

From www.EarthCitizens.net: An Invitation to Peer Learning for the Great Turning

An article about self-help cooperative education for ecological empowerment
by Dennis Rivers and friends – www.EarthCitizens.net – April 14, 2018

“The Great Turning” names a vision of a global awakening to compassionate interwovenness, a vision recently championed by writers such as [Joanna Macy](#) and [David Korten](#). The Great Turning has become a compelling idea in recent decades because it is not clear that humanity will survive the damage that our out-of-control industrialization is inflicting on the Web of Life.

Because the world is in fact a single, extended, biological community with an infinity of interwoven processes, no individual or country will be able to thrive for long while those nearby suffer or perish. We are all passengers in the same fragile boat called the Web of Life. I am convinced that this is the central challenge and lesson of our time.

Thus we invite and encourage each person
to become a lifelong learner, peer mentor and creative advocate
of the cooperative and compassionate connectedness
on which the life of Planet Earth depends.



Tree of Life -- By Meganne Forbes

The breakdowns of industrial civilization, from pesticide-caused illnesses to nuclear meltdowns to raging social inequality to chronic, technologized war, are, at root, fueled by a *vision of isolation and separateness*. Deeply embedded in our present culture and economic system, this vision of separateness is completely at odds with the endlessly interwoven and feedback-loop-permeated biology (and sociology) of human survival and well-being. To give just three of many possible examples:

- the toxics we dump in the ocean come back to us in the fish we eat,
- the gigatons of exhaust that humans pump into the atmosphere each year are coming back to us as a planet too hot to live in,
- the high-technology weapons the United States invented over the past century to dominate the world, from the AR-15 rifle to nuclear weapons, now threaten every day the survival of every U.S. citizen.



Alberta Tar Sands — Photo from EricWallberg.com

We (the tiny Earth Citizens cooperative) invite you to consider that the great challenge of our time is learn a new kind of respectful cooperation, with both the Web of Life and with one another, rather than pressing forward with our current, painfully destructive dreams of isolation and practices of domination. (This is similarly true in many countries, but as Gandhi and Jesus advise, let us begin with correcting our own mistakes.)

This is not a new idea, but we find it to be profoundly true, true enough to start a new community of scholar/activist/lifelong-learners in order to explore and live it more fully. Our hope in creating a web-based learning community is to use the best of the web to inform and empower people as nurturers of life and advocates of ecological sanity, in ever-widening circles. We join our efforts with kindred spirits around the world to help in the Great Turning by putting all the learning materials that we ourselves generate into the Creative Commons. Whenever possible, we will distribute the best teaching and training materials we can find that have been developed by other groups. (Please subscribe to our free newsletter in order to receive learning network news and updates about new additions to the Earth Citizens' Library.)

Climbing the uphill path together: As much as it is possible to pioneer with an idea that is already several thousand years old(!), the Earth Citizens' extended community is pioneering the [Team-of-Two](#) idea (transformational friendship) as a way of encouraging people to both expand their life-skills and participate in the Great Turning (global ecological awakening) outside the limiting boundaries of expensive classrooms and seminars. Our vision of a new sort of invisible university of ecology is a loosely-knit community of thoughtful and creative people, woven together through a web of overlapping and mutually supportive friendships. One of our inspirations is the successful history of Latin American literacy campaigns, in which peer mentoring played a key role.

On the pages of the www.EarthCitizens.net web site we offer extensive information and links about many of the major issues of our time, and a list of profoundly creative people, whom we hold as exemplars, guides and permission-grantors of the ecological life. We are also the developers and publishers of the [Spiral Journey Resilience and Empowerment Curriculum](#), and the [Deep Green Awakening Mandala Series](#), both inspired by [Joanna Macy's Work That Reconnects](#), as Creative Commons resources for ecological and emotional survival in a world that is seriously falling apart.



A gift from the Earth – Sculpture by Vijali - Image courtesy of artist.

Instead of focusing on academic degrees, credits or certificates, which many other institutions already do perfectly well, we encourage people everywhere to become (or continue their journey as) “Earth Citizen LLEARMers” (Lifelong: **L**earners ~ **E**ncouragers ~ **A**ctivists/creators ~ **R**esearchers ~ **M**entors) across a wide range of topics and issues related to ecology, sustainability, social justice, and personal/human development. The Earth is our classroom. The fate of the Web of Life and People is our class project. Contagious compassion is our radical method.

