

## A Greeting of the Spirit

### Into the Garden

This article is about *devotio*. The essence of *devotio* is receptivity to what is reciprocally unfolding, possible, unknown (Buber, 1960, p. 178) in Scott, (2008).

Buber speaks of 'devotio' in terms of man's relationship to God. However, his theories apply equally to the relationships that exist in the relationship between child and child, student and teacher, person and nature. How does one get to that place of courage and willingness to work in closeness and chaos?

I find the garden is a wonderful place to start.

2004. Bonnie leads twenty-eight students into the darkness of the forest, their home-made lanterns like fireflies as they move deeper and deeper, their voices growing more and more quiet until the silence of the students reveals the sound of a leaf falling, a mouse scurrying, a bird warning others, the wind caressing cedar branches, the stream moving over silky mossy stone.

I feel an ache of longing to share in this embrace, to be united and absorbed. A longing like carnal desire, but directed towards earth, water, sky, and returned by the whispers of the trees, the fragrance of the soil; the caresses of the wind, the embrace of water and light (Hammarskjold 77).

2005. A huge patch of blackberry, stinging nettle, elderberry, strung with rock and clay sits on the edge of the forest. Behind it, young vine maple are already beginning to grow on the edge of what was once a deep dark forest full of lush ferns, giant and green, reminding one of what nature can plant and grow all by herself. A neighbor's choice to cut twenty old growth cedar was already changing the forest. The students cleared the new growth of shrubs and weeds. They dug five large holes and filled them with rotting leaves collected from under a maple tree. And then they planted the Sequoia, and in front of them the Golden bamboo. We needed to create shade. We wanted desperately to keep the mystery and magic of cool and dark and ancient.

2006. Charles emerges as the natural leader teaching the students the art of gardening in all its forms as they build the garden bed, laying brick, adding compost, dividing day lilies, pruning the backdrop of Hemlock. Everyone has a role to play. All do something they've never done before, hands in the dirt, hearts in the job.

2007. The fire roars and Vandy reads her letter to her son, asking for forgiveness for not wanting to be pregnant, trying to release herself of the unfounded but ever present guilt that comes to mothers if anything happens to a child. A child born with Asperger's Syndrome. Tears run down her face. Vandy throws the letter into the fire and we all circle our friend, their fellow student, and surround her with understanding and caring.

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Jung tells us that “ritual is recognized as a transformative fire through which an individual moves on the journey from one level of society to another or from one level of awareness to another” (Woodman 31).

2008. Linda shapes the frames for four giant turtles, topiaries inspired by one of the many nature books in our class library. They are placed in a small clearing next to a shed she and I and five other students built out of a discarded cedar fence. The turtles are filled with ivy we found growing next to the fence. We are so proud. We’ve never built a shed before and all on found material. Recycling at its best.

2009. A line of students form a chain gang as they pass river rock from one to the other, finally arriving to the end where it is dropped inside a narrow metal cage. Their voices chant in song. Every fifteen minutes one leaves the chain and a new student enters. The energy, the organization, the joy at creating something so beautiful and so functional reaches the others who do the hard job of attaching the heavy metal walls which will house the river rock and allow another six feet of stone wall emerge before them.

2010. Exhausted from a morning’s hard work, a huge meal, a hot Jacuzzi, students spill their bodies into the porch, the outside seating, the many spots I’ve created with just this in mind, and we talk and play our instruments and read our poems. I sigh. Even in my most positive planning, I had not imagined it could be this good.

For six years, three groups of students have joined me at my cabin in the rain forest of the Pacific Northwest. I’m not sure how it started. Perhaps, just the need for celebration, for ending in a place of beauty and peace. But it quickly grew beyond that. That trek to the garden at the end of the semester became a tradition. And it became an opportunity to document an ethnographic study of how students work cooperatively in what can be called a carnivalesque setting, a setting which is unfamiliar, but is close to nature.

Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counter posed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life (Bathkin 123).

Do students respond and report themselves as experiencing the day in a creative, transformative manner?

