8 Place Making

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My academic career has developed through a continuing effort to balance family and work, the personal and professional. Finding that balance is both difficult and joyful. My first sabbatical was shaped by the birth of twin grandchildren. In an earlier chapter in this series, I noted that “although they bring wonder and wisdom, grandchildren are not part of one’s curriculum vitae” (Block, 2017, p. 41). The wonder of the tiny sister and brother also produced some difficulty in time management for research and writing. My research on place-based learning was supported and reduced by the experience of living and learning with the twins. I sought a place to focus my research and found it in Navdanya, an organic farm and learning centre in northern India. There, place-based learning developed into an understanding of “place making,” how we impact places. That understanding led to a community-based reconciliation project, the Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest, where the twins planted fingerling spruce when they were four.

Breathing Space and Births

After ten years in the academy, I was fortunate enough to be granted a study leave, a breathing space, from July to January. For part of that leave, I positioned myself for place-based learning in a far-from-local place. I travelled from Winnipeg, Canada, to...
Navdanya, an agroecology and biodiversity conservation centre, in Ramgarh, India. As well as being an organic farm, Navdanya is the site of Bija Vidyapeeth, or Earth University, which offers a variety of courses on ecology (see https://www.navdanya.org). For ten days, I was a resident student taking a course, Gandhi, Globalization and Earth Democracy. Navdanya was founded in 1994 by Vandana Shiva, a physicist, feminist, and environmental activist whose family owned land in northern India. Shiva had been working on seed saving since the late 1980s. Navdanya means “nine seeds” (symbolizing protection of biological and cultural diversity) and “new gift.” Navdanya was a gift of learning, which I still value years later.

The decision to travel to Navdanya for the course was complicated by the birth of the twins just six weeks prior to my study leave (the University of Winnipeg’s term for sabbatical). When my daughter was seven months pregnant, she left her career, her friends, and her home in a large American city, where she had lived and worked for almost ten years. In her late thirties, having been independent and self-supporting since age twenty-one, she moved into our home in Winnipeg, the city where she had grown up, focused on bringing the twins as close to term as possible. My partner of fifteen years, her stepfather, and I had a large house that could accommodate her and the twins without crowding. Emotionally we also had room for her, the babies, and a nanny—although it was a stretch.

I earned my PhD at the University of North Dakota and, after term positions there and at the University of Manitoba, was hired into a tenure-track position at the University of Winnipeg. After three years, I was entitled to apply for a half year of study leave. The study-leave committee accepted my application and the leave was scheduled from July 1 to December 31. By the time the twins were born, I had finished teaching and had most of my marking completed for the May grades deadline. In the month of May, my primary focus was on the twins and their mother. I submitted my grades and kept up with email but did no research or writing. It will come as no surprise that June was much the same.

Our first grandchild had been born two years earlier in Toronto, with a second arriving two months later in Montréal. I had spent most of that winter break in Montréal helping the new parents with the baby. With the twins it was different from the other
grandchildren, I was not simply helping; I was co-parenting. Their mother and I had agreed to that term. However, I was the working co-parent and my partner was also working full time. My daughter hired a part-time nanny who came in daily and did some cooking and light housework for the family as well. There had been a night nanny for the first three weeks. During evenings all three of us were on call—rocking, singing, walking, and talking the babies to sleep. Nights were also busy. Our community of friends and relatives was very supportive. Despite that help, it was nonetheless intense. Without the structure of teaching in September, I had to find time and space to work, to research, and to write.

Research

In my faculty, one’s first study leave usually comes after earning tenure. However, I had negotiated with the associate dean to take my study leave before tenure to improve my prospects by having time and space to write. I had anticipated having eight months to deepen my research agenda, and time to write without interruptions. My research encompassed teacher education, cultural sustainability, school gardens, and place-based learning, all emerging from my lived experience. Life experience supports learning, but life circumstances can obstruct the writing process. At the time of my application, I did not know I would be living with and caring for twin grandchildren and their mother during my study leave. It was a context that required an intricate balancing act.

