

The Spinning and Weaving of Yarns Around the Fire: A Council of All Beings Story for Children and Its Multiple Implications

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Abstract/Description: What happens when educators and professionals take a long-standing pedagogical activity, The Council of All Beings, and reshape the experience into a picture book? This paper provides a link to the story and relates the storytelling process that occurred with such an adaptation. The paper then explores the benefits of storytelling for young people and considers how co-creating stories can be an antidote to ecophobia while fostering empathy and sparking emotional engagement in the natural world. Finally, the author suggests that co-creating storytelling activities and picture book creations could be used to help children reimagine the world.

Keywords: Council of All Beings, co-creating storytelling, K-6 education, ecophobia, empathy, ecofeminism

Since humans could speak, stories have been a way to see, hear, feel, and know our world. Stories connect us to one other, the world itself, and all Beings. Joanna Macy's and John Seed's interactive activity, *The Council of All Beings*, uses storytelling as a basis to enable people to connect with other-than-human Beings¹ of this world. This paper explores the writing process educators and professionals from multiple fields (described as my colleagues) undertook in a graduate course to adapt the idea of the Council of All Beings to create a collaborative children's story, *Yarns Around the Fire*. This story incorporates ecofeminist principles of cooperation and mutuality that attempt to decolonize and rehumanize the teaching of environmentalism and ecological awareness (Holmes, 2021). My colleagues and I began with the intention of creating a story for our students and children of family and friends. As our picture book took shape, it became an offering to spark children's creativity in connecting with the natural world so that other scholars, activists, and educators, especially in the K-6th grade setting, might introduce the process of having students storytelling their own Council of All Beings and expand upon our ideas. *Yarns Around the Fire* should be seen as a catalytic activity for future stories for children, especially of their making, which is addressed later in this paper.

The story can be accessed at [Yarns Around the Fire](#); it includes the anthropomorphism of eight plants and animals who share their worries and fears about what is happening to their homes due to human activities. Each Being also shares what they have to "gift" to the world, such as scent, seeds, or song. While multiple and varied oral and written storytelling traditions are found worldwide, much of our Western storytelling tradition has been influenced by the patriarchal narrative, the Biblical Genesis story where the divine promises land, safety, and progeny to specific clans. The problem is that patriarchal storytelling has emphasized a "world without women, worlds boasting of the superiority of humans over nature, worlds denying the presence of spirit" (Orenstein, 1990, p. 129). Given the state of our environment, climate change, and the colonization of the land that could *help us heal*, we humans cannot afford to tell stories that are not inclusive of all Beings and do not engage a sense of spirit or imagination to help solve problems. We need to see the world beyond something to control and subjugate.

Process and Plot Structuring

Environmental educators and activists have suggested we use our imagination and move beyond control and subjection of the non-human world with specific storytelling activities. This paper centers on and adapts one specific storytelling activity: *The Council of All Beings*, a communal ritual developed over three decades ago. Eco-philosophers and eco-activists developed this interactive activity as a process to support solidarity with other life forms by speaking on behalf of other-than-human Beings (Seed et al., 1998/2007). While this ritual was designed to aid adults in understanding our place in the interdependent web of life and in strengthening our commitment to the natural world, this activity has been used successfully for students of all ages and in multiple settings (Macy, 2005). Participants choose a specific plant or animal to represent when participating in a Council of All Beings. Using masks or other creative artwork to embody the plant or animal Being, the person speaks from that Being's viewpoint in three parts. First, there is the rollcall of all Beings. For example, someone might begin, "I am Snake, and I represent the Snake People." This roll call is often a contemplative, solemn

experience, setting the mood for active listening. After all Beings have named themselves, there is a second cycle of sharing where the Beings take turns expressing the pain they have experienced at the hands of humans. The third cycle focuses on the gifts or healing abilities each Being can share with the world. The tone and content shared by each Being differ significantly, some coming across as gregarious and others as stricken (Macy, 2005; Macy & Brown, 2014).

