ECOLOGY AND EQUITY: TOWARD THE RATIONAL
REENCHANTMENT OF SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY

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At this point in history, the domination of nature is inextricably bound up with the domination of persons....[T]here is no point in liberating people if the planet cannot sustain their liberated lives, or in saving the planet by disregarding the preciousness of human existence not only to ourselves but to the rest of life on Earth....We thoughtful human beings must use the fullness of our sensibility and intelligence to push ourselves intentionally to another stage of evolution. One where we will fuse a new way of being human on this planet with a sense of the sacred, informed by all ways of knowing — intuitive and scientific, mystical and rational. It is the moment where [we] recognize ourselves as agents of history — yes, even as unique agents — and knowingly bridge the classic dualisms between spirit and matter, art and politics, reason and intuition. This is the potentiality of a rational reenchantment.¹

As we approach the end of the 20th century, evidence of social oppression and environmental destruction exists on a planetary scale. Major violations of human rights are reported in China, South Africa, and Iran while in the United States growing numbers of children slip through invisible “safety nets” into poverty and despair. Rain forests of Central and South America disappear at an alarming rate while the air, land, sea, and wildlife throughout the Middle East are poisoned in the aftermath of war. Throughout the world those who are poor or politically powerless suffer the consequences of social and environmental exploitation while others profit.

In response to such conditions, we look to education for hope. The history of American schooling is characterized and defined by dramatic attempts to promote social equity: the common schools movement of the mid 1800s, the Progressivist movement of the mid 1900s, and the legal crusade for equal educational opportunity of the 1950s–70s. We have also turned to the schools to raise awareness of environmental problems and to promote responsible interaction with the biophysical world.

Yet our efforts to advance social and environmental justice through schooling have achieved only limited success. Why is this so? In this essay I argue that the primary barriers on the path toward equity are philosophical rather than material or technical in nature. Crippled by a worldview that pits humanity against nature, male against female, and rich against poor, significant progress is not possible. What is needed is a moral and conceptual vision in which differences now locked into exploitive, alienating, and oppositional relationships are transformed into relationships characterized by equity, continuity, sensitivity, and reciprocity. What is needed is a moral and conceptual vision in which connections between social and

environmental oppression are acknowledged and addressed in an integrated manner. This is the project of rational reenchantment: promoting social and environmental justice by transcending the constraints of dualistic thought.

Though framed in different ways, the goal of rational reenchantment emerges as a recurrent theme in the writings of theorists concerned with interconnections among pressing societal, educational, and environmental concerns. In what follows I adopt Ynestra King’s concept of rational reenchantment as a focal metaphor to guide consideration of contributions from ecological feminists, environmental ethicists, and Deweyan philosophers, all of which demonstrate the harmful effects of dualistic thought and provide guidance for progress toward equity in educational, social, and biophysical environments.

THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite demands of the feminist movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society.3

These words illuminate a central thesis of ecological feminism: important connections exist between environmental exploitation and social oppression.3 According to ecofeminists, the domination of women and the domination of nature work together in mutually reinforcing ways to maintain modern patriarchal societies. It is not possible to liberate women or solve the environmental crisis within the conceptual constraints of the status quo. What it means to be human, and the nature of human relationships with the nonhuman world, must be reconceptualized from a nonpatriarchal perspective.


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The task of eliminating oppressive relationships motivates ecofeminist efforts to transcend dualistic thought. The antidualist stance in ecofeminist philosophy is well articulated by Karen J. Warren and Val Plumwood. Warren explains that both the domination of women and the domination of nature are justified and maintained by oppressive conceptual frameworks. All oppressive conceptual frameworks share several significant characteristics. First, they are centered in value hierarchical dualisms: "disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional [rather than complementary] and exclusive [rather than inclusive], and which place higher value [status, prestige] on one disjunct rather than the other." For example, rather than viewing humanity and elements of nonhuman nature as distinct yet related variations on a common evolutionary theme, they are perceived as isolated endpoints of a judgment-laden dichotomy privileging humans. In describing this same conceptual pattern, Val Plumwood notes that the overall effect is to alienate and polarize for, "traits taken to be virtuous and defining for one side are those which maximize distance from the other side. The traits most highly regarded and treated as establishing what is 'authentically human,' for example, are those unshared by nonhuman nature."

