AWAKENING IN/TO SCHOOL, SELF, SOCIETY AND ANIMATE EARTH:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC MÉTISSAGE OF ONE WOMAN’S JOURNEY WITH/IN LIMINAL SPACE

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Aline Mary Wilkie, candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, has presented a thesis titled, *Awakening in/to School, Self, Society and Animate Earth: An Autoethnographic Métissage of One Woman’s Journey with/in Liminal Space*, in an oral examination held on April 29, 2014. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

This dissertation is the journey of one woman with and in liminal space as I awaken to the discourses of Modern Western school, society and self in order to understand the possibilities for changing educational provision. For most of my lifetime I had been trying to transform the existing system of education, motivated by the environmental devastation and social upheaval of our times and the impact these conditions have upon the lives of children. Being very influenced by liberal ideals of activism and the discourses of environmental education and critical theory, this dissertation began as an action research process, where I attempted, not for the first time, to engage a school staff and community in re-thinking and re-imagining how school could be done. While I encountered the familiar experiences of synchronicity, new possibilities and hope that often exist in such action processes, it was not long before such limit work once again bumped up, painfully, against the worldviews and sacred stories of Western school, society, and the internal discourses of the self. I encountered the familiar disciplining and normalizing forces of these institutions, the culture, and my own psyche. Having cycled through this familiar territory more than once, it became clear to me that I was the nexus upon which this research process turned, so I made the conscious decision to step back from it all, school, society, and even self, and examine the stories. Using lenses that I had resisted throughout the first years of this dissertation, poststructural, postcritical, postcolonial, and feminist, I examined my experiences and turned a critically reflective lens upon the discourses of Modern Western culture and the institution of education while at the same time turning the mirror upon my self.

Méttissage, which has its roots in the Latin word mixtus, became the guiding metaphor of the research process. Along with mixing multiple theoretical perspectives, this research also braids multiple methodological stances. Biographical, narrative writing blended with ethnography, as discursive constitutions of self were examined and deconstructed within the contexts and discourses of Modern Western culture and school, creating a complex autoethnographic braiding of the personal with the socio/cultural. This méttissage life writing also included the fragile and difficult braiding of discursive and non-discursive “speech” into a “text” which could be written and read differently, privileging both the written word and image. Arts-informed research gave a language to the tacit, embodied, intuitive, spiritual experiences for which I could find no “words,” with collage, artwork and mixed media functioning as legitimate kinds of texts that could “speak” these experiences and ways of knowing into being.

All such autoethnographic memory work is fictional, but it is such fictions which provide the substance of a lived reality. Some may see such work as navel gazing and/or narcissistic, however it is within the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that are told to us and about us that our agency, our capacity for resistance, and our freedom exist. Such reflective work supports us in reconceptualising author-ity, allowing us to become the authors of our own stories. We can re-read the images and metaphors of old storylines, re-story dominant discourses, re-write possible futures and write ourselves otherwise. Through this reflective journey I re(dis)covered my voice and dared to speak aloud experiences often silent and silenced in Modern Western culture and its institutions. This intimate, inner journey tells of experiences of awe and wonder, pain and struggle, failure and doubt, compassion and awakening. In sharing this inner world with my readers, I hope that this méttissage of story, image and reflection creates possibilities for connections to familiar tales, disruptions of “common sense” fictions, and awakenings into new writings of self, school and society for the benefit and healing of our children and our animate Earth.
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my anam cara, my soul friend, husband, and love of my life, Lawrie. Without your unconditional love and acceptance of my journey and self, this process and its many awakenings would never have taken place. Your words of encouragement and faith in my ability never wavered no matter how many times I got lost, faltered or wanted to quit in the forest of this exploration and my life journey. For your endless patience in listening to every thought, every new direction, every draft, I am eternally grateful. For your unconditional acceptance of me as a human being, I have no words, I owe you my life.

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Chapter One

Framing the Research
Awakening
I stood on the banks of the river watching the water filled with ice chunks from the spring thaw flow by. This place, this valley, this river had woven itself into my life story. I was born here, I had died here to a part of my self several years ago, and I had spent the last few years travelling here, working here, learning here and awakening here. Now I was going through another death along the banks of this river. As I stood beside the rushing spring water I noticed that the flow of the river had changed. It was flowing in the opposite direction from what I recalled when I had stood upon its shore all those few years ago. The huge boulder that stood along the banks had shifted and was turned upside down. I knew by these unusual signs that I had entered a cycle, a place of the thinning of the veil, where reality was suspended and another way of seeing and being was appearing. I wondered what else this valley had to show me and teach me. I had learned of the ancient meaning of this place from those who held the stories of their relations, those First Peoples who had come to this land hundreds, even thousands of years ago. This valley had been a place of healing for as long as time. People had travelled from faraway lands to come and seek the waters of this river, the healing of this land. In this valley it had been agreed that there would be no conflict, that peoples of all nations could enter here peacefully, put down their weapons and heal. The land would heal them, the medicine people that came here would heal them, and being with all their relations in this place of peace would heal them. I wondered if I had been touched by the energy in this place, if I too was on a healing journey that kept drawing me back to this land, this valley and this river.

I did not feel healed today; I felt broken, defeated, exhausted and raw. But I also felt strength and at peace. I had made a decision; I had chosen to step away before I was broken in a way that could not be repaired. I knew I had to leave before actions were taken that would not allow me to reflect, to flow backwards on this river and unravel the threads of this journey. I had a life story to examine, a tale to unwind and a journey to re-walk with different eyes; awakened eyes. My heart was aching but my body slowly unclenched for the first time in several months. Having finally listened to the screaming voice of my intuition, the begging signs of my body, and the heaviness in my soul, I knew it was time to stop. I had stopped before, and that is what made this decision so difficult. I had been so sure this time that I had understood enough about society, school and my self that I could change things. I was sure I knew enough about power, knowledge and truth that I could transform things. I had been so sure this time would be different, that this time I would get it right. I had researched, read and studied in order to understand the ideologies of humanism and to deconstruct some of its discourses. I was sure I had figured out how to reconstruct education in order to alter Western ways of ‘doing school’ that I knew were destructive to humanity, to our planet, to our children, and to our very souls. I believed no more than ever that current educational forms in the Western world were at the center of our ecological and social problems. But once again I was going home defeated, confused and angry, unable to sustain the transformations that had taken place over the last few years in this school. But I also recognized that I had been on an amazing journey, I had experienced reality in ways I could never have imagined, been a part of amazing synchronicities and transformations. I had met elders and spirits in human form, and other forms who had shared knowledge and ways of seeing that forever changed me. I did not understand everything that had happened on this path but I knew I had all been an extraordinary teaching.

I picked up several stones and threw them into the river, each time naming an ending that was taking place. It was a ritual, a speaking aloud of my intentions. One by one I dropped the pebbles into the rushing water as I symbolically let go of the pain, the anger, the fear, and the disillusionment that had been a part of this journey. This ritual began the long process of forgiveness; forgiving myself for the places I had been unable to see and the lessons I had brought upon myself when I became tangled up in old wounds and pain and forgiving those who had been teachers through their inappropriate and harmful behaviors. I thanked the universe for the many experiences of the last few years, both joyful and painful, and asked for clarity to come over the next few months as to the meaning of these events. Finally I prayed to this valley of healing that it would heal me, heal us all and heal the earth as we journey towards greater understanding. As I walked slowly away from the river, cool mud oozing through my toes, I knew that the Earth would heal me and bring the clarity I was seeking. I needed to lie on the warm prairie grass and feel my heartbeat race back in rhythm with the ancient beating of our Mother. I needed to listen to the wind, watch for the messages from the animals, hear the teachings of the water, soak in the wisdom of the ancient stone people, and sit under the moon. It was these things that would heal my spirit, and these teachings that would bring understanding to the path I had walked. I joined the woman who had brought me to this valley one last time, intuitively knowing what I needed to begin my slow journey of healing and understanding. As we stood together looking over this valley she repeated something that she had said many times over the last few years: “You are my dissertation.” As tears filled my eyes I slowly drove away, winding my way along the river and out of the valley, off to discover the meaning of that phrase.
Meaning making

For my entire career in education I had been trying to enact change and transform the existing system of education. This impulse had first been motivated by the effects that I saw upon children who the system marginalized, often those “othered” in society. Kids who weren’t smart in the way the system defined it, who had been labelled and set aside as disabled, special needs, special cases. Kids who weren’t white, weren’t rich, didn’t live on the right side of the tracks, weren’t straight; children who had been abused and damaged by life. I often saw the system further abuse and damage these children by the way it functioned, the kind of knowledge it accepted, the truths it taught, and the stories it told. My efforts at change also became motivated by the effects upon the earth that I saw Western education perpetuating. I wondered how we could pretend not to hear the groaning of the Earth under the machine of industrialized progress that education just kept feeding. Early in my career as a teacher I had been able to enact education differently to meet the needs I perceived weren’t being met for children or the Earth. With my door closed, my persuasive speech, and my red-haired temper I was able to carve out a place in my classroom in which the ethics, the processes, the values, were different from the most of the other classrooms in my school and from the system and society that surrounded it. I created a little Camelot that I and my students could both enjoy (Jardine, 2005).

But I soon realized that creating a Camelot in my classroom didn’t change the structures, challenge the systems, or transform the power relations of Western education. So I became a principal, imagining that I would have enough power and freedom in that position to re-imagine and re-invent ways of doing school that could include not just the modern discourses of education, but many delegitimized ways of knowing and many silenced voices. I became a warrior for educational change but soon realized that processes of transformation are much more complex and challenging than I had first imagined. I soon found that creating educational experiences in schools that included “othered” voices and “othered” ways of doing school, while welcomed by some, often met with intense resistance and demands to return to what was “normal”. This pattern was painful and confusing and I was driven to understand why changing educational provision was so difficult. I was encouraged by new ideas I was encountering a recently started Doctoral program and hoped to engage what I was learning in the school community I was working in. As I read, researched, searched, and listened I found many of the feelings I had about Western society, education and it’s effects upon the environment reflected within the writings of several authors. I agreed with Fritzof Capra (2000) when he stated that our complex industrial systems, both organizational and technological, are the main driving force of global environmental destruction and the main threat to the long-term survival of humanity. I found support for my perspectives on the institution of schooling in the writings of such authors as David Orr (1994) who stated that “the crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perceptions and values; hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions and values. It is an educational challenge. More of the same kind of education can only make things worse” (p. 27).

As I began the slow and uncomfortable process of deconstructing humanism and the Western institution of education, I led the staff I was working with in processes of questioning our felt experience of what is “common sense” in education. We began to examine the unnoticeable in school and question if the world we perceived through the lens of our culture and the lens of our training in education was partial, limited or incomplete. As all of us had been in the education system for much of our lives, both as children and adults, and had been quite successful in this system; the myths and the stories ran deep for many of us. We were all truly fish in the water of industrial-age assumptions (Senge, 2000). We created the conditions to engage as a learning community of interested teachers, support staff, parents and community members in questioning the unexamined assumptions that form the very basis of our culture and our educational system that perpetuates it. Many staff who were uncomfortable in this process left, while those that stayed and those that came to the school joined in the process of critically examining both personal positionings and the educational systems’ “sacred” stories and practices. Staff at their own level of comfort engaged in experiences of ways of knowing beyond those encouraged or promoted in Modern Western education. As we experienced these “othered” discourses we imagined ways to weave these multiple ways of knowing into the existing structures of knowledge within ourselves and our school. As our efforts to re-imagine, re-vision and re-construct education began to meet with resistance and disciplining, questions arose around how and why systems of education and Western society suppress alternative knowledge frameworks. It became clear that it was the will of these institutions to continue to reproduce social inequality and to promote discourses that support progress and economic advancement despite its effects upon the Earth and many of her Peoples. This period of dissolution and ending was perhaps the most difficult, painful, life-altering time of my life, and I struggled to make meaning of it all.
Going in circles

I had travelled to visit this woman, who I considered a mentor, a friend, an intuitive and a healer. I was hoping together we could make some sense of what now seemed to be the big tangled mess of my dissertation process. She had challenged the structures of higher education with her dissertation and I hoped that she could help me unravel the web of confusion I felt caught in. We sat across from each other in her office and she explained how the action research process I had been enacting within my school had disintegrated and ground to a halt. My hopes for enacting transformative change in a school and engaging other ways of knowing, learning and being had ended in dissolution and my walking away. I went on to say that this was not the first attempt that I had made at changing educational provision as a principal of a school, and that while these processes had been different, there had been similarities as well. I had engaged more than once in attempts to weave discourses and practice that were outside the “common sense” stories of Western education into the existing structures and system. The ideas and visions, actions and change, excitement and enthusiasm, synergies and synchronicities that always emerged at the start of such attempts, seemed to inevitably unravel. What began as a positive, energy-filled initiative which engaged “othered” discourse and “other” ways of educating children and engaging community, consistently stalled out and came to an end. I always experienced this closure as extremely painful and a personal failure.

I shared how the closure, resistance and discipline came from different places: resistance from some members of the community and efforts at controlling and normalizing the discourses the school was enacting by senior administration, especially those who held different perspectives of the purpose of education. The disciplining and normalizing actions could take several and multiple forms: demands to come into line with division direction, domination and acts of authority by senior administrators, demands to change, alter or end certain initiatives or increased demands for completed paperwork, data collection, and other administrivia that took over any possibility of enacting education differently. All these were attempts to bring the direction of the school and myself back into conformity, sameness, “normalness”. A story was always created that the ways of doing school we were engaging were somehow not going to meet the academic needs of the students, help them progress and succeed and therefore what we were enacting was just nonsensical. I fought back, challenged and refused these disciplining and normalizing techniques, at times in ways professional, and at other times not. In frustration, exhaustion and illness I would end up leaving the position. In the past, I would piecemeal my self back together, read, reflect and eventually seek work in another place that seemed more responsive than the last to enacting other ways of doing school. I shared earnestly that I was not interested in repeating this pattern again, and I doubted if my body could withstand another circling of this kind. This time I wanted to do something different. I had no idea what to do with the action research process that had been central to my dissertation, which had also unravelled and come to an abrupt end when I left the school.

This mentor then posed a question. She wondered if I had ever stopped to ask myself why I kept experiencing this process over and over again. Had I ever wondered why I kept circling around, each time perhaps with more awareness, but with the same end result? In that moment, I came to a shocking realization. It seemed as if the story I was living had been repeating itself. The places and the characters on my travels may have changed, but the issues, situations, actions, results and feelings were familiar. I was stunned. I realized I needed to step back in order to take a better look. I needed to step back from it all: self, school and society that were all entwined and tangled up within me and take a long, deep look. I needed to unravel the story I had been living and examine it, right down to the finest thread.
Unravelling threads

In reviewing the cycles of action and change that I had been engaged in over the years, I could see that while I had asked many hard questions about my own practices in education, and in my research, I had avoided those which were ostensibly concerned with emancipation. My perspective of change had continued to be based upon an emancipator quest for improvement in educational contexts and had remained steeped in the hopes that my research and my practice would result in “better teaching” as well as a hope that the children may, as a consequence of education, have “better lives”. I realized that I had not broken from paradigms of change and action and emancipation that drew their strength from the discourses of liberal humanism. I had been very influenced by the inspiring images of power, resistance and freedom which formed during the 1960s and 1970s. The environmental movement, women’s rights, civil rights, gay and lesbian movements all resisted obstacles and fought for emancipation from the dominance of those historically privileged in Western culture (St. Pierre, 2000). However, they all also employed humanism’s understanding of change, emancipation, freedom and power. Butler (1995) calls this an “emancipatory model of agency” (p. 136) and those that break through the internal or external “barriers of power are considered heroic or bearers of a universal capacity which has been subdued by oppressive circumstances” (p. 136).

All of my efforts to emulate these resistance fighters of my childhood and these movements of emancipation had been unsuccessful, unsustainable, and painful. Brown & Jones (2001) state that “any emancipator perspective presupposes values which cannot be agreed upon universally or permanently. If we fight for something we are always working against someone else’s interests and there are difficulties in creating a robustly moral perspective that will be seen as better by everyone” (p. 4). Thus there was always resistance, closure and struggle. Could I give up this heroic quest, this warrior’s way and re-search, re-view and reflect upon emancipation and change from another lens, in another way. Butler (1992) suggests that we need to describe and critique our fondest attachments and examine the effects upon real people of whatever systems of meaning our attachments produce. I could see that in my lifetime I had been very attached to freedom, to giving voice to the oppressed, and to resisting power and those people and institutions that seemed to hold it. I realized that perhaps I needed to “question the limits of [my] capacity to enter into projects of action as [an] intentional being[...] in this way” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 6). The very desire within action research for taking specific steps, controlling actions and influencing outcomes can “cloud our vision against the very complexities we seek to capture, trapped as we are in socially derived constructions of the world we experience” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 6). If I were to move away from the somewhat rationalistic focus concerned with effecting productive change through a systematic process of action research and the promise it held out that people could work towards improving social conditions, what would I turn to?

I had always held the position that postmodernism, with its assault on Enlightenment epistemology and the humanist discourse of progress, seemed to necessitate the abandonment of the emancipator impulse. Perhaps this was because “particular theories of postmodernism(s) seem to offer very little in the way of hope that liberating human or social transformation is a possibility” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 20). However by opening to questioning the assumptions inherent in the field of political liberation, maybe it was possible to not turn my back upon notions of emancipation, but rather “turn because it allows different perspectives to emerge” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 29). Perhaps the postmodern turn embodied a different problematic from the theory of action that has dominated the human sciences since the early twentieth century. Perhaps I could question injustice and domination in other ways; ways different from leftist opposition, scholarship such as critical theory, or methodologies such as action research.

“...there is a continual rhetorical stance in U.S. critiques of the linguistic turn that if one does not make explicit the normative commitments and the subject in the knowledge of social science, no one will act and the people of the world will be incapacitated... We can point to no instance of people being incapacitated to act because of intellectual knowledge; in fact, people typically act in ways that intellectuals do not approve of.”

Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998b, p. 30
Life tapestries

It was a cool fall day, my mother’s favorite time of year. We sat wrapped in woven blankets drinking tea on the small deck overlooking the shared courtyard that held many with stooped backs like hers, slowly walking in the late afternoon sun. Her mind, tired after more than ninety years of living, was now caught and entangled in the webs of dementia. The geese flying high in formation overhead prompted her memory. This was the time of year the geese flew south and I flew back to school, just as she had for many years. She asked me if I was ready to go back to the classroom. I answered this question again and again that afternoon, each time a different story appeared to explain why I wasn’t going back to school for the first time in 45 years. At first I said I couldn’t; I was ill; my body struggling with strange symptoms that modern medicine had yet to explain to me. Then I said I was tired of the politics, the games playing and the struggle. Next came a story, exile pain and suffering. Finally a tale of wandering, feeling lost, on the margins and alone in the borderlands.

After each story I spun she wanted to know how long I had been teaching. Each time I responded 25 years, she looked astonished and would say that was long enough. She would sit up and strongly tell me that after so many years of “going school,” it was time to rest and to take care of myself. I was sold that I should stop and take some time before I decided what I wanted to do next. Finally, in the fading light of the afternoon sun I asked her what she thought I should do next. She sat quietly for quite some time, then drew my attention again to the sky, a soft, faded pink, remarking on how beautiful it was. I thought she had forgotten what I had asked. Then she said quietly, “You used to love to dance when you were little, you danced all the time.” I was shocked by this revelation. Of the many stories that I had fabricated over the years and woven into the complex story of my life history, dancing had never been among them. I had no memory of dancing as a child. I had not taken up this narrative of myself, or added this thread when I spun together the tale of my existence. I liked the image, my small self, arms and legs floating, spinning freely. I carefully wove this gift from my mother into the tapestry of my life story, another strand in the mixture of this complex weave of selves; a braiding of multiple identities. I wondered how and why I had dropped this stitch along the way, which made me wonder what other pieces were missing, and which ones I had taken up that were not even mine.

As the sun began to set on the horizon I opened myself to a feeling that had been dancing at the edges of my consciousness for days now. It was a sense of a slow unravelling... a fraying. The edges of the tapestry of my life history, stories of self, school and society, did not seem so solid, so fixed or so sure anymore.
Braided subjectivities

For much of my life I held an image of my self that was fixed and bounded, a signifier of who I am. But experiences in my life had begun to shatter this fiction of a unitary self; a separate essential being. I could see how this individualistic "identity" had been established through images and through discourses as being real, but when I sat in meditation, lay on the Earth and felt her beating heart, or heard my ancestors voices in the beat of the drum, huge cracks began to appear in this foundational idea of Western thought. There was no "I" to be found, at least not one that stayed fixed, stable and unchanged by the struggles "with desire, politics, and the plethora of codes produced by regulating discourse and practice" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504). The "individual" of humanism is generally seen as a stable, fixed, unified, rational, knowing, autonomous, independent and ahistorical individual who is "endowed with a will, a freedom, an intentionality which is then subsequently "expressed" in language, in action, and in the public domain" (Butler, 1995, p. 136). This individual can study the outside, observe it, know it, make predictions about it and try to control it. This notion of the subject creates a person, who besides being stable and coherent, can use their powers of reasoning and rationality in order to understand the complexities of the world, including those which are embedded in teaching (Brown & Jones, 2001). As much as I had tried to rationally understand the complexities of society, education and my very being and to change it, to control it, these attempts had been unsuccessful. Something about the humanist view of the individual and their capacity to affect change and free themselves from oppression seemed incomplete and somehow damaging.

I became drawn to poststructural theory that considers the subject “a construction, and identity is presumed to be created in the ongoing effects of relations in response to societies codes” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 503). “The fragmented subject, with its multiple selves, implied by poststructuralist theories” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 7) seemed to be more congruent with many of my experiences. I could no longer relate to the idea of self or an identity that was solid and fixed, but could see the “I” of my experiences as a “heterogeneous and incomplete process” (Flax, 1993, p. 93), continually being reconfigured and renamed. I began to perceive that the specificity of experiences and their intensity “need not be the markers of a bounded self, but, rather, the moments at which an experiencing being comes to know the possibilities being made available by virtue of their presence within the collectivity, albeit a collectivity that constitutes itself through discourse in which the individual experiencing subject is made the primary focus” (Davies, 2000, p. 31). I became more comfortable with resting in the ambiguity and possibilities of these multiple selves. In humanism “subjectification takes place in such a way that “identity” is shaped through “choices” that are understood to spring from and confirm that very identity” (Davies, 2000, p. 32), I began to see that in many ways my identity had been produced through discursive practices that determined what inner and outer selves had been even thinkable to me, let alone achievable within the bounds of Western society. I could see that poststructural analysis could make intelligible how “I” in my multiple subject positions as woman, white, a mother, a teacher, an administrator, a psychologist, had been produced “within humanisms grids of regularity and normalcy” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 505) and how it could allow me to open up and rework these concepts. The possibility for deconstruction and reconstruction of the subject became very appealing.

I began to wonder if the poststructural subject could be a fertile site for reinscribing the concepts of transformation and agency. Humanism posits that the individual can “produce true knowledge and has the power to effect change” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). Our entire Western society is based on the belief that the humanist self has an inherent agency, that all people have access to this agency and can escape to freedom from oppression by exercising their innate wills. Those individuals that confront and overcome such overwhelming odds become a hero and a model for the rest of humanity. Popkewitz & Brennan (1998b) find that a seeming paradox is introduced as we re-vision the philosophical issues of agency and actors as a priori conditions of analysis and social action. In social theory, such as that expressed by Foucault, the agent is present, not as the actor in the narrative inquiry, but by destabilizing the conditions that confine and intern consciousness and its principles of order. Making the forms of reasoning and the rules for “telling the truth” potentially contingent, historical, and susceptible to critique, can be a practice to dislodge the ordering principles, thereby creating a greater range of possibility for the subject to act (St. Pierre, 2000).

Feminist and postcolonial literatures disrupt how we tell the truth by making the rules for telling the truth visible and open to critique. Perhaps this in itself can become a political strategy for constructing options to the rules through which power is deployed. Education has been historically centrally concerned with training in truth production, including universities and educational research. Perhaps as Foucault challenged, a problematizing theory such as poststructuralism may be one way to re-consider and re-imagine the politics of knowledge, the politics of change and the possibilities for the subject to act (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998b).
Entering the land of between

The decision to step back from the many roles, subject positions and expectations of Western culture and examine them meant that I entered a new unfamiliar space. I found myself in a strange new land. I had abandoned the appropriate. I had abandoned my position(s). I had even abandoned my research process. I was on uncertain ground now, on the brink of leaving school, society and self to enter upon another space. I was in a passage from one place, mainstream society and Western education, to another which was unknown and untravelled by me as of yet. I made a decision to consciously reject the comfortable, the known, the accepted and the expected roles that had been imposed on me for half a century by Western society. I found myself on shifting ground, displaced, in exile. I felt that it was better to wander around for a while in the margins, the borderland and to remain in this liminal space rather than staying where I no longer felt I belonged. I felt an outcast from my former life. At first I felt afraid, alone, lonely, sad, ashamed and confused. I was no longer clear about who I was, where I belonged, or what I now wanted to be doing. Eventually though, this failing to be in position began to lend a certain sense of freedom and profound clarity. There was a freedom achieved through the rejection and abandoning of the appropriate and inhabiting this threshold space. I began to recognize that liminality offered freedom to be my-self, to see my-self, to examine my subjectivities, and to open the possibility of self-creation. I found power in the limen; I was neither this nor that, not one kind of person or another, and their was the promise of power in embracing other selves.

There were many gifts to be found in this state of liminality: acute insight, heightened intuition, and many ayeed seeing. I gained a perspective here that I could never seem to have as an insider. There seemed to be a wide angled lens through which I could view my personal life his/her-story. The opening of vision in this threshold allowed a re-viewing, re-thinking, and re-telling of my life history. The webs of power in which I was enmeshed became more visible, just like a spider’s weaving appears after the rain. I could see more clearly how my personal history, the history of school and of society were woven together with ideas of power, knowledge, and truth. I began to wonder at the productive quality of power as I could see the effects as it had circulated through the institutional practices of school and society and the discourses of my daily life. As the boundaries and permissible paths I had been confined to and produced by became more visible I began to take apart the illusions I had held of agency and “free will”. I began the difficult work of seeing how I had been complicit, through ignorance or unconsciousness, in the construction of these boundaries and possibilities. A more compassionate view became possible within this liminal space for my self and others. I experienced a shift of focus from viewing certain people as the controlling actors, who held power and used power to marginalize and control, to an awareness of the systems of ideas that normalize and construct the rules through which the Western world and its institutions are organized. Disrupting these knowledge/power relations made visible those systems of ideas that construct the subject, institutions and the very reality of the world we have created within the stories of humanism. Several assumptions that I held regarding my political commitments for social change and resistance shifted. I became comfortable with the messy, chaotic complexity of the limen, this in-between space, and was more and more able to stay with the story of my experience and explore the contradictions, tensions and possibilities.
Surrendering to uncertain ground

I knew it was time to step outside of the comfortable plot lines of my life story and surrender to this place of liminality, “a state of necessary in-betweenness” (Heilbrun, 1999, p. 98). This is the site that “postcolonial literary scholar Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space” of ambivalent construction: the site that Trinh Minh-Ha, a postcolonial feminist, calls “a hybrid place”” (Smith, 1993, p. 169). It is difficult for those of us who have been conditioned by Western culture to always be in control, to be growing, to be progressing, to be succeeding, to just stay in spaces that are neither this nor that, but this and that (Aoki, 2003). It is challenging for us to remain in spaces of chaos and to surrender to the “fecund limen” and just exist “in a threshold state ‘betwixt and between’ existing orders” (Norton, 1988, p. 53). It is difficult to remain in a place that appears to be so lacking in form and structure, without apparent purpose or direction. Kennedy (as cited in Huber, Murphy & Clandinin, 2005) comments that the limen’s “apparent lack of structure is both its strength and weakness, a strength because of what it offers to those who engage with it, a weakness because in the structured society in which we live, there is a fear of the chaotic” (p. 279).

Jardine (1998) sees the liminal as a threshold, a hyphenated space, that is “haunted and generative” (p. 123). Entering this space means encountering with ghosts of stories past which needed to be re-examined and re-felt upon. But it is also a fertile space filled with the possibilities that such encounters might contain. In this space I could feel myself turn in-ward, to step back from the many roles, constructions and subjectivities, and to become curious about my-self, about the institution of education, about my understandings of power, knowledge and truth. Irwin (2004) writes that such in-dwelling expresses and animates “a desire to explore new territory, a borderland of reformation and transformation, a geographical, spiritual, social, pedagogical, psychological and physical site” (p. 30).

Crossing the threshold into liminal space required that I abandon the centre and engage in non-linear journeying and border crossing. It means consciously choosing to explore beyond the margins of Western culture, and choosing instead to speak from the margins, “regularly shifting locations, roles and voices, continuing always to challenge the dominant culture [one is] surrounded by” (Pryer, 2004, p. 208). In refusing the center, one chooses “the margin as a site of radical openness” (hooks, 1996, p. 48). One must recognize that remaining in the geographical trope of the borderlands, this space of multiple oppressions and potential liberations, will render one unrecognizable. Liminal space “is at once psychological, physical, metaphysical and spiritual” (Irwin, 2004, p. 30) and remaining there one will become a stranger to oneself. Somerville (2007) writes that “this becoming-other [is] born of the space in-between” (p. 234). It is the limen, these in-between spaces, that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). It is frightening terrain to no longer know the face reflected in the fecund pond or the voice that speaks from the edges of the limen.

I began to wonder if remaining in this hyphenated space, with all its messiness and complexity, would be vital to the “creation of new understanding and regeneration of meaning” (Hurlock et al., 2008, p. 291). Would remaining in this “space between what was and what might be” (Huber, Murphy & Clandinin, 2005, p. 279) help me to develop connections between the disparate lands of policy and practice I had experienced in education. Could I better understand and negotiate between the ideals I held about Western school and society and the harsh realities of my experience. Turner (as cited in Aoki, Low & Palulis, 2001) states that the limin is a space of “fructile chaos, [...] fertile nothingness [and] a storehouse of possibilities” (p. 1). Perhaps as messy and complex as liminal space is, in crossing its thresholds we can entertain new understandings and take up new positions. Perhaps it is within this in-between space where one can create anew, renegotiate who we know ourselves to be, engage in consciousness raising, realize a plurality of being, and create a hybridity of understandings. Perhaps it is in this space where one can imagine future possibilities (Huber, Murphy & Clandinin, 2005). Perhaps it is “the possibility of (trans)formation [is] a saving grace of being in the spaces of liminality” (Hurlock et al., 2008, p. 294).

Heilbrumnn(1999) cautions that liminal space is “never designed for permanent occupation” but as a place “between destinies” (p. 101). We are not meant to live in what Bhabha (1994) referred to as the “stairwell as liminal space” (p. 296) but rather are to recognize that the generativity of the stairwell relies on its use as a passage. We are to move through it, trouble the knowledge we encounter and negotiate the spaces, but not get locked in the stairwell (Hurlock et al., 2008). Liminal space allows a crossing into new understandings and being “where as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays” (Heilbrun, 1999, p. 102).
journey to messilage

Existing for a time in liminal space, I began to trouble the compartmentalized and essentialized identities I had woven into the stories I told. I wanted to unravel the threads to see how systems of power, not just social but familial, had saturated and composed the languages of myself, how I was positioned, what corners I had been woven into. I searched through boxes and albums of childhood photos, multiple identities staring back at me, as I began to unravel this tapestry. I gently and carefully began to pull apart the threads that held together this weaving of mixed and multiple identities, opening old dusty boxes and black pageled albums retrieved from my parents' home after they had moved to seniors complex, and others I had hidden away years earlier when a favorite aunt had passed away. They were filled with faded black and whites, letters, and family trees all worn and aged; the histories of my ancestors. I began untangling old memories, old images, and old stories, and gently began unwinding the history I had inherited and imagined, wondering if there could be a re-telling of this self I imagined myself to be. As I re-searched and re-thought these complex and messy threads of relatedness and belonging, a new fabric began to emerge. Hidden in these boxes were threads of stories that had been untold, some had been severed, others dropped, and some deliberately discarded. As I took up these missing threads, I began to question how my ancestral stories had been written and portrayed and why. I wondered at the possibilities of discovery and transformation if I pursued these dropped stitches.

Unravelling the mixed tapestries of my ancestral clans I discovered that all the varied strands could be traced backwards to a single source, the Celts. One side of the family tree emerging from the birthplace of the Celts, Alainna Lorraine. Later through the massive purges and racial cleansing of the European peoples of the area, they were pushed from their contested lands across the ocean to North America. The other Celtico thread of my family tapestry having migrated or being pushed westward across Europe until they could go no further, had claimed the green isles as their own, only to be pushed on again. Through colonization, famine brought on by colonization and calculated attempts at genocide my Irish ancestors were forced from their homeland. This massive, relentless, and efficiently managed national enterprise had left them boarding coffin ships to an unwanted future. These branches of my family tree both landed on the windy Canadian prairies only to experience further oppression and persecution as they attempted to assimilate and disappear into the landscape; changing family names, hiding languages and traditions, burying identities and shame in the drifting prairie soil. The marriage of my parents brided together these two different threads which had long ago been spun from a similar fabric, now woven back together into the tapestry which formed my life story. Irish and German diaspora, woven together with pork hooks and sauerkraut, Irish coffee and the Irish Rover. I could feel myself on shifting ground, the imagined fixed identities slowly revealing themselves, as they always do, when new threads of the past or present are picked up. Those genealogical digs unearthed a mixed-textured weaving much more complex, politicized and oppressive than I had ever imagined. My ancestors struggles for autonomy from colonial, economic and ideological submission appeared to be woven into my very DNA. This was how I often experienced the world and perhaps why I continued to return to the borderlands, the edges, the liminal; perhaps this is why I felt comfortable in those spaces of hybridity, indeterminacy, undecidability and difference. Perhaps it also explained several of the threads that ran through my life tapestry: the constant refusing of categories, pressing against fixed boundaries, enacting resistance and the overwhelming desire for agency.

Holding this altered creation story in my hands, I could see how we are all creations, born into messilage, mixtures of different fibres that are constantly being re-woven. We are complex weaves of gender, historical, linguistic, social, cultural selves with multiple identities. Our life histories are brided of fibres which create a living, shifting, breathing, growing tapestry, never known, never complete, never final, never fixed. We are messilage beings, inhabiting the borderlands, the spaces between and spaces between the in-between, places of fluidity and mixtures; refusing closure, binaries, and certainties.
Métissage as research

The metaphor of métissage came to encompass and guide my research process and to represent the act of resisting a pure, untainted form of research. Métissage, which has its roots in the “Latin word mixtus meaning “mixed”, primarily referring to a cloth of two different fibres” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 141), speaks to the complex and often “messy” threads of our stories, our relations, our personal histories and our experiences of living curriculum in educational spaces. Métissage illuminates the braided and relational character of our lives, experiences and memories. As a research practice, “métissage is focused on relationality and the curricular and pedagogical desire to treat texts and lives as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent” (Donald, 2009, p. 9). It makes possible the mixing of memory and history, place and space, ancestry and (mixed) race and the familiar with the strange (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009). It provides a counternarrative to the grand narrative of our times and can challenge, mix and blur the “traditional modernist barriers between subject and object, private and public, interior and social spheres of lived experience” (Zuss, 1997, p. 164). Métissage makes visible and possible the interconnections among the personal and the public realm. Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) describe métissage as “an artful research praxis that mixes binaries such as colonized with colonizer, local with global, East with West, North and South, particular with universal, feminine with masculine, vernacular with literate and theory with practice” (p. 9) Métissage, “has the power to undo logic and the clarity of concepts” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 141) and offers the possibilities for reconciliation and harmonious relations between alternative and mainstream discourses. Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt & Donald (2002) theorize métissage as a curricular practice that can be used to resist the priority and authority given to official texts.

Métissage can also blur and fragment traditional humanist claims of a pre-discursive, transparent subject and its experience and can serve as a way of describing the braided weave of composite identities we inhabit. As researchers engage a critical, rhetorical approach that integrates the questionings of subjectivities that are present in poststructuralist feminist writings they enter “a thirdness, a new third world in which tradition no longer constitutes true identity: instead, there are multiple identities” (Irwin, 2004, p. 27). Métissage allows for the tracing of these mixed and multiple identities, while interrogating possibilities of identity (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p.1). Métissage as a conscious act of braiding subjectivities, reveals the limits of our knowledge, our political orientation and other dimensions of self in ways that reveal the discourses that shape our work and open possibilities for thinking about that work (Hart, 2005). Métissage may open possibilities for not just the blurring of identities but for the “fabrication and reweaving of resistance subjectivities” (Zuss, 1997, p. 165) and refusals to be aligned with any one category.

Métissage is a concept and practice that is “particularly applicable to the experience of exile; physical, emotional, or political” (Zuss, 1997, p. 166). Rather than dialogic opposition, métissage offers points of convergence yet respect for divergence—where differences and similarities are woven together. Inhabiting the borderlands in this way can provide an opportunity to re-think, re-live, and re-make the terms of identities as difference and similarity is confronted in apparently contradictory worlds. Métissage provides a language of the borderlands, a way of integrating multiple ways of being, knowing, doing and making and offering this as an integrative experience for others who engage it. Métissage can “explicitly merge, and blur” and “ventriloquize the often disparate voices and tensions composing any subjective experience of identity and difference” (Zuss, 1997, p. 163). If we conceive of research as métissage, an interweaving and intraweaving of concepts, activities, and feelings, we are creating fabrics of similarity and difference. Embracing a métissage existence of the borderlands is filled with the possibilities of opening up and disrupting “taken for granted ways of interpreting the world” (Sommerville, 2007, p. 266).

Métis, the name given to the wife of Zeus in Greek mythology, was gifted with the powers of transformation (Lionette, 1989). This points to the transformative possibilities of journeying through métissage. It is possible to braid strands of becoming, (re)creation, and renewal into a métissage that is both political and redemptive. The creator of métissage, “métisseur” or “métisseuse” as described by Karahasan (2008, p. 179) is also transformed through these processes of braiding (Donald, 2009) and blending (Lowan, 2011). Through working with memory, with both head and heart, the researcher creates a mestissage which calls “for new worlds with the transformative power of restor(ing) us more wholly to the world” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 12).
Entering a liminal space of unknowing freed me to reflect, to look back upon my life, my history, and my stories without so much dread. In this threshold I could take the tattered pages out, dust them off, look at them from a distance, with less attachment. I could look for the threads that held them all together, that ran through the whole lot of them, and sense places where I had some unravelling to do. Some of these stories come from memory while others re-formed in the dust that I blew off the lids of the boxes in my basement, crates in the garage, and tubs in the shed. These were filled with artifacts, photos, unit plans, lesson plans, and text books. I found cards, notes and letters gifted by students, colleagues and my own children and family from over the years, thanking me, sharing with me, and wondering with me. Class photos, old polaroid pictures, photo jackets filled with tales of times gone by, reflected across space and time. I had been a hoarder of these treasures, never sure if I would need them someday, attached to some for sentimental reasons, and to others, by shame and anger. There were boxes with personal journals, artwork, and poetry holding heart and soul stories, rarely shared, deep and dangerous. All of these stories were entwined into the tapestry of my life history. They were stories of teaching, of activism and warriorship, stories of healing, not just physically but emotionally and spiritually, stories of seeing, of vision, of seeing in other ways, and tales of seeking and questioning for understanding.

I encountered stories that I had told myself, told others and told no one. Some had become tall tales, exaggerated from the retellings, while others were small stories of that special child that touched my heart, the ones that I had lost, the colleague that drove me crazy, the parent that had frightened us all. There were school stories of special times; outdoor education trips, dinner theatres, volleyball tournaments, bottle drives and wake-a-thons, all filled with love and laughter. And there were stories of incredible synchronicities, spirit-filled tales, unexplainable events and tragedy. I thought back over some of the absolute wonders I had been a part of in some educational experiences; those amazing times where things had jelled, we had all come together, a whole so much greater than its parts. And there were the stories of frustration, of manipulation, of control, and of disciplining and management. There were the heartfelt tales, those personal and those of colleagues who were prodded, pushed, chastised and bullied into conforming, fitting in, following the direction set by others. Stories of misuse and abuse of power, and of false empowerment, heroic stories, stories of overcoming adversity, fighting the system, challenging institutional hierarchies and patriarchies. And there were sad stories, painful tales of failure, loss, shame and disembowelment.

As I wandered the ruins of what had been a carefully constructed life, career and participatory action research project, I began to wonder if I was “the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turned” (Spry, 2006, p. 188). As I began to unravel the threads and look more closely, I realized that I had a his/her/story to examine, to critically reflect on, to take apart and turn over. As I untied the knots, unwound the threads, and began the long work of rewinding, I finally began to understand that I was my dissertation, a metissage of different fibres braided together into the single strand that was my life story.
Weaving stories

Stories are essential to human understanding and are the way humans make sense of their world and “it is through story and metaphor that we begin to understand significance” (McNinch, 2009, p. 66). Narratives form our reality. We become their vessels. Stories find, capture and hold us. Existing in the limin and travelling in the borderlands I encountered many narratives, tales, and stories; some that had held me captive for many years, some that seemed real and others mere fictions I and others had created, and some that had been silenced, disowned, forgotten and forsaken. As I looked within the photos, journals, artwork, poetry and theoretical writings of my life story there appeared “an evocative, scenic, and unfolding story of what happened” (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 129) and “an abiding recognition that existence is inherently storied. Life is pregnant with stories” (Kearney, 2002, p. 130). The multiple ‘texts’ of my life experiences and the threads of the stories of travels through multiple life worlds had become an unexamined tapestry. As I re-read and re-membered these stories multiple resonances occurred and I wondered if re-living, re-viewing and re-writing these narratives could help me to live into a new story as I recognized the story I was situated in (Lewis, 2009). In choosing to chronicle our stories, “we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and who we have been” (Cooper, 1991, p. 11). The personal, concrete, and mundane details of a life experience, a life journey can become a window to understanding the relationships between self and other or between individual and community. Huebner (2009) states that “understandings of the journey of individuals as they pass through their allotted time are needed” (p. 8). Excavating ones stories, engaging in “psychic-archeological digs” (Estes, 1992), embarking on a genealogy of one’s life history (Foucault, 1980) as a research endeavor may seem self-indulgent (Hart, 2005, p. 392), narcissistic (Hartnett & Engles, 2000, p. 1051), or an example of emotional exhibitionism (Fourmiller, 2011). However, I had begun to wonder if perhaps “...such navel gazing may be just the antidote for the empirical maladies affecting our schools” (McNinch, 2009, p. 66). Perhaps it is “this critical stance and the stories we tell ourselves, and others that will help us surpass the technical foundations of education” (McNinch, 2009, p. 78).

And so began the long process of un-ravelling and re-viewing my individual biographies, the stories through which there is an “I” with something to tell, but with stories that can never fully be told (Davies, 2000). Through the re-telling of these stories I could delve into my own subjectivities, observing the discourses and practices through which I articulate my experience as well as being alert for the absences and silences in my talk. I could re-examine the discursive constructions of selves and attempt to deconstruct, disrupt and go beyond familiar obvious taken-for-granted tales and readings. Our multiple subjectivities are braided into our life histories and the stories we tell and live; we cannot escape our own historical textual and weaving. The structures of our subjectivities can only be accessed through thick description of lived experience (Hart, 2010). In writing my life history, I could begin speaking these multiple selves, some known, some “othered”, into being. Examining my narratives allowed me the opportunity to “[e]xcavate layers of the self as both pre-reflexive consciousness (embodied knowing) and conceptual reasoned consciousness (constructed knowing)” (Hart, 2005, p. 394). This working from within (Pinar, 1994) is a challenging task as it “requires a confrontation with all of one’s minotaurs in labyrinths of ever-revealing consciousness, soul and being. It is not for the faint of heart and requires lionhearted courage” (Fowler, 2003, p. 165).

Finding, researching and telling stories from our own experiences opens possibilities for an interpretive analysis of both “the inward path of the journey with inspiring landscapes and the outward path with political territories” (Meyer, 2003, p. 21). Jickling (2005) writes that our stories may not resolve questions about good and evil, right and wrong. However “good stories can do work, enable relationships and connect people to real-world, everyday issues” (p. 30). Through both critical and thick description I hoped to come to a place where I could value all the experiences that formed my life, including the difficulties faced in both the living of these experiences and in trying to articulate or narrate the meanings of those experiences that have formed me. I needed to hold these “shards and images of difficulty long enough to examine them” (Fowler, 2003, p. 165), and perhaps heal from them. Examining a life story may allow one to “[... ] evoke deeper parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance the sense of self-or even alter one’s sense of identity” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 965). Estes (1992) writes that the simplest and most accessible ingredient for healing is stories. Stories are medicine (Estes, 1992) and appear to be the DNA, the genetic code of human consciousness (Fowler, 2003). Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered. Our sacred narratives “[...]lie too deep in the consciousness to be explicitly articulated. People do not invent sacred stories for themselves: they awaken to them” (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 263). It was time for an awakening.
Power filled discourses

The phone call had come about a half an hour ago. And as I listened to the story on the other end I felt such pain building inside of me that I had begun to weep. It was that or explode into tiny shards of nothingness. As the conversation ended I stared up in complete disbelief at the moon which dimly lit the country road I found myself on. I felt as wild and crazed as the wind whispering the trees in the ditch beside me. I could hear coyotes howling in the not so distant hills and knew I was at some risk being out here alone in the dark beginnings of this storm. But the heat inside of me felt just as dangerous. As the rain that began to fall mixed with the tears streaming down my face, I heard an unholy sound coming from the depths of my being. Loud, throat ripping, gut tearing screams tore out of me. Sounds I had never heard any human make before. It was the sound of helplessness, visceral anger, and life threatening guilt... How had my path to change a school ended in such harm, such damage, such pain? I sank down on my knees on the gravel and lowered my head in defeat. I had no fight left. I could not comprehend why the wish to engage other discourses and give voice to other and "othered" ways of knowing, being and doing school resulted in such horrific actions. What didn’t I understand? What had I done?

I had expected when I informed my school division that I was leaving before the year ended, taking the sick leave that my doctor recommended, there would be consequences. After several months of disciplining actions on the part of the recently new leadership of the school division to bring the school and myself into alignment with its directions, I was exhausted and physically ill. While the initiatives the school was involved in had been supported and championed by the former administration, it was not seen in the same light by the new one. My anger and fighting back against the regulating attempts upon my person and my leadership had only worsened the situation. My decision to step away was made not just for my health and well being. But for the benefit of all those in the school community. I hoped that I was the problem and that when I left, the staff and community would be able to carry on and finish out some of the important work that we had undertaken. I knew this choice I was making was not going to be received favorably by some and expected some fall out personally, but was sure that my decision would allow the successful completion of several of the initiatives underway.

So when my email access was cut off two days after I went on leave, severing all communication with colleagues and staff, it was shocking and hurtful, but not unexpected. The hiring of a new administrator before I had even had a chance to remove my personal items from my office was surprising, but not unimaginable. The process of shifting the direction of the school and dismantling many of the initiatives and projects which began immediately was saddening, but not unusual. These things all followed a pattern I had seen more than once before when engaging in discourses outside the norm. In schools. What was unfamiliar and painful was the damage being caused to others who had been significantly involved and supportive of the new discourses and processes the school had engaged in for the last few years. Grants had been ended, projects stopped, project leaders and partners encouraged to go away quietly, jobs threatened, promises and treaties broken, and good people damaged. Hopes that many had held to give voice to those who are often silenced in our schools and communities were cut short, cut off, and discarded. Many who had tentatively began to trust, to hope, to speak, were harmed. It was a burden I felt was mine to carry as I had been the driving force and vision behind this process. All of the judgements that had been said to me or said about me I now levelled at my self. I internalized it all. Held it all, owned it all. This rage turned inward was to be the most challenging adversary I had ever encountered and would force me to look at how power is a part of the tapestry of western education and society and the formulation of my very self that I had never dared examine so closely.
 Braiding threads of power

The threads of power that run through life stories need to be examined in order to be thought about differently. I needed to call into question the “self” that was narrating these stories; the one who had agency to act in the world, resist domination and empower others. In the stories that humanism tells power is generally considered to be the product of agency, which we are said to be naturally endowed with, and which exists outside ourselves giving us power to act in the world. Through this lens “[p]ower then is something we possess; and we can deploy it – give it away, take it back, etc.” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 488). I began to question these humanist assumptions about power that made me the hero of my own story (Lather, 2001). If this truly was how power operated why had I not heroically been able to use my agency to avoid the domination I found in institutional education and society to empower the “less fortunate”, to gain freedom from oppressive structures, to possess the agency to break through these barriers of power, to rule myself and not be ruled by others. I had failed in my endeavors at empowering sustainable changes to the practices of educational provision, not once or twice, but several times. Feminist, postcolonial and poststructural perspectives argue that the centering of the subject as one who is naturally endowed with agency is an invention of Western psychology (St. Pierre, 2000; Butler, 1992). Poststructuralism works to historicize subject constructions in order to dislocate these inscribed identities, to question the giveness of these historical constructions and these notions of power (Popenwitz & Brennan, 1998b; St. Pierre, 2000). In these theories power is no longer considered to belong to an individual but exists in relations; always present, mobile, unstable and reversible.

“Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are all endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). I began to wonder if this was why the humanist tasks of identifying and confronting a person or an institution that seems to have power had not worked. Perhaps rather than there being opposition between the rulers and the ruled at the root of power relations, the entire relationship is imbued with and characterized by power. It became clear that telling stories from the perspective of an historical “I” consisting of past constructions of the “subject”, needed to be braided together with an autobiographical “I” that interrupted these effects of power; a métissage of power.

I began to engage poststructuralist readings of my stories in an effort to explain the disciplining forces that I had experienced as well as the dominating effects of individuals and institutions upon my body and my psyche. I was used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside but readings of Foucault present an understanding of “power as forming the subject as well” (Butler, 1997, p. 2). Foucault linked the formative or productive character of power to regulatory and disciplinary regimes upon the body (Sawicki, 1991) that serve to train human beings and turn them into the sorts of subjects/objects which society needs (Jardine, 2005). States of domination upon the body do exist, however, as a great many power relations are fixed in asymmetrical ways and allow for limited freedom (Foucault, 1997). Butler (1997) braids this theory of power together with a theory of the psyche. Through troubling the psychic form that power takes she finds that the formation of the subject involves the regulatory formation of the psyche. “Power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordinations, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self identity” (Butler, 1997, p. 3). This power takes the form of turning, either back on oneself, or even on oneself. This psychic operation of a regulatory norm is one of the most insidious of powers productions, “the power of internalized oppression” (Sawicki, 1991, p. 95). I needed to examine how this turning back upon oneself and on oneself functions; tracing how regulatory power becomes internal and creates such an agonizing experience through this different type of submission to power.

Autobiographical writing from a feminist poststructural stance could create a critical distance from my life story, allowing me to bring to light and deconstruct the tales I told myself and those I had been told. Within my life writings I now had the tools to examine the major acts of power and knowledge in society and school and the rules that justify them (Jardine, 2005). Such autobiographical life history writing becomes a genealogy, which Foucault (1980) describes as “histories of the present” (p. 83) that “defamiliarize present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary” (Sawicki, 1991, p. 101). Jardine (2005) promises educators that “once we identify the genealogy that lead to our current position, we can understand how and why we are affected by power and knowledge as individual human beings in our society” (p. 28). I wondered at the possibilities of poststructural and feminist autobiographical life writing to free us from certain forms of experience and self-understanding that we inherit under the conditions of domination and subordination that exist in humanism. Perhaps to continue to struggle for rights, justices and freedoms within the constraints of modernity this autobiographical life history writing could be a critical first step in deciding what should be changed and what should be cherished and kept as we envision alternative future possibilities for self, school and society (Jardine, 2005).
As a last few solitary leaves blew across the road, I sat staring at the page in front of me. This single piece of paper created an interesting and terrifying new subject position, one that I had not yet occupied. A stroke of the doctor's pen on this document made it official; I had entered the stark land of the disabled. Beyond the fear and apprehension this label held for me, I was struck by the irony of the situation. I had spent the majority of my career in education engaged with those that society constructed as disabled. Now I was holding in my hand an entrance pass to this subjectivity and the gaze was turned on me. Several years ago when my autoimmune system had first been compromised it had managed to fight off the unseen and unknown attackers, and I had been able to recover enough to return to the ‘real’ world. But that was not happening this time. In fact over the last few months my symptoms had multiplied and worsened. It appeared I was destined to remain in this in-between space that I was occupying.

As I watched my body (over)reacting to much of what existed in the world around me, I realized that many of the ecological and social justice issues I had studied and taught were now up close and personal. Here in liminal space where boundaries blurred and uncertainty reigned, the social issues I had always thought I was somehow separate from, took on a different perspective. My concerns about chemicals in our foods and water sources, invisible BPA linings in cans, the plastics and latex that spilled from our cupboards and the “natural” additives hidden in our genetically modified foods that flooded our grocery shelves were no longer just topics of unit plans or classroom lectures or Earth Day presentations. These social issues that had always seemed separate, out there, a safe distance away, to be talked about from a distant observer perspective, were now painfully, obviously on inside concern. Ingesting many commercially available foods could swell my windpipe and stop my breathing at any time. Drinking water from many sources caused my entire body to swell. Genetically modified grains that saturated the supermarkets caused eruptions on my skin and in my bowels. Food additives and chemicals deemed safe by government regulation caused severe allergic reactions. Walking down the laundry detergent and cleaning supply aisle in a grocery store could result in burning welts around my neck and on my chest. The cultural values of hard work, material success, and climbing the ladder, and the countervailing liberal/corporate discourses of struggle, voice, resistance, and emancipation both produced a multitasking frenzy that had left my immune system on overdrive and exhausted. With every bite and breath these social and cultural realities were inside of me, edges blurred, boundaries faded. The socio-cultural-historical were already, always, intricately entwined within my life tapestry: spun right into the DNA of every cell.

I could no longer pretend I was on the outside of the effects that humanism was having upon the world. The modern world’s mantra of progress at any cost was no longer a social discourse that I could critically deconstruct, intellectualize and push to the outside of my experience. It was on the inside inside my skin, inside my thyroid gland, inside my liver, inside my intestines, inside my cells. I could not write myself as an autobiographical text without a weaving of the social, cultural and historical threads in which I was situated and constructed. Autobiographical texts: stories of emotion, dialogue, spirituality and self-consciousness, the relational stories and stories of institutional life, all needed to be woven into the historical, social and cultural contexts in which my life stories were embedded. I could not write though any other life-scape than the one I was living, with its blurred boundaries between personal, social, cultural and historical. I needed to create this missesage as a fluid mixing, braiding, and blending of autobiography with ethnography.
"In writing about experiences we write our lives and living in the social, cultural, political and ideological contexts that shape and inform our worlds, and we learn to read our lives and living in creative and critical ways that open up possibilities for living well."

Kirkland & Leggo, 2008, p. 247

Braiding the personal and the political

Metissage life writing can mesh experiences, perceptions, and understandings with the social and cultural contexts within which they are situated. The personal and the socio-cultural are engaged in a constant dance of blending and merging, separating and reconstituting, forming the tapestries of our life stories. Self-narratives need to critique the “situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710). I needed to open apertures within my life history writings for understanding and to question the multiple conditions and contexts which give rise to the experiences, languages, memories, stories and places that were being brought out for examination. I needed to entwine the autobiographical genre of writing and research with “multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Irwin (2004) writes that “autoethnography is well suited to the borders because it includes any form of inquiry that attempts to confront complexity among human relations within their temporal, spacial, cultural, and historical context” (p. 34). An autoethnographical approach to life writing could support me in braiding my life story with the history that is told and put “the autobiographical and personal” in conversation with the “cultural and social” (Ellis as cited in Adams & Jones, 2008, p. 374). I could gaze reflexively first through a wide-angled lens outward on social and cultural aspects of my personal experiences and then look inward, exploring a “vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Autoethnographic life writing could be a conduit through which I could retrieve buried knowledges and question aspects of my experience that were woven within cultural and social discourses and texts.

A metissage of narrative, autobiography, ethnography, and genealogy provides the means to braid ‘texts’ that attempt to reflexively map multiple discourses that occur (Denzin, 1997) and to create a braided tapestry with the “myths, stories, and poetry of others that are part of our spiritual, social and historical fabric of life” (Huebner as cited in Holman Jones, 2005, p. 767). Métißage life writing shows how personal and family stories can be braided in with larger narratives of nation and nationality, often with provocative effects (Donald, 2009). This contextualizing of life stories within social space and historical time can “heal the rupture between the individual life narrative and the collective and historical experience” (Goodson, 2006, p. 9). Working with auto/bio/ethno/graphy as a critical point of departure, métißage life writing can be used to resist the priority and authority given to official texts and textual practices (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt & Donald, 2002). Interweaving the strands of narrative, poetic and mythopoetic writing with feminist, poststructural theories and analysis can make visible and deconstruct the social and cultural spaces which we occupy and which occupy us. Literary métißage initiates a “genuine dialogue with the dominant discourse(s)” in order to transform these discourses, thus “favoring exchange rather than provoking conflict” (Lionnet, 1989, p. 3). Trihn (cited in Spry, 2006) argues that a responsible, reflexive autoethnographic text “announces its own politics and evidences a political consciousness. It interrogates the realities it represents” (p. 199). “Acts of métißage reverberate their polyvalent and heteroglossic embodiment as political, cultural and engendered performances” (Zuss, 1997, p. 167) and adapt “to the kind of political/social world we inhabit—a world of uncertainty” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 962).

Braiding the personal with the social and cultural can “produce a métißage that interrogates how the texts we produce and how we ourselves are constituted in particular locations” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 7). Métißage allows one to “fabricate textual spaces for the representation and expression of new forms of subjectivity (Zuss, 1997, p. 176). Such texts “aspire to purposeful and tension-filled “self-investigation” of an author’s (and a reader’s) role in a context, a situation, or a social world” (Holman Jones, 2008, p. 24). Perhaps such self-reflective critiques upon life histories will influence not only the researcher’s subjectivities and understandings, but could inspire “readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts” (Spry, 2006, p. 188). Researchers can move from inside their lived, subjective experiences to outward expression while working to take readers inside themselves and ultimately out again (Denzin, 1997). Researchers and readers begin to see how their story is “like and unlike the stories of others who are struggling to make sense of themselves, to retrieve their suppressed selves, to act ethically” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 966).
tales of the depths

The hills were alive with vibrant splashes of color as the prairie plants opened up in the early morning sun. Far below the lake was calm except for the lazy spirals that ran behind the few water birds that dotted its surface. The dry prairie grass brushed my bare legs as I wandered slowly across the hilltops. I was barely aware of the beauty as I was surrounded by the pain in my heart. It had captured all of my attention. I was asking inside. Filled with a sense of loneliness and separation from the rest of humanity. As the rest of the world was packing picnic baskets, dotting sunscreen on their kids' noses and finding a towel to cover the warm beach sand, I was enmeshed in this endless searching. Sick in body, mind and spirit, I felt like a wandering nomad, restlessly searching in the borderlands of society and my own psyche seeking some intangible, unnameable understanding.

Restlessly I lay down on a huge rock warmed by the summer sun. I wanted this internal need to search to stop; to still this eternal longing that spoke in my dreams, whispered in my days, and haunted my life. I felt outside of place now, out of step with the rest of the world, with no real home, no place to belong. A nomad, a wanderer, a seeker. This liminal, numinous space that I was uneasily residing in had become barren terrain. I wanted to quit thinking, quit wondering, quit dreaming, quit seeing and go back to the way things were. The anguish that had been lingering for the last few weeks cracked open. I lay exposed under the brilliant sky and just gave in and gave up to the storm that erupted inside of me.

As I lay spent on the cool, hard clay, breathing heavily, exhausted, the air still, and a pregnant silence descended. I lay quiet within the expectancy of the moment, holding my breath along the edges of fear. Suddenly a high-pitched shriek erupted, tearing the stillness and shaking my being. Directly above me, framed by the prism of light of the sun, hovered a majestic golden eagle. Wings outstretched, its lonely cry cracked into the hills and echoed in ripples across the sky. For several minutes it remained washed in light above me. It's call reverberating in my heart. Slowly I felt the pain release, and a opening begin. I heard faint whispers urging me to see beyond this reality, to know there was so much more. I felt suddenly that there was no place to go, nothing to learn, no mountain to climb or progress to be made. I only needed to awaken to the energies of this numinous space and time.

This contact with the numinous, with this space of unknowing, reminded me of the gifts of the limen. As the eagle spiraled into nothingness in the sky above, I allowed myself to expand and I felt a shift as I connected to this universal part of my nature. This moment where the veil had thinned reminded me of the mystery of reality that existed beyond what my five senses could comprehend. I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the teachers in my life, human, more-than-human and spirit, that had touched me with this knowing. They had threaded encounters of liminal, numinous space into the tapestry of my life story, enriching it with depth and mystery.
“Every human being who walks the Earth Mother has an individual sacred path through life. That sacred path is created by the weaving of many tangible and intangible threads, which connect all of our emotions, dreams, thoughts and experiences. The spirit’s invisible thread of life force unfurls at birth and carries us through the twists and turns of growing up and learning about life on planet Earth.”

Sams, 1999, p. 3

Weaving “othered” realities

The way we see and experience ourselves and the world informs our perceptions of reality and our positions on what counts as legitimate knowledge (Bai & Cohen, 2007). We accept without question “the ‘official’ reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality [...] and is considered the most developed consciousness, the consciousness of duality” (Anzaldua as cited in Snow, 1994, p. 324). Western philosophy and educational theory take an analytic perspective that rests on positivistic assumptions and abandons metaphysics as nonsensical (Miller, 1994). But it appears that the perception of reality in the Western world is itself a metaphysical problem. Plato’s legacy that individuals must develop their rational mind and society must privilege conceptual and discursive consciousness created binaries that place certain ways of being, seeing and knowing over others. Descartes’ influence that left us looking at the world through the Cartesian lens has stripped the world of its sensuous and spiritual qualities and left it inanimate (Bai, 2008). Huebner (2009) feels this limited perspective of reality does not depict the complexity, or even begin to approach the mystery of the human condition.

Bai (2008) writes that the rational, dualistic view of reality that exists in humanism is an incarnation of an alienated psyche and eyes that “are not animated and enchanted” (p. 4). When we enter non-dualistic consciousness we experience a loosening of the psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere. This is “what every major religion has sought to offer-a shift in identification, a shift from the isolated ‘I’ to a new, vaster sense of what we are (Macy, 1999, p. 124). These sacred sites of experiences and inner landscapes provide “a vision of the world where the individual, through the immediacy of his or her own breath and awareness, can connect to the universal [...] of their nature” (Bai & Cohen, 2007, p. 50). As I began to unravel the tapestry of my life history, threads of experiences beyond material realities were re-viewed and remembered. These experiences were outside of sense experiences and even reflection. They were part of “a larger reality (eg. The Tao, the Over-Soul, the Ground of Being) that is much different from the empiricist’s notion of an objective reality” (Miller, 1994, p. 22). These ways are intuitive, somatic, affective, experiential, and spiritual (Curry & Wells, 2006) but require a quieting of our conceptual mind. We can access openings to ancient wisdom through experiences in meditation, dreaming, shamanic journeying, holotropic breath work, prayer, vision quests, artistic practice, immersion in nature or times of simple quiet attention. These shifts in consciousness can be “perceived as visual images, dreams, a felt sense, or a feeling. They may be experienced as a gut feeling, serendipity, a sense of being drawn to pick up a particular book, go to a particular place, or as words that pop into one’s head” (Barrett, 2009, p. 10). These experiences sometimes termed trans-rational, transpersonal, spiritual or animist engage “affect-laden, magic dimensions and archaic depths that are embodied, ecstatic and transformative” (Perara, 1981, p. 13). Curry & Wells (2003) find that in these experiences there exists the possibilities of a self that is not boundaried by a physical body, personal thoughts and ideas, or even understandings of who and what the “I” may be. Forbes (2006) writes that such non-dualistic experiences can lead to an expanded perspective of the s/ Self which incorporates and transcends social construction, is non-conceptual and discloses the non-duality of all human existence. The glimpses I had in my life into these realities, the path within the path (Baldwin, 1990), had left a sense of the intrinsic mystery implicit in reality, and the profundity of the human condition (Huebner, 2009).

Despite how intertwined these experiences were within my life tapestry, I hesitated about braiding these stories of non-dual reality into the méttisage of this life writing process. These experiences would be difficult to speak of for many reasons. These perceptions of reality are inherent in the wisdom traditions of all indigenous peoples, ancient and ancestral ways of knowing, mystical and esoteric traditions in all cultures and have “been highly valued and used in many cultures across the world for thousands of years” (Walter & Fridman as cited in Barrett, 2009a, p.10). However, these experiences are often not acknowledged by Western ontological assumptions (Battiste, 1998). Ancient ways of knowing (Barrett, 2009a) that value the feminine, the more-than-human world, the animate earth and spirit have been delegitimized by the Western ontological position of material reality. They have been colonized by the overdevelopment of the rational, discursive mind and the Western socio-cultural systems that support this onto-epistemological view, including education. These positions have often been seen as expressions of backwardness (Bowers, 2004) and “at various times in history, been outlawed, belittled or condemned” (Barrett, 2009a, p. 12). Despite the fears that these historical and present day circumstances brought up and my concerns regarding technologies of power that might be imposed externally and from my own tendencies of self-policing (Foucault, 1988), I did not want to exclude these stories. By braiding the inner, spiritual reality with the outer, rational perceptual world, perhaps I could turn the limited lens of Western material, dualistic, rational reality inside-out. Perhaps this could make speakable many experiences and realities that have been silenced, delegitimized and colonized in Western society and institutionalized education.
Blending voices.

I rolled over and looked at the clock; it was 4:30 in the morning. I had been waking up at this ungodly hour for days. There are those who say this is the witching hour, a time of bewitch and between, cauldron time. It was becoming for me a time between worlds, when neither dreaming or sleeping, images, insights, and deep knowings appeared. When the analytic storyteller mind was at rest this subaltern part of my self...my subconscious, true self, soul, yin consciousness, intuitive self...my right mind, would speak. When my body had slowed and my consciousness opened, I could exist in this space of non-dual consciousness. Flashes of insight filled journals, tales of serendipity and creative non-linear imaginings, circular meanderings, and numeros images appeared on the pages. However, each day as I tried to sit in front of computer to convert this into linear language my writing stalled; I became speechless. The linen has its own language and I need to find a way to give it voice.

Tonight, just as the last few nights, there was a burning, angry rash circling my neck, the red raised welts of voice pressed against my skin, choking me. The throat chakra, this true voice, was pressing out from the inside demanding to be heard. I could not just engage in linear, rational, cold writing, privileging one way of knowing, and delegitimizing others. This voice that demanded to be heard, read and reciprocated would not let me, it woke me up bringing the inside out, refusing to be silenced anymore, again. Not without making me sick and waking me up night after night, the inside pain of it raising the axe and raising the welts encircling my neck, choking me. My body was saying no and so painfully and loudly that I had to listen. I could not privilege the logical voice over the intuitive, rational over knowing over embodied, or once again these parts of me would be "rejected", delegitimized, and burlled. My voice burned from the inside out, speaking loudly to me, giving me the courage to find a way to allow this voice its place on the page.

How was I to capture these elusive moments of transformation, clarity and awakening? How could I speak these images that bubbled to the surface in this liminal space and time? What language could render the impossible? How was I to translate the voices of the waters, the teachings of my grandmother, the songs of my ancestors, the faces in the trees, visions in the pregnant darkness of the sweet, slick in the rain, or the teachings of the hawk and the raven. I needed the aesthetic and creative fires of the cauldron to give shape to the entirety of my experience in order for it to become seen, known, and heard; to appear in its wholeness before my own eyes and others eyes. The passion that I felt in those liminal spaces, the tingling spine, racing heart, and heightened senses when I was immersed in the moment and accessing the numinous were impossible to convey in words. As I exhaustd memories, or they became unboxed in my dreamscapes they became blended with passionate and aesthetic expression every night on the blank white pages beside my bed. It was as if my subconscious mind, my emotional life, my spiritual experiences and my academic mind were being converged, mixed, and blended into one another; rational and transcendental intertwined.

Like the collage of words, drawings, images and mythopoeics that were appearing in my journals, I began to see how the pieces and fragments of my memories and life were constantly rearranging and reconfiguring themselves. In my journals I was delving into the depths of liminal knowledges and embedded meanings and rendering these understandings and experiences artistically. My subconscious was being made conscious through creative renderings as the masses of words, images and impressions which were crowding my being, my dreams came spilling out onto the pages. Words were no longer sufficient for these travels in liminal space and the complexities could not be unravelled with the rational mind. These ways were fluid and emergent, blending into collages of fused illusion images, objects, materials from different worlds all enabling double readings and ambiguities as multiple texts were juxtaposed. My time in liminal space convinced me that vulnerability, instinct, imagination and creativity could be very effective research tools that needed to be woven into my intellectual, rational, linear narratives and theoretical writings. In due time these all became braided with one another and began to form a metissage of multiple and multilayered meanings.
Mixcraft

Deleuze & Guattari (1980) note that “writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has everything to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come” (cited in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 969). Engaging in research in liminal space encountered realms of experience which by their very nature are highly subjective. Trying to represent these experiences presented me with a “struggle of representation, [and] the necessity to create new forms through which to represent alternative knowledges”(Sommierville, 2007, p. 227). Descriptions of these dimensions are difficult to put into a discursive language which tends to fragment and contrast and favours interpretation through ordinary linear consciousness (Moss, 1986). Typically and “almost unthinkingly qualitative research validates the mechanistic model of writing, even though that model shuts down the creativity and sensibilities of the individual researcher” (Richardson, 1994, p. 517). I became skeptical about the possibilities of meaning-making and representation of these non-dual experiences through standard forms of academic texts and realized that “[...] most writing has both presentational and propositional aspects, however, western society and the tradition of the enlightenment continually pushes us towards the propositional end of the continuum, it pushes us toward clarity, away from ambiguity, towards precise (and singular) meaning” (Taylor, 2004, p. 74). I knew that my inquiry process needed to privilege both text and image as they met within moments of métissage.

My autoethnographic métissage needed to mix a variety of written genres and art media including narrative, poetry, scholarly and reflexive theoretical discourse in order to give voice to the multilayered experiences of my life writing. Arts informed research methodologies and methods of representation could give “form to that which cannot be articulated or known through traditional forms of research” (Promislow, 2005, p. 46). Arts-informed autoethnography “examines the intersections of art, education, qualitative, and/or autoethnographic research” (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 134). A blending of autoethnography and arts-based research braids the subjectivities of artist/writer/researcher and creates a work that is “embodied inquiry: sensuous, emotional, complex, intimate” (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 135). Braiding the arts into this life writing created possibilities for more physiological, sensory, embodied, intuitive experiences to merge with cognitive knowing (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 132). Pente (2004) explains that by including artistic activity it is possible to derive into aspects of the self that cannot be describe adequately with words. The “language” of this research had to at times be capable of “speaking” from a mystical, anist, spiritual point of view while at other times from a linear perspective, a multiliteral view that encourages thiness. Pearce (2004) states that when language needs to shift from discursive to non-discursive then the textual imagery becomes visual rather than verbal and drawings and paintings function as kinds of texts. Composing collage and mixed media allowed me to transpose my experiences onto a blank artist’s page in a language that was not limited to the discursive. When writing is interrupted with images, consciousness is slowed down as image making is a more contemplative process than writing. This supported the disruption and decolonizing of Western ways of knowing and representing that was essential in this life history writing. In this métissage which blurs and merges genres, texts and forms into a representational text that is capable of speaking in multiple languages, a three dimensional text is created that can encompass locations of past and present, the field and text, and the visual narrative (Pente, 2004).

Collage, narrative, and reflexive theoretical writings can be intertwined into a seamless text which calls “attention to the irreducible heterogeneity of the "postmodern condition..." [j]ust so as it does bind these elements, as elements, within a kind of unifying field...the practice of collage also resists the romanticism of pure difference” (BrookeMAN, 2001, pp 10-11). Engaging collage as a textual strategy requires a deliberate overlapping arrangement of bits and pieces, there are no clean edges or borderlines between, which makes it possible to create a non-verbal, non-linear text of images. Each image chosen within the collage is significant, is a signifier and can “catch the constitutive role of the mingling dance of signify” (Hurrien, 2003, p. 112). Collage can contain “reflections, interpretations and actions in ways that complement and/or disrupt their written texts” (Irwin, 2004, p. 35). Sometimes text is integrated with the artwork or collage and other times the text and image stand alone. Integrating layered text with collage involves “putting yourself into your text and putting your text into the literatures and traditions of social science” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 975) through the insertion of relevant analytical statements or references. This braiding of “art and writing unite the visual and textual by complementing, refuting or enhancing one another” (Irwin, 2004, p. 31). Image and text do not duplicate one another but rather teach something different yet similar. Arts-informed métissage gives a language to tacit, embodied, intuitive experiences allowing these voices their place on the page as texts that speak the language of the limin.
Métissage traveller
walker between the wor(l)ds
gathering the threads
of the patterns in the past
tracing their length to the present
unravelling the patterns of his(her)story
only way to change them is to know them
how much of the past
weaves it’s influence today?

Disentangling histories of the present (Sawicki, 1991)
power-knowledge practices
that normalize the subject, school and society;
discourses that determine what can be said
by whom, when and with what authority (Ball, 1990);
and the arenas in which ‘truth games’ are played out;
rendering the familiar strange

Dropping the stitches of “othering”
cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998)
colonialism and hegemonic structures;
blending the “competition of voices
that should never
be silenced by any group
in a position of dominance” (Huebner, 2009, p. 11)
the callings from the edges
from the other side of the moon.

Awakening from the dream state (Goldtooth, 2010)
Seeing through deep time eyes; (Dowd, 2010)
Picking up the threads and weaving a new tapestry
Of what we should cherish and keep
And what we should change (Jardine, 2005)
A métissage of possibilities for
other ways of experiencing ourselves as subjects (Sawicki, 1991)
and new forms of school, society and life.

Nomad Re/searcher
“there can be no final arrival:
there is only searching...
and re/searching” (Pryer, 2004, p. 211)
as Spirit edges us forward,
shaping,
shifting,
shadowing
what is yet to come (Meyer, 2003).

Fellow travellers
“You need these stories, too
you need these trails,
these maps.
Why?
Because like me,
you are in a dream,
you are lost
always trying to find your way
home” (Chambers, 2003, p. 109).
This life story is an autoethnographic métissage of words and images, thoughts and dreams, whispers and songs, impressions and knowings of a traveller, a nomad wandering the borderlands, skirting the edges in liminal space. It is a tale of inward and outward travels; personal, professional and political and of awakening in-to-self, school and society. The hero’s journey—the quest of the warrior of Western tales—is not reflected in this telling. There is no yellow brick road, no path in the woods that goes straight ahead, no breadcrumbs to follow or even places with clear forks in the road in which to choose the one less travelled. There is no damsel in distress, no beast to slay and there is to be no hero’s welcome, even though one might think this would all be true. Instead, the travels are more that of the spiral, a circling of stories, with greater awareness each time around. The traveller must be determined to stay awake, to be aware, to pay attention to the learnings. Many before, in ancient times and the not so distant past, have worked to provide some sign posts and maps to guide the way. The nomad feels at most times as no hero, but rather as a being becoming, more and more naked, open and exposed; able to see the past more clearly, to be present more often. This then is a story of awakening, of becoming, of being, of the life of a traveller with-in liminal space. Perhaps in some small way it is heroic; more likely it reflects this extraordinary time on earth and the ordinary human condition that has existed since time began.
Chapter Two

Contextualizing the Research
This progress is the thing that France is premier in the next hundred years.

Champion.

No. 703.

"Con/text"

When they put on their. They say "Goodbye".

LITTLE R.

She was just a very pretty woman. She lived a nice life.

Elementary Arithmetic

The method of finding the H.C.F. when the numbers are not readily detected.

To find the H.C.F.

Find H.C.F. first.

But then...

THE STORY OF THE CANADIAN READER

you-all

(lies) ing

MRS. M. H. MURPHY

1009 A. MELHEE

Jackston St.

I will send some money to send today. I wish you to come.

