

# Joining Heaven and Earth: Art Education and Ecology

## Art Education and The Great Work

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*Abstract: This essay offers an immodest proposal to the field of Art Education; reposition itself from the minor and peripheral role we now play in our educational systems vis-à-vis what are considered to be the core areas study and value, to a central dimension of the entire educational enterprise. Art teaching so reconceived moves to an essential function in education by embracing the most ancient, ubiquitous and important mission that the arts have served its societies; envisioning how we might live, rather than to portray, decorate and entertain us in the lives we have come to live. How we prefer to live has always diverged from how we presently are living, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the way we are currently living is not merely unsustainable for our species and for significant portions of all species, the way we have come to live is threatening the very ecological dynamics that cohere the whole shebang.*

*We must explore, find, and adopt ways of behaving on this planet that are informed by and consistent with the ways of the rest of the planet. We must turn again to close and full exploration of the ways all the rest of the natural world puts its vast home in order so that we may have a chance of success in putting our home in order. We must create ways of thinking and behaving that rejoin our ways with the ways of all the rest of creation. This is essentially the conclusion of all the disciplines of knowledge, and their common meeting grounds come under the general title of Deep Ecology. This essay argues the case that the arts have historically played, and art education can and should play-a particularly significant role in contributing to this Great Work. Examples and exemplars abound in the arts and are described herein.*

*This essay also makes the case for and describes a school whose mission is likewise conceived of as a grand and critical experiment investigating both how we have come to live they way we have, and, how we might come to live; coexisting as members in good standing of an infinitely intertwined, vast family of all entities. In other words; ecologically. This is what Thomas Berry calls "The Great Work." It is what Asian cultures call, "Joining Heaven and Earth." I describe what such a school might look like; a school that has as its core mission to be an experimental station for the Great Work, for rejoining the human fragment of creation with all the rest of creation. A school in which the arts are central to the investigation and creation of everything, all the time. Artful thinking and behaving in this school are found throughout the curriculum, throughout the pedagogy, throughout the physical premises, throughout the spirit of the place. This essay calls on art teachers to bring to bear our vast array of particular talents, skills and knowledge as artists and teachers to good effect on this great work.*

Art and its teaching serves many purposes; just now social justice is our prime agenda; visual culture, discipline based arts education are still others. All are worthy and all contribute to social welfare and to the invigoration of the arts and art curricula. But the arts also serve another function for the human condition, the most ancient, universal and the most consequential: I call it Joining Heaven and Earth. Amongst all the other contributions the arts offer the rest of the community, Joining Heaven and Earth, presents us with engaging in the most important agenda for this most perilous phase of our species. If we do not get *this* right; if we do not begin to behave in ways that are informed by, and consistent with, the ways of the rest of the universe, then for us, who are on the brink of ruining the whole fabric of human life on this our dear, one and only planet; if we *do not rejoin* our ways with the ways of all the rest of creation, then utilizing the powers of the arts to extend social justice, increase visual literacy, foster self expression, entertain us, decorate us, assuage us, will not matter a jot. Not a jot.

Thomas Berry, the clarion spokesperson for the fate of the Earth, called “The Great Work,” rejoining what should never have been sundered; our infinitesimally small, but most important fragment of the universe with the rest of our family- the rest of the universe. This essay examines the case for the arts, specifically the teaching of the arts, to be a unique and powerful instrument for awakening our students, our society to this Great Work. What business do the arts have in this lofty exercise? Indeed, what business does art education, required as we are to teach to national standards, beholden to state frameworks, required district priorities that make no mention of heaven nor earth, nor for that matter, of Joining Heaven and Earth to take up this grand agenda?

But first, what exactly does this term imply; Joining Heaven and Earth? And, what special contributions have the arts to offer to bring this grand agenda to bear upon our particular profession as art teachers? For some, Heaven consists of a single god in command of everything and everyone. For others Heaven is full of many gods each in charge of one thing or another. For still others, no gods at all, but spirits dwelling in all things. For some others, no gods or spirits, just divine Nature as it arises each day. For others it is still more abstract and rarified; Heaven is the cosmic regularities and patterns that subsume all the particularities of the world within a coherent cosmos. Western traditions posit that Heaven resides above; African and Australian traditions mostly have Heaven embedded in the earth. Asians have it above, Native Americans everywhere. Whatever Heaven consists of and wherever it is to be found, the concept and pull of Heaven has exerted tremendous, if not the most important influences on humans in shaping our concepts, behaviors, policies and institutions.

