VIRTUAL HIGH:
TOWARD AN ECOLOGY OF BEING

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Abstract

It is the purpose of this study to investigate by way of phenomenological analysis the development of authentic self in the context of *Virtual High* learning community, a unique, innovative learning program for teenagers in Vancouver. Virtual High, derivative of *Wondertree* (an elementary-age program of similar nature) in its orientation and support of natural learning, provides the 25-35 teens who attend full-time the opportunity to participate in a consensus community, self-direct their learning, hire their own instructors and share in the maintenance of their learning center, a large refurbished house. The principal themes espoused in the community are self-awareness and self-responsibility, and learning consultants, including the author, draw on aspects of indigenous and ancient spiritual traditions, and depth psychology, to help nurture student growth.

This study, foregrounded in the author's reflections on his own learning and conventional education experiences as a student and teacher, offers, first, a literature study of ancient spiritual and aboriginal traditions and developmental, Jungian and existential psychology. This study helps to illuminate the tenets of authentic self and circumscribe for the individual an *ecology of being* that includes relational fields within oneself and between self and others, and self and environment.

Next, the author details empirical and relational characteristics, and the configuration of learning within Virtual High, and he reflects on the extent to which 'lived space' and 'lived time' in Virtual High are the primary heuristics of an ecology of being, as triangulated from personal praxis and theoretical implications of the literature study.

The study suggests Virtual High contributes positively to the authentic growth of its students and offers educators a model of learning that honours individual and relational needs. This model is distinct from conventional schooling and teaching, instantiating an epistemology that extends pedagogy to an ecologic formulation of inter-relational living and learning.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

From as early as he can remember, the child loved being outside. He would play for hours in the park across the street, climbing trees, building forts, damming a creek, running with his dog. At a pond where his mother took him on weekends he loved to watch and catch tadpoles, frogs and fish after fantasizing about their watery homes. Sometimes he brought live or injured animals back home, including an orphaned baby skunk. When these and other pets died, the child buried them with ceremony and kept their memories alive with stories. This boy knew how to be alone in the world and enjoy his own company, and at times he would actively seek solitude. His room, or the grove of trees across in the park, or the edge of the creek were favourite places where he enjoyed thinking, observing, imagining. Each winter, starting soon after he learned to walk, he would spend hours in the frozen air playing hockey with his brother and friends and teaching himself to be a better hockey player - in this he would not settle for anything less than the best he could be. He enjoyed playing, and earned personal attention for his expertise and leadership. While playing, he learned the value of teamwork and developed some skill at nudging his teammates to greater efforts. He also taught himself how to be an expert skier, and how to play the guitar, in both cases through modeling and practice. While rarely instructed by his parents, he nonetheless received their support for all his passionate interests.

First with his parents, then with friends and later by himself, he came to enjoy camping and the outdoors, where he came to value the magical essence of the earth. Because of his passion for the outdoors, he went on to pursue geology as his first professional career, which in turn enabled him to live out another childhood dream of searching for treasure, which made him a better geologist. It was a satisfying career until he challenged himself to become a journalist, filling yet another childhood fantasy.

Skating, camping, skiing, playing music, reading and writing were all childhood pursuits that continue to give him much fulfillment as an adult. He also became a school teacher and a leading advocate for environmental stewardship. Drawing from many experiences of overcoming adversity that arose in the experiences described above, he embraced new challenges confidently, knowing he had the power to create satisfying and amenable resolution to just about anything.

The child arrived at the Kindergarten for his first day clutching his mother's hand. Why don't you sit here and draw something, a horse? asked the strange woman. Many of the other children stopped what they were doing to stare at him. The young boy was uncomfortable being asked to do something he hadn't mastered in a room with strangers, and he showed his reluctance. You can do it, the strange woman said enthusiastically, inserting a pastel crayon between his fingers and guiding his hand to the paper. No I can't do it, the boy asserted, I've tried before and I can't draw a horse. Oh sure you can the teacher chimed and again guided his hand to the paper. Compliantly, the young boy traced the familiar outline of a disfigured horse he had drawn many times before. He was deeply embarrassed that he hadn't mastered this skill, and doubly frustrated to be required to do this in front of strangers. He turned and began crying on his mother's arm. That's good, said the woman. NO IT ISN'T shouted the boy. Please mom, I want to go home, he screamed into her body. I think we'll come back tomorrow, the mother said. In succeeding years of elementary school, the child was beaten about the head by a sadistic, boy-hating teacher, punched in the face by another, and pitched into a locker for questioning the veracity of a textbook. He and many other students spent a lot of time plotting vengeful schemes against teachers and principals and vandalizing school property. After moving to a new city, he was placed arbitrarily in a streamed class of 'slow' students who spent much of the year fighting, abusing each other, and being disciplined by the teacher, while the other class of 'fast' students in the adjacent room went on special field trips, listened to guest speakers and

had privileged access to the musical instruments. Much of the students' activities in the slow class focused on 'getting even' with teachers and, again, vandalizing property and stealing from each other. When the boy helped create an elementary-school graduation mural, he and several others represented the school as a menacing penitentiary. This boy retained a habit of fighting, abusing others, vandalizing property and stealing throughout high school. One classmate he taunted with other students became a 'bag man' living on the streets of Toronto shortly after leaving high school.

Notwithstanding the behaviours and attitudes he adopted throughout his school experiences, the child received adequate grades to proceed to university. He eventually attained several degrees, though he notes that his scholarly focus arose from passionate interests he cultivated outside of school.

I am the child in the above descriptions, and that is how I remember much of my youth. I recall that the challenges of living and learning emerged for me in a constellation of dynamic forces influenced by relationships, environmental factors and personal sensibility. I often mastered skills or achieved some desired end by way of informal heuristic processes honed during hours of solitary and group play, by modeling others, by experimentation, and through reflection. I strove to reach self-determined goals and I was enabled in meeting and overcoming many challenges with support from my parents, siblings and others. I recollect that I was an excellent natural learner, with a facility to master most tasks I set out to accomplish. My ability to learn was present all the time, and much of my learning was driven by an enthusiasm to experience new things. Similar learning dynamics extend to the experiences I have had, and continue to have, as an adult.

Reflecting on my history, an obvious contrast I make in the descriptions above is the limiting and adversarial role of schooling I experienced with respect to my personal growth. The portraits are meant to convey an impression of life I recollect as a young person and a sense that achievements throughout my life have had little

to do with schooling. I also believe that my emotional health was impaired by some of my schooling experiences.

Following my adult professional experiences as a scientist and journalist, I worked as a fulltime middle and secondary teacher in the conventional school system for over four years in some 15 schools. Subsequent to my teaching experience, I have worked for the past four years as an educational innovator, specifically, as a *learning consultant*, co-creating *Virtual High Learning Community* - a unique educational program for teenagers based in Vancouver.

Virtual High includes processes distinct from those commonly found in conventional schools. It emphasizes student self-responsibility and self-awareness in the context of community. This orientation is informed by specific psychological and cultural insights oriented to nurturing natural learning, self-awareness and self-growth.

Foundationally, Virtual High represents a conceptual outgrowth of *Wondertree*, an innovative learning program initiated by former public school teacher Brent Cameron in 1983 to support what he marked out as the natural learning tendencies of his then five-year old daughter, Ilana. Eventually working with a group of 10-15 children over several years, Brent described his experiences in Wondertree and circumscribed a theoretical base for supporting natural learning tendencies of children in a Master's thesis entitled *Wondertree, A Description of a Unique Model for Wholistic Natural Learning* (Cameron, 1990). When I learned of Wondertree, I read Brent's thesis and worked in a Wondertree center. I felt he had created a plausible and powerful working model. After discussions, Brent and I decided to work together and in 1993, after modifying some of the precepts guiding Wondertree to more optimally support teenagers, we co-initiated Virtual High. In the second year a team of writers, of which I was one, crafted a set of conceptual assumptions for Virtual High (see Cameron, B., Maser, M., Green, S., et al [1995]) in which we stressed the importance of:

   - unique and natural learning characteristics (modalities) for each individual,

   - self-directed, self-responsible and self-reflective learning,

   - learning relationships based on mutual trust, respect and agreement,

- learning in consensual and supportive community,

- an ecological or holistic framework of living,

- self-directed, self-challenging learning with respect to Information Technology (IT)

In Virtual High, the 25-30 teenage learners, the majority of whom have 'walked out' of the conventional education system, and some of whom have participated in the program since its inception, are given responsibility for charting their own learning paths and are supported in their learning practices by learning consultants. The context of Virtual High is a small, intentional community that gathers in a refurbished old house, making decisions according to principles of consensus democracy. With the exception of stewarding physical and emotional safety, which is occasionally re-interpreted by learning consultants, consensual decisions reached in weekly meetings dominate community practices. They involve consideration of who is hired, how budgetary moneys are spent, hours of operation, how technology is used, and behaviours practised by community members.

