

*Passage Six:
Caring For the Earth*

Protecting the Birds in the Nest

Kristie

When I was little, my mom ran a day-care center. In the spring she often took all her little kids to Lake Lagunita at Stanford University to see the Monarch Butterflies. My best friend, Adrienne, and I always tagged along. As our little band of curious kids walked around the lake, we found hundreds of caterpillars on the milkweed that surrounded the lake. Mom let us take a few caterpillars home at the end of our stay. Back home, we watched, with great anticipation, for the caterpillars to metamorphose into their chrysalis form and hatch into elegant butterflies.

After the butterflies emerged, we knew that it would take about two hours for their wings to dry before they could fly away. I took special care of one of the newly hatched butterflies, which I adopted. I blew on its wings and swished it through the air to help it dry out. Then, I took it outside in the sunlight. Finally its wings became dry and strong so it could take flight. It left my hand, rose above me, and made two graceful circles. Then it swooped down and landed right on the tip of my nose. It was in no hurry; it just sat there resting. My mother ran into the house and got her camera. She returned and snapped my picture. Then the butterfly flew away. Mom always insisted that it was the butterfly's way of saying thanks.

I loved butterflies, but my real fascination was with birds. It was a solo activity, much different from playing horses or climbing trees with Adrienne. I spent hours watching birds as they ate, preened, built nests, and darted in and out of the trees and bushes. They seemed to come in all sizes and colors, with peculiar habits that distinguished them from one another. I wondered if they ever slept.

One day I was exploring around my neighbor's bushes. I was shocked to find a bird nest that had fallen on the ground; it was moving. I looked inside and discovered three tiny baby birds inside. I picked up the nest and ran home, careful not to disturb the little babies. I showed my discovery to my mother. She called a family friend who was familiar with Wildlife Rescue, a humane group that cares for wild animals that are injured or separated from their mothers. Our friend took the birds to the shelter where trained volunteers nursed the little birds and, when they were able to take care of them-

selves, released them. I was fascinated that people could raise birds and safely release them back to nature. I wanted to be a nurse to the little birds, too. It wasn't long before I took the **Basic Care** class at Wildlife Rescue. When I graduated, I became a volunteer. I was ready!

Early in the summer, I spotted a fledgling bird in my neighbor's yard. It was a towhee, a small non-descript bird that is usually seen foraging for food on the ground under bushes. It was just learning to fly and hadn't developed a fear of humans yet. So I crawled into the bushes, held my hand out to the bird, and let it perch on my outstretched fingers. The mother bird squawked at me. That got my neighbor's attention, and she squawked at me, too. I still got to hold the bird for a few precious seconds, before I had to go, dodging an angry mother bird as I left the bushes.

I checked on my fledgling friend every day before my neighbor arrived home from work. One day I saw a cat pounce on the little bird. I ran as fast as I could, screaming as loudly as I could, and chased the cat away. I was furious. When I knelt down to pick up the bird, my heart almost stopped. Its feathers were wet, it was trembling, and scared. Then I saw blood on its body and feared for its life. I took the little guy home and called the shelter. I was determined to save my little friend.

I was required to register the bird at Wildlife Rescue before I could get antibiotics for the bird. I administered the medicine and food with a small syringe. I had to open its little beak and squirt the liquid into its mouth, making sure that he didn't choke. He acted as though I was his mother.

The next step in the recovery of my patient was to get it a companion so it wouldn't imprint on me. Wildlife Rescue supplied me with a baby cowbird for that purpose. Someone had brought it to the shelter after it had fallen out of its nest. I nursed them both for about a month. After the initial excitement, I settled into the enormous task of mothering at only nine years old. I had to make sure that I fed them every hour during the day. My mom helped me, but I did most of the feedings.

After my part was finished, I took them to an aviary where they could move more freely and get used to life in the wild. This was the last stage of recovery, before being released. Each different species of birds required a different type of care, even a different type of aviary, so people in our community offered special locations to cater to different bird species. Wildlife Rescue coordinated a network of recovery aviaries around the community for this purpose.