My academic career has evolved through a series of similar balancing acts, and from integrating the personal and professional. My research emerged from problematizing my teaching and from an individual commitment to sustainability. In my four years at the University of Winnipeg, I had presented and published papers on teacher education and on internationally educated teachers and had begun a school gardening project. I was collaborating with Dr. Laura Sims, a colleague at Université de Saint-Boniface, on a paper on teacher education and sustainability. It was with her that I first discussed going to study and work at Navdanya. I was concerned it might not be seen as legitimate research. Laura told me to go for it and learn from it. After some soul searching, I applied to Navdanya, was accepted for the course, and bought
the plane tickets. The course description as posted in 2014 on the Navdanya website read:

Gandhi, Globalization and Earth Democracy
November 21st – 30th, 2014
Faculty: Sri Satish Kumar, Venerable Samdhong Rimpoche, Dr. Madhu Suri Prakash and Dr. Vandana Shiva, Arun Gandhi

We live in the midst of multiple crises—ecological, economic, social, political. The current economic model has pushed most ecosystems to the verge of collapse. Species are disappearing, and climate catastrophe is overtaking people’s lives from the Himalaya to the Rockies, from the Bay of Bengal to the Philippines.

Not only are ecosystems collapsing, economies are collapsing. People are suffering from a delusion in which it is believed that this economic downturn is only a small hiccup and all will be back to business as usual. This is not the case; we are at a turning point of a crisis. A crisis is also an opportunity and during this course we will discuss how this crisis can be turned into an opportunity. The course is not only about information and knowledge but also complemented with experience, by being on the Navdanya Biodiversity Conservation Farm and participating by doing.

Globalization has also led to the unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a few global corporations. The course explores the relevance of the four Gandhian principles of swaraj (self-governance), swadeshi (local production), sarvodaya (well-being of all) and satyagraha (non-violent civil disobedience based on the force of truth) to create and defend people’s economic and political freedom.

Examining the political context of sustainability was important to me, as was consideration of how to take action. I believed the course at Navdanya could intensify this learning.

In the interim, from August until my departure in November, I spent full days on the Winnipeg campus, away from the babies and continuing my research and writing. I would arrive home as the nanny was leaving and be kept busy with the twins. The house would be covered in baby equipment and there would often be
visitors. My partner’s son, his wife, and their dogs stayed with us for a couple weeks in October, adding their energy to the home. We did not always recognize home as the place it had been—it was altered and overtaken by kids, grandkids, and dogs. Home was a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The babies were new, but caring for babies was familiar. Living with my daughter had happened before, but now it was different:

No place is to be learned like a textbook or a course in a school. And then turned away from forever on the assumption one’s knowledge is complete. What is to be known about it is without limit, and is endlessly changing. Knowing is therefore like breathing; it can happen, it stays real, only on the condition that it continues to happen. (Berry, 1991, p. 75)

Change was the fabric of my life during my study leave. Balancing attention to my research with caring for the twins was ongoing. The babies’ needs were changing; our home was changing to meet those needs, and my research direction was changing as I prepared for Navdanya. I was concentrating on place-based learning.

**Place-Based Learning**

Place-based learning has become part of my practice and grounds my pedagogy as a teacher educator. I examine how place is central to the educational process; this learning begins within the local, the places we inhabit. Place-based learning connects us to places, spaces, sites, environments, ecosystems; none of which are empty of human intervention, of the learner. The learner is, in turn, situated and positioned by those places and by the cultures that emerge within them (Chawla, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2008). Constructing a pedagogical space (Stevenson, 2008) within which it becomes possible and necessary to act with intention and address socio-environmental issues is inherent in place-based learning.

Place-based learning is an orientation, not a strategy. It orients us to a way of knowing that embraces the changeable, the emergent (Kentel & Karrow, 2010; McKenzie, 2004), and the possibility of transformation. For a teacher, it is a repositioning, from one who produces and delivers knowledge to one who facilitates knowing (Anderson et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2008; Freire, 2005). Familiar and
unfamiliar places are both sources of learning. The teacher must adjust the mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar to the teaching and learning context.

