CHAPTER 12

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CARING WITH THE EARTH, COMMUNITY, AND CO-LEARNERS FOR THE HEALTH OF BIOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND MUSICAL ECOSYSTEMS

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CARE HANDBOOK TOPICS

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Philosophical perspectives
Social activism and critical consciousness
Wellbeing and human flourishing

A complex and interrelated set of environmental challenges has been created by the overuse of natural resources, unchecked pollution, and unsustainable development of the wilds. For example, human-released greenhouse gases have caused rapidly escalating and damaging levels of global heating, and biodiversity loss and pollution has resulted in the extinction of 70% of the non-human species on the planet (Figueres & Rivett-Carnac, 2020). At a moment when more people are awakening to these and other human-caused environmental crises, it is becoming clearer that the only viable way forward is to stop *living on* the planet and start *living with* the earth.

To live with the earth requires that individuals and communities relinquish anthropocentric assumptions that humans are superior to other life forms, and exercise humility as a means consider sustainable relations and new lifeways (Smith, 2021). It requires that we *care with*—not simply care about or for—the earth. Hendricks (2021)

defines "caring with" as a relationship that "is one of spiritual communion rather than roles to be performed, and where neither I nor You need be superior nor inferior" (p. 246). Caring with the earth would, then, necessitate that individuals and communities attune with the earth as an equal partner in discerning what care is needed for the biological ecosystem (see Shorner-Johnson et al., this volume).

Shifting from an anthropocentric worldview to one where humans and all other entities of the earth are seen as equal collaborators is likely to inspire profound changes in cultural ecosystems as well. Such a perspective might help us to understand the benefits of "caring with" in our human relations. For example, when humans learn to fathom the myriad ways that they are interconnected with the biological ecosystem, perhaps they will also learn to understand the unique niche that they occupy within the social ecosystem (Plotkin, 2008). In this way, humans might better understand the need to maintain relations within a web of caring (Shorner-Johnson et al., this volume). In this chapter, I argue that music education pedagogies that are mindful of caring with the earth are perhaps the most profound and powerful place to attend our energies if our goal is to address systemic barriers to equity, and to confront and transform the unsustainable thinking that negatively impacts our social relations and personal wellbeing.

"Caring With" the Earth vs. Saving the Planet: Embracing the Narrative of "Caring With"

Many in the environmental movement speak of how individuals must "save the planet" as if an individual alone could do such a thing. Such statements can induce feelings of guilt and shame as well as panic. These ideas stem from capitalist propaganda meant to convince individual consumers that they are the ones responsible for the multiple environmental crises humans now face—and that governments, multinational corporations, and the extremely wealthy are somehow not to be held accountable as well (Powell, 2021). The propaganda works by engaging one's egotistical wish to be a hero—a role that is often thought to be a noble path in our cultural narratives (as described in the next section) but one that I assert is harmful to the individual, their community, and the planet.

Holding the belief that it is one's responsibility to "save the planet" can cause isolation in three ways. First, given the complexity of the climate crisis, it can cause one to feel paralyzed in despair, unable to act as a hero or otherwise. Second, it can separate individuals from their local community including those who are working on local solutions. Most importantly, it can sever one's relationship with the earth. Believing in the hero narrative can preclude one's identity *as* the earth, or as an integral part of an

intricate system of relations (Smith, 2021). Such separation can also lead to declines in mental and physical wellbeing when one is isolated from the nurturing energy of nature and community (Louv, 2012).

The Hero Narrative and Salvific Discourse

The hero narrative, as told through the ideology of Western individualism, is one where a male "asserts his individuality and 'finds himself' through the undertaking of a journey . . . usually without a permanent companion . . . after this, he returns home as a mature man, assured of his personhood" (Boyce-Tillman, 2000, p. 34). In some cases, his homecoming is for the purpose of saving the people deemed too weak or unable to save themselves. In these stories[1] the hero is isolated and does not have healthy relations with the community nor the earth-system; through his separation he may feel rejected from and/or superior to the community and earth.

