

Sibley Nature Center is situated on 49 acres within Hogan Park in Midland, Texas. The stated mission of this center is “to increase awareness of the natural and historical environment of the southern Llano Estacado through a broad range of interpretive programs and personal experience” (Sibley, n.d.). The director of the center since 1987, Burr Williams, has developed a unique style of education and co-learning through various interactive modalities centered on storytelling and hands-on investigation. He interacts with and shares his knowledge with people of all ages and backgrounds which include, but are not limited to, children in early childhood daycare programs, grade school and high school students, master gardener groups, ranch owners and oil company executives, and senior citizens in managed care facilities. It is his hope to generate a lasting curiosity about, and informed stewardship of, the unique bioregion here in West Texas called the Llano Estacado.

Most people, whether they live here in West Texas or elsewhere, imagine this place as flat, boring, ugly, and unremarkable. Many are fond of saying the best way to see this place is in the rear view mirror of one’s car while driving down the interstate toward either greener pastures and mountain streams or the sights and sounds of the big city. Consequently, I am intrigued by the way Burr consistently activates energy and enthusiasm about an area commonly considered a “wasteland.” People of all ages who have been touched by his stories and activities begin to see with different eyes, to appreciate the uniqueness of this environment, and to understand how this place, the Llano Estacado, shapes them in deep and sometimes inexplicable ways. My goal in this fieldwork is to be a participant observer of this process of education at the center, to engage in as many activities sponsored by the center as possible, and to witness the engagement of other

participants in these programs. I am especially interested in the roles of storytelling, imagination, exploration and creativity in calling people to enter into a deeper awareness and experience of place.

The first gathering I participated with, along with my eight-year-old daughter, was the initial session of a Junior Master Gardener summer camp program. The Junior Master Gardener program is an international youth gardening program that is intended to ignite “a passion for learning, success and service through a unique gardening education” (Junior, n.d.). This summer camp was an intensive, several-weeks-long program of a local group (one of several JMG groups in the city) that meets at Sibley Nature Center and is named “Desert Bloomers.” This particular group aims to educate children about the unique bioregion of the Llano Estacado through traditional gardening (vegetables and herbs) and through designing and maintaining habitats particularly suitable to the flora and fauna of this area. A small JMG garden has been established within the boundaries of Sibley Nature Center and programs are conducted there year-round by volunteer Master Gardeners.

When my daughter Rachel and I arrived, the children were actively engaged in a board game about wildlife diversity, a game whose purpose was to deepen the participants’ understanding of the links between diet & habits. They were exploring the worlds of omnivores, nectivores, and carnivores, and learning about the polarities of nocturnal and diurnal habits of being. The children were highly engaged in this activity ~ there were bright eyes all around, dialogue and discussion was interactive and playful, and the children were laughing and at ease with one another. A space was quickly made for my 8-year-old daughter; she was welcomed warmly and she quickly entered the game; there were instructive and welcome comments from others as she learned “in the flow” how the game proceeded.

I soon learned that the summer camp participants had been divided into 2 groups; while one group played games inside the building, the other group worked in the garden outside. After about 30-45 minutes, the groups switched places and activities. After another 45 minutes or so, all of the “Desert Bloomers” ended up together in the indoor meeting area. After a brief closing session of snacks and wrap-up discussions, prizes were given out to those who had participated in some meaningful way, as determined by the facilitators. The awarding of prizes was used as an incentive for active engagement and curiosity about the activities. Throughout the morning, children were encouraged to be observant, respectful of the environment (picking up trash, not picking all of the wildflowers and native plants along the path), and mindful of their peers and volunteer leaders (assisting others, listening to one another).