In relationship with a learning consultant, each student crafts a Personal Learning Plan identifying goals, assessment strategies and time commitments through a weekly and seasonal (half-year) schedule. Other consensual agreements are to attend weekly small group (one-hour) and community (three-hour) meetings, to clean a chosen area of the learning facility, to be respectful and honest in relations with other community members, to attend meetings punctually, to pay monthly tuition fees, and to refrain from consuming drugs or alcohol or engaging in sexual practices on the premises. Doing academic courses, secondary or post-secondary level, is optional.

Educators, community and business leaders, and families have visited Virtual high from around the world and remarked on the uniqueness of the program. Though not without its wrinkles, Virtual High does serve as a model for self-directed learning within a consensual community, and many visitors have expressed an interest in starting 'Virtual-High-type' programs in their communities or schools.

Development of Thesis

The following thesis entwines three research tracks. The first research track, in the foreground of this study (Chapter Two), is a personal critique of conventional education contextualized within a discussion of relevant psychological and emotional topics, learning (as contrasted with schooling), and my experiences as a conventional school student and teacher. This critique emerges from an experienced sense of there being something morbid to a modernist approach of schooling that favors an authoritarian imposition of curriculum and production-oriented processes over nurturing authentic self-growth. Herein, I holistically examine common school processes, reflect on their meanings, and clarify parameters for a new concept in human learning and living that honours authentic self-growth. In the course of a literature review for this section, I have noted a lack of recent critical accounts by experienced and active educators, thus necessitating and making appropriate my critique. My intention is to contribute to the contemporary educational debate about the meaning of learning experiences for young people, and to lend support to the possibilities of natural learning.

The second research track, and subject of Chapter Three, is a broad-based literature search building on the conceptual terrain sketched out in Chapter Two. My purpose is to illuminate psychological and cultural characteristics of nurturing authentic self-growth and emotional health. Certain concepts, such as the quest of *individuation* and the need to understand oneself in time and space, emerge from this research as widely generated and accepted. This study, together with my own sense of authenticity, or personally sensed truth and meaning, help conceptualize an *ecology of being* which is meant to be more descriptive than definitive.

This concept of an ecology of being then clears the way to a third research track, which is a descriptive study of Virtual High that highlights the spatial and temporal relations of learning. Chapters Five and Six clear the way to a view of students' *authentic growth*, now interpreted as development that contributes to individuation as defined by modern depth psychology, and the quality of being humanly complete, as defined by spiritual traditions and indigenous cultures. Authentic growth implies

a sense of significant meaning, as interpreted by myself and/or another member of the Virtual High community.

By way of conclusion in Chapter Seven, I address research findings, including attributes and concerns of Virtual High, and suggest how the preceding conceptual work might make a contribution to a wider educational praxis.

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate the nature of lived experiences in Virtual High and to evaluate its meaning within a conceptual framework that expands or transcends pedagogy toward an ecology of being.

Coming to a deeper, *hermeneutic* understanding of the processes and dialogic nuances influencing self-growth and learning in Virtual High can provide important insights to students, educators, parents, community leaders and others, and contribute to the present dialogue about the kinds of relational dynamics that respect human growth and learning. I believe such an investigation will also strengthen my understandings and provide opportunities for reflection and re-orientation in my role as learning consultant in Virtual High, as a parent, and as a social and environmental advocate.

I use 'ecology' here to refer to a defining principle integrating various systems of human interaction and kinds of consciousness that function independently and communally. Additionally, the word describes a body of knowledge. In the words of sociological researcher Edith Cobb,

> Ecology as a science permits us to evaluate reciprocal relations of living organisms with their total environment and with one another as living interdependent systems....plants, animals, and humans must now be thought of as living in ecosystems, in a web of related, interacting, dynamic energy systems (Cobb, 1977, p. 24).

Cobb's evaluative sense of ecology, though developed through child study, is aligned with the recent social movement known as Deep Ecology, known for its eco-centric praxis. Like Cobb, Deep Ecologists assert that humans are interdependent and interconnected with the whole fabric of reality, shaping the environment and co-creating the social fabric that supports human life. As humans understand the complex web of relationships within which we exist, we can take more responsibility for stewarding and sustaining environmentally benign processes (Devall, 1986).

Ecology implies relationality and, in a human sense, involves us in relational exchange at all levels of spiritual, existential, mental, emotional, and physical awareness. It also orients us socially toward community and practically toward communion. Writes Susan Griffin (1995): "The wish for communion exists in the body .... (as a realization) of a desire that is at the core of human imaginings, the desire to locate ourselves in community, to make of survival a shared effort, to experience a palpable reverence in our connections with each other and the earth that sustains us" (pp. 145-46).

I suggest an ecology of being represents a dynamic ontological domain characterized by in situ *personal awareness and a striving toward healthful balance* of individual psychological forces (e.g. emotions, perceptions, impulses) within oneself and between self and other, self and community and self and environment. I have chosen these domains of relationality to help distinguish and comprehensively characterize the meaning of lived experiences in Virtual High. Relationships between educators and students have often been described within the theoretical terrain of pedagogy, though, in ecology, I see a conceptual arrangement that holds out the promise of a more consensual and caring relationality. Ultimately, I hope that my reflections on the experiences of Virtual High contribute to an ecological understanding of pedagogy that facilitates more meaningful and deeper relational experiences with young people, and helps to nurture their authentic and healthy growth.

This thesis textualizes a hermeneutic conceptualization of *authenticity*, as interpreted by research subjects, third-party commentators and myself. *Authentic self, authentic learning* and *authentic humanity* are notions first discussed in Chapters Two and Three, with each calling forth a quality of sensed truth in living and relating to others, in support of an ecology of being. This sets the stage for reflection on the authenticity of learning and living in Virtual High in subsequent chapters. Given the wide range of interpretive forces that seek to construct meaning in living and relationality, resolution of authenticity is inherently problematic. Throughout society, the notion of authenticity is widely applied to processes and products and, evidently, is occasionally misapplied by enthusiastic and vested interest authors. Rather than establishing dogmatic certainty, I hope my conceptualization and commentary on authenticity reflects groundedness and confidence.

Field Research Methodology and Orientation

Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis include a description of assumptions and general characteristics of Virtual High and the fruit of field research concentrated in Virtual High from January to June 1996 (some earlier reference notes are also included). This field work has been completed as a case study of Virtual High, derived from observations and interviews with students, parents, learning consultants, mentors to the program, and other visitors. It was completed according to Simon Fraser University guidelines for ethical research, including signed consent of participating students and parents. In Virtual High, in keeping with our principle of consensus, I first shared my research proposal with all students, then requested and received their agreement to carry out the investigation.