In her critique of the hero narrative, Boyce-Tillman (2000) states that it imparts "an abrogation of responsibility for anyone but oneself, a denial of any responsibility for the results of one's actions and a confusion between the private and the public" (p. 34). Boyce-Tillman also points out that such a journey is often not open to women, the poor, and others with lower social status. For example, for women "the heroic quest was never a possibility" as many are torn between a society that values the type of individualism characterized in the hero's narrative and a "deep need for community and stability for the sake of their children or their family" (p. 34). The hero narrative precludes the more equitable option of "caring with" to create a just community, because it excludes most from the opportunity to gain full personhood, and its individualistic pull impedes on the impulse of those most inclined to value the creation and maintenance of community and the earth.

As Boyce-Tillman (2000) notes, the poor and those of lower status are also prohibited the opportunity to embark on the hero's journey. The hero's narrative is mired within

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[1] From Boyce-Tillman (2000): "The need of human beings for community is to be found in many sources today—political, psychological and religious, to name but a few. The legacy in the UK of the Thatcher years is one of fragmentation and an excessive emphasis on the individual. But it is a process that started with the Enlightenment and its rediscovery of the epic of the heroic journey. The male hero narrative (based on Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*) is of one who asserts his individuality and 'finds himself' through the undertaking of a journey. This is usually without a permanent companion (although with many temporary travelling associates who are often either embraced or killed). After this, he returns home as a mature man, assured of his personhood. This particular myth is at the very heart of Western civilisation" (p. 34).

a system of value hierarchies that are enacted through a system of dualisms (man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, civilized/savage, etc.). As such, a greater amount of subjecthood is afforded to white, male, cisgendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied individuals (Plumwood, 1994, 2002). Such a system is one of control that is deeply embedded in Western language (Plumwood, 1994, 2002).

It is important to acknowledge that the same value hierarchy places humans above nature (Plumwood, 1994, 2002). Situated squarely within an anthropocentric worldview, humans are seen as the only entities considered to have subjecthood. Given the history of colonization and the imposition of Western thought across the world, such control likely influences most systems in which humans participate.

Value hierarchies devalue the inherent wisdom of persons of color and indigenous persons; women and gender non-conforming individuals; homosexual, bisexual, and asexual persons; those who are neurodiverse or have embodied differences; more-than-human creatures;[2] and the earth system herself. This unjust and unbalanced perspective lies at the foundation of the systems of thought that elevate one dominant narrative at the expense of all others, and that objectify both "low-status" humans and the earth-system to exploit, extract, and abuse. In music education, this hierarchical thinking is evident in philosophies, theories, and curricula that suppose that Western classical music has a civilizing capacity, or in situations where music is lauded as having "saving power" to correct some societal ill (Koza, 2006). Here music is seen figuratively as the hero.

In the context of music education, Hendricks (2021) proposes a "caring-with" perspective to replace the "music teacher as hero" narrative which, at best, reinforces a "caring about" or "for" perspective but does not fully value the contributions of music learners. Hendricks (2018) explains that the hero narrative can harm students when teachers exercise power over them, and it can harm teachers when they believe they must make inappropriate personal sacrifices for their students. Similarly, Koza (2006) critiques of the notion of "Saving the Music"—school music specifically—because of the "salvific impulse" at the root of such efforts. Historically such "salvific initiatives" have been justified because school music (and the typically Western classical canon taught there) could save "children's souls from eternal perdition, their morals from the ravages of 'trashy' music and undisciplined ways, and their taste from the corrosive effects of a supposedly deficit culture" (p. 26). When educators hold the attitude of caring about and for their students in order to save them from some perceived ill or deficit, they reinforce the very value hierarchies that have placed our students in what seems, through this perspective, to be a lesser-than position (Hendricks, 2021). As such, reinforcing such value hierarchies is both socially unsustainable and unjust.

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² More-than-human is defined here as all flora and fauna, as well as the planetary and cosmic system of which humans are an interrelated part.

Occupying a Niche in the Biological and Cultural Ecosystems

Rather than understanding oneself as a hero or through the intersectional locations of an invented value hierarchy, Plotkin (2008), an ecopsychologist, suggests that individuals view themselves as occupying a niche in both social and ecological ecosystems. In this way, one can see one's actions as influencing the human and more-than-human entities with which one co-exists, and vice versa. Through such a perspective, the emphasis is not on control of one over the other, but rather on just, peaceful, and life-giving relations between individuals, among groups, and within a complex web of social and physical relationships. To the extent that one can imagine oneself as embodying a niche in an ecosystem, one might begin to embody a "caring with" attitude that honors one's unique creative gifts, skills, and purpose in life as well as the ways that one's contributions might simultaneously benefit oneself, others, and the more-than-human world.

