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"WE MUST RECOGNIZE THAT IN THE MIDST OF A MAGNIFICENT DIVERSITY OF CULTURES AND LIFE FORMS WE ARE ONE HUMAN FAMILY AND ONE EARTH COMMUNITY WITH A COMMON DESTINY." EARTH CHARTER PREAMBLE

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Chair

INTRODUCTION

“Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.” Earth Charter Preamble

We are pleased to introduce the first edition of the Earth Charter Magazine, a publication that celebrates the diversity of voices and contributes to the purpose of our UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development on research and education at the intersection of sustainability, values and education. Looking ahead, we aspire for this magazine to become a reference and an instrument for inspiration, knowledge sharing of research or experiences on new approaches to education and the ethic of care and work related to the Earth Charter.

Within these pages, you will encounter seven articles from a variety of authors working in different areas and cultural contexts. Some share brief research results; others offer personal reflections on experiences related to their work with the Earth Charter. This issue contains articles highlighting how the Earth Charter principles have been incorporated into curricula at the school and university levels. Some articles emphasize the importance of the whole institution approach (WIA) and transdisciplinarity in education; others link the Earth Charter with key concepts, voices or areas of knowledge. These examples and lessons learned could be used to spark new approaches to readers' own educational institution or practice.

As you embark on this reading journey, we invite you to embrace the power of diversity, recognizing that it is through the exchange of ideas and perspectives that we expand our views and unlock innovation. We hope that this magazine becomes a resource that inspires people to integrate the Earth Charter Principles into various contexts and learning scenarios and consequently ignites positive change.

Enjoy the reading!

LINDSAY LOUISE BACURIN, MARIA SOSA
AND MIRIAN VILELA
EDITORIAL TEAM



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The Possibilities of Rhizomatic Imagination and Ecopedagogy Amid the End of an Era



César "CJ" Baldelomar

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*Note: This essay is adapted from its original version as a script for a presentation delivered at the Spirituality and Sustainability Conference in Assisi, Italy, on 10 June 2023.

First, a vignette that encapsulates the main themes of the essay.

During early May 2023, just as the weather started feeling like spring in New England, I noticed a dove nesting in my neighbor's gutter. For three weeks, I observed with fascination and admiration as the dove diligently remained in place, awaiting the next generation to emerge from its shell of comfort. Then one day rain and thunder suddenly interrupted the weather pattern. A flash rainstorm—more common during summer—washed away the nest. The eggs, the very promise of new life, now lay cracked on the concrete ground. The dove would periodically return to where its nest once stood over the next three days or so. Was it hoping the rainstorm never happened... hoping the eggs were there or even hatched? Or did it forget about the deadly rainfall? Or was it mourning? Perhaps all of the above and more.

Was it all for naught? The entire process, from mating to laying the eggs to nesting... all the dedication and effort... for what? Is there a divine plan or reasoning behind it? Was there some telos that should serve as the foundation for futures? I think not. Climate change, the presence of the gutter, and bad luck all coalesced for a perfect storm that ensured the dove's

failure. A tragedy! Death that serves no *raison d'être*. A waste amid a necropolitical landscape. A wasteland that can teach if we are willing to learn.

What is possible is foreclosed by narratives that make anything other than its own storylines impossible. What decolonial scholars call the pluriverse is dominated and limited by the universe. The cacophony of dissonant and dislocated voices is silenced by the symphony of voices obsessed with their own melodies that play on loop across generations. Education is unable to teach beyond its own self references to a decaying culture, limiting the possibilities for what never was. Languages unable to allure: dead languages.

All our institutions, even progressive ones, are deeply embedded within the colonial matrix of power, which leads to a matrix of domination that emphasizes hierarchies, binary thinking, mechanistic separations, hyper-individualism and an uncritical acceptance of the way things are. So what to do?

I suggest we embrace the end of an era in order to dislodge stagnant imaginations and pedagogies. Portuguese sociologist Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2018) states: "Imagination of the end is being corrupted by the end of imagination" (p. ix).

"The end of an era." This catchphrase is common in our quotidian parlance. What



Photo credit: César "CJ" Baldelomar

does it mean, though? It usually means the end of some alleged coherent block of time, the passing of the torch from one generational representative to another or imagining the way things were—the fabled past—as no longer able to continue in the present. It is done. "Concluído". "Finito".

I usually approach with suspicion any narratives of a linear past, present and future. For me, time is rather messy—a sometimes cyclical, often chaotic, occurrence. I tend to agree with French philosopher Michel Foucault (2010), who describes history as one of domination upon domination. All histories repeat in cycles around power's multivalent distributions. Even the biblical book of Ecclesiastes raises the harsh reality that time is nothing but a repetitive cycle. For example: "There is nothing new under the sun." / "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever." / All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full" (NIV, 1:4-7).

Until now! Seas are indeed filling up and rising, disrupting ecosystems and bodies of all sorts, especially along coastal areas. The gift of prophecy is elusive. It might come in waves—if at all. In this case, the author of Ecclesiastes got it partially right. Yes, generations will come and go—and not just hominid ones—but earth will remain forever, though in a poisoned state. Biblical writers could not have imagined the catastrophic impact of homo sapiens, through technology, on the planet.



Photo credit: Thuy Ha Bich - Pixabay

But what about the promise of the rainbow? Was it not Yahweh's symbol of the covenant never to flood earth again? Genesis 9:14-15 states: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." Extinction level devastation was never to occur again. Never say never.

The end of an era? Divine protection is not guaranteed. Even faith in collective human agency is under suspicion—and rightly so. If at the end, what will our swan song be? Human all too human, of course. We deny and hope, especially at moments of deep existential and physical pain. Warding off the inevitable—this is the cycle of bodies, particularly of privileged bodies. Those in precarity, at the edge of nonexistence, know better.

Hopelessness, nihilism and lack of faith in collective agency envelop us like the waters on our vulnerable shores. Promises no longer hold their rhetorical weight.

Turning to the youth, I've often heard that they are tired of being told they will remedy all ills, solve all problems. They also say that they don't need any more science to convince them that things are awry. Enough with "hope" talk, they say. Their batteries are already depleted with energy-draining preoccupations like how to survive with low and stagnant wages that leave them vulnerable to the exuberant rising costs of living. And so we reach a major conundrum, a major roadblock, to transforming worldviews, to thinking and being otherwise. How can we expect youth to change lifestyles and imagine another world when current economic, political and religious systems—bolstered by educational paradigms—are all presented as sacred, as sacrosanct, as given... as the only possibilities then, now and forever?

Have we reached the end of an era in terms of imagining what is possible, in terms of even envisioning—dreaming about—other ways of thinking and being? Or have these "imaginings" always been the prerogative of a select few throughout history? Indeed they have. And those



select few recruit and coerce others to buy into the imaginations, the fictions. The ability to dream and to imagine is crucial. If that too is policed and disciplined, then we can forget about any lofty hopes of systemic change.

For unpoliced imaginations to take off, one must walk the tightrope of delving into the reality of inherent precarity experienced by most bodies while looking toward a different future. Bodies are always in motion through time and space, never settled in a wondrous but chaotic cosmos that precisely because of its vastness will remain ineffable and enigmatic. The Divine. Mystery. Clouds of unknowing.

Playing with ideas means fragmenting them and then arranging them into infinite constellations of possibility. To create is to express—and to imagine is to exercise divinity. Rubem Alves [2002] writes of teaching in the following way: “At the end, instead of having a clear, simple and cogent conclusion, what I had was a collection of fragments and a number of question marks...” [p. 7]. Fragments and question marks. These are teachers’ best friends, though they could always morph into enemies if not intentionally pursued. What does it mean to teach departures and not arrivals? What does it mean to learn always in motion, with moments of suspension? What does it mean to teach and learn as bodies subject to precariousness and/or precarity and so at the mercy of life’s inherent vicissitudes?

To help us begin to think about these questions, I turn to a “rhizomatic imagination” or way of thinking. French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari [1987] define a rhizome in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* “as a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals” (p. 22). Rhizomes have no center; they conjure images of multiplicities, assemblages of all kinds (including unexpected ones) that are always in movement. They are decentered and always travelling in unexpected directions, with no telos or end point. Rhizomes can spring up in several forms and at different junctures. And they are always in between, “interbeing intermezzo,” messing with fixed borders or even with settled concepts of self. Rhizomatic connections, then, are transformational, multiplicitous; they are offshoots that form unexpected alliances across seemingly irreconcilable differences [Baldelomar, 2022].

Thinking and being rhizomatically open us toward forging paths—other synapses and portals—toward a pluriversal reconception of our own positionalities and epistemes. This renders any one worldview—any one consciousness or educational paradigm—as simply one among a multitude of possibilities.

In pedagogical terms, rhizomatic learning is always open to any and all connections beyond the systematic, strategic or rational, though it no doubt recognizes

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César "CJ" Baldelomar



their importance. And that is the key: rhizomatic education does not conceive of learning and teaching as dualistic. All is useful in forging knowledges, worldviews, and worlds. Nothing is to be discarded, for one cannot know what combinations of fragments or offshoots will emerge for complex beings such as we. Such learning and teaching are always in motion and fluid, much like our bodies and lives, despite our futile attempts to be arboreal and planted.

The most important questions for me today are: how can we allure through what we teach while sitting in contexts that might not, to put it colloquially, have light at the end of the tunnel? How does our flesh both limit and expand what can be taught as bodies of all kinds die so that we may live?

A possible pedagogical offshoot of rhizomatic imagination is an ecopedagogy that can guide us through a collapsing era. It is a pedagogy with roots in critical theory and the Global South, especially in Brazil, that critically unites human rights with the rights of earth, which the Earth Charter so cogently underscores. Ecopedagogy seeks to envision other worlds through an integral ecology that disrupts normative anthropocentric, ego-centered, market-oriented educational philosophies and paradigms. It straddles utopia and reality, never peddling denial of our collective precarious state. At its center is the importance of non-Western, non-Global North knowledges for fresh imaginations, collaborations, and creative [transformative] energies [Antunes and Gadotti, 2005].

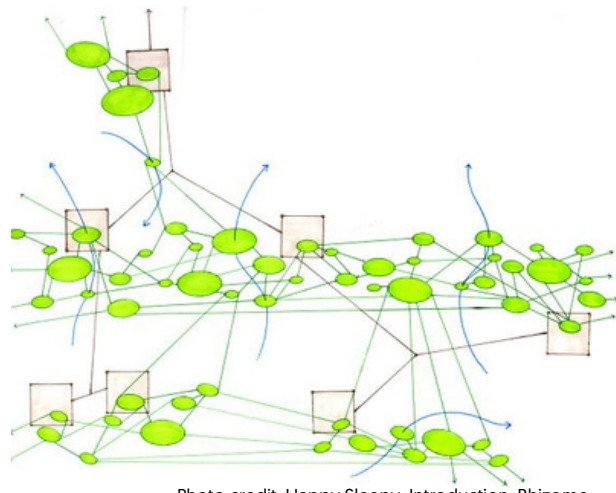


Photo credit: Happy Sleepy. Introduction: Rhizome

Ecopedagogy can enhance ecoliteracy and education for sustainability both conceptually and practically to cultivate two broad aspects crucial to confronting the ecological crisis: 1) critical imagination and creativity, which are essential to transforming paradigms and worldviews often trapped by simplistic religious and ecological narratives of our [usually exalted] place within the matrix of life and the cosmos; and 2) ability to sit in the “dark night of the soul” in order to honestly engage [to radically accept] and mourn the mass suffering and death [necropolitics] of all species and life on earth. Ecopedagogy demands that we accept our roles in perpetuating death-dealing paradigms [imagination] and practices.