Warren goes on to explain that the existence of value hierarchical dualism alone does not create an oppressive conceptual framework. This characteristic must be combined with a second distinguishing feature, a logic of domination: a system of values and a structure of argumentation that sanction subordination. To illustrate, if I believe that my artistic skills are more highly developed than those of a plant or an animal, my conceptual stance toward nature is not necessarily oppressive. My stance is clearly oppressive, however, if I assume that because humans possess special abilities that plants and animals do not, humans are morally justified in exploiting plants and animals for their own purposes, without regard to the impact of their actions on the exploited or the natural environment as a whole. The combination of value hierarchical dualism and the logic of domination creates a powerful conceptual dynamic.

Moreover, because all oppressive systems are structured and perpetuated by this same dynamic, all are intensely interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Plumwood illustrates the interconnectedness of social and environmental oppression by proposing that the development of egalitarian humanity/nature and male/female relationships is dependent upon the resolution of a third value hierarchical dualism: the mind/body dichotomy. The assumption that the realm of mind, spirit, rationality, consciousness, and intelligence is separate from and inherently superior to the physical, material, and bodily sphere is a cornerstone of Western philosophy. Plumwood notes that the conceptual centrality of the mind/body dualism derives from its ability to generate, reinforce, and maintain linkages among other more specific dichotomies. She explains:

This spirit-nature split is read into class and sexist relations, women, slaves and lower classes being seen as analogous to the inferior realm of bodily "nature," while "ruling class" males identify themselves with the transcendent spirit.... Here the authentic self is regarded as the soul or transcendent rationality, over against bodily existence... the relation of spirit to body is one of repression, subjugation, and mastery. Material existence is ontologically inferior to mind and the root of moral evil... Domination is "naturalized," so that the inferior ontological and moral characteristics of body in relation to mind are identified with the inferior psychobiological "natures" of women and subjugated classes.  

In reviewing the history of Western education, the impact of the mutually reinforcing relationship between humanity/nature and mind/body dualisms is easily traced. Grounded in the assumption that what is basically and authentically human can be defined in terms of the mind, cognitive activity becomes the focal point of the educational process while lower status and value are delegated to all non-cognitive pursuits. Mind/body, thinking/feeling, reason/emotion, cognition/perception, science/intuition are polarized into value-differentiated oppositional pairs. Our knowledge and understanding of what it means to live and learn as humans are thus distorted. Additionally, because domination of the biophysical world is justified in terms of humanity's unique capacity for thought, the separation of humanity from nature is rigidly maintained.

Such concerns are well articulated in recent interpretations of Deweyan learning theory. In his review of the ecological perspective represented in Deweyan thought, Tom Colwell concludes that for Dewey, any approach to education that assumes separation of humanity from nature is both conceptually and ethically inadequate. 

Dewey believed that human and biophysical development are in essence interactive and interconnected, each occurring within the context of the other. Learning consists of those special interactions that enhance understanding of the "self-in-community" with other humans and the biosphere. Knowledge and values are developed experientially across a broad spectrum of relational encounters. Colwell explains:

> [Humans] constantly emerge within nature in environmental situations composed of a mix of human and nonhuman natural elements and brought about in the incessant flux of nature. These situational problematic centers are the natural genesis of human experience, thought, and learning. They arise within situations of nature and are not actions upon an external environment: the human is one element of nature among other nonhuman elements, and its interaction with them is a mutual exchange....Human experience, Dewey says, "is of as well as in nature." It is not experience which is experienced, but nature.

It should be noted, however, that although human interaction with the biophysical world is central to Dewey's epistemology, the humanity/nature dualism is not reversed, thereby yielding a romantic, nature-centered position. Dewey was not promoting naive, purely sensorial communion with nature. He was not advocating the subordination of self and intellect through narrow preoccupation with physical

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7. Ibid., 121-22.
sensations. Instead, Deweyan learning theory calls for the integration of multiple ways of knowing, the interweaving of complementary information-processing capacities (intellectual, perceptual, and emotional) centered in the concept of experience.