As an oak tree is connected to the ecosystem of which it is a part through thousands of chemical relations—including the oxygen-carbon-dioxide cycle and networks of mycorrhizal fungi (to name a few)—so too is each human interconnected in many systems of relations. Musically one might consider one's relationship with the instruments or voice one uses to express oneself, with the various genres of music to which one has been exposed, and so forth. Learning to occupy one's niche in the musical ecosystem requires discernment of how much space one needs to thrive as well as the importance of sharing space and resources. Musically, it means learning when to listen and when to play—when to solo or accompany (see Boyce-Tillman, this volume).

To better understand how one currently occupies a niche in the more-than-human world, one can learn to "care with" the earth and her wisdom toward the co-creation and co-enactment of life-giving and sustainable living (Smith, 2021). In music education, for example, music students might co-create musically within a natural soundscape attuning to the musical intelligence of a particular ecosystem. In this case, the wisdom of the earth can be seen in the balance, form, and expressive qualities of the biophony (those made by the flora or fauna), and geophony (sounds made by weather or geological features) (Pijanowski et al., 2011). Musical co-creation with the earth's wisdom might occur when music makers attune to the biophony and geophony to co-create a soundscape responsively and dialogically.

Deep listening to the ecosystem might also help learners to cultivate their auditory and spatial senses, which might prevent the atrophying of such abilities—as is argued to occur when humans spend too much time indoors and/or using technology (Louv, 2012). Here the wisdom of the earth can be seen to educate one's body and mind, an important consideration given that humans evolved in outdoor spaces—and that auditory and spatial capabilities are the very ones that allowed humans to develop their ability to express musically. In the case of deep listening and attunement, a learner might also

develop a deeper understanding of how their body and the more-than-human world are interdependent and relational.

To better understand how one occupies a niche in a just social world, one can learn to "care with" others in their communities to co-create peaceful and equitable structures, laws, policies, and cultural practices. In music education settings, one can "care with" other music makers to co-create musics that represent the musical heritages, experiences, and unique musical expressions of all involved. Paris and Alim (2017) refer to such an approach when they describe culturally sustaining pedagogies that decenter monocultural norms.

Decentering monocultural norms is essential for our survival. For biological ecosystems to be healthy, self-organizing, and sustaining they must contain a diverse array of plants—so too must our social ecosystems include diverse cultural expressions to survive and thrive (Shorner-Johnson et al., this volume). Such a pluralistic approach is quite different from the monocultural ones too often enacted in schools, which have been and continue to be a "largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose of deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). Pushes for standardization and conformity to one cultural norm are in essence no different than deforesting the Amazon to create a pasture for cattle or a palm oil plantation: The end result of such efforts are social ecosystems that are unsustainable because they are built on exploitive relationships.

To engage in a pluralist music education that helps an individual to understand their niche within the social ecosystem, I do not mean that one "learn their place" within a system of value hierarchies based on Western ideals. Rather, I mean that learners first be encouraged to explore the musical heritages important to their family, those of youth culture, and of other traditions that appeal to the learner. To explore one's own unique place requires a reciprocal inquiry that deepens one's self-identified musical culture(s) as it simultaneously exposes the learner to those of others.

Stated differently, "caring with" requires that one spend time deeply cultivating the ability to make music via one's own tradition(s) (Sarath, 2018) as well as learning cultural traditions other than one's own. Similarly, caring with co-learners requires that one spend time with others to better understand the gifts, traditions, and creative impulses that each individual (the self and other) brings to music-making. Similarly, investing time in relation with those of cultural traditions other than one's own can also be seen as a means toward being in relation with oneself—each learner understanding that they occupy a different strand in the web of human experience. In other words, pluralistic music education approaches that model themselves as an ecosystem are not hierarchical but relational, and they acknowledge that "engagement with culture is always shifting and dynamic" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 7).

