

Leading from the Heart of Nature

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### Abstract

Charles describes how concepts from nature have informed and guided her work throughout her career as an educator, author, organizational executive, and facilitator of positive social change. She applied natural systems concepts to the development and implementation of well-known and widely-used interdisciplinary K – 12 environment education programs, Project Learning Tree and Project WILD, in the 1970s and 1980s; in community-building work in the 1990s; and, for the past decade, as co-founder and now CEO Emerita of the Children & Nature Network, to help create, inspire, support and encourage the burgeoning worldwide movement to reconnect children, and people of all ages, with nature in their everyday lives. She is currently helping coalesce the emerging field of nature based leadership to apply nature's lessons to achieve economic, environmental and social justice through the Nature Based Leadership Institute at Antioch University New England.

*Key Words: leadership development, organizational development, children, nature, education, curriculum development, nature based.*

Ecology is a term my grandfather, Perl Charles, first brought to my life. He was born in 1899 and traveled with his family to the western United States by train, wagon and on foot at a time when people sought New Mexico as a place to, it was hoped, recover from a grave illness, in this case, Great Grandmother's tuberculosis. The family, with four very young children, settled in New Mexico in 1907. Granddad, as were many in the family, was a life-long conservationist. He taught me that, in an ecology, all parts of any environment, living and non-living, exist in relationship to one another. The parts interact dynamically, and no one part stands alone. In ecologies, organisms' interactions, in optimal, self-regulating, self-organizing ways, are key to evolutionary success. As poets and naturalists through time have observed, everything is connected to everything else.

Some of my earliest defining childhood experiences from the time I was four years old and got my first horse, Palo, and well into my 20s, were spending time on horseback, with my granddad or my Dad on his horse in the lead. One image tells a lot of this story. I was about 16. Granddad took me to a high knoll in the White Mountain region of Northern Arizona. In every direction, 360 degrees, all we could see was horizon, with juniper, some Ponderosa pine on the knolls, big skies and open range. There was nearly nothing in the way of human habitation that was visible. He said, "Vistas like this—a big view—always give me perspective." I have lived my life that way, recognizing that humans are a small part of the big picture in relationship to the Earth, which supports and nourishes us all.

My great grandparents, Tom and Beulah Charles, were a legendary influence—business people, authors, civic leaders, conservationists, and instrumental in the White Sands being set aside as a national monument in the United States in 1933. I was raised to strive for a balance of culture and nature, with a drive to bring diverse interests to the same table to find the common good, and with a healthy respect and sense of responsibility for the needs of future generations. They were both role models beginning in my earliest years. Watching and learning from great grandmother Beulah, who was a college graduate among her other accomplishments, it never occurred to me that I would not figure

out a way to graduate from college and go on to serve in leadership roles. It did not matter that neither of my parents and neither set of grandparents were college graduates. They were accomplished in other ways. All of them urged me forward. And I felt inspired, determined and accountable for doing so.

Throughout my life and career, my primary focus has been on children, communities, and the environment that sustains us all. I have worked to design and implement ways to connect people with nature—in school, at home, in neighborhoods, towns and cities, in rural and wild areas—everywhere people live, learn, play and work. And, enhanced by the gift of a fabulous partnership and collaboration with my now deceased husband of 40 years, Bob Samples, nature itself is my guide.

I first remember Bob being explicit about what he described as the principles of natural-systems management in the 1970s. He conceptualized, wrote and spoke publically about those principles. I began applying them to my work, to some degree with the early development and implementation of the K-12 interdisciplinary environment education program, Project Learning Tree, and then especially with the design and implementation of Project WILD in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the 1990s, we applied these natural systems concepts to civic engagement as well and reported on them in our book, *Coming Home: Community, Creativity and Consciousness* (Charles & Samples, 2004). Beginning in 2006, with the formation of the Children & Nature Network, I consciously applied the concepts to facilitating social change in order to achieve a vision in which all children live, learn, play and grow with nature in their everyday lives. Currently, I am also applying these concepts to help create the Nature Based Leadership Institute at Antioch University New England, where people may receive certificates and obtain graduate degrees with concentrations in this growing field of study.