If we are to emerge in states of decreased precarity, our thinking must be chaotic and eclectic, imaginative and creative, playing with categories in the process of undoing them. Only then will fragments emerge that might, just might, result in life-giving constellations.



Principle 14 of the Earth Charter—which gels perfectly with ecopedagogy’s goal of paradigmatic, systemic transformation—reminds us that formal education and life-long learning should integrate the knowledge, values and skills needed for a sustainable way of life. The arts and humanities figure prominently into this. We can allure through words and dance, painting and poetry, music and thought experiments. But most importantly, we must let all our surroundings and its inhabitants, from the micro to the macro to the cosmic, teach us. Beauty and ugliness should inspire both awe and dread.

The end of an era is a welcome prospect for bodies in movement, for imaginations taking flight to worlds not yet here, for beings seeking guidance for what never was but what could be.

Continually unlearn in order to re-learn and learn anew, especially from multiple sources. That is our best “hope” for any prospects of finding pockets of air in an increasingly suffocating environment replete with cracked eggs.



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Digging Deeper to Unearth the Roots of Pro-Environmental Behaviour



Janika Liv Marais (Heyerdahl)

Janika Liv Marais (Heyerdahl) is a Life and Natural Science teacher with a passion for education for sustainable development (ESD). She holds a BSc in Biochemistry from the University of Cape Town with a focus on terrestrial ecology and climate change mitigation, a Post Graduate Certificate in Education from the University of South Africa and is a Master of Research graduated from Hartpur University. Janika's interest in sustainable development and the natural environment inspired her to found Huruma Education, a consulting organization that facilitates the development of environmentally, socially and economically sustainable practices in schools. Janika earned a Certificate in Education for Sustainable Development from the University for Peace and develops educational programmes and teachings based on the Earth Charter Principles for secondary education.



After completing the Earth Charter Educators course and designing a number of learning programmes geared at facilitating the development of sustainable behaviours, the more critical part of me began to wonder what impact this work would really have on most of the students' actual behaviour later in life. I looked at myself and some of my loved ones critically, and even with all the knowledge and empathy that we had, this did not always translate into sustainable behaviours in our lives. Why was this? Was it because we didn't have the right systems in place in South Africa, recycling systems, sustainable packaging options or affordable options of renewable energy sources? Upon moving to England and devising a research question for my master's, I settled on the question of determinants translated into actual recycling behaviour in England. There was an easy and efficient recycling system, and my husband and I became avid recyclers very quickly. I dove deep into the literature around recycling behaviour and what was termed other 'pro-environmental' behaviours. I learned very quickly that easy and efficient systems did not translate into recycling behaviour, with England struggling to combat their low recycling rates, well below their target. And, in fact, well below South African recycling rates [due to recycling in the informal sector]. I started to see patterns in the literature. Pro-environmental behaviours were very seldom predicted by external factors such as systems, financial incentives, financial penalties or guilt tripping media. In some cases, these external factors would increase engagement in the particular behaviour that they targeted but would not spill over

into other behaviours or would even reduce engagement in other behaviours. With the bigger picture in mind, it was clear that external incentives and individual types of behaviours such as recycling behaviour were not sufficient to combat the global environmental and associated social crisis we face. It seemed that intrinsic motivators were important predictors of a wider range of pro-environmental behaviours. I started to see patterns in the literature, with moral or social norms and values playing an important role in pro-environmental behaviours. Identity as a 'green' person predicted some pro-environmental behaviours, but a stronger predictor was environmental identity, where an individual included aspects of nature into their personal identity. I reflected on this literature and was compelled to try and understand how these factors formed and how they might be encouraged in a formal education environment. I started to think of these factors relative to known lines of human development such as moral intelligence, spiritual intelligence and identity which I had read about in Ken Wilber's books, "Integral Psychology and Sex, Ecology and Spirituality". What if these intrinsic factors were capacities that developed at some of the higher stages of human development? I started to scour the literature and did not find much that investigated the relationship between known models of moral or spiritual development and pro-environmental behaviours. If a relationship could be established between these lines of development, this could provide evidence for integrating workshops that facilitate the development of these 'soft skills' into formal education settings with



Photo credit: Janika Liv Marais [Heyerdahl]

the goal of encouraging pro-environmental behaviours. Inherently, development of these capacities would allow for an increase in pro-social behaviour as well. Also, I was intrigued by environmental identity linked to mystical experiences as a construct that consistently predicted pro-environmental engagement. Also, it is an identity that could reasonably be assumed to allow one to engage in the highest forms of moral reasoning and decision making, as one is acting not from a case of mistaken or fragmented identity, but rather from a sense of oneness with all life. Below is a brief summary of my dissertation that resulted from this questioning.

The Earth Charter takes an optimistic view on the potential for humanity to create a just, peaceful and sustainable society. Pillars II and III of the Earth Charter, Ecological Integrity and Social and Economic Justice, emphasize environmentally sustainable behaviour as crucial components in creating a just, sustainable and peaceful world. The potential and the necessity for humanity to reach spiritual and moral maturity and a mature sense of identity is reflected in the Earth Charter Principles.

Models of human development also reflect an optimistic view, with humanity's highest stages of morality, identity and spirituality being more inclusive and compassionate. The environmental issues that we face are systemic in nature and therefore require systemic solutions. It is arguable that globally, the predominant systems that exist today largely reflect the predominant sense of spiritual capacities and associated identity, worldview and moral competence. Both private-sphere behaviours, like personal recycling and waste and energy use reduction and public-sphere behaviours, including environmental education activism, lobbying governments for policy change and organizing protests to create awareness are necessary to create the Earth Charter vision [2000]. It is well accepted in the field of environmental psychology that intrinsic motivations such as identity, morals and values are predictors for engaging in a wide range of sustainable behaviours [Gatersleben et al., 2014; Steg et al., 2014]. Because interventions to encourage sustainable behaviours often require extensive financial and human resources, it is important to identify the interventions that produce the



widest ranging results in sustainable behaviours. Therefore, it is important to encourage the development of intrinsic motivations which result in a wide range of private- and public-sphere sustainable behaviours.

Although the Earth Charter emphasizes the importance of moral and spiritual education, programmes for sustainable development, known modes of psychological development and their associated interventions to facilitate the development of moral reasoning capacities, spirituality and identity have not been included in education for sustainable development models. Developmental psychology posits that moral reasoning, identity and spirituality develop incrementally throughout an individual's life span. As with much learning and development, these capacities need to be intentionally facilitated [Lind, 2019].

Moral development refers to an increase in the capacity for moral reasoning. Moral reasoning refers to the justification given for a moral decision. Moral competence is the ability to consistently apply a type of



Photo credit: Janika Liv Marais (Heyerdahl)

justification in various moral dilemmas. There are six stages of moral development according to Kohlberg's model which has been widely adapted and applied [Kohlberg et al., 1983]. At stages one and two, the lowest stages of development, moral reasoning is based on punishment or reward, while stages two and three, the middle stages, involve compliance and obeying rules, laws or social norms. At stages five and six, the highest stages of moral development, an individual is consistently able to critically consider their social norms and values to apply a deeply held set of universal ethical principles such as justice, equality, dignity and respect when reasoning through moral dilemmas, even if this means breaking societal norms or rules [Kohlberg et al., 1983]. All these universal ethical principles are reflected in the Earth Charter as necessary for a peaceful, just and sustainable future [Earth Charter, 2000].

The Earth Charter emphasizes a need for individuals to identify with the whole earth community and relates this to establishing a universal sense of responsibility [Earth Charter, 2000]. The former echoes of environmental identity [Clayton, 2003] and the latter of the highest stages of moral development [Kohlberg et al 1983]. Environmental identity, a collective identity that includes an individual's moral, emotional and cognitive connections to the natural environment, has been identified as a consistent predictor of a range of environmentally sustainable behaviours [Olivos & Aragonés, 2011; Tam, 2013; Davis et al., 2011; Alisat & Riemer, 2015].



However, it is not clear how this identity forms, nor has it been framed in relation to existing models of moral development. Identification with the natural world or all material reality appears in many of the world's wisdom traditions through mystical experiences of union with all of reality. Spiritual intelligence is a construct that is in its infancy and involves the ability to cognitively process non-material reality. It is a measure of an individual's awareness of a reality that transcends the material world, the ability to cognitively process the non-material world, the ability to critically process existential questions, to create personal meaning out of experiences and expand their consciousness (King & DeCicco, 2009).

Until this study, environmental identity, moral reasoning and spiritual intelligence had not been investigated in relation to each other or to environmentally sustainable behaviours. This study sought to determine whether higher levels of moral development, spiritual intelligence and environmental identity were associated with engagement in private and public-sphere pro-environmental behaviours via online survey study and also, whether moral development and spiritual intelligence were associated with higher levels of environmental identity, a known predictor of pro-environmental behaviours.

For my research, I conducted an online survey to determine whether there was a relationship between moral competence, stage of moral reasoning development (Lind, 2019), environmental identity (Clayton, 2003), spiritual intelligence (King & DeCicco, 2009)

and self-reported pro-environmental behaviours in the private and public sphere. Participants were sourced via online snowball sampling through my personal social media and through Facebook groups with an interest in environmentalism and sustainability. The survey sample size was 304 people, a large proportion of whom were college-educated (87,5%), women (76,3%) and ranging in age from 18 to more than 65 years old. Multiple linear regressions were run to analyze the effect that moral competence, stage of moral reasoning development, environmental identity and spiritual intelligence had on self-reported pro-environmental behaviours in the private and public sphere and also on how moral competence, stage of moral reasoning development and spiritual intelligence influence environmental identity. The most significant findings are reported below.

Environmental identity was the only variable in this study that significantly predicted both private-sphere and public-sphere pro-environmental behaviours and accounted for 28% and 33% of the variability in each of the respective behaviours. Environmental identity is associated with feelings of closeness (Olivos & Aragonés, 2011) with nature and relatedness to nature (Balundé et al., 2019). Environmental problems that are more relevant to an individual's sense of self can attract more attention, arouse more emotion and connect more to other aspects of their lives and behaviours (Clayton, 2003). Therefore, in individuals with higher levels of environmental identity, environmentally unethical or unsustainable activities may



Photo credit: Graeme Holliday

cause them to become more emotive, and these individuals may be more sensitive to and more aware of environmentally unethical or unsustainable activities in their daily lives. More personally significant issues move the individual to mitigate the perceived environmental threats or to reduce their role in environmental damage [Clayton, 2003].