In investigating this thesis I first organized field research to illuminate superficial or empirical characteristics of Virtual High. Unique as they are, most of these characteristics might be experienced by the common visitor. Next, to generate a deeper or 'thicker' description of the lived meaning in space and time of Virtual High, I investigated the following domains of relationality after recognizing the fundamental significance of these distinct phenomena to the processes of *being* human. Within each relational domain are noted the questions I attempted to address:

i. individual/solitary relationality, so as to gain some understanding of student self-questioning, self-understanding and self-growth, which are accorded significance in Virtual High. Research here seeks to identify: *What activities students focus on in Virtual High, and why? What learning takes place in Virtual High and what is its significance? How is self-understanding influenced in the program? How has Virtual High influenced students' self-growth ?*

ii. dialogic, self-to-other relationality between students, and between students and learning consultants, so as to gain some understanding of the significance and dynamics of these relationships, and to learn how relations might be improved upon to enhance self-growth. This research seeks understanding to such questions as: *What are the predominant relational characteristics between students and others? How is learning*

influenced in these relationships? What is the nature of the relationship between learning consultants and students?

iii. **self-to-community relationality**, so as to gain some understanding of the significance of being-in-community, of working through challenging issues with the principle of consensus, and learning how community influences self-growth. Research here hopes to identify: *What are the characteristics of being a member of the Virtual High community? Is being-in-community a meaningful experience, and why? How does the community influence the perspective and self-growth of individuals?*

iv. **self-to-environment relationality**, so as to gain some understanding of the significance of the (unique) physical Virtual High environment in the determination of students' experiences there. This research seeks to address: *What are some obvious and subtle influences of the environment of Virtual High on activities there? What are student impressions about the influence of this environment? What is the appropriateness of the environment in helping achieve the goals of the program?*

In examining and explicating the lived experiences of Virtual High, my aim is to deepen or 'thicken' understanding of the 'authentic' meaning of these experiences. 'Thick' description draws upon the notion generated in anthropology and ethnography (Geertz, 1973), that making the most insightful meaning during research requires that researchers declare themselves a significant aspect of the researched, that data is 'triangulated' or gathered from several perspectives, that opportunities are available to the researched to represent their own opinions on the research focus (where applicable), and that the context of research is meaningfully addressed. In other words, this practice allows for reciprocated interpretation. By their nature, thick descriptions take longer to compile than thin descriptions, though their value lies in the 'groundedness' of interpretation, versus the often abstract extrapolizing that accompanies thin descriptions.

With respect to the present research, whereas a thin description might note a messy kitchen in Virtual High and conclude students aren't especially clean or responsible (as some visitors have done), this thick description will attempt to explicate the phenomena, and identify their spheres of meaning. The truth is, a messy kitchen, like other phenomena in Virtual High, can have many meanings, and

it is only through thick, contextualized examination and hermeneutic interpretation, including relational explication, that authentic meaning can be described.

In this explication I have discovered that space and time characteristics interact fluidly with relational aspects, and teasing apart separate interpretations has been a challenging exercise. Equally challenging has been the weaving together of analytically distinct research tracks into an holistic and meaningful framework. Such is a challenge of ecology: to interpret the interaction between self and others in an ever-changing world.

Chapter Two

AN EDUCATOR'S CRITIQUE

After I worked professionally as a scientist and journalist, I had an interest in working with young people. Subsequently, I enrolled and graduated from a popular teacher's college, and then secured full-time employment in a secondary school where the median age of teachers was 51 (I was 29). In my first week of work, students and colleague teachers told me that I "got the worst kids and worst classes in the worst school in town." As an entry-level assignment, I was surprised at the lack of support offered to me, especially in comparison to my other professional experiences, but I drew on my expertise and survived adequately. After being commended by students and staff for my work, I looked forward to a renewed contract until I was told the only position available the following year was to teach 'masonry' in a religious school. I suggested the superintendent must have confused my resume with another person's. He had not. I declined the offer and my wife and I moved to South America for teaching positions in a private school. Our experiences there were similarly chaotic to my first and we returned to Canada after one year to a third location and another attempt to find deeper job satisfaction, this time in a city that boasted "excellent schools and excellent education". In one month of supply teaching in eight schools, I was threatened and harassed by numerous students, assaulted by one, I witnessed an 11-year old student imprisoned and screaming in a padded and locked room, saw teachers assault students, students assault students, noted incredible indifference to learning by students and teachers, and I withdrew from teaching. My wife experienced much the same, though she secured full-time work. The following year, we moved again to take full time positions in a private English language school for visa students. Minus the violence, this job was nonetheless frustrating and boring as student indifference ran remarkably high, for which I didn't fault students. The curriculum I was required to teach them was so divorced from any meaningful experiences in their lives, trying to engage them was like trying to start a fire by rubbing marshmallows together.

As when I entered the field of education, I continue to be interested in nurturing growth in young people, yet the experiences of conventional education seem to be

grossly mismatched to the learning needs and aspirations of young people, the first clients of education. In this chapter, I wish to investigate the nature of this situation, so as to more meaningfully explicate the ongoing experiences of young people with respect to schooling, learning and living.

Whither Education?

According to award-winning educator John Gatto (1991), the most significant roots of mass schooling are found in Prussia in the early 1800s, where drill practices were introduced to heighten the efficiency of battle troops and proved to be very successful. In following years, schooling was adopted as a means of socializing young people to industrial standardization and providing basic literacy training, a trend which was apparently enthusiastically supported in Europe and North America by various politicians, religious leaders and captains of industry. Pressure on governments in the last century, says Gatto, led to the mandating of mass schooling for children and the overthrow, in North America at least, of basic democratic rights of individuals for choice in education.

During this century, mainstream education in North America has additionally been shaped by theories of pragmatism developed by Dewey, behaviour modification theories originating in the work of Watson and, later, Skinner, and ego-centrism and theories of cognition generated by Freud and Piaget, respectively (Bowers, 1993). The 1960s and early 1970s were characterized in North America by educational experimentation that challenged conventional practice and proposed more student empowerment (Burton, 1972), though, presently, few experimental programs offering students greater control of their own learning remain in existence [1] (Bowers, 193; Smith, 1992).

Today, mainstream education of young people predominantly reflects an institutional agenda, of which some of the chief characteristics for its clients are teacher-driven instruction and teacher-based authority, individual competition and normative evaluation. According to family psychologist Gordon Neufeld (1994), a

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[1] Examples of student-centered programs include *Sudbury Valley*, USA; *City-As-School*, USA; *Walkabout*, USA; *Sumerhill*, UK; *Productive Learning*, EEC; and *Wondertree*, described later)

mindset rooted in Behaviourism continues to dominate psychological approaches to conventional education, despite the increasing marginalization of Behaviourism in conventional psychology.

Bowers (1993) places the philosophical orientation of conventional public and university schooling predominantly in a modernist camp that stresses objective logic, economic utilitarianism and competitive individualism, and undervalues subjective modes of knowledge, ecological and systems thinking, and practices of cooperation and communitarianism.

Gregory Smith says mass schooling is little changed from its industrial age predecessors and remains the dominant form of socialization for young people. "Through schooling, children ideally acquire both the skills and social norms required to negotiate the economic and political institutions that dominate contemporary society" (Smith, 1992, p. 2). Yet, he suggests the ideals underlying mass schooling are wearing thin and improperly address future needs. Young people emerging from conventional school experiences, he says, "could well lack the social skills and dispositions needed to foster their own survival... [including] the ability to cooperate and enter into alliances with others to solve common problems and to recognize the fundamental interdependence that people share with one another" (p. 3).

I share much of this concern with the predominant form and results of conventional schooling, and I have noted related concerns apparently expressed by the first clients of education, namely the young people presently enrolled in schools. Though their opinions about the meaning of school experiences or their assessment of its perceived values are rarely included in evaluative reports, two recently published surveys by the British Columbia Ministry of Education which did include such results are the *In-School Survey* (1993) of 2,200 public school students, and the results of a student forum compiled in *The Unheard Voice* (1993). In both cases, students expressed widespread and significant dissatisfaction with public schooling and, in the latter document, voiced interest in comprehensive systemic overhaul (See **Appendix Ia and Ib** for reference excerpts)[2].

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[2] Curiously, the survey results have been neither addressed, acted upon nor repeated by the B.C. Ministry of Education. The following year, 1994, a different, and more confusing set of questions was asked to a smaller group of students. Even more telling of bureaucratic indifference to student opinion is a recent shift by the present Ministry of Education away

Most people experience schooling during a time of personal growth and, for many, the concept of learning is situated in the context of schooling. Yet for some people, myself included, memories of schooling and school-based learning are troubling. Some people develop attitudes and behaviours in school for which they are rewarded, but once they leave school the same attitudes and behaviours hinder their development and relationship potential. I am thinking, for example, of competitive and aggressive attitudes promoted during physical education and sports programs[3]. Given these characteristics, the utility of mass schooling as it is presently conceived and politically imposed under the guise of 'education' is questionable. Additionally, there is need to probe and examine the conceptual terrain of institutionalized education and determine, if even superficially, to what extent this process is oriented to nurture authentic human development and growth.

