

2009

My husband and I had an 18month old daughter, and another on the way. We felt a stirring inside- a whisper of 'inner knowing' that our children were born to be part of something greater than our family, greater than themselves. We began to look for this 'something bigger' within education. After visiting several area schools, Jon and I recognized there is a missing element in the programs. There seems to be a 'vacuum' in the learning experience, but at that time, I didn't have enough access to nomenclature and educational wisdom to name it, or qualify it. I just knew that there was something incomplete in each of the programs I visited, and that my intuitive knowing felt they were not a match for my daughters.

I contacted a Montessori program in Mills River to schedule a visit. The campus was a rented space within the building and acreage of the Unity Church. There were creeks, trees, and 25 acres to explore. This felt like it could work. However, the school there was falling apart, and the teachers and staff were less than stable. But there was a stability present in the greater environment. At the time I didn't recognize that this would be a defining moment of awareness- that the PLACE provides the stability, and that the people's relationships with PLACE complete the picture. Eva and Bea attended the Montessori program at the church for a half year. It went bankrupt. At that point, I wanted them to continue their learning in that environment, but there was no option to do so. We'd made the acquaintance of two parents there, Suelin Lilly and Jojo Yonce. Their daughter Skylar had befriended our daughter Eva. They also wanted to see Skylar's learning continue in that location, or at least in the same nature-based framework, so we began to discuss the idea of launching a program ourselves.

I began to feel a vision for children's learning emerging within me, and a growing impulse that I would be part of creating a new kind of educational environment. How would I do this? I had no degree or qualifications. I wrote about this impulse, and described, to the best of my ability at that time, what it would look like. Systems Thinking, Waldorf, Montessori, Nature Connection...all were woven into the vision. I also saw that adults, children, and elders would be an essential part of the learning experience, and that the learning would be part of life, part of the 'ordinary-ness' and 'extraordinary-ness' that are part of living a life on Earth. I envisioned something like Esalen, or Omega, with Waldorf and Montessori education for the children. All of these existing ideas and philosophies were 'almost it', but not quite...

I decided to share what I'd written around the vision with my mother in law, Cora, during a visit to WV. When I looked up from reading, she was moved to tears, and said 'this is bigger than you, and you will need help....you wrote this? And you have no degree?'....her acknowledgement was witnessed by the entire family- my husband, sister in law, father in law. Cora was a bit of a Chinese matriarch, and her children and family followed her lead with most everything. She was also the only care provider for my father in law, Romeo, who had suffered a stroke in 1996 and was entirely paralyzed on the right side.

The day after this 'reading', Cora woke up, and went out pick blackberries. During her stroll, she found two tortoises, brought them back to the house, and put them in a small box for safekeeping, to show her granddaughters. Later that morning, she died, tragically, unexpectedly, mysteriously. She was found sitting next to an enormous puddle of blood- but she didn't have a single spot of blood on her clothing or body. It was a horrible shock. Later in the day of her passing, we discovered the two tortoises that she'd left behind. One was a bit larger/older, one a bit smaller/younger- just like Eva and Beatrice. There was something so poignant in this, a deep symbolic communication. Turtles are important symbols of longevity in Chinese culture.

The following week, with the blessings of the family, my father in law gave me a check for 10,000, to begin the work of creating a school. Jonathan and I reconnected with Suelin Lilly and Jojo Yonce, from the defunct Montessori school, and we sought their support in forming this new entity. One of the teachers from the former school told me about another teacher I might want to contact. This teacher was Laura Coleman. I also reached out to David Martin, whom I knew through other nature education and summer camp connections. I hired both of them, and retained one of the teachers from the former school. Montessori Learning Community was born. It had a co-operative structure, and a core board consisting of myself, Jonathan, Suelin, and Jojo. We endeavored to have fun while forming the program,

and enjoyed most every minute of it. Our board meetings were filled with laughter, camaraderie, and stories of our interactions with the children.

2010

While MLC was a courageous and surprisingly successful pilot program (full enrollment was achieved within 30 days!), it became clear there was something deeper to come. Although we'd formed healthy relationships with the church that hosted us, and learned to love and appreciate the land, the church had plans to develop portions of the wildness that meant so much to the children, and there was a growing divide in the church congregation about the benefits/detriments of hosting the program.

