

# Nature as Refuge, Nature as Teacher

*Helping students connect to nature in a mindful way  
can offer refuge, resilience, and hope in challenging times*



All photos by Stephanie Alekskiuk



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By **Stephanie Alekskiuk**

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**Y**OU PROBABLY DON'T NEED ME TO TELL YOU that we're living in challenging times. The difficulties we are facing as individuals, as communities, and as a planet often seem overwhelming, leading to feelings of depression, anxiety, and even despair. How can we bolster our own mental and emotional well-being and that of our students during these times? How can we inspire the next generation to care for and act on behalf of the living world? How can we work together for social justice and true reconciliation? Can connecting with nature in a mindful, embodied way play a role?

Just outside the doors of any school is a whole world of sensory stimulation that offers a welcome change of pace. Supporting students to cultivate a connection to the natural world, even in the schoolyard, can offer solace: providing a source of refuge in challenging times. As a connection to the living world deepens, however, nature can become more than just a place to escape our difficulties, it can become a teacher: modeling the wisdom of honouring

and staying present to our challenges. Cultivating the courage to do so can build resilience and empower us to work together to find creative solutions to the difficulties we are facing as individuals and as a society. Doing so in a mindful way, can magnify these benefits.

This article explores some ways that teachers can take students outside as a way to support them to find resilience in difficult times. Bringing together the power of nature connection with the benefits of present-moment, embodied awareness, these activities can support student well-being in the short-term, as well as to teach them skills and strategies that will benefit them throughout their lives. Although the activities shared here are geared toward students from Kindergarten to Grade 4, most are appropriate for all ages, including adults.

## A. Nature as refuge

Many of us find refuge from the storms of life in the natural world. Just going for a walk in the neighbourhood or sitting outside on a balcony can widen our perspective. We can model for our students the ways in which nature can serve



as a refuge when we feel overwhelmed, by changing the pace and taking learning outside.

With its ever-changing array of sights, sounds, smells, and sensations, nature invites us into the present moment. When we take the time to slow down and pay attention with all of our senses, anxious thoughts fade to the background. This puts us in a great position to open to gratitude, which can further bolster feelings of well-being.

*"We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures."*  
– Thornton Wilder

Practicing gratitude feels good! There is so much we take for granted moment to moment: from the delicious way that air fills our lungs to the essential way that water hydrates our bodies. In addition to drawing students' attention to these more subtle (though always available!) gifts, taking them outside to notice and connect to the beauties of nature, even in the schoolyard, can make practicing gratitude even easier. Here are some simple activities that can help invite your students into mindful presence outdoors.

## Activities<sup>1</sup>

### Human Camera

**Credit:** Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy

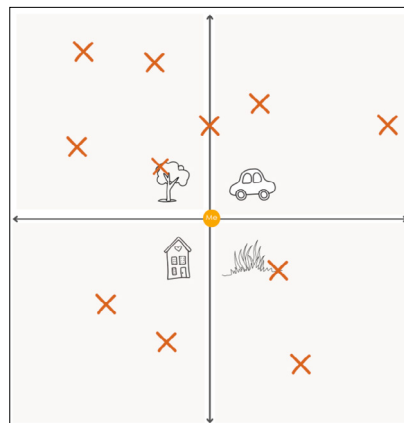
Take students outside for this activity, to help them to develop gratitude for the natural beauty visible from the schoolyard.

Divide students into partners. Have one partner be the photographer, the other the camera. Have the camera close her eyes. The photographer will guide her to a "picture perfect" view and tap her shoulder to "take a picture." These can be done as "close ups" by bringing the camera close to an object, or as "wide angles" by giving the camera a wide view. As the photographer taps on the camera's shoulder, she opens her eyes, takes in the view for several moments, then closes them again. The photographer continues to find two

additional views for two additional photographs. Partners switch roles, and the new photographer does the same: guiding the camera to 3 different spots, tapping his shoulder to take 3 different pictures.