Perhaps the garden visitations might have begun naturally out of my own sharing with them those things in my life that mattered most. As a teacher of language arts, I share my own work with my students. Eight years ago, I began to share bits of my gardening book as an example of biography. Each garden room is named for a special person in my life, the plants chosen to represent the essence of the person and our relationship. *Kissing Cousins* - full of plum and pink, sexy and flirtatious. *Meadows and Mothers*, alive with the innocence of daisies and wild flowers and two giant golden weeping willows. *Young Love*, all moss and stone and moving stream in the heart of the garden, amidst old growth Cedar.

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Each garden room forms a chapter of the book. Though my own story dominates the theme, photographs of the garden, descriptions of the plants, paintings by artists visiting the garden, poetry and prose are integrated into each chapter. A chapter entitled, "Into the Garden" opens with:

Come into the garden, Maud,  
For the black bat, night, has flown  
Come into the garden, Maud,  
I am here at the gate alone:  
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,  
And the musk of the rose is blown.

For a breeze of morning moves,  
And the planet of Love is on high,  
Beginning to faint in the light that she loves  
On a bed of daffodil sky. (Tennyson 209)

With the sharing of the book came the student's own desire to write biography, to find art and poetry and prose to accentuate the tone of what they were writing. This was especially helpful for International students who had difficulty with the notion of tone. They weren't sure of what was meant by the tone of the words. But when invited to find a song or a photograph that would accompany their words, the concept became clear and with it their pride and pleasure.

With the sharing of the book came something else: the desire to see the garden. With the desire came individual invitations. And then, a group came for a visit, until finally a whole class of students was welcomed into the garden. It has become more of a ritual than a tradition. The difference? Ritual, to me, holds a special place of magic and opens the door to creativity and wonder. A ritual is more of a spiritual experience. Some might say there is no place for such experiences in a school year. I reply by inviting them to my garden. Such knowledge only comes with actual being, being there and being with. Being with the garden, being with oneself and others.

### Process leads to Product leads to Process

What do they learn? I could say the obvious. They learn to appreciate the beauty of nature. They learn that to have a garden is a huge responsibility, a lot of work. They learn to organize themselves and to work together as a caring group. They learn co-operation and leadership. They learn to communicate in a genuine manner. They experience creativity and inspiration. Yes, all of these. But the opportunity to focus energy on and explore the aspect of the event most important to each individual is what makes it so profound.

In my classroom teaching, I rarely give one assignment to all students. I tend, instead, to build choice into my lessons. The day at the garden allows everyone to find her space, her way to work and play, her way to create and grow. I have no idea what might emerge. But I am certain something will.

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I yearn for my students to experience a notion of curriculum as Daignault explains it, as “a participation” in “continuing creation” (Irwin 4).

Each time we spend the day in the garden, students say it is a day they will never forget. The fame of the day has grown. Parents join students, as do husbands, sons, daughters, friends, brothers, sisters, pets. This last year a Chinese diplomat accompanied her daughter. I was aghast when the petite woman in her sixties, dressed in a gorgeous linen suit, pressed to perfection, even after a two hour drive in a crowded car – how in the world did she do it? – climbed on top of a wood pile and began to throw wood down to the group of students below. They had decided to create a living wall out of the decaying alder. They reconstructed it to hide the ugliness of a barbed wire fence. They added sedum and trailing native plants. They inserted a soaker hose that was attached to a large tank that filled with overspill from the pond.

The group named themselves the “Wall Flowers”.

One very important addition to the garden was my choosing to rescue horses. I also procured some chickens and ducks and doves. Connection to nonhuman creatures heightened the experience and provided even more opportunity for creativity and connectedness. I began to witness what researchers (eg. Walsh, Herzog & Knight) were discovering: that human/nonhuman interactions reduced stress and contributed to feelings of wellness and creativity. Much of the research on human/nonhuman interaction centers on the idea that it is a common human tendency to affiliate with nature. They postulate that this affiliation enhanced the fitness of our ancestors, and so, the brain became attuned to extracting, processing, and evaluating information from the natural environment, including other non-human animals. Research examines two general categories of bonds: those driven by Biophilia (human fascination with life) and those influenced by Biosynergy (mutual enrichment of life) Rose (2001).

