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A View From Clark Butte

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Clark Butte, Hoback Basin, Greater Yellowstone Bioregion, Middle Rockies, Wyoming, USA, North America, Earth. These descriptors fix my location on Earth, my *terra munde*, a particular place that grounds my being but is not mine alone. Rising up out of United States Forest Service land, it is public domain, joining in common all species that live in or pass through its environs.

The hike to its summit at 8000 feet elevation, about 1000 feet above the basin floor, is more than a cardio-vascular workout, although it surely is that. It is a review of the diverse vegetative communities from sagebrush steppe to spruce/fir forest: the red bloom of wild onion and delicate ivory sego lily cups of spring, the papery sheen of dry pods in autumn. Here I meet the "Others," prey and predators maintaining a delicate balance: dragonflies and mosquitoes, eagles and ground squirrels, coyotes and antelope. The latter are always in sight from birth to rut when they start their migration to winter in the Green River Basin. On the summit as I catch my breath, I enjoy the view and spend a moment in contemplation.

Down below the Hoback River, bordered with willows, meanders over a broad arc, skirting a dozen or so cabins scattered on the river terrace. Beyond ranch meadows, a magnificent rampart of mountains embraces the Hoback Basin: the Gros Ventres to the north and the Hoback Mountains, a part of the Wyoming Range to the west whose foothills, the South and East Rims, complete the perimeter. Like a raptor riding the thermals of memory, I circle round and round and look down on my home territory and previous habitations spreading over 300 miles of western Wyoming and Northern Utah. Thanks to hindsight I can also look back on cultural and environmental commons I have shared as student, teacher and citizen.

Facing south, I see below me the small cabin that Paul Shepard and I built about 20 years ago. With the exception of one year when I stayed on for the winter, I am usually a "bluebird" and go south to Salt Lake City when the snow begins to "stick." Beyond our cabin I see

more ranch meadows, an elk winter feeding ground and the forested South Rim of the Wyoming Range. This range is a part of the Overthrust Belt that runs from Mexico to Canada, a rich depository of natural gas.

After years of activism by a coalition of hunters, ranchers, environmentalists and recreationists, Congress recently protected the Wyoming Range from further development. On its south slopes in the Hamsfork River Watershed is the ranch where I spent my formative years. My father, Mateo Bertagnolli, immigrated to Wyoming in 1907, started working as a shepherd and eventually advanced to foreman of a large sheep outfit. In the summer of 1918, riding through a mountain meadow to check on herds, he met my mother, Matilda Coletti, who was helping her father bail hay to take to their homestead near the mining camp of Sublette where they sold milk and goat cheese. My mother and father were married two years later.

Dad came from the Austrian Tyrol; my maternal grandparents, from the Italian Alps bordering France. Both were from large desolately poor peasant families as were many in Europe suffering from over-populated and ecologically devastated lands. One solution to the problem was to export population to "America" where laborers were needed to dig coal to fuel trains, to carry more coal over the newly built Transcontinental Railroad, to power the Industrial Revolution in the Eastern United States.

In 1928, my parents with savings and borrowed money bought a sheep ranch on the Hamsfork River just before the economy crashed. We moved there a year later when I was three. My father had never seen the inside of a classroom. My mother, needed at home to care for her seven younger siblings, was minimally educated to the eighth grade. They talked their way through debts, drought and the Great Depression, two aliens—my mother lost her citizenship when she married my father—as they tried to improvise an American way of life. Later visiting the "Old Country," I found that our way of life was authentically Italian. A child ethnographer of sorts, I listened to their conversations as they worked together or sat at a red-checked oil-clothed kitchen table in the evenings, calculating their latest financial standing.

They were both hard-working perfectionists but with different temperaments derived in part from different worldviews of their ancestors. Whereas my father was entrepreneurial and impatient, unafraid to take risks, my mother was reticent and cautious. The course of our lives depended upon their improvisations and discussions that at times took on epic proportions but were never violent. Although I was unclear how they finally reached decisions, I never doubted their passionate love for each other that was evident every minute of their lives.