### Sound Map

This activity works great out in the schoolyard! Invite students to find a place to sit with a journal and pencil. Offer these instructions:



Set up your map (to be done quickly, no perfection needed!). Divide your page into four quadrants. Add a circle at the centre - that represents you! Draw something you notice with your eyes in each of the four quadrants: in front, and behind you, to the right, and to the left.

Take a good look at your map. Now, close your eyes and open your ears. With eyes closed, mark your map with an "x," each time you hear a sound. Don't worry if you don't get the location just right! Invite students to open their eyes once their ability to pay attention to sounds has diminished.

Come back together as a group to share. What did you hear? Did you notice anything new? What sounds did you enjoy hearing? Did any of the sounds spark your curiosity? What kinds of things are you wondering about?



## Mindful breathing

The following five activities work wonders when transitioning between activities. Children often respond well to the invitation to bring their attention to their breath in a fun, embodied way. What's more, mindful breathing brings us back into the present moment, allowing us to more effectively connect with the natural world.

- Flower breathing (Credit: Thich Nhat Hanh). Hold two fists in front of your body, fingers folded on top – these are your flowers. As you breathe in, open your hands, exposing your palms. These are your flowers opening to the sun. As you breathe out, close your hands again, the flowers are closing. Repeat as many times as is helpful.
- Mountain breathing: Spread your left hand out wide, fingers pointed to the sky. Place the index finger of your right hand on the base of the thumb on your left. Trace the 5 fingers of your left hand with your right index finger. Inhale on the way up, while saying, “Up the mountain.” Exhale on the way down, saying, “Down the mountain.”
- Volcano breathing: Crouch down, close to the ground. Place your palms together in front of your chest. Stand up forcefully, inhaling as you extend your hands straight up and then exhaling as you drop your arms, extended, to the side of your body. This represents the lava erupting out of the volcano. If it helps, audibly exhale or yell as you do so.
- Rainbow Breathing: Start with palms together at the chest. As you inhale, raise hands high. Exhale while lowering arms out wide in the shape of a rainbow. As you exhale say: “Red”. Bring palms together at the chest. As you inhale, raise hands high (but a little lower than the first time). Exhale while lowering arms out wide in the shape of a rainbow. As you exhale say: “Orange”. Continue with each colour of the rainbow (yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet), decreasing the size of each arc as you go. To add an additional challenge: start small with violet, and increase in size, until you reach red.
- Teddy bear breathing: Invite students to lie down on the ground. Place a teddy bear, or similarly-sized object



on their bellies. Invite them to breathe in and watch the teddy bear rise with the breath. Invite them to exhale and watch the teddy bear fall. Try quick breaths, then slow breaths.

Continue for as long as is helpful. Since this activity is great to do outdoors, one option is to invite the students to find loose parts in nature (sticks, pinecones, etc.) to place on their belly.

## Howl like coyotes

Any time you need students to come together and get out some energy, invite them to howl like coyotes. If it helps, play the sound of coyotes howling from YouTube: it's hard to resist adding your voice to the chorus of the pack.

## Sit spots

The place where we teach is more than just a backdrop. It is living land we can feel a connection to. This connection can be supported by establishing a place bonding or sit spot practice. Sit spots involve taking time to connect to a particular place on a regular basis. In addition to providing students with practice in paying attention, the sit spot offers a chance to develop and reflect on a growing relationship to place.

You may be wondering how sit spots can work when the only “nature” available to your students in the schoolyard is a field of grass, which for most of the year, may be covered by trampled-down snow. It may take a little imagination and encouragement, but you will be surprised and delighted by what your students notice when given the chance. What colour is the sky today? What shape is that cloud? Why is that bird flying over there? Why was my shadow shorter last time? With change being constant outdoors, there is always something to notice and wonder about.

By establishing a sit spot practice with your students, you will be offering them the space, time, and guidance that is needed to learn to attend deeply. With this kind of attention comes curiosity, wonder, creativity, and insight. All qualities that will help them along their learning journey. Developing a close relationship to a particular spot in nature can also offer them a sense of belonging: a gift that will sustain them through difficult times<sup>ii</sup>.