We might think of what Heaven connotes from an entirely different point of view. For as long as we continue to consider Heaven as some place else, as somewhere else, as over there, beyond here and now, or, as in another realm or dimension, if we continue to **divide** Heaven from Earth, how we consign our selves to live now, from how we desire to live, then; we will always separate our selves from all the rest of creation. And so we will remain broken off from our family of origin, our immense, spectacularly varied, gorgeous, wonder full, astonishing, stupendous, rambunctious, sublime...family. Being so alienated from our family of origin and ultimate destiny, all the rest of creation, we all too often experience a sense of being alone, apart from the great ongoing swarming, and to us, seemingly indifferent universe.

Quoting an earlier text of mine, “But suppose we *are* Nature. Suppose we are one more interesting crop of a universe whose nature is fecundity and whose manifestations are infinite. Suppose there is no divorce. And that drawing closer to nature is not so much an outer journey to some distant exotica but a journey in the exact opposite direction, inward to an awakening of what is already contained within. What we so fervently desire to join *is* joined, just veiled.” (London, 2003, p. 318) And the artistic/creative processes lift the veil.

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If we do lift the veil even somewhat and catch a glimpse of the world as it is, what might we see of this chunk of the universe, of Great Nature? It is what you and I see every day whenever we step outside and bother to take the merest gander all around us;

**A great ecology**, teeming with variety, every thing exquisitely made, every single thing necessary, every thing grace full in its particular movements, everything patterned at every layer of its being, all layers exactly fit, every thing subtle in its manufacture, nothing sloppy, nothing incomplete. Every thing throbbingly robust, every thing complex unto its finest details and order of magnitude, every thing musical in its movements, not a thing shy of itself, not a thing embarrassed by the company it keeps, or its origins, or its capacities. Every thing pulsating in harmony with every thing else, no pushing no shoving. When it rains, every thing gets wet. When the sun shines, every thing grows. When the seasons change, every thing changes simultaneously, each in its own way, each at its own pace, each living to the fullest each season, each day, each moment. The night having its beauties, as the day has its beauties. No thing ugly, no notion of ugly, nor beautiful because every thing is well made, every thing fits, no left overs, no thing and no one left out, every portion integrated with every other portion; self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, [and] self-healing, (Berry p. 162)

Let's call all *this*, Heaven. An infinite ecology of all entities, much like an improvisational jazz ensemble; each member enriching the other, and together creating domains and harmonies unattainable alone. This grand ecology. this Heaven, is not somewhere else, it is right here. See for yourself; that's what artists do. The Great Work is to observe, to experience, to participate in and thus to come to acquire enduring knowledge about the ways of Great Nature, [our HEAVEN] and to inform the ways of our wayward segment of Nature; you and me. [our EARTH]. *This* is Joining Heaven and Earth.

### What is Art For?

How then might teachers of the arts lend our talents, knowledge and high office, to address the Great Work? Let us start with what art is for: The purposes of art are many; self expression, decoration, entertainment, social justice, cultural literacy, celebration, commemoration, and so on. But at its very core and purpose, the most profound mission of the arts is to bring images and stories to the people of how we *might* live, compared to how we have come to live. Art is the most human of activities that help us savor life as it is, surely, but more importantly still, *the arts provide us with glimpses of how life might be lived-giving significant form to significant values.*

Have I just announced a startling point of view about the prime purpose of art? Is this news? If so, what do you think Bach was about? Or Beethoven or Brahms, or Martha Graham, George Balanchine, or Bellini, Fra Angelico, Homer, Virgil, Mondrian, David Whyte, Mary Oliver, Tony Kushner, the Kahlivala, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Wasilly Kandinsky, Igor Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Robert Pinsky.

The necessary counter parts to those artists who have devoted their gifts and talents to providing us with views of how we might live are the artists who have shown us how we have come to live: Breughel, Dickens, Melville, Roth, Larson, Ensor, Beckman, Goya, Grosz, Warhol, Rauschenberg. Why both sets of artists? One to wake us up to the look of the consequences of how we have come to live. The other to show us how we might live.