So what do natural systems management principles, nature based leadership and the movement to reconnect people with nature have in common? They all reflect a yearning and urgent call for action by which humans will live with, learn from and care for the living Earth in ways that will nourish all life

for generations and generations to come. How can each of us contribute? We can do so by what I call leading from the heart of nature.

### **The New Nature Movement**

People throughout the world are hearing this message, it is touching their hearts, and they are taking action. The movement to reconnect people and nature is burgeoning worldwide. It is largely self-organizing and spontaneously generating. It is a manifestation of a sweeping and compelling perceived need for systemic social change—where people everywhere are resonating with the importance of re-righting the balance, especially between children and nature, in their daily lives. Richard Louv coined the term “nature-deficit disorder” in his seminal book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Louv, 2005, 2008). Louv is quick to say that “nature-deficit disorder is not a medical diagnosis, but a description of the human costs of alienation from nature.” Through his writing, public speaking and communications from the international non-profit organization that he and I co-founded in 2006 with others, the Children & Nature Network (C&NN), Louv has called for a new nature movement (Louv, 2011).

I read *Last Child in the Woods* when it first came out in 2005. I reached out to Rich, not knowing him, to ask him to participate in a National Conservation Learning Summit I was helping to convene and which was held in November of 2005 at the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. The 2005 National Conservation Learning Summit was the idea of, and sponsored by, the Paul F-Brandwein Institute along with a host of federal and non-profit organizations. This Summit was the original vision of Brandwein Institute President, Keith Wheeler, and President Emeritus, Jack Padalino, supported heartily by the rest of the Brandwein Board, including Marily Dewall and Mary Brandwein, who was still alive at that time at 94 years young. Ten years later, the Brandwein

Institute again convened a significant summit at NCTC, building on the work initiated in 2005. Inspiring a New Generation: North American Summit took the work further to foster collaboration and build a framework for action. Results of that Summit will continue to guide much of the worldwide work to reconnect people with nature.

The messages in *Last Child in the Woods*—combined with the evidence all around us for children’s “nature-deficit disorder”—are among the energies fostering, nourishing, compelling, and creating the children and nature movement. While the book, *Last Child in the Woods*, is not the sole cause of the current children and nature movement, it has, in every sense, unleashed a force of nature.

One of the goals of the Brandwein Institute, shared and supported by C&NN, is to nourish and support the non-partisan, inclusive, pro-active worldwide efforts to reconnect children with nature. Many individuals, organizations and nations are actively involved. One small measure of the growth of the movement in the more than ten years since the founding of C&NN is that people from more than 200 nations have visited C&NN’s website, [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org); more than 70 nations are represented in its online directory; and people from more than 100 nations have downloaded its free publications and other resources online. The reasons for this interest are many, beginning with the evidence that supports the benefits to children’s health and well-being, and that of the Earth itself, from children’s connections to nature. Generations who have had little or no personal connection to nature are unlikely to produce passionate, informed and responsible citizens of the Earth.

***Natural Guides to Leading from the Heart of Nature***

I personally have been guided and informed throughout my life by my lifelong experiences in direct contact with nature, beginning with formative childhood experiences, through my teens, and as the primary focus of my work throughout my adult career. I can personally testify to my own sense of purpose, vitality, and conscience as being nourished in large part through my connections with the world of nature. For our purposes in this publication, I want to emphasize what I call “natural guides.” As I have stated, I have applied these guides to the development of leading environment education programs, to the movement to reconnect children with nature, and most recently, to a new effort to coalesce this thinking into the emerging field of nature based leadership.

For perspective, the title of my 1998 Brandwein Lecture given at the US National Science Teachers Association annual conference was “Natural Guides to Community Building.” Here is a quote from my talk in 1998:

*“Let me start with a worry I have. This is a worry I have had for 25 years—and it is getting more intense, not less. I worry about children, youth, and adults living lives so immersed in technology that we forget to directly experience the living world itself—we forget nature, the first classroom. For the long term, I believe that we have to remember how the living world works from direct experience, from intimacy, from the loving respect and substantive knowledge that cannot be obtained vicariously or virtually.”*

In that talk nearly 20 years ago, and subsequently in many other places, including in our book *Coming Home*, I describe what Bob and I learned from observing natural systems and applying those insights to human relationships, from families to schools to businesses to whole communities. To state the obvious, nature has been establishing and sustaining successful models of living systems for about

15 billion years. Nature has a track record of success. Principles of contemporary ecological perspectives can help us detect some of the attributes that are central to the health of living systems. We need to draw on nature's successes and lessons to re-right the relationship between people and nature.

