

Nature and Eros

An Educational Process for Engaging With a Living Universe

By Kerry Brady and Brian Swimme

Abstract: *Nature and Eros* is an integral educational process offered to graduate students at the California Institute of Integral Studies. It was developed in response to the illusion operative throughout Western industrialized culture, that we are separate selves living upon the earth. Across many disciplines we are awakening to the knowledge that we are living organisms intricately woven into the ever-evolving vibrant web of life. The central aim of the *Nature and Eros* course is to initiate and support a shift in our perception of this larger web; and to activate the lived recognition of our deepest identity as an inextricable part of the cosmic unfolding that brought us forth.

Boundaries

*The universe does not
revolve around you.
The stars and planets spinning
through the ballroom of space
dance with one another
quite outside of your small life.
You cannot hold gravity
or seasons; even air and water
inevitably evade your grasp.
Why not, then, let go?*

*You could move through time
like a shark through water,
neither restless or ceasing,
absorbed in and absorbing
the native element.
Why pretend you can do otherwise?
The world comes in at every pore,
mixes in your blood before
breath releases you into
the world again. Did you think
the fragile boundary of your skin
could build a wall?*

*Listen. Every molecule is humming
its particular pitch.*

*Of course you are a symphony.
Whose tune do you think
the planets are singing
as they dance?*

~ Lynn Ungar

Nature and Eros is an integral educational process that aims to initiate a lived realization of our deepest identity as an inextricable part of the cosmic unfolding that brought us forth. The heart of the journey is a five day retreat designed to support students in discovering their authentic expression and belonging within an ever evolving earth community. From the start, the invitation is to dissolve beyond our too small sense of self into who we are in our essential nature and, from there, to open to the way life seeks to evoke us in our own becoming.

The exploration begins with the fundamental question of who we are in our deepest identity. For 13.7 billion years a single energy event has been unfolding and expressing itself first as stars and galaxies, then as solar systems with planets, and in its most recent expression as a living Earth with humans. Our inherent nature is this evolving Energy which gave birth to everything that pervades us and defines us. In the cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead, our universe is one great pulse of being, constantly flowing forth from formlessness to form and back again. The empty yet fecund void condenses down into qualities and energies where it begins to play with movement and form, expressing itself through the particularity of our bodies, with colors, sounds, tastes, feelings and impulses that emanate through each of us. This universal movement is at the root of all we see and experience, and is the very essence of who we are.

Our ancestors understood this. They knew they lived in a universe that was alive, constantly feeding and informing them through their days. Whereas they were embedded in a vibrant matrix with all of life evolving in mutual unfoldment, we have grown up in an industrial culture where nature has become the backdrop to all of our human endeavors. To our modern eyes the earth has primarily been seen as a resource bin for our human agenda. We've carried forth with our economic growth needs despite the impact on the rest of the planet. While we have seen extraordinary advances, they have come at a tremendous price. Earth's life is unraveling. We are caught in a psychic despair that leaves no sector of our souls untouched. In essence we've become alienated not only from the natural world but from our own deepest nature. We live in boxes, careen along the highway at high speeds, turn the lights on when it gets dark and, as a culture, prefer hyper-controlled and fabricated worlds such as Disneyland over anything wild. No wonder we're disoriented and dis-eased. With such a deep sense of alienation and "homesickness" we've literally forgotten where we came from. As a result, we've become blind participants in the destruction we're only recently coming to face.

We in industrial societies have lost contact with the organic impulses that guided our ancestors in each moment. Instead we have become encased in plastic, steel, drywall, brick, linoleum, and glass. Whether through the overly cognitive, abstract curricula of our schools or the exploitive processes of our economies we have learned to override our natural rhythms in order to fit into the system. As Paul Hawken recently stated, “Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would become religious overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead the stars come out every night, and we watch television.” (Paul Hawken, Commencement Address to the Class of 2009, *University of Portland, May 3rd, 2009*) As a result we have lost not only our natural relations within the Earth community but that which naturally emanates through each one of us

Nature and Eros is designed to support us in our efforts to re-attune to the innate intelligence of Life in all of its expressions – within and without. The course is an invitation to open fully to the creative impulse that’s been here since the beginning for in turning to Life we turn to the core wisdom of the universe. The aim of the journey of *Nature and Eros* is to support the recognition that we are not a lost, separate self living upon the earth but are a pulse of creative energy, intricately woven into the fabric of life. When we begin to inhabit this realization we become poised to discover more mutually enhancing ways of being and participating in the world.

