

Reciprocity and Love in a Garden

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Abstract: Finding love and reciprocity in the garden during challenging times by growing community-based learning experiences.

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Colton Community Garden, Museum of Northern Arizona
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This evening I can nearly taste the scent of the damp clay earth with tinges of resinous pine at the Colton Community Garden in Northern Arizona. I feel the cool air on my skin and hear a deep sigh from both plant and animal as they drink deeply from the gift of this afternoon monsoon at the base of sacred mountain Dook'o'oshíid in the *Diné* language and Nuva'tukya'ovi in Hopi. The shift in seasons is apparent in the sink of cool air, chatter of birds, and carpet of yellow flowers across the land. The mountain rises in a deep blue-purple hue above the heavy clouds. Soon the frosts will glide down the mountain and visit this patch of earth on which I stand, and the plants that we have been tending will again enter a deep winter's rest. In this one moment in time, my entire body soaks in the golden glow of sunflower with the last pulsing light of day.

This garden has been an anchor for me for years and has recently evolved into a true sanctuary from the challenges of the life during a pandemic. With two young children, dogs, rabbits, and chickens, my husband and I have created our own little urban homestead of sorts. It often feels like a zone of chaos, but it is the kind of chaos that tethers me to place. After two months of teaching university courses full-time online amidst screaming children, wrestling dogs, and two chicken casualties, this garden became an evening ritual escape. The tiny food forest corner of the garden, in particular, became a sacred space.

As COVID started to take hold in spring 2020, this little plot of land took shape under the loving care of Permaculture Design Course students from a graduate program in Sustainable Communities. In the previous fall of 2019, I guided 20 students as they learned to shape earth into form, creating a spiraling, mini, high elevation food forest. As learning moved online in the spring, we still managed to gather in the garden, masked and distanced, to plant trees and shrubs. With the pain of isolation, growing awareness of the climate crisis, and massive racial inequities, we planted seeds of hope in the form of cover crops and strawberries, drawing forth the bees and building soil and promises for the future. We laughed, cried, and shared in each other's struggles. We put our love, prayers, and hopes into a biodynamic water vortex, water spinning one direction, then the next. To our tremendous delight, the garden responded in kind with abundant growth and beauty.

Reciprocity and Love in a Garden

The Hopi word, *siitala* (see-tah-lah), translates directly as “a land brightened with flowers” (Museum of Northern Arizona). The metaphorical meaning is often interpreted as, “the reciprocity between humans and the natural world that is necessary for all elements of life to thrive” (Museum of Northern Arizona). What my students and I witnessed in the garden was a reciprocal dance of humans and plants, beauty, and life.



Artist: Carliss Sinqua, Hopi
“Butterfly Maiden Butterflies & Sunflower”

This concept of *siitala* supports the notion that human beings are an integral part of the natural systems to which they belong. As such, they also have an impact on those ecological systems, enhancing or degrading them. From a permaculture perspective, humans can do “less harm,” and they can also have the transformative potential to enhance the bio productivity and health of the planet. In doing so, the relationship between living systems and people shifts from one of taking and receiving to one of mutuality and symbiosis.

As Indigenous researcher and educator Robin Kimmerer (2013) posits, “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond” (p. 124). Just as we

love and care deeply for our beloved garden, might we also consider the possibility that our love is returned? Flowers, fruits, and herbs –all gifts from our beloved? Can we extend that image to consider learning that also embraces beauty and the diversity of life through love?

I have spent the better part of the last seven years working to bio-culturally situate and bring to life sustainability and food system-focused first-year seminar courses at a state university in Arizona. With each passing year, I have encountered students with growing levels of anxiety and depression. The pandemic has brought this rate to an all-time high. As we gathered online in the spring of 2020, the stress and fear among my students was palpable. In my Growing Community first-year seminar course, which focused on the practice of placemaking and community gardens as spaces for transformation, I shifted our original collective hands-on learning in the garden to having students plant seeds at their own homes. As we received notice that students were to vacate the university campus, I scrambled to collect potting soil, pots, and seeds with my students.

I was nervous that the transition to online learning was going to be an utter disaster. Instead, much like their growing seedlings, my students showed an enormous capacity for resilience. Our weekly sessions quickly became a space of refuge and an opportunity for connection. After the first week our check-ins began to morph into glorious reports on the growth of their seedlings.

“MY SEEDS SPROUTED!!!”

“MY PLANT GOT ITS FIRST LEAF!!!”

As the weeks went by, these reports shifted in nature, revealing layers of emotion.

“I can’t believe I’ve kept this plant alive. I am so proud of myself!”

“With all the stress and challenges of my day checking on my seedlings are literally the highlight of my day. No joke. I check on them like ten times a day to see how they are.”

