

CHAPTER 1: TEACHING CREED

Where does one start when they begin the process of story telling or painting? Teaching for me, is a process of becoming. My early experiences with art and nature were fostered by significant people in my life, both teachers and family members. Even as a child, I experienced contemplative moments in nature when I questioned my place within the earth community. The sketchbook and journal, always close at hand, became a place for meaning making and self-realization. Elders in my life nurtured a respect for nature and a love for art providing me with a visual inquiry of perception, conception, expression and reflection. My love for art and nature came to fruition through youthful inspirations, musings and mentors.

TEACHER MENTORS AND ENTERING THE PROFESSION

At the age of four, I knew I was going to be a teacher. I drew a picture of myself as an artist --black tam and french painting shirt, standing in front of a classroom holding a palette. I have no idea where this vision came from but I knew even then what my destiny would be. Coming from a long line of teachers on both sides of my family gave teaching a familiar place in my early years. Maybe it was my wonderful grade 8 teacher Mr. Christner who kindly took me to the nurse's room and let me cry through the pains of adolescence; he patiently listened to my emotional experiences. Mr. Christner never once gave me a detention for my continual lateness and overall scattered state. Then there was Miss. Meckbach, a proud, heavy-set, tall English teacher (and an accomplished writer in her other life), who gave me permission to

illustrate the novel of the Stone Angel instead of writing a 10-page essay in grade 13. Mr. Shaw changed my life. When I think of him, I begin to smile --such affection rises up from within me. No one compared to this teacher. He taught economics, which I generally hated, but I signed up for the course because I had heard about Mr. Shaw's great teaching. I fell in love with him after the first class. I loved watching the two balls of spit accumulating at the corners of each lip as he became more impassioned about each topic he introduced. I can still picture his flailing hands and bulging eyes as he hopped around the room like a kangaroo. He cracked jokes and persuaded every student that economics was the divine incarnation of knowledge on earth. I was converted. All of these teachers and others I cannot possibly include here, fell in love with their art --the art of teaching. And we were their creations, art forms filled with possibility, ready to be molded but also to develop our own self-awareness and ability to think critically in a complex world. They loved us all, like an artist loves her creation, aware of its independence and life ahead and but also proud of being part of the process. I now know that we were not their creations. It was the rich classroom environment that inspired us to become what we are today.

MY FIRST EXPERIENCES

I began to teach at fourteen. I assisted a local art teacher in children's studio classes each Saturday. I was fortunate. Having the opportunity to work under another teacher but also being able to guide younger students gave me confidence early on in life. I was confident of my own art making abilities and developed invaluable leadership skills. During my university years I had built up a following of private students and

rented a studio space downtown. I taught four classes of children's art each week. "This is how you paint a tree using a fan brush. This is how you blend red and yellow to make a gradated sunset. Don't forget about the negative space." I soon left that painting stage behind and began another one as I finished teacher's college, entering into my first teaching position in a private Anglican school. "To Stir into Flame the Gift of God." That was our school motto. I am pretty sure this quote did not mean for me to catch fire. But that seems to be what I do when I teach. I am full of enthusiasm inspiring those around me. At St. John's Kilmarnock, you stand up when a teacher enters the room. "Keep your shirt tucked in! Ladies, do not roll up your skirts. Pull those socks up! Where is your 10 page essay on discipline? Don't be late for Even-song, you are the reader today. This year, our house trophy goes to Brock house."

I think I was hired because of the mere fact that I spouted out the right things during the interview. "I believe in discipline. A balanced student must strive for discipline in the spirit, physical exercise and of course, the academics." I was also also hired because St. John's did not have an arts program and was trying to "get with the times." It was up to me to create the art curriculum and deliver it to grades 9, 10, 11, and OAC (grade 13). This could not get in the way of coaching cross-country running and Nordic skiing, designing the sets for the school plays, and the regular course load of grades 8, 9, 10 and 12 English, grade 8 History, Guidance and Religion. One year I taught nine different subjects to completely different children. I had not yet earned a classroom; I strolled through the hallway carrying all my art supplies and textbooks on a cart with squeaky wheels. Like the students, stifled by a stiff blue blazer, I longed to rebel. Seeing these

children driven to exhaustion by their demanding parents motivated me to make the classroom a place of discovery and passion, but also a place of retreat. We talked about lucid dreaming, challenged different religious views, and shared our deepest thoughts in journals. I read every one of the journals and wrote faithfully in each one until midnight most evenings. While in labour with my first child, I was still reading and commenting in the journals.