Sure I told you booked.
Culture shapes our perceptions mostly at an unconscious level and it is extremely difficult to penetrate the unnoticeable and question our felt experience of what is "common-sense". It rarely occurs to us to ask whether the reality we perceive through the lens of the culture in which we grow up is partial, limited, or incomplete. All of us who have lived our entire lives immersed in Western society must recognize that the myths and the sacred stories of this culture run deep. We are truly fish in the water of industrial age assumptions (Senge, 2000). For this reason “life stories (including their stance or view as well as their discourse) cannot be understood if they are decontextualized” (McNinch, 2009, p.79).
This research is set within this historical time of great crisis and great opportunity on a global level. "In our moment in history, perhaps the most sweeping and radical transformation ever to occur on Earth is underway" (Plotkin, 2008, p. 2). The post-modern turn has deconstructed many of the structures of industrial civilization and while we can celebrate the many accomplishments of the development of reason and rational thought, we must also recognize that the shadow side of modernism has relentlessly undermined the Earth’s water cycles, atmosphere, soil and oceans and damaged all the major life systems of our planet. “Compounding the ecological crisis are decaying economies, ethnic and class conflict and worldwide warfare (Plotkin, 2008, p. 2). As we join the analysis of post-modernism with the roots of the global environmental crisis, it has become clear that what we are facing is a unique historical event (Gare, 2006). “History will one day clearly show that we are at a major turning point, not merely of the human story but in the story of the entire universe” (Dowd, 1991, p.3). The fabric of life is unraveling with humanity as a conscious witness but also a cause of the disintegration (Wahl as cited in Seely and Reason, 2008).
There has been a knowing in my bones since birth, maybe deeper than my bones. That I have been touched by the hidden whispers in the wind, the sun dappling through the branches, the waves on the water.

I have been inspired by unseen radio waves and fuzzy black and white images that shouted revolution; have a dream, burn your bra, down with the establishment, stop the war; fight for peace.

I have been moved by the strength of resistance that like green grass breaking through the asphalt challenged the patriarchal, controlled reality in my family kitchen as the small green transistor radio blared with rebellion while we girls carefully dried the dishes.

I have been frightened by the silent spring, the cold war, the warming climate, the growing population and the shrinking dollar.

Life stories need to be set within the context of multiple periods of time: the large chunks of time the Western world has constructed including the Modern and Post-modern Eras; generational or cohort time in which our subjectivities are constructed; and cyclical time, the stages of life which we have moved through. “This intensely private and yet universal and public cycle is the garden we occupy” (McNinch, 2009, p. 79).
My life story has been shaped by my immersion in the sea of Western modernity and the patriarchal, hegemonic perceptions and values that lived within the walls of family, church and school. On a less conscious level, I was also influenced by the de(re)constructing, (quest)ioning and (re)awakening of the energies of post-modernism which called into question the multiple discourse of modernism that had been presented in the spaces I inhabited as “common sense”. Born at the start of the 1960’s into a suburban family with prairie farm roots, my daily and living rhythms were steeped in the influence of the fear induced cold war fifties, the intense energy of the turbulent sixties, and the revolutionary seventies. Fear, rebellion, and the optimism that change is possible are all part of the legacy of this generational time. But I was also constructed in the urban empty lot behind my house, the prairie farmyard, grandma’s small town garden, Aunt Rita’s cottage high above the shimmering summer lake, and the yearly family vacations in the cool mountain air. Years of lying face to face upon the Land and hearing the heart beat of the Great Mother as she caressed my cheek with warm summer breeze and hummed a lullaby often lacking in the cold embrace of modernity, had an equally life altering influence in the garden of my life cycles. My life journey within the shifting times of modernism and post-modernism, the generational time I have been constructed within and cyclical time and the life cycles I have passed through are all essential to the context of this research.
There has been a knowing in my bones since birth,
But deeper than my bones,
I have been angered by the hierarchical,
Hegemonic structures of systems
That stood
Unmoving
In the cold stones of church,
The climbable ladders of society,
And the carefully constructed bricks of education
As the earth shudders under the wheels of consumerism
And our children ache from the pain and trauma of our times

Another brick in the wall

Low Self-esteem
Exit ONLY

We are waiting for you
At the turning
We don’t need no education
We don’t need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the class room
Teachers leave those kids alone
Hey, teachers! Leave those kids alone!
All in all, it’s just a
Nother brick in the wall
All in all, you’re just a
Nother brick in the wall
We don’t need no education
We don’t need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the class room
Teachers leave those kids alone
Hey, teachers! Leave those kids alone!

Context is the social, political, cultural and spiritual force that shapes the life of a person. “Every person lives within a society’s context – whether we live comfortably in the middle of this collective force or straining at the edge” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 21). Throughout my life I have struggled to accept the enculturation of modern education, family, church and society and was constantly pushing at the edges of what felt like a cage of expectations, rules, social mores and demands of modernism within the context of Western society. Even as a young child I began to articulate, usually unconsciously, alternative positionings, often driven by the pain that I saw in the lives of others and felt in my own. “At the interactive edge between the self and society, context is constantly shifting, absorbing new information, ideas and technology, making room for new experiences that have proven possible” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 22). This research study is set within the shifting contexts of my life story and the experiences that contributed to the expansion of my perception of what is possible within the story of school and the story of Western culture. It examines the enormous and complicated tension between expansion and contraction as context changes and shifts while some in the culture push the openings, some try to slam them shut and others just want to stay out of the controversy.
There has been a knowing in my bones since birth, maybe deeper than my bones, that I have suffered as I held my new born babies in my arms and wondered what I would tell them of what their ancestors had done to lead us to this place and time and where I was and what I was doing when the world was exploding.
Experiences in education as a student, teacher, special educator, educational psychologist and administrator convinced me that that the casualties of this exploding world are children and that the Western institution of schooling that privileges the modern, industrialized, patriarchal worldview needs to be troubled, exposed, examined and reflected upon to determine if and how it helps or hurts our children and our world. “We in the northern hemisphere have been saturated with voices that prevent us from critically reflecting on the momentous period in which we are living” (O’Sullivan, 1999, p. 40). This research study is set within the context of the powerful discourses that direct our attention towards a way of seeing the world and a way of “doing school” that is destructive to the planet, to humanity, to our children, and to our very souls. While there is today in educational discourse critique of both subject matter and the student, the “critique of society seems beyond the pale, as major social and economic forces tend to silence most criticism. Students are graded against the backdrop of content and society but the reverse is not true” (Huebner, 2009, p. 11).

Questioning and wondering about “the nature of education systems that continue to reproduce the kind of social conditions (i.e. passive consumerism) which pose threats to the environment and which conserve rather than challenge critical consciousness of social-environmental issues” (Hart, 2010, p. 158) is urgently needed within the context of Western education. “Even a cursory glance at Canadian history, even a tentative scraping through the layered palimpsest of national memories reveals that in Canada-education has always served empire” (Chambers as cited in Brogden, 2009, p. 129). While the economic and technical dimensions of the present global crisis are important, current educational forms appear to be at the center of our social and ecological problems (Reason, 2005). “The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perceptions and values: hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions and values. It is an educational challenge. More of the same kind of education can only make things worse” (Orr, 1994, p. 27).

Springer (as cited in Mayes, 2005) states that “…public education forces children into a lock-step march from grade to grade, and then on to some form of post-secondary vocational preparation, basically unconcerned with the subtler developmental needs of children but quite anxiously attuned to the demands of corporate capitalism for obedient and efficient “worker citizens”” (p. 52). By definition the context of learning and schooling are political in the sense it concerns “issues of power, leadership, decision-making, choices and values, belief systems and ideologies” (McNinch, 2009, p. 79). The current political context of education sees the “continued dominance of modern, technical discourses in many lived curricular spaces throughout North America, curricular spaces where teaching and learning happen in the day to day” (Brogden, 2009, p. 128). Huebner (1999) states that “the limits on what to teach, the domination of technical language, of behavioral objectives and evaluation cloud the understanding: understanding of self, of our work, of young people” (p. 381). Set within a growing neoconservative movement throughout North America, in education there exists a growing “climate of high-stakes standardized testing and ever increasing demands for “accountability”” (Brogden, 2009, p. 128). An “aboriginal concept of accountability in education is much broader than simply meeting the needs of the aboriginal learner, the institution, and society as a whole. It includes learning to be accountable for the impact that our human activity has on the earth and beyond” (Hill, 1999, p. 123). Within the context of Western education, such discourse is viewed as nonsensical.

Sadly, within “this complex web of politics and powers, what is at stake are the storied lives of students and teachers” (Tupper, 2009, p. 122). This research study hopes to examine critically and compassionately this political context and then step outside those modern discourse that shape us as students, teachers and individuals marching toward a future based upon securing both social order and economic success into the context of life experiences that see beyond “objectives”, “learning outcomes” and the belief that the purpose of education is to secure a place in a prescribed future, to the wonder and uncertainty of life’s journey together (Lewis, 2009).
This research study is set within the possibilities for reimagining and transforming the dominant discourse in Western education and engages the contextual openings that exist at this time in our culture as many are asking questions that produce different knowledge, produce knowledge differently and are producing different ways of living in the world (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2002). “We need a revolution in the West: not violent overthrow, but a willingness to take responsibility for the course of history being set forth in our names. We need a revolution determined to activate broad, inclusive social change” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 22). Education is contextualized in this research as activism, as a “protest against present forms that they may be reformed and transformed” (Huebner, 1999, p. 360), and as a challenge to the ethics of Western society that is increasingly dominated by individualism, greed and profit. Education is (re)imagined and (re)contextualized as a transformative change process that creates the conditions for teachers, students and communities to focus upon which parts of the cultural and educational commons to conserve and which to change (Hart, 2005) while considering the qualities so needed in ourselves, our institutions and our world at this historical time: beauty of existence without intentional harm, and truths about politics, ecology and socio-economic justice (Fowler, 2009).
Education as activism, change and transformation within this study is contextualized within the liberalist and neocorporative positionings that have emerged in Western culture and have been mirrored in education. Liberalism has influenced education in the areas of environmental education, equity and diversity education, anti-racist education, post-colonial education and feminism in education. There has appeared in reaction and response to liberalism and its perceived effects in education, an “ultra conservative agenda and resurgence of conservative positions as an attempt to regain hegemonic power that was threatened by women, people of color and others” (Apple, 1990/2002, p. 1). Pinar (as cited in Tupper, 2009) argues that as a result of the appearance of this neoconservative agenda, education “has become a skill-and-knowledge factory...in the schools, millions live the nightmare each day, too few seem to realize they are even asleep” (p.3). Hart (2010) wonders how far school systems will be willing to go within this context in allowing students and teachers to engage in activities that go beyond normal school boundaries that privilege work construed in terms of discrete, manageable units, right answers and certainty through measuring devices.

Within this political climate, enacting discourse not considered normative in Western society and challenging the “common sense” assumptions of modernism, the dominant discourse of Western society and the educational structures that suppress alternative imaginings and possibilities is politically dangerous. Education that represents alternative discourse challenges privilege and those who unconsciously, disconsciously or consciously benefit from it and engages discourses of power. This embodies significant social risk for those who do so (St. Pierre, 2007) and these risks are greater now as the neocorporate movement has been taken up in Western society and education. It is within this context of risk that this research is situated.

Within this shifting landscape of politically charged discourse, this research contextualizes the subjectivities of both educators and students and the agency they have, or perceive they have, to enact alternative possibilities. “Educators have witnessed a massive attempt—one that has been more than a little successful—at exporting the crisis in the economy and in authority relations from the practices and policies of dominant groups onto the schools” (Apple, 1990/2002, p. 2). A discourse has appeared that states if teachers and curricula were more tightly controlled, more closely linked to the needs of business and industry, more technically oriented, then all the problems of unemployment, lack of achievement, disintegration of the inner city and so on, will disappear. This coupled with a resurgence of neoliberalism in the Western world has significantly impacted both the subjectivity and the agency of students and teachers. The increased focus on individuality and competitiveness, on students as economic units in a market economy (Davies, 2006) and on accountability through a rhetoric of assessment, convinces students and teachers that there is no choice at a systemic level. Instead, agency exists only in individual choices to become appropriate and successful within that inevitable system. Such a system is extraordinarily difficult for students and teachers to reflexively examine and may, through the discourse of inevitability, dismantle resistance to itself and any attempts to (re)imagine or (re)engage alternative discourse and ways of “doing school”.
There has been a knowing in my bones since birth
maybe deeper than my bones
that
there is more to reality than meets the eye
and the beat of the drum
the cry of the eagle
the ring of the bell
the scent of the goddess
all know
all are knowing
all are all knowing
all are one
both/and
This work is set within the context of decolonizing the Western imperialism that exists in society and schools that welcomes and validates some ways of being and knowing and delegitimizes and colonizes others. In the present context of the Western cognitive imperialism, “a form of cognitive manipulation used to discredit other knowledge bases and values”, often uses public education to validate and empower only one source of knowledge, and legitimize “only one language, one culture and one frame of reference” (Battiste, 1998, p. 20). Schools have been colonized by a market ethos of “what counts” as important knowledge (Apple & Buras, 2006). The curriculum perpetuates power inequities and creates generations of citizens that have their worldview influenced by what is missing: women’s voices, indigenous ways of knowing, the truth about historical inequities in Canadian governmental practices, the cries of the Earth as we destroy hundreds of species mindlessly each week while we drown in consumerism, and the voice of spirit as it whispers to us on the winds of crisis and hope. It creates a learning context that many students, teachers and families remain disconnected from and silenced by. “In effect, Eurocentric knowledge, drawn from a limited patriarchal sample remains as distant today to women, Indigenous peoples, and cultural minorities as did the assimilationist curricula of the boarding school days” (Battiste, 1998, p. 21). This research study is set within the context of intentionally engaging multiple discourses which are often absent in the conversations of Western culture and education including but not limited to ancient, feminine, indigenous, more-than-human, and spirit ways of being and knowing, giving voice to these alternative ontological and epistemological positionings.

Wheatley (1998) believes that many of the negative and troubling behaviors in organizations today represent a clash between the forces of life and the forces of domination; between contested ontologies and epistemologies. “As questions are raised about alternative ways of knowing and diversity, the discussion quickly slips into paradigm maintenance by supporters of the Eurocentric canon. This Eurocentrism resists change while it continues to retain a persuasive intellectual power in academic and political realms” (Battiste, 1998, p. 23). However, light continues to break through the shadows of modernisms carefully constructed reality; a new vision and story continues to push from the womb of modernism’s dysfunctions (O’Sullivan, 1999). The profundity and mystery of life cannot be contained by any single discourse system (Huebner, 2009), and other ways of knowing and being that have long been silenced in the West are finding their voice and speaking alternatives to life within the third space that is emerging. This research study exists within the context of these contested ontologies and epistemologies, and this emerging space that includes but transcends multiple discourses and multiple ways of knowing and being. This space engages the possibility of moving beyond the business of reproducing ourselves within the familiar contexts of Western culture and asks how we might re-imagine ourselves (Meyers & Leggo, 2009). Within this space one can engage other ways of being and knowing without rejecting Western scientific perspectives or rational, conceptual knowing; one that can create opportunities for both/and (Barrett, 2009). This third space dwells in the hyphenated space between “non” and “material” reality, between “non” and “dual” thinking, between ancient and modern ways of knowing; a liminal space that is both/and, betwixt and between, a space of “fructile chaos, [...] fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities” (Turner as cited in Pryer, 2004, p. 204). “When Martin Luther King, Jr., said “Nothing can stop and idea whose time has come,” he understood the power of contextual opening—and the need to seize the moment” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 22). This research is contextualized within this opening, within this liminal space, a “vulnerable, fluid place between knowing and being” which allows the “conditions for both preserving and generating life and pedagogical becoming between the old and new, between memories and imaginings” (Hasebe-Ludt, 2009, p. 27). In this liminal space we can question the prescribed notions of existing frameworks, create vibrant possibilities of new understandings and “engage in border crossings between different existing and imagined worlds” (ibid).
There has been a knowing in my bones since birth, maybe deeper than my bones that while I was doing change, change was doing me suffering took me inward into a spiralling, tangled forest journey of awakening with in liminal space

This research is set within the context of awakening:
awakening to the struggle of disentangling ourselves from the branches of patriarchy and modernity, pruning away what is sick and keeping the healthy growth;
awakening to the strange hold the discursive mind has upon our consciousness, (re)membering we are more than our logical, rational, thinking mind and (re)opening to our heart/mind that is as spacious as the sky;
awakening to the present moment, the everyday experiences of growth, death and rebirth and (re)viewing the impermanence of life, as it arises, meets us in the always present, present, and dissolves;
awakening to the call from the other, the human, the more-than-human, and Spirit, “that we may reach out beyond ourselves and enter into life with the life around us” (Huebner, 1999, p. 360), (re)membering that “education is not only a leading out from that which I am, it is also a leading toward that which I am not” (Battiste, 2002, p. 14);
awakening to pain, trauma, and suffering, (re)learning that power and control can be used to exclude or repress, (re)engaging “wide open-eyed awareness about desire for power or control or will to damage from anger which is nearly always born from fear and grief” (Fowler, 2009, p. 58) and (re)playing Rumi wisdom “Don’t turn your head, keep looking at the bandaged place, that is where the light enters you”;
awakening to the (re)minding that Knowledge is more than secular, it has a sacred purpose, an absolute Otherness, a transcendent Other, that goes beyond all appearances and all conditions and (re)seeing that education is the lure of the transcendent” (Huebner, 1999, p. 360);
awakening to the emerging numinous threads of new ways of knowing and being struggling to birth within a liminal space of new possibilities;
awakening in/ to s/Self, school and society with/ in liminal space.
Chapter Three

A Rude Awakening
A rude awakening
Shaken Awake

Startled, I stared disoriented into the darkness, heart crashing in my ears. It felt as if I had been dragged awake by some unseen force, the air was urgent, hot and frightening. As my eyes adjusted and heart slowed, reason kicked in and reminded me that I was at home, in bed, the crisp white sheets wrapped around my legs. As I gazed through the darkness I made out familiar shapes in my newly decorated room, everything clean, shiny and in its place. I was safe and in control, it was all good. I pulled the covers up and settled back into my bed, listening to the softly blowing wind outside my window and began to drift off. Then a voice wrapped around my brain and I was violently pulled upright. Sheer terror, the scent of death in the air, I leapt from the bed and ran. My chest was exploding and fear filled my nostrils as I raced into the bathroom. Outside the wind was strong as I sat down on the tub edge in the dark trying to get a grip on myself. I had always felt this fear, sometimes at the edges of my world and sometimes in the center, but it had never been like this. Suddenly the world tilted, the air cracked open and everything still as I waited, poised on the edge of something. “Is this death,” I wondered? Then the wind exploded with biblical strength, shaking the house and calling to a depth in me I’d never met and couldn’t ignore. It surrounded me, sucked the air out of my lungs and all thought from my mind.

The anguish I had kept buried with frantic improvement projects: home, school, environment and self, surfaced like a tidal wave, engulfing me with a force greater than I had ever known. The knowledge of the harm being done to the earth, to our fellow creatures and oppressed peoples around the world and within this country unfurled within my belly. This was a truth that was too immense to bear. I wanted to die. I curled forward wrapping myself into a small cocoon, rocking like I had done when I was little and the pain had gotten too big. Then light blasted through the window, filling the room, summoning me. I turned and crawled up on the edge of the tub and peered out the window, hands gripping the ledge and legs shaking. I felt miniscule in the face of this force that had entered the world around me. Trees were being violently wrenched by the wind as the clanging of the wind chimes joined with the unearthly sound that was crushing the air around me. An intense light filled the back yard, blinding me. I quietly whispered “God?” Instantly, sound and light entered my insides, filling me, enveloping my soul. I began to make out a presence floating in the air above the fence which divided me from my neighbor. Faceless and ghostly, gossamer tendrils of energy whispered it’s presence. This being emanated such love that I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. Slowly the wind calmed and the figure faded.

Shaken and confused I stumbled through the shadows and down the stairs. Light was splintered and bursting from behind the blinds in the darkened kitchen, filling the room with shafts of brilliance. I was drawn to it and tentatively reached out and touched a beam. Then a question “Do you want the fear to end?” Hesitantly I whispered back “yes”. “Then search” and instantly it was over, the light was gone and the world righted itself as the air returned with a shimmer to its former state. Everything appeared as it had before, all was back to normal. I stood in the darkness, cold seeping into my bare feet as a knowing unfurled in my bones. I would never return to ‘normal’ again.
“Humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice, the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we can imagine, the limits of our pleasures. Humanism is everywhere, overwhelming in its totality; and, since it is so “natural,” it is difficult to watch it work.”

St. Pierre, 2000, p. 478

Sleepwalking

This experience of awakening shook the foundations of my carefully constructed version of reality which had already begun to show some cracks in the brick work. I had felt for years a bubbling beneath the consciousness of Western culture that something terribly wrong not just in the world, but with how we saw the world. I often experienced both the personal and ecological pain that seemed to permeate the human experience in the West. In 1988, John Seed wrote that “...the destruction of our life-support systems [...] is the deepest and most pervasive source of anxiety in our time” (p. 7). Every once in a while I would experience this overwhelming sense of fear, but our society has constructed complex taboos against the communication and expression of such anguish. Before long the billion dollar industry of distraction and the ever increasing speed of the hamster wheel of progress would lull me back to sleep. I would once again join the masses in the denial of the trauma of our times.

Despite my actions of environmental care as an individual and an educator, I suspected that those of us living in modern culture have more complicity in the devastating destruction of the earth than was ever openly admitted or discussed. I reduced, reused, recycled, planted trees, purchased green products, and shared this discourse of sustainability and stewardship with the children I taught. I did all this while I enjoyed my sport utility vehicle, vacations in the mountains, burgers at fast food restaurants, trinkets for the kids from the dollar store and strawberry salad midwinter. I was not oblivious “to what those things cost at the store, [or] to what they cost when all the uncounted effects of their production and use are added up” (Ayers as cited in Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 12) but could rationalize that I was a good environmental citizen living as sustainably as I could. As a culture in the West we cover up and deny wrongdoing and invent elaborate “intellectual” and “rational” justifications for it. “Our whole economic structure today participates in this kind of self deception” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 12). While I could sense the ever growing global crisis the “...taboos against speaking of it or even seeing it are subtle, strong and complex” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 12). I felt constantly conflicted in the life I was living within the sticky web of modernism and this uneasy sense that there were undercurrents flowing under the discourses of humanism that I was not catching. Understanding modernism and how it functions in the world is an enormously difficult task “since the language, practice and effects of humanism have been operating for centuries, envelope us every moment, and have become “natural”” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 478).

My experience in the early morning hours of being shaken awake, literally and figuratively, was life altering. My mind struggled to encompass the possibility of realities outside the realm of anything I had ever encountered. I stood naked in the unknown, stripped to the core of my being. I was brought face to face with the depths of the grief and pain I had denied feeling for the earth and the anxiety I had buried about the escalating environmental, social and economic crisis that was unfolding. I saw clearly the anger and judgment I had directed at others and my self for not being able to change things and alter the course of this crisis. This awakening brought to consciousness many of the questions I had intuitively sensed regarding the powerful constructs of the modern era and initiated a slow process of troubling what counts as truth in the discourses of humanism. Integrating, discerning, and responding to this experience presented an opportunity and a challenge I was unsure I wanted. I was to soon learn that when we deny such experiences and our inner knowing we do ourselves and the larger world real damage.
Shaking the ladder

The encounter of the night before scared me half to death. I could barely focus the next day at school and frantically arranged to meet with two people whom I considered knowledgeable about all things strange and spiritual. Both advised that I take some time, write things in a journal and engage a process of discernment regarding the meaning of this encounter. That night still very disturbed and disoriented, I called on an old trick that I had invented as a child. I liken it to pulling God out of a hat like a rabbit. I would sit with the bible, let the pages fall open where they would and read to see what God might have to say on a particular subject. This was always a technique I resorted to when the going got rough. Like when I was eight and had stolen candy from the corner store and sat with it unopened and sticky in my hands trying to decide what to do. So I engaged this tried and true method of spiritual discernment and went searching for my old childhood bible. After digging through piles boxes from our last move I finally found it. I blew the dust off in anticipation, closed my eyes and flipped open the book. There on the open page was an Old Testament teaching tale about a man with a strange name. The story went that an angel had awakened him from his sleep and dragged him by his head to a high rock. There God demanded some things from him which of course he did not want to do. So he pleaded that God would let him do otherwise. I slammed the book shut in fear and set it aside.

I looked around at the carefully constructed life I had created for myself: the big house in the “good” end of town we had just moved to, the carefully decorated and arranged rooms, the skating rink in the backyard that my kids were playing on, and the preschool across the back yard where my children attended that had a solid reputation for educating the right kind of kids into the right kind of world. I thought of the newly appointed position of vice-principal that I had worked hard to get as a young woman in the system. I was excited about this position and the opportunities for making change that became possible. I could introduce many of my passions to a whole school: environmental and outdoor education experiences, holistic teaching practices, social justice work. No way was I going to search for anything that might in any way shake up this opportunity or the carefully arranged person I had become in the life I had been told I should want. I told whatever had shown up in my life the night before to get lost, find someone else to do its dirty work. I liked my life too much the way it was and no way was I giving up anything.

To all who looked from the outside in, my life was good. I was a well liked, innovative teacher who was moving up through the system rapidly because I had fresh ideas and worked hard. I was a good environmentalist who recycled and took my students outdoors and planted trees in school grounds and nearby parks. I was an activist who worked to change education to better support students who were lost and hurting within the existing system. I loved being a mom and to assuage any guilt I felt for the long hours I was putting in at school I had a come in nanny so I didn’t have to drag my kids out on cold, dark winter days.

There was only one annoyance in this life, one small crack in the glass that someone may have noticed had they looked closely enough. At times when I looked in the mirror I could barely meet my own eyes. I would feel this creeping fear that I did not recognize who was looking back. I had a sneaking suspicion that by climbing the ladder, even with the best of intentions, I was somehow losing a part of myself. But I brushed these thoughts aside as I put on my mascara and carefully straightened my jacket and skirt that was the unspoken but accepted uniform for women in the system. As I had told myself many times before when life shook the foundations of my carefully constructed existence, this too shall pass. I decided to set that strange experience aside and not think or speak of it again. Although I felt a touch of inexplicable loss at this decision, I was convinced it was the best thing to do.
A way of seeing

Julian Jaynes (as cited in Kyle, 1993) writes that most people at some point in their lives have experiences where they hear exterior sounds or see visual images. The problem is that our modern culture does not have a context from which to interpret the significance of this type of event or how it could fit into our daily lives. “Our ancestors lived in this sacred world of gods and spirits, but we in Western cultures lost this deep personal connection over the past 2000 years” (Kyle, 1993, p. 20). Discourse of the sacred and spiritual have been colonized and delegitimized by the institutionalized beliefs, practices and rituals of Euro-Western religion that have in many ways served imperialistic ends. While I had struggled for years with the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of the institution of Western Christianity, it was the only discourse that was familiar to me with which to try and make sense of my experience. Finding little within that tradition to support a deeper understanding of an encounter outside the realm of my reality, I put this seemingly unusual happening away and tried to deny and forget the deeper knowings it stirred in me.

I had a sense that paying attention to this event would change me somehow, unsettle my life, demand an examination of my way of “seeing”. The majority of us who are of white, European ancestry, even if we come from deep cultural roots of oppression, racial discrimination and histories of diaspora have tremendous privilege in the “new lands” we now occupy. The problem is that this privilege is usually unconscious and unnoticed. There is a deeply entrenched discourse in the West that anybody who acts according to certain standards is meritorious and deserving of societies social and economic rewards (Hurtado & Stewart, 1997). This fiction that humanism has produced confirms that all people have access to equal agency (St. Pierre, 2000) and equal access to all of the benefits of our consumer society. These discourse successfully mask the already-privileged status of certain identities (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 5) and create “common sense” stories within our culture regarding success and attainment. But Watt (as cited in Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari and Guskin, 1996) states that our “consciousness of the real status of the story has not been totally repressed and there is a hazy awareness, just below the threshold of consciousness, that a belief is false or groundless” (p. 588).

Prior to this experience, I often put aside the “hazy awareness” I had regarding the “sacred” stories of modern culture and the institution of education that told this story to countless numbers of children every year. I worked instead within the structures of humanism as a liberally minded activist. I believed that “human beings can change themselves and the world they live in through the force of their (apparently) independently developed and freely chosen beliefs and acts” (Burr, 1995, p. 60). I was lost in “humanism’s inscriptions of reality, knowledge, truth, rationality and the subject” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 11). But now something had been startled awake, and as much as I wanted to put the whole experience behind me, the chrysalis of an unfamiliar way of seeing was growing inside of me. A process of destruction and deconstruction had begun and it was impossible to stop.
Keep your eye on the raquet.

The calling of spirit that had entered my life was carefully set aside in a box not to be opened as I continued on my quest for ways to change the traditional structure of education. I was on the front line of educational reforms as they appeared. Common Essential Learnings, the Adaptive Dimension, holistic learning approaches. I believed strongly in hands on, hands in the dirt learning, noticing that often children who presented with academic or behavioral problems in the classroom excelled in environmental action projects, outdoor education and leadership opportunities. I was constantly searching for interesting and innovative ideas to meet the diverse needs of students which I felt the present system often neglected, or was even the cause of. I wrote several grant proposals as school budgets were always too small or too targeted to academic learning to support the directions I wanted to try. Gaining grants for after school programming for kids who needed support, being offered an opportunity for our school to engage in a technology project to improve communication between parents and teachers, environmental grants for school ground projects and inventive student leadership programs were all part of the projects that I initiated and received funding for. At times these initiatives grew into something big which was noticed by the system and often by the media. While I didn’t go looking for the attention these ideas gained, I did grow in a sense of self importance and rightness for the work I was doing. I worked collaboratively with teacher teams on many of these projects but I struggled with those who couldn’t see things the way I saw them. I had no patience for those who wanted things to stay as they were and couldn’t understand how they couldn’t see that things needed to change. I believed kids needed better than what we were offering them. I moved on to a new school after the old coach turned principal, who had known me since I was twelve, agreed to my suggestion that we needed to part company. I felt we didn’t share the same passion, for change or a willingness to fight for what kids needed. He nicely suggested that my passion for ideas and new ways of doing school was unbalanced and my intensity was too much. He wanted things to quiet down and I thought he was an old stick in the mud. So I moved to a new school with what appeared to be a more progressive principal, who at least wore Armani suits and a quartz watch instead of old sweatshirts with threadbare sleeves.

I was a few months into life in my new school, and was on a high from all the great things we were accomplishing. The community came out in droves to the opening B-Box we organized with the kids and staff, even though some of the parents on the PTA were upset that we had taken over an activity that should have involved them. We made a huge splash in the community and in the media during education week with an “under the Sea” thematic unit the whole school participated in, even though some staff expressed some reluctance at the work involved. We had an evening for parents to inform them of the progressive educational endeavors we were involved in and it was hugely attended as students showcased on stage yet another reform initiative that the Ministry of Education was promoting. Some of the older staff talked about the latest band wagon but I dismissed them as old fashioned and out of touch.

Then one day in gym class while setting up the nets for badminton a child took a swing with his raquet. As I didn’t yet have myoggles on, it hit me square in the eye, lodging my contact lens into my cornea and sending me in an ambulance to the hospital. As I sat at home for the next two weeks with a patch on my eye after surgery waiting to see if I could still see. I was forced to be alone and to be still. I couldn’t read or watch TV. It was mid-winter and too cold to be outside. I could do no lifting or cleaning, nothing. There was no place to escape from myself. I began to feel uneasy, edgy, and afraid. One night reminiscent of two years earlier I was awakened with a start from a dead sleep into a space charged with luminous energy. As I opened my one good eye I could see multiple figures floating through the air above my bed. They varied in appearance: some were childlike while others had long bodies with flowing streams of substance well beyond where their body should have ended. I squeezed my eyes shut and felt my body fill with anxiety and terror. I was sure when I opened my eyes they would be gone, but they weren’t. One being stopped directly above me, and reached down towards me where I lay hiding in the covers. That was it, I sat up filled with anger and the figures scattered. A small part of me was disappointed but the rest of me was angry. I didn’t want these strange things happening and I was sure I was going crazy.

There was no more sleep that night and the next day I was consumed with nervous energy and a sure sense that the whole in the head I had received did more than damage my eye. Finally out of desperation I dug the bible out of hiding and again tried to pull some sense through the rabbit hole. As I had done two years earlier, I randomly opened to a page and began reading. There in front of me was the story of Saul on the road to Damascus where he was knocked to the ground and blinded until he stopped to listen. I began to cry and could feel my carefully constructed self and world begin to crack. Pain began to leak out of my being, and I wondered why were these things were happening to me. Wasn’t I trying to be a good person, a good mom, a good wife, a good member of the system and society? Wasn’t I being successful, fulfilling what the world wanted of me, walking the path that I was supposed to be walking? Yet I could feel panic swirling inside, a sense that something was terribly wrong. A small part of me wondered if I was in fact blind to something significant; to a truth that was buried deep inside under the piles of stories the modern world had sold and I had bought into over the years. I pushed myself and others continuously to create something better in our schools for our kids and our earth. The world was in crisis and I was in a panic to stop it, to fix it. This energy was fueled by the belief that I could change things, that the world could be a better place if I just kept working at it. The fear that started that day with the asking of these questions never left me but only grew, suffocating me until I could barely breathe.
Blind progress

The rhetoric that existed within Western culture within the late 80’s and early 90’s regarding environmentalism and individual responsibility permeated educational provision. This discourse was created within society as we became aware of the dangers and damage being done to the earth. In response to our feelings of being “disheartened” (Babbitt, 1989, p. 6) we were assured that science, technology, and democracy would solve the problem. We were bombarded with messages that while scientists and politicians looked after technical solutions and environmental regulation and policy, people needed to “take responsibility” and we only had one hundred years to do it. When I open the boxes of my teaching materials from this time period they are filled with books on conservation, the three Rs, stewardship projects, activist guides and energy literacy materials. We studied ecology and conservation in science class, still using the scientific method, but now to study polluted water, halogen light bulbs and dripping water faucets. No one questioned this praxis, it was just “common sense”. I engaged children in programs which promoted outdoor educational experiences that stressed the goals first promoted by William Stapp who is considered “founder” of the environmental education movement: knowledge of the natural environment, interdisciplinary exploration, and an inquiry-based, student-centered curricular framework (Kahn, 2010, p. 7). We planted trees, built birdhouses, cooked hot dogs in solar ovens, began CleanCat recycling programs, and put stickers on all the lights in the school to remind people to turn them on when not in use.

I did not engage children in critical literacy, questioning, deconstructing or problematizing this discourse for many reasons. The first was that these discourses were common sense and permeated all of the materials, curriculum, and societal messages of the time. When the Omni environmental special came out in 1989 I used it as a key resource in the classroom, including the supplement “Help Wanted: An activists guide to a better earth. When the opening article promoted the following discourse: “As capital flows from one country to another and trade increases, the emergence of a new, interdependent world economy can be channelled into environmental progress” (Babbitt, 1989, p. 6), I didn’t question it. To think outside or beyond this discourse was impossible, outside of my frame of reference, my capacity to see and quite frankly outside of my level of energy. Engaging environmental education within a school environment, like any liberal discourse I introduced, was already pushing the limits within schools and communities of what was acceptable and allowed. It is true that these educational practices presented our students with options and choices but “did nothing to challenge, or even to problematize, industrial societies’ drive for the ever-more-effective domination of nature and use of its “resources” (Licklind, 2005, p. 37). However, just doing this was already shaking a several hundred year old structure that didn’t take kindly to this type of disruption. Environmental education has been challenged in recent years for it’s inadequate summation of the larger structural challenges such as those Jickling points out above and it’s tendency to intervene in a manner far too facile to demand or necessitate a rupture of the status quo” (Kahn, 2010, p. 11). However, those of us engaging in environmental liberal activism on the ground, within schools, were excited, but nervous about even doing this. Such approaches to education were already well outside the discourse within schools of what “counts” as education. It was a continual struggle to explain to parents, other teachers, and administrators that we were “doing school”, that students were learning, and we were teaching. It was hard to convince that students who weren’t in rows, who were working in groups, sitting on the ground and digging in the dirt were still learning and this was still school. All some could see was mess, chaos, noise, mud in the entrance way, and students who were out of control or as one teacher said “too big for their britches”. It was a continual uphill battle of convincing and promoting as well as finding funds to do any of these practices.

While it was tiring, I never thought of it as dangerous. I was too soon encounter just what I was shaking up. I sometimes wonder if my painful encounter with the racquet was both a warning to wake up and see and a loving blessing as I continued blindly forward.

“As Harvard scientist Edward O. Wilson told us, “How the human species will treat life on earth, so as to shape this greatest of legacies, good or bad, for all time to come, will be settled during the next hundred years.” The responsibility lies squarely with us. Will future generations praise our foresight or look back in anger and dismay at what we had, and what we lost forever?” Grovesnor, 1988, p. 771
Eyes closed I let the air conditioning dry the sweat on my brow, hoping the cool air would still the nausea that was rolling through my body. It was a warm spring day, but not warm enough to account for how I was feeling. It was a few minutes before I stopped shaking enough to drive out of the Board Office parking lot. I had just left the second parent meeting in two weeks that I had been asked to attend by a senior administrator. Recently I had been promoted to the role as principal at the school these parent’s children attended, but I didn’t officially start at that school until the fall. The present principal was still in place, but absent from these meetings. I had agreed to attend these meetings knowing that fact but now I was questioning my judgement and the reasoning of the administrator who had asked me.

In the last year I had continued on my climb up the ladder, encouraged by colleagues and mentors to apply for a principal position. I had responded assuredly to the questions of the interview panel as milk leaked into my breast pads and down my silk shirt while my newborn waited at home with a friend. I brazenly told the superintendent when he asked me where I envisioned myself within the next five years, that I would be sitting in his chair. I got the job that day, and was the youngest female administrator ever hired in that school division.

Driving slowly down the street I still felt sickened by what I had just participated in. Both of these volatile parent meetings had been filled with angry expressions of their dissatisfaction with the present principal, both his actions and decisions. Their level of anger seemed disproportionate to their issues and concerns. They were allowed to vent, belligerent and questioned his competence as the superintendent soothed them and assured them that they had been heard. She explained that I was being moved into the school as the new principal to address their concerns. I felt sick not only by what had been said but also by the fact that I had been told to not tell the outgoing principal about these meetings. While I had many faults, unethical behavior had never been one of them. My Irish Catholic mother had ensured that I had a massive moral compass and I was filled with guilt at my participation both in the meetings and in the secrecy I was told to keep. I trusted the superintendent and felt flattered by the attention that was being given me as the savior for the community, but this just felt wrong.

I ensured what else to do I shut my conscience down and kept on driving as I reminded myself of how hard I had worked to get this position and that my intentions were good. I steadfastly ignored the small voice whispering to me that I was a fraud and a fake. I no longer felt so sure of the answers that slid so easily off my tongue in the interview that had gotten me this job. I knew they were what the system wanted to hear but something had begun to sound off to my ears. And now for the first time in my life I had consciously participated in a situation that I knew was unethical and wrong. I wondered that day how far I would be asked to push my beliefs in order to have this position and how far I would be willing to go. I knew that if my attendance at these meetings became public I would not be the only person asking these questions.
Deepening in the dirt

The meetings I attended appeared to just be “business as usual” within the organization. There did not seem to be any sense of wrongdoing or oddity about them to a senior administrator or the parents who participated. I seemed to be the only one questioning what was going on. It appeared as if these types of behaviors were so accepted that they were unconscious within the organization. As Hillman (1995) states “the unconscious is exactly what the word says: what is least conscious because it is most usual, most familiar, most everyday. This is the daily round of business.” Education in Western society is ultimately a business. It’s function is to disseminate the unconscious, common sense ideas of Western culture, including ideas about power. I began to realize that day I did not have the power and agency that I imagined I did, and had no understanding of the collective notions of power that were operating within the “business” of education.

All of us in modern Western industrial society exist within the “business” of its institutions and under the influence of others within these systems; their authority and their tyrannies within the structures of power that exist. This power often wears the disguises of authority, control, prestige, privilege, influence, wealth and so on.

“Among the ideas of business, “power” rules the roost. It is the invisible demon that gives rise to our motivations and choices. Power stands behind our fear of loss and desire for control; it seems to offer the ultimate rewards” (Hillman, 1995, p. 2). I was invited into a new circle of power due to my elevation within the hierarchy to principal, and made choices that day that were in alignment with the business of the system but completely against my own personal belief system. “In egocentric society people all betray themselves-their authenticity-in order to gain some degree of socioeconomic security (or excess) and some form of social acceptance” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 216). I had betrayed my deepest beliefs for position and approval and in many ways I was more disempowered than I had ever been.

Plotkin (2008) states that those of us who live within modern, industrialized cultures live in a largely adolescent world which “being unnatural and unbalanced, inevitably spawns a variety of cultural pathologies, resulting in contemporary societies that are materialistic, greed-based, hostilely competitive, violent, racist, sexist, ageist, and ultimately self-destructive” (p. 9). Power within such societies is largely defined by the ideas of Western capitalism which have grown into an immensely complicated organism called the Economy (Hillman, 1995). Its powers have become interiorized in our culture. In mainstream egocentric society the unconscious discourse which permeates all our lives tells us that life is about acquiring as much material wealth and power as possible. “This is the most common message in Hollywood movies, popular books and magazines, TV programming, and other forms of advertisement, and this is the subtext in much of the conversation in egocentric society and the choices made in the business world” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 9). The choices that were made in those meetings were all about this ideology of power. Decisions were made for both systemic and personal socioeconomic security and social acceptance by the senior administrator in those meetings and by my attendance I was complicit in that. “When we take an honest look at the people in charge of the governments, corporations, schools, and religious organizations of industrial growth societies, we find that too many are psychological adolescents with no deep understanding of themselves” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 218) or of the dynamics of power that exist so unconsciously within our culture.

My feelings of discomfort and sickness became an impetus for me to deepen my understanding of this unconscious discourse of power. Hillman (1995) states that eventually this deepening gets down to bedrock ideas and the moral grounds which make partnership in the organization possible or impossible. One begins to question “Does this organization have a fundamental vision which I can share; does it desire the same goals; do we practice similar principles? What truly, realistically are its are its principles-and what are mine?” (Hillman, 1995, p. 51) The more we ask these questions the more we grow, evolve and mature. This growth is growth of the soul. However, “as in a garden...deepening brings ugly twisted things out of the soil. It’s a work in the dirt” (Ibid, p. 52).
Reach for the top

A month into my first school year as principal I sat alone in my new office with my two plaques proudly displayed on the wall telling all I was qualified with not just a Bachelor's of Education but a recently obtained Masters' degree. This community contained several elements that exacted every ounce of privilege out of those degrees. Frequent letters from lawyers reminded me that the education and position of the parents they represented set them well above me on the ladder. They assured me they would use their power and privilege if I didn't comply with their demands to take no action regarding the behavior of their children.

I had some indication that there were serious problems within this parent community when I was asked to attend the June Home and School annual meeting and be introduced as the incoming principal. The chairs were divided into two sections and so were the parents who attended. There were loud accusations that the counting of the ballots at the election had been fixed and several parents walked out. The newly elected executive began to list their demands which ranged from access to the library to review and burn books with “inappropriate” content to holding prayer circles in the school to save the lost souls of students and staff. Several angry arguments and confrontations broke out within the executive and members of the audience over these issues and several others. I felt a growing sense of panic regarding my capability to understand or even work with this community which I shared with my superintendent. She explained that these problems were a result of the previous principal's illness, lack of appropriate management of the school and his negativity and she was sure things would just get better.

I struggled to believe this when I received my first letter from a lawyer in my second week as school principal and from that point onward was caught in a constant stream of community conflict. Teachers were frequently under attack from disgruntled parents who would not hesitate to go directly to Senior Administration to exact punishment and retribution for any action taken to respond to the needs of their child. And sadly a pattern seemed to have been well established that their complaints and demands would be listened to and dealt with from that level. These were competitive, success driven parents and no child could be perceived as having any kind of academic or behavioral needs. There was no room for or acceptance of diversity and the only educational goal worth achieving was the highest mark in the class. Many children in the school understood all their privilege and position, but seemed lost, confused and angry despite the money and freedom thrown at them by their parents.

It was the most fractured community I had ever worked in and I had no idea how to heal the divisiveness. I was unsure how to fulfill the needs of the students when no one would acknowledge or even talk about them. At a loss and out of my element, I began searching for some type of solution or secret weapon with which to deal with the conflict and anger. I was leafing through a magazine when I came across an advertisement from a group that supported school ground naturalization. It showed a picture of a tree being planted by the anonymous hands of a child and an adult and the slogan promised that nothing would build a greater sense of community than shovels, pick-axes, and manure. Desperate for some direction to heal this community, teach these children and help these teachers, I made a phone call and set in motion a series of events that would forever change my life and the way I saw the world.
“The eye is blind to what the mind cannot see.”
Nelson, 1979, p. 2

Movin’ on up

When I let my mother know that my first job as principal would be at the school down the block from her house, she exclaimed “Oh no!” My parents had moved into the area fifteen years earlier, after my siblings and I had all moved away from home. It was the first home they had ever owned and it had been seen as a step up to move to this more affluent neighborhood. At the time I didn’t understand her comment and was offended and hurt. It was only months later that her dismayed response made sense to me.

My family had lived in various rental homes in low income, blue collar neighborhoods when I was a kid. I didn’t see us as poor, we lived the same as all our neighbors did and we always had enough, just enough many days, but enough. The back yard garden and the frozen farm cow stored in the neighborhood meat locker kept us in food for most of the year. Hand-me downs and mom’s sewing machine kept us in clothes. My dad dedicated his life to his government job, working long, stressful hours for which he was rewarded with continual promotions, ending in upper management late in his career. My mom returned to her job teaching hearing impaired children when I was seven and that income helped make life more comfortable, and the move to the “good end” of town for their retirement years possible.

My teaching career had been spent in schools mainly in low income areas of town with very diverse student populations. I began my career in the basement of my former high school teaching eighteen students in an old, abandoned communications lab left over from the days when it had been a “comprehensive” high school. My classroom, titled “The Special Resource Room”, was an alternative high school placement program for students who could not manage the mainstream or adapted curriculum; a nice way of saying it was a dumping ground for kids who did not fit anywhere else in the system. From there I moved to various schools and positions always working with kids and families in low-middle income neighborhoods just like the ones I had grown up in. Parents were either hard working and supportive of the school or struggling and absent. The PTA raised money to help kids go on ski trips and purchase new play equipment and planned hot dog days and family dances. There was very little response, positive or negative, from the community to any discourse I enacted that may have been seen as outside of the “common sense” ways of doing school. The school division stayed relatively uninvolved and distantly supportive. I felt a sense of agency and freedom to try new ideas and make changes.

The school in my parent’s new neighborhood where I was placed in my first role as principal may as well have been on Mars. I had no experience, no training, no theory, no background that could have prepared me to enter the world of privilege I encountered. I don’t think I even knew what that word meant. I didn’t see my own privilege as white, educated woman who had broken through into the middle class or shattered the “glass ceiling” as a young woman entering administration. I didn’t understand the privilege and power of others; of wealth or of position. I truly believed in the modern tale that had been entrenched in the discourses of my growing up years; if I worked hard enough I would be rewarded by moving up the ladder. I did not believe this was because of any privilege I had, but because I had strived to get there. The advancements in my career, while flattering to the ego, were motivated by my determination to shake up what I saw as traditional ways of doing school, including the hierarchy and power structures that existed. I believed that I would eventually be in a position where I had enough power to enact discourses in education that could help heal the environmental devastation of the earth, the fragmentation that existed within many school communities and the broken hearts and souls of children that I had met in every school I had worked in, including and maybe especially, in this one.
Planting resistance

Several months later on a beautiful spring day at what should have been a celebration I sat in a plastic chair in the school gym, heart pounding so loud I couldn’t hear the leader of the School Ground project talking on the stage. I rubbed my sweaty hands on my jeans and felt my hip bones protruding through the material. Down the crowded row from me a member of the School Board and a parent who was a police officer sat protectively keeping guard. Media tape rolling, the news reporters recording the events were oblivious to the tense level of expectation in the room as those of us in the knox sat waiting for the other shoe to drop. It had been three days since the anonymous calls began coming to my house warning me to watch my children on the playground at their school in case something should happen to them and threatening me with a media fiasco at this community event that would create allegations that I was embezzling school and grant funds. I was being told to stop this project, cancel this celebration or I would pay. I felt the tragedy of the situation as these children, teachers and this community deserved to celebrate. So much had been accomplished in such a small period of time by a dedicated and committed group of students, staff, parents and community members that had mobilized an entire neighborhood and beyond to action and environmental and educational change. I also felt real fear. These actions seemed to have stirred such resistance and anger that not only this celebration and project could be damaged or my reputation be smeared in the media, but my children who were three and five years old could be hurt. I could see the tops of their blonde heads across the gym as my husband tightly held their hands and I wondered how my intentions to heal a community, the earth, and children had come to this.

The call to the number on the advertisement months earlier had resulted in multiple synchromistic events that engaged the students and staff in a whirlwind of change and action. I had been connected with a visiting university professor who was a leader in creating naturalized outdoor spaces that recognized a child’s needs for play. This led to a partnership with the university and the engagement of several well-known environmental educators and their eager undergraduate students. The school was filled with enthusiastic energy as university physical education and environmental education student-teachers engaged children, staff and community members in hands-on learning about environmental issues and active play. A steering committee of students, staff, parents and community members formed and a plan was soon in place to naturalize the school ground and to create amazing play spaces and learning spaces for children. Several grants were obtained by the committee and the project was given a title “welcoming back the wilderness”. Several hundred people attended the first work bee to help create that vision. Children worked next to parents, neighbors, staff and grandparents to create unbelievable change. It appeared that community could be grown in the dirt.

Not everyone in the community was supportive or excited by the actions being taken but I naively maintained that I was not and never had been political and forged ahead. I could not imagine that anyone could be resistant to environmental education, student leadership, hands on learning, community engagement and children’s right and need for play. Momentum grew and the project became larger and took on a life of its own. I couldn’t have stopped it if I wanted to. This momentum carried me full speed into a collision with the powerful worldview and its ideologies that I was unconsciously challenging.
Unearthing politics and power

My claims to being apolitical were naïve certainly, and ignorant perhaps. I had a specific, limited definition of those within the system that I saw and experienced as "political" and a definite resistance to joining their positions. There were the educators who said they represented me through the teachers federations and associations; but whose anger, defensiveness and attacking manner towards staff or senior administration seemed counterproductive to their causes. Often their arguments and issues did not reflect my views of education; which I would have gladly shared if they had ever asked. The other visibly "political" group that I encountered in schools were the outspoken feminists of the organization that wore power suits or masculine attire. They publically berated staff for what they saw as sexually inappropriate comments or actions and openly accused men in the staff room or at meetings of looking at their legs stuffed into control-top pantyhose and high heeled shoes. These groups often encouraged me as a young woman to advance within the organization but for very different reasons. I was approached by the "union" people to consider participating in the federation as I was viewed as having passion and was often involved in working for change in the areas of student rights, environmental education, and social justice. The "power women" stated the need for more women in positions of power in the organization and encouraged me to advance through the ranks for that reason.

I did not feel any affinity with either group and often stated publically I was not "political" as a means of setting myself apart from them. I struggled to see how the rhetoric of either group was going to help the children in my classrooms or schools I worked in. Would it buy desks, or write an appropriate curriculum or provide kids with lunch money? Would having more women in power somehow change the violence kids witnessed each day at home and at school, the addictions, the racism, especially when these women often supported the existing hegemonic structures of the institution once they achieved their power positions? Would the association address not just the rights of teachers but those of children who were powerless over, abused and belittled by many of those same teachers they protected? Would either group ever openly discuss dwindling sources of clean water, the rising temperature of the earth, the growing hole in the ozone layer; all issues that our kids thought about every day? I saw a lot of lobbying and arguing but little action from these groups that was going to make a difference in the impoverished, disenfranchised and disconnected lives the children I was working with. I was all about using my energy to just get on with the business of creating a better world for these kids and for the earth and saw education as a key way to make this happen.

I was committed to the idea that education could be a powerful means of addressing these issues and did not see the versions of "politics" I had been introduced to as a young teacher or administrator as a positive part of that process. It is possible that I was "[...]

(Huebner, 1999, p. 232). As a result of my blindness to the possibility that the institution of education is political, the resistance that I began to encounter through the "Welcoming Back the Wilderness" initiative was unexpected and surprising to me. I did not comprehend that power makes up the center of education and so I did not expect that my power would come up against the power of others; parents, board members, senior administration, curriculum writers and the worldview and ideology of the government which ultimately directs education.

The project was speaking into being the possibility not just of imagining a new way of doing school, but of imagining a more just public world. The problem was that I did not understand that I was engaging a community in a political struggle not just to reform or transform the present institution of education, but was also voicing my political right and that of an entire community to reform or transform our public world (Huebner, 1999). I was disrupting a very powerful ideology committed to maintaining a naïve faith in past ways and protecting a very specific image of the future. I was challenging the "dominant commonsense that informed the organization of school knowledge" (Dimitriadis, Weis and McCarthy, 2006 p. 4) and knowledge itself which is a site of tremendous power. I did not recognize that education is a political activity and the school is one way to organize power and influence. I was disrupting the basic conservatism of school that this community and many others expected and challenging the right of those who control our public world to continue to control it. In a community where many enjoyed, expected and embraced the privilege that wealth and whiteness, power and position afforded them, this would not be tolerated for long.
The room was filled with students, parents, staff, neighbors, community members, university staff and energy. It was the night of our first steering committee meeting which was coordinated by a visiting university professor who had agreed to take on the role of consultant to this project even though we could offer him no financial support. He would be able to contribute the benefit of years of experience developing school play areas in Canada and around the world and I could not believe our luck in having him right here in our city at this time.

Two weeks earlier at a PTA meeting it had been agreed that a steering committee should be formed which could dedicate their time and energy to the revitalization and diversification of play spaces on the school grounds. We had been discussing the playground for months both at the school staff and the PTA level due to the concerns of all regarding the level of violence, bullying and unsafe play on the school grounds. The PTA initially discussed the addition of more manufactured play equipment as a solution but some of us were unsure that was the answer. The existing play equipment caused no end of conflicts and injury and several parents shared constant concerns with teachers or myself regarding how these conflicts were being dealt with by the school. A common refrain we heard from the community was “boys will be boys” which seemed to legitimize all kinds of negative and violent interactions between students which invariably filtered into the classroom. Staff were exhausted by this ongoing cycle and support was uncertain at the level of the superintendent. More than once had I been called and told to tell a teacher to apologize to a parent for the way they managed a behavior issue despite the fact that it had been handled according to both the school behavior plan and division policy. It seemed the focus of senior administration was to pacify these angry parents who went above the school when they did not like our ways of dealing with their children. This steering meeting offered a possibility for all of us in the community to come together to creatively try to find solutions to the bigger picture of student aggression and violence on our school grounds which was so significantly affecting classroom functioning and community relationships.

There were many varied opinions at this steering committee meeting as to what the best approach to the playground revitalization would be. However, as we were all led by our project consultant through an activity that asked us to write about, share and post our memories of the most significant play experiences of our lives, it became clear that nature had played a huge role in nearly all of these reflections. This opened the discussion to the possibility that perhaps more manufactured play structures would not provide our children with the types of experiences we were all describing. A sense of enthusiasm began to fill the room as we were shown slides and heard stories of other school grounds around the world that had reimagined their play spaces and naturalized their playgrounds. I became convinced that night that this direction had amazing possibilities for reduction in school ground violence, the creation of an experience that could potentially develop an environmental ethic among our students, and most importantly could help heal the anger, divisiveness and conflict that this community seemed to be filled with. I saw amazing potential for real student involvement and leadership throughout this process which I believed was often missing in the present structure of education. I began to envision how learning could become more experiential, hands-on, inquiry based and connected to the present global environmental and social crisis that the world was experiencing. In my growing enthusiasm, I did not notice that there were a few people in the room, some from the existing PTA, that were not so enthusiastic about this new direction and not so sure their voices had been heard. I jumped in with both feet and began to steer the school in this new direction.
Driven by a vision

For many adults some of their strongest memories and recollections of childhood relate to outdoor places (Titman, 1994). This became very visible on the evening of the first steering committee as adults from all perspectives and walks of life agreed on this one point. When the agendas and strong opinions were set aside in a process of recollection and reimagining, all the adults and children in the room alike were once again immersed in the realization of the significance natural environments and unstructured play had upon their development. At the same time we all became aware that children don’t experience some of our “deepest childhood joys—those of field and stream, rocks and vacant lots; of privacy, secrecy, and tiny things that crept across or poked out of the earth’s surface” (Rivkin, 1995, p. 2).

Where children play affects how they play. “Their natural curiosity and desire to explore can be blunted by static surroundings” (Society for Children and Youth of British Columbia, 1999, p.5). The small asphalt space, four ball diamonds set on a bumpy and worn weed filled field, the broken down and unkempt primary play structure all surrounded by a chain linked fence was almost devoid of plant and animal life. Children constantly bickered, bullied, fought, or hid inside to stay out of the elements. I believed at that time that naturalizing the school ground could be a way of changing this behavior while at the same time providing for connections to the earth that I believed were so important in the development of an ethic of environmental care and stewardship. This process would provide us as a community of educators, students, parents, and interested neighbors an opportunity to observe first hand how the “ecology of children’s playing and learning was influenced by natural habitats, as compared to the traditional schoolyard settings of asphalt, game lines and fixed equipment” (Moore & Wong, 1997, p. xvi).

Naturalizing a school ground however, is much more that planting trees, introducing native plant species, creating accessible pathways and digging ponds and streams. It is an attempt at rewriting the accepted, common sense, centuries old story of school. School grounds are as much “texts” as the textbooks children are given to study, the books in the library they can select from, the songs that are sung at assembly and the outcomes in the curriculum guides. “School grounds give out coded messages to the children who use them about their identity as part of a group of ‘users’” (Titman, 1994, p. 16). All of the elements that exist on a school ground “communicate” a message to students and adults about the use they are supposed to make of the space, about what the belief is about the children who use the space and what the common-sense story of school is.

Playgrounds that are barren, neglected, asphalt covered spaces communicate a story that play is less important than learning, that minds are more important than bodies, that adult’s comfort in the staff room is more significant than children’s comfort in the rain, sun or wind. Structured, fixed, metal structures painted in bright primary colors designed by adults send messages that adults know better than children, that control is important, that diversity like that found in nature is scary and out of control, and that mechanical form is better than organic. School grounds devoid of nature; trees, flowers, water, insects, animals or those surrounded by neat rows of perimeter trees which children can’t touch or climb on tell a very loud story. Nature is to be looked at not touched, nature is to be controlled and orderly, nature and learning are separate, and sterile barren spaces are more civilized. This is the lens through which the modern world view sees education, through which patriarchy sees nature, women and children, and through which western “civilization” is created again and again in each child who sits in a desk and scrapes their knee on the asphalt.

Naturalizing the school grounds means changing the signifiers, writing a new story and challenging the existing one. What I did not understand was that there were some within the community that did not want the story to change. While they could recall memories of outdoor experiences that were pleasurable and impacted them, they did not think it was the function of schools to provide pleasurable, enlightening or even transcendent experiences (Rivkin, 1995). The function of school in the modern view is to train children to be good workers and contribute to the economic and moral structures of society in order to continue to advance civilization. Organized play, structured, barren grounds, exercise centers, football fields, ball diamonds and running tracks all contribute to a school grounds that promote this view. When the planning for the school ground began at this site two different beliefs in two very different stories came together in a room, but did not necessarily hear each other. Rather than a coming together of ideas, two different directions were forged, with two very different lenses and they were moving towards a head-on collision. And I was at the wheel and had no idea what the process I was driving signified.
Meeting Power

It was a beautiful spring day and the school was humming with energy as I stepped over several children sprawled on the floor in the hallway. They were so engaged in discussion, they didn’t even notice me. Young children and older students worked side by side, bent over the large sheets of paper in deep concentration. The space was filled with activity and chatter as environmental education student-teachers led the cross-grade groups in deep conversation about native prairie plant species that could grow on a naturalized school grounds. Down the hall in the multi-purpose room students busied in the temporary greenhouse measuring plants, discussing natural fertilizers and pesticides, while others watered seedlings for the vegetable gardens that were built at the last community workbe. I entered the open area, left over from the open classroom experiments of the 90’s, which was seeing more action than it had in years. There students were discussing pond plants and amphibians that they felt were important for the secret garden that was under construction in the old cement courtyard. I could hear the shouts and squeals of laughter coming from the gym as middle years students collaborated with university physical education students to finalize the play activities they had created for the younger grades to try out on the playground at recesses.

I was meeting with a group of students who were setting up displays for the upcoming environmental conference being held at our school that weekend. They had just completed a scaled model of the school ground naturalization proposed design for the public to view on the weekend. Over one hundred and fifty people had registered for the conference and they were nervously discussing their presentations. The community wide promotion the students had planned with the help of the naturalization steering committee for the conference had been a success and these were bigger numbers than we had expected to attend. The pamphlets which had been distributed to the community in the last month and the local media coverage they had sought out proved to be good advertising strategies. The conference was sure to be a great learning experience for students and community as many environmental activities were planned. Participants could attend sessions ranging from a university professor teaching composting, to learning to make bread from ground wheat with a local farmer who would be planting soon with students on the school grounds. Our students were doing several presentations and the displays of student learning processes and projects had filled the conference room. It was an exciting time in the school and tremendous learning was taking place.

As I sat with this enthusiastic group of students who respectfully listened to each other, made decisions by consensus and volunteered for leadership roles for the conference I saw the irony of the situation in light of a different kind of meeting I had to attend earlier that week. I had recently become aware that individual meetings had taken place between a senior administrator and a small number of disgruntled parents from the school without my knowledge or attendance. I expressed my disbelief, concern and frustration regarding this to senior administration and as a result was told I would be informed and included in any further meetings. Soon after I was asked to attend a meeting with a parent and a superintendent which was to take place at the Board Office. As the meeting began it became apparent this parent had met with the superintendent before, although he and I had only spoken on the phone once in the several months I had been principal at the school. I sat in shock as he attacked her, swearing and threatening her as she made promises and pacified him. Although it was difficult to determine what his issues were with the school as his main agenda seemed to be to establish a position of control, it appeared that he was not supportive of the way learning was being engaged at the school and he disliked some of the measures a teacher had taken regarding his son’s behavior. As I watched his interactions with the superintendent I began to realize the immense power certain parents seemed to wield within the system and to what limits they were being allowed to go. I began to sense a widening gulf between the type of education that was evolving at the school and the version of “school” that was being demanded by some parents. I wondered if it would be possible to bridge the differences between these perspectives and I was not sure if I even wanted to. My eyes were being opened to new possibilities, and I was seeing the amazing benefits of engaging discussions that were outside of the “common-sense” ones that some seemed so intent in maintaining. I had an uneasy sense that the school division was becoming less supportive of what was growing at the school both in the greenhouse and in the minds and hearts of students, teachers and community.
Against Common Sense

The dynamics that began to emerge within the community between the differing perspectives on education were troubling to me. What I could not see was that reimagining learning, decision-making and community involvement were in multiple ways troubling a foundational story that has been growing within Western culture for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years. “The sea in which we swim” (Burr, 1995, p. 52) in modern culture was not visible to me. It was not clear what it was that was being disrupted which was resulting in such resistance and reaction.

The foundations of Western culture and the bricks which built the structure of Western education are formed by powerful discourses which emerge from a particular perspective or view of the world. The struggle we all face in the West is that we are like fish swimming in an imperial, industrial, patriarchal sea and coming to see the water in which we are immersed is extremely difficult. It is so challenging because society creates for the individual the conditions that encourage the understanding of some discourses as “common sense”. It is like these discourses, these systems of statements that construct objects and create representations of events from the discursive social culture, become so engrained in the fabric of our society that they become truth (Burr, 1995). They are like a story that we all unconsciously agree to believe in and act from.

What we say and write is not as much an indication of our beliefs, opinions, inner conditions of temperament, personality or attitude as the humanist story of the Western world would tell us, but rather is a manifestation of discourse; representations of events from the discursive social culture. Our identity is constructed out of those discourses which are culturally available to us. We are the interweaving of threads...age, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation...and each of these threads is constructed through the discourses that are present in our culture. We have a limited selection of sproels and colors to choose from in our Western culture with which to fashion ourselves and each offer a different version of what it means to be a particular thing; male, female, principal, teacher and student. These available discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices lived out in society from day to day and institutions such as education, church, law and family that perpetuate these particular discourses. They offer us social positions, status and our very identity. These ways of structuring society are put into practice every day by the things people do, their social practices and what they learn about in school. These are all ensured and encouraged by the law.

Burr (1995) suggests that particular discourses, particular ways of representing events and people, enjoy widespread acceptance in the form of “common sense” or truth because they are in the interests of powerful groups in society. Discourses such as education as a meritocracy or career success as survival of the fittest are more likely to be accepted as “common sense” truths than discourses challenging the power and control inherent in the existing educational institution or which represent the collaborative and cooperative nature of the human species. Common sense discourses in our society reflect the perspectives, experiences, and values of only certain people, especially those who have traditionally been privileged or currently wield political influence. Trying to go beyond the discourses of our present society and challenge, even unconsciously, oppressive conditions that permeate our culture is disrupting these discourses and threatening the privilege, position, status, and economic success of those who presently benefit from them. Unfortunately, I had no understanding that the changes that were growing at the school were shaking the foundations of these discourses and threatening those who benefit, unconsciously, disconsciously or even consciously, from the present common sense tales that permeate Western culture and the institution of education. History has proven that those who pursue practices that run counter to the commonsensical ideas of the culture are often squashed under the heels of those who have gained power, privilege and position from the way things are.
Spring Community

The sun filled the sky with a brilliant blue and clear day. I stepped into the frantically running for the supplies needed at the various work projects and took a breath. It was the first time all day I had looked out across the entire school yard that teemed with life and activity. We couldn’t have asked for more perfect weather for this “Work Bee” day and we never could have anticipated the number of children, staff, parents and community that showed up to help bring the school ground design to life. After months of collecting children and adult wish lists, design ideas, concerns, hopes, feedback and meetings a design plan had been completed. I was most proud of the involvement and leadership of our students in this project and the voice they had been allowed at the steering committee meetings. They were emerging as the key participants in this process and the learning taking place was incredible.

People were joking and laughing as they stood in line at the BBQ for a well deserved lunch donated and prepared by a local restaurant. While the morning had started with some speeches by students and the steering committee and recognition by local politicians, School Division administration and School Board officials, the rest of the time had been filled with building, digging, planting and hauling. Before my eyes the barren school yard was transformed: trees planted, pathways created, sand play areas dug, play houses assembled, picnic tables and benches constructed, asphalt games drawn and colored, and chain link fences painted. The most amazing thing of all was that much of this had evolved as children and adults put their creative minds and talents together. Throughout the day as the various work groups formed, amazing creativity, spontaneity and imagination took place that evolved beyond and improved upon the design. The chain link fence was painted brilliant colors by all kinds of people who showed up with paint brushes in hand and created a design together. A group of women who had assembled at the proposed site of a new sand play area with their children discussed the plans, creativity flowed and a more organic direction was decided upon. What had emerged in a few short hours was a stunning sand play area filled with large boulders and some fixed logs for climbing. Being placed now were loose logs and branches which could be moved and adjusted by children as their play ideas flowed and changed. The children and adults working side by side to create this space were having trouble finishing as countless children, small and big, had gravitated to the area and were already deeply engaged in play. Several volunteers were planting trees around the space to provide for shade and as they watered the trees in they were playfully spraying the workers and players alike. Squeals of laughter reached me across the playground as I watched this scene. Neighbors had been walking across the street all day with plastic containers filled with perennials from their gardens and the front yard beds filled with color as these were added and changed the proposed planting plan. The bench and picnic table builders decided that one bench had to be wrapped around a large fir tree and worked together to design, create and build this structure which they were now sitting on and laughing together as they enjoyed lunch.

It seemed the many of the dreams that we had written on paper at the opening celebration where sent up into the sky in a helium balloon basket were coming true right before my eyes. The goal of the project that had been outlined months earlier by the naturalization of a committee of parents, students, staff and community appeared to be on its way to achievement on this day. The fervent wish of so many to see children encounter a rich and diverse environment for play and learning was being realized. As I looked at the hundreds of volunteers from this community and beyond working together towards this goal I believed that my wish for the development of a sense of community, belonging and engagement with the school and its children was also coming to life. I felt an overwhelming sense of joy in that moment that we were truly creating a “play” ground and a “learning” ground. I allowed myself a moment of true hope for the future of not just this community but for the larger earth community as well.
Who are children allowed to be?

School ground naturalization guides all promote the involvement of students from the idea phase to completion in any naturalization project (Evergreen, 2000, 2001; Moore & Wong, 1997). Titman (1997) writes of her surprise in discovering in a substantial review of the research into child-environment interactions “how relatively rarely researchers have sought reference to and involvement of children in order to understand better the subject of child-environment relations” (p. 12).

Despite the fact that The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child and the expanded Convention on the Rights of the Child cite a “right for children to participate in making decisions about the things that affect their lives” (Moore & Wong, 1997, p. xvi), it is a rare occurrence that more than token involvement is given to students in Western education. “Students are subaltern and in positional powerlessness within current educational struggle over curriculum and pedagogy” (McGregor, 2009, p. 348). If their voices are heard at all in educational settings they are regarded as marginal and uninformed. Youth have the capacity, the will and the desire to share their voices and engage in discussions regarding their needs and how the curriculum, both public and “hidden”, is meeting those needs. Whether we invite their voice or not, they are constantly reading the signifiers in their environment within the school, drawing their own conclusions, and facing the decision to conform or to resist oppression.

“Children read lack of care and maintenance of the grounds as a reflection of their own lack of value to the school” (Titman, 1994, p. 53) as well as the school’s lack of care for the environment. Where children perceive that the ethos of the school demonstrates non-caring for the grounds, thus signifying non-caring for them and for the earth, they are faced with a difficult choice. Either they accept this as the dominant culture and suppress their instinctive personal inclinations or they reject the school ethos and all that goes with it. Consequently their responses may then manifest in a variety of behaviors ranging from compliance, pleasing, overachieving and looking for adult approval to disengagement, class disruption, school ground power games, or the search for more personally relevant education outside of school. “For some children this [leads] to their colluding with the uncaring attitude, for others it represent[s] an opportunity to make a ‘bad situation worse’. In some cases it was read as a clear signal, an invitation to vandalism.” (Titman, 1994, p. 53).

The will to self-constitute and contest ideological constructions and discursive practices has been used by numerous subaltern groups to resist oppression (Apple and Burras, 2006). However, personal resistance in the school context is problematic for youth. Students who choose to express their need for voice and power or who challenge teacher or school authority, implicitly or explicitly, are put at risk of being labelled a troublemaker. As educators we need to interrogate assumptions that construct our ideas of non-compliant students (McGregor, 2009) and examine our beliefs regarding school grounds and how those may be helping to create those “bad kids” and “bad behaviors”. We need to question who school grounds are for, what they are for, what they signify, what our children “read” about school and their value to the adults and community of that school, and what is being said very loudly about who children are allowed to be.

Where children are encouraged to participate meaningfully by sharing their ideas, planning, planting, building, working alongside adults, leading, speaking, and organizing “their sense of pride and ownership [becomes] symbolic of their relationship to the school as a whole” (Titman, 1997, p. 39). This level of participation becomes symbolic of real ownership; the grounds are theirs. They feel that the school has vested a degree of trust and responsibility in them and children feel a sense of not just ownership but belonging to a community. When children are involved and working together with adults they witness the efforts of a entire community to improve the play and learning spaces of their school and this conveys “messages about the extent to which they were valued which seems to have been more significant for them than the provision of the equipment per se” (Titman, 1997, p. 47). Hart (1992) asserts that the benefits of children’s involvement in anything that involves them is not just in making the product more appropriate for the users but the real long term benefits lay in the fact that the students involved develop confidence and competencies.

“Student leadership and initiative is the driving force behind any successful outdoor classroom project. The components, structure, and goals should be defined by students, and from the very beginning it is their vision for the school grounds that should be cultivated and thought of as the foundation from which the project evolves”.

Stowell, 2001, p. 16
Child's play

It was one of the last days in June and I was busy in my office finalizing fall schedules when I was interrupted by several excited staff. They told me I had to come out to the playground and see something that would make my day, maybe even possibly my whole year. I nearly had to run to keep up with them as we hurried down the hall and out into the hot, June sun. They motioned to the newly created sand play area and stood back while I watched. There in the sand, surrounded by the absolute chaos of many playing children, completely engaged, was one of the most troubled young boys in our school. As I watched him sharing digging toys with the children around him and helping a younger girl move a long branch into his play space my vision began to tear. This was a young boy who we all had spent many hours agonizing over. We struggled trying to find ways to help with his fits of violence that often rippled through his classroom, blasted through the playground and tore open our hearts. He was only seven but it often took several of us to contain him and help him come down from his rages, after which he would cry for ages and tell everyone how sorry he was.

This was the first time in the year I had known him that I saw him actually play. I looked at the staff who worked so closely with him in amazement and they said this had been developing ever since the sand area was constructed. They described how at first he would crawl under some of the logs and moveable branches and watch the other kids play; yelling or running away if they got too close to his hiding spot. Then as time went by he would come out and play alone until the last couple of days where he just seemed to blend in and engage in play with multiple children in this space. There was no hitting, no sand throwing, no stealing toys, no rages, nothing but play. There he was under the shade of the newly planted aspen and pine trees surrounded by boulders, rocks, wind, sunshine, sand, toys and most amazingly, children.

As the four of us stood together watching and smiling I felt my heart expand and my resolve solidify. This was why we were doing this project. It was for all the children at this school who needed to have the chance to play in cool sand, hear the wind in the pine branches, feel the smoothness of a rock, the safety of a branch fort and all of the things that I instinctively knew contained nature’s healing powers. It wasn’t the new playhouse that he gravitated to but the earth. Children and adults who are damaged, traumatized, over-stimulated and under-loved all need time, space, and places where they can connect to the earth. Ever since I was a young child I had continuously returned to the earth when things were troubling, traumatic, unsettling or just too much. All the adults in the room the night we imagined this project remembered those times and spaces and the numinous, transcendent power of nature that we cannot understand as a human species but we know we need. As much as some of those parents had dismissed those times as “child’s play” and insisted schools were for reading, writing and arithmetic we all knew deep within our collective memories that our kids need and deserve more than that. We also sense that our world is going to need and deserve kids who are healed, whole and connected both with others and with the earth.

As I walked back to my office I was determined to somehow convince those who were so significantly opposed to how we were trying to rewrite the story of school that child’s play was essential to the healing of our children and our earth.
Quit playing around

In today’s Western society there are serious and increasing threats to play opportunities, especially where outdoor play is concerned. “Children today play outside less often and for briefer periods; they have a more restricted home range and have fewer, less diverse playmates” (Louv, 2005, p. 34). This significant decrease in recent years is for a multitude of reasons: vanishing habitats for play, less undeveloped natural space in urban settings, increases in family work hours and decreased holidays. There is also fear for children’s safety from traffic, predators, and violence. “Cultural values about play also have a major impact. What happens when too much emphasis is placed on work (over play), achievement (over experiences), and “order” (over exploration)?” (Graham, 1999, p. 11). The result of all of this is that many children end up spending their leisure time in highly structured, goal-oriented activities. Free time to play in nature is replaced with organized sports and technology. When a culture values technology more than nature, directions more than dialogue and control over opportunities for imagination; then play is reduced to a structured, ordered controlled event.

School grounds hold many possibilities to counter these cultural and value trends but this is not often the case. Despite the multitude of research on the value of unstructured outdoor play for children, the traditional design of school yards remains the norm and has rarely been questioned. “The conventional perspective of school designers and administrators is that the land around the school should be designed and managed for surveillance of students, ease of maintenance, and team sports” (Cheskey, 2001, p. 5). Avoiding litigation is often a primary criterion in schoolyard design which results in the only physical features in many schoolyards being manufactured play equipment. The emphasis on surveillance results in placing students in large open spaces without shade or shelter so that supervisors can see all areas and all children with ease. The cumulative effect of the fear of lawsuits and the growing obsession within our Western culture for order is the creation of a chilling message that is sent to our children. They learn that “free-range play is unwelcome, that organized sports on manicured playing fields are the only officially sanctioned form of outdoor recreation” (Louv, 2005, p. 28).

