

DOES STILLNESS BRING WISDOM?: A JOURNEY TOWARDS HUMAN-BODY-LAND INTERCORPOREALITY

BRIDGET MCCLARTY
University of British Columbia

Abstract

Three vignettes illustrate my journey towards human-body-land intercorporeality. More-than-human beings have guided me for decades, as both teacher and student. Re-engaging with intercorporeality through eco-centric, slow pedagogical practices fosters enduring learning, connecting the body, emotions, intellect, and spirit to the more-than-human world in a pursuit of stillness and peace.

Keywords: intercorporeality, slow pedagogy, embodied learning, awe, connection

Spending my childhood playing in the forest and snow molded who I am, shaped the lens through which I see the world, and guided my choices in life. I endeavour to spend time daily in the natural world, and to help others establish their connection with the more-than-human world. Re-engaging with intercorporeality through eco-centric, slow pedagogical practices fosters enduring learning, connecting the body, emotions, intellect, and spirit to the more-than-human world in a pursuit of stillness and peace.

As a child, I spent much of my time building forts and creating snow sculptures. At school, I would sneak away at lunchtime with a few of my friends; our place was secret, and we felt free, playing among ancient trees. At home, we had a treed space in our backyard, and beyond these trees were *the Woods*. Potawatomi botanist and educator, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), refers to the “grammar of animacy” (p. 48), which refers to showing respect and kinship for more-than-humans through the use of pronouns and capitalized names. The Woods were a constant in my life; I could always return there. Experiences in the Woods shaped me as a child, allowing me to feel nurtured and connected through body, mind, and spirit. My childhood involved being in the Woods and in Snow—often alone—spending hours building, creating, learning, and being. Cedar and Hemlock towered over me, protecting me from the snow, the rain, and the sun. My tree friends buffered and muffled the judgements, the expectations, the voices of the world. I could imagine and create while feeling peaceful and still.

My chosen path allowed me to work outside, and it was through this work that I learned to move my body through vast landscapes. My first career allowed me to follow animals through coral reefs, over mountain passes, and on frozen rivers. Later, I taught others how to move their bodies through these landscapes thoughtfully and efficiently, while remaining attentive to their own corporeal needs.

Through my outdoor work, I discovered that I loved adventuring outdoors during my leisure time, and my expeditions became longer, more remote, more adventurous. Over time, my trips became focused on external achievements, not internal peace. Mountain travel requires full-body, bilateral stimulation for uninterrupted periods of time, bringing me not into a state of flow, but rather into a state of mental stillness. When my mind and body become synchronized, my mind is present and empty. Only then, am I fully in my body.

Years ago, I had the opportunity to join a month-long ski traverse through the Coast Mountains, a major part of the Pacific Coast Ranges located in British Columbia, Canada. For the first ten days, I slogged through the snow, step by step, pulling a sled and hauling a backpack. I was slow, unfit, and often afraid. Tibetan Buddhists chant the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* to invoke the universe’s benevolence for safe travels in the mountains (Matthiessen, 1978); I tried channelling courage as I murmured my mantra in time with my movement:

Om, Mani, Padme, Hum

I found my rhythm in the glide, shift, glide, shift, glide

Skis moving on the snow. Om, Mani, Padme, Hum

My world became snow, sky, weather, wind

Food, sleep, glide, shift, glide, shift

Om, Mani, Padme, Hum, Ski, eat, sleep, repeat, Om, Mani, Padme, Hum.

Figure 1. *Traveling through the Coast Mountain Range.*



Finally, on the twenty-seventh day, the end was near; tomorrow, I would leave the trip. It was a rare and glorious mountain day: no wind, blue skies, bright sun, perfect snow. Peak after snowy peak crested in every direction, as endless as waves on the ocean.

Never had I felt so powerful and confident. I had never travelled such distance through my own power. My body and mind were healthy, strong, and resilient. I stood on top of the icefield, feeding my ego and gazing at the highest peak in the range, feeling empowered and accomplished.

