

Trumpeter (1997)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Education, The Deep Ecology Movement, and Transition

Hank Colletto

Audubon Expedition Institute

HANK COLLETTTO is presently a faculty member with the Audubon Expedition Institute. For Hank, Environmental Education is a lifestyle as well as a career. Educational methodology is ever changing for Hank because he realizes there is never a set equation to follow when utilizing the learning community model. Hank feels strongly about modeling behavior as an intricate part of environmental education. He teaches from the perspective of working toward the most ideal human/planetary relationship that can be formed, while also realizing we must work from a place of practicality. In the past Hank has lived at a consensus-run community-based land trust and worked as a field engineer for an energy conservation company. Hank is the father of an eight year old daughter (Marlo). He now shares with friends the responsibility of being a land steward in a beautiful riparian ecosystem in the state of Maine. When he is not traveling and living out-of-doors, Hank lives in a eight by ten foot remodeled super-insulated chicken coop. Gardening is an important way for Hank to live a lower impact lifestyle. His favorite wild places to explore are the sandstone canyons of the Escalante River system and the glacial valleys of the Wind River Mountains.

May 8, 1994: Location: Santa Fe National Forest, Santa Fe New Mexico. Elevation: 8,437 feet above sea level. Ecosystem: Ponderosa Pine forest. Air temperature: 29 degrees Fahrenheit. Weather: Wet snow beginning to fall heavy. Time: The day before the end of a semester with the Audubon Expedition Institute (AEI), a graduate and undergraduate level Environmental Studies/Education Field Program.

Large snow flakes, the kind that signify the oncoming of a gradual change to rain, cling to the warm tears dripping down my cold cheeks. It is fitting my tears increase in volume, as the source of their presence is grand in scale. It is no coincidence our final gathering finds our group of sixteen students and three faculty joined by our hands in a close circle. We are ending as we began, back in the Sonoran Dessert four months earlier, now with our spirit's and intellect's a bit more nourished. We have lived out-of-doors together for the entire semester. Our group is gathered on the afternoon of the last of several days of transition activities. We are about to partake in the final stage of a closing ceremonial event intended to help transition the students into their lives beyond the "classroom".

My tears represent a joy that is based in all of what this learning community has accomplished, as much as they are filled with the sadness of having to disassemble the intense connections we all have labored to create. Beautiful tall evergreen trees surround us, snow is greeting our fulfilled souls, and the forest floor feels supportive with its soft sprinkling of dry pine needles. Thoughts

about being wet and cold are not a priority.

Within this closing ceremony, I reluctantly try to convince my firmly grasped hand and my saddened state of mind to release themselves, both from the object my hand holds and my incredible connection to the students. We have spent months weaving together a matrix of healthy communication, student centered learning, and intimate connection to our desert surroundings. In a swell of emotion I unclench my cold fingers and toss the symbolically chosen pine bow into the snowflake laden air. Together eighteen other pieces of ponderosa pine bows - each as diverse as the individuals tossing them - slowly rise toward the forest canopy for what seems like enough time to take a journey in my mind.

My thoughts wander back in time to all the deep learning and transformation I witnessed during the semester. I recount so many memories and ideas related to our time together. While attempting to sort out my mix of emotions, I am succinctly reminded how AEI dances on the edge of meshing what is thought of as the more traditional world of academics with that of nurturing an environment that promotes intense community development and an encouragement to redirect one's values and behavior in relationship to ourselves, other people, and our surroundings. I am amazed at what this group of individuals has experienced. I have strong hope in knowing they will spread their study and practice of deep ecology, through their personal ecosophies, to the world beyond their learning community. It is never a guarantee that all groups achieve the intense level of community development and academic standing that this group has, but our learning communities always dive deeper than the students ever imagine they can.

It is this final part of the semester, challenging me in more ways than I can fathom, that brings to me so much living evidence supporting my commitment to teaching from a deep ecological perspective. My thoughts roam to the content of an essay that I previously wrote for the students. I was intending to share some ideas about how they might be challenged when leaving the support of their learning community while also encouraging their continued support for the deep ecology movement, to practice their ecosophy of living. I read the essay to the students earlier this afternoon.