How might we live in contrast to how we have *come to live*? How about a civilization that is characterized – again- by a great ecology, a society teeming with variety, where every thing is exquisitely made, every single thing is necessary, every thing grace full in its particular movements, everything patterned at every layer of its being, all layers exactly fit, every thing subtle in its manufacture, nothing sloppy, nothing incomplete. Where every thing is throbbingly robust, every thing complex unto its finest details and order of magnitude. Every thing musical in its movements, not a thing shy of its self, not a thing embarrassed by the company it keeps, or its origins, or its capacities. A civilization wherein every thing pulsates in harmony with every thing else. Neither pushing nor shoving. Not a thing left out. Nothing to kill or die for. Self propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, and self-fulfilling communities. Nature.

*How about living within a society like that?*

The human fragment now rejoined to the rest of all creation might well be a place where black and white skins, red and yellow skins, bowing to the right or bowing to the left, fast and slow, old and young, bent and straight, are all made room for at the same infinite banquet table. In such a level of civilization, we might live grace fully, care fully, with the full array of our expanded kinship networks. We might craft every iota of our life as if our life depended upon it. For it does. And we presently don't. When it comes time to yield our place in the world, we might do so graciously. For now we don't, and we must. When in the midst of this great gift of life, Life! we might live robustly, colorfully each day, each breath, at each meeting of each member of our infinitely large, always strange, family.

How about *that!*

But wait; couldn't *any* teacher in any discipline also do this? What special qualities *do* the arts contain that contributes to **Joining Heaven and Earth**? And more precisely, what does a teacher of art have to contribute? Thomas Berry, again tells us; "The natural world demands a response beyond that of rational calculation, beyond philosophical reasoning, beyond scientific insight. The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul. A response that artists seek to provide in color and music and movement." (Berry p. 54)

And what are the skills that artists have in particular abundance that enables them to bear witness to the harmonies of Great Nature- and give evidence of them to their colleagues? How about these?

Penetrating curiosity, Devoted seeing, Exquisite workmanship, Integrated themes, Astonishing variations, Passionate forthcoming; Unhurried wonder, Reverent attention, Leaping imagination, Openness to this and to that, Searching after Pattern, Perceiving harmonies subtle and complex, Transparency, Persistence, Devotion to excellence, Awe, Wonder, and, given the privilege of witnessing the crushing beauty of Great Nature, a quiet, but absolutely certain, pervasive sense of Gratitude. Enduring qualities of Character, to join with those of Enduring Knowledge.

The very bases for creating *any* art form are these: to discern the patterns, the harmonies that cohere every single thing, and place every single element within ecology of all things. To observe the patterns and the harmonies that cohere every single thing, and, to place every single element within an ecology of all things. The Great Work of Art resides in its abilities to compose the many elements of any art; line, form, shape, hue, tone, texture, interval, pitch, pattern, rhythm, into a grand ecology of all elements. These abilities of the artistic processes are the exact same procedures using only different elements that are involved in engaging successfully in the Great Work; composing the many human elements of creation within a coherent ecology of all the rest of creation.

What evidence is there of artists and art work whose qualities empower this joinery? Indeed the **evidence is art's history**. Have you not heard a Bach Cantata? What do you think that was about? Or Verdi's Requiem? Puccini's Madame Butterfly, Mozart's Cosi fan Tutti? Brahms's Deutsche Requiem, or our own John Lennon, Nat King Cole, Marion Anderson, Kiri DeKanawa. Tibetan Mandela's, Navaho sand paintings, Mixtec pottery, Bengali temples and their dancers, Basho's Haiku, Shakespeare's sonnets, Pascal's pensees, Almadovar's movies. How about the pyramids of Giza, Angkor Wat, Machu Pichu, the Parthenon, Chartres, the Dome of the Rock, Temples of the Sun and of the Moon, the stars and the flowers.

In the creation of all these what do you think in the main their projects were? What work were they engaged in? Some handsome objects to entertain us while we remained attached to how we now live? A good deal of this, of course, but it is simply not credible that these people used up their lives, poured their gifts, honed their talents over the course of their life merely to entertain and decorate the lives we have, distract us from our more serious engagements with life, like shopping, holding down a job, paying bills, driving our kids here and there.