I am deeply convinced that the entire world needs the careful thinking and disciplined practice that colleges and universities encourage, to be applied now to the unfolding of sustainable ecologies and sustainable societies. But existing college and university systems are generally not arranged to help everyone, only to help the very talented and economically well-off.

One giant problem with that arrangement is that in a time of global ecological crisis, Mother Earth — the Web of Life — needs help in the making of a different world from all of us, not just from the very talented few. It wastes the talents of so many people who, if they had only received a bit more support and encouragement, might have made enormous contributions to the common good. Particular institutions may be able to ignore all these potential contributors, but society as a whole does so at its own peril. Hence the need to re-imagine, with the help of new technology, what a learning-encouraging community could be like, and how far it might reach out to include and nurture.



[Earth Song – Greeting Card from Syracuse Cultural Workers](#)

This is already happening at many major universities and new online institutions with the emergence of free online courses. Many large businesses are also shifting gears from providing training to supporting self-directed learning. Our goal is to carry forward this momentum into a vision of lifelong learning for everyone, dedicated to nurturing the web of life and people.

**Five important steps toward excellence
in the process of LLEARMing.**

A decentralized, self-organizing, learning network of peer volunteers will most probably need to invent its own new pathways toward excellence. In the context of the LLEARMer vision of adult development (**L**ifelong: **L**earner ~ **E**ncourager ~ **A**ctivist/creator ~ **R**esearcher ~ **M**entor), here are five promising ingredients for your experiment in emergent excellence:

- 1. COMMITMENTS: Choose a topic, a cause, a practice, or an inspiring person whose work you want to carry forward, any of these related to the Great Turning, and commit to studying/working with your choice for at least six months:** This could be as modest as reading a single book, or as large as participating in a global campaign. To become excellent at any endeavor, or well informed about any topic, takes a lot of study and practice. That is why it is so important to pick a topic or practice with which you feel a deep emotional connection. As St. Teresa of Avila advises, "...do that which best stirs you to love."

A parallel teaching, one I received from the eco-advocates Joanna Macy and John Seed is that when we devote ourselves to something much larger than ourselves (a mountain, a river, a forest, the well-being of an oppressed people) *the power of that larger something we love flows through us in turn.* (I think of this as the shamanism of devotion).

In the context of the LLEARMer vision, choosing a topic, a project or a practice through which to express a love for all creatures great and small, includes opening to become a learning companion and co-mentor to at least one other person similarly committed.

2. COMPANIONS: Find co-explorers and co-mentors – Learn new communications skills to improve your mutual support: Peer mentoring and coaching are already established practices in many fields, from teaching to architecture. So there is a large body of research and experience to draw upon as we seek to build an extended community of lifelong co-learners. Peer support has also been championed over many years in the Co-Counseling movement, which has popularized the principle that you can receive as much nurturing attention from others as you are willing to give to others, thus avoiding the lack-of-funds-means-can't-participate problem. See our [Teams-of-Two Guide](#) and [The Seven Challenges Workbook](#) for team-building suggestions and resources.

3. JOURNALING: Reading, writing, drawing, reflecting and resisting. You can deepen your critical reading, writing and thinking skills by keeping a journal. One of the important differences between reading a book and watching a movie or TV show, is that when reading, you can slow down the pace, and even go back a few pages to check the consistency of the author's arguments. TV, ads and film sweep us along and make us much more vulnerable to swallowing whole the script writers' assumptions and values. Writing down (and/or drawing), again and again, what you are learning, how you feel about it, what you agree with, and what you disagree with, will gradually help you develop your own strong voice, a deeper grasp of your own life situation. You will be able to present a stronger case for your views, and you will get better at cutting through the fog of vague excuses offered by the purveyors and apologists of war, oppression and ecological destruction. I am convinced that resisting the forces of destruction needs us to hold a

beautiful vision of something much better. Write and draw that vision in your journal.