Disrobing Our Cultural Costumes

A sad moment in time this is. It is time to say good-bye to all of you. We have had some wonderful challenging times together. This precious time in our lives is quickly moving on. It seems just an instant ago we were laboriously hauling our equipment filled backpacks through the cactus scattered Galliero Mountains. It is now time to disassemble the beautifully moulded and tangled community web we have all struggled hard to spin. We have become an integral

part of one another and aspects of this will never disappear.

I often wonder what more this expansive life sustaining planet would be teaching us if we could clearly, and without bias, feel its gentle spirit while it's being filtered through the formal cultural costumes we so majestically wear. Our tightly woven academic community is physically dissolving, and it will never exist as it has, ever again. What has happened in an educational sense for you here? Have you been able to decipher a whisper of the planet's non linguistic speaking voice? Nature, as we term it, has been trying to communicate with some resounding tones. Were you among the privileged, to interpret its elusive language as it was strained through the covert culturally manufactured colander that surrounds your senses? Nature's illustrious voice is actually quite overt to the non-domesticated life on Earth. I am confident you have all made a step toward learning to further shed the thick-layered unsustainable costume our culture has carefully dressed us in, to more thoroughly feel the flow of life.

It's a peculiar process, the way our culture so formally dresses us for the drama of life. As uninformed children we don't even realize we are being trained as actresses and actors to premier in predetermined social roles. Unfortunately, the pageant director forgot to tell us the true story of nature, because it wasn't part of their written manuscript. It wasn't part of their living act, so they simply didn't know any better. The props we are presented with are lifeless technology, green paper money and often times unnecessary unnatural grief, instead of fertile earth, green plants and healthy human relationships.

What kind of role might you have been convinced to carry out? Is it an aggressive journey to make a lot of money and own a "nice" car and a big house? Maybe its a drama that includes learning to dislike yourself for not being muscular, sexy, or thin. Possibly it's a destiny where you buy material goods to make up for a lack of unconditional love. Perhaps it's a show where your act includes doing destructive things to your body because life hurts too much. Somehow our cultural teachings are not conducive to love, nature and health. But they can be, if you choose in your life to continue looking in the mirror to more clearly see the fanciful costume you have long been unknowingly displaying to the world.

When I was in elementary school I spent much of my play time with a boy named Fran. We were both members of the local boy scout troop. In the locker room one night at the infamous town swimming pool, where the scouts got to swim once a week on Tuesday nights, I became puzzled as I peered over at Fran's naked body. As he stood under the shower I noticed his penis was very strange looking. It was like nothing I had seen before. Surely - I thought - it had to be abnormal. I thought it was so strange, the way it had an extra flap of skin covering over its tip. I was certainly thankful I had a natural normal penis. I didn't seriously think about, what further evolved into a profound incident, until 9 years later when I was glancing through a college anatomy book. Until then, I was convinced circumcision was defined as the whole penis getting chopped off

as some punishment or something. I wondered how I could hold a false belief as strong as I had.

I actually existed for 21 years thinking and believing my penis, and many other aspects of my worldview for that matter, were normal, and Fran had a serious unnatural condition. I had been circumcised and I learned an altered way of thinking, but didn't even have a clue that I had taken on the belief. Yes Hank, your foreskin was cut off when you were a baby! My belief in the reality of my own nature was literally shattered. This experience was a catalyst in getting me to more closely investigate the ideology my culture so delicately instilled in me. A culture's true power comes from its ability to instill a belief in such a subtle way that the recipient does not know of its existence. I had to discover what more I had blindly accepted as the only reality, after realizing many of my culture's beliefs were a bit less than sustainable.

Cultural training or conditioning in and of itself is not a bad trait. In fact it is essential to culture, and humans must have culture in order to survive. However, problems arise when we get trained to carry on behavior that has little to do with self preservation. Some people might say it would be easier existing in our culture by being absolutely immersed in its madness without having any awareness of, or conflict about, its wrong-doing. The ultimate challenge for you is to simultaneously live in peace with yourself, while also bestowing the knowledge you hold about unsustainable behavior in yourself and in our culture.