When it was time for our group to move outdoors, we found the first group had been shoveling small rocks from a large pile into wheelbarrows and buckets. The children were moving the rocks and placing them on the edges of heavy black plastic that was lining a depression dug into a corner of the garden to form a pond. Students either paired off or chose to work individually: the favored activity was shoveling the rock into buckets. There were several kinds of shovels available; through working with them, the children quickly learned which were more efficient. Some “guarded” their favorite shovel; others decided to take turns, allowing someone else to use the favored shovel from time to time. Some only wanted to carry the buckets over to the pond; others preferred variety and alternated between tasks. Adults who were present often navigated the unwieldy wheelbarrow or carried buckets as well. A few adults hung out near the rock pile; others were near the pond, supervising the placement of the rocks.

It was hot; children were encouraged repeatedly to drink plenty of water. All of the children were very actively involved, even though the work was strenuous and tiring. What could

appear to be tedious and repetitive work was experienced as fulfilling and engaging, perhaps because each child had the freedom to discover his or her unique niche within the possibilities of participation. The children were also involved in documenting their work, taking photos and jotting down notes about the photos they were taking. (The photos were taken with digital cameras and were often shown at the end of the class, when everyone returned to the indoor classroom for snacks and concluding discussions about the activities of the morning.)

After our group had labored about 45 minutes, the other half of the participants rejoined us in the garden, along with Burr Williams who acted as the guide and instructor for the next phase of the morning's adventure. All together now, we trekked several yards down the nature trail to the main pond (original pond) at Sibley to collect "critters" for the new JMG garden pond. This older pond was murky, green, and full of life and "pond-smell." The children were each given nets to use; as they dipped into the water at the pond's edge, they were eager to see what they had captured in the murkiness of this pond. Burr helped the children identify the specimens they found within their nets. Most caught little fish called gambusia (mosquito eaters); these and any other critters caught in the nets were placed in a large bucket of water to safely transport them to the new pond. With our collection in tow, we returned to the little pond that was now full of fresh, clean water. Burr and the children ceremoniously introduced the fish and other pond specimens to their new home; words were said to welcome these critters to the JMG pond and to express the desire for them to thrive in this place that had been prepared for them. The children seemed truly in awe of this moment of introducing new life into a place they had helped design and create. Indeed, there was a general sense of being in sacred space.

When we all returned to the pond the next day, the quiet and calm reverence at the end of the previous day gave way to youthful exuberance and the spontaneous celebration of this

sparkling, crystal clear oasis in our often dry and hot prairie. Several children were happily skipping small stones in the new pond! Others were checking to see how the fish and other critters had fared through the night, peering into the water to catch a glimpse of movement or color. We also noticed several dragonflies who had already located this new oasis, dipping onto the surface of the water or hovering nearby.

One of the tasks for this day is placing fine sand in the shallow end of the pond in an attempt to attract butterflies who like to dip into the moist ground near the edges of water. This work goes slowly ~ the children are awkward with the bulky bags of sand and with the tool (rake) being used to smooth the sand into the water. Some children resume the previous day's task, bringing in more rock along the edges of the pond to fill in areas left undone or partially done the day before.

Today the children are also working in the vegetable garden. They are given simple but ingenious devices made from plastic tubing and clear plastic film canisters. These homemade gadgets are used to gently capture garden bugs by sucking on the tubing and drawing the bugs into the canister that has been sealed with nylon hose to keep the bugs from entering the tubing. There is much energy and excitement generated by this activity, especially when termites are discovered when the earth is explored below the surface. Magnifying glasses appear and are traded back and forth to get a closer look. Corn-ear worms are spied in the corn that has finally matured. The children delight in pulling down the corn silk to reveal this life where it at first appears "nothing is going on." We also find the cotton rats have been decimating the corn, thoroughly enjoying the delicacy as soon as it ripens. All attempts to keep them out of the corn have failed.