A PHILOSOPHY OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

My philosophical teaching approach at this time was to develop relationships with my students. I cared deeply, sometimes too much. I was not afraid to share my mistakes and nurtured the children through relationship building. Connecting with the students inside and outside of the class was important for me and I tried to be available for extracurricular activities and other school programs. I never questioned the traditional and very structured way of the private school and found my own subtle way of doing things within the walls of the classroom. I headed out for a run every lunch hour.

Not surprisingly, many students began to run as well. I produced my own artwork and made silver jewelry --the students watched and developed their own hobbies. Actions have always spoken louder than words. Ministry documents were scarce as were hand-me-down lesson plans --all the teaching came from a blank canvas and I enjoyed creating the materials and ideas myself. I loved this freedom and was able to play with Art History and integrated a variety of subjects. I blended Art with Religion, Geography, English, and History. It was a teacher's dream but I did not know it at the time. I must not forget though, that if I showed up for class in my running gear, I was severely

reprimanded. My idea of a good time was playing tag with kids out on the field and showing them I was not too old to out-run them.

When my first child was born, I decided to leave the classroom. Soon, I began to teach community classes, returned to my private studio classes, and ran workshops at regional galleries. I also decided to put more energy into my own art making process showing my work in public and private galleries.

THE JOYS OF TEACHING ADULTS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM MY STUDENTS

The world of adult education introduced me to another wonderful place of connecting and exchanging ideas. There was Eleanor, an amazing woman who devoutly came to painting class every Thursday. She travelled on a motorized scooter because her multiple sclerosis had left her unable to walk and her hands were weak. Once she found herself caught in a terrible snow storm and arrived to class with frostbite. Her commitment to learning and to her special time of art making taught me far more than I was ever able to give her. Edward was a charming 90-year-old who had become blind in his later years. He had decided he wanted to learn to paint and came to my house for private classes. I had no idea how I was going to do this but was determined to show him the world of art for the first time. He was successful and taught me that contour line drawing can be done with the hands instead of eyes and that the best seeing comes from the heart and the imagination. I was learning to see.

There are students I've taught who have passed on. One woman left me her art books in her will and I think of her every time I pull one out for teaching. Nothing delights me more than showing someone who has lived a full life, how to see the world for the first time. I like to blend observational art with intuitive art that comes from within. Teaching art involves an understanding of visual culture and creative problem-solving. However, I sometimes feel that I spend too much time on the analytical aspects of art and could benefit from more progressive and current ideologies. But having said that, I believe it is fundamentally the relationships made between teacher and student that override any "trendy" teaching philosophy. This has been my teaching creed:

- Love the person you are teaching and consider it a privilege that you are able to share something that will make their life richer.
- Realize that the student has as much to share with you and with the entire class, and respect the knowledge and experience he or she brings with them.
- Build your teaching ideologies from the student's personal experiences, cultural background and knowledge.
- Be willing to admit fault and laugh at your own inadequacies.
- Be passionate about what you teach.
- Fall in love with the process of sharing knowledge.
- Be the facilitator, acknowledging other sources and be aware of multiple ideologies and solutions.

- Be willing to touch, hold, hug and embrace a student when necessary. The more energy you give out, the more is received.

