

## Bent like a Bow by Nature: A Mother/Daughter Bond

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The gently breaking wave laps up against the Lake Ontario shore on this fresh spring morning. The white foam arching over the wave's crest stretches to the shoreline first and then quickly dissipates into the sand. As the remaining water recedes into this Great Lake, I wonder if this is the first time it has met the shore. Before I can formulate a response, the next wave cradles the beach in a repetitive song that continually repeats its message like a mantra. The sheer vastness of the water draws me deeper into her mystery. I love skipping stones onto her untouched surface early in the morning. Finding the perfect rock helps me to carry out my morning ritual. As I squat close to the ground I sift through a variety of contenders. There are sphere-shaped rocks, egg-shaped rocks, rocks that are too heavy, and rocks that are just too big that simply will not dance across the water. However, when I come across the one I am looking for I will know. I find a flat round shaped rock. As I massage it in my hands allowing my fingertips to skim its surface, I note that it has the right smoothness and the perfect weight; not too heavy and not too light. I hold it in my hands to examine it one last time. A déjà vu type feeling washes over me just before I skip it across the water. I am back in my Kindergarten year when I got to spend every morning with my mom walking along the shore in Coronation Park on days just like today. This was when I established the ritual of finding that perfect rock.

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The smooth grey flat oval rock I chose skipped eight times across the glassy surface of the water. The trace of its path quickly retreated allowing the pristine surface to reemerge. "Did you see that one Mom?" I cry out in excitement as I glance over towards the picnic table at the edge of the beach to see if she was watching.

*"Yes, Hilary, that was your best one this morning. Skip one more and then it will be time to head back home for lunch." I don't know how she does it. At five years old she patiently sifts through the stones until she finds just the right one. I wonder what her criteria are. I see her close to the ground sorting through an assortment of rocks until she finds the one she wants to skip. When she discovers the right one she takes that extra time measuring her chosen rock holding it gently in her hand rolling it over in fingers before weighing it in a downward then upward motion in the palm of her hand. Just before she is ready to skip her chosen rock, she maneuvers her body sideways with one leg back and one leg forward. With her right arm drawn back, in a split second she slingshots her hand back as her wrist flicks her chosen rock onto the surface of the water in a side arm fashion. She has a natural rhythm. Pitter-patter across the pristine surface the rock skips its*

*pattern until its momentum runs out and the rock submerges below the surface. "I think that may have been your best one today Hilary." I don't think she agrees as I hear disappointment in her voice as she comments under her breath that it only had 5 skips. I have enjoyed our morning ritual walking along the shore of Lake Ontario in Coronation Park over the past year. This 'stolen' time has been a rare gift for me to be in Nature with my youngest daughter during her formative years.*

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Two people brought together through birth deepened their relationship through Nature<sup>1</sup>. I had failed to remember the simple pleasure of skipping stones that I experienced as child until I picked up that rock and rummaged it through my fingers. Immediately, memories of my mom bringing me to this place day in and day out in my fifth year of life flooded my memory. I remember walking under the willow trees along the pine-scented trail across the drawbridge and down to the waters edge. When one is aware of his surroundings while in Nature "there is something about such gathering that is deeply personal, deeply formative, deeply pedagogical."<sup>2</sup> With the help of sorting, gathering, and collecting stones "I did not simply remember this place. Of necessity, I remembered, too, something of what has become of me."<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to my mom for spending time with me in Nature during my Kindergarten year. It was during our morning forays that, unbeknownst to me, she was encouraging me to develop my own ecosophy, which is in alignment with the philosophy of deep ecologist Arne Naess,<sup>4</sup> who encouraged his students to articulate their own ecosophy.

"Ecosophy is derived from the word *ecology*, "the study of interrelationships," and *sophia*, "wisdom."<sup>5</sup> It involves deep questioning of the deep ecology movement while examining our own "basic values and lifestyles and reflects

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<sup>1</sup>I capitalize the word "nature" in my writing to convey my respect for the mystery and spiritual aspect of Nature.

<sup>2</sup> Jardine, David. 2009, p. 156

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Naess, Arne. 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Drengson, Alan and Devall, Bill. 2008, p. vii.

on our fundamental relationship with nature and who we are.”<sup>6</sup> I began to learn who I was through my Mom’s inquiries while we were immersed in Nature. During our walks, there were long periods of silence where we became one with our natural surroundings. We would stop and stillness would envelop us. It was during some of these moments that my mom would pose questions. One such moment occurred while perched at a lookout point peering over the edge down to the coastal water of Lake Ontario below, we silently observed four or five big rocks nestled against the shoreline surrounded by a thick mass of verdant seaweed. “What does it look like to you?” my Mom asked.