Schooling and the Emotional Needs of Young People

And that is the problem: academic intelligence offers virtually no preparation for the turmoil - or opportunity - life's vicissitudes bring. ... Much evidence testifies that people who are emotionally adept - who know and manage their own feelings well, and who are real and deal effectively with other people's feelings - are at an advantage in any domain of life, whether in romance and intimate relationships or picking up the unspoken rules that govern success in organizational politics. People with well developed emotional skills are also more likely to be content and effective in their lives, mastering habits of mind that foster their own productivity; people who cannot marshall some

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from a student-centered learning initiative (*The Year 2000* plan) to a back-to-basics, authoritarian approach.

[3] I have many memories of sporting competition from primary through secondary school. As a child and teenager, I was very attracted to sports in school where I was a 'good' athlete, participated on many teams, and earned numerous ribbons, badges and trophies. In a word, I would choose 'insidious' to describe the influence of competition on myself and my peers, absurdly annointing 'winners' and 'losers', and fostering a range of anti-social behaviours, from brutal aggression (often rewarded, occasionally modeled by my teachers) to catastrophic loss of self-esteem.

For a comprehensive study detailing the harmful results arising from sanctioned competition in schools and in society, and the false claims made in its support, the reader is advised to consult Alfie Kohn's *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

control over their emotional life fight inner battles that sabotage their ability for focused work and clear thought. (Goleman, 1996, p. 36)

Developmental psychologists have identified certain psychological priorities or needs which attend healthy emotional development[4]. First is the need, starting with the youngest infant, to attach to an adult (most commonly the mother). Related to attachment needs is the experience of receiving care. Parents are acknowledged as the primary care-givers to infants, children and adolescents, and, of course, their strategies can support or stifle optimal development.

It is also recognized that other care-givers, or care systems, can significantly influence emotional development, providing further need to review schooling. Schooling can be viewed as of potentially enormous influence, given the amount of time most young people invest in schools and the deep nature of experiences they have there. For the majority of North American children, schooling begins when they are five or six years of age. For some, the new routine comes as a very significant change in the patterns of their life; for others who may have attended daycare, schooling might appear to be an extension of this experience and thus not so different.

A second emotional priority identified by Neufeld is the need to differentiate and develop ego-strength, so that one might further the process of *individuation*. As popularized by psychologist Carl Jung, individuation is described as a fundamental psychological journey along the "path to authentic selfhood". "In the adult," Jung says, "there is hidden a child, an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed, and that calls for unceasing care, attention, and fostering. This is the part of the human personality that wishes to develop and complete itself" (*Psychological Reflections,* 1945).

A third priority is the need to integrate or socialize into a supportive community. Healthy socialization, Neufeld says, relies on the experience of healthy separation; if

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[4] For more detailed treatment of developmental needs as identified in psychological literature, the reader is especially referred to Klein, 1995; Schippers, 1994; and Jones, 1995. The roots of contemporary, popular developmental psychology evidently are rooted in the earlier works of pioneering researchers like Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Heinz Kohut, and Margaret Mahler.

separation, or individuation, is incomplete due to immaturity or arrested development, attempting to manipulate a child can bring out feelings of anxiety, insecurity and hostility. 'False' socialization is characterized by Neufeld as conformity and compliance, usually enacted at the expense of separateness and individuality.

Interestingly, some developmental theories of psychology describe individuation as the process leading to separateness and that is the end of the story. Gilligan (1982) and others point out that this is a limited conception of human development, failing to take into account further developmental needs and processes that transcend ego-centric individualism and allow for the creation of attachments to others. As Neufeld clarifies, and consistent with Jungian, transpersonal and existential psychology and other cultural orientations, individuation is not the end of the story but a stage on the path to healthy re-integration and socialization.

A fourth priority, and the final one discussed here, is the need to understand our own self-hood and derive meaning from our existence. According to much psychological and sociological research, most people, young and old, seek to derive meaning from their existence [5]. Writing in his recent book *In The Middle Of This Road We Call Our Life* clinical psychologist James W. Jones says "finding meaning and purpose is not optional; it is central to human life" (Jones, 1995, p. 12).

With respect to providing support for optimal self-development, schooling appears often to be focused predominantly on self-achievement, fostering excessive competition between individuals and rewarding the 'best' competitors. Paradoxically, however, conventional school curricula are not self-generated but they are standardized regimens created for educators to maximize the processing of masses of young people. Young people who 'fail' to meet academic or behavioural standards, e.g. who act in unique ways, are commonly categorized and accordingly processed, whether labelled as 'learning disabled', 'emotionally challenged', or 'gifted'. Conventional school students are almost never, in my experience, 'confirmed'

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[5] For more elaboration on the human psychological need to understand existence, and to fulfill spiritual purpose, the reader is referred to the work of Jones (1995); and the work of existential psychologists Rollo May (1983) and Victor Frankl (1962). Sociologist Robert Coles (1990) also illuminates this drive in young people in his book *The Spritual Life of Children.*

for who they are, uniquely, and allowed to *just be* and pursue self-determined learning challenges.

Significantly, among the most immediate experiences of daycare and years of schooling is the cessation of one-to-one caring proffered by mothers and fathers, and the inception of one-to-many caring, proffered by teachers and teacher aids. Some children and teenagers may be sufficiently mature to overcome this arrangement, but many are frustrated by it, or make up for it by bonding to their peers, who are ever-present due to the institutionalized practice of systematic age segregation.

Some psychologists have expressed concern over the outcomes of the latter two scenarios, suggesting that prolonged frustration can produce neuroses[6] and/or pathologic behaviours. Peer orientation can also significantly compete with, and cancel parental influence. Contemporary, widespread peer orientation, says Neufeld, is an unprecedented arrangement in human social history, and he identifies it as a contributing factor to rising antisocial behaviour and alienation among adolescents from adults.

To bio-sociologist and author Ashley Montagu, "so-called 'aggressive' behaviour in a child (or anyone else) is simply love frustrated, or thwarted. A child's thwarted need for love will compel him [sic] to struggle as if for air. If it is withheld from him, he may indulge in violent behavior in order to procure that air or the food he needs. The most important of all the foods for the development of his personality is love" (Montagu, 1970, p. 28).

To educational philosopher Nel Noddings, "the maintenance and enhancement of caring" should be the primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort (Noddings, 1984, p. 172) in order to nurture moral and ethical growth. She adds,

> Ethical behaviour arises out of psychological deep structures that are partly predispositional and partly the result of nurturance. When we

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[6] Psychologist Abraham Maslow attributes psychological neuroses "to spiritual disorders, to loss of meaning, to doubts about the goals of life, to grief and anger over a lost love, to seeing life in a different way, to loss of courage or of hope, to despair over the future, to dislike for oneself, to recognition that one's life is being wasted, or that there is no possibility of joy or love" (Maslow, 1971, p. 30).

behave ethically as one-caring ... we are meeting the other in genuine encounters of caring and being cared for. There is commitment, and there is choice. The commitment is to cared-fors and to our own continual receptivity, and each choice tends to maintain, enhance, or diminish us as ones-caring. ... To receive and to be received, to care and be cared-for: these are the basic realitites of human being and its basic aims (p. 175).

As for supporting socialization and integration, as discussed above, schools are themselves social organizations to which students are required to adapt in order to meet with the rewards of schooling. This organization most often situates administrators and teachers as authorities and self-proclaimed subject experts, and students as compliants and information recipients. Behaviour modification and classroom management techniques are practised routinely on students to foster compliance, though, according to Neufeld, such imposition may be at great odds with natural biological and social urges, and again produce reactionary results.