This movement into a larger identity necessarily involves the deconstruction of the modern ego, sometimes referred to as the “industrial ego.” The everyday self – or ego – that drives most of our decisions is not in essence the fullness of who we are. This part of our identity does not emerge until a few years after birth and is profoundly shaped by the particular family-language-culture we grow up in, which for most of the readers of this article is modern, industrial society. This small self develops in response to that which is reflected back within the context of our individual circumstances. During our first few years, as we attune to what we need to do and be in order to survive, physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, we learn to bury many of our inherent qualities in order to fit in. As a result, the Great Self – the limitlessness of who we are at birth – closes down until, finally, we come to regard our small self as all of who we are. No matter what our individual situations, when the whole culture is caught in a particular frame it is nearly impossible, given our early impressionable nature, not to become imprisoned in this too narrow sense of identity. Given that most of us have grown up amidst the modern agenda, we come to assume that we are disconnected, private consumers in a dead world.

Contrary to what we often assume, we can not actually locate ourselves in any fixed state. We like to say “this is me” or “this is who I am and what I like” in order to pinpoint ourselves in some known context. Our essence, however, is much more mysterious than that as there is only the momentary expression of what is moving through us in any instant. The moment happens. And then it disappears, giving way to what is to come next.

We tend to get so pulled into the events and everyday “doings” of our lives that we become caught in the consumerism of the industrial ego. But we are so much more than that. The energy coursing through our bodies was only recently part of a star, our Sun. The heart of our bodies comes from animals who invented each of its molecular structures over hundreds of millions of years. Each carbon atom of our bodies required the explosion of a star. We are the work of the universe as a whole. Nothing less than the entire universe was necessary for us to take even a single breath. Each one of us is a mode of the totality.

We are more a product of nature and energy and the wild than anything else but we take our culturally conditioned “sense” of self as real. This is where the alienation begins for in coming to rely on the heavy-handed certainties of the industrial ego, we close ourselves off from the subtle impulses of nature, of our Great Self. When we believe and experience ourselves to be a “thing”, both static and separate, we begin to seek “out there” for that which will quell our inner pain. Whether it’s pleasurable experiences or material comfort, we end up desperately grabbing for that which will fill the emptiness at our center only to wonder why we are not living the full expression of who we are.

Nature and Eros moves away from the whole tendency to attempt to fill or further solidify this false sense of self. Instead, it begins with an attitude of surrender. From the start the invitation is to open to the way life itself is leading the way. A central tenet of the course is that we are less intelligent than the matrix from which we were birthed. Therefore, throughout the five days students are encouraged to play with what it is to become more permeable to the way the world seeks to awaken us to our innate impulses and place within the larger whole. Rather than attempting to “get” anything, students are encouraged to drop away from the busyness of mind and the everyday agenda of ego and open to the creative impulse that displays itself in a myriad of ways before and within them. Contrary to the form of education taking place in the traditional classroom, our lectures are secondary to the inner and outer stirrings that seek each student’s attention. The idea is not to learn a new form of ritual or to take on some previously mapped out tradition but for each person to discover *their* doorway into listening to the language of the world and to what most readily allows them to awaken to the deep hum of the universe.

The retreat itself takes place in a wilderness setting, away from the pace and structure of modern life. We “retreat” from daily structure and modern living in order to immerse ourselves in a different rhythm where we become silent and open to Life and how it seeks to penetrate us. By leaving the habits of culture and bringing ourselves to the wild we dissolve beyond our well defined edges and begin to reverberate with those beings that can’t help but live from their natural state. Within the rhythms and cycles of the natural world our domesticated walls begin to soften. Old layers peel away and that which is untamed within us begins to emerge. In lingering with the other-than-human world, we become more intimate with the enveloping life community. Rather than being thought of as “resource”, the beings themselves become “relatives”.