The focus on place-based learning is infused in the social-studies-methods courses I teach. I emphasize that place-based learning is embodied (Kimmerer, 2013) and requires action (Chawla, 2007; Hampton, 1993). Students’ agentic potentials can be realized through interaction with the place, its biotic and abiotic components. These interactions, in turn, can shape the place they are experiencing. Studying the particulars of place involves understanding systems and thinking systemically (Laszlo & Clark, 1972; von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Place-based learning moves through past, present, and future. In connecting to a place, students discover its history and its potential, and thus the potential to act for change. Teaching respect of place and how to live within ecological limits (Shiva, 2016; Suzuki & Boyd, 2009) necessitates addressing the inequities in our places, both local and global. Thus place-based learning encompasses place making—“from the perspective of democratic education, schools must provide opportunities for students to participate meaningfully in the process of place making, that is, in the process of shaping what our places will become” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 627). Place shaping or making is collaborative, grounded, and enacted in both teaching and community activities. Place making requires more than studying a place; it requires intentional interaction with the place and its living and non-living components, human and other than human. This intentional interaction involves taking one’s place within a place and taking it in relationship. Place-based learning can be transformed to place making when it becomes possible and necessary to act with intention to address socio-environmental issues (Gruenewald, 2003; Stevenson, 2008). By teaching through the interactions of persons, places, and the relationship to the land, we may understand the agentic potential to act collaboratively for change in classrooms, schools, or communities.

Navdanya: Learning Contextually

Navdanya is a small organic farm that serves as a model to local farmers in the northern state of Uttarakhand (formerly Uttaranchal) at the foothills of the Himalayas. Practices at Navdanya are also shared with small farms elsewhere in India. The farm also houses
Bija Vidyapeeth, which offers courses and workshops related to seed saving, organic farming, and paradigm shifts. The course I studied was taught by Dr. Vandana Shiva, Satish Kumar, and the Venerable Samdhong Rinpoche over a ten-day residence.

The formal course was lecture based, with Kumar, Shiva, and Rinpoche speaking sequentially a few days each. Shiva and Rinpoche also taught together. Our teachers were learned scholars and activists, well known in ecological movements. There was time for questions and discussion after the lectures. During the day we met outside; in the evenings we met in a hall. We were literally sitting at the feet of the master for much of our course work. That traditional modality was both connected and in counterpoint to the place we inhabited. Studying with a guru is a tradition in India. Within that study there is the possibility of transformative learning. The Navdanya experience has been characterized as transformative: “One reason I created this space was for cultural transformation” (Vandana Shiva, lecture, November 28, 2014). In counterpoint to the traditional lecture format was the collaborative and intergenerational learning process at Navdanya.

The bijaks (literally “the sower of seeds”) were an example of how learning at Navdanya encompassed the traditional, the modern, and the postmodern. They were interns—mostly young adults, late teens to late thirties, from Europe, the Americas, and Asia—who had found their way to Navdanya with an intention to live the change. In contrast to students like me, the bijaks were at Navdanya for extended time periods. They stayed in dorms, worked and played on the farm, pursued their individual studies, and took courses. Those I studied and worked with during my stay were examining and advocating for a range of issues, from organic gardening and farming to peace studies, community organizing, and economics. The direction of their work was shaped by their communal life. There was ongoing discussion and debate, very different from the formal classes, yet an extension of them. At Navdanya, the bijaks were producing knowledge in relation to specific projects in their local settings. Moreover, they were exchanging knowledge among each other, their teachers, staff, and students on the farm, and people in the surrounding villages. One evening of the course students and bijaks presented their individual research.

This collaborative process was also intergenerational. Teachers, students, and bijaks ranged in age from fifteen to eighty. All benefited
from the different experiences and the different historical periods lived through. In one presentation, a student, otherwise a professor of education, referenced her experiences as a student and teacher in the seventies, connecting the environmental movement of then to the present. This student’s cross-cultural experiences also enriched the conversation, as did the student studying peacemaking in Israel-Palestine. Those intergenerational and cross-cultural experiences were woven through the ongoing dialogue during the course.

The experience at Navdanya was of place-based learning. Had I been taught by the same three teachers in another location, I would have learned differently. Their teachings resonated with the place and context they taught in, learning outside in a garden, learning in collaboration, cross-cultural learning, intergenerational learning, and learning bracketed by service, *swadeshi* (self-reliance through working with one’s hands). The Navdanya experience rooted my focus on ecology and sustainability, and from those roots grew an understanding of place making. I experienced the balancing of diverse perspectives produced by intentional use of place-based, collaborative intergenerational learning in counterpoint to traditional lectures. Working in place, *swadeshi*, is directly experienced at Navdanya and is integrated into the learning process. Grounded in this experience, I began a consideration of how the design and practice of Navdanya could inform place-based teaching and learning in schools and in my teacher-education courses.