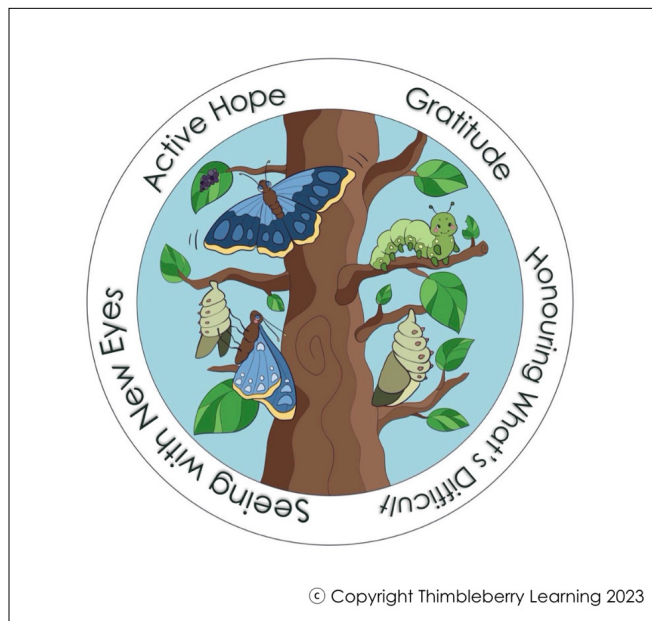
Learning to attend to the natural world through gratitude, embodied awareness, and sit spot practices can serve as a refuge for students: a way to escape and find solace when challenges come their way. As a relationship to the natural world grows, however, nature can become more than just a place of escape. It becomes a teacher. Nature shows us that there is wisdom in facing that which is difficult; that our challenges, when honoured, and even embraced, can be opportunities for growth and transformation.

## B. Nature as teacher

The natural world does not seem to shy away from darkness or difficulty; times of challenge are often followed by times of growth. What's more, much of the living world experiences periods of dormancy, rest, and retreat: a process that paves the way for productivity. It is often our habit to want to skip past the difficult and get to the results. Winter, though, is not a mistake. The pupa is not a problem. We can allow our challenges to work on us and then watch what begins to emerge.



## The Butterfly Cycle



*"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly,  
but rarely admit the changes it has gone through  
to achieve that beauty."  
– Maya Angelou*

The Butterfly Cycle is a framework that can help students be mindful of their own inner experience as they navigate the ups and downs that come their way. Borrowing from Joanna Macy's four-fold spiral from [The Work That Reconnects](#)<sup>iii</sup>, the Butterfly Cycle invites students to map their own experience to the life stages of (1) caterpillar – *gratitude*, (2) chrysalis – *honouring what's difficult*, (3) emerging adult butterfly – *seeing with new eyes*, and (4) flying adult butterfly – *active hope*.

### **Honouring what is difficult**

Having spent some time opening to gratitude, we're better prepared to face the inevitable difficulties that come with life and learning. Just as the caterpillar sheds her skin, and dissolves inside the chrysalis, we often face challenges that shake our confidence. What would shift for us if we were able to honour difficult emotions and experiences, and recognize that within them is the very seedbed for growth and transformation?

*"It's not always easy to reckon with our own and others' emotional lives. But when kids and adults are given the permission to feel all emotions, and learn how to manage them, it opens doors to collaboration, relationship building, improved decision making and performance, and greater well-being. Almost all the essential ingredients for success arise from emotion skills."  
– Marc Brackett*

Many of us have been conditioned to turn away from or ignore uncomfortable emotions. We're told to "cheer up" and "stay positive." What can shift for us, and for our stu-

dents, when we honour that we're not always feeling "fine"? What if students understood that sadness and grief are normal, even healthy emotions that are free to come and go on their own when we allow ourselves to feel them?

Honouring students' feelings can be as simple as listening without trying to fix or change anything. Simply letting them know that they are heard and that their feelings are honoured is often all that is needed.