Throughout the retreat we engage in a variety of practices designed to lift the veil between our everyday self and the larger mysteries. Our anthropocentric lens has caused us to forget that the universe doesn't speak English but communicates in a multitude of ways that we've become deaf and mute to with our conditioned ears. Because we don't have the threat of survival pressing down on us like other beings in the wild, our senses are not as acutely attuned as other species. We utilize a very particular part of our brain in order to focus in on one thing at a time. While this enables us to develop mastery and expertise in our lives, it cuts us off from the multiple types of intelligence we are afforded, most especially that of our sensory awareness.

Our great gift as humans is that we have the capacity to fall into our senses and become fascinated and in awe with nearly anything. When we give way to this innate tendency, we avail ourselves to full bodied, sensual encounters that draw us beyond the confines of the everyday mind. In every encounter and in each moment that we are moved beyond our beliefs and opinions, the world reveals itself anew. By opening to colors and sounds and felt senses, our consciousness naturally moves out of the circular fixations of the industrial ego and allows for a more direct and immediate contact with all that is before us.

To support students in awakening to what we designate as their emerging Great Self, the retreat is designed as a back and forth flow between the personal and cosmological aspects of our nature. We are "Beings in process". As such we attempt to support students in feeling the subtle movement or pendulation that's always occurring between manifest and unmanifest aspects of our being. In that light, the practices reflect this natural "breathing": in moments it is about dissolving into the silent, empty aspect of our nature; at others it is about actively engaging with the more dynamic movement, or undercurrent, which seeks its unique expression through each one of us. While the retreat carries a certain structure, it is simultaneously organic in the way it follows the rhythm and movement of the group as a whole, drawing, simultaneously, from what is evoked through the particular ecosystem we find ourselves in.

Below is a more detailed description of the heart of what defines *Nature and Eros*:

Each day begins in **silence**. From our night time dreams and inner stirrings, we flow into the day with open receptivity. Rather than pushing ourselves into a set agenda we drop away from our everyday way of relating and allow the world to find us. As David Whyte says, "In that first hardly noticed moment to which you wake, coming back to this life from the other more secret, moveable and frighteningly honest world where everything began, there is a small opening into the new day which closes the moment you begin your plans." By falling into the silence within and around us we return to the fertile ground of Being where all can arise anew. Silence allows for a more natural rhythm and permeability that supports us in discovering what it is to listen and respond to our organic impulses rather than from our conditioned way of moving through the world.

During **listening meditations** we turn our awareness to “outer” sounds – the wind rustling through the trees, the shrill of a hawk or the silence of the night sky as well as to “inner” sounds – our heart beat or felt sensations or a feeling of stillness. By grounding our awareness through the senses we drop away from the busyness of mind and our own small world and discover ourselves within a larger community of beings. In addition, we learn to experience the naturally fluid way consciousness itself moves: in one moment we might be drawn to a movement or a sound or an inner sensation; in another we might rest in silence or the sense of space around us. Without needing to steer the experience, we come into a direct and immediate relationship with all of Life and to what it is to give way to following life’s lead rather than our own agenda.

Weaved throughout the experiential practices are daily **explorations into the nature of the universe**. Such dialogues, we have found, provide a framework that allows for a deeper surrender to the process. During these discussions, we draw on the discoveries of evolutionary science in order to re-member our larger place and to discover the inherent movement within our own deepest nature. By looking to the many “powers” that permeate the cosmos we apprentice ourselves to the way the universe itself moves. The world – the universe – is constantly groping, always moving according to what works. The way of evolution is to be crafty and to drop a strategy if it’s not working. As Thomas Berry liked to express it: “the universe is neither determined nor random but creative.” What would it be, then, to apprentice ourselves directly to the universe – to discover what it is to move from alienation to intimate connection and from an individualized agenda to creative participation with the ever evolving living web of life? When we look to the other-than-human world, we come to see that everything co-evolves together. Each being is molded by the multivalent communities to which it belongs. In a forest, each species has a very particular set of requirements that get met in a way that’s mutually enhancing for other species of the community. The microbial species, the insects, the fungi, the plants, the animals are all tied in through one great conversation. They are in a chemical conversation, sharing nutrients and the soil, as well as a three dimensional space relationship, continually adapting and adjusting with the shifting environment. In lingering in a place without false borders mysterious things happen which carry us beyond our own previously defined edges.