Stage 5 moral preference, the ability to apply a deeply held set of universal ethical principles such as justice, equality, dignity and respect consistently, and moral competence or consistency significantly predicted environmental identity. Therefore, as postulated, an identity that prioritizes the natural environment may be related to a universal sense of moral responsibility. Moral reasoning capacity may indirectly influence private-sphere and public-sphere pro-environmental behaviour through environmental identity. A significant relationship was found with both moral competence and stage 5 moral reasoning. Moral reasoning at this stage involves reflecting on inconsistencies in one's community's values and addressing inconsistencies to preserve one's rights and the right of others to promote the greatest good for the greatest number [Kohlberg 1984].

Spiritual intelligence also significantly predicted environmental identity, particularly the factor of critical existential thinking which accounted for 25% of the variation in environmental identity. Critical existential thinking is the subcategory within



spiritual intelligence that can be applied to any life issue, as an object or event that can be viewed relative to one's existence, including nature (King & DeCicco, 2009). Individuals develop personal philosophies or conclusions about reality by contemplating existential issues, using critical thinking and integrating scientific knowledge and personal experience (King & DeCicco, 2009). Through this kind of analysis of reality, individuals might come to a sense of identity that involves recognition of the similarity of self and nature, and this may play a role in providing one with a sense of connection and being part of a larger whole (Clayton 2003), leading to high levels of environmental identity.

This research provided the first evidence for a relationship between moral reasoning stages and environmentally sustainable behaviours. Stage 4 moral reasoning is where the individual has a sense of duty and obligation to uphold laws and rules based on the assumption that if one person violates the law, then everyone might (Kohlberg 1984). Stage 4 moral preference significantly predicted private-sphere pro-environmental behaviour ($p=0,24$), which can be explained by private-sphere pro-environmental behaviour rapidly becoming moral or social norms and are perceived as normative behaviours or governed by unspoken moral law (Steg et al., 2014). As expected, the research found no significant relationship between moral stage 4 preference and public-sphere pro-environmental behaviour because it is an inherently activist type of behaviour that challenges policy or law rather than abides

by it (Sloot et al., 2018; Alisat and Riemer, 2015). Public-sphere behaviours are, however, necessary to allow for the radical change of harmful systems that is required. Therefore, it is important that we educate beyond morality based on rules and regulations and facilitate the development of stage 5 and 6 moral reasoning where deeply held universal ethical principles such as justice, equality, dignity and respect are consistently applied in scenarios involving nature despite what current unsustainable societal norms or laws dictate.

The values of justice, equality, dignity and respect are clearly stated as crucial for a just and sustainable world in the Earth Charter. The capacity to reason through moral dilemmas and to apply these values universally arises at the highest stages of moral reasoning development. This study shows a relationship between levels of moral development and increases in environmentally sustainable behaviours and environmental identity. Because of this connection, moral development should be incorporated into school curricula. There are existing education programmes involving discussion of various moral dilemmas that can be implemented and allow for the development of moral competence (Lind, 2019). These may be added to existing interventions to encourage sustainable or pro-environmental behaviours. The Earth Charter states that spiritual and moral education is important for creating a just, peaceful and sustainable world (Earth Charter, 2000); however, known models of moral and spiritual development have not been given much attention in research or widespread



education programmes. For example, the Eco-Schools Program, which is the most widely applied environmental programme in schools, has failed to have a measurable effect on children's behaviour (Boeve-de Pauw & Van Petegem, 2013) and may benefit from including pedagogies that facilitate the development of spiritual and moral capacities. Developing critical existential thinking and personal meaning production might allow individuals to realize the unity of all reality and assign meaning to life and therefore decide to engage in pro-environmental behaviours as a result. Future studies may determine pedagogies such as mindfulness practices that might allow for the development of spiritual intelligence.

Perhaps the most notable findings of this study are that spiritual intelligence and moral competence and stage 5 moral reasoning significantly predict environmental identity ($p=0.001$), which is, in turn, a significant predictor of both private-sphere ($p<0.001$) and public-sphere ($p<0.001$) pro-environmental behaviours. This provides evidence that moral and

spiritual education is indeed necessary for creating a just and sustainable future as it may allow for individuals to cognitively reason through moral dilemmas relating to the environment with an understanding of the reality of existence, having come to the realization of their oneness with the natural world. Further, research has shown that morality and environmental identity can be developed through education interventions (Young et al., 2020; Clayton, 2003; Lind, 2019). Moral competence does not develop naturally but is fostered through discussion, debate and intentional facilitation (Lind, 2019). Given the significant contribution of spiritual intelligence and moral competence in predicting environmental identity, education programmes that increase levels of environmental identity (Stapleton, 2015; Young et al., 2020) to enhance motivation to engage in pro-environmental behaviour may benefit from adding components that increase spiritual intelligence and moral competence.



Photo credit: Graeme Holliday



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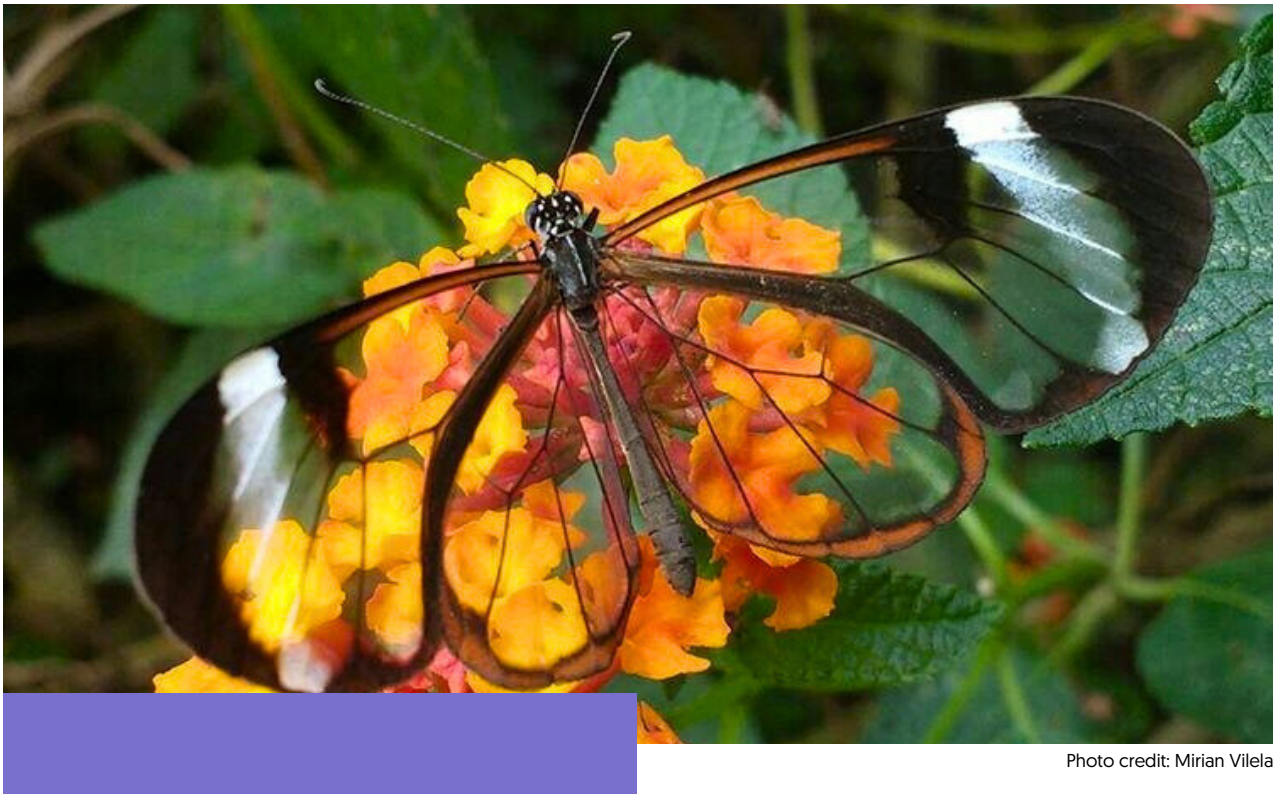


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Alexander von Humboldt's Cosmopolitan Thought and the Earth Charter*



Wellington Vilela de Araújo

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Introduction

In his work "Perpetual Peace," Immanuel Kant expressed the view that "the application of law across the entire surface of the earth... would ultimately result in a cosmopolitan constitution" (Kant, 1795/1999, p. 329). A global constitutional order signifies, above all, the universal belief in the need to search for basic values and norms that unite people from all nations and cultures. Over the past decades, in response to the growing and inevitable global interconnectedness, numerous initiatives seeking to create a global constitution have emerged. It is evident, therefore, that Kant's dream of establishing a cosmopolitan constitution is not entirely unattainable. On the contrary, considering the many transboundary elements we share such as oceans, rivers and air (and water and air pollution), humanity certainly needs a code of ethics and values, a charter of common rights and responsibilities. Hence, the search for and the ongoing debate about a global constitutional order makes sense.

To partially address this challenge, particularly regarding the fragmentation of environmental governance instruments, jurists and governments worldwide have considered and proposed the creation of the Global Pact for the Environment as a way to better articulate existing environmental law instruments. [1] A regional-level example is the European Green Deal, a European ecological pact, which is an initiative of the European Commission that seeks to generate a green revolution in the European continent. Here, the commitment among all member states

is to make Europe carbon neutral by 2050. With the approval of the European Climate Law, this political commitment becomes a legal obligation across nations in that continent. (European Commission, n.d.)

For Klaus Bosselmann [2019], a form of global constitutionalism can be seen through the developments in national constitutions, often with similar principles. For it appears that over the last 25 years, complementing the development of international law, there has been a "greening" of national constitutions in the sense of growing recognition of the essentiality of environmental rights and duties (Bosselmann, 2019). The dual development of national and international environmental constitutionalism allows us to observe a global trend, even if incipiently, towards a world constitutional order or global constitution (Bosselmann, 2015). Still according to Bosselmann, the real viability of a global constitution reveals numerous preliminary issues to be resolved, such as the problems of legitimacy [2015]. In any case, although the drafting of a global constitution is still idealistic, the discourse on global constitutionalism has generated many ideas around a global constitution-type document. For Bosselmann, the Earth Charter is undoubtedly the best example of a document with a purpose to comply with a global constitution [2015].

In this context, the Earth Charter presents itself as an interface between global ethics and international law, between good intentions, aspirations and politics, and, in



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a way, at the forefront of a vision of international constitutional order. Indeed, this article reaffirms the desirability of a global constitutional order, notably in the field of environmental law, with the Earth Charter playing a central role, as it can be considered to be a solid ethical foundation for a global constitution model.

For Febres, when discussing global governance and sustainable development democracy is assumed to be the ideal political context, knowing that it is an essential condition, depending, however, on other elements [2015]. In this sense, Febres summarizes, “the values introduced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, by the various international declarations on environment and development and, in particular, by the Earth Charter, due to its high level of participatory consensus, become necessary references that give an axiomatic basis to governance” [2015 p. 20].

Febres goes further considering it correct and opportune to characterize the Earth Charter as a *sui generis* instrument [2015, p. 255]: rich in legal diversity, with principles that follow different orders and classifications in different instruments (even in different normative orders), but that, within the scope of the Earth Charter, all of them have a systemic and non-hierarchical treatment. Furthermore, she believes that this is what makes the Earth Charter a different instrument because it incorporates eminently moral connecting norms, modeling an ethicalization of international environmental law and laws related to sustainable development.