During early childhood, nature was my commons. In the summer, I played for hours by an old oxbow, where I would answer periodically to my mother's calls. At times, I would squat by the water, mesmerized by the vertiginous display of life coming into being, where unbeknownst to me eating and being eaten was the

name of the game. Memory of another phenomenal moment at that age returns of my standing in nightgown at our attic bedroom window, shivering in the cold morning air, listening to the pulsing cadence of thousands of frogs. Such childhood meditative moments, called “flow time” in research on children and nature are seen as antecedents to ecological awareness in adults.

As my two sisters and I grew through early childhood, our parent’s expectations for us gradually changed. First we stood by their sides observing them at work; then we became little apprentices helping when we could; and finally, at about the age of 12, we became full-fledged participants in the working ranch. Beside them in their subsistence activities, watching them manipulate the loose parts of their existence, along with their occasional misunderstandings and obvious love for each other, founded my family values and work ethic. With their stern guidance and high expectations, I learned to carry out and complete projects. Their astute seasonal observations, sense of timing, understanding of the phenology of the seasons and appreciation of Earth’s creations set my roots firmly in Nature.

My introduction to an educational commons came to me in my first three grades in a one-room school in Opal, a railroad livestock-shipping center whose population has never exceeded 100 souls. The post office, a hotel and a dry goods and grocery store were contained within the big, redbrick Opal Mercantile. Since there was no school bus, my parents drove us five miles to and from school each day, no small challenge over unimproved roads during winter blizzards and spring thaws.

In the one-room school, Miss Anna Beyda taught about 20 children, grades one through six. My movable desk went from one location to another as she, undoubtedly a Dewey disciple, organized multi-graded reading and mathematics groups. All students collaborated to build appropriate dioramas in a giant sandbox with each social studies unit. Construction was negotiated among the children from an array of building materials and pictures of the culture laid out by Miss Beyda. As the diorama approached completion, she gave us each a wooden clothespin to take home to adorn appropriately as an actor in the culture we were creating. In the meantime we were studying and reading about their beliefs and practices and in the end would compose an illustrated essay about each.

Free to move about the room to get a drink with a dipper from a pail of water or to get warm by the big coal heater in the corner of the room, I returned to the diorama frequently. As I think back on our unit on Japan, I actually feel that I was in that country among pagodas and groomed gardens. Nothing in my past educational experiences so impressed me as this particular activity—except for recess.

In winter in deep snow we played fox and geese chasing each other in abandonment as we were transformed from predator to prey. In the spring and fall, we set up householding in a ramshackle shed near the school and furnished it with old furniture, rusting enamel

pots, broken china and discarded kerosene lamps gleaned from a junk heap nearby. The older girls chose their children from us younger ones; I adored my mother Pearl. In the spring we dug for pig potatoes, wiped clean of dirt with our dresses and eaten with soda crackers smuggled from home. From recess to recess we enacted the on-going saga of Westward Pioneers, while the boys ran around us in cowboy and Indian wars shooting each other dead.

After school each day, my sister and I walked across the tracks to wait for our parents at the Opal Mercantile, although privately owned, a public commons of sorts where people of the scattered community met. Permitted to wander through the store that sold everything from soup to saddles, I preferred to sit on the warm radiator at the front of the store to await my parents and listen to conversations on world events: the Japanese and Chinese war continued unabated; floods were devastating the Ohio and Mississippi valleys; Bruno Hauptman was found guilty of kidnapping and killing the Lindbergh infant son; closer to home, Sparky Dawson was sentenced to life in prison for bludgeoning her husband to death with a gas pump handle. The one-room school and the Opal Mercantile were my first experiences shared in common with others not family.

Someone once described childhood as a trying time of chipped teeth and dead cats. Death entered our lives when a young classmate drowned. A middle child, I at times felt misunderstood or neglected, a feeling shared with most children living in an imperfect world. The entitlement of some did not go unnoticed by me when my best friend dressed in cheese cloth and tinsel, from a wealthy ranch family whose grandmother was the superintendent of schools, was given the part of fairy in the Christmas play that, from my perspective, was made for me.

In the throes of the Great Depression, the closure of rural and mining camp schools followed that of the coalmines. As I was entering the fourth grade, the Opal school closed its doors and we were bussed 12 miles to the Burgoon School in the town of Diamondville, where I would spend the next five years, grades four through eight.