By listening to the **language of birds** we open our awareness to the community of beings around us. When we tune into the variety of sounds and communications that birds exhibit we heighten our sensory perception, becoming more sensitive to our surroundings, and open to the reality that they live in a very different world from our own. Through our human centered lens our default position is to imagine that birds live in *our* world. But they are not in our world. They have a very different sort of consciousness than we do. They see and experience life through a very different set of perceptions than our own. In listening to their language – from pure singing to family communications to “alarm” cries – we are often propelled into a world far beyond our own small lens. Attuning to their calls opens us as well to the wider landscape around us for they are not

random in their communication. They cannot afford to be. On the contrary, their voices tell exactly what is going on around them at any one moment. As naturalist Jon Young points out, the Apache knew when a white man was coming up to two miles out simply by tuning into what the birds were saying. If they and every other being know there's a language to tune into, we can learn to listen too. At the very least, we might fall into wonder when taking in the rapturous songs they express for no apparent reason other than pure gratitude.

Each day there is ample time for students to **“wander in the wild”**. On their excursions students are supported in learning what it is to be spoken to and called by life. Whether through a gut sense, a feeling of intrigue or a heart felt longing, the invitation is to practice giving way to where they are drawn. Anytime their mind comes in to steer the way, they are encouraged to turn their attention to their sensory awareness and to the next thing that draws them forward: the sun piercing through the leaves, a hawk's call or the beckoning stillness of the pond before them. Once drawn in, the experience unfolds on its own as there is simply receptivity to the momentary movement and what is revealed along the way.

The invitation is to dwell, patiently, in the world's time -- to feel what it is to glide as a hawk in the thermals or to have roots that extend deeply into the earth or to feel oneself as tall grass, bending and dancing with the wind. While “wandering” students are encouraged to pierce beyond the tendency to simply see green wallpaper as they walk through the wild in order to come into relationship with the actual community of beings around them. The suggestion is to stop and linger when called by a particular being: to get curious about such things as what makes it unique, how it has adapted to the world around it and what particularly draws them to it. In order to get to know a plant we don't need to be able to identify and name it. Rather we can utilize our curiosity to discover its nature by looking at such things as whether it produces berries or pods, or is thorny or fuzzy to protect itself, or is tasty or colorful or sweet smelling in order to help it pollinate. By lingering in our curiosity our objectivity dissolves and we avail ourselves to be touched through the encounter.

The “moment” of being touched can be quite ordinary when it occurs. In fact, it is often so “ordinary” that we don't tend to acknowledge it as it usually occurs below the level of the mind and requires a certain sensitivity to even recognize it. We often negate such experiences, saying something like “it's just my imagination”. After an emotionally moving encounter with a Redwood, for example, a person might rationalize the occurrence by saying she was simply projecting onto it. Or, on the other hand, she might project a vast meaning on it, keeping it ever so slightly on the intellectual level, thus separating herself from the heart of the moment. With mutual evocation, however, we are not simply imposing ourselves onto the “Other” – whether the Other takes the form of a person, the sun at dawn, or an enchanting piece of music. Nor are we simply feeling the Other inherently as it is. *Rather, we experience what comes from the union itself.* The “conversations” draw out the individuality of each being so we simultaneously come to

know something about ourselves as well as the Other. By allowing ourselves to become taken and absorbed in such a way, we “lose” ourselves in order to *find* ourselves and re-discover the larger community of which we’re a part.

We’ve all experienced what it is to be evoked through the variety of people we encounter in our lives. Through such interactions we feel and express different aspects of ourselves based on what is called forth through each encounter. Similarly, different environments induce certain feelings based on how we uniquely respond to the particular vibration or setting we’re in. The truth is that *everything evokes*. Whether it is through the wren’s call, a dream image, or the vast silence of the night sky, the universe whispers to us in every moment. How then can we make ourselves more permeable to that which lies before us? How might we open to the feel of the sun’s rays on our skin or the coyote that stands motionless in our gaze? How can we discover the negligible parts of ourselves that seek activation by the ten thousand things themselves?

