



Coyote's Teachings: Cultivating Awareness and Natural Connections

by Lindsay Letitia Huettman

I am out in the foggy, wet Pacific Northwest winter with my 10-12 year-old homeschoolers' program, heading to an amazing place we call Elk Meadows. As we cross the meadow, we stop for a word of thanksgiving about the day and send the kids to their Sit Spots. The instructors also head out into the landscape, finding a place to rest and watch the morning wake under the goliath presence of Mount Si.

Life is revealed to all our senses in this temporary silence. As a mentor, it helps to model to my genuine excitement at the small birds in the willow thicket while enduring the cold, damp earth that I rest upon. This is a great time for instructors; a sacred time to breathe and connect to the elements, earth and its creatures. It is also the time I invite Coyote to come out and do his secret, stealthy duty as the ultimate mentor. During this peaceful space, Coyote brings me glimpses of the internal workings of my beloved students.

If any of the students were looking my way, they would see my attention on the meadow; my head turning to interpret bird calls. Perhaps they see my chest moving up and down, taking large gulps of the mist rolling off the Snoqualmie River, and observe my eyes scanning the horizon, searching for elk on the forest edges. What they wouldn't see

is a part of my awareness is also listening to Coyote.

Coyote observes my students while they watch the morning unfold, in their own particular style. Jamie is looking at something very close to the ground. She's totally engrossed, picking up a small stick with an indistinct insect, that she is goes cross-eyed trying to identify. Meron has a larger stick, tapping it somewhat quietly on the ground, fidgeting for many moments, until he sees a Red Tail hawk and falls under its hypnotic flight. Chris is still and silent, looking around for awhile. Bored, she rests her chin in her gloved hands and sighs. Coyote takes note of this-unobtrusively, subtly, and even secretly. I smile, laugh and become curiously and keenly aware of the depth and wisdom of what Coyote shares with me. I add these observations to the cumulative reams of mental *(continued on next page)*

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notes I take on all of my students. Coyote illuminates signs of aliveness, health, vitality, enthusiasm as well as edges, grief, challenges and insecurities.

The kids return at our beckoning and share about what they experienced this morning during their Sit. We listen for what they see and Coyote helps us note what they don't see. Afterwards, some of us spend the day getting down on our hands and knees smelling elk lays; others explore a grove of old-growth Spruce trees on the meadow edge. During lunch, we have an epic mud fight, then an introduction to mycology with some polypores found on a rotting log. We spend unstructured time letting nature be our guide. Just being together in nature, as a community, creates the glue that makes this amazing day stick to the fabric of our souls.

During the year, we share inspiring journeys with our

students, all the while asking questions for which we instructors might not necessarily have the answers. This can be an edge for some new to the art of questioning. Coyote reminds us to be curious with our students; we don't always have to have the answers! We can show them how to be life-long learners by our openness at being curious, humble, awe-struck and alive! Many times though, we are asked questions that we do have answers for. We get the inevitable nature queries, "What kind of animal left that track?", "What kind of bird was that?", and "What family is that plant in?" Sometimes we will answer, but most of the time we don't. Coyote tells us to stop, let our students become alive in their own learning. Ask them questions from behind, and this will encourage them to step up and be the guides of their own learning journey, leading themselves to the answers. Let them look, taste, touch, feel, smell, listen and ask. Coyote says by giving answers ourselves we may take away the very thing we are trying to cultivate: an independent curiosity and deep, personal connection to the natural world.

At Wilderness Awareness school we practice what we call Coyote Mentoring. From our teachers, we interpret Coyote as one who walks the edge; living in both worlds, the wilderness and the city. Walking this edge asks him to stay alert and to constantly redefine himself as he travels-bringing the wisdom of the forests back to the city and vice versa.

Coyote is often a trickster and can see what is unseen, and uses this to do what needs to be done—alone or with a pack. He is playful, wise, sneaky and deeply caring. Coyote is the mentor's mentor, and encourages us to use tools unseen by our students. These tools will help inspire, challenge and cultivate love for themselves, their communities and nature. There are so many gifts and lessons we learn from Coyote! How else can I use these wonderful tools to cultivate the change I see in my students in everyone else? I have wondered if this wily mentor could also help us to impress the importance of bringing humans closer to nature within our school districts, governments and greater communities. A great example of this possibility came to me as I travelled this fall to Manitoba, Canada for the provinces first ever Nature Action Collaborative for Children.

We arrived at Camp Manitou and felt instantly at home with the rustic cabins, and the fire pits, the easy laughter, and wonderful food that marks almost all of the more



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outdoor-centered conferences I have attended. Ellen Haass (co-author of *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*) and I were asked to keynote and to run Coyote Mentoring sessions at this three day conference. On the flat, beautiful, Manitoban deciduous forests, we came to know and love this small group of primary school educators and the challenges they face in bringing students outdoors. There are numerous logistical and access issues that are difficult to this,

and many groups of educators.