I was unaware of the research explaining why we are so attracted to nature and to living non human creatures. However, I was delighted by the increase in a sense of wonder experienced by the students as a result of the interplay with the horses and feathered creatures. Many had never touched a large farm animal, had never held a chicken, had never fed a carrot to a mare.

Many projects began to centre around caring for the animals and birds. The first project that just emerged, using found objects in the garden was the building of a safe and large area for the doves made by adding chicken wire to the outside of a decorative gazebo. Students planted a small tree for the doves to use as a nesting, resting place. They reshaped a small dog house for the doves to occupy on cooler nights. They added an umbrella to a side of the gazebo to protect the doves from rain. I doubt that a prettier, more protective and comfortable environment for the two doves, Hamlet and Ophelia could be found. The students had displayed a deep sense of empathy for the birds, imagining what would make them safe and happy. And in the process, the students themselves felt safe and happy.

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At the end of each class, we produce a book which we bind and which each student receives as a good-bye gift. The garden forms the theme of the book. Photos taken in the garden accompany the contributions made by each group of students.

This book provides a sense of completion and an opportunity for reflection. Because all that teachers do is under such careful scrutiny, it is important that as a university class, we attach a definite meaning and process to our experiential work. “Experience per se does not automatically equate to formal learning...they must be reflected upon to discover their meaning, assess their value, and locate them in one’s existing store of knowledge” (Finn & Finn 40).

I’ve been teaching language arts for a long, long time. When I first started out as a high school teacher in a small prairie town in Saskatchewan at the age of nineteen, I didn’t know a lot about how to teach writing.

I turned to books written by and for English teachers and professors. I happened to fall upon a little book called *A writer teaches writing* by Donald Murray (1969). It was a turning point in how I taught. I turned, literally, to writers. To everything they said about their writing. Guided by Murray’s original seven stages of writing process, I developed what to me are four essential elements of any creative process, including writing (Author & Apps).

The elements are: Discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics and creating a design. In order to produce a product, the creator needs to attend to all of these.

Working in the garden is a creative act that includes the same four elements. Students who have learned the elements in class as they produce their compositions now recognize the similarity and insert this knowledge kinetically as they build walls, create garden art, make a garden bed.

Discovering a subject implies having a focus, a purpose, something one cares about and wants to explore. Why build a garden wall? Is it for privacy or beauty? Is it to hide an ugly barbed wire fence or to provide a place upon which to grow roses? Is the garden bed a focal point, a statement full of passion or of quiet beauty? What has drawn the student to this project over another? What is it they want to explore, discover, learn about themselves?

Next, we consider the audience, those who will visit the garden. Do we want them to meander down a path, or head for a specific destination? What kind of a relationship do we want the gardener or the visitor to have with the garden? These factors must be considered in creating a garden just as it is in writing a story or painting a picture. One group of ten students created a path that curved and slowed the viewer down until a surprise was revealed. To live the experience of sensing an audience, the students brought five other students down the path and photographed their surprise when they turned the corner and saw the surprise awaiting them – a fountain of a young girl pouring water.

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Searching for specifics includes the search for detail, for those specific items and ideas and tones that make clear the purpose and further develop the relationship with the reader or visitor to the garden.

In creating the raised bed, we chose to use old recycled brick. That lent an air of old world sophistication to the project. Our goal was to create an English garden in the forest. Which shrubs and plants to include in the bed? We already had several plants to divide and replant in that area – roses, peonies, day lilies.

The students wanted to add so many of the plants we had seen in photos of English gardens, plants like hydrangea, delphinium, larkspur, hollyhock, Peruvian lily, oriental lilies. We looked at size and shape and color. As we did, we kinesthetically and visually experienced the same search for specifics that a writer seeks in bringing her work to clarity and power.

Design is the fourth essential element and one of the easiest to recognize as part of the process. Design means having the parts in the right place so that the whole feels unified and complete. English speaking students are very familiar with design. A sentence has a subject, a verb, an object. A paragraph moves the work forward in a linear fashion. Plato taught that the argument needs a beginning, a middle and an end. We all work that way very naturally, so it is not a big step to move that thinking to the garden. You plan a path with a starting point, a middle, and an ending point. The path should never lead to nowhere. It can circle around, it can lead to a bench, a special tree, a view of the lake.