4. EXPANDING THE COMMONS: As a peer volunteer, participate in (and create new) alternative forms of interacting that do not depend on money. A totally fee-for-service world (where our world is heading) looks to me a lot like a world heading for destruction. The reason for this is that no one will pay us today to preserve a livable world for future generations. A human survival strategy based on the vision of millions of well-paid ecology consultants is, in my view, vulnerable to falling apart the day after the money runs out, or, alternatively, vulnerable to never starting because the needed money never arrived. Thus, it certainly looks to me as though we need a different paradigm.

Fortunately, we are all alive today because our parents fed us when we were little and had no money to buy our own food. There are many examples of altruistic action in the web of life, all the way down to the tree roots that serve as conduits of nutrients from older trees to younger trees. We invite everyone drawing inspiration from the Earth Citizens' Online Library to be especially creative in organizing educational processes that do not require the payment of fees or admission charges, so that more people can be empowered.

5 CREATING AND SHARING: Out of your engagement with your calling, your chosen topic or practice, create something that can be shared with the community of that topic, and with the world. This can range from writing a song, making a documentary video, writing a review of a book or movie, to documenting your experiences as you participate in a some large effort to mend the world. Place a Creative Commons copyright on your contribution, so that other people can use it and build on it. (For example, my friend Vijali Hamilton recently traveled to North Dakota to participate in the Standing Rock pipeline protest, and contributed to that protest by creating [an article and YouTube video](#).) We draw inspiration from the growing trend in education toward “learning portfolios” and creative projects instead of examinations.

In the LLEARMer model, rather than demonstrating your achievement by passing a test, you demonstrate and deepen your creative involvement in your topic, cause or practice by contributing to it in some way. ***Wherever you are on the spectrum of development, you can make a contribution.*** Even if you are a total beginner, you can find someone who is doing good work in your area of interest and find a way to help them carry forward their work, as you develop your own skill, knowledge and competence. (I think of this as similar to the [Renaissance Workshop](#) model of universal participation, in which even the youngest apprentices contributed according to their skill level.)

The [r]evolution can start right here: Seeing everyone around us with new eyes.

One important aspect of LLEARMING is an emerging, ***three-part vision*** of what it means to be on an equal footing with another person, given that no two people are exactly equal, ever have exactly the same experiences, temperaments or skill sets.

In my experience, with *every* person I meet, from newborn to ninety year-old, I have (and am invited by life to deepen) at least three parallel, different and complementary relationships, like a chord of three notes played on the piano.

- There are some areas and topics in life (including your own life journey of development) about which you know much more than I will ever know. In relation to those areas I will always be your student and apprentice.
- There are some areas and topics in life where we know roughly the same amount and/or we've had roughly the same amount (or lack) of experience. In relation to those areas, I am your companion and co-explorer.
- And there will be some areas and topics in life where I know more than you do, or have had more experience than you have had. In relation to those areas, life calls me to be your servant-mentor. My task is to support you and encourage you in your learning and exploration.

In a society based on competition and merit examinations, there is a powerful drive to know lots more than other people, and to benefit from having specialized knowledge that other people do not possess. Like so many sharp tools that humans have invented, this one can allow us to be very productive, but it can also injure the tool user and those standing nearby. To the degree that I get swallowed up in striving for superiority through specialization, I will tend to focus almost entirely on the areas where I know more than you. But if I do that, not only will I become an unpleasant person to be around, I will also be seriously out of touch with you (and the entire world), missing most of the creative possibilities in our relationship.

In relation to the complex journey of becoming a person, you (and everyone I meet) already have much to share, much to teach me. You have had many life experiences that I have not had, and you may have struggled through many difficult situations that I have not yet encountered. Looking at the world through your eyes will allow me to see aspects of the world that were previously hidden to me.

And in relation to the great crises that the world faces today, my task is to walk along beside you and support you in extending your love of life in widening circles. Without this more supportive style of ecological, social and political organizing, it is difficult to see how people will be able to endure their ongoing encounters with the monumental ugliness and sorrow of industrial civilization at its destructive worst.

