



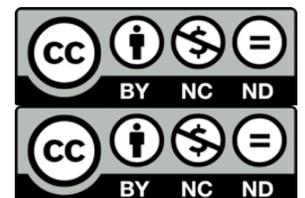
## A Call for Ideas

What is your secret for learning?

*“Nothing is more dangerous than denying your children the experience of danger.”*

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## A Week in the Woods

I spent a week camping with 170 people, ages one to eighty-four, on an isolated mountaintop on Salt Spring Island to attend a workshop called **The Art of Mentoring**. The theme was deep nature-based education and the creation of sustainable communities, sometimes referred to as “the 200-year project.”

People came from all over Canada and the US, many ran their own programs, and it seemed there were more people from Montana than anywhere else. Almost everyone was there with their family so that, at times, the tents and bare-bottomed children scattered over many acres felt like a happy refugee camp.

Youth support was a major focus and the program has separate tracks for toddlers, children, teens, and adults. It was led by my friends Jean-Claude Catry and Ingrid Bauer, who run the **Wisdom of the Earth** program on Salt Spring, and the younger leaders of a dozen outdoor education programs they have helped spawn over Vancouver Island.



## **The Art of Mentoring**

Coming from roots in traditional culture, The Art of Mentoring follows the path of Tom Brown, Jr. and his student Jon Young in exploring how health, mind, and culture are maintained by community and government. Jon Young has described a blueprint for sustainable community that he has named the 8-Shields program. This is described in his 2018 book *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*.

This represents the fundamental mixture of modern and ancestral cultures. It is the same path followed by Benjamin Franklin and others in the founding of the United States, which was modeled on the Iroquois Confederacy. I've been involved in nature-based learning for many years. I did not attend to learn more details. I went with more personal motivations.

I went to meet the scattered community of educators who are developing programs along these lines. To find out who they are, where they are, where they're coming from and where they think they're going. In particular, I wanted to meet people who shared my own interests and, in this, I was fairly successful.

My roots are in spirit, family, and learning on the internal side, and nature, science, and culture on the external side. Many of these interests were shared by those attending. I was interested to see how deeply each area was understood. The area least represented was science.

## **Deep Nature Connection**

The critical idea behind deep nature connection is not nature, it's connection. Nature is the mirror because nature holds the chaos of the interaction of relevant things. The idea is similar to deep psychology in that perception comes before thought, and instinct before analysis. Instinct means intuition and emotion, not reflex and impulse. It is now recognized that this notion of instinct underlies consciousness.

As your relationship with nature is the screen on which you explore your perception, your relationship with other individuals is similarly the screen on which you explore yourself. These screens present you with a view of your own psychology, consciousness, reality, and personal growth.

While this and other programs emphasize doing simple things in nature—weaving, carving, survival skills, and reading the landscape—the emphasis is not on the result but on the process. Your focus in weaving a basket is your hands, not the basket. Your focus in reading the landscape is not the topography of the land, but the topography of your mind. Another word to describe this is “subtle perception”.