When I looked down at the snow, it took me a moment to digest what I was seeing. A long, steady line of tracks had appeared, perpendicular to our route, climbing straight up the enormous mountain, crossing the glacier, and continuing, without a break, as far as I could see. The five-toed track and loping gait were the signature of Wolverine.

Humbly I stood staring at the snow. My ego crashed as I instantly became aware of my fragile existence; I felt vulnerable and completely dependent. The blinding sunlight clearly revealed that I was but a tiny, naked ape in this alpine environment, protected yet encumbered by my layered clothing and heavy pack of food and equipment. In contrast, Wolverine had traveled from the ocean, across the mountain's icefield, and beyond. She lived her entire life in the mountains—fully embodied, thriving—depending on her wits and senses.

I breathed in the stillness as I stood quietly for a few minutes. It dawned on me that, despite my best efforts, I had been so distracted by my journey's challenges and outcomes that I had forgotten how to be present. When I saw Wolverine's tracks, I suddenly felt a surge of awe and appreciation for her ability to move her body with confidence and grace through the vast landscape. Her survival depended on her awareness of her senses and her ability to live in the

moment. Wolverine's presence taught me humility and gratitude, and connected me emotionally to this place, her home.

I closed my eyes and felt the breeze in my hair and the sun on my face. I inhaled deeply. I was embodied, I was still, I was in the mountains again.

Playing as a child in the forest, watching wild animals, and adventuring through the mountains throughout my life has inspired an awe for, and a connection with, the world. The wisdom traditions have always recognized this connection, this non-duality: there is no distinction between body/world, body/spirit, self/other (Bai et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2021). Our consciousness is vast and exists beyond our corporeality, in the liminal space between our body and the limitlessness of existence (Todd, 2014). Whenever I seek answers, I turn to the more-than-humans, the universal consciousness, to seek guidance; I know that the wisdom of the universe will show me the way.

During my thirteenth year of teaching, I needed guidance. I held yet another temporary, one-year teaching contract in yet another school in the district. I dreaded each day of that co-teaching year: it was chaotic, traumatic, and unstable.

In late May, my principal offered me the golden carrot: a permanent contract. The devastating catch? I had to remain in the same co-teaching situation for yet another year.

Should I stay, or should I go? Surely, my mind argued, I have the strength to spend another year in exchange for career stability, security, seniority, and standing. My heart tightened. Insomnia, anxiety, and tachycardia had been with me throughout the year.

I conferred with my parents, friends, and counsellors. I journalled, listed, and mind mapped. I dreamed, reasoned, and meditated. What should I do? Where is my path? I needed wisdom. I needed guidance.

Years ago, in Peru, I worked with the medicine of a Plant Teacher under the guidance of a shaman. Now, as I sought wisdom and guidance, the Plant Teacher reappeared to help me make sense of the situation.

My medicine was strong tasting and fast acting as her spirit infused my body. My sensations were distorted and beautiful and intense; sorrow, empathy, realization, and awe washed over me. I was reduced, my layers disintegrated, until only my core remained.

Eventually, her message made sense: *Never forget you have a green heart.*

I fell into the deepest sleep. Waves of peace and gratitude washed over me, as I remembered who I was. With certainty, I saw my path forward.

Figure 2. *Preparing the plant medicine.*



I left that classroom to teach outdoors for a year. My sabbatical without tenure. Each day I was moving my body outside, finding meaning in the world, and my heart was full of joy. Each night, I gave thanks to my Plant Teacher, who had gently reset my feet on the right path.

My green heart beat strong again.

Figure 3. *My green heart, beating strong.*



Indigenous peoples around the world have a long history of communing with, and learning from, plant and fungi teachers for the purposes of wisdom and spiritual connection (Buhner, 1996; Miller, 2017; Pollan, 2018). Inviting my Plant Teacher into my body allowed me to somatically and spiritually connect with the more-than-human beings. My Plant Teacher dissolved my ego, allowing me to become receptive to her wisdom, and her clear message cut through the fog of expectations, redirecting me back to a life outside.