*"Not everything that is faced can be changed;  
but nothing can be changed until it is faced"  
– James Baldwin*

When we are inundated with "bad news" stories, it is understandable that we want to shut down and check out. We're overwhelmed! If we want things to change, however, we will need to carve out the space and time to gently let the realities of our ecological and societal crises into our hearts. How can we hope to protect and heal our planet from the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss if we are not first willing to grieve what is being lost? How can we ever hope to approach meaningful reconciliation without allowing ourselves to feel the heartbreak of the effects of colonization, including residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls? How can we possibly reverse generations of systemic racism without looking within and facing our own unconscious biases? Our feelings of grief, sadness, and even anger over the state of our communities and our planet is evidence of our love. We can help our students to understand that their sadness is a healthy and natural response. Helping them to feel and process these challenging emotions can have a powerful impact for their own well-being, as well as that of our communities and the planet as a whole.

### **Seeing with new eyes**

*"In the depths of winter, I finally learned that  
within me there lay an invincible summer."  
– Albert Camus*

After experiencing the darkness of the chrysalis, the butterfly emerges transformed. The limited vision she had as a caterpillar is replaced by new eyes that see the world in vivid technicolour.

Like the emerging butterfly, we too can see the world differently after having weathered our own challenges and experienced all of our feelings. Creative solutions for attending to the difficulties in our communities will be more likely to emerge once we've faced them and allowed them to work on us. After honouring our difficult experiences, we can emerge with a renewed sense of our connection to each other and to all of life. This can leave us better able to empathize with others and work for a more just and equitable world.

### **Active hope**

*"Hope just means another world might be  
possible, not promised, not guaranteed.  
Hope calls for action; action is impossible  
without hope."  
– Rebecca Solnit*



Having started from a place of gratitude, honouring our difficulties, and emerging transformed, we are then prepared to go out into our communities with active hope. As the flying butterfly goes into the world, laying her eggs in hope for the next generation, we can discover and use our own unique gifts to plant hopeful seeds in the world. We are better resourced to take action for social justice and for the planet. As we envision a future where all can thrive, we can set our sights on working together to make that future a reality.

## Activities<sup>iv</sup>

### *Desktop Butterfly Cycle*

You can invite your students to colour in and keep their own Desktop Butterfly Cycle<sup>v</sup> on their desks. Throughout the day, students can place a marker (a rock or other small object) on the phase of the cycle that matches how they are doing. When they feel stuck working on a difficult assignment, or are experiencing challenging emotions, they may want to place their marker on the chrysalis. This can be a reminder that difficulties are a normal part of the learning process and of life. Once they have a breakthrough of some sort, they can shift the marker to the emerging butterfly. Remind the students to start each day with gratitude.

### *Weather Report*

This activity supports students to get in touch with and share their feelings in a non-threatening way.

Do you ever notice that sometimes your feelings match the weather? What might that mean?

Compare feelings to today's weather. What might it mean to feel cloudy? Sunny? Rainy? Cold? Stormy? Do your feel-

ings ever feel different than the weather? Sad on a sunny day? Cheerful on a dreary day? Let's do a weather check-in together. Invite students to give their own weather report.

### *Emotions Like Clouds*

Before this activity, have a discussion with students about how emotions are like clouds, they come and go. If we can notice them when they're here and care for them with kindness, they'll be free to come and go on their own. When we push them away or ignore them, though, they tend to stick around.

On a day when the big, white puffy clouds are moving quickly across the blue sky, bring students outside to do some cloud watching. As they settle in, invite them to notice how gravity is hugging them close to the earth. They are held by, and provided for, by this earth in every

moment. Invite them to lie on their backs, looking up at the sky, and watch how the clouds come and go, just like our feelings. None is ever here to stay for long.

### *Like a Tree in the Wind*

**Credit: Kaira Jewel Lingo**

This is a great activity to do on a windy day near a mature tree in the schoolyard. Even on the windiest of days, when the tree's branches are flailing wildly, its trunk stays rooted, calm, and grounded. We, too, can access our own inner "trunk," finding a sense of calm.