Because towhees feed on the ground, they are easy targets for cat attacks. Once I found a towhee that had escaped from a cat, but sustained a broken wing in the process. I had to learn a tough lesson. If a bird is not releasable, the Wildlife Rescue has to put it out of its misery. The method is swift: the bird is placed in a container filled with CO₂; the bird just lies down and dies peacefully. Peaceful or not, killing anything was almost beyond my comprehension.

I had to adapt quickly—my feelings and the larger conceptual order of things had to come into balance. I found out that part of the care for an injured bird is to determine if it could ultimately survive in nature. Of course, as a little girl, I wanted to keep all of the birds alive as pets, but that wasn't permissible. It isn't legal to keep wild birds as pets, and it isn't ethical either. The towhee would never be tame so it wouldn't lead a normal life as a pet. I knew the rationale, but I wanted to keep it anyway. I had to turn my little bird with the broken wing over to Wildlife Rescue for disposal. It was a hard reality for me to accept.

I really don't know where my love of birds began. I was connecting with nature, to be sure, but my obsession with birds was more than that; it was my passion. When I went to Disneyland at an early age and saw the Tiki Birds, my passion was fanned even more. Mine was not like one of those childhood fantasies that disappears; it has stayed with me.

The elementary school I attended, Peninsula School in Menlo Park, California, had a wooded campus which I explored a lot. When I was seven, two of my classmates and I used to walk around the school and look under rocks to

find creepy, crawly things. I couldn't imagine that happening anywhere except Peninsula. On one of these expeditions, we found a dead robin. We wondered what we could do with it. I got the idea to stuff it so it would look like it did when it was alive. My friends liked that idea, so we went to our science teacher for advice. Our teacher had taken a course on creating study skins for scientific research, so she was a good resource. It was a long way from a taxidermy mount, but we didn't know the difference at our young age.

We had an activities hour each day in which we could work with clay, weave, do art projects, work with wood, or work on a project of our choice. Rachel and I spent the next two weeks of activity hours preparing and stuffing the bird. Each day we did a little more work and then put the skin back in the refrigerator in preparation for the next day. It didn't look much like a bird when it was done. The skin had started to decompose and lots of its feathers had fallen out. But we were proud of our work. Rachel and I took turns caring for it at our houses after we finished our work. Peninsula encouraged our interests. I enjoyed science and made good use of the opportunities provided by the school to dissect a shark, a fetal pig, and a frog. Still, I enjoyed stuffing birds most.

Working with the robin sparked my interest in taxidermy—the science of stuffing and mounting animals. While Rachel went on to other interests, I took on taxidermy with a passion. It wasn't long before I was experimenting with wire supports to make my mounts stand erect. A local nature reserve hired me to mount birds that had died on their property. My mother insisted that I get formal training if I was going to do mounts for others. She found a local professional taxidermist who was tickled to take on a young, enthusiastic apprentice. He showed me the proper techniques. In turn, I got him interested in doing free projects for local nature centers—it gave him a community outlet for his talents and a break from mounting heads for trophy hunters.

Somehow the penguin caretakers at the San Francisco Zoo got my name and hired me for a project. Aggressive sea gulls were eating most of the pen-

guins' food at the zoo. This made it an expensive operation, given all the antibiotics and nutritional additives that penguins required. My job was to take a dead sea gull and stuff it to look dead. Gulls make a distress cry when they see a dead or injured gull. The warning cry causes them to fly away. It worked!