The Burgoon School was populated by a multi-cultural mix of children of miners recruited from all parts of the globe. The status of children was distinctly aligned with the socio-cultural-economic stratification of parents based on their command of English, their education and positions held by their fathers. Mothers stayed at home and only single women or widows worked as teachers, secretaries, nurses or housekeepers. For the children of privilege, rewards were exaggerated and punishment moderated. That is not to say that those without privilege went unacknowledged. In their own right they claimed their rewards for intelligence, achievement and good behavior.

Miss Marie Eastman, the fourth grade teacher was as precise as the pendulum of the big clock on the wall. She organized each day's activities where we were pitted against each other, our aptitudes and deficiencies revealed to all. Presidents Washington and Lincoln

looked down approvingly as we colored between the lines of mimeographed illustrations and were drilled in the three R's and Palmer Method Penmanship.

Later handsome Mr. Edwin Hampton, perfectly groomed and smelling of Old Spice shaving lotion, was the center of attention of every young girl in our fifth and sixth grades. When he came to the playground we surrounded him like a gaggle of goslings. Strangely, I have no memory of his teaching except for a field trip to old Fort Bridger that enthralled me with the history of our place. As a budding, pre-puberty girl, I learned that men were fascinating and beguiling creatures.

We girls formed a secret society that provided imagined adventures and mystery as well as sex education when our leader informed us that the stomach of one of our classmates was growing under her WPA flour sack dress. On the playground games were fiercely competitive, softball in particular, which I loved. Bonds were established between classmates in those upper elementary grades that persist to these days.

During the decade from junior high school until my junior year in college, our country was embroiled in war, at first by supplying our allies and then in the full-fledged slaughter. Those were dark years for me. Like all teen-agers, I was idealistic, romantic and craving adventure. Uninspiring teachers, irrelevant courses in the context of the world crisis, disappointing national politics and the socialization of women all added to my existential angst. I turned inward to my Catholic faith and became more interested in boys and participating in athletics than in my classes.

Back on the Butte, over the East Rim I can see the Wind River Mountains, fault block mountains that rose out of archaic sands during the Laramide Revolution. On their rugged slopes one summer my life took on new form. In my late 30s, I was trying to reconcile an abstract religious faith, a failing marriage and a fragile psyche. I had just moved into a high school biology position after teaching junior high school science for five years in the small community of Kemmerer, Wyoming where I had attended high school and my husband and I had made our home.

I entered teaching without any training in teacher education. My husband had become disabled and with four little mouths to feed, I convinced the superintendent of schools that I could teach junior high school general science. With a degree in zoology and chemistry and certification in physical therapy, not used in the small hospital in our town, I thought teaching would be a breeze. He agreed to hire me if I completed 12 hours of correspondence courses in education that summer. I did so and entered teaching that fall somewhat sleep deprived and naive to the challenges ahead. Although I struggled as I learned on the job, deep down I knew I had found my place. I loved teaching. The only supervision I had that year was by a precocious little genius who pointed out my errors each day. I recruited him as an advisor and he has remained a trusted friend to this day. My primary incentive for improving my teaching came out of

determination to make my courses more relevant and interesting than those I had known.

That spring when I had moved to high school biology and earth science teaching, I found a flyer in my school mailbox describing a two-week field course at the Audubon Camp of the West to be held that summer in the Wind River Mountains. It offered re-certification credit, which I needed. I left my children in the care of my mother and sisters, and on my own for the first time in over a decade, I drove north to Trail Lake Ranch, nestled in the rocky remnants of a glacial moraine and surrounded by towering wilderness.

The inspiring instructors and methods of teaching exemplified an ideal I wanted to achieve in my own classes. The content focused on our natural ecological commons: land, water and air, inseparable from diverse species, our own included. While I listened and observed and learned, I was mentally revising my curriculum. I could see the need to increase my knowledge and I dreamed of returning to the setting one day as an instructor.

