us into response, is information about dangers and disasters. Just think of how the environment (perhaps we need to say *The Environment*) usually shows up in the media: massive fish kills here, air pollution there, radioactive power plant wastes, global warming, more endangered species on the brink, and on and on. The net effect of piling up more and more of this sort of information about ecological crises is, ultimately, to overwhelm us, perhaps young people—students—especially. Early on we tell them (my third grader for example already knows it very well) that the world they are inheriting is diminished, dirty, in danger. Again and again we drive

the point home. I find that today's college students are the best-informed I have ever known about environmental dangers. They are also the most deeply pessimistic: numbed, evasive, despondent. This too, I am afraid, is a product of doing all too good a job of (a certain kind of) environmental education. I take it that it is also not a good thing.

### III

These thoughts naturally leave us confused and discouraged. If it is true that environmental education, after all a natural and well-intentioned response to a serious crisis, turns out to be ineffective at best and maybe self-defeating as well—what then?

I have argued in other places that there are constructive and indeed enormously appealing ways to reconceive education as a whole, and environmental education in particular. The general idea is that the real work lies at the level of social “reconstruction”: that is, the social context of school itself needs to be rethought and rebuilt, so that school's tasks and projects fit naturally into the “great common world,” so that they join a larger dynamic that gives them purpose and appeal. For a spectacularly prosaic but very useful analogy, think of Driver's Education in American high schools now—one of the few classes that students are truly eager to take, because driving manifestly enables them to take their place in a larger personal and social practice, shared by parents and peers, already familiar in all manner of ways, and a practice that further enables their own growing independence and adulthood. Ironically enough (as it may seem) this could be a model for environmental education as well. Looked at from this point of view, I propose, the task not so much of environmental educators per se but of all environmentally-concerned citizens is to create the kinds of larger social/environmental practices and meanings that will make specific kinds of environmental learning—the specific sorts of things schools actually are good at—compelling and attractive in the same ways. Imagine for instance a society that celebrated the passing of the first warblers, say—or hawks or salmon or whales—or that like the Audubon Society did a one-day annual bird count, everyone out listening and looking, or maybe turned out all the lights once a month to watch the stars or the latest comet. Such a society, for one thing, would engage “nature” first in the mode of celebration and connectedness rather than in unease or fear or distance. Moreover, and crucially for education, such a society invites “environmental education” almost as a rite of passage, a way of taking part in the great flow of life and its associated festivals. School cannot create environmental consciousness out of whole cloth: *that* is a matter of remaking the whole society, and it is then within *this* that school finds a role—a limited role, but correspondingly a role that it can effectively fulfill.

Still, this is a long-term vision, not a story that offers much to those of us who want to teach right now. At least in the short run, most of us teach (and philosophize about teaching) in the normal settings: that is, inside, and usually inside buildings made specifically for teaching purposes; with a large number of people, usually younger, led by one or a few older people through something like a “curriculum.” School and society are what they are, and unless we pull out of them entirely, this is still the setting within which we must work for change.

My aim in this essay, then, is to speak to this very setting. I do not believe that we are reduced to just making the usual motions. The question I wish to pose is: can teaching “go wild” *here*, even in this least promising of settings? A certain amount of the traditional information is no doubt necessary. But what else? Rather than abandoning the usual, how could we really push its envelope?

The answer I propose is that even in so thoroughly humanized and academic a setting as a classroom—or even (God forbid) a professional convention—we can work toward and embody a radically different practice and philosophy of (environmental) education. Even—and maybe to some degree especially—within the conventional spaces and modes of teaching, it is still possible to unsettle our deep-felt sense of disconnection from the world, and to begin to reconnect. Much else must be done to really come “back to Earth,” of course, but I will argue that even in the conventional spaces we can make a constructive contribution to this process after all. And the same may also be true in reverse. It may just be that environmental education in this wilder key can open up unsuspected possibilities for conventional classrooms and methods generally. At any rate, I now want to propose some very specific and practical teaching strategies along these lines for your consideration.

#### IV

Wherever we are, first of all, there we are. Even when the astronauts leave Earth, they take not only the air and the water and the fire with them, but also, crucially and inevitably, themselves. Maybe our search for wildness should start right here: with our very own selves.

