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## The Radical Notion of Natural Education

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Cultural healing through holistic education.

## Wolf Kids



I visited Jean-Claude Cabry and Ingrid Bauer on Salt Spring Island who run the Wolf Kids homeschool program based on Jon Young's 8 Shields learning model. Salt Spring is a large island 20 minutes by ferry from a port that is 20 minutes by car north of Victoria. Jean-Claude's [Wolf Kids](#) program runs 3 days a week throughout the school year. He also runs two programs for families that meet one day per week, a 5-day survival course, and two long-term mentor training programs for adults. All of his programs are full and have waiting lists. Most of those attending are from Salt Spring Island but I'm told a few families who attend

have come from Vancouver Island.

The Wolf Kids program is an outdoor learning environmental experience. It has little in common with institutional education or the modern teacher-student relationship. His traditional mentoring-based program aims to create a cultural reintegration of individuals, families, and communities. Jean-Claude designed his program for homeschoolers rather than work with state schools which would require that he compromise his ideals. Once I describe the model you will understand why many people are interested in it.

## The 8 Shields Model

Human relationships develop similar structures in increasingly larger groups. This is the notion of self-similarity that is embodied in fractals and which manifests throughout nature. At the small scale is the ego, a "society of mind." Similar personality "components" develop in families, communities, and society. Education should be viewed in this same fractal way: as a process by which people learn balance and come together to form larger balanced elements; balanced individuals learning a place in, and a way to a balanced culture.

Modern factory schools -- barely 200 years old -- are linear and regular: they inculcate state priorities, train commercial skills, and guide moral values. Because these schools are neither organic nor designed to interest students they impede the natural growth of individuals, families, and the culture. According to scholars ranging from the radical educator John Taylor Gatto to the educational philosopher John Dewey, modern schooling is a central plan dictated by authority. Modern schooling focuses on skills and information, presents recreation as competition, and replaces natural interconnection with a filtered experience designed by experts.



*Jean-Claude Cabry and child*

This is in contrast to the 8 Shields approach of Jon Young that Jean-Claude is applying in his [Wolf Kids program](#). Jean-Claude laid out the four aspects of learning as presented in this philosophy. Education in this broader sense is the agent supporting regenerative culture and must include these processes:

1. skills and information: how mind affects the world,
2. recreation: how you interact with the world,
3. nature connection: an emotional connection to the rhythms of the world,
4. cultural connection: finding meaning and purpose in lineage and community.

The 8 Shields approach combines these processes by observing, studying, and participating in the life of plants, animals, and rhythms of the wild. Learning to build with, follow, and understand the signs of all natural processes. That is, to learn of the larger workings of the natural world by working in full contact with natural life forms. It is an unfiltered experience that aims to open our awareness to the complexity of the world around us and within us.

Cultural connection lies at the root of health and growth at all scales: cultural, community, family, and individual. 8 Shields adopts a mentoring approach in which everyone plays a role. In intact cultures everyone who has something teaches something, everyone who strives to learn finds someone who strives to teach. Everyone embodies some of both. Being both a student and a teacher is the glue of identity. In a living culture everyone plays these roles.

The "8 Shields Institute ... support(s) the development of an emerging international network of deep nature connection, mentoring, and culture repair. The 8 Shields Institute is committed to researching, testing, training, and building of healthy, supportive cultural processes that restore deep nature connection and bring meaning and hope to people's lives. ... These commitments enhance and strengthen the work of deep nature connection, culture repair, cultural mentoring and community resilience.



*Melodie Kauff and student*

"The project's aim is to teach individuals Advanced Connective Practices and routines. These highly refined practices follow the ancient rhythms of life; they provide a natural template for building and maintaining balance and connection in oneself, within families, and within community." - from the 8 Shields [web site](#)

According to Jon Young these eight "shields" represent cultural archetypes, which are an extension of personality types to a transpersonal scale. Each of these eight attributes arises in sequence in the development of an individual:

1. quiet mind.
2. clarity of a child.
3. vitality and quick response.
4. deep listening, immersive experience.
5. care and empathy.
6. awareness of what is needed, being truly helpful, personally committed and wholly connected.
7. fully alive and in possession of higher vision, and the skills of personal and community healing.
8. love and forgiveness.



Quiet mind is the self-awareness of the newly born. Clarity of the child is the intuitive knowledge of virtue, happiness, and the integrity that underlies discernment. Vitality and response are the powers of learning through exploration. Deep listening occurs with the development of self-expression, and the desire to learn and to teach. Care and empathy emerge in adolescence along with interconnection. Awareness of the necessary develops in young adulthood as people become co-creative. Higher vision emerges in the expansive phase of maturity. Love and forgiveness mature with age.