Educators who can see themselves and their students as located in a web of relations—rather than occupying a rung in a singular hierarchy—might be able to free themselves from deficit thinking and see the value their own unique contributions as well as those of all others. For example, a high school choral teacher might consider a student as being

deficient because she cannot read notation well. However, the same teacher could instead regard the student as an expert in gospel music and rely on her expertise to inform the performance of such repertoire. As such, each student can be seen to have unique and particular form of expertise in the tradition(s) in which they are well versed, as well as areas and traditions that are less developed. By focusing on the web of cultural relations within the ensemble, the teacher might better ascertain the cultural gifts that each student brings rather than measuring their worth by the criteria of only one tradition. To use an ecological analogy, instead of expecting every flower to be a lily, one might delight in the colors and shapes of all the plants in the ecosystem. Such a perspective is one that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses.

Humility and openness are essential to break with value hierarchies that assume that Western music is superior. Breaking the habit of sizing up others to see where they stand in relation to Western classical standards can make way for new practices that lead to just and sustainable relations. Instead of comparing our students' collective achievement to that of the student achievements of other teachers, worrying that one lacks expertise in all musical genres, or being intimidated by musicians who hold skillsets that one has yet to master, educators could create a hospitable space of sharing and co-creation that celebrates the gifts of everyone. By focusing on what each musician might share with others rather than what each musician is lacking, educators might be able to unblock learning and free themselves and their students from the fear of judgment. Doing so might foster a more sustainable type of music-learning that is welcoming, inclusive, compassionate, and joyful.

Culture Bearing or Culture Making?

A culture-bearer can be defined as one who maintains and passes along a cultural tradition to the next generation. Music educators act as culture-bearers in instances when they are primarily concerned with helping children to listen to and engage in the music in which the teacher is well versed. Traditionally, school music has privileged the transmission of Western and European cultural traditions over all others, which has empowered Western classical culture-bearers and disenfranchised those bearing other traditions. In places where Western ideas have been imposed through settler colonialism, the result has been more than mere disenfranchisement: Western dominance has led to the intentional erasure of indigenous peoples, their languages, and their cultural traditions (Martusewicz, 2019).

To "care with" culture, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are multiple cultural traditions that co-inhabit the human musical ecosystem. Caring with cultures in music education settings means that we as educators honor and respect the multiple cultures that co-exist within our school and larger communities, privileging none over another—seeing each as an ecosystem and each occupying its own critical niche in the whole of our community. As mentioned above, this perspective allows us as music educators to

relinquish our role as expert (Hendricks, 2018) and notions of superiority/inferiority (Hendricks, 2021). To use another ecological analogy, we must respect that we are but one species of tree in the forest if we have seen ourselves as a culture-bearer of a particular musical tradition.

Making way for culture-bearers of other traditions to occupy their rightful niche within the music education profession is an essential part of caring with our communities, because to care with others we must be willing to build relations. Preservice and in-service teachers need opportunities to critically examine ill-fitting roles in which educators have traditionally cared for learners as part of the project of "civilizing" those from "other" cultural traditions that are deemed inferior as viewed through the dominant system of value hierarchies (Plumwood, 1994, 2002). Instead, preservice and in-service professional development might be seen as collaborative ventures where teachers learn to embrace "caring with" attitudes that in some cases could lead to roles such as collaborator, culture maker, and facilitator—or new roles that are co-created and negotiated in each situation.

In keeping with Hendricks's (2021) definition of "caring with" as a function of eliminating value hierarchies in music-learning relationships, it will be important to relax expectations that music educators must fulfill particular roles at any given time, and instead open space for negotiating with others from moment to moment. The role of the culture-bearer will likely continue to be one of the roles that music educators might be called to embody in such negotiations. However, from a "caring with" perspective, that role would need to be enacted with recognition that all learners and community members who identify with that tradition have a mutual responsibility for maintaining the tradition, with equal investment and co-ownership of the process. For example, a high school orchestra director might partner with regional Bluegrass musicians, the fiddling community, their students, parents, and the venues that feature such music to ensure that tradition is maintained. The same director might also partner with the regional or city orchestra, chamber ensembles, soloists, community orchestra members, their students, parents, and audiences and work together to consider the ways that the Western orchestral tradition is experienced and maintained within that community.