School staffs, officials and parents bemoan the fact that kids just don’t know how to play anymore like we did. Stories are created about how today’s kids are they lazy, negative, hyperactive, and violent. But where are our kids to go out and play and how? Another organized sport or game on asphalt with the sun, wind and snow beating down on their heads? On crusher dust fields where the dust kicks up into their eyes and the rocks impale in their knees. Kids don’t want to be organized all the time and unstructured play is essential to their development. In order for unstructured play to happen however, the environment on playgrounds needs to be conducive to creative, imaginative exploration. The school ground needs to invite back nature; both of the earth and of our children.

The problem for many adults is that naturalized school ground settings and natural children are untidy, indefinite, unpredictable, and hard to control (Moore & Wong, 1997). “Accommodating children’s existence as growing, moving organisms can run counter to the school’s largely cognitive aims, yet a teacher cannot ignore children’s livelihood” (Rivkin, 1995, p. 9). Schools pull children toward culture but respect must be paid to the nature essence of children for them to stay healthy. Although children need to move, “many adults cannot tolerate the incessant, unpredictable, activity of little bodies moving to their separate drummers (Olds as cited in Rivkin, 1995, p. 10). As a result order, predictability, structure and control are often the key factors that influence school ground design. We must question as adults however, what price our children and our culture will pay for such a severe disconnection from their own nature and from the natural world.

Doucette, Kowalski & Ransome (2006) state that “at no time in our species’ evolution have the young been so separated from nature. Obsessed with protecting children from any possible mishap, hovering “helicopter” teachers and guardians have not only alienated children from the natural world, but unknowingly taught them to fear it.” (p. 12). Continual admonishments to students not to touch the few trees that exist on the school perimeter or walk on the front lawn, and the endless attempts to micromanagement of students’ play outdoors has effectively sent students a strong message, “You’re here, nature’s there, and never the twain shall meet.” (Doucette et al., 2006, p. 12). As adults we are aware “that children don’t experience some of our deepest childhood joys—those of field and stream, rocks and vacant lots; of privacy, secrecy, and tiny things that crept across or poked out of the earth’s surface” (Rivkin, 1995, p. 2). We recall the joy we felt in those spaces and moments that at times verged on the transcendent. Our school yards offer one space in our ever sanitized culture for our children to have these experiences, but many adults are just too afraid to allow it.
A dressing down

The fall leaves crunched under my high heels as I waded to the students raking leaves and pulling the frost-wilted flowers in the warm fall sunlight. The school yard was filled with several classes taking advantage of the weather to engage in the changes that had taken place in the last year on the school grounds. Classes were working in the outdoor classroom, studying the fall habits of insects and adding dotted leaves to the compost while another group of students were examining the pond and learning how to get it ready for winter.

I had quickly changed from my outdoor work clothes to principal outfit as I rushed to meet a senior administrator for a lunch meeting she had requested. I was unsure of the agenda and in light of recent events where I had felt a lack of support from her I did not feel a great deal of trust or optimism about this encounter.

After a few minutes of very uncomfortable small talk she began speaking, while efficiently attacking her hamburger. She expressed concern regarding my work attire and suggested that I needed to dress more professionally. As I watched the gravy from her French fries drip onto the polka dot bow of her blouse, I was given several suggestions as to which women in senior administration, herself included, that I could model my wardrobe after. I was stunned and insulted, and tried to visualize myself in the high necked blouses, polyester skirts and comfortable shoes that represented some of the women she suggested, or the power suits, tight skirts and flashy jewelry of the others. Instead of discussing pressing concerns such as the brewing conflict between the school's PTA and the Naturalization Steering committee, the ground breaking upcoming partnership signing with the local university, or the recent meeting she had chaired where staff and myself were harassed by a parent who was allowed to tape record the meeting, we were talking about my need to wear pantyhose. I was stunned and speechless which gave her the opportunity to also suggest that I become more focused on my efficiency at completing the flood of paperwork that had come on the heels of the recent change in leadership within the division.

There were multiple top down directives focused on improving the "organizational structure" and "efficiency" of the system. The former leader of our division had envisioned team approaches and a flattening of the hierarchy. He had stressed school autonomy and had encouraged innovative and progressive approaches to learning. I was struggling with this recent move towards a more conservative, traditional, business-like approach to education. Trying to maintain the new learning initiatives and direction the school was engaged in as well as meeting the demands from this administration was exhausting.

I left this luncheon encounter angry, disillusioned and frustrated. I was not alone in my perspective as soon after this meeting several administrators organized a meeting with the director to express their concerns regarding the evolving direction the division was taking and the capacities of some senior administrators to support the schools effectively. The team building and trust workshops we were all being subjected to only worsened the situation. I became very outspoken regarding the climate of surveillance and control we were experiencing. I felt like I was being stuffed into a box I could in no way fit in, nor did I want to. The experiences that I had encountered through the naturalization process had only made this more difficult as I had seen the possibilities of other ways of seeing, knowing, being and doing school. I was at a loss as to how to proceed.
Rock the boat, don’t rock the boat baby

Western institutions will grant reasonable power to students, teachers and administrators providing they are not too individualistic in their speech, their actions and their commitments (Huebner, 1999). But when the discourse is stretched too far and the subject goes too far beyond the bounds of “common sense”, all attempts will be made to bring them back under control. Common sense doesn’t just tell us what schools could be doing, it tells us what they should be doing and this moral imperative explains why we feel pressure to conform within school systems; we don’t chance rocking the boat lest we be seen as abnormal, senseless or counterproductive. This luncheon meeting was disguised as a supportive professional discussion, but it was in fact a subtle push to bring me back within the range of acceptable discourses within this school division and the common sense notions of what an administrator was allowed to be, look like and do. It was a not so gentle reminder that I didn’t want to appear too different from other administrators. As I nibbled on my garden salad I received the subtle suggestion that I should not be engaging my school community in activities that would be perceived as senseless, such as school ground naturalisation. And the show of authority was to remind me that I was part of a hierarchy that just made “good sense”, and my consensus decision making practices and attempts at authentic community and student engagement could be seen as counterproductive to the system.

At the time I did not understand any of this. I knew I was angry, felt manipulated and that the authority of the system had been used to control me but for the life of me I could not explain how or why. Kumishiro (2004) pinpoints why challenging the prescriptive nature of commonsensical ideas is so difficult. It is very difficult for us to even see that they are prescriptive as they are masked or couched in concepts which we feel social pressure to conform to such as tradition, professionalism, morality and normalcy. Thus the seemingly innocent and instructive pointers I was given regarding my professional attire were hidden within the commonsensical notion of traditional administrative dress and under the guise of a mentor helping me to appear professional and achieve normalcy within the institution. It was presented as common sense that an administrator should dress a certain way and I was even given multiple examples of what the system found acceptable and appropriate. There also existed the undertone of morality in the gentle suggestion to wear panty hose to cover my legs and high necked, closely covered blouses to cover my femininity. The focus on my efficiency and capacity to complete the expected common sense tasks of an administrator more effectively very subtly called into question my professionalism and my acceptance of the division direction towards traditional education.

The luncheon meeting was not the first time in my career I encountered methods of surveillance intended to limit my speech and bring my discourses back into alignment with the system. I had experienced previously in my career the withholding of contracts, yelling and threatening, manipulation and lying, and sexual advances; always from those who were higher up the hierarchy. What was different about this luncheon’s attempts at surveillance and silence was that it was offered by women. These types of patriarchal power games I had learned to expect from some types of men who I had learned to recognize in my growing up years in family, school and church, but I could not understand them coming from women. Shouldn’t we stick together and support each other I naively wondered. But this experience was the first of many lessons I was to receive from women in positions of authority within school systems who would teach me that women in positions of power could be a worse “master” than any man. What confused me was that these power plays came from those within the system who were self professed feminists. I came to hate the word feminism and loudly stated I was not and never would be a feminist. It was not for many years and many more such experiences that I came to understand the many discourses of “feminism” and the misuses of power that took place in it’s name.
Your ladder is against the wrong wall

I sat folding and unfolding the white cloth that covered the convention center table, trying desperately to focus on the drone of yet another speaker and stay awake. My mind was agitated and swirling back and forth between the growing points of conflict that had developed in my second year as principal at this school. I felt constantly pulled apart by two opposing directions; one filled with optimism and growth and the other with anger and demands for the status quo to be maintained. Parts of my days were filled with possibilities and exciting happenings such as the interview with the national news media that had taken place earlier that week. In the half-hour live conversation which aired on radio stations around the country we celebrated the directions the school was taking in environmental education, student leadership, the child’s right to play and community engagement. The rest of my time was filled with conflict as I was continuously engaged with a small group of disgruntled parents who were becoming more demanding and aggressive. My stomach tightened as I recalled the recent actions of a father who had subpoenaed myself and a teacher to testify in a messy custody battle over his special needs son. He felt our statements had been the cause of his loss in court and he wanted us to change what we had reported. What began as angry calls to my home escalated to an encounter on my front street where my husband and threats of police action finally made him stop. I could find no contact point between these two worlds I was experiencing and no way to resolve them.

My inability to understand or see clearly what was happening was having significant impact upon my school life, family life, and my health. Many of the things I loved about school; working with students, participating in outdoor education experiences, supporting teachers in their classrooms, and the school ground naturalization project were constantly being disrupted by a small group with big demands. At home I was exhausted, short-tempered and stressed and spent most of my waking and sleeping hours trying to figure out how to resolve the situation. This constant level of high stress was resulting in weight loss, hair loss, sleep loss and energy loss. I was anxious, agitated and angry but could not put my finger on why. There was more going on than the surface conflicts I was experiencing; something deeper and more intense was surfacing from within me but I could not put my finger on what it was.

Suddenly I was startled out of my reverie by the life altering words of the presenter. He stated that many people spend years climbing the ladder only to discover when they finally reach the top that their ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. In that moment it was like I woke up to my life and the true conflict I was experiencing. I clearly saw the wall my ladder was leaning on and what that wall represented: progress, meritocracy, competition, success and power at all cost. The stories that I had been acculturated into by the modern world were being exposed and the rotting core beneath becoming visible. I sat in shock not knowing what to do now that cracks in the brick wall of my carefully constructed life and self were beginning to show.

I walked somewhat dazed out of the workshop, feeling as if my whole world had somehow tilted and cracked. As I stood there self-destructing and deconstructing I was approached by my superintendent, who unaware of the revelation I had just had, innocently asked how I was. I stared at her and all she represented: a male-identified woman climbing the ladder, doing “important work in the world”, sacrificing many aspects of her self in order to be a good worker in the system and I knew I could not conform to this role. I knew I didn’t want what the ladder had to offer anymore and sensed that on many levels the life I was living was making me sick. I told her my babysitter might be quitting, and with all the stress at the school, it’s impact on my family and health, maybe staying home would be a good option. I walked away, gazing at the world around me with new eyes.
The view from the top

While many in Western society are motivated to climb the ladder for social approval, position and prestige or for wealth, financial gain and power; I was scrambling up the rungs for a different reason. While there was a part of me that enjoyed the attention from colleagues and family for my “success” in attaining a leadership position and the things the money could buy me, there was something bigger than all this driving me. My climb up the ladder was in a large part motivated by a never-ending, ongoing fear that the sky was falling, the glaciers were melting and the hole in the ozone was growing. I was looking for some solution to end all the suffering that I perceived; mine, the kids I worked with and the more-than-human species that were becoming extinct every day I drove my car to work. I was terrified by the global environmental crisis and believed that somehow our children needed different skills, different abilities and a different education to prepare them for such a chaotic, uncertain and difficult future. I didn’t think we had a lot of time to think, talk and ponder this; time was running out just as fast as our oil.

I believed that the only way I was going to make change in the modern, Western world and in education was to put on my armor, pick up my sword, grab the swiftest steed and leap into battle (Murdock, 1990). However, I had inherited from my culture a rather deluded belief that I had to ascribe to a masculine model in order to do so. This was the only discourse available to me as a young woman in a patriarchal society. “In our culture, the heroic ideal of the Warrior has been reserved for men-usually only white men at that. Women in this plot are cast as damsels-in-distress to be rescued, as witches to be slain, or as princesses who, with half the kingdom, serve as the hero’s reward” (Pearson, 1986, p. 2). Since none of these alternatives seemed especially appealing or effective, I attempted to emulate a Western masculine model and become a warrior for change. “Women emulated the male heroic journey because there were no other images to emulate; a woman was either “successful” in the male oriented culture or dominated and dependent as a female” (Murdock, 1990, p. 10). So I began my heroic quest for the holy grail which could save us all from environmental destruction.

I soon discovered that the masculine, one-sided models of the warrior that the West in particular has created, do not satisfy the whole person. It was creating an imbalance within myself and within my life which was leaving me scarred and broken. Through my choice to engage in this masculine form of activism, I was sacrificing my health, dreams, intuition, beliefs and “a deep relationship to [my] own feminine nature” (Murdock, 2010, p. 7). I felt disassociated from my body and mourning the lack of time for family, creativity and my own self. Despite all of the amazing things that were changing at the school I was feeling a longing for something I couldn’t name and a calling from something I couldn’t see.

Had I looked carefully into the cracks of the wall my ladder was leaning against I would have seen that “[u]nderneath the frantic absorption in the pursuit of money, status, power, and pleasure and the addictive and obsessive behaviors current today is, we all know, a sense of emptiness and a common hunger to go deeper” (Pearson, 1986, p. xx). The masculine portrayal of the warrior in Western culture is focused on surface, external events. All change that needs to happen is seen as out there; someone or something else that needs to be changed. There is no recognition that there is something deeper that needs to be paid attention to, something internal that is reflected in the conditions of the outer world. The western portrayal of the quest has been translated as a outer-worldly journey, and much of the wisdom contained in the original tales of old has been lost in this translation. The quest for the grail is not an outward journey, but an inner one. The longing that I was feeling was for this inner journey that I was denying. Estes (1992) writes that “the longing comes when one realizes one has given scant time to the mystic cookfire or to the dreamtime, too little time to one’s own creative life, one’s life work or one’s true loves” (Estes, 1992, p. 3).
A leap of faith

I gazed around the directors tastefully decorated office while I waited for our meeting to begin. It had been a very cold Christmas season, and the building held a chill, as it was empty for the holidays except for the two of us. I had requested this meeting before the break and although I was unsure of my agenda or the outcome I knew something had to change before I went back to school in January. I thought back to the last few weeks before the Christmas season and realized that my eye opening experience at the conference had changed how I saw things and opened up a whole lot of questions that I had never asked before. Today I was here to ask a few more.

I had received a call from the director after the conference workshop, indicating she had spoken to the superintendent and wanted to offer, from one working mother to another, some support and ideas regarding my babysitting dilemma. She realized this was causing stress and wanted to help. I puzzled over the fact that she called me to talk about this stress, but not the stress caused by a conflicted community, volatile parents, the challenges of the Home and School, and the questionable support offered by the superintendent involved. While she had been visibly supportive of the School Ground Naturalization project, the partnership with the university and the learning initiatives at the school, I wondered why she was not offering support for these concerns. I assumed that she knew if the superintendent had talked to her about my babysitting needs, surely she was talking to her about the issues at the school. After a recent meeting called by the principal to express their concerns regarding that superintendents lack of support in all of the schools, I knew she knew some things. I was here today to see what kind of support was going to be available for me beyond babysitting advice.

As I watched her enter the room, I realized she was the perfect example of a modern, successful woman in the male-oriented work world. She was driven, achievement-oriented, non-emotional, impersonal and a dedicated worker who was married to the job. She was wealthy, owned a large home, drove an expensive car, had her clothes custom made, and lots of degrees hanging on her wall. She could have been the poster child for reformist feminists everywhere: a powerful woman who could play hardball as well or better than all the boys. I knew my concerns had to be approached in a rational, logical manner in order for me to be heard and taken seriously. I expressed that while there was much about the job I loved, I felt constantly in a state of crisis and was experiencing extremely high levels of stress due to several factors. I explained that being a new principal for a school of nearly 300 students, 28 staff and a significant special needs population in a community with such significant parental demands and needs was overwhelming. This was especially so because I had no vice-principal to share duties with and to have support from in some of the volatile situations that were escalating in frequency within our parent community. I suggested that perhaps one of the existing staff could be placed in an acting position taking on some of the duties of vice-principal and I would be willing to take on extra teaching duties to facilitate this. She responded that our administrative time was decided by formula and that we did not qualify based on these calculations for a vice-principal. She also stated that the Teachers’ Federation would not support my giving any administrative time or part of my allowance to a teacher who was not hired officially as a vice-principal. While she expressed sympathy for how busy and overwhelming the job of principal could be, she was sure I could learn ways to manage the stress.

I sat staring at the pictures of her small children on the impressive wooden desk and knew in that instant that I had made a decision. I asked her how many days off she had taken over the Christmas vacation to spend with her family and she said Christmas Day. It was busy, she had a great deal of work to do and could accomplish so much in the quiet, empty office while the other staff vacationed. I questioned when the last time was she had gone out for dinner with friends, went for a drink or a tea with her staff, did something just for fun, lay on the earth. I realized I could no longer go along with the values that this individual represented or be satisfied with the life that the modern world promised. I had seen it’s shadow, both within the volatile parents I had encountered, senior administration, policy, curriculum and most importantly within myself. I could no longer claim ignorance to the realities I was coming face to face with and I could no longer ignore the voice of spirit that was calling to me to open my eyes. I told her I was resigning, and as I watched the shock register on her face, I said I would stay until June. I wanted to complete what I had started with this school community but after that I would return to the classroom. It was my first, small step off the ladder.
“Though I have always felt a good measure of agency in the world, it was a voice constrained by a power-over orientation, motivated by competitive ambition, fear and insecurity. Success meant grafting the skins of patriarchy on my body by feeling powerful—"on top" and "in control"—in comparison to those I perceived as powerless. But the high heels pinched. The panty hose compressed. The power suits made dancing impossible.”

Spry, 2006, p. 199

A hard landing

Mainstream materialistic, patriarchal society is egocentric in nature and as such its values and goals emphasize social acceptability, materialism, self-centered individualism, and superficial security (Plotkin, 2008). The standards that determine a healthy, full-functioning "adult" within such a society center around a socially popular conformist who earns a lot, buys a lot and works hard to heroically climb the ladder of success and "get ahead". Many women within this culture have bought into and conformed to the "heroic" patriarchal journey and reject the feminine which has often been portrayed within our culture as "unfocused, fickle, and too emotional to get the job done" (Murdock, 1990, p. 6). Feminine qualities are perceived as weak, inferior, and dependent; not only by the dominant culture but by women themselves. Many women choose to climb the ladder in an attempt to dispel this corporate, societal myth and prove that they have a mind and can succeed on their own merit (Murdock, 2000). Everything in the lives of women who make this choice then becomes "geared to getting the job done, climbing the academic or corporate ladder, achieving prestige, position, and financial equity, and feeling powerful in the world" (Murdock, 2000, p. 6). This is of course fully supported and promoted by our Western culture.

The male-identified women in the organization and their intellect, sense of purpose, ambition and the sense of security, direction and success they exude has become the model of success for women in our society. Feminist discourse in mainstream society promotes this as the goal for all women. Patriarchal mass media portrays feminism as focused on women seeking to be equal to men and gaining equal pay for equal work. The women in my organization who lived and spoke this discourse were all white and materially privileged. These women represent what bell hooks (2000) refers to as reformist feminists, whose sole intent or focus is about women gaining equality with men in the existing system of white, supremacist, capitalistic patriarchy. The rhetoric of reformist feminism promotes women breaking free of male domination in the workforce, becoming more self-determining in their lifestyles and maximizing their freedom within the existing system. In order to make this possible they needed a "lower class of exploited subordinated women to do the dirty work they were refusing to do" (hooks, 2000, p. 5). This requires accepting and colluding with the subordination of other classes and races of women and also alloying themselves with the existing patriarchal structures of society. The underlying assumption in reformist feminism is that women can be feminist without fundamentally challenging or changing themselves or the culture. Most women, especially if they are privileged white women, cease to consider revolutionary feminist visions of personal and societal transformation, especially when they began to gain economic power and social power within the existing structures of society. This discourse of reformist feminism had a significant influence upon my construction as a female school administrator.

Much was asked of me as a woman in the system when I moved into a position of “power” within the institution. I was expected to unquestionably support the system (which was often heedless of the plight of endangered children and endangered species), my country (which exploited the earth and many of it’s poor and non-white peoples) and my religion (which supported a hierarchical, patriarchal, and rule bound structure). I felt pressure to create a Martha Stewart–inspired showcase home and office like many of the women I saw in these positions had, and I purchased all kinds of third world goods to make that happen. I had donned the power suits and high heels that were made by toxin-producing processes or slavery-based practices. I bought a brand new family van which helped expand the ever growing ozone hole and sent my kids to attend what was considered a “good” school in a “better” neighborhood thus colluding with classism and racism. My need to fit in, to be socially acceptable, was a force even bigger than my drive to heal the earth and culture. As a result I often participated in behaviors that were counter to many of my deeply held beliefs. The line I crossed that eventually stopped me dead was the question of what value I was going to place upon my own children. Placing them ever lower so I could climb ever higher became visible to me the day I resigned and I realized how close I had come to sacrificing my children and my self on the altar of patriarchal, capitalistic, hegemonic Western culture. Plotkin (2008) states that waking up from the egoic trance of Western civilization is exceptionality difficult, but changing our lives after is even more challenging, as “we must first recognize how we have been a part of the problem” (p. 225). I experienced a hard landing into self-reflection after leaping off the ladder.
Getting on Board

From where I sat in the meeting I could see out of the corner of my eye the “Secret Garden,” a peaceful courtyard sanctuary that had grown over the last two years replacing asphalt and weeds with ponds, plants, pathways and peace. It was a place where children and adults alike could sit, center and gain harmony. As the tension in the room grew between the teachers who had called this meeting and the senior administration they had invited to attend, I read the wall mounted sign in the courtyard... “A special place to rest, talk with a friend, dream, listen to birdsong, look for tadpoles, watch butterflies and ladybugs, worship, read, learn about nature, write poetry, smell the flowers, leave small gifts. To rediscover our sense of wonder and show that we care for our environment.” I wondered if this attempt by staff to have a voice and be supported by the system would end in the harmony and peace that the “Secret Garden” exemplified. I prayed for all of our sakes that might be so.

I had recently been approached by several senior members of staff who were concerned regarding the actions of a small number of parents who were exhausting the efforts of all of us and disrupting learning, relationships, and a sense of safety and peace in the school. We had sensed that these parents had blended together in the community and were finding strength as a group as they often referred now in their phone or letter communications to “we” and “other parents.” Our suspicions had been confirmed a week ago as the most volatile and outspoken parent of the school, who had threatened several of us over the last few months with lawsuits, had demanded a Board hearing. He had not appeared alone as the Board had expected but with a small group of parents. These parents were the ones who had been confrontational with staff or myself at some point over the last few months, and several were a part of the Home and School. Their actions were escalating beyond letters and phone calls to physical confrontations in the school with staff, which always seemed to occur when I was away from the school. The staff team were concerned for each other’s safety and well-being, and for mine. They had come to express their concerns that something had to be done, we all knew we could not continue this way. I explained that I continued to share my concerns with senior administration and had hoped that my resignation might have caught the attention of the Board and that some questions might have been asked but that had not happened. I honestly told them I didn’t know what else to do. The staff then decided that they would see if all of their voices together could be loud enough to get some support, and they called a meeting with senior administration.

As the meeting began the spokesperson for the entire staff who were in attendance spoke of how the year had begun with the staff feeling excited and energetic. They had perceived that as a group they were the best and strongest staff that could have been amassed in one building for the purpose of guiding 350 students through a school year that would ultimately prepare them to become caring and responsible members of the school community. They saw a knowledgeable and committed teaching staff that would provide quality education for all children, whether they were physically, mentally or emotionally challenged. They felt that the plans that were in place for a renewed effort to tackle the problems of the year gone past were strong and they were committed as a group to their success. The staff believed a commitment to opportunities for student leadership would continue to strengthen and support many of the students who struggled with a strong sense of self and personal power which often played out as disruptive and harmful behavior to others or themselves. They had developed opportunities for peer mediation, play leadership, intramurals, arts education and spiritual growth. They were excited about the naturalization process, physical education and environmental science collaboration with the university and felt it was a strong aspect of their plan. Retreats, conferences and many other ideas were put into their year plans to help motivate the staff, children and parents of the community. They truly believed they could make a difference and fulfill the division mission statement of “Being Strong Together.”
The staff expressed that they believed their plans would have come to fruition given the chance but that despite the well thought out curricular and responsibility plans in place that would allow staff, parents, administration and the parish communities to work together to support student learning and behavior, their efforts had been frustrated. They expressed that they had expected parental support both for these initiatives and they had received that wholeheartedly from the majority of the community. But from a small but very vocal and volatile group of parents they had received condemnation, harassment, and a lack of support. They expressed that the general pattern of these parents when they were contacted regarding behavior or academic concerns was to bypass the teacher and immediately go to the principal. If they did not get what they wanted there, they continued on up the ladder to senior administration. The staff shared that instead of feeling supported at this point, the professional competency of staff was questioned and they were asked to provide excessive documentation to support their decisions. They saw that this small number of parents were often empowered by decisions made from above which often went against teacher or school recommendations. This resulted in these parents and their children returning to the school with a renewed sense of unhealthy power that took more time and energy to work with.

Several individual teachers then shared their personal experiences of being on the receiving end of these parents. They had been subjected to derogatory remarks both in writing and in person regarding their capacity to educate or supervise students and their poor decision making skills. Some shared how they had been verbally threatened both in the school setting and in their homes for doing their best to support the needs of this small group of children. They perceived that these students, who were becoming empowered by their parent’s actions, had needs that continued to escalate as a result. They shared concerns that when parents did not like the decisions or actions of the teacher or principal, they went to senior administration, called board members and one had even approached the Minister’s office. Some had been threatened with legal action. Others shared that things had escalated recently into being challenged in their classrooms by parents who would show up and try to sit at the back of the class or in the lunch room to supervise staff whenever the principal was out of the building. Others shared stories of feeling threatened in meetings where senior administration were present and as a result they felt forced to bring in support from the Teacher’s Federation in order to feel safe. Others shared concerns that many of these parents had been elected to the Home and School Association this year and that had led to a severe breakdown of the working relationship between teachers and the group whose mandate was to support them. They felt that this group often made decisions without the support of the staff or consulting them and entered staff spaces such as the lunchroom without staff consent where they harassed staff who were not supporting their latest initiative or event. They stated relief that I had listened to their concerns and recently stopped the functioning of the Home and School until we could meet and problem solve these issues.

The staff stated that this situation with this small minority of parents had led to low staff moral and high stress. Some staff were choosing to transfer, while others who had been outspoken or brought in outside support feared being forced to transfer as one staff member had been the year before. They felt they were not being heard when incidents occurred and that senior administration did not trust in the professionalism of the staff. They expressed that they perceived that this situation had been partially responsible for my resignation and that the decision to assign another first year principal the next year to replace me was unwise. They expressed concerns that this trend of lack of support, which they felt had existed in the school since the last principal, would continue with the new principal after I left. They were asking that parents be clearly informed of their role in the education of their child and that support from Central Office be given to all staff.

I looked out at the Secret Garden as the meeting was drawing to a close and the staff’s request to meet with the Board was granted and felt a crushing sense of sadness and defeat. I had brought all I knew all I had learned, all my past experience to this school year in hopes of supporting all of the children here and bringing together this fractured community. I, like the staff, had believed that our positive initiatives in curriculum, student leadership and school ground naturalization would be enough to heal this community, but I was wrong. There was too much in this story that I did not understand and I felt saddened that I had not been capable of protecting my staff against all that they had expressed at this meeting. The vision of peace that had grown in the “Secret Garden” remained elusive and out of our grasp.
An acorn and a fire

It was a beautiful sunny day and I took a deep breath of the warm spring air as I passed the kaleidoscope of colorful tulips that waved me up the walkway. I was nervous but determined to keep this appointment. I had never gone to talk to someone before about my life, my hopes, my pain, my dreams. I was suffering and I had no clue what I was going to do with my life now that I had leaped off the ladder. I was heartsick by what I had discovered about the wall my ladder had been leaning against and why I had become on my climb to the top. I was grieving the loss of what I had believed in and what I thought the system of education stood for. I was exhausted by my constant doing and this eternal drive I felt to change education, support our youth and save the earth.

As I sat across from this woman who would become for me a wise elder and one of the greatest teachers on my life journey, I pondered the question she had asked. After listening to my stumbling attempts to explain the life situation I found myself in, she gently asked why I was there. What was it I was seeking, what did I want? I sat in the quiet acceptance of her office and knew that I wanted peace from the constant sense of achieving, doing, and running I always felt. I wanted some relief from the increasing sense of loss and internal pain in my heart as I opened my eyes to the shadow side of the modern culture I had grown up in but never really saw. I wanted some distance from the anger I felt over what I saw as an attack both on the way I was trying to reimagine education and on my very person. I longed for relief from the bitterness I felt from the betrayal, lack of support and constant efforts by the system to make me conform and be something I was not. I wished for a reconnection with the self I seemed to have lost somewhere along the way on my climb up the academic and institutional ladder. And then there was this longing which had become a constant aching in my heart; a vague sense of being called by something.

She suggested a book that I might want to pursue reading, "The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling" by James Hillman. In this book Hillman states that each human being is born with an acorn—an image, character, fate, genius, calling, daemon, soul, or destiny (Hillman, 1996). The nature of this acorn remains shadowy, revealing itself mainly in hints, intuitions, whispers, and the sudden urges and oddities that disturb a life. Well my life had definitely been disturbed. In fact most days felt like living in the center of a wildfire, things burning up around me so fast I couldn't grab on to anything solid anymore.

As I digested Hillman's thoughts I began to wonder if the restlessness of heart, the impatience and the yearning that I often felt when I allowed any stillness in my life were the call of this "acorn", some deeper part of my self; my soul. And if my soul was trying so hard to get my attention what was it trying to tell me? What was I missing?
“Once awakened, we begin to remember the call of the soul and the song of the world, and we suffer the immense grief and hope gifted by those revelations. Grounded there, we can reroot our lives in soul and nature.”

Plotkin, 2008, p. 109

Getting Burned

It is difficult in modern society, which Plotkin (2008) describes as an egocentric society, to simply wake up. It often takes something traumatic or disorienting to be significant enough to shake us out of the trance of modernism. When that happens we can become “demoralized or not functioning” or we can wisely perceive that we “are caught in a situation [we] need to understand or change” (Bolen, 1984, p. 1). It is often at this time we seek out the guidance of a wise elder or teacher to help us understand the basic plot to our story and help us face our wounds. If we journey far enough into the inner landscapes of our wounds, we discover there the mysteries of destiny which Hillman (1996) refers to as our acorn or our soul. We go to therapy to recover this, whether we know it or not.

“Psychology in its truest sense: psukhe/psych, soul; ology or logos, [is] a knowing of the soul” (Estes, 1992, p. 7). To uncover our soul we will most likely need to set aside the psychological frames that are usually used in the Western world, as they do not reveal enough. “They trim a life to fit the frame: developmental growth, step by step, from infancy, through troubled youth, to midlife crisis and aging, to death” (Hillman, 1996, p. 5). Present psychological paradigms which explain our lives by genetic codes, ancestral heredity, traumatic events, parental unconsciousness and societal dysfunction do not sufficiently account for or engage with the “numinous or visionary calling at the core of the mature human heart (Plotkin, 2008, p. 3). Hillman states that modern approaches to psychology rob us of our true biographies, our destiny, which is written into our souls. Estes (1992) notes that Western psychology has done “little to describe the psychological lives and ways of gifted women, talented women, creative women. There is, on the other hand, much written about the weaknesses and foibles of humans in general and women in particular (p. 8)”

In contemporary society we see maturity in terms of hard work and practical responsibilities and our psychology mimics this perspective. We go to therapy to “work” on our relationships and to “develop” a strong sense of self. An egocentric society supports an egoic paradigm of psychological maturity. Mystical affiliation is the very core of maturity and true adulthood is rooted in transpersonal experience which is experiences as a sacred calling (Plotkin, 2008). This mystical affiliation is the very core of maturity, and it is precisely what mainstream Western society has overlooked or actively suppressed and expelled. “Western civilization has buried most traces of the mystical roots of maturity; yet this knowledge has been at the heart of every indigenous tradition known to us, past and present, including those from which our own societies have emerged” (Hillman, 1996, p. 7). The concept of each individual having a soul-image, a spark of uniqueness, appears throughout history in many cultures by many different names: image, character, fate, genius, calling, daimon, soul, destiny. Hillman (1996) states that these titles do not tell us what the soul is, “but tell us that it is and point to its mysteriousness” (p. 10).

When we encounter the “essential mystery at the heart of each human life” (Hillman, 1996) we learn how our wounds are essential facilitators of our soul lives. Carl Jung was fond of reminding us that, to the soul, the wrong way is always the right way (Mayes, 2005). Our deepest wounds and our soul are intimately related. Every one of our psychological wounds, “…including those engendered by an egocentric family or culture, can serve as catalysts for our renaissance and soul discovery” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 109). We become wounded when what we are doing and who we are being is not a true reflection or expression of our soul. We long for “a life that is soul satisfying” (Bolen, 2001, p. xiv). What we choose to do or be and how we choose to live must correspond with what is true for us at a soul level. This is something we know in our bones, at our core, and which the acorn deep within us calls us to with longings, and nudges, and whispers in the night. We begin to burn from within and get burned from without in order for us to wake up to that image and calling deep within us. The acorn waits, but it does not wait quietly.
A wake-up call
I stood in the hall looking at the brightly colored pictures of spring flowers that filled the entire wall outside the kindergarten room. I was waiting for my daughter’s teacher who had called me that morning and asked that I come in for a meeting. It was the day before our big community celebration and work bee for the naturalization project but she had said it was urgent so I had dropped everything and rushed to the school. As the teacher slipped out into the hallway I waved at my daughter who was busy playing cards with the boys. Her teacher kindly and gently explained to me that she had called because my five year old had tearfully told her that morning that she didn’t want to go out on the playground because she was afraid that she would be stolen by the people who were mad at her mommmy. My head began to spin and I had to sit down.

A few days ago I had come to the school to talk to the teacher and principal and explain that we had received several anonymous, angry, threatening calls both at my home and work in the last week with regards to the upcoming community celebration for the school ground naturalization project. It seemed that as the project gathered media attention the disgruntled parents in the community were becoming more agitated. The upcoming celebration and work bee seemed to have become the focus for the aggression and anger of this group. An anonymous call had been received at the school division office indicating that if the community celebration and work bee was not stopped, information would be leaked to the media accusing me of the misuse of grant funds. Several anonymous, threatening calls had begun coming to my home as well, some of which had been answered by my three and five year old daughters. One of these calls had intimated that I had better get people watching my kids on their school grounds to be sure they were safe. As a result of this call I had visited my daughter’s school and asked the staff to keep an extra eye at recess and informed them that the baby sitter would be coming in to pick her up at lunch every day.

I had not anticipated however, that my very bright and astute five year old had heard enough of the conversations at home and picked up enough of the energy within our family that she had become afraid. I sat in shock and felt the most crushing guilt and violent rage that I had ever experienced in my life. When I could speak I told the teacher I needed to see my daughter. When she came out I hugged her tightly and promised her that no bad people were going to hurt her. I told her I was going to be home from now on which would make the bad people very happy, and I would be able to drive her to her school and pick her up at lunch just in case.

When I was sure she was ok I drove back to the school, picked up the phone and told the director I was done. It was six weeks until the end of the school year, but nothing could make me stay now. I indicated that I would remain involved in the completion of the naturalization project until the end of June and would attend that weekend’s celebration and work bee but that would be the end. I took one last look at that office which had been a "learning grounds" for me of things I had never anticipated and I walked out. No decision in my life had ever been that easy and that right.
A calling from the depths

In 1968 Joseph Campbell wrote, in “The Hero With a Thousand Faces,” that the task of the true hero is to shatter the established order and create a new community. In doing so the hero slays the monster of the status quo, the dragon of the old order, which is the keeper of the past. In Western culture the established order is made up of many deeply entrenched patriarchal values such as dominance and control. A woman who wants to challenge these discourses often begins with the traditional hero’s journey as it is the only visible model for change within Western culture. “She puts on her armour, mounts her modern-day steed, leaves loved ones behind, and goes in search of the golden treasure. She fine-tunes the skills of logos. She looks for clearly defined routes to success” (Murdock, 1990, p. 36). There are problems with this approach however, not just for women, but for men as well. It ignores, suppresses or buries half of who we are as humans; it is unbalanced in its approach. Our feminine nature, our instinctual, intuitive capabilities, our capacity for creative thinking beyond the discursive, and our innate compassion as a human species are all subsumed by this masculine hero’s path. This is especially damaging for women because if women “see themselves through a male lens and continuously measure themselves by standards of a male-defined culture, they will find themselves deficient or lacking in the qualities that men value. Women will never be men, and many women who are trying to be “as good as men” are injuring their feminine nature” (Murdock, 1990, p. 14).

When we suppress our feminine nature and “lose touch with the instinctive psyche, we live in a semi-destroyed state and images and powers that are natural to the feminine are not allowed full development (Estes, 1992, p. 8). When we are cut away from our basic source our instincts are lost; subsumed by “the culture, or by the intellect or the ego-one’s own or those belonging to others” (Estes, 1992, p. 8). Throughout history, particularly in Euro-Western countries, feminine qualities have been forbidden, tortured, quelled and suppressed. Discourses have evolved which tout the feminine nature of humanity as dangerous, mad or evil. Fortunately, no matter how many times the feminine nature is pushed down, it is never completely destroyed. When we tire of the dirt and grime from the dust that blows up from charging around on our hero’s journey to change the world, we may get our first glimmer of this nature. When the heat becomes too much for the armour we are dragging around into our daily encounters we may hear a faint calling from the depths. And when another blow from an opponents sword becomes just too painful, we may sink down onto our knees in the mud and something may reach up to pull us downward. Retrieving our feminine nature requires descent; a movement inward and downward. The armour must come off as we slide exhausted off our charging horse and into the depths of our feminine consciousness.

Descent is a different kind of journey and not one for the faint of heart. It takes enormous courage to enter one’s depths and search. This journey can involve “a seemingly endless period of wandering, grief and rage; of dethroning kings; of looking for the lost pieces of [the] self and meeting the dark feminine” (Murdock, 1990, p. 8). There is no timeline on this path of descent, it may take weeks, months, or even years. It is a sacred journey that cannot be hurried. For many it will involve periods of darkness and silence as one learns to listening deeply to the feminine nature that has been so deeply submerged. It involves more being and less doing. “There is a desire to spend more time in nature being nurtured by the earth and an increasing awareness of seasonal changes and the rhythms of the moon” (Murdock, 1990, p. 8). On this journey not only the lost parts of the self are reclaimed but also the lost soul of the culture. As one reconnects to the feminine nature there arises a compulsion deconstruct and then abandon patriarchal stories and engage a process of reclaiming ancient cultural knowings which arise from the depths of the descent to the feminine soul of the self and the world.
Healing voices

It was a cloudy fall day as I walked through the school grounds with the Minister of the Environment and several students, staff and parents that I had worked so closely with over a year ago. The prestigious award we were there to receive and the recognition of the School Ground Naturalization Project from the Federal Government was just one more bittersweet moment among many that had taken place in the last few months. Recently a flood of positive attention for the project had come from many places both within and beyond the area of environmental education and school ground naturalization. Articles had appeared in newspapers, popular magazines, and environmental education texts highlighting the project as “one of the most ambitious schoolyard naturalization projects undertaken in Canada” and a “prairie wonder”. The project had received several awards including the “Go Green Award”, “Habitat 2000”, “The National Wildlife Award” and now was receiving Federal Environmental recognition for its exemplary status in school ground naturalization and environmental leadership and change. This recognition had washed away for many the sense of failure and discouragement that had resulted from the attempts by some to use the project as the scapegoat for all the ills that beset this school, community and the system of education in general.

However, the greatest award received by any of us who had believed in and supported this re-imagining and re-envisioning of education were the comments of the former students as they walked through the grounds and talked with the Minister of the Environment about how this project had impacted them. Hearing students say that it had changed how they viewed education and community, that it had impacted their relationship with the earth and had helped them believe they had some agency in the world was significant. The dedication of the school grounds to their recently deceased fellow student who had been completely confined to a wheelchair spoke volumes about what had become important to these youth. It became clear that the process we engaged in as we naturalized the school ground impacted their perspectives on many social realities beyond the environmental and play focus the project had begun with.

The process we had engaged in had created space for the voices of the students to be heard. The young girl who shared with us her realities of living in a school setting with a physical disability had opened many eyes and she had become a voice with all those in the school and surrounding community who lived with disabilities. Other students had brought a voice to their concerns regarding school and community violence, gender equity issues, and their worries for the future of the earth. They were equal partners at the table as discussions took place regarding all aspects of this project and many other aspects of the school. They started their own initiatives such as the Peacekeeper Project where older students supported younger children on the school ground in mediating conflict in peaceful ways. The process we had engaged in through the School Ground Naturalization project had reconstructed students as valued members of the community and allowed them to have a voice in decisions that affected their lives. The forms of membership that ‘school’ typically defines for students with regards to their participation was disrupted and shifted.

The capability of students to go beyond what is commonly allowed or accepted in our educational and social spaces was very obvious that day in their conversations with the Federal Minister, the media and the community. I began to wonder about the understandings of ‘the child’ and the ‘young person’ embedded in the broader discursive field of ‘child development’ in the west. Where had this knowledge come from, who had created these truths, and how did power operate in ways that disallowed other possibilities? Had our “Welcoming Back the Wilderness” project somehow welcomed back parts of our children and youth that had been delegitimized?
Voicing oppression

The naturalization process that was engaged during this time and in this way disrupted and challenged the ‘common sense’ way of doing school that exists in the West. Maintaining the status quo in education, although comforting in its familiarity, is also quite oppressive. Norms of schooling like the norms of society privilege and benefit some groups, identities and ways of knowing while marginalizing and subordinating others. Kumashiro (2001) feels it has become normal for religious intolerance, racial discrimination, gender inequity, and economic bias to permeate educational experiences. Anthropocentric views are also normalized in educational conversation thus marginalizing any discourse of the environment, ecology and most particularly animate Earth. This explains why schools contain only certain materials, organize them in only certain disciplines, teach using only certain methods, and treat students in only certain ways. Insisting we use “common sense” when changing or reforming schools is really insisting that we continue to privilege only certain perspectives, practices, values and groups of people.

What many reform initiatives fail to address, consider, or call into question is the fact that schools are always addressing oppression by reinforcing it or allowing it to continue playing out unchallenged. The processes we engaged through this School Ground Naturalization project challenged the oppressive nature of school on many levels. It reconstructed the role of the “child” or “youth”, the place and voice of the community, the realities of the disabled, and our relationship with the Earth. It reimagined ways of decision-making, and shook the standard hierarchical roles that exist within school systems. This process went beyond the discourses that function within the standard form of Environmental Education that is typically enacted in schools which is subject to, and subjects itself to, the disciplinary power of the dominant educational discourse. Many of the current practices of institutionalized Environmental Education serve to legitimize, rather than challenge, educational practices that are problematic and that in fact create a need for environmental education (Gruenewald, 2004). The process that evolved during the School Ground Naturalization project became representative of more ecological or transformative environmental educational discourse practices which was a direct challenge to the ways that the dominant educational discourse operates under assumptions that contribute to the deepening socioecological crisis of our times (Bowers, 2004; Gruenewald, 2004).

The processes that emerged during the School Ground Naturalization project questioned, re-constructed and re-considered discourses and practices in the classroom and the school that maintain existing power relations. New discourses of consensus, negotiation, and community emerged. New ways of thinking evolved regarding the child and youth that were outside of the common sense beliefs about children based on Western psychological models of development. Parents and community members were engaged in multiple ways through this project that challenged the existing hierarchical structures of school. This process rocked the status quo by giving a voice to many who are typically oppressed within the existing structures of education; the child, youth, parents, a neighbor, a farmer, an MLA, a university student or professor, those of other cultures, women. What was unknown and unclear to me as one who was in a leadership role in the school during this transformative process was the understanding that “practices of negotiation and participation […] are imbued with power” (Cruikshank as cited in Milie, 2007, p. 18). I did not understand how deeply the discursive field of the school is embedded in school and government policies, pedagogies and curriculum frameworks which are developed independently from students, community and very often teachers. These “historically constructed values, priorities and dispositions that construct how one should see and act toward the world” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1999b, p. 9) actually disable student, community and even most likely teacher participation in reimagining and revising education and result in closure.

The discursive field of the school also produces a narrow field of possible subject positions for students, parents, teachers, support staff, principals and the community. Engaging new possibilities and voices which are typically “silenced” in education was to challenge these socially constructed and accepted identities which are to be normalized through the discursive practices and disciplining regimens of education. The power relations that remain hidden enclose and intern all of us within the confines of these available and acceptable subject positions; the “good teacher”, the “reasonable person”, the “child”, the “youth” and the “learner” that we must educate. Speaking in a voice outside of these possibilities means one will be subject to all of the normalizing techniques of our disciplinary society.
Ashes to ashes, dirt hills to dust

I sat in the office chair, heart pounding with anger as I faced the two senior administrators I had asked to meet with me. Sitting beside me was the vice-principal of the school where I had spent the last year teaching part-time. He and the principal had been amazingly supportive to me in my time at their school. I had decided to return to the classroom to find out if it was teaching I had come to be disillusioned with or just the circumstances of my time as administrator that had left such a bad taste in my mouth. He looked at me with sympathy now as we listened to the senior administrator, who had been newly appointed as superintendent following his time replacing me as principal after I had left the last spring. This man, who had been my grade six teacher, was answering my question as to how a very damaging story had come alive in that school community during his time there as principal. I had begun to hear stories from people within the community about this information circulating a few weeks ago and who was spreading it.

He nonchalantly recounted how he had publically shared information with parents and staff that I had overspent the school budget, mismanaged and overspent grant funds for the naturalization project, paid my “Friends” who consulted to the project money and the several other errors and mistakes he felt I had made at the school in my time there. He calmly stated that he had told people these things, which basically defamed my character both within the school community and within my professional community, because people had asked. I was astonished by the matter of fact way he shared what he had done as if it was all just “truth” and by the acceptance of the director that this story just made good sense.

I thought back to all that had happened after I had left the school the last spring. The School Grounds Naturalization Committee had been disbanded, the Home G. School reinstated and re-empowered, several portions of the project halted, significantly changed or destroyed, funds and decision-making re-centred in the school office, and all curricular connections to the environment ended. The partnerships that had been developed with both the university and several community organizations and individuals had been severed. All signs of consensus decision-making, community involvement, and student leadership disappeared. It had been a painful time for many in the community, and agonizing for me to watch from a distance.

The story that was being created by the man in front of me and others was that all the problems in the community were a direct result of the School Ground Naturalization project and my abilities as an administrator. Two scapegoats had been found and the damage was irreversible. The common sense story of education had been recovered and the voices of other possible discourse were silenced. I looked at the director and asked how she had ever hired me if she had believed I was so incompetent. She responded with congratulations; she said she understood I had taken a job elsewhere. A week prior to this meeting I had decided to take a job in a different school division. I had wanted a fresh start and to leave all of this behind. In that moment of anger, humiliation and pain I decided that I wouldn’t walk away without responding: I would step into the ring and fight.

For another year I dragged this anger around with me and was determined to be heard, to speak for myself, my colleagues, and the community. I wanted to prove that the discourse we were enacting through the naturalization process was legitimate. Eventually, despite the fact that I could disprove the allegations, that the Human Rights Commission could prove a harassment case, a lawyer could create a case of defamation of character, and the Federation could demand retraction and apologies; I came to the conclusion that none of these actions and none of my anger would change the dynamics of how quickly and efficiently I and the discourses I was engaging in were silenced. I had become in the eyes of many “abnormal”, a failure, unstable, dangerous, incompetent, and just too “out there”. The educational discourse which had grown at the school that gave voice to other ways of knowing and other possibilities for doing school had been deemed nonsensical and irrational. I came to realize this was not a battle I would ever win; I walked away and tried to bury it all.
The death of assumptions

Until this point in my career I had assumed that I had agency to change education. I had always had difficulty both as a student and an educator believing in and acting on "the knowledge, truths and practices that dominate our modern Western societies and educational institutions" (Jardine, 2005, p. 2). I struggled with the competitive nature of education and the alienation and isolation many students and teachers experienced as a result of this. I disliked the hierarchical, disciplining nature of systems in the West and the fragmentation and suffering this created. I saw young children entering schools eager to learn, explore and create quickly become focused on grades, test scores and competition; all marks of success within this system and society. I wondered how the life-threatening effects of over-consumption upon the Earth that this success-driven educational system promoted could be so silent within our school curriculum and day to day functioning. I was determined to use my agency as an individual to change all of this. I had enacted much of this on a small scale as a classroom teacher but it had been fairly hidden behind my classroom door. At times I had experienced the attempts by administrators, colleagues or parents to have me conform to the "common-sense" ways of doing school, but up until this point I had been able to resist this; or move on to another location and begin again.

This experience as a principal of enacting alternative discourses on the level of a whole school and community had left me questioning how much power I really had to change anything. I began to wonder about the assumptions I had made about power, knowledge and truth. As a product of the 60’s and 70’s I had grown up on a diet of “Power to the People” and a strong belief in the oft quoted activist’s creed of “Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has”. I assumed that when Ghandi stated I was to “Be the change I wished to see in the world” that meant I was to go out and change the world into what I wanted it to be. The liberal ideals I had been raised on which sought progress through managed social change and an emphasis on the individual and the needs of the individual (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998b) were well engrained. I believed in the discourse I was enacting and I felt it was definitely better for people and the earth than what the present systematic education was offering. However, my attempt to do this kind of change in a public way with an entire community had led to my being disciplined by the system, the community and in some cases by my colleagues. I had not followed “the prescribed regimes of schooling and had become labelled as “unique” at best, and as [an] incompetent troublemaker[... who must either be convinced of or bullied into conformity at worst” (Jardine, 2005, p. 4).

I began to realize that I had made many assumptions as an educator about what education does and what educational systems perpetuate. As Apple (2002) points out “these assumptions concern some very deep seated, but often unconscious, presuppositions about science, the nature of men and women, and the ethics and politics of our day-to-day curricular and pedagogic theories and practices” (p. 4). I did not understand that our educational institutions function to distribute many ideological values and knowledge based on these assumptions nor did I realize that this that is not all they do. They also ultimately help produce the type of knowledge that is needed to maintain the dominant ecological, political and cultural arrangements that exist in our modern society. McGregor (2009) states that it is this nexus between knowledge, cultural capital and power that explains why schools and educational systems suppress, consciously or in many cases unconsciously, alternative knowledge frameworks. Foucault (1980) takes this idea even further by stating that “power is not built up out of “wills” (individual or collective), nor is it derivable from interests. Power is constructed and functions on the basis of particular powers, myriad issues, myriad effects of power” (p. 188). But I could not yet see this possibility. While my experience of enacting other discourse in education had rudely awakened me to ideas of power, I became sure that it rested within the interests of the system, the institution, the hierarchy and the privileged who gained from these. I now had a target, a place to fight against, to watch, to mistrust. It had a name; traditionalism, fundamentalism, conservatism, the political right. It gave me an altar to lay all my anger, shame and sense of failure on. I buried my naivety and simple assumptions about my self, school and society and began to question, to search and to pay attention. It was a beginning step towards gaining consciousness of the many systems of ideas that enclose and intern “reason” and the “reasonable person” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998b).
The chess board of reality
Held players all asleep
So sure that they had agency
Not mere pawns in too deep

Subjects constructed for the play
Of governmental power
Convinced that they had found the way
For freedom’s seed to flower

She stepped onto the field of play
Convinced she could make change
And blindly on she led the way
To make the known seem strange

She gathered bishops, queens and rooks
Engaged the land of kings
Ignoring the distasteful looks
And threats to stop these things

The black assembled peacefully
To face the dreaded white
They struggled for democracy
But weren’t prepared to fight

They gave a voice to other ways
These delegitimized
They dreamed of truth and freer days
But these ways were despised

The disciplining gaze drew near
They said she went too far
And she began to feel real fear
But led the field to war

The inquisition was begun
Regimes of power in place
Examinations soon were done
And held up in her face

Conform or lose the rules are rules
The status quo is clear
This is the way it’s done in schools
Give up what you hold dear

These normalizing modern plays
Make objects of desire
Return the pieces from strange ways
Or burn them in the fire

She tried to fight back with a voice
She used her agency
She still believed she had a choice
That truth could set them free

She realized a bit too late
She was caught in the grid
Of modernism’s natural fate
The discourse had been hid

Off with her head the sovereign cried
As pastoral power had failed
She will be missed the bishop lied
As truth games still prevailed

So naturally she lost the game
She walked off of the board
The players knew who was to blame
The other team had scored

The knight was back up in the tower
His gaze roamed far and near
It all was righted in the hour
Control by gaze and fear

But rudely wakened from her sleep
She now could see the game
She knew the self that went that deep
Would never be the same
Chapter Four

Gaining Consciousness
Gaining Consciousness
Earth healing

I lay on the hot sand watching my children play in the water. They were blissfully unaware that their mother was shattered into a million pieces. I took a deep breath and let the earth seep into my skin and bones. As I listened to their laughter, watched them run in the shimmering water, build sandcastles, play, imagine and dream. I wondered how I had gotten so lost. How had I come to be so far away from the land and so far away from myself? What was it about living within the modern Western world that had resulted in such a fragmentation of self and disconnection from the Earth?

I had returned to the land, the water and the hills to begin the long process of putting myself back together. I had a sure knowledge that I would never return to what I had been, nor did I want to. Just like Humpty Dumpty, I had fallen off the wall, slipped off the ladder, and I would never allow all the kings horses and men to put me together again. I had a deep sense that whole parts of myself had been submerged and subdued in my attempts to meet the visions of success that were held out as the golden treasure in this society.

After years of living in an urban center with its speed, anxiety and pressure I felt fragmented and scattered. Many seasons of running in the career fast lane had left me depleted and exhausted. Recent attempts at trying to change the way school was commonly done had left me with a sense of failure and betrayal. I felt ostracized by many of my former colleagues, as well as from the system that I had been a part of for most of my life. I was drawn to the land, to the Earth, to the stillness and the vastness. I spent hours laying on the sand, sitting under the moon, walking on the lake path and resting in the hills. I wanted the cold dampness of mud between my toes and the sharp scratches of tree branches on my skin. I felt that I had been in a very deep sleep, unconscious to whole parts of life and myself. From the tears that fell often into the musky dirt of the prairies there arose the scent of death. The Earth seeped into my consciousness and my very being, allowing me to grieve.

I began to re-view and re-think how I was living, where I was living. I realized many contradictions between what I believed in and how I was being. I felt a longing, a pull, at times a desperate need to rediscover parts of myself that had been put away in order to fit in and survive this culture...the dancer, painter, creator, thinker, imaginer, dreamer, seeker, and storyteller. The parts of me that were "too wild", "too passionate", "too earthy". I had been harmed by taking some of these parts out in my workplace and in the world. I had reacted, over-reacted, raged, folded, and slunk away when challenged and disciplined. I wanted to lick my wounds in the tall grass, to reconnect with the source of these ways of being within me in the darkened forest. I needed to let something die in the shadowing twilight...and let something be awakened in the soft glow of the moon.
Life’s a beach

In my attempts to change the existing institution of education I had experienced discipline, dismemberment, and even a sense of betrayal. Trying to bring about change and still meet the demands of the system had left me “overscheduled, exhausted, suffering from stress-related ailments, and wondering how [I] got off track” (Murdock, 1990, p. 1). This was not what I had bargained for when I first pursued healing for a community, the earth and children. The image I had held of this process had not included a sacrifice of body and soul. I had never imagined that the re-envisioning and re-enacting processes I had helped lead the school in would have such repercussions. I knew from experience that “our 20th century Western society, a disciplinary society, tells us not only what we must be and do, but how we must do it” (Jardine, 2005, p. 48). What I did not understand was that any discourse that seeks to exist outside of these expectations would be subject to the disciplinary principles that control all individual actions in society. Foucault (1980) explains that these principals operate on individuals in order to render them easily supervisable, efficient, and productive (p. 215-216). Knowledge and power function in disciplinary societies by turning all individual human beings into objects that exist, act, or are knowable only in relation to the rules laid down by this power and knowledge. Our society operates through the use of mechanisms of power which maintain certain ways of knowing and being that have become economically advantageous and politically useful. “Individuals risk severe punishment going against the prevailing ethos” (Wehr, 1987, p. 17).

When I made the decision to walk away from the school out of concerns for my family’s safety and my own physical and mental wellbeing, I experienced a very interesting, although painful, phenomena. Outside of a very few close friends within the school community, my teaching profession and my administrative group, I was not contacted or communicated with. I received one sympathy card from a colleague that expressed deep concern for the fact that I had a “breakdown”, which I found quite startling. I heard a story of how several parents from my former school, all women, were discussing how nice it was to have a man back in the office. Friends shared how some colleagues wondered what I had expected would happen by doing what I had done; that I had gotten what I deserved. When I returned to work the next fall in the role as a part-time teacher, the subject of my experience in the past year, which had been very public, was never mentioned. I was treated with a reserved politeness and distance from the majority of the staff. Wehr (1987) writes that “the very worst punishment a society can inflict on its own members is exclusion” (p. 17). In primitive societies the punishment for transgressing a taboo was often death, however, in our “civilized” society we do not punish deviants in this overt way. “We simply snub them, refuse to offer them hospitality or understanding, and cause them a “death of the soul” rather than physical death” (ibid, p. 17). What I had done, who I had been, what I had spoken, had broken a taboo, stepped out of the “norm”, and subjected me to disciplinary power. “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions [of which education is just one] compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, excludes. In short it normalizes” (Foucault, 1979, p. 183). The most difficult thing for me to understand, was that the institution which disciplined included not just those that I had perceived to be in positions of “power”, but fellow administrators, teachers and community.

Wehr (1987) writes of how “women sense on some deep level, that they are acting in a “taboo” manner if they do not engage in the same conversational terms as everyone else” (p. 17). They internalize a sense of their own inferiority rather than challenging societies messages. “Internalized oppression feels a certain way inside a woman, it speaks with a certain voice, and it has a certain effect on her” (Wehr, 1987, p. 18). My anger, pain, outrage and confusion regarding what I had experienced by enacting “othered” ways of knowing and being was not only directed outwards, but more significantly, deeply inward. Jung writes that our inner and outer realities mutually reinforce—even invent—one another (Wehr, 1987). I had entered the system, learned the accepted mode of self-expression, played the game, while at the same time feeling drawn to pull up from the underground aspects of our human experience that have long been submerged: organic, earth-bound, material, embodied, relational ways of being. Now internally I was feeling a longing to pull from the poorest land in my psyche this instinctive nature that throughout history has been “plundered or burnt, dens bulldozed and natural cycles forced into unnatural rhythms to please others” (Estes, 1992, p. 1). I had lost contact with this inner nature in the “deserts of materialist rationalism” (Luke, 1986, p. 9) and had experienced an essential ingredient on the soul’s journey through affliction, the experience of social rejection (Weil as cited in Luke, 1986). It seemed that the Earth that I had set out to heal was in fact going to be essential to the healing of both my inner and outer worlds.
voices from the deep unknown

The four women stood facing me with deep love and compassion. They held within their hands a golden eagle. Quietly they all waited for my decision. You have a voice...we have all had a voice...you will be free...but it will never be the same. You will not please everyone and there may be a price...pain...do you want us to release it?

I hesitated. My mind filled with thoughts of the life experiences that had brought me to this time and place. I questioned why I had been born within this modern, western culture that caused me so much pain. What had been the purpose of my being placed within the hierarchical, patriarchal structures of family, religion and school? Why had I experienced ridicule, disciplining and failure for my attempts to alter these realities for myself, for children? Why had I lived where I lived and experienced what I had experienced?

You needed to learn how it feels to be oppressed...to not have a voice...it is your path...purpose...to have a voice...do you? As the answer yes filled my entire being the eagle was released from the four women's hands. Free, it flew in ever widening spirals high up into the blue beyond.

I found myself sitting on a flat rock staring out over the hillside and the calm lake below. The breeze blew gently, swaying the trees in the late summer sun. The smell of sage was strong in the air as I took a deep, soul opening breath. This was a sacred place, a healing place, a teaching place. Here the pressures that were constant to be a blur of activity, to be successful, to be all things to all people, stilled. This was a place of old knowing, of earth speaking. This was a wild place, a mystical space. The legacy of the humans who have been on this land a long, long time, was imprinted upon the ground and in the air. Here was a place where I could dance unseen, cry unheard, and howl to the moon with all the anguish I felt as an outsider in this culture. Maybe here I could loosen the grip of the song of the dark years I had been living in, a song of the starved soul (Vistes, 1992). Perhaps here could come a new song, a deep song, a song of my matriarchal ancestors and a song of the women of this land. Possibly here I could grow the strength to own my voice, to reclaim my soul, to open my heart, and to live with the pain.

As the visions faded from my consciousness I heard the gentle voices of the four women in the distance...come here to find strength and power...you will have a guide...find a tailisman to remind you of your strength...
“What is meant by the word spirit? There are a thousand answers, but the true meaning is glimpsed by us only through the kind of experience that can never be rationally explained in words. Only the images which perennially emerge from the unconscious of humankind may convey in a symbol the power of the spirit.”


Inner Depths

Everyone experiences emotionally powerful images which appear in our inner landscapes (Wehr, 1987). Experiencing this archetypal vision provided for me a glimpse into a world beyond ordinary reality. The potential for mystical experience, while the birthright of all humans, can have a profound effect upon the individual when they happen. This experience challenged my worldview and undermined many of the “truths” that I had encountered within my own education and in the system in which I taught. I could not explain this experience in view of my old belief systems and it profoundly influenced my life philosophy and worldview. I could offer no rational explanation for what I had experienced and yet this had seemed as “real” as my experiences of ordinary states of consciousness deemed “normal” by Western scientific, psychological perspectives. Grof (1993) writes that what I encountered was in fact a normal and natural manifestation of the deepest domains of the human psyche. “In many instances, the emergence of these elements into consciousness may be the organism’s effort to free itself from the bonds of various traumatic imprints and limitations, heal itself, and reach a more harmonious way of functioning.” (p. 19). In light of my recent life events, which for me had been very traumatic, this did seem to be an opening to healing; one that was out of the realm of my ordinary experience, but deeply profound.

The study of non-ordinary states of consciousness is an area grossly neglected not just by traditional science, but by the entire Western culture. “In our emphasis on rationality and logic, we have put great value on the everyday sober state of mind and relegated all other states of consciousness into the realm of useless pathology” (Grof, 1993, p. 13). The traditional Western understanding of the human psyche is significantly ethnocentric, as Western scientists see their own particular approach to reality and psychological phenomena as superior while judging the perspectives of other cultures as inferior, naive, and primitive. “All ancient and pre-industrial cultures have held non-ordinary states of consciousness in high esteem and valued them as powerful ways to connect to nature, sacred realities and other human beings as well as useful in identifying diseases and healing” (Grof, 1993, p. 13). Many of the “insights from ancient polytheistic theologies, [...] teach us about the wonderfully multiple nature of the human psyche” (Pearson, 1986, p. xviii). The traditional academic approach to human consciousness is “cognicentric” (Harner as cited in Grof, 1993) in that it takes into consideration only those observations and experiences that are “mediated by the five senses in an ordinary state of consciousness” (p. 13).

Modern depth psychology, transpersonal studies and consciousness research have coincided with revolutionary developments in modern physics. This has profoundly affected the traditional Cartesian world view and Newtonian mechanics which have been responsible for creating a very limited view of human beings and the criteria for what is an acceptable or unacceptable experience of reality (Capra, 1982; Grof, 1993). The Western world view only accepts experiences of ordinary or “normal” states of consciousness where “we experience ourselves as existing within the boundaries of the physical body (the body image); our perception of the environment is restricted by the range of our sensory organs” (Grof, 1986, p. 38). Non-ordinary states of consciousness “represent a critical challenge to traditional ways of thinking and suggest an entirely new way of looking at reality and our existence” (Grof, 1993, p. 14). These states, which can be accessed through or triggered by “the practice of meditation, a session in experiential psychotherapy, an episode of spontaneous psychospiritual crisis (“spiritual emergency”), a near-death situation” (Grof, 1993, p. 14), provide gateways into the deep territories of the human psyche which are uncharted and delegitimized by traditional psychology.

In the area of depth psychology and consciousness research, C. J. Jung “amassed convincing evidence showing that we must look much farther than personal biography and the individual unconscious to grasp the true nature of the psyche.” (Grof, 1993, p. 12). Jung postulated that available within the “collective unconscious” is an immense pool of information about human history and culture that exists within the depths of all psyches. Archetypes, which operate in the collective unconscious, are deep and abiding dynamic patterns or primordial organizing principals in the human psyche that remain powerful and present over time (Pearson, 1986). “We can see these archetypes clearly in dreams, art, literature, and myth that seem to us profound, moving, universal, and sometimes even terrifying. We also can recognize them when we look at our own lives and those of our friends” (Pearson, 1986, p. xxv). Through this encounter with archetypal energies I recognized the spiritual dimension that exists not only in my own psyche but also in the universal scheme of things.
under fire

The spring ice crunched under my boots as I made my way with my husband towards the school. The parking lot and street were jammed with cars which surprised me; I had never seen this many cars for a school event unless it was the annual Christmas concert. My husband and I entered the gym of my children’s new school only to find that every seat was taken and people were standing along the walls and at the back. It appeared that nearly every member of this small community we had recently moved to had come to this meeting. Seated at the front of the room was the principal, Director of Education, a superintendent and the School Board Chair. The focus of the night was discipline and school violence and the energy in the room was charged.

The perspective of the community seemed to be that there was too much violence in the school. At the open mike parents shared stories of their children being hurt due to what they perceived as a lack of discipline in the school. One family told of their choice to home school after one of their sons was beaten up not on the playground, but in his classroom. Other parents spoke of the lack of learning that was taking place in this environment. The community was demanding answers and wanted guarantees for their children’s safety. From what I could gather it seemed that the school for the past number of years had had a very tight discipline policy which listed many behavioral rules and a “strike system” for those who broke them. Three strikes on any of the rules, from gum chewing to punching someone in the face, resulted in the same consequences, a strike. Three of those and you were out of school, suspended. Repeats of this sequence resulted in longer times away from school. This system did not seem to be something that many in the community had supported and much anger was expressed over the way that this form of discipline had affected their children. However, there were also many concerned that when the new principal took over the school and removed the “strike system” things had not gotten better, but the community felt the situation had in fact gotten worse.

As we moved from the gymnasium to a classroom for small group discussion my husband and I shared a look of concern and disbelief. We had just moved to this community three months ago and our five and seven year old children seemed to be enjoying their new school. I was stunned at the stories of conflict and violence that had been shared; this was a small school with less than 200 students from kindergarten to grade six. In the small group session parents were eager to ask the school staff for their perspective on what was happening within the school. The teachers shared that they were afraid to do playground supervision as they knew there would be violent outbursts especially among the older boys. Teachers were tired of intervening in fist fights and explained that the lines at the office after recess were often very long. They expressed concern that the behavior of the older students was being emulated by the younger children and spreading throughout the school despite the best efforts of what appeared to be a very competent group of teachers. They explained that these issues often carried back into the classrooms affecting the entire learning environment.

I went home that night worried about my children’s future in a school so filled with violence and conflict. I had hoped that leaving the urban setting for a beautiful small town surrounded by hills, water and trees would offer more opportunities for our family to connect to the peacefulness and healing that we had all experienced on the land this past summer. It now appeared that rather than escaping the fire as I had hoped this move might bring, I was now caught in the center of it, with my children more affected than ever before.
"The paradox is that their very resistance to the sovereign power wielded by their teachers places them (and their teachers) ever more firmly in the grip of the disciplinary power that neither students nor teachers stop to perceive, as busy as they are fulfilling their roles within the paradigms of sovereignty."

Covaleski, 1994, p. 8

**Burning conviction**

For at least two decades discipline has been at or near the top of the list of public concerns about our schools (Covaleski, 1994). "Problems with school discipline have been ranked as the most serious problem with schools according to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll public opinion survey in the past 38 years" (Rose & Gallup, 2005). Gossen (1996) states that teachers report discipline as the most challenging part of their jobs and as a result classroom management is the workshop topic most sought after by teachers. "They want to know techniques to apply to a classroom to curtail disruptions." (Gossen, 1996, p. xiv). The word discipline is derived from the Latin word *disciplina*, which means learning. However, "[...] when used in school-talk "discipline" is often, perhaps usually, synonymous with "classroom management" (Covaleski, 1994, p. 1). "In our culture we have transformed the meaning of discipline into something one does to another to encourage conformity. We tend to associate the word discipline with discomfort, not with what we value" (Gossen, 1996, p. xvi). Kohn (1996) writes that "[t]he raison d’etre of discipline or classroom management is almost always to secure children’s compliance with adults’ demands" (p. xii).

The model of discipline or classroom management that was exemplified by the strike system of rules and consequences that was spoken of at the community meeting was, and still is, a very common practice in schools. After the Second World War teachers domination over students through physical coercion was made illegal in many places and corporeal punishment was gradually removed from most school division policies and practices (Slee, 1995). New approaches and strategies to shape students behavior in desirable ways then had to be developed. While students in these classrooms had more apparent freedom, these freedoms were coupled with whole hosts of strategies that were invented, and have been reinvented over the years, to manage student’s conduct in desirable ways. Many of these discipline approaches were based on the tenants of behavioral conditioning and target their subjects’ behaviors and self-governance. "For example, Skinner's (1968) behavior conditioning strategies teach the students to self-regulate their behavior in the classroom. In this understanding, ‘discipline’ is mechanistic, its target is the behavior of the individual (Millei, 2007, p. 8). Reward and consequence classroom management programs based on the stimulus-response model have been predominant in schools. Stickers, reward boards, strike systems, loss of privileges, detention, and student of the week celebrations were all common place in schools, just as they had been in this one.

Covaleski (1993) argues that these forms of discipline still place the teacher in the role of the ‘sovereign’ in the structure of the school, even though corporeal punishment has been removed. Sovereign power as described by Michel Foucault (1979) in *Discipline and Punish* is a form of power expressed in recognizable ways through particular and identifiable individuals. "These individuals are visible agents of power, known by others and by themselves to be such" (Covaleski, 1993, p. 1). Most classroom management programs function on a teacher-directed model and impose rules and consequences upon students (Kohn, 1996). Teachers are encouraged to focus on students’ behaviors and alter those that are seen as inappropriate. This is achieved by resorting to some sort of extrinsic inducement; some type of reward or punishment. When sovereign power operates in these cases, students know they have been acted upon, in what ways, and by whom. When power is wielded intermittently over specific parts of student’s lives so visibly “as Foucault would predict, the school becomes a site of resistance and outright rebellion precisely because it is a site of sovereign power” (Covaleski, 1993, p. 6).

The overt conflict, violence, opposition and rebellion that was being experienced in this school was only logical. When the disciplinary ‘strike system’ was removed it now was very visible to the students that the school staff was acting to impose control overtly on them. It was no longer hidden under a disciplinary ‘system’ of rules and controls. The students could now visibly see who it was that was forcing them to act in ways they would rather not. The students naturally resisted and rebelled, as were several of their parents and the community. The community wanted freedom and choice for their children, but also safety, control, ‘discipline’, and non-violence. They burned with the conviction that who was at fault in this situation was the teachers, the principal, the school division and the ‘bad’ kids. Due to the slight of hand by which disciplinary power diverts attention from its exercise, what was not seen clearly that night was that resisting the sovereignty that is exercised by the teacher, principal and school division authorities blinds all even more surely to the disciplinary power that operates on all concerned (Covaleski, 1993).
Meeting discipline

It was the first week of school and teachers were frantically preparing their classrooms for the students that were to come in just two days. All of us felt the disruption and interruption that an upcoming parent meeting was bringing to our day and most of us felt some trepidation about the agenda. I had recently joined this school division as a teacher and felt an extra sense of pressure to be prepared for my students. I was new to this school and community and I had accepted an unusual assignment, even for me. I was one of two teachers who would be teaching a multi-grade classroom, mine was a grade 4/6 split and the other was a 2/6 split. This grade configuration was an attempt by the school and division administration and this staff to try a different approach to the discipline problem that had been brought into the public eye at the community night held the past spring. The decision to combine grades in this manner had sparked further community concern and dissent and today's meeting was with a group of parents who were strongly opposed to this new direction.

As I entered the library where the meeting was to be held I could sense the tension. There was an obvious dividing line between the school and the community within the room. The meeting began with one father demanding to tape record the proceedings. The director responded with a curt no to the parent and an indication that a staff member would take notes and that all parties would get a copy. I was asked to be the note taker as I was new on staff and was seen as having relatively little input into this discussion that had been ongoing since June. The principal and some staff members began by explaining their rationale for why younger and older children had been put together in multi-grade classrooms. They stated that the older students would be in a role of supporting and protecting the younger children thus becoming role models and more appropriate in their behavior. The separation of some of the older students would allow for fewer personality clashes and opportunities to negatively influence each other. They also spoke of the educational value as older students supported younger children in learning. The director added his support for the school's decision as it was made on sound educational premises. He spoke of the research that the staff had completed and of the successes of other schools who had tried this approach. The parents shared their concerns that their younger children could be hurt physically, emotionally and intellectually by this arrangement. They did not believe that pairing violent older students with younger children would automatically bring out a caring attitude in these youth that they saw as troubled. The conversation became more heated, with parents demanding that this decision not go forward. One or two parents began threatening further action to the Ministry and the School Board as they felt they were not being heard. They felt that the school was going ahead with its decision without considering the parents concerns.

At this point the Director rose up in all his exceptional height and size and yelled with all of the command he must have had in his days as a football coach: "Enough!". The room froze in stunned silence. He shouted at the parents who had become attacking, demanding that they stop talking in that manner to the staff. I lifted my pen off the page and stopped writing, as I was sure this exchange should not be recorded. The language had definitely left the realm of professional discourse. Slamming his hand on the table the director demanded to know what was wrong with this community. He argued that there was always a crazy faction that attacked the school, wrote petitions, were unreasonable and volatile. He stated that he supported the staff, the decision stood as it was, and the parents would either accept this and be quiet or they could leave. Several parents angrily yelled back that they would move their children from this school. They stormed out, knocking over furniture in their dramatic exit. In the quiet aftermath of the outburst the director called the meeting adjourned and pleasantly wished the few remaining parents and the staff good luck in their new year and with this new initiative. I sat back in amazement, reflecting on the difference between this overt show of discipline and power as compared to the more subtle and manipulative discipline I had experienced in my previous school division. I was unsure what I thought of either but I could not help but wonder if this was not preferable. At least everyone knew where they stood. And the meeting was over quickly leaving me lots of time to focus on my classroom. As I handed the notes I had taken to the secretary, a small part of me wondered if I would feel the same way if I had been on the receiving end of this form of disciplinary gaze.
Managing Behavior

The power which was visible in this meeting, while significantly different than what I had experienced in my previous school division, was familiar from my childhood. In school, family and church I had often encountered this overt and explicit flexing of the hierarchical muscle. In Western culture the word power became entangled very early with the ideas of hierarchy, domination and authority. The root of the word power “is potfit meaning husband, lord, master; Greek pósis, husband, from which des-potes, “lord of the house” from donos (Greek), domus (Latin), and pósis, master” (Hillman, 1995, p. 97). Hierarchy and subordination, even despotism are built right into the western etymology of power. To be dominated by a power external to oneself, to be acted upon by force, to be mastered over as these parents were in this situation “is a familiar and agonizing form power takes” (Butler, 1997, p. 1). One must wonder at the relations through which power operates in our Western system of education. How is it that a director, a principal, a teacher or the system itself can subordinate the wishes of a parent? How have these mechanisms of power been able to function to discipline not only children but their parents, families and society?