My colleagues and I engaged in our own Council of All Beings, which served as a basis for our picture book; however, we expanded our experience from the process Seed et al. describe. After being moved by our Council experience, we wrote our story, adding details, transitions, and illustrations in a collaborative process that spanned about four weeks. Spinning the story and creating the artwork, though time-consuming, were relatively easy individual processes. Weaving together our various Being's yarns and the illustrations was more challenging than the actual writing. Initial planning discussions regarding the formation of our story centered around plot structure. Three plot structures typify literature for children: linear or dramatic, parallel, and episodic (Russel, 2019). Linear plots focus on conflict after conflict until one climactic event. Parallel plot structure is similar; generally, two or more dramatic plots occur until they merge in the climax. The linear and parallel climactic aspects seemed discordant with the intent of our story: to provide multiple voices for all beings to be heard. Orenstein (1990) explains that feminist matristic literature "espouses the ecofeminist reflowering of multiple variants" and in so doing avoids a "'phallogocentric' literary structure and strategies" (p. 143). Our group agreed that an episodic plot structure, loosely related stories with a similar theme, was more in harmony with our story goals and the ecofeminist principles of all Beings worthy in and of themselves (Griffin, 2016; Harris, 2021; Matthews, 2008). Feminist matristic storytelling cross-fertilizes stories and preferences multiple versions and voices (Orenstein, 1990). We attempted such multiplicity with *Yarns Around the Fire* by having multiple plants and animals speaking. Additionally, the multiple voices (both through text and image) facilitate an interweaving of stories, and I would suggest a literary symbiotic network of Beings that we are representing and showcasing.

In another departure from Macy's activity, our children's story, *Yarns Around the Fire*, is less about mourning (anger, despair, fear) or calling humans (children) into account for what has happened environmentally and is more about sharing our chosen Being's difficulties relating to humans. Such a shift felt more age-appropriate for younger students than burdening them with too many concerns. While many educators believe children can handle climate change lessons in age-appropriate ways at any age (Chawla, 2020), noted educator and scholar David Sobel warns parents and teachers to be wary of instilling too much angst and fear in children regarding environmental topics. Doing so could result in ecophobia. This term explains what happens when children become disengaged and feel helpless and hopeless regarding nature and ecological problems. Such disengagement primarily occurs if adults feed children environmental facts and draft them as climate change and environmental warriors before developing an emotional connection to nature and learning behaviors that lead to change (Sobel, 1996; 2007).

Sobel advocates children 4-7 years old engage in activities that foster empathy with other-than-human Beings, and children ages 7-11 engage in physical exploration and in activities where they can play at being animals (Sobel, 1996; 2008). His educational practices stress that no abstract environmental tragedies should be shared before fourth grade (ages nine or ten) (Sobel, 1996). As a supplement to this advice, Chawla (2020) reminds educators and parents that

given our media saturated society, children are exposed to environment topics and problems from an early age, and teachers need to be prepared to address such topics in meaningful ways. Research has found children are inspired and inspire others when creating performance-based art about environmental problems and solutions (Chawla, 2020). This ties into acting out performances of other-than-human Beings and writing stories and designing picture books about them.

While children and adults of all ages tend to enjoy pictures books, they are generally geared for ages 2-8. Our story encompasses Sobel's age range suggested for both fostering empathy and interactive play. Admittedly, some of our Beings mention complex problems such as increasing temperatures and rising sea levels. Some of our Beings also ask for help from the readers, which could result in young children disengaging from the story since they do not have the power to make significant environmental changes. Additionally, our story engages in anthropomorphism, which scholars and activists argue sometimes creates misleading views and may result in "othering" plants and animals, creating a sense of hierarchical thinking promoting human agendas (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016; Russel, 2019), though anthropomorphism is generally considered acceptable in children's fiction and poetry (Russel, 2019; Huck, 2023). Despite these possible weaknesses within our story, we tried to focus on eco-aspects that could build empathy by incorporating real-life local issues relatable to children, such as not stepping on plants, avoiding poisons sprayed on lawns, or not capturing or scaring snakes and birds. Doing so meant writing as if we were the other-than-human Beings to establish an age-appropriate connection and to see our Beings as part of the world, not something apart from it.

In *Yarns Around the Fire*, we also forwent the initial roll calling of the Beings. This component is an ideal ceremonial aspect, calling listeners and performers into a sacred space to focus on the upcoming stories. We followed the practice of having a guide facilitate the flow of the Council; however, for a children's story, we felt our guide (Saguaro) should welcome and invite readers to listen to the individual yarns of Mangrove, Grasshopper, Dandelion, etc. instead of engaging in the beginning rollcall. Each Being shares both their worries and gifts, and then we move on to the next Being's yarn. At one point, I was concerned if it was problematic that we were not following Macy's structural pattern of all the Beings first sharing their anger and pain before moving to the Beings sharing of their gifts (Macy & Brown, 2014). Through the evolving collaborative process, my colleagues and I agreed that for a written format, the structure where each Being told their full story was the best because it was easier to focus on each respective Being's story. Too much alternating of the voices, in the end, we felt would be more difficult for younger students to grasp, even with our Saguaro guide. We wanted to avoid minimizing or losing the thread of the story of the Being who was speaking.