Sociological researcher Daniel Goleman also identifies how schooling is remiss in fostering emotional aptitude - "a form of disease prevention" (Goleman, 1995, p. 183). Throughout this comprehensive text, Goleman repeatedly describes how emotional aptitude is an oft-overlooked though very significant indicator of psychological health. He claims that almost all students who do poorly in school lack one or more of the elements of emotional intelligence listed below (p. 194):

1) Confidence. A sense of control and mastery of one's body, behaviour and world; the child's sense that he is more likely than not to succeed at what he undertakes and that adults will be helpful.

2) Curiosity. The sense that finding out about things is positive and leads to pleasure.

3) Intentionality. The wish and capacity to have an impact, and to act upon that with persistence. This is related to a sense of competence, of being effective.

4) Self- Control. The ability to modulate and control one's own actions in age-appropriate ways; a sense of inner control.

5) Relatedness. The ability to engage with others based on the sense of being understood by and understanding others.

6) Capacity to communicate. The wish and ability to verbally exchange ideas. feelings, and concepts with others. This is related to a sense of

trust in others and of pleasure in engaging with others, including adults.

7) <u>Cooperativeness</u>. The ability to balance one's own needs with those of others in group activity.

Overall, I question whether schooling as an institution is capable at all of providing the caring environment for young people it purports to provide, or whether caring has been dispensed with altogether to meet institutional demands. If such is the case, then young people are suffering a disservice, for in the words of Wilhelms (1970), "If a child is to grow to his [sic] full individuality, he must be living in an environment where he feels himself to belong, where he is wanted and respected and dignified" (p. 43).

Whither Learning?

As I have observed with my own daughter and countless young people, and as I recollect from my own experiences, childhood and adolescence is a time during which young people repeatedly demonstrate an innate and elegant ability to self-challenge and self-master the most significant tasks without schooling. Schooling evidently represses natural learning processes with its own agenda, despite positive intentions and bureaucratic aspirations.

Curiously, schooling has become closely linked during this century in North America, even synonymous, with learning, though this association bears closer scrutiny. The hinge in this discussion is determined by how 'learning' is described, and whether it is agreed that students in schools achieve much or little learning, and whether students themselves believe school-based learning is valuable.

Consistent with my orientation toward an ecology of being, I suggest there exists an ecology of learning, an interdependent webbing of biological, psychological, sociological and spiritual impulses that encourage us to explore and generate meaning from the world around us. This learning quest is fundamental to human *being* and to life itself. Peter Jarvis writes,

> Learning ... is of the essence of everyday living and of conscious experience; it is the process of transforming that experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and beliefs. It is about the continuing process of making sense of everyday experience - and

experience happens at the intersection of a conscious human life with time, space, society, and relationship. Learning is, therefore, a process of giving meaning to, or seeking to understand, life experiences (Jarvis, 1992, p. 11).

And for educator-author John Holt, the learning act is creative and begins in childhood:

> Children are natural learners ... The one thing we can be sure of, or surest of, is that children have a passionate desire to understand as much of the world as they can, even what they cannot see and touch, and as far as possible to acquire some kind of skill, competence, and control in it and over it. Now this desire, this need to understand the world and be able to do things in it, the things the big people do, is so strong that we could properly call it biological. It is every bit as strong as the need for food, for warmth, for shelter, for comfort, for sleep, for love. In fact, I think a strong case could be made that it might be stronger than any of these (Holt, 1989, p.159).

Next, it is worth considering how learning is an attempt to reach beyond the creative act to grasp its self-significance as an interpretive act. Human understanding is always an interpretive act in which the learner moves in a circular fashion between ignorance and knowledge, seeking contextual understanding, and learning about something unknown only by recognizing it as something that fits into or challenges what is already known. As interpretation, learning is ecological in nature. In fact, Shaun Gallagher situates the locus of learning in the interpreter and links the process to a broader social context. He writes:

> All learning involves self-understanding, whether self-understanding is set up as a consciously determined goal or not. ... Self-understanding is always being tested out, challenged in the process of learning about the world. Self-understanding is not an autarkic state; it is a process interdependent with other persons and things that define the situation of educational experience (Gallagher, 1992, p. 166).

This statement brings into stark contrast the kinds of learning present in schools. What do students learn, for example, when teachers assume full responsibility for shaping learning tasks and guide students to the 'right' answer? According to John Holt this kind of "unasked-for help" has harsh consequences.

> Anytime that, without being invited, without being asked, we try to teach somebody else something, anytime we do that, we convey to that

person, whether we know it or not, a double message. The first part of the message is: I am teaching you something important, but you're not smart enough to see how important it is. Unless I teach it to you, you'd probably never bother to find out. The second message that uninvited teaching conveys to the other person is: What I'm teaching you is so difficult that, if I didn't teach it to you, you couldn't learn it (Holt, 1989, p. 129).

Holt's assertions point out a need for educators to question the meaning of much teaching that goes on, and especially when unasked-for help is coupled with unwanted tasks or curriculum perceived as meaningless. To Falbel (1989), compulsory curriculum, treatment and help, is "antagonistic" to learning, and is "much more likely to hinder learning than to help" (p. 41). Falbel further suggests that when we act as if we really control someone else's learning, "we in a sense steal learning from the learner" and alienate that person from his or her own experiences. He adds,

Schools cannot help but alienate their students from the world as long as they treat learning as an activity separate from the rest of life. ... The student becomes out of touch with the world, because the world is delivered to him or her a little piece at a time, in predigested form. The teacher invariably finds her - or himself acting not in response to the student's wishes or requests for help but according to the lesson plan, teacher's manual, or curriculum guidebook, which is to say, according to the goals of some anonymous authority. Not only are students alienated from their own interests, but also, they are frequently not even allowed control over their bodies: 'Sit straight!' 'Face forward!' 'Line up!' 'Pay Attention!' (p. 44).

Most often, students who learns their lessons well and are compliant to the capricious and sometimes absurd agenda of teaching are the students who are rewarded in this system. Conversely, almost any student who fails to satisfy the measurement criteria as arrived at by some external authority, rejects curricular assertions, or doesn't accept the will of the teacher, is punished in this system. Clearly, it is a daunting task for a student to plan and embark on a path to an authentic, self-chosen learning experience in a conventional school.

Notwithstanding the imperfections raised here, and many not mentioned due to space limitations, one might still be inclined to believe that schooling fosters much significant learning through the delivery of its curriculum. After all, one comes into

contact with much information about academic research or test results, usually through school representatives or circulated through mass media, that makes a case in support of schooling, either overtly or tacitly. Some of this is appropriate, for schooling is not without some rewards. I ascribe significant value to some assignments I experienced as a student and as a teacher, yet many studies of learning, and especially those focusing on school-based learning, are often shaped by limited, quantitative evidence drawn from test scores or other predetermined 'performance criteria'. These studies fall into what might be termed 'thin' as opposed to 'thick' descriptions of learning.

Research into learning in schools which relies on thin, narrowly focused description should be declared as such, with the researcher pointing out what was not measured, and why. Too often, thin description serves as the basis on which policy and even public opinion is generated about learning - as in the case of test result comparisons between geo-political entities. Political and administrative expediency would appear to be one of the reasons why this is so, underscoring a systemic problem with schooling — that matters of expediency are considered a higher priority in schooling than addressing the learning needs and interests of students themselves as they declare them.

Discrimination against students, young people for the most part, since schooling was mandated, is also another reason thick descriptions of learning are avoided. Presently, full democratic rights of choice with respect to education and learning, including the right to choose what to learn, when to learn, who to learn with, and where to learn, are not extended to young people in North America. To those who choose, or who have the legal option to pursue home schooling or home learning, there are fewer educational opportunities and resources made available than for students going to schools, and families are made to assume most or all of the financial burden of homeschooling, as opposed to students in public schools who are subsidized for thousands of dollars.

With respect to relevancy and appropriateness, the curriculum and practices of conventional schooling appear to be outdated and out of phase with many societal changes that have occurred, let alone changes in the learner. In my view, the rise of mass media, the ecological crisis, information technology, new models of business and the rise of holistic ('systems') thinking are significant developments in our

society, yet schools offer few if any opportunities for students to study and understand these developments in any meaningful way. Accordingly, the lived experience of school often has little practical meaning for its students, as is borne out by the two surveys appended here. To Strommen and Lincoln (1992),

> We have allowed our schools to remain in the past, while our children have been born in the future. The result is a mismatch of learner and educator. But it is not the children who are mismatched to the schools; the schools are mismatched to the children. Only by revising educational practice in light of how our culture has changed can we close this gap (p. 475).