Deweyan themes of continuity and balance are further reinforced by Noel Gough. In formulating what he describes as an ecopolitical paradigm for education, Gough recommends that current emphasis on the education of cognition be balanced with increased emphasis on the education of attention. Rather than perpetuating the tradition of preparing learners to depend almost exclusively upon analytic abstraction, logical inference, and memorization of socially validated knowledge, students should be encouraged to rely more heavily on their perceptual capabilities — to develop enhanced levels of sensory and intuitive awareness that make it possible to gain insight from the informational structures inherent within the environment. Gough elaborates, quoting the work of Emery:

Neo-Lockean theories of perception have led us to believe that “real knowledge is locked up in the storehouses of knowledge that are so jealously guarded by a priesthood of scholars and scientists” and that the best way to gain access to that knowledge is through years of schooling in the disciplines that have been our means for organizing the contents of these “storehouses.” Ecological theories of perception suggest that limitless information is present in our personal, social, and physical environments and that with an “education of attention” we can access as much of it as we need: “It is an education in searching with our own perceptual systems, not an education in how to someday research in the accumulated pile of so-called social knowledge.”

In light of the above it can be argued that an education separating humanity from nature, mind from body, cognition from perception, and thinking from feeling is detrimental to all students. However, it should also be noted that the negative consequences of hierarchy and discontinuity are not equally distributed across student populations. In contemporary classrooms, patterns of epistemological and sociocultural discrimination conspire together to pose significant barriers for female, Chicano, Native American, and other students whose primary talents and resources lie in more holistic and connected ways of knowing.

Looking beyond the classroom to address concerns for change and development at societal levels, the moral and political hazards of dualistic thought are further revealed. Failing to acknowledge the existence and power of oppressive conceptual frameworks plays itself out in the varied forms of social and environmental injustice that are perpetuated throughout the world on a daily basis. Those who are poor or

11. Ibid., 228.
politically powerless suffer the worst consequences of environmental destruction; increasingly, children bear the heaviest burden. Images of young ones irradiated at Chernobyl, burned by toxic gases in Bhopal, and dying of starvation in Ethiopia attest to the terrible price that young ones pay.

Children's lives are further diminished as environmental exploitation and militarism are locked together in a self-perpetuating cycle of destruction. Overconsumption of natural resources by citizens of industrialized nations and Third World elites results in growing militarization, which in turn requires increased consumption. Tensions created by inequitable resource distribution are expected to grow as competition for limited commodities intensifies. Already the lives of millions of children are ravaged by war. Each day throughout the world children are killed, injured, orphaned, left hungry and homeless, conscripted, and held as political prisoners as a consequence of military activity. The amount of suffering imposed on children as a result of recent hostilities in the Middle East has yet to be determined, and may never be fully acknowledged.

Moreover, the interweaving of social and environmental oppression is not unique to the lives of children in developing nations. This point is tragically reinforced by Jonathan Kozol in his description of schooling in East St. Louis, where children study and play amid the fumes from two chemical plants, raw sewage released from antiquated waste disposal systems, and severely contaminated soil poisoned through years of hazardous dumping. In this setting, children's opportunities to learn and grow are severely constrained by levels of childhood asthma and lead poisoning that are among the highest in the United States.

To make matters worse, while the masses suffer from a worldview that justifies the separation and privileging of an elite minority over nonhuman nature and the rest of humanity, the sensitivity of the privileged to the consequences of their actions is deadened. Theories of social change that divorce thought from feeling and humanity from nature discourage rather than promote people's involvement in principled social action. In his analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Deweyan thought, William Chaloupka notes that Dewey well understood the futility of attempting to promote social change through the imposition of values — even highly noble ones — for such imposition cannot speak directly to people's experiences. For many, concepts such as "poverty," "race," or "environmental degradation" become abstractions and therefore lose their motivational power when separated from experiential contexts. The need to establish an experiential basis for

social commitment is intensified for people living in modern, technology-driven societies. Elise Boulding explains:

Building our own experience is particularly important for those of us who live in technological societies, because we spend so much time getting knowledge about the world secondhand... We live inside a shell, a technological shield, which insulates us not only from the vagaries of wind, weather, and temperature but from most of the rhythms of the ecosystem — that wonderful interactive system of biological and social realms. In a well ordered city, who knows when the bees are out for honey? When the moon is full? When its time to dance barefoot? Who is crying alone in the night? Who can't sleep for hunger? We can move through life without knowing these things... The shell moves with the people it encases.17

Even when moral abstractions do inspire social action, the likelihood that such efforts will prove effective is diminished. Failure to acknowledge the crippling effects of dualistic thought often results in fragmented and misguided approaches to reform.18 For example, because thinking in value-laden dichotomies leads us to believe that there is little connection between patterns of social oppression and environmental destruction, politically we may feel that we need to make tradeoffs between educational programs and pollution cleanups — when, as is illustrated in the case of East St. Louis, both concerns must be addressed if either is to be resolved.

To summarize, reform efforts centered in a dualistic worldview privileging humans over nature, mind over body, or thought over feeling cannot eradicate social and environmental neglect or abuse. Exploitation of the biophysical world and the oppression of women, children, racial/ethnic/religious minorities, the disabled, and others are intimately related and mutually reinforcing. Any attempt to radically challenge social or educational inequities must also challenge human domination over the biophysical world. The quest for social and environmental justice is tied to the resolution of value hierarchical dualisms and the logic of domination. This is the project of rational reenchantment.

RATIONAL REENCHANTMENT: CONCEPTUAL AND ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF AN ALTERNATIVE WORLDVIEW

Rational reenchantment is a state of being centered in themes of equity, continuity, sensitivity, and reciprocity, attained by transcending the constraints of dualistic thought. It is a powerful image emerging in response to a deeply felt body of social criticism. Movement toward an ecologically defined state of justice and compassion, however, requires more than expanding the list of targeted oppressions to include environmental exploitation, thereby broadening reform agendas that already appear overwhelming. The transformative potential of ecological thought lies in its ability to generate conceptual bridges; to draw from the theoretical collapse of dualistic thought those themes most likely to inspire environmentally sound social and educational reform, those themes most capable of establishing an evolutionary pathway toward an integrative, egalitarian worldview. In this section I explore two such themes: the reconceptualization of human and nonhuman nature, and the reconceptualization of difference.

Reconceptualizing Human and Nonhuman Nature:

As an initial step on the path toward rational reenchantment, what it means to be human and the nature of human/nonhuman relationships must be redefined in a manner that transcends the harmful effects of dualistic thought. Establishing a philosophy centered in continuity rather than dichotomy poses a direct challenge to the power of oppressive conceptual frameworks. Key aspects of an integrative, ecological ontology are summarized by Stephanie Lahar:

We must understand "natural" and "social" histories [as well as our personal lives] as processes of differentiation and incorporation that are expressions of nature, rather than emerging out of nature. This way we neither annihilate ourselves in nature (reducing ourselves to a small and therefore expendable part) nor sever ourselves from the nonhuman environment and from those aspects of ourselves unmediated by social processes. At the core of the expanded concept of nature which I advocate is the rejection of a subject/object split at its root — the opposition of human consciousness and a mechanical nature — and the adoption, instead, of an ontology of nature as fundamentally material and subjective. This acknowledges different types of subjectivity in natural phenomena that include [but are not limited to] human life and mental processes. In these terms human consciousness is a specialized form of subjectivity, but in no way exclusive or original. Imbuing nature with both materiality and subjectivity provides a substantial basis for commonality as well as differences between human beings and nonhuman life, without the mystification of a discontinuous conceptual leap from nature to human existence.\(^{19}\)

It is important to note that Lahar’s extension of subjectivity/consciousness/intelligence to nonhuman nature is supported by a growing body of scientific evidence challenging the assumption that cognitive activity is exclusive to humans. For example, recent reviews of the literature on animal cognition suggest that all vertebrates are capable of complex learning. Capacities for prediction and the ability to use equivalents of human formal mathematical processes including multiplication, equalities, subtraction, and division have been demonstrated experimentally.\(^{20}\)

Overall these findings suggest a continuum of subjective activity linking all life forms.