The 8 Shields program aims to foster the natural development of these attributes. These attributes are not taught but seen, experienced, and modeled through relationships. The mentor and the mentee share an experience that creates insight in the younger and regeneration in the elder. It is not enough to do things outdoors, it is necessary to be in relationship in the natural world. A whole relationship is lived and, as such, the experience must be whole in all dimensions. Here is a philosophy of learning, not a philosophy of teaching. It is an holistic vision of regenerative culture.

"Learning isn't just about imparting information. It's also about creating opportunities for dynamic, engaging connections to form. Before there were the formalized schools and institutions as we know them in the modern era, how did people learn? How is the "human operating system" already hardwired and optimized to absorb experiences and lessons? ... Each participant's journey is unique and based on their own curiosities, passions, and focus." -- from the 8 Shields web site.

An element embedded throughout the 8 Shields approach, complementary to the development of attributes, is the removal of blocks. These blocks are recognized as being larger than each person's individual experience. These are ancestral and cultural scars and obstacles. Jon Young says:

"There are compensation strategies that form like a web around a wound, and they often develop into a gift, a particular skill set. We can learn to see that, and it helps the healing process of the wound. ... We also track out further, and look at what inner wounds and blocks appear that challenge us from fully living our gifts."

## **Schooling on Salt Spring and in Victoria**

Many parents on the island are unable to homeschool and cannot send their kids to the Wolf Kids program. Many parents want to reform the public schools. Jean-Claude's program has triggered major changes in the whole schooling environment in this area. I am on Salt Spring staying with one of these parents, a woman who needs to send her son to a public school and who wants school programs reformed. She tells me this story:

A group of island parents who wanted to create a school along the wild learning model proposed to the local island school board the creation of such a school which they would fund and run themselves. Their proposal was rejected. These parents then found another school board on Canada's mainland, half a day's travel away, run by a superintendent who did support them. Through loopholes in Canada's education law this superintendent's support enabled these parents to start their own state funded, state approved school here on Salt Spring island.

A wealthy landowner provided the land and structures, the state provided a teacher's salary, and their school automatically received government support for each student enrolled. The new school has full enrollment. As a result of the lower enrollment at the public school, the public school receives less government funding.



*Caitlin and Phoebe*

Parents whose kids remained in the local public school returned to the school board asking for reforms in the existing program. This time their request was allowed and these parents created a new teaching position, wrote the job description for the teacher they wanted, and had a certain freedom in defining a new program. This is the program to which my host's son is a part: a hybrid of wilderness experience and modern schooling offered at the local public school.

As a result, this island of 10,000 people has 4 types of publicly funded teaching programs: the Wolf Kids learning program, an independent state-funded nature-oriented school, a hybrid nature-based public school program, and the standard public school programs. The standard school model pervades the rest of this small island and the entirety of the city of Victoria, Vancouver Island, and generally the rest of the province.

The public school system in BC provides a better learning environment than public schools in the US. The BC system has taken steps to dismantle the state defined test-based education that pervades public education in the US. BC public school teachers have significant latitude in creating their own programs and syllabus. State school teachers must still be trained and certified in "teacher mills", but I'm told many new teachers have a broad vision.

To some extent teachers are moving away from the failed centrally controlled, institutional model of schooling. In addition, parents in BC can declare their kids to be "home schooled" and be subject to few requirements and no supervision. This state of affairs provides a somewhat more fertile environment for school reform, but it is still "schooling" in the old sense of the word. In Jean-Claude's view, in the view of Jon Young, and also in my view, this notion of schooling will never substitute for authentic learning or foster cultural reintegration.

Many "regular" people here on Salt Spring subscribe to this view; they are not radical educators. There are about 350 other 8 shields programs around the world like the one Jean-Claude has created. Yet 40 minutes to the south there is a city of 300,000 in which no one seems subscribe to this view. There are no radically unconventional learning programs in Victoria. This seems odd.

I am aware of some alternative programs in Victoria, but I consider them narrow in attempting only minor reform to the system of institutional schooling. In their support of core institutional schooling these alternative programs cannot replace institutional schooling.

Daniella Roze, a colleague and co-worker of Jean-Claude's, has created extra curricular wilderness courses in Victoria. Her [Thriving Roots program](#) is chipping away at the edges of factory schooling, moving us toward a regenerative culture.

As in all holistic changes there is the potential for a snowball effect as many agents shift direction at the same time. This change is not slow, but the process of inoculating the population with new ideas is slow, and it is a faintly responsive process. What needs to happen is for the adoption of new ideas to grow asymptotically or, in the modern vernacular, "go viral." It is only then that the whole system changes. This is where we should focus our efforts.



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