With a National Science Foundation scholarship, and my four children and a baby sitter in tow for the next four summers, I attended Washington State University at Pullman, Washington, where I earned a master of arts in teaching biology. Once more I was fortunate to have courses taught by exemplary professors. The scholarships, designed to improve the teaching of science, did that for me. Back home in late summer on weekend camping excursions with family, I kept field guides at hand as I became more familiar with the Hamsfork River ecosystem. Each fall I entered the school year with plans for improving my teaching. During the 60s when many citizens were challenging the social and political fabric of our country, in a small provincial town in Wyoming, I was revising my life and my curriculum.

The biology classroom was in a wing of the school with access to the outside. Not far from the schoolyard was an over-grazed bull pasture in a gulley with a spring. I began using it for field studies for my biology classes. Over the course of several years, I convinced the school board to buy the land and I developed into KOLAB, Kemmerer Outdoor Laboratory. Each year I honed and revised the place-based biology curriculum. With a small grant, I bought field equipment and conducted workshops for elementary teachers in the use of KOLAB; they and their students responded enthusiastically.

A representative from the National Association of Biology Teachers visited my classroom and in the spring of 1968 named me the Outstanding Biology Teacher for Wyoming, no great achievement, since there were very few biology teachers in Wyoming whose entire population could have snuggled unnoticed in a corner of one of the larger cities of our country. I was told that after the ceremony where I was presented with the honor, a school board member stated with some passion, "Hell, we've been trying to fire that woman ever since we hired her."

I had been one of the thorns in the school board's side. When I

was first hired, no salary scale was published and contracts were negotiated individually. I joined the state teachers association and, with a few brave compatriots, fought to improve salaries and negotiated a published salary scale, which jeopardized our own appointments but improved conditions for all teachers.

Last fall, on a sentimental journey, I visited the area where new elementary and middle schools have been built near-by. A wooden walk leads down into KOLAB, which has been protected from over-grazing for over 40 years. Instead of the barren pasture of yore it is now a thriving steppe habitat used for field studies by all classes.

In 1969, with a graduate fellowship to the University of Utah and three of my children—my oldest daughter by that time had married—I left husband, home, church and high school teaching to earn a doctorate in education with a minor in ecology. During the next four summers, I fulfilled my dream and returned to the Audubon Camp of the West as an instructor.

I spent every spare moment those summers back-packing into the Wind River Mountains with my children who were working at the camp. At the end of sessions one year, with two colleagues and my children, I hiked over the top of the “Great Divide” to Green River Lakes, the headwaters of the Green River. On the top at over 11,000 feet, mountain sheep grazed between frost-shattered rocks. Swarms of black rosy finches and horned larks prepared to migrate to their wintering grounds on the steppe. It snowed. Here before me was the undisturbed product of evolution at this particular place and time, where creatures, perfectly adapted, were making it on their own in an unforgiving environment. The dynamic interplay of elements and living creatures was primal as well as harmonious, as if life were beginning anew. Here was where “currere,” the course of my life, had brought me thus far. My commitment to the preservation of wilderness solidified at that moment and has been a primary motive in my life to this day.

Back at the university as an instructor, I began an alternative education program, called STEP, for disaffected high school students. I confess as accused of commitment to Freire’s ideas but hope my environmental focus in our generative thematic curriculum mediated his shortcomings, which I over-looked. One of my first students, and later head teacher in the program was Robert Bullough, whom many of you know.

During the years at the university, I also developed a field studies course and workshops in environmental education and seminars on environmental and equity issues for graduate students and teachers. National forests and parks, desert, rivers, bird refuges and wilderness study areas became our study sites. Teams researched various aspects of each ecosystem from geology and flora and fauna to cultural history and, on site, shared with each other what they had learned. Final projects resulted in teachers’ guides and statements at hearings in support of the protection of environmental and social commons.

During my academic career I became an environmental activist and remain so to do this day. I served on governor and agency advisory boards and, as president of the local Audubon Society, made countless statements in support of preservation and protection of wild nature. Since my retirement I have served on boards of several environmental foundations.