The discussion with the parents at this meeting initially focused on the needs to manage students behavior and to have a well-managed school. The concept of management represents an imperialistic discourse which “views the social world as locked into irrational chaos, as needing to be brought into its redeeming order” (Ball, 1990, p. 157). This discourse constructs its superiority via a set of potent discursive oppositions; order is set over and against chaos, rationality against irrationality, sanity against madness and so on. The initial arguments put forth by the school centered on the need for order. Management as a professional discourse allows its speakers to lay exclusive claims to certain kinds of subordinate others as objects of that discourse. Schools and their professional staff are the experts in the procedures that will bring the necessary order and rationality to the situation and parents are the subordinated recipients of these procedures, whether they wish to be or not. The language of management deploys rationality and efficiency to promote control. “As a discourse, a system of possibility for knowledge, it eschews or marginalizes the problems, the concerns, difficulties, and fears of the subject’ - the managed” (Ball, 1990, p. 157). All of the limits and possibilities of action are determined by position and expertise in the management structure and parents are merely recipients of an orderly, knowing, rational system. It was expected that the explanations and procedures would be accepted by the parents and that they would cooperate and comply. Management characteristically attempts “the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior” (Bates as cited in Ball, 1990, p. 158). When some parents continued to argue, make demands, and resist the direction of the school, the director questioned what was “wrong with this community”. The opposing parents were accused of “never being satisfied”, as “always writing petitions” and of being “crazy”. The discourse of management creates the managed as fragile, prone to irrationality and emotion. Any opposition to control is seen as the problem of the individual not the system and as a symptom of personal dissatisfaction and unfulfilled needs. “Dissensus or conflict are not necessarily totally ignored in this work but are regarded, within the logic of the paradigm, as aberrant and pathological” (Ball, 1990, p. 158). In this way oppositional activity towards school systems is defined, in terms of the perspectives of the dominant group, as inherently irrational. The resister is cast as social deviant and all attempts are made towards normalization through coercive procedures.

While the use of these tactics increased the likelihood of the directors power producing it’s intended effect, it did not alter the fact that those parents still had a range of actions available to them. Foucault states that those who are subjected always have a degree of freedom (Butler, 1997). Some parents responded by choosing to leave the school as one way to resist the disciplining and sanctions they had been confronted with. The labels that had been tossed in the direction of these parents were similar to those I had been charged with in my previous school division. I too had exercised my agency and choose to leave. Somehow though, the accusations of deviance, irrationality, emotionality and fragility had not been left behind. They followed me like a shadow and I reacted any time I felt any type of normalizing techniques being sent in my direction. They were like a gaping wounct that bled every time I sensed any judgement. I had become imprisoned by them and had no idea who the jailer was, or who held the key to my release.
it was a warm fall day as the students exited the bus by the lake. As I watched the students push and shove their way down to the canoes, I questioned my sanity. In my first few weeks at this school, it’s reputation for having discipline problems had been more than lived up to. Every day on recess supervision I broke up at least one physical altercation and was beginning to feel like a police officer instead of a teacher. While I had managed to get to a place where the classroom was not filled with physical violence or name calling it was definitely not filtering out into the school community when I left the room. Desperate for some solutions, I began taking these students out of the school and on to the earth. I had always found that some of the most disengaged, violent, angry children appeared differently when they were in nature. I was in a school set in a resort community, two blocks away from a lake, hills and grasslands. The core of school grounds, although barren of any vegetation but the six trees at the front of the school, gave plenty of space to roam but not much interest. So we went for nature walks on the path along the lake, studied ecosystems under logs in the brush field across the highway, and collected soil samples in the hills. On each of these outings a crisis would take place; an argument over supplies, a dislike of a group member that would erupt into name calling and pushing, someone getting to the top of a hill first that would result in several students pushing to be first instead. So today after several weeks of preparation, despite my misgivings, we were going out in the canoes.

it was a calm day and the water was like glass as we entered the canoes under the direction of the community’s recreation coordinator. The afternoon began well, canoes string out in a line of six, one behind the other. Lots of laughter and comments on the world we were immersed in could be heard as we made our way along the lake shore. We stopped to watch a beaver passing, marvelled at the geese flying in formation overhead who later slid in for a stop along the water surface. We had spent class time studying this lake ecosystem and looking under the microscope at the water that was held in several smelly terrariums along the shelf at the back of our room. Now that they could touch with all their senses what they had studied, they were the most interested and engaged I had seen them. I began to hope that perhaps time immersed in nature was what this group needed. But as can happen on an idyllic day on the water, as we began to turn around and make our way back the wind came up, hard and fast. Clouds were building in the west and while the storm was a long way out, the waves on the lake broke the calmness of the afternoon in more ways than one. Most of the kids dug in and paddled hard, with the inexperienced students at the stern doing their best to stay on course. But one canoe, led by one of the most volatile and fragile members of our class, got into trouble. I could see his blond head thrashing frantically from side to side as their canoe veered off course and began heading in to shore. The waves were catching the canoe broadside and the two other kids in the canoe started paddling, grabbed the sides of the canoe and began yelling. I headed back to where they were struggling and could see the recreation leader reaching their canoe ahead of me. He was trying to calmly talk to the kids in the canoe and give some direction to the boy in the stern who was yelling back at him. Suddenly with no warning, the boy leapt out of the back of the canoe, abandoning ship in the shallow water, and walked into the shore. As I caught up with the canoe and tied it on to the back of mine for a tow, the recreation director followed the boy along the shore from his canoe and tried to talk to him. He was running away from the bus and away from where we were to dock. I knew I had to get the rest of the kids back to school for the end of the day and watched in frustration as this boy ran in his soaked runners and dripping life jacket away from us all. As I got the kids out of the canoes, loaded up the gear and got everyone on the bus I could see the faint outline down the shore of the canoe paddling alongside the angry, enraged, swearing kid. I felt like swearing myself as we headed back to the school. I had to admit that connecting these students with nature was not having the effects that I had hoped. Something about how these children were being treated by institutionalized education was causing a deep resistance that I did not understand. I suspected that somehow the domination of children, which occurs in most classrooms and schools and the domination of nature were intertwined. After my own experience of being disciplined in my last school division I felt empathy for these angry children and desperate for a way to fix the situation for us all.
The roots of discipline

As an educator I have always believed that it is critical to provide young people with “the experience of being in natural places, of feeling the earth as it is without human alteration” (Hart, Jickling & Kool, 1999, p. 105). Louv (2011) is adamant that “a reconnection to the natural world is fundamental to human health, well-being, spirit and survival” (p. 3). However, as Gruenwald (2004) reminds us, when environmental education is institutionalized within general education it often neglects related social discourses it is enmeshed within. Environmental education can not and does not exist in isolation from the systemic disciplining and normalizing control that schools exert upon children. Leaving the institutional environment for brief reprieves in nature does not alter the fact that the schools are engaged in normalizing behavior, which students (and teachers) often resist. Institutional education, with its specific mechanisms of power and specific uses of knowledge, is an expression of several root metaphors of modernism. Teachers are rarely aware of the deep metaphorical constructions that underlie modern consciousness and that are passed on through the curriculum and the “management” of the people within the walls of every school. According to Bowers (2000, 2004) our cultural practices stem from and are perpetuated by “root metaphors” or “meta-schema” that are encoded into the language and thinking of that society. It is very difficult to deconstruct the texts and discover the root metaphors of Western culture and how they affect our ontological and epistemological understandings. These root metaphors are deeply embedded in language and allow for the conceptualization of some relationships while hiding others. From a Foucauldian perspective, these root metaphors persist within a society because the discourses that perpetuate them circulate everywhere in a culture and are embedded in our thoughts. These root metaphors and our language, thoughts and actions that flow from them produce “real, material structures—categories, binaries, hierarchies, grids of intelligibility based on essences— that reward identity and punish difference” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 484).

The “core expressions of culture in Western, industrialized countries are based on the root metaphors of anthropocentrism, individualism, and progress (as well as derivations of these)” (Gruenwald, 2004, p. 86). These meta-cognitive schemata frame how relationships and processes are understood, while excluding other ways of understanding (Bowers, 2004). Plumwood (1993) sees anthropocentrism and androcentrism as the main root metaphors responsible for creating conditions for oppression of nature, women, and marginalized populations including children. “The logic of domination and its oppressive conceptual frameworks have created a situation where women, non-European races, children, the elderly and nature are considered inferior, available for exploitation, and in need of management and care” (Harvester & Blenkinsop, 2010, p. 124). When nature (or children and teachers) are constructed this way, they become seen as lacking in agency, and can then be systematically omitted from consideration in decision-making (Plumwood, 1996). Their discourses are then framed as low-status, containing marginalized knowledge and are generally not permitted to influence how social and educational issues are framed. Certain voices and perspectives become disqualified, and it becomes difficult to think and act outside of these discourses that are built upon these root metaphors. Root metaphors and the discourses that perpetuate them are productive and work in very material ways through institutions to construct realities that control both the actions and the bodies of people (St. Pierre, 2000). “These deep, taken-for-granted interpretive frameworks also encode the moral templates that serve to normalized behavior— even when it contributes to the destruction of ecosystems” (Bowers, 2004, p. 224) and oppresses and damages children. St. Pierre (2000) reminds us that while “we construct the world as it is through language and cultural practices, “the way it is” is not “natural”” (p. 483). All root metaphors and discourses can be questioned. We need to question how certain conceptions and practices of “discipline” or “classroom management” came to be normalized within schools, and which root metaphors and discourses underlie and perpetuate them.
Developing voice

The room became very still and quiet as the teacher told her story of the disciplining she had received as she had engaged her class in an ecological study of the river which ran through her town. She shared that she had been doing this for many years with her biology classes, and each year had become more concerned with what they were finding. This year when she had made the results public she had been silenced. Her voice wavered as she described being brought in by her school administration and told to stop testing the water every year with her class and to definitely stop talking publicly about what they were finding. The town was not seeing her actions favourably and she was reminded that it was important that the school have good relationships with their community. The school division felt she could meet her curricular objectives in another way and she was to do that immediately. Anger and bitterness echoed in her voice as she shared her experiences as an educator enacting environmentalism that challenged the economic, social and political aspects of an ecological problem within the place she lived and worked.

I looked around the room filled with mainly male science educators and wondered how they were going to react to this telling. This was a very different story than the valorized tales we had been hearing so far about enacting environmental education in schools. The environmental educators who had been invited to this public consultation process by the Federal Environment Ministry had so far shared and celebrated many examples of the “good work” being done in schools by environmental and science educators. This telling was challenging the discourse of environmental education as it was being told in this room and an uncomfortable silence fell when she finished speaking. Perhaps the discomfort was due to the content of her story, or perhaps that it was because she became emotional, or maybe even that she was a woman speaking this story. Many quickly responded that this example only supported the need for the framework the Federal Government was proposing. They stated that connecting environmental education and sustainability would be a good thing for all of us who were engaging environmental discourses in schools and would give us the support and legitimacy we were lacking. Many of the educators agreed saying that with this framework of education for sustainable development in place teachers would be supported in engaging environmental education practices in their schools and experiences like hers would no longer happen.

I had remained silent as this public consultation process had carried on, unsure and somewhat suspicious of government’s sudden interest in environmental educators and what we had to say. I was uncomfortable with how easily environmental education and education for sustainable development were being woven into a single discourse in this process. However, when this idea that the disciplining of teachers enacting a political, radical environmental education, such as had just been shared, would all stop because a government framework for sustainable development was in place I knew I had to break the silence I was keeping. I knew from experience that environmental education was completely tangled with discourses of power, “truth” and “common sense” ideas of learning. I personally wept the tears of trying to enact environmental discourses that challenged these stories of humanism. So I shared my story of walking the path of environmental education that had taken me well beyond the planting of gardens, researching extinct species, or measuring pollution in snow samples of my previous experiences “doing” environmental education in schools. As I told of my experiences of getting caught up in the force of radical environmental ethics I could feel all of the emotions of that time surging to the surface. I spoke of the joy I felt at becoming re-connected with the land and the deep love that had grown in the many relationships that had formed in the community. I told of the sense of empowerment felt by many in the community who finally had a voice and were heard; the young female students who joined the steering committee, the elderly woman who had gardened for years across the street, the young girl who had spent her life sitting silently in a wheelchair in our school. I spoke of how much I had loved being able to step outside of the box of school administration and its rules as I worked in consensus with the community, put my hands in the dirt with children, and re-imagined school with teachers. I also spoke of the silencing I had received, the disciplining forces that had risen to crush the project, and the pain that so many had felt. As the tears that I had been fighting back began to run down my embarrassed face I looked to the woman who was there representing the government and told her that doing “real” environmental work, radical deep work, life changing work, was dangerous because of what it was challenging, what it was speaking, and who was speaking it. I cautioned that asking teachers to enact environmental education in schools was dangerous business and I did not see how a government framework was going to change that. She kindly responded that she would love to talk to me more about this after and I could sense the discomfort and embarrassment she was obviously feeling spread around the room. This was a scientific, logical, rational discussion about environmental education and sustainable development. The women’s stories that had been shared spoke in a different voice that could not and should not be heard.
Sustaining metaphors

The root metaphors of androcentrism and anthropocentrism have become intricately interwoven and interconnected within the history of the Western world. Pálsson (1996) writes that throughout human history and into medieval times people saw themselves as an integral part of the world. Their interrelation with nature was so thorough that they could not look at it from without, but only from inside of it. Humanity was a microcosm within the macrocosm, integrated into the world outside “each different part of him being united to a different part of it by some invisible thread” (Barfield in Bordo, 1986, p. 442). Bordo (1986) writes that “[i]t seems clear that for the medieval ascetic and philosophical imagination, the categories of self and world, inner and outer, human and natural were not as rigorously opposed as they came to be during the Cartesian era” (p. 446). This view shifted significantly during the Middle ages, as the Western ecclesiastical establishment began to have a great intellectual and spiritual impact upon how nature and women began to be viewed. The biblical tradition began with a creation narrative wherein the Earth Mother of Eastern Mediterranean was abandoned in favor of the transcendent Heaven Father. The natural world was no longer the locus for the meeting of the divine and the human (Berry, 1988). A subtle aversion to the natural world began, a sense that humans do not really belong to the earthly community of life, but rather to one in heaven. “Religion told us that the earth was a corrupt place, that our true home was heaven, that sensual feeling was not to be trusted and could lead us to hell and damnation... our own senses could not be trusted and that therefore we must bow to scripture and the authority of the priest” (Griffin, 1989, p. 9).

This systematic fragmenting of the medieval world and the “othering” of nature it entailed took more formal shape in the Renaissance period, during which the whole Western attitude towards the environment, knowledge and learning was transformed (Pálsson, 1996). Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century power began to shift from church to state, and the authority for knowledge from priest to scientist. Griffin writes that although power now took on a new guise and a new language, several essences of the paradigm of the Christian tradition remained as Cartesian thought emerged and the scientific revolution began. Descartes separation of the knower from the known and the Cartesian re-fashioning of the ontological orders of human and natural in two distinct substances, corporeal and spiritual, made possible the complete intellectual transcendence from the body and utter detachment and dislocation of the natural world from the realm of the human (Bordo, 1986). Nature (she) then became “it” which could be understood and controlled; this otherness of nature was what now allowed it to be known (Pálsson, 1996). Anything that remained of the image of an organic cosmos with a living female Earth as its center gave way to a mechanistic view in which nature was reconstructed as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans (Merchant, 1990).

Armed with the newfound gods of imperial science and rationalism, Western society set out to tame the unruly, unpredictable female universe and Nature. The Cartesian masculinization of thought (Bordo, 1986), which resulted in “the masculine mind discarding parts of its own substance, calling it Eve, ‘female’ and ‘inferior’” (Hilman, 1972, p. 250) transformed those who had become symbols of Nature in society into objects of degradation. The otherness of the female, with her strange rhythms and mysterious powers that are evocative of the chaotic and mysterious rhythms of Nature, needed to be brought under forceful control. “The mystery of the female, however, could not be bent to man’s control simply through philosophical means, more direct and concrete means of “neutralization” were required for that project” (Bordo, 1986, p. 455). The desire to dispose society of all irrational and magical thought which was now connected with the female and the obsession to bring the untamed natural power of female generativity under forceful cultural control “led to the Inquisition and the witch burnings” (Griffin, 1989, p. 8) and “the male takeover of the processes of reproduction and birth” (Bordo, 1986, p. 455). Women were now socially constructed and intricately entwined with nature as “other”, as less than; divided “along an invisible borderland between what we call Nature and what we believe is superior to Nature” (Griffin, 1989, p. 8). This construction of Nature and women as inferior allowed for the control, management, development, care, subordination, disciplining, suppression, use, and exploitation of the raw material of both. Disregard and denigration of the earth became analogous to the denigration of women’s bodies (Merchant, 1990). These roots of anthropocentric and androcentric thought were buried deep within the consciousness of Western culture; so deep as to be sustained as “natural” and “common sense” for hundreds of years.
It was an exciting day for our entire staff as we came together to meet with a woman who had a different vision and perspective about children and school discipline. A member of our staff had attended a workshop and came back completely excited by what she had heard. She told all of us at our last staff meeting that she truly believed these ideas could provide significant support for the struggles we were engaged in every day regarding student behavior. The school division had granted our school an extra day of inservice so that we could have this workshop as they knew the community and school were still in a volatile position regarding student behavior.

The most powerful part of the day for many of us was the experience of examining our paradigms regarding student behavior or what was often called misbehavior. We explored the current views and techniques that were used for managing children that were all based on external motivations. We all could agree that our efforts to reinforce children’s appropriate behavior extrinsically and to control their misbehavior externally through rewards, consequences or punishment did not work for very long. Then we examined the positions of control that teachers manage from. We were told that in the first four positions, punisher, guilter, buddy and monitor the teacher is trying to be in control over student behavior, in the fifth choice, the manager, the teacher used practices which were to lead to student self-discipline. When we examined the different roles, I could see myself at different times in my career or even different times of day as being in any and all of these positions.

What this process made me reflect upon was the effect that those positions were having upon children, humiliating, shaming and moralizing was creating fear, dependency, compliance and conformity. I recognized that all of the disciplining techniques that I disliked being applied to me and that I resisted and rebelled against, I was doing to students. I had always thought that my checks marks on the chalk board were in some ways less harmful than the strap, but now I wasn’t sure. This discipline model appeared to be offering a new position, a new way to see children and behavior, a move away from negative and positive control to encouraging children towards self-control. I liked the idea of creating shared beliefs with students, strengthening them rather than harming them when they made mistakes. I wanted to learn how to move away from being an authoritative teacher. I really agreed that no matter what I tried, I truly could not make a child behave or learn. I was just not sure and I was really seeing that at this school. Kids would risk and resist detention, bribes, interesting lessons, visits to the principal, suspension, phoning parents; all of the variety of sanctions we could invoke were not changing behavior in the ways we wanted, but were in fact creating more resistance, student violence and withdrawal.

This approach appeared to offer me the opportunity to be different kind of teacher and to truly examine what I thought my job was. We discussed together at length if it was truly our job to motivate students. Was it perhaps our job to provide a safe non-judgmental environment where students could choose to motivate themselves. We questioned whose job it was to learn and if it was truly our job to make our students learn. We could see the possibility that it was only our job to create the conditions for learning and it was up to the students to choose to learn or not. We wondered if it was our job to make kids follow the rules or to create shared beliefs that we all agreed to then students would clearly know what would happen if they did not keep their commitment to the group. Perhaps this could move kids away from spending so much energy figuring out how to comply, negotiate, manipulate or explode to get what they want and maybe it could move us into a different place as teachers. We wondered if we could move students and teachers so immersed in our socialization of positive reinforcement or negative punishment towards internal motivation and evaluation. We envisioned that we could stop controlling students and instead help them build a strong internal locus of control. Perhaps we could help all of us move from a failure identity and move us from sanctioning coercion of children in our society. I could see that in many ways we were abusing children with our discipline and attempts to control and coerce them. We were the bullies in many ways. This whole process challenged our view of children, forcing us to question if it is okay for adults to abuse children through school discipline. We had to ask if we believed children have fewer rights than the rest of society; if they were mere objects to be disciplined and controlled. Our positions as teachers were shaken by this day and a process of questioning what schools and society held as “normal” and just good “common sense” regarding discipline was begun.
Frightening morality

The root metaphors of humanism lurk below the surface of discourses of discipline and classroom management in the themes of autonomy, progress, the utopian quest for freedom of the individual and the possibility of controlling knowledge of the social world (St. Pierre, 2000). The regulation of bodies has historically been a primary focus of the project of humanism and its modes of education (Kelly, 1997, p. 31). A range of social practices has been and continues to be the means for accomplishing this. Discipline practices constructed as discourses of humanism “revolve[…] around opposing ideas of students freedom/autonomy versus teachers dominance/control that construct[…] an axis between maximum freedom and maximum control according to the ‘personal power’ the teacher exerts and the ‘personal power’ the students have” (Porter as cited in Millei, 2010, p. 13). In this continuum of positions of control, teachers as sovereign power in the classroom using corporeal punishment is set as the position where students have the least freedom and teachers the most control. This punitive end of the axis is set as the least desirable and the most negative and repressive with corporeal punishment being the most damaging “for it left its mark” (Gossen, 1996, p. 29).

In medieval times when sovereign power ruled, torture was a public spectacle of control and discipline where offenders were amputated, dismembered, “symbolically branded on face or shoulder, exposed alive or dead to public view” (Foucault, 1979, p. 8). This physical punishment was in Foucault’s terms, “an art of unbearable sensations” (p. 8). The sovereigns ability to punish was linked to the acceptance of the people of the time of the sovereigns ability to wage war “Both address enemies of the state” (Balser, 2011, p. 3). However, “by the end of the eighteenth and middle of nineteenth century, the gloomy festival of punishment was dying out, though here and there it flailed momentarily to life” (ibid). There was shift in relations from sovereign power to a theme of governance of the self, children, family and state (Marshall, 1990). Discipline during the early nineteenth century now “had an explicit social function: the establishment of religious authority and the development of moral beings”(Tavara, 1996, p. 196). Behavior and its treatment when deemed deviant was often tied to religious authority and deemed solvable only through religious injunctions. This became mirrored in the establishment of the first urban schools at the time. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, philanthropic evangelists, the established church, utopian socialists, and utilitarian radicals expressed from differing perspectives their concern about the moral and intellectual condition of the urban poor. These concerns mobilized a strategy of schooling to normalize and regulate the “nomadic, dissolute degenerate and marginal population of the urban slum” (Jones, 1990, p. 57). In these schools pupils and the school environment were controlled in order to achieve an “unmediated identification of religious authority with school morality” (Tavares, 1996, p. 192). The student was to be gently shaped in a gently caring institution, the school (Marshall, 1990).

Mid-nineteenth century Europe influenced by Cartesian thought and the scientific revolution soon deemed education too important to be left to the voluntary religious bodies and government began to see schools as the “machinery through which it could scientifically inculcate habits of morality” (Jones, 1990, p. 58). Morality and “an economy of the body” were both necessary in the emerging schools for the control of children to ensure a docile and useful workforce for the demands of an emerging capitalism (Marshall, 1990). This focus on morality led to educational science rejecting corporeal punishment not from “a progressive humanitarian sensitivity to physical suffering, but because the feelings had to be educated to respond to rituals of humiliation” (Jones, 1990, p. 64). The transformation of the child into an ethical subject responsive to shame was necessary for the construction of “docile bodies” ready for the workforce. However, lack of support by parents and students for the moral paradigm, the quick turnaround of schoolmasters who resisted the constant surveillance of their morality, and schoolteachers inevitably being unable to fulfill the expected model of humility in practice, led to moral training being imposed “not scientifically through a model machinery, but through the institution of a regime of corporal punishment” (Jones, 1990, p. 67). The pupil’s body became the direct recipient of punishment and pain. The teacher or schoolmaster was the administrator of punishment and the birch rod and cane the instruments (Tavares, 1996). Along with corporeal punishment, other forms of actions were used such as wearing dunce caps, seating pupils on a dunce block, gagging (for whispering), pulling hair, twisting ears, calling names, dressing boys in girls’ clothes or placing children in ridiculous and undignified positions (Morehouse as cited in Tavares, 1996, p. 193). The relationship between the teacher, head master, and pupil during this time was made explicit through direct injunctions which were mainly physical. It was not until after the Second World War, in reaction to the severe human rights violations that occurred, that movements to make physical coercion illegal in most Western schools appeared. New technologies of discipline emerged that were perceived to be more humane and imagined to free the students from the dominance of the teacher.
Deep woman time

I saw the figure of a woman, ancient, frightening but familiar. She was standing on a hill, sun and moon in the sky, found green earth below. Arms outstretched, feet bare, hair flowing in the breeze, her arms were outstretched and heart wide open. I could not see her face but I could feel her, deep within my chest. She was strong, solid, grounded, powerful. She stood overlooking the earth, eyes all seeing, all knowing, loving all. She was earthy, wild, unaffected and unmade up; feet not confined to tight high heels and breasts free from brass that cage and deform. She was free, unfettered, and uncaged. I could taste on the wind her strong life force; a life giving energy that carried medicine, healing...a salve for the constant longing. The distant drum was beating in the air and in my heart an old memory began to stir, calling to me...remembrances of hazy dreams, long ago stories of the far-seer, the deep listener...source of light and dark, night and daybreak.

She was disruptive in all her strength and power. She was so much my opposite that it may me feel small, and petty, that all the things I had strived for were little and meaningless. Her calling brought up fears...fears of being alone, not being loved for who I am, not being liked or accepted, never healing...fear of change, fear that if I could ever finally find myself, my purpose, my place...fears that I wouldn’t have the courage to make it really happen. I would be too afraid to take the risks to find my purpose, to set out into the wilds to find her...find myself. I was bereft at the idea that I would never move out of the present safe place I was occupying; complying so I wouldn’t be exiled, and yet knowing I was exiled from myself. I felt powerless and she was power-filled...where had my inner power gone? I resented her strength, who was she? A part of me felt agitated and filled with a longing to drop everything, kick off the chains that held me and run off into the woods, forsaking everything to find her, touch her, just see her face. I could hear a mournful song, the keening of my starved soul, waiting...always waiting...by the mystic cookfire.

My attention was pulled away from the woman on the hill by a deep stirring within me. I looked down and there curled beneath my ribs, close to my heart, was a small starved, sickly being. I felt physically ill and disgusted but could not look away. It slowly lifted its head and stared up at me as waves of nausea rolled and I was overcome with fear and aversion. Tentatively, staring deeply into my eyes, it unfurled itself from within me and crawled upon my lap. It gazed at me imploringly and despite all the sickness this being made me feel, I knew that somehow it was a part of me. Looking upon the emaciated face and starved body I felt a distant sense of recognition. Slowly I reached my arms around it and held it gently, rocking, singing a long-forgotten song of the wild-one, the goddess, the ‘other’...waiting in the far woods at the edge of the world...at the end of time...calling softly for me...it was time.
"The memory is of our absolute, undeniable, and irrevocable kinship with the wild feminine, a relationship which may have become ghostly from neglect, buried by over-domestication, outlawed by the surrounding culture, or no longer understood anymore. We may have forgotten her names, we may not answer when she calls ours, but in our bones we know her, we yearn toward her; we know she belongs to us and we to her."

Estes, 1992, p. 5

**Woman in-between**

The Western world is and always has been caught up in an “endless series of hierarchial binary oppositions that always in the end come back to the fundamental “couple” of the male/female (Moi, 1987, p. 104). The male/female division creates dualistic pairs set in binary opposition to each other where the “feminine” side is always seen as the negative and as powerless: “activity/passivity; sun/moon; culture/nature; day/night; father/mother; head/emotions; intelligible/sensitive; logos/pathos” (Cixous, 1986, p. 63). Liberal feminism occupied a signifying space which represented the desire by women for access to the male symbolic order (Kristeva as cited in Davies, 2000, p. 38-39). In this first space many women found that in order to enter the patriarchal domain of power and to be taken “seriously”, they had to don the persona of a “pseudo-male” (Campbell as cited in Murdock, 1990, p. 1). This often required that women reject, consciously or unconsciously, the feminine side of the binary in order to break through the glass ceiling and play in the “boys club”. Radical feminism offered a critique of the celebration and equation of masculinity and rationality and confirmed for women “her sense of self as one who is embodied, whose emotions, desires, feelings are as legitimate a part of “reason” as the much-valued rationality she has supposedly lacked” (Davies, 2000, p. 48). In this second signifying space this involves a desire for separation from the male symbolic order and a reclaiming and reconstruction of the “lesser” side of these constructed binaries as of value.

As someone who was constructed during emergence of Liberal feminism in the West, I grew up immersed in the cries of “I am woman hear me roar”, “equal pay for equal work”, and my mothers strong admonition that I needed to get an educator and get a “good job” so I would never be dependent upon any man. These discourses had convinced me I could do anything any man could if I wanted it bad enough. I was proud of the fact I could swear as well or better than any of the male teacher on my staff, and was just as able to break up a fist fight in the school yard as any of them. I was never conscious that a part of me was buried, starved and emaciated until this knocking came to the door of the deep female psyche within me. Woolger & Woolger (1989) write that this reawakening of the feminine can cause a profound upheaval within the consciousness of women. Murdock (1990) finds that women have a quest at this time in our culture to fully embrace their feminine nature and learn how to value themselves as women in order to heal the deep wound of the feminine. For some this healing and reconstruction has involved a reclaiming of aspects of the forgotten feminine banished many centuries ago by searching the “pre-patriarchal symbol systems for the goddess in pre-patriarchal history, hoping to find historical remnants of a worldview that does reflect women’s consciousness” (Wehr, 1987, p. 23). Our unconscious mind may draw upon images such as “Sophia as earth-cave-moon... dark interior female wisdom (Wilshire in Davies, 2000, p. 51), “Wild Woman” (Estes, 1992), or “Great Mother, who of old was called Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Ceridwen, Diana, Arinrhod, Brigid, and by many other names” (Starhawk, 1999, p. 102).

According to Jungian theory these images are archetypes; “the ultimate sources of those emotional patterns in our thinking, our feelings, our instincts and our behaviors that we might call “feminine” in the broader sense of the word: creative, inspirational thinking, nurturing, mothering and gestating, all passion, desire and sexuality, all urges towards connectedness, social cohesion, union and communion, all merging and fusion as well as impulses to absorb, to destroy, to reproduce, and to replicate belong to the universal archetype of the feminine” (Woolger & Woolger, 1989, p. 7). Wehr (1987) writes that although Jung’s symbols have been criticized for having come from the androcentric nature of the prevailing symbol systems of his time the “value in what he called the “feminine” has pointed to what is lacking, undervalued, misunderstood and feared in the Western world” (p. 125). However, archetypes do not transcend culture (Pearson, 1986). Wehr (1987) reflects that while psychological forces including prerational images and mythical themes do shape society, “at the same time, social structures already in existence at the time of each individual’s coming into the world exert great influence in shaping the individual personality” (p. 18). Just as women may be unaware of the powerful effects that cultural stereotypes have on them, “they may also be unconscious of powerful forces within them that influence what they do and how they feel” (Bolen, 1984, p. 1). Archetypal images need to be grounded in their social context as society and the individual psyche are always in dialectical relationship with one another. The Jungian perspective gives the understanding of how women are influenced by powerful inner forces, or archetypes and the feminist perspective gives an understanding of how the root metaphors of Modern Western culture “reinforce some goddess patterns and repress others” (Bolen, 1984, p.4).
Giving voice to a new language

I stood in the hallway with the four students who had been in an altercation at recess. Now was the time to put into practice what I had been learning about this different approach to discipline. Instead of telling them what I saw, blaming, doling out consequences, and all of us leaving as angry as we came together, if not more so, I began to approach this differently. I led them from the hall into the empty library and we all sat around the table. I started by saying that we are all human and we all at times make mistakes. When some of the students reacted by angrily stating that ‘they’ hadn’t been the one to make a mistake, I stopped them and said we were not about blame here, we were here to let everyone have a voice and a part in fixing this relationship. I could feel everyone calm down, and one at a time they began to tell their perspective of what happened. Sometimes in this retelling another student would get heated, angry, and interrupt to tell his version. I reminded them that everyone would get a chance to talk until they all felt they had been heard.

We were all new at this, and it felt a bit awkward to all of us. I had, pulled the bright yellow index card filled with this new language out of my black pocket. It carried with me everywhere now to reference when I got stuck or forgot where I was going with this process. Very quickly when the students realized no one was punishing them, blaming them, or accusing them they began to really talk to each other and try to explain their perspective. There was no need for me to do much. They could see with a bit of support from me how they could fit the situation for the future in the football games at recess, where there could be compromise on all parts. Some still wanted me to harm or punish the student who had lost control but I asked them about what would solve. Did they want the relationship repaired and the problem solved or did they want to hurt someone because they had screwed up. We went back to our shared beliefs that we had recently created together where we had all agreed it was okay to make a mistake. I reminded them that when we had talked about what my role was now in the class that they did not want me to hurt them, humiliate or embarrass them but help them to learn another way to deal with the situation. We all agreed that our behavior, our actions were something we could learn and become stronger at, just like math or basketball. I asked them to think about what kind of a person they wanted to be, in this situation and in life.

We also talked about how we wanted to all leave the situation feeling like we had a plan that we could all live with and that strengthened rather than weakened everyone involved. Some of them wanted to know what I would do if someone didn’t follow this plan, didn’t stick to what they had agreed to. I suggested they not worry about that unless it happened. To me it said that someone had more to learn than the rest who were able to make it work, that was all. There were no bad people here, no bullies, no one to fight against or to make war on. We were all just people trying to get our needs met in the best ways we knew how, doing what had always worked for us. Now we were learning other ways to be that allowed everyone to get their needs met, not just us. As we all got up to return to class I looked up at the clock, ten minutes this time, not the half hour of a few weeks ago. My sincere hope was that soon they would be able to do this without me but we weren’t there yet. I wanted these to be tools they could use for life, not just for school or to make me happy. The best part was I was done, there were no checklists to follow, no principal to speak to, no detention to supervise and no parents to call. There were also no referrals forms to fill out, testing to be done, psychologist to see, and labels to be applied. Several of these students had already been assessed and diagnosed with one of the many educational syndromes that psychology has coined: ADD, ADHD, Conduct Disorder, Impulse Control, Oppositional Defiance Disorder and the list went on. Unfortunately these labels were often substituted for the child themselves, claiming their identity and usually offering little supports except more methods of control: medication, rewards and punishments or suspension. Nothing learned, nothing changed, no one healed or strengthened. The students that walked ahead of me into the classroom appeared calmer, more capable, and more confident. They had been heard, they had been able to think, they had been able to solve things. Things were healed and strengthened, not beaten into submission. More and more often this approach to working with students seemed to be resulting in some changes. Conflicts that used to result in violence were now being solved differently. They had been very angry with each other and one student had gotten physical, but the rest had walked away and had come to me for help. That was a huge change from a few weeks ago. This new language seemed to be giving us all new voices with which to speak to each other.
Behavioral science speaks

The late nineteenth century witnessed a move from the violent exercise of power of the sovereign upon the body of the subject to regulation through governing practices. Foucault (1979) states that the punishment-body relation is not the same as it was in the torture during public executions as “[t]he body now serves as an instrument or intermediary” (p. 11). Peoples abilities and knowledge about themselves came to be more ‘gently’ shaped through these new governing techniques (Marshall, 1990). To “govern” in this way is to designate the way in which the concort of individuals or groups might be directed and to shift the focus from the individual body to various forms of social organization which depend on the classification of the individual. By the late nineteenth century the “human sciences” of psychology, philosophy and sociology produced systems of classification that defined subjects. “People became the objects of scientific knowledge and vast knowledge and discourses were produced talking about and with these subjects” (Millei, 2010, p. 18). The human sciences of clinical medicine, psychology and psychiatry “played an important part in the creation of disciplined subjects, that is, individuals who conformed to certain standards of sanity, health, docility, competence and so on” (Jones, 1990, p. 98). Scientific knowledge was now developed about people; their behaviors, attitudes and self-knowledge. These were all developed, refined, and used to shape individuals. Marshall (1990) comments that “[t]hese discourses and practices have not only been used to change us in various ways but are also used to legitimate such changes, as the knowledge gained is deemed to be true” (p. 15). This knowledge is developed through the exercise of power and used in turn to legitimate further exercises of power, which Foucault called power-knowledge (Foucault 1980). Institutions who exercise this power are disciplinary institutions, one of the most significant of which became the school. In schools the difference between discipline of the early nineteenth century and the classroom management techniques that later developed from the human sciences were characterized as a difference between the barbaric and the humane or progressive (Tavaris, 1996).

The psychological sciences, characterized not only by belief in the knowability of the social world but also by belief in its management, with “this commitment to the calculability of human conduct became the new authority; its power laid in its ability to name, classify, and therefore manage” (Tavaris, 1996, p. 195). This new field of knowledge provided educators with a language to talk about behaviors as well as procedures to diagnose and prescribe solutions for the behavior being discussed” (Millei, 2010, p. 18). This language developed within a medically oriented discourse, where deviance was defined as a symptom tied to a deeper mental disorder or illness. “The notion that deviance is an “illness” was prevalent during the early twentieth century in the discourse on intellectual capacities” (Tavaris, 1996, p. 196). In that context deviance was often understood as the result of an organic defect of mind and perversities were seen as “natural”. Early in the twentieth century, experimental laboratories on intelligence testing began having an impact upon the discourses of psychology. Behavioral sciences and the therapeutic programs that evolved during this time reinforced a reliance on scientific inquiry while also radically altering the way in which conduct was to be conceptualized and managed. With the advent of behavior therapy and behavior modification discourses, students all became viewed as potential social deviants who must be managed.

Disciplinary power and the power that scientific knowledges wield become normalizing, impacting upon an individual’s body and behavior. It makes the individual regulate her own conduct, “it creates new comportments of the body and individuals, it produces novel aptitudes, it increases the individuals performance and multiplies its capacities in order to increase ones utility” (Foucault as cited in Millei, 2010, p. 18). Schooling then emerges as a type of administrative-pastoral institution, concerned with the management of the population of the school as a collection of individuals who can now, because of the human sciences, be described by particular characteristics or classifications. “Classifications and conceptual terms such as social deviant, motivation, behavior, and effective instruction, all part of the dominant language idioms in education, are inherited from the psychological and behavior sciences” (Tavaris, 1996, p. 198). These psychological discourses mask who the disciplining agents are, teacher, principal, or school division administration, by employing classifications and categories that appear to be professional, derived from the measuring devises from which these terms are associated. The knowledge and power of such scientific discourses and their normalizing techniques function in our society to turn all individual human beings into objects that exist, act or are knowable only in relation to the rules laid down by this power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Jardine (2005) notes that when students do not comply with the rules and demands of the system “it is rarely the schools themselves that are put into question. Rather, students become assessed and diagnosed with one of the many educational syndromes and labels that psychology has coined” (p. 3). Teachers and administrators, who are also caught within the normalizing impacts of these power-knowledge webs that these scientific discourses weave, often substitute these labels for the far more difficult and intimate task of allowing the child to speak.
Ancient voices

The snow crunched under my boots as I made my way along the path towards my space in the hills. I had come here many times since I had found this place from my visions. It had become a sacred place, a place where I connected with the Earth in a way I had not ever before. As I sat upon the ground in this place through the seasons I had begun to sense an inner rhythm I had been disconnected from. The rhythm of the wind, of the seasons, of the animals, the grass, the plants and the water. I had learned to quiet my busy, thinking mind and to hear the sounds of the Earth, see the signs that were present in nature, hear the hum of insects, calls of the gulls, howls of the coyotes. Recently I had begun to hear nudgings, knowings, impulses and intuitions. I had begun to interact with this space, connect with the energies here, the presence, and some old knowings began to emerge from within me.

Rocks whispered to pick them up, plants spoke lessons and healing. I began to follow these emerging impulses that seemed very ancient but new to me, stepping out of the ground and the consciousness of the land. I made a sacred prayer space on a huge flat rock surface where I could sit and see out over the lake. I placed rocks in four directions, piled them upon each other and sat for long times listening, seeing, seeing through. I often heard the whisperings from a grouping of sage, guiding me, sharing old secrets. Soon I began to perform rituals, walking in three circles around the sage, sometimes silently, sometimes chanting, singing, praying, seeking. I followed the urging to collect the sage from these sacred plants, take it home, hang it to dry and return with it. I found a small earthen bowl at home and brought it with me, filling it with the fragrant herbs. I was drawn to light the plant, breathing in its healing and then holding the bowl I would pray...to the four directions, to the sky above...the earth below...the water...the animals...the stones. Sometimes I heard or saw teachings. Animals would wander by, birds would fly overhead, old stones would speak their languages from the thick bush surrounding this space. All of these signs became pregnant with meaning. It was as if the Earth was talking to me and I was talking to the Earth. I had told no one of these experiences, and took no one with me to this sacred place. I was unsure, uncomfortable, and uneasy about these happenings.

Today under the bright winter sun I placed the earthen bowl in the branches of the western sage bush. I could see my breath as I lit some of the leaves from this plant that I had carefully dried at home. I began to pray and walk the three circles, counter clockwise, opening...shifting reality...changing energy. Then I stopped in each direction facing it, heart open, arms outstretched, waiting for the wind to shift, the energy to rise. To the east, where am I to go? What am I to do? South, let go of old hurts...West...new beginnings hope gratitude north...see two worlds...crack between...whispers you need a change. I sat to pray on the rock, the stones I had laid in the fall still in the spaces I left them...breathing in and out with the earth, feeling my roots dig deep through the snow into the core below, my open mind bringing in energy from the sky above. This ritual seemed natural, normal, a part of me, dusty but not forgotten. Finally the cold won out, my toes were numb. I walked the clockwise path around the circle, three times, hearing distant chants in my head, rhymes of old. I picked up the bowl and walked my way eastward through the deep snow, back to the world...but changed...always taking now this space with me...this knowing...this emerging connection with the Earth...the sacred Earth.
Subtle listening

It is difficult in our Western societies to relate to the land and its non-human inhabitants in the same way our ancient ancestors did (Farmer, 2009; Cowan, 1993) or as the ever-diminishing numbers of indigenous peoples do today (McGaa, 2004). Cowan (1993) reminds us that this awareness and consciousness of nature is not solely a primitive concept. "In the mystical literature of all peoples, regardless of religion or century, we find vestiges of the belief that the natural landscape is spiritually alive and that an indwelling spirit animates each living or created thing" (p. 106). We have to be awake to "these other styles of expression, these other bodies, these other shapes of sentence and sensitivity" (Abram & Jardine, 2000, p. 168).

However, it appears that as a species we have developed a strange inability to perceive nature, a real inability to see or focus upon anything beyond the realm of human speech and human technologies. Danaan (2009) notes that it is only very recently in our human history that we disconnected from the natural currents of life on our planet. In our highly technological, capitalistic culture, we have largely lost touch with the changing seasons, the sources of our food, and the living land. It is like we have developed a collective spiritual "autism" with respect to Nature (Berry, 1999) and this disconnect is like an illness for "when we divorce our conscious awareness from our roots, we become zombies" (Danaan, 2009, p. xiv).

Bai (2008) notes that in the Western world "our consciousness is dominated by the spell of the discursive, and by the time we are out of childhood and through formal schooling, most of us have largely disposed of the animated sensuous perception of the world" (p. 10). It is there that the anthropocentric beliefs that humans are one of a very few species capable of intelligent, conscious communication become ingrained in us (Plumwood, 2002; Barrett, 2009a). Through our discourses, actions, and everyday practices in our culture "the more-than-human are maintained as objects, making an animated, spirit-ed natural world difficult to conceive of" (Barrett, 2009a, np). Bigwood (1993) notes that this anthropocentric "cripple[s] our sentence to the extent that we are able to contact only ourselves and our own products" (p. 44). Cowan (2003) writes that it is in this way that "we create the Great Split between ourselves and nature, thinking we are different, or removed, or even alien to the natural world" (p. 2). An ancient relationship with plants and stones pulses in our blood like the wildness that reclaims cultivated lands and most of us know of this interconnection in our cells but we deny it in our habits of daily living. "We talk about the 'environment' as an other. Our cultured minds think of us as not-nature, not-environment, not earth" (Danaan, 2009, p. 5). Fawcett (as cited in Barrett, 2009a) suggests that "we need to decolonize our relations with other animals [and I would add non-human beings] and our ways of knowing their consciousness, in order to expand the spaces that they inhabit in our imaginations, in public environmental discourse, and decision-making" (np).

It is possible for those of us acculturated and schooled in the West to reawaken our abilities perceive the spirit or life force that animates our universe (Sams, 1999) and to reanimate our perception (Bai, 2009). Cowan (2003) feels we don't ever really lose this sense of oneness and connection with nature, but as Bai (2009) states children's native capacity for an animated consciousness is highly damaged through Western schooling processes. Abram (1996) believes that "nonhuman nature can be perceived and experienced with far more intensity and nuance than is generally acknowledged in the West" (p. 27). "The voice with which nature speaks is tactile, sensual, auditory, odoriferous, and visual-a visceral understanding communicated through our hearts into our minds" (Merchant, 2013, p. 194). When we slow down enough and tune in to our subtle senses, "we can find a whole new level of being where plants talk and stones offer us companionship" (Danaan, 2009, p. 90). We can reacquaint ourselves "with a mode of awareness that preceded and underlies the literate intellect, to a way of thinking and speaking that strives to be faithful not to the written record but to the sensuous world itself, and to the other bodies or beings that surround us" (Abram, 1996, p. 10). "Plants, animals, and spirits exist in communicative relationship with humans" (Barrett & Witherick, 2010, p. 4) and "human and non-human persons can interact in intimate physical and/or spiritual and energetic relationship" (Barrett, 2009a, np). When we begin to open ourselves to this relationship with the more-than-human world "we start to remember the things that our spirits have always known" (Sams, 1998, p. 3) as we become more attuned to the steady stream of sensory information that the natural world provides (Farmer, 2009). Nature communicates with us in each and every moment, both in form and in spirit. Our work is to reawaken our senses so that we can be guided by her promptings. McGaa (2004) believes we can "renew our connection with Mother Earth through ceremony" (p. 130) where we can truly experience and come to know that there is "no duality in all this, that on some mystical level we are the river and the setting sun, we are the clouds above the hills" (Cowan, 1993, p. 3).
Growing questions

It was a freezing cold fall day and as I began putting on my jacket to head back out onto the playground to check on the students working outside, I stopped and looked around me. Several students were at the computers creating a brochure for a grant the class wanted to apply to for their Heirloom Garden project, others were doing a science lab comparing commercial fertilizers to composted matter, several were outside installing snow fencing around their newly planted native species garden before the winter snows came, and some were reading a story about a young boy who was suffering the effects of pesticide exposure from working at a chocolate plantation in South America. I had been with this class for three years now, as the school had expanded to include grade seven and then grade eight classes I had moved on with them, we had slowly grown together in this way of integrating ecological learning into our school day. Three years ago I had attended a Climate Change workshop that was focused on supporting each attitude in developing a community action process focused on sustainability. While I felt strongly that humans did need to live sustainably on this Earth, I often wondered if my perception of what that meant and the discourses around sustainable development that were entering environmental education programs and the school curriculum were the same. I was unsure about the claims that were made at the workshop that at the root of all global crisis, including climate change, were personal, individual values that cause us to behave in environmentally destructive and selfish ways. I was uneasy that the values promoted focused on respect for humans but not the Earth. I felt suspicious of the pressure to develop a community action process that promoted values with students and community that were compatible with a healthy environment and progressive economic and social decisions. I was no longer sure these two things were compatible.

When I returned from the workshop I decided to engage my students with an inquiry process to investigate climate change but, as I was skeptical about some of the truth claims of this program, I set off on my own direction with the students. My personal experiences of connecting in a deep way with the energies of the Earth, and my past experiences with the political nature of ecological work were disrupting many of common sense beliefs and assumptions that I held. As I began to actively search and question, I took my students with me; we questioned the effects of genetic engineering on ecosystems, foods and human health and out of that a heirloom vegetable garden project evolved, we talked about herbicides and pesticides and then created a compost bin for our garden, we inquired into the non-native species on the prairies surrounding our school, stumped native grass seeds into a hill on the playground with our bare feet and then sadly watched as it was taken over by those invasive plants, and we worried about the loss of nutrients in the soil and our food and the growth of the pharmaceutical industry and then made tea from the rose hips in our garden. Action arose out of deeper understandings of the issues and our interconnectedness with these systemic concerns. As I looked at these students on this day, engaged, interested, curious and at times passionate, I realized that I didn’t care if the project was a success, looked beautiful, won any awards or was sustained after I left this school... it was the questions, the process, the engagement and the growing voice of these students that mattered.

Despite my conviction that this process needed to be honoured and the questions needed to be asked, I often felt a shadow of fear lurking, reminding me that all this could be stopped and changed in an instant. So I kept things very quiet, I didn’t tell the school division anything about the project once the initial request by the students to plant some trees and build some gardens was approved. I knew the leader of our school division’s perspective that he hired good staff and he let them have autonomy to enact curriculum in their classroom in the way they saw fit. As long as he didn’t get complaints he wouldn’t get involved, so I made sure no one had anything to complain about. I also made sure I could show anyone who asked how each of our inquiry processes were connected to the official provincial curriculum. I didn’t publicize to the community what we were doing as I was afraid it would have caused a reaction and I would have been forced to stop and to quit asking questions. I did not want to disturb the harmony of our process in any way. I believed deeply in what I was learning and teaching but I also knew that I was operating on the edge and needed to stay out of the watchful disciplining eyes of those who did not understand or support challenging and re-imagining the discourses of education.
Sustaining subjectivities

A revolutionary vision of sustainability emerged at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 which placed environmental, socioeconomic, and political problems together in one light, while demanding long-term and integrated responses to our growing planetary social and ecological problems (Gruenewald, 2004). However, what emerged at the end of this first Earth Summit was instead a discourse that promoted education, public awareness and training in environmental sustainability. This was taken up and constituted as discourse that tied sustainability, progress, and economic growth with ecology (Ortega-Cerdà, 2005). Sustainable development was being offered as a new storyline that could create and permit new forms of alliance, actions and possibilities; rearticulating the historically oppositional relationship between government and environmentalists. The root metaphors of anthropocentrism, individualism and progress (Bowers, 2002, 2004) that this sustainability framework grew out of became invisible and it was the beginning of what was to become a powerful discourse that would grow so great as “to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (Foucault, 1979, p. 201). The disciplinary power of government, supported by science, rooted in these invisible, natural, common sense metaphors would construct an even more sanitized form of environmental education which would support the goals of Western education rather than challenge them (Gruenewald, 2004). The merging of environmental learning and sustainability with progress and economic growth resulted in the use of education “as a mere method for delivering and propagating experts’ ideas about sustainable development” (Jickling & Verne in Kahn, 2010, p. 14). These ideas continued to promote an anthropocentric view of nature and to constitute nature as a social resource, but one that we would now more efficiently exploit and more carefully conserve. The discourse of sustainability that had been articulated in Rio had been stripped of its revolutionary political possibility and in its place the discourse that tied sustainability to development grew, reinforcing rather than subverting deep seated humanist assumptions about humans and nature. This discourse of sustainability cast humans “as active agents whose essence is to transform the world” (Bell & Russell, 2000, p. 192) while all of the social, economic, political, and deeper cultural aspects of climate change become invisible and nonsensical. Jayer (as cited in Livesey, 2002) explains that “[t]he Foucauldian terms, sustainable development thus represents a space of dissension and sociopolitical struggle where competing discourses of the economic and environmental paradigms are joined” (p. 316).

As I began the slow process of digging beneath many of the “truths” emerging around climate change, I was challenging the discourse of sustainable development that was being taken up by general education and many environmental educators. I knew from past experience that by disrupting some of the practices of general education and politicalizing some of the discourses of humanism that are common sense in our ways of living, thinking speaking and being in the West, I was on dangerous ground. I was not completely aware of how or why the ecological discourses that I was engaging with my students challenged the dominant discourses but based on my experiences of enacting alternative discourses in the past, I knew enough to be aware of the disciplining forces that I might experience as a result. To avoid this I hid what I was doing from the panopticon-like surveillance of the dominant educational discourse which disqualifies political questioning or perspectives and dilutes content so that questions of power and knowledge become invalid and invisible. The agency of teachers within general education, their ability to act within these spaces, is constrained by discourses and disciplinary power (Barrett, 2007; Davies, 2000; Foucault, 1979, St. Pierre, 2000). Disciplinary power has been insinuated into every facet of education; schedules, curriculum, disciplines, examinations, supervisory cycles, growth plans and so on. This not only works as an externally imposed mandate from above or outside, but from within “the very grain of individuals” (Foucault, 1979, p. 26), our own contradictory subjectivities. We all carry those stories within us of the “good” teacher, and the disruptive, uncooperative, incompetent teacher, and so we become constrained within the very discourses of humanism we are trying to change (Barrett, 2007). The privileged dominant discourses in education and society, such as the discourse of sustainable development, that constantly tell us what gets to count as legitimate knowledge, and legitimate ways of doing school, are insidious. Like noxious weeds, they wrap themselves around our being, constraining us, trapping us in our subjectivities, choking out our agency to question and enact alternative discourses. But like the few native prairie plants struggling to survive in the school garden overgrown with invasive species, something inside of me continued to struggle forth to challenge these discourses despite my tears.
Wisdom journey

I stood on the edge of the forest, protectively gripping the small sweaty hand. I could feel my pulse drumming in my neck. I felt protective of the child, we had only recently found each other again and I didn’t want to lose her or see her further damaged. However I knew that the child was meant to come on the journey, to enter the woods with me. The four women stood with me, waiting, radiating strength, kindness and compassion. Their loving faces, always watchful, always present. They knew with the old knowing it was time for me to enter the forest. This was not a journey I had to take, no one was forcing me. But I had questions that needed answering. I knew I needed a learning, a riddle to solve, and I had to go out into the forest and search. I knew that it was time to leave the world of fear which had become very empty.

The four women, the warrior, the seer, the teacher and the healer circled around me. They placed around my neck a heavy earthen vessel, a wisdom container. It was empty. This was to be a wisdom search, a healing journey, a quest into the shadowy depths. Then out of the tangled forest edge stepped a hooded one, faceless, nameless, hidden. He was to be my guide through the forest. Fear tightened in my gut and I was tempted to walk away, back into the mist... the unconscious, unseen life. But it was time to begin. I cast one last glance toward the circle of women, and heart pounding in my chest, hands tightly clasped with the child’s, I turned and stepped into the musky darkness.

As we walked through the woods I could glimpse within the tangled brambles scenes from my life, from ancient times, of far away realms, of times yet to come. But the guide did not stop... it was not the time. We walked in circles, spiraling upward, climbing a well worn path through the trees. Finally we emerged from the forest’s edge, high above the tree line on the side of the mountain. I could see up ahead, near the top of the cliff, a large cave. The guide urged me forward, and I scrambled up towards the opening with the child. As we caught our breath inside I could see a beam of light in the distance. I walked out towards the far edge of the cave and found myself standing on a ledge suspended high above the land below. I could see only clouds, a thick haze concealed everything from view. Then suddenly I heard the cry of the eagle, and looking up I met it’s piercing gaze. The clouds turned a brilliant purple, and I felt a wrenching pain in my forehead. It was as if the bones of my skull were pulling apart, opening, stretching. The pain grew in intensity, and then suddenly my vision shifted, I could see in a different way... a third way... it was as if another eye had opened within me.

I gazed out over the land and as the haze slowly lifted I could see for miles. I could hear the eagle in the distance, calling. Letting go of the child’s hand, I spread my arms and stepped off into the air. I was lifted, flying, spiralling, circling ever higher. I could see in all directions, across space and time, into and through. This was what was possible, this many eyed seeing. Freedom of clear vision awaited me at the end of this tangled forest journey I was to walk. Soon I stood once again beside the child, hands locked in solidarity. We would take this journey together, with different eyes, through ancient time, present moments, and future possibilities. I would grow this many eyed seeing, with vision animated, illuminated, and integrated and seek wisdom on this path.
Many-eyed seeing

In our childhood consciousness the world seemed like an enchanted place; we could feel the pulse of life, the heartbeat of the earth, and the throbbing mystery animating every being that surrounded us. Bai & Cohen (2007) note that “[b]abies and little children learn to see the world and inhabit a certain corresponding consciousness naturally, with little conscious effort and with utmost ease just by the fact of being immersed in the given cultural environment” (p. 39). As children we could see the world through eyes not yet dominated by dualistic seeing. Sadly, it does not take long in the Western world for children to become acculturated and educated into a mode of objectified consciousness. Our education has, for the most part, focused on developing our skills of analytical thinking and the discursive mind. Carr-Gomm (2002) writes that “[m]odern brain research shows that for most of us, our primary mode of functioning comes from the dominant cerebral hemisphere, which mediates the function of analytical thinking” (p. 61). This development of the rational intellect while a wonderful gift to humanity, has become privileged over and above intuition, feelings, emotions, aesthetics, and communion with animate Earth and Spirits. These ways of knowing and being are devalued and separated from analytic thinking and set in binary opposition, with the intuitive always on the losing end. Thus the imaginative, enchanted, animated, feeling consciousness is constructed as less than and childish. When we see the world through the frame of dualistic consciousness we fall under the spell of the discursive (Bai, 2009) and become cut off from immediate, embodied, sensuous contact with both the outer world and inner realities. We give way to the Rationalist inside of us and stop trusting feelings, insights, intuitions and inner wisdom as these were often aspects of ourselves that were ridiculed during childhood. We come to believe that our consciousness rich in empathic emotions is childish and that the feeling way of life wounds us easily (Bai, 2009). Our intuition, poetry, imagination, and ‘arty’ stuff is infantilized and our rational mind gains dominance. Soon we are surrounded by fear and insecurity at the thought of dismantling the safe, rational, world in which we have become cocooned and constricted (Simpson, 1999).

We perceive the way we do because it has been normalized in us and we must take a journey to break the Cartesian curse (Bai, 2003, 2009) of dualistic, analytic seeing. We must work to develop our less dominant modes of consciousness that mediate “the synthesizing, non-analytic forms of thought and expression” (Carr-Gomm, 2002, p. 61). It is no simple task to de-school the self, cleanse the eye of perception (Bai, 2009) and re-experience life through these “othered” perceptions. It is difficult work to free the self from metaphysical realism, the belief that how we see the world is how the world really is, and of the dogma of objectivism, that the world is out there completely independent of how we perceive and conceive of it. Bai (2003) writes that “there is only the laborious path of skillful practice whereby individuals undertake transformative activities that shift their cognitive frames” (p. 46). Bai & Cohen (2007) explain that “to change an older person’s established way of seeing and doing is a difficult and time-consuming effort, and often a struggle” (p. 39). The difficulty lies in shifting and changing one’s consciousness while inhabiting the same consciousness. Barrett (2007) writes that for her this required being immersed in a “metaphysical and physical journey that required an intense de-schooling process” (p. 217) in order to dismantle and rewrite the many layers of discourse that had been inscribed within her consciousness. This work is a slow and gradual process which requires strong commitment to practice and immense patience with the process.

Simpson (1999) notes that our physical eyes are the tools with which we perceive tangibles, while the Sixth Chakra, Anja, the ‘third eye’, “offers us the ability to intuit things for which we have no concrete evidence” (p. 107). Estes (1992) writes that we have the ability to see “not through two eyes, but through the eyes of intuition which is many-eyed. When we assert intuition, we are therefore like the starry night: we gaze at the world through a thousand eyes” (p. 10). We are no longer trapped by metaphysical realism or completely locked into normalization and as soon as we begin to see different possibilities then the spell is broken. Our two sides of the brain begin the process of working in harmony (Carr-Gomm, 2002) and we recognize, on both an intuitive and rational level, that how we apprehend the world is just one possibility among an infinite number of others. Bai (2003) explains that when this opening happens “[o]ne no longer thinks naively that how the world appears to one is how the world objectively is and that if the world appears differently to others, they are stupid, crazy, or immoral or all three altogether” (p. 45). We enter the forest with new eyes, many eyed seeing, and begin the long journey and challenging work of untangling the tales we have been told, re-animating our senses, and truly “seeing” the worlds around and within us.
Shadow discipline

Walking down the hall on my way back to my classroom, I saw the little boy skipping in circles outside the closed classroom door. As I got closer, I could see it was my youngest daughter, having a wonderful time outside of her classroom all alone. I sighed to myself and put a lid on the frustration I felt seeing any child alone in the hallway, alone my own child. We had agreed as a staff that this strategy did not fit with the model of discipline we were enacting in the school. Our goal was to help strengthen children not harm them. This was a left over tool from those forms of discipline that emphasize teaching children pleasing and avoidance behaviors rather than helping children become the people they want to be. I stopped beside her and tentatively crossed the line between teacher and mom and asked her why it was that she was out in the hallway again instead of in class. She answered that it was much more fun out in the hallway and she was free to move. She reminded me that I knew she had trouble learning while sitting in her desk and that last year she had let her stand while she worked. This teacher wouldn’t do. She got in trouble all the time because she couldn’t keep still for that long. She remarked that it was ok, she liked it in the hallway. I thanked her for being honest, gave her a hug and walked on.

I entered my grade eight classroom, where some students lay on the floor, others sat on the couch, some were at desks and others at tables. Some students had headphones on, some were on computer, while others talked together as they worked. This was the work environment they had helped to create and organize and when it was not working for any of us, we met and solved the problem in a way that met everyone’s needs. I admitted to myself that I was somewhat frustrated with the lack of harmony that existed at times on our staff, especially at the start of each school year. When new staff would join us every year, we would go through the painful and slow process of discussing what we believe as a staff and why we treated children the way we did in this school. It was a significant leap in paradigm for some staff and some never seemed to be able to make it. While many used the language of beliefs and needs, and said it children that it was ok to make a mistake, it still sounded and felt controlling and coercive. Rather than students self-evaluating these staff did it for them, forcing planning sheets and processes upon them thus creating a consequence rather than an opportunity for self-balance, becoming and relationship.

The challenge with this lack of harmony among the staff was that this misuse of the language was creating triggers for kids, and there were times now when I heard students say, “I hate restitution.” Many staff were troubled by this and we would discuss among ourselves why some adults had such trouble with giving up control and continued to use fear and coercion to get people to do what they want. We recognized that something had changed significantly in how many of us saw children, relationships and the world and that our perceptions had “shifted”. Our relationships with children and each other were changing as we moved from “doing to” to “working with” people. Instead of controlling kids and making them do what we wanted, we were learning to listen, to ask questions and to ask what students needed. These changes were creating a more peaceful, fun, safe environment in the school, but we were unsure how to support those staff who were struggling with rethinking discipline. One of the greatest challenges I experienced at this time was how I felt in my relationship with our school administrator. While she appeared supportive of this new approach and spoke the language with students and staff, I often felt myself reacting and resistant to her. Under the words I felt the subtle sense of manipulation, coercion, and control. While I was being told I had freedom, control, and choice, it didn’t often feel that way. I could relate to my daughter in the hallway and her need to push back against these invisible threads of discipline and to skip outside the lines. I could also relate at times to those students who shouted at certain staff that they hated this. I did at times too, but I couldn’t put my finger on why.
Freeing Discipline

For four years the staff had been engaging the Restitution Self-Discipline approach developed by Dianne Gossen (1996, 2004). This program is based upon the work of William Glasser’s Control Theory (1984), an interactionalist discipline approach which conceptualizes disruption in a classroom as “lack of sufficient relationships between students and teacher” (Millei, 2010, p. 16) or a result of schools leaving student’s needs of love & belonging, power, freedom, fun and survival unfulfilled (Glasser, 1986). Gossen’s work is also influenced by the interventionist approaches to classroom discipline which focus on students’ learning to control their own behavior. Rather than making behavior contingent upon compliance (Gossen, 2004) non-interventionist approaches such as Kohn’s (1996) guidance approach to discipline, are thought to transform discipline from getting students to comply through the domination of the teacher to producing “morally sophisticated people who think for themselves and care about others” (p. 62). Gossen writes that Restitution Self-Discipline helps people make a “paradigm shift from external discipline, which coerces and alienates youth, to internal discipline, which strengthens and embraces youth” (2004, p. 13).

This discipline program saw earlier interventionist forms of classroom discipline as controlling and regulating children and failing to provide them with the “fundamental freedom liberal societies entail for their members” (Millei, 2007, p. 1). Gossen’s work is critical of interventionist approaches which “target students’ behavior and self-regulation, and subject these to training through certain practices” (Millei, 2010, p. 15) such as rules, rewards and consequences, punishments in terms of timeouts or trips to the principals office. Interactionalist approaches argue that such practices of self-discipline which require a behavioral accommodation to certain external rules necessitate a teacher-centered approach to discipline which limits students’ autonomy and subjects students to teachers’ dominance and control. Gossen (1996) writes that interventionist approaches “of managing people tends to train them to focus externally on evaluation of their faults by others” (p. xiv). The restitution approach seemed to move some of the personal power that the teacher exerts to dominate and control students to the students and increase their power and freedom. I saw the punitive and autocratic approaches on the continuum of the positions of control as less desirable than this option of Restitution which seemed to endow students with more autonomy and freedom. The provision of students’ freedom was surely more desirable than the repressive and negative controlling approaches. The dominance of teachers over students was obviously harmful and resulting in resistance, anger and violence. It was in this way of thinking that the ideas of dominance and control became entangled together and freedom was positioned as their opposite. It became desirable for all of us in the school to create the conditions where children had “the ability and determination to regulate one’s life by rules, which one has accepted freely I would add for oneself” (Peters as cited in Millei, 2010, p. 14). I assumed that moving to the Restitution approach and becoming a manager of student behavior in my room rather than a punisher or user of coercive methods of discipline would mean that external control would cease along with the resistances that students were mounting against it. I came to believe it was desirable for the students to fulfill their need for freedom and power and that teachers’ dominance in the classroom was the reason why disruption occurred. If I moved from being a boss in the classroom to the manager that Restitution promoted as the more desirable position for the teacher to be in, then the power I held would be reduced and the dominance of the position of ‘teacher’ would be tamed.

However certain students were still resistant, especially with certain teachers, and I continued to feel a subtle sense of being controlled and manipulated by my administrator despite the consistent use of the Restitution approach. Many felt that the reason why students or staff were reacting was because some staff were still coercive and punitive. We were conceptualizing power as domination and control; as something which is externally applied. We felt that if teachers’ dominance was reduced and students were allowed, taught and supported in self-regulation they would be more free, more autonomous. When we look through Foucault’s lens of power and government, however, approaches that promote self-regulation actually “impose greater tutelage over students in insidious ways” (Millei, 2010, p. 14). By introducing what we saw to be more democratic, freeing discipline approaches we actually imposed a form of control that is masked in students’ assumed freedom, autonomy and empowerment. These approaches draw on the idea of the rational autonomy of the individual student who is capable of reflecting on, monitoring and self-regulating their conduct, intentions, needs, feelings. Approaches like Restitution construct and train these capacities in order to produce obedient students who self-regulate their behavior to match that of an ideal, obedient, moral subject who has social allegiance with their fellow students, teachers, and the school. While these approaches may not use “repressive power, students are not freed, but are in fact subjected to increasing government through the institution of school” (Millei, 2007).
Breathing fear

I had been sitting on the floor for several weeks now, at first impatiently, then sleepily, then fidgety, then bored. But now a new feeling was lingering in my insides every time I sat on a cushion, closed my eyes and tried to breathe. It started with mild worry, then moved to anxiousness, and a times shifted into absolute terror. Now each time I tried to use the breath to center, I couldn’t breathe. My stomach tightened, my chest clenched and my breath became shallow. I felt like I was choking and I became panicked and wanted to stop. But I had come here for a reason and I wasn’t quitting now.

When I had first seen the poster in the organic grocery store for a “Healing Through Meditation” course I was unsure. But the kind face of the teacher on the poster and the promise to still the mind and find some balance was too enticing to ignore. The idea of sitting with a group of people quietly, silently, once a week and receiving instruction on how to calm this monkey mind of mine that woke me up faithfully at five o’clock each day was enough to get me to sign up. I had read a book or two about mindfulness and tried to meditate on my own once or twice but I just really didn’t understand it. But I knew that some respite for the restlessness I felt, the discontent, the searching, the lack of balance in my life would be welcome. The idea that I did not need to travel to some foreign country, change my job, or start all over as I often felt I would need to do in order to gain some peace and calmness was exciting. The thought that there was a new territory, an inner space that was unknown to me but that I suspected existed, a space where I could find self-understanding and healing, was what was motivating me now.

I knew that I needed to face fear in my life. I had suspected for some time that it lay beneath my reactivity to any kind of judgement from others, especially those in positions of authority. I also wondered if it was what drove me into the imbalance in my life: too much work and not enough play, too many hours at the school and not enough time in nature, too much running and no time for good food and healthy exercise. I wondered how much fear was controlling my life. I wondered if I was actually afraid of fear itself. I questioned what would happen if I could finally unmask fear, see what was behind this emotion, this delusion that chased me in my days and haunted my nights. Would I have the courage to mindfully meet, directly and without complications, this fear when it arose in this practice, let alone in my life?
Waking up to fear

Mindfulness meditation has everything to do with waking up and existing within the present moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) writes that from the Buddhist perspective, “our ordinary waking state of consciousness is seen as being severely limited and limiting, resembling in many aspects an extended dream rather than wakefulness” (p. 3). Meditation can help us wake up from the sleep of automatic thinking and unconsciousness in which we may spend days, weeks and even lifetimes. But when we sit with ourselves, quietly and still, we begin to become aware of our automatic, busy mind and the patterns, sometimes painful to see, of our blame, fear, judgement and rejections of ourselves and others. And underneath this we encounter our fear. Mindfulness practice opens everything up in a very organic way, not through searching, or probing, or pulling, but just by paying attention, sitting and watching what arises.

Joseph Goldstein (2003) believes that we cannot underestimate the potential fear has to control our lives. “This mind state has extraordinary range of expression: from mild worry to chronic anxiety to abject terror” (p. 77). Fear lies behind and beneath many other emotional states that cause us pain: behind greed lies fear of not enough, behind aggression lies the fear of harm, behind hatred the fear of not being loved and accepted. Fronsdal (2001) writes that “fear is at the root of many types of psychological suffering, and an important part of mindfulness practice is to study it—to understand and accept it enough that we do not live under its influence” (p. 76). Kornfield (1993) describes how we “get caught and lost in fear so often in our life, but rarely have we examined and dealt with the demon of the fearful mind itself” (p. 91). We feel tremendous aversion to encountering the demon of fear, naming it, sitting with it, getting to know it. The poet Rumi encourages us to welcome all guests that come to door and invite them in for tea, including fear.

Having spent years running from fear and its many emotional companions, this did not seem like a comfortable proposition. However mindfulness meditation it is not always necessary or wise to confront fear directly, but instead one can connect the mind with the breath so it is less engaged with fear. In this way fear loses some of its power. Then we can investigate fear, “explore it, sense it, and become connoisseurs of it” (Fronsdal, 2001, P. 77). We can observe our bodily responses when fear arises; butterflies, clenching stomachs and constricted breathing. This keeps us from getting caught in the stories, old and well worn, that tend to activate our fear and send us spiralling. I was amazed when I was instructed to step away from these stories, drop them, and concentrate on what was happening in the present moment. Most of the time in meditation and in life, these stories are irrelevant, the products of our rational, automatic, storytelling left brain which is caught in the past or imagining the future and completely unaware of our present experience. Underlying many of these stories were beliefs that I had never acknowledged and only rarely questioned: I was afraid of what other people thought of me but rarely questioned the belief that love and acceptance came from acting a certain way; I was terrified of my emotions but rarely questioned why it was not socially acceptable to experience and express many emotions such as anger, grief and fear.

Sitting with fear, watching my mind spin stories about all the things I should be afraid of gave me a chance to see these beliefs, question them and gradually they lost their power.

As difficult as this was to do on the cushion, it was nearly impossible in my daily life. After so many years of functioning on automatic pilot, of living in the past or the future, of listening to and believing all of my stories, it was difficult not to go back to sleep when I stepped back into my life. But I was no longer so unconscious that I did not begin to notice, almost always after the fact, that much of my embarrassment, anger, guilt, discouragement and judgement was actually triggered by fear. Often when I ran from relationships, conflict, people, and situations it was because I was afraid. When I was irritable, frustrated, challenging and argumentative it was because I was afraid. Fear was never far away, and I was to encounter this demon over and over again. However, over time as Kornfield (1993) explains, “if we open our eyes and our heart to the fearful mind and gently name it, “fear, fear, fear,” experiencing its energy as it moves through us, the whole sense of fear will shift, and later will simply come the recognition, “Oh, fear, here you are again. How interesting.”” (p. 91). But aversion had been my go to strategy for many years and I struggled to stay with the sensations, to pay attention to the ideas, beliefs and stories, to notice the trembling in my gut and to stay with the scary stories fear tells. It was challenging to admit how fear shaped my sense of trust and my beliefs about the world. I was not yet ready to recognize how many of my choices, my intensity, my passion, my activism, my drive for change in education and in the world was driven by fear. I was not yet able to accept how often fear controlled and disciplined my daily life.

“Fearlessness is not necessarily the absence of fear. It is a positive quality that can exist side by side with fear, overcoming the limitations arising out of fear.”

Fronsdal, 2001, p. 81
Renovating discipline

The school year was coming to a close and we had been informed that the School Division was going to do a renovation so that my vice-principal could have his own office. It had been both of our first years as administrators in this school and we had shared the one and only workspace in the school office. These conditions had encouraged the shared leadership of the school and all decision making and planning was done in a very equal and balanced way. We had been able to approach the school division with ideas as a team on the same page which had been helpful as this could be very challenging at times. When the Supervisor of Facilities informed us in the last few days of the school year that the entire library collection of books and furniture would need to be moved for the renovation. I asked who we should hire. He responded that there was no budget for that and that the kids and the teachers could do it. After two days of talking to staff who were too tired to take on such a task, I reluctantly called the director to express my concerns and I found myself in a conversation that mirrored many of earlier ones of this year. An unhealthy pattern of communication had developed over the year which frustrated, angered and scared me. Things often became attacking and personal and I would be on the receiving end of judgements about my personality, my life, and my decisions. Often in these hour long conversations that got nowhere and felt ridiculous and grading and unprofessional I would rise to the bait and become reactive and argumentative. This pattern had only worsened after the day at a conferences’ end when he told me he found me attractive and to my hanging open mouth shock he said not to worry about it, he was over it now. I responded that I hoped this meant things would be more appropriately professional but that never materialized, things only got worse.

When I made the call about the renovation plan, what I had hoped could be a professional conversation once again deteriorated into another round of ridiculous judgements over how I was not creating a positive feeling on staff, that I was a workaholic, I was too emotional, too driven, too independent and that other schools were just doing what they were asked and they didn’t complain. I felt angry, shamed, embarrassed and chastised. I knew this form of communication could not continue and I was frightened by the volatility of these conversations. I decided that in the future for my own sake I needed to communicate by letter or email, no more personal conversations or phone calls. I decided to keep my mouth shut during these conversations and to not respond and become reactive but rather to take notes of the conversations and reply later in writing if necessary. In the fall when the renovations were incomplete, the facilities manager informed me that he would not and could not get enough done to get our computer system up and running for the start of the school year and that the library furniture and books would have to be put back by the staff and students. I asked a few questions and could hear his frustration at my attempts to solve this problem, so I stopped talking and hung up the phone. Within 5 minutes I received a call from the Director telling me that he had a call for the supervisor who was angry that I had hung up, and that we needed to ‘play nice’. I documented the call, said very little and hung up. Then I hired someone to do the work we needed done and paid for it out of the school budget. I knew that more conversations and judgements would occur if I did anything further. I was lost in a whirlwind of anger, fear and shame; angry that I was allowing myself to be treated this way, ashamed by my inability to stand up to this person but terrified that the accusations were right and that I was all those things I was being accused of. I felt alone and isolated and though I knew I should tell someone, I said nothing to anyone about what was happening.
“Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That’s why it loves perfectionists—it’s so easy to keep us quiet. If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we’ve basically cut it off at the knees. Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither.”

Brown, 2012, p. 58

Such a shame

In Foucault’s idea of governmentality, the kinds of power exercised in the management of groups of people, from families and school classes to church congregations and national populations, do not crush the agency of subjects into submission but rather cultivate this agency in particular ways (Gallagher, 2008). In this exercise of power one does not crudely impose the will of one (the state, the employer, the teacher, the student) upon a subordinate party (the citizen, the teacher, the student) but instead there is a “much more subtle interplay between the hierarchical, coercive power of the governor over the governed, and the governed subject’s power over herself, which we might call her autonomy” (ibid, p. 11). In this way, coercion both requires the complicity of the subject and is at the same time limited by the extent that the subject invests in this complicity. Those who exercise governmental power attempt to make those they are governing so effective at regulating their own conduct that they will ultimately not need any external, supervising power. Persuading people to participate in their own subjection is an extremely effective and efficient mechanism of power, enabling those who govern to do so with very little intervention. Effective management of employees and students then involves securing the complicity of the subjects being governed and controlling their agency by allowing them some control over the processes of government and decision making. When the subject steps out of the realm of what the system has allowed to be in their control or beyond what is deemed as appropriate for the managed subject, then subtle coercive forms of discipline are affected. These are aimed at the individual, at their very being, at their subjective self. Milieu (2010) writes that rather than freeing up subjects from dominance, these forms of discipline impose a form of control that is masked in the subjects assumed freedom and autonomy. Rather than the liberation of subjects, control is deepened in insidious ways. Rose (1999) writes that “[this kind of ‘government through freedom’ multiplies the points at which a citizen has to play his or her part in the processes that govern him […] And in doing so, it also multiplies the points at which citizens are able to refuse, contest, challenge those demands placed upon them” (p. xxii).