Facilitating more authentic learning than that presently pursued by schools requires a different approach by teachers and administrators than conventional 'stand and deliver' techniques, including providing many more opportunities for students to acquire hands-on, lived experiences in the pursuit of learning, and much higher support for individualized learning. Such an educational orientation also requires a deeper understanding of the emotional needs of young people and how these needs can be supported.

Though various factors appear to mitigate against this kind of learning in the conventional education system, many young people are eager to assume responsibility for their own learning, to participate in dialogue with supportive adults, and to have meaningfully relevant learning experiences. To my knowledge, many educators are also eager to participate in more authentic relationships with their students.

Personal Experiences as a School Teacher

Because I have almost always had an awareness of my potential to optimize my own learning, I have made it a habit to informally observe the learning experiences of others. These personal observations, coupled with a review of literature, led me to critically examine my experiences, with respect to learning, as a full-time teacher in mainstream public and private schools from 1987-1991.

Though my experiences as a teacher were at times satisfying, overall I was frustrated by systemic impediments. Constrained by conventions of tests, discipline, timetables, etc. I was expected to enforce, I felt consistently hampered in facilitating

richer learning experiences for my students. In these situations, the learning that did take place was often oriented to topics chosen and manipulated by a domineering adult (usually myself), which fostered a range of responses in my captive student audience covering excitement, passive acceptance, indifference, resistance, fear and hostility.

I often had students, too, who were frequently frustrated by the lack of perceived relevance of classwork to their lives or felt their learning interests to be undervalued by 'the system'. I also know many colleagues who were stressed to the point of illness by many aspects of the conventional system, including lack of relevance and systematic and arbitrary treatment of students.

At times, systemic absurdities also hijacked learning. When I taught in Colombia, for example, students lived in fear of taking (and failing) SAT tests designed for schools in the midwest US. Another experience occurred during my first teaching job in Ontario, where I created a guitar club which became very popular. Ironically, I found myself sneaking in students who had been suspended from school for various reasons, including poor attendance because they considered nothing they were learning to be of relevance, with the exception of the guitar club.

The staff rooms in which I co-existed during my formal teaching career were where most teachers concentrated on systemic priorities such as test preparation and grades, behavioural management and modification, discipline, scheduling, curriculum, union meetings and business. Though some of these activities could be construed as supporting student learning, learning *per se* was rarely if ever discussed. For me, the roots of this vacuum are situated in the training I undertook to receive teacher certification where, with one notable and marginalized exception[7], discussion about the forms of learning beyond the mechanistic administration of

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[7] During my teacher training year at MacArthur College, Queen's University (1986-87), I chose an oddly-titled course 'Human Dimensions", offered by professor Mac Freeman. In stark contrast to the other utilitarian training I was receiving, Mac's course was balm for the soul, offering insights into humanistic psychology, the role of love and caring and nurturance, and exposing the fabric of human relationality. Mac also initiated 'Wellspring', an intra-MacArthur network for 'Hum-Dimmers', that grew to include hundreds of individuals around the world. Now officially retired, Mac nonetheless continues to host Wellspring conferences at his Kingston farmhouse and to travel and share his expertise across the country.

curricula, and how different kinds of learning can be nurtured, were wholly ignored. Many colleague teachers report that my experience represents a common practice, or malpractice, of fostering only superficial discussions and explorations of learning as part of teacher preparation.

This situation is regrettable. As I mentioned above, schools are presumed to be, and are promoted as, institutions supporting high learning achievements. Unfortunately, the kind of learning most promoted in schools is prescriptive learning in the service of the school 'system' and not necessarily the kind of learning that fosters rich self-knowledge. As a result, the legacy of this kind of learning, with its 'hidden curriculum' of checks and balances, is that many learners sit in schools or leave frustrated and bitter, for which our communities and society in general are the poorer. To John Gatto, this experience has left young people – the principal clients of the education system – "beating on the walls of the cages we call schools" (Gatto, 1992, p.4).

Nurturing Natural, Transformative Learning

In light of the ecological framework described in the introduction, I believe some guidelines can be circumscribed to help educators innovate new models of education that nurture learning and self-awareness, and ultimately foster more culturally and environmentally sustainable lifestyles. Help in generating such models can be found by examining the relational dynamics between teacher and student, e.g. pedagogy, and by illuminating various cultural practices focused on enhancing self-health and subsequent societal health.

Toward a Moral, Empathic Pedagogy

Though 'pedagogy' is often linked to the instrumental practices of teaching and curriculum delivery in support of the modernist orientation of mass education, I believe there exists a need to make explicit the tenets of a pedagogy that is foremost sensitive and appropriate to real needs and lived experiences of young people. Such a human-centered approach to pedagogy might be construed as antithetical to the aims of mass schooling, but to educational researcher Max van Manen, pedagogy is inherently oriented this way:

Pedagogy is the activity of teaching, parenting, educating, or generally living with children, that requires constant practical acting in concrete situations and relations (van Manen, 1990, p. 2).

Moreover, van Manen states a case for "pedagogic competence" reliant upon a deep code binding adult to child and guiding "how we should be and act with children" (p. 152). Such competence, he writes,

involves the anticipatory and reflective capacity of fostering, shaping, and guiding the child's emancipatory growth into adulthood: what you should be capable of, how you should have a mind of your own, and what you should be like as a person ....Langeveld, 1965. The emancipatory interest of pedagogy in the educational development of children does not require that children are 'educated' to become like the adults who educate them. Adults are themselves challenged by the emancipatory interest of pedagogy to see their own lives as a potentiality, that is, as lives of oriented being and becoming" (pp. 159-60).

The "reflective capacity" van Manen alludes to above circumscribes an opportunity for the more powerful pedagogic operand (likely a parent, teacher or other adult) to take broad measure of the phenomena under consideration and reflect morally and ethically before acting. If this is not done adequately, then the operand runs the risk of acting insensitively in addressing the authentic concerns of 'the other' as the other articulates them.

I recollect from my own teaching that there were times when my students had real needs and concerns that I passed over in order to serve what I now consider the artificial needs of the 'system'. In other words, I stifled my "reflective capacity", which diminished my ability to support emancipatory interest. In one significant example, I remember having a 16-year old student whose depression was so great that he could barely do more than sign his name to any test paper presented to him. For the most part I ignored him, which allowed me to proceed with the curriculum. I didn't feel good about the action I took at that time, and I continue to feel rotten about it. He had real needs that I imagine I could have come to understand, and I might possibly have shown some care. The school's agenda, ultimately serving someone else's purposes, could have waited. In an education experience oriented to a moral pedagogy in support of authentic human development, I would have been free

from constraint to enter into a meaningful dialogue with this student and, with his consent, explore possible solutions to help ease his pain.

Obviously, what is contestable in the day to day experiences of adults working with children is the priority given to authentically supporting their "emancipatory growth into adulthood." As stated above, this notion may be construed as antithetical to the aims of mass schooling, and so the adults are confronted with a political and moral dilemma. In supporting the aims of schooling, the case may be, as I experienced as a teacher, that there is little or no provision for teachers to become "pedagogically competent" as conceptualized by van Manen.

As for a working model espousing such an orientation, I was most impressed upon reading Brent Cameron's thesis on Wondertree, with insights he had into the dynamics between empowerment and relationality, suggesting that

> The politics of relationship is of a primary focus in developing a new model of learning. Relationships based on equality, and designed to create win/win results for each individual in the relationship, are open relationships. They create possibility and growth (Cameron, p. 12).

In a felt sense I was very aligned with Brent's insights, though I had not previously encountered a description of this process. Another suggestion he made which inspired me was in his advocating for a 'learning consultant' to engage in two opposite processes. First, to "get beyond the context of the patterns of involvement, and investigate from a larger frame," or a "meta-frame", which he derived from the work of Grinder and Dilts, to help discern "patterns that connect, to understand in new ways, much as an aerial view provides an overview in comparison to a ground-based perspective (p. 27).