“It looks like hula skirts on hula dancers moving their hips to and fro,” I openly replied. “Yes I can see that,” she replied. No response was out of reach and no answer was ever wrong. Any answer I put forward was accepted and any response was possible. Whether she could see the hula skirts on hula dancers or not I can still visualize that moment forty-five years later. At another time she shared her appreciation of a walking stick she had found for herself by sharing with me that it was “bent like a bow by Nature” as she planted it into the soft wood chip path between each step. I, in turn, of course found a walking stick just the right size for me and proudly showed p that, it too, “was bent like a bow by Nature.” Our interrelationship was deepened through our bond with Nature. This wisdom grew out of “specific actions in unique places and contexts”<sup>7</sup> or put more succinctly *our* wisdom grew out of *our* daily connection in Nature in the fifth year of my life where half the day was spent with my Mom outside immersed in Nature, observing, contemplating, and sharing our stories. “Long walks in Nature provide some of the best parent-child interactions during middle childhood. Let the child set the pace and stop when she stops. Wander and wonder together, admire and explore. It’s probably best not to volunteer information, but do answer her questions in a way that evokes further wonder-and ask her imaginative question of your own.”<sup>8</sup> It would seem that my mom intuitively knew how to instill a deep connection between her child and the natural world. Another way to instill this connection was through story.

Stories were and continue to be a big part of my life. Stories make “abstract issues accessible” and suggest “a way of entering the theoretical via the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Plotkin, Bill. 1998, p. 125.

concrete.”<sup>9</sup> My Mom had many roles in life, she was a teacher, an intellectual, a philosopher, a linguist, and an existential humanist, but above all else she was a storyteller, a writer. Writing permeated every persona she inhabited. She wrote both poetry and prose eloquently and fluently in both French and English. I believe she interpreted the world through writing. One morning after one of our walks she spent the afternoon and into the evening writing a Children’s Story entitled *The Story of the Green Count*.<sup>10</sup> The setting was Coronation Park. The protagonist was Hilary at 5 years of age and the other character was The Green Count. He was a gentle man who lived his life seeing the world in one colour, green, whereas Hilary saw the world in a multitude of colours because she lived in a Spectrum. Near the end of the story, my mom has Hilary write a letter to the Green Count inviting him to learn about life in a spectrum.

*Dear Mr. Wenceslaus I. Wish-Wash Green,  
I mean dear Mr. Noble Count,  
I feel sorry for you because you live in a green world where everything  
is green. I’m afraid you’ll never know the other colours. There are other  
colours besides green. Did anyone ever tell you that? There’s red and blue  
and pink and purple and yellow and oranges and of course there’s black and  
white. Would you please let me show them to you? I live in a SPECTRUM.  
Would you like to see all the colours in my spectrum?*

*Your Friend,  
Hilary A. Matte*

*Green Castle On Green Hill*

*Dear Hilary,*

*Thank you for your letter. What is a spectrum? I’m a bit afraid of  
strange, new things...but I’d like to have a friend who lives in a spectrum if I  
just knew what a spectrum really was.*

*Wenceslaus I. Wish-Wash Green  
The Green Count*

*Dear Green Count,*

*I’m your friend. A spectrum is not frightening. It’s beautiful. It’s  
exciting. I have one. You can have one too. I’ll show you mine tomorrow at  
four. Meet me on the other side of the drawbridge. I’m five years old. I have  
yellow hair and I’ll be carrying a walking stick bent like a bow by Nature.*

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<sup>9</sup> Dewhurst, David and Lamb, Stephen. 2005, p. 914.

<sup>10</sup> Matte, Jacqueline. 1967.