A garden bed needs a feeling of completion, of satisfaction for the gardener, the visitor. In creating a design in my garden, I want it to look natural, to keep in tone with the wildness of the tall cedars, the rushing salmon stream. But I also want a clear sense of design.

The work of art may, like a magician's act, pretend to any degree of spontaneity, randomness, or whimsy, so long as the effect of the whole is calculated and unified...In this structural unity lies integrity, and it is integrity which separates art from non-art. (Dillard 28)

### Not control, but tons of planning

Though I have a terrible and not too secret pride in my ability to offer students a wide plethora of opportunities to express themselves and find personal meaning in their work, I do not do so in a haphazard manner. I plan, plan and plan some more. This is as true in the garden as it is in the classroom.

Getting ready for thirty students can feel daunting. I'd recommend starting small and working up to it. Planning the transportation, etc. is the easy part. It's the day that needs to be ready. Having the materials ready to go is important. Anything that might be too heavy or in any way dangerous has to be "pre-done" by experts.

Let me explain using the example snap shot moments I cited at the opening of this article. To prepare for the fire and the "purging" exercise, we all wrote letters of special meaning

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to people we cared about. We wanted the letters to move beyond the “hello, how are you, I am fine”, beyond the “letter to the editor”, beyond the horrible “xeroxed letters” too many of us receive at Xmas time. This group of students decided they wanted to write letters of apology, confessions. They didn’t plan to send the letters. It was about personal forgiveness.

We had studied the archetype of love and the notion of forgiveness as moving on, letting go. We had studied Jung and the shadow that haunted our unconscious selves. And so, we wrote the letters with the intent of throwing them into the fire. We shared the belief that nature would be a good place for healing.

Nature, the Gentlest Mother  
Impatient of no Child  
The feeblest - or the waywardest -  
Her Admonition mild – (...)  
With infinite Affection -  
And infiniter Care -  
Her Golden finger on Her lip,  
Wills Silence - Everywhere. (Dickinson 385-386).

I had prepared for the fire, had ready dry kindling, paper, slow burning logs. I had plenty of seating. I had huge umbrellas in case of rain. I had long hoses attached to faucets in case we needed to quickly put out the fire. I had rakes and no axes. I had warm blankets and old coats.

In order to walk through the forest with lighted candles, you need to make lanterns of metal. Bonnie, an artist as well as a teacher, was the creative genius behind this project. The students fashioned their own lanterns, punching small patterns into the metal. The candles were glued solidly into the base and long handles permitted safe carriage. Students were not given instruction about silence. It was hoped that the power of the journey would speak for itself, and it did.

To build garden beds, you need to have ready brick or stone, compost, plants, lots of tools, wheelbarrows, lots of gardening gloves and shoes, old jackets. Usually at least ten students want to do one project, sometimes all want to do the same one. I usually have several “packages” of items which will enable students to do the work that speaks to them...from planting potatoes for those who have never planted a thing to weeding a wild flower bed for those who don’t know the difference between an aster and a dandelion.

The rock wall project was spectacular and took several weeks of preparation. The stone had to be ordered, the posts cemented into place, the heavy gage metal cut. The idea is to enjoy the experience, do enough work to learn and be challenged and engaged as a group; but never to be overwhelmed and always to be able to finish in about three hours. Always, I want there to be a product at the end of the work and place to take a proud picture and revisit.

What I never tell them is HOW to do something. I have materials ready for several projects and they chose the project and who will lead and how they will proceed. They

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often suggest projects they might want to try ahead of time and they bring the materials they want to experiment with. However and whatever they decide to produce, the consistent thing is a deep feeling of commitment to one another and to the garden.

Proud of their wall, their statue, their tree, my students feel such a feeling of ownership of and commitment to the garden that they revisit year after year. I bought the property as an escape for my writing. Little did I know that it would become a hub of creative activity and friendship. Happily, it feeds my creativity and my writing. So much young life surrounding me fills me with a renewed energy that sees me into my golden years. Happily, it feeds theirs.