For many years I taught outdoor education within a variety of pedagogical frameworks and felt a vague sense of unease with the ontologies I had witnessed. The quiet reflection period of the pandemic lockdown provided me with the space to identify the source of my unease: many outdoor pedagogies perceive the outdoors as a setting for personal growth and achievement, often emphasizing kinesthetic activity and quantifying participants' outdoor experiences in terms of elevation, distance, speed, etc. (Lowan, 2009; Sabet, 2018). Additionally, the semantics are often patriarchal, colonial, and violent: bag, take, conquer, overcome, defy, challenge, face, beat, crush, slay. The message is clear: the natural world is available for us to use as a playground, an obstacle course, a conquest. Dualisms are emphasized and facilitating opportunities for developing a meaningful connection to the more-than-humans are minimal at best, but more commonly ignored.

In contrast, my most profound experiences with the more-than-human world – the gifts, the moments of awe, the sense-making and wisdom and guidance – have occurred during quiet and often inactive moments, where I am not necessarily 'alone' (as a host of other beings surround me) (Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013), but not in the company of other humans. Indeed, when I facilitate outdoor-immersion opportunities for my students, many are genuinely surprised by the impact of the experience of stillness.

Sense-making through re-engaging intercorporeality and eco-centric, slow pedagogical practices is the learning that endures (Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Connecting the human body to the more-than-humans kinaesthetically—through eating the flesh of the berries and breathing the oxygen from the trees—is to be *Embodied* and *Being-in-the-flesh* (Eli, 2013). To be conscious of the fact that we are ingesting, and communing with, the land is to enter the liminal space between flesh and spirit (Todd, 2014). We bridge the outer and inner worlds by bringing the outside in: somatically our senses detect the scent of the branches, the touch of the bark, the taste of the berries, the sound of the leaves rustling, and the sight of the contrasting red berries and green leaves. Mindfully we use our senses to connect with the world outside our bodies, sense-making through contemplation.

Recently, my students and I entered that liminal space while on a field trip, walking through the old growth forest fringing the coastline. We stop frequently, sharing stories and details about the living giants surrounding us: the many uses for Western red cedar, the tree of life for the Coast Salish peoples (Stewart, 1984); the fire-resistant, insulative bark of Douglas-fir; the open canopy where grandmother Hemlock once stood, but recently fell over during a windstorm. Walking slowly, stopping to talk, admire, observe. Then walking again, slowly, through the forest.

Notice this patch of shrubs with their fragile, succulent red flesh berries. Salmon from the nearby stream, who traveled the ocean for four years, have returned here, to complete their journey home. Eagles, ravens, bears take the fish from the river, and the salmon bodies, along with the rain and the water in the soil, nourish the

forest plants. These shrubs combine sunlight and carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to produce oxygen and the sugars that sweeten their berries.

Now, as you eat these berries and breathe the air, the water, sugar, and oxygen from the land will nourish each cell in your body. The land—the oxygen, the water, the sugars, the salmon—and all the smaller oceanic fish that the salmon ate—is now part of your body. You breathe the oxygen produced by the forest plants. You exhale the carbon dioxide that will be used to create more berries, more oxygen. You and the land are integrated: you are a part of the land, it has become a part of you—the land is in your cells, your blood, your lungs, your tissues.

We walk. Digesting. Breathing. Integrating.

We pause.

Figure 4. *Eating salmonberries. Being-in-the-flesh.*



You are all very busy people. Your schedules and lives are full and rich. Right now, however, I would like to give you the gift of time. Soon, I will invite you to simply be.

When I finish speaking, I will invite you to find your sit spot. Perhaps you like the view, perhaps it is comfortable and soft, perhaps it is quiet and inviting. Your spot will? be away from distractions. You will recognize your spot when you find it. You will be close enough to hear me when I call you back, but far enough away that it will feel like your own space.

When you visit your spot, you won't need to read or write or answer questions. You will simply be. Perhaps you close your eyes to focus on the sounds around you. Perhaps you lie back to watch the cloud formations. Perhaps you notice an ant, carrying its food. It's up to you. The only thing I ask is—please put your phones away – do not use them, you do not need them, I will call you back when it is time.

We sit. Digesting. Breathing. Integrating.

Time passes.

I invite them back to our starting location. The group moves slowly, quietly, and with intention. Their energy has changed—they are peaceful, thoughtful.

