

Learning to Connect; Connecting to Learn

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

First Nations elder Mary Everson is a walking library on local flora and fauna. However she began a guest lecture in Serena's class, not by expounding upon what she knew, but rather by telling a story about how she learned it.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "I used to go walking all of the time with my grandmother. She would point to things, and tell me about them as we went. She would say, 'here is a plant that is good for a fever', or 'here is a plant that you can use for burns'. Every day we would go walking together, and that is how I learned. Not from books, because we were not a culture of written language. Every thing we learned, we learned from another person."

The more we think about this story, the more astounding it is to both of us. As children, we loved to learn, and our learning came from the written word. We sat at our schoolroom desks, unafraid of intellectual competition and eager to demonstrate our skills. But the real treasure troves were libraries, and both of us remember books as childhood companions. Between the pages we found our adventures, and we dreamed of far away times and places. Even now, when we are curious or need to know something, we usually turn to the printed word, and more rarely, to opportunities for experiential learning. What would it be like if everything we learned, we learned from a human voice? A voice that was familiar, and that loved us?

We live in an information-intensive society, and, within the mainstream of North American culture, learning and information gathering are largely solitary

pursuits. Both of us have taken literacy for granted, but never stopped to question what was lost in moving from an oral to a written culture. The voice in a book is left to our imaginations to conjure up. And although many of us have wonderful memories of stories read aloud and shared with a cuddle, the book itself does not cuddle us. Computers and the internet are similarly un-cuddly; even when we use them to correspond and connect with others. The voice, the face, the smell and especially the touch of another person are not part of the experience. The need to learn and the need to connect with others are separate in a print-based culture. Stories exist apart from story-tellers; information exists in a disembodied state, apart from those who created it and from the natural world that it describes. No wonder loneliness is such a common condition.

Our natural curiosity and our natural affinity toward one another have not been separate throughout most of human history; they have been rolled together into the act of teaching and learning from one another. Technology has changed, beginning, perhaps, with the printing press, and taking further leaps in the invention of television and the internet. But we are still both curious and social creatures; we are tribal by design.

Both of us have summer memories rich in this kind of social and family bound learning. Monika recalls annual mushroom hunts and berry gatherings with her grandmother, parents and siblings. She remembers cycling over wooded hills riding on the kids' seat on her father's bike, learning the names and habits of trees.



She remembers the summery scent of Linden trees in bloom and making tea of Linden tree flowers. She remembers when she and her cousin learned to crochet from their grandmother's neighbor back in the old coal miners housing settlement in Gladbeck, and summer days spent catching shrimp in tide pools on the beaches of the North Sea with her siblings. Serena remember the word games that her family played on long car trips, the silly songs her mother taught her, and her best friend Annie, born before the 20th century, who told her about farming with horses and showed her how to quilt and take care of gladiola bulbs. Telling stories, skill and hobby sharing, and making music are human-to-human ways to reconnect our need to learn with our need to be close to one another. Nature walks teach us to feel our place in the web of things bigger than ourselves. Campfires are time-honored and beautiful settings for sharing between generations. Even books can be bridges between people when they are shared out loud, or talked about together.

For children and families, summer break is an important opportunity to experience more of this kind of learning; learning that connects them to the natural world and to the "tribe" of family and community. This kind of experience is not a luxury; it is an important part of becoming fully human. Brain development depends upon socially shared experiences, and having a sense of belonging on the earth depends upon knowing about our natural surroundings.

We hope you will take an opportunity to learn or share about all these interesting things: The sun and rain, water salty and sweet, local animals and plants, your personal stories and cultural history, night sky and phosphorescence, music and food and all the other things this season has to offer. Have a great summer this year.

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