Purpose And Value: Empathy & Curiosity

The construction of our story leads to multiple questions regarding the inclusion of our story in a classroom. What is the purpose and value of sharing or creating a story like this with students? If one of the purposes of stories is to connect, how does this story and similar student-created Council stories foster empathy and compassion? Is the inclusion of such an emphasis on character, ethics, and empathy (seeing a world view from a non-human perspective) appropriate in an educational sphere?

When considering educational spheres, it is helpful to remember that storytelling, imaginative play, and discovery in classrooms, particularly related to science and nature teaching, occurs less than in the past. Judson (2015) reminds us that Education for Sustainability (EFS) educators have tended to emphasize knowledge, science, and skills when focusing on sustainability, climate change, and environmental topics. Similarly, Griffin (2016) explains that as one moves through the educational system, childhood awe and connection to nature are lost in school curricula and replaced by scientific objectivity and a belief in a technological culture omnipresent in the dominant worldview. Sobel (1996), too, discusses how nature is too often a reductive subject to be studied, not something with which to interact. This reductionist view leads to the separation of humans with more-than-human Beings, resulting in alienation from nature. When humans are separated from nature, we tend to see Nature as something to be mined, drilled, cut down, removed, or destroyed. Nature is too often something to be conquered and controlled (Kimmerer, 2013; Mies, 2014; Shiva, 2014b). Shiva (2014a) describes big biotech as being “predicated on the assumption that species do have not intrinsic worth” (p. 267). The stories we tell then—to each other and our students—are ones where technology, memorization of facts, and knowledge are privileged over other types of learning such as emotional engagement, hands-on learning, and discovery.

While science is in the foreground of environmental education, Judson (2015) argues that ideas of wonder and awe in learning and emotional engagement are not even in the background of sustainability education. Emotional engagement and imagination are simply absent when teaching about our environment; however, the imaginative aspects are what teachers “employ to make learning meaningful for their students” (Judson, 2015, p. 213). Famed environmentalist Rachel Carson (1965/2007) found that instead of teaching the names of plants and animals to her young nephew, he learned more about the natural world by having fun, playing imaginary games, and engaging in the sense of discovery. This awe, love, curiosity, and connection to nature, to more-than-human Beings, needs to be present to foster an ethic of caring for and caring about other Earth inhabitants—living and non-living. Indeed, studies demonstrate that too much knowledge of environmental catastrophes “actually discourages environmental behavior” (Sobel, 2007). If children (and adults) *feel* something and have an emotional engagement, then they can move toward connection and change, especially when conditions or opportunities exist. Such movement is where literature, particularly stories, comes into play.

Stories help us make meaning of our histories, cultures, and civilizations—the experience of being human (Russel, 2019), or as Orenstein (1990) describes, “Narratives create our culture, and that our culture determines our description of reality—which is, itself, a cultural construction” (p. 130). Spinning yarns, those stories at their root, which are true with some embellishment or implausibility, are typical of childhood. Spinning yarns evokes sitting around a fire from our earliest times, speaking one’s truths—and perhaps adding a little flourish. From ancient times, people also have been inspired and awed by nature. Children especially have this curiosity, wonder, and connection to the environment (Sobel, 1996; Carson, 1965/2007). For example, children do not think it is silly to talk to trees. Or, that trees talk. (And we now know that they *do communicate* through symbiotic mycorrhizal networks (Schwartzberg, 2019; Simard, 2021)). As Sobel (2008) asserts in describing the three developmental stages of an ecological education (empathy, exploration, and social responsibility), “Talking to trees and

hiding in trees precedes saving trees” (p. 19). As the connection with nature is eroded through elementary school, adults begin to denigrate such ideas of awe and discovery as “imaginative,” “childish,” or “irrelevant” (Griffin, 2016, p. 13). This separation, again, disconnects us from nature, facilitating that sense of entitlement too often present in the way humans subjugate the more-than-human world. Allowing students to hear from the Beings in our story who get trampled when people veer off paths, who are cultivated only for human consumption, and whose livelihood is threatened by global and local threats can help students connect and develop an emotional connection to the environment. As Okri (1997/2014), explains,

One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, we are also living the stories we planted-knowingly or unknowingly-in ourselves. We live the stories that either give our lives meaning, or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives (p. 37).

Stories, in particular, act as a way for children to get inside another’s viewpoint, fostering empathy and compassion. Thus, partaking in stories that give voice to other-than-human Beings helps construct narratives that do not center humans as the owners of the Earth. We begin to change our values, cultural parameters, and perceptions—our reality.