I struggle to contest or challenge the demands, judgements and attacks imposed upon me by this ‘government of freedom’. Deep inside I was afraid that the claims that were being directed at me were somehow true. When I was told I wasn’t like the other administrators who complied without complaint, that I worked too hard, that I was too competitive, or too emotional I was affected deeply. It was often stated that I was known by administration, that they could see into my soul to the traits that made me at odds with the system of governance I was subject to and subjecting myself to. I was ensured that my resistance to control over my agency was a flaw, a problem in my subjective self, that needed fixing. This was a familiar song with an old, haunting melody left over from childhood encounters with family, teachers, and church figures who all levelled the same thinly veiled message, ‘The institution is not at fault, you are. We have given you power, control, freedom and yet look what you do with it, you hurt the system by your actions’. Since childhood this form of governmental power had produced a slow coiling of emotion deep within my belly, a dark emotion that smoldered below fear, anger, and reactivity; it was shame. Brown (2010) defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging” (p. 69). Through our upbringing in cultures that govern through shame we carry messages of self-doubt and self criticism around with us in our heads. We can’t always point to a certain moment or specific criticism because “[s]ometimes shame is the result of us playing the old recordings that were programmed when we were children or simply absorbed from the culture” (ibid, 2012, p. 67). Shame begins for us in relationships with others, but soon we learn to do shame all by ourselves. It is through feelings of shame that we become complicit in our own governmentality; we discipline and control ourselves to avoid this emotion that suffocates our sense of worthiness and connection. Shame moves from our actions to our very being; we don’t do something wrong, we are wrong, we don’t just make a mistake, we are a mistake. Shame becomes an internalization of those messages that are used by institutions or in power relations to encourage governance, control and compliance. We no longer question the institution or the person we are in relationship with, it becomes all about us. We then comply, shut down, act out or find ways to fight back. Shame shifts the focus onto the subject rather than the structural elements in the social domain, limiting any politicization of issues of social regulation and differential power (Tavaras, 1996). Shame steers the subject’s conduct and emotions in line with the institutions preferred way of existence and disrupts the capacity of the subject to question the discursive practices in institutions that preserve “a certain kind of life, a certain social reality, and a certain social order” (ibid, p. 200). I could see myself reflected in the faces of those students in the hallways and offices of our school who fought back, turned out or shouted against what appeared to be a more compassionate form of discipline which was to grant us more freedom and agency. Many of us were deeply shamed into compliance with the now more hidden rules of a system we wanted to debate, negotiate and challenge. It was a shame our voices were silenced, as so was our creativity and ingenuity; neither of which can survive in such a climate.
A fond farewell

I stood on the stage and watched as the staff shared their memories, stories, pride and love for my daughter who sat on the large wicker chair with a huge smile on her face and tears in her eyes. We were nearing the end of this night of celebration and farewell to our grade eight class and it had been amazing to watch the confidence, pride and self-worth of each child as they were spoken of by the staff who had worked with them over the years as teacher, mentor, coach, listener, and caretaker. As I listened to the vice-principal talk about my daughter a slow realization came over me. He did not just see her as an object, a student, a statistic or data, but as a human being. He knew her, cared for her and in fact loved her. I was struck by the fact that all of the children had come forward that night and heard a heartfelt living speech from different staff members that celebrated their gifts, their talents and their uniqueness as a human being. Each and every child in that grade and in fact in the entire school, was cared for and loved by the staff, even the most challenging and difficult. The staff made an effort to ensure that each child had at least one adult in the building who knew them, greeted them, welcomed them and supported them on their journey in our school. Everyone from the instructional assistants to the teaching staff had worked together to ensure that no child was isolated, forgotten, unknown and uncared for in this building and each sought out a relationship. We were especially mindful of those children who were not as socially connected with or accepted by their peers. As I watched my daughter I could see that this experience of being accepted and loved by this staff had made a difference in her life. She was more confident, more willing to take risks, more able to speak her mind and more able to be herself.

I realized that something magical was being woven in this school. I thought back over the last few years as the feeling in the school had shifted from control, management, and organization of students to one of caring, love and genuine interest. The relationships among the staff had also changed and deepened from congenial, superficial relationships to collegial, open, caring, loving ones. We knew each other, respected our diversity, supported each other, and genuinely discussed together our questions and ideas about learning and teaching. These relationships amongst students and staff had exploded into the most dynamic learning environment I had ever worked in. As I looked at the yearbook that was created by a group of students to be given to our grade eights as a farewell gift, I was amazed by what had happened in that year. Learning and extra-curricular activities were constantly appearing to meet the needs of not just some students but all. And our community had become a part of it all, responding and showing up in huge numbers to Christmas concerts, dinner theatres, volleyball and basketball tournaments, environment days, play days, learning fairs, science fairs, bottle drives, charity nights and on and on. Students, staff, parents, grandmas and grandpas and neighbours side by side. Many also joined our school council, came to information nights and gave us their ideas.

I had never been so busy, had so much fun, learned so much about learning and teaching, taken so many risks or involved the voices and opinions of students so much as I had this year. And it just kept getting better. I loved the school, loved the students, had deep, loving relationships with my colleagues and I loved being a part of this. The only shadow that lingered over it all were my struggles in my relationships with the senior administration of the school division. While they loved what was happening at the school I continually dreaded the conversations that would come when something went wrong or someone made a mistake, which I knew was inevitable. I wondered if we would be treated with as much love, respect and care as we showed each other in this school.
The heart of teaching

Caring, loving, trusting relationships are not often spoken of or promoted in the context of modern education. Many teachers are considered to "care" if they conscientiously pursue curricular expectations and encourage and coerce their students to meet these goals. But as Noddings (2005) notes, these teachers may be unable or unwilling to establish relationships with their students that are caring, trusting or loving. The conditions in schooling can be so difficult that even if teachers want to connect and create relationships with students it is almost impossible. Growing class sizes, schedules that move students to several teachers a day, increasing curricular demands and the increasing pressures of standardized testing all ensure that even if teachers did want to care and students did want to connect in relationship, it is difficult if not impossible to do so. And yet we know as educators that students who feel deeply connected through at least one relationship of profound respect, deep caring, and a quality of "being with" that honours the truth of each person in the relationship in our schools “are more likely to survive the “lure of risk” and the damage of stress; they are more likely to discover and contribute the gift they are meant to bring to the world” (Kessler, 2000, p. 18). Palmer (2007) is adamant that good teachers must possess a capacity to weave a complex web of connectedness between themselves, their students and their subject matter. “The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (p. 11).

Miller (2006) writes that prophets, mystics and visionaries throughout history have felt that the formative force of the cosmos is love. Education which believes in the importance of the care and love of the soul of the child aligns itself with this universal force. He believes that in order to encounter society’s prejudices, ideologies and violence “we need to reclaim the true meaning of “education” from the soul-numbing system of schooling within which the modern world has imprisoned its children” (p. 5). Love and care in schools can support an education in which relationships of wisdom and loving-kindness develop that enable all present to see the true nature, the divine eternal nature in all beings. Nelson Mandela, after twenty-seven years in prison, felt that “people must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love” (1994, p. 542). As we learned to develop caring, trusting loving relationships in this school it affected all aspects of our lives. The creativity, uniqueness and gifts of each individual were valued and respected and began to grow. Learning flourished for both students and teachers, risks were taken and mistakes made and honored. Behavior “problems” seemed to diminish as students knew that they were loved and accepted even if they made a choice that hurt others or themselves. Buddhist teacher Donald Altman (2003) notes that “when love and approval are withheld, withdrawn, or conditional, then we search other ways to get it—some good and some bad” (p. 197). Our caring and respect of our students and each other was no longer conditional, and as a result we all flourished. My motivation towards the environmental project I had been engaging at the school for the last six years also shifted and changed, led now by a caring, loving relationship with the Earth. Miller (1996) writes that love motivates people to make the world a more beautiful place. Roszac (1992) sees this as a shift from ecological work motivated by guilt, to that motivated by love for the plant and its beauty.

Unfortunately when educators enter into caring, loving relationships with students that honour the cosmic force that breathes life and creativity into every child, they are accused of being anti-intellectual or politically subversive. Miller (2006) states that the “guardians of culture—those with a vested interest in maintaining social, economic and political inequality—are the first to make these claims because they prefer authoritarian models of school and a “transmission” model of teaching and learning: their foremost aim is to keep people in their places” (p. 3). It appears there are two emotional tracks that underlie education; love and fear. Don Miguel Ruiz, of the Toltec tradition, writes that from the Toltec perspective, everything is made of Love, Love is life itself. And yet he sees that fear is often the emotion that drives our relationships and our society. “In the track of fear we have so many conditions, expectations and obligations that we create a lot of rules to protect ourselves against emotional pain, when the truth is that there shouldn’t be any rules” (Ruiz, 1999, p. 64). But societal structures have plenty of rules, and while I was finding the courage and freedom to begin to enact new and different subject positions in the conditions we had created in this school, I knew this would mean I would often not be the kind of teacher or principal that the school system wanted me to be. I was ever aware of the judgement, the guilt and the punishment on the track of fear, where there is no justice, only the obligation to be a certain kind of subject.
Failure identity

I sat on the couch huddled in the wolf blanket for comfort and stared at the moon. I had woken up again in the middle of the night and here I sat in the darkened living room not wanting to wake anyone else. The moon shone down through the skeletal branches of the trees outside the window as I curled into a ball, protecting my aching insides. As much as I tried to stop it, the events of the last few weeks just kept playing over and over in my mind, looping around and around like a film on one of the old movie projectors at school. I could not shake the sense that despite feeling that I had done the right things, said the right things, reacted the best I could, things had gone very wrong.

First there had been the phone calls of two weeks ago. When the first call had come from the director, as I knew it would, I had done my best to follow my plan to not be drawn into a childish argument or be baited into reactivity no matter how I was judged. A few days ago I had been approached by a superintendent regarding an angry parent, and when I learned that he had come by this information from another superintendent who had heard this in a social setting in the community I expressed my concerns about the ethics of the situation. Soon after this conversation a call from the director had come and I had once again been unsuccessful in disengaging. I had listened and not responded to the judgement that I had overreacted to the situation, that I didn’t communicate well, and that I was too quick to jump to conclusions. All I did was continue to repeat that I did not want to have this kind of conversation with him, that I would meet to resolve and fix things with the superintendent and that I would like to be able to do that process. After thirty minutes when I did not respond and defend myself things had only become more personal and difficult. Finally I lost my temper, defended myself angrily and hung up. Then I received a second call a week later which the director said was an attempt to be my mentor as he said he felt I needed one. I was informed that I was too reactive and needed to calm down more. He said that I didn’t trust the senior administration because of my past which he felt I obviously hadn’t let go of. He stated he wasn’t the same as my last senior administrators and I needed to trust him and his team more. I was quite speechless and such a feeling of hopelessness washed over me, that I remained silent.

Still raw from these events when I had to make the call two weeks later to share an innocent mistake on the part of staff, I wanted to crawl into a hole. Some photos had been taken at a staff social event with a school camera and it had been opened and viewed by some students. While the photos were silly and fun, they were not appropriate for student viewing. I made the call to senior administration in case they received some parent calls as I knew if I did not share the truth of what happened and they heard another way that would be cause for concern on their part. I assured them I would handle the situation at the school level and hoped that would be the end of it. When I received a call two days later stating I needed to discipline the staff I said I would have to discipline myself as well because I had been at the staff function. My refusal resulted in senior administration coming out to meet with all of the staff involved and lecturing us on appropriate behavior and the use of better judgement. I had sat with the staff and let the feelings of humiliation and shame wash over me. I had no idea how to continue to balance what I had learned about compassionate, strengthening processes with people and the coercive, controlling, disciplining strategies of the school division. Now as I sat sleepless under the shadow of the moon, I felt waves of darkness wash over me. Once again I found myself at odds with senior administration and wondered what could be wrong with me that caused me to be so reactive, angry and in conflict with those I perceived in positions of power. Fear snaked through my belly as the feelings of failure in my identity as a principal washed over me.
Being seen

A willingness had developed within the staff to go beyond the specific field of possibilities; those already determined appropriate moral codes by which people within Western schools and society are to conduct themselves. We were contesting the common morality and questioning with our students the typical school rules, codes of conduct and policies of school divisions, as well as curricular demands that school can only be done in certain ways. We were trying to reach beyond the boundaries of the “certain kind of people” that were to be produced by and within the school, and open the discursive fields within the school that construct students, instructional assistants, teachers, parents, caretakers, grandparents as second-class people, as “other” and as incapable of authentic collaboration and decision-making. We were examining our educational beliefs, asking how our practices truly affected children and if these results matched our beliefs; when they did not we changed things. But we were doing all of this within a system of disciplinary power in which “individuals are known to others and eventually to themselves only insofar as they contribute to the efficient progress of the efficient production of their society” (Jardine, 2005, p. 57). Individuals are not to be independent, creative, unpredictable beings, but rather are objectified, subdued and docile subjects who must function within society’s prescriptions and norms.

Deacon (2006) writes that “over a comparatively short period of time, modern schooling has brought countless individuals and diverse populations to accept and tolerate steadily increasing degrees of subjection” (p. 183). Foucault (1979) writes that “[w]e are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the “social worker” judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to him his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements” (p. 304). Educational systems create this subjectification by fusing together the human capacity to manipulate words, people and objects thus inculcating behavior through regulated communication and power processes (Foucault, 1983). In schools it is not only the students who are expected to absorb socially desirable forms of behavior but so are teachers and principals, who perform under the critical gaze of school division administration, school boards, provincial governing bodies, and community. Foucault explained that those who exercise power in the school are as caught up in and subjected by its functions as those over whom power is exercised; power relations are seldom one-sided but in most cases reciprocal (Deacon, 2006). Gore (1998) indicates that regardless of progressive or conservative orientations in schools, multiple techniques of power are present beyond surveillance such as: normalization, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualization, totalization, and regulation.

Relations of power and their techniques, which are at the very heart of educational systems, are difficult to respond to. While direct domination can be avoided or at least counteracted, Deacon (2006) states that relations of power “are inextricably intertwined with pedagogical effects of guilt, obligation and verification, and assumptions about degrees of ignorance, dependence on others, legitimate compulsion and achievement” (p. 184). Power produces most, if not all of our ideas about what we should do and be (Foucault, 1980), and in school systems these ideas are then used to supervise and control individuals. In this school we were engaging a process which named, examined, questioned and challenged many techniques of power and our complicity in them, which then changed our practices and behaviors. I knew that we were stepping outside of the norms and regulations of not just the school division with the practices we were engaging in this school. While I felt a great deal of passion, commitment and belief in what we were doing, I also had already been on the receiving end of many of the disciplining techniques used within systems of power and had felt their effects. I felt the constant sense of what Foucault (1979) referred to as “being seen”; the sense that I was being monitored and that power was being exercised even when there was no visible presence of any senior administration. I had learned as a young child both at home and school, and throughout my career in education, that any action at any time could be used as an instrument for controlling behavior. I either subjected myself to disciplining, or terrified myself when I refused this complicity. When I made the call to “fess up” about the actions of staff during a social time in the school which threatened to become public, I gave in to the fear, the monitoring, the gathering of powerful knowledge; what Foucault (1990) refers to as the “imperative to speak”. We were often told as principals that while we had much autonomy, we were to “tell the truth” to senior administration about any situation that may reach their level that may be difficult or damaging before it came from another source. Foucault “identified the presence of this imperative for us to speak about any knowledge society needs in order to integrate and control our daily lives and the individual possibilities we will or will not be allowed to pursue” (Jardine, 2005, p. 65). While I knew that retaining information was itself worth a penalty, I was surprised that even with disclosure came a disciplining response. Foucault’s words that “power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth” (1980, p. 93) became a debilitating reality that haunted my time in the school from that point onward and affected all of my decisions. It was as if a heavy shadow had descended over me.
Shadow woman

The child was standing beside me, our hands clenched tightly. Facing us was a dark frightening woman, black hair flowing, masked eyes gazing at the two of us. She was of the underworld, the shadows, the place of the dead. The staff in her left hand glowed dimly in the darkness. I was not afraid of her but I did not want to be here in this space and in this dark energy. She slowly and gently reached out and took the child. I was sinking, deeper and deeper.

...you have released her she is with me now...

I felt unsure if I wanted her to have the child. This shadow woman was so dark, and I did not trust the darkness. In fact I spent much time and energy running from the shadows. As the child stepped away into her arms I felt alone...alone...alone...

Betrayed...abandoned. I had always been alone.

Suspended in the darkness was a large mirror. I felt drawn to walk towards it, to confront the face in the mirror. As I stared into its shadowy depths images appeared of many faces, many masks, many selves that all were me...unknown, unnamed, unconscious...darker sides, alter egos, dark twin, disowned othered... The shadow woman watched me with compassion, knowing I needed to face these shadowed selves, to accept them and to love them.

She gifted me then with two animals, a black panther and a raven. I began to run, the panther by my side, the raven following, silent in the air behind us. There was a sense of urgency.

...no time to waste...you are needed...they are here to help you...another way of seeing...you have been given vision...it is always with you...

As I stood before her once again flames surrounded us. I lowered my head. She placed a crown of flames upon my head, pulsing fire. Then she stepped away, the child with her. I was alone in the darkness, in the shadows.
Descendings

Breaking free or letting go of the discourses I had learned as a Western woman/teacher/principal/mother was not something that I even knew I needed to do. While there was a strong part of me desiring change, transformation, another part of me equally resisted death, any kind of death; death of the ego, of the “truths” of this culture, of the stories I had created about myself, for myself, for others, to protect myself. Fox (1991) tells us to “dare to enter the dark, meaning entering nothingness and letting it be nothingness while it works its mystery on us” (p. 19). Cixous (1993) encourages us to go to the depths, to have the courage to do so and look deep inside the self. The appearance of this woman of darkness, of shadow, forced the first crack in my resistance to face my unexamined and habitual ways of being in the world, doing school, and living self; especially those shadowy ways that I chose not to look at too closely.

Every culture contains mythologies that describe travels to the Underworld (Conway, 2011), the Great Below (Perera, 1981), to Old Mother Death (Estes, 1992) where descent, destruction, death, and transformation occur. In Jungian terms these manifestations throughout mythology and in modern culture represent “the shadow or dark side of the Mother, who brings death, miscarriage, abortion, and bloody demise” (Woolger & Woolger, 1989, p. 404). Starhawk (1999) believes that in our culture we are comfortable with the Goddess as Mother or Muse; the nurturing, inspiring and healing aspects, but it is much more difficult for us to understand the Goddess as destroyer. She writes that “Judeo-Christian dualism has conditioned us to think of destruction as synonymous with evil” (p. 106). Living as we do so removed from nature, we are cut off from experiences that remind us that death and creation exist together and are necessary to change. “Creation postulates change; and any change destroys what went before” (Starhawk, 1999, p. 106). The fire of transformation is a bringer of new life in nature and in our lives. Our distance from these reminders in nature has created within modern culture a tremendous fear and resistance to these descents, these deaths, these “dark nights of the soul” (May, 2005, p. 8).

My encounter with the vision of the dark goddess was a foreshadowing of the journey of descent that I was teetering on the edge of. When I was ready to face in the mirror my false self, my shadow, and the stories I had been told and had created about my subjectivities, then the fire of transformation would begin. Ford (2002) writes that we are afraid to face our false selves and our shadow beliefs because we have become our stories. Our subjective self is created early on when love is traded by family, society and school for performance into societies norms. Pennington (2000) states that the message little ones get is that “[t]hey have value, they have worth, they are lovable because they perform in acceptable ways” (p. 30). This is reinforced by peers, school, and society. It is in this way that the false self is constructed. There is tremendous fear when facing this false self, and the stories we have identified with, for if we are not this self, and not these discourses, then who are we? Outside our stories, life feels frightening and uncontrollable. The unconscious fear we have is that if we surrender these identities that have been created throughout our lifetimes “we will be devoured by the emptiness...Our fear of nonexistence is so deep that most of us settle for a repackaged version of the self we know rather than wake up inside the unknown” (Ford, 2002, p. 12). We cannot imagine ourselves outside of the multiple discourses we have been shaped through, many of which are competing and contradictory. There is not one false self, but hundreds, as over a lifetime we have accumulated layers of taken-for-granted stories. Sadly these subjectivities limit our possibilities, and restrict us. Ford (2002) believes that in fact these shadow beliefs and false selves hide our precious, sacred gifts as human beings. These gifts become like an innocent child that is ours to protect. We learned to hide all our “magnificence deep inside so that no one would ever discover it, so that no one could hurt it or take it away from [us]” (2002, p. 2).

While ancient cultures knew that journeys of descent would help us dis-cover and re-cover the magnificence that is our true being, such travels are not encouraged, spoken of, or tolerated well in our modern culture. It is not ok to “break down” or “break through” or “break open” in this society and there are plenty of drugs to help you “get over it” and “get on with life.” Because of this such descents are not to be spoken of, or only in hushed tones as tranquilizers are shared in the shadowed corners of homes and workplaces. So for those who are dragged into descent all we can “hope for...is the strength both to deal with and to receive the axe’s blow” (Cixous, 1993, p. 63) as we stumble along in the darkness.
Ashes to ashes

It had been a hectic fall weekend at the end of a busy month. The playoff volleyball tournament had been a success. Everything had gone off without a hitch and now my team was in the finals. I fought off feelings of dizziness as I set up the nets for the final match. I brushed off the nausea my spinning head was causing, reminding myself that I hadn’t eaten much that day or had enough rest in the past week. My sleep was still disturbed with the conflicts of the last few weeks with outer and inner forces, and no matter how much I tried to sit in silence and find some calm and balance, my mind was consumed with fear. As the final match started I could feel the beginnings of what felt like a fever and within a few minutes sweat was beading on my brow and running down my back. I could feel itchy bumps begin to rise all over my neck and chest. My breath felt hot and I felt disoriented. I sat down on a chair for the remainder of the match, asked a couple of colleagues to take down the equipment and got my husband to drive as my daughter piled into the back seat of the van holding her second place medal.

The next few days passed in a blur as my body was overtaken by what seemed like a strange virus. When I called in sick to the school I was told that a few other children were sick and had a rash. The health nurse asked us all to remain home in case it was signs of a contagious virus we had all caught. When the test results came back negative all of the children returned to school but I only became more ill. As I lay in bed, the dizziness only increasing and my strength failing, I thought back to the meditation night of a couple of months ago. I had announced in the class that I had spent several months sitting with fear, feeling fear, facing fear and that there was one frontier that I felt I had left; the fear of death. I felt I needed to face this final fear, come to terms with it so it would stop ruling my life. The teacher had looked concerned at my announcement and after class had asked me if I could take some time off work, to rest and slow down, as I seemed determined to engage this process. I lightly stated that I didn’t think I needed to do that, I would be fine. Now I wondered what I had put in motion that night.

Over the next few months my body became consumed with a sickness modern medicine couldn’t diagnose, couldn’t drug and couldn’t seem to fix. I was forced to stop, barely able to drag myself up the stairs from my bedroom to lie on the couch for the day. My body seemed to be attacking itself, and reacting to anything and everything in the environment, even the food I ate and the water I drank. As I became weaker I entered the tilted world of the ill, an isolating, desolate island. I was forced to be and to sit with nothing and no one but myself. Finally one day as I lay in tears on the floor, too tired and sick to eat or drink, I was forced to face the fact that my body might fail, that I could die. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. And for the first time in my life I surrendered, stopped trying to control it all or figure it all out. I gave up and gave in. I lay on the floor, staring at the slow dripping of water off the training branch outside the window and my mind slowed, stilled, and finally, blessedly, stopped. Silence.
“Seeds grow in the dark — so do we. Let’s stop making such a virtue out of
the light and turn toward what’s in the shadows and breathe it in, breathe it
here meeting it face to face until we realize with more than mind that what we
are seeing is none other than us in endarkened disguise”.

Masters, np. 2013

Sinking into the Shadows

The Celtic year begins with Samhain, celebrated on the 31st of October, which marks the beginning of growing darkness, a
time to go within, and to slow down. Horton (2006) writes that it is “a time of enveloping darkness that invites the seamy
side of life to slither out from under the rocks” (np). As we journey with the Dark Goddess in Samhain season we are invited
to go into the darker aspect of our own natures; our shadows. As illness struck during this time of the year it dragged
me down into the darkness and mystery of the Shadow Woman and I was unsure if I would emerge again renewed, or if
she would devour me. I had never allowed myself to slow down, to stop running, taking action, fixing things, to be in stillness.
I was afraid to confront the Stillness because I did not want to confront the fears and criticism of my Shadow. With
all of my activity and business I tried to mask my Shadow, but the Shadow had shown me no mercy and continued to drive
me beyond what was humanly possible (Sams, 1993). Ford (1998) writes that many of us “believe that if we look closely
enough at what lies deeply within us we will find something horrible” (p. 1). This turning away from areas of our experiences
and our selves that causes us pain is the true nature of all dis-ease.

We were exposed as children to many modes of social control over our emotions, our actions, and our very thoughts
through “the combination of moral and scientific discourses that function to govern individuals and teach students to in-
ternalize blame” (Boler, 1999, p. 52). Welwood (1992) writes that “[a]s children, when an experience was too much to
handle, we would contract our awareness and our body, shutting ourselves down like a circuit breaker, out of fear” (p.
160). Over time these contractions lead to the development of whole identities, multiple subjectivities, based on rejecting
painful aspects of our experience and ourselves that we could not tolerate or learned were not acceptable to others. To
the world we showed many masks, identities that we continued to have to maintain, prop up and defend. “The continual
need to monitor our experience, in order to screen out feelings that might threaten our identity, creates a third kind of
suffering: an ongoing, underlying state of tension and dis-ease” (Welwood, 1992, p. 161).

When so much of what I believed about the nature of reality and my being was stripped away by illness, my experience of
the stilling of my busy discursive mind was the beginning of healing. Being able to move away, even for a few seconds,
from the stories of my experience into my actual felt experience; to see the branch, the drops of water, the melting snow
with no narrative, was the beginning step out of dis-ease. Welwood (1992) reminds us that “[s]ince the condition that has
created our distress is a biased, narrow, partial view of our experience, we can’t heal ourselves or anyone else just by pro-
moting a different view” (p. 163). It will just be another partial view of our experience. What we have lost contact with is
our direct experience, our pure awareness, the very ground of our being. Our discursive, busy, conditioned mind is contin-
üally processing information and we have been so trained in Western schools and society to focus on words and the con-
tent of our thoughts that we are not even aware that there is pure awareness operating; available in every moment.

When we begin to experience the gaps between our thoughts, the holes in what we thought was a solid identity, it may
feel “like hanging out in empty space, like a little death” (Welwood, 1992, p. 165). But we soon discover that we do not
have to hold on to this constructed identity in order to survive. We also recognize that the emotions we feel, the states of
mind we experience are not solid unless we weave them into a story. We begin to see and feel the effects of these states
and these stories upon our bodies. Coming into awareness provides the possibility to begin to become aware of our shadow
selves, those rejected, repressed aspects of our entire experience that we find painful. We can begin to take apart the
stories that were created over a lifetime about what parts of our experience, our expression, our emotions, our being
were acceptable or “natural” and those parts that were “abnormal” and to be suppressed, repressed and silenced. Sitting
in awareness one begins to see how dismissal and silencing occur when “outlaw emotions” (Boler, 1999, p. 1) are ex-
pressed, discourses are contested or shadow characteristics are allowed into the light. Entering the darkness of our selves
with a quality of not knowing allows us to see, feel and experience life as it is. “In opening to our experience in this way
without holding on to any story about it, we create a compassionate space that allows new parts of ourselves to unfold,
and old parts that were cut off to enter the stream of awareness and be included” (Welwood, 1992, p. 168). When all
shadows have been brought to light and reclaimed and our awareness is able to circulate freely through all aspects of our
being, we become healthy, whole and at ease.
jumping through the jaws of the moose

It was the third day of the retreat. Although I had been awake for more hours today than I had in months, I felt energized. I had spent hours outside sitting in meditation, feeling the pulse of the earth match my heart. I had sat on the banks of the river, watching the water flow by, knowing deeply that it had a secret to tell if I could only hear. I had sat in the pregnant silence of the soft blue light in the meditation hall, listening to my breath and that of many others. I had walked barefoot on the spring prairie grass as the sun came up over the horizon. "Step, step, step...". Shutting down the business of my mind, experiencing the natural world without thought, judgement or comment. I was becoming the grass, the ground, the sky, my breath, the air. I was here to heal not just my body, but my heart, mind and spirit. I had a sense that if I could just step outside, beside, beyond the clinging of this mind there was something in the silence waiting, a knowing beyond what I had experienced before.

The wind was wild, falling in sheets as I walked up the worn path to the top of the hill. My mind had stopped now, was silent and I was sheer, raw emotion. The pain and anguish in my being was so intense I thought I was going to explode. Suddenly without warning my world cracked open. I shattered into shards of meaningless and blow apart. I could see the bars of the cage I had been contained in blow apart and fly into a million pieces. My breath left my chest in a rush, my head felt like it was going to explode and my vision expanded. Then I felt within me a deep knowing, as the words formed in my consciousness, "It was not the crucifixion it was the resurrection": I saw with blinding clarity that to focus on death led to individualism, separation, clinging, aversion and suffering. The whole point was the resurrection, life, rebirth, presence, interconnectedness, eternity, awakening, peace and joy.

I felt my being expand and sheer wonder fill every cell of my being. Then quickly came complete disbelief and then anger. Was it? It was so simple. How did I not know? Why had no one told me? How had an entire culture missed the message and gotten so off track? Before I could run away with this energy, directly in front of me on the path appeared a magnificent, golden bird. It was so close I could have touched it. It hovered there and stared into its eyes and was overcome with an intense, all-encompassing peace. It was all ok, I knew now, that was all that mattered. As it left me and flew circling ever higher into the sky above the valley I felt a sense of expansion, a shift in vision. I would never see or be the same again.
Entering the stream

Kornfield (2000) writes that a thousand gates open to the spirit but that “[t]he most frequent entryway to the sacred is our own suffering and dissatisfaction” (p. 5). Illness can be a gateway, and from its depths comes a calling for us to seek a wholeness that is missing in our lives and demanding that we awaken. Illness made me more aware of a constant longing I often felt for something essential that was missing that “dances at the edge of our vision, always with us like the air we forget until the wind blows” (Kornfield, 2000, p. 9). I felt a strong need to immerse myself in stillness, silence and practice with no interruptions. Thich Nhat Hanh (1988) writes that “[a] beginning meditator may want to leave the city and go off to the countryside to [...] rediscover and restore himself or herself, without being carried away by the chaos of “the outside world”” (p. 37). The decision to attend a six day silent insight meditation retreat proved to be transformative activity that significantly shifted my cognitive frames. The awakening I experienced exploded what Bai (2003) calls the objectivist paradigm. My ordinary state of consciousness was disrupted, blown open and silenced. My discursive, languaged mind was the only state of consciousness I had ever been aware of. Immersion in mindfulness helped me to awaken out of this discursive consciousness which Bai (2003) states gives rise to reification. “Reification means, simply put, seeing the world through abstract categories and mis-taking the latter for reality itself” (p. 46). When we see the world this way we see it through conceptual categories, and live in an illusion that reality comes in these categories. Hattam (2004) proposes that “Buddhism, and especially its mediation practices, be read as ‘technologies of self’ (Foucault, 1998a) that deconstructs a reified self [...]” (p. 110).

As I walked through nature for the next few days it was as if I was seeing the world for the first time. Each leaf, each tree, every blade of grass was filled with a light, an energy, a dimensionality I had never seen before. It was as if a veil was lifted from my eyes and I could truly see the world around me, feel it within me, breathe it in. be one with it, a part of it, not some separate entity. I had read about, talked about, and thought about the concept of the intrinsic connection behind all aspects of reality, but here I felt it, sunk into it, experienced it. When my languaged mind was finally at rest, my intellect silent, and my stories forgotten, I could open up to the immediacy of the world as it is. Bai (2003) writes that “[t]he hidden cost to the discursive mind is our inability to sink deep into and feel embedded in, or be one with, reality” (p. 47). The experience of this opening into reality was intense; nature felt alive, animate, glowing, breathing, living. I often found my heart bursting with emotion and tears running down my face as I walked in awe along the river, through the tall grass, under the trees, along the muddy path; seeing it all as if for the first time.

After only a few hours in this state I felt completely revitalized, alive, filled with energy and more physically well than I had in months, maybe in years. Bai (2003) writes that when our consciousness is no longer divided into subject, object, or perceiver and perceived “[t]he two poles of perception are integrated into a seamless unity, and as a result, a tremendous sense of vitality is released” (p. 52). I found myself sitting in the meditation hall long into the night after the last group sitting ended, arising early in the morning, eager to get outside, to see the faces of my fellow meditators, to taste the food at breakfast, to feel the sun on my skin. I spent the last three days of this retreat resting in this nondual mind as all of creation around me came alive, and I felt one with this animated world. On the last day when we were to speak I struggled; I did not want to return to the addiction of this hyperactive, discursive mind that had driven me for years. I found it exceptionally difficult to speak and yet retain access to this nondual mind and the bare awareness of the moment. As the retreat ended with a sharing of our experience, I spoke last. I could find no words to describe what I had awakened to, but only could quietly weep. I shared that for many months when I was ill, as I had driven to the weekly meditation class, I would hear the same song on the radio, it’s lyrics calling to me; “Take a look through my eyes” (Collins, 2003, np). That was all that needed to be said because all who were there and had glimpsed the world through these eyes, knew. They knew it was healing medicine, for bodies ravaged by illness, minds caught in dualism and instrumentalism, and an earth groaning under the weight of humanities de-animated consciousness. It was this first beauty of awakening that they remembered and that I took home with me as I re-entered the world. On the drive home I felt the veil of unconsciousness descend like a blind being pulled shut, and as much as I fought against it, eventually I was pulled back into the spell of the discursive. As Kornfield (2000) reminds us “[t]heir realizations and awakenings show us the reality of the world, and they bring transformation, but they pass” (p. xiii). But I was to learn that this animated consciousness was never far away; it was as close as the next breath, as taking a seat on the cushion, or resting on the prairie grass.
She stepped onto the checkered board
More conscious of the game
New players were assembled here
But some things felt the same

The disciplining gaze in place
Techniques of power remained
All were subjected to its force
But no one could be blamed

This power moved among the rooks
The queens, the pawns, the kings
No one could hold it in their grasp
Or stop the pain it brings

So sure there was another way
To step beyond the gaze
She searched for freedom and for peace
From disciplining ways

She threw away the punishments
Rewards and consequence
No more external discipline
Or teacher dominance

Helping students meet their needs
To freedom, power and fun
They learn to self reflect and grow
Emancipation’s come

So sure that she had found the way
She blindly failed to see
That underneath it all still sat
The roots of power’s tree

Progress in all its forms remained
The need to reach ideals
To climb, to change and to succeed
The things this world calls real

Anthropocentric roots still lie
beneath these freedom flowers
That silence women and the earth
And strip them of their powers

The rules were buried deep beneath
corruption hidden now
The regulation of the self
was its insidious power

She felt these things within herself
When disciplining came
It woke itself inside of her
Caused anger, doubt and shame

Complicit in these games of power
Body, mind and soul
The guilt and fear became too much
On her it took its toll

And thus began her dark descent
To shadows in the night
To places she had put away
And hidden well from sight

Dark Goddess of the underworld
Pulled bones and skin away
And left her laying there exposed
With nothing left to say

Her talking mind was put to sleep
And eyes were opened wide
Into the world of here and now
Both outer and inside

Awakening upon the hill
Opened her eyes to see
Focusing on death was not the way
Resurrection was the key

The glowing light within each thing
Helped her to realize
The earth’s not something to sustain
But animate, alive

She looked back now upon the game
The pieces blown apart
And wondered now how would she play
If it would break her heart
Chapter Five

Eyes Wide Open
Eyes Wide Open
Spinning on the wheel

The air was cool but the sun high in the brilliant, blue sky as we loaded into my jeep. The dust from the dirt road blew over the golden crop of wheat ready for harvest. We were heading out towards the medicine wheel and the Elders and teachers filled the vehicle with laughter and joking interspersed with stories as we drove. The old man who sat scanning the horizon from the seat beside me had spent some time the day before generously sharing his knowledge of the medicines of the prairie plants on the land in the hills. He had not known I was ill but handed me some berries part way through our walk and told me to take them, boil them and drink them, they would purge what ailed me. His knowledge was deep and to be respected. I hesitated to tell him what I had seen yesterday up at the wheel, but decided I wanted to know what wisdom he could share. I told him of the crows that I had seen blooming on the hill; it was late October. He listened and was silent for a time. He responded by sharing a vision of the upcoming disasters facing all of us who were sharing this planet. He said there would be three great catastrophes on the earth, and we would be forced to learn to live off the land and work in community if we were to survive as a species. He said that the crocus I had seen were just one more sign of how ill our Mother, the Earth, is.

We rode in silence the rest of the way, partially because I was negotiating the rocks on the prairie path we had entered, and partially because his words had brought a solemn thoughtfulness to the group. I could see the bush and rock that marked the wheel in the distance and wondered what his reaction would be to this space. While I found much of the reserve land in the area near where I lived to be full of a pulsing energy and spirit, I had never felt that at this medicine wheel. This land had been taken over by farmers, who had most likely been unaware or unaffected by the sacred gift that their land held. The area was often used to graze cattle, and was scarred from their use. The group got out and walked in various directions, exploring. I watched the bent form of this wise medicine man trace a path around this land. The day was warm and I lay back for a while on the rock I was on to gaze at the sky. When I sat up he was gone. I asked one of the others where he was, and they said he was walking back. I was shocked as we had driven a long way and he was quite elderly. When I expressed my surprise the rest of the group shrugged and said that he had said this land was dead and he wouldn’t stay. One of the remaining group invited me into the wheel and began teaching me its ancient meanings that had been passed down to him by the Elders of his tradition. He pointed in each direction, sharing the teachings and the healings of each. Then he pointed to the northern spoke, with many rocks missing and much overgrowth and he said to me “This is your path, to the north. It is more difficult. It has been covered over by hundreds of years of domination. My people have had only 200 years of this. Our path is still strong, the stories are still told, it is easier for us to find our way back. Yours is more difficult, but it is the sacred path you must walk, it is the sacred story you must tell.”

Standing on the medicine wheel and sharing its power with the Cree storyteller, I realized it was time to stop running away from my story. While I struggled with the products of humanism that harmed, environmental degradation, hegemony, patriarchy, global terrorism, it was time for me to confront the imperial legacy I had been born into. This legacy affected the world I lived in, the world my children will inherit, and the world of every child I teach. It was time for me to walk this path on the wheel, face the painful truths I had avoided, and discover its medicine and healing. As we left the wheel the group discussed how it would take much time and ceremony to heal this sacred space and bring back any of the sacred energy that had existed during the time their people had inhabited this land. They wondered if the farmer would be willing to sell this small patch of grass that contained such a sacred symbol. I felt saddened and stilled, as I had so many times before, to be a part of a culture that so mindlessly had taken the land of these First Peoples and attempted to destroy their traditions. I wondered when the Western world would respect the ways of knowing of the people who had lived on this land in harmony for thousands of years and begin the long journey of repentance and reconciliation for the damage we have done.
Walking north

The path of colonization, imperialism, oppression and genocide that lay buried on this northern spoke of the wheel was not one I had learned of in an entire lifetime of walking on the prairie grass or sitting in the enclosed walls of the many brick school buildings I had occupied. It was a silenced story, pushed underground like the rocks I was staring at. I had never thought much about my northern roots, or the white skin and red hair that I had inherited. I never thought of cultural identities, including my own, as constructions, products and effects of social and historical relations and imbued with power (St. Denis, 2007). I certainly did not believe that my white skin automatically constructed me as superior. My mantra as a human being and an educator had always been that we are all equal as human beings and I had no idea what effect that dismissive statement had on those who had been oppressed on this land. Just as Peggy McIntosh (1998) writes, I too “had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (p. 165). This northern walk I was instructed to take was going to be a long and painful one as I faced the task of deconstructing hundreds of years of colonization. What I did not realize was how deeply this colonization affected me as the granddaughter of immigrants to this land and the privilege I now held as a result.

As I stood on this land with these people whose ancestors had been here since time began on this continent and watched them walk upon what had once been sacred ground, something inside of me began to shift. As I watched them step with sadness over the cattle droppings that littered the center of the medicine wheel something began to stir. As I watched the medicine man walk with resignation away over the hills, away from a sacred space and a land that he declared dead, questions began to rise. How had this sacred space been taken from the hands of these people and why? How was it that it was not being returned to them now that it was at least recognized as sacred? How was it that the traditions and spiritual practices of these Nations had been deemed less than by white settlers and government leaders of the time, attitudes that continued into today? How was it that I, a white person, could be treated with such disrespect and these teachings and stories shared, despite the history of this land which I understood very little about. As I watched and listened to the stories and teachings that were offered so generously to me, I began to feel a sense of uneasiness and disturbance regarding several of the trends that I recognized in both the educational and social cultures of recent times. I had recently attended the “Teaching Treaties in the Classroom” workshop offered by the Office of the Treaty Commission but had walked away with no real understanding of the words “We are all treaty people” that were stamped on the white box I took back with me to school. Now I wondered about my delivery of this content in my classroom when this walk on the medicine wheel showed me how little I understood about these Peoples or the Land I was standing on. I was completely unaware of the dangers of including First Nations and Métis content in the classroom without any critical deconstruction of imperialism or with no concept of decolonizing or anti-racist education or even any awareness of the need to do this. Perhaps it was some improvement over the typical “historical Indian” teaching I had engaged in the past, but still dangerous as ideas of genocide, land grabbing, assimilation and oppression were all completely unconscious and therefore absent from my teaching. I had been uncritical of the recent trend to integrate into ecological and science education literature First Nations world views and beliefs about nature, usually written by white scientists and ecologists. These writings spoke of the need for “aboriginal” or “native” knowledge to help with the environmental crisis Western ways had created. I had never questioned the sage bundles, sweet grass strands and books containing “traditional knowledge” I saw displayed on the shelves of Western stores.

That day on the medicine wheel was to mark the beginnings of a slow, painful realization that cultural genocide has taken place on this land we now call Canada and that I had taken no steps as an individual to learn about this or deal with it. How could I teach about First Nations ways, demand their knowledge to help save the earth, or learn from their deep spiritual traditions when I had made no attempts to repair my own relationship with these peoples and nations? I had made no admission of harm and guilt in my own complicity in this continued reality and had no recognition of the privilege I had as a white woman at an entire cultures expense. Until I began to walk the path of deconstructing the colonial history of this land and could become aware of my continual complicity in the perpetuation of cultural genocide and assimilation, I was contributing to the continued colonization of the First Peoples of this country who are the “tragic victims of modernization and progress” (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 2). Walking north would require that I open my eyes.

“Scattered across the Great Plains of North America are thousands of enigmatic stone circles constructed by Aboriginal peoples. These so-called medicine wheels represent the spiritual keepers of Aboriginal knowledge and mark the historical stages of Aboriginal cultures.”

Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. v
Spirit comes to school

My eyes were closed as I took in the sounds of twenty-eight bodies breathing, barely heard over the slow trickle of water running over rocks. The air felt clear in this room and the energy still, relaxed, and deepening. I slowly opened my eyes and looked around at the class of thirteen and fourteen year olds who were never silent and rarely still in the classroom. But here, in this sacred space that they had helped to create with teachers and parents, they sat with eyes closed, some relaxed in chairs, others on a couch, some on the floor surrounded by plants, and some leaning back on wooden stumps near the water. It was from this sacred space of stillness, awareness, and attention that we would approach our discussions on culture that the curriculum directed us to study. Entering a sacred space both externally and internally seemed to create the conditions for students to be more open to enter conversations regarding other ways of knowing. They seemed more aware of the sacred space we enter when we want to understand ways different from our own, just as we took our shoes off before we entered this room, we were learning to metaphorically remove our sandals before we entered the sacred spaces of other ways of knowing and being. As I brought the students back to begin today's discussion, I marvelled at the gift of this space and the knowledge that had come to us in such a synchronistic, magical way.

I had returned from my time in the land of illness wondering if part of the healing needed by many of the students in our school was spiritual. My personal experiences had convinced me that human beings are interconnected with all the energies in every plant and animal, cell and star and that somehow our disconnection from the Earth, these energies and our inner selves was damaging not only to the planet but to us. But I had no idea how I would approach this with the class of grade eight students I taught in my hours. I was not a principal, or with the staff I was charged with leading. Then one day a woman came to the school to use the phone as her car had broken down, and when she left we had agreed to a pilot of a renewed curricular document which focused on critical and creative thinking and personal and social values. The woman happened to work for the Ministry of Education and was a part of this curricular renewal project. She was especially excited about the spiritual development component. I was stunned to hear that the Ministry was moving in this direction and that it could be possible to have three half day workshops and receive the document and implement this in the school. The staff enthusiastically embraced the idea of the workshops as many could see that the renewed objectives completely supported what we were already doing in the school and could support the more recent commitment the staff had made to holistic education; body, mind, emotions and spirit were all to be taken into account in our teaching. This curriculum offered us the tools to explore how spirit could come to school.
“As I look at the huge problems our young people will inherit—racism, poverty, violence, the degradation of nature—I can’t imagine how we will make it if we leave soul out. My hope is that each of us finds a way to act to make sure that no child’s soul is left behind and that every aspect of the human spirit is welcomed in our homes, communities, and especially our schools.”

Latieri, 2001, p. 170

Soulful education

I had returned to school from my illness changed but I was to soon realized there had also been significant change within the school division which had been driven by higher levels of government. The amalgamation of school divisions that had taken place in my absence seemed to have been accompanied by an embracing of the ideology of global competition, which as Miller (1996) states, narrows the role of the school into the production of consumers and producers. With amalgamation came the discourses of efficiency, data collection, standardization, accountability, and outcomes based curriculum. All of these emphasize production and results rather than the processes of learning and all “ignore the important areas such as personal and social development” (Miller, 1996, p. 4). This shift would only further acculturate and educate children into a dualistic, objectified, alienated consciousness and teach them to see themselves as subjects that are separate from the world. I knew that the entrenchment in this idea of a solid, separate self resulted in seeing the world as not-self, or “other”. As Loy (2003) points out the problem with this is that “[t]he alienated subject feels no responsibility for the objectified other and attempts to find satisfaction through exploitive projects that, in fact, usually increase the sense of alienation” (p. 172).

Bai & Cohen (2007) write that intrinsic respect for people and nature comes out of a perception that the universe and all beings within it are “alive” and “sacred” and in order for this to create this shift in perception we need “to introduce views and practices that will help people to inhabit a non-dualistic, intersubjective consciousness” (p. 39). There was however little to no support for teachers within schools to engage with philosophies or practices which would lead to such shifts in perception. Miller (1996) notes that “[w]e rarely hear from a government official that education might help in the development of human beings and the human spirit” (p. 1). That had definitely been my experience as an educator; things like spirit and soul were not a part of secular public education, and just barely visible under the dogma of religious education in the Catholic schools I had taught in. And yet in the midst of all this movement towards global education, standardization and accountability there was the creation of a curriculum document which focused on social, emotional and spiritual development. The Renewed Objectives for the Common Essential Learnings of Critical and Creative Thinking and Personal Social Development (Finney, 2008) stated that a spiritual development component was further delineated within this curriculum to “support teachers in responding to the goal of education in this area in a way that is consistent with the democratic and multicultural nature of Saskatchewan society” (p. 1). I had no idea that spiritual development was not a new area but had long been one of the goals of education in Saskatchewan, as this document stated. What was new was the inclusion of objectives for each grade level and guidance and background information for teachers. Within this document I found the support I needed to continue in the work of creating respectful, healing, loving relationships within the school as well as to educate in a way that recognized the intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual needs of children. This curriculum could also support practices which would provide students with opportunities to still the discursive mind and open possibilities to experience non-dual states of consciousness. Teachers were encouraged to support students in developing the abilities to be still, quiet, peaceful, and silent and to become reflective and aware of how such states feel.

There was a deep hope evident within this curriculum document that such a spiritual focus within schools could support “a sense of connection with others that transcends individual/cultural differences” and a “profound interdependence with all beings, life forms and forces” (Finney, 2008, p. 246). It provided a direction to not just talk about diversity, but to engage in practices that would allow children and adults to move beyond the objectifying ego consciousness which is alien to “other”, whether human, nonhuman, or nonsensate (Bai & Cohen, 2007). It allowed me to provide opportunities for children to experience non-dual consciousness where one is capable of intersubjectivity and an experience and understanding of the interdependence that exists between all peoples and all sentient beings. Sitting in our spirit room after a time of meditation and silence allowed for more openness to discussions of the sacredness of all cultures and belief systems. We could explore race and gender as social constructions as this curriculum encouraged us to do. Sitting on the land doing breath work and sitting in silent observation deepened students connections with the sacredness of the natural world “linking the soul with the Earth soul, or Gaia” (Miller, 1996, p. 9). Engaging spirituality meant that school became for me a soulful place and a sanctuary “an integrated system of souls—not so much a place but a state of mind in which [we could] flourish” (Secretan, 1996, p. 38).
Little school on the prairies

My new keys struggled to open the metal door as I took in the chipped grey paint and the graffiti covered brick walls. The halls echoed in the summer heat as I walked quietly, glancing into rooms filled with desks in neat and orderly rows, chalk on ledges and textbooks lining the shelves. Tattered green curtains hung limply from the windows and a lone fan buzzed softly in the oppressive silence. The honour role plaques gleamed brightly on the main entrance wall, names of the privileged and chosen emblazoned for all to see. Awards of gold, silver and bronze champions of knowledge crowded the white-washed walls. A bare wooden cross stood solidly marking the entrance to the dusty office.

A long, dark hallway led to the back office and sweat ran down my back as I approached the space that would be my home for the next five years. At the creak of the switch the fluorescent hum broke the stillness and shed some light on my new home. A large desk crowded the room, imposing itself against any guests who dared to enter the chamber of authority. Stark, cold and empty it mocked me as I entered, carrying a small, green plant, my family photos, seashells and a paper angel. I wanted to run out. Instead I went to the store and bought a tree. A lone tree that I placed in the hall across from the wall of fame—of shame. There we stood, two solitary newcomers, facing each other in solidarity.

I wondered if I would be spending a lot of time as a lone newcomer here as I thought back to the first meeting I had attended with the new group of principals and vice-principals I would be working with. I had gone to the meeting very enthusiastic to meet these people but when I had approached a group of women to greet someone I had known years ago I sensed a lack of welcome. As I had walked towards the group for an enthusiastic hello they had turned towards me, pulled together and all signs of smiles and welcome washed off of their faces. I faltered, slowed down, and approached cautiously. I had no idea what was going on but the energy from the group was palpable…I was not welcome, did not belong, was not wanted. This had seemed odd to me as my interview to get the job as principal in this new school division had been very positive, and the senior administrators had shown very open to the ideas of restorative justice, progressive curricular ideas and spirituality that I had discussed with them. I had come with hopes that engaging in educational practices that supported the emotional and spiritual lives of children would be encouraged and supported in this Catholic school division.

I had also come because I knew that I had to walk this northern spoke on the wheel of my life and that included returning to the city of my birth and the faith into which I had been born. I had left both, run from both, for many years now and knew that it was time to return with different eyes and look again. As I walked slowly down the halls steeped in tradition back into the light of the summer day, I hoped I had the courage and strength it was going to take for this journey.
"The longings of the human heart, the desires for meaning, purpose and fulfillment are all born of a yearning that defies rational explanation. Mystics have known this for many millennia. And so have most humans, if they could learn to trust their intuitive wisdom. But our educational systems have effectively indoctrinated us to be subservient consumers, who don’t ask informed questions and collude with those who claim they can satiate our essential hungers."

O’Murchu, 2007, p. viii

**Circling the wagons**

Education in the Western world has become small and protective; a kind of circling of the wagons around what people think they are sure of and what they can control. One of our central challenges in education is rallying around fixed ideologies which sounds the death knell for a diversity and creativity of responses (Wheatley, 1998). I had developed a sense of this over the last few months as I began to engage in graduate level university classes which had challenged the epistemologies, ontologies and the ideologies I had often unwittingly ascribed to. Coming to this new school division I was more determined than ever to question traditional thinking and ideas and dig underneath the ideologies that drove Western education. I was sure that these could be brought to light, examined, deconstructed and then new ideas could emerge.

Returning to the Catholic faith into which I had been born, rebelled against and walked away from many years ago was also driven by similar questions and desires. I detested the patriarchal, hierarchical structures of the church and the moralizing indoctrination in the same way I struggled with many of the discourses within education. Just as I felt that there had to be something beneath or beyond the structures of education, in the same way I believed there could be much more to faith and spirituality than the narrow vessel religion had become. Rohr (2009) wonders why the "world religions stopped doing their job of spiritually transforming people and cultures?" (p. 11) but I questioned if the Christian faith was even capable of this. In my experience "much of religion itself has become a search for social order, group cohesion, and personal worthiness, or a way of escaping into the next world, which unfortunately destroys most of its transformative power" (ibid, p. 15). In all my days in Catholic schools and churches I had never experienced anything but this, but my spiritual questing of the last several years had led me to wondering if there was some truth to the sense that I had always had that there was something deeper within this tradition.

In the past year I had begun to spend some time at a retreat house near my home that was an interfaith center, rooted in the Catholic tradition but very engaged in dialogue with many spiritual traditions. It was not unusual on one weekend to have a yoga retreat, a recovery program and a Catholic nun teaching on gender issues in the Christian churches. Living in this retreat center was a small group of Franciscan monks. Initially I began to attend retreat events and Sunday mass there because they challenged my thinking and went much deeper into the traditions of the Christian faith than I had ever experienced. But what kept me returning was the absolute unconditional love and peace these elderly men all radiated. Nothing was hurried, no one was rushing, all were welcome, and as I sat in the circular center of this retreat house and listened as the soft brown robes rustled softly past in the silence I felt close to some secret about this religion that I had never touched before. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk writes that "[t]he monastery is a controlled environment for the professional pursuit of cultivating one’s contemplative dimension" (1983, p. 8). I became curious about the knowledge that had been gathered by these seekers, and found within the small library, books filled with the history and practices of Christian contemplation, centering prayer and mysticism. Here in the walls of this monastery I was to discover the wisdom of hundreds of years of knowledge, practices and Christian traditions focused on contemplation, nonduality, and "third eye" seeing (Rohr, 2009, p. 23), all pointing to spiritual awakening and the transformation of the human person.

As I began to learn about and experience this path of Christian contemplation I began wonder if schools could become sacred ground with places and spaces for of silence and contemplation? Could schools become places where we could reclaim our intuitive wisdom and inner resources and outgrow the ideologies that control our lives and our hearts (O’Murchu, 2007). Merton (1961) writes that through contemplation we know by “unknowing”, even beyond all knowing or unknowing. “Contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own lights, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self” (Merton, 1961, p. 2). Through awareness, awakening, entering the “naked now” (Rohr, 2009) could we see more clearly other ways of being beyond the discourses of progress, success and competition that humanism promotes? Could education become a means of awakening from such a trance? These were the questions that I took with me to my new school division and hoped to enact within this Catholic school with its rich, deep, hidden tradition of practices for awakening such an awareness. What I had not expected was that in the same ways I had found people tied to the ideologies of humanism, many were bound, perhaps even more tightly, to the truth claims of religion.
It was the first day of school with the new staff. While I was looking forward to starting the year, I was apprehensive about the provincial government’s requirement for all schools to create a Continuous Improvement Framework Plan which was being newly implemented across the province. It felt like a lot of pressure with a staff that was new to me and to each other to create goals together that were to improve outcomes for all students and to have those complete by the end of September. I was especially concerned after the week of student registrations that we had just finished, as it was apparent that the majority of the families who had registered had significant social needs. I knew that our goals for the year would need to reflect and respond to some of these needs that the children were coming with, and that this was never an easy task. We began the day with a discussion that would build our shared vision of an ideal school. As I listened to the input and ideas of the staff, I could not reconcile what they were discussing with the many families and children I had met in the last week of registration. While I had met children who had been in many schools and had histories of poor school performance and behavioral struggles, the staff shared that the community expected high academic standards and quality performance from this school. While I had met families living in poverty, several who were single parents or grandparents raising their children, the staff talked about how the families at the school wanted quality athletic programs and good behavior. While I had talked to families who shared stories of mental illness, substance abuse, and social services involvement, the staff talked about the need for order and rules to be followed. While I interviewed many families who had a Catholic member of the family somewhere in their history but were non-practicing, or were not Catholic but interested in their child being exposed to some form of spirituality, the staff talked about the number of masses we should have and getting the priests to come to the classroom. I was completely confused by what was taking place and could see it would be a long road to a shared vision.

We then moved on to some discussions regarding our beliefs about restorative justice, school safety, the need to support students when they reported school violence of any kind. I believed that one of the most basic needs of children was to be safe and in order for learning to happen, we needed to minimize physical and emotional violence of any kind. I knew that many of the new children we had registered either had histories of school violence or were the victims of it and assumed that there were children at the school who also struggled with these issues. At this point, one teacher spoke up, the only male on the staff, who stated that he didn’t know what I had heard about this school, but that they didn’t have kids like that. As many of the long time staff shook their heads in agreement, he emphatically stated that kids weren’t “bad” in this school and he didn’t see that he would be needing the office to support him in keeping a safe classroom and school. I thought back to the many families I had met over the last two weeks of registration, some new to the community and some returning to this school for the second or third time, and I wondered about this statement.

Later we discussed some changes that had been made to the breakfast program that had been in operation at the school. During registration week, almost every one of the many families we had registered had signed up for the community lunch program that was provided by a community organization for families that could not provide lunch for their children. When I began to get a sense of the social needs of this community, I called senior administration to ask if this was a school that had special status as a “Community School,” which meant we would be provided extra support and funding including breakfast and lunch programs. I was told that the school had no such status, but that it had received funding for a breakfast program for the fall. I called the organization that was to provide breakfast only to learn that minimal funding would be provided to students who the school had designated as “in need.” I could see that this would never meet the needs I had observed only in the first week, so rephrased and now happily shared with the staff that we had received funding to provide breakfast to any and all children who wished to before school started each day. The reaction I received completely took me off guard. The existing staff were visibly upset, stating again that this wasn’t that kind of school, they didn’t have “poor” kids here, and that it wasn’t the role of the school to feed families. As the day drew to a close, I could see that the views about this school in particular and about education in general were very diverse and wondered if a shared vision would even be possible within an entire year, let alone in the month I had to do it.
Re-viewing social problems

Mullaly (2010) writes that “there are three major competing but unequally held explanations for the existence of social problems in liberal democratic societies such as Canada” (p. 7). These differing perspectives mean that people do not actually “see” social problems in the same way, let alone have similar approaches to responding to them. These ways of perceiving social problems stem from the ideologies at work in society. Hall (1990) defines ideology as “those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 8). These ideologies reify and maintain the oppressive power structures that ensure the sanctity of the dominant group’s power (Pascarella, 2007).

Some view social problems as the result of a deficiency in the individual and blame is placed upon the victim and/or the subculture to which they belong. The solution to social problems then becomes one of correcting, making up for, managing or changing the deficiencies in the individual or culture by altering the behavior of the person. “If effect people are worked on so that they can better fit into the mainstream, into the culture of the majority or dominant group” (Mullaly, p. 13). These approaches to social problems leave institutions and systems unchanged. In contrast, a liberal-humanist view sees social problems as stemming from the social disorganization that emanates from large changes in peoples lives, caused by such things as industrialization, urbanization and globalization. These changes are seen to disrupt the individual, resulting in alcoholism, family breakdown and dysfunction, domestic violence and so on (Mullaly, 2010). Social problems are approached from a humanitarian perspective, providing social care to people disrupted by these changes as well as fine tuning, or reforming the system which is viewed as having a few limited imperfections in an otherwise equitable and just society. Esteva, Stuchal & Prakash (2005) write that “[t]he ‘needy man’, a new species, is a product of capitalism and is continuously reproduced in the economic society” (p. 18). This has created the major business of modern society; social service, with educators being one specific class of service professionals. Another explanation for social problems is the social conflict or change perspective which attributes them to the social practices and structures that favour some groups while oppressing others. Stemming from critical theory, this view sees that the oppressed are subjected to all kinds of social problems, and believes that the solution is to transform society into one in which there is social equality for all. Education is seen as site where dominant forms of oppression are unlearned and deconstructed, and dominant ideologies challenged in the curriculum and everyday actions in schools (Verma, 2010). Bowers (2005) critiques such social conflict views of social problems stating that often the “progressive” reforms that stem from critical theory can be both hegemonic and ecologically indifferent. She goes on to say that they perpetuate the double bind of using the same mind set to solve problems that it created in the first place.

Early critical social theory was bound up with the Western assumptions of progress, success, individualism, development. In recent years a critical postmodernist perspective has created another lens through which to view social problems. Foucault’s analysis of criminality found that it was practices or discourse that create the category of criminality, thus concluding that social problems are constructed and interpreted (Mullaly, 2010). Fleras (2001) writes that “[s]ocial problems involve conditions that are socially constructed and contested yet reflect objective reality” (p. 3). This perspective cautions us that when we see aspects of the structures of power in society we cannot assume that oppression has the same effect upon all people within a particular social group such as poor people or people of a cultural group. We are reminded to contextualize social problems within the issues of power and domination, to identify what gives rise to class, race and gender inequities, and to look at how power shapes our consciousness. We are challenged to critically acknowledge one’s place within these ideological structures and then reconstruct our identities. For many years I had assumed the identity of the hero who saves “those kids” who apparently need saving. This community and those I encountered within it would challenge me to deconstruct these ideological positions instead of being “numbed by my good intentions and by an upbringing in a system of power and privilege that reinforces the ambiguity of my whiteness” (Pascarella, 2007, p. 43). I needed to turn the gaze of a critical poststructural perspective upon myself and realize that it wasn’t “others” that needed saving, but my view of social problems that needed re-viewing.
Healing Discipline

We sat together on the couches in the behavioral classroom where one of the boys spent half of his days when he was not at our school. The other boy looked nervous but both were respectful of the Elder in the room. They had agreed to this process, a chance for traditional healing between them with the Elder. They both felt a connection to their heritage and both families had agreed this may be a strong way for both of them to learn. As the Elder began to light the sweet grass she talked to the boys of how we would begin in prayer before we would discuss what had happened between them. She told them this was a healing time for both of them. After several attempts and the braided grass would not light, she looked around and asked if anyone in the room was on their moon time. This was a new expression for me but as there were only two women in the room, and she was looking at us, after a few seconds I understood, and said that yes I was. She asked me to leave the room and remain outside until she was done the prayer and then I could return. As I closed the door behind me and as I looked back through the glass window, I saw the sacred plant instantly light, and surround the group in sacred smoke and prayer.

The remainder of our time together was just as magical for me as I watched this small woman who radiated power and wisdom, respectfully listen, question, teach and guide these two young men to resolve their differences. Their issues with each other were serious and had erupted in violence with a knife and a life threatening situation two days ago on the school grounds. I could see something happening between the three of them that I did not understand but definitely felt deep respect and awe for. I had spent a great deal of time with both of these boys, seeing their anger, defensiveness and defiance to the system. I thought back to the first day of school as they had been among the many parents and students who had been greeted to the new school year by a teacher yelling from the top of the stairs to take off their hats, take off their shoes and to stay outside until the bell rang. This was just one of many ways that students were controlled, punished, coerced, manipulated and frightened into compliance and what was viewed as appropriate behavior. While I had worked over the last two months to try and move this stuff away from punishing children and managing them by fear, I realized that the restorative approach that I was taking with students was still in many ways very different than what I was witnessing between the Elder and these two boys. The way the Elder spoke to them and guided them through ceremony, conversation and teachings brought out a side of them I had never seen in the school: deep respect, intense listening, willingness to share, and true connection. I realized in that moment how little I knew of the First Peoples of the land I was walking on and the worlds of these two young men that I was trying to guide and teach. It was obvious that this time with the Elder was healing not just their immediate issue, but perhaps also the long-term effects of Western discipline that had been imposed upon them. It was here that I began to reconsider who it was that had the problem in our schools, and who or what had been failing.
White washing

In this new school I continued to promote restorative discipline approaches as a far better alternative to the punitive, autocratic approaches so common in schools. I did this not just because I believed it strengthened and taught children (Glasser, 1998; Gossen, 1996; Kohn, 1993; Ross, 1996), but also because it could perhaps be more effective with the growing numbers of First Nations and Métis students attending the school. Often restorative justice approaches to school discipline are referred to as coming from a new paradigm (Redekop, 2008) that is “rooted in aboriginal practices” (Gossen, 2004, p. 21). This idea that the restorative discipline I was enacting in the school was somehow similar to the “traditional” approaches of child raising within aboriginal communities (Ross, 1996) made me feel that perhaps I could better connect with these children and their families. However, as I experienced the interaction between the Elder and these young boys I began to realize that the restorative justice paradigm and the programs that arose from it did not begin to touch the depth of what I was witnessing. The ceremony, the protocols, the teachings and the spirituality came from thousands of years of cultural tradition and a world view that I in no way understood.

As I sat through this experience I became aware of a deep sense of being an outsider and as this intense discomfort grew I realized that in this situation I felt the sense of being “other”. I began to feel into an awareness that I had a racial identity; I was white. Schick (2009) states that “race” doesn’t figure consciously in the identity of most white people, and this invisibility of whiteness equates to a kind of racelessness. I had never been referred to by others as white, and I don’t think I had ever really thought of myself before this moment as having a racial identity; it had been invisible. I also had to admit I didn’t really want it to be visible; I felt a great reluctance to accept the history of dominance and oppression that came with this skin color and to admit to the privilege that I gained every moment because of it. In my many years of teaching and learning about culture, race, and multiculturalism within Western education I had never understood that “to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in racial imagery other than that of white people” (Dyer, 1997, p. 1). Schick (2009) writes that whiteness is a “construct that is produced through the effects of racial hierarchies and constructed dominance” (p. 119). This construction has created the illusion that whites are not a certain race but the human race. There is much power in this position of being ‘just human’ and allows the non-raced to claim to speak for the commonality of all peoples. As Dyer (1997) writes “[t]he media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speaking for whites while claiming—and sometimes sincerely aiming—to speak for humanity” (p. 3). Not being able to see that our whiteness leads to all kinds of privilege and power makes the positioning of whites in society and in schools even more secure.

What I experienced that day with the Elder and these two young men prompted the beginnings for me of what Dyer (1997) calls “making whiteness strange” (p. 4). I began to think about how my whiteness had been constructed, in all its complexities and contradictions. It took a long time to become fully aware of the way white people are privileged, and enjoy “unearned advantage and conferred dominance” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 14). As McIntosh points out, white people don’t see their privilege, or invisible assets. It is as if white culture and identity have no content, don’t exist, are really nothing in particular. Dyer (1997) cautions that “as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it” (p. 9). We then construct schools in our own image, filled with curriculum, discipline policies and programs which all reflect our dominant images imposed upon all others within our world. This invisibility of our whiteness also highlights the difference and otherness of those who we see as having a racial identity. We spend a great deal of time in schools talking about, planning for and responding to this racial other without ever seeing ourselves as having a race and the implications and ramifications of this white skin. Schick (2009) states that “[d]iscourses that omit talk about race depend on and reinforce the social meanings of who is “normal” and who is “the other”” (p. 119). This given sense that white is normal results in the creation of standards for what defines success, achievement and appropriate behavior. All others are to meet these standards or fail. This is why regardless of good will or good intentions, white power will continue to reproduce itself in our schools; it is not seen as whiteness, it is seen as normal. Because of this normalcy we will continue to speak our whiteness into, around and above all other racial knowledge, believing that our integration of their traditions and ways in our schools through curriculum and discipline programs is inclusive and connecting rather than just another appropriation and “eating [of] the other” (hooks, 1992).
gathering the troops

My heart sank when she announced that there was no application process or monies available right now for designation to become a Community School. After the hour long presentation by myself and the support of the director and the superintendent for the needs of the school, this was our answer. None of us had been aware that the Ministry of Education was reviewing its community school policies and I was devastated. I had no idea how to go about supporting the many needs in this school community, not just learning, but basic survival and safety needs. I knew that being recognized as a Community School would provide staff and funds to help to connect to the community and to support those children who were disenfranchised, lost, transient, on the move, hungry, violent, tired and lonely. I think she saw the looks of disappointment on our faces because she said she would take our request back and see what might be possible in the future. She also stated she was very impressed with the initiative that the staff had taken to respond to the needs of the children.

She then directed a very pointed question at the division administration. She wondered how they were and could support us in our needs. She felt there were things that the division could do to make things more bearable in the meantime. We had been trying to run the breakfast program with volunteers, but it was a huge commitment and at times people didn’t show up or we couldn’t fill the schedule so often our secretary came in early with some other staff and with the children made food available, especially for the little ones. Finally, we were given special permission for the year to use some grant money to hire a part-time staff person to provide some stability to the program. When the cold winds of winter came it had become very apparent that many students did not have warm clothing. We had been able to borrow some clothes and winter boots from another school that did have Community School designation and the parents in our PTA had been incredible with finding items for the children when we asked, but it was in piles in a storage cupboard because no one had the time to organize it all. A staff member had convinced the local ladies church group to knit mitts for our students and those had come in great numbers, and were in the hall available for the students who needed them. Staff who were encouraging students to come out for school activities quickly realized that rides to and from practices and games and money for the warm up clothes were just not possible for many families, so many coaches began driving groups of kids or organizing parents to help out. We were doing an admirable job of patching up some of the needs that we saw that were getting in the way of learning, but many that were becoming apparent to us we had no way of meeting. As I headed back to the school, I hoped for a miracle. And I was determined to do ask as they asked, and collect data as it appeared that in a climate of accountability, outcomes and test scores, that was what counted, not whether a child was fed, warm and safe in our schools.
Teaching in neutral

Community education has existed within Saskatchewan since 1980 when a discussion paper was released by the Ministry which formed the basis for the creation of Community Schools. At that time eleven Community Schools were designated in Saskatchewan to respond to urban Aboriginal poverty (Amendt, 2008, p. 4). By 2001, the numbers of community schools in the province had increased to 98, with several schools now qualifying that did not necessarily have high numbers of aboriginal students but still had significant social needs. Now it appeared the Ministry of Education had put a hold on the Community Education application process while they re-evaluated the status and success of the past years of Community Schools. I found this surprising considering that the vision of the SchoolPlus model which was adopted in by the Government of Saskatchewan in 2002 included an important recommendation that all schools in Saskatchewan adopt the Community Schools’ philosophy. I was confused, but the Ministry staff explained that with the data that had been collected over the thirty some years of community schools, the graduation rates of First Nations and Métis students were still very low and the data on reading levels and provincial assessments were also very poor. This data had resulted in questions being asked as to the “success” of the Community School initiative. I was very aware that many of the “successes” of Community Schools would not necessarily show up in the type of data that was being collected. I was also unsure how it was imagined that kids could achieve academic outcomes if they were hungry, scared and transient.

What was problematic in these discussions of “success” was the failure to critique the unspoken assumptions about the superiority of Western education. We failed to unearth the ways that Eurocentric priorities, values and ideologies are embedded in all of our approaches to teaching and learning, including community education. We never questioned or realized that when we think about education, teaching, learning, academic achievement and success, these are all embedded in values and perspectives that can be quite oppressive as they privilege only certain kinds of knowing as legitimate and marginalize or disadvantage others. Kumashiro (2004) writes that “[w]hat have come to be defined as good teaching in the United States [and I would add Canada] are approaches to teaching that reinforce certain ways of thinking, of identifying, and of relating to others, including ways that comply with different forms of oppression (including racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, colonialism, and other “isms”)” (p. xx). What we are doing in our schools as we work to help the Aboriginal child become successful is a form of cultural imperialism; we are teaching “them” to become more like “us”; to value what we value, want what we want, live as we live, and know as we know. In this way education, as a function of government, works to ensure “that all Aboriginal students [will] be inevitably absorbed into provincial systems and mainstream society” (Battiste, 1995, p. viii).

Fasheh (2008) writes that role of institutions in maintaining the hegemonic ideologies and knowledge within a society is of primary importance. Schools do not just transmit or provide knowledge but rather they “substitute one kind of knowledge for another in the context of a power relationship” (p. 325). Crucial in the hegemonic relationships that exist within Canadian culture and schooling is the belief that the lifestyle and values of the hegemonic group are inherently, naturally, and objectively superior. Because of this belief, which is invisible to most who benefit from it, educational systems force Eurocentric values, beliefs, and knowledge upon Indigenous peoples effectively displacing indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge. Battiste (2008) writes that “the results of these assimilationist strategies are multigenerational educational failures among Indigenous peoples and educational outcomes far below the national average” (p. 86). But we do not critically examine power relationships, hegemonic ideologies or our complicity in the hidden curriculum within schools as the “substantive cause of minority students’ low academic achievement” as Cajete (2008, p. 205) advises us to. Instead, we look to the ineffectiveness of our “Aboriginal Education” programs, and go about re-forming them, without ever recognizing that the term itself is a socially constructed Western idea and a “modern form of racialization” (Chartrand, 2010, p. 7). It has become so normal for racial discrimination and other forms of oppression to permeate our educational experiences that it goes unrecognized and unchallenged because we have been successfully convinced that schools are neutral (Kumashiro, 2004). In the discussions we had regarding the “success” of Community Schools the ideologies of Western education, which are in no way neutral, were not questioned.

“Insisting that we use our common sense when reforming schools is really insisting that we continue to privilege only certain perspectives, practices, values and groups of people. Common sense is not what should shape educational reform or curricular design; it is what needs to be examined and challenged.”

Kumashiro, 2004, xxiv
Hold your horses

The parents came into the staff room at recess very excited to share with the staff their ideas for this year's school grounds project. The parents had been working on playground for years installing new play equipment as old structures were out. This year discussions regarding the grounds had come up again as the primary play structure had been deemed unsafe and needed to be removed. The chain linked fenced yard was the size of postage stamp and covered with cement and crushed dust. Parents had tried many times to get a small grassed area to grow, but the newly seeded grass had been taken over by mile high weeds and the heavy traffic of students who wanted to play on the only green grass in the grounds had pounded it bare. The brick walls and cemented play spaces were covered with graffiti and littered with oil stains from its use as a parking lot for the church on the weekends. When we had been able to convince the church to stop parking cars where children played we began to discuss the grounds more seriously. They had become a darkened hideout for partying and drinking on the weekends, and every Monday we returned to broken bottles and more graffiti and garbage strewn across the play spaces. I began to talk with the parents about what we believed about play, about space, about the environment and how school grounds speak a language to the community about its beliefs and values. I shared with them what I had noticed as I spent time with my students out of doors and in the valley. What I had noticed was that when we spent time as a class sitting quietly in the hills, watching the river, writing in journals under a tree and thinking and creating in the covered outdoor shelter the conflict, stress and anxiety that often existed in the classroom dissipated. When I questioned the students about this shift they had expressed the need to be out of doors and out of the structure of formal education.

They wanted something different on the school grounds, many of them sharing that they had a need for places to socialize and relax and they imagined seating, trees, outdoor learning spaces, gardens, and a spiritual space. I shared with the parents the value of opportunities for children to connect with the animate Earth, and how it seemed to be healing for them. The parents began working with the students ideas and together with them created a draft design.