How was that experience for you?

Smiles and nods.

What sorts of things did you notice?

A spider building a web. Birds singing in the trees near my spot. The sounds of leaves rustling in the wind. The way the moss was soft to lie on.

How do you feel now?

Relaxed. Calm. Happy. Content. Peaceful. Aware.

What did you like most about this activity?

You didn't give us an assignment or a worksheet—that made me feel relaxed.

I haven't ever really been without my phone like that. It was really hard at first – I was distracted because I couldn't look at it. But after a while I started to see other things around me. Things I hadn't noticed in a long time, bugs and sounds. I felt like a little kid again, just lying in the grass, doing nothing. It was cool.

I liked smelling the salt in the air. It reminded me of when I was little, and my parents would take us down to the beach. I took a lot of deep breaths.

I lay down on the ground, underneath this big tree, and it made me feel really small. I started to wonder how old the tree was, and what changes it had seen in its lifetime.

I haven't ever done that before—just sitting alone in nature. I liked it. I feel happy.

We pause. Digesting. Breathing. Integrating.

In a few minutes, we are going to leave this place. The reality is that we might never return here, to this place—life is unpredictable that way, and there are no guarantees. Think about how you feel, right now, and know that whenever you want to feel this way again, you can always come back to the Land. It's always here for you.

When I finish speaking, I invite you to turn to a view that you like, find stillness, and intentionally remember this place, and how you feel right now. It's like you are taking a mental photo, or postcard, of this place, this memory, this experience. Perhaps you would like to silently say a few words of gratitude or prayer or appreciation. Then, when your heart is full, come back to our circle, and together we will make our way home.

The Land blesses us.

The Land teaches us.

We walk. Digesting. Breathing. Integrating.

Figure 5. *Noticing Spider's web.*



I am not my talk. I am not my actions. I am my silence. I am the consciousness that perceives all these things. When I go to my consciousness, to that great pool of silence that observes the intricacies of my life, I am aware that I am me. (Wagamese, 2013, p. 15)

Since time immemorial, humans from world cultures have sought wisdom in and from the Land (Lee-Hammond, 2017; Wildcat et al., 2014). “Land” includes everything on Earth—rivers, plants, stars, animals, humans, winds—and is the source of all wisdom (Goodyear-Kaopua, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013; Styres, 2019; Wildcat et al., 2014): “[a]ncient knowledges are (re)membered experiences that form deeply intimate and spiritual expressions of our connections to Land” (Styres, 2019, p. 26). For it is in the stillness where we can hear the messages from other beings; listening to the Land is where we find the answers (Hill, 2008; Smith, 2005).

Temporarily leaving society to spend time away from humans to allow the self to dissolve into the universe has always been an important ontological and spiritual practice (Bai & Cohen, 2014; Smith, 2005). “After periods of intense solitude in nature people often remark that they feel as if they are in the presence of something greater, whether conceptualized as God, Creator, or higher force” (Daniel, 2005, p. 96). To become fully immersed in the quiet of the Earth is to

shed the dualism of body/spirit, human/world (Bai, 2015; Bai & Cohen, 2014). As Niitsitapi scholar Leroy Little Bear says:

That's the reason why our people go on a vision quest. That is why I call on the bears. That's why I call on the eagle. I call on the rocks, the plants and so on to tell us knowledge that we would not otherwise pick up—the knowledge that is beyond our frequency range (Leroy Little Bear, as cited in Hill, 2008, p. 8).

But to receive the wisdom of the universe, one must be open and receptive, listening with both heart and mind (Hill, 2008).

The more-than-human world has guided me on my journey, and I am intrigued: what is the essence of spending time away from other humans and intentionally listening to other beings? What revelations might arise from eco-centric, slow pedagogical practices? Connecting the body, emotions, intellect, and spirit to the more-than-human world in a pursuit of stillness has been a common thread throughout my life, oscillating between the fore- and background, guiding my life choices and directions. And, although I have played the role of teacher for two decades, the time has arrived for me to embrace the beginner's mind, to hold space, to practice patience, to be still, and to learn.

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