Second, he suggested it was important to "experientially rediscover the child's world view, to gain that ever present sense of newness, unity, and curiosity", a process he linked to specific Zen-related exercises in 'headlessness' as derived from the work of British philosopher Douglas Harding. Such experiences are designed to lead one to heightened awareness and, in my experience, assist with empathic understanding. Wondertree, Cameron said, represented the incorporation of these two technologies into the day to day interactions with children, "to be outside of the story and see the story as one possible map, and to join the child in their state of curiosity before the story is told, is an integration of objectivity and subjectivity into

a new Subjective model" (Cameron, p. 28). To join the child and to move with them towards contexts of finer distinctions and more comprehensive "patterns that connect", as illuminated by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, says Cameron, inscribes a shift "towards an emergent, evolutionary, synergistic and natural process of learning.... a process of incorporating a meta-view and an intrinsic epistemology into practice within relationships with children." (p. 28)

At the time I read Brent's thesis, I naturally reflected upon my own teaching and learning experiences. In my conventional teaching, and personal learnings, I strove to create relationships that offered empowerment for myself and with my own teachers or students, when I was not overwhelmed by the suppressive forces of 'schooling' that mitigated against such developments. In striving to create this (at which I had very limited success), I determined that a felt sense of relationality *grounded in mutual understanding and experience* made available the possibility of optimizing immediate growth and hope for growth in future learning and teaching opportunities.

Now, I am able to link these feelings more closely with the assertions above by van Manen and Cameron, respectively, and the experiences of *empathy*, defined by Riker (1991) as:

> a capacity in which we gain knowledge of others by repeating in ourselves how they are feeling. What we empathize with can be what others are consciously or unconsciously experiencing. ... This empathic sharing is the heart of all ethics of love, in which we are asked to be open to and join the joys and sufferings of other human beings. ... When we empathize with someone's feelings, we inherently affirm those feelings, (p. 196),

inclusion, which Noddings describes as a process effected by a teacher to heighten a sense of 'duality' with a student, in which

> the teacher receives and accepts the student's feeling toward the subject matter; she looks at it and listens to it through his eyes and ears. How else can she interpret the subject matter for him? As she exercises this inclusion, she accepts *his* motives, reaches toward what *he* intends(1984, p. 177),

and the dialogic process of *mirroring,* as described here by Margulies:

> One finds - and loses - oneself through the other. ... the mirror of the
> other is the catalyst for change and the medium of self-reflection; the
> mirroring creates the observing distance that is necessary for
> recapturing (or capturing) oneself. One goes outside of oneself to find
> oneself (1989, p. 110).

Meta-processing, empathizing with children and young people, and including
and mirroring, then, represent an appropriate context to support an authentic
learner-mentor relationship with another, wherein the goal is to support self-growth,
as distinct from an authoritarian relationship.

Yet, validating the lived experience of 'the other' poses a psycho-political
challenge for many people of all ages in our society. For parents relating to young
children, children relating to other children, adults to other adults, and teachers to
students, it is not necessarily easy to "receive the other" and be attentive to personal
concerns, for such action may be construed as threatening to individual ego-strength,
or because persons involved may not have experienced or understood this process.
Each relationship, of course, has its own unique set of characteristics and challenges.
Accordingly, resolution is sometimes unattainable due to the intractability of the
persons involved, or it may involve the release of power by one person to the other,
or it may involve dialogic mediation.

Today, attempting to resolve challenges in relationships between humans has the
characteristics of a growth industry, often involving psychotherapists, consultants,
mediators, or other persons trained in negotiating skills. I suggest that in seeking to
be 'received', people are seeking to be understood, and in seeking understanding one
gains in knowledge of oneself and another, creating new opportunities for self
growth.

It is worth considering the broadest ramifications of a moral, empathic, and
awareness-generating pedagogy as described here. To me, the origins of aggression
are often found in a political/psychological relational rubric in which one is
misunderstood and undervalued. Under this condition, growth is stifled and
bitterness fostered. This could be equally applied to wars between societies as it
could be attributed to disfunctioning families and disgruntled students in schools.
Conversely, when one is understood and valued, one receives permission to grow

and individuate and securely live in relational harmony with others, which ultimately enriches the experiences of *being* human. In the words of sociologist Alfie Kohn,

> The antidote to dehumanization .. is to appreciate not only the other's distinctive point of view but also to see that other as a human subject - and to recognize that we share this attribute. This 'emotional realization of the unity of mankind as a species' [Scheler; The Nature of Sympathy, 1954] is not a contrivance to be employed on special occasions; it is a mode of being in the world, a way of living. It emerges from the acknowledgment that one's meaning - one's own humanness - depends on affirming the subjectivity of others. Such a humanizing affirmation has the concrete consequence of reducing aggression, making life safer and more pleasant" (Kohn, 1990, p. 142).

Empathy and morality, as described above, are significant orientations for educators and parents. But I've also observed that orienting oneself empathically and morally may be ephemeral and barely perceived by the one-receiving unless one understands and "receives the other" as a fellow human sharing common biological, psychological, sociological and spiritual characteristics and yearnings; in other words, unless one understands and feels aligned with our 'ecology of being'.

Toward an Ecology of Being

The descriptions which introduced this chapter imply and make explicit several propositions. First and foremost is that I experienced 'me-in-the-world' from as early as I can remember, the context of which I infer as an 'ecology of being' shaped by an interdependent constellation of solitary and shared biological, psychological, sociological and spiritual impulses.

I surmise that I consciously sought and was naturally drawn into 'authentic' learning experiences which I judged consciously and unconsciously in some manner to contribute to my personal development and/or well being, and avoided or resisted dubious experiences that seemed superficial or linked to an inexplicable agenda. Always, my learning was nurtured by the hope of personal transformation leading to a deeper reward consistent with my innermost aspirations.

As well, I surmise that my moral response, or morality, emerged in a *gestalt* of influencing factors which could be described as the context for response. For

example, my environmental advocacy arises from my scientific knowledge in concert with many experiences of enjoying and being a sensitive participant in the natural world. These experiences, I speculate, wouldn't have been so positive if I had not also received my parents' support, nor would I have been so sensitive and empathetic if I had not felt cared for my parents and others.

Today, I am content with my life, who I am, and how I participate in the processes that engulf me as an adult human organism of the *cosmos*, including the resolution of personal challenges. I am spiritually, joyfully and powerfully aware of me-authentically-in-the-world, by which I mean in no way to suggest I am a finished product. It seems apparent to me that *being* powerfully, authentically and wholly human and living a meaningful life – for myself and other persons – is far less an end game than it is a process grounded in an understanding of personal ecology and requiring practice.

I believe that the quest for wholeness or authentic personhood is a defining human characteristic, ever-present from soon after conception and, I imagine, until death. This quest sustains several psychological and biological developmental seasons and shapes much human behaviour.

Unquestionably, this quest is challenging to sustain and many human cultures have devised intricate and elegant rituals and rites of passage to help guide and nurture the uninitiated through the seasons of individuation to temporary stations of completeness. Such completeness is reflected in an ability of individuals to integrate their needs and impulses with other persons and social groups. Many such cultures recognize *integration and interdependence* as organizing factors fundamental to cultural sustenance.

As an adult and fairly recent father, and one who has chosen a role as educator, I feel the path to authentic and healthful personhood requires a pedagogical approach that includes morality and a profound ecological orientation proffering nurturance, love, care as well as knowledge of the ever-present human quest for wholeness and willingness to authentically support those questing for wholeness.

In accordance with this orientation, I believe our western society and its peculiar emphasis on individualism, rationalism, technologism and a few other 'isms', perilously undermines and interrupts the practice of *being* and *becoming human*. As

evidenced from increasing youth and adult violence, pervasive existential despair and dis-ease that characterize most of the communities with which I interact, few people, young or old, feel content or well[8]. As evidenced from news about the apparent deterioration of planetary environmental health as a result of human actions rooted in western beliefs, we are presently harming or eradicating countless organisms on earth, including humans, and we are likely jeopardizing the quality of life on earth in the future *for all beings*.