During this time, we began to see that the faculty, parent, and children's authentic learning was deeply dependent on their relationships with the land- our PLACE needed to be stable, consistent, secure. My husband Jonathan and I also simultaneously began to see that we needed to move my handicapped father in law to NC to provide care for him, and that we needed to build a home that would support his physical limitations, while providing a healthy balance of privacy and family interaction. The totality of learning-as-living was beginning to emerge through the inherent circumstances of our family needs, that seemed to be co-evolving alongside the needs of the school. The idea of inhabiting the place where the learning was occurring, of creating a Sanctuary for life-as-learning, became part of me in a way that is difficult to speak to. It became who I was, this vision, dream, aspiration.

At that time our family lived in a beautiful woodland 'neighborhood' near Pisgah National Forest, called Sleepy Gap Acres, and we contemplated the possibility of moving programs there. We had a neighbor and friend there, Rebecca Vann, who had hosted summer camps on her acreage, with David Martin acting as assistant. I'd known Rebecca for many years, but didn't know of her intimate knowledge of the plant kingdom till my children attended her camp that summer. It seemed for a moment that there was promise in the possibility of collaborating with her, David and others in Sleepy Gap Acres, to dive deeper into our community's relationships with the land where we resided, and build the programs I'd envisioned from these relationships.

However, there were topographic and other limitations at Sleepy Gap, and David, Suelin, Jojo and others suggested we might begin an exploration of shifting the program to another place, and search for land that could provide the stability and spacial elements we felt were essential. A friend of mine suggested that I look at a piece of land in Candler. I refused, thinking the price made it an impossibility. But, in spite of this, I drove out to the land at 111 Ballard Cove one day....

The moment I entered the gravel road into the Sanctuary, I knew I'd found home. Not just a home for me and my extended family, but a Home for All- the children's programs, the adult programs, and a sacred, temporal context for the deeper spiritual impulses that had yet to emerge. And yet, in that very moment, I immediately began to grieve the loss of it, because I also knew there was no provision that would allow me (or any of the others involved) to live there, or to steward the other aspects of what was coming forth. An extraordinary amount of money would be required. Who would provide this? How could I even begin to ask for it? I was given an answer: 'just listen deeply'. I sat in the bold creek that flowed from the mountain through the landscape. I heard the water whisper the words 'marry me'. I began repeating this quietly to myself as I played in the water, lifted stones, held salamanders. I answered myself and the water... 'I will. and I will never leave you'.

I visited the land several times per week. I would often wake up in the middle of the night, and slip quietly away, driving the 30 minute trip with the burning anticipation one feels when waiting to meet a new love. I would dream about the land, take it with me everywhere. I brought rocks, spring water, flowers, into my home and kept them next to my bed at night, or under my pillow. I yearned for it perpetually. Some of others (Jonathan, David, Rebecca, Suelin, Laura...) also began to develop their own intimate explorations and their own stories of communion- but those will best be retold by those individuals.

During my visits, I began to recognize that there were places that called forth certain awarenesses, welcomed certain activities, 'asked' for different kinds of interactions. It became clear to me, and everyone, that the children's learning would take place on the 90 acre parcel where TLV currently resides, and that the 'bald' or gate of welcoming (John's words) was to be 'left alone'. The residential community would be situated to the south of this. There were trees, rocks, and watercourses that 'spoke' poems of their purpose to me and all the others who were ecstatically exploring the nooks and crannies of the land.

I began talking about funding with conservation organizations, my husband's family, whomever I could. I needed to raise money, and had no experience whatsoever that supported me to do this- the most money I'd ever earned in a calendar year was 13,000, and every penny I saved had been spent on travel and exploration in the East. Not a good precedent for soliciting donations. I began to cultivate a relationship with Scott McElrath, the broker/co-owner of the land. He was encouraging, and seemed to believe in the purpose we'd envisioned for the land. We assembled a group of people to make and offer to purchase- including David Martin and his wife Valerie, and two other couples. But the other co-owner, Boyd Hyder, was dead set on pricing that we could not match. We made several purchase offers, wrote letters, to no avail. We finally gave up, and then decided to purchase the land one parcel at a time, with the faith and hope that provision for the remainder would come, somehow. I was guided to see that purchasing at the premium price that Hyder/McElrath wanted would later bring a blessing with it. This made no sense at all, and explaining it to people whose hard earned resources were allocated to the purchase was a task, and a great learning for me.