Looking back at my experiences over the years, I am cognizant of another important commons, the generous circle of friends and colleagues who nurtured my development and continue to do so today. A few deserve special mention. After completing his doctorate at Ohio State University, Robert Bullough returned to the University of Utah to join our faculty. He encouraged me to accompany him and our colleague, Ladd Holt, to our first Curriculum Theorizing Conference. During the next years I was inspired and mentored especially by Bill Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, and Janet Miller. They legitimized my use of personal narrative as a way of exploring and understanding the teaching experience. My marriage to Paul Shepard, a human ecologist, and the work on his papers and books since his death, furthered my understanding my place on earth as a "thinking animal." Finally, I am most appreciative of the invitation from Susan Edgerton and Patrick Slattery for this opportunity to share my personal history.

Out of this biographical meandering, I've distilled a few thoughts for your consideration. Clearly "The Commons," is a fruitful paradigm and prism for viewing education in general and for creating curriculum. It includes things we jointly inherit or create, from nature's gifts to social structures to the mapped genome and your own research. Teachers and students fulfill their duties as citizens when they scrutinize the acts of our government that impinge on the commons at home and abroad. The consequences of violating the public commons are seen in poverty and war, but also in the wastelands left by over-development and poor planning that destroy a sense of place and disrupt community life for inhabitants.

Unfortunately inalienable gifts from the earth are limited and are not fungible. Unlike plants, which produce their own food, we cannot live without eating other living things or their products. Unlike clams, we do not carry our houses with us and must build them from earth materials. The truth is that our lives are unsustainable. The best we can do is to limit our consumption and wherever possible replenish what we've used and restore what we've harmed.

In the past with our focus on individual development we may have given too little attention to what children can learn in common with others in place-based curriculums and community projects. Such studies, graduated for different ages and stages of development, are perfect for grounding students to their home territory shared with others. Such involvement brings students a feeling of affiliation and personal efficacy. From an early age they need to know they can make a difference in the world.

Participation with others, especially in mixed age groups, such as

tutoring or working with younger children or older challenged adults or elders, develops empathy. Compassion for suffering of others is sorely lacking in our youth and in many adults, where often narcissism seems to be the key to success. This is not to say that high expectations for excellence in knowledge acquisition and skill perfection are not important and should go unacknowledged. I was impressed when Michelle Obama told school children: " I wanted to be smart in school." It would be well if all students could be so motivated.

Certain aspects of modern society work against our efforts to involve students in the commons and beg our attention. Technology that enhances learning in our classrooms can become a primary distraction and addiction for some students. The combination of video games and drugs are especially attractive to boys and young men who often move to drugs alone. Young women, who have their own set of problems, nevertheless are presently more successful in high school and outnumber young men on college campuses. The number of addicts dying from overdoses or leading unproductive lives is staggering and numbers in tens of thousands. This is not just a border problem but is one we face in schools that have become the market place for drugs. Getting at the problem is not just a matter of law enforcement; we must all be involved in solving this societal problem.

From the top of the Butte as I look out at the Basin below, all is still. The peace and quiet of this moment reminds me of one more aspect of our environment that commonly acts against meaningful educational experiences for our children and youth. Noise from machines and gadgets and thoughtless conversations fill the lives and ears of our children as it does our own.

The winter I spent alone in my cabin, I experienced silence as I had seldom experienced it before. Deep snow and frigid temperatures made it palpable. In an effort to understand the experience of the silent landscape, I read a book by Max Picard, *The World of Silence*. In it he said that silence like love, loyalty, life and death is a part of our primary object reality. By primary he meant that these phenomena cannot be reduced to anything else but are accessible to each of us at a deep and fundamental level, a commons of sorts that we all share. The silence he wrote of is not that of an unreflective moment when something needs to be acknowledged, or of reticence when something is hidden, or of withdrawal, when hostility is masked. It is the silence I experienced in deep snow in winter at my cabin, or in the Arctic Refuge or on the top of the Wind Rivers. But it is also the silence of a meditative moment on top of the Butte, in my garden or at my desk. It is the silence a child finds in a naturalized corner of a schoolyard or a family yard and garden.

If I were principal of the universe, I'd want every student and teacher to experience this kind of silence, fecund, full, and dense with spirit, assuring and peaceful, with a hint of death but also the hope of new beginnings.

(AAACS Invited Symposium, San Diego, 2009)

Sources

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