“My grandmother gave me corn seeds that her mother brought with her from Mexico and we planted them together in our backyard. I’ve missed my grandma so much since leaving for college. It was really nice to spend this time with her.”

One student in particular struggled to make it to class but immersed himself in this assignment. With his parents’ permission, he tore up the entire side yard and planted his own garden of corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, and potatoes. This student went from sporadic to near-perfect attendance online, during a pandemic no less.

The Ecovercities Movement

“What might the university look like if it were at the service of our diverse ecologies, cultures, economies, spiritualities and Life within our planetary home?” ~ Ecovercities Alliance Website

In late October 2019, driving West from the Morelia airport towards Lake Patzcuaro in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, I could see field after field of golden flowers—preparations for Dia de Los Muertos and the annual monarch migration. I could only imagine the fields from the air, a highway of color welcoming the annual return of butterflies to the winter resting place for monarchs living east of the Rocky Mountains in the continental United States. *A land brightened with flowers.*

The monarchs are considered an embodiment of the spirits of the dead coming back to visit loved ones. The festivities center on welcoming both the monarchs and loved ones home with displays of magnificent beauty—ofrendas backlit with the glow of candles and cascading flowers, photos of, and favorite foods for, those that have passed on. Music, dance, and magnificent costumes call the spirits home to be with their beloveds. The monarchs come to rest for one last time before laying the next generation of butterflies.



Ecovercities Ofrenda, Michuacan

Just as the monarchs were returning home to their mountain refuge, so too did I make my way with a group of over 100 participants to the hills adjacent to Lake Patzcuaro for the fifth annual global Ecovercities gathering. The alliance itself includes representation and leadership from over 260 member organizations representing 47 countries and 50 languages. This gathering alone was immensely diverse and created a sacred space for emergence, for love, connection, and transformation. We had joined together to nurture a collective vision of higher education that better serves the diverse ecologies of our planetary home.

This global response to the need for authentic higher education learning that honors “diverse ecologies” is happening within the ecotones*. This collective response is profoundly beautiful, diverse, and teeming with life. In these spaces, multiple, divergent cosmologies are deeply honored and allowed to co-exist. Members share their diverse worldviews and practices of ritual, healing, and transformation. People share their pain and our celebrations; participate in a process of decolonizing and un-learning, healing and regeneration; and forge deep relationships and germinate new ideas. *The world blooms anew with possibility.*

Just as the monarch must migrate back to its ancestral homelands in order to give birth to a new generation, undergoing massive transformation in the process, so must we undergo our own collective transformations. *May we collectively create spaces of learning, from our diverse cosmologies, that honor a land brightened with flowers.*

Transformation & Growing Edges

Much has changed since we gathered in the community garden and in the hills of Patzcuaro in 2019. The first-year seminar sustainability-focused, community-based courses and the graduate level permaculture design course, were eliminated. Shortly after learning of these changes I made the difficult decision to leave my beloved job of seven years.

At the center of my decision to leave was the way my whole body remembered being in relation, and in community, in our ecoversities gathering in Michoacán. Hearing stories of ways that communities around the world were rising up and offering alternatives to mainstream education that truly honored Indigenous wisdom, were regenerative in their care for the earth, and were fair and just in their commitment to intergenerational learning, issues of sovereignty, as well as racial and environmental disparities. I found I could no longer reconcile this calling to teach in a way that was truly earth- and people-honoring with the changes to my job. With a vision for bringing ecoversity work into being, I handed in my notice.

What transpired over the following two years during the pandemic is difficult to put into words. My former self would have hoped to report that I had launched some high impact ecoversity and was changing lives left and right. That I was working outside the system and demonstrating at the edges how truly transformative education looked—small and intimate class sizes and real-world project-based work in service of the community. Democratic decision making at all levels of the educational organization and a deep commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Instead, three very unexpected things happened: 1) I cracked open (and started to heal); 2) I found my people (and a deep sense of belonging); and 3) I returned energized to working within (and beside) the system (on my own terms).

Cracking Open (and starting to heal)

I experienced a surprising amount of grief and sense of loss as I let go of my old world and leaned into the new. At first, I clamored frantically towards an alternative vision for higher education, desperate both to

* a region of transition between two biological communities.

change the world and to maintain my identity as an educator and academic. Alongside the increasing demands of part-time self-employed work, being a full-time stay-at-home mom, and increasing anxiety over the state of the world, something inside me finally cracked. I simply had to stop. I had to stop fighting for a vision and measuring my worth by outputs. Instead, I began to slow down. Escaping alone for nightly sunsets over the San Francisco Peaks from the Colton Garden stilled my heart's frenetic pace and slowed and deepened my breathing. *Seeds in soil*. Slow and intentional conversations with co-conspirators and increasingly dear ones from the Ecovercities network and the Enlivened Learning Cooperative allowed me to both see and be seen. I began to cultivate a practice, in the words of my dear friend Ngaragni, of "listening not only to the heart of the mind, but also the mind of the heart". *Metamorphosis*.