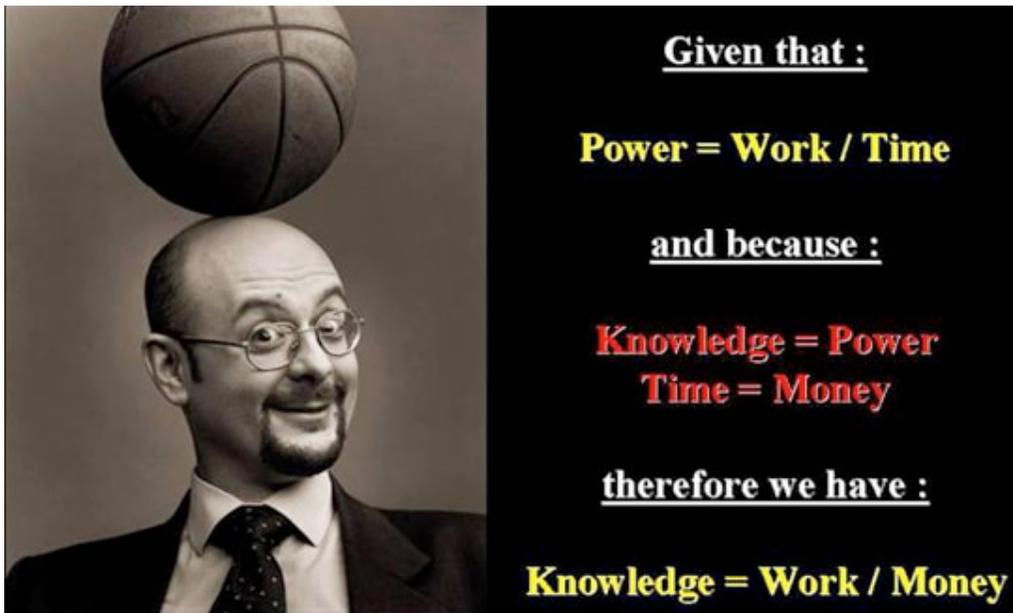
## The Nature Spirits

There are people who have taken this another step and who claim nature is composed of anthropomorphic entities living lives parallel to ours, more integrated into the natural world than we are, and scarcely in communication with us. Shamans claim this as their reality, as do the founders and followers of the famous [Findhorn community](#), located in Northern Scotland.

The more scientifically minded have a host of disparaging names for this point of view—paranormal, superstitious, or pathetic to name a few—and this is too bad. To deprecate nature animism is to confuse mythology with science or, even worse, to deny mythology and believe only in science. To do this is as stupid as the obverse, which was to deny science and accept only mythology, which is the realm of fundamentalism.

To integrate these two seemingly disparate points of view you need only recognize that our reality is based on perception, and what we perceive is not real it is mediated. In addition, although the naive empiricist would claim reality exists separate from us, we can only know what is connected to us.

Everything that we perceive reflects some reality or some consequence of it. It is the ascription of an immediate, direct, one-to-one correspondence between perception and reality that is ridiculous and—I would even go so far as to say—insane. This is a form of insanity shared by many of the world's smartest, analytically-minded people. I believe this is because human beings are, evolutionarily speaking, beta versions of consciousness.



## Reality

David Spangler, now living in Washington state, was a founder of the Findhorn lineage and is in fairly regular communication with nature spirits. He founded the **Lorian Association** which offers courses to develop deeper nature communication that take mindfulness and deep nature learning a step further. I've read some of his 35 books and I have taken these courses but I have not been contacted by the nature devas, or maybe I have.

One of his points is that the level of communication you establish is not up to you, it's up to them and it depends on the relationship. I'm OK with that because I think of everything as a work in progress. I try to communicate but, not knowing what I'm trying to communicate with, I'm satisfied to cast about.

It's fairly clear that you invent what you see. There is little dispute in scientific circles that this is true. This does not mean that what is represented by what you see is unreal, only that your representation of it is. Similarly, we invent words to represent ideas. The ideas are real. The words aren't. The words are signifiers of what's real.

Much of what we perceive are signifiers and this is important. We normally think of signifiers in combination with the objects or ideas that they signify, but for most of the signifiers we create we are not aware of what they signify. Consciousness is an emergent process that is never complete. There are always elements in our consciousness that are beyond our grasp. Most of what we see, feel, and think we don't fully understand. Spirits and apparitions are just a dramatic example of our normal experience of being dimly self-aware.

# WHAT IS SUBTLE PERCEPTION?

## 1. SUBTLE REALMS



### Perception

I have stable, visual pattern-matching algorithms in my brain. I can see faces in almost any random pattern: foliage, my Formica countertop, the patterns in the tiles of my bathroom floor. I can also see faces in the patterns of light and dark when I close my eyes, and I know I cannot focus on any image at the surface of my cornea. These images are in my brain and, because my neural algorithms are stable, I can trace the outlines of these faces. Sometimes they move. I would not be too surprised if they spoke. And if they did, I'd listen or try to read their lips.

Working on my computer in my reclining chair last night, out of the corner of my eye I saw a figure across the room. The shape was fairly stable and I did not look at it because I rather enjoyed the illusion. Pattern-triggering images always correlate with some boundary lines visible in the environment. Oftentimes, when you look directly at the image, your conception is shifted by what is actually there and the perception of a face or figure is lost.

After working for ten minutes I decided to look up, and when I did so I could no longer perceive the figure when I looked in that direction. I was mildly surprised because there was also nothing in that direction that suggested the outline that I had seen. I wrote it off as just another mystery of perception, but the story didn't end there.

