

**A Sense of Place and the World Within**

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Abstract:

The author explores her own personal journey toward a sense of place as she draws connections among our natural and human community, early childhood development, peace, and sustainability. The story contributes to the continuing dialogue that explores the relationship of place to humans and its various viewpoints, approaches and experiences.

*Keywords:* sense of place, place-based pedagogy, peace education, sustainability, intercultural and refuge experiences, early childhood education



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My quest for peace and a sense of place reflects the history and cultural background of the place I came from, recognizing now how our beginnings create our future paths. Mine is a living story shaped by remarkable experiences and diverse perspectives, fusing past and present into a dance of harmonious and discordant crescendos creating the person I am today: mother, educator, peacemaker, and activist. Experiencing life in different countries and adapting to very diverse political systems, cultures, and languages has helped me to feel the world between spaces and words: where the intra-active interacts subliminally and where the richness of life is often experienced in simple gestures of kindness. This has also helped me to appreciate the fact that life is filled with an equal amount of peaceful and conflicted situations that need an equal amount of time to become life lessons for our own ever-evolving self-development.

I was born in former Czechoslovakia, a small country located in central Europe, filled with rich history, culture, and a troubled past. My parents were avid nature people. They canned food, shopped at the local markets and tended a huge garden we owned behind our house. My sister and I walked to school daily in all sorts of weather. In my country we walked everywhere. By walking we experienced the rhythm of the earth, met the same people every day, greeted each other, and on occasion stopped for a friendly chat. Those experiences presented us with unique opportunities of naturally acquiring social skills that sustained me into adulthood. To know how to greet a person, speak in a cultured manner to the neighbors, and maintain ongoing peaceful relationships despite our differences requires social-emotional skills.

What I learned at an early age is to pay attention to the world around me with a compassionate eye. I would often sit quietly observing the constant flow of a stream making ripples on the water and feel the peaceful tranquility of silver stars gently touching the tips of the waves, while being completely surrounded by quietness. I

remember waking up and running outside, tracing exposed roots of the trees, and mapping the forest grounds directing me to the shelters I built with leaves, moss, and fallen sticks for little critters. The magic of childhood spent in nature provided me with a solid core of knowing who I am and my place on this earth. I am convinced that spending time in nature contributes to a strong sense of place; however, it is not limited to a physical place only. It is also an experience that is connected to that place and felt deeply in the heart, thus providing a sense of contentment and belonging which ultimately leads to a strengthened identity and security (Bowers, 2005).

These childhood experiences of growing up in nature and with people created an inner sense of place I carry deeply in my heart. When traveling and settling in different countries and experiencing adjustment difficulties, I could always find a creek or go for a hike or make small talk with a passerby to reach out to my childhood memories. Nature and beauty and a small friendly chat with bystanders helped to sustain my ability to face different and often complex cultural interactions. It supported me in my conscious effort to balance my inner circles while connecting to outer circles of different cultural ethics, customs, and landscapes. The almost obsessive seeking of my inner sense of place fostered in me a need to live in harmony with my deeply embedded cultural traditions while adapting to very different social norms. This profound knowing of where my sense of place lies resulted in increased competence to carve out a meaningful life for my family and myself in a land that has such a different mindset from my own culture.

Living in the cold war era in my homeland ruled by a communist government, I witnessed firsthand the traces of the past pain of the Second World War, the present trauma of the communist oppressive regime, and what those caused to my parents' and grandparents' generations. I wonder how much epigenetic inheritance played a role in my upbringing, thinking of my ten-year-old self passionately writing peace poems expressing my wish for world peace, somehow hoping to ease their pain away. As a young child I had a tendency to shower my parents with forbidden questions of why we were occupied and had closed borders around us. Why could we not travel, and why did most adults turn their heads away when children asked such questions? Feeling the unspoken tension and sense of learned helplessness when people met in alleys and discussed their life situations with eyes probing the crowds for potential spies, helped me to understand how the inner sense of place can survive within each of us under the most brutal and unpredictable conditions.

I am a political refugee who crossed the borders of Austria and former Yugoslavia in 1984 in pursuit of living my life free to travel, free to think for myself, and free to accomplish my dreams and life purpose. As I witness the current mass exodus of refugees coming to the shores of Europe, I finally open to my own healing and recognize how much courage, sense of self-preservation, and hopeful trust in the future I must have possessed at just 22 years old. Seeing people walking the Hungarian land, marching toward Austria, their faces filled with determination and hope for a future that has been lost in their homelands, I suddenly realize that this journey was mine 30 years ago. As I look around admiring my new home and the gentle candlelight shimmering from the glass hurricanes, I have the urgent need to cry and let go. My feelings further unfold into the abyss of thinking about the amount of desperation, courage, and strength that prompt some people to flee and seek out a better life for themselves and their families, while

others stay and cope with their unbearably harsh life situations. I am curious how much the role of place and culture defines one's willingness to leave everything behind and/or stay. What if people's attachment to the land, culture, and home is strong, yet people are forced to leave due to famine, war, or drug violence? What kind of replicating circles of trauma do many of the geo-political conflicts create for the refugee communities?