In 2006, when a group of us founded the Children & Nature Network, I thought about how the principles I applied to the healthy development of both Project Learning Tree and Project WILD could be applied on a larger scale. That is, how could the natural guides to community building be applied to nourishing this worldwide movement to reconnect people, especially children, with nature? I thought about it, talked about it, wrote about it, and consciously put the ideas to work.

In this spirit, here are seven illustrative characteristics of natural systems that I have used for decades to help guide my life and my work. While my emphasis here is specific to the new nature movement, these natural guides apply within family settings, among friends, with colleagues and with people we do not know. They apply at home, at work, in our communities, and throughout the world. These are only examples of what we can learn from nature that I personally find to be powerfully useful and transforming, not a comprehensive list:

- Diversity
- Niche
- Cooperation
- Self-Regulation
- Optimization
- Connectedness
- Community



**Diversity**

Diversity tends to be an indicator of health in ecosystems. Diversity assures resilience. Monocultures, in contrast, are vulnerable. From an educator's perspective, we want to provide for the many ways of knowing that are inherent within learners. Respect the varied learning styles and modalities that children and youth use to learn and grow. Within a community, we must cherish and celebrate our differences for from those we can create a healthy whole. When we think about the importance of reconnecting people with nature, beginning with children, this reminds us to think in terms of the many ways in which people can choose to participate in this movement—in their daily lives, in their priorities, where and how they live, learn, work and play. From individual children and their families to whole communities, this movement to reconnect children and nature will be inherently resilient to the extent that we embrace the many ways in which people can help to heal this broken relationship. There is no one right way to reconnect with nature. One size does not fit all.

**Niche**

A niche, in the ecological definition of the word, is how an organism makes a living. Every organism has a niche and is therefore inherently important. Used to indicate a role, the word is alive with possibilities—each person can have multiple niches, and various niches over time. A niche requires action. An organism has something to do. Every organism warrants respect. It is important that we recognize this concept as educators, citizens, community participants, and members of a world community. Everyone has a contribution to make, everyone can help re-right this balance. From the perspective of C&NN, we think this movement is taking form at every level—in individual children's choices to play outside and take their friends; in families starting Nature Clubs for Families; among grassroots leaders starting children and nature initiatives in communities throughout the world; in

whole communities, and at state, provincial and federal levels. This movement is not just bottom-up nor top down. It is everywhere, and everyone has a niche, a role, a way to make a difference.

### **Cooperation**

Although competition exists in natural systems, its role has been overemphasized. Cooperation is prevalent and actually more pervasive than the role of competition in the natural world. An effective movement to create social change is epitomized by cooperation. Most of history's major social movements were characterized by people of all walks of life and all political persuasions coming together with a common purpose. Through C&NN, we are consciously fostering and encouraging community-based collaborations to build the children and nature movement. The *C&NN Community Action Guide*, downloadable from C&NN's web site, is a tried-and-true guide to implementing social change through respectful cooperative efforts—a process honed for decades by Dr. John Gardner and John Parr and others, and applied, for the first time, to building this movement.

### **Self-Regulation**

Self-regulation is one of the most provocative natural guides to building a social movement. Contemporary views of ecology and ecosystems hold that the natural world is a self-regulating system, arguably the most successful management system in the world. It has persisted through immense spans of time and is still here and functioning.

Fundamental to the children nature movement, families and individuals are taking responsibility in their own lives for reconnecting with the natural world. This is a form of self-regulation. We published the *C&NN Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit: Do It Yourself! Do It Now!* The response is evidence that the self-organizing, self-regulating dimension of this movement can be nourished and supported. The result is happier, healthier families, beginning with their children, who are learning once again how to go

outside, and how to make it a priority to invent, explore, play and learn in the natural world. Another manifestation of this self-regulating influence is our approach to encouraging grassroots efforts to build children and nature initiatives—from neighborhoods to towns and cities to states, provinces and larger regions. We spread the word, provide tools such as the *C&NN Community Action Guide*, offer encouragement, and then get out of the way—believing that a self-regulating approach to building a movement to reconnect children and nature is inherently resilient, adaptive, and more likely to succeed over time than if it were proscribed from and by a top-down model and infrastructure.