I had invited the group to share the ideas with the staff and gather further input for the school grounds design. It had never occurred to me that the staff would not be supportive of this initiative and direction as every day teachers spent a great deal of time in their supervision of this jail like grounds dealing with conflict, violence and injury and I was sure any change would be welcomed. However, when the parents began speaking about the process, and sharing the design ideas they had gathered a reaction happened that I had not expected. While most of the staff were silently listening and examining the plan, several vocal staff who had been at the school for many years stated that they did not like the ideas they were being presented with. They did not see how trees were a good idea on a school ground, and how an outdoor classroom and seating area would be functional. They could not understand how anyone could see plants and gardens as a part of a school yard and wondered how children could run, or play football or soccer when there were trees and benches in the way. They felt that the older students who wanted these spaces should be out running and playing not sitting around at recess. All of these additions would take away space for organized games and that was not what a playground was for. When the parents and I tried to speak for the students who had wanted an area to sit and visit with friends, shade on hot days, to be surrounded by nature and to see something living on their school grounds, they were uninterested. When I spoke of the research which showed huge reductions in violence when school grounds welcomed nature back, they were unaffected. When I spoke of the opportunities for teaching outside, for science learning, environmental stewardship, spiritual connection with the land, the few vocal opponents drowned me out. The parents were upset and deflated and I felt terrible that I had led them into this situation because of the assumptions I had made. I had never encountered teacher opposition to school ground naturalization, and while some of these arguments regarding children’s play had been heard from traditionally minded members of communities I had been a part of, on a teaching staff it was unexpected and surprising. However, the parents decided to go ahead with the fundraising for both a traditional play structure and for the naturalization process. It appeared even with opposition, the ideas for reanimating the earth of the school grounds would not be corralled and fenced in.
Can’t see the forest for the trees

Through several significant encounters with other ways of knowing, seeing and experiencing the world, I had come to know what Suzuki (1997) describes; “[t]here is no environment “out there” that is separate from us” (p. 7). However, I had no idea how to bring “othered” worldviews, epistemologies and ecologies forward when just the idea of putting trees on a playground was seen as foreign, dangerous and non-sensicle. The cognitive imperialism of modern society limits all thought and ways of knowing to just one view of the world. Suzuki (2007) notes that as we have developed modern technology based on this limited view of reality “our ancient understanding of the exquisite interconnectedness of all life has been shattered” (p. 3). Battiste (2000) writes that public education has “established Western science as a dominant mode of thought that distrusts diversity and jeopardizes us all as we move into the next century” (p. 194). Our reliance on Western scientific epistemologies has created the best and the worst in modern society; incredible economic prosperity for some and environmental crisis for all. Our overreliance on one epistemological stance is costing us the future of our children as we face the global disasters we have created with our scientific ingenuity. Having such limited access to only modern knowledge in our public educational systems has “placed our collective survival in jeopardy” (Battiste, 2000, p. 202).

The cognitive imperialism that drives the curriculum in Western schools has actively suppressed and denied all other ways of knowing, thus limiting the access of our children to knowledge bases that we may very well need to help us sustain life on our planet in the future. While many Western scholars are realizing how important Aboriginal knowledge may be to the survival of the world (Mander, 1991; Ross, 2008; Suzuki, 2007), Western education still actively denies the importance, relevance and at times even the existence of tribal epistemologies. In our schools we limit access to worldviews beyond our humanistic lens and “perpetuate the belief that different cultures have nothing to offer but exotic food and dance or a shallow first chapter in the story of what is to come” (Battiste, 2000, p. 202). All peoples once saw themselves as embedded within a world in which all the parts were intricately interconnected, but the Western legacy of Copernicus, Newton, Darwin and Descartes has fragmented us all into a million pieces. Creating a balance between these modern and indigenous worldviews is a great challenge facing modern education and a necessity for the survival of the future generations of all the Earth’s children.

We have been educated so far away from an epistemological and ontological stance that sees nature as animate and ourselves as interconnected within the web of life that we now need to relearn these ways of knowing and being. As I was told that day as I stood on the wheel looking north, my path home was very hidden and covered over by hundreds if not thousands of years of colonization. How was I to re-connect and re-learn these ways of knowing? I was becoming very aware that as Suzuki (2007) writes “[w]e have much to learn from the vast repositories of knowledge that still exist in traditional societies” (p. 26). But I wondered how was I, a white, settler-immigrant educator, to do this? How do I engage with aboriginal worldviews without subverting them into the dominant culture? Battiste (2000) writes that “dominant society has a tendency to take elements of traditional Aboriginal knowledge out of context and claim them for itself” (p. 194). How could I ensure that I would not participate in further exploitation of traditional knowledge and culture? I was being encouraged through new curricular directions to include First Nations and Métis content within the classroom, and I was intrigued with the ecological teachings of Indigenous peoples but I agreed with Maclvor (1995) who cautions that “such content must be incorporated into the classroom with care since traditional perspectives need to be treated respectfully, and a complete understanding of Aboriginal cultures is beyond the grasp of non-Aboriginal peoples” (p. 75). Over the past few years in Western society, education and environmental education I had witnessed a significant interest in the knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Battiste (2000) states that “[h]is interest has reinstalled the predatory mentality of Eurocentric thought” (p. 11). As Eurocentric society continues to contaminate the land, drift in the sea of consumerism and the wasteland of secularism, and the consequences of our actions become clear, can we now rush toward Indigenous knowledges for help? Can we demand that “Indigenous peoples share their knowledge, their hearts, bodies, and souls so that Eurocentric society can solve the various problems its worldview created?” (Battiste, 2000, p. 11). I felt uncomfortable with the whole idea but didn’t really know what else to do. It was not yet clear to me that the most important thing for me on this northern walk was to deconstruct the systems of Western knowledge I had been educated in and to become aware of the colonizing discourses and imperialistic worldview I had been “marinated in” (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005).
Small possibilities

It had been a busy day and as I looked down the hallway at the bustle of learning taking place I longed for a few minutes of quiet respite. It was literacy time in the primary classrooms and students were in levelled guided reading groups all over the place. Some in classrooms and others in the hallway on chairs engaged with their group in reading a new story and trying out new reading strategies. The adults and the children in these small groups were so intent on their discussions and reading that they didn’t even notice I was there as I stepped over the little bodies on my way to my new favourite space in the school. As I rounded the corner I already felt a sense of calm embrace me. Here in this room, of wool, and plants, and rocks and water I could take a breath from the day. As I sank into a small chair in the corner by the window to catch my breath from the business of the day I smiled in wonder. Who would have ever thought that the most peaceful place in the school would be a room filled with sixteen three and four year olds, over half of which had been identified as “vulnerable” or “at risk”.

The artificial florescent lights were turned off and the warm glow of the light table drew my attention. Several children were clustered around the space creating patterns with the colorful glass beads and shapes glittering on its surface. In the back corner another group were moving figures on the overhead projector and telling a story to each other as the characters danced on the white sheet on the wall. Several in paint shirts near the sink created masterpieces as they swayed slowly to the classical music playing softly in the background. Another group were elbows deep in soapy water, experimenting with different items to see which ones would float or sink. The teacher quietly talked with these children, taking notes for her documentation panels she would hang outside in the hall so all could see the inquiry and imagination of these little minds. The instructional assistant was at the back of the room with a group who were building structures out of large wooden blocks and cardboard boxes. She was supporting a little boy with communication delays who was painting and nodding to the children who were helping place his block. It was calm, serene, busy and beautiful. I left the room that day with an absolute faith in children as thoughtful, competent, strategic learners and as compassionate, loving and creative human beings. I was more determined than ever to continue to search for ways to provide a more holistic learning environment for all of the children in our school.
Re-viewing childhood

While we had been unsuccessful in our attempt for application for designation for Community School status, the Ministry had responded in the fall with support and funds for the establishment of an early intervention Prekindergarten program. In 1996, the Ministry of Education had implemented the Prekindergarten Program for Community Schools with the “intention of enhancing the capacity of communities and school divisions to provide early educational supports for young children” (Saskatchewan Education, 2008, p. 1). This program was established to provide for “vulnerable” children and Ministry documents state as it’s rationale for this provision that “it can be beyond the means and ability of some families to provide a stimulating environment and appropriate supports during the critical stage of early childhood. The school can play an important role in providing supports to children and their families” (p. 1). It is viewed that equitable opportunities are provided for children because some children need more supports in order to participate and achieve in school and develop in later life into caring competent contributing citizens who don’t require costly supports. The document goes on to state that “[c]hildren who display intellectual and social-emotional challenges during their early years are vulnerable to poor social, economic and health outcomes as young adults” (p. 2).

Modern, Western culture has specific discourses regarding children and childhood. Fu, Stremmel & Hill (2002) state that “[w]hatever “image of the child” we have constructed is influenced by larger cultural, social, historical, political, and economic factors, in addition to our ideological constructions” (p. 38). Western education is rooted in stage and maturational models of child development which tend to see childhood as preparatory, provisional and subordinate to adulthood. Our early childhood programs are seen as places where children develop “readiness” for entry into society as contributing members. Childhood in the Western world is constructed by a global epistemology of learning that values economic growth. Children are not valued for who they are now but for what they can do in the future to benefit society. Many early intervention or pre-kindergarten programs are guided by powerful discourses of advanced liberal economies that view the child as a potential worker. Clyde et al. (2006) ask “how important is it for children in the twenty-first century to be able to pose their own questions, offer hypothesis to understand their worlds, find their own solutions?” (p. 225). It appears that if our goal is to create future workers to meet the needs of society then these things become very unimportant. If the child is seen as vulnerable, in a state of “readiness” and not able, then the role of the preschool program is to ready them for the next stage of life in a culture of competition. In this way children in our Western schools are constructed as powerless and as Anderson & Johnson (1994) suggest “contempt for the powerless leads to oppression of the disadvantaged as well as to the abuse of children” (p. 17).

Many of the “at risk” students in community schools were (and continue to be) of First Nations ancestry (Whiteman, 2010). Many of the vulnerable children who enrolled or were placed in our early intervention program were of First Nations and Metis descent as well as children who were termed “visible minorities”, “developmentally challenged” or identified as having “social/emotional or intellectual needs”. We questioned how we could structure a preschool program that would be truly inclusive and responsive to all children and the divergent views of “childhood” that came from these many different worldviews. The teacher being assigned to this program had knowledge and training in the Reggio Emilia approach and we looked to this as a starting point. The discourses of childhood that flow through this approach construct children as competent, born “ready” to learn, and to be protagonists in their own learning and development and not merely consumers of information and ideas (Curtis & Carter, 2008; Fu, Stremmel & Hill, 2002). This perspective implies that children are fully human from birth, and therefore, they are worthy of our deepest respect. New (2003) writes that this philosophy runs “counter to a subject-centered, outcomes-based view of education and ha[s] challenged educators to rethink the purpose and the scope of what they do” (p. 35). This approach encouraged us to not look outward for the answers as to how to meet the needs of children but to look to our community with all its accumulated and diverse knowledge, experiences and wisdom to create a more holistic learning experience for children. We hoped to allowed all children and their families to express their voices in “hundreds of languages” (Malaguzzi as cited in Fu, Stremmel & Hill, 2002, p. 24), honouring the diverse views of childhood that were outside of and delegitimized by Western constructions.
Leaving privilege

It was about ten minutes into the School Community Council meeting when the door opened and a parent stalked in to join the group. As she slid into a seat down the long row of round tables across from me I could sense her anger. This was the largest group of parents that had ever attended a council meeting since I had been at the school and I was concerned about the energy I could sense from this parent. She had been a long time volunteer at the school and often on committees with the former PTA. She had backed away when the structure of the group changed into a School Community Council at the end of last year, a new requirement of the Ministry of Education. Some of the long time parents were uncomfortable with the changes; students were invited to attend from the leadership teams to present and gain support for their projects and a parent from each classroom was a part of the council now, there was no longer for the parents in their grades and to take information back to the classroom. Several of the new parents who had volunteered for this role were not the typical parents that had participated in the past; some were young single mothers, others new to the community, from other cultures and those who had for a long time been on the fringe, their children the ones who struggled with academics or behavior. We had also moved to a consensus decision-making format as a part of our new constitution which meant more discussion and debate and chances for everyone to have a voice, students included, and this was not well received by some parents who had been on the former PTA.

As we moved through the agenda and a new topic was brought up regarding the Restitution training night coming up which would be open all parents and staff, this woman erupted. She shouted at me across the long distance between us that she had just learned a family was leaving the school because their daughter was being bullied. She was sick of this Restitution stuff; she wanted the horrible kid that was responsible punished and kicked out, and for me to become more harsh with these “bad” kids that were getting away with bullying. She stated that we couldn’t afford as a school community to lose another “good” family like this and she threatened that I had better be sure that didn’t happen. She stated that she didn’t know what was happening to the school, that I was attracting these kinds of kids and families with the way I ran things and allowing kids to do whatever they wanted. She angrily shouted that I had better clean it up. I was shocked at the outburst and frantically searching my mind for how to do damage control on this one, because sitting beside her was the mother of the so called “bully” she was talking about, and across the table from her was the mother of one of those “bad” kids from one of “those families”, both of whom had only started coming to these meetings and feeling confident enough to speak. I wondered how badly their voices would be drowned out or damaged by this privileged outburst.
"One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth."

McIntosh, 1988, p. 169

Educating race

Education is one of many sites where white privilege, or infrastructural racism, is normalized rather than a site for critique of our socially constructed initiatives and assumptions. We do not examine how education perpetuates the status quo and excludes other knowledges and people. Imperialism has had a profound influence on the view of the world that most people hold. It perpetuates the myth of meritocracy and the myth of the land of the free, fooling us into believing that all of its benefits are equally, democratically available to all people. We remain peacefully unaware that this privilege is available only for a select few who already hold power due to the color of their skin. These myths serve “to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already” (McIntosh, 1998, p. 169). It was clear at this meeting that this power was being displayed, that the voice of class and racial privilege was going to silence those “othered” voices at the table. It was really race and class that was attacked, not the presumed behavior of a child. In fact, there had been no “bullying”. The family had stated that they removed their child that they did not like the behavior of their daughter when she associated with “particular” young women in her class and felt she needed “different” peers to associate with. The outburst at the table was not in fact about discipline and bullying, that it was perceived I had allowed such children to enter the school and was giving them a voice and teaching, rather than disciplining and expulsion to another school. The majority of the children under attack at this meeting came from families who were economically disadvantaged and racially different.

The ways in which relations of domination are lived and sustained are complex. Privileged white families and their children “are not seen to possess norms and values that derive directly from their social location and that are sustained by such practices as considering individuals outside of their social context” (Razack, 1998, p. 38). The subtle imperial themes of difference and identity became much more obvious in this clash at the parent council meeting, where discourses of “good” families leaving and “bad” kids getting away with things were made visible. The implication was that with the entry of “other” types of families into the school and their inclusion in places where their voice could be heard, such as the parent council, was driving away the good families. Schick & St. Denis (2005) explain that “[i]t is the normative and tacit production of whiteness that gives licence to more overt and deliberate acts of racism” (p. 310). White privilege is symbolic and a racial construct and as a discursive practice it sustains Eurocentric world views held in place by inherited ideologies and institutions such as education. People rarely deconstruct or question the beliefs they hold, both individually and socially, that perpetuate the colonized agenda, cycles of oppression, and concepts of privilege. Sammel (2009) states that people “hold these perspectives due to their conscious or unconscious cultural articulation of hegemonic colonial Canadian values” (p. 57). The discourse at this council meeting were representative of the power hierarchies and colonizing agenda embedded in Western societies. Dyer (1997) writes that “as a product of enterprise and imperialism, whiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination” (p. 13). Ratcliffe (2000) notes that whiteness, like any other socially constructed category (student, teacher, dean, gender, race, class), is a trope, “and the actions and attitudes associated with this trope are embodied in all of us (albeit differently) via our socialization” (p. 96). The problem is that performing whiteness, which signifies privilege, is often an invisible practice for white people who assume their own thinking and acting to be the norm and this privilege is kept firmly in place by denying and resisting differences. This is what enables the racism in our prairie schools to escape scrutiny.

Schick & St. Denis (2005) state that “[t]he narrative of the Canadian prairie context is invested in intercultural relations that privilege whiteness and marginalize Aboriginal people and other racial minorities” (p. 295). Having white skin on the prairies has generally meant that race is something other people have. Prairie people claim that their success in school, and that of their ancestors is because they worked hard and had a desire to “better” themselves, thus equating the failure of “others” as a lack of trying. We claim principles of equality but practice racism. McIntosh (1998) writes that “most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist” (p. 169). Fine (1997) states that “where whiteness grows as seemingly “natural” proxy for quality, merit, and advantage, “color” disintegrates to embody deficit or “lack” (p. 58). We then claim that “it is our meritocracy and not our violence that continues to secure white domination” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 303) in our schools, our parent councils and our society.
Stirring the ashes

I was in such shock as I watched the scene unfold before me in the center aisle of the church that I couldn’t respond. I just stood there as these parishioners pushed past the little children that I and the student ushers were trying to guide to the stations for the receiving of the ashes. As my vice-principal saw what was happening and tried to intervene he was pushed out of the way by an angry, elderly gentleman who firmly told him to get the hell out of the way. This was his church not ours. As he bulldozed a path through the children who were lined up in the aisle, several parishioners followed him, looking in disgust and annoyance at the little multi-colored faces that I held back in my arms who had not yet noticed what had happened. I looked up at my vice-principal and shook my head as he made to follow them and stop them. There was no point angry as we both were, there was something much deeper happening here than either of us could stop.

Our faith goal as a staff to create more of a connection between the children in our school and the church community that was ten steps from our back door seemed somewhat naïve at this moment. We had assumed that all we had to do was invite the parishioners to celebrate with us, spend time with our children in prayer, and community would happen. This Ash Wednesday church service was one of many celebrations and masses that we had at the church in the last few months, but this time rather than inviting parishioners to join us, this was a full integration of the parish and school. It was the only day that Ash Wednesday service being offered and as a result at least a hundred people from the parish had attended. The church was packed and hot and the service was long. It had been difficult for many of the parishioners to follow as the language barrier between the newly immigrated priest and our children was significant. I had been so proud and impressed with our students who participated in all parts of the mass and who sat quietly through what was now almost the hour and a half point. To see this reaction on the part of the members of this parish stirred the ashes of some deep feelings I had been able to bury.

This show of entitlement, of exclusivity, of hierarchy, of judgement, and of racism were all of the hypocrisies I had struggled with in my relationship with this patriarchal religion. I felt protective of the fragile spirituality we were trying to grow with our students, and did not want it crushed under the ignorant heels of these parishioners and their attitudes. As I watched the elderly, white, privileged parishioners push their way out of the church at the end of the mass, fur coats disdainfully pulled away from touching the children in the aisle, I looked up at the figure of the risen Christ, arms spread wide, hovering over the exit: I wondered how he would respond to these little children being pushed away from him in disgust because they did not fit with the image of who the Christian God would and should save. I imagined he would roll over in his grave if he had one.
"The missionary finds among a people that are so constantly moving about that if he is to expect real, good work it must be done by gathering a number of the children together in Home or Boarding school or Industrial Institution where they can be kept constantly and regularly at school and away from the evil influences of heathen life."

Crosby, 1914, as cited in Archibald, 1995, p. 293

**Saving grace**

Christians tend to see themselves as liberal minded citizens, knowledgeable and sympathetic of the "other", and yet many of these "othered" people associate "whiteness with hypocrisy, especially religious hypocrisy, as when people profess Christian principles yet practice racism" (Ratcliffe, 2000, p. 99). Christianity "has been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history" (Dyer, 1997, p. 17). Christianity in many ways has shaped the European feeling for self and the world, and while church attendance in the West may be on the decline, these discourses still in many ways make up the ways in modern society that people think and feel. Much of the identity of white settler society "swirls around the creation and maintenance of the dark "other" against which their own whiteness and goodness is necessarily understood" (Schick & St. Dennis, 2005, p. 309). Western Christianity affirms the notion that white citizens will be the helpers of the "exotic other", creating national discourses with which white Christian people can identify as the "helper of the less fortunate", even while affirming the taken-for-grantedness of white privilege (Schick & St. Dennis, 2005, p. 312). Green (2009) notes that "[m]ost of those with privilege are happily unaware of the particulars of Canada’s colonial past and also of the contemporary consequences of colonialism, which include both Aboriginal trauma and white privilege" (p. 134).

Christianity became the religious export of Europe, bringing its culture and consciousness to the imperial, colonizing enterprise. Dyer (1997) states that "Christianity (and the particular inflection it gives to Western dualist thought) is founded on the idea-paradoxical, unfathomable, profoundly mysterious—of incarnation, of being that which is in the body yet not of it" (p. 14). This idea gives white people a special relation to race because they cannot be reduced to their bodies, they are something else that is not reducible to the body or then to the racial. This underlying idea of Christian embodiment, that some bodies have spiritual qualities and others do not, is a trope of white racism. It was through this trope of embodiment that "church authorities argued that Indigenous peoples were infidels, natural slaves, children or backward savages" (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 97). "In colonial times, Eurocentric religions were exported to Indigenous peoples as superior commodities that it was deadly to refuse" (Rahner as cited in Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 97). Educational systems were complicit with Christian domination and religious oppression as missionary schools were established with the purpose of "Christianizing and civilizing First Nations children" (Archibald, 1995, p. 292). Religious educational aims focused on conversion and "[t]he ‘knowledge of most worth’ was considered to be Catholicism, English and later, the general subjects of grammar, spelling and arithmetic, in that order" (Archibald, 1995, p. 293). Kanu (2008) states that "[t]he curriculum offered in these schools was intended to break First Nations students of their ‘nomadic habits’ and prepare them for employment befitting their status, and make them ‘good Christians’" (p. 74). Battiste and Youngblood (2000) write that this "[r]eligious coercion left deep scars in the minds and hearts of Indigenous peoples" (p. 97).

We cannot assume that Christian colonization of First Nations peoples has ended as "colonial prejudices have been transformed into religious and state theories of spiritual and cultural superiority, which reject the legitimacy of Indigenous peoples’ values and institutions" (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 100). Laenui (2000) writes that the process of colonization of the spiritual aspects of Indigenous cultures began with the destruction and eradication of all physical representations and symbols of Indigenous culture through the burning of artifacts and the destruction of sacred sites. Indigenous religious practices were belittled and denigrated as "devil" worship and practitioners were condemned to physical punishment or judicial consequences. Today many Christian religions see Indigenous beliefs as remnants of a culture which are tolerated as exhibitions of the continuing ignorance of folkloric native practices. Others seek to transform First Nations spirituality into the dominant religions through practices of appropriation such as "using an Indigenous person as a priest, permitting the priest to use the Indigenous language and to incorporate some Indigenous terms and practices within the churches framework of worship" (Laenui, 2000, p. 151). Battiste & Youngblood Henderson (2000) state that practices of continued evangelization of Indigenous people by the Christian churches presents a huge obstacle to healing and yet it continues despite the evidence of the damage of colonial practices, especially those of religion. Schick & St. Dennis (2005) state that "[t]his is the assumption of superiority that whiteness permits: what we have and who we are is what the world needs, whether it wants it or not" (p. 308).
There’s no Indians in that town.

We sat at the table red faced and confused as the whole room continued to belly laugh loudly and enthusiastically. This was the third time in the last two months that we had gotten this reaction and I just didn’t get the joke. This conference focused on honouring and learning about First Nations ways of knowing was one of several that I had recently attended. I had come with the staff person from our school that was newly appointed as the supervisor of community education, provided by the funding from our grant. She had much knowledge of community development and engagement but we had some other learning to do. We had slowly and tentatively begun our journey of trying to get a grasp on how two white women were to create a climate of belonging and cultural affirmation in our school. This was the beginning point that had been suggested by the First Nations and Métis Education staff of the Ministry who were supporting us in the first year of our pilot project to find a different way of doing community education. Because neither of us was of First Nations or Métis ancestry and had little to no connections to this community in our school or city, we felt we needed to go out and meet, learn and listen to the community.

I was beginning to expect that when we asked a question at one of these conferences we would be asked to say where we were from. This seemed to be a significant form of understanding and respect needed before any conversation would begin. Each and every time we said what city we were from, we had received the same response. First came the question “Don’t you know, there are no Indians in that town?” which was immediately followed by gales of laughter by all of the First Nations and Métis people in the room. I sensed the joke was on us but also that this good natured teasing had an important lesson in it that I needed to understand. I was determined today to find out what I was missing. As the conference broke for the lunch hour, the two of us tentatively approached the elderly man who had made the comment and wondered if he would be comfortable explaining the joke. We told him that he was not the first person we had received this response from when we said where we were from and we didn’t understand. He sat us down, patiently smiled at us both and told us what we needed to know. He explained that the city we were from had such deeply entrenched racial attitudes that to the white people there, the First Nations people did not exist. They were invisible, unseen, and therefore non-existent. He said that many First Nations people knew that in order to survive in that place, they needed to go along and act, be and behave invisibly. He said they laughed because otherwise they cry, the pain is that raw when the hatred for their people is that deep. He challenged us then to think about our classrooms, our school community, the grocery store, the church. Did we see any Indians there? Or were they invisible to us too?
Invisible ideology

Schick & St. Denis (2005) state that the portrayal of Canada as a raceless nation, and white settler individual claims of racelessness, are both racist acts. The myth of the barren land, conquered by our “brave and tenacious ancestors who came from elsewhere to create this good society” (Green, 2009, p. 140) is firmly embedded in white consciousness. Kanu (2003) calls this the fantasy of a homogenous national identity and states that it is unified through cultural power. Settler violence continues through our insistence on racelessness and discourses of colorblindness where we treat all individuals as though they were the same (Razak, 2002). These discourses and their practices mean there is little chance for individuals of First Nations and Métis ancestry to enter Canadian society’s consciousness as persons.

Caliou (1995) states that we must find ways of dismantling the seeming “invincibility of denial which condones systemic racism” (p. 56). One would think that schools would be the ideal place to confront discourses of racelessness, colorblindness and denial but as Willinsky (1998) notes, few institutions in Canadian society could best the public school for excluding dissenting voices. In our educational institutions “students have long had lessons on who is and who is not a member of this community known as Canada” (p. 7). There is little in the Western curriculum which creates a consciousness within white settler students that they have displaced the people who had lived here for thousands of years before colonization (Kumashiro, 2001). Schools perpetuate the myth of history as an impartial account which privileges only white voices. Students learn only this perspective and all other voices are silenced or excluded. It is in this way that schools create spaces where one is rewarded for performing in normative ways—which means in white ways. Although not everyone can be classified as a white person, everyone can perform white practices. Performing whiteness is usually an invisible practice for white people who assume that their thinking and acting is the norm. But as Ratcliffe (2000) writes, “[p]erforming whiteness is a very visible practice for people of color. “Acting white” on the job or in school may garner promotions or good grades” (p. 97). Because of the privilege that is received for appearing white or performing whiteness, often people who fall outside the trope of whiteness may choose such practices, despite the risks and damages of betraying one’s culture. Schools reward students for such “white” performances and for reaching to achieve the standards and norms created by white society.

Schools could resist racist practices if they were places where what was challenged and changed constantly was the norm. Instead our efforts in Western schools to accept diversity and have a inclusive multicultural curriculum usually stop after “adding on” difference. These curricular approaches often mask the already privileged status of certain identities. Kumashiro (2001) cautions that this act of naming difference in “inclusive curricula, can serve less to describe who a group is, and more to prescribe who a group ought to be” (p. 5). Kanu (2003) states that the school is the “state’s vehicle for ideological assimilation and homogenization” (p. 71) so it is not surprising that curriculum is limited to “add and stir” approaches to difference, which do nothing to challenge the myths of this country or expose the systemic racism that is perpetuated by white settler (un)consciousness. It is no easy task to confront and eliminate racism from Canada’s social fabric when “racist assumptions that legitimate our politico-social order have been dignified by intellectuals, by policy and by politics, until they have become part of what many understand as common sense” (Green, 2009, p. 140). It is in this way that any attempts to disrupt national myths or challenge white privilege are constructed as nonsensicle.

It is upsetting to disrupt common sense, and so we refrain from doing so. Britzman (1998) claims that difference is something we have yet to learn but that we subconsciously resist. We have tremendous resistance toward learning and experiencing that which will “disrupt the frameworks we traditionally use to make sense of the world and ourselves” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 5). We must go through an unlearning process that is not easy or rational. It is difficult to learn that what we think is normal, and who we think we are, are both social constructs that are maintained within the discourses of the dominant culture and that these imagined identities are maintained at the expense of the “other”, who is marginalized and silenced. It is especially difficult to come to terms with our privilege as white settlers and how it contributes to and makes us complicit in ongoing systemic racism. We must go through a process of resignification where we make our story unfamiliar and unnatural. It seems however, that this “bedrock of denial must be dynamited” (Caliou, 1995, p. 56) in order for it to become conscious and visible. It took the laughter of many nations to blow open my carefully constructed wall of denial and resistance.
Open your heart

I sat at the table with the parents from the School Council, heart pounding, knowing this would be a difficult night. I gazed at the small woman who sat down the table to my left, an international Aboriginal figure known for her work in healing and wellness, and hoped her presence could bring some reconciliation to the issues and people seated around this table. She had been excited, almost gleeful, when in her impromptu visit to our school she had entered into the midst of a racial conflict. A concerned parent had shared that a few nights ago at the school when parents had been preparing some fundraising materials, some had shared their perceptions that I was out in the community recruiting Indian children and families so that I could get grant monies for the school. They felt that was why so many Aboriginal children were not at the school, many of them bringing problems and troubles. I had been shocked by this racial attitude, and could not believe this conversation had taken place within the group charged with supporting the school and all the children it in. I knew some of the parents on the council were still struggling with the direction the school was taking into community education but I did not understand what their issues were. The school was safer and violence was at a minimum. Activities in the school had increased, learning results had improved, and children were engaged and happy; but none of this seemed to matter. In fact when I shared these points at every meeting it seemed to only make them angrier and more entrenched in their viewpoints. Our guest felt it was wonderful these racial attitudes were being spoken, because before they had been silent, when there was no talk, there could be no point for healing. She said that now a discussion could begin. She was delighted to hear about this turn of events and asked if she could attend the meeting. She advised me to give each member a gift to start the evening, as in her tradition when someone had talked badly about you, you gifted them in thanks for bringing an issue to light for discussion. It was a show of forgiveness for the transgression and a desire for healing, understanding and reconciliation. I shared with her that I had struggled with conflict between the community and school before in my career and that I wanted to learn how to do this differently. I did not know how to manage the conflicted beliefs and angry accusations from parents who saw the world so differently. I was grateful she would come and share her perceptions and her expertise in reconciliation.

I handed each person around the table the gift I had brought for them and thanked them for coming. I shared that I had been informed of the conversation that had taken place with some members of the Council and my concern regarding this attitude towards members of our school community and children in the school. The Chairperson of the Council expressed her concern and the Superintendent shared that it was a strong belief of the School Division that all children regardless of ancestry were welcome in our schools and she hoped the councils would reflect these beliefs. A parent on the council spoke of how she had attended a workshop at her workplace regarding understanding the treaty teachings and how she had learned a great deal and supported the school in teaching these historical truths to the children and bringing Elders and knowledge keepers into the school. Then the conversation wound around the table to those parents who I knew did not support many of the schools directions or my leadership in these initiatives. One father expressed that nothing that we were doing at the school anymore supported his child. He demanded to know how what I was doing would help his son get into university, and be successful as his parents expected him to. He expressed he was especially upset I had removed the honour roll which he felt provided the recognition and competition students needed to succeed and that now academics were just watered down. Then a woman across from him attacked the restitutive approach, saying it didn’t help the victims. She stated that we spend all our time supporting bad kids who were the perpetrators. She expressed that I didn’t and had never supported her or her daughter and that often her child was blamed when she was in fact a victim. She looked around the table and stated that good families had left because of what I was doing. I felt myself getting angry and defensive. I had been over and over this discussion with some of these parents. I could see myself almost in slow motion close up, shut down, and back off. My arms crossed my chest. I slid away from the table and back onto my chair, my breathing increased and my gut tightened, as fear settled around me. I shared the same statistics and the same information I had been speaking for over a year in response which could refute all of their arguments and I could hear the exasperation and annoyance in my tone. Suddenly the tiny woman who had been silent and watching, exploded, banging her hands on the table and shaking her head at me in a mixture of compassion and frustration. She looked directly at me, ignoring the meeting and the discussion that was taking place and told me that I was not listening; I was not hearing what they were saying. She told me that when the teachers at the meeting talked about what we were doing at the school it sounded good, but when she spoke she could not hear me. With great kindness she told me that I needed to open my heart, that she knew I had been hurt, but that I needed to open my heart. At first I felt chastised and small, but as I let her words wash over me, a deep pain exploded around my heart. To my complete embarrassment I began to cry and I could not stop. Several parents, now uncomfortable and unsure, assured me that I was doing a good job but that they just did not understand or support what I was doing. I was unable to respond and the meeting ended quickly as it appeared that not only had my heart opened, but it was leaking all over the table.
Gazing into the colonial heart of racism

Systems of oppression are ingrained within the hierarchical levels in all communities in Canada, due to its colonial history. Social cohesion within school communities cannot be constructed without first tackling the racism inherent in the colonial construction of this country. While it is easy to identify individual acts of racism at council meetings or in community conversations, it is much more difficult to begin to recognize the existence and nature of systemic racism that implicates not just openly racist individuals, but all people who live in this country constructed on colonial and imperialistic foundations. Green (2009) states that racism never happens in the absence of relations of privilege, and it is these relations which are at the heart of the colonial relationship. British colonialism constructed indigenous people as culturally and biologically inferior, thus justifying the domination of the superior British colonizer. Race was constructed as an incontestable and difference as final. Noel (as cited in Hingely) states that “it is through another’s eyes that the dominated receive their identity and, therefore, their relative worth and place in society (2000, p. 103). Racism occurs every time people act as a dominator, reflecting race as a real category, but also “when they act on the privileges or liabilities conferred by racist processes” (Green, 2009, p. 135). Youngblood Henderson (2000a) writes that the continued legacy of white privilege is one of the forms of permanent aggression against Indigenous people. Settler descendants must recognize that they carry the “invisible weightless knapsack” of unearned advantages which help to improve and maintain social positioning in society, despite the ideals of equal opportunity, equality and inclusiveness that might be ascribed to.

Green (2009) notes that “systemic racism is embedded in Canadian political culture, in the service first of colonialism and, subsequently, in the maintenance of settler and white privilege” (p. 134). Confronting and eradicating racism in school communities will require unmasking white-preferential processes, as well as ideas that privilege is the result of personal merit and hard work. Because these ideas are so common sense in the colonial narrative of Canada, most members of the settler population deny the existence of privilege and the resulting systemic patterns of discrimination and racism that exist. Razack (1998) states that this leads to “the dominant groups refusal to examine its own complicity in oppressing others” (p. 40). While it is easy to identify and condemn openly racist acts, it is much more challenging for settler descendants to recognize the need to look into their own heart to see how they are complicit in racism. It is also difficult to deconstruct Western education’s engagement in systems of exploitation, domination and oppression and to acknowledge the traumatic legacy it has left in this country.

Youngblood Henderson (2000b) notes that the “inviolability of that “other” against which European identity is formed was secured by elevating some kinds of knowledge and suppressing others” (p. 70). Colonialism’s education project was created to secure the colonial identity as superior and it spent centuries classifying and ordering humanity through its imperial lens in order to support its position. Willinsky (1998) writes that this project “gave rise to peculiar and powerful ideas of race, culture, and nature that were, in effect, conceptual instruments that the west used both to divide up and to educate the world” (p. 3). Because of this we cannot see Western education as innocent or neutral. “Our schooling has not been so much the great redeemer of prejudices as the tireless chronicler of what divides us” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 1). Education has played no small part in teaching us to discriminate between the civilized and the primitive, East and West, First and Third World countries. “Schools have offered students little help in fathoming why this sense of difference in race, culture and nation is so closely woven into the fabric of society” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 5).

Racism has been continuously transmitted via public education which has been “a central element in the colonial discursive apparatus which produced, and formed the ‘truth’ of racial hierarchies employed to justify the denial of human and civil rights to some groups of people deemed inferior” (Comeau as cited in Green, 2009, p.135). Smith (2009) states that Western education “is designed to teach peoples to accept their subjection to colonial and capitalist structures.” (p. 82). Despite educators best efforts to make schools more inclusive, they in fact remain mainly reflective of white, Western, Eurocentric interests. Until settler descendants understand how to acknowledge racism and race privilege in the educational practices of the school and in “normal” life in colonial spaces such as Canada, the effects of colonization continue (Schick & St. Denis, 2005).
Pride and prejudice

we stood around the fire holding cedar branches in silence. The land echoed with the sound of our drumming and singing. The moon, Grandmother as I had been introduced to her today, shone softly off the prairie snow. Through my breath I could see the tobacco tiles burning in the night as I listened to the prayers of the Elder, rising to the Creator with the smoke from the fire. She prayed for many here and away, all who had given her gifts of tobacco or and cloth and requests for prayer tonight and throughout the last month, as she offered them to the fire. She prayed in her language, and in mine. Her teachings were offered and shared freely for all around the fire. We had been accepted in the circle of strangers but not outsiders. I stepped forward when it was my turn, and prayed into the sweet smell of the cedar for understanding, for some direction in how to walk this process that had appeared when we had entered the world. This grant had drawn us into. I knew I had no idea how to enter relationships with the First Nations peoples of this community, and I could sense they were not overjoyed or excited to do so with me. I did not understand it, but I could feel the energy. I was welcomed at the fire, at ceremony, in prayer, but I was not trusted nor was I going to be welcomed with open arms. There was too much history I did not understand, too much about my whiteness I didn’t get, and I had no idea what I was to do.

As we joined together inside for food and tea, that energy became stronger. I no longer felt the welcome of the fire and the inside lighting reflected the questions and distrust on the faces of people in the community, especially the Elder. They all knew each other and while they were polite in their interactions, we were not directly talked to or included in the conversation. I watched the respect shown to the Elder; she was served first, she was asked for direction, she was asked to share a story or teaching. I watched her cool response not just to me but to our community coordinator who had brought me here with her. She had met the Elder at a community meeting for a First Nations association and it was there we had been invited to this ceremony. I knew how the Elder had responded when asked how we might go forward in creating relationships with the First Nations community in the city as we attempted to develop a climate of belonging and cultural affirmation; that a good first step would have been to hire an Aboriginal person to do the job. She had said that if we were serious about relationship then we were to come to ceremony, learn, watch and listen. So despite the minus 22° temperature and the fact that it was a school night we came. And now I felt we weren’t being acknowledged for our effort or welcomed by this Elder. In fact, it felt disrespectful the way she was treating us, with her looks of suspicion and distrust. So when I got up to leave, I refused to give the name of respect I saw the others doing as they addressed her; the term Elder which they all used with such reverence and adoration. I looked at her and said thank you and her first name. I purposefully did not use the title Elder, as in all of my privilege, preconceptions, pride and prejudice I didn’t think she was acting like one. Then I left.
"In both contemporary American and Canadian educational contexts [...] First Nations students often learn in marginalized school environments and are depicted in public policy by deficit terms. Their realities often serve to exploit an already underrepresented group. For these conditions to change, thus, Aboriginal students’ experiences in practice and policy must be subject to critical discourse in order to inform teachers’ pedagogical practices and understanding."

Cherubini, 2011, p. 2

**Powerful care**

Descendants of settler populations see themselves reflected in social and educational institutions and in the dominant culture in ways that Aboriginal populations or “visible minorities” do not. Green (2009) finds that “this phenomenon perpetuates both racist assumptions and racist processes, even as it is so normalized as to be invisible and non-controversial” (p. 135). It is however, very obvious to those whose “visible” attributes of skin color and “race” constructs them as subordinate. This quite reasonably results in “anger at and resentment of those who benefit from race privilege while denying the existence and consequences of racism” (Green, 2009, p. 135). Such denial leads to a lack of understanding on the part of settler descendants regarding the distrust, the anger, and the apprehension of First Nations communities when offers of relationship are offered. These tend to focus on white Western professionals wanting to “help” and to “support” Aboriginal children through educational initiatives without ever understanding that this is an old colonial song that situates Aboriginal peoples in a historical context, exercises Foucauldian notions of power and care, and endorses the continued subjectification of all First Peoples in Canada.

Foucault (1983) reminds us that over the last few centuries society has effectively learned to exercise a power concerned with the well being of the population as a whole and that it is “a power coated with a veneer of “generosity” and sincere dedication to the whole community” (Fischer, 2011, p. 208). Mainstream Western education has not duly recognized Aboriginal epistemologies and traditions and the result has enabled inequities to exist in power relations between itself and Aboriginal peoples. These imbalances of power create the conditions where the white settler is moved to the position of generous helper. Eurocentric Western education positions Aboriginal students as “the Other” and has positioned itself in the role of enabler which situates educators as those who could care for the dependent other. Foucault calls this “pastoral methods of care”, which are “considered to be enabling methods of control by a dominant agency over their subjects and are generally perceived as redemptive in their intent to convert unhealthy subjects for the greater benefit of themselves and society at large (Vander Schae as cited in Cherubini, 2011, p. 8). In our efforts in schools to be sensitive to the “needs” of the Aboriginal learner and community, we further solidify our position as caregivers. When we have no sense that the Aboriginal trauma suffered by communities for hundreds of years is not a historical artifact but a very real and present reality, the resistance by members of the Aboriginal community is then marked as an unwillingness to accept the assistance of the generous provider.

Battiste (2002) identifies that the challenge to these relations of power and pastoral care is to sensitize the Western consciousness of Canadians to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Aboriginal peoples. It is essential for the settler population to acknowledge the historicity of the past in the psychological, cultural and physical genocide of the Aboriginal peoples and realize that it permeates the present. Members of white settler society need to be aware of the ways in which they benefit today from the subjugation and devaluation of Aboriginal peoples. Neegan (2005) states that “although the continued colonization of Aboriginal peoples demonstrates how the dominant group uses the education system to reproduce the same exploitative conditions that sustain their positions, nevertheless change can occur if the dominant group is willing not just to acknowledge Aboriginal people and their ways of knowing, but also, and more importantly, to address the issues of inequality of power and power relations between themselves and Aboriginal peoples” (p. 14).

It is difficult to think differently from the ways we usually think, rather than simply legitimating the things we already know and which are already established for us. Educational opportunities typically offered to white settler teachers usually focus on Aboriginal ways of knowing, and do little to support the development of understandings of the present effects of colonization and Western complicity. These experiences emphasize “cultural rather than racial differences, and the historical and contemporary experiences of racism permeating the province often remain unnamed and unchallenged” (Tupper & Capello, 2008, p. 563). As a result educators have little understanding of the colonial legacies that shaped not only the history of Saskatchewan but its present. My attendance at this first ceremony, and the cool welcome by the community was to be the first of several lessons that would lead me to finally problematize the forms of knowledge, power and pastoral care existing within Canadian and Aboriginal relations and Western education that I took for granted as common sense.
Willow Teachings

The room was filled with the smell of fresh willow as we twisted, threaded, beaded and talked together. No matter what I did, my drum catcher continued to look like a lopsided egg rather than the beautiful circle of the young Cree mother across from me. I listened fascinated to the conversation taking place between her and one of our young staff. They were sharing their experiences of life in this city and it was striking how they were different and yet similar. The staff member had many experiences as an immigrant and ‘visible minority’ in our Western school system that this mother could relate to: special education classes, being lumped in English as a Second Language classes with multiple languages and cultures, fights on the playground over customs and racism. They laughed together over the times they had been expected to be the spokesperson for the entire ‘non-white’ world as if their skin color somehow made them experts on all cultures, especially their own. Another teacher whispered to me as we sat together threading our way through this experience that she had lived in this city her entire life and she had never seen this many First Nations and Métis people in that whole time. I was alone in one room together as we were tonight. She wondered how she had been so blind. I smiled and realized the teachings of the willow went far beyond what anyone had expected might happen when this process began.

The young Aboriginal parents who had come to hear the teachings of the willow from the Cree wisdom teacher regarding traditional parenting perhaps had not expected the group of teachers that had joined them in the community room at our school. But when this room was imagined and created by members of the school and community this had been the vision: that the community, all of the community, would be and feel welcome in our school. That all kinds of knowledge and all kinds of learning would be shared in this space and that the staff would become learners, listeners and community members not the fountains of knowledge we sometimes thought we were, pretended to be or were forced to be. We could enter a place of ‘not knowing’, of ‘non-expert’, and learn what we did not understand. It appeared that the learning was extending far beyond the planned curriculum of the wisdom keeper’s presentation. As we ate stew and bannock together and sipped muskox tea I could feel the small tentative beginnings of an opening to learning about the First peoples of this land and our relationship to this history beginning for all of the staff who attended.

As I got up to leave, I took with me a plastic bag containing braided sweet grass which had been given to me by a superintendent with the directive to put on every classroom’s prayer table. It had come with a typed sheet of information about several sacred plants used by “native” peoples. We had learned enough now on our journey of understanding to question this action so several of us approached the cultural teacher and asked for direction. She kindly stated that sweet grass was usually gifted directly by an indigenous person and she also stressed we would want to know how it was picked and by whom. She said that teachings were usually accompanied by the elder’s name and place, as many nations had different teachings. She then told us that this plant was very sacred in her tradition and came with many protocols for its use, and for this reason she did not think it was the best idea to have it on display in our classrooms. As I handed her the bag and asked her to take it to an elder to take care of in a ‘right way’. I thought of the kids I had found hitting each other with it over the lunch hour and felt sick. I began to see how easily in Modern Western education’s quest for inclusion and belonging we could and did appropriate knowledge and traditions. I realized how much we didn’t know and how much in all of our white privilege we thought we did. We thought we had the answers for First Nations’ people and the education of their children. When we didn’t even know the questions. I began to realize that it would take hundreds, if not thousands, of willow teachings for me to even begin to understand.
“Spiritual and cultural traditions are a physical, mental and spiritual part of individuals and peoples. When people are stripped of their land, home, language and identity—when a people has been subjugated to genocide, rape and incarceration for the benefit of my sense of place—and I then decide that I have a right to that people’s language, culture, spirituality—that is an acute act of violence.”

Unsettling Minnesota, 2009, p. 55

Claiming spirit

Modern Western education, in its rush to celebrate “cultural difference”, and promote racial equality often introduces Aboriginal elements into the classroom without taking into account the effects of colonization, oppression and on going racial discrimination. Schick & St. Denis (2005) caution that “without a critical race analysis, the “celebration of diversity” and other popular narratives have every possibility of reinforcing relations of domination” (p. 295). Battiste & Youngblood Henderson (2000) comment that “[i]ronically, although cognitive imperialism devalues Indigenous knowledge and heritage, dominant society has a tendency to take elements of Indigenous knowledge out of context and claim them for themselves” (p. 87). Laenui (2000) states that in processes of colonization, when a traditional culture refuses to die or go away, attempts will be made to transform it into the culture of the dominating colonial society. Indigenous practices will be incorporated into the dominant cultures forms of worship and indigenous symbols will decorate modern spaces, all within the general colonial structure, thus exploiting the culture further. Battiste & Youngblood Henderson (2000) state that Indigenous “heritage and teachings are open to pillage in the same way and by the same peoples who have been taking [Indigenous] land and resources for more than five hundred years” (p. 12). Daes (1993) describes this activity as the final stage of colonialism, following the exhaustion of Indigenous peoples’ tangible assets.

Kumashiro (2004) notes that Western education often consists of a desire to repeat oppressive practices, like bringing in dancers on Aboriginal days, setting up paper teepees, or displaying cultural or spiritual artifacts, because they provide some sense of comfort, and we can applaud ourselves that we are doing something to be inclusive. The oppressiveness and racism of such practices are difficult to see because racist assumptions legitimate our social institutions and have become much of what many consider to be common sense. Regan (2010) notes that a core tenant of Canadian identity is that we are a nation of peacemakers in our relations with Indigenous peoples. We do not recognize our history of land claims as colonial conquest, or categorize the residential school system or other assimilation strategies as acts of violence (Regan, 2010), nor do we see that appropriation of cultural artifacts, knowledge or spiritual perspectives are exploitive practices based genocide (Smith, 2005). It is the unequal balance of power and privilege, gained through colonial aggression, which allows for spiritual appropriation and which gives colonial settlers the privilege and ability to ignore it. This creates a what Green (2009) calls a culture of white racism which can then “operate in ways that appear to be benign, unintentional, passive or unknowing” (p. 140). This culture of racism “pretends to respect others cultures, to be welcoming and non-judgmental and therefore non-responsible” (Green, 2009, p. 141), while at the same time (ignorantly) taking (and benefitting) from another’s culture as they continue to suffer from dominant systems of oppression and injustice. When concepts of property, claim and power are extended to ideas that a person’s spiritual and cultural identity is something they do not have claim or ownership over, and that it can be taken without asking, this exploits not only that culture but the people it belongs to. Smith (2005) writes that such appropriation goes beyond a simple aggression; it is a perpetuation of deep mental and physical violence. She explains that spiritual appropriation is a violence so personal, mental, physical and spiritual that it becomes a form of sexual violence as “this practice of taking without asking, and the assumption that the needs of the taker are paramount and the needs of others are irrelevant, mirrors the rape culture of the dominant society” (p. 126). It is colonial power that creates and allows this violence, and it is colonial power that gives colonial settler descendants the privilege and ability to ignore it.

Appropriation is about unequal power relations, which while rooted in our Canadian history of domination, continue to exist today. To eliminate such racism requires more than “simply the goodwill of well-intentioned white people and the superficial recognition of Aboriginal cultural practices” (Green, 2009, p. 143). Settler descendants must educate themselves to understand and be honest about what practices are appropriation and therefore inappropriate, as well as see with clarity how acts of appropriation are personal investments in the continuation of a colonial system. The illusion of inclusion and diversity must be questioned in educational systems that largely ignore First Nations and Métis voices, while at the same time appropriating certain knowledges and practices. Such modern domination, that have been internalized across generations, are used unwittingly and ignorant within educational practices and must be challenged. Settler descendants must un-learn what Modern culture teaches about the right to exercise power over others to satisfy desires; recognizing the absolute violence of claiming the very spirit of a culture to do so.
We are all one people.

The young voice broke out over the gym, a solitary note which echoed with pride as he was receiving his Métis badge at this celebration of learning. The strong voice of the cultural teacher joined in as she repeated the chorus in Cree. An integral part of our school community, she had been instrumental in this young boy’s reconnection to his ancestry. Then, the entire student body broke into song, declaring to all those who had joined us for this celebration that we are all one people. I realized we had a long way to go on our journey of understanding but that these students were beginning to see that we are all one, all interconnected in a great web of being. Several students then spoke of our journey to create a place where all peoples feel belonging, and where the culture of our First Nations and Métis students is affirmed and welcomed. Several students and staff then spoke about changes that had taken place in the physical environment of the classrooms, hallways, community spaces and school grounds. Students shared how together with their teachers they were on a journey of discovery and research as to how the environments of their classroom impacted their brains’ ability to learn. Others spoke of how they were a part of examining what could be done in the environment of their classrooms to create a sense of belonging for all children and what they had tried so that all children could see their family and cultural values represented in the school. Others shared how their classroom started every day with a meeting where they focused on the Tree of Learning and how they had become aware that the roots of the tree, basic needs for sleep, food, and safety, as well as relationships with family and classmates, could all affect their learning and ability to focus. They shared several of the tools they had learned, including which staff were available to help them when these needs had not been met. Next from the front of the gym, several little bodies of kindergarten children popped up, carrying their body tools. They said their names, held up their tools with pride, and told the whole gym how their chew ring, or bubble seat, or rocking chair was helping their body be “just right” for learning. Several children from every grade followed suit, children who had often been seen as the “academically challenged” or “behavior kids” took the stage to speak of how their tools helped settle their body, met their need for movement and helped them to focus.

As a massive cupcake was rolled to the front of the gym for all to share, several senior students came along with me to tour through the school our special guests who had come to celebrate with us. The students spoke confidently to adults from of the Ministry of Education, Special Education, Early Childhood Education, and First Nations and Métis education branches about the learning journey we had been on. Many of these departments had contributed funds and support for our initiatives and now they could see what had been accomplished. The students were completely at ease answering the Mayor and local MLA’s questions about why the school now appeared so physically different. They were able to explain why certain colors were chosen, why furniture was arranged differently, and why there were plants, trees, water and natural lighting in many of the classrooms and hallways. Several students were especially animated in their explanations of why spaces to sit, to gather and to work together were critical for supporting many of their needs for connection and relationship. Others showed the changes to the school ground which reflected the desire of all children and staff for outdoor spaces that contained elements to support not just physical but social, spiritual and environmental needs. As the students had been significantly involved with the staff on this journey to rethink learning spaces in the school, these students could talk easily about the research, and the results of our changes. Several spoke of how the school felt different to them now, less like an institution or a jail. In several spaces in the school we explained the traditional artwork, or artifacts that had been gifted to the school from many First Nations and Métis members of the community to support our learning journey. As the school staff, students and guests shared lunch together, one of the Ministry staff asked the students whose school they felt this was. Without hesitation one young woman, who had come to our school only a year ago, dragging a history of poor attendance and on-going conflict with staff and peers with her, responded confidently. As her gaze took in all of the students, staff and community members who were there, she replied “Ours”. In that moment I realized that in the students’ eyes we were becoming “All one people”.

Place as cultural practice

There are many “common sense” practices that exist in schools, including the very design of the physical environment, that are not supportive of the learning needs of many children. Rather than a continued focus on what is wrong with children, the light needs to be shone upon what may be wrong with our schools. If we just look at the success or failure of students in the classroom without critically looking at the place of that experience, then we emphasize individual agency, blaming students for their own failure, rather than looking at the structures of schools which significantly shape and constrain the experiences of the children attending them. Popkewitz (2000) states that there are many ways that people come to know, understand and experience themselves as members of a community and citizens of a nation state. The classroom is a part of the on-going dynamic of students’ construction of their identities (Ellis, 2005). Karrow (2006) writes that how students come to be is largely dictated by what is or isn’t learned in school, and the physicality of classrooms and schools participates in the construction of students’ identity. Aitken (as cited in Ellis, 2005) states that “[c]hildren can be the ultimate victims of the political, social, and economic forces which contrive the geography of the built environment” (p. 56).

Ellis (2005) reminds educators of the “opportunities and responsibilities in the social construction of classrooms and schools as places” (p. 57). Teaching, learning and the curricula are all subsumed by the physical structure of the classroom which is often one that “diminishes our relation to place and effaces our sense of being” (Karrow, 2006, p. 40). School places that reflect multiple meanings, and it is within the place of school that those meanings are most visibly reflected. Ellis (2005) states that “[p]lace-understood not as merely a location in physical space, but as a human conception and habitual site of human activity-and its plenitude-understood as a subjective or intersubjective creation—are dynamic and changing” (p. 58). When processes are engaged to explore, question and shift the physical spaces within schools, this affects shifts in the identity construction of staff, students and the community. This very process begins the process of “unearth[ing] the many ways that place impinges on identities surrounding race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality” (Adams et al, 2001, p. xix). Ashcroft (2001) writes that ongoing formations of place are “intimately bound up with the culture and identity of its inhabitants” (p. 156). Schools spaces reflect multiple meanings, but in Modern Western schools it is the instrumental aspects of education that are emphasized. Where curriculum is conceived in terms of design and delivery, teaching is viewed as methods, and learning is seen in terms of outcomes or standards, classrooms are structured in ways to accomplish these specific aims and objectives. School spaces were created in the image of the Eurocentric worldview; individual desks emphasize competition and supports ideas of meritocracy, straight linear rows support ideas of efficiency and control, florescent lighting and white walls support ideas of the institutionalization and standardization of learning. All of this is housed in “standardized buildings run and operated by centralized bureaucracies often insensitive and oblivious to the local needs of the community” (Karrow, 2006, p. 191).

Lack of attention to the educational needs of local communities is not accidental. Canada has created a national “myth of cultural homogeneity” and role of schools is critical to the task of unifying cultures through assimilation and normalization (Kanu, 2003). The curriculum, of which school space and place is a part, “has been employed to neutralize difference, assimilate, and establish for the “other” a worldview and a concept of self and community” (ibid, p. 69). School spaces reflect a curriculum that has and always will be a cultural practice, so when individuals set out to re-form or re-imagine schools spaces and how they relate to issues of social inclusion and exclusion, they are engaging structures of knowledge and power. Reconceptualising educational spaces results in a “destabilization of taken-for-granted categories, representations and truths” (Hoffman, as cited in Kanu, 2003, p. 69). Recognizing place as a cultural practice within schools supports communities in challenging the “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993) of Modern Western education and opens doorways to understanding and accepting the cultural legitimacy of Indigenous conceptions of place, power and identity.
Tobacco and prayers

I stood behind the line of others waiting, my mind blank. I had no idea what I was going to ask for or say to the tiny woman we were all waiting to speak to. I watched as she listened intently and compassionately to the people as they came with prayers, tobacco in bags or cigarettes and the need for prayers. Finally I was in front of her, hand held out to shake hers as I placed tobacco in her outstretched hand. From deep within me came the words “Thank you for teaching one who knows so little.” As our hands touched, there was apology, recognition, and a beginning. It had taken me a whole year to understand how much I didn’t know, how much I had assumed, how unconsciously I had walked upon the land of these First Peoples with no understanding of what that meant. Coming finally to a place of seeing my settler identity, my privilege, my complicity in reinforcing colonialism and racism had been a humbling and difficult journey. I was finally at a place where I knew I knew nothing and I could perhaps now begin to learn.

I was overcome with emotion as I walked clockwise back into my place around the fire. Tears filled my eyes as I realized how much generosity it took, how much strength and how much kindness to have me, a white woman, an educator in a dominant system, a middle classed privileged person of Eurocentric heritage, stand around this fire. I represented so much of what had harmed and continued to silence these people who had experienced genocide, colonization and continued oppression. I had been color blind, buying into the stories I had been raised on of Canada as a raceless nation. I had secretly prided myself upon being an activist, a person who helped the other, who was tolerant, and yet all the while I had been a part of supporting the institutionalizing of colonial settler privilege. I had passed the discourses of Canada as peacekeepers and the helpers of the unfortunate and needy on to hundreds of children I had taught. I could not imagine the impact such racist, ignorant ideals had upon all those children.

It had not been easy to scrutinize and examine my own identity, to start to see these things about myself, about the system I worked within, and about the country I lived in. I knew I had a long way to go and a lot more peeling of the onion of my ignorance to do. I prayed to Grandmother Moon as I felt the heart beat of the drum and the Earth in my chest that I would have the courage to continue. This may not have been what anyone had expected when they sent this school on a journey to enact a new kind of community education, but it was where I had been led and where I was committed to continue to go.
Truth and reconciliation

Eurocentrism and its devastating legacy of domination and oppression cannot be changed or cured through a simple apology. Eurocentric thought, the dominant consciousness and order of contemporary life, is so entrenched that it claims to be universal. This discourse of universality is used by Eurocentric thinkers to project their beliefs onto other cultures that possess different worldviews or epistemologies. Battiste (2005) states that “[u]niversality underpins cultural and cognitive imperialism, which establishes a dominant group’s knowledge, experience, culture, and language as the universal norm” (p. 124). The claim to universality often means aspiring to domination and the oppressed and colonized are judged by the norms and expectations that the dominant culture has set. This has led to a perception of inferiority of Aboriginal worldviews, epistemologies, languages, traditions and cultures. “Using the strategy of differences, [educators and policy makers] believe they have the privilege of defining human competencies and deviances, as well as the authority to impose their tutelage-through education-over Indigenous peoples” (Battiste, 2005, p. 125) The focus of education then becomes what the governing body will do for Aboriginal students in order to make them more “socially contributive and economically prosperous citizens” (Cherubini, 2011, p. 7). Thus, based on universalist claims, educational institutions attempt to re-create or re-produce the Aboriginal identity according to mainstream political interests.

Graveline (1998) suggests that in educational practice, teachers and administrators assimilate to the norms of the dominant culture by “imposing them and then supporting people to adapt to these demands, rather than introducing new paradigms of knowledge” (p. 9). However, the values, norms and knowledges of educational institutions are framed as self-evident and are not open to debate or contestation. Battise & McLean (2005) state that “[t]he Eurocentric foundations of colonization are solidly entrenched in the political, social, economic, educational, and spiritual frameworks that continue to marginalize and encroach on FN [First Nations] knowledge, belief systems, and ways of life” (p. 1). The exercise of power by the governing bodies of education is hidden in discourses of improving outcomes for Aboriginal students, thus positioning these students as “Other” which “serves to problematize this population in the same deficit terms that have historically subjectified them to inequitable conditions” (Cherubini, 2011, p. 8). Clearly, as Battiste (2005) states, “you can’t be the Global doctor if you’re the Colonial disease” (p. 121). It is essential to move the focus of the “problem of Aboriginal education” from the supposed failures of Aboriginal students to the consciousness of those in the dominant culture.

Mullaly (2010) states that “the decentering of the dominant culture is a fundamental challenge to the dominant order” (p. 243). The decentering of the personal consciousness of each individual of this nation is required as all Canadians are affected by discourses of Eurocentric universality and its colonial legacy. Young (1990) affirms that the “[t]he dissolution of cultural imperialism [...] requires a cultural revolution which also entails a revolution of subjectivity” (p. 4). White settler consciousness must untangle the knots of universalism and begin to remove the distorted lens of Eurocentrism in order to see our imperialistic legacy. Tripp & Muzzin (2005) state that the “[p]ersonal is political and so we know that there is a personal and spiritual component to consciousness raising” (p. 10). In order “raise our consciousness” we must reflect on our own experiences as a member of an oppressor group. This is especially challenging because the processes of becoming an oppressor is hidden from the person; equated with normalcy, neutrality, common sense and universal standards and values. However, if we do not engage in this processes of shifting and decentering Eurocentric consciousness, what we do not know about ourselves, those areas that are unconscious or disconscious, can have unintended consequences for members of oppressed, supressed and colonized groups. “Becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed [...] when the oppression is not part of your own experience, you can only understand it though hearing others’ experiences, along with a process of analysis and parallels” (Bishop, 1994, p. 95). It will only be when the colonizer deconstructs and decanonizes Eurocentrism that we will decenter oppressive and colonizing power relations. It is only then that relationships based on mutual respect and an honouring of differing worldviews and epistemologies may have a chance to begin, and reconciliation may then be possible.
The lead warrior

As I helped fold clothes in the crowded gym and give bags to those who needed them, I realized that I had no idea how a great majority of the people in the western world lived. This was our third clothing give-away in the last year and a half, organized by the Community Connections Committee made up of students, parents and staff, and each time it had grown in size. As I surveyed the bustling gym, I saw aspects of community that I had been blind to for most of my career in education. Families from our school, elderly women, people who had recently become unemployed, a woman who had recently become very ill, all walked hesitantly through the door, their need greater than their pride. I watched as they filled bags of necessities for their children and themselves: warm winter coats, baby clothes, pants for their growing son, a warm blanket for their grandmother. I was sure it was not easy to come and appear as the "needy" or the "poor" and have us middle and upper class white people hand over our excess goods that spilled out of our closets and our lives. I realized that many had walked a long way with little children through the snow and they had no transportation so we began organizing rides home with some of our volunteers. I watched one mother who was on this committee and helped organize this event fill bags for her several children from the tables, and wondered what kind of a society creates those that have and those that have not. Tonight as I came face to face with my own ignorance and privilege that I used to think I had somehow earned, I realized I had much to learn and much more to question about how schools, society and myself were all caught within a way of being that privileged some and excluded and harmed many others.

I waved across the room at our cultural teacher as she entered the gym. As we walked around the room greeting the many people who were there, we began to talk about the reasons behind the need for this event. I shared with her the continued resistance we were encountering as we began to move within this space of enacting a climate of belonging not just amongst the students but the entire community. It seemed the more that we did to include, support and welcome those who were often excluded and isolated in the community, the more resistance showed up. I told her how I struggled to face the power of those who questioned what we were doing, as many were influential members of the community and the school division. She then began to share a teaching from her tradition of the lead warrior, and the role they played within her culture. She stated that those who were in the position of lead warrior in the traditional community were charged with carrying the vision of change forward regardless of the consequences. They were to receive their direction and guidance from spirit, and their work was for the benefit of all relations. As we began to walk together down the hallway to get a tea from the cart, between the two of us, out of the corner of my eye I suddenly saw the image of a woman, dressed in a soft green tunic, a bow over her shoulder and a staff in one hand, feathers and beads swinging from its tip. On her shoulder sat a golden eagle, and wrapped around her neck peering intently at me was a raven, purple eyes penetrating my soul. She was proud, strong, determined and able. When I turned to look she was gone, but my heart was pounding and knew what I had seen. I listened very closely then as the cultural teacher described how this lead warrior was often the object of attack, censorship and efforts to control. But it was the role of the lead warrior to expect this, to be strong enough to persevere and lead the way for change. I felt fear clench my belly and wondered if I would ever have the capacity and strength of the vision of the lead warrior woman that had walked beside me that night.
“Othered” leadership

Aoki (2005) writes that the principal or leader of a school at one time was understood to be a principal teacher, a leading teacher. “In this sense, the principal was a specially recognized teacher, but first and foremost, a teacher” (p. 350). Over time the word principal became detached from this role and linked instead to administration, a term borrowed from the business world. “In educational administration, the principal become-administrator is endowed heavily with organizational theory, or leadership theory, each a part of management theory” (Aoki, 2005, p. 350). As educational leadership has become couched heavily in the language of business and industry, education has become entrenched in the discourse of business; an educational enterprise to be managed. Discourses appeared which emulate industrial management such as curriculum as delivery systems and teachers as technicians and principals reconstructed as managers or administrators. Management becomes the mechanism for the reform of schools and the disciplining of teachers. In such administrative structures “[p]olitical, ideologically-loaded decisions are choked by bureaucratic-administrative systems and attempts are made to displace issues of moral and cultural identity with the imperatives of administrative efficiency” (Ball, 1990, p. 154).

Often counter-posed to such traditional, hierarchical and bureaucratic approaches to school administration are discourses of participatory approaches to school governance. “Unlike bureaucratic control, which invests control in supervisors who enforce bureaucratic rules, concertive control through self-managing teams or councils hands over the creation and supervision of rules and norms to organizational members” (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998, p. 336). While this may seem like a positive development, in actuality the intensity of control has increased, but its source is now hidden. Management teams, professional learning communities, and shared governance parent involvement models all actually “achieve a system of control that is more effective than that of other systems” (Barker, 1993, p. 433). These types of participatory management reforms are disciplinary practices just like the hierarchical approaches they are counter-posed to. In fact, they represent increasingly rationalized efforts to control and normalize individuals, but through more non-overt or unobtrusive control. In participatory approaches it just appears that control no longer comes from above or outside of the individual; in fact the intensity of control has been increased while its sources are hidden. Anderson & Grinberg (1998) state that “[r]egardless of which techniques of administration we use (i.e., site-based or bureaucratic management), we cannot escape the effects of disciplinary power” (p. 338).

Counternarratives exist that challenge the “politics of truth” (Foucault, 1980) which have resulted in the discourses of educational administration and participatory approaches to school governance and their processes of normalization. Alternative paradigms of leadership exist that are not trapped within the discourses of efficiency, productivity and effectiveness but rather gave voice to a knowledge outside of this version of truth. Such notions confront the ideas of leading from the intellect, understanding that knowing something intellectually does not make it wisdom (Sans, 1999). Ed McGaa, Eagle Man of the Oglala Lakota, speaks of a spiritual leadership without domination, where one’s responsibility to lead is balanced with the good of the many (2004). This is different than the binary opposition created within discourses of educational administration between the manager and the managed. This speaks to relationship not hierarchy. However, as hooks (2003) notes “a culture of domination, like ours, does not strive to teach us how to live in community” (p. 163). Having been constructed within the disciplinary practices of Western leadership, it is difficult to set down the tools of administration, deconstruct the power/knowledge discourses of this way of leading, and imagine how to begin to take up alternative discourses. Chief Leonard George of the Tseil-Waututh in British Columbia describes that the ‘traditional’ approach to leadership begins with the understanding of the “individual responsibility to become the best human being possible, and to enhance that ability in others. Through this kind of development, true healthy leadership is possible.” (cited in ATFL, 2009, p. 14). Such internal, spiritual discourses of leadership open Western administration to the possibility of the development of lead warriors who are guided by love and capable of “liv[ing] in community with all of life” (hooks, 2003, p. 163).
Healing knowledge

It was a cool day as I walked along the street, gazing up at the old buildings trying to find the bookstore. I had walked up and down this block three times and had not yet been able to find the entrance way, but when I checked the paper I had quickly sketched the address on, it had to be on this block. Then I saw recessed between two buildings a small walkway, and as I peered down the shadowed space I could see an entrance, a tall old wooden door. There above the dusty glass were old brass plated numbers, this was the place. I opened the door and walked inside and felt like I had stepped onto the set of a Harry Potter movie. The long narrow walls which seemed to go back into the building forever were lined from floor to the very high ceiling with books. There was an old wooden ladder that slid along the wall so the top shelves could be reached. An old glass counter that encased what appeared to be some rare old manuscripts held an ancient, massive cash register. Everywhere I looked books bulged from the shelves and toppled over each other in piles on the floor. As I walked around in amazement a woman approached me and quietly asked if she could help me. I turned, took a big breath and said aloud what to me sounded completely ridiculous, but somehow in this place it seemed completely normal. I told her that over the last two weeks I had been approached by three different people, one a complete stranger, with her name and a recommendation that I come to see her. I explained that I had been dealing with some unusual health issues for quite some time, as had an older sister. Now, however, a young niece was very ill, with similar symptoms but more severe. All of us had spent much time going to many different doctors and specialists but no one could really tell us what was wrong. I shared that we had been receiving healing support from one of the cultural teachers at the school I worked at, a Cree knowledge keeper. Along with sharing her knowledge of healing plants, she had also shared the visions and dreams she had been experiencing involving our Irish ancestors and our sickness. I explained awkwardly that it seemed that many people felt that coming to this bookstore could somehow help with our understanding of this connection between our ancestors and our illness and support us in our healing.

She nodded, completely nonplussed by my strange story, walked to the front door, and turned the heavy lock and swung the old sign to closed. She suggested we go and sit at a table near the back and she would make us some tea. As I sat down she suddenly said that no, I was not to have any tea. There were issues for me with mold which had been passed down within my ancestral lineage and I needed to stay away from anything containing it. She brought some hot water and lemon and sat facing me. She grabbed a pen and a piece of paper and continued to talk of my ancestors, speaking of their leaving Ireland, and that something had happened that was traumatic before they left. Whatever this event had been was somehow affecting all of our health. She wrote some dates on the pages and several events that were very accurate regarding my ancestral past. She suggested that healing needed to happen on an energetic level, with someone who could connect to this ancestral story. She assured me that we could become well, but that some type of curse had wound itself into our history, and it needed to be unravelled. I was shocked as this is what the traditional healer had told us, that some sort of spell or soul wound had entered our ancestry. A knocking at the door ended our conversation, and as I listened to her talk to the next woman who entered the store I realized that I was not the only one who came for this woman’s gifts, that others knew of the wisdom and healing that lay within the walls of this book store. I glanced down at the papers she had given me and the words scrawled across the pages which were completely outside the realm of my ‘normal’ experience: shamanic knowledge, Earth vibration, energy, brids, silver, the Seven Sisters, Iona, Yggdrasil, Odin. I purchased two books that might explain some of these concepts and the history of my ancestors that I had never thought about investigating as a part of our family illness. As I walked out of the store onto the street I placed my hand against the wall, feeling the warmth of the stones to assure myself I was still in this world. I felt like I was returning from another place, familiar but long forgotten. It seemed that the small view of reality that I had been constructed within was crumbling, just like the old bricks under my hand.
Treating the colonial dis-ease

Modern Western culture privileges material realism and maintains rationality as the primary and privileged epistemology. To be educated into the modern Western worldview, discourses, and practices results in assumptions that dominate ‘normal’ thinking including the emphasis on a physical material reality as primary, and perhaps the only reality that exists (Barrett, 2013, np). So enormously powerful is such ‘conventional’ thinking that to depart from it would immediately put one’s sanity into question (Bai, 2013, np). Entertaining onto-epistemologies that are beyond rationality, often termed transrational, animist, intuitive or spiritual seems “strange, if not crazy, as the vernacular expression goes” (ibid, np). Because we are so conditioned to see that other ways of knowing and being are “superstitious” and “uncivilized” and that such “feelings and beliefs are evidence of ignorance and barbarity” (Daes, 2000, p. 7) it is very difficult to entertain the possibility that “rationality is in part a Euro-imperial, historically specific construct and not a neutral, ‘human’ universal” (Findlay 2000, p. xi). Enculturation and education within modern Western onto-epistemologies has conditioned us to approach other ways of knowing with scepticism, as we are so firmly entrenched in a worldview that will not allow for openness outside rational empirical thought processes. Duran & Duran (2000) note that the continued privileging of Newtonian and Cartesian worldviews and the objectification of science is nothing but ongoing social control and hegemony. This epistemic colonialism has been imposed upon all peoples exposed to European worldviews and ideologies. Churchill (1994) states that colonization has by now been consolidated to such an extent that it is difficult for EuroAmerican descendants to see themselves as being colonized.

To begin the process of healing from what Daes (2000) refers to as the disease of oppressed consciousness we must begin by acknowledging that rationality is only one way of knowing (Wilkinson et al., 2007) and that it is a deeply embedded epistemological assumption (Barrett, 2013). The objectivist paradigm embedded in a solely materialist ontology has had much influence on the current state of knowledge, leaving no room for ancient and contemporary onto-epistemologies which have great credence in a wide variety of contexts and cultures (Hart et al., 2000). As settler descendants we must become aware of how multiple ways of knowing, both ancestral and contemporary, have had a long history of devaluation and marginalization and continue to be oppressed. Engels (as cited in Ermine, 1995) states that Eurocentric epistemologies based on scientific rationality were used for dominance and in effect produced a state of ‘false consciousness’ which worked to extinguish all those epistemologies that were focused on “the delicate path into inner space, the metaphysical” (p. 102). The curse of material rationality and the spell of the discursive (Bai, 2009) has resulted in the complete erasure and denial of those ways of knowing and being that were part of a collective, cultural subjectivity in multiple cultures. The colonization of these ways of knowing has resulted in psychological, social, and spiritual trauma that is inter-generational; held in the very bones of our collective consciousness.

Countercolonizing discourse and the liberation of transrational, animist, intuitive and spiritual onto-epistemologies are needed as we attempt to overcome and heal from the colonial mindset many of us have internalized. Astin (2004) writes that the word transrational means beyond, not counter to, rationality. Engaging these ancient and contemporary ways of knowing can provide an “epistemic correction” (Hart et al, 2000) to the colonial consciousness, engaging both rationality and transrationality as equally legitimate and necessary ways of knowing. Ermine (1995) writes “that individuals and society can be transformed by identifying and reaffirming learning processes based on subjective experience and introspection” (p. 102). This could result in truly hybrid post-colonial ways of experiencing and expressing our subjectivity which could move us towards a postcolonial paradigm which “would accept knowledge from different cosmologies as valid in their own right, without them having to adhere to a separate cultural body for legitimacy” (Duran & Duran, 2000, p. 87). Regan (2010) cautions that not all in Eurocentric Western culture and its institutions will be enthusiastic about such reclaiming work. She notes that because radical change is not ultimately in its best interest, the dominant majority is apt to reinforce imperialism, often unconsciously, in ways that are detrimental to the decolonization of individuals, institutions or culture. Encountering these continuing colonizing discourses and disciplinary forces often reopens the wounds of generational trauma and internalized oppression and can stall or foreclose any and all attempts to reclaim these ‘othered’ onto-epistemologies that hold out the promise of healing our colonial dis-ease.
Shattering narratives

It had been a powerful lunch hour and many staff wiped tears from their eyes as they helped stack away the dishes and prepared to return to their classrooms. I knew they would be entering those rooms with different eyes than they had in the morning. The small, quiet grandmother looked exhausted after sharing the heartfelt story of her experience in residential schools as a child. This was not something she often spoke of, and I wondered how this sharing would impact her life. She was here visiting her daughter from the north, where she still lived and many ways of traditional existence, and had agreed to come and speak to the staff and the children.

The experience of hearing from a member of our community, the mother of one of our cultural teachers who had come to know well and care about deeply, had a much different effect than reading it in a book or hearing a stranger on a video. Here was a connected member of our family sharing from the heart a story that had been silent for many, many years. It was a human story, and it changed us all. As I followed her and her daughter down the hallway where they were to speak to the grade five class, I wondered at her courage.