### The Feast

An important part of the day is pleasure. I love to cook, as do many of the students, other teachers, parents. We cook up a storm. Barbeques, outdoor ovens, crock pots, all work overtime. The meals that are produced out in that little cabin and its many outdoor spaces are of such variety and quality we just eat and eat and drink and laugh and tell stories we'd never tell in other circumstances. Students bring musical instruments and read their poems and put on skits. Cultures are shared under the canopy of our common culture, mother nature.

The students who visit my garden are mature students, older than high school. But the same thing can be done with all ages. It would take even more planning, more supervision, easier projects. I have a huge privilege in that I own the garden. But there are many gardens who welcome volunteers, many parks where projects can be completed.

The same principles apply. Have a setting where nature can be appreciated and experienced. Plan activities well in advance so that a good variety of materials are ready and several projects can be invented and completed by groups of students. Create plenty of opportunity for pleasure and group bonding and creativity. Record the process to share with others. Record with note taking, audio and video recordings, student work. To sum it up, celebrate respectful and joyful relationships with nature and one another and within themselves.

The summer course (485) opened a door for me to discover myself as a person and my confidence in myself began to re-charge. The truths that I discovered about myself wouldn't allow me to ever go back to the way it was. I learned new things about myself and different opportunities presented themselves in a way that excites me, in a way I've never experienced before. My love of reading and writing was re-ignited. I wake up in the morning now with a weight somehow lifted off of my chest and I can enjoy my relationships with people, the sunshine, the world, and I see my dealings with students and colleagues in a different light.

(Renee Wishlove, student commentary about 485 for another class 3 months after our class ended, with permission)

### A Move Away from Prescription

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The push toward centralization and control, particularly after the adoption of Goals 2000 and “No child left behind” legislation which mandated that only scientifically proven methods be used, has led to a focus on direct instruction where teachers follow a scripted curriculum and prescribed instructional practices (Finn & Finn 97). This is particularly true in poor, working-class districts where students may have had little opportunity to visit or work in a garden.

The “go green” movement may provide a healthy and legitimate antidote to the dehumanizing affect of state control on educational choices and give teachers a sense of freedom and purpose outside the classroom. Moreover, in this new awareness of the life threatening manner in which we have treated our planet, no one feels certain of what to do. Methods cannot be dictated. Science does not have the answer. We must deal with the spirit and our attitude towards our planet, before we can begin to find solutions that the population is willing to follow. We need a unity of mind and body and spirit, something we have lost. What then, is the path to this very ancient way of being?

The trips to the garden are, like the garden itself, organically developed. This is true even to the point of which comes first - the language arts assignment or the trip to the garden? Traditionally, teachers give an arts based assignment and have students use nature as a source of inspiration. That is not what happens in our adventures. It grows both ways. It grows all ways. Sometimes the classroom practice will play itself out in the garden. Sometimes the garden inspires a new project.

The whole process grows out of occasion. We know the garden is there and we will be having a day in the garden. We avoid such personally irrelevant writing tasks as “go into the forest and write a poem using all the senses.” Instead, I want the students to experience the garden and explore and discover in a bigger more natural way, consistent with the way nature reveals herself to us.

There is a growing trend to include gardening programs in schools to teach students to embrace better eating habits. Some are also addressing the effectiveness of gardens as leading to “a strong sense of belonging among students who were formerly dislodged from their birthplaces, together with providing opportunities for learning English language and forming connections to the local environment” (Cutter-Mackenzie, p.122).

It is encouraging that gardens are becoming a part of many standard curriculums. It is encouraging that they are not being used as “living textbooks”, but as life itself. In order for us to learn from gardens, from nature, from life, we need to pay close attention to it in a way which is real and present.

“We need to inhabit stories that encourage us to pay close attention, we need stories that will encourage us toward acts of the imagination that in turn will drive us to the acts of empathy, for each other and the world” (Kittredge p.6).

We avoid any artificially imposed units on nature or trees or conservation. Instead, these topics emerge out of all of the work, with a growing awareness and appreciation.