### **Optimization**

There is an unfortunate tendency in contemporary Western culture to think that most is best. The popular sayings, “He who dies with the most toys wins,” and “Everything to the max,” reflect this tendency. Perhaps at no time in human history has this attitude of “maximizing everything” created such a tragic consequence, so entirely avoidable, as the excess in the human economic system manifested in recession, foreclosures, debt, and economic losses that have children and families on the streets, dreams dashed, and a worldwide economic system in more imbalance than might ever have been imagined. And perhaps nothing more represents the threat from maximizing, rather than optimizing, than the persistent loss of species diversity, habitat destruction, and over-exploitation through fracking and other acts of violence against the Earth and all of its life forms, and the result we are seeing in global climate change. We humans clearly need to pay attention to how nature stays resilient and healthy, and model that approach in all of our relationships, beginning with the Earth itself.

The resource base for nearly all things in nature is balanced, abundant, and even redundant by design. Nature keeps energy and resources in reserve. Rather than maximizing everything, nature tends to optimize its use of resources and to make sure that there is sufficient redundancy to assure continuity. The human idea of “saving for a rainy day” is a form of keeping energy in reserve. When we

pace ourselves and avoid burnout, we are acting optimally. Classic burnout is working to the max.

Nature reminds us to be moderate rather than excessive. This does not mean we don't work hard or that we don't strive for excellence. It does mean that we take care to nourish ourselves and others along the way.

### **Connectedness**

In nature's ecologies, every part is connected to every other. The ripples of any action affect whole living communities, sometimes in ways not seen. Echoing others before him, the naturalist John Muir observed, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin." When we apply the concept to growing a movement to reconnect children and nature, it helps us to remember to respect all the parts and foster ways in which people of every age are nourished by the refreshing benefits of nature in our daily lives.

Building a shared awareness of the indicators of nature-deficit disorder helps to build a bond that connects us all to the importance of re-righting the balance for children, and for us all. *Last Child in the Woods* serves as a powerful voice to connect increasing numbers of people—hear the message, and you get it, and you can help spread it to others. Building a shared awareness of the benefits to us all through the human-nature connection is equally if not more important. All of us can help disseminate the key messages of this movement to help reconnect children and nature.

In this movement, this reminds us to create opportunities for all people, of all ages, incomes, and ethnic groups, and in communities of all sizes and locations, to feel a sense of shared purpose with one another, to be mutually supportive of one another. Everyone in a community has a vested interest in the health and well-being of children. It helps when whole communities work together on a mission and goals; when there is agreement and shared commitment to making tangible steps and taking action

to create places, spaces, opportunities, and experiences by which children in their everyday lives are connected to nature for their healthy development and well-being.

The media can help, and are beginning to do so, with stories like one about Nature Clubs for Families that appeared on the Today Show; front page stories in the Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, and Boston Globe; and a full feature in the weekend edition of USA Today. Communications tools such as Web sites, texting, online communities of interest, blogs, electronic newsletters, and other forms of outreach and inclusion are all serving as powerful ways to nourish and support this sense of connectedness—this sense of being a part of something purposeful, inspiring, healthy, and commonsense—that is at the heart of this movement to reconnect children and nature.

We also need gathering places—some can be designed and enhanced. And a great many already exist, often in the form of neighborhood, city, and regional parks within easy reach of many children and families. Neighborhoods can be more children and nature-friendly. Some places are taking down backyard fences and designing commons areas for children to play safely with an appropriate amount of supervision. Rooftops are being turned into gardens and play areas, safe above what can be dangerous streets below.

In addition to places and spaces in which children can freely explore and connect with the natural world, we thrive and the movement grows through shared experiences. Many young families find it inspiring and confidence-building to plan and share outings in nature with others. They often don't know where or how to start and can use the free downloadable resource, the *C&NN Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit: Do It Yourself! Do It Now!* People are forming these nature clubs, inviting friends, family, and whole communities to join them, and having weekly or monthly outdoor adventures in natural areas.

