

## **Building Unconditional Confidence** *the lock on the prison door or the key to real freedom?*

[\*for audio version, click here\*](#)

*Note: this is the first in a six part series on the Ecosystem of Education. Here we lay the ground for all the articles to follow.*

Unconditional Confidence. The notion reminds me of sitting at a musical performance: it starts out as an improvisation with the instruments each seeming lost in its own world, creating more of a cacophony than music. But there is a sense of the instruments, the actual tunes, reaching for one another. And then “whoosh!” with an uprising of air, suddenly they are all aligned in a harmony and a unified voice unfolds. Sometimes it is a strong and forceful crescendo, sometimes a quiet comfort, sometimes a playful romp, but the sense of alignment and opening up are the same. Unconditional Confidence? For me, it is that sense of all the inner pieces coming together and opening to song – an “all’s right with the world” sensation.

This has nothing to do with an *I-win* or *I-am-always-right* arrogance; it is not the *I-am-best-at x, y, z*, security we often mistake for confidence. It is not reassuring ourselves with “affirmations” or “intentions.” It is not about being able to prove our worth to others – or even to ourselves. What I am talking about here is a deep sense of “all’s right” or belonging, of having a place in this world *independent* of any talent, accomplishment, or approval. It is a confidence that has nothing to do with “doing,” or even with having inborn talents, smarts, or even kindness. Rather, it is an experience of being engaged in living and learning without an issue of measurement or comparison. It is an inner knowing that our worth is outside the realm of accolades and proofs, an experience that our value is *not* conditional – and the experience itself is outside the realm of question; it opens in another world.

Many parents and teachers, both alternative and traditional, work really hard to build this very experience of unconditional confidence in the children, wanting them to have a belief in themselves, a feeling of worth, that can’t be threatened. Much as I understand, respect and share that desire, trying to build unconditional confidence actually turns tight the lock on the prison door. With more than 50 years in education, I have come to see that there is no issue of greater importance for the children or for the world around us, than how we understand unconditional confidence. Here’s why:

*December 2000. Fifteen pairs of eyes transfixed on me. Well, not really on me personally, but on me as storyteller, as conduit to this other world. These seventh grade students listened intensely as I told of the life of Nicholas Copernicus:*

*“Nicholas sat in his observatory high above the little town, watching. He barely moved a muscle. He tried to breathe deeply, but his breath kept catching in his chest and his arms and legs tightened. The same words he’d been saying to himself for months and months rumbled round and round inside him. ‘Something is wrong here. SOMETHING is WRONG here!!!’”*

Looking out at these seventh graders, I could see that their breathing had become choppy, too. In this moment, they stared wide eyed and silent. For the last few weeks, I had watched as they tensed and relaxed with each adventure of young Nicholas Copernicus: his boyhood pranks, the loss of his father, his developing passion for the stars.

Now, as I brought the weeks of story to a close, the children's breathing was as unsteady as Copernicus' as he came to realize that what the world around him believed, was not true. They sat very still, understanding that what the pope and the bishops and the priests believed, was not true. And they knew well from the earlier chapters that disagreeing with the church might well mean death for Copernicus. They sat forward, anxious and agitated; you could have heard a pin drop as I continued.

*"Nicholas jumped up. He spoke slowly: 'They **are** wrong – all of them are wrong! The sun; the earth: NO!' Nicholas laughed a moment, 'It is the earth that revolves around the sun – not the other way around!' he said slowly as he headed inside to recheck his calculations.*

*Nicholas bent over his pages of notes and worked his idea through; he shivered, but the broad smile never left his face. He was sure now: all the others **were** wrong."*

I ended the story there, with Copernicus' realization. The children sat very still, barely breathing. The 15 pairs of eyes that had been so openly focused on me, now focused inward. Some looked down. Some glazed over. The children sat unmoving for a bit longer than usual, three minutes, maybe five. I waited and watched. Then Micah, a twelve year old, sat up very tall. He lifted his head, his deep brown eyes looked straight at me. Micah's eyes sparkled; really it was more of a piercing quality than a sparkling one that met me. The intensity of his look held my attention and I waited silently to see what was stirring in him. Suddenly, Micah whacked his hand on the table. The sound reverberated and everyone else sat tall, too. Then he spoke very slowly, "Well . . . if that was what they thought then and they were wrong . . . what do we believe now that isn't true?!"