If the continuity in human/nonhuman nature is thus established, the ethical implications are quite significant. If subjectivity is not attributed to humans alone, then the human claim to unique moral standing is severely challenged. Concerns for justice and compassion must be extended beyond humanity to embrace all aspects of the biophysical world.\(^{21}\)

Moreover, the need to respond to the biophysical world with responsibility and care can no longer be justified solely in terms of the positive implications of such action for the future of humanity. Moral consideration must be devoted to the well-being, diversity, and longevity of nonhuman entities and ecosystems due to their unique and inherent value. Such consideration can only be developed in light of a more sophisticated understanding of the varied forms of intelligence now expressed outside the realm of human endeavor. Humans are thus called upon to engage in more creative and extensive interaction, to establish new connections across the humanity/nature continuum.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 37.


\(^{21}\) Warren, “Toward an Ecofeminist Ethic.”
RECONCEPTUALIZING DIFFERENCE

Although establishing continuity in relationships previously characterized by separation and alienation is an essential step, this alone is not enough. Continuity-awareness and appropriate response to shared characteristics, must be balanced with sensitivity-awareness and appropriate response to diversity, individual variation, and uniqueness. The reconceptualization of difference also precedes rational reenchantment.

In “Nature and the Theorizing of Difference,” environmental ethicist Jim Cheney analyses two approaches to overcoming the oppositional and alienating affects of dualistic thought. He begins by denouncing what he refers to as “totalizing” or “salvational” theories that attempt to address difference by subsuming it within a greater whole. In such frameworks it is acknowledged that differences among isolated entities exist, but their significance pales in comparison to the commonality experienced as all are drawn together toward shared identification with higher unifying principles. This approach, for example, is promoted by deep ecologists whose writings suggest that alienation from nature can be overcome by turning away from one’s sense of uniqueness as a human in order to fuse with a higher, universal ecological consciousness. One might suggest that this approach is also represented in educational reform movements of the 1980s which subverted efforts to enhance educational opportunities for members of specific disadvantaged populations by promoting individual excellence for everyone.

The problem that lies at the heart of totalizing theories is the acceptance of diversity as a state to be transcended. Difference is thus easily perceived as a deficiency to be corrected, a threat to be controlled and eventually overcome. As Cheney notes, “the central operative idea at work in these concepts is the idea of containment, containment of the other, of difference.” Although totalizing theories can provide a sense of security and wholeness, they also serve to perpetuate alienation, blindness to difference, and “colonization” of the disenfranchised by the privileged.

Recent attempts to promote educational equity through erasure, containment, or colonization of difference reinforce Cheney’s concerns. Based upon false assumptions of shared needs and aspirations, attempts to assimilate diversity by means of gender/class/race “blind” curricula establish loss of gender/race/class identity as a prerequisite for academic success. Disadvantaged students struggle to survive in systems designed to respond to the needs and aspirations of the dominant population.

23. Cheney refers to this aspect of deep ecology as Ecosophy-S and cites such theorists as Warwick Fox, George Sessions, and Bill Devall.
services to assist students struggling to position themselves along a continuum of healthy, socially acceptable sexual identities. Although it is assumed that applying loving perception with respect to sex/gender differences would benefit all students, those whose educational experiences and opportunities are now diminished by discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual preference are likely to benefit most significantly.

Similar to the redefinition of human and nonhuman nature, the ethical implications of reconceptualizing difference merit special attention. To centralize difference, to acknowledge continuity and yet respond to variation with sensitivity and love, a contextualist ethic is required. A contextualist ethic acknowledges the historical, material, and cultural "embeddedness" of moral decision-making. Values are developed in response to, rather than abstracted from, specific situations. Values change over time as knowledge and understanding are enhanced. It is the contextual nature of ethical decision-making that frees us to respond to difference with sensitivity, guiding moral action on the basis of our perception of another's specific need or our own desire to offer a specific contribution, rather than the dictates of traditional hierarchies of rules and rights.

