

Experiential Ecology Field-Study Assignments

1-Beliefs: Visiting a Local Church, Sanga or Temple

During the first week of this course we are exploring the potential of a person's beliefs and/or "story" to create separation and/or connection. As part of this exploration, I ask that you take a field trip this weekend to a local church, Sanga, or Temple. Set forth imagining that you have been dropped down on Earth from outer space. Your assignment is to observe these human ones. In this case you are observing their rituals/beliefs/practices as they relate to the divine and life's meaning and purpose.

Where to go? Pick a service that you would not ordinarily pick... something that really feels "out there" for you.

What to do during the service? OBSERVE! As you observe, consider the sequence of events, the language, the movements, the arrangement of physical space, the emotional tenor of the event, and anything else that strikes you.

What to do after the service? Talk to at least three people from the congregation. Begin by introducing yourself and explaining that you are there as part of a class that has the aim of understanding what it means to be a human being. Then ask if it would be OK to ask some questions. If you get permission, begin with questions that create comfort (e.g., How long have you been coming to this church? What do you like about this church?). Then move to questions that get at beliefs/values. Here you might consider asking:

- What is your understanding of God?
- Describe your relationship to/with God? (Intimate? Distant?)
- How do you believe the world (earth) has come into existence?
- In what ways does your religion affect you on a daily basis?
- In what ways, if any, might you like your church (congregation) to change?
- Talk to me about love as it manifests in your religion/church?

NOTE: These are just ideas for questions. As you talk, your own questions will spring forth. Go with whatever has life for you!

IMPORTANT: Your job is to simply listen deeply. No judgment. Just listen.

Journal Entry: As soon as possible after your church visit sit down and make a 2-4 page handwritten entry in your journal. Specifically, consider the ways that religion as you have seen it enacted on this day either contributes to or undermines a sense of separation with self, other, nature and the divine. Conclude your journal entry sharing your vision of a religious practice that might lead you to experience the sacred in every day life.

2-Experiencing the World Without Words/Numbers/Clocks

The hypothesis that I would like you to examine this week is that language, images, numbers and the marking of time can cause separation—i.e., can cause a kind of contraction. In this vein, I would like you to carefully observe the way that time, images, numbers, and language are used by both you and those around you. So, for example, if you pick numbers, pay attention to all the times that you encounter numbers during the day. It might begin when you hear on the radio that the temperature is 20 degrees.... Then, in your first class you might receive a number grade for a quiz you took last week, etc. In this example, your first task will be to simply **note** all the times that you encounter numbers during the day.

The second task is to consider how these encounters affect you—for example, when you hear that the temperature is 20 degrees, how does this affect the way you think about “coldness.” Do your encounters with numbers during the day cause you to feel expanded (open) or contracted (closed)? In other words, do you feel enlivened or deadened?

Specifically, I would like you to devote one day over the coming week to numbers, one day to images, one to language and one to time. For each day, keep a log of your encounters in your journal and then at the end of the day write a one-page reflection on what you learned, especially as it relates to feelings of separation and/or connectedness. Know that I am undertaking this exploration with you.

3-Studying Humans

Part I: Spend one hour watching television—yep... watching t.v. Do it by running a kind of “transect” through the stations. The idea is to move from station to station. Once you “arrive” at a new station (the next one in “the transect”), spend 2 minutes observing what’s going on and then take a minute to note down what you observed. Continue from station to station like this for the entire hour... After an hour you should have approximately 20 sampling points. Then, and this is very important, after you have finished your ‘transect,’ stop and interpret what you observed—i.e., attempt to elucidate the deeper meaning of what you observed at your various sampling points (i.e., station). For example, let’s imagine that your first station shows a courtroom scene with arguments being made back and forth. You note this and then, going deeper, perhaps you “hypothesize” that this species (*Homo sapiens*) seems to resolve conflict in formal settings and that the “resolution” of conflict seems to occur through a form of verbal jousting..... You needn’t do this for every single sampling point.