The other students sat taller still, nodded slowly, almost cautiously, and then, for a moment "Yeah!" and "Wow!" rolled through the room. Not one child suggested that we have already figured everything out – all sat in the realization that we may not know the world as well as we think we do.

So here we are at a pivotal moment, a moment when the children are seeing the world in a new way, a moment when a shift in their sense of reality is happening before our eyes. How we respond will make a great deal of difference to their experience now, to their learning, and to their priorities in life. And the choice we make will depend on our understanding of unconditional confidence.

- 1) Response #1: "Wow Micah, that's a really important insight. So, if the world around Copernicus could have been wrong about something so huge, what ideas of today do you wonder about?" The teacher listens as the students take up one idea after the next. A great list is made: boys and girls are the same; war is necessary; you are what you eat; education is the silver bullet. They are breathing quickly and full of ideas. Reflection, perspective, creative thinking roll from child to child. The room is a buzz with ideas and all the kids are engaged.

- 2) Response #2: “Great Micah, you are right, Copernicus saw something the others hadn’t seen. What did it take to even imagine something so different from what was accepted, thought to be fact, in the world around? Who of us could do that?” A hearty discussion on courage and imagination follows; it opens into a discussion on peer pressure. Though the teacher does not make a list, she asks questions each time there is a chance to bring the conversation further into a focus on courage and tenacity and self-trust. There is much nodding, and many “yeahs” roll through the room. Most of the children are sitting forward, eager to speak.
- 3) Response #3: the teacher nods and waits in silence. There is a slow rumble through the group, a “yeah!” here and there, a comment now and then about how huge the change was, how courageous Copernicus was. With each, the teacher nods and waits. Then the students settle back into breathing deeply, and into Micah’s question, “What might we believe now that is not true?!” The room buzzes with a low, almost internal, hum. The kids are all stirring, faces shifting and changing, but there is little talking. Still, the teacher waits, and when the students seem to have settled, she sends them to snack and recess.

How to decide? As parents and teachers, we can see so many opportunities here for learning. Working with #1, many a great conversation on perspective and assumption and courage will likely unfold. Working with #2, insights on social pressure and self-trust and courage might well emerge. There are so many opportunities here to reflect on and analyze and question different elements of this amazing story, and all of these would have the subtext of helping the children build unconditional confidence.

I would not do either of those. Why? They do not build unconditional confidence; they undermine the experience of it.

Yes, I meant to say that; it is not a typo. Meeting Micah’s earthshaking realization with a reflective or analytic engagement, even one focused on courage and independence, will not build unconditional confidence. Why? The answer is hidden within the question: *We can’t build unconditional confidence because “building” the unconditional is an oxymoron; building something makes it conditional. By definition.*

Hmmm . . . that is not just an attention grabbing line; it is a pivotal truth: as soon as we enter the world in which we are looking to *build*, the possibility of touching the unconditional is gone. And it matters. It makes all the difference to the moment to moment world of growing and learning; it makes a pivotal difference to how we navigate this life, no matter our age. It makes a difference to Micah.

Why? If we have to build confidence, i.e. build a sense of self-worth, then we are trapped in a game that requires *proving* that we matter. Once we enter that arena, one upsmanship is the currency: more this, most that, better at this, best at that, and so on. In that world, we unavoidably begin a mad scramble to show our worth. But no matter how great we may be at this or that, if our value is

dependent on that superiority it is a fragile sense of value, one that is just waiting to crumble. It can't help but leave us fearful and empty – seeking external approval and proof.

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As we look around us today, we see this emptiness abound. I cannot even imagine the empty echo that allows someone to separate babies from their parents and put them in cages. I cannot imagine the emptiness that allows someone to pour toxins into rivers or send refugees back into violence or walk into a church or synagogue, or even a school, and start shooting. And I am grateful that I can't. But I do know the shadow of that emptiness; I think we all do. And I know that when that takes over, we believe one upsmanship is our only hope and superiority our only proof of value. From there, all joy is muted and deep compassion is not possible.