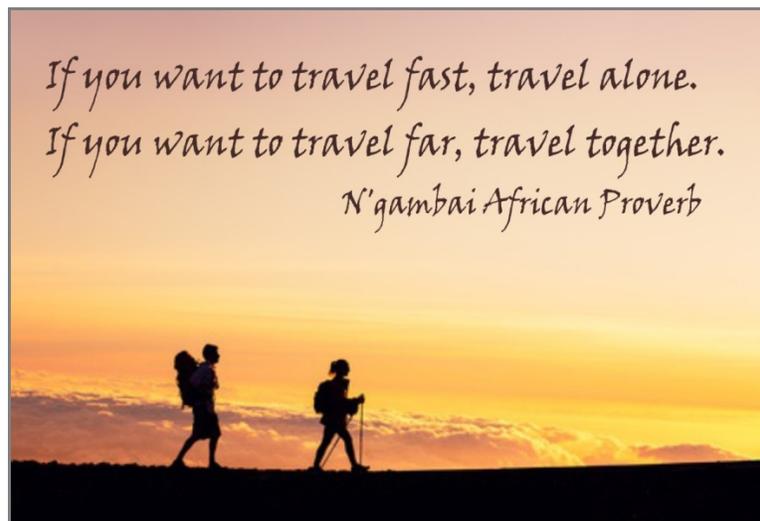


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At first glance this “walking-along-beside” might seem to emphasize the effect that I have on you, the emerging strengths I support in you. But this change in roles, the shift from anxious striver for superiority to cooperative nurturer, is one of *the deepest possible changes I can make in my own life*. This is the Great Turning at the most personal level. The world today runs on domination. As we articulate and embody the vision I have somewhat awkwardly described here as “LLEARMing with three-part learning companions,” we vote with our own lives for a different kind of world, and for a different kind of personhood within that world. In such practices, I see us enacting in small ways the changes we hope to make in much larger ways. For me, this is a way of keeping alive a vision of what is most beautiful in people, even in a time of violence and chaos, even a time of genocide and ecocide.

We close this invitation to a learning-community-without-walls with deep bows of gratitude to eco-philosopher Joanna Macy and the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and with the (slightly amended) words of Rev. Howard Thurman a great African-American pastor and scholar and a mentor to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., As you explore the lists of [topics](#), [exemplars](#), and [steps in the Spiral Journey](#), on the EarthCitizens.net web site, we invite you to keep these words in mind:

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs.
Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and
[finding a kindred spirit as your three-part learning companion]
go do that, because what the world needs
is people who have come alive.”

– Howard Thurman
[italics added by Dennis Rivers]

Recommended Reading List (in development 2-15-2018):

Communication skills:

[The Seven Challenges Workbook: Communication Skills for Success at Home and at Work.](#)

Dennis Rivers, MA, communication skills trainer and anti-nuclear activist. Available free of charge in PDF format at www.NewConversations.net

[The Talk Book.](#) Gerald Goodman, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, UCLA.
<http://global-find-a-book.net/gerald-goodman-the-talk-book-1439246890-9781439246894/>

Supportive relationships:

[The Helping Relationship: Processes and Skills.](#)

Lawrence M. Brammer and Ginger MacDonald.

[Powers of Two: Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs](#) Joshua Wolf Shenk.

[Power of 2: How to Make the Most of Your Partnerships at Work and in Life.](#)

Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller

Another writer who has done a wonderful job of carrying forward the work of Carl Rogers and his associates is Jacqueline Small. Her book, *Becoming Naturally Therapeutic: A Return To The True Essence Of Helping*, is a kind of universal guide to being a helpful companion on the bumpy road of life.

Co-mentoring:

A Philosophy of Havruta

Understanding and Teaching the Art of Text Studies in Pairs. Elie Holzer with Orit Kent. Academic Studies Press, 2013.

<https://www.fastcompany.com/3045170/hit-the-ground-running/the-case-for-co-mentoring>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/how-do-life/201411/co-mentoring>

<https://platform.coop/stories/boston-collaboratory-school-mentoring-horizontally-up-down-and-sideways>

Collaborative egalitarianism:

Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Paulo Freire

Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Paulo Freire

Human development:

Developing Through Relationships: Origins of Communication, Self, and Culture

Alan Fogel

The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development Robert Kegan