Finally, organize your observations and interpretations into a two-page (hand-written in

your Journal) characterization of Homo sapiens with special emphasis on this species' values and beliefs as revealed through your sampling.

Part II: For the second part of this week's work you will actually make contact with this species you have been studying via television. Yep, we'd like you to talk to some of these *Homo sapiens*. Talk about what? Well, in looking at the homeland of this species, Planet Earth, you've noted that things don't look very good. Indeed, every major ecological system shows signs of distress—water, air, soil, climate, biodiversity.... Your task is to “sample” a few *Homo sapiens* to understand how they are seeing the health of the environment of planet Earth. You've observed this species enough to know that if you are going to talk to them you've: 1) got to be honest and; 2) catch them in a place/time where they aren't busy. You select the PSU campus as the right place and you decide that you will approach them by simply explaining that you are doing an assignment from “headquarters” (i.e., Bio 450).

You realize that it will be important to select different types of subjects—e.g., different genders, ages, ethnicities, economic “classes” of *Homo sapiens* to ensure a representative sample. You only have 1.5 hours for your sampling—enough time to talk with six different individuals. You have a colleague (i.e., fellow classmate) who will join you. The two of you will approach single individuals (e.g., perhaps a *Homo sapien* sitting on a bench by a fountain or having a bite to eat) and engage in **strategic questioning** around the general topic of how this person is seeing the condition of the environment/Earth. For an orientation on strategic questioning read <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC40/Peavey.htm> Based on this reading you will learn that strategic question is not about having a conversation in the usual sense, but, instead, about asking very open and respectful questions and then listening very deeply.

After each “strategic questioning” encounter sit with your partner to discuss what happened. Use this time to review the questions that you asked, paying attention to the ones that were truly “strategic.” This mini-debriefing is very important.

After you have completed your work, write-up what happened in 2 pages (handwritten in your journal). First, describe EACH of your encounters: Who did you talk to? How did it go? What questions were truly strategic? How well did you listen? Then, conclude by considering: 1) What did you learn about *Homo sapiens* and what did you learn about yourself through SQ? and 2) What did you learned about the art of asking questions, in general, and what relevance might this have for asking questions in the sciences.

There is a culminating piece to this two-part assignment. On the final page (page 5) of your reflection address the following questions: 1) How did your understanding of humans—based ONLY on your television analysis—change as a result of your strategic questioning investigation? And 2) What possibilities, if any, does your study species possess for healing its environment and how might this species tap into these potentials?

4-Exploring What it Means to Play

For this exploration I would like you to spend 1.5-2 hours at the Cooperative Play School located at the Quaker (Friends) Meeting House located 611 East Prospect Ave. The teachers at the Play School, Joanie Maumer and Kat Alden, will be expecting you. Arrange to arrive either at 9:00 am and stay until 10:30 or at 10:00 and stay until the session ends at 11:30.

Phase I--Observation: Spend the first hour of your visit simply observing. This means taking yourself out of the action. Find a place where you can sit and see the entire play space without being in the way of the flow. Spend the first part of this observation time taking in the whole scene. Jot down notes as you observe. Bring various senses into play and be patient. What can you learn about this play school--this culture--this species--simply through observation? Be prepared to surprise yourself!

After a time, pick one child and carefully observe him/her. Observe everything about this child! Again, be patient.... quiet your mind and become “observer?” What can you learn, simply through careful observation of this child?

As I have said on numerous occasions there is a tremendous amount that we can learn when we carefully observe—I mean really observe—what is going on around us.

Phase II—Play: Spend the second part of your time actually **playing** with a child. How? Fred Donaldson (“Playing by Heart”) says that “In play we interact heart to heart, without any of our cultural separations.”

“Play,” says Donaldson, “is when we don’t know that we are different from each other... and not different from God.” When it comes to “how to play,” Donaldson says that it requires some unlearning. “The only way to do it is to let go of all your adult roles.” Donaldson offers the following tips to get us started:

- Get down
- Be quiet
- Let go (i.e., table thoughts)
- Pay attention
- Be in touch

“All playmates,” concludes Donaldson, “have two very special messages to share with you: 1) You are lovable; and 2) there’s nothing to be afraid of.” So, with all this mind, pay attention choose a play mate, get down and play.