Though it may seem like focusing on unconditional value is a luxury we can't afford amid the problems of climate and injustice that we face today, in fact, these all stem from that same emptiness. So yes, it matters that we shift our attention to *unconditional* confidence; it matters if we are to make real change in this world for ourselves and for others.

Okay then! Given the crucial place of unconditional confidence and the fact that we can't build this confidence, how do we support the children when so many need support!?

While we cannot build unconditional confidence, we can learn to trust *the source of unconditional confidence, the vital aliveness in each of us, and we can help the children connect with that. This source is already there in all of us, and it is, therefore, indestructible and unconditional; it is our birthright.*

That's a mouthful and could well sound like blather, but I believe we all have direct experience of this unconditional confidence. All of us. It's that "all's right with the world" sensation, a full and vibrant feeling when the cacophony opens into harmony. In that moment, there is no issue of whether we belong or how we measure up, or even how we fit in.

Personally, I experience it as a fullness and an immediacy. That sensation rises in me quite reliably when I see the curved sole of a toddler's foot as he stretches up to reach for something, reaching higher for all he's worth, 100% invested in this one move. It sparks a feeling of bubbles rising through me, and giggles in the chest. My smile seems to pull on my heart, squeeze it, and it holds both humor and wonder at all the life packed into that tiny sole.

Another reliable opener for me is the sight, sound, and smell of a clear mountain stream. With this, my heart slows and expands, and it is deep breaths, not giggles, that fill me. There is also a strange cool, crystal-ness that seems to mist through me and bring a kind of shiver. My smile is a quiet one, but the fullness is expansive.

There are many others for me, but for this discussion it seems important to include those that happen in moments when a new and deep understanding opens. This one is harder to describe. I feel a sense of physical alignment, literal alignment as though a plumb line is running from the sky

right through me and into the earth. My feet are anchored and the sensation of being straight but not having to hold myself up, a strong but supple sensation arises. In this one, I literally hear that music come into harmony.

In all of these, the chatter inside fades back and the colors and smells and textures come forward; I feel connected to the world around, and the underlying pulse is a sense of wonder. And this is true even when the connection happens in moments of great effort or deep sorrow. In all, it is the body sensations that signal that “all is right with the world.”

Maybe this sense of “connected wonder” happens for you when you hear a line of a poem or a piece of music. Or maybe it rises when sitting Shiva with a dear friend who has lost her love - just simply sitting with her. Maybe it happens when the water is running over the dishes you are washing, and you notice its clear flow. Or when the falling snow catches the light. It need not be ascending Everest; the possibilities are endless and rise up moment to moment. And when we are able to let these moments touch us, there is fullness without measure, a sense of being vitally alive - whether these are noisy, fireworks moments, moments of deep silence, or even moments of frustration, anger, or sorrow.

In those moments, we are fully present. I think it is what William Blake meant when he spoke of *seeing the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wildflower*. It does not matter how smart or clever or insightful we are; it does not matter if we are artistic or athletic; it does not matter if we have physical handicaps, or sensory or emotional ones. It does not matter how talented or pretty we are. It does not matter how badly we have been wounded. This is an experience of inherent-vitality and it happens on another plane, one where nothing affects the blueness of blue or the smell of the newly tilled spring earth. In that moment, we are connected to ourselves and to the world around, and that vital life-force pulses freely through us.

This feeling of vital aliveness is not earned, it *cannot be* earned; it just is. It is inborn; it is the nature of being human and it is unconditional. As a result, this vital aliveness is the source, the *only* source, of unconditional confidence. In my life and in my work, Enki Education, underneath all else, the focus is on this; it is the fulcrum around which all else turns - this approach to life, this worldview, and this approach to raising and educating our children. It all boils down to this: **we all have an inherent-vitality, a life force that, when accessed, naturally sparks a sense of wonder and connection to all. It is this vitality that births the experience of unconditional confidence, and it is from this that both compassion and wisdom flow naturally. It is our birthright.** Period.