We had assembled the family funds to at least secure a 41 acre portion of the acreage and begin building the family home that would support the required elder/handicapped care. On the day of the closing, my mother, who had been providing care for my father in law after Cora's death, suffered a major heart attack, which left her permanently handicapped. This created an emergent need within the family that inspired even more immediate economic support, and required swift action on our part. We had to make a difficult decision to move independently, because others in our purchase group were not ready to move forward within the timeframe required by our emergent family needs, and also had issue with the pricing of the land. I was suddenly alone in my bold 'venture'. How would I repay the family? How does one create a community, subdivide land, plan construction, build roads, deal with county ordinances? This was part of a year long learning, and an enormous test of my 'marriage' to the land.

It was sometime during this year that a friend and co-worker, Jenne Sluder, directed me to the Center's website. What I read there struck a chord inside, and this resonated so deeply that I longed to travel east and meet with the people who'd formed this amazing organization. Within my heart and soul, I knew that these folks were somehow connected to the destinies of the mountain and the people who would be learning there. At that time, I had no confidence in my ability to communicate this without sounding a bit crazy. I saved the website for another time, but the information was lost when my computer died. I longed to remember the name of the organization, and in the process, also forgot who'd connected me to it in the first place.

2011

We developed a plan to divide the 41 acres into lots, reserving the forested areas as conservation land, and limiting construction to the cleared pasture. I intended to utilize funds from the sale of lots to generate the capital needed to purchase the 90 acres, and pay back the family. We sold 10 lots within 9 months, with no advertising, and within the shadow of the 2008 recession. I used the funds generated to secure the 90 acre parcel, and began the Sacred work of building relationships with the land and people who would work with the children.

With all that was in need of my time and tending, I decided to homeschool my own children, with Laura Coleman coming once per week to assist with their education. Jojo and Suelin joined us, with their

daughter Skylar. On the land at SMS, we built our family's new home, and moved in that summer. During the move, Romeo suffered another stroke, which left him much weaker, and much more needy. But he recovered, and began to enjoy his time in the setting of the Sanctuary- so very different from the urban one he'd lived in his whole life.

During the summer, we also invited the first group of children to the mountain for David Martin's True Nature Camp. Rebecca Vann was a co-facilitator. During the week of camp set-up, she and I took a walk together, and visited the spring. At one point during the walk, she looked at me, teary-eyed, and said she was deeply moved and called to serve the mountain in a greater capacity, but didn't know where to start. I told her to walk and listen, and she'd eventually recognize her path of service here.

Later in the year, we erected a small classroom structure, purchased Waldorf homeschool curriculum, furnished the classroom, hired teachers -David Martin and Sara Peninga- and invited the inaugural group of children to The Learning Village(a name given by David Martin). I knew Sara from Azalea Mountain Waldorf school, where Laura Coleman had begun teaching. Two of the 8 children who began attending TLV had profound learning difficulties, and all the emotional scars that come with this in our culture. Neither of them could read, even at the age of 11 and 13. Within a few months, these children were reading confidently, writing, and had 'caught up' on any delays in their development. I knew the mountain and the safety and belonging of the Sanctuary were somehow responsible for this. There was no 'special training' that could have healed these children in this way.

My own children followed their beloved teacher, Ms Laura and attended school at Azalea Mountain in Autumn 2011. This was a sensible choice, given the older ages of the group we had on the mountain. Laura and I continued to meet and vision what education might feel like, look like, be like on the mountain. We had high hopes that Azalea Mountain might see a future home here, but were willing to forge our own path if necessary. Azalea brought their older grades classes to SMS each Friday for their nature immersion day, and the children immediately developed connection and relationships with the mountain- 'anointing' special trees, building forts and fairy houses, playing in the creek.

We invited the board and faculty of Azalea Mountain to visit SMS. They were scouting a permanent location for the program (they had temporarily rented space in town from a church), and also looking for a place to bring their students for nature immersion programming they'd planned for Fridays. During this visit, Amy Arrendell, board chair for Azalea, was moved to tears, and felt deeply called to the mountain. She asked the BOD to consider SMS as a potential location for Azalea. This eventually created a rift that Amy tried to reconcile for two years. She asked me to delay the 'official launch' of The Learning Village, with the hope that the Azalea parent body and board would soon develop the same response to the mountain as she had, and would come around to the idea of building their program at SMS.

2012/13

In early 2012, Rebecca Vann was the second person to 'take up residence' within the Sanctuary of Sacred Mountain. She moved into a rental that sat just below the 'bald'/gate of welcoming/Long Mountain. She'd walked and camped and dreamed of the land for many months, and began to see what her first act of service would be. Her affiliations and intimacy with the plant/herb community in Asheville, and her growing intimacy with the Sanctuary, led her to a recognition that Goldenseal, a cherished and very over-harvested Appalachian native plant, wanted a safe place to grow its healing roots in the Sanctuary. There was a powerful potency in this plan. I remember sitting with Rebecca in what we now call Rumi's Field, and as we discussed the practicalities of the planting, a mutual recognition emerged that these golden roots that she would plant were a sacred offering in support of the Sanctuary's Earthen abundance, and that this action would bring a grace of reciprocity to all our future work there. She gathered all in our community to participate in the planting day- a kind of 'call to assembly' that she'd later be asked to perform many times on the mountain.