However, on the path to get to the Earth Charter, it is essential to visit Alexander von Humboldt [Bonpland and Humboldt, 2018], as he was the one who set sail towards the new world in search of scientific evidence to demonstrate the interconnection of all nature and its relationship with humanity and to justify the development of transnational protection rules in the field of international environmental law.



According to Andrea Wulf [2016], Alexander von Humboldt was the founding father of the environmental sustainability concept. As such, we could argue that his thoughts significantly influenced the development of international environmental law and, possibly consequently, the vision of the Earth Charter itself. Almost 200 years ago, Humboldt described Earth as a living organism, where everything is connected, from the tiniest insect to the largest and tallest trees. According to Laura Dassow Walls [2009], Humboldt united art and science when he said that we must use our imagination and our feelings to understand nature.

Therefore, Humboldt's perception of Earth as a living organism and recognition of the interdependence embodied in a global living society (an observation also made by Kant) is translated into modern times through the Earth Charter which affirms that "Earth is alive with a unique community of life" and in addition, it stresses our identity as an "Earth Community" (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).



Photo credit: Mirian Vilela

It is therefore essential to explain Humboldt's influence on international environmental law and, consequently, on the inspiration for the key ideas embedded in the Earth Charter. So let us first introduce Humboldt and his key ideas.

Who was Alexander von Humboldt? And what is his Relationship with the Earth Charter?

According to Harvey [1998, 2020], Alexander von Humboldt was a Prussian scientist who lived from 1769 to 1859. He traveled over 64,000 kilometers across the four continents, wrote 36 books and corresponded with 25,000 people. In fact, for many historians and biographers, Humboldt was one of the most esteemed men of the 19th century! [2]

In general, the name Alexander von Humboldt is more known among geographers, biologists, and naturalists. He is also highly recognized in the countries where he extensively traveled and conducted his explorations, including Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and especially the United States. Humboldt, being a naturalist, mining engineer, philologist, geographer and having many other specialties, embarked on an incredible exploration through Spanish America starting in 1799 [Harvey, 2020].



According to the Spanish researcher and historian Miguel Ángel Puig Samper Mulero [2007], Humboldt was born in 1769, on the outskirts of Berlin, to a wealthy family. Wilhelm von Humboldt, philosopher, diplomat and founder of the Humboldt University of Berlin, who was the architect of the Humboldtian education ideal, was Alexander's older brother.

As mentioned above, Alexander von Humboldt left behind a life of privilege and embarked on a five-year exploration of Latin America, where he spent nearly all of his inheritance. It was a journey that shaped his life and way of thinking, ultimately allowing him to become known throughout the world. Humboldt's scientific work has inspired many other scientists to this day.

For instance, Charles Darwin said that he would not have embarked on the "Beagle" and, therefore, may not have conceived the "Origin of Species" without Humboldt [Darwin, 2003]. As a young man, Darwin read Humboldt's book "Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent during the years 1799-1804", which was part travelogue and part scientific treatise based on Humboldt's explorations in Latin America.

According to his biographers, Humboldt indeed influenced Darwin in various ways. Firstly, the descriptions of Latin America were actually the reason for Darwin's desire to explore it himself. Once in Latin America, Darwin saw this new world through the lens of Humboldt's books, as can be inferred from his initial writings

upon his arrival in Brazil, "I am at the present fit only to read Humboldt, he like another Sun illuminates everything I behold" [Wulf, 2016, p. 297].

According to Puig, Humboldt dedicated his entire life to his passion to search for relationships between the inorganic and the organic, the harmonies and connections of nature. In short, he aimed to understand the Cosmos, the entire cosmology of the 18th century and accomplished this goal towards the end of his life by writing a series of books titled "Cosmos" [Puig, 2015].

Humboldt was a lifelong abolitionist; he believed in the innate equality of all races and wrote about it frequently. Therefore, he criticized the slavery he witnessed in Latin America and the United States. According to Harvey [2020], Humboldt's commitment to equality was not just related to American slavery. He was involved in and advocated for equality among all races and in all places. Throughout the four years he spent in South America, he always hired local people to guide him. He did the same during his time in the United States, as he was interested in learning from native communities whom he respected and admired for their knowledge. He did not consider them to be inferior, contrary to the majority of European explorers of the time. This consideration of human dignity can be found reflected in Principle 12 of the Earth Charter which states, "Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily



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health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).

We can see Humboldt's spirit and ideas, of love for nature and humanity, reflected throughout the Earth Charter.

The Cosmopolitan Thinking of Alexander von Humboldt and the Earth Charter

"Alles ist in Wechselwirkung!" [3]

Humboldt presented a concept of nature that still greatly influences our way of thinking today. He described Earth as a living organism (Wulf, 2016), where everything is connected, from the tiniest insect to the largest and tallest trees. Therefore, significant similarities and coincidences between Humboldt's thinking and the Earth Charter can easily be observed.

It is worth highlighting that the Earth Charter is a declaration of interdependent

principles, formulated from an ethical perspective, that constitute common foundations for humanity. It was developed building upon existing international instruments, treaties and conventions, as well as multicultural dialogues and consultations. It articulates the foundations for the paradigm of sustainable development and was conceived to guide not only states and governments, but also individuals and organizations involved in global environmental governance. In its preamble, its cosmopolitan approach is evident, embodied in the principles of universal responsibility and global interdependence.

Before embarking on his adventure in the Americas, what were Humboldt's actual intentions? To collect plants and animals, analyse electricity and magnetic elements in the atmosphere, and measure mountains? Yes, but behind all of this, Humboldt had a true purpose of "researching the interaction of all forces and the unity of Nature." (Wulf, 2016).



Humboldt wrote in his diary that everything is in interaction, interconnected: "alles ist in Wechselwirkung!" (Wulf, 2016). For him, going out into the fields and observing the vegetation, animals in their habitats, the landscape, the blue sky, the colour of water, initiating measurements, temperature, atmospheric pressure – all was a part of an impressive unity. No one had connected all these things together before! Therefore, every piece of information was potentially useful and part of the whole picture (Wulf, 2016 cit. 7, p. 66). This is reflected in the Earth Charter, in the affirmation that "all beings are interconnected and that each form of life has value," as well as the need for "a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility" (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).

Final Reflections

As evidenced above, Alexander von Humboldt was the one who sought evidence for Immanuel Kant's idea of the interconnection of all nature and its relationship with humanity (Wulf, 2016). He sought and found evidence that increasingly justifies the need to develop transnational rules notably in the field of international environmental law, for the protection of common goods (the commons), as they are found in nature: water, air, soil, forests and biodiversity. These elements and our requirements from it, unite human beings across nations and cultures.

In this regard, the Earth Charter, from a Humboldtian perspective of total interconnectedness, suggests, as

highlighted by Febres, a particular vision and a model of sustainable development in which the economic sphere is considered part of the social sphere, and both are contained within the biosphere. Understanding the integrity of the environment as a prerequisite that conditions the other objectives, it makes a call for the need to "find ways to harmonize diversity with unity." (Earth Charter, 2000). Therefore, the worldview articulated in the Earth Charter bears undeniable similarities to the ideas of Humboldt. Such similarities can be found in his work "Cosmos" where he elaborates on "the interrelation of all that exists, the unity in diversity!" (Puig, 2015 and Gómez Carder, 2019) The global unity Humboldt perceived is the most important premise that underpins the Earth Charter. This ever-increasing awareness of this interconnection and interdependence of all life on Earth, clearly articulated by Humboldt and in the Earth Charter, makes the cosmopolitan vision inevitable. These findings serve as a guide and basis to move forward on the path towards global environmental governance and also a global constitution.

*Note: This article is an extract and adaptation of my 2021 Dissertation "Alexander von Humboldt, A Carta da Terra e o Pacto Ecologico Europeu" (Alexander von Humboldt, The Earth Charter and The European Ecological) to obtain my Master's Degree in Law, with specialization in International and European Law, New School of Law, Portugal. Tutor: Dra. Soraya Nour Skell, Professora de Direito da Universidade Nova de Lisboa and reader: Rose Marie Inojosa



[1] The Global Pact for the Environment is an initiative and a “draft international treaty, which aims to recognize a new generation of fundamental rights and duties related to the protection of the environment, and in particular, the right to a healthy environment.” (<https://globalpactenvironment.org/en/>)

[2] A recent exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art titled *Alexander von Humboldt and United States: Art, Nature, and Culture*, organized by Eleanor Jones Harvey, senior curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, considered how deeply intertwined the ideas of Humboldt were with America's emerging identity, based on an appreciation of the landscape.

[3] Everything is connected!

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Whole Institution Approach for Sustainability and Transdisciplinarity



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Introduction

Renowned Chilean scientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela said, “living is a learning process” and proposed the theory of autopoiesis to explain how living beings emerged which led to their Santiago Theory of Cognition (Maturana and Varela, 1998). They affirmed that learning is associated with the creative process that leads to the emergence of living beings. As living beings, we are constantly learning through our interaction with the environment, and through this interaction and learning we self-organize and self-create (autopoiesis). It is through this constant learning that living beings, after thousands or even millions of years, evolved the best traits like eyesight, teeth or roots best adapted to their environment. Although Maturana and Varela’s theory focused on the learning process of the emergence of life forms, academics (Gutiérrez and Prado, 2004; Assmann, 2002) have also used these ideas to understand the holistic nature of the learning process. It is a realization that we are constantly learning from what we perceive, in this sense, students and staff are learning, consciously or unconsciously, from the way a classroom is set up, the attitudes and cultural norms of students and staff, how bathrooms are set up, the food offered and so on. If we understand living as a learning experience, we can realize that education (formal, nonformal or informal) has a fundamental role in influencing learning, therefore, in our living experience, the way we perceive the world, and how to make sense of

situations and our values and ethical principles.

In this context of understanding the holistic nature of learning, the concept of “whole institution approach” emerged and is considered by UNESCO as the recommended strategy to implement education for sustainable development (ESD) (Kohl, et al., 2021). ESD is an education agenda that can be traced back to Agenda 21 (the resulting programme from the United Nations Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, 1992) and consists of a series of ongoing efforts to transform education practices and systems to better address the world’s complex sustainability issues. It recognizes that education is central to the quest for sustainability, but not any type of education; it is an education that leads to personal and social transformation (UNESCO, 2012). This entails that is not an education “about” sustainable development, but “for” sustainable development, that is, going beyond sharing information to enable actions that lead to the practice of sustainability. This requires a transformation of the education practice “to enable learners to live what they learn and learn what they live” (UNESCO, 2020), and the whole institution approach for sustainability is considered a good strategy to achieve this transformation. In the latest policy document of ESD: “Education for sustainable development. A Roadmap” (UNESCO, 2020), the whole institution approach is highlighted as a



strategy to implement the objectives of Priority Action Area 2: Transforming Learning Environments.