The zoo's newsletter reported the problem. It quoted the zoo keeper as crediting a local twelve-year-old girl for the solution. Then, I began getting calls from local elementary schools requesting me to make presentations. The teachers wanted someone close to their students' ages to stimulate interest in science. I took my egg collection, my nests, study skins, and diagrams into the classrooms. Word spread and I started getting similar calls from other elementary schools, scouts, and nature clubs. My collection grew; I added an owl skull. The owl has a bone plate that supports its eye; it almost looks like a pair of binoculars and gives the owl a panoramic view. The children were intrigued. At first, the children swarmed me with their questions, especially second graders. I had to learn to have them hold their questions until I was finished with my formal presentation. During this period, I was making ten dollars an hour mounting local birds for the Environmental Volunteers, a local docent training program.

One of my favorite nature spots was only a few blocks from my home. It was a ninety acre sanctuary on which St. Patrick's Catholic Seminary was located. The church used the building as a study retreat in which to train priests and nuns; I used the sanctuary to hone my skills as an amateur ornithologist. I remember going there as a child with my brother and our golden retriever; the grass was so tall I couldn't see over it. Years later as I walked home from Peninsula School, I would walk through the seminary grounds each day. The majority of my life-list of birds came from these walks—Goshawks, Dusky Flycatchers, Vireos, Hermit Warblers, Screech Owls, Red-Tailed Hawks, and Kestrels. Sometimes I would sit quietly and write in my journal.

I am sitting under the shade of a giant oak. The morning sky is beautiful.
I breathe in the crisp, clear spring air. Above me is a nest of bluebirds.

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I've been watching the nest since the babies were small. Now, they are almost grown. I hear a sharp twittering. The mother bluebird has just kicked the baby out of the nest! It flutters back, confused.

She pecks at him to force him out again. How terrible! I sympathize with him. One day, you just get kicked out of your warm nest where you've been raised and nurtured. Your parents decide you're old enough and boom!, you're kicked out. Then I think about my own home situation and the stupid fights I have with my parents—curfews and such. Maybe it's not so bad.

The little blue bird flutters back into my brook of gentle thoughts; he lands on a branch of a tree just under the rising sun. In this serene setting, he peacefully preens his feathers. "Peacefully preens his feathers?!" I think, as my thoughts awaken to what has just happened. "Peaceful?" I wonder, after the little guy has just been kicked out? Maybe that's the difference between wildlife and people. Birds see life and death in simple ways we cannot comprehend. Never will you see a bird grieve or be swarmed with emotions. The baby bird is on his own now—free.

Today is not much different than yesterday for the bluebird, only a slight change in instincts. Follow the force saying "search for food on your own" instead of "gape for momma bird." Just another day in the life of the species.

I am flying over the brook of gentle thoughts. It quietly laughs at me as it trickles down and parts the trees. A breeze blows across my face. Everything is so beautiful from here. A great view of the valley. I am flying. Wind rushes by. I just believe in me. The view is so good. I can see my family from here. Everything is beautiful from here.

I remember how horrified I was the first time I watched the soil being tilled at the seminary. Nature has its own way of managing dry grasses, but tiller blades make deep cuts into the ground, unearthing and killing gopher

snakes. I witnessed whole populations of reptiles being eradicated. They were vital links in the food chain.

Still, the seminary grounds were my place to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. There, I could find peace. It was my place to commune with nature, to watch the sun set, and watch the animals in their natural ecosystem. The observations that I made contributed to my knowledge base. I felt the land; it was part of me. One day I was sitting under an oak, the sun was setting, my journal was at my side. I was startled by the loud sound of a Peregrine Falcon diving straight toward the ground just a few feet behind me. Its folded body sliced the air—it was practicing its **stoop** for prey. The falcon was so close to me that, when I turned to look, I could clearly see the colors of its wings, body, and tail. The black markings on its face stood out like a mask. It dropped straight down and recovered without hitting the ground; then it resumed flight. I was amazed that it could change directions so abruptly and fly so close to the tree tops.

When the seminary was damaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the church decided to sell some of its land to pay for the repairs. To cover the cost, they chose to sell most of their land, which was prime real estate for developers. Local environmental groups were priced out of the bidding by rich investors, who purchased the land. It was the beginning of the end for my place of solace.