Is it not more credible that their project was to see so deeply, so broadly, so finely, so courageously, and to listen so care fully, feel so empathically, move so courageously, say so completely, that the "news" they brought back from their seeing, their expeditions beyond the horizon of where others had gone, their

scrupulous craftsmanship, were all unveilings of how *we might live*, rather than acquiesce to how we were given to live and now believe that we are *consigned* to live.

Put in other terms, employing the language of Martin Buber, might we not say that Art filled consciousness engages every thing, every “it” in the world as if it was a “Thou”? And, by the intensity and sincerity of that reaching towards the “other,” unveil the Thou that is indeed embedded in every thing; elevating every “it,” to “Thou.” Thus every day things; a **pear**- in the gaze of Cezanne, a **puddle** in the eyes of Monet, a **hand** in the hand of Tintoretto, a **cloud** for Turner, An **urn** for Shelly, a **bone** celebrated by Georgia O’Keefe become- now for us too, Thou. The bequest of the arts for those who would attend- seriously to what the artists introduce to their communities, is a world that is more complex, more exquisite, more necessary, more related, more mysterious, can I get away with saying, more holy than we ever expected?

### **Towards a New School**

If indeed, art filled consciousness engages every “it” as if it was worthy of the designation and treatment of a “Thou,” and this consciousness is exactly what is required to join Heaven and Earth; Why not create an entire school that also embraces this great Work and employs the arts to realize that grand ambition? We might also say this: **why not make the prime objective of Art and of Education, the prime objective of Art Education?**

If we were so bold to do so, what might such a school look like? What might we see as we spend a day in such a school? Let us observe what the teaching of the arts might look like within a school in which the entire enterprise; its curriculum, pedagogy, administrative policies and allocation of resources are conceived of as a *vast experiment towards the Great Work*, towards Joining Heaven and Earth. I take courage in so bold a proposition from many sources, the prime one being Thomas Berry, for he tells us in his book, *The Great Work*;

“We need to reinvent [what it means to be and behave like a new human] *because* the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions, either individually or collectively. What is needed is something beyond existing traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human... The human is at a cultural impasse. In our efforts to reduce the other than human components of the planet to subservience to our Western cultural expression, we have brought the entire set of life-systems of the planet, including the human, to an extremely dangerous situation. Radical new cultural forms are needed. These new cultural forms would place the human within the dynamics of the planet rather than place the planet within the dynamics of the human.” (Berry p. 160)

This call to reinvent the core values and behaviors of society is an ancient and venerable one. It is the entire call of every spiritual and religious tradition. It is the call of every revolutionary manifesto including our own Constitution and Bill of Rights. It is Plato’s call in *The Republic*, and in the *Symposium*. It has been the call for countless other reformers secular and religious. It was the call of the Bauhaus, of Robert Owens’s Utopia, and that more recently of John Dewey’s *Schools of Tomorrow*. Of Walden, one and Walden Two. Of Black Mountain School of Art, and behind the casting of the reformist missions of many of our current charter schools. So let us be as bold and as hopeful as they, mindful of their only partial successes, but taking courage by observing the many ways Nature employs to persistently evolve new experiments in becoming.

We might take courage in this ambition by reflecting upon what more than likely was our original reasons for electing to teach. If we allow ourselves the pleasure of reminiscing for a moment, did we not decide to teach art and to make art to do this very crazy thing? When we were still young and new to our glorious profession, did we dedicate our gifts and hone our talents only to comply with national standards and teach curricula that were designed by others who never met our students, visited our school, or ever met either you or me? Or did we secretly say to ourselves and only to our best and trusted friends; “I want to change

the world! I want to make this a better world.” Did you perhaps put it still in other terms? Something about saving children? Creating community? Bringing beauty into children’s lives? No matter. However we phrased it, didn’t we want to Join Heaven and Earth?

If art teachers *were* to take up this grand agenda, we might initially find ourselves with few companions in the field of art education. *But* we would find ourselves in good company, we would become a member of an ancient, universal confederacy of artists who from Lascaux to Virgil, Aeschylus to Giotto, Rembrandt, Vermeer, William Blake, Van Gogh, Mondrian, Monet, Cezanne, Brancusi, Rodin, Rothko, Judy Chicago, Maya Angelou, John Lennon, and a million others who thought that lending their gifts and time to this lofty ambition of Joining Heaven and Earth would be a good way to spend a life. For let us suppose, *that just where we are, here and now*, our little orb, this dear planet, is a chunk; one fantastic chunk, of the rest of the universe, operating within the laws of all the rest of the universe. Every tree, every leaf, pore, twig, bud, every root, every frog tadpole bean pole, stream brook, dew drop, mountain top, blue bird, scarlet tanager, painted bunting, violet wisteria, purple iris, cadmium tulip, buttercup, Andromeda, cosmos, is; what could they be anything else but our *family!* Our relatives.