In this article, I intend to explore the concept of whole institution approach (WIA) for sustainability as a way to enhance quality education, bring perspectives from transdisciplinary research and how this can contribute to clarifying the path to implement WIA.

Transdisciplinarity is a response to a different way of building scientific knowledge that best fits to the sustainability crisis in which we are living. It is a realization that fragmenting and compartmentalizing knowledge will perpetuate our ongoing crisis. Also, realizing that western scientific knowledge is not the only valid source of knowledge, there are other perspectives and types of knowledge that together can bring about the necessary solutions to the complex issues we are facing.



Photo credit: Hairy Er

What is Whole Institution Approach for Sustainability?

The whole institution approach (WIA) is a strategy to mainstream sustainability into all aspects of the learning environment [Holst, 2021], or to “walk the talk” in terms of sustainability commitments. The word “mainstream” refers to a complex process of integrating sustainability in all areas of education practice. What are these areas? Although different authors express these in different ways, the following contains the main aspects that are consistently referred to in different publications [UNESCO, 2012; Wals, 2012; UNESCO, 2014; Jiménez, 2019; Kohl et al, 2021; Holst, 2023].

- Content [Curriculum]
- Pedagogy [Methodologies]
- Infrastructure [classrooms, gardens] and Operations [environmental management]
- Interaction with surrounding community
- Student life and institutional culture
- Institutional policies and governance
- Special events
- Capacity building
- Research

WIA can be considered as the organizational manifestation of an integrative view on sustainability in education [Sterling 2003, in Holst 2023].



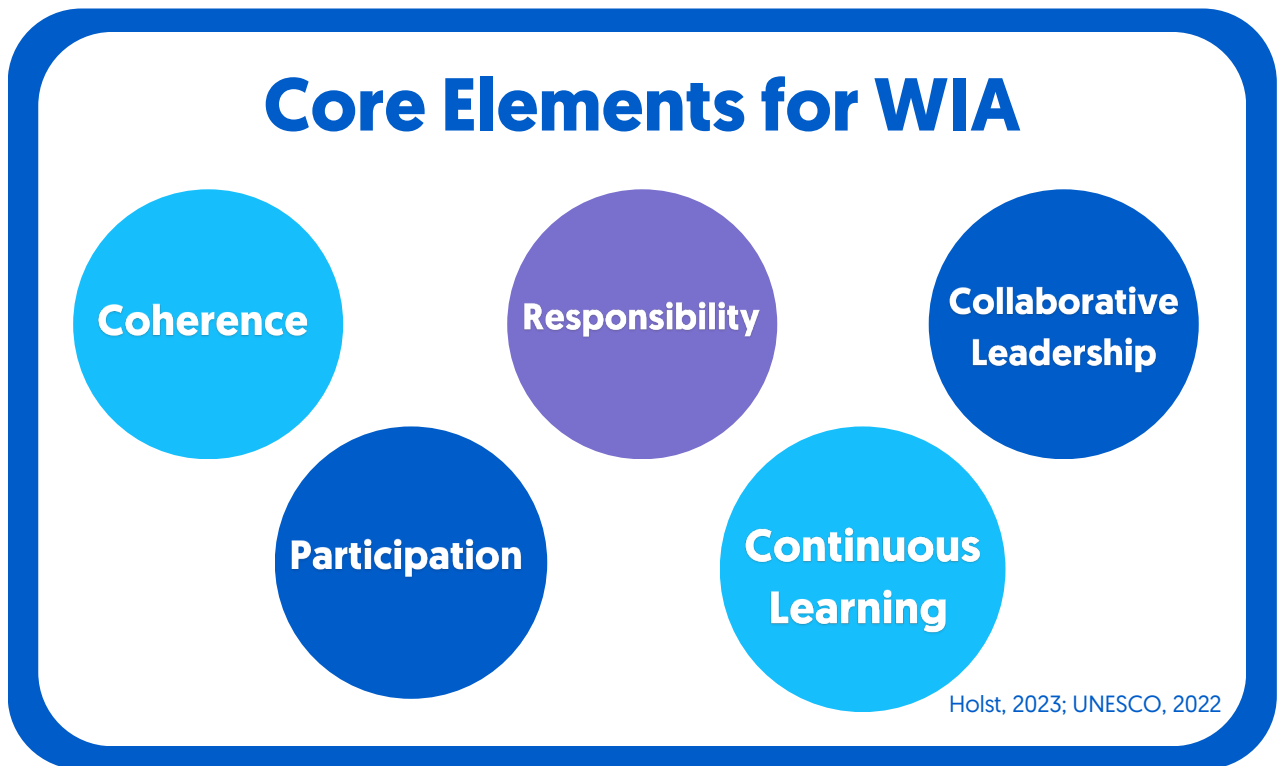
The implementation of WIA seeks coherence between what is taught and what is lived and done in the education institution with respect to sustainable development. This coherence involves the participation of the educational community, where students, staff, parents and the community know about the purposes of the school and its commitments to sustainability and are involved in the actions that are generated for the practice of sustainability, in a contextualized and reflective way [Mogren, et al., 2019].

The aspiration is that all members should feel responsible for the needs of the school community and have an active role, participating in continuous and cyclical learning processes of improvement that lead to identifying and addressing the needs of the school community. The role of the organization's authorities is key in exercising collaborative leadership, opening spaces for participation and listening to the educational community.

Implementing WIA should result in the emergence of a sustainability culture or ethos in the institution. For this to happen, it is important to integrate the values, principles, knowledge, skills and vision of sustainability in all areas of action in the institution, which include the formal education process but also the informal or hidden curriculum, through a permanent school planning and [self] evaluation [UNESCO, 2012, 2014].



Photo credit: Earth Charter International



What Steps can be taken to Implement a WIA?

A holistic strategy using WIA for sustainability is not linear; therefore, there is no standard method of utilization. There are some widely applicable methods, but each process is unique based on the context of the institution. Some institutions may start at the governance level, generating commitments to sustainability from the authorities, writing policy documents in a participatory manner and incorporating a diverse group of stakeholders; this would then be communicated with all the education community. Collaborative and decentralized leadership (in the form of committees or working groups) may be most useful in an institution where dialogue spaces are open to generate favourable conditions for collective action. Dialogue,

as Wals et al. (2012) affirm, is a catalyst for individual and social transformation of worldviews, behaviour and social organization.

Sustainability actions in the areas of operations (environmental management) and infrastructure could be good starting points for some institutions. These include tangible steps like reducing the ecological footprint, decreasing pollution and improving the well-being of the education community which could include creating gardens and relaxation areas. For WIA the key aspect is to connect these efforts done at the infrastructure and management level with the curriculum (UNESCO, 2022; Holst, 2023), so students can learn sustainability in a practical way, getting involved with the



efforts that the institution takes and moreover, proposing actions to improve what is done. In addition, students and professors can reflect on the sustainability actions of the institution in the classroom and generate a more complex view about what they see in practice.

The curricula and pedagogy should reflect knowledge, skills, perspectives and values related to sustainability in a crosscutting way in all subjects, practicing inter- and transdisciplinarity. Both what is taught and how it is taught are equally important. Curriculum planning should reflect the systemic view required to understand sustainability, a viewpoint that considers the interrelation between the social, economic and environmental aspects (UNESCO, 2022; Holst, 2023). This is an important challenge for any education institution, as this is the biggest transformation of the conventional education system, shifting away from a strict disciplinary and fragmented perspective to a more systemic one.

Project-based learning based on real world problems is a good way to start the process of incorporating a more systemic perspective in the curriculum and to practice interdisciplinarity. Moreover, if these projects incorporate and engage students and professors, but also local community members and other stakeholders and are framed as transdisciplinary research projects, then opportunities to practice WIA are increased. In this sense, transdisciplinary

research and teaching is a gateway for WIA. It can make WIA more tangible for the education community, providing a framework to collaborate with external stakeholders and enabling the education institution to foster transformation towards sustainability beyond the institution's walls.

Practicing WIA for sustainability will impact the institutional culture or ethos, from events and festivals to normal daily routines, the presence of values and ethical principles associated with sustainability can be perceived even by visitors outside the institution, who could have a transformative learning experience just by visiting the institution.

Transdisciplinary Research and its Contributions to WIA

From the early attempts to define what ESD is [e.g Chapter 36 of Agenda 21; Tilbury et al, 2002], it was conceived of as a transdisciplinary effort:

To move forward (in reorienting education towards sustainability), leaders and individuals from traditional disciplines need to develop ESD in a transdisciplinary manner. These leaders and skilled professionals should work collaboratively with other sectors including various ministries and NGOs to develop activities ranging from policy to community-based projects. However, each discipline involved in ESD should continue to develop



its own discipline and subject areas, each with its own perspectives, strengths and skills. The strength of ESD will come through diverse disciplinary contributions woven together to accomplish a shared vision of sustainability. (Hopkins and McKeown, in Tilbury 2002 p.18)

Nonetheless, the wording of transdisciplinarity is not prevalent in the way ESD practitioners present their work, nor in the conceptualization of WIA.

Transdisciplinary research, as Bergmann et al. [2021] affirm, aims to contribute to understanding and solving complex real-world problems through collaborative and participatory processes that bring together not only scholars from various disciplines, but also other non-academic stakeholders. It is a research approach that transcends discipline boundaries, integrates different perspectives and validates different types of knowledge, to generate something new, context-based and appropriate.

Conducting transdisciplinary research can be considered to be an education process that promotes the type of competencies associated with ESD. Bergmann et al. [2021], referring to Schöpke et al. 2018, mention that the type of collaboration needed to generate transdisciplinary research implies the development of certain individual and social competencies such as anticipatory, normative or system thinking competencies, as well as dialogue, empathy and listening skills that could be strengthened when students get involved with experiential transdisciplinary research projects.

Through systematizing transdisciplinary projects happening in Germany and Austria, Schäfer et al. [2021], identified positive results due to the projects' participatory approaches. Most successful projects were those that were able to institutionalize the recommendations set forth, form platforms, alliances and committees that would take over the work after the project completion. For example, they mentioned the development of mutual understanding as an important factor to the integration of knowledge from different disciplines; this understanding comes from developing interpersonal relations first. An aim of many transdisciplinary projects is building trust which is key to forming formal or informal networks; this also may include bringing together stakeholders who normally would not interact. Generating dialogue and having common ethical principles as a foundation is instrumental as well.

Participatory approaches can be brought to curriculum design in both basic and higher education. Holst [2021] refers to examples where curriculum was co-designed with learners, non-teaching staff and even community partners, making the curriculum more relevant to the learners with higher possibilities to contribute to societal change. Project-based learning is another way to develop sustainability competencies. Transdisciplinary projects in higher education and possibly in basic education bring about the conditions to generate these types of learning opportunities.



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WIA and Institutional Ethos

WIA can transform an organization's culture towards sustainability by institutionalizing this in different forms like institutional policy, committees and networks. The Earth Charter can serve as an important tool to accelerate this process of building the culture of sustainability in an education institution, because less time will be lost in identifying what values and ethical principles are associated with sustainability that the institution can integrate. The Earth Charter offers a framework or first step to avoid starting the conversation from scratch, having a set of values and ethical principles for the institution, through internal and participatory dialogue processes, can identify which of those values are more pertinent and how to contextualize them.