We cannot create or earn this inherent vitality any more than we “create” or earn the sun. Nor can it, by the same token, be destroyed. Still, it can be obscured, much as the sun can be blocked by cloud cover, pollution, volcanic debris, or even nuclear winter. But, none of those things alters the sun. Same here: our inherent-vitality, our inner sun, just is. Yes, it is often obscured by the difficulties of navigating the nitty gritty of human life, and still, our inherent-vitality is no more changed by this struggle than the sun is changed by clouds of any sort.

This inherent-vitality is our birthright, so by definition, this applies to everyone – ev-er-y-one! No matter our gender or race or religion or time in history, no matter our intelligence or skill or talent or even our level of compassion and generosity – or lack thereof – underneath all else, lies our inherent-vitality.

It is not easy to look around the world and believe there is an innate vitality and, inseparably, an innate value in all humans. We see children left to starve, vets left sleeping on the streets, and racial injustice perpetrated at every turn. Where is the inherent-vitality allowing all that? Yes, it is hard to see inherent-value in those enacting cruelty, but how many times have we heard of someone's heart opening on his deathbed? How often have we wished that very opening and warming for someone – even someone who has hurt us badly? How great would it be to see Trump melt in sorrow and put all his money towards healing the damage he has done? Of course, these openings are a rarity, and many people never experience the unconditional confidence, wisdom, and compassion waiting to flow out, but the hope we hold – that hope *in and of itself* – tells us that we already know that there is an indestructible, inherent-vitality that *could* be accessed right to the final breath and open the flow of wisdom and compassion.

Inherent-vitality is the all-important core of life, so it is from a connection to this that we experience our value as a given, and in turn, naturally walk in confidence. Often we use these terms interchangeably, but in the end, it is access to the vitality on which all else rests.

What does this have to do with how I respond to Micah in this pivotal moment when he is seeing the world anew? Everything. In that moment, Micah was standing in wonder. He was opening to the unknown. The clouds and obscurations had evaporated, and his inherent-vitality was flowing freely; in that flow there was no question of personal value and nothing to prove. *And* the class had opened with him. There was no sense of anyone showing smarts, or of needing to come up with something “better.” There was no scramble for earned-value. No one even tried to prove that we really do know everything now. Really, there was no sense of anything but the wonder of being out in the unknown.

So from there, any attempt to engage the children in reflection and analyzing, or even in realizing how big this was, would just pull them away from the sense of wonder, away from the experience of inherent-vitality, and into a search for an “earned-value.”

That brings us to response #3. With accessing inherent-vitality as the focus, the teacher's job is first and foremost to walk out onto that precipice with Micah, to stand in the fact that we do not and cannot “know” with finality. In so doing, we are also standing in wonder, the wonder of Micah's insight and the whole class' ability to open to it, and the wonder of standing in one of those “full alignment” truths. The teacher's job is to step into the experience with the children and hold a container that allows that experience to take root. This is true whether we are talking 12 year olds realizing a profound truth or four year olds watching a worm in a mud puddle; it is true whether helping a frustrated ten year old open to an understanding of fractions or watching a two year old running away from a diaper change in squeals and giggles! And it is true in times of joy *and* in times

of sorrow, times of ease *and* in times of effort. Doesn't matter: when there is a willingness to join the children in the depth of their experience and hold space for that to take root, we empower the process of trusting inherent-vitality. In turn, each time we stop here we anchor this experience of inherent-vitality as true-north on the children's internal compasses.

So beneath the silence of response #3, is a trust in the indestructibility of inherent-vitality. **The choice made is not a choice for *building* confidence, but for honoring confidence at its source: connection to inherent-vitality, and then trusting its natural flow.**

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In the Enki approach, this "entering the children's experience and holding space" is ground zero, but that doesn't mean that there won't be a time for reflecting and analyzing, questioning and applying. At some point, these very activities will till the soil for a new moment of deep opening, a new moment of wonder. But we will choose when, how, and even *if* it is best to bring these at all, with a focus on fostering the connection to inherent-vitality. And this applies in all situations. Just as we do not rush that toddler squatting before a worm, hurrying him on to more important things, nor do we make this moment "count" by giving him a lot of important learning about soil and compost and worm life, by the same token, we do not use "understanding" or "learning" to rush Micah as he stands on this truly awesome precipice: facing the unknowability of life.