The proposed development called for a gated community with large, expensive homes. The project required city council approval of the use permit, building permits, and zoning changes. Big developers, big business, and big money, largely from outside our community, supported the subdivision. The neighbors, who didn't want more population density, more traffic and less open space, opposed it and persisted in attending city council meetings, collecting signatures, and drafting an initiative. A major battle ensued.

Supporters and protesters took their positions at the city council meetings held to discuss the proposal. I was surprised that only two or three people spoke in favor of the subdivision, though. I knew most of the people who ar-

gued against the project. Even though more people lined up on our side of the issue, the city council seemed to be favoring development. Our cause was beginning to look like a lost cause. I had one idea to fight the development; it was a long shot, but it seemed reasonable to me.

I knew that the Peregrine Falcon, which I had seen on the seminary grounds, was endangered; and I knew that endangered species habitat was protected by law. I had met only one other person, an older man and an amateur ornithologist, who had seen the falcon. I talked to him and he agreed to support my observation at the council meeting.

I requested an official Environmental Impact Report and read it carefully. I was surprised to find that it didn't fully represent the bird populations, or even list all the present species. I had counted more than ninety different species of birds on the seminary grounds, the report listed fewer than twenty. In parts of the report, some species were mentioned twice—once by names in current usage and a second time by names that were no longer used by the scientific community. To this thirteen-year-old, the Environmental Impact Report seemed to be a pretty sloppy piece of reporting.

A final meeting was called to hear the community's concerns before the subdivision was to be approved. One council member, a neighbor of mine, had asked me before the proceedings, "Why are all these people talking and wasting their time at our meetings? You know that they don't have a chance to win this issue." He may have been right about the eventual outcome, but I wasn't ready to concede. I was disgusted at his cavalier attitude. He dismissed the environmental position without even trying to understand it. I signed up to make a presentation at the next meeting.

My family and friends went to the meeting and so did members of local environmental groups. Again, I was surprised that so few people advocated for approval. Once again, I didn't recognize them as people I had seen in Menlo Park. I knew many of the people who spoke against it. One protester cited studies in which sick people healed faster in a serene environment. He

asserted that our community needed more open space for the health of its people, and that it had already reached a critical population density.

The city council members looked annoyed. It was discouraging for me to watch them. One was tapping his pencil, some leafed through papers, and others seemed bored with the environmentalist's pleas. The council members didn't even look up at some of the presenters.

I heard my name called; my stomach erupted like a flock of partridges. I looked around. The place looked like a courtroom; official flags stood at the front of the room; council members, mostly men in business suits, sat stuffy in a semicircle of padded wooden chairs, as if ready to circle the wagons in case of attack. My nervousness evaporated—the experience was pure passion for me. I walked to the podium and delivered my speech. I really put myself into it; I said what I had to say. My friend Rebecca told me later that when I asserted, “Endangered species habitat is protected by law!” councilmen came out of their slumber and took notice. I pointed out that the Environmental Impact Report was inadequate, sloppily researched, and had made no mention of the Peregrine Falcons. I went on to address the specific points of the report. As I turned to take my seat, I got a big roar of applause. I couldn't help but smile as I walked back to my seat.

Shortly after I delivered my plea, there was an intermission. A man in a business suit came over to me and asked, “Where can I see your falcons? On what part of the grounds do they live?” I was thrilled that someone else was interested in my passion, but something made me suspicious of this stranger. I asked him who he was. His reply was that he was a nature lover and that he “favored the land.” He said that he lived in Atherton, a wealthy community nearby, and saw hawks in his yard all the time.

I gave him a vague description of the location. I was naive, also. After the intermission, I noted that he sat with the group of developers and their lawyers favoring the subdivision. Then, I learned that he was the primary developer! My stomach sunk to my feet. I felt that I may have betrayed my Peregrine friends. This event left me very distrustful of well-dressed strang-

ers. After the meeting, I went back to him and told him other places to look for the birds. I wanted to throw him off, but the act seemed futile; the damage was done. I worried for several days.