The children have become investigators, detectives of the natural world, discovering many aspects of their surroundings that had been right there “under their noses,” ready to unfold under the gaze of a different level of awareness. After the children have had plenty of time to expand the horizons of their curiosity, Burr calls out to gather the children around: “Go ahead and have a sit-down...Take a break.” He encourages them to get some water, adding in his calm but firm voice, “Ever-body hunker down...have a seat.” The coolness of the morning has worn off, and everyone is ready for a water break, glad for the chance to sit around in the shade, on the rocks and on the ground. Burr talks casually with them about what they have been discovering. He is very attentive to them and is careful not to let them interrupt each other, giving everyone time to say what they have to share. Intentionally slowing the pace of activity and interaction, he is always aware of keeping their full attention, gently but consistently drawing those back in who wander or who become distracted with another activity or who are simply fidgeting.

Once he has their attention and he senses they have entered a different mode of listening, he begins to talk about the habitat they are creating in and around the little pond. He introduces them to a plant called blue mist, which they will plant today near the pond. Burr shares a personal story of his experience with this plant and its relationship to butterflies. He is helping them understand what a symbiotic relationship is by explaining how this plant and the butterflies coexist and support one another; one provides nourishment, the other provides pollination for regeneration. In the absence of this symbiosis, neither would continue to survive. Burr talks of the plan to plant these flowers along the walkway to the pond in the hope that it will eventually spread and “carpet that whole area.” He explains how the new plants come up from “suckers” that extend underground from the original plant. He reveals that these plants came from his land, his own garden. By enriching their activities with these stories of interconnected life, he opens

up the possibility that the children will take this work to heart and understand that they, too, are an integral part of the story of this place.

While the blue mist is planted along the path and at the edge of the pond, another plant will be introduced in the pond itself. Burr tells the children why this plant, the money plant (named so for the shape of the leaves, like small coins of green), has to be planted in such a way that it won't become invasive and overtake the blue mist. It will be placed in a container within the pond, allowing it to thrive without crowding out other plants nearby. He explains that the money plant provides the fish and other critters in the pond places to hide out and to find nourishment. A volunteer who has this plant in her own pond divided some of hers and donated them to the children's pond.

One child takes this opportunity to ask about the fish that he has noticed traveling over a boundary in the pond, moving into a shallow area that soon could dry up and leave the fish stranded. Burr explains how to address that dilemma by bringing down the level of the water and removing the possibility of adventurous fish crossing that boundary.

Burr then begins to expand on the understanding of habitat and co-existing species. Because children living in the Llano Estacado have generally been taught to be very wary of certain insects (pests), Burr takes some time to point out that insects are not "bad." Wasps, for example, are commonly exterminated as soon as they or their nests are discovered. Burr explores how and why we should take steps to live with wasps and allow their place in the environment. He points out their crucial role in the eco-system while also sharing things to watch for/be aware of when encountering wasps. For example, a nest way up high is okay as long as it is not near the doorway of a building or passageway where passersby could unintentionally disturb it. He

stresses to the children that one must be warier of wasps and their activities in the fall, for this is the time of year when wasps are more easily disturbed by accidental intrusion.

Burr points out that insects are abundant, and he astounds the students when he informs them that throughout the year there could be about 5,000 in one backyard! He acknowledges that we know a lot about the ones that hurt us ~ but others go practically unnoticed and we don't know much about them. He encourages the children that in order to know more about insects, all that is required is observation over long periods. He shares the story of how he and a group of children learned something interesting about grasshoppers as they walked and observed along the nature trails one day; by investigating the unfamiliar sounds they heard as they walked, they discovered that grasshoppers get together in one location and sing when it's time to mate. He also talks briefly about two of the children's favorite insects in his area: the roly-poly and the ladybug. They are intrigued to hear that roly-polies are great for breaking down rotting vegetation (in compost piles) but are not happy visitors to a newly planted garden where they devour tender seedlings. Many are surprised that ladybugs, though they migrate through our area, really prefer the mountains. He and other participants share stories of coming upon huge gatherings of ladybugs on the top of mountains in New Mexico and far West Texas. Burr winds up his discussion about the smaller inhabitants of our region by asking the children to keep their eyes open for box turtles to bring to the garden; they need about a half dozen to help with the insects that are not garden friendly but provide excellent nourishment for box turtles.