Helpful Hints on Play: *It may be helpful to enter into play with a personal physical queue such as wearing pig tails or wearing mismatched socks or wearing a shirt backwards or something that you liked to wear best as a child (e.g. My friend Rose says: “I loved horizontal stripes as a kid and if I wear that now, I automatically feel kid-like,*

playful, emotional, immediate.”) Secondly, "Breaking the rules"--like scribbling outside the lines or smashing a block tower while making crashing sounds and spraying of saliva--can also be a path into play. Thirdly, playing with a child as if you don't understand how things work or you can't remember what they've just said or just "playing dumb" can also be a great pathway into play.

5-Creating a Learning Manifesto.

Some educators contend that we cannot say that we have learned something until the “learning” shows up in our life. According to this view, for learning to be genuine it has to change both *who* we are **and** *how* we are in the world. Now you and I could debate this idea using our cognitive faculties for days on end. Instead, let’s try something different. Let’s try to live this idea as a “belief” and see what happens. How?

First, based on your life experience as a learner, I would like you to articulate your personal “Learning Manifesto”—a statement of your commitment to your learning. See this as a statement of you taking charge of your education. Make your manifesto as concrete as possible (i.e., avoid abstractions). You will know it is sufficiently specific if it leads you to concrete actions and behaviors.

Next, over the coming week, take a least one new/original action that involves risk and that places you in full alignment with your “Learning Manifesto.”

I believe that this is the most difficult thing (most risky thing) I have asked you to do so far. I say "risky" because I think most (all?) of us have become so conditioned to not taking responsibility for our education that we experience profound discomfort, and maybe even resentment, when we are asked to finally stand up and "DECLARE" ourselves as in charge of our education.

6-Engaging in a Techno-Fast

Chellis Glendinning asserts that we are all, to varying degrees, addicted to technology. According to her, we surround ourselves with TVs, video games, ipods, cars, phones, computers, microwaves and all manner of gadgetry to escape the pain of living lives **separated** from intimate contact with what is real: the air, soil, water, trees and wild life that lives and swirl around us.

Is there any truth to Glendinning’s claim for you? For me? Let’s find out this week. How? Here’s what I am going to do: Compile a list of all the technologies I use in a typical day. Next to each technology I will assess my level of dependency, on a scale

of 1-4. My tentative scale is as follows:

Level 1-Without this technology, I would suffer only minor inconvenience (mostly I use it simply because it's there). Example: ginger grater

Level 2-Not having this technology would be a bit of a hassle; I am glad I own this.

Example: blender, stereo

Level 3-This is pretty important to me; my life would be complicated if I didn't have it.

Example: alarm clock, telephone, car. . . .

Level 4-This is very important to me; I rely on it every day; my life would begin to implode without this. Example: hot water heater, central heat, computer, refrigerator

Now, recall that Glendinning compares our techno-addiction to substance addiction. If she's right, me and you should experience severe "withdrawal" (i.e., pain, upset, confusion, anger, unbalance) when we suddenly deny ourselves of our daily fix of any of our LEVEL 3-4 techno-dependencies. As a kind of test, I am going to do without hot water (level 4) and my telephone (level 3) for the next week and in so doing carefully observe my mental, emotional, and spiritual state, day-by-day. I will pay attention to how my perception of things around me changes; and I will note the ways that eliminating these two technologies **separates me from** and/or **brings me into fuller relationship with** myself, others, and the wild.

I invite you to do this field task with me (i.e., to create your own categories of techno-dependency and engage in a "techno-fast" of your choosing). Alternatively, feel free to create your own "field exploration" around any of themes of the Week 3 readings (i.e., progress, needs, techno-addiction, one world). Summarize your findings in your journal.