In all situations, it is the connection, and not the collection of information or skills or accolades, that is our focus. ***Connection, not collection is how we access this vitality and it is our job to trust that.***

An old saying from the east sums it up well: "*The ordinary man sees magic in the extraordinary. But it is the extraordinary man who sees magic in the ordinary.*" That magic is the result of deep connection and trust - connection to that inherent-vitality within; trust that life force flows freely from there and is inseparable from the sense of personal value. It is here we find real compassion, intelligence, and wisdom, and, in turn, it is from here that we can fully walk our particular path and use our unique skills to serve all. And all these things happen naturally, like water flowing downhill.

So within the Enki approach, there is a time and a place for virtually all the elements of what we normally call "education." But when our focus is on how, when, and if these elements will serve that connection to inherent-vitality, the process and the children's experience is totally different. Emily, one of the current Enki teacher trainees, a teacher with 20 years of experience in public and alternative education, put it this way: "With inherent-vitality as the fulcrum, everything is turned 180 degrees - even when it looks the same, it is completely different!" By the same token, so much of what is done in holistic programs, and even in traditional programs, is central to and deeply enriches the Enki approach; everything I learned in my years of work with many, many approaches, and from many, many teachers, enriches Enki. BUT when these are brought in through the 180 degree shift, the impact is very different.

*Back in the early '60's I spent my summers, two full months, at a camp in central Massachusetts. For me it was heaven, and one of the highlights of each summer was the annual canoe trip. Depending on how old we were, we would spend one to two weeks out on the rivers and lakes of New England. It was a different era and we could freely move around, sometimes camping at a campsite and sometimes asking a farmer if we could pitch tents on his shores. Loved it.*

*But in order to be allowed to join the trip, we had to pass a canoeing test. Getting in and balance and strokes – all easy peasy. But learning to right a tipped canoe, that wasn't easy. To do it, suspended in the water, you have to roll the canoe to bottom up, dive under and come up in the air pocket, and then – hopefully with a partner – take hold of the gunwales, give a hard scissor kick strong enough to break the hold of the surface tension, and simultaneously throw the canoe up and flip it over. Voila.*

*But now imagine you have been invited to go canoeing, but you have never seen a canoe. You are given paddles and told to go to the beach and have fun. You go to where the canoes are stored and all are belly up in the water. But not having canoed, you don't know they are upside down and assume this is how it all works. You climb on the upturned bottom, and, with effort, find your balance, and, with more effort, paddle out. All is – well – harder than expected, but you are canoeing! Fun – sort of.*

*Then I come along and, having spent my summers canoeing, I tell you that you have it upside down and you will find more freedom and flight – more life – if you flip it over. Yikes, it was hard enough to get your balance this way, now I want you to flip it and get back in! Worse yet, I tell you that to flip it, you have to dive under the water, kick hard enough to break the water's surface tension, and flip the canoe over without taking on extra water. Hard, but once it is over, it will all be easier and more fun. With the canoe flipped 180 degrees, you will be working in harmony with wind and water, and flying free.*

Same canoe, but when used in harmony with wind and water, a different world opens up. The gunwales are still the same, the seats, the ribs, the belly, all of it is the same, but turned 180 degrees, the experience is completely different.

It is not easy to flip any “canoe,” and when we are talking about flipping the way we parent and teach, it is harder still. Why? Because as parents and teachers, we put heart and soul into the children and it is painful to look back and realize that our best may not have been what we had intended, and may even have caused pain and damage. With 50 years behind me, I am very familiar with this difficulty, and it took me a long time to realize that teaching and parenting are dynamic processes, not static accomplishments. Most important of all to the children, and irreplaceable, are our intent and our love. Nothing we *do* even touches the impact of these.