By this time, the children are ready to stir again, and various children are called by name for specific tasks. "Mouse," who noticed the problem with fish escaping into the dangerous shallows, is given the job of pouring gravel/rock in the appropriate area of the pond. Others are drawn together, usually in groups of two, to complete the various steps required to plant the two

kinds of new plants in or near the pond. Burr and the other adults encourage teamwork and cooperation through communication, questioning, and problem solving. The money plants are placed in several dirt-filled buckets in the deep part of the pond. The blue mist is planted along the pond edge and marshy area near the path; a little stream is dug out using large sticks to help draw water from the pond out to the young plants.

It was clear that the children were particularly enthralled with the garden and pond this day. The bug catching and observing started it all and the stories and interesting “odd facts” shared by Burr deepened their fascination and interest. The children had thoroughly enjoyed lingering in the garden area, interacting with the place and each other. When the time came to disperse, they seemed reluctant to move on.

A few weeks after this intensive and high-energy experience with school-aged children, I was able to accompany Burr as he conducted a morning nature walk with a group of senior citizens at a local senior-citizens’ housing development and center. I was curious to discover how he would approach a different audience in his efforts to educate others about the flora and fauna of the Llano Estacado. It was interesting that his style of conversation and storytelling did not change; however, the facts he chose to share generally carried more of an historical depth. In addition, though we covered very little physical ground during the walk, the number of things noticed and talked about was surprisingly high.

One tree encountered at the onset of the walk, for example, elicited conversation on a number of levels. First, it was apparent the tree, a piñon, was suffering. When asked about it, Burr acknowledged the tree was indeed dying, probably from too much water due to the frequent watering schedule of the sprinkler system; this tree was planted amid flora that required more water than it needed. Someone suggested that this type of tree just could not thrive in our

climate; Burr countered with the fact that there actually was a tree of this type on a ranch in the next county (planted and watered appropriately) that had grown to be taller than a two-story building. Another person shared that she had often seen a bird called a piñon jay in and around this tree. She had been surprised to see such a bird, as this species was more common in New Mexico and Colorado. Burr concurred that this bird is not common in this region, but he shared an interesting story about a large number of these birds showing up in our area about four to five years ago. It was highly unusual at the time, but ever since then the sightings have been fairly regular, though not in such large groups. As we were beginning to walk beyond the piñon tree, a third woman commented on the sap oozing from it; Burr agreed with her suspicion that it was a sign of the tree suffering, but then offered the suggestion that pioneers and native Americans often harvested the sap as their form of snack food along the trail and asked if she would like to try it after he sampled a bit. She and one of her friends agreed to follow his example; however, they were not highly enthusiastic about recommending it to others!

Just a few steps further along, Burr spied a native plant, purslane, that was harvested during the depression in this area and cooked as greens to prevent scurvy. The same woman who sampled the piñon sap remarked that when she lived in New Mexico, she observed New Mexicans eating this plant as greens also. Burr added that purslane can now be found with various colors of blooms, but only the yellow blooming is the wild variety – all others have been introduced from elsewhere. Another native plant, spurge, was spied by a participant on the walk. Burr cautioned that its sap is dangerous; it will burn the eyes and, if it gets on the skin, that spot becomes particularly photo sensitive and irritated. This group seemed particularly intrigued by the information on edible plants; another participant asked Burr about the morning glory growing

close-by, as she had heard of it being used in salads. He had heard of it being utilized in other areas of the country, but not our particular variety.