On the bright side, my speech caused a delay in the approval. Because of the potential for damaging endangered species habitat, the city was required to hire a wildlife biologist to investigate my assertion. I got to accompany him to the seminary. I took him to the site where I often saw Peregrines. We didn't see any, but the biologist said that, in this case, an actual sighting was not critical to his report. When we parted, I asked for his address and requested a copy of the Environmental Impact Report when it was completed. He expressed surprise at my request and commented on my maturity. I felt good about how I was conducting myself.

The biologist's report to the City Council concluded that the seminary grounds were not considered to be a critical habitat to the Peregrine population; it was not the birds' breeding grounds. Since the birds were migratory, the seminary was simply their wintering grounds; they could move elsewhere. As I thought about the dwindling habitat in my community, "elsewhere" seemed pretty remote.

The City Council released their final draft, stating that they had addressed the public's concerns and concluded that there was not sufficient reason to block the proposed subdivision. They approved the land use and building permits and allowed the entire project to go through as proposed.

Months later, the former seminary grounds were transformed by heavy equipment. A giant wall was constructed to conceal the million-dollar homes that were being built. The wall isolated the houses from our larger community while creating a rift in the middle of our community. Today two controlled gates keep the general public from intruding on a spider web of private cul de sacs with manicured lawns that exist inside. The native oaks and native grasses are gone forever. The dead trees, which were wonderful niches for Acorn Woodpecker and other critters that live in tree cavities, or hawks that sit on big open branches looking for prey are gone forever also.

The next little crop of girls like me will be relegated to cement and asphalt playgrounds to help them prepare their minds for the inevitable onslaught of so called **civilization**.

I visited the site during construction. I took my binoculars with me in hopes of catching one last glimpse of any bird-life that might remain. A guard approached and asked brusquely, “What are you doing with that camera? Are you here to take pictures?”

“No,” I told him. “These are my binoculars, I am just looking for birds.” He put my name on a report form and said that if my business was done, I should leave. I thought to myself that this guard must have gotten his education in a pretty sterile concrete-and-asphalt environment.

One small field is left near the renovated St. Patrick's Seminary; there are no trees on it; but it's like money-in-the-bank to the church. At one million dollars per acre, they can rest well. I don't rest so well as I pass the new development—all I can see is a high, colored wall. The two gates leading into the development each have twenty-four-hour-a-day guards. I will never see inside those walls again; I really don't want to; the sight would tear up my heart.

I needed to move on. Education, it is said, is the key to success. But education comes in many forms—some more inspirational than others. I had the good fortune to attend a school that did inspire, one that embraced children and made them a part of the school. It was a place where the excitement of learning something new was a bright and joyous experience. Learning didn't simply appear in books. It sprung from the everyday life experiences of the students and teachers who share them.

I am a Peninsula School graduate. It is hard to explain what that means to someone who has only experienced a traditional school. Individuality, love, compassion, and a joyful environment can produce amazing results. I cherish every memory I have of Peninsula. It brought out my creativity and uniqueness. It gave me an opportunity to work with others; it gave me a

chance to have some of my needs and ideas carried out. When I am loved and accepted, my energies expand. In a stressful learning environment, all my energy is absorbed in fighting routine and in coping with stress. In a safe home-base, I can expand my energies into interests, community work, and creativity. Good schools could work miracles for society.

Peninsula school really helped nurture my passion for the outdoors. It's the kind of school where you can squish your toes in the mud, or stuff birds—if you are me. Teachers become buddies, not unapproachable authorities. My science teacher—my close friend—encouraged my passion. I appreciate just how much the staff nurtured my creativity. ***They inspired me and then got out of the way—so I could shine.*** Unfortunately, the school only went to the eighth grade.