I love working at AEI, but at times we as an educational institution have some extremely careful decisions to make. For example, do we or don't we go to such despair-inducing places such as: The Peabody Coal Mine, Glen Canyon Dam, Paloverde Nuclear Station, or the Navajo Reservation? You see, in many respects, I wish I never learned the truth about circumcision or the altered reality of so many other aspects of my cultural training. To put it plain and simple, it was more comfortable living in absolute ignorance, especially with respect to my relationship with nature. It's great to be informed about the more realistic script of life's story, but it can be terribly agonizing living with the pain this knowledge constantly induces.

Throughout this semester the faculty were sometimes forthright with our personal biases during the presentation of ideas and issues. Perhaps there were some silent inquisitive voices among you, asking why we looked at issues from a deep ecology approach. My answer is that we feel you have not always been told the entire story about your relationship with nature and technology. For all your life most of you have been heavily sheltered from nature's other story. Ask yourself: Did you ever learn to love the planet in all its softness as well as its fury? Were you ever taught to live in a healthy sustainable manner? Has anybody ever taught you the skills necessary to have healthy relationships with other people? AEI continually works hard to reverse this tragedy of omissions.

It hurts on a deep level when we find out someone has lied to us, especially

when it wasn't truly a lie, but a deception created by an often times unconscious perpetrator. Our culture has been promoting a deadly deception. You came here to this environmental education program, for a relatively short time. We felt strongly about exposing you to a side of the story we assumed you might not have seen. We were ambivalent about showing you what's really behind curtains number 5, 6 and 7, because in some respects we knew it might change your life forever in some strikingly painful ways. However, more importantly, we wanted you to have new choices about what role you want to play in shaping your own life and the world around you. Your destiny might no longer be predetermined by the costume you were unknowingly, and at the time, probably unwillingly dressed in and yet trained how to wear. Exposing you to the hidden set was scary because we knew it might be painful for you to find out how distant your relationship to the planet has been. Furthermore, I personally wondered if for some of you it was a responsibility you wanted no part of, but now realize it's something you must morally assume.

I am sure you recognize that you have the choice to be a professional actor in a completely different sort of live production. You don't have to be manipulated by the insane clandestine cultural producer. If you wish, you can burn the contract you have with your unsustainable agent and sign on with nature instead. You can have a new freedom, but with it goes new responsibility to yourself, your future students and, of course, the planet. I am sure that sounds a bit scary, but I can assure you it is worth your trouble

There will be many choices, if you hang on to your awareness. Will you choose to take a shower everyday because it will be available, or will you sacrifice this knowing now what it takes to heat and pump the water? Will you choose to buffer your emotional hurt with the use of substances, or will you express yourself in healthy ways now knowing your emotions are part of your natural self? Will you choose to buy fancy new clothes, or will you buy used clothing now knowing what it takes to produce fabric? Will you try to create an image to make yourself look more culturally acceptable, or will you accept yourself for simply being, now knowing you are a natural creature? Will you choose to spend your time listening to loud electronic music or will you listen to the hoot of a great horned owl, now knowing there is a wilderness called Escalante Canyon, that you came to love? The choices will be infinite, but they will only exist as choices if you choose to take control of your life, rather than being controlled by your surroundings and other people.

Instead of assuming the privilege to choose, you could ignore what you have learned about our unbalanced relationship with the planet. You could take the easy route by forgetting about the conflict you may have discovered. You could leave here to go home and kick along in your high backed cushioned seat on USA flight 04DOOM! You might sit up comfortably with your mind in the upright and culturally locked position. You could ride out the rest of your life in the direction the manipulative auto cult pilot leads you. I have spent numerous

hours examining that well padded seat for broken parts, and let me tell you, that flight may be destined to crash. Either the numerous frustrated passengers are going to demand a refund, or the oily greed driven fuel supply is going to be exhausted. The occupants on the plane don't appear to be happy about their misguided bumpy travels. Something is awfully painful, but they aren't sure why they hurt. Providing you do happen to get back on that plane you should know that fortunately it is equipped with some well packed and very useful, but hidden, parachutes. The flight attendants don't tell you where they are because they themselves don't know of their existence. Hopefully AEI has acted as an oxygen pressurization chamber and a training room for your jump preparation. If you were fortunate during this semester, you heard nature whisper to you the clues about how to find the hidden parachutes. If you did happen to read those subtle helpful hints, there is a greater challenge. Will you be able to get your colorful nylon parachute strapped firmly to your body? Finally and most importantly, will you decide to make the scary seemingly impossible jump toward greater freedom, a self controlled landing, and most importantly your partially regained wildness?