The very first challenge, then, odd as it may be to say it this way, is to notice that *we ourselves are actually present*, inevitably, in body as well as mind—or rather, as my Eastern colleagues would say, as body/mind, one integrated being. It is the body part that is all too often forgotten. Officially, in classrooms, we are supposed to be just minds, after all; the body fades away, becomes mere background, maybe at times a minor annoyance, but if it emerges into attention it can only be as distraction or embarrassment. Correspondingly, though, I want to suggest that bringing the body back into the picture creates just the right mix of discomfort and provocation to serve our pedagogical purpose.

It is not hard to do, in actual practice. By way of beginning I ask a class or audience to form small groups of three or four. Then, as soon as the chairs are all moved and people have settled in with each other, I ask them to pack themselves—the same group—into half the space. Get people to push right up next to each other, practically on top of each other, inside the usual cultural “personal space”—at least enough to genuinely become aware of others as bodies, after all: as animals, as embodied beings.

Now I ask each person to look closely at their own hands. With my Critical Thinking classes I make this a ten or fifteen minute project, all by itself, and even ask students to write a report. For present purposes, a few minutes are enough—enough to notice the pores, the skin cells, indeed the skin itself as one vast, supple organ; the scars that tell stories of the past; the mechanics of the hand, like its grasping function and the famous opposable thumbs; the webbing between the

fingers that recalls our kinship with the ducks; the hair that recalls our kinship with the apes. Lest anyone miss that last message, in the background I project some images of ape hands compared to humans, or little lizard feet. Finally, I ask people to look at *each other's* hands in the same way—and again to take some time with this. The contrast between hands is often fairly striking, and is one way for people to notice things about their own hands that otherwise are so familiar that we take them for granted: the uniqueness of the shape and length and orientation of the fingers, maybe, or the individuality and complexity of the lines in our palms.

Even this simplest of little projects, I find, perceptibly changes the feeling of the room, already loosens up and gives shape to a new kind of energy. A context in which animality is acknowledged and welcomed seems also to be more comfortable, both intellectually and also literally, physically. And something else remarkable has happened too. People are actually *holding hands*. In younger classes there may be a certain amount of tittering about this (though far less than if you directly ask them to hold hands—this way of doing it leads them into it before the usual defenses and categories kick in), but it seldom lasts long. In older audiences I sometimes wonder out loud whether some of the people present may have known each other for years, but without once ever touching, at least in this sort of deliberate but simply “present” way. It is a lovely new dimension. In any case what tends to grow on people, younger or older, as they sit and continue to hold hands, are the basic animal things: warmth, first of all, and pulse. The warmth of another live, animal being. Pulse in turn leads to thought of the animality of rhythm itself—of how fundamental is the heartbeat, say, to the ways we feel music in our bodies. An old choral teacher of mine told me once that the monks and boychoirs who sang the earliest polyphony kept time by, well, holding hands. In this way they apparently managed to synchronize their heartbeats, and then could keep absolutely precisely to the beat of the music. This may also explain why so much of that music is sung *andante*, about sixty beats per minute. Think of the beat of the drums at Native American dances: it too is the pulse, the very heartbeat of the dancers.

Enough of this, perhaps: now let people let go of others' hands, pull their seats a little bit apart. Even so there is a remembrance of embodiment that remains, something people carry away and think about. A number of students over the years have told me how much “the hand thing” meant to them: both looking at their own hands, and others', and recognizing the similarities to non-human hands; and also holding others' hands, in a way quite different than the one or two ways in which our culture allows people their age to hold hands now. Indeed, I suspect that touching like this is taboo in our culture partly precisely because we are reluctant to acknowledge our own animality (and/or that we have so reductive a view of animality that turns it all into sexuality, and a insistent reduced sexuality at that). Many things, it seems, may be usefully and memorably unsettled here.

## V

Of course we do need more than ourselves to “go wild.” Soon enough we need the presence of the more-than-human world. Here again certain means of subversion and reversal are ready at hand.

The first of these is very simple: open the blinds, and whenever possible, open the windows. Do this in a dramatic way, noting as you do it that it is peculiar that we are asked to teach and learn about the natural world in spaces more and more cut off from it. I am constantly struck by how inattentive we are to the structure of physical space generally, and, as teachers, to classroom space. A visiting Martian anthropologist would surely be amazed by our practice of teaching young people about their belonging to the world in rooms that are as enthusiastically as possible sealed off from anything but themselves, even to the extent of keeping the blinds closed and windows shut—if we are so lucky as to have windows at all. Since we do seem to have this practice, however, we can at least take it as an opportunity for a persistent, explicit, and dramatic challenge. “Silhouette” the usual practice, as it were, instead of letting it recede into the taken-for-granted background, and hence make it a subject of critical thinking itself. Open the windows, in short, and talk about it.