Many of the schools do not have green spaces within their facilities and cannot get funding for field trips. Safety regulations do not allow the kids to be in a non-contained space, requiring fences instead of trees. We were told by one teacher that much of the community, although rich in farming and hunting culture, does not recognize a problem with the fact that a majority of their children spend most of their time indoors, connected to electronics. Still, these teachers were here, trying to learn more about how to connect their students with nature—stretching themselves, and often finding themselves at their edges, as they learned new Coyote Mentoring skills. They are asking big questions, trying to communicate with government and administrators about the importance of child health and its links to time spent outdoors. They are starting school gardens, coming together as individuals and committees to trade skills and stories with each other. This was a solid group of educators that were not

going to let nature slip under the rug in their classroom! One thing Coyote noticed with this group was their many stories of deep personal connection with the land and how this was the root of their passion for teaching about nature.

The common bond of connection to the land is nothing new to many of us in this field; of course this is where our drive to mentor tomorrow's environmental educators comes from! But is this enough? Can I just stop at inspiring my students to connect with nature? In some cases, it is enough and is the basis for lasting change and educating the next generations. Still, if we also want to work to create change within the educational structures that already exist, how can we do this effectively? We know of many people who are in their thirties, forties, fifties and sixties who are presently in administrative positions. They grew up in a world where the only rules they had to follow were to play outside and make sure to come home at dark! This is not the case today. Many kids that are addicted to technology are restricted in outdoor exploration by home-owner association rules, or have parents that have become afraid of the woods. How can Coyote help others in positions of authority remember the value of our essential connection to the earth? That there are many kids who have never been allowed to go out and 'come back at dark'? Coyote would inspire us to dive even deeper and ask, "How and where does real change start?"

Like many environmental educators worldwide, the soul of what we want to implement-within the complexity of curriculum alignment standards, science comprehension and field trips- is simple; Go outside, be in nature, and form a connection to the earth, to your community and yourself. This will help cultivate a stewardship ethic that will save our species from extinction! Boy, no pressure here! Still, I would ask Coyote, "Isn't your answer a bit simplistic in addressing a very complex issue? Just go outside and be in nature?" Coyote smiles at me wisely and says nothing. Step-by- step we face these challenges and little-by-little things are changing. There are times in every outdoor educator's career where they wish to have more space, more freedom, more time, and more financial resources (!) to make programs more powerful. Like the teachers in Manitoba, we write grants, collaborate, attend conferences, self educate and take classes. I always wonder what Coyote would say about all the work we do while asking ourselves, if this is really enough? In my more frustrated and cynical moments, I say things are not changing fast enough, and demand to know why this process is so slow? How can Coyote Mentoring, the mentoring I most value, possibly create enough great change in the world, open eyes and infuse us with aliveness and connection to nature? Finally, Coyote says, "shhhh..." and takes me back to Elk Meadows and asks me to breathe...

Coyote reminds me that real change comes from this morning, sitting with myself, observing nature and my students who I dearly love. He says slow down and remember your connection. Remember that day in Michigan, age six, when the forests were imprinted on your soul. That mo-

ment, and many after, led me to be here in this exact spot in Washington State at age 32, where I sit in this soggy, morning meadow, smiling in drenched, muddy raingear, exhaling a foggy breathe. Coyote tells me I will get all of them to understand by being here myself and by bringing them here, in person.

Let them see the world through our eyes, he says. Let them know the sun on their face, the mud squishing between their toes and the awe of seeing a herd of elk one winter's dawn. But please, whatever you do, for each and every student, parent, school board member, donor or government official you bring outside,-go out there at least ten times more for yourself. The seed of all the work we do started somewhere. We create that same opportunity for our students each and every single time we take them outside. Our personal connection and relationship with ourselves, our communities and the earth is the impetus for all the change we have seen in environmental education so far. This change will continue to grow from a humble yet powerful commitment to ourselves to simply go outside and be.

It is time to go back to the vans and return to the land where the parents await. We are all extremely muddy and, exhausted- and deeply content. I turn for one last look at the meadow and see Coyote running through the forest's edge saying over his shoulder, "Gotcha last!" He trots into undergrowth, disappearing from sight. He knows I cannot resist hide and seek, and sees keenly as my mentor that I'll be tempted to come back, another mist-filled morning, to play in the meadow.

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WAS is a nature awareness/survival skills school that teaches natural sensory awareness in the wilderness, bird language, tracking, plants and much more. Visit <http://www.wildernessawareness.org/index.html>