If *Yarns Around the Fire* helps connect students to nature through imagination and helps foster change in the way we see the other-than-human Beings, is having such an ethical intention problematic? The answer is a resounding no. Ecofeminist philosopher Freya Mathews (2008) describes a moral point of view as simply having ‘the capacity to see and feel the world from the point of view of others’ (p. 47). Empathy is what makes us our best selves and helps us tune into each other—and the natural world. Orenstein (1990) advocates that before telling stories or engaging in mythmaking, we follow Whitmont’s injunction always to ask, "Whom does it serve?" In mythmaking our Council of Beings, we are serving plants and animals. We are helping their voices be heard. Similarly, we are serving children, our audience, so we help foster their empathy and compassion for the other-than-human Beings of our world.

As in Macy’s Council of All Beings, our Beings share their difficulties with human interaction and share their gifts. Kimmerer (2013) equates gifts with responsibilities. How do Other Beings use their gifts to serve Other Beings and humans? If Other Beings have gifts, it is logical to ask what gifts, what responsibilities, humans have to Other Beings? This question, then, becomes another area for the imagination. What gifts does each student, each child bring to the world? Indigenous and ecofeminist world views promote connection (human and non-human), aid in mutual healing, and emphasize the value of reciprocity (Warren, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013). The yarns in our story may be a bit didactic, but an ethical premise asking students what they can do for others is an ideal place to begin or include in any storytelling.

Purpose And Value: Co-creation

Whereas Judson (2015) believes we do not have enough imagination when teaching about and connecting to the environment, Mathews (2008) posits that imagination is not enough for connection. Humans must actively induce and co-create the connection between nature and ourselves—a process of co-action. Mathews (2008) believes that if we want to foster relationships to more-than-human Beings (as well as ourselves), “we will clearly have to devise forms of synergistic co-action with the other-than-human realm” (p. 53). The idea, then, with

Yarns Around the Fire is not only to listen and then imagine Orchid Tree's perfumed blossoms or Cardinal's fear of humans. This story should be seen as a beginning—a figurative jumping-off point for students. In addition to physical encounters between humans and other-than-humans, another option for co-creating and engaging in synergistic experiences is through collaboration (Mathews, 2008). By encouraging students to engage in collective yarn spinning to create their own Council of Beings story (or even just holding such a Council), the act of co-creating with other students and teachers helps transform a student's reality. The act of co-creating storytelling uses imagination, develops empathy and compassion, and helps to create a new reality.

Writing one's own Council of Beings story is an important and imaginative act, even a radical act, because delving into a plant or animal's perspective and speaking on behalf of that Being is a force against hegemonic voices who believe people do not need to consider or account for what plants and animals are experiencing. Radical teaching does not just happen in the classroom. It may occur in faith formation classes, book clubs, parent or guardian/child groups, or through activities within social/educational groups like Girl or Boy Scouts or after-school programs. Sharing this story and engaging in collaborative yarn spinning may be appropriate in multiple spaces and even with individual parent or guardian/child relationships.

Ultimately, *Yarns Around the Fire* is not a story just to share with students and then file in a drawer or delete from the computer. It is an invitation, a call to co-imagine and co-create a different world. *Yarns Around the Fire* is a springboard for students to be inspired to discover Other Beings and to try to learn and tell their stories, feelings, and experiences, which we also encourage with interactive activities at the end of our picture book. Sobel (1996) and Macy & Brown (2014) especially describe various interactive activities for children that enable them to dance, play act, observe, feel, and “experience” what it is like to be other-than-human Beings. These activities, including storytelling, collaborative writing, and drawing to enable students to create their own picture book, are a process of learning, engaging, imagining, and reimagining. According to Okri (1997/2014), “Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals or nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations” (p. 90). Likewise, Kimmerer (2013) advocates that we need to honor traditional or Indigenous earth stories *and* urges us to create new stories. Through storytelling, we “bring science and spirit back together” to nurture our new selves (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 347). Through storytelling and their imagination, children first connect with the natural world. Then children become the co-creators and the changemakers, spinning and weaving new yarns to create new stories to live by, doing so in these elementary years not only through formal classroom learning but through discovery, creativity, and wonderment at the natural world and all of Earth's Beings.

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Entries reflect a more inclusive (hence feminist) adaptation to APA to include author first names.

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Footnote

¹ In this paper, I use the term other-than-human Beings, referring to flora and fauna and sometimes natural substances like rocks with the understanding that they are imbued with their own energy and uniqueness. People and children generally choose a plant or animal when participating in The Council of All Beings. I also use the term more-than-human Beings/World, which was coined by philosopher and ecologist David Abram in 1996 to be more inclusive with all life and earthly nature (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016). This term refers to animals, plants, micro-organisms, landforms, climate, geography (eco-systems of living and non-living parts) and speaks to the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human species with the world (Elton, n.d.; Abram, 2012).