*Your Friend,  
Hilary A. Matte*

*If you happen to be in Coronation Park at four of an afternoon, any day of the week, any month of the year, you'll see two people walking under the willow trees, across the bridge, and along the beach. One is very tall; the other one is very small. They both carry walking sticks to meet their individual requirements, a big one and a small one bent like a bow by Nature. The tall one is the Green Count. The small one is Hilary. They are looking for colours in the leaves, in the sky, in the water, in the pebbles on the beach, in the flowers along the pine-scented trail. They are capturing colours and now the Green Count understands because Hilary has let him discover her secret: Hilary's SPECTRUM is the world. Hilary has taken the Green Count's hand and she has led him into a diversified world. He understands now that the many things that you do, the many sights that you see, the many people that you meet, the many sounds that you hear, all these adventures mixed up together make many colours. He also knows that the smiles and the tears, the work and the play, the search and the find, the light and the dark are the excitement and the responsibility. Guess what? The Green Count doesn't live in his Green Castle on Green Hill anymore. He lives in a Spectrum too. And Hilary's spectrum shines a little brighter and has grown a little bigger since she and the Green Count have become friends.<sup>11</sup>*

*The Story of the Green Count* has been a seminal story in my life. The story itself illustrates a humanist philosophy whereby the protagonist, Hilary, believes that learning is a personal act that leads an individual towards self-actualization<sup>12</sup> or what Arne Naess calls self-realization. They have similar theoretical underpinnings in the fact that self-realization "is an active condition, not a place one can reach."<sup>13</sup> In addition, Naess maintains that "self-realization is not self-centered" and that "the diversity of different individuals and approaches remains, as we share and shape our connections to the larger."<sup>14</sup> In the story, Hilary needs to share her world (spectrum) with another human being in order to shape her connection to the larger world

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Abraham Maslow, 1968. *Toward a Psychology of Being* (2nd ed.). New York: Van Nostrand.

<sup>13</sup> Naess, Arne. 1989, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 9

while moving herself closer to self-realization. She does this by inviting the Green Count to walk with her in Coronation Park. By accepting the invitation, he allowed himself to become experientially immersed in Nature. As a result of this bond her “spectrum shines a little brighter and has grown a little bigger since she and the Green Count have become friends.”

I have read this story countless times both as a young person and as an adult. Every reading unveils a new interpretation in light of any new knowledge and experiences I have undergone. In the story my mom concludes her writing by stating, “*They are looking for colours in the leaves, in the sky, in the water, in the pebbles on the beach, in the flowers along the pine-scented trail.*” This is what we were doing on our daily walks in Nature. We were immersed in the wonder and the mystery Nature offers. “The philosophical side of ecophilosophy investigates the particular methods of viewing the world that lead different individuals to something like the platform of deep ecology.”<sup>15</sup> Naess’s own Ecosophy T, was formalized during the time he spent in his mountain hut Tvergastein. This was the *place* where *he* developed his system of reasoning that led to a development of a platform where “personal philosophies of life in a worldview”<sup>16</sup> could be considered. Was I able to begin to develop my personal ecophilosophy at such a young age? I believe I was.

According to Sobel cited in Bill Plotkin’s “Nature and the Human Soul,” “Empathy between the child and the natural world should be a main objective for children aged four through seven” and he advises “parents and teachers to encourage emotional responses to the animals and plant life that children discover in the natural world.”<sup>17</sup> My mom certainly had this in mind while we walked in Nature experiencing it day in and day out for an extended period of time. Our intergenerational story was taking shape. She encouraged and facilitated “a heart felt and hands-on form of nature education.”<sup>18</sup> This authentic learning experience guided me in the process of cultivating my own ecosophy. As I reflect upon my walks in Coronation Park and the subsequent Children’s Story that was written, I now realize that this was the place where I

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Drengson, 2008, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Plotkin, Bill. 2008, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

developed *my* personal philosophy of life in a worldview. From admiring the dancing seaweed, skipping stones on Lake Ontario's flat surface, sitting under the shade of an expansive willow tree, to finding and naming my walking stick which was "bent like a bow by Nature," all these performances were moments I came to appreciate while being immersed in Nature. Given the chance, I explored these forms and forces of nature. Through my interactions with Nature I was "granted the widest and deepest trove of resources with which to flesh out a self."<sup>19</sup> I found places to be quiet and relished those moments of solitude. It is difficult to put into words what my ecosophy is but perhaps the complexity of Nature is in her simplicity, for I do not need anything other than to *be* there. One thing is for certain, I have a great respect for all things natural and perhaps my Mom's "soulcentric approach to child development" allowed me to "grow into [a] soul-rooted (initiated) adult."<sup>20</sup>

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The grey water of Lake Ontario looks ominous on this cold November morning as I walk along the shore of Burlington Beach. The waves are in an upheaval stirring up the bottom dwellers, leaving a buildup of debris upon the sandy shoreline. Each wave progressively runs up onto the beach flattening the sand as it hits the shore, propelling the remains further up the beach. The remaining water rushes back seaward just in time before the next wave action. I lift my collar high enough to cover my neck from the sweeping easterly blowing off the lake then rearrange my hat to make sure the built in earmuffs are completely covering my ears keeping the warmth where it should be. Regardless of the earmuffs tightly secured on my head, the sound of the powerful water hitting the shore is deafening. The spray sends a crystallized mist into the air.