Generating capacity building with the Earth Charter also opens opportunities to strengthen emotional competencies in learners and educators, which, according to Holst [2021], are fundamental to facilitate

a motivational and empowering institutional climate and are competencies associated with ESD.

Motivating Change Towards WIA

Educational institutions that aim at generating transdisciplinary research on sustainability could enhance the quality of education they provide if their inner practices are coherent with the sustainability principles and actions, also engaging in a more meaningful way with societal actors. That is, if they “walk the talk,” that could ease the way to open dialogue spaces and build trusting relations. And, when the culture and practices of the education center are coherent with sustainability, this could make them be transformative forces in their communities towards sustainability.

Organizations that follow WIA foster visibility and transparency of SD activities; internally and externally [Holst, 2021], this



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helps to foster participation and engagement in the long term.

In addition, understanding that living is a learning experience and a holistic process, generating a WIA process in the education institution will most likely improve the institution's quality of education.

Even though the actions to implement WIA will be context-specific, it can be helpful to review case studies of educational institutions that have attempted to practice WIA. The “Education for Sustainable Development: Theoretical aspects and experiences in Central America” lists examples of schools that are practicing WIA (Jimenez et al, 2021). It contains 18 case studies of schools in Central America using WIA and also methodological information on how they are implementing this. Two universities stand out as examples of using WIA: Methodist University in Brazil (see the article of Waverli Neuberger in this Magazine) and Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Germany (Adomßent, M. & Michelsen, G, 2016; and Adomßent, M., 2022).

The invitation is for education institutions to take bold steps in contributing to the transition towards more sustainable, just, and peaceful societies through practicing a whole institution approach towards sustainability.



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A University Experience in Implementing the Whole Institutional Approach for Sustainability with the Earth Charter: Lessons Learned



Waverli Maia Matarazzo-Neuberger

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I will not start this article by saying that we are currently experiencing a planetary crisis; we know this already, especially you, the reader, who chose to read a magazine with this editorial line. Instead, I want to reflect on this current time of change and the role of universities, based on my experience implementing a sustainability programme in a Brazilian university using a Whole Institutional Approach, based on the values of the Earth Charter (EC).

Changes are challenging, and even if we say otherwise, most human beings resist them. Whenever we must seek a new balance, we go through a difficult transition phase, where the thought patterns that created the old system become more present and more powerful. It is fear that takes us to this comfortable place, with the results we know, fuelled by the interests of those who benefit from the status quo and who seek to maintain control of the patterns and structures that gave rise to it. However, as new ideas and practices seep through the cracks and crevices of the old system, they add to the increasingly unsustainable weight of the previous framework and lead to its ruin. I believe that we are on the threshold of a great change because the current system can no longer envision paths or offer solutions to the concerns of the emerging future. In response, we seek the comfort of old formulas and solutions, in a movement that makes the old paradigm increasingly heavy and unsustainable. Although this widens the gaps where new ways of seeing the world thrive, there is still no clear path with new patterns of thought.

But what role do universities play in this scenario? The old system and the new represent two opposite paradigms on a spectrum with many possible gradations in between, while the new is still a nebulous future. We need to understand what we are attempting to hold onto and keep, so that we can let them go and rise above the situation to reflect, observe and see new paths. This, then, should be the main contribution of universities in the current times.

In 2008, I was the leader of the Sustainable Methodist Programme, at the Methodist University of São Paulo in Brazil. I describe in detail how this programme was implemented and some initial results in Matarazzo-Neuberger (2010). The following video gives an overview of the programme and presents its results, based on testimonials from participants from all segments of the university [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDU6Ya6Jies>]. This article and video, prepared over a decade ago, clearly highlight what we did and the reasons that contributed to the success of this programme. In this new article, I will reflect on the lessons I learned from this experience, the reasons for this success, as well as its subsequent decline. Let's start with the reasons for success.

In 2006, faculty, students and administrative staff created a conducive climate for sustainability within the university. From there, the intention and common commitment arose to incorporate sustainability at the core of our work, as an



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institutional value, integrated throughout the curriculum of all courses offered and in the university's management. In this fertile ground, the seed of the programme was planted, and from the outset, the entire university community was invited to become gardeners. The discussions generated from course curriculum mapping and the input from the administration revealed a scenario with the potential to unite the entire university. University leadership prioritized sustainability in every speech, and the combination of this determination and the community's aspirations, along with deep and genuine listening, guided the collaborative development of the programme's direction and were crucial for its successful implementation. There was space, support, and encouragement to develop a shared vision of doing the right thing, which was important for that moment and for our common future. Few things are as memorable in life as being part of a group driven by this energy.

Continuing to collaboratively build a common direction required dedication to

reflect, discuss, and adopt shared values and to redefine the definition of sustainability which had become overused and already had numerous definitions at the time. It was at this moment that we decided to adopt the Earth Charter (EC) and its principles as our definition of sustainability, basing our programme on a common dream for the future, written and endorsed by people from all over the world, and which reclaims values that can collectively make us better. The Earth Charter's pillars and principles are so systematically interconnected and interdependent that even when a particular discipline falls into one of the pillars, such as social and economic justice, it is impossible to consider its principles without also considering respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, democracy, non-violence, and peace. Thus, despite our different approaches, we were integrated, in the same boat and on the same course, guided by a clear shared vision and a common aspiration.



And the programme thrived. We won successive awards, not only the university itself, but also the students and their projects; 232 faculty members, representing 41% of the university's faculty at the time, went through the Leadership Development Programme in Education for Sustainability in Higher Education, as did all managers and administrative supervisors, free of charge. The goal was to develop and empower leadership and create opportunities for the adoption of new teaching and management methodologies. Even the top leadership, represented by directors, vice-rectors, and the rector, went through the programme. Changes also occurred in management. An ecological footprint assessment of the university, which evaluated energy use, water consumption, waste generation, and supply chain, led to the development of plans and reforms that allowed significant savings and actions in the area of conscious consumption, many of which were led by the students themselves. The

sustainability vision articulated in the EC reached the classrooms, departments, and other spheres of decision-making and areas of action of the university, and was extended to the surrounding communities, expanding the university's involvement in solidarity economy programmes aimed at low-income communities, as well as entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

Sustainability became a research focus in all courses and led to projects that integrated teams of professors and students from departments who barely knew each other before. This is how the former Environmental Center was elevated to become the Center for Sustainability, becoming a space for exchange and learning for the entire university. We became the subject of articles, videos and interviews and were invited to give lectures at other educational institutions. This series of events brought great visibility to the programme, much more than we could have anticipated when we started.



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However, I didn't perceive the signs of the programme's decline that began as early as 2012. Vanity and ego are pillars validated and encouraged by the structure and functioning of universities. The position of prominence I assumed in this wave of success, partly because there was no expansion in the team leading the programme, ended up exacerbating weaknesses, especially after changes in the institution leadership. The programme's



reach and the development of new leaders also represented a parallel power to departments and directorates, something that the predominantly male and hierarchical command structures started to view with suspicion. Another problem was the mindset of having achieved the goal that emerged in the wake of the programme's success which shifted management's focus to other objectives.

To paraphrase Cortella, the human condition loses substance and vital energy every time it feels fully comfortable with the way things already are, succumbing to the seduction of rest and immobilizing itself in accommodation. Satisfaction concludes, ends, finishes; satisfaction leaves no room for continuity, for further progress, for persistence, for unfolding. Satisfaction calms, limits, dampens (2015, p.11). The change of values required in the implementation and continuity of a programme like this is a process, and to reach the essence, like peeling an onion, it is necessary to strip away many layers of old habits and comfortable truths to create space for the new to settle. We had built at most three layers of this new framework, namely: discovering a common purpose with the adoption of the principles of the EC, training of faculty and administrative staff, and the cross-cutting inclusion of sustainability in the curricula of the courses offered when the focus of the management was redirected.

The fissures caused by the aforementioned reasons undermined the energy of the group and opened up space for new

versions of sustainability aligned with market values and slowly gained ground among faculty members who were no longer fully aligned with the programme. The programme began to decline in 2014, and by 2017, it no longer existed.

Conclusions

Many lessons can be learned from this experience. As mentioned in the introduction, we need to rise above the situation to reflect, observe, and see new paths. It's not easy. Market pressures for workforce training rather than training individuals who can create change exist and are powerful. Training students for a market in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) and BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible) world is difficult because the world will not be the same when they graduate. Moreover, it disguises changes to avoid making real change because the underlying values are the same ones that created the problems. By creating professionals solely focused on seeking solutions without teaching them to reflect on the causes and avoid generating problems in the first place, we perpetuate a cycle where today's solutions become tomorrow's problems. Without developing critical thinking, imagination and consequently the capacity for creation, we are destined to endlessly repeat the same cycle. As Hoffman and Ehrenfeld (2017, pgs. 4, 6) state, reducing the unsustainability of our way of life is not the same as creating sustainability.



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Sustainability requires an effort to re-examine who we are, why we are here and how we are connected to everything around us. Sustainability is not a fixed final state to be achieved, but a constant pursuit of what it truly means to be a human being living in an interconnected and complex world. It is a desirable future built not only on technological and material development but also on cultural, personal and spiritual growth. The Earth Charter advocates for this future, where human development will primarily focus on being more, not having more, recognizing that we are a human family and an Earth community with a shared destiny, responsible for each other, for the greater community of life and for future generations. To achieve this, we need to educate citizens with a deep sense of caring for the common good and the responsibility to contribute effectively to improving our societies [Earth Charter Commission, 2000].

I am convinced that the values to guide this change are the values articulated in the EC, which provide the perfect foundation for an ethical behaviour that respects human dignity and basic human rights, as well as the unique capacity of nature to sustain life. Respect, care, understanding, tolerance, compassion and love are the foundations of these values and principles, elevating us to the best of what we can be as humans. By adopting these values as our compass, we create the necessary space for the right questions to emerge and for us together, as an academic community, to elevate our vision to see new paths



collaboratively. The energy and strength that manifest in a group when we feel we are doing the right thing are what we need to create flourishing learning communities. And thus, the future we desire can unfold before us.

I hope that reading this article can inspire you to make the necessary changes to bring forth this future. There is no single recipe, and in fact, there is no recipe at all, but I carry with me some valuable lessons that I have tried to convey in this brief account. The Whole Institution Approach requires a shared and constant effort of engagement and deep listening. The advancements we achieved would not have been possible if the programme had been solely in the hands of a specialized department responsible for sustainability, nor would they have happened solely through the decision of the top leadership. It is a process that involves both top-down and bottom-up approaches, requiring attention, involvement, respect, reflection and constant co-creation to effect changes in the institutional culture. And for this, everyone needs to be gardeners, involving all segments and eliminating boundaries. Walking your talk is essential. Education is based on example and trust, and without living what we speak, we do not truly build anything. But what is truly fundamental is establishing common frameworks that can bring inspiration and create a strong sense of belonging to the group, while respecting the diversity and complexity of this world. For us, the EC was that common framework, and around it, we built a deep and beautiful experience that still marks the lives of everyone who participated in it.