Teaching outside is a natural next step. This usually takes more work. “Going outside” on campus depends on suitable spaces. As every teacher knows, just sitting in the grass on the Quad tends to lead to very entropic classes. The space has no natural focus, friends and other students are always walking by, and classes tend to drift into passivity and distraction. These are all remediable problems, however: what we really need are more workable outdoor classrooms. After some years of agitation, some of my students and I have succeeded in persuading our administrators to build an outdoor amphitheater (possibly two) specifically for teaching purposes: built into a hill partly below ground level, well-shielded from passers-by, seating in semi-circles so that the space focuses the mind rather than distracts. Outdoor space also has a “shape” and can be attended to for learning or other purposes. At Elon we also have access to a former church-camp “Lodge” and twenty-acre wooded grounds about a mile from campus, to which classes can bicycle or drive (with only ten minutes between classes, walking both ways takes too much class time), either on the spur of the moment or by prearrangement.

Back in the classroom, hopefully with natural light and air, I propose that we need more “natural” things around us. I have formed the habit of picking up little rocks or other small tokens (striking twig formations, feathers, sometimes the skull of a bird or small mammal that places itself in my path) from the mountains or woods or shores I visit. These surround me now at my desk: others are in my car, others my children inherit. The contrast to all the other artifacts around me always provokes a useful remembrance. My pens and keyboard and journals bear the signs of artifactuality: they are simple, geometrically regular, have a history that I know and that I knowingly live within. My little rocks and crow skulls and trilobite fossils speak of other things. The rocks speak for example of tectonic upheavals and volcanism, eons of water and ice and fire. Their shapes are not human-made, their histories are measured in millions of years, not industrial or manufacturing half-lives.

So I take rocks or other such items into my classrooms. Often I offer each student such a token. Perhaps a small rock from the nearby beach, as I also did for everyone who attended my talk at the Philosophy of Education Society conference. Bring in a variety and let people pick those that call to them. Then invite them to think about

maybe even to investigate that rock's history. What is it made of, how and when was it formed. Ideally, then, even this littlest of things becomes a link to a much bigger history, a much bigger story, a visible, ever-present, almost ritual reminder that the Earth is bigger than we are, that we live at the intersection of vastly different kinds of stories.

I have a small meteorite that I sometimes carry around with me too. To me it represents a sort of "next step" in this thinking-through-rocks, framing even the ancient stories of Earth's rocks in terms of still longer and larger stories. Since Earth is geologically a live planet, almost all terrestrial rocks are much younger than Earth's full age, 4.5 billion years or so: they have been melted and crushed and remelted, maybe many times. Meteorites, by contrast, are virtually timeless. Some come from the Moon or Mars, which are not geologically active but once were, so their rocks are roughly contemporaneous with the older of Earth's rocks. Most, however, come from the asteroids, which were almost always too small to be geologically active, and so date back to the very beginning of the solar system itself. Here, I hold in my hand a 4.5 billion year old rock. In fact, certain very rare and precious meteorites may come from comets captured by our sun but originating in *other* solar systems, in the coalescence of gas from other supernovas—so they are the only physical material we have, that we can hold in our hands, that may be older than Earth and our solar system itself.

On the other end of the scale of permanence and evanescence, it is a nice complement to bring in, say, flowers. Sometimes I hand around a bowl of daisies, pansies, nasturtiums, and the like, along with my bowl of rocks, and ask everyone present to pick one of each. The color, the softness, the smell of the flowers all immediately appeal. I ask everyone to breathe deep the smell of their flowers (and the rocks too, sometimes, for rocks too often smell). And then maybe to think a little more about this matter of smell, too. Unlike what we see or hear, what we smell or touch or taste does not stand at a distance. What you smell is already part of you, is physically inside you. When you smell the flower, the flower comes into you. It is the same with the rock: when you touch a rock, the rock touches you back. Holding rock or flower, in this sense, is like holding hands with the world, except that with the world itself there is no way to let go. In this sense we are all, always, literally in "communion" with the larger world. At least this is one quite concrete way of thinking about the interconnection of all life with all other life and with the whole world, necessarily at every moment—and it is, for sure, a rather unexpected way of thinking about flowers!