Cheney explains that a decision to extend differential treatment to subjects of moral concern need not be justified in terms of perceived differences in the worthiness or validity of their conflicting claims. Centered in a contextualist ethic, differential treatment is morally justified on the basis of differences in the type of responsibility and care required to address the specific interests or concerns of each subject. It is these differences, not differences in value determined in reference to a universal standard, that dictate differences in moral action. Thus if I am called upon to mediate a conflict of interest concerning the use of a wilderness area in a developing country, my central task is not to determine, in a universalist sense, whose concerns (government and industrial developers, environmentalists, indigenous human and nonhuman populations) are most worthy, and then to privilege the interests of that particular group. Centered in a contextualist ethic, I do not have the option of responding to those entities whose ways of being are most different from my own (plants, animals, land forms) by simply assigning significantly higher or, as is more often the case, significantly lower value to their concerns than to those of the parties with whom I have the most in common. That is, I do not demonstrate appropriate responsibility and care by adopting either a radically protective stance toward plants and animals or by fully supporting industrialist interests. Neither do I behave in an ethical manner by responding to the problem solely in terms of environmentalist versus industrialist concerns, thereby failing to consider the

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31. The importance of assisting young people in developing positive sexual identities is reinforced by results of recent research suggesting that gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers. See Gary Ramafedi, James Farrow, and Robert Deisher, "Risk Factors for Attempting Suicide in Gay and Bisexual Youth, Pediatrics 87 (1991).


33. Ibid.
at the expense of the community. First, we have little control over the receiving of
gifts. As noted by Hyde, "A gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot
buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will."37 The exchange is experienced in
terms of mystery and grace rather than self-congratulation, for we do not earn a gift;
instead, we are blessed.

Further, once a gift is received, we must relinquish control over it at an
appropriate point if it is to maintain its value. Again quoting Hyde, "A gift that
cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant
donation...the gift must always move."38 If we constrain its motion by clinging to it,
or passing it on only when an immediate and equal offering is guaranteed in return,
the power of the gift is lost. If we relinquish our control and give unconditionally, the
gift will return to us, though perhaps after a long period of time and in a dramatically
different form.

In fact, the paradox of gift exchange is that once the gift is passed on, its value to
the individual releasing it and to the community-at-large actually increases. This
increase is experienced directly by participants through their growing involvement
in the mutually beneficial relationships that emerge through the process of gift
exchange. Cheney explains that within such systems one's sense of self and social
value are defined not in terms of personal accomplishments or acquisitions but
rather in terms of the relationships established through giving and receiving: "selves
are not atomistic entities protected by bundles of properties or interests internal to
the individuals. It is a community in which individuals are what they are in virtue
of the trust, love, care, and friendships that bind the community together."39

Finally, in an economy of gift exchange, individual power and privilege are not
easily won and perpetuated by valuing a few select contributions above the rest. A
varied collection of gifts must circulate in order to ensure collective survival and
fulfillment. Diversity thus becomes an important resource.

A Market Economy of Exchange

The equity implications of gift and market economies are well illustrated by
applying each model to the process of schooling. In this section, I begin by summa-
rizing key features of the market economy model that dominates contemporary
educational systems. I will then develop a scenario, written from the perspective of
a teacher, outlining initial steps and primary implications of movement toward an
economy of gift exchange.

xix. It is important to note that Hyde's formulation of gift exchange (based on anthropological studies,
literary examples, and his interest in the lifestyle of the artist) is quite specific and not to be confused with
patterns of gift-giving commonly practiced in contemporary market-driven societies in which objects or
services of approximately equal value are exchanged between two parties in order to fulfill social
obligations. Further, although he acknowledges that gifts can be used negatively (to manipulate, humiliate,
or control) his formulation focuses on the positive aspects of gift, in comparison to market, exchange.

38. Ibid., 4.

A market economy of relational exchange is grounded in value hierarchical dualistic thought. Knowledge, the primary commodity, is defined almost exclusively in terms of cognitive and technical abilities. Attempts to produce, accumulate, and apply knowledge for personal advancement or material gain are generally valued more highly than attempts to teach, share, or apply knowledge in order to sustain the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of the community.40 Knowledge is distributed as efficiently as possible from scholars to teachers to students, all of whom assume standardized roles and responsibilities within a strictly defined relational hierarchy. Because what counts as knowledge is so narrowly defined, few avenues for success and recognition are provided. Because differences in need, ability, and interest are so closely tied to differences in worth, diversity is perceived and experienced as a problem.