Evolutionary science has revealed is that everything in existence is here because of having been brought about through some previous events and relationships. Similarly we have latent qualities within us that are negligible or muted until they are evoked through an encounter with an “Other”. When something captures our attention, our whole being turns toward that thing, if even for an instant. Prior to our conceptualizations, there is a resonance that occurs between us and that which we’re in momentary relationship with. Within such deeply engaged moments lies the potential to be truly changed for it is then that we let go, even temporarily, of our need to hold ourselves together in the usual way. As we follow the call of the Other, we are carried into alluring yet dangerous (for the ego) territory for in falling we become lost in the encounter. We call it *Nature and Eros* because it is an erotic way of being – always slightly beyond our control, ever new and mysterious. When we allow ourselves to melt into the beckoning glance before us, we open ourselves to something greater. It is then that we become permeable to what is trying to break through and to lure us into a greater belonging.

Through the world of quantum physics, depth psychology, and the science of ecology, we have come to discover that everything is far more entangled and interpenetrated than most of us had supposed during the last three centuries of the modern world. These discoveries have led some Western philosophers into rethinking epistemology -- our understanding of how we come to know the world. If during the modern period we were satisfied with the Cartesian-Kantian assumption that there was a fundamental division between ourselves and the universe out there, we are now abandoning that dualism and exploring more participatory epistemologies. *Nature and Eros* is based on the metaphysical assumption that to be human is to be in relationship, and that to be in a relationship is to be *constituted*, at least in part, by the Other, by both her visible and invisible aspects. During the modern period, the image for epistemology was that of a white-coated scientist making notes on his clipboard as he examined something through a thick window. For *Nature and Eros*, the image is that of two beings - two lovers -

tenderly opening, touching, receiving, patiently listening and speaking to each other, as their depths are mysteriously ignited, discovered, and brought forth anew.

This newer epistemology, which has been given theoretical articulation by thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead and Freya Matthews, and which more accurately characterizes the methodological approach of such scientists as Barbara McClintock, Jane Goodall, and Barbara Smuts, can be explained more simply by the example of light. In the Cartesian view of a person seeing a tree, for instance, a particle of light is understood as traveling from the sun to the tree, where it bounces off and arrives at the eye of the person. The act of seeing is understood as a surface reflection. The tree is out there; a particle of light has bounced off the leaf; the person gets information about the tree, perhaps, but the relationship between the tree and the person is superficial and objective.

The participatory view is different. To begin with, the particle of light is not understood as a kind of bullet that bounces off a wall. Rather, the particle of light is a quantum, and this quantum is absorbed by the tree so that it disappears into the energetics of the leaf when it interacts with it. The tree leaf then creates a *new* quantum of light, a *new* photon which then is absorbed into the energetics of the person's eye. This new quantum is thought to be an expression of the tree, even an essence of the tree's existence in that particular moment. When this photon is then absorbed into the person's eye, it is thus the tree itself – an essential aspect of the tree – that is now part of the tissue of the human who is seeing. Therefore, the human sees the tree because the tree has given expression to itself and has now become integral with the person herself. For a person in a participatory epistemology, knowing the tree amounts to knowing herself, her larger self which includes the essence of the tree.

In each moment, therefore, atoms and organisms and mountains are gushing with self-expression which flood the universe in every direction. In essence, Life penetrates far more deeply than the culturally encased ego could ever realize. To move towards becoming more permeable and being evoked by the ten thousand things, then, does not exactly require more effort. On the contrary, our challenge – our opportunity – is simply to open effortlessly to every thing and every being that is already touching us in visible and invisible ways.

In support of developing a more permeable wholeness an exploratory way of working with the **four direction wheel** is utilized during the retreat. Nature based cultures around the world have unique versions of the wheel that they employ as an internal map and way of connecting to the world. Rather than imposing a specific version of the wheel, as there are many (each one emerging, to a great extent, out of the particular ecosystem from which it stems), we invite students to play with how it might be useful in their own evolution. In general the wheel is a tool to support us in aligning ourselves with the rhythms and cycles of the world in a more intimate and conscious way. By engaging with the inner and outer directions of ourselves in relation to the cycles and rhythms of the land itself we come to discover our ever-changing ever-evolving nature. When we dwell