The classroom waited in anticipation of their guests. They were studying the treaties and the cultural teacher had agreed to talk about the meaning of the teepee with them. Her mother would speak of raising a teepee and what it had been like to spend time in one. It was a very typical, historical lesson that placed First Nations and Métis people into the past, a place where most teachers felt safe to tread. But today we would learn a lesson that would forever change us all.

As the presentation began and the children began asking questions of a typically stereotypical nature about Aboriginal peoples, I could see a look arising on the face of the cultural teacher. She turned the direction of the presentation, and began asking the kids what they thought of the First Nations and Métis people now in their city today. The children were silent, looking at one another, until one outspoken boy held up his hand and said that Indians were dirty and drunk. All of the kids held their breath, waiting to be chastised and when they realized that was not going to happen, almost every hand in the class went up and within minutes the entire whiteboard was filled with the most racist slurs and attitudes one could imagine. The classroom teacher and I exchanged concerned glances not sure where this was going, and the elderly Cree grandmother was looking at her daughter like she had lost her mind.

Then the cultural teacher began to ask her mother questions: “Are you a drunk? Are your children in jail? Are you dirty? Do you get everything free from the government? Do you live on welfare? Are you violent? Have you been arrested by the police?” Her poor mother, who had no idea where she was going with this, became more obviously offended and angry as she answered each question with a no. Then the cultural teacher bluntly told the children that she was an Indian woman, her mother was an Indian woman, in fact they were Cree women, a part of a Nation that had lived on this land long before any of these children’s settler ancestors had come here. She reminded them that she lived down the street in their neighborhood and that many of the children in their classroom were First Nations and Métis. I could see the puzzled looks on the children’s faces as they stared at their presenters and then looked at each other. I could see them struggling with their dissonance at encountering their stereotype standing in front of them and it not adding up. There was no longer just a heroic, historical Indian in a teepee and a drunk one on the street. Their views had been shattered and now the conversation could begin about the realities of the past: the genocide, broken treaties and assimilation strategies that lay beneath the social ills and racial slurs that were strewn across the board and in the consciousness of these children, many of whom directly benefited from this hidden, historical past. The colonial settler story had been disrupted forever for these children and for me and perhaps now our minds were unsettled enough that we could begin to listen, reflect and take more appropriate action.
"Instead of posing the question about reconciliation as a matter of what ‘they’ [First Nations] want—recognition, compensation, land—and what ‘we’ can live with, the subject under closest scrutiny becomes ‘ourselves’. In other words, the subject is not the ‘Indian problem’ but the ‘settler’ problem."

Epp, 2008, p. 126

Unsettling the settler

The residential school process institutionalized by the Canadian government sought to transform the mind of Aboriginal youth not educate it (Battiste, 1995). Through a variety of day schools, boarding schools and industrial schools Eurocentric worldviews, languages and values were forced upon Aboriginal children. Battiste & Youngblood Henderson (2000) state that "[f]ederal residential school policies removed children from their homes; placed them in unloving environments; forced them to surrender their identities, their languages, their relationships, and their religions; and fostered a breakdown of family and cultural institutions" (p. 83). Battiste (1995) writes that "[t]hrough ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization (p. viii). The outcome of the legacy of this attempt at assimilation through education is one of tremendous loss; loss of traditional ways, family connections, languages, culture and spirituality all of which has led to significant and painful upheaval in Aboriginal communities and individual lives and families. The historical record of residential schools that I had intellectualized in workshops and readings did not touch the anguish that I heard, felt and experienced on the day I listened to this personal sharing by the mother of a cultural advisor to our school. It was not until this day, in this lunchroom and classroom that the word genocide entered my consciousness and I became aware of how deeply embedded racism is in the fabric of this nation, our educational system and my own identity.

In the 2000 school year, Saskatchewan Learning implemented curriculum policy for Aboriginal education in its Action Plan 2000-2005. Two of the four recommendations of the Action Plan, to implement and actualize First Nations and Métis content and perspectives, as well as a focus on developing a positive school climate were significant to classroom instruction. These recommendations are both examples of a cultural approach, a dominant discourse in Saskatchewan schools regarding Aboriginal education. Schick (2009) writes that “there is a broad and commonsense appeal for culturally relevant modes of schooling as a way to remedy the failure of public education for Aboriginal children” (p. 114). Cultural approaches stem from the popular tropes of multiculturalism and equality that constitute and solidify the Canadian identity of a peacefully diverse nation. Tupper & Capello (2008) note that “[i]n social studies, history and Native Studies curricula in Saskatchewan, the emphasis is often on cultural rather than racial differences, and the historical and contemporary experiences of racism permeating the Province often remain unnamed and unchallenged in these documents” (p.563). To create a counter story to cultural approaches in curriculum the Office of the Treaty Commissioner (OTC) created the Treaty Resource Kit with the intention to make explicit the knowledge and experiences of First Nations people along with their relationships to white settler society (Tupper, 2011). From the OTC’s perspective, treaty education is anti-racist education, and is focused on revealing colonial and racial practices that remain prevalent in Saskatchewan (OTC, 2002). It was hoped that engaging with this process could begin to challenge dominant belief systems held by white settler teachers and their students. My attendance at the OTC workshop did not challenge the cultural approach I found in curriculum that I enacted in my classroom or unsettle my white settler identity. While I taught about the tragedies of the residential school experiences, the differences in worldviews, and racial attitudes in the treaty process at no time did I see myself as a part of this colonial present; it was a historical past which we were overcoming through these teachings. Nothing that I had yet experienced had been “sufficient to overcome and unsettle the social positioning and “commonsense” assumptions of [myself as a] racialized white [person]” (Schick, 2009, p. 115).

As Schick (2009) emphasizes “[t]he effects of residential school experiences, cultural genocide and economic exploitation are part of the ongoing legacy of colonialism that marks Aboriginal/settler relations in the Canadian prairies” (p. 113). And yet it wasn’t until this day, when I heard the voice of someone who I was in relationship with and cared deeply about speak of these affects upon her as a human being, that I fully realized that I lived within a colonial society and worked within an institution that continued the legacy of assimilation. The racial slurs that spilled from the mouths of those young children juxtaposed against the horrific personal accounts of past and present genocidal and colonial actions finally knocked me out of my unconscious, disconscious ignorance. I was forced to “consider the ways in which the ongoing racialization of First Nations people by white settlers perpetuates conditions of oppression that reinforce inequality” (Tupper, 2011, p. 45). I was finally unsettled enough to face my colonial settler identity.
Feasting on generosity

I sat next to my husband in the large circle of chairs surrounding the Elder. Smoke floated softly to the ceiling from the ceremonial pipe as prayers were offered for the Feast. This was a coming together of people from many places to celebrate together and pray for the work of the Métis society in this city. It was a young organization and hoped to support the many Métis families and youth in a city where such supports were few. I looked around the circle at the many elders and wisdom keepers that had come to be a part of community and feast together. As the pipe was passed I realized the significance of this event for our school. This would have been the first time the smoke from the pipe had filled the air of this building and I knew it was a significant beginning for us in relation with the First Nations and Métis peoples of this school and surrounding community. We had heard often during this second year of our grant project as we continued to try and understand how to create a climate of belonging and cultural affirmation in a school how important it was the community lead us where it wanted to go. We were the non-knowers, there was much we didn't understand, and all we could do was offer in good faith our openness to relationship, the rest was up to the community. We had struck a tentative beginning with the young Métis leader of this organization and had told him that our school, our resources and our time was available for his work. The feast marked the beginning steps in connecting with this community.

There were some members of our school community here, families with children, others who lived in the neighborhood and surrounding city, and some from cities further away. All were here to witness this beginning relationship, to support the work of the Métis in this city and to pray, celebrate and feast together. As the Feast began and food and gifts were served I was struck again by the generosity of the community; generosity of food, gifts and relationship. Those of us in the group who were visibly "other" in this situation were treated with patience and respect as we were taught the protocols of this ceremony. Many sitting near us introduced themselves and their children, shared their stories of where they were from, their band, their nation, their traditions. I watched with interest the mayor and the two MLA's who had responded to our invitation to attend. I could see this was a new experience for them but was happy they had chosen to come. This would add support to the path we had chosen to walk as a school community. Only one member of our senior administration from the school division was present; the same one that attended all of our events when invited. I wondered where the others were, why they did not attend, and what that may mean for us in the future as we continued to build relationships with the First Nations and Métis peoples of our community. I was worried that there would be a lack of understanding as to why we had stepped back from thinking we could lead this process, to a space of un-knowing and allowing the community to lead us. This was not a very typical way in Western society or education, and I wondered how this would be interpreted by those who were not walking this journey with us but held power within the system. As the laughter and fun quieted at the end of the ceremony, I let my prayers join those of the Elder as I asked the Creator to extend the generosity of spirit that was evident in this room to those spaces of power beyond the school.
Eating ignorance

Relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies in Canada began over 500 years ago and as regular contact between these societies increased it established the need for Aboriginal peoples and the newcomers to work out the terms by which they would live together. Increasing pressure from the European nations led to the negotiations of “Peace and Friendship treaties so that the people would be able to coexist on the land” (Antone, 2005, p. 56). “These political agreements were undertaken by Indigenous nations to ensure their continued prosperity, as well as to create a political space for the newcomers to this continent” (Guardry 2013 p. 83). The treaty relationships were originally meant to establish the political and physical space for both treaty partners to exist independently of one another while simultaneously maintaining a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship. Tully (1995) states that “treaties give rise to constitutional interdependence and protection” for both treaty partners, and they do not result in “discontinuity or subordination to a single sovereign” (126). However, the treaty agreements deteriorated into one of domination by the non-Aboriginal partners and a long history of displacement and assimilation began (RCAP, 1996). Tupper & Capello (2008) note that “since the signing of the numbered treaties there have been numerous (mis)steps by the government in discharging their responsibilities” which may be “characterized alternatively as paternalistic, racist or culturally genocidal” (p. 560).

In the present day, most non-Aboriginal people are for the most part extremely ignorant of the initial intent of the treaty relationship or the many ensuing (mis)steps that have followed; both have become a public secret. "As Taussig (2002) notes, a public secret involves a practice “of knowing what not to know”, an ongoing performance of repression and expression, that is at the very basis of being “properly” educated and socialized” (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005, p. 1). The majority of white settlers function with what McIntyre (2000) calls “studied ignorance” and “privileged innocence” regarding the treaties which serves to uphold the status quo, assigning power, privilege and the capacity to shape “realities” and “truths. Such privilege allows its holders not to know or think about systemic inequality or their role in sustaining that inequality; they can then “disassociate themselves from, and presume themselves innocent of, the cumulative appropriations and disposessions that define systemic relations of domination” (McIntyre, 2000, p. 159). This allows white settlers to plead “It was so long ago, can’t they just let it go and get on with their lives?”, or to argue “It wasn’t my ancestors, my immigrant family were good people.”, or to claim “What happened in those residential schools was horrible but thank goodness that’s all over, now let’s move forward and use our skills and expertise to get those First Nations kids reading scores up and graduation rates higher.” When we enact such discourse we are in fact “erasing, dismissing, distorting and forgetting the lives and experiences of Aboriginal people” (Bailly, 2007, p. 85). Our “strategic ignorance” (Tupper, 2011) divests us of our responsibilities, allowing us to protect our identities as white, immigrant, innocent settlers rather than allowing the words invader, colonizer or assimilator to enter our consciousness. We cannot entertain the possibility that we continue to live in our white privilege all because we have not, as non-Aboriginal Canadians, honoured our end of the treaty relationship. We remain ignorant, unwilling or unable to disrupt or reveal our settler identities. We do not question the public secret of the “treaties”, and become defensive when genocide is suggested as we allow the racist and assimilationist policies to continue to function in our midst unnoticed, unquestioned, unchallenged, and invisible.

As I watched the rising of the smoke of the pipe that night I sensed the possibility for a change in relationship between this school and its First Nations and Métis community members. Any possibility of changing this partnership would require that we, as non-Aboriginal educators, become aware of how Western education has played a significant role in “ir/forming epistemologies of ignorance, and in particular, white ignorance, which is itself a product of white normativity” (Tupper, 2011, p. 48). We had to become open to learn about and admit to “the manifest failure of [the] interventionist and assimilationist approach” that schools of the past and present perpetuate (RCAP, 1996, p. 38). We had to step away from the paternalistic relationship Western education has traditionally modelled in this country and look for a way to restore the roots of intent in the original treaty partnership. We had to be open, despite our fears, or guilt, or unwillingness, to stop being ignorant, to unlearn the collective stories we had been told and maintained about the treaty relationship and face our own complicity in the loss of the partnership that had been the original intent. We needed to stop the unilateral interventions typical of non-Aboriginal society, especially endemic in education, and work to regain “a relationship of mutual recognition and respect for differences” (RCAP, 1996, p. 39). It would prove to be very difficult to swallow and digest my white settler ignorance.
The hanging of the angel Gabriel

I sat on the cushion in the middle of the room, candle lit and door closed. It was after seven at night and I should have been on my way home, but as I had walked past this space on my way to the parking lot something drew me in. I took off my shoes, set them outside the door and stepped inside. Instantly the energy of the room enveloped me and I knew I needed to sit in silence, to contemplate my situation, and to give in to the feelings I had been trying to run from. As I sat gazing around the room I was amazed that this sacred space had come to exist in a school, even, and maybe especially, a Catholic one. The ancient statue of the Angel Gabriel hung protectively above me as I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. The frantic pace of the last few months settled on my shoulders as my mind filled with swirling images and my body with a cascade of emotions. There was joy, love, peace, a thought about how this prayer space had grown from being from the ideas of the older students in my class who were longing for places of quiet to engage the meditative and contemplative aspects of a faith long buried, the excitement of younger children who wanted water, rocks, light and nature in this space, and the inspiration of staff and community who worked together with students to bring this vision to life. There was wonder as I watched the looks of fascination on the faces of several visitors, newcomers and community members who showed up at the doors of our school like gentle waves as if drawn to some, often leaving gifts in their wake star blankets, crosses, and angels to hang. Many were community elders and knowledge keepers from many traditions, who after their initial visit became important relations to our school community. There was pride that this had become a place that recognized the commonality in all traditions and where the pipe and prayers of a Anishnabe Elder could be present and welcomed with the cross and blessings of a Priest, the Buddhist chants of a grade 8 student sitting still as a lotus flower and the calming yogic breath of a troubled child. As the prayers of many traditions echoed within this space, it seemed to develop an energy and power of its own, a life force that emanated throughout the building. I often heard the hushed comment, "I wish I had gone to a school like this", as newcomers entered the school and this space. And there was awe as many new families, some from immigrant backgrounds, many of First Nations and Métis ancestry and others with children damaged by life and the system began to come each week. They were hearing that this school was a place where their children would be heard, their culture would be respected and their voice was welcome.

But there was also pain. I seemed that the last few weeks had been filled with stories from children and families of trauma, abandonment, sexual abuse, physical assault, violence, poverty and need. More needs than I could stand to listen to, let alone meet. As I sat day after day, hour after hour with the suffering in this community, I saw it with different eyes and felt it deeply. My journey into other ways of knowing and being had challenged many of the beliefs, values and ideologies I had held both consciously or unconsciously. I had experienced a silencing of my world and a shattering of the facade modern Western culture creates. Like a cheap vaudeville show, when the curtain had come down, the film and corruption was visible, and I felt sickened by it all. How would I help the child living in poverty when I now saw that Western culture and institutions like education created the conditions for them being there? How could I face the First Nations child whose parents were caught in the throes of drug abuse when I knew the violence of cultural genocide had put them there and that continued colonialism, of which I was a part, only served to keep them there? How was I to stand in the pews of the church surrounded by damaged children and tell them this was to be their salvation, when I now knew that this institution had been instrumental in the violent silencing of women, Indigenous peoples and contemplative, spiritual knowledge? How was I to speak aloud what I now knew when it would only cause me to be more ostracized, more isolated, more different, more dangerous, more "other"? I felt disconnected, grieving stories I had believed and how those narratives had in so many ways harmed me, the earth, children and the many voices "ethered" in our society. As I stared face to face at my own complicity in many of the conditions which created the pain I was listening to daily, I felt helpless, stripped of agency. My own memories both personal and ancestral were stirring regarding power, hierarchy, abuse, and trauma; demanding a voice and to be heard. I needed to step away, take some time to collect the pieces of myself that had been blown apart in the last few months. I had a spiritual illness, a soul wound, and I needed a spiritual cure. I gazed at the angel above me, wondering if the voices of spirit, long silenced in this tradition, were able to speak and if I was ready to hear.
“Religion often divides humankind, spirituality on the other hand, of whatever deep and sincere kind, heals and unites and makes us all brothers and sisters, since true spirituality intuits and honors the common ground of all being.”

Tuori, 1998, p. 37

Seeing the light

In Modern Western culture it is not just in the institution of education that rational-analytic modes of generative knowledge and perception are privileged over mystical, intuitive, somatic, affective, and experiential forms of knowledge (Curry & Wells, 2006). Religion has mainly been functional and institutional rather than spiritual and personal and often delegitimizes and subjugates inner esoteric paths and contemplative practices (Rohr 2003, 2009). Williams & Ritzman (2012) note that “[t]he great problem of the institutionalization and structuring of religious experience is that dogmas and orthodoxies grow up and rigidify around spirituality...limit[ing] and even forbid[ing] access to genuine spiritual encounter (p. 30). Bigger (2009) argues that religion can be anti-spiritual and controlling rather than empowering. Perhaps this is why the majority of today’s children and youth describe themselves as spiritual but most are unlikely to go to church or participate in any type of organized religion; over forty percent say they never attend any kind of religious institution (Goebel, 2008).

Berry (1999) states that there is a psychic-spiritual dimension to all reality and that there is an intersubjective interconnection between the spiritual and the human species in all its manifestations: rational, physical, psychological and spiritual. Spirituality, different from religious belief, connects to this psychic-spiritual dimension of non-material forces, such as spirits and unseen powers (Bigger, 2009). The spiritual world has been recognized by many as a source of knowledge and in many cultures and contexts, accessing and engaging knowing acquired through spiritual means is normal practice, central to both knowing and being (Barrett, 2013). However, the term spirituality is highly contested in Western research and education as the ideological valorization of mind and the suspicion of embodied, intuitive and spiritual experiences in education, including religious education, delegitimizes the possibility that there may be other aspects of our being beyond mind, and even beyond body and emotion that are implicated in learning. Anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and feminist theories have challenged discourses that favour certain types of knowledge over others and which privilege the desires and values of select groups of students over other groups which are “often discriminatory on the basis of race, class, and gender” (McLaren, 1989, p. 183). While such work has contested the mind/body binarism and worked to find ways to integrate both the body and emotion as an aspect of embodiment into intellectual work, these theoretical stances still favour the physical over metaphysical, rational over transrational and material over spiritual. In this way they continue to reproduce Modern Western cultures hidden “logic of domination”, and while they may affect change on intellectual or emotive level, they often do not result in the complete dissolution of the dualistic separate self that discriminates and oppresses other beings and nature (Orr, Deborah, 2002).

Barrett (2013) notes that spiritual perspectives can support the development of a non-dualistic understanding of the world, eventually eliminating the binaries and categories that privilege the knowledge of some cultures over others. This can result in eliminating the conditions for dominance and oppression. Orr (2002) posits that spiritual practices can address oppressive ideologies in the lives of students and foster change not only on the intellectual level of students learning but also “on the levels of body, emotion, and spirit, the levels where the most insidious and resistant formations of oppression are often lodged” (p. 480). She stresses the possibilities of embodied spiritual practices to break down essentialism, binaristic conceptual schemata and reified concepts of the self which can loosen the ideological formations that structure the lived experience of oppression. Spiritual practices can bridge the socially constructed gulf between mind and body, feeling and spirit, ideas and life, and self and other that current pedagogy is often unable to span (Barrett, 2013). A common strand running through spiritual, contemplative and meditative practices developed over many millennia and across many cultures is the aim to increase and clarify awareness of experience undistorted by such things as the preconceptions, biases, and conditioning that are internalized through exposure to Modern Western worldviews and ideologies. Such spiritual techniques are designed to bring to experiential awareness the ways in which a distorted or false idea manifests in an individual’s life and, in the process of achieving this awareness, create the possibility of change. It is through such spiritual practices that we can understand the message of the elders of all traditions who state that a “divine light shines through different windows but it’s the same light” (Harvey, 2012, p. 25) and that there are many paths which are all deserving of respect.
I stood in the valley of Fire, the sun beating hard upon my head as I sat beneath the shadow of the Seven Sisters getting ready to light the sage. I had been given by the Cree teacher, mentor and friend who had come with me to this desert place. Fifty kilometers north of Las Vegas, City of Sin, I found myself immersed in a valley that was thought to have formed more than 150 million years ago. I had spent the morning walking through the red clay, past the plants that had gone to sleep for the desert winter to view hundreds of carvings, petroglyphs left from peoples hundreds of thousands of years ago. Western experts didn’t seem to know for sure where these people had come from or what the American guide, looking uncomfortable in his starched khaki shirt, told us that the local aboriginal peoples stories told that these had been stone people, they had come from the stone, and had returned to the stone. He didn’t believe it of course, but he did have trouble explaining the petroglyphs that were hundreds of feet high up the sheer cliffs in many places. He uncomfortably shared that legend had it the shamans had gone into some kind of trance and had floated up into the air to carve the story of their visions on these red cliffs.

After a morning of touring in this red valley we had pulled over and stopped for lunch. It was at a road stop right next to the highway and as we got out to the metal covered picnic area I felt a stab of disappointment. I wanted to eat alone, away from the group of five I had been travelling with, to sit on the dessert sand and see in this place. And I was also aware of the sage in my pocket, and the advice I had received that I was to smudge out here in this valley, to pray for understanding, for healing, for some balance. However, the guide was adamant that this was where we were to eat, so we walked across the road towards the picnic table. As we were about to be seated I was swarmed by wasps. They covered my clothes, my lunch bag and the table I was going to sit at. No one else seemed to be attracting them, so I tried to move to another table, thinking it may have just been something near that space, but they followed me. None bit, but they were frantically swarming all around me and seemed to be growing in numbers. Some of the group ran to the van and the tour guide suggested we could not eat here. As I reached the van, they all magically flew away and we continued on the road. The guide was flustered and said he wasn’t sure where we could stop now, then he said he knew of a place, it was not on the tour but it was nearby. As we drove up to the huge red rock formations he announced that these were the Seven Sisters.

I wandered between the huge rock formations until I found a quiet place away from the group and sat down to pray. A cry from high above in the blue sky announced an eagle circling above. With the smell of sage on the dessert wind, I asked for direction, for understanding, for some vision of how to go forward and some way of handling the pain and trauma that had appeared not just in my outer world, but in my inner self. After some time in prayer and silence, I walked out into the dessert and stared back at the Seven Sisters, asking for some guidance from these ancient stone beings. Suddenly I heard a wisp of wings above my head and a rasping, guttural sound. Above me flew a massive raven, which landed atop of the Sister rock where I had been praying. This raven, Bran as it was known to my Celtic ancestors, Initiator of death and rebirth, foreteller of healing through the resolution of opposites, seemed to have a lot to say to me. It walked back and forth, its croaking sounds echoing across the distance between us. I could sense the urgency in this communication, and as I stood on this barren land I began to open to all kinds of voices, the wind brushing through my hair, the drone of hundreds of insects, the scent and stillness of the dessert sage. What had been a silent landscape now seemed to be alive with sound, voices that were always present but which I had been unable to hear. Abruptly this beautiful communication was shattered by the shouts of the leader to come back, it was time to go. I walked shaken across the sand and stone that a moment ago had seemed alive with voice when I saw one of the group members duck and another run. I heard the whoosh of wings close enough to ruffle my hair and a deafening croak in my ear as the raven brushed by me and flew back up to the top of the red cliffs. My heart was pounding at the close encounter and the group laughed sharply, remarking that I sure seemed to attract some strange wildlife. Down the road we stopped to view a last set of petroglyphs that were not usually on the tour, but because we were in this out of the way place, the guide stopped to show us. These drawings were different from the realistic representations we had viewed all morning; these were swirls, and spirals, rounded bodies, and circles within circles. The guide explained that these were thought to have been created by the women of the people of long ago. I gazed back at the Seven Sisters and wondered what this land was trying to tell me if I just had ears that could hear.
“For a few people of European ancestry, the felt awareness of a living, expressive terrain may have been buried for some forty or fifty generations, yet it has never been vanquished: even at that depth it moves and stirs, exerting its influence upon our bodies and our dreams, waiting patiently for the moment when it will rise like a bubble from the depths, expanding rapidly toward the surface as the pressure upon it decreases, until it bursts into the open air of our experience, and we breathe of it once again.”

Abram, 2011, p. 55

Hearing Voices

Our pre-modern animist ancestors saw all of creation as alive, imbued with spirit, but as the world acquired the habits of the educated mind, which separated the knowing subject from the objectified world, certain parts of the world were viewed as not alive or having no consciousness (Stuckey, 2010). To be educated into the Modern Western worldview, discourses and practices is to embody the dualisms of body-spirit, human-nature, and subject-object. Bai (2013) states that “an essential part of this knowledge acquisition is learning the everyday language that expresses the binary categories, such as what is sentient and what is not sentient, or what is animate and what is not animate” (np). We are taught to see our place within the universe as a relationship between a pure subject and a pure object, between an active intelligence or mind and purely passive chunks of matter. Berry (1999) writes that in such a context the other than human becomes totally vulnerable to exploitation by the human. Our political, economic, intellectual and religious establishments are committed, consciously or unconsciously, to promoting this radical discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman.

The human/nature binary positions humans as active, expressive agents and positions “more than humans” (Abram, 1996) as passive, with nothing to express. Our indigenous ancestors, and the many Aboriginal peoples who still hold fast to oral traditions, speak “directly to [the] world, acknowledging animals, plants and even land forms as expressive subjects with whom they might find themselves in conversation” (Abram, 2010, p. 19). The introduction of the written word, and then the alphabet, into the social intercourse of humans initiated a fundamental change in the way newly literate cultures understood their reality (Shlain, 1998). Written words came to provide a representation of the world as though outside of it and not a part of it, and humans began to take the palpable world itself as a representation. The animate landscape lost its voice and humans came to believe that they alone were the carriers of consciousness in this world. Abram (2011) writes that as oral cultures encounter the written word its as if a kind of spell is cast upon the human senses, and “the entire culture comes to conceive of language and meaning, as an exclusively human property” (p. 56). Alphabetic civilizations have fallen under the spell of their own signs, the spell of the discursive (Bai & Cohen, 2007), and have come to believe that real sentience, subjectivity, is the exclusive possession of our human kind.

Rose (2013) notes that the problem with this binary position is that “communication, or expression, has been equated with language” (p. 102) This has created an arrogance in imagining that humans are the only creature who speak and thus the only ones who possess an active voice. Curry (2008) states that when we conflate communication with language it puts us in a human-centric enclosure, where we pretend to be disembodied minds looking at nature without being situated in it. In this dualistic view humans are positioned as expressive active agents, while non humans are passive with nothing to express (Plumwood, 2009). While more than human beings don’t speak in a human tongue, in words, they speak: in song, or in rhythm, or in a language of movements, gestures or slowly shifting shadows (Abram, 2010). Mathews (2008) states that we do not merely imagine the perspectives of these more than human beings but that there is a synergistic encounter between the human and other-than-human inner realities where both are actively being shaped and shaping the other. Berry (1999) writes that every mode of being in the entire universe has “the capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action” (p.4). Plants, animals and spirits exist in communicative relationship with humans, communicating in multiple registers (Rose, 2013) but humans caught within our own human-made symbols have forgotten how to listen.

There is an intentionality within the more than human world—always mysterious, but never mindless—and we can relearn how to experience ourselves as creatures who are attentive to others and who are participants in the life of the world. Rose (2013) states that humans can enmesh “themselves ever more knowledgeably into the creature languages of country” (p. 104). We can re-encounter the expressiveness and mindfulness of more than human world, stepping out of our concepts and our head and back into the sentient world where we can hear the Earth’s language that is constantly calling is to enter into encounters, to be co-present and engaged. We can relearn how to experience ourselves as one among many in a world filled with mindfulness by opening our selves to others as communicative beings. This post-Cartesian reconstruction of our beings would recognize intentionality, include communication exchange and agency (Plumwood, 2002) and honor the voices of all sentient beings.
I stood in the middle of the large room in stunned silence. The last thing I expected when we stumbled along a route of strange synchronicities was to find a center for brain education in the middle of the desert. We had come to this part of the world, my husband and I, on the recommendation of a healer who suggested that the vortex energies of this land were extremely intense and could help restore energy balance in any life form. As we drove through the desert and mountains to the small town nestled in the midst of multiple red-cliffed mountains, the trees and shrubs that lined the roadway radiated an unusual light and energy and the air was clear, crisp and vibrating. This land, known to be traditionally sacred lands of the Aboriginal peoples of the area, was said to contain concentrated fields of power that could provide significant shifts in consciousness and healing not just on the physical plane, but emotionally and spiritually. We had spent several days climbing the jagged cliffs, staring out over amazing vistas and walking through the unusually diverse vegetation. As we stepped over and around massive twisted trunks of trees, centered by the energy of these ancient red mountains, we drew in the unusual energies this place obviously contained. On our last evening in town we ate at a small restaurant serving Eastern cuisine, and enjoyed the beautiful murals that surrounded us on every wall. A beautiful woman was centered in all of the designs, holding the earth in her compassionate gaze. I asked our waitress to explain who the woman was and she said her name was Mago, a Korean word which translated to Mother Earth or Ancient Mother.

The next day when our plans for a final hike to a not yet visited vortex area were spoiled by a sudden torrential downpour, we sadly left town through the desert. We had one more day to spend in this beautiful area but it appeared it was not meant to be. As we drove down the highway to return to the city that neither of us felt ready for, I began to see a figure far off in the distance in the desert. As we drove closer, it became obvious it was a huge monument rising up out of the sand. I could not believe my eyes. It was a statue of the woman from the restaurant walls, Mago, holding the earth in her hands. I convinced my husband to turn off the highway, and as we drove towards Mago, other figures surrounding her became visible. She was surrounded by the statues of multiple enlightened beings from diverse spiritual traditions: Buddha, Lao Tzu, Jesus, Mary, Confucius and others. As we entered the small building in the park we learned of a center not far from this spiritual monument that was dedicated to awakening the dream of Mago. After a bit more convincing that this was just too big a coincidence to be unimportant, my husband was driving us along a potholed, beaten path farther into the desert; something seemed to be pulling us along in this stream of energy.

This string of synchronistic events had brought us to a healing center filled with gardens, labyrinths, meditation halls and a large educational center. The sign at the entrance announced that the mission of this space was to help humans feel the joy of the unbreakable bond that their souls share with Mago’s soul. As I walked through the Brain Education Center, the words on the walls spoke of a necessary advance in human consciousness which could only be achieved through the human brain. The information stated that after an overdevelopment of the rational capacities of the brain humanity needed to re-learn how to commune with Mago by awakening a long-dormant capacity to sense energy. Oneness and interrelatedness. I had never thought of the brain and its functioning in connection with the environmental crisis humanity is facing. As I was standing in complete fascination with this idea I saw out of the corner of my eye a tiny Korean woman walk quietly towards my husband and stand directly in front of him. She reached out her hand and gently placed it upon his forehead and told him that his head was hot, filled with too much heated energy of swirling thoughts. Then she placed her hand on his stomach and told him that his belly was cold, which made it hard for his body to digest food. She said people in the West are upside down, backwards, and that we need to learn about Cow. Then to my continued surprise she reached her hand up to his forehead again and said, slowly and quietly, “Cow, cool mind, open heart, warm belly. Cow. This is how your energy should be.” Then she bowed solemnly and walked away. This quiet teaching awakened us both to the possibility that what was happening within our brains and what was happening to the Earth were somehow connected.
"All the problems in the world were created by the human brain, and within the human brain lie all the answers....If all human problems result from the brain, they can also be solved by the brain.

Imbalance in the world is a reflection of the imbalance within our bodies and brains."

Lee, 2009, p. 125

Brain wave
When written words began to supersede spoken language, the left brain’s dominance markedly increased and the right brain’s complementary role in creating and deciphering language diminished. This resulted in Western civilization being increasingly dominated by left brain processes, values and ways of seeing the world (Shlain, 1998). The constant progression of Western culture toward the limits of rational thought are the byproducts of this judging, analyzing, planning, brilliant monkey mind (Bai, 2006) but this overreliance on the Earth is becoming obvious, and the effects on [human] health are becoming clear as well (p. 84). While we need the ability to make fine discriminations, and to use reason appropriately, McGilchrist (2009) states that alone these are destructive and may be bringing humanity “close to forfeiting the civilisation they helped to create” (p. 93). The contributions of the left hemisphere need to be made in the service of something else, that only the right hemisphere can bring.

While every cognitive behavior we exhibit involves the activity of both hemispheres through their connection of the corpus callosum, these two parts of our brain attend to the world very differently. The left hemisphere’s language center uses words to describe, define and dissect in loops of thought patterns that constantly categorize objects into hierarchies, critically judging and “re-presenting” an external world. This world is explicit, abstracted, compartmentalized, fragmented, static and essentially lifeless; we feel detached from this world but in relation to it we are powerful (McGilchrist, 2009, Taylor, 2009). If the left hemisphere is the hemisphere of ‘what’, the right hemisphere “with its preoccupation with context, the relational aspects of experience and emotion and the nuances of expression could be said to be the hemisphere of ‘how’” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 93). While the left steps outside of the flow of experience and represents the world, the right allows things to be present to us in all their embodied particularity, with all their changeability and impermanence, and their interconnectedness, as part of a whole which is ever in flux. The right mind creates a master collage of what this moment in time looks like, rich with sensations, thoughts, emotions, and physiological responses (Taylor, 2009). While the left hemisphere is disconnected from the Other, powerful but only able to know itself, the right pays attention to the Other, and sees itself in profound relationship, attracted to and given life through the betweenness and relationship with this Other. The two hemispheres also manifest unique value systems that result in very different personalities. Taylor (2009) notes that the right brain personality lives in the richness of the present with unbridled enthusiasm and gratitude for life, content, compassionate, nurturing and optimistic. The right hemisphere is socially adept, sensitive to nonverbal communication, empathetic, open to the eternal flow, existing as one with the universe. The right brain personality cares about its body, others bodies, the mental health of society and our relationship with Mother Earth as in its experience of reality we are all connected in an intricate fabric of the cosmos. Taylor (2009) experiences this mind as “the seat of [her] divine mind, the knower, the wise woman, and the observer. It is [her] intuition and higher consciousness” (p. 147). This hemisphere must be balanced by the left hemispheric personality which is preoccupied with details, tight schedules, defining boundaries, judging good and bad right and wrong. However the left has the potential to worry incessantly, getting caught in painful memories of the past and worrying about the future. This personality uninformed by the compassionate wisdom of the right can be a verbally abusive, arrogant, sarcastic, judgemental egomaniac.

While these two ways of being present in the world are both essential, “[t]he triumphant march of literacy that began five thousand years ago conquered right-brain values (Shlain, 1998, p. 44). In the Western world we have become so caged up in our linguistic conceptualizations and thought constructs that that we have difficulty realizing these are just our thoughts; just representations of reality (Bai, 2013). Our Western education systems have promoted the development of left hemisphere skills and rewards those whose gifts are in analytic, left-brain activities. Western society continues this unequal valuation as cognitive-based skills usually earn greater money and status. We do not educate the gifts of the whole brain; rather, we develop, condition and reward the left with its incessant automatic conceptualization, creating imbalance and blind obsession (Lee, 2009). When we have no conscious control or awareness of the dominance of the left hemisphere, then there is no autonomy. We are conditioned into this overreliance on left hemisphere skills, values, personality and functioning and are constantly driven by it. When we are caged up in concepts and driven by them we do not have freedom; this is addiction (Bai, 2013). This addictive imbalance actively delegitimizes the gifts of the right hemisphere and the result is the devastation of humans, more than humans, and the Earth.
success-filled conversations

As I drove down the steep road into the park I could see smoke rising from the chimney of the shelter. The lone car in the parking lot told me where the cultural teacher had brought a new student for today’s teachings. He had come recently to our school from a reserve up north, where he had been expelled from every school both on and off the reserve. His mother had shared that he had been in school much over the last three years due to his violent outbursts and refusal to do any sort of school work. We had said we would try to work with her son but it had definitely been challenging. His fluctuations between a likeable, humorous, childlike boy to an angry, defensive and posturing tough young man often happened without notice and we had little idea as to what triggered these outbursts. As I wrapped my scarf around my neck and put on my mitts and walked towards the shelter, I wondered at the sanity of the teacher in bringing him out here alone. As I joined them around the fire, I was surprised to find him more relaxed, focused and engaged than I had ever seen him. They were deep into a conversation regarding his attendance at ceremony and the last sweat he had participated in where he had seen a vision of his spirit animal. He spoke intensely about his connection to the land, his grandmother, and his traditions that he had to leave behind in the snowy distance to come to the city with his mother. As I watched this transformed young man I realized how opposite his vision of a successful, fulfilled life was from the of versions of success and achievement that were promoted within the Modern Western worldview that drove our educational enterprise.

Over the last few weeks since I had returned from my desert time I had found myself surrounded by some challenging conversations regarding what schools were for and what would measure the success of what we were doing in education in general and in this school specifically. A new staff member who had recently been assigned to the school in a position of some influence was constantly questioning the directions of the school: how we were approaching our academic program, how the classrooms were structured, and the steps we were taking to meet the learning, social, cultural and spiritual needs of students. She openly shared her perspectives and those of others in the system who thought our methods were suspect, that the school was being run by the students, and that we were doing children a disservice by not preparing them for the expectations of high school and the real world. At the same time as I was hearing these conversations, the principals in the system were being brought together to envision what our leaders were calling “the gold standard of success” for our schools. Familiar discourses of successful learning, clear expectations, recognition and approval were shared in these discussions as being essential in helping students be in the best position to negotiate for higher positions and jobs and become successful. Many expressed that the purpose of children going to school is to learn but students needed to see the importance of what they are learning for real life and it is the job of the school to make the learning touch their lives and have them see the relevance of it. It was stressed that administrators need to break down the barriers to children learning, move away from power struggles with community and families and think about what every child needs to be successful. As I listened silently I realized that while I had been taught to believe these versions of success and that I had said them myself and taught others to repeat them, I no longer could commit to this discourse. I had no idea what could replace it, if a different vision or version of success could be imagined within the existing system, but I wanted to try.

On the next free non-student day I invited staff and community to join in a conversation and engage in a rethinking of what success could look like for our children. Several of the participants were from diverse cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds and as the lively discussions at the tables took place two very different views began to emerge within the conversation. There were discourses that represented the view that becoming first in the global market economy was the measure of success in schools and that technology, better test scores in science and math, and a global literacy would get schools there, juxtaposed to this was discourse that stated an education for wisdom, creativity and awe, connections to the Earth and spirit and learning from place would create good people who had healthy, respectful relations with all beings. These conversations were challenging and as one participant noted of the emerging integration of these diverse perspectives it could be the death of education and the birth of learning to do these things. While I knew we had not started a revolution or would necessarily change Western education, especially as the system was becoming more focused on achievement, test scores and controlled curriculum, I did hope that this conversation may have inspired a questioning attitude amongst all of us who were there regarding the Modern Western story of success.
Successful annihilation

Studies regularly point out that existing educational systems in Canada have largely failed the Aboriginal peoples as evidenced by poor graduation rates, high drop out rates and poor achievement on standardized performance scales (Little Bear, 2009). Western education stresses the importance of improving outcomes for Aboriginal students and closing the achievement gap that separates the lower achieving Aboriginal students from their mainstream counterparts so that they too can reap the rewards of being successful members of Western society. Modern Western culture, entrenched within the ideologies of capitalistic materialism, defines success as financial security, material wealth and a “good job” at the top of the Western hierarchy of employment. Competition, rivalry, survival of the fittest, which are all part of the tacit infrastructure of the present Western education system, supports students in meeting this vision and version of success. The standards and rules for achievement within Western education are based upon Western capitalist ideologies and leave neither “space nor place for Aboriginal knowledge or ways of teaching and learning in a White privileged education system” (Ireland, 2009, p. 9).

Little Bear (2009) notes that “what makes for differences in approaches to learning and education is the culture with its paradigms, customs, values and the resultant ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology” (p. 10). Western ideals of success are at odds with the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples who view success as self-mastery and learning about one’s special gifts and competencies, with the end goal of education being goodness (Anuik, George & Battiste, 2008). Western education does not recognize Aboriginal peoples onto-epistemological and cultural perspectives towards learning, and the directions and standards for learning remain “unidirectional or univocal, flowing from the colonialist to the colonized” (Kanu, 2003, p. 79).

Little Bear (2009) points out that education systems in Canada have consistently been reportedly unresponsive to the educational needs, wants, strengths, and weaknesses of Aboriginal Peoples. “They have largely resisted making the infrastructure, curricular, and pedagogical changes required to effectively serve Aboriginal students” (p. 6). Those in positions of power in education consistently portray the lack of achievement of Aboriginal learners in crisis proportions, a tactic that “positions those in power as willing to invest and tend to the inherent crisis, all the while establishing direct control over the conditions and the stakeholders” (Cherubini, 2011, p. 5). This further entrenches the marginalization of Aboriginal learners, who through multiple generations of colonization were deprived not just of an economic base for survival, but pride in self, community and Ancestors (Battiste, 2002). Aboriginal learners continue to be subjected to assimilation strategies designed to “get rid of the ‘Indian’ in the Indian” (Ireland, 2009, p. 9) and their lack of success within this system justifies their continued positioning as wards of the state, in need of government control and intervention in order to achieve success.

Battiste (as cited in Little Bear, 2009) states that in the same way that Eurocentric thought stripped their grandparents and parents of their wealth and dignity, the realization of invisibility within Western structures of education strips modern Indigenous students of their heritage and identity and “gives them an awareness of their annihilation” (p. 20). Aboriginal children in schools encounter not just the individual, personal racism which public education denies and does not provide ameliorative policies and practices to address, but they must confront and try to survive a system that by its very foundations is a racist, assimilationist structure. Ireland (2009) writes that in these conditions eventually the learning spirit of Aboriginal children goes into "retreat, going through the educational ‘motions’ but not really engaging because the curriculum and pedagogy are foreign and alienating with learners carrying the burden they can neither name nor set aside” (p. 9). Western educational institutions “must address their role not only as colonizing tools but also in perpetuating hegemony and refrain from using increased enrolment or graduation rates as indicators of their success in meeting the education needs of Aboriginal peoples” (Ireland, 2009, p. 36). Instead it must undergo a comprehensive decolonization, recognizing that standards of success have been established by dominant onto-epistemologies that are legitimized by hegemonic practices, especially the predominance of Whiteness as neutral and invisible. Ireland (2009) states that the multilayered Eurocentric foundations of education “thwart the learning spirit as it moves along the path of life-long learning” (ibid, p. 8). When we look at the devastating effect this has had upon Aboriginal children we must question what such an education does to all children who are being colonized and assimilated into capitalist, materialist ideologies of success that are clearly no longer sustainable for the Earth, or for children.
Leave it at the door

The staff were chatting together and grabbing breakfast as the newly appointed head of the school division entered the room. We had been called as a staff to attend this breakfast meeting for a “discussion” of the school division direction. The tables had been arranged in a grouping but I noticed that our guest sat at a table removed and apart from the staff and waited quietly for us to be seated. She began by assuring us that the recent school division survey of staff perceptions had been reviewed, that teachers had been heard, and that since the survey many things had been “taken off our plates” that had been shared as concerns. We were told we should be happy with the support that senior administration had given in making these concessions. One staff member spoke up at that time and said how happy she was with the support of one member of the division team, our school counsellor. She shared that she had many children in her classroom that experienced many serious social issues; abuse, poverty, violence, suicide, and stated that she could not have survived the year without the support of this member of the school division team. She shared her hopes that the division was thinking of hiring more counselling staff for the next year as she had been teaching for over thirty years and each year she had experienced the needs and demands of children and their families increasing. In response our presenter shared that she had worked in a school in one of the most violent areas of the country which was filled with all sorts of social and cultural issues and stated proudly that the school had been successful in teaching the students to leave those issues at the door. She told the staff that she believed if the school was a welcoming and settled environment students would respond to that and know what was expected and they would learn to leave their social problems where they belonged, at the door. She also suggested that staff needed to learn to leave their personal issues at the door, as our purpose here was after all, education. When another staff member spoke up and said that they felt schools did have a role in dealing with these issues as students, especially young ones, were not very capable of leaving their personal struggles at home, the response was less polite. She was clearly told that other social agencies were responsible for such issues and schools could not be responsible for all of society’s ills. Our leader went on to say that if we take these issues on it lets the other agencies abscond from their responsibilities. The staff looked at each other in surprise at this response, and as it was clear this abrupt correction was disciplinary, fell silent and the meeting ended soon after.

As I was leaving the room, I was directed to meet in my office where I was told to silence the staff that had questioned. I responded that I agreed with their perspective that we had high numbers of students with social needs and that the counselling and Community Education staff support had been critical to our surviving and thriving as a school community. She responded that none of those positions were guaranteed in the future, even the ones funded by the grant monies we had received, as there were many demands being put on the school division by the Ministry and few supports forthcoming for First Nations and Métis education or social concerns. She said if we could show that what we were doing at the school was affecting student academic outcomes then we would be unstoppable. When I expressed my concern over the potential loss of those positions, and the effect that would have upon the success of our school meeting those academic outcomes, she responded that it seemed to her that it was time for us to move forward. She said that education needed to become multicultural rather than being so fixed on just the First Nations and Métis population, and that it was time for all of us in this province to move in this direction. She said this was the direction at the Ministry level and it seemed it was time for the past to be let go, and for all of us in education to focus on getting academic outcomes for our Aboriginal students up to par with all as we moved forward as a multicultural nation. I stood in silent shock as she left but was not surprised when the next day a Superintendent arrived at the school with more direction from senior administration. I was told to focus on getting students from a wealthy, new area in town within our boundaries to come to our school, and was informed that all of my future applications for attendance at the school would have to go through senior approval now. It was explained that this school could not become known as a school for the poor and that we had reached a saturation point for students with needs of any kind. I was told that enrolment was down in this school, and that things needed to change or it would cease to exist. Before I could respond that we had the highest enrolment now that the school had experienced in ten years, I was told to get a major advertising campaign together that would attract a different “demographic” but that it would all need to be reviewed before it went out to ensure it contained the “right” kind of information. The next day I sent a letter to senior administration stating my concerns with this approach and to correct some obvious misconceptions about the school, staff and students, but there was no response. All was silent.
Multicultural Kumbaya

The Multiculturalism Act of 1988 called for the equal participation of all Canadian citizens in what is commonly referred to as an immigrant country. Schick (2009) states that the discourse of multiculturalism in Canada is a “well known trope of Canadian identity and a popular discourse for ostensibly promoting harmony and understanding, if not equality, between cultural groups in Canada” (p. 114). Official multiculturalism is a well-rehearsed part of the national narrative and synonymous with being a good Canadian. Cherubini (2011) states that in education, multicultural polices and practices “are an outcome of the challenges, political movements, and legislation that sought to underscore the distinct needs and learning preferences of students from varying races and cultures” (p. 1). Schools are directed to promote the well being of each individual and community by affirming the cultures, traditions, languages, spirituality and worldviews of all students. In this way multiculturalism attempts to fold Aboriginal perspectives into minority discourses, but the irony for Aboriginal peoples is “that they do not consider themselves a part of these ethnic and cultural groups by virtue of being the first peoples of Turtle Island-North America” (Cherubini, 2011, p. 2). This policy was not embraced by Aboriginal peoples because it does not acknowledge what they consider to be their fundamental rights as they were established through the various treaties and agreements with the European settlers” (Cherubini, 2011, p. 3).

Multicultural education is not a singular discourse; rather it ranges from conservative multiculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, left–liberal multiculturalism, to critical multiculturalism (McLaren, 1994). Despite the diversity of these forms of multiculturalism, they all subscribe to similar foundational assumptions. Each repeats a “colonial blind pattern” (Calderón, 2008) evident in many educational practices and research, where Western ontological frames and their institutionalization are normalized and perceived as neutral. Calderón (2009) states that “Normative Multicultural Education...defines multiculturalism within settler-state discourses and institutions; emphasizes multicultural goals in relation to equality and citizenship rights; perpetuates colonial models of education; and operates within traditional western metaphysical frameworks” (p. 54). As a result citizenship, equality, and diversity narratives become the mainstays of normative multiculturalism in education and support the “multicultural prattle” (Calilou, 1995, p. 48) that assumes if students learn to appreciate each other’s culture, hold hands, and sing Kumbaya, then all will be well. The colonial ontology that grounds such a multicultural education favors settler narratives and actively delinks present settler dominance from the historical genocide of First Nations peoples thereby promoting “assimilatory curriculums and educational practices” (Calderón, 2008, p. 1).

The Canadian policy of multiculturalism is founded on difference (Calliou, 1995) and issues of classism and racism are masked in polite discourses of equality, peace and freedom. Multicultural education induces people to accept these colonial ontologies as proper and meritorious ideologies and values. Educators reproduce these ideologies that serve to protect white settler societies while they appear to advocate for First Nations and Métis students. They willingly and enthusiastically promote discourses of equality and diversity as a means for inclusion, yet all the while remain blind to endemic colonialism. In this way, multicultural discourses and educational practices imitate and perpetuate colonial models of education and their assimilationist agenda that have been forced upon indigenous peoples in white settler nations for hundreds of years. Multicultural policies and practices keep “the focus on Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives and realities and not on the transgressions of the oppressors” (Cherubini, 2011, p. 7) which effectively silences issues of land claims, economic marginalization and colonizing policies. Schick (2009) states that multicultural approaches in education are not sufficient to unsettle the social positioning and common sense assumptions of racialized white teachers or to challenge the colonial origins of multicultural discourses. It is only through engaging anti-colonial practices in education that white settler descendants are able to examine and make explicit the dominance of colonial ideologies, institutions, and practices. It takes courage to acknowledge the “inadequacies of a policy that may only create ‘good-old-boy’ tolerance and mask systemic inequities and that views racism as a separate issue not to be discussed openly at food fairs, intercultural dances, and other publically funded celebrations” (Calliou, 1995, p. 47). It is not easy to turn classrooms and schools into sites of dialectical tensions as power, privilege and state policy are deconstructed and efforts are made to cripple systemic institutionalized and individual racism. Raising such difficult, complex, and interconnected issues challenges the power and privilege of some individuals in Canadian society who prefer to remain in denial and leave such concerns at the door where they “fester like untreated wounds” (Calliou, 1995, p. 48).
Making a circle in a ladder system

I sat across from the Elder and her Oskapewis, helper, in the darkened prayer room and took a big breath. I was here to ask for help, for the school, these children and myself, but had no idea after what I had learned this afternoon how to approach this. I had just come from attending the Elder's talk with the grade eight class and had learned a significant teaching. The class studying the Circle of Justice process the Canadian justice system was engaging with Aboriginal offenders which their curriculum told them was drawn from the teachings from First Nations Peoples. I was eager to hear her perceptions on restorative justice as I continued to be inspired by this concept as an approach to conflict within schools that advocates responses to harm that are healing and strengthening rather than inflicting retribution and punishment. The Elder explained to the students that the Restorative Circle of Justice approach that was being enacted in the justice system in Canada really was not very representative of how restorative justice was done among the First Nations people it was the governments took on this type of justice but in many ways it had been created without the consultation of the First Nations people but was politically spoken of as coming from the People themselves. She shared how many things were done for First Nations Peoples by the government, schools or other Western institutions that were thought of as helping or promoted as being tied to traditional values, but in fact were not. As I listened I thought about the grant we had just received to support us in connecting with the First Nations and Métis community of our school by forming an "Aunties and uncles" advisory committee. We had been encouraged by one of our key support people in the First Nations and Métis Education branch of the Ministry that this advisory group was key to our moving forward in this community, and he suggested we apply for this grant to help facilitate this process financially. We had just heard we had been awarded the grant, but now I felt very unsure what our next steps should be. After listening to the Elder's talk this morning, I felt we should ask her if she would be willing to lead this process and guide us, as I did not want to be just one other white person imposing my process and beliefs upon First Nations Peoples.

As we discussed the grant and the hopes of creating an advisory committee from Elders and Knowledge Keepers in our community to guide our further actions and decisions, I shared my concerns regarding the shifting climate in the school division in the last few months; that the change in leadership seemed to be directing a significant change in focus in our school's journey in researching other ways of doing community education. I shared my frustrations with the promotion of discourses of multiculturalism, and the possibility that after the grant monies ended we may owe our program. I shared my worry about what we were hearing regarding the possible dissolution of the First Nations and Métis Education branch at the Ministry level and the impact that would have upon our school. I feared that if Community Education was in jeopardy at that level as the government ploughed ahead with its efforts to eliminate the achievement gap between Aboriginal children and their settler counterparts, burying everything that did not have to do with achievement, improved test scores and graduation rates, then the community process we were trying to create was also in danger. We had been warned to collect data, take video footage or do something to show that the voices of the First Nations, Métis and the entire community were supporting what we were trying to do. I did not want the First Nations community to have to search for us and commit to us, or for people step forward in an advisory role, without being truthful about where things may be headed and the possibility that the entire process may soon be stopped in its tracks.

After listening quietly to all I had to say the Elder responded that I was trying to create a circle in a ladder system, and that as a result I was meeting with resistance. The ways of knowing, being, and doing school that we were experimenting with, the flattening of the hierarchy and attempts to hear from all members of our community regardless of age, culture, or class were all circular approaches and the ladder was responding as it will. She asked then what I was to do, should I stop, give up, step away, give the grant monies back, admit the ludicrousness of this direction? She responded adamantly with a no, challenged my willingness to quit so easily in the face of difficulty, asking "If you won't speak for us who will?" As I sat in silence trying to take in the meaning of what she was telling me she quietly said she would join in our process and provide us with some direction. She stated she needed to go and pray to the grandfathers and she would return when she was ready.
"Transformation is certainly what we colonizers need as a People, and we would be among the first to be blessed by the process of making things right. Holding ourselves accountable for the massive crimes embedded in our history and recurring in our present would help us to become the kind of People we aspire to be but are not."

Breton, 2010, p. 186

Re-storying Justice

The conflicts we face in Canada, a colonial settler nation, have deep historical roots that can be traced in the stories that we as settlers tell and retell ourselves and others about our “non-violent” past (Regan, 2010). Schools and society promote a story that celebrates the settlers occupation of this land, while dismissing the Original People—their language, traditions, knowledge, relationship with Land, even their competence as humans—as minor footnotes buried in the past. The colonizer’s heroic original story about how settlers came to occupy this land and the myth of our history as benevolent peacekeepers, is told to generation after generation. As part of this cultural myth settlers are told and believe that they live in a just, fair and equitable society. They assume when conflicts occur, everyone involved will receive “due process”, believing that the “law of the land” is basically good and injustices are the exception rather than the rule. Such stories do not tell settler descendants that the life they enjoy came through the suffering and genocide of the First Nations and Métis people and of the ancestral lands they inhabit; which has been the root cause of generations of suffering and conflict. Donald (2009) writes that “stories that Aboriginal peoples tell about places in Canada can trouble historic myths and prompt Canadians to question the depth of their understanding of the familiar places that they call home” (p. 10). While it can be “unsettling” for settler descendants to hear the Canadian version of the “original” story told to include the experiences of the Original People, “revising myths and unpacking assumptions embedded within them is a powerful way to reimagine history and envision a new future” (LeBaron, 2003, p. 281). In this way “the subjugated memories and histories of those hitherto marginalized can become part of the curriculum conversation” (Kanu, 2003, p. 78) regarding justice and restoration.

Colonial settlers remain largely unaware of how the genocidal history of Canada profoundly shapes ideas of justice and the character of colonial descendants as a people. While historically our justice system advocated responding to harm within society by inflicting more harm through punitive and retributive systems of justice, in the 1970’s victim-offender mediation programs were initiated as an alternative response. Breton (2010) writes that “restorative justice is basically new to dominant society’s criminal justice system, yet its core concepts are ancient” (p. 178). Indigenous Peoples’ teachings and traditions, which distill generations of experience regarding coexistence as a way of life, are focused not on punishment and retribution but on the best way to repair broken relationships for the good of all. “The aim is healing, repair, restitution and making whole, so that the community heals” (Breton, 2010, p. 178). As such the essence of restorative justice as a philosophy and way of life holds huge promise for helping colonial settler nations learn how to coexist with others. Despite this potential, Regan (2010) notes that restorative justice has failed to live up to its decolonizing potential in Canada. Breton (2010) states that the restorative justice movement has lost credibility in Canada because it has failed to address People-to-People issues between the First Nations Peoples and settlers or the crimes embedded in Canadian history. She goes on to say that “[m]any First Nations now reject restorative justice on these grounds” (p. 185). The core vision of restorative process which promote going to the roots of harm and doing what it takes to make things right is experienced as empty rhetoric, invoked only when colonial power structures deem it advantageous to do so. Instead of working towards the promises of restorative justice, healing, wholeness and strengthening, it functions as another tool of colonizer institutions and supports the continued dominance of colonial structures. “Restorative justice is simply used to make the violence of the criminal justice system-the colonizers’ control-by-fear device seem more humane” (Breton, 2010, p. 185).

The challenge for restorative justice approaches today is to address the wider, historical, generational contexts that have generated harms, rather than staying focused on individuals, families or communities as the problem, while the larger reasons for these problems remain invisible. It is difficult for restorative justice as a healing process to be taken seriously when the justice system works through processes of accountability, reparation and healing at the individual level but fails to hold the country and settler descendants accountable for the genocide that was committed on these lands, for these lands, we now call Canada. We must expand the focus of restorative justice principles for healing harm between people to healing harms between Nations, or it will join all other colonial enterprises which deny the cause of suffering and perpetuate harm. Breton (2010) writes that restorative justice does not have to be hijacked into being an accomplice to colonization, for its roots are not there. Only if restorative justice embarks on processes which focus on re-storying our national myths and healing the systemic issues causing suffering to all First Nations and Métis people, is there any hope for healing and restoring relations for the good of all Peoples.
Fasting on Fear

I sat facing south, the direction of Spirit, the drum made in ceremony with the elder a week ago sitting silently on my lap. I was waiting for my song, exhausted and spent after hours of being chased by fear. Any and all manner of fears, of death, of failure, of annihilation, of going crazy, of persecution, had chased me round the enclosure of the prayer ties and my mind for hours. There had been no place to hide, no distractions to free me, even sleep eluded me as these horrifically terrifying feelings I had been running from for a lifetime grabbed me, tightening around my neck, causing bile to rise, my knees to shake and my head to pound. No matter how fast I walked on the blanket of fall leaves within my circle under the aspen trees, how much I cried to clear fall sky above or bargained with any and all gods and goddesses I had ever heard of to release me from this debilitating anxiety, I was caught. This was why I had not wanted to come and had tried to elude the quiet nudging of the Elder to participate in this four day fast. I had not wanted to face these demons. I lit the sage once again, smudged and then I prayed with all my strength that the Elder was right in her knowledge that the Earth held the memory of our ancestors and that those stories were also held in my DNA. I asked Mother Earth to share her wisdom with me, praying I could somehow regain my traditions. I could hear the drum from the fire in the distance, never stopping, as the Elder and her helpers prayed for me as I struggled my way to clarity, vision, healing and direction.

Slowly the beat began to shift, take on a deep, distant and ancient form and through the tall grass I heard whispering footsteps from a great far off. Slowly they appeared, some from my left and others from my right, surrounding me in ever widening circles that seemed to go on for eternity. Woman, hundreds of women, ancestral women, eagle and raven clans, circling around the drum, dancing together, intertwining my histories. One woman stepped forward from the group, holding an ancient cloth scroll in her hands and began to speak. We were warriors...you come from powerful women...we come to fear death...we lost our spirit and our practices...fell victim to abuse. The sickness that you feel deep in your belly...tightening around your neck...when you meet resistance you fall to panic, anxiety, fear and illness. We have come to give you the strength of your ancestors against this fear. For generations our women have been so afraid they have not been able to protect their children...give them the stone of security...this has left the children searching in the wilderness for safety and security...you cannot be a warrior if you don’t feel secure...we came to fear persecution...the last few generations have been paralyzed by it. We are here now...healers and warriors...offering healing hands, leadership and strength. This ancestral fear has fogged the intuitive healers and broken the hearts and inflamed the bodies of your warrior ancestors...it has debilitated both sides of your ancestral tree. In the past we healed ourselves...but for several generations the intuitive warrior spirit...healing warrior spirit...has been lost. You must recover ceremony...ask the ancestors and they will teach you...ask the Elder to help you...reconnect with the Earth. We are warriors that heal the Earth but have bodies that are sick because the Earth, our mother, is sick, the spirits are sick. Embrace both of your ancestral sides strengths...acknowledge and heal the weakness of spirit...healing spirals.

I asked her to help me...to blend my heartbeat song with the heart beat song of Mother Earth...the ancient song of all my ancestors. She nodded and slowly unrolled the parchment in her hands, and the song began, verse after verse as the women in circles upon circles around my prayer space sang this ancestral women’s gathering song. They were here, joined together, to honor, dance, sing, and pledge this sacred vow....the Earth has the knowing...take your staff, wand, sword, knowledge and wisdom...for love and for the Earth...seventh sister of the tribe...carry the sacred vow forward...respect the sacred knowledge from those of this land...It is time...take the eagle, hawk and raven of the ancestors. As I joined in the singing of this ancient song...hawk came...spirits came...I drummed...branches falling onto the tent behind me...on my head...the tent shaking...a brushing through my hair...I drummed...Agayagaylee Agayagaylee...we stand before you now...And bring the sacred vow. The scroll...the sacred vow...It was time for me to carry it forward...this vow of love for healing of the Earth...ourselves...it was time...carry the vow...they would be beside me as I carried this forward...healing myself...speaking for the Earth...uncovering the traditions of the ancestors...being a healing warrior on the Earth...standing with courage...speaking what I stand for...what my ancestors have vowed to stand for...talking to those who have no voice...or have lost their voice to fear.
**Soul-shattering**

In its drive for civilization and progress, European culture intentionally buried its connection with a rich, deep indigenous heritage. Cowan (1993) writes that there is “a blind spot created by Christian-European superiority that holds that modern people of Western European civilization are superior in every way to their pagan ancestors, and especially superior to peoples in other parts of the world who do not share modern Western beliefs and European skin tones” (p. 129). Implied in this prejudicial stance is the notion that even when Europeans were indigenous, they were not that uncivilized. Eurocentric colonial anthropologists studied peoples without ever entertaining seriously that their forbears once lived in a culture with a similar cosmology and that this is their heritage as well as the heritage of all indigenous peoples in the world. There was a time and place in the past of all settlers where their ancestors were original peoples who faced invasion and colonization. Merchant (1990) notes that the witch trials, which focused on the elimination of entire cultures, particularly of women, who held the view of nature as animate and infused with spirit, are a prime example of colonization, genocide and assimilation within Europe’s history. Churchill (1994) states that “[t]hese women who were being burned alive, were thus murdered precisely because they served as the primary repositories of the European subcontinents indigenous codes of knowledge and corresponding “pagan” ritual” (p. 263).

European peoples learned to dominate one another long before they developed the power to dominate peoples in other regions of the world (Daes, 2000). Because the physical differences between settlers and the original people were not so marked, assimilation and loss of culture occurred more completely as the centuries passed. Colonial settler descendants have become so conditioned and so self-identified with their oppression that they’ve lost the ability to see it, or resist it in any coherent way; they have become self-colonizing. Daes (2000) writes that all peoples have been oppressed at one or more times in their histories, the experience of oppression is universal; oppressed peoples differ mainly in their awareness of the effects of the experience on their beliefs and their behaviors.

Many European peoples experienced significant social, economic, and political traumas as a result of their colonization. These conditions drove them to find new homes and the effects of these intergenerational soul wounds continue, in many cases unconsciously, to haunt most family trees. What is more traumatizing for colonial settler immigrants to realize, however, is the fact that many of their ancestors, upon coming to Canada, strategically went “from being victims and opponents of racial oppression to upholders of slavery and white supremacy” (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 186). Ratcliffe (2000) notes that the dysfunctional side of this process is that in becoming white, immigrants, who themselves had suffered the effects of colonization on their own homeland soil “did not alter the cultural structure of oppression but managed instead literally to work themselves into the racial category of privilege, thereby reinforcing already existing oppressive patterns for those still categorized as non-white” (p. 97). Green (2009) states that the primary motivation of most Canadians’ ancestors in immigrating was that there were opportunities, especially economic opportunities, and “access to cheap or free land here, that were not available at home” (p. 133). Memmi (1965) writes that “[i]n choosing the colonies, the immigrant chooses these benefits while also knowing that the indigenous peoples will be constrained in relation to the newcomers thus creating privilege” (p. 8). Despite the fact that many European immigrants continued to experience racism and oppression upon arriving in Canada, “[t]o different degrees every colonizer is privileged, at least comparatively so, ultimately to the detriment of the colonized” (Memmi, 1965, p. 11).

As the structures of domination and the effects of colonization become visible and the role institutions such as education and religion play in reinforcing them become clear, the result is life altering. Recognizing one’s own complicity in this however, is soul-shattering. Colonial settler descendants must be willing to feel the pain of what’s been done and their ongoing complicity. While the genocide that happened cannot be altered, continued denial of this fact can be. Acknowledging the magnitude of the harms, its ongoing effects and settlers present responsibilities are necessary. Regan (2010) states that Canadian “citizens must understand that the moral and political integrity of nations as “intergenerational communities” rests upon fulfilling their collective moral obligations” (p. 22). We are bound by the treaties made, and sometimes broken, by our ancestors. As settler descendants who have benefited greatly from the colonization of this country, reparation, both morally and financially becomes our responsibility. Settler descendants can then begin the work of reconnecting themselves “to their indigenous traditions and identities in ways which instill pride rather than guilt, empowering themselves to join in the negation of the construct of “Europe” which has temporarily suppressed their cultures as well as Peoples indigenous to lands they now occupy” (Churchill, 1994, p. 149).
Sweating a name

It was the fourth round of the sweat when I saw the colored waves of energy in the darkness in front of me. Beautiful undulating wisps of colors floating like wings in the air. I stared in amazement wondering if anyone else was seeing this, when a face appeared in the darkness above the colors. It was a woman, older, hair piled up on her head. As I watched her smiling face, the wings of light lifted up above my head and then floated down over me, surrounding me in light. I looked at the energy that seemed to be waving now behind my back and then back to the face suspended in the heated air. I wiped the dripping sweat from my eyes with the damp fabric of my skirt, and then she was gone. As the foggy steam rose from the Elders splash of water on the rocks I wondered about what I had just seen. Then the flap was opened and the blessed cool prairie breeze blew in, cooling us all.

I was sitting on the grass, touching the bear claw around my neck and listening to the voices of those around me as I shared in the celebratory food. I thought back to the beginning of the day and the Elder calling me in to the lodge before the sweat was to begin. I was terrified to enter and had nearly convinced myself I could not and would not do this, but I didn’t feel I could say no. The door flap was still safely open and maybe I could hear what she wanted and then tell her I couldn’t do the sweat. I was gripped once again by fear, sure I would die in the claustrophobic space and heat. As I crouched and made my way over to her, the cool scent of pine wafted up from the floor and I began to feel calm. I sat down and she handed me a black roped necklace with a bear claw hanging from it. She was of the bear clan herself, but I looked up confused not understanding the gesture. Then she told me that her purpose was not and never had been to make me into an Indian, but to help me to discover my own path and my own ancestral roots. She said the necklace was in thanks for my willingness to listen and to learn the ways of her People. Now I could share that knowledge in my family and my school. Tears had filled my eyes then as they did now, when I heard her call my name. I went over to where she was sitting and knelt in the grass next to her chair. She told me that my ancestors had come to her during the fast and she had been given my spirit name, Dancing Butterfly Woman. I was once again overcome by her generosity and kindness, and willingness to support me in my journey. Becoming part of the bear clan of the Elder meant that I would connect to the very deepest of my own ancestral roots. As the Elder had told me I was not to try to connect to her culture but rather to recover the teachings from the roots of my own ancestral tree. The beat of the drum had awakening within me an intuition, a molecular memory. The Elder said this deep connection to indigenous roots is the foundation beneath all cultures.

I also knew, however, that I needed to take care not to be overwhelmed by the formidable forces of the Bear, the ferocious mother, the berserk warrior. These forces of anger and primal ferocity untempered with the human qualities of compassion and reason, could damage not only my life but those of others around me. As I had heard today the painful stories of the many women who, as part of their work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, had spent weeks listening, collecting and honouring the voices of their people damaged by intergenerational trauma, I could feel the rage of bear energy staring in my belly. While I had spent much time in the last few months facing my own personal and intergenerational trauma, I was struggling with my complicity in the pain of another entire culture, pain that my ancestors contributed to. I wondered how this Elder could accept me as a member of the bear clan, and her kin. I could not understand this generosity and was overcome with guilt, shame and anger. I often felt overwhelmed by the anger I felt towards my fellow settler descendants, who seemed purposefully ignorant towards the fact that we are all strangers, visitors, colonizers in this land. I watched how many felt they had the right to appropriate not just the knowledge and gifts of the First Peoples, but their very spirituality. But I could see how the lessons of the bear had come to me many times in the past year when my first inclination was to protect, to fight against, to fight for, and to harm. But I knew the angry warrior was not what was needed or being called for at this time. I prayed that the energies of the butterfly that had been gifted to me by my ancestors in my spirit naming today could help me transform this fierceness and regenerate such feelings into compassion and love.
Ghosts in our genes

Many settler descendants, inspired by a lack of depth or authenticity within their own culture, seek meaning within ontogenies that offer what western imperialist culture cannot. Unfortunately, as many within colonial cultures are completely disconnected from their own ancestral heritage, having been conquered and colonized, they are inventing a new brand of genocide; cultural appropriation. Settlers often try to associate themselves with Indigenous imagery and symbols “in an attempt to establish a primordial relationship with the land, and to authenticate their presence in the country” (Reid at cited in Gaudry, 2013, p. 80). This connection is often manufactured through a generalized appropriation of Aboriginal symbols, knowledges, and spiritual practices. Indigenous scholar Waziyyatowin (2009) explains that “when colonizers appropriate aspects of our culture, this is just another part of a long colonial history” (p. 154). Colonizing society has worked systematically, over the centuries, to strip away all aspects of Indigenous culture, and continues today to subject Aboriginal peoples to colonial regulation; not giving control of caring for their land base, establishing their own economy, educating their children, governing their people, or practicing their spirituality as they are still denied access to sacred sites, lands, and waters that are central to their spiritual traditions. When colonial settler descendants appropriate the spirituality that remains inaccessible to many First Nations and Métis peoples it is not just offensive, but violent. Settlers imagine that they are acting anti-colonially by “appreciating” Indigenous culture or pursuing what they imagine to be indigenous ways of life. Morgensen (2009) states that appropriating Indigenous traditions in an effort be intimate with Indigenous land and culture expresses settler desires without necessarily contradicting them. Settler descendants must find ways to explore alternative onto-epistemologies in a manner that does not involve finding their identities in someone else’s past, understanding that a more authentic life does not come from stealing the traditions from another’s culture; this only perpetuates harm and continues colonization. Battiste (2005) challenges colonial settlers to deconstruct Eurocentrism, the dominant consciousness and order of life in which all of us have been marinated. Settlers must undertake the time consuming, grueling and incredibly painful work of ‘unsettling’ their colonizer history and settler mentality in order to become real, genuine allies to Indigenous peoples, being careful not to get sidetracked in feelings of superiority, “white-savior, pan-Indian-ally mentality” (Wicanipi iyotan Win, 2009, p. 6) and a sense of entitlement to Aboriginal ceremonies, spaces and spirituality.

Deconstruction of colonizer mentality inside of one’s self is important, but it is not enough. Settler descendants must learn to feel comfortable with being from elsewhere, and work to reclaim their own rich ancestral heritages and cultures, recognizing that despite significant colonial influences, vestiges of these ancestral original-people teachings and traditions remain (Breton, 2010). If we want to regain more holistic, animist, spiritual onto-epistemologies and traditions, settler descendants must unearth the roots of our unique Indigenous ancestry. Reconnecting with this indigenous heritage allows those of European descent to see that cultural imperialism is not something born of their own traditions, but is something as alien and antithetical to those traditions as it is of any people in the world (Churchill, 1994). By reintegrating with their Indigenous selves, settler descendants can step outside history “not in a manner which continues it by presuming to appropriate the histories and cultural identities of its victims but in ways allowing them to recapture its antecedent meanings and values (Churchill, 1994, p. 147). Having reclaimed such a rich traditions will support settlers in engaging in deeply meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples, standing against appropriation and supporting decolonizing efforts in ways that “that raises our consciousness, develops our resistance, and helps us engage in transformative action” (Battiste, 2002, p. 121).

Waziyyatowin (2009) states that this does not mean that “others should never engage Indigenous ways of being, as all peoples need to engage in sustainable living practices and Indigenous cultures offer excellent models for all people” (p. 154). Battiste (2002) writes that “Indigenous knowledge may be endangered, but is still available to those who wish to acquire and benefit from it. It must, however, be accessed in ways that are respectful to those who have nurtured it in the past and will sustain it for the future” (p. 122). In this time of environmental and social challenges we must all find and centre ourselves in knowledge that embraces the holistic principles of respect, interconnectedness, and animate spirituality. Rather than former-colonizers appropriating Indigenous spirituality and ceremonial life to do this, they can learn instead “to embrace Indigenous values such as balance and reciprocity” (Waziyyatowin, 2009, p. 155). Settler allies can also work to ensure that Aboriginal people are able to practice their ways of being and spirituality by helping them recover lands so they can engage in those practices. Such a decolonizing stance is very “unsettling” experience but Morgensen (2009) states that “[embracing uncertainty and discomfort”-getting used to these feelings, and learning to live well amidst them--will be the productive and enlivening result of settlers displacing their centrality on stolen land and committing to work for Indigenous decolonization” (p. 158).
Chasing Sitting Bull

I wiped the dust off my clothes that I had picked up from my awkward climb through the broken window frame. Wind whispered through the time worn wooden floor boards as I walked to the center of the room. The pipe from the old stove that would have heated this one room school house hung stubbornly from the ceiling, refusing to give in to the movement of time. I wondered then about the conversation I had been a part earlier today. As the group of women I was with walked and prayed upon their traditional and sacred lands with the old school house visible in the distance, the question had been raised as to whether the institution could be taken out of education. The First Peoples of this land had been educating their children since time immemorial, long before this imperial model had emerged. As I stood in the middle of this old building, weathered but withstand the test of time, I wondered if the construction of education that had come with the empire and been such a major part of the establishing of a way of seeing the world, could ever again be separated from the education of children. This old school house marked a change that had come, a time when the imperial, factory model of school was introduced. On this land, the last place that Sitting Bull and his People danced the Sun Dance, children had been educated in a very different way. As I looked out the window to the north I could imagine the First Peoples of this land that I had seen in a faded photo at the museum, encamped on this earth, just a few feet from this school. They had already had their lives disrupted by the white settlers who had come, but soon the model of education that took place in this old school house would take over their People in ways that would be forever damaging.

I wondered about the span of time before the Europeans had come with their drive for progress, ownership and domination. The petroglyphs in the park a few miles away were said to be at least 1,500 years old. The sacred site that was surrounded by chain link fence to keep out vandals, but also refused the descendants of the First Peoples of this land, told another story of education. The engravings in the sandstone rock stood as a silent reminder that life, spirit, teachings, knowledge, and meaning had been present on these lands long before the British Empire decided it would conquer and colonize this place. One people had constructed their knowledge, their worldview, their system of education as superior, and through force and power had made it so. I could not stop gazing at the cracked, faded chalk board, front and center in this small room, a symbol to the representative of this worldview of education that filled empty vessels with “truth”. I questioned how much had really changed since this model of education grew up on the prairies in these single rooms of disciplined truth and knowledge. The function for which these schools had begun, civilization, enculturation, economic progress, had really not changed. I wondered about the possibility of what I was trying to do within this imperialistic system in the urban prairie school I was working in. If the function of the process of education had really deep at its core, changed so little since this time, did I really imagine that I could change it? Did it really want to be changed, or was it serving very well the very function it was created for? I wondered if, just as I had chased the ghost of Sitting Bull through this valley, I was also chasing a pipe dream. Were my efforts to do school in ways that engaged multiple ways of knowing and multiple constructs of education going be allowed when these ways challenged the very function of institutionalized education?