Building a movement by paying attention to the importance of connectedness—in this case a movement that is based on hope, health and well-being—is grounded in laughter, play, wonder, shared

adventures, and appropriate risks. The results are exhilarating, inspiring, stress-reducing, and good for everyone.

At the neighborhood and community level, nationally and beyond, one way to foster connectedness is to bring people together in various forms of celebration and activity. Work together to accomplish tangible results. That is the model we are encouraging through our *C&NN Community Action Guide*. There are many approaches to cultivating a movement in which people of all ages recognize that they are genuinely connected to each other.

### **Community**

In many ways, the single most important of the natural guides is the concept of community. Key to any successful movement is creating and sustaining a powerful sense of community. People feel a part of something that matters, and are inspired, nourished and supported in the process. Communities in nature are living and non-living parts, all connected into a cohesive whole. Communities can grow and change, while providing a sense of place and comfort. All in all, the movement to reconnect people and nature stands on a belief that healthy children are the heart and foundation for healthy communities. All of the other natural guides—diversity, niche, cooperation, self-regulation, optimization and connectedness—fit together within the organizing principle of community. Communities begin with their individual members—in this case, in home and families, with friends and neighbors. To the extent that we consider this movement to reconnect children and nature to be place-based, and in our hearts, we will succeed in re-righting the natural balance for children in their daily lives.

### **The Ecology of Hope**

Each of these natural guides to creating cultural change by building a movement to reconnect children and nature, in combination with the others, helps to form what I call the ecology of hope. By

applying these natural guides, I believe we will successfully create the kind of social change in a living ecology that is necessary for children's health and well-being, and their likelihood of living fulfilled, productive and healthy lives as adults. Hope is fundamental to children's health and well-being. Children need to have successful experiences, every day, of making choices and learning from those results in positive ways. We do a disservice to children if we take away their opportunities to explore, learn and experience the joy and wonder in their immediate natural world—rather than overwhelming childhood with the calamities of scale affecting people and the planet.

Hope is derived from the exercise of will. Success in exercising will, on whatever scale, develops a sense of efficacy—that is, a perceived belief that I or you can make a difference. Combine the exercise of will with the experience of efficacy and hope is the result. To a large extent, today's children live within a culture of depression, not an ecology of hope. The children and nature movement is building an ecology of hope.

For young children, efficacy and hope are nourished by playing in wild and semi-wild places outdoors—turning over a rock and feeling connected to all of life; climbing a tree and feeling a surge of confidence and exhilaration, peace and perspective; having an adult share a place so special that the child feels valued and develops a lifelong connection to the power and the beauty of the natural world. For learners of all ages, we are nourished and inspired by our grounding connections with nature in our everyday lives. From the perspective of a world in stress, people disconnected from each other and the Earth, there is an accessible and healing alternative. Looking to nature.

### **Nourishing a Planetary Perspective**

Change is a result of consciousness. If consciousness is what we pay attention to, as neuroscientist Karl Pribram has said, then creating a shift in consciousness requires paying attention to different things. It is up to each of us, and begins within each of us. Bob Samples said, "Consciousness is

the dance of the spirit, the song that connects, the hope for the future.” Bob was a champion of the spirit, and consistently urged all who would listen to turn to natural systems, to nature, for perspective and inspiration. He said, “We need to reground ourselves in the ways of wild ecologies . . . It is nature that will guide us to the kind of realistic, dynamic equilibrium that we need in order to heal the rifts between culture and nature.” I would add, to heal the rifts between children and nature, between communities and nature, from our homes and neighborhoods to the planet as a whole.

There are enormous opportunities available in cultivating a world consciousness in right balance with nature. We need to create a whole new level of cooperation. We have to figure out how to bring together the many diverse people who see and sense these problems, and, if given the right opportunities and encouragement, could work together to help address them. In the end, and for the future, we need a new common sense—and, I believe, a collective consciousness—about the big issues that will sustain us all, and the planet itself, for future generations. We need, I believe, to lead from the heart of nature.

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