What then might we see as we take a little walk around this “New School?”

We approach the school greeted by a thoughtfully designed and crafted landscape. A broad field stone path, gently curved to slow the pace, and to herald the specialness of things to come welcomes us. Bordering the path are clumps of native trees selected to provide the particular visual joys of each of the seasons; some apples and pears, a clump of birch, some poplars and sugar maples. The usual perimeter of lawns are replaced here by clumpings of native grasses and scatterings of wild flowers.

The large borders in Spring were full of crocuses and snowdrops that sparkled against the receding snows. A month or so later the beds held daffodils, tulips and hyacinths, followed in turn by simple to maintain cascade of blooms from roses to phlox. Now dahlias and fall asters dazzle us with their crimson, violet and scarlet blooms. Each group of students and their teachers are responsible for one season or another,

What immediately strikes our eyes as we approach the buildings is that everything is so handsomely painted. The entrance brightly colored proclaims that this is a place of high adventure, and that everyone is welcome to its community. Other portions of the building are differently colored; some to induce quiet reflection, others to support intense conversation. Still others that promote abstract and imaginary flights of fancy. Large scale sculptures are placed here and there to complement the natural sculptural qualities of the landscape. The signage strikes one as being made- and well made at that- by the students themselves. The whole place proclaims that this is a special place, loved and cared for by its members, a place that invites bold imagination and finely crafted objects, ideas and relationships.

A great vase in the entry hall, covered as it is with hand made tiles of local clays and pigments, segways the great out of doors- in door. It is the project of the first graders to daily create and refresh this seasonal reminder of Nature’s endless variety of definitions and look of the beautiful. Upper classmen designed and made the vase- it’s as tall as a first grader.

The walls, like the walls of the courts, temples and palaces of ancient Egypt and Assyria, Rome, Versailles, Moscow, Vienna, Angkor Wat, Oaxaca, and Khartoum are all covered with mosaics of the many tales of Genesis, including the children’s own conceptions of how this all began, and how it is unfolding. These too have been conceived and executed with the fullness of talents and industry of the members of the community. This grand project has taken many years and is in the process of being recreated with each succeeding generation. Of course it takes a lot of research, preliminary and continuing discussions with many people, each contributing different knowledge, perspectives and skills. The completion of each section is always attended by fabulous ceremonies involving dances, music, poetry, fancy dress and fancy foods all created by the children, their teachers and the parents. You should make it to the next one.

Let’s skip back out side for a moment and take a look at the small but lovely pond that they all created- hand dug! and now surrounded by self designed and built benches and picnic tables. Paths connect one area to another interweaving the little landscape park. Each brick and tile, flower and shrub has been chosen and

placed after much thought, discussion, consensual decision, dirty hands, dirty cloths, runny noses and smiling faces.

A small raised viewing platform overlooks it all, again designed, engineered and built by the entire academic community with the expertise and muscle of the parents- and some good neighbors. The platform has been designed to symbolize the principle of Heaven over looking the things of the world. The water reminds them of the ephemeral, the evolving, the effervescent Earth. The little islands in the pond are to suggest that like these islands, our lives too are moments in time, the brief- but beautiful moments of a life span. Small arched bridges- also designed and crafted in-house, span the islands. It's particularly beautiful to see in the mornings when the children arrive; and in the afternoons when they return home. It's awfully lovely in the fall when crimson and gold leaves dot the pond. Lovely in a different way in winter. Again lovely and again differently in spring time when the daffodils that the kindergartners planted are in bloom.

The symbolic and actual relationships between water and its many ways, and humans and our many converging ways, are the subject of much art and literature the children study. Teachers tell stories of such things to their students. Older students create such stories and read them to the younger students. The youngest students do the very same things amongst themselves.