Take some nice deep breaths of air. Now think about that air. Where has it been? We breathe in and out 450 cubic feet of air every day. When not inside our own lungs that very same air has been inside each others', in and out of other rooms, down around the corner, at the beach, up and down smokestacks and tailpipes, and just about everywhere else too. Air is not neutral stuff: it carries vast numbers of spores, tiny insects and other life forms, electrical charges, varied chemicals—even, once again, tiny fragments of other worlds in the form of meteorite dust. The air in every breath is one more link, ultimately, with the entire universe. So we arrive again in



a similar place. The philosopher-magician David Abram proposes that we no longer say that we live *on* the Earth, but rather that we live *in* it—for we do, we live at the bottom of the sea of air that is the atmosphere, and are in constant intercourse, in every literal sense of that word, with the whole of the world with every breath we take.<sup>6</sup>

Taste is the other sense that requires actual physical incorporation. No way to taste anything without taking it into ourselves—without taking it, literally, in “communion.” So all food, for one thing, is a kind of joining or connection (or, if you think about subsequent stages, cycling). Only it is hard to remember this with the sorts of things we eat every day. For the sake of awareness it is much more useful to eat something unfamiliar—once again, something a little unsettling, something you will remember eating for quite a while. Having reached this point, I therefore invite my students or audiences to eat their flowers. After all, there they are, holding a flower; it will not last long anyway; and I take care only to bring in edible kinds. Eat your flower, I say. Always an interesting moment. Usually about half of the crowd will try it—more if younger kids, fewer if adults. I eat a few just to demonstrate that they are not instantly lethal. I do not insist. The important thing once again is the new idea of what it is to eat something—not merely some kind of nourishment, understandable solely in terms of the self and its physical needs, but a kind of incorporation, taking the world inside ourselves, “intercourse” once again. Indeed I have friends who are not vegetarians for this reason: eating flesh, on their view, is one form of communion with animals.

This way of putting it naturally invokes a religious or sacramental dimension. I consciously follow the pattern of Christian “Communion”: passing the bowl, taking and eating as a form of affirming and indeed ritually recreating “oneness in body.” But the intent is not blasphemy—though I admit to skirting the edge. Appropriating such cultural symbols is a useful, if “edgy,” teaching method. This very theological sort of unease opens up something that otherwise might not be reachable. Both the rock (which I invite people to carry away and keep, on the desk or in a pocket, as a kind of reminder) and the flower, loved for its beauty and fragrance and then consumed, serve as ritual reminders of community or oneness, sacramental reinvocations of the living Earth and one’s relationship to it. And Oneness with Earth, I would argue, is the *original* communion—both fundamental to our own lives, every single one of us, and at the origins of humanity and life as such.

## VI

On the face of it seems impossible to commune with the other wild creatures in classrooms: after all, they are not here. And we would not care to invite bears or vultures or orca into “our” spaces even if we could. Even the “biospheric egalitarianism” of which some radical environmental thinkers make so much does not imply that we somehow do not need our private (to self, to family, to species) spaces.

Still, the story I am telling does not yet include the wild creatures, and in some ways they are the most crucial of all: they are the ones with whom we (perhaps especially young people) can most readily and immediately identify—much more

naturally than with, say, a meteorite—and they are the ones who animate and electrify a landscape or a dream. Surely we need them too, yet it is not clear how to invoke them.

There are some useful thought-experiments that offer at least a first step. Try, for instance, to think of some familiar and specific aspect of “our” world from the perspective of specific other animals. Pigs, say. As the saying goes, it matters a great deal to the pig whether or not the world is Jewish. In a somewhat similar vein, a North Carolina fast-food chicken restaurant chain has lately mounted a billboard advertising campaign featuring loveable cows urging you to eat more chicken. As a vegetarian I find this remarkable, since you would think that no meat producer would want to so prominently highlight the fact that a massive number of deaths, of cows *and* chickens, is the premise of meat-eating as such. I would have thought that the blood, as it were, is way too close to the surface here—but evidently not for the advertisers. It seems that even here we need a little more imaginative work, putting ourselves truly into the animals’ places and not just as an amusing billboard gimmick.