*I was awakened to this in a rather humorous way about 20 years ago, early in the life of Enki, when I felt a major shift in my understanding take hold. Even with the lift brought by the new understanding, I fell into an all-or-nothing depression: “what about the dozens and dozens of children I had already taught?! What about my own?” I was moping to a friend about all the children I had “ruined” because of my misunderstandings. She turned to me and, rather sharply, said, “Oh, so all those kids are ruined? Rotten? Solomon, Ben, Kaeli, Cara, Jesse, Claire, Alexis – that's what ruined looks like?”*

*I had to laugh. These were kids who had been with me for years, kids who were bright, engaged, creative, and more. And they were, at that point, vital and engaged twenty-somethings heading out into the world with gusto and care. I look back now when they are in their mid 40's, and see they have grown to become leaders in their communities, people making a difference in the world, and many are parenting and doing so with love and commitment. Yeah, whatever my impact may or may not have been, "ruined" does not describe them!*

Through that conversation I came to see that *if* we are to have the courage to keep growing, we have to be able to hold conflicting things simultaneously *and* not make them into an "either/or" war. I had given these children my best and done so with love, and that was primary nourishment. AND – *not but* – there remains much to learn, much of great importance. Both things are true. So while respecting and appreciating all you have offered the children in *your* lives, you can still flip the canoe and see what you think of a different world!

This flipping begins with recognizing that when *earned-value* is our fulcrum – even if we are seeking to bring an experience of unconditional value or confidence – we are setting the children up to step on one another to prove their better-ness, to prove they have a right to be here in this life and be loved. It does not matter if they are better at music or science, kindness or stillness, math or sports. When superiority becomes the currency, the confidence sparked is really an arrogance.

On the other hand, with *inherent-vitality*, and, inseparably, inherent value, as our focus and the fulcrum of our outlook, that clamoring to prove our worth is irrelevant. In this world, connection to our inherent-vitality moves us forward, and no kind of collection can replace that. With inherent-vitality as true-north on our compasses, connecting with this, is what calls us back when we, inevitably, lose our way.

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It is one thing to have this intent, and another to actually make it a reality in the day to day, moment to moment world. So how do we do this? One could easily think a self-directed approach to education, a free-school or a "child-rearing without boundaries" approach, each with its particular trust in the children's impulses, would shift the fulcrum to accessing inherent vitality, and therefore, to supporting inherent-value. After all, if we trust the children, why not really trust them! I certainly believed that – and believed it with all my heart when I first began teaching.

*1969. New York City. Newly 18 years old. I had spent the last eight months assisting with the five year olds at East Harlem Headstart, and, whenever I could, sitting in an apple tree on my hippie friends' farm reading everything I could about the free school movement and the pioneers in education: Holt and Denison, Kozol and Ashton-Warner, A. S. Neil, and many others. Filled with deep engagement and dreams and clarity – really that unique certainty reserved for that time in life when we know absolutely everything – I headed off to volunteer at a free school in San Francisco. To be precise, the school was in the pan handle of Golden Gate Park, no building, and I lived in a room in an abandoned hotel where we had to climb over the fallen beams and navigate broken stairs to get into the "apartment" that I shared with the founders of the school. We were all part of the dream and the belief that if we just left it all to the children, wellbeing would bloom. You have never*

*seen more devoted or loving or generous teachers, or teachers more sure that their approach would free the children to their inherent beauty; I promise. Wonderful people.*

*Freedom: the children, aged four to 13, came and went as they pleased, both from school and in and out of any classes offered. Teachers showed up when they felt like it, if they felt like it. We believed the dream so completely, and we were hell bent on living it! Ah, the '60's!*

*But, despite the ferocity of my belief, I could see the children were not blooming. They were anxiously active and openly destructive . . . and we called it "creative and free." Well, "we" did not include me; what I perceived was pain. I could tell you stories that would make your hair stand on end; the children were lost and hurting and crying out for help. I felt often that I could see their life force flowing out from their feet. At minimum, the zest that is childhood, is life, was not easy to see. That experience remains the most sorrowful mix of dreams and reality I have experienced in education.*

So, no, not free schools, not even child-directed schools and not boundary-less parenting; each of these has something to offer, but in and of themselves, they are not a road to accessing that inherent-vitality. Just as a river needs banks to flow freely with all its force, the children need relevant boundaries and structure to support the free flow of their life force. Even though freedom and self-direction can be part of accessing inherent-vitality, these cannot be the center or core of the method.