Another traditional aspect of the teaching and learning at Navdanya was the absence of personality or individualism. As students, we were able to access what was offered by our teachers and the place and work with it. The milieu was one wherein the group attended to the teaching. There was no tailoring of instruction to our personal needs, nor were we invited to “share our thoughts and feelings” on a regular basis. It was energizing to connect to the teaching and work collaboratively, with one’s personal agenda withheld for the interim. The teaching could become a place from which to build individual or collective inquiry (Whyte et al., 2016).

At Navdanya, place-based learning is both local and more than local. It is extended through time and space as *bijaks* and students in the courses maintain relationships with one another when they return to their home countries and continue to generate cultures of sustainability. These aspects of Navdanya construct a culture of sustainability: a community of shared work and shared values, respect
for differences, respect for place, living and working in interaction with animals and vegetation, an ecological perspective. Navdanya was designed to facilitate a specific kind of learning, particular to its mission and its place, and yet transformable to other places. Similarly, place-based learning is embedded in the familiar to expand into the unfamiliar (Chawla, 2007; Kimmerer, 2013).

As Shiva explained (lecture, November 28, 2014), we need allies in changing the paradigm, in transforming a mechanistic worldview to an understanding of the web of life and the relationships that shape it. At Navdanya, the relationships between people and place are foregrounded. Place making emerges from these relationships.

My position at Navdanya encompassed both student and teacher, both foreigner and fellow, and within that merging of relationships transformative learning became possible. What was transformative came from both the familiar and the unfamiliar, from the place and from within. Authorizing time for study is itself a powerful choice and experience. Having Navdanya as a place to study, reflect, and regenerate placed me within a tradition and among like-minded people. The conversations that emerged from the intersection of place and people affirmed some of my convictions and unsettled some of my assumptions.

**Positioning Oneself and Perspectives**

How does one construct possibilities for exploratory dialogue in familiar places? It begins by teaching through the interactions of persons and places and the relationship of culture and place: “the land shows the bruises of an abusive relationship. It’s not just the land that is broken; but more importantly, our relationship with land” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 9). Indigenous perspectives on place, on land, and on those relationships offer alternatives to the subject/object dichotomy of scientific materialism. Our teachers at Navdanya also proposed alternatives to that dichotomy. Kumar (lecture, November 24, 2014) explained that caring is not attachment; rather, caring is engaged action, that love is freedom from attachment and engagement is a participatory relationship, not an ownership. The emphasis on relationship was both familiar and unfamiliar for me. Differences in Indigenous, Asian, and Western perspectives are not incompatible. Cultural hybridity includes many perspectives and their influence on each other (Donald, 2009; Simon, 2013).
My position at Navdanya also included my role as grandmother, Baba. Every evening after dinner, I would take my iPad to the best WiFi zone and FaceTime with the twins, who were six months old, their mother, and my partner. Those relationships were cherished; part of my learning at Navdanya was holding onto and letting go of those relationships simultaneously. My understanding of how to connect, how to relate with generosity rather than possessiveness, has deepened over time and from learning from Indigenous perspectives as I worked with Indigenous activists in Winnipeg on the Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest, a reconciliation project. Understanding we are all related, and trusting relationships, allows for letting go.

My first journey to India was in 1973, when I was twenty-one. I was hired to teach at a school in Ootacamund (now Udhagamandalam), Tamil Nadu, in southern India. I had joked that the only way I could leave my parents’ home was to go all the way to India. Certainly, I am a person for whom relationships are a priority. Leaving my role as co-parent/Baba for three weeks in India and Sri Lanka was not an easy decision. Yet my role as a researcher was also a priority. Study leave is a privilege that comes only every several years, and I wanted to utilize the time to gather new understandings. I believed Navdanya would nourish new ways of thinking and teaching about sustainability, and it did.

Understanding one’s relationships as part of the web of life (Simpson, 2014; Kimmerer, 2013) is central to Indigenous teachings. These teachings, and Indigenous history and cultures, have been missing or misrepresented in Canadian social studies and science curricula (Borden & Wiseman, 2016; Greenwood, 2009; Scully 2012). Like many other teacher educators (Tupper, 2011; Sims, 2015), the investigations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had incited me to rethink how I taught Indigenous perspectives. I wanted to do better. During my research on Indigenous history, I initiated the community-based project Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest. This place-making project was produced in part through what I had learned in Navdanya. It included swadeshi, and is intended for transformative learning.

Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest and Place Making

The Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest is a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action (Canada, 2015). It is
a place for learning and healing located within St. John's Park in the North End of Winnipeg. This park is built on the site of the landing of the Scots Selkirk settlers. It was the meeting place for those settlers and Indigenous people. Many statues and memorials to settler history and war heroes were installed, but there was no recognition of Indigenous history or peoples. Kapabamayak Achaak (Ojibway; “Wandering Spirit”) rectifies this omission. It is a living memorial to Indigenous children lost to or affected by the residential school system. It provides a culturally specific urban greenspace for the community, for ceremony or simple reflection. The architect, Ryan Epp, describes Kapabamayak Achaak as a spiritual landscape, built to remind us all that Mother Earth and her inhabitants are sacred.

It is an outdoor learning space where place-based learning and intergenerational learning connect students to their histories, and cultivates citizenship and sustainability; where place making becomes possible. There is a teaching circle of oak logs around a granite medicine wheel, with additional stone seating. Métis-Anishinaabé artist Natalie Rostad-Desjarlais painted designs with animal and human figures on boulders in the four directions. Trees and shrubs were planted. In the next phase of construction there will be a garden of medicinal plants adjacent to the circle.

Visits to the site are not intended to be singular experiences. Teachers are encouraged to plan a series of visits, which allow students to see changes in the environment and build relationships with the place. A living curriculum is being constructed with teachers and students. Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest curriculum emerges from our focus on sustainability and thus is designed for transformational learning: “All education is environmental education. By what is included or excluded, students are taught that they are part of or apart from the natural world” (Orr, 2004).

Kapabamayak Achaak is a collaborative partnership between public school, post-secondary educators, and community members, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who formed the Healing Forest planning group, with the support of Cathedral Church of St. John the Evangelist, located adjacent to St. John’s Park. My role was lead of the planning group, which recently incorporated as a non-profit agency. Kapabamayak Achaak has received private donations from community members and has received grants from the University of Winnipeg, the Province of Manitoba, the City of Winnipeg, the United Way, and the Winnipeg Foundation. These grants have been
directed to constructing the site within St. John’s Park, and for the learning taking place there. One example of an education project is the commemoration of Orange Shirt Day, which remembers survivors of residential schools through the story of Phyllis Webstad, who was stripped of the new orange shirt she wore the first day at her residential school. On site, the schoolchildren hear stories from Indigenous Elders or survivors of the residential schools. They also explore the site and the park it is situated in.

Collaborating on the construction and the curriculum development of Kapabamayak Achaak is compelling place making. Community engagement through the project has connected me to current activism and to tradition in parts of Indigenous communities in Winnipeg. Working with Indigenous community activists and studying Indigenous worldviews foregrounded how relationships and relationship building are valuable for learning. This influences how I work with partners in the Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest. My concerns about myself, a non-Indigenous person, as “lead” of the project were ameliorated. This work directed me to reconsider how I build relationships within my teacher-education practice. I also reconsidered my relationship to the land and how that infused my living and learning.

I grew up in a garden and keep that tradition for my children and grandchildren. We observe growth, climb, and talk to trees; study insect life and feed the birds. As a young adult I moved back to the land; as an older woman I understand the land is everywhere. Working on the Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest has awakened my awareness of sacred spaces. Bringing students into that space, I witness their connection to the other than human world, to the land. Kapabamayak Achaak, akin to Navdanya, can become a place for transformative learning, where place making is integrated with the learning and where the past informs the future. My experiences at Navdanya shaped my understanding of how place-based learning is transformed to place making. I attempt to enact this understanding in teaching and in community-based research in Kapabamayak Achaak.

Studying in Navdanya was an honour and a gift. Leaving Navdanya was easier than leaving the babies had been. In mid-December I returned to Winnipeg, having completed the course and after meeting my partner in Sri Lanka for ten days. In Jaffna, Sri Lanka, we revisited his past as a student there in the 1970s, and imagined a possible future of wintering and volunteering in the island country. Winnipeg was cold in December and there were no
flowers blooming, except the roses in the babies’ cheeks as we walked with them in the snow. In January my study leave was over; the twins were sitting up and teaching recommenced—with a promise to build on what I had learned in Navdanya and a commitment to place making and relationships. Enacting that commitment in my teaching is an incomplete and continuing task, as is making places for learning. The Kapabamayak Achaak Healing Forest is a place where relationships are made.

References