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How about the language arts learning? Is the work more about writing? Reading? Creativity? Relationship building? Cooperative learning? Responsibility? Celebration? Appreciation? Awareness? Transformation? Joy? At different times, for different people, one of these dominates. For the student who has never been out of the city, raised in the proverbial concrete jungle, awareness dominates. For the student who is on a path of transformation, creativity surfaces. For the student crying for a sense of power, responsibility rules. For the student who finally understands the concept of focal point or conclusion, of structure, it is a meaningful review of writing process. For the quiet student, a moment alone with a wild trillium discovered behind a rotting log is magical and often results in a flow of poetry.

For my daughter, Laura  
Such strange sensations happened once in me  
In springtime when you cartwheeled 'neath my cage  
Of ribs. With bumps and heaves like in a rage  
And all my heart was longing just to see  
A hint of who you'd be, what mystery  
You'd bring to me. But wond'ring at what stage  
You'd fly from us, a songbird from a cage,  
Soar distant paths, down mountainside and scree.  
This summer night I think of you, my child,  
Who danced and sang, played flute and made us proud  
Was Puck, Fiona, mischievous, loving, true  
Yet needs must break with us and seek the wild  
Tempestuous reefs with lands and peoples loud  
Who call you forth to find the fullest you (Diane Stevens 8).

The poet, Keats, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey in 1818, describes things ethereal as being real, semi-real or no things. Semi-real things “require a greeting of the Spirit to make them whole”. He believed in bringing one to nature in whatever form as a way to create this “greeting of the spirit” – as if the psyche recognizes something of itself in the matter of nature.

Woodman adds the Jungian interpretation to Keats' romantic pantheism and suggests that the unconscious responds to nature by becoming the “perceived subject”. She suggests there is some sense of reciprocity in which conscious and unconscious, mind and matter, join to produce a third. That third is the meeting of mind and body and spirit bringing with it an act of joyous recognition (Woodman 57).

This notion of close communion with nature has been discussed in a most interesting manner by Buber in his I/Thou philosophy. He contends that you can “turn to” the other in a dialogic manner and your awareness of the other, be it human, anima, plant, or even stone, creates a “partner in a living event” (Buber, 1965, 74). Frank Scott (1981) writes, in “Windfall”:

This leaf, held like the heartache in my hand,...  
This small complete and perfect thing...  
This is a leaf I talk to as a lover

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And lay down gently now my poem is over (144).

“What is also significant is that the epistemic stance of *devotio* and the resultant awareness and turning are brought on by a conscious act of will; Buber here refers to entering into relation as an act and as work” (Scott 14).

I have come to believe, observing my students in the garden over the years, recording their behaviors, examining their written statements and creative products, that this joyous recognition is the greatest benefit of being there. It is a learning that produces a sense of agency and a wisdom not found in books alone.

I feel this is especially important in this troubled time where ‘progress’ has threatened the quality of life on our planet and crowded city living has left many young people experiencing “‘environmental generational amnesia.’” Technology in the form of robot animals and simulated nature is trying to replace what we are losing. “The concern is that, by adapting gradually to the loss of actual nature and to the increase of technological nature, humans will lower the baseline across generations for what counts as a full measure of the human experience and of human flourishing” (Kahn, Severson, Ruckert 37).

Northrop Frye speaks to this bringing together of mind and body and spirit in his lectures on the bible. “The figure of wisdom in the Bible suggests the little girl with the skipping rope, and when Jesus places a child in the middle of the disciples, it is not as a symbol of uncritical intelligence, but as a symbol of genuine wisdom, where the absorption has gone to the point of complete spontaneity. There are many Eastern religions...that stress the recovery of the child’s spontaneity, that complete integrity of the rhythm of thinking and doing as the goal of what they are teaching” (550).

In today’s world of isolation and angst, of testing as reform, not for reform, (Meier 120), of bureaucratic control and diminished professionalism associated with unreasonable accountability, with too much materialism and competition, we need to heed these words on what it means to be truly wise. I would hasten to add, what it means to be truly human.

A wise teacher may just be one who believes there is enough time in the school year to watch a child skipping in the garden and creates opportunities for her students to partake in an act of joyous recognition.

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