I braced myself for the public schools and went to Menlo-Atherton High School, about a mile from my house. “MA” was a school similar to most other high schools in the area. I don't really remember my freshman year. I never really opened myself up to thinking. I just passed the school year away sitting in class passively doing homework. It was a non-event in my life. Sophomore year was my ***poser era***, a period in which I created an image of something that I am not. It was also my more rebellious year; I was bored and wanted some action. Near the start of the year, I decided to see what I would feel like if I got stoned. At lunch, I'd hang out with the parking-lot people, who talked about dumb things like how many beers they could chug. I put on my I-don't-give-a-shit act so that I would fit into the crowd. When we weren't in class, we were smoking dope on a dirt trail near the baseball diamond.

I was just a follower that year. I was following something that wasn't me. I was getting nowhere, like a rudderless ship. I still longed for Peninsula. My wish was to have one more Peninsula day sharing love with all my old classmates. I had to accept that it was gone and I'd never get it back. This wasn't easy for me. The combination of my loss and the lack of fulfillment at MA fueled my frustration and anger.

In March, I tried LSD. A whole new world opened up. In April, I took it three times in six days. A new world of **bullshit** opened up, I realized. I only took it one other time; then I stopped. By the time my sophomore year was almost over, I realized I wasn't pursuing myself; I wanted that to change; I knew I wanted to be me. That's when I stopped smoking dope.

I started dressing in my own way; I started acting like myself, instead of like the person I thought others wanted me to be. I rearranged my personality. I no longer wanted to be isolated from people: I wanted true friends; and I wanted self-identity. My mom sensed my need. She didn't want me to go back to MA for my junior year. That became a certainty the day she picked me up at school and a car load of kids drove by shooting guns in the air.

We began our search for another school. A family friend recommended The Learning Community. He had close ties with families whose children had had positive experiences there. Also, we knew that Paki, a former Peninsula School student, was returning for his second year there. We checked it out, and I applied. I felt like a fifteen-year-old lost waif when Gary interviewed me that summer; fortunately, we liked each other. I longed for the peer relationship that I had experienced with teachers at Peninsula, and thought I could have this kind of relationship with Gary. Besides, sitting in a desk for fifty minutes while some teacher filled me with useless information didn't appeal to me. Working with a group of twenty-five kids to develop our studies together did appeal to me. I enrolled for the fall term.

It wasn't until after our three-day Venture Retreat, three weeks into the year, that I felt secure with the group. Bonding with the group and seeing how much we could accomplish when we were all working together really helped me. After that I began to understand Paki's intensity to live up to his commitments. He would come by my house early in the morning to give me a ride to school. I would say, "Hey, Paki, we could leave later and still get there on time." But Paki always insisted on leaving early. After Venture, I realized that it really wasn't much of a sacrifice for me to be on time and keep my commitments. I started to feel better about myself. Then later on, when I started driving my own car, I left early as a matter of course. If I happened

to get to school fifteen minutes early, I could just hang out in the room and get to know Janna or Joe better. Still, it took the first semester to acclimate. I just took things in.

I loved the way Learning Community functioned. Here was an approach to education that seemed to erase the separation between school and life. It created a classroom bond that made me feel at home. It felt like a progression beyond what I had at Peninsula. Gary helped us understand how our personalities functioned, and worked with us to fine-tune our group dynamics. He helped us see that we had many dimensions within our being—physical, emotional, intellectual, societal, environmental, and mystical. He said that a basic challenge in life is to understand ourselves as a whole person. I remember thinking about how confused I got when I only viewed myself through a small window. I longed to be able to see myself in a larger sense.

My experience wasn't perfect. Work started piling up and I felt overwhelmed. I had to create and fulfill my study contract. Resistance set in, I began to feel hesitant about The Learning Community—afraid I'd been brainwashed or something. Although some of my optimism subsided, a new feeling of knowing myself didn't. My hesitancy toward the program went away as I discovered that I was being challenged to move beyond the familiar and away from past, limited definitions of myself.