Toward a Gift Economy of Schooling

As a teacher wanting to move away from a market economy model I face a formidable task. I realize that it is not enough to tell my students that knowledge is a gift, that teaching and learning do not reside on opposite ends of an artificial dichotomy, that our differences are a source of strength and hope. Instead, I must do all that I can to shape the classroom environment so that the experience of such concepts is likely to occur. So, on the first day of class I inform my students that we need to conduct a “gift assessment”; we need to identify what gifts we have to share and which ones we would like to receive in the process of learning/teaching. I ask that we begin this process alone, partially because we are so rarely provided opportunities for self-reflection, but also because I know that we will all find it difficult. Our experience in a market economy of schooling has taught us to accept the judgment of authorities, to see ourselves in stereotypic categories, to be self-critical, to hide our deficiencies and sometimes our talents from others. We have also learned that the lower one’s position in social and academic hierarchies, the less one has to contribute.

After commiserating for a while about the task and our past experiences, I suggest that we brainstorm together. It is easier for us to begin by identifying contributions and needs not directly attached to ourselves. At first we notice that our collective list is dominated by attributes traditionally recognized and rewarded in schools: content knowledge, academic skills, and individual leadership. We quickly conclude that if everyone is going to participate in numerous, ongoing, give-and-take relationships, we must expand our conception of what is necessary to promote the learning/teaching process. Our suggestions begin to address other dimensions: experiential, intuitive, aesthetic, emotional, kinesthetic, biophysical, and social. Even though the importance of these aspects of classroom life, in comparison to cognitive and technical dimensions, is seldom formally acknowledged, on some level we know that they are essential to the development of supportive and

empowering classroom communities.41 Often we find that we do not even have the vocabulary to describe these gifts, so we use examples or create a new terminology of our own.

When the flow of new ideas begins to subside, we agree to end this early phase of gift assessment. We realize that in order to sustain healthy patterns of exchange, our appraisal of needs and services must be grounded in the reality of our individual and shared life contexts. We therefore plan to revise and expand our collective list over time in light of what we learn by working together in the classroom and by seeking insight concerning our project from family, friends, teachers, administrators, educational researchers, policy makers, and other representatives of the broader community. We are particularly careful to seek out the perspectives of those traditionally excluded from defining knowledge and determining educational policy. We realize that those whose needs and contributions have traditionally been dismissed or ignored — women, children, people of color, the handicapped, and the poor — have a special role to play in defining what constitutes equitable, life-enhancing patterns of exchange. Because they have experienced discrimination, they possess a valuable understanding of the structures and subtleties of oppression and the possibilities for reform.42 We therefore devote special attention to their notions of justice and compassion in schools and society. Additionally, we begin to consider ways in which our learning/teaching community could be enriched by, and contribute to, the biophysical environments in which we are embedded.

As our collective list of needs and services grows more diverse and inclusive, we begin to develop “personal gift exchange profiles.” As a teacher during this transitional stage, it is my responsibility to assist students, and to provide opportunities for them to assist me and each other, in working through this process. I remind my students how important it is to balance potential needs and contributions in their personal profiles because the entire system is dependent upon each of us participating both in acts of giving and receiving. I also remind them that their profiles cannot be permanent or static. We must avoid labeling and locking ourselves into specific roles or categories. Instead, our goal is to learn and grow as individuals while remaining responsive and connected to each other. As a simple way of illustrating both the need for balance and for flexibility, I select a learning/teaching task to be completed in small groups. After necessary roles are identified, students — based upon their initial profiles — select a role with which they feel comfortable; they are

41. This point is supported by results of a recent study in which approximately three hundred and fifty elementary school students and their teachers participated in evaluating the quality of their current classroom experience and in theorizing about the nature of ideal learning environments. Maintaining emotionally positive and supportive classroom atmospheres was identified by both teachers and students as the most significant factor in promoting learning. See Ruthanne Kurth-Schait, “Educational Systems Design by Children for Children,” Educational Foundations 5 (1991): 19-41.

then divided accordingly into heterogeneous, complementary groups. Although they assume this chosen role throughout most of the project, at times students are required to exchange roles and to reflect upon how these changes affect patterns of giving and receiving within the group.