"Caring with" might also be understood as a culture-making process. In order to create a space for communities to engage in music-making that respects and acknowledges the musical heritages, experiences, and creative impulses of all, musicians within the community might work to re-value collective community-based music to a greater extent. To support this notion, a culture-making approach might be embraced in schools where music is considered not only a subject worthy of study but also a means of bringing disparate voices to the table, to celebrate the cultural richness that might be created if deep respect and inclusion were practiced. For example, a music teacher might invite culture-bearers from the traditions represented within the community to ensure that each tradition is preserved and respected, and that each tradition is in musical dialogue with the others via intercultural exchanges. Such an exchange might include the musical fusions co-created in a way unique to that community (e.g., a country, hip-hop, mariachi, and Western classical musical dialogue).

In a culture-making approach students craft music with their community in a way that reflects the rich traditions, interests, and identity of those with whom they collaborate. In such a case, music is for the purpose of self and community expression, of bringing people together for community solidarity and resilience, and for celebrating all that is good about one's place of residence or bioregion. Alternatively, the music might convey what is problematic or needs to be changed in the community. It might involve sharing important information and even involve protest. In either case, individual and community interests are focused on simultaneously as a means to promote mutual thriving.

"Caring With" Learners: Nurturing Uniqueness and Soulcentric Maturation

Attunement with nature, or "soulcraft" can be seen as a means of building relationship with the earth as oneself (Plotkin, 2003). Such attunement differentiates from nature activities meant only to facilitate personal growth, which assumes an extractive and self-serving perspective instead of a relational one. Plotkin defines "soulcraft" as those activities that allow one to discern their place in the ecosystem. Such understanding transcends and includes one's occupational, familial, and cultural identities to consider the deeper metaphor one is enacting throughout one's life. For example, Plotkin—a psychologist—has identified that he lives the metaphor of a cocoon weaver, or a person who supports others through times of transition. According to Plotkin, understanding the metaphor of one's purpose is an essential quest of a human's maturation process, and it affects one's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing as well as one's relations with the earth and one's human communities. Unfortunately, current educational practices often fail to provide the type of personal reflection that would assist learners toward an ever-deepening understanding of their purposes because education has become too standardized and focused on career development (Robinson & Aronica, 2016).

Just as an oak tree cannot survive in the brackish waters where mangrove trees thrive, so it is that each of us must be in a biological and social ecosystem where we can flourish. Caring with learners is essential if educators see their role as one of assisting learners to better discern their rightness-of-fit in the biological and social ecosystems. Contrary to many of the assumptions that have forwarded notions of standardization in music education, caring with learners means that we do not force on them ways of learning and curricula that are ill-fitting and unsupportive as they seek their niche in the ecosystems.

Nature allows for multiple pathways for learning. For example, when fledgling birds first leave the nest, they sometimes flutter around wildly as they learn to use their wings. Some fly weakly but seem to understand immediately how to ascend into the canopy,

whereas others fly more horizontally at first until they build the coordination to make an ascent. In music education, maintaining a stance of humility and curiosity is essential for educators to create the conditions needed to support learners in the testing, trying, and exploring that children and youth need to survive and thrive musically (see Boyce-Tillman, this volume; Dansereau, this volume), and to do so in such a way that does not sever their identity *as* earth (Smith, 2021, 2022).

Conclusion

As music educators consider ways to shift education so that it might promote a sustainable worldview, it is important that we acknowledge how anthropocentric approaches to learning have been harmful to both people and planet. Specifically, value hierarchies and standards imposed by the dominant social group have led to the exploitation and abuse of both the social and biological ecosystems, as the needs of the few at the top of the value hierarchy are prioritized over those of the rest. Such an emphasis has weakened relations within the interdependent biological and social ecosystems that all depend on for life.

To restore such relations, educators and learners alike might adopt a "caring with" approach to listen and attune carefully with one another and the more-than-human world. Through such an approach, all might learn to fully occupy their unique niche in the social and biological ecosystems. "Caring with" in music education ecosystems requires that all listen to and partner with one other. It also requires and that educators continually ensure that all learners have the resources that they need to thrive and that all students are valued for their contributions. Attempting the shift to a sustainable worldview might help educators and students to identify the unsustainable thinking that has negatively impacted our social relations and personal wellbeing. Perhaps together we can heal, restore, and create a just world as we create new and sustainable lifeways.

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