Finding my People (and a deep sense of belonging)

Folks within the Ecovercities network work from within, beside, and outside higher institutions of learning. In permaculture we might describe this as working within the edges, where two ecotones join to create a third, making this space one of immense diversity. Meadow meets forest. Forest meets ocean. In their joining, a third space is formed: the liminal space.

I have worked from within the forest of higher education, and I have worked from the flower-laden meadows. It is the liminal space between that enlivens me the most. Where the wax current and three leaf sumac meet the oak and elderberry, nitrogen-fixing New Mexican locusts, and fire-adapted ceonothus. It is here that the micro-colleges movement challenges larger higher education institutions to teach to the scale of relationships and community; to connect learning to community and create learning communities that are organized at a scale where true and deep relationships may form, bringing diverse voices together in one space and toward the pursuit of a common goal. The ecovercities movement reminds the micro college and larger universities to remember their place as entities existing in an interconnected world for which their own future is deeply connected to the future of the rest of the living world. They remind them to integrate, reaching across disciplinary silos in order to reach transformative, life-affirming possibilities that might assist in the mutual healing of ourselves and the planet. The higher education institutional forests might challenge the micro colleges to continue to remember accessibility, and to serve the needs of the most vulnerable to live as agents of their own lives and futures. They might also remind the ecovercities and microcolleges that higher education institutions as also valuable producers of knowledge and research.

Imagine if we lived in a world beyond either or and black and white. What if there was room for more than one "truth?" In place of limitations, a vibrant space of grey (and purple!), a pluriverse—where many worlds exist at once and in tandem.

As my dear friends and colleagues from the Enlivened Learning network (2021) have posited,

Although diverse in its origins, this knowledge movement engages not only in critiquing and resisting our broken education systems, but also in cultivating new stories, practices and possibilities that reconnect and regenerate learning in local ecological and cultural ecosystems. We are witnessing a movement in knowledge co-creation and un/re/learning

that shifts away from the modernist aspiration for the one and universal to an aspiration for/of the many- that which sustains and enlivens (both the human and the beyond-human)(Mandel et al., p. 6).

How might we cultivate new stories, practices, and possibilities that reconnect and regenerate learning in local ecological and cultural ecosystems? What is the cost to the youth we were entrusted to serve if we don't? What will be the cost to our planetary home if we fail?

Working from Within (and beside) the System (on my own terms)

Fast forward two and a half years from when I left my university position, and you will find me—perhaps surprisingly—back at the state university and working for a new college, The School of Earth and Sustainability. Here I am teaching (and reaching) over 270 students each semester in an environmental science and sustainability course for non-majors and co-designing an exhibit on biocultural diversity with 24 ENV students as a part of their culminating assignment for a writing-intensive class.

What is so magnificently different about my return to higher education this time around is that I'm in my body (and mind and heart) differently. An invisible thread inside me tugs between a fire and sense of urgency that I feel in my belly and a deeper knowing that rests in my heart. The fire burning in my belly knows that my choices today impact the choices that my children will have in the future. My heart knows that the best choices are made by listening deeply to our intuition and in a deep honoring of the gifts that we each have to give to the world. I know my worth more deeply, and I can more clearly articulate the reasons why I am doing what I'm doing. Instead of impulsively saying "yes" to everything, I have started to ask questions like "does this action nurture or restore life in some way?" and "does this action employ my unique set of skills as well as have an amplifying impact?" I consider whether I am merely working alone in this action or if I am joining others in inspiring a movement of change.

I have re-entered the higher education workforce with a level of intention and laser focus on creating spaces of transformation for more, not less, by doing less, better. My intention is to demonstrate from within that I can both teach and support student learning while also serving my community. It is possible to connect learning to students' lives and honor their whole being in the process. From specs and practices such as minute papers, peer and self-evaluations to collaborative and experimental project-based work, I am seeing what is possible. I am pushing the boundaries of what it means to form communities of learning and spaces where students feel seen and valued. In May 2023, I will delight in my return with a much smaller group of students to Aotearoa/New Zealand, where we will learn by living intentionally and through deep cross-cultural and place-immersions with co-conspirators from Ecoversities and the Enlivened Learning Cooperative.

These days, I sleep a little more deeply again. My tired bones sink into the mattress, and before I can begin to imagine the next day's happenings my breath has slowed, and my mind has cleared. I rest in knowing the good work that the next day will bring and in knowing in my body the possibility that *love grows; love grows in a garden.*

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