

Natural Phenomenon: a conference about earth knowledge

“Natural Phenomenon”, what a title for a conference! And what a phenomenon it was. With a line up of speakers from around the globe, not to mention the magical aura of the Wild Woods, we were in for two and a half days of environmental invigoration. Of course this review is only a glimpse of the magic that occurred, but it was a weekend full of heart and brain food that I would recommend to all who love to frolic in nature.

The Wild Woods is situated approximately 20 minutes drive out of Whangarei, New Zealand, and is the play space for the children who attend Cherry Daly’s early childhood centre Open Spaces. The environment was the perfect setting for an all outdoors conference. I was fortunate enough to be there with three of my like-minded and thoughtful colleagues who made the experience all the more wild! On arrival it was straight into organising our five-star accommodation (a three lady/one man sized tent – perfect). We arrived just in time to help with the final touches of setting up which included putting up marquees and giant flags. My friend Jonny (who was also one of the talented speakers) and I were put on giant flag making. We were asked to take the farm truck down the long windy driveway to collect some bamboo to thread the flags on to. Here I was thinking we would go gather a pile of neatly prepared bamboo poles and makes some flags, easy. But no, of course the essence of this conference was about connection and the process, and the immense satisfaction they produce when they are in synergy with one another. So the hunting and gathering began, hunting down

a bamboo bush and chopping down the tallest ones we could find, mullet off any leaves or imperfections and thread on our flags. We then had to distribute the flags along the fence line of the driveway. With my gumboots on and my sleeves rolled up, I was immediately invigorated by my first experience at Natural Phenomenon.

As the weekend rolled on, so did the inspiration. Keynote speaker Rusty Keeler, a wise guru from Ithica (USA) discussed the potential of natural playscapes and the importance of being in relationship with those in your local community. This meant thinking about your current outdoor environments and how you could incorporate the materials of the community to link children to the wider world around them and connect them to a place of belonging. He also shared his visions of developmentally appropriate environments which included hills, pathways, sculpture, hidden nooks, fountains, and musical elements. Ken Finch (President & Founder of Green Hearts Institute, USA) highlighted the concerns of children constantly being exposed to adults imaginations rather than having the freedom to access their own. Through this message he revealed the honesty of children “damaging” nature throughout their interactions; however Finch suggests it is through these nature experiences children learn compassion, concern and care for respecting and loving the environment around them.

Each workshop was situated somewhere unique and special surrounded by the gifts of papatuanuku (the earth mother). Sitting on my wood stump stool I

sat in appreciation of Anna Gentry, a woman who I believe is an artist to humanity. Her words resonated in my soul, which was completely relevant as the workshop was about soul lessons. Our discussions embraced the notion of finding balance between our personality (the head) and our soul (the heart). Anna discussed the necessity of children being exposed to all the elements to create balanced individuals, believing each element aligns different parts of our being: Fire (spiritual self), Air (mental self), Water (emotional self) and Earth (physical self). By being aware of each element we begin to recognise the gifts each element has to offer and how they complement each other. By understanding and respecting the elements we can support children to become aware of how nature can sooth, calm, regulate, excite and ignite curiosity, wonder and awe, personalising nature to create a meaningful life long relationship with mother earth.

My second workshop gave me a personalised relationship with mother earth which involved mushing clay, sand and straw between my toes to make cob. The objective was to create a storytelling area in the woods for the children. We collected rocks making them into the shape of a bench seat, covered them with cob and finished it with homemade concrete. A mosaic of patterns was caressed out of leaves and shells to give the final touches. This was a real highlight for me, there is nothing quite like squishing raw earthy ingredients between your toes and the enchantment it gives you.

There were many other workshops that were going on including building fairy houses, rescuing native seedlings, earth dancing, building outdoor play scapes, understanding therapeutic play and emotional intelligence, Nikau art and traditional flax weaving. It’s not often you get a conference that makes you feel calm in the heart, content and at peace, come check it out! 25-27 November 2011, more details next issue.