Speaking of freeways, one of my favorite examples is the turkey vulture so ubiquitous along Eastern highways. What do they see in the roads? It turns out that they see what we see: a quick way to travel (the big highways create favorable winds and lots of heat columns to ride) and plentiful cheap food (road kill). Puts our highway driving in a slightly different light, does not it?

Still, again, we speak here only of thought-experiments, not the presence of real animals, and so seem to hit a dead-end. Is there anything else to be done? I believe that there is. I suggest that there are wild animals right here next to us after all (that is, besides ourselves), though typically overlooked or, when not dismissed as beneath notice, often feared. I speak of the *insects*.

Most of us may already recognize that there are “bugs” all around us most of the time. Even as I type, right now, a small spider keeps appearing and disappearing around one of my stacks of papers and books. There are ants on the floor and the occasional ornithopter-like mayfly softly buzzing by (I just changed the storm door screens yesterday, so there were many opportunities to come in). For my part I welcome the company, mostly, but even when the company is emphatically not welcome they persist anyway. A month or so ago I was flying from Los Angeles to Chicago on one of those huge Airbus-type planes, row forty or something, way in the back, in the middle of a row of nine seats, thinking about some of these things, and just as I got to thinking about insects, who should I notice making her way along the side of my tray table but a little pillbug. Thirty-five thousand feet up in the sky, streaking along at five hundred miles a hour or more—even here there are bugs.

Ordinarily we may think nothing of all this insect life right around us, or just find them annoying (we get “bugged”—a revealing phrase, that). Only a small mental flip, though, and they may emerge in quite a different light. Consider what it is like when you think you are alone and then discover that someone else is with you, perhaps even watching you. Hegel pointed out long ago that self-consciousness does not and cannot arise when we are alone, but only and necessarily when we are with

others: we see ourselves for the first time from another point of view. Could not something quite similar be true when we recognize that even as we sit in our wholly human-defined space, pursuing our intellectual agendas with singleminded passion, there are right around us other awarenesses, with other agendas, aware of us even if we are not aware of them? A spider, say, thus emerges as another form of awareness, another presence, a co-inhabitant of what we thought was “our” space, an independent being from whose point of view we can perhaps come to see ourselves in a new way. We become self-conscious in an unexpected way, cast in an unexpected light.

The probable presence of insects thus makes possible a real perspective-shift, not just another thought-experiment. I invite my audience now to look around, right where they are, in search of whatever insect life they may find. Do not move them, I say, certainly do not harm them: just see who is around. When they are really likely to be present, it’s not at all so hard to look at things their way, to take their point of view (and the questions are natural: “Where would they be? What are they doing?”)

All of this is prelude to the last card I play. I begin with a self-revelation. As it happens—perhaps not so coincidentally—I myself am a insect, in fact a spider. That is, my totem being, one of my primary more-than-human identifications, is a Daddy Longlegs (Harvestman). Daddy Longlegs come around me, turn up on my body and almost always in my tent in the mornings when camping out, whether the “bug-proof” netting is closed or not. I see myself as lanky, heading toward the impossible gangliness of Harvestmen; and besides I am a Daddy...well, it all works out. Enough to say that some kind of affinity seems to be operating here. I go on to remind people that we Daddy Longlegs are completely harmless to humans, we do not bite, do not make webs, and so on.

Now I tell the group that I have in fact brought in some Daddy Longlegs, right into this room, and released them right before people came in. “You never know: perhaps there were no spiders here after all, so just to be sure I brought some in myself.” Sometimes one or two will show themselves at this point in the talk, and I can invite them down onto my hand or shoulder. In any case the group’s challenge is to find the rest. So this is not an experiment, I say. We are not just trying to take the viewpoint of a spider in theory, but in *fact*. They are here, they know where you are even if you do not know where they are, and I want you to try to find them and make their acquaintance. Also eventually I want to escort them back outside. Look for their spindly legs sticking out from underneath chair frames or behind curtains or...well, where? Where would you go in this room if you were a spider?

It should be very clear that I am not speaking of bringing spiders or other insects into the classroom as exhibits, in bottles or tanks, appropriated and confined for our scientific or merely curious inspection. This is a philosophical experiment, not Show and Tell. The aim is to attend to how it changes our sense of this space when we discover such Others *already* present, *co-inhabiting* this space we were so sure was only our own, elusive but independent, on much more equal terms. The more-than-human world is not merely a safely-controlled, distant object of study, but is all around us (in addition to *being* us) all the time, even so close as the spider that may at this moment be under your chair or laying eggs in the corner. Looked at in the right

way, this can be an enchanting thought, and I have seen groups of young people take to it with enthusiasm. Adults are sometimes a little slower, or more mixed, but for all of us, somehow or other, it opens a new sort of door in the mind.