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Escola Vila and Ecosystemic Pedagogy: Living the Earth Charter Principles



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Ecosystem Pedagogy and the Curriculum Web

The Escola Vila was founded in 1981 in the city of Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará in the northern Brazil. It was developed with the goal of providing a differentiated education, one that broke with traditional paradigms to form critical, fair, happy and creative human beings who are actively engaged in exercising their citizenship in different socio-environmental contexts.

Throughout its existence, the Ecosystem Pedagogy was elaborated and systematized, as a result of an innovative and unique experience of our school practice. Its theoretical foundation is based on the thoughts of influential thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Edgar Morin, Jean Piaget, Fritjof Capra, Humberto Maturana and Ubiratan D'Ambrósio and other thinkers focused on new educational trends. One trend that is considered essential to this pedagogy is transdisciplinarity.

It is undeniable that the separation and generation of knowledge by disciplines has contributed and continues to contribute to the evolution in several areas (such as natural and social science, language, history, philosophy, humanities, etc). However, it is now necessary to question this logic of separating knowledge into disciplines that do not communicate with each other. Instead, it is necessary to teach and learn how to interconnect the multiple knowledges present in our complex reality.

To do this, we must go beyond interdisciplinarity work, as it relates one discipline to another, because it does not

teach the meaning and applicability of the curriculum in life and specific contexts and situations. Thus, for us, transdisciplinarity is both a part of, but also beyond, disciplines because life itself is transdisciplinary.

The Ecosystem Pedagogy is, therefore, based on complex and interconnected values, promoting the interrelation between knowledge, subjects and reality. It takes place based on six points: coexistence in diversity, authorship and leading role, socio-environmental action, implication and contextualization and creativity with criticality.

From this perspective, the school space should not be merely a place for teaching disciplinary subjects with no practical use, required only to pass tests and be forgotten later. Rather, the school must be the foundation for the development of citizens who seek knowledge in order to interact and act in the search for solutions and alternatives aimed at an egalitarian, fraternal and sustainable society. The experience at Escola Vila proves that it is possible to teach children to read and write without having to spend many hours in the classroom; however, it requires teachers to abandon the idea of "teaching classes." In our ecosystemic perspective, a class is the result of the experience and knowledge that all people involved in the school community already have or are open to experiencing and building.

Inspiration for the Ecosystem Pedagogy came from several documents, such as the "Universal Declaration of Human



Photo credit: Escola Vila

Rights", "the Seven Necessary Knowledges for the Education of the Future", "The Transdisciplinary Charter", "The Federal Constitution", "The National Common Curriculum Base" and "The Earth Charter". They are fundamental texts for the practice of Escola Vila which aims at an education with an integral approach to the human being.

The ecosystem curriculum proposed by Escola Vila goes beyond the archaic concept of a "curriculum grid" and proposes in its place, a "curricular web" composed of three interrelated conceptual maps:

1. The web of the individual's relationship with themselves.
2. The web of the individual's relationship with the social environment.
3. The web of the individual's relationship with the environment.

Our greatest challenge was to move away from the curriculum and work with disciplines to develop a curricular web. The "curricular web" starts from the principle that we are part of the environment, which in itself is a reflection of our actions. Therefore, we are co-responsible for building our own reality, and should act intentionally with care for individuals, society and nature. Thus, as the Earth Charter states, "our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions" [The Earth Charter, 2000].



Photo credit: Escola Vila

The Collection: Caring for Planet Earth

At Escola Vila, the principles of the Earth Charter materialize through transdisciplinary didactic material developed for each grade level. The Collection Caring for Planet Earth is made up of six portfolios and organizes its curricular and pedagogical approach through projects, where a common theme interconnects all disciplines and works throughout the entire school.

The contents of these materials are developed in a contextualized way, through experiences, research and discussions. The Collection Caring for Planet Earth allows the student to experience the applicability of the content and knowledge acquired, as well as their ongoing reconstruction and re-signification, seeking the formation of critical human beings and the construction of a less fragmented and mechanistic society.

Collective activities are proposed in each class, valuing the importance of cooperative work and discussions, whereas converging and diverging points of view are considered for the construction of knowledge. In this way, students are the leading actors in the learning process, and the contents are considered by teachers as tools for understanding reality.

Project 1 – The Person in the Social

In this project, students learn about the Elderly Persons Statute by visiting institutions that care for the elderly and carrying out a solidarity campaign and collecting food and toiletries for donation. The culmination of the project is a great Reunion of Generations with music and games and involves the entire school community as well as the elderly from the collaborating institutions. The project objective is to cultivate fundamental values for living together in harmony with others like respect, love and solidarity



which are directly linked the Earth Charter, including Principle 2 which states, “care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love” and Principle 15, “treat all living beings with respect and consideration.”

Project 2 - The Person in the Discovery of its Values and its Roots.

In this project, students undertake research on indigenous nations, quilombolas (1) and colonizers and learn about their customs, traditions and spiritualities, valuing each one’s contribution to our nation. There are also visits to traditional communities and historical museums. At the end of the project, the reunion of cultures takes place with the participation of representatives of these cultural groups, in addition to the entire school community.

The objective is to remember our history, recognize our roots and the values of the peoples that preceded us, especially Indigenous people.



Photo credit: Escola Vila

The purpose here is in line with the Earth Charter Principle 12b. that says it is necessary to “affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.”

Project 3 – The Person in Nature

In this project, students visit parks, dunes and rivers; interview locals; research endangered animals; and study real estate speculation responsible for environmental degradation; waste management and conscious consumption. They hold demonstrations, marches and write to administrators of public departments and authorities offering suggestions to preserve nature.

The culmination of this takes place in the first week of June when the World Environment Day is celebrated. A seminar is organized to present the results of the research conducted by the groups to local public managers and environmental experts, with whom together they look for solutions.

The goal of this is to develop awareness that we are part of nature and are connected to the entire universe. All the work done during the project seeks to implement Principle 8 of the Earth Charter, which states that it is necessary to “advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.”



Project 4 – The Person and Tradition

In this project, research on our traditions is deepened including June folk festivals, "cordel literature" [2], "parlendas" [3], stories told from generation to generation, songs, popular myths, riddles, popular proverbs, tongue twisters, games and all the wealth of folklore that must always remain alive in the memory of our people. The culmination happens on Folklore Day and includes party to present the research results through dances, exhibitions and games.

The objective is to research and study the history of colonization, the mixing of ethnic groups, Brazilian cultural traditions and spirituality, all of which aligns with Principle 8b. of the Earth Charter which states to "recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being."

Project 5 – Guardians of the Planet

In this project, kindergarten and elementary I students are divided into eight thematic areas [Recycling, Communication, Education, Fauna, Flora, Housing, Health and Food], about which they carry out research, interviews and studies related to these themes according to their grade level. Elementary II students are responsible for researching and discussing politics, taxes, the economy and social movements. The culmination of this is the Seminar Caring for Planet Earth, in which the results of this work are presented, highlighting questions and demands of each theme and includes a show performed by kindergarten children's artwork. The objective of this project

incorporates several principles of the Earth Charter, serving as a guide to the Guardians about how to both meet the needs of the present and the future of the planet. For example:

Recycling: "Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems" (Principle 7a).

Communication: "Enhance the role of the mass media in raising awareness of ecological and social challenges" (Principle 14c).

Education: "Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life" (Principle 14).

Fauna: "Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering" and "protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering" (Principles 15 a-b).

Flora: "Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems" (Principle 5e).

Housing and Food: "Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required" (Principle 9a).



Health: “Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction” and “adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world” [Principles 7 e-f].

Project 6 – Building a Better World

The objective of this project is to work with and deepen the understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The Seven Necessary Knowledges for Education, the Federal Constitution, the Charter of Transdisciplinarity and The Earth Charter as necessary instruments for building a better world. After studying, researching and experiencing the Person as a Whole and carrying out the Guardians of the Planet Project, students have the awareness and the tools to exercise their citizenship in nurturing and putting into practice essential values for the survival of humanity, through social agency supported by laws, declarations and statutes. Through social actions,

activism and community service students express their feelings of solidarity, respect, fraternity and compassion. For this reason, in this last project, students from kindergarten to 5th grade visit community day care centres, schools or NGOs that work with children, experiencing integration with everyone. The culmination happens with a show at the end of the year where students express their understanding of relevant current issues and how to address it according to their research.

The Experiential Laboratories

We also apply the principles of the Earth Charter in the Experiential Laboratories and Artistic Creation Ateliers. In the laboratories, students have the opportunity to work on disciplines in a meaningful way, with hands-on practice, making discoveries through experiences and using and interconnecting the knowledge acquired in their school routine. For example, in the orchard, vegetable and ornamental gardens



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laboratories, students come in direct contact with Mother Earth and study the best time to plant, the scientific name of the vegetables, proper harvesting times, food preparation, nutritional values of vegetables and fruits, types and origins of ornamental plants and how to produce seedlings.

At Living Pharmacy, they research the use of medicinal plants including their active ingredients and what they are used for, prepare natural and home remedies and teas and learn about Indigenous people's traditional medicine practices.

In the Health and Food Laboratory, studies are carried out on different types of diets including natural, macrobiotic, vegetarian and vegan, the nutritional value of food, the difference between natural and industrialized food, integral health care and how to cook diverse recipes. At the House Maintenance Laboratory students learn and practice different cleaning techniques, maintenance of small electrical and hydraulic networks, carpentry and finishing stages in building. Alternative Technology is the laboratory in which students learn about techniques in agriculture, recycling, solar energy and permaculture. Finally, in the Fauna laboratory, studies are carried out on the circulatory, respiratory, reproductive and digestive systems of the animals kept at the school, in addition to learning about the proper diet for each animal.

Artistic Creation Ateliers

The Artistic Creation Workshops are spaces that allow for the recognition and development of emotions, feelings, creativity, morals and ethics necessary for



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individuals to find their place in society. In music classes, kindergarten students discover musicality through the choir and the discovery, observation and experimentation of rhythms. Elementary school students learn to play musical instruments. In craft classes, manual and creative skills are developed using different materials and techniques. Students learn the visual arts through drawing, painting, woodcuts and sculpture which allow students to express ideas and feelings and to explore creativity. Drama classes teach dramatization, in its various genres, and foster development of verbal and non-verbal communication and body language, as well as individual and collective responsibility and the concept of belonging to a group. In body related classes, students learn alternative techniques including biodance, yoga and shiatsu, to explore psychomotricity for physical and mental well-being.

Group Work

Living in diversity is an important challenge and brings great learning in building a new society. The group work developed at Escola Vila favours the development of coexistence skills and enables constant contact with different ways of thinking. Knowing how to communicate with the community and respect others' worldviews is fundamental for meaningful learning, so teachers always use group activities rather than individual projects. In this way, students are encouraged to interact, talk, discuss, exchange ideas, argue, understand and accept the other's point of view, even if it is different from their own. These groups are established by the teachers or by the school to guarantee their diversity. In addition, each group assumes different responsibilities on a weekly basis, such as cleaning the room, organizing lockers, distributing snacks and carrying out projects. In this way, students' autonomy and roles are expanded, and all students experience and share in the democratization and self-management of the classroom. This also nurtures the spirit of service and cooperation.