As I laboriously traverse the stone laden upper portion of the beach, in order to protect my feet from getting wet, I keep a close eye on the rocks that line the path. In an instant, I see the one. I pick it up and flip it over in my gloved hand a couple of times. I simulate a side arm throw towards and water and then quickly slip the flat oval rock into my coat pocket. I continue to make my way along the beach and gradually the rocky surface dissipates and all that remains is sand. I stop to relish the moment. I look down the beach and I can see the path I have travelled as my boot prints are echoed in the sand. Once I arrive at the last stretch of beach, the Brant Long Term Care Facility comes into view. I glance at my watch. My timing is good, lunch should have

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

wrapped up thirty minutes ago. I am on my way to visit my mom. She should be back in her room that over looks the lake by the time I get there. During the spring and summer months most of the lake is hidden by a small but mighty stand of Oak, Maple, and Shagbark Hickory trees that are outside her window. But as autumn progressed and the temperature dropped so did the leaves that held the lake at bay. For the past month we have been able to enjoy a 180-degree view of Lake Ontario. I scurry up the embankment and quickly cross Beach Boulevard. I come to the paved road that leads to the Brant Center entrance. I hurry my pace anxious to see my mom.

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“The wind is blustery today mom!” I confess as I untie my hat from around my chin and pull it off my head. I can see from her lowered head and chin resting upon the upper portion of her chest that she was sleeping. I continue talking giving her time to awaken. “The water is stirring up the debris from the floor of the lake leaving a trail of *detritus* on the beach.” She smiled as best she could since Parkinson’s and a series of strokes have taken away her natural ability to raise the ends of her mouth into a proper smile. *Detritus* is one of our favourite words. “How do you pronounce that again?” I tease.

“The accent is on the first syllable with a long ‘i’ sound,” she manages to say without missing a beat.

“*De-tri-tus!*” I repeat with the correct inflection and continue my description. “The water is brimming with undertows making the most magnificent crashing noise and the spray is crystallizing before it can make its way to the ground.” As I am talking I maneuver her wheel chair towards the window. I scroll up the blinds right to the top so we can have a wide expansive view of Lake Ontario. “What do you think mom?”

“It is wild,” she surmises.

“Yes!” I reply as I pull up a chair. I rummage through my pocket and find the rock. I place it in the palm of my mom’s good hand and close her fingers around it. She brings it up as close to her face to get a better look. “It is a beauty,” she says then adds, “perfect for skipping.”

“Yes, that is what I thought too.” Her hand did not stop caressing the flat oval rock for the remainder of my visit as we sat in silence mesmerized by the raw beauty of Lake Ontario.

Two people brought together through birth deepened their relationship through Nature. Today was no different. In spite of the fact we were trapped indoors, once again we found ourselves bounded by Nature, fully immersed in a panoramic view of the waves crashing hard upon the shore. We were taking pleasure in the sound of the strong easterly wind whipping against the windowpane while at the same time experiencing the tactile sensation of one flat oval rock that brought the mystery of Nature into the concrete. This was an instance of the ineffable. Each wave that crashed on the beach had its



own story to tell. Each gust of wind that pushed its way to the shore had its own story to tell. Each rock had its own story to tell. We simply sat and listened.

Guided by my mom in my formative years, walking in Nature, I learned how to appreciate the simple things in life. Now I am able to bring this essence home to her so that she can be comforted during late elderhood<sup>21</sup> by the simplicity within the complexity that Nature offers. Her guidance helped me to develop a personal ecosophy that I live. Through Nature, I was led to seek a spiritual dimension in my life, and by actively living my values and beliefs, I have returned this gift to my mom in a space that could have potentially been devoid of Nature's presence, but instead is now infused with its mystery. "Nature, in all its functions, is remarkably purposeful. Who, then, could possible imagine that he or she was born into this world for no purpose?"<sup>22</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gold, Taro. 2001, p. 51