Since my enrollment in The Learning Community, I have created a path for myself, and have discovered more of who I am. When I got lazy and wanted to stop, The Learning Community kept me going. When I caught myself slipping off the path into self-denial, I fought back. I couldn't turn my back on what was being shown to me. The Learning Community taught me about myself, about education, and self motivation. The psychology seminars opened doors into what I hide inside and defend against. I learned that human beings are similar in their resistance, and I learned ways to overcome my resistance. And I got perspective; Gary told me something that I will never forget: "There is a time in the lives of most people when they think they know everything. But as time passes and they find out there is more,

they come to the realization that the more they know, the more they find they don't know.”

There was so much I didn't know about myself, although I was making some pretty important discoveries. I learned that ***no one is alone***. I don't have to be. I can choose to make myself feel alone. From the honesty and openness I have seen in each person during Venture and the “interpersonals” and from my own experiences, I know that I am not alone. We are all in this world together, and we can help each other.

I've learned how to make a commitment, and I realize that ***anything can be achieved if one commits***. There have been some things in my life that fell through because of my lack of commitment. In The Learning Community, I've seen commitment really make a difference.

I learned that ***I will succeed if I persist***. At the beginning of the year when I was feeling stressed, I didn't know what to think. I almost let myself fall again. I realized that we all have our ups and downs, and, if we persist, eventually things will come around. I saw this happen during our Venture Retreat and during SIMSOC (the Simulated Society experience we shared). When all seemed lost, our group hung together and pulled through.

Also, I learned that ***education is the key***. At MA, there were times I thought high school was the end of the world. It wasn't. I've come to like school so much more since I've taken charge of my education. I've been able to do things that benefit me, things that are worthwhile. Books are one way of learning, but there are so many more ways to learn, ways that aren't available in regular school. Life is learning: we learn from mistakes; we learn from being together. Most importantly, we learn through experience by working together.

It wasn't until the second year that I really started to take initiative and to help facilitate the group's discussions. It was a real bonus to be joined by my childhood friend Adrienne—my butterfly partner. We could share the experience and she was a great motivator. I started to blossom as I applied my-

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self. I took the next step, to make school the dream that I knew it could be. I wanted to help make something beautiful and I knew that if I applied myself and our group applied itself, we could succeed.

As the year progressed, many things stood out. Our group made a decision to open up our schedule one day every two weeks and engage in community service work. The time gave me an opportunity to get back into the elementary classroom again.

I wanted to share important lessons that I had learned during the year: that in order for the world and its environment not to crumble and die, we all have to make commitments and modify our lifestyles to achieve the world we want. For the first few weeks, I was invited to teach a third-grade class. I took some of my taxidermy and bird skulls and taught them about different beaks and feeding habits. I wanted to teach more. I let kids know that they could make a difference—locally and globally. They could set up bird baths and feeders to help local bird populations. They could get their families to recycle and to be environmentally responsible to help the global environment.

The light of enthusiasm is bright and alive in kids. On our nature walks, the kids always gathered around me with bright eyes, personal stories and continual questions. Their lives seeped into me and gave me more power to want to help our world. Helping the environment is the most important issue facing our world today. We can make a difference with the help of dedicated and compassionate children.

One of the speakers that Learning Community invited into our classroom came from Magic, a local human-ecology collective. He invited us to help a group of volunteers plant and care for oak trees in the local foothills each week. He explained that the foothills had been grazed for over one hundred years. Each spring, the young acorn sprouts were eaten by the cows. Consequently, the foothills have old growth oak stands, but no new growth. This condition, if it continued unchecked, would result in the elimination of the oak forest. Another impact on the ecosystem, was the one-way flow of nu-

trients. As a cows eat the grasses, some of the energy is burned for the animal to live and some of it is added to their weight of the animal. When the animal is slaughtered for food, the ecosystem is depleted by the amount of energy burned. The cow is not an efficient food system.