As Amy Arrendell had requested, we 'waited' with the impulse of TLV for two years, and my children attended Azalea. I began to sense that the clarity Amy hoped for would not come. Meanwhile, the relationship between myself and the mountain ripened and matured, and the clear guidance and vitality that I received when sitting quietly in the forest, exploring the waters, or playing and working with my children, became the most prominent indicators of action or change. I began to sense the role of animals within the Sanctuary. Horses were frequently part of the story that the mountain told me, and I'd often 'see' them in the big field, or galloping down the mountain. I had a deepening, in-the-body sense that all life was sacred and safe here, and that there could be no intentional harm brought to any of it. There was a nearly forgotten intimacy- the kind one reads of in legend and myth- that would be reborn between the animals and humans of the Sanctuary. But there were old stories of disrespect, cruelty and killing of the animals here that would need time to heal. The children would know the way, inherently. And there would be someone, yet to come, who was the Bringer-of-Sacred-Relationship with the animal kingdom in the Sanctuary.

Sometime during that year, a friend introduced me to a man named Charles Kouns. Charlie was a man whose inner knowing and heart presence led him to listen to the voices of the children, and create safe experiences- called 'listening sessions'- during which they could reconnect with their own original selves and their own inner knowing regarding their learning, the context of that learning, and how, where, with whom their learning journeys needed to unfold. Charlie had travelled around the world to listen to young people, and gathered their collective voice into a tome called 'Imagining Learning- The Wisdom of Young People on Education'. Charlie came to TLV a few times that year to counsel, support, inspire and lift my own confidence up to the place of courageous creation. His encouragement offered a 'permission' from beyond myself that I needed at that time, as I hadn't fully stepped into my own inner knowing enough to trust the task that had been laid before me.

I also began to feel that it was time to move forward with TLV- to hire kindergarten teachers, retain David and Sara, and begin a 'soft launch' of The Learning Village. My own children shifted from Azalea to attend classes on the mountain. Rebecca would help with organizational structure and administration, and this resulted in her spending more time on the mountain. She began to experience a deepening of her relationship with the plant kingdom while exploring the community of plants in the Sanctuary- one that went beyond the study of plants as medicine, or the scientific and practical roots of the organic movement. Quite by accident, she stumbled upon a book on Biodynamics. Although she knew nothing about its practices, she immediately felt a somatic calling to bring Biodynamics to the Sanctuary. We buried our first BD 500 preparations that year. The following year, we applied the 3 Kings offering of gold, frankincense, and myrrh on Epiphany Day. Rebecca's 'call to assembly' was exercised once again, and many of our community, as well as many from the greater community, children and adults, answered her call to participate. That year, she brought her newfound passion into the Village, and taught Ms Sara's class of 3rd/4th graders about planting with the biodynamic cycles.

The winds of change called some of our pioneering group elsewhere, and shifts occurred, as they always do....David Martin left us to pursue a position at a local green building firm, and to be present with his new son, Cedar. Suelin and Jojo's lives and career began to lead them elsewhere, although their daughter Skylar remained with us at TLV for a bit longer. Later that year, Amy Arrendell experienced a family death/crisis and stepped away from the Azalea BOD. This led to their inevitable shift away from the possibility of SMS as Azalea's home. They stopped coming on Friday for nature immersion. It was clear that something new was coming toward us.

It was then that Laura Coleman decided to leave Azalea, and began working with me to refine the vision and lead a class of 5th/6th grade students at TLV. She would eventually purchase a lot in the residential community, and begin to plan for her future of residency on the mountain. Several families followed her migration from Azalea, because they viewed the relationship with the land at SMS as essential to their children's learning. Nicole Almeida was one of those that listened to the call of the mountain, but it would be a while before she saw clearly to purchase a lot and take up residence within the Sanctuary. Joy Kennedy was another who left Azalea, and although she didn't immediately enroll her son Henry at

TLV, it wasn't long at all before she brought Henry to the mountain, and came forth with her passion and calling around the animal kingdom- horses in particular- and began to live into her vision of animal-communion-as-learning.