What then? How do we open this access? There are many wonderful teachers of adults working with this very issue – Pema Chodron, Tara Brock, Adyashanti, Joseph Goldstein, Brene Brown, Peter Levine, Steven Porges, and on and on. They teach different forms of mindfulness meditation and guide different approaches to personal growth and trauma work, and I have benefitted mightily from all this guidance and these teachings. As well, I have been a meditator since 1968, and since 1975, have had the unparalleled privilege of being a student of the Tibetan Buddhist master, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. And I can't imagine who I would be without these teachers and teachings. My appreciation is more than boundless – it is the anchor of my life.

**BUT children are not little adults. The very things we adults use to access our inherent value – things such as meditation and analysis and reflection – are counter-productive, actually destructive, for children under the teens.** Maybe reincarnate lamas being trained in monasteries develop differently; I am not qualified to say either way. But for the vast majority of children these approaches are destructive to accessing inherent-vitality.

Why? In a nutshell: children grow through metamorphosis, i.e. like caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly. Meditation and reflection are like the nectar that is the butterfly's main food. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with that nectar; actually, there is everything great about it. But for the caterpillar, eating nectar will mean starvation; he literally does not have the means to digest it and make it into nourishment. Same for children. Although on the surface children can *perform* quite well when fed adult food, inside it is pulling them from their inherent-vitality; they learn to work for the applause of the earned-value paradigm and that applause becomes their true-north. So until the children are "butterflies," **it is up to us to foster the *experience of presence, connection, and***

**compassion** that mindfulness practice and active reflection can bring to adults, and to do that through the rhythms and richness of everyday daily life.

I will say more about this and what the implications are for education in future installments; for now, let's entertain the notion that it is true and focus on the big picture.

Seeking a way to foster this presence in children, what I eventually came to see is that making this shift to inherent-vitality as the fulcrum of our living and learning depends on aligning ourselves with the processes of nature. Juvenal, a poet from ancient Rome, described it perfectly: "*Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another.*"

This has enormous implications for raising and teaching the children, more than I will attempt to cover in this article! But from beginning to end, one principle runs through all of nature: interdependence, i.e. *all* of life functions in ecosystems. And all the elements of an ecosystem must work together in a harmonious and dynamic balance if we are to maintain deep health, in this case, that health is access to our inherent-vitality.

Most people reading this – at least those sticking with it this far! – already have a deep awareness of and commitment to looking at the natural world as a living being. Now we need to turn these same eyes on the raising and educating of our children. This is wherein lies the 180 degree canoe flip, and with it, the ability to have our work serve the clearing of clouds to access our inherent-vitality. Despite deep exploration of and engagement with many approaches – including free schools, emergent curriculum, integrated day, theme studies, Montessori, Waldorf, and traditional, and work with some wonderful individual teachers – I have not seen anyone hold conscious and active work with this ecosystem of education at the center.

In order to bring you a deeper sense of what it means to make this shift, in the upcoming articles we will explore the educational ecosystem as a whole and also look at more of the specific elements as they unfold "in the trenches." For now, I will end this first installment with a glimpse of the kind of change that shifting to an ecosystems approach opens up; it is a glimpse of these same children, Micah's group, when I first met them, just over a year earlier:

*1999. In my preceding 30 years of teaching, I had told hundreds of stories to children aged two to 15, and the children had always settled in quickly and listened eagerly. Not this crew! Oh my goodness, not this crew. This crew listened long enough to hear a word that triggered something in them, and then they took off in discussion of that. So if I was telling of "the azure blue sky over the high desert where a small band of Apache walked quickly, hiding from those who hunted them," one child might catch the word "blue." She might start in on a conversation – or a monologue – about a blue bathing suit she just got. Another would hear that and chime in about what she had just gotten. Another about not liking shopping, but liking chess. All the while, another group would have taken off on the word "desert," and wandered who knows where! I felt like I was in a living Rorschach test or in a production of the Theatre of the Absurd! Work with movement, the arts, and projects were all the same, everyone jumping every which way to his own superficial and fractured drummer. And academics, oh my goodness. They had a combination of very confused concepts that they applied without*