At the far end of the park- that was used only a few years ago as a vast asphalt slab for kids to run around on for fifteen minutes after their fifteen minute lunch break, is now covered with gently undulating grassy slopes dotted here and there with clumps of shrubs and flowers, some medicinal for the body, some for the spirit, all for the observing eye.

At a distance is a little hut. It's modeled on the idea of a tea pavilion, open on all sides to view North East South and West. It's really not much of a structure at all. Easy to build, easy if you do it *very carefully*, each step fulfilling its own purpose, there is a canopied platform to observe how the world is ordering itself, so that the occupants of the pavilion *might so orders their ways*. It's only large enough for about a dozen children and adults to sit comfortably. It is a place that everyone understands is special; a place where only personally made things are shown, spoken of and performed for invited guests. Here children can read to one another their own poems, stories and essay. Where they can perform their own music, on their own crafted instruments, sing and teach their songs, try out their dances, invite a few of their friends for tea! Personally made snacks. Of course the clothing is hand made too. Vases, baskets, paintings, sculpture, weavings, prints; are all shown, one at a time by the students to their guests, their friends, teachers, and parents. The children speak thoughtfully and carefully; their listeners are likewise thoughtful and attentive. The children therefore become even more thought full and care full. In this school everyone values craftsmanship because *craftsmanship is really only clarity and care in the service of making and saying meaning full things*. This is the pivotal reason that the values that informs all of the arts informs all of the thinking and activities of all aspects of the school.

Look over there, it's the greenhouse. Walking inside we see a group of children and adults; they are planting flower and vegetables seeds for next season. Another group is gathering seeds from the spent veggies and flowers of the previous season. Still another group is making carefully drawn images of orchids that will be made into illustrated books based on the hand tinted wood block prints and texts they are composing. The limited edition books will be auctioned at the end of the year to supplement the budget. In these and other ways, greenhouses and ponds and bridges and printing presses are no strangers to this school.

Over there, under the geodesic dome recently completed, is another group of children and adults, they are speaking with a horticulturist from the university about a planting scheme for a new experimental organic vegetable garden. The funding for this is underwritten by the county horticultural society.

The Imagine/Research/Art, Design and Build workshop is a large multi stationed building where people go to design and build out their projects. The theme of this year's school-wide theater/performance piece is; "Spring dreams of summer, winter hopes for spring". Some students are designing and fabricating the costumes, others the sets, others the lighting, others are composing and practicing the music, still others are

working on the dance. People from one group are constantly going back and forth to other groups, coordinating invigorating, and negotiating, trying to establish a viable ecology amongst all the many necessary portions. That other group over there? They are creating the storyboards for the video/cinagraphic elements of the work.

Here's a room whose title above the door reads; "Microscopes and Telescopes and Binoculars, Oh Boy!" Nice! Maybe we can get to go inside next time. Those kids crawling around on the ground with magnifying glasses? They are following a trail of ants from their feeding grounds to their nest, noting the many different tasks they are performing and how they signal to each other where to go and what to bring home for supper. Each one is writing and illustrating their observations.

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Oh that's right, you were looking for the Art Room. Right. It is over there, adjacent to the Imagine/Research...building. Unlike the usual hubbub that we saw in that other building, it is rather quiet in here. A few children are working together on some small scale projects, but for the most part children seem to be working in solitude; something our present schools rarely if ever provide for. Here single enterprise is as valued and supported as is the need for community and collaboration elsewhere on campus. This domain most resembles that frequently described but rarely provided personal space for private reflection and artistic exploration. Here students are encouraged to explore their inner nature, to embark on voyages that only they can pursue and do so by calling upon their unique resources. Here, the need for periods of time alone, seeking the often subtle intricacies of the Self are encouraged. Flights of speculation, fantasy, and reverie are given both space and time. Free to pursue whatever paths may beckon them, the students are still mindful of the overarching mission of the school and their membership in it: to find ever more rewarding and less costly ways of joining Heaven and Earth; exploring the many ways of how we might live compared to how we have come to live. Their explorations of the vastness of inner nature compliment their researches into the grandeur of outer Nature. The cap stone project of these explorations will be a group exhibition with a catalogue of the show including artist's statements, a forward by a local artist, and the entire enterprise curated by the students themselves.