Something is tragically and brutally wrong with this picture.

I believe it *is* possible and appropriate to orient oneself ecologically to nurture the development of young people towards their most authentic and healthful stations, for whom the instrumental approach to development adopted by schooling is evidently antithetical.

In the following chapter, I will draw on new insights into the human condition from depth psychology, and spiritual insights from philosophy, wisdom traditions and indigenous cultures that trace their practices back hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of years, to conceptualize a practice of orienting oneself ecologically to students. In this conceptualization, I bring forth the possibility of nurturing an ecology-of-being that instantiates the promise of human wholeness and a more healthful future.

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[8] I am aware of two authors who have recently completed wide-ranging studies documenting pervasive and increasing violence, depression, suicide and stress-related illness among young people throughout North America. For more information, the interested reader is referred to Chapter 15 of *Emotional Intelligence* entitled "The Cost of Emotional Illiteracy", by Daniel Goleman (1995, Bantam Books) and Chapter Five of *The Optimistic Child* entitled "The Epidemic of Depression", by Martin P. Seligman (1995, HarperCollins)

Chapter Three

TOWARD AN ECOLOGY OF BEING:

PATHS TO AUTHENTIC SELFHOOD

If you have grown up immersed in western culture, then you and I might share some similar notions on 'being human'. In my case, my ideas have been clearly influenced by my parents, and by growing up in middle-class, urban/suburban, predominantly white Judeo-Christian, mercantile North American culture.

My ideas have been further shaped by playing competitive sports, consuming thousands of hours of television, being schooled, traveling and living in two other countries, playing music, being a son, brother and father, and many, many other experiences. My ideas on being human are still forming though I am content with who I am. I also reflect that certain personal experiences were very important in determining who I am, including experiencing love, pain, aggression or humiliation, personal warmth, being 'high' from physical and mental accomplishments and experimenting with some drugs, and, again, many additional experiences.

Yet I have been personally troubled in my adult years. It seems certain dominant attitudes, including ego-centrism, insensitivity, competition and aggression, are increasingly emerging in my society, western society, as a logical consequence to a life of rational and pathologic disconnection from a nurturing matrix that is, nonetheless, also a human legacy. Evidence that such behaviour fosters pain and suffering and jeopardizes global, community and individual health doesn't seem to have convinced many people, including politicians, to model or support the adoption of more benevolent lifestyles.

I feel a need to know some reasons why this is so. I agree with the proposition by psychotherapist Chellis Glendinning who says in *My Name Is Chellis and I'm In Recovery From Western Civilization* that we in western society exist "dislocated from our roots by the psychological, philosophical, and technological constructions of our civilization" (Glendinning, 1994, p. x). Recovering psychological and spiritual health, Glendinning adds, is a massive challenge made more difficult because the practices

of experiencing our humanness, or "primal matrix" is anathema to the objectivist/reductionist foundations of western society.

So I puzzle over a question: What does it mean to be an *'authentic human'*? The answer(s) to this is critical for me to discover. If such a thing as an authentic humanity exists, and by *authenticity* I mean the quality of being complete and whole as defined by my sensibilities and various definitions afforded by others, I would like to know what its lessons might be for me as a person, a husband, a father, a son, and as a citizen.

Germane to this study, I would also like to know what lessons might be learned from such an investigation by myself as an educator, and what lessons might be available from my scholarship that other interested educators might find valuable. As stated in the introduction, my most significant developmental experiences seem to be at odds with my experiences as a student in the conventional school system and as an educator striving to nurture students to a richer experience of self-growth. In concert with Chellis Glendinning, Tewa artist and education professor Gregory Cajete says the crisis of conventional education is rooted in "the crisis of modern man's [sic] identity", the symptoms of which he characterizes as "alienation, loss of community, and a deep sense of incompleteness" (Cajete, 1994, p. 26). If such a proposition is valid, what illuminations on *being* human might be available for an educational project that seeks to nurture authentic self-growth and community?

My intention in this chapter is to draw from various culturally-distinct sources a characterization of 'authentic humanity', and describe how this characterization can be nurtured. Rather than being definitive, it is meant to be descriptive, with special emphasis on cultural insights that I gauge to offer most hope of fostering a *transition of praxis* to conventional educators who may wish to shift from curriculum-focused teaching to nurturing authentic learning and growth. To assist in this I have added some comments drawn from my own experiences. With respect to the different cultural orientations mentioned herein, I have attempted to seek out cultural members to best represent themselves and their cultural practices. Though many of the world's religions are founded on the precepts of ancient spiritual traditions, and some explicitly recognize and support the achievement of authentic selfhood, it is not the intent of this chapter to illuminate religious practices nor compare world religions.

Who Am I?

If I were an adult male of an American Indian tribe, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Sufi, or a practising member of another culture grounded in a traditional spiritual orientation, I would have access to a cultural notion of what it means to be authentically human. This notion would be grounded in mythology and spiritual doctrine set in text or communicated orally, visually or dramatically, and informed by various experiences that circumscribe a deep understanding or wisdom about being human. Other members of my cultural community would share such an understanding and (hopefully) offer support to me to deepen this understanding through all the seasons of my life, from infancy into adulthood and to death (Campbell, 1988; Cajete, 1994).

For at least three millennia, where there has been human society, people have debated, crafted texts and represented inner unspoken urges focused on what it means to be 'authentically' human. Various conceptual orientations to *authentic selfhood* can be traced to Ancient Spiritual traditions, indigenous (Native American Indian) cultures, and relatively recent insights from the fields of Depth Psychology, and its antecedents found in Jungian, Developmental, Transpersonal and Existential psychology. Insights from existential philosophy have also helped shape foundational precepts of depth psychology, but they are not specifically referenced in this chapter.

We in western society have isolated and identified *spirituality* as the domain of knowledge that addresses exploring or seeking authentic humanity (Spretnak, 1991). In the west, sub-domains of western knowledge that deal explicitly and intellectually with the issue of human existence include epistemology, psychology, psychiatry and existentialist thought, and explicit interpretations emerge from western literary, visual and dramatic arts. In the sciences, emerging from *empiricism* and rooted in notions of *objectivity*, this century has given witness to the grounding of theory in *subjectivity*, beginning with developments in the physical sciences pertaining to the notion of relativity and quantum physics, and extending to theoretical developments in the fields of cybernetics, systems dynamics and others (Bateson, 1972; Grof, 1988).

Many indigenous and spiritual cultures do not separate spirituality. Their notions of spirituality and human existence are reflected within a continuum of processes that defy reduction or categorization (Highwater, 1981). Yet, according to several researchers, there are significant commonalties with our western discoveries. Pioneering transpersonal psychologist Stanislov Grof identifies similarities between ancient spiritual traditions such as the different systems of yoga, Zen, Christian Mysticism, Sufism and Gnosticism and his own work in the field of Transpersonal psychology. Recent discoveries, Grof says, "confirm the claims of ... the great mystical traditions that humans can also function as infinite fields of consciousness, transcending the limitations of time, space, and linear causality" (Grof, 1988, pp. 238-39).

Cajete also suggests the axioms of indigenous living are consistently aligned with traditional spiritual philosophies, including the proposition that each person is "unique and has a path of learning that they need to travel during their life" (Cajete, p. 226).

Existential psychologist Rollo May also contends that the field of existentialism is closely aligned with modern-day depth psychology and is related to ancient Oriental thought, as illuminated in the writings of the Chinese philosopher Laotzu in the *I-Ching*. These fields are concerned with *ontology*, the science of being, he says, and a capacity to reflect on "being in the world" and "knowing oneself as the subject of what is occurring" (May, 1983, p. 58).

Being Human

We have 'to be' before we can 'do.' (Hoeller, 1992)

Implied in a notion of authentic learning is a notion of authentic humanity. Western researchers, philosophers and cultural leaders have discussed such a proposition for thousands of years. Below is an introductory study of propositions identifying cultural commonalties explicating human existence.

Indigenous (Native North American Indian) Perspective

In *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (1995) authors Beck, Walters