I am not implying it would be wrong to continue your familiar cultural standard operating procedures. We all know the truth of the matter is that we will all partake in our own way. We are obviously not going to revert to being a hunter gatherer people. I am not even suggesting we do revert, (although it would be great). However, transitioning back to the mainstream culture that helped shaped you can be done in a well planned healthy fashion. In a conscious way rather than by habitual reaction. You can control your destiny and not be persuaded by the hidden, out of control, cultural agenda. Thus, it is possible to be immersed and still avoid at least some of what makes no natural sense.

At times the semester has been genuinely difficult for all of us, but you will soon discover that many of those challenging experiences have been secretly accumulating inside you, expanding on your past wisdom. Allow your discretion to aid you, when you see that everyday choices will tend to become quite limited under stressful circumstances. When you re-board USA Flight 04Doom, you might be unnaturally stressed. Maybe stretched to the point of needing cultural anesthesia to numb the excruciating pain. Possibly it will be frantic escape through: fast colorful cars, material possessions, loud electronic music, debilitating alcohol, or expensive recreational drugs. I strongly care about all of you and hope you will fall back on your deeper life experiences to nurture yourselves and other species.

Soon we will all disperse. You may never hear the "sustainability" word emanating from my mouth, but let me leave you with a final thought to consider. You should realize that you might board that wide body cultural jetliner and feel the seemingly life saving, federally mandated, seat belt squeeze tight around your unsuspecting waste. It might feel like the buckle is too seized to undo. If this occurs do not despair. You will find out that you have some new and special

tools with you to undo the tenacious strain that the wide diameter societal seat belt might exert on your tense susceptible bellies. Part of your symbolic tool kit will be your AEI experiences, but it's now more thoroughly stocked and well organized drawers need to include the following critical implement.

Carry a small well defined photograph of yourself. A representation that depicts you at the age of 1 or 2 years old. You should be naked of clothes in that image thus, in a metaphorical wild state of being. Back when you were devoid of the cultural costume you now so formally, and perhaps painfully, wear. Pull this picture out whenever you feel like a part of your nature is being muffled by another seemingly attractive layer of what will be the now revealed, no longer secret, cultural costume. Use this instrument as a soothing reminder that legitimate wildness still exists around you, as well as within you, buried deep beneath what might feel like impenetrable culture laden walls. Look closely, then listen for the planet's blue and green voice, feel nature's wise and powerful draw and remind yourself, you are an extremely beautiful, wild, and fully worthwhile mammalian creature, where ever and whatever you choose.

At that moment in time upon magically disassembling the hardware holding together your seat restraint, you will realize the exact location of the hidden emergency parachutes. Another quick but methodical glance at your photo will give you the courage to make the jump. After you slowly glide to your safe landing, now as a productive healthy role model for world change and an determined promoter of sustainability you will be faced with a final most worthwhile challenge. It will be your responsibility to pass on the blueprints that will enable your students to build their own personal self-preservation tool kit. Then, in the same way that you have learned to begin the painful process, you must gently but assertively guide others to the back-stage dressing room so they can look in the mirror and see a different vision. Then they can begin disrobing their seemingly glittery - but at that moment obviously dangerous - cultural costumes.

From my perspective beneath the towering evergreen trees, I am observing low altitude dark clouds traveling quickly through the cold mountain air. Rain seems more likely now even though there are small breaks in the clouds allowing the sun's rays to warm my cold skin for short periods. My thoughts are led back to our circle of students and faculty by the soft methodical wedding of vegetation and the earth. One by one the pine bows land and bounce on the snow-covered ground. Many members of the community are crying, each for their own reason. I glance around the circle one last time and reluctantly acknowledge the passing of another amazing semester.

Citation Format

Colletto, Hank (1997) *Education, The Deep Ecology Movement, and Transition Trumpeter*:
14, 2. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.14.2.9>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details