To understand my lifelong quest for peace and sense of place, I decided to examine the foundation of my journey and the connection between my cultural background and the societal mindset including the particular era and place in which I was born. My home country, now the Czech Republic, is a small nation where for most of its history people lived in small towns knowing each other and developing their local cultures. On occasion, these communities quarreled over natural resources, which eventually resulted in small tribal wars. However, in general, the society at large did not engage in outward aggressions toward another nations. As Madeleine Albright (2012) suggested, the reason was the small size of this nation along with genuine peacemaking tendencies, which directed its people to take care of the land and focus on family instead of harboring aggressive tendencies. These local cultures depended on each other in terms of trade and livelihood as well as the dependence of how they approached peace and crisis. Knowledge of Czech social life, interactions, and routines was passed on to the next generation, adapting and creating new knowledge that was closely tied to the historic knowledge of that place. Woven through daily life activities, celebrations, religious or spiritual ceremonies, areas of play and work, and stories and other forms of creative expressions, this intergenerational knowledge eventually formed a specific mindset of the society, which would manifest in times of crisis, conflict, or peace (Boulding & Ikeda, 2010).

My ethnic awareness acknowledges that the Czech Republic, its bioregion, the geography of the place, and the diversity of the landscape are all part of my psyche, subliminally influencing my unconscious, emotions, well-being, and attitudes and approaches to a variety of initiatives, be they peaceful or problematic. Living in the Czech Republic under the Russian occupation helped me to understand our people's strong aversion toward violence and aggression. I view the people of the Czech Republic as quiet peacemakers closely tied to the land and family, resilient people who over the span of many years masterfully adapted to practicing peace strategies that would help this tiny nation to survive on a daily basis. Following closely the landscape of tribal wars, three hundred years of established monarchies, two violent world wars, and involuntary imposition of a variety of political regimes, resulted in my indepth understanding of a personal inner need to comprehend the concept of peace. I deeply relate to my ancestors' longing for peace.

I was born in the Sudeten land marked by a violent past and filled with tragic stories of forceful ethnic movements instigated by Hitler's divisive policies in 1938. As a young child I noticed many older women sitting on benches around town squares, eyes filled with sadness, and I listened to the firsthand stories of these true war survivors. These stories were not scary to me because they were told with heart and factual lived experiences. As if I was listening to the ancient fables and mythology, these stories helped me to understand and respect my ancestors for not engaging in wars and rather retreating, knowing that oppressive situations shall not be permanent.

The people of this small land-locked country surrounded by mountainous horizons decided to shape their destiny through a peaceful path. One would question why Czech people prefer music, humor, and art to fights and wars. Is the land beneath their feet tired, asking directly to be taken care of? As Albright (2012) writes, “The destruction of Bohemian nobility had given Czechs a uniquely democratic character: unpretentious, practical, and steeped in humanitarian values” (p. 31). She suggested that the land has a quiet role in shaping those values.

My passion and life commitment lies with teaching, which I perceive as a work of heart and a pathway to freedom and peace. One cannot teach without compassion, love, curiosity, and high respect for life. Before I entered the Prescott College doctoral program, my academic focus was on early childhood education and how I could make a difference in the way we teach for integration in order to educate children for their full potential. I researched nature, the essential need of humans to be in nature, and its health benefits on the child’s development. Through exploration of peace studies I reflected on values and ethics of peace and mapped out different ways of how to educate for peace, which helped me to realize the enormity of this issue. This awareness inspired me to seek connections between environments and aesthetics (Berleant, 1992), and eventually create a sequential map leading me to the question I pose to myself: What does it involve to help children realize their full potential while nurturing in them the essential need for conservation, genuine respect for coexistence, and the value of restoration? My masters’ thesis research focused on connecting aesthetics and environment, which resulted in creating a holistic curriculum with peaceful and sustainable tendencies. As young children experience sensory motor stimulation and react to the aesthetic pleasure of creating, the experience of deep motivation within occurs that inspires children on their path to a deeper purpose, creates connection to the place, and promotes compassion and an aesthetic appreciation of life (Berleant, 1992). With this appreciation, the need for preservation develops into adulthood, thus creating sustainable ways of living, conserving, preserving, and appreciating life (Bowers, 2005).

Being an educator of young children for over twenty years, working in various public and alternative school environments and recently experiencing major accreditation processes, I wonder what approaches would encourage experiences that cultivate positive values and compassionate attitudes toward others and the world, which is so much needed now. Our human identity and personal fulfillment is closely tied to our relationship with nature and with others to help us sustain healthy emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and spiritual development (Wilson, 2002). The power of our need to share and create can be visualized as a web entwining through a fabric of space influenced by the interactions and connections we experience and live (Capra, 1996). These interactions start with young babies and continue throughout early childhood years helping children to adopt effective strategies that will sustain them into their adulthood (Siegel, 2012). As I witness young children’s play focused mostly on media types instead of the creative and free-flowing scheming of imaginary play scenarios, I often grieve the loss of child’s play. Children come and share with me images of movies that should have never been introduced at this age or freely talk about guns and real violent images they saw on daily news. Many children have stressful weekends resulting from moving between two households, often crying and asking for the other parent or being overly sensitive or

aggressive in their interactions with others. I notice children in my classroom who ask and need unhurried and loving time to spend in someone's arms, time to stay quiet, or time to rest. Especially on Mondays children ask for space just to be and play so we listen and take them for nature walks or play outside.