That summer, Andi Morrel, the mother of one of our TLV students, contacted me to encourage a meeting with one of her dear friends, John Shackelton. In August, John and I met for the first time. There was an immediate recognition between us. John felt that his learning was to be here with us, and I sensed that he and his work are the beginning chapter in SMS/TLV's developing Story of Place. We met a few times, and he eventually shared the working draft of his book, *Opening Forgotten Sanctuaries- Education as a Sacred Encounter*. I quickly finished the book, completely amazed that someone who did not know me, or the mountain, or the impulse behind TLV, could have written this story of learning within the Sanctuary. John and I delighted in our shared communion with one another and the mountain, with the deep work of participation in Earth's community of life. We met frequently, and our time together was blessed with such love and communion that we often cried together.

At some point in the first few months, John mentioned Peggy Whalen-Levitt, and The Center. I visited the website, remembered it immediately, and found myself ecstatic at having been reunited with this 'lost calling'. I was amazed, inspired, nearly bursting with love and adoration for John, this process, and the possibility of meeting with the people who'd birthed The Center.

2014/15/16

During TLV's first year with Laura on the mountain, she and I began to see that something deeper and authentically 'born of the land' was to be our 'curriculum' at TLV. Although Steiner's approach to education and human development was a natural fit for learning on the mountain, we knew that the Waldorf curriculum in its current 'static' form and with its somewhat Euro-centric leanings was not the totality of the learning experience as we wanted to bring to the children. We saw that there was a 'Living Curriculum' that waited for us, and the children, to uncover it, and we knew its emergence would take time, courage, and a deepening of our relationships with one another and the mountain.

It was then that we made a commitment to one another to do the inner work necessary to remove ourselves from any unconscious or conscious feeling of obligation or responsibility to perpetuate the imposed methods and maps for learning that defined our culture's idea of education. Beyond the tragic story of education within our public systems, we also saw the harm done by the Waldorf movement's righteousness, orthodoxy, and religiosity. We felt that there was life and vitality in Steiner's words and visions, and that these living wisdoms were most often not present within the faculty and administration of most Waldorf schooling environments. We also saw, more and more, that the story of PLACE that comes forth naturally, in the children's play, exploration and interactions with one another and the mountain, would be a vital part of the children's experience here, and would be the quintessential element of this Living Curriculum.

We also felt deeply that animals, and the natural empathy and affinity that most children have for them, would be an essential 'bridge-to-communion' that is present in authentic learning, and we'd need to begin integrating animals into this Living Curriculum in real and practical ways. Joy Kennedy bravely endeavored to bring this learning to the children. She sought, and received (within hours!) a bank loan that allowed her to purchase horses, erect fences and a barn, and begin integrating the animals with the children's learning at TLV. Since then, we've added rabbits, more horses, and soon, chickens and sheep to our community of life in the Village.

Concurrently, our work with the Center continued to deepen through the blossoming relationship between Peggy and I. Our faculty enrolled in the Center's Inner Life of the Child in Nature and Being, Beholding, Belonging programs, and more friendships were born between Peggy, Sandy and many on our faculty. Out of this intimacy, a slow and soulful recognition began to bubble up from the depths. What would it feel and look like to collaborate in a deeper way with the Center? In keeping with the

sacred reciprocity of the Sanctuary, how could we better support the Center's work? And most near to our hearts...how could we dwell in the wisdom of its lineage, bask in the blessings of collaboration, in an extended and continuous capacity? All are questions we are currently exploring together.

We've sought and hired teachers with Waldorf training and experience, with the idea that the impulse that had drawn them to Steiner's visions of teaching-as-spiritual-work, could naturally evolve into a deeper exploration of their own unique calling to learning/teaching-as-a-sacred-encounter. We've asked our faculty to set aside a regular time to meet with John and discuss their inspirations, fears, hopes, intentions, and challenges in the classroom, and to authentically uncover their own identity as teacher. We've now recognized that *learning is life* within the Sanctuary of Sacred Mountain, and there is no way, and no reason, to separate the growth and work of TLV from that of the Sanctuary as a whole. This sacred work is ongoing, perpetual, alive, and sometimes a bit frightening. But it is the only living, authentic way to bring forth what we've envisioned, to participate in the Story of the Sanctuary, and learn to recognize what we Belong to, and what Belongs to us.

We are now in the early imagining of a high school environment, and the creation of a temporal and energetic space for intergenerational learning to emerge organically as a natural artifact of living in communion, living in community, being and belonging.

To be continued....