in the dawn or take in the new buds of spring, for example, we awaken ourselves to the rhythms and qualities of the east part of our nature. When we experience the sounds and activities of dusk, as the earth turns away from the sun and the transition to darkness we are affected differently than at other times of the day. By exploring and imagining how dawn and dusk and summer and winter live within us we open ourselves to a wider range of qualities and energies that seek to become in any one moment. Our deepest nature is beyond the wheel. The wheel is a dynamic way for us to contact and come into relationship with the more manifest version of who and what we are in any one moment. As we discover the east and south and west and north aspects of ourselves we open to our wholeness, reacting less from our deficiencies and excesses, more permeable to the world and its constant whisperings.

As students move through the five days we encourage them to try not to make sense of the experience by attempting to lock it down but to open to the mystery of what is gestating within. Rather than trying to “figure out” what happened on a walk or what a seemingly synchronistic encounter meant, students are invited to draw or move or write poetry in response to what is being evoked. Poetry, movement and the creative arts support their ability to begin to “read” the tapestry that is being woven on their own inner horizon. Each encounter or momentary evocation is a gift from the universe that moves them to the next expression or evolution in their lives.

The goal is not toward a static vision that we finally arrive at and continue to go after in a linear way. Rather it is about our ongoing becoming. We tend to grab onto grace filled moments of “insight” or “intuition” by centering our lives on what they mean (an ego strategy) rather than allowing a true unfolding to occur. Instead of controlling the outcome or attempting to make it real too soon the invitation is towards something far more vibrant and erotic. We fear this way of living and moving through the world as we never know quite where it is going to take us and it pushes against the comfort of the familiar. Many of the practices, therefore, are designed to support students in being with both the excitement and awkwardness of what is newly emerging.

During **talking staff councils** we open the door to “speaking from the heart” about what has depth and meaning. Within the community of council students practice resting on the edge of their own unfolding by listening and speaking from a new place and allowing themselves to be surprised by what is revealed in such unfamiliar territory. Within the safety of a circle of others who are doing the same they move towards an unrehearsed way of being and root themselves more fully in that which is fresh, unconditioned and waiting to reveal. By **working with dreams** (day and night) we invite active engagement with the limiting stories, beliefs and patterns that are shedding as well as with what naturally wants to bloom. Dreams, in addition to other practices, put us in contact with the particular way our conditioning rises up to thwart the natural impulse of what beckons. By **paying attention to these “edges”** – that which lies on the periphery – we open to the “waking dream” that waits to claim us. It is then that we come to discover

what it is to shift from *trying to move through the world to allowing the world to move through us*.

Nature and Eros is rooted in the conviction that when we allow ourselves to be moved in a dynamic and organic way, we give way to becoming one with the moment to moment movement of Life itself. The purpose is not simply to dissolve into a transcendent state of consciousness but to enter into open receptivity so that Life can authentically and vibrantly express itself in the unique pulse that is ours alone. The goal is not to get rid of the small self but to widen our awareness to include both the unique character, personality, and style we each inhabit as well as the silence and full expression of what wants to emerge from the fecund void of our being. It is about awakening to both Being *and* Be-coming. Without Becoming there is the tendency to escape into a transcendent state where we remain unengaged with the larger community and our own deeper impulses. Without Being there is the tendency to get stuck in the drama of the ego's forever quest for comfort and security. When, however, we allow ourselves to be "breathed" between both we begin to exist in the true "non-dual" – rooted in Being while actively and dynamically engaging with the world and the deeply personal qualities and flavors that make us each who we are.

Our gift is to become conscious participants in this great cosmic dance – feeling and expressing the full range of what it is to live in this form, taking in the full spectrum of life's experiences. Our great opportunity is to enter into alignment with the creative pulse of life. The "pull" we each feel is the universe, rising within us, *as us*, consistently inviting us to re-member our essence. We are the universe itself, burst into conscious self-awareness. We are that creative energy which fashioned galaxies and salamanders, now suddenly aware of itself. When we open to the silence that underlies all else, simultaneous to the grace of being moved we come to experience the movement within stillness and the stillness within movement. It is as Do Hyun Choe says,

*Stillness is what creates Love
Movement is what creates Life
To be still
Yet still moving -
That is everything.*