Of course the **Imagine/Research/Design and Build** facility itself could also be considered an extension of the art room, for in this school artistic principles and skills inform everything that everyone is doing all the time. Nothing gets decided upon or designed or fabricated that is not without the eye and values and hand of the artist. And the artist teachers. Aesthetically conceived, ecologically informed, economically designed and thoughtfully crafted things are the only things permitted in *this* school.

You might have noticed that not all the students seem to be in school today. That's right, a number of groups are doing fieldwork in a number of local settings. One group is working with the Blue Rivers Association, a citizens group working on cleaning up the creek that runs by the town. Another is on a field trip guided by the city's Conservation Commission, studying a possible site for a playground (that the Parks Department has invited the school to submit designs for) but that may have some polluted ground water problems to first address. The state Audubon Society is conducting a survey of songbirds in our area, and a group of the students have signed up to assist in this project today. The Tree Warden has taken a few students with him today as she begins to draw up a list of diseased and damaged trees that may have to come down, and a plan to replant them with more suitable species. Busy day, busy day.

### **In This School**

Our school can be understood to be a colossal experiment, a laboratory investigating both how we have come to live they way we have, and, how we *might come to live* given what we now know about how we used to live; comfortably within our family of origin and destiny.

The children and the teachers come to this school each day not only because they are compelled to by parents and by law, but also because *each one of them is needed* if this great task that they are about is to succeed. That girl is putting on the final coat of paint today on the garden bench she and her friends made in honor of her grandparents who donated the funds for it. She's bringing the paint, so she must go to school today. That boy is the fellow who is responsible for firing the kilns for the mosaic tile; he can't be late for school today. Those two are doing the lighting for the play and they have to come early today to set up the lighting board. Here comes that older kid who is presenting a lesson on butterfly life cycles to the kindergarteners this morning. His mom and dad have been so helpful on helping the research on this and so they are all here for the presentation. The group of girls and boys over there working on their documentary of the seasonal evolution of a bud unfolding to a flower and then on to a fruit have been here at the crack of dawn to catch the first bee visiting the still virginal apple blossom.

**When the children graduate from *this* school:**

They will come to love this world, because they will have had a deep and close, and care full sustained acquaintance with her

They will have observed and taken to heart that in this world each thing leans and depends of every other thing. Just like Nature. Just like the rest of our little chunk of the universe. And they have learned to behave likewise as members in good standing of a large, infinitely large family

They will, each and every one of them, know how to prepare the ground, plant and tend, harvest and prepare food they eat

They will know how to design and make all the *utensils* for planting, harvesting, preparing and serving food, all the bowls, baskets, knives forks, plates and cups

They will know how to create sustainable systems; biological, social, political, intimate, familial

They will know how to design, make and use all the furniture they need; chairs and tables and desks

They will know how to design and build and care for their shelters

They will know how to fix everything they make and everything they break

They will know how to share everything they have in surfeit, with everyone in need

They will know how and when to be gentle and kind, when to be patient and enduring, flexible in times that require it, unmovable at times that require that

They will know how to treasure what is of value, how to let go of what requires relief

They will come to identify themselves as citizens of the planet, as members of an inclusive family, as well as to respect whatever subdivisions they have been born into and value; religious preferences, geographic origins, family traditions, local inflections of style

Did I already say that they would come to love their home, and their extensive family and treat this planet as indeed their home and all its entities as family? Perhaps I did.

In *this* school, birthdays, of which there are over 400 in the school year, are most often celebrated not by going to Chucky Cheese, or the Pizza Hut, or Taco Bell, or Burger Chef or Burger and Fries. Birthdays in this school are celebrated by the donation and planting of commemorative trees, and gardens and islands, and fountains, and telescopes and park benches, accompanied by appropriate poetry, music, and children concocted snacks. Actually quite tasty, novel in any case.

Being charter members of the Junior League of the National Audubon Society, and also that of the National Wildlife Federation and the regional chapter of the Trust for Public Land, all the students, and their families and the teachers become Life members of these organizations, receiving their literature and the school a raft of free speakers and free admission to all their lands, and events: for *life*.