This group of elderly women moved slowly, but noticed every little thing around them on the walk. Though we only walked about 50 feet from the building, we spent nearly 30-45 minutes talking about insects (“I have a little bee that is in my garden every morning . . .”), edible plants, birds and broken egg shells, native and introduced plants, pioneer days and practices, and several other topics of interest. After this short foray into the outdoors, we returned indoors and gathered around to sit and listen to Burr share information about the natural history of this region. Several men joined the group at this point, and Burr’s audience eagerly listened to his presentation, which ranged from the period of the Ice Age to the time of the Lipan-Apache Indians in the 1600s. He and his audience were in complete agreement that if you live someplace, you should know the history of that place. Burr brought his talk to a poetic close by pointing out how a people are shaped by the eco-system in which they live, by the place they inhabit. For example, those of us in West Texas, where the land is flat and the sky is wide, are accustomed to seeing far and living like the sky is the limit. There is a lot of space here and room for optimism, for example. He asked if there were other ways in which the people in the audience imagined the land on which they live had shaped them. The responses were quite interesting and varied:

“There is room for God in everybody.”

“We knew we were in God’s presence.”

“I feel crowded in the woods of East Texas.”

“I can’t see anything in the mountains.”

“You don’t like it at first, but it grows on you.”

“I’ve got alkaline in my veins, sand in my craw.”

“The sunsets, the moon, even those old dried tumbleweeds are beautiful!”

When it was time for Burr to bring his talk to a close for this visit and resume another day, many in the audience remarked, “Don’t stop now!” and “So soon?” This audience undoubtedly shared Burr’s passion and love for the place they call home, the Llano Estacado. They were eager to hear stories about the history of this place and to have the opportunity to share their own versions and interpretations of the people and the land. There was a mutual hunger for celebrating and revisiting the unique richness of a land that, at first glance, appears to be miles and miles of barren wasteland and endless horizons. History came alive in that room, and the spirit of the land resonated in the voices, the eyes, and the memories of the elders who spent that morning with us.

The flavor of these excerpts of my time with people of various ages who were engaged in learning about and exploring their connection with the land they inhabit is distinctly different in many ways. However, they each resonate deeply with many of the concerns and observations of those who are engaged in the work of re-establishing a living and co-creative connection between humanity and the earth. It’s not that this connection has ever really faltered or weakened; rather, it is that the connection has been pushed aside, ignored, reduced to sentimentalism, or relegated to the borders of consciousness or attention. The connection is always there, but most of us (especially in the technologically advanced Western world) have become what Gary Snyder terms “nature-illiterate” (2000), unable to appreciate and nurture the wildness of our earth and, consequently, the wildness of our own psyche (both collective and individual). It seems to me that the fieldwork I chose has indicated ways in which this

disconnected style of living on earth can be broken, opening up alternate avenues of connection and discourse with the natural world, with the wild.

Jung once observed, while reflecting on the state of modern consciousness and man's dissociation from nature, that

Natural life is the nourishing soil of the soul. Anyone who fails to go along with life remains suspended, stiff and rigid in midair. That is why so many people get wooden in old age; they look back and cling to the past with a secret fear of death in their hearts. They withdraw from the life-process, at least psychologically, and consequently remain fixed like nostalgic pillars of salt, with vivid recollections of youth but no living relation to the present. (Sabini, 2002, pp. 67-68)

The group of senior citizens who were actively engaged in the nature walk and natural history talk Burr Williams conducted exhibited the energy and enthusiasm that Jung laments the loss of in those who do *not* choose to stay in touch with their natural surroundings. This group not only literally got out and observed the world as it presented itself in the moment; they were also deeply involved in re-imagining and re-calling their connections to the land through not only natural history but also their own individual lifelong relationships to the land they inhabit.

Through ongoing visits and contact with this group of seniors, it became clear to me that they fully understood what Jung meant when he maintained that

Man has always lived with a myth, and we think we are able to be born today and to live in no myth, without history. That is a disease. That's absolutely abnormal, because man is not born every day. He is born once in a specific historical setting, with specific historical qualities, and therefore he is only complete when he has a relation to these things. (Sabini, 2002, p. 98)