Commitment and Social Inclusion

Escola Vila, since its foundation, has always invested in the community, facilitating training for teachers in the community and public schools, donating school supplies, carrying out the integration and coexistence of the students of Escola Vila with the community or inviting students from the community to the school.

Ecosystem Pedagogy proposes practicing citizenship activities that extend beyond the school walls. Therefore, Escola Vila represents and feels represented by the Earth Charter's 16 principles and believes that this document should be made available, consulted and adopted as a theoretical and practical reference in other schools, universities, companies and branches of government. It is increasingly essential that we commit to action and the training and transformation necessary for the continuity of life on Earth.



Photo credit: Escola Vila



[1] *Quilombolas* are the descendants and remnants of communities formed by fugitive enslaved people (*quilombos*), between the 16th century and 1888 (when slavery was abolished), in Brazil. They continue to live in their traditional communities.

[2] Cordel literature is a traditional regional literary genre with the main characteristic being colloquial language, humor, irony and sarcasm and a strong presence of meters and rhymes. They are popular poems, which seek to communicate orally (as opposed to traditional literature printed in books), and also through small and simple leaflets. It has the social function of informing situations and elements of Brazilian culture while entertaining the public.

[3] *Parlendas* are children's verses, offering combinations of simple, brief and repetitive words that are easy-to-memorize. They are part of Brazilian folklore and pass from generation to generation, transmitting popular oral culture.

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Towards A Culture of Openness: Living with the Earth Charter in Times of Uncertainty



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Timothy Ogene



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I am still struggling to remember how I came across the Earth Charter, and which came first, the organization or the document. What I do remember was the world that existed at the time and my own anxieties in relation to the changes happening around me. It was the early 2000s, and the world was only beginning to experience the immense and accelerated pace of social media and its propensity to bring vast distances together. I had dropped out of school, where I was training to become an accountant, and in my state of curiosity and worry I found a measure of balance in my volunteer efforts around the country. I put myself forward for all sorts of activities, from organizing youth entrepreneurship conferences on university campuses to facilitating sustainability initiatives on different platforms. While these activities were beneficial and grounding, they were experiments in humanistic endeavour, uncoordinated and unconnected to my inner sense of balance. I longed for an anchor, perhaps a holding narrative that I would always reference for direction.

Around the same time, I applied for, and was accepted to attend, the first Jane Goodall Global Youth Summit in Florida. It was an experience that transformed the way I saw the world, particularly how we relate to our shared humanity and the environment. I met like-minded people from all walks of life, and in my interactions with them I realized they too were, in spite of their cultural differences, drawn to the possibility of a better future.



It was around this time, perhaps a few months after the summit in Florida, that the Earth Charter floated into my life. It might have started with an invitation to apply for the post of Youth Representative for Africa and the Middle East, and one of the requirements was a familiarity with the Earth Charter itself. The opportunity to serve intrigued me and stimulated my sense of adventure, but it was the document itself that changed my life. I read the Earth Charter Preamble slowly, with intent and an open mind:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

I am reading those words again here in Maine, thousands of miles (and years) away from my tiny room in an obscure town in Nigeria, and I feel that my response today echoes what I must have felt in the past. I can sense a light switching on as I re-read those words, and I think it was that glow of conviction that led me to embrace the principles of the Charter.

Years later, as I moved on to other pursuits, the exact wordings of the Charter faded from my memory. I would occasionally see posts on social media and would momentarily re-live those days of active engagement in my early twenties. But life itself was marching in a different direction. I had returned to university to complete my undergraduate studies and carried on to graduate school. I branched out to pursue my writing and academic career, and I was lucky enough to secure a teaching position at Harvard.

From a distance, my path as a novelist and scholar of African literary and cultural studies seemed very far from the world of the Earth Charter and its principles of sustainability. And there were times that I questioned the value of my own work in relation to our shared humanity.

My personal anxieties about my work are not unfounded. As a creative writer and scholar of modern Africa, I am aware of the wider debates about the value of the humanities.



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What, indeed, are the humanities for? How useful is the study of literature, for instance, to our global efforts to raise awareness about climate change? In more practical terms, how do we translate the humanities, literature in particular, into measurable transformations that advance our collective good? The rise of subfields like public humanities and environmental humanities are reflective of that need to justify the study of the humanities. Some scholars have argued that the humanities are more valuable when they go beyond the classroom, an approach that has gained momentum in recent years. The debates are often driven by value in terms of tangibles and quantifiables, not by the “softer” and sometimes invisible ideas and principles that shape the way we engage the world.

On my part, I realized that I had unconsciously incorporated a sense of continuity and connectedness in my creative and critical work over the years. My reading of literature and history, and engagement with society itself, is driven

by the idea that cultures are linked beyond their material manifestations. Our experiences are shaped by events that are sometimes outside our immediate surroundings. This awareness of connectedness, which permeates my work, gives me a holding narrative that is beyond the mere facts of research. My students have also come to appreciate this approach.

In the last two years, I have taught courses that consider the place of modern African cultures in the world. While I emphasize the local realities of history and culture in the making of modern African experiences, I also remind my students that the continent, like every other place on earth, is a product of a long process of encounter, affinities and entanglements. I encourage them to imagine a world beyond the present, to consider the crossroads of time, and to reconstruct an image of our shared humanity that is profoundly entangled, complicated and unyielding to any single narrative. The goal, I often say, is to explore the lines of



connection that are not readily visible, and in the process cultivate and advance a way of being in the world that is rooted in empathy and care.

It is only recently, and especially since I began thinking about this piece, that I started to see the link between the approach described above and the Earth Charter. I do not recall making a conscious effort to integrate the Earth Charter into my work and teaching, neither did I announce to myself that I was going to reference its principles in my daily life.

So the question is: in what ways have the principles of the Charter contributed to my journey so far? There are no direct or simple answers. I think the principles stuck with me like the habits that we learn as we move through life, habits that become second nature, so “natural” that we begin to lose track of how we acquired them in the first place.

If considered a “habit” to learn or cultivate, the Charter becomes less of an abstraction. It becomes a gradual process of reorganizing our priorities with the ultimate aim of attaining a more balanced life. This, in turn, invites us to consider the long-term consequences of our choices. By integrating a sense of global connection and broadmindedness to my personal life and teaching, I am investing in a world that celebrates what we all share in common: our humanity and how it relates to history and culture and nature itself.

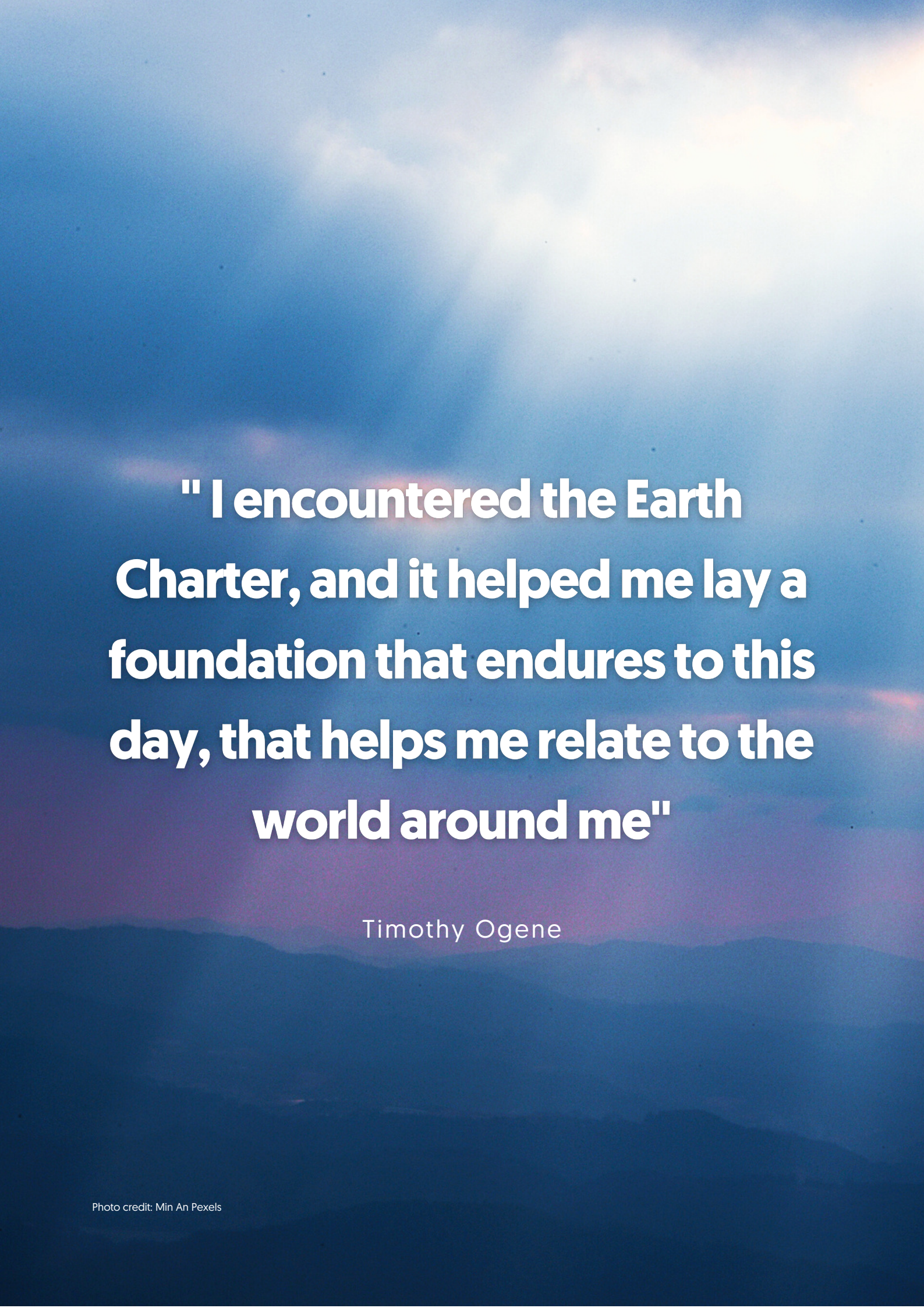
A few days ago, I took my four-year-old to the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath

and we saw an exhibition that I am still thinking about. A quote on the wall by Rachel Carson caught my attention: “The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery not over nature but of ourselves.” I pondered the word “mastery” and how, in our collective history, it has meant two broad things: domination and/or control. And it is always directed outwards, not inwards. I felt Carson was inviting us to turn that same energy inwards; not to only “know” ourselves, but to fully understand the planetary roots of our tendencies in relation to one another and the environment.

More than a decade ago, I encountered the Earth Charter, and it helped me lay a foundation that endures to this day, that helps me relate to the world around me. Maybe this is a step towards the type of mastery that Carson writes about, a quiet journey towards a life that is more aware and connected to other lives. Perhaps the first step in this process is to place the self on the edge of things, to watch and learn, to see oneself as part of a larger picture, and to stay open to new ways of seeing the world. As the Charter reminds us, “Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.”

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**" I encountered the Earth
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