As we drove out of the valley we passed the sign for the reserve to the east, a stark reminder of the lengths an empire would go to in it’s efforts to establish and maintain itself as dominant. I thought about the recent moves in education which promised to infuse First Nations and Métis ways of knowing into all aspects of the curriculum and wondered if such a dominant, assimilating system, constructed on inequality and power, would truly be open to any ways of knowing that are outside of what is normalized and privileged through its curriculum and methodologies. I wondered how teachers, educated and enculturated into the worldview and values of Western education, could be expected to infuse into the curriculum what they do not know or understand. Was it possible that these statements to infuse Aboriginal ways into curriculum were just more empty promises, not much different than the ones given to Sitting Bull over a hundred years ago by the same government who had stood by and impassively watched his People starve to death. As I watched the wind blow strongly through the prairie grass in this valley of sadness and death, I wondered if we could ever remove the grip of such a violent, deceitful and racist institution from the lives of our children.
Taking the institution out of education

Offering an educational curriculum that acknowledges Aboriginal onto-epistemologies is of much benefit to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike. Neegan (2005) states that the holistic patterns that are consistent with Aboriginal knowledge need to be incorporated into the curriculum and “doing so will strengthen Aboriginal philosophies and facilitate both Eurocentric and Aboriginal ways of knowing rather than pit one against the other” (p. 13). More importantly the acceptance and inclusion of Aboriginal ways of knowing and spiritual practices into Western Eurocentric education would ensure a more balanced, harmonious and holistic approach to living and learning. Despite these positive benefits, St. Denis (2008) states that while the call for providing culturally relevant education in schools has been made for well over three decades, appeals for such interventions have been limited by racism in education as “racism and colonial structures are inseparable from the very structure of these institutions (Smith, A., 2009, p. 82). Battiste & McLean (2005) write that while public schooling has not completely ignored Aboriginal content, mainstream knowledge has not been questioned or reconsidered. As many provinces and territories have taken on the task of finding ways to make their curricula more inclusive, the history and knowledge of First Nations and Métis people is acknowledged as “a” knowledge that Aboriginal students may benefit from, but not “the” knowledge that would reach all students. “The ‘add and stir’ model of education does little to empower students and reconcile their position in society nor does it provide the needed foundation for students to find the awareness or means to overcome the root problems of their oppression” (Smith, A., 2009, p. 7).

The province of Saskatchewan’s recent renewal of provincial curricula includes the infusion of First Nations and Métis content and perspectives, and worldviews as a foundation into all subject areas of the curriculum (Whiteman, 2010). Ireland (2009) cautions that “[a]lthough there can be merit to curriculumizing Indigenous Knowledge, which is to turn such knowledge into lesson plans that fit into a module on a particular topic that harmonizes with prescribed learning outcomes, such an act can risk reducing Indigenous Knowledge into forms of inert information that could be communicated by anyone, to anyone, and thereby undercut the living nature of Indigenous Knowledge, as well as the honoured role of holding Indigenous Knowledge in one’s community” (p. 48). Whitman (2010) states that such curriculumizing raises other challenges “such as the inclusion of spirituality, ceremony and the accompanying protocols [which] are necessary in order to create holistic models of education” (p. 10). When attempts are made to infuse Indigenous knowledge into Western colonial onto-epistemological frames of education, it becomes bound by Eurocentric modes of crafting curriculum and truncated into conventional classroom pedagogy. This is “further complicated by demands for more “accountability,” particularly through an increased emphasis on the measurement of students’ academic achievement outcomes” (Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006, p. 15). These dominant discourses and their disciplining forces influence teachers willingness and capacity to infuse First Nations and Métis ways of knowing into their delivery of curriculum. Teachers are also influenced by their prior experiences and preconceived understandings and their instruction is framed by their own pedagogical scaffolding (Dion, 2009). As a result even curriculum that is intended to disrupt dominant approaches to Aboriginal education that do exist within the curriculum and support documents such as “Teaching Treaties in the Classroom” are often delivered in a way that reinforces these prior perceptions. Teachers will then enact familiar discourses of pastoral care, citizenship education, and multicultural perspectives and will not examine with their students the wider socio-political implications of colonization. As Dion (2009) states “teachers cannot teach what they do not know” (p. 103).

Most significantly, integrating Aboriginal ways of knowing for the purposes of providing cultural knowledge and developing the cultural competency of individuals and systems (Saskatchewan Education, 2009), much like a multicultural curriculum, is not adequate to the task of addressing and challenging the racism that is inherent in the system of Western education. Change can occur only if Western education is willing to not just acknowledge Aboriginal people and their ways of knowing, but more importantly, to address the issues of inequality of power and power relations between themselves and Aboriginal peoples. St. Denis (2008) states that schools cannot effectively infuse First Nations and Métis culture into the curriculum if racism in education is not confronted. It is a reality that anti-racist education and “[p]ostcolonial thought and its methodologies for change are not in the contemporary curriculum of schools...there are few places, if any, where postcolonial thought has been ushered in as a foundation of education for the future” (Battiste, 2004, p. 62). A truly post-colonial education would challenge the Eurocentric nature of curriculum documents, investigate the impact of colonization on First Nations communities and its implications for today, challenge the dominant teaching discourses that implicate the way teachers deliver Aboriginal content, and call into question the limits of what colonial Western education knows as “truth” (Dion, 2009).
Hope on a mountain top

We had been hiking for hours and had finally come to the top of the mountain, the glaciers within our reach. This is where the trail ended, but people continued on, walking on a thin rope of soil high above the glacier floor, winding its way into the heart of the ice. As we put on more clothes and readjusted our packs, my husband was filled with enthusiasm for this last leg of the journey but I was feeling unsettled and agitated. For some reason that I could not name I did not want to continue, I wanted to stop and turn back, but I pushed the feeling aside and followed toward the rocky trail. As I walked across what felt like the top of the world, shale hundreds of feet below, mountain peaks close enough to touch, I began to hear an unearthly, inhuman sound. I glanced around but no one else up ahead on the trail seemed to hear it. It became deafening and I put my hands over my ears as an intense pain gripped my body and ripped apart my insides. I doubled over and felt like I could not breathe. I was overcome by this haunting symphony, a pain emanating from the bowels of the earth, a howling, devastating anguish. It wracked my heart and out to the bone. I was overwhelmed by the sense of tragedy carried by this voice of the water...of the Earth. As I fell to my knees on the path, leaning over the edge of the trail, I was overwhelmed by the reality of what surrounded me and that I could not avoid in this place. Where once had been towering sheets of ice there was nothing, the glaciers had disappeared, receding hundreds of miles. I gave in and knelt down, rocking back and forth, holding my chest and joined with the cries of the Earth that crashed off the mountain, faces surrounding me and reverberated through every cell of my being.

Here, on the top of this mountain, I came face to face with the pain and fear I had kept at bay since my childhood. Here was what I had run from for an entire lifetime, absolute, irrefutable evidence of the crisis that the world is in. For the first time in my life I allowed the overwhelming grief of what humanity has done to the Earth enter my consciousness. I wished then, in that moment, that I had never had children, what would become of them. I was overcome with hopelessness. Suddenly the haunting cry ceased and deep within my being I heard...there is always hope, use your voice, step over this fear, educate. In one hundred years there will be no glaciers left...the children of this time will have to be inventive...create new ideas...reconnect with the magic and power of the water...school needs to prepare them for this...do not be afraid...this is the sacred vow of your ancestors.

In that moment I came to know without a doubt, that the Earth, our Mother, is alive; a living, breathing, feeling being. I knew I needed to listen, that she is grieving with us, crying with us, healing with us. As my husband rushed to my side to see what had happened to me, I rose up, determined to keep the vow. I knew there was hope and I was not alone. The Earth and my ancestors were with me. There was hope. As I stumbled my way further along the path to stand above what remained of this once towering glacier, I was stunned by what I saw. There in the snow were the figures of the dancing women, four of them, that I had seen in my visions, heard in my sleep and encountered on rock face and stone all over this land. Powerful women from ancient times, visions of hope, rebirth, a stunning celebration of the deep, healing energies of the Earth. In that moment the pain in my chest exploded, shattering all my fears, all of my anger, all of my anguish into a stream of love, for this planet, for all sentient beings, human and otherwise. With this love there was hope.
Natural love

All mainstream solutions to global warming have one thing in common, the desperate attempt to try and save industrial capitalism. Many so called sustainable efforts confront global climate change only when it is seen as a serious threat to development (Jensen, 2009). Industrial capitalism is seen as primary and that which must be maintained at all costs while “the real, physical world—filled with real physical beings who live, die, make the world more diverse—as secondary” (p. 8). As the temperature of the Earth rises there is a direct and corresponding increase in consumerism, as the Western world distracts itself from that real, physical world with a billion-dollar industry which tell us everything will be alright if we just buy (Macy & Brown, 1998). While ecologists and environmentalists keep their climate change arguments girded with statistics and their thoughts buttressed with abstractions (Abram, 2010), reformers and activists, armoured with anger and dooms day prophecies, try to rouse people out of their public apathy, which only results in more resistance to the overwhelming, complicated, out-of-control reality we are all facing. It is as if as a human species we have an instinctive self-protective sense that we must not let ourselves get to close to a place where “there is no ‘environment’ distinct from human kind-no ‘nature’ ‘out there’” (Mathews, 2008, p. 53), lest we succumb to an overwhelming grief. We want to keep ourselves hardened to a “heartache born of our organism’s instinctive empathy with the living land and it’s cascading losses...[lest we be bowléd over and broken by our dismay at the relentless devastation of the biosphere” (Abram, 2010, p. 16). It is becoming more impossible, however, to be exempt from the pain of the collective suffering of the human, more than human and the Earth herself or to ignore the cries of the unborn generations. Macy & Brown (1998) tell us that our suffering “lies not with our pain for the world, but in our repression of it” (p. 27).

As we cut ourselves off from our vulnerability, we also become cut off from the joy of an embodied, animate existence (Abram, 2010). We disconnect ourselves from a deep, inner power that comes only from living in communion with Nature and the absolute sacredness of the world (Harvey, 2009). The human mind, with its unique ability to create the sensation of separateness, forgets that we are part of the web of being and this forgetfulness is the source of imbalance, illness and suffering. This separation from the natural world is an “inherited violence” (Haraway, 2000, p. 106) that causes great harm to other cultures, to the planet and all sentient beings. The colonization of nature and the colonization of Indigenous peoples and all human and more than human “others” are not separate issues; all major systems of oppression intersect. Gould (as cited in Orr, 1994/2004) states that we cannot “save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well-for we will not fight to save what we do not love” (p. 43). When we fall into love with the Presence that permeates and animates all of creation, we re-experience a sacred communion with each other, with the animal world, the plant world, stones and mountains, rivers and seas, winds and spirit, ancestors and guides. Re-claiming our capacity to see the world as alive and as capable of a reciprocal, loving relationship goes against all of our conditioning.

“We have been culturally inducted and educated into hurtful and hurting knowledge, not love’s knowledge” (Bai, 2013). Decolonization then must involve processes of deconstructing our identification with and loyalty to Modern Western culture and uncovering and experiencing “our innate connections with each other and with the systemic, self-healing powers in the web of life, so that [individuals] may be enlivened and motivated to play their part in creating a sustainable civilization” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 58).

Regaining a loving connection to the animate earth and all sentient beings can be supported by opportunities to express one’s deep responses to the present condition of the Earth and to face and reframe our grief. Engaging in processes to reclaim teachings and practices that support the growth of a loving, reciprocal, respectful relationship with the natural world and all her human and more than human beings can help us move beyond our grief to healing (Bai, 2013; Macy & Brown, 1998). Opportunities to experience the unending stream of loving, compassionate energy and healing union with the forces of nature can help people to “reframe their pain for the world as evidence of their interconnectedness in the web of life, and hence of their power to take part in its healing” (Macy & Brown, 1998). Contemplative practices, ceremony and ritual, and immersion in the natural world can all provide opportunities to experience the natural love of the Earth. Cowan (2012) reminds us that all original peoples were given teachings and practices to remind them of the sacred relationship with all human and more than human beings and such “remembering produces healing, wisdom, a flourishing environment and a sustainable way of life” (p. 44).
As I walked around the room holding the shell of smoldering sage so the staff who chose to could smudge, I wondered about the reactions of some who had gathered with us in the prayer space for our opening day activities. At the direction of the Elder, who stated it was time to “invite the ladder into the circle.” I had invited the new priest from our community church, our religious consultant and all of our senior administration. It was the first time many of them had been in our prayer space and I wondered about the reaction to the inclusivity of religious traditions that were represented there, as well as the leadership provided by the Elder at this opening ceremony. I also wondered how they liked my outfit today. I wore a long skirt as was expected as the Elder’s helper and my bear claw necklace around my neck. As I had just been chastised the day before by senior administration regarding my attire at the opening administrators meeting, I was curious what the reaction would be to today’s wardrobe choice. I could feel anger smoldering in the pit of my stomach as I offered the smudge to senior administrators, who in the midst of the opening day presentation to the entire school division on inclusivity, had disciplined me. I had been pulled aside at a break by a nervous and uncomfortable senior administrator who had been sent to tell me that the outfit I had worn at the meeting the day before had been seen as too revealing and inappropriate and I needed to dress more professionally. While most of my being responded with hurt, anger and resentment another small part of me smiled at the irony of the situation. The presenter had just spent the morning challenging the leaders of competition that are set up in organizations which create an environment of conformity and dulls creativity. I heard his warning ringing in my ears, reminding me that if we are going to be truly inclusive in schools and make a conscious choice to stand with those who were often excluded, we would pay a cost; inclusion would make us feel out of place every time. My traditional dress today made it very obvious who I was choosing to stand with, and I wondered if his words were true...that to walk the road of inclusivity would challenge me. I felt fear sliding along my bones and I wondered if I was up for the ride as I remembered his words that our life was not about us and we would be woken up to that fact if we truly invite the poor and the marginalized into our schools. As the Elder spoke to the group of the importance of ceremony to her people and many children in our school, she shared that ceremony was not easy, adding that her daughters, as she pointed to me and the community educator, have learned through experience how hard a fast is. Out of the corner of my eye I saw reaction from the division leaders who were there and was unsure if it was the term daughter or the fact that I had attended a fast that had caught their attention. I felt fear grip me again at the risk we were taking here, but I took a deep breath of the sacred smoke that still hung in the air and prayed that I could quit worrying about the consequences, trust the prayers of the Elder, and let go of trying to control this process that was moving forward with a life of its own.

After the ceremonial part of the morning ended, and the guests had gone, the Elder shared teachings which would support the staff in imagining an education of a different kind, a blending of the circle and the ladder, where the voices of all peoples and all traditions and ways of knowing could be heard. This direction had come to her from the process of the year before when after prayers to the grandfathers, she had led the school in gathering the voices, needs and wishes from the four directions and four age groups in our community asking for direction in how to best educate all of our children. A pipe ceremony had been held to bless the work of the advisors who had gathered to support us in our journey to greater understanding. From listening to the many voices gathered over several weeks, it had become clear that further work was to be done to ensure that all voices could be heard, the history of this land and all its peoples could be understood, and the community could heal. So this year, the Elder and the advisory group of Elders and knowledge keepers in the community had dedicated themselves to guiding and supporting our school on such a journey. We applied for the next stage of the grant, with the intent that under the guidance of the First Nations and Metis community, staff and students would learn together the meaning of “We are all Treaty people.” The Elder felt this work could culminate in a play created by her and the children as its performance for the entire community could provide much learning and healing for all. Today was the first day of the teachings by the Elder for the staff to support us in our efforts to teach all children as they negotiated the river of life. As I listened to the teachings, I realized that many of children in our school, especially those that had been specially placed at our school by the school division, were in need of many of these “stones”, security, order, social acceptance, growth and feelings of self-esteem, adequacy and love. I looked at the small stone in my hand, the stone of order, the third I had been given by the Elder on my path of learning and healing and wondered how I could help these children when I had not received these stones in my own childhood. I had spent many years caught in the rapids of life because of this and I wondered if my compulsion to rescue, save, and fix so many of these children was because I felt, experienced and struggled with the effects the discourses of “normality” had upon my body and psyche, just as these children did. I knew I did not yet have the capacity to withstand the systemic patterns of power in Western schools and society that reach into the very grain of the individual, touching our bodies, learning practices, and lives and was beginning to see that I was as traumatized by this as much, if not more, than many of the children I was trying to support.
Post-colonial Imaginings

Wilson (2000) notes that education can be used as a tool and a weapon. He explains that when education is used to protect the dominant narratives and to maintain social order, it becomes a weapon of control. When education is used to expose and challenge these narratives, it becomes a tool of liberation.

In order to engage post-colonial imaginings in education, there must first be a deconstruction of Eurocentric discourses and a decolonization of the beliefs that are constructed and maintained in Western education. Assumptions of schooling must be challenged and the collective responsibilities we bear for the colonial status quo (Begley, 2010, p. 31). To truly engage in post-colonial educational work, settler society must step out of the role of being “merely first nations’ content” (Begley, 2010, p. 31). Rather than being seen as the source of knowledge, educators must facilitate the creation of knowledge by students themselves, through active participation and critical reflection.

In the words of Cadieux (2000, p. 73), “educators must be on the lookout for ideologies and the ways in which these ideologies are perpetuated through educational processes, such as teacher-student interactions and curriculum development. It is crucial for educators to be reflexive and critical in their practice, to examine their own beliefs and assumptions, and to work towards creating a more inclusive, holistic, respectful, and balanced educational environment.”
No justice here

This was the second meeting this month I had attending with this mother, her son, and the multiple agencies that were assigned to work with them: social services, health and education all sat around the table. As I watched her struggle to keep her composure I told the school staff that were with me that we were leaving. Earlier in the meeting this young boy and his mother had revealed that he had been sexually assaulted at the treatment facility he had been at before our school, and that he had received no support. The psychiatrist was appalled by this news and questioned the social workers who were there. They confirmed they knew of the assault but stated he had left the facility quickly after and there had been no follow up. The psychiatrist left the meeting saying that she would have it investigated and then decide what type of treatment he would need. So no help was arranged for him and no support for this mother and the school staff both of whom were overwhelmed by the many violent and unusual behaviors he struggled with or the psychotic episodes he experienced when he did not take the multiple medications correctly. Once the psychiatrist left, things had shifted in the meeting as the many agencies directed accusations and frustration at this mother and her son regarding the many ways they had tried to “help” her and how she did not follow through and was ungrateful for their support. My heart went out to her as I watched her alone with her son try to stand for herself against this group of “helpers”. I felt traumatized by what I was watching and did not want all of the staff sitting and witnessing her humiliation.

As I stood out in the hall waiting for the meeting to end I thought back to another meeting that the school team had called a few weeks back to bring together representatives of all of these agencies to try and work together to support this family. When this boy was assigned to our school we were told by the social worker involved that he had been involved with justice, had been in psychiatric youth treatment centers and in alternative settings for behaviorally disordered children, all before the age of eleven. A member of our senior administration had heard his story at an interagency meeting and volunteered our school as a last ditch attempt to keep him out of full custodial lock-up, stating that if any school could help him ours could. It was a heavy burden for the staff to carry as he was an extremely traumatized and damaged child whose behavior could shift from withdrawal to violence within seconds. While we were having some successes, it was exhausting and at times overwhelming for all of the staff and we needed help. But when we had sat around the table with all of the multiple services involved in his case and shared how our first few weeks at the school had gone, the supports we had in place, and the other side of this young man that had begun to emerge, I could see that all these people were incredulous and somewhat unbelieving of our stories. We had asked these agencies to come together to see who would fund the glasses the optometrist had said he needed and some reading resources that were appropriate for his age and reading level. He had announced to his teacher and to me two weeks ago, and again that day to the group of adults, that he wanted to learn to read. We had discovered that some of his frustration and inappropriate behavior in the grade six classroom was because he was in grade six and reading at a beginning grade one level, and he couldn’t see the print on the page. We explained that the school had freed up staff to support him in an intensive reading recovery program, but we needed money for glasses so he could see and for the program we knew could help him. All eyes at the table had gone down at that time, and no one from all of the agencies stepped forward to take responsibility or offer support. Several passed the buck around the table, but as the meeting ended we had no commitment from anyone. I was shocked and angry, and saw the look of resignation replace the look of hope on this young mother’s face. She was used to the system and I could see her withdraw away from all of us. After weeks of our community education supervisor working with her, helping her get furniture for her children, winter clothes, medication, and an eye appointment, she had quietly said when I asked if she would come to this meeting that she was overwhelmed by our support to her, that she had always had to do things herself and negotiate systems alone. She agreed that she would come. However that meeting and now this one had both been completely unsuccessful and traumatic. No help had been forthcoming from any of the agencies, and today she had been attacked with accusations regarding her lack of follow through with any of the services given. As the door opened suddenly signalling the end of the meeting, she walked by me and did not meet my eyes and I could feel the fragile trust we had built up crumble.

In frustration I wondered where the justice was within these “helping” systems for all of the peoples caught within their grasp. As I sat with the workers afterward and listened to their continued frustration and the ease with which they blamed this mother and her children, I challenged them. I stated that they kept trying, as a part of this massive mechanism of social services, to “help” the less fortunate, and guide the “culturally different” and wondered aloud how any of us as white privileged, colonial people could presume to have any idea how to help this family that was living with multiple traumas resulting from generations of colonization and racism. I recommended that perhaps it was time to try something different and suggested that they use their funds this time to allow our cultural teacher to approach this mother and offer to walk along side her and give her whatever help she asked for. Perhaps this could be a more just* response from colonial descendants.
Ally walking

Regan (2010) states that “Canadians are still on a misguided, obsessive and mythical quest to assuage colonizer guilt by solving the Indian problem... rather than look at our colonizers selves” (p. 11). Settler social service systems view Aboriginal learners as the problem and as a result they become the locus of intervention; the colonial injustices inherent in these systems are never questioned. “The devastation produced by racial and class discrimination... evident in the lives of Aboriginal learners is too often attributed not to systemic discrimination but to their individual psychology” (St. Denis, 2008, p. 18). Settler individuals continue to support these colonial social systems which have been constructed by society to “help” the needy “other,” unable and unwilling to see that through such actions they are exercising unjust power. “Most even believe, in all good faith, that [they are] looking out for the good of the dominated” (Noel, 1994 p. 79). It is critical to understand, however, that individual Settler people play a significant role in the hierarchical, colonial structures of Eurocentric society and its institutions and that consent and active participation are required for many aspects of on-going colonization (Barker, 2009). We make conscious decisions every day to conform to the system, and in this way we “confirm the system, make the system, are the system” (Schell as cited in Regan, 2009, pg. 214). But a Settler person is not necessarily a colonial, this is a choice we can make or unmake. Barker (2009) states that “the term “Settler” is a statement of a situation, whereas a “colonial” is one who actively participates with the empire and spreads the imperial sphere of influence” (p. 339). Settlers are not predestined to be colonial in their actions and can choose to act in non-colonial ways, but this will require the giving up of all hegemonic pursuits of Modern Western culture. While imperial forces and power structures do exert pressure to ensure that Settlers fulfill their colonial role, we must question “why Settlers continue to submit to a society predicated upon power and control that is so diametrically opposed to the principles that most Settlers claim so strongly to espouse and that results in their own control” (Barker, 2009, p. 347). Socio-political change will not come from hegemonic institutional structures of power and control but from within each individual settler descendant who chooses to question interpretations of philosophy that support imperialism and visions of society that are founded upon the continued oppression of any and all human, and more than human beings. Imperialism and colonialism are social states, not cultural tenets or imperatives, and settler descendents can choose to no longer support such structures and powers by incorporating “decolonizing principles and practices into our daily lives and working in ways that shift binary colonizer/colonized identities” (Regan, 2010, p. 218). Settlers who would be Indigenous allies must reject the imperialist mind and struggle to unlearn it’s “truths”, recognizing that we will be continually discomfited and unsettled as we do so. We must be deeply invested, willing and able to utilize our personal privilege against itself to dismantle a Eurocentric, colonial world order.

Settler allies must be “willing to engage directly with Indigenous people in unsettling encounters that keep us living in truth” (Regan, 2010, p. 218), seeking genuine and committed relationships rather than focusing on results, data and test scores. Instead of assuming we understand the “problem” and have the solutions, we must be willing to listen and take direction from Aboriginal Peoples in how to aid in their liberation, especially in relation to their experience of our privilege. Battiste (1998) states that settler descendents “may be useful in helping Indigenous people articulate their concerns, but to speak for them is to deny them the self-determination so essential to human progress” (p. 25). We must work to understand Indigenous humanity and its manifestations “without paternalism and condescension” (ibid, p. 26). We may then be able to support the larger political struggles for self-determination as fundamental to the human rights and dignity of all Indigenous Peoples, using our privilege to challenge oppressions to Indigenous rights to their own traditions and systems of governance, restrictions imposed by Indian act and Canada’s failure to endorse the United Nations declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We can use our voice to speak against assimilationist policies and colonial attitudes of the settler majority, especially those concerning the continued settler occupation of Land. We must help all settler descendents understand that all Indigenous knowledge systems, governance systems, languages and cultural and ceremonial practices are rooted literally in the landscapes of traditional territories (Regan, 2010). By occupying the Land that is so deeply connected to the life of a culture we continue imperial and colonial power by thinking that Land is rightfully and justifiably ours. We must be willing to directly challenge the comfort we have due to the displacement of another People, committing to work for justice for the People who’s Land we are inhabiting. Since the coming of the settlers, with our histories and legacies of imperialism, harm has been inflicted almost beyond belief to the Land and to the people who were part of intact ecosystems and cultures. Saying we support decolonization struggles, and are in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, without confronting the issues of our presence on the Land, is a perpetuation of colonialist mentalities. Facing the complexity of these issues is a daunting task for settler allies, and we can become paralyzed at the immensity of it. However, we must remember that while some may view the walk of an ally as an act of resistance that is oppositional, it is in fact an act of critical hope which we do not do alone (Regan, 2010).
A day to remember

It was a few minutes before the start of our Remembrance Day ceremony, and after greeting the veterans who were joining us for the day, I excused myself and ran upstairs to the office to get the prayer I was reading, just as I was leaving the office three things happened at once: a door slammed loudly down the hallway from the grade 5 room, an angry yell came from the community room, and across the hall I could see a young man shove a desk into the wall in his classroom as he went in the opposite direction of his class who were leaving the room. Within seconds I realized that three of our most volatile students in the school were out of control, which was confirmed as three different staff rushed to tell me that as they were leaving to go to the assembly, these students had bottomed out. I turned to my vice-principal, handed him my speech, and told him to start without me. I closed the upstairs doors as the last students made their way to the gym, took a deep breath and braced myself for what was becoming almost a daily happening in our school, crisis intervention. While the name of the program that we had all been trained in said it was non-violent, the trauma of these episodes was affecting the entire school. I could see two of our support staff running down the hall to help intervene and I directed them to just be present. Keep these two boys apart and see if they could bring themselves down on their own. I ran down the hall to where the door had slammed and entered the room to see a young man pacing around the outside of the desks, wild eyed, throwing rocks from the prayer table in the room and anything else he could get his hands on. The support staff who opened the door had been keeping him contained so he did not run out into the school where we knew from past experience he could do damage to himself or others. I buzzed the intercom and as I directed the secretary to reach his dad and the support staff from central office, he picked up a desk and ran towards the window full speed. The staff and I charged it and took all of our strength to get the desk out of his grip and him into ours. As we finally moved to the floor, all of us sweating and the boy crying, I knew he would slowly calm down now. The staff said he had hit him, and as they slowly rocked while he screamed and cried, I heard a crash from down the hall. Running towards the noise I could see that one of the boys had left his classroom and entered the room where the other student was, and I knew these two in the same room, angry, was a volatile and dangerous combination. Together with the support staff we managed to get one boy back to his class, with lots of language and yelling from both, but no physical altercation. Within a few minutes of talking we were able to calm the one boy down enough for him to express that he hadn’t wanted to go to the assembly, he didn’t want to talk about dead soldiers, he just wanted to go home. He had not taken his medication for the last few days as it had run out and this made him very unstable and volatile. The secretary came to say his mother had called and she was walking over to take him home. As he got his coat and made his way out of the school, I entered the next classroom and could see that things here had deescalated, so I returned down the hall and entered the room to see the boy curled up on the floor with the staff rubbing his back. He had grown a lot in the last few months, no longer the little boy he had been at the start of the year, and these outbursts were becoming more dangerous for the staff and for him. I spoke softly to the staff, checking in to see how she was, I could see a bruise forming on her cheek where his head had come back as we started the restraint, and I shook my head in frustration at this situation.

Suddenly the door opened and not one but all three staff from student support services rushed in. It soon became clear, however, that they had no new ideas of how to help us with this boy or the others that were so reactive and violent. I knew that as a staff we were reaching a breaking point, and I could see that no matter how many long hours I was working, I could not keep up or find a way to balance the demands of these children with the many other demands of the school. While there were many proactive ideas from the school and division staff to help the situation, nothing was yet in place. While I knew things moved slowly in systems, when the staff that had come said there was no more help coming from anywhere yet and they could not offer more than they were, I lost control. I angrily asked them why they had been silent when counselling and behavior support staff had been let go and positions not filled last year when we so obviously need the help. I was blunt and forceful in my comments, and was not surprised when that afternoon I received a visit from a superintendent. I was surprised, however, when she minimized the trauma of the morning and the difficult challenges facing this staff, saying she had heard we had some excitement that morning. Then with no consultation she announced her decision that the young boy would be expelled and not allowed to return until his family did what they had been asked and took him to the psychiatrist to be assessed and medicated. I felt my heart break as we all knew he was living in a home of substance abuse, neglect and at times violence. It was then suggested that I should go home, that I was too angry and was turning everything into a crisis. I was told that I had so much support and yet I demanded more. While I did not end up physically going home that day, promising that I would ask for nothing more, a huge part of me left. It was clear that if I continued to demand, accuse and be angry and attacking it would only make matters worse and the needs of these children would be deflected into my needs for disciplining. So at the end of the day, after an angry call from the father of the expelled child and time with the staff who had been traumatized by the days events, I sent documentation on all of the children we had challenges with and their outstanding needs to the superintendent and her team. And then I stepped back. I knew I needed to let go of the anger and frustration I felt and the judgments I was making of people and myself. I gave in to an overwhelming sense of failure and pain. I was beginning to clearly see the tremendous burden I put upon myself to rescue these children of trauma and wondered if it was perhaps time to rescue myself.
Traumatic healing

Bodies are shaped and disciplined through the systemic patterns of power in Modern Western society. Multiple normalizing discourses influence and hinder the development of our thinking and are inscribed upon our bodies. We are often unconscious of the ways that the images and impressions from the past reassert their hold on us in the present, often in the form of unconscious traumatic responses to deeply engrained triggers. Levine (1997) states that trauma resides not in the event itself, but in how the nervous system processed that event. Often such emotionally-charged events and traumatic experiences are etched into the neural circuitry of the brain and encoded in the amygdala. "When the amygdala recognizes one or two factors similar to that experience, it effects a neuro-chemical reaction through the body to help the person deal with the perceived danger" (Anuik, Battiste & George, 2010, p. 75). These triggers produce more than a memory, in fact many times there is no conscious memory of the origin, but multiple physical responses that re-engage the body as if the threat is still happening (Levine & Kline, 2007). In individuals who have been traumatized the cortex is unable to allay the fear response, the person cannot reason away the fear, and so inadvertently are left to either act it out on others with extreme emotion, suffer silently or disassociate from the distressing fear-response signals. In those suffering such post traumatic stress responses "the frontal cortex is held hostage by a volatile amygdala" (van der Kolk in Levine, 2007, p. 11). When the body emits adrenaline during a moment of fear or trauma, but can’t then release it by fighting or escaping, the person’s reaction can stay with them for years and hold them back on many levels. The bodies (of both students and teachers) continual responses to the triggers of trauma "takes energy away from the learning process at hand" (Anuik, Battiste & George, 2010, p. 75).

Trauma is more complex than just these individual experiences, as we are all are born into sociopolitical and familial systems and are often the unknowing recipients of intergenerationally transmitted individual or communal trauma (O’Loughlin, 2010). Davies (2000) states that “the desire for power in it’s most brutish manifestations leads to one group of people burning another at the stake (for having different ideas), or to committing mass genocide (of those who have different cultural practices, or who occupy desired space)” (p. 21). The multigenerational traumas from such events is transmitted by affected parents, grandparents, or other family members who have been traumatized to subsequent generations (Levine, 2001 in Coll et al p 2)

"The terms historical or cultural trauma have been used to accent the depth and breadth of certain traumatic experiences shared by many (e.g., genocide, war)” (Coll et al, 2012, np). The effects of genocide are personalized and pathologized (Duran & Duran, 2000) as the victims of colonization often blame themselves for all of the pain they have suffered” (Daes, 2000, p. 6). Mitchell & Maracle (2005) suggest that for victims of cultural genocide and colonization the term post-traumatic stress response (PTSR) rather than post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is more appropriate as it shifts perspective from blaming the person and provides a compassionate lens from which to better understand a realistic human response to trauma rooted in oppression and cultural domination. Historical trauma resulting from histories of genocide has psychological, behavioural, and medical impacts not just on the generations that directly experience it but for as many as seven to ten generations after (O’Loughlin, 2012). Childhood and adult chronic conditions and trauma responses can be linked to unconscious responses to ancestral traumas.

Settler descendants whose ancestors suffered the spiritual death (Daes, 2000) of colonization, genocide and oppression can acknowledge the pain, grieve, honour the ancestors, and heal the malignant shame. We can reclaim healthy cultural narratives and “feed the hungry ghosts” in our ancestral trees in order to heal the trauma trails in the lives of subsequent generations. Colonial settler descendants must also commit to the much more difficult work of acknowledging our part in the intergenerational historical trauma of the Indigenous peoples who continue to suffer the effects of the decisions of our ancestors and the unconsciousness of diasporic peoples who populate their sacred Lands today. We must recognize that the historic experiences of colonization and trauma experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada is a source of intergenerational post-traumatic stress in the Aboriginal population (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009). Mor doch & Gaywish (2001) see the “historical trauma and ongoing trauma from chaotic childhood experiences of neglect, sexual and physical abuse, domestic violence, and loss of culture, language, and land as contributing to a prolonged traumatization of Aboriginal people” (p. 100).

The imperial project and its far reaching arms of colonization have left a “legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations.” (Mitchell & Maracle, 2005, p. 15) and across cultures. Daes (2000) writes that “[t]he tragic experience of colonization is a shared experience, and the oppressors as well as the oppressed need healing if the cycles of external aggression and self-destruction are to be discontinued” (p. 5).
Take off the armor and put down the sword.

As I lay faced pressed to the soft cloth, quiet music in the dim lit room, I could feel my body finally begin to unclench and relax for the first time in weeks. I had been feeling ill again, swollen, heavy, covered in raw sores, pain in my stomach; a state my body hadn’t been in for over five years. I had come to this place while on vacation in the mountains, by accident, if there are such things. Looking for a yoga class I stumbled upon this healing center, named after our first mother, Gaia. It was an integrated health center, combining Western and Eastern approaches to medicine. I had booked a massage, but within two minutes of being in the room, the healer suggested that my body needed some very different things than just a massage. Trusting that I had ended up here for a reason, I relaxed into the acupuncture to balance the energy that was swirling out of control in my system, allowed the cupping to release some of the emotional and physical toxins that were filling my body, and some light massage to allow muscles that had been gripping for weeks to finally relax. As he sat quietly beside me now on the chair, a single acupuncture point on my forehead, he held a sacred, safe place as I let the thoughts, images and feelings come.

First the anger...against those in power who showed a lack of understanding for the needs of damaged, abused kids...who sent violence and anger into schools without adequate supports...who said the traumatized and broken to leave their pain from family and systemic abuse at the door...who said give them their drugs to settle them down, put them in a desk, teach them math and to read, that is what they need, that will solve their ills. Then the pain...for the broken hidden ones who came every day, medicated; some days zombies who slept on the couch or in their desks, listened to violent music on iPods, heads pulled up to block out the world...for the ones who lived the streets, showed their violent sides, knocked over book shelves, screaming at staff about the devil and threatening to send going friends to hurt us all...for the ones who told unbelievable stories of watching their mother get stabbed and sitting by her body until the neighbor and police came and who daily ran screaming through the halls and climbing on roof tops to escape the horror...for the damaged ones who tortured and abused a mother, for days on end, watching her suffer before the police came, vision damaged, body scarred, mind broken...for all those children who when they had given up and quit fighting, biting, kicking, running and trying to crush our skulls into theirs, would cry like innocent babies, and break all of our hearts, day after day...but who were to get to math class, to learn the alphabet, pass the tests...the rest wasn’t our concern. Then came helplessness...for the young teacher whose big blue eyes begged me for some direction as to how she was to get her kids ready to achieve well in the standardized tests when so many resisted and struggled with learning, and with each other, while one child ran through the school, shouting “no no no” when she tried to teach him...for the support staff, all women, poorly paid women, amazing women, who chased this child, restrained that child, held another child, were sent to the hospital by that child, filled out accident reports on that child, felt trauma on a daily basis, and cried in the hallway after a day of violence, physical restraints and danger...Then came the rage...at the institutional, hegemonic, colonial government agencies that worked in isolation, passed the buck, up the ladder, passing responsibility as children fell through the gaping cracks in their broken walls...for the fathers and mothers who came, often bewildered, embittered and ashamed, sometimes angry, a few times drunk, to pick these children up and take them home to more abuse and neglect, colonized, oppressed, blamed victims of a system that silenced us all. Then came the heat of betrayal, knives, hundreds of knives burning in my back...for expressing frustration, anger, speaking aloud, naming the systemic dysfunction and abuse...for the blame that was placed because I was angry, frustrated, in pain, reeling with helplessness but told to be silent, to shut up, to stop speaking aloud against systems, challenging the discourses of imperialism, competition, achievement...for the isolation and disciplining because I spoke, at times loudly, angrily and foolishly...for this becoming my issue, my personality, my stuff. Then the sense of failure...for the school having reached a “saturation point”, too many poor, brown, violent, needy, fringe, outcast people...for chastisement at expressing anger when they were sent away, thrown out, back to the trauma, back to the streets, into a bottle of medication, back to the reserve, off to grandmas or aunts...for not being Christian enough or mature enough to accept that this is all God’s plan, the poverty, the racism, the ancestral generational trauma, the classism, the Earth damage, the soul damage...for not trusting that this life is chosen for us all...we need to allow these children to live out God’s plan for them, it is not for us to play God...just do the paper work, complete your reports on time, quit talking badly about us behind our backs, smile, stop being so angry, get with the team, and for God’s sake quit suffering. Then finally the shame...for sending words, energy and rage into the universe, spinning like a whirling dervish, with shards of anger flying out in all directions at any and everyone who I thought was to blame, and inwardly towards my fearful, traumatized, helpless self. I could feel the sword in my hands...my armour in place...ready for battle with the enemies, the individuals, the system, the gods...when he gently said...it is time...take off the armour...put down the sword. Terrified but knowing he was right...it was long past time...I let go...I put it all down...finally blessed tears...then silence.
“Warriorship is so tender, without skin, without tissue, naked and raw. It is soft and gentle. You have renounced putting on a new suit of armor. You have renounced growing a thick, hard skin. You are willing to expose naked flesh, bone, and marrow to the world.”

Trungpa Rinpoche, 2011, p. 50

**Spiritual warrior**

Harvey (2012) writes that “[t]he problems facing us are too vast to be tackled from anything but an enlightened consciousness in action” (p. 27). The complexity and interconnectedness of our current global situation will require solutions rooted not just in rationality but a change of heart. This will require a different kind of warrior than the aggressive, angry, fighting image of Western culture. Modelling the warriors of Eurocentric mythology “[a]ctivists tend not to inquire within or spend serious time taking advantage of authentic paths of personal growth or spiritual wisdom” (Harvey, 2012, p. 27). For all their courage and indignation, they tend to act from unhealed aspects of their shadow, from fear, from righteous anger and are lacking the spiritual strength to keep going in the face of massive defeat and disappointment. These warriors fight for sustainability in the world in non-sustainable ways, with severely unbalanced personal ecologies and little care for their most precious resource; their life force. Ignoring the need to invest care in body, mind, heart and spirit they sacrifice these to the egoic images of heroes, martyrs and lone warriors (Utne, 2006).

Many other cultures and traditions teach a very different vision of activism that those of us in the West could learn much from. Joanna Macy (in Macy & Brown, 1998) shares the teachings of the Shambala warrior given to her by Cheogyal Rinpoche who states that the Shambala warriors are spiritual warriors who train in the use of two weapons, compassion and insight. Compassion provides the passion and power to act, to move, and to see the pain of the world. Compassion without insight, however, will lead to burn out. Insight provides the warrior the wisdom to understand that there are no enemies, just radially interdependent beings. Regan (2010) quotes Taiaiake Alfred and Lana Lowe who share an Indigenous view of the warrior. They state that the words translated from Indigenous languages as warrior, have deep and spiritual meaning. It “literally means ‘carrying the burden of peace’” (p. 219), and the warrior identity is that of a sacred protector of the People and Land. Chodrin (2011) states that in Buddhism, a spiritual warrior is a bodhisattva. Such a warrior has a tender heart, renounces hard heartedness, allows themselves to be tender, sad, and fully present (Trungpa Rinpoche, 2011). This form of warriorship builds and creates; it does not destroy. What all of these traditions teach us is that only after we come to know ourselves, face our shadows and our fears and develop an open heart can we can become a warrior who helps others.

Those who wish to become spiritual warriors must work to overcome the aggressive mentality of Western activism which makes savage denunciations of what is believed to be systems of cold evil that exploit the earth and peoples. This represents a failure to understand how such a warrior is projecting their own unacknowledged darkness and fear onto others. Harvey (2009) writes that this stance of aggressive anger and attack keeps us from seeing how implicated we are in the present state of the world. Advocating for any cause in this spirit of anger and self-righteousness virtually ensures that one’s efforts will increase resistance rather than heal people. People won’t consider change if they are humiliated and condemned, this only reinforces what our actions were trying to end. Chodrin (2011) writes that one of the main features of the path of the spiritual warrior is facing fear; fear of our own shadow and the collective shadow of the world. When we are afraid we go inward and start to armor ourselves: protecting ourselves from whatever we think is going to hurt us. Rather than becoming free from fear, picking up the armour and sword only escalates our fear and hardens our hearts. Chodrin (2011) tells us that the hallmark of training in spiritual warriorship, in the bodhisattva path, is cultivating bravery. Spiritual warriors train in touching fear, coming to know it and experiencing vulnerability. When Spiritual warriors do the work of developing courage and fearlessness they are cultivating the capacity to love and care about other people. Spiritual warriors work to uncover their illusions about their inner nature, embrace dark inner saboteurs, forgive resistance to change, and accept, more and more, the heartbreak and unconditional helplessness the ego’s strategies have created to mask and avoid (Harvey, 2009). Spiritual activists become strong enough to see themselves with gentleness and kindness and become completely accepting of all their painful shadow parts. A spiritual warrior enters the world with no masks and no shields but a genuine heart and a genuine mind. Chodrin (2011) cautions us that this doesn’t mean we will no longer uncomfortable with parts of the self but we will no longer run away, avoid experiencing, or strip on the armour to ward off uncertainty and fear. An armoured warrior develops an “iron heart”, but a spiritual warrior develops a tender heard of sadness which can be “touched by pain and remain present” (Chodrin, 2011, p. 51). This develops in the spiritual warrior the humility to no longer view those who oppose what they believe as “other” and they can approach those who see the world through different lenses with respect and compassion. Spiritual warriorship is a life long journey of awakening the compassionate heart of sacred activism.
Painful growth

This was the second time I had been in this office in two weeks. The last meeting had been to discuss my growth plan and goals as an administrator and I knew from the tone of the senior administrator’s voice who had called me to this meeting today, that I was growing in ways that weren’t acceptable. I knew these meetings were attempts to bring me back into “alignment” with the directions of the division. Apparently what I had chosen to say at the last meeting had been met with some concern and now I was here to experience the disciplining actions of the power of this office. When I had come in a week ago it was the first time I had been at work in several days as I had been spending my time running up and down four flights of stairs in the hospital between my father who was experiencing serious complications after major surgery and my mother whose severe anemia was complicated by her demented confusion. I had tried to go to work once during this family crisis, but when I had returned to the hospital to find my ninety year old mother in restraints, tied raving and disoriented to a chair and my father still unconscious upstairs, I knew work was not a possibility or priority. I tried to reschedule the upcoming growth plan meeting in order to stay at the hospital, but I had been curtly informed that senior administration’s time was valuable and I was to appear. So when the paper had been pushed across to me that I had filled out several months ago, the letters that swam in front of my exhausted eyes had appeared written by a completely different person. The page was filled with my attempts to fit into the system and be the type of principal I was being asked to be, the “good” administrator. The goals I had been encouraged to set which focused on my lack of attention to details, my need to answer emails promptly, be careful and accurate with the numbers and data that I reported to the school division and be more organized, now seemed unimportant and ridiculous. I pushed the paper away, looked my supervisor straight in the eye and said what I believed about education, from my heart, with little care of the consequences. I shared my deep beliefs in the importance of providing an education for the whole child, body, mind, spirit, and emotions...the need to meet children and families where they are...the necessity of supporting their needs and visions for success not ours...how critical a climate of belonging and cultural affirmation is in a school...the greater importance of being truthful about colonialism and racism...the wonder of experiencing other ways of knowing...the excitement of re-connecting children to the land...the challenges and rewards of engaging children and their community...the awe of experiences of spirit and touching the numinous...and how I had become convinced that as we do these things, feel these things, learn these things, experience these things...this was the best kind of education. At that point in this meeting to discuss my growth, the senior administrator took a big breath, literally rolled her eyes in exasperation, and asked where academics were in all of this. She stated that I had spent enough time creating a climate in the school and it was time to get focused on academics, achievement and test scores. Once again the discourse had appeared that it had to be one or the other, that because we were engaging other ways of knowing and re-imagining school that there would be no learning happening; as if the mind was being ignored when emotions, body and spirit were included.

So as I sat down at table for this second meeting today, I knew it’s purpose. I expected to be challenged and disciplined in order to bring me back into alignment with the purposes of education that had been consistent for hundreds of years. Much as I knew this would be painful, that it would be easier to fight back, mount a counter attack, or run away, I knew I was time to be a different kind of warrior...the armor was off...the sword was down...I would not scream or fight...talk badly about these people even in my head...send out damaging energy...pick up my sword and bash someone’s skull in. Instead I would listen...pay attention...try to stop hating, blaming, judging...I would watch myself, watch my body and pay attention to what was happening. So I pulled out my note pad, began to take what looked like copious notes and attempted to look like I was completely focused on what was being said. Instead my focus went inward...I watched inside myself to see what was happening...the waves of anger that washed over me at the personal nature of the attacks...rippling rage and the urge to harm back as I was criticized...pain as I was told I was disliked by some and frightening to others...shame curling in the pit of my stomach as I was shown how I was failing...I watched as I began to leave my body, disassociate, as fear began to take over. Suddenly I saw very clearly how what was happening to, and in me, and my reactions to it, were mirrored in the face of every child in pain I had ever worked with. I realized then that while I was fighting tooth and nail to save these traumatized children, I had been fighting just as hard to save myself. I then began to look with curious eyes at the administrators around the table...one silent, head down, letting the accusations fly, refusing to support with the information she had that would counter much of what was being said, or share that she had supported and encouraged much of what we were doing, staying out of the line of fire...the other angry, forceful, cutting and ruthless becoming more vicious when I did not respond, defend myself, or break down and cry...and I began to see clearly how we were all caught in the sticky web of power and knowledge that were inherent in the system...and the fear that drives the disciplining, feeling beliefs that if these other ways of knowing and being were allowed the chaos would be unimaginable and unbearable...and in that moment understanding damned and a small piece of my heart began to break, and break open, for the suffering this causes us all.
"But if that self-forming is done in disobedience to the principles by which one is formed, then virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that risks its deformation as a subject occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew, who will be a subject here, and what will count as a life, a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgment in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint."

Butler, 2001, p. 20

**Powerful agency**

Power is inherent within social networks rather than being constituted somehow above society as a supplementary structure. We have all been constructed as compliant individuals who carry out state intentions to ‘tame’ the population through a processes of induced self-regulation (Popkewitz, 2000). But not only is the student and teacher constructed through passive processes of objectification, and active self-forming subjectification, (Ball, 1990) which are mediated by school administration, educational reform and centralized policy initiatives, this mediation is extended further, from the teacher, through the school administration, to school division administration, and to the state. What looks like agency in all levels in hierarchy of education, is in fact the state exercising discipline and control over all. All social spaces and practices are colonized (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998). When we see that we are all functioning in these webs of power/knowledge that circulate throughout the hierarchies of education and society, we understand we are all entangled. St. Pierre (2000) writes that these “contemporary forms of control and ‘discipline’ block relations of power, in that it objectifies and fixes people under its gaze and does not allow them to circulate in unpredictable ways” (p. 491). Disciplinary power, involving surveillance and hierarchical observation are not mechanisms of subjugation but derive from power/knowledge; the collective rationality of human beings. Foucauldian thinking arouses our consciousness to reflect on this modern rationality and on our subjectivity. It reveals the danger of our dependence on the effects of normalization and the possibility that we could go beyond this. When we come to see the limits to our freedom in the real world social contexts and situations, this may have the effect of enabling greater mutual understanding and tolerance and open new possibilities for communication and cooperation.

For Foucault power is everywhere; it is always already there. Foucault (1990) states that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relations to power” (p. 95). One can never be outside of power, but this does not mean one is condemned to defeat. The aim of resistance is not to attack a group or an educational system, not to “try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state institutions, but to liberate us ‘both’ from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state” (Foucault, 1983, p. 216). Teachers have often been challenged to be transformative individuals whose position is like that of social reformers, taking on the immensely heavy responsibility for social reconstruction. Foucault states that instead our individual responsibility “is to struggle against the forms of power that transform [us] into its object and instrument in the sphere of ‘knowledge,” truth,” consciousness,” and “discourse”’ (Bouchard, 1977, p. 208). We can begin by writing histories of the present, diagnosing the current situations in which we find ourselves to show how knowledge and power work together to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world. We can look for “how the object field is constituted but also for the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point up their contingency and their transformability” (Butler, 2001, p. 14). If the effects of power/knowledge are intolerable and cause a distortion of our subjectivity, Foucault encourages us to unceasingly search for other alternatives so as to establish a new subject and to avoid being objectified and instrumentalized (Wang, 2007). Subjectivity is not fixed but found in the course of an individual’s comportment of themselves as free beings. We can promote “new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of [the] kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries” (Foucault 1983, p. 216), and challenge our submission to subjectivity and the normalizing modern rationality that operates in the process of individualisation.

Foucault does not assume that there is inside of each of us a source for resistance that is housed in the subject or maintained in some foundational mode. He states instead that we have a will not to be governed, which “is always the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price” (Foucault, 1997, p. 72). When we gain a critical distance from the established authority we begin to recognize the ways in which the coercive effects of knowledge are at work in subject formation and can then decide if we will pay that price. This means to risk one’s very formation as a subject, but it is also at this point that one can begin to transform in their singular being, to make life into an “oeuvre”, a work of art (Foucault, 1978), to become a subject who endeavors to form itself, engaging in the arts of existence, both crafted and crafting, self-making; a self that is self-forming, outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible formation of the subject, an agent in virtuous disobedience and risky artistry, free from constraint (Butler, 2001).
Elders' Prayers

For weeks I had felt the borderlands closing and our processes for engaging other ways of seeing, doing, being, and learning becoming controlled, managed, changed and stopped. Today I had been summoned to yet another meeting with senior administration, this time to ‘discuss’ our First Nations and Métis initiatives at the school. I was informed that the research process and review we had hoped to engage with an educational research group’s support would not go forward. After reviewing the grant, it was felt that there had been no demand for such a report, that the deliverables for the project had changed over time, and that it was not necessary. So the hopes we had to report on how our three-year process to re-imagine community education and how it had impacted all students and staff had ended. The Ministry staff who were supporting us and encouraged the research process had said a solid research report showing our many successes could have meant the receipt of another grant to continue the project. Now these hopes were shattered.

Next on the agenda had been our newly received grant for teaching treaties in our school this year. This grant had come out of a two-year process of working with community Elders and Knowledge keepers, and we had received funding to engage each classroom in learning about the treaties through Elder teachings and presentations which would culminate in a school play being performed on National Aboriginal Day. The focus of the play was to re-write and re-tell the history of the land this city sat on and engage in ‘truth telling’ regarding how the treaties had created the relationships and realities that existed on this land today. The newly formed Aunts and Uncles Advisory Group for the school, made up of First Nations and Métis Elders and Knowledge keepers was supportive, and ready and willing to guide the process. The First Nations artist we had engaged for the project, a playwright and actor had visited the school and met with the staff and was excited to begin. The advisory group had already begun teachings in the classrooms and was working on the draft of the play based on the treaty teachings. Our staff had been ecstatic about this process, as it was a way for them to approach the treaty teachings as students with their class, learning from the Elders and Knowledge keepers directly so they would be more prepared to walk this teaching path with confidence the next year as non-Aboriginal teachers. We all believed this project could help all of us step forward in understanding and consciousness. In one Elder’s words, it would be through art and a true sharing of local history that the community could be brought out of the dark. The voices of all in the community could be involved in the process, their legacy valued and accounted for, and as a result of this project, true community could begin.

Despite the beauty and hope of this project, senior administration was focused on their perception that I had gone ahead without the knowledge or support of the school division. I responded in amazement to this charge, stating that one superintendent at the table had attended the community exploration process that began last year and had been well aware of the continuation into this year. However, when I looked across the table for confirmation she looked down and would not meet my eyes as the criticisms continued. the scope of the project was too big, the time away from academics was too much, the role of the Elder in the school was becoming more respected than I was as principal, there was a lack of curricular connections in the meaningful subject areas of reading and math. I wanted to scream in frustration, to argue and deny the ridiculousness of these charges against this well thought out community engaged process. However, once again I waited, watched and listened, hoping my silence would somehow salvage this process that meant so much to so many people in this community. As the attacks continued, I finally played the only card I had. I sat back, closed my binder that contained the hundreds of pages of this grant process and said that it appeared the central office leaders were opposed to this treaty education initiative and perhaps we should stop the whole thing and return the grant to the board who had awarded it. I knew that the names of the school divisions who had received these grants had been published in several places and communicated to the Ministry of Education. I hoped that my threatening to publically say the division had been non-supportive would stop what was happening here. I was partially right. They did hastily say that was not necessary, but multiple controls were put in place, with the grant funds being dispersed and approved through the board office, consultants monitoring and controlling the process to be sure we were meeting curricular objectives, shrinking the project down to a much smaller scale, and a diminished role for the Elder and Knowledge keepers.

As I drove away after the meeting I felt violated, like I had been raped. I had to pull off the road to gain control of the weeping that took over. As I gazed up at the tiny Grandmother moon in the sky I realized that how I felt now, oppressed, controlled, managed, “othered” was a tiny sampling of how the People in this community, who had stepped forward to trust this process, felt every day in our Western world. I at least could take my white face into the world outside of that meeting, away from those few people, and enact the privilege of my skin color. I realized now that multiple Peoples and beings could not. My phone rang then and I heard the voice of the Elder on the other end of the phone, telling me I had done well, that I was a strong woman, that I had faced my fear and kept my integrity; they had no power over me now. I asked her how she did it, how she survived living in this society, that was so near to being post-colonial, as some liked to claim, than it had been 200 years ago. I wanted to know how did she not die from the pain, or kill someone in anger. Her answer was profound and life altering: pray, she said to give it all up to the Creator, we cannot do the Creator’s work with bitterness in our hearts, all we can do is speak our truth and then leave, walk away. As I pulled shivering from cold and shock back on to the road that snaked across the prairies, I prayed to the Grandmother that was lighting my way to help the bitterness I felt leave my heart, and help me to know when the time had come to walk away.
Sacred outside

Contemporary reforms of education, which see the system as a political instrument for oppression, social control, and advancement of Western power/knowledge and ideologies, seek to transform this mode of educational discourse. Wang (2011) writes that the "politics of confrontations and emancipation" that tend to accompany such reforms are not the way such discourse can be changed (p. 150). She cautions that that imagining a new system as a panacea, with other universal operations that can be substituted for what is current, cannot be the solution to the problems of educational discourse. These imaginings of new possibilities are being duplicated inside of the very discourses that the reforms are trying to change. A new transformation will only occur when the rules of a system can be changed and Foucault's work leads us to understand that this change must occur by way of a continual modification of both objects and subjects. Foucault states that power is productive and that subjects can and should strive for freedom on the basis of power/knowledge, but that this can be best attempted through the possibilities of human self-creation (Gordon, 1980). Rather than arriving "at a priori moral or intellectual judgements on features of our society produced by such forms of power [one can] render possible an analysis of the process of production itself" (ibid, p. 237). This process of production imagines power then as a space that is full of possibilities for human subjects.

Foucault saw power as constituted by forces, and spoke of the outside as a place where force arises, not a physical place, but a provisional, unstable, "non-place" where a perpetual state of evolution exists, and where new possibilities of living are created (Deleuze, 2006, p. 71). It is in this non-place of the outside where one can be freed from dependence upon power/knowledge, such that the outside becomes a place where the self is liberated from this closure. The outside is outside processes of normalization and outside the disciplinary manipulation of power relations. "[]pulls oneself free of oneself and prevents oneself from being the same" (Foucault as cited in Wang, 2011, p. 15). The outside is, therefore, a free space that relates to self-creation, to a re-fabrication of the self. This freeing and liberation is not to be understood in terms of a politics of emancipation however, as there is always a line between the inside and outside, between tolerance and resistance. Our subjectivity is on the inside, the discourses that speak us, and we cannot avoid the impact of power relations and of relations of knowledge within this interiority (Wang, 2011). We cannot evade the inside, but must learn to move to the outside, cross the line so to speak, to the outside where the reflexive forces of power operate outside of the force of resistance, a space where we can think otherwise. The production of subjectivity is on-going, our being is always "becoming", and the outside provides a non-place where closure is liberated through this becoming; an incessant evolution and continuous forming of a subject which evolves with power/knowledge in its eternal flow. The subject has a choice then, to continue to be produceddocilely or participate in a self-production inspired by resistance. A powerful subject depends upon agonistic relations between power and resistance, but resistance in the outside becomes an affirmative power of life, a passion, opening possibilities for new ways of seeing and speaking and the possibilities of knowledge becoming different. Resistance is no longer understood as release from oppression but the practice that overturns power relations so that they become productive in the formation of powerful subjects, "the force of a life that is larger, more active, more affirmative and richer in possibilities" (Deleuze, 1997, p. 77). The outside is the place and space where forces are folded otherwise, and new possibilities for a life imagined.

Pelbart (2000) states that "in other times and elsewhere, different spaces of the outside were capable of opening up (shamanistic, prophetic, mystical, and political spaces)" (p. 207). These other and "othered" spaces knew of the element that comes from the outside, the forces, the exteriority, the groundless ground from which subjectivity itself emerges. They understood that the outside is immanent in subjectivity. They understood as well that the initiation to the outside, the passion for/of the outside finds its political function when it triggers a subjective mutation, that is, a disruption of affects. Such a contested subject can stand at the interstices and live legitimately in liminal spaces (Bhabha, 1994) with liminality becoming a valid, and recognized space to occupy and marginal subjectivities and ways of knowing become legitimate ways of being, of being outside. To come to occupy the outside one must engage the constant practice of agonism between power and resistance, between one’s own knowledge and truth, always striving for the outside free space of self-formation. There must be a constant search for a way to "interrogate present being, open towards becoming, towards our selves becoming otherwise in the future" (Wang, 2011, p. 154). This practice of self-formation becomes the practice of education itself where "[..] we find not the map of another world, but rather the other possible cartography of all worlds-that which precisely makes this world to be another, delivering us from the chains of everydayness...[a]nd this makes possible unheard of resistances as well as unheard of voices, both of them capable of folding us otherwise" (Pelbart, 2000, p. 208).
Seeking

I was sitting with my mother, the cold fluorescent lights of the hospital shining upon her tiny frame. It had been a difficult night for her, lost in confusion as to where she was, why these people were poking and prodding her, and why bags of blood were dripping into her body. She had told me this morning in a whispered voice that her mother had visited her in the night and that her father was still there, sitting beside me in another chair, as her many brothers and sisters came and went from the room, talking to her as they passed through. I shivered as I looked around the room and wondered if as the veil was thining for her, these visions from other spaces and time were just as real as the hard chair I was sitting on. She then leaned close to me and quietly stated that she had seen the light last night, she had the choice to go, to leave... but that she had decided to stay here... she was still needed. Then she lay back quietly, settling in to rest as she softly spoke to the many beings that had gathered with us that I could not see and hear.

I thought now about the choice to leave that I had been faced with not so long ago, but how unlike my mother I had chosen to go. I remembered the agony of the decision, as I had walked for hours in the hills, through the rushing waters of spring, looking for some sign of what I was to do. The snow had melted enough and for the first time in months I was able to enter the forest... breath in the aspen, listen to their whispers on the wind, pray for a sign. Then in the pristine white, undisturbed since the last spring snow, I saw tracks, small arrows, clearly and decisively marking a path to follow. I walked down gullies, under trees, around rocks, following the trail as the afternoon sun warmed my face. Climbing up a small hill I could see something in the distance, a dark figure laying on the snow. I slowed as my dog growled beside me, sensing danger. Then she leapt ahead, sniffing and circling the object, then deciding it was harmless she wandered off into the brush leaving me to investigate. As I walked closer I could see curled in the snow a coyote, caught in the sleep of death. As I got closer, I drew in my breath in shock at the grotesque image of its face. A branch was stuck straight through its gaping eye socket and its mouth was pulled back into a grinning smile as it laughed at me from another realm. Coyote, trickster, a jokester message from beyond... take the stick out of your eye... look around... really see... we are all dying... quit taking it all so seriously... do you get the message... do you see the great joke... choose life... move on... heal yourself... did you get it this time around... yet? I was not sure that I understood all of the lessons yet, but I did know clearly that it was time to leave, to walk away, to choose life, and the next day I did just that.

Suddenly I was snapped out of my memories as my mother shot straight up in bed, tremendous energy filling her small frame, as she looked me directly in the eye and in a commanding voice with absolute clarity asked me “So Aline, did you find what you have been seeking all this time?” She stared hard at me then, vibrating with intensity, then slumped back on her pillow, eyes closed, and faded away to sleep. I was stunned, but as the room that had been charged with energy and force slowly quieted and stillled, I was reminded clearly of another encounter many years ago in a dark kitchen. As I had stood feet cold on the floor shivering in fear, listening to this same voice as it had asked me if I had wanted the fear to go away, and how when I had responded yes. I had been told to search. I realized I had been searching ever since, journeying through the darkened forest of both inner and outer realities, wandering through borderlands and liminal spaces, peering in books, the clouds and nature, pressed up against the mirror of my own reflection, glimpsed through the darkened glass great mysteries beyond. As I sat now in the stillness of the room, I felt into this question... was there fear... was there pain... was there awakening... was there joy. And I answered quietly to the sleeping figure of my mother... yes... I had found what I had been seeking all this time.
Chop wood, carry water

I had spent a great deal of my life as if sleeping, unconscious of the many forces within me, within school, within society, flowing through the animate Earth. This force, this inner wakefulness, startled me awake, startled me back. I started a journey, entered the forest, wanting fear to go away and longing for some peace in this chaotic, crisis filled time. As I journeyed with fear, invited it in my guest house, stuck my head in the mouth of the demon, I realized just how much fear drove me... to “Be the change”, do the change, change everyone else, change things, take action, out there, change the structures, shift the system. I had missed the key in Ghandi’s message, the verb to Be, just be, be the change, be peace, be love, be compassion, be joy, be fearless, be all those things you wish the world to be. As we change and transform the self, this changes and transforms those around us, those we touch, the world. I could see clearly that the great masters of the world, who inspired great transformations and movements for change, did not do something, but became something. Ghandi and all other great spiritual teachers and change agents were transformed beings; it was who they were, who they had become, their very presence, that changed the world. Be the change you wish to see, the sustainability question answered, sustained by your change, it is about who you are, who you become, not a movement or a thing you do, but your very presence in the world, sustained in the hearts and minds of those whose lives are touched, by a fearless, broken open, loving, compassionate heart.

I realize that awakening is a lifelong process and at no time will my wisdom container be full, not in this lifetime or in many lifetimes I imagine, so at no time do I get to be an “expert” or to be above the challenges. There is a constant need to reawaken, in every moment, to this body, this monkey mind, this nature, who we are, and at no time is the work done. There is a constant flow, a stream that just keeps carrying us to the great ocean, all we have to do is get into the river and stay in it. As we flow on this never ending seeking journey, we have moments of enlightening insight, awe-filled awakening, and then as the Zen adage goes, we chop wood, carry water. Bai (2013) writes that in our wakefulness there must come a rethinking of how we chop this wood, a shift in the quality of how we carry the water, a re-looking at our priorities and commitments in order to live a more animated, bonded and belonging, loving, happier, and fulfilled life. Awakening changes what we value and find meaningful, and we may need to re-think how we spend our time and energy. There is a choice once we wake up and see the barnyard as Rico (2011) writes, to live inside or outside of it. We need to be mindful of the voices that come to us outside the boundaries of this seemingly normal reality, whispering “Jump the fence and run for it”, enter the outside, live in the limen, make direct contact with the unexpected, with the deep mystery that is just beyond the fence, see the world as it really is, magical, beautiful, precious, loving, kind, animate, alive, compassionate. Stand outside in the incoming light of the unexpected, “educate” yourself, draw forth your inner knower, allow the learning spirit to come back to life and the presence that animates the universe to guide your way. Awaken.

“Humankind is being led along an evolving course, through this migration of intelligences, and though we seem to be sleeping, there is an inner wakefulness, that directs the dream, and that will eventually startle us back to the truth of who we are.”

Rumi as cited in Barks, 2004, p. 113
The board lay broken on the ground
Pieces in disarray
She set off on a different quest
To see in different ways.

The legacy of ancient ways
Had long been buried deep
Beneath the waves of empire's march
To keep the world asleep.

The magic, myth and mystery
The ways of being round
The circle and its energies
Were now hard to be found.

The ladder with its poisoned tip
The weapon took its due
It colonized most everything
As empire only grew.

But there were those who held these ways
Traditions still alive
Despite colonial settlement
Had managed to survive.

For all her white-skinned privilege
Her people didn't earn
They kindly shared traditional ways
A gift so she could learn.

Of generations torn apart
By certain ways of mind
Imperialism led the way
And kept her people blind.

To power greed and genocide
That settled on this land
Behind the masks of peacefulness
The treaty shook of hand.

They sat her down upon the Earth
She lost her settler pride
And found ancestral circle gifts
Lay buried deep inside.

She heard her peoples sad lament
And felt ancestral shame
For claiming land and ways of life
That cause these Peoples pain.

The drum beat loud within the song
A sacred vow to hold
To heal the Earth and use her voice
These stories must be told.

She saw the dangers of the left
That kills a mystic right
A brain caught fire in thought gone mad
That rules the world by might.

She carried all this back to school
And much to her delight
So many loved the circle ways
Embraced the silenced right.

New ideas filled their minds
They re-imagined school
And found new ways to teach and learn
Which challenged all the rules.

They reconnected with the brain
The body got its tools
And spirit grew in silent love
As "othered" came to school.

They walked together on a path
To learn traditional truth
Unsettling their colonial minds
Re-seeing troubled youth.

The trauma of their present lives
The generational pain
Exploding in the halls and homes
A legacy of shame.

The Elders guided on a path
To give the People voice
To re-tell the true history
So healing was a choice.

Soon disciplining reappeared
Displaying all its might
The armour and the sword went down
And she gave up the fight.

She learned there was no enemy
Her heart was broken wide
A warrior of a different kind
Emerge from deep inside.

She saw that power had trapped them all
In its eternal flow
Imprisoning their very lives
The ways that they could know.

But then she heard an ancient voice
The calling from outside
The kind of subject she could be
The freedom to desire.

And so she stepped beyond the fence
Reality blown wide
And with compassion in her heart
She chose to stay outside.

She walked among the limen now
A foot within both worlds
A journey which will never end
Awakening unfolds.
Wide awake by the river

I settled onto the cushion and looked out at the solid, still mountain and the frozen river barely visible through the deep green morning light. The swans had stayed all winter, further downstream where the river was open, a constant reminder of the path of transformation...inner to outer...ugly duckling to swan...heretic to healed...that I continued to flow upon. I closed my eyes and let the depth and stillness of this place settle inside of me...yin...grounding...calming. I could still feel some agitation within, and consciously relaxed the belly. Still the shoulder blades down and back, opened the heart, slowed the breath. Feeling present I opened my eyes and lit the candle, setting out the objects needed from the altar...wand, statue, rattle, feathers...as the smoke of sage cleansed the air within and without. I intuitively selected crystals...selenite, quartz, sodalite, and tourmaline...clarity, higher guidance, grounding and unification of logic and intuition...asking these to aid in my understanding of the situation I found myself in. For the first time in many months I had felt the gut-wrenching, bone-wrenching fear that had been a companion for most of this lifetime, and was on the hunt for understanding and direction. I closed my eyes, called upon my spirit guides and matrarchal ancestors to join me in the circle as I travelled inward into other realms and spaces...touching lightly, looking closely, paying attention, waiting. Visions of trauma, this and other lives, generational, slid in and out of a heavy, thick fog, that dragged me down, suffocating, burning, choking, paralyzing. I understood...these fears of persecution, violence, control through intimidation...were still in my bones, arising unbeknown when things got too dangerous, too risky, too uncommon-sense. As I returned to the present I chose the tourmaline pendulum and clarified what I had seen...the fear was from the trauma of this lifetime...influenced by the ancestral line...it will eventually resolve...need energetic clearing...will not resolve at once...learn how to clear my self. It was obvious to me that this fear had been brought on by the gentle questioning of yesterday by a mentor and friend who wondered what, in the writing I had submitted for final committee approval, had not been said that needed to be said...what was unfinished...not closed or not named as a future place...what was the something I just didn’t...or couldn’t say. I knew what it was...it was about this fear...this trauma...my drive to rescue the children of trauma...who was I rescuing and why...me or them...I was compelled and driven by this need. I knew now it was the old ways, the ancient ways, the forbidden and forgotten ways...energy, ceremony, spirits, shamanic journeying, goddess, animals, Earth...that could heal this trauma, ease this fear. Panic had jumped, lightened, tightened, enclosed...this was dangerous ground to be speaking from...this inner healing journey...the rescue of self...the ways of healing...the types of knowing. As I lay the cards out in front of me, I was not surprised by the message...wealth, fear, death/rebirth. As I was entering this time of completion, the end of this long project of self-reflection and healing, this time of new beginnings and looking ahead, fear still sat deep inside of me...it could not be ignored.

As I drove into town to see the medical doctor for support with the one last physical ail-ease not yet healed, I knew these ancient healing ways could not be spoken of in that space. These ways of knowing had been delegitimized, marginalized and at times demonized by western medicine, academia, religion and society. I had pushed her as far as she could go with unusual requests for unorthodox testing and medications from the healers I saw who were considered outside of the realm of possible healing modalities, despite their years of training, schooling and apprenticeship. I was grateful she was open to working with some of these practitioners and providing me what I needed with no questions and no obvious judgement. As I left her office I felt again that tightening of fear as I thought about the repercussions of speaking of these ways aloud anywhere, including the academic space of my dissertation. As I began the drive home I took a deep breath, cleared my mind and opened to the present moment, aware that Nature was always speaking to me if I only was ready to listen. Soon up ahead in the sky I saw the familiar spiralling flight of the eagle, golden, strong, calm, as it soared above the rocky cliffs of the mountain road...I bring you courage to see this through...venture into this territory with confidence...detach yourself from these worries and fears...see the wider picture, I felt strength and determination fill my being, and as the radio played I listened as Sara Bareilles encouraged me to "...say what you need to say...I wanna see you be brave", and Michael Jackson reminded me from the grave that "...if you wanna make the world a better place...take a look at yourself and then make a change." I knew however, from the deep pull of the energy of this fear, that I would need help on this part of the journey. When I arrived home I contacted a healer I had not yet met, who used a method of energy work I had not yet experienced, but who I intuitively knew it was time to meet and heal and learn from. I knew that I was being called to walk into this new space of learning, speaking and sharing ancient, animate, spirit ways and make available these discourses previously unheard, disallowed and foreclosed. I was no longer so naıve as to believe that I would not encounter rejection, ridicule and persecution as these discourses bumped up against those which dominate modern Western culture and its institutions. I would need support as I moved ahead as it appeared fear was to be my companion and teacher for now. All was as it was meant to be...all was blessed...the journey continues...
One voice

As I continue in my journey down the river, I find myself flowing between, around and within the discourses of Modern Western Culture, observing how they subject me, conscript me, form me. I look at the patterns of thought that were drilled into me by others and attempt to make visible and record those traditional patterns and make conscious the ways I unconsciously interpret the world. This is where I now believe some strategies of liberation lie and where we have some possibility to consciously develop resistances against this “normality” (Davies, 2000). Judith Butler (1995) reminds us that as subjects we are constituted but not determined, and I believe it is there that our agency lies. It is a continual, ongoing process for me to see how discourses, both external and internal, continue to influence and determine my thinking and being in the world(s). As I move beyond these old/new ways of thinking, speaking, desiring, clinging and resisting I can still see how existing discursive practices can trap me into the worlds I am trying to move beyond. It is always startling to discover how old impressions, images and voices from the past can still reassert their hold on me in the present moment. It is not so easy for me, I am discovering, to shed the interpretive frameworks or the patterns of desire that I took up as my own when I learned to play the game of humanism. I can see that for now on my path I am not free of these discursive constitutions of self, but I am developing the capacity to recognize, resist, subvert or change the discourses through which, and to which, I am being subjected.

I have actively worked to position myself differently within new discourses, flowing within and around them, and noting the observable, dramatic personal changes they can bring about. I have noticed with interest the deep resistance I have at times to these changes, as do others around me, even when at an intellectual level I can logically and rationally see that the change is desirable. It has become very visible to me how inscribed our bodies (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual) are with the discourses of a life time, or for some, many lifetimes. Our bodies have learned well to interact with the world in certain ways, and as Davies (2000) cautions, these ways may need more than just new discursive practices or alternative discourses to change them. I have observed with much astonishment how a sense of the body that I had completely forgotten I even had can so quickly settle upon my skin, dig into my bones, and disrupt my spirit when certain discourses fundamental to Western culture re-appear. It is an extraordinary feeling to so quickly be reinscribed, by others or self, as abnormal, nonsensical and dangerous. I am relieved and reminded by Davies (2000) in these times that I always have the freedom to recognize these multiple readings in order that no discursive practice or positioning by powerful others (or powerless selves) can capture or claim my identity.

The question of how we clear these discourses, heal the effects they have upon the body, psyche and soul is of great interest to me at this point in my journey. I have observed that ancient, animist, and spiritual ways of knowing open possibilities for crossing traditional boundaries as well as counteracting, modifying, refusing, or going beyond the limited and limiting discourses of Modern Western culture. I wonder at their capacities to shift discourse, to support powerful transformations, to help humans recognize and experience our deep embeddedness in nature. I question if discourse can be conceived as energy, and these discourses can be embedded in the body at cellular, genetic, and/or energetic levels (Barrett, 2009) then what could be the potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness to shift, dislodge, heal, rewrite these stories in our bodies, consciousness, schools and cultures?...the journey continues.

I hope you, blessed reader, remember as you step away from this story that all stories are fictions, but that such fictions provide the substance of a lived reality. However, also be reminded that our capacity to write such stories supports us in reconceptualising author-ity, allowing us to become the authors of our own stories. We can re-read the images and metaphors of old storylines, watching how we get hooked, pulled back in, and how we cling and grasp and resist. We can re-story the dominant discourses and re-write possible futures by going beyond what is already known, giving voice to new/ancient tales that have long been erased but not forgotten. In our author-ity we can re-write ourselves otherwise, as a multiple whole encompassing both sides of any dualism (Davies, 2000), or as the un-conditioned, unmanifest, unconstructed, unborn self. All stories are writable...all it takes is one voice.
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