My greatest delight occurs when a student comes to me and says, “Sheila, I looked at the cast shadows from the street lights last night and saw colour. For the first time I noticed that shadows have colour in them.” Or, “The more I look, the more I see. Even the tiny variations of colour and value on the sunlight fern overwhelm me. How do you capture that fresh living green from new growth?” “When I do a blind contour drawing I feel so calm and my mind is so focussed. I discovered that doing blind contours helps me sleep.” “Yes, I saw the earth’s shadow rise in the east while the sun was setting. It blew my mind to realize I was seeing our cast shadow in space.” “This image here is of my husband molesting a young child. I knew about it. Now I am ‘painting out’ the past in an effort to heal. I am using a mandala and the warm colours of cadmium and yellow to show the good energy in my life now.” “Thank you for showing me how to fall in love with my subject, to not be afraid to create and to express myself on paper.”

GOALS FOR GROWTH: VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Teaching requires a commitment to personal development and progressive thinking. There are days when I lack new knowledge and begin to feel stale with my material. I know I am caught up in a modernist philosophy and need to explore more expressive and experimental subjects. I must learn to let go of the teaching reins and let the students explore. I need to work on bringing students to a place where they are

caught in process, forgetting about end results and experiencing a sense of wonder. I have always believed that art is an essential nature in all people, and I tell students that anyone can learn to draw. This ontological belief is consistent with the idea that art making is a form of play and everyone knows how to play --although there are adults who sometimes forget and need reminding.

I would like to expand my repertoire, trying new ideas and playing with mixed media combinations. I need to update myself on current artists and art trends connecting with other educators and art institutions to grow personally and professionally. In doing this I hope to provide enriching art education to students in Northern communities. I am interested in returning to the classroom while developing my own art practice. Working from nature has been a large part of my own artistic process but has not been fully developed in my classroom teaching.

ENVIRONMENTAL ART

My greatest interest lies in environmental art --art that has a message or is informed by nature. Henry Thoreau and Thomas Berry quotes fill my art studio walls and I reference J. K. Grande's ideas on culture and nature (Grande, 1994) when I paint sea anemones. I look forward to reading Suzi Gablik's work (Gablik, 1991) and want to combine environmental art with a more collaborative approach to learning and creating art. Yet, it is Peter London's ideas that I look forward to studying (London, 2003). The intuitive painting approach which I currently use, needs to enter my teaching space. I find Peter London's ideas similar to the ideas of Douglas Sloan. In *Insight-Imagination* (1983),

Sloan discusses how deep contemplative thinking and seeing nurtures the imagination. Experiences in nature give students the opportunity to develop perceptual awareness and the imagination. "All genuinely new knowledge comes by means of passionate, energy-filled insight that penetrates and pierces through our ordinary ways of thinking" (Sloan, 1983, p. 141). Insight allows an experience to be seen through new eyes. When we see something differently, we can change old thinking patterns deepening or perceptual abilities. "The imagination then, is necessary for perceiving and understanding the world, making possible human discourse and purposeful activity" (Sloan, 1983, p. 141).

I want students to experience what I feel when I connect with the natural world and to be able to see into the life of things, which rises from emotion as well as intellect --from the heart as well as the head. After everything I have shared, I can summarize by saying, "I have to love my subject and I have to love the student." My relationship to my art parallels that of the student. I want to instill wonder, respect and emotion in the student and give her a renewed appreciation for our natural world. Education and understanding leads to a desire to protect and nurture. The artist is also the visionary; being able to imagine societal changes and chose to raise awareness through art and through action. I am looking for a way to connect my art making with my teaching, hoping to find unified themes and pull all the fragments together. I am fortunate though, for I carry the passion and energy from the teachers who have come before me, those who have stirred into flame the gifts of others.



Touching Worlds, wc, 14 x 20. (fig.1)

extraneous flower

time spent on my stomach looking deeply into tidal pools -for me this small ecosystem represents a world of interdependent creatures all competing for life yet balanced in their existence

if culture is the human understanding of nature
 what is nature without humans
 the lines between animal and plant
 between land and sea
 and nature and culture

are invisible
 anemone foreign in its existence pulsating with energy sticky to my fingertip an
 extraneous flower amidst a sea of pollution
 is it only natural to see the world in a pool of water
 to humbly see ourselves and ultimately
 if you look long enough

to see the hope of our children's future as part of the tidal pool