Our work in developing personal profiles soon leads us to reconsider traditional approaches to evaluation. Rather than attempting to measure how much knowledge each individual has accumulated, our efforts are redirected toward assessing the quality of our participation in the learning/teaching community. "What have I shared? what have I gained? what do I hope to give and receive in the future?" become questions central to our analysis. In order to answer these, we must find ways to balance the need for ensuring accountability and adherence to collective values and expectations with the need to encourage self-knowledge, self-expression, and self-respect. We therefore begin to experiment with various combinations of evaluation strategies including self, peer, and "experienced observer" assessment.

As we become more comfortable with our limited gift economy, we are again drawn to interact with social and biophysical communities beyond the classroom. Our task is to expand our learning/teaching economy by building bridges across progressively larger chasms of difference in order to establish new opportunities for mutually beneficial exchange. When approaching difficult problems, therefore, rather than joining with those who are familiar and potentially like-minded, we challenge ourselves to seek counsel from those whose gifts of insight are likely to be very different from our own. When we enter into these divergent relationships we are careful to ensure reciprocity; we begin to realize, for example, that we cannot move toward social or environmental justice by continuing in our attempts to "educate" unwitting "oppressors" or to provide "service" or "protection" for the "oppressed." These metaphors assume that we as "change agents" have something of value to offer to those above and below us on traditional social hierarchies, but do not imply that these others have gifts to offer to one another or to us. Such one-way transfers disrupt the web-like, synergistic nature of gift exchange. Rather than perpetuating such interactions, we are challenged to begin the difficult task of recentering approaches to social and environmental education and activism in metaphors of communication and creative exchange. Increasingly these concepts shape our curricular decisions. We find ourselves asking not only, "Has this knowledge stood the test of time?" "Does it have aesthetic, scientific, or practical value?" but also, "Will this course of study bring us into contact with alternative points of view or ways of being?" "Will it assist us in breaking down old barriers and opening new opportunities for connection and cooperation?" "Will it promote both individual fulfillment and collective well-being?"

As our work on this challenge begins, the first year of our experiment comes to an end. Reflecting back on what we have accomplished, it is clear that we have not reached the standards for justice and compassion implied in the vision of rational reenchantment, yet we are pleased with our progress. By reconceptualizing ourselves as "givers of gifts" we have learned that the central roles of "teacher" and "student" are unnecessarily separated and constrained within traditional classrooms. Our
experience has taught us that responsibilities for the creation, sharing, and application of knowledge can be widely distributed and continually shifting. Rather than perceiving ourselves and each other in terms of socially-defined roles or stereotypes, we have begun to view each other as unique configurations of special qualities and characteristics which serve as potential building blocks for mutually beneficial exchange. Consequently, we are now more aware of our differences but are not so quick to translate these differences into differences in worth.

We are also more aware of the relationships that bind us together. Our experience has taught us that "community" must be defined broadly, including human and biophysical elements, and that all aspects must be sustained in order to ensure continuity and variety in gift exchange. For this reason, the needs and aspirations of the community cannot be subordinated to those of a few select individuals. Neither can the needs and aspirations of specific individuals be subordinated to those of the community. When individuals are pressured to surrender their uniqueness, to seek unity in sameness for the good of the greater whole, they lose their potential to establish just and caring relationships across domains of difference.

Moreover, we have learned that rational reenchantment is not attained by struggling to move awareness and commitment to this cause upward through traditional hierarchies of power and value. Rational reenchantment is not a commodity. It cannot be produced or earned by the elite and then bestowed or imposed on the masses. Instead, the path toward rational reenchantment moves simultaneously upward and downward, inward and outward, weaving among humanity and the biophysical world a complex web of new connections and opportunities that will eventually overcome the oppositional and alienating affects of dualistic thought. Like any worthy goal, rational reenchantment is attained through the giving and receiving of diverse yet complementary gifts.

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