But wait a minuet. We are living in a global economic recession. This tour of an imagined New School might be seen as just that: imaginary. Because as appealing as it may be, the costs of conducting school such as this would be prohibitive given the budgets almost all public schools receive from federal, state and local governments. With only those sources of funding much, but not all, of this would indeed be difficult to afford. That is why this school has a Development Office! Just like Independent Schools. How do you think Independent Schools get to do all the things public schools rarely if ever do? They have a Development Office and staff who raise the money from alumni, from businesses, from philanthropies, from wealthy folks all of whom are also dedicated to creating a better world, a place where **Heaven joins Earth**.

There is also an office of Collaborative Learning that develops working relationships with like minded institutions of higher education; so our school is marvelously supplemented with expertise also betting on a future they might create rather than the present they have been forced to inherit. Members of such private sector institution are also on the board of overseers of our school.

At the end of the school year, this school publishes an annual report outlining all the experiments, discoveries, and achievements undertaken by the students and teachers during the year. A handsome, in house publication, on-line copy is sent to every student and their parents, every school board member and city councilor. So do all alumni and benefactors. Just like every big business, every college, just like every Independent School. The last pages list all the benefactors and their gifts; as the list of the school's accomplishments increase, so does the list of the benefactors and the largesse of their gifts.

In this school, all the teachers, whatever their several and common expertise, are always planning and working together because that is what happens in all the rest of creation; an ecology of all entities. That makes everything viable, sustainable, and dynamically evolving. Music, and visual art, and woodworking, poetry, dance, and literature, horticulture and microbiology, astronomy, food services, nutrition, and physics, economics, ceramics; every single one of these working together go into the creation of every movie you see, every opera you attend, *why not every school?* Especially a school who's very business it is to create a new ecology of all beings? A school whose mission it is, is to Join, no, Rejoin Heaven and Earth?

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We took this guided tour headed by someone from the community of the arts; and therefore saw the school through that particular lens. We did so because that is the presumed readership for this article. We might also have joined the tour led by a person from the sciences, or headed by the maths, or histories, or the literatures. Each one of them would have been able to enunciate the particular ways in which their ways of discovering meaning and representing knowledge was in evidence and made their unique and common contributions. To take just a tiny fraction of the treasury of perspectives and knowledge arriving from one of the other domains; literature; we might learn to see the world from the vantage point of these writers from within our own society; Thoreau, Emerson, Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, Rachel Carson, Wallace Stegner, Gary Snyder, Paul Sheppard, Walt Whitman, Eric Sloane, Robert Frost, Joanna Macy, Wendell Berry and Thomas Berry. And further field; Rumi, Hafiz, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Li Po, Basho, John Ruskin, Black Elk, Saint Francis of Assisi, D. H. Lawrence, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Merton. Thich Nhat Hanh, Jose Arguelles, Pablo Neruda, Mary Oliver, on and on, on and on, on and on.

To conclude this excursion into the possible, actually towards the absolutely necessary, I return to a view presented at its outset: At heart, originally, and deeply still; we are artists. We desired to employ our gifts and enthusiasms as an artist and as a teacher of art, to make this a better world. Why not bring that same exact ambition more to the center, the explicit center of our professional life? Not incidentally and quite importantly, doing so will also migrate the same ambition to the center of our personal life.

Walk along the broad road with such companions as Virgil, Duccio, Beethoven, Tolstoy, and Paul Klee, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Walt Whitman, Aretha Franklin, and dear- forever young John Lennon. Be the teacher of what you wish to become. As Maxine Greene famously urged upon us; make of your classroom the arena of your own becoming, and it will surely follow, that the children will do like wise, for only as *you strive to become* the person you desire to be, so will they. Allow the full array of our talents as artists and the loftiest ambitions of our choice of career as teachers bear upon this Great Work; joining Heaven and Earth.

Ready now to go back inside the New School? What else is there to see? Well, there is *so much* to see and imagine and discuss, and explore, and create in this school, why don't *you*, dear reader, take this portion of the trip on your own? Envision your own school- or classroom in which rejoining Heaven and Earth- the Great Work is on the agenda. Step into the vision of a school of your own hopes for a future closer to the way you wish to live, rather than the way you have come to live. Locate just one scene in your New School that seems most appealing to you and seems easiest to bring about, requiring absolutely nothing more than what is already at hand and requiring no one else's permission- other than your own. Start tomorrow. Make just one shift in your lesson plan that incorporates an ecological perspective. Add a new book to your required reading list. Ask a new type of question. Have a new kind of conversation with a trusted colleague.

Ready?

Set?

Go

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