I enjoyed the physical exertion of planting and caring for trees and welcomed learning about the environment. Also, I profited greatly from my interactions with the Magic community. Here were seven people living in one house, with one seldom-used car and a bountiful garden. They were fully dedicated to a sustainable lifestyle. They took so little from the community, and they gave back so much: planting trees, leading workshops, and making presentations to the city council on vital issues. Each week they opened their home to the community, inviting people to eat food, to dance, and to share in the joy of living. I was inspired.

Magic also shared its resources. One of the members of the Magic community gave me a book about biodiversity entitled ***Shattering: Food, Politics, and Genetic Diversity***, by Cary Fowler and Pat Monney. The book focused on the food system, especially on the plants that we raise to eat. Years ago, the range of foods grown by farmers was so broad that no single pest could devastate the food supply that we humans depend on for survival. There was enough diversity for species to be able to survive in a changing environment. Today, that broad diversity has dwindled down into a narrow line of specially-bred vegetables, with many of their diverse cousins long gone. I realized that lack of diversity poses a real threat to the human species.

A friend at Magic taught me about Seed Saver Exchange, an organization that grows and maintains a broad selection of grain, herb, and flower seeds for distribution on the planet. They are dedicated to helping maintain plant diversity at a time when global agricultural practices have moved toward single high-yield crops. I began to learn about environmentalism on a large scale.

Also, I began to understand how our day-to-day living, our lifestyle, affects the environment. I was beginning to extend my interest in saving birds to

saving the planet. What our lifestyle supports or how it impacts the Earth is vitally important. I applied the understanding of commitment that I learned in the Learning Community to the larger issues of lifestyle and sustainability. We **can** do something to help save the environment; our contribution is real and immediate. We can conserve in the way we live our lives—day-to-day. We are the true **birds in the nest** and the nest is our environment. We can educate ourselves to clean up our own nest and put it back in order.

I took my new awareness back to the classroom. I offered to teach an SIS—a student initiated seminar—on biodiversity and sustainability. I started by sharing my knowledge about birds. I brought in a live American Kestrel, who sat through my presentation eyeing the class, and a stuffed owl. The Learning Community students huddled around my skull collection and wanted to touch everything. In some ways their enthusiasm was like that of the second-grade class; They asked questions like “Did you stuff that owl by yourself?” I felt supported. They showed a deeper respect for what I did. I didn't even mind their calling me **bird woman**. As with my second graders, I had to remember to defer all their bird questions until my presentation was complete.

Next, I shared a paper, which I had received when I attended a summer institute sponsored by the School For Field Studies in Montana. The paper summarized the **Caring For the Earth** conference on sustainable development held in Switzerland. I shared the key point made by scientists at the conference that genetic diversity is essential for species survival in the ecosystem and for planetary evolution.

I wanted the class to know that the ecosystem is vulnerable to sudden environmental changes, that we have lost many varieties of food crops, and that we are causing changes much more rapidly than organisms can adapt to them. If we do not take care to preserve biodiversity, we create an unhealthy system. We have made and are making such a system on the planet now. It is a system with narrow and specialized features, one in which sudden environmental change can result in the disastrous loss of a crucial species. We as

humans depend on this highly specialized system and we are vulnerable, especially in our single species food crops.

I told my classmates how I have begun to look at my total lifestyle. I gave concrete examples of how my daily choices contribute to the development of a viable environment: riding my bicycle instead of driving in cars, eating organically-grown food free of pesticides, putting on a sweater when I am cold instead of turning on the heat, and staying physically active in nature to maintain direct contact with the Earth. I explained how the passion that I feel now has grown from a childhood desire to protect and nurture the wild birds to include larger environmental concerns. I have developed a new lifestyle and a new consciousness.

I have become aware of the impact of my life on the planet. This awareness, along with my example, helps me to educate others so that they can be aware of their impact on the planet. We must each do our share in caring for the Earth. Our lives and the lives of generations to come depend on us. We must each become protectors of the birds **and** the nest.