Observing this phenomenon I am more than ever convinced about the crucial importance of letting children have time in nature. I recognize now that we must approach early childhood as a sacred place for teaching ethical and peaceful practices in order to imagine a sea change toward a sustainable existence. The castles filled with light and the dreams of the young child's mind where everything is possible and functions as an interconnected web of life, is a right given to every young child. I see many young children walking into my classroom understanding this basic fact of interconnectedness, and I wonder if other educators feel this way and understand how essential it is to help young children to keep this wisdom despite the encroaching culture of a uniform and standardized way of learning.

One of the ways to nourish this sense of interconnectedness is to engage in a significant dialogue that explores the relationship of place to humans and various viewpoints and approaches (Chalquist, 2007; Amster, 2015). Place-based pedagogy consists of diverse perspectives related to a sense of place, embracing a way of knowing through observation, personal reflection, and willingness to engage with the place (Bowers, 1992; Orr, 1994). By exploring the relationship between the land, culture, and its inhabitants, people are able to achieve informed perspectives about environmental approaches and ask fundamental questions: 1) What is the relationship of place to a human system? 2) Is there a connection between environment, aesthetics, and peace? 3) What happens to the environment and people when attachments to place are disrupted? 4) Is there a connection between place and person, environment and self, and mental health?

Arnold Berleant (1992) suggests that when humans engage in the environment, the participatory activity encourages an integrative perception of the aesthetic dimension, which has the potential to be very enriching and powerful, and can eventually result in influencing human values and judgments. Berleant further suggests that with this intentional environmental appreciation, values such as tolerance, respect, and humility might increase, hopefully resulting in a thoughtful approach to planning and preserving our surroundings. According to Chet Bowers (2005), considerably planned or preserved places have the potential to evoke internal feelings of beauty and contentment. These feelings are inclusive and evoke a sense of peace which is directly connected to the place and helps to nurture a sincere need to preserve the place (Bowers, 1992). This need helps to build a sense of conservation and sustenance, thus helping humans to strengthen the bond between them and the place. Once humans seek beauty in surrounding environments, a sense of peace and willingness to preserve it naturally develops (Berleant).

As David Orr (1994) points out, place-based pedagogy explores these connections and encourages children to learn about their own place and their connection to others through that place. Wilson (2002) states that human identity and personal fulfillment depend on our relationship with nature as well as our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and spiritual development. This development is influenced by the relationships

that form a basic fabric of daily interactions (Siegel & Bryson, 2011), and those start very early once the young children enter early childhood centers.

To feel connected to the place, it is necessary for young children to explore the local place, know the plants and vegetation, be with the seasons and people, and understand the culture of that place (Bowers, 2005). Children who have had direct contact with the natural world during their early years feel connected to their world and develop an ecologically sensitive approach to nature and later the need to preserve it (Orr, 1994). In other words, they develop a sense of place. This sense of place further fosters a sense of wonder as well as nurtures children's sense of beauty, natural appreciation, and deep respect for the mystery of life, thus supporting their imagination (Wheatley, 2002).

According to Orr (1994), having a sense of place separates temporary residents from more permanent dwellers, who become rooted in a particular place with knowledge, care, and love. This profound understanding fosters emotional and spiritual ties to the place, a sense of belonging, and an integral relationship between the land and its inhabitants (Stone, M. K., Barlow, Z. & Capra, F., 2005). When young children experience this communal feeling, their behaviors and values enhance their development toward ecological and cultural preservation, understanding that the whole community is involved in this process.

The temperate forest of rolling hills that was my original home and the high desert plateau in Arizona that I now call home form two fundamentally different landscapes that through my lived experience somehow mysteriously mesh into one. The Arizona desert starry sky brings me back to childhood wintery nights of the Jeseniky Mountains where the sky would carry on with brilliant light, comforting me with the feeling of arriving home. As I climb the Phoenix canyons up toward the high desert and the crisp air makes space for a spectacular light show of the early night sky, I let stars carry me back to my adopted home. These and many other land messages help humans to sustain themselves in an almost umbilical way, knowing that they are tied to the soft nuances of the land they live in (Chalquist, 2007). The strength of personal comfort lies in the depth of understanding that I am able to sense from the land, seeing its patterns and transforming them into my new home. As Helen Meloy (2002) powerfully writes, "We are blood-tied to landscape by the language of cells. Although we may be hell-bent for metaphysical starvation, trying with all our might to surrender our sensory intelligence to technology and massive artifice, it will take time for these million-years-old senses to atrophy, to go the way of our tail, devolved to a bony nub" (p. 320).



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Lenka Studnicka is an accomplished educator and an award-winning designer. Lenka is completing her Ph.D. in Sustainability Education with an academic focus on peace education in early childhood contemplated as a sustainable peace building process, which is supported by her international doctoral research. Lenka lives in the small high desert town of Prescott, Arizona.