### Experience

It was late. I was still on my dawn to dusk waking schedule so I was tired to the point of falling over. I'd also eaten late, a simple meal of potatoes and kale with nothing in it that was particularly stimulating or psychoactive. Yet, while falling asleep I was having a full-blown psychedelic experience. I was so disembodied and discombobulated as to feel almost psychopathic, but since the state was familiar from many past entheogenic ceremonies, I just let it run.

I had strange dreams, too complicated to make much sense of. I even got up to pee in the middle of the night and this trance state was still proceeding with full force, just like an ayahuasca trip. Even my visual perception was amplified, as ayahuasca will do, making appear brilliant the flashing LED of the smoke alarm.

In my dreams I was visiting a couple of islands, attending at least two, complicated ceremonies. I was encountering both positive and negative energies. I was interested in purchasing real estate there but I did not like the spiritual real estate broker. This was pretty much a perfect match for what I'd been doing over the past three weeks.

I cautiously asked one of the allied dream characters whom they would recommend. I could not see the ally, but his voice was that of Walter Grabowski, my New York-Polish auto mechanic who is an enlightened force in his community. He referred me to someone whose name I wrote on the side of my hand in red pen, but there is nothing there now. I woke up feeling normal. Spontaneous experiences of this sort are uncommon. I enjoy them when they occur.



## Learning Secrets

I met many people at the workshop. I rarely like watching myself being listened to so I tried to keep quiet. I hoped to sell copies of my book **The Learning Project** but ended up giving many of them away. The book served as a conversation starter.

Once started, I turned the conversation to the book in progress, Learning Secrets, and I explained that I was looking for aphorisms that were dramatic enough to get a reader's attention, important enough to be worth stating, obscure enough to have escaped general appreciation, and seditious enough to get people to think for

themselves. I got quite a few, and it made me realize that I should ask you for the same.

Here are some of the learning secrets I collected on this ethnographic trip into the culture of deep nature education. I'm presenting these statements in their stenographic form. In the Learning Secrets book each will be accompanied by at least one or two paragraphs of explanation.

- **Faith is temporary.**
- **Hope is a poison.**
- **Love does not prevail.**
- **Spend little on yourself.**
- **Your future is built on trust.**
- **Respect is a force of nature.**
- **A protected life is an angry life.**
- **Stop historical trauma.**
- **Be willing to feel the pain.**
- **Explore secondary emotions.**
- **Learn to trust yourself.**
- **Ask “why?” and “What if?”**
- **Teachers are not mentors.**
- **Decide what's worth learning.**
- **Where curiosity ends, learning stops.**
- **There is a story behind every situation.**
- **When I know your story I lose my judgements.**
- **The person who bullies you is fearful and small.**
- **Aggression is an expression of defeat triggered by fear.**
- **Pay as much attention as possible while remaining as ignorant as possible.**
- **What ceases to be appreciated starts to disappear.**
- **If you are not addressing other people's fear, then you are not addressing your own.**
- **Between reality and expectation lies education. Between expectation and wishing lies disappointment.**
- **Sadness is easy to hold on to. Happiness floats away.**
- **You are limited by what you can perceive.**
- **Debris, decay, and excrement are the foundations of sustainable growth.**
- **Find self-love before anything. You make no progress without it.**
- **Trauma always leads to disconnection.**
- **Every action is an attempt to meet a need.**
- **Make your transitions steps to a bigger self.**
- **Are you willing to face what you're afraid of?**
- **Grief and sorrow are a contraction of the body.**
- **If you stay away from fire you will remain sour, doughty, numb, and raw.**
- **Let the landscape that you create move you through it.**
- **Nothing is more dangerous than denying your children the experience of danger.**
- **Nothing is more important than people.**
- **What would the wisest person you know do in your situation?**
- **Nature connection is about building relationships.**
- **Consider what learning tasks define your life.**
- **Everything that's meaningful is important.**
- **Make progress and don't leave anything behind.**
- **Peace is not the absence of strife.**
- **Remember with all your senses.**

- **Loneliness is a killer.**
- **Think like a tree.**

I will not use all of these; there will be editing, but I'd recognize the value in soliciting ideas from other people. Some of the ideas I've gotten I might have considered too simple. Others, more elaborate than would come naturally to me, but I appreciate the broader scope of ideas that I'm getting by asking people for that one point that has been important to them.



## **A Call For Ideas**

Please send me your suggestions, and please sign up for my email list of Learning Secrets which I'm sending out weekly, and which presents one secret along with a brief explanation. People who sign up for the Learning Secrets email will automatically get a copy of the book once it's published.

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