*understanding, and areas where they refused to apply what they did know because they were “free to think as they pleased” (about such things as punctuation!). Still, they spent much time showing off how much they knew – about everything! Even their self-directed projects were a scattered mess. It was a zoo. But most disturbing to me was that these students had come to feel that critical thinking meant being critical – not open and insightful, deep and flexible, but literally, just critical. So all day, every day, they saw it as their job to criticize: me, their friends, themselves, the study – endless criticism and all of it superficial and destructive.*

*These children had come to me from this largely child-directed, alternative program, from public schools, and from Montessori. Varied backgrounds, yet all engaged in the directionless theatre and the endless put downs.*

*How did I stand it? For openers, I cried my way home every day – really, got in the car, left the school property and wept, wept away the endless putdowns, but even more, wept away my hopelessness. Second, I felt clear that IF this lack of open interest and depth was really what children had become, I did not want to teach anymore, so I had nothing to lose by holding to my path and trying to open them to an inner depth – starting with an open interest in the world around.*

*So I stuck to my guns and continued presenting stories and activities that invited an open sinking-into and engagement with new worlds. For eight weeks, eight excruciating weeks during which I maxed out the tear quota and during which I meditated a lot, I worked hard to reenter each day fresh.*

*And each day I did come in fresh and I continued with offering “food” I felt would be deeply nourishing. Then, in the eighth week, virtually all at once as though they had been hit by a great wave, the students dropped their competitive battery and started really hearing and living the stories, participating in the arts and academic activities with focus and gusto, and they began participating in self-directed projects with creative focus.*

*The year went along like this with the children deeply engaged and each activity or discussion or reflection setting off the next connection. And then one day near the end of the year, I got to witness just how deeply in them this shift from being anchored in the scattered collection to being anchored in a deep connection sat. At this point, we had been focused on the American Revolution and on the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) impact on the formation of the U.S. government. One day when I was very tired and had a lot on my plate, I decided to tell them about the writing of the constitution as a report, and not invite them into it as a story of human struggle and creativity. Seemed like a good idea to me: I would lay out the information and then the next day I would go back into the more connected and life-filled story.*

*I started writing lists on the board, as is normal in most classrooms. And then I started in on presenting an oral report. The students looked at me, stunned. Then one after the next, in slow motion, they started saying, “No. This is a story. Tell the story.” I told them that this day we would have a report and then we would return to hearing about the people in more depth, to story, the next day. But they just shook their heads and, speaking really slowly and patiently as though I must be having trouble understanding, one after another, said “No. This is a story.” I must admit that in that moment, and even writing it today, I could barely refrain from laughing at their sincere shock and confusion, and at their determination to get me to provide real “food.”*

*Finally, they had had enough. James – a very bright child who had started off the year obsessed with showing how smart he was, actually, with showing that he already knew anything I might think I had to offer – stood up. I had no idea what was happening and just waited and watched. He silently walked over to the light switch, turned it off, and then went to the windows and closed the curtains – both things I did before telling a story. Then he sat down and folded his arms on his desk and looked up, waiting. All the other children*

*followed, and again, 15 pairs of eyes were focused on me, silently insisting I stand as storyteller, insisting I open the door to a world in which they could feast. They had no interest in collecting a bunch of facts, they knew there was a world to connect to behind that facade. So, despite a chest full of giggles, I dropped into storyteller mode and did my best to turn the report into a story on the spot.*

From that point on, we continued on a deeply connected exploration of history, culture, math, science, and most importantly, the human journey of which they are all a part. The next autumn we find Micah, connected, safe, engaged, and, therefore, able to walk out onto a precipice most adults avoid like the plague: the precipice of knowing that, no matter what we think we know, really we must live in the unknown!