## VII

What is it to “go wild?” One beginning of an answer starts where we just left off: it is to have a sense—quite literally a “sense”—that we coinhabit this world with a diversity of other forms and shapes of awareness, of “centers” of dynamic change, right here and now. It is to recognize that even the shape of our own awareness often eludes us (for example, our own animality). Wild is that unsettling sense of otherness, unexpected and unpredictable and following its own flow, but still a flow that is in some not-quite-graspable way, ours too.

And so, I propose, teaching can “go wild” after all, even in the most conventional sorts of settings. I want to reiterate, still, that what I am proposing here is intentionally restricted to the specific question posed in section III. I am not proposing a curriculum—I have ideas about that, too, but again that is for elsewhere—or indeed anything so systematic. These activities are instead a way of unsettling and subverting the usual and, if you will, “hidden” or “implicit” curriculum, and right where it lives, right in the most traditional settings. I want to insist that this sort of wild subtext needs to be a necessary part of any environmental teaching—and, perhaps, of any teaching at all.

As to teaching itself, what is radical about my argument is an invitation in a somewhat different direction. Everything I have described is easy to do, at least from the point of view of resources or preparation or training. The strain, such as it is, is on the conceptual side. To pull off most of these things in a classroom—let alone at an academic conference—requires that we take up the role of teacher itself in a rethought way. To reinvoke animality for others you must first be comfortable with your own. To be willing to speak your totem with others, not to mention handling spiders (or whatever the analogue for you might be), you yourself must experience the human/other-than-human boundary as more permeable than our culture teaches us it is. To be willing to move into “religious” space, for example by consciously invoking something like a “communion” model, you must be willing to walk certain lines that are not entirely comfortable, perhaps even to contemplate becoming a modest kind of spiritual innovator in a culture that tends to like its spirituality fixed and safe. To be willing to remake the very space of a classroom, to invite a kind of more-than-human wildness into a space that started out so neat, bodiless, wholly anthropocentrized, and in control, you must be attentive in a bodily way to the very shape and feel of space itself.

All of these, in short, require of the teacher a different kind of presence than the all too familiar fact-purveyor. And so, surprising as it may be (or not), the invitation to environmental education in this key can end up spurring a re-vision of what it is to be a classroom teacher *tout court*. I think this is a lovely implication, myself. Environmental philosophers have long suspected that environmental *ethics* has the potential to remake all of ethics—so perhaps it is not so surprising that the same should be true of the relation between environmental education and education

proper. Wildness tends to ramify—which is why the tradition looks upon it with such unease, and why, right now, we need it so very much.

---

1. For a developed critique of standard environmental education, see my articles, “Instead of Environmental Education,” in *Proceedings of the Yukon College Symposium on Ethics, Environment, and Education*, ed. B. Jinkling (White Horse, YT: Yukon College, 1996) and “Deschooling Environmental Education,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 1 (1996).

2. On the contribution of hyper-humanized spaces to this conceptual shift, see my article “Non-Anthropocentrism in a Thoroughly Anthropocentrized World,” *The Trumpeter* 8, no. 3 (1991).

3. Recent philosophical and cultural discussion of the roots of human disconnection from nature traces back to Lynn White’s 1967 article “The Historical Roots of Our environmental Crisis,” widely reprinted, for instance in Richard Botzler and Susan Armstrong, *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), a collection that includes a number of commentaries and related views as well. See also Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (Washington DC: Sierra Club, 1982) and Anthony Weston, *Back to Earth: Tomorrow’s Environmentalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

4. Canonical critics of traditional models of education include Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-Education* (New York: Vintage, 1962); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974); John Holt, *Instead of Education* (New York: Dell, 1976); and more recently, John Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down* (New Society Publishers, 1992).

5. John Dewey, “School and Society,” in *Dewey on Education*, ed. Martin Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959). On the Notion of the “Hidden Curriculum,” see Illich, *Deschooling Society* and Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), chap. 5.

6. On recovery of connection through the senses, and specifically on the mediating role of the air and the breath, see David Abram’s book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), esp. chap. 7.