Invite your students to stand, watching the tree blowing around in the wind. Invite each student to "be the tree": feet rooted to the ground, arms stretched wide and swaying wildly in the wind. They can make audible sounds like the wind blowing through the branches. Before continuing, draw their attention to the trunk of the tree. The branches are blowing around, sometimes so much it seems they might break! But the trunk is completely still. Rooted and grounded. Centred in its place in the earth.

Discussion points: Sometimes, when we're nervous, scared, distracted, angry, etc. we're like the branches of the tree. A little bit out of control and scattered. There is a part of us, though, that we can always come back to, to give us a sense of calm and security. Just like the trunk of the tree.

When you're feeling strong emotions, it can be helpful to let them move through you and release them, like the swaying branches. At other times, when those emotions are overwhelming, it can be helpful to find a sense of calm, like the trunk of the tree. It takes practice, but it's there for you!



## Conclusion

Our students are facing many challenges today; they will need a wide range of resources to support them as they grow up in an uncertain world. Offering them opportunities to cultivate a mindful relationship with nature can provide a welcome refuge. With the natural world as their teacher, they can also learn how to honour and face their challenges with courage. The principles and activities described in this article can be brought to life in any schoolyard, helping us echo to our students the natural world's invitation to be present, to find resilience, and ultimately, to know that we belong.

**Stephanie Aleksiuik** is the founder of Thimbleberry Learning, an environmental education provider and consultancy in Calgary, Alberta. A certified Mindfulness Instructor, she is interested in the intersection of nature connection and well-being. Learn more at [www.thimbleberrylearning.org](http://www.thimbleberrylearning.org).

### Reference

Macy, J., & Brown, M. (2014). *Coming back to life: The updated guide to the work that reconnects*. New Society Publishers.

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Being trauma-informed. Although many of us take solace in being outdoors, this is not universally true. It is important to be mindful that some of your students may have had experiences that have made them feel unsafe outside. It can be helpful to start with shorter periods outdoors and build up gradually. Being trauma-informed also means offering choice. If an activity suggests closing the eyes, always offer students the option of keeping them open.

<sup>ii</sup>For more on cultivating a Sit Spot practice yourself, or with your students, see the [Sit Spot Guide](#) on the Thimbleberry Learning website.

<sup>iii</sup>The Work That Reconnects uses the framework of a four-fold spiral, to engage communities in experiences that support a deep understanding of the ways we are related to life. Experiencing these four stages, namely: (1) gratitude; (2) honouring our pain for the world; (3) seeing with new eyes; and (4) going forth with active hope, empowers us to recognize our inter-relatedness with all life and to use our unique gifts to work together for a better world (Macy & Brown, 2014).

<sup>iv</sup>Being trauma-informed.

Some students may be dealing with challenges that are particularly difficult. It is crucial, when inviting students to share emotions to offer choice. Make it clear that sharing is optional.

Taking time to honour difficult emotions that come up in the moment is not the same as asking students to revisit old experiences that could retraumatize them. In honouring what is difficult, and sharing emotions, we are not trying to instill or drudge up difficulties, we are simply working to support emotions that are already present. That said, if students are dealing with a difficult situation and need more support than you can offer as a teacher, it is important to be prepared to offer additional resources. This could include both school and community psychological services.

If your students are dealing with collective trauma, having recently experienced an extreme weather event or a tragedy in the community, and you have come together to share your emotions, it is important to end the session with some joyful, active movement. We always want to leave students with a sense of hope and gratitude, rather than leaving them hanging in the chrysalis stage, stuck inside their own difficulties. Connecting back to hope and gratitude at the end of a session will leave them better prepared to meet their own challenges in life and learning.

<sup>v</sup>You can find a printable template for The Butterfly Cycle, as well as guidance on how to use it with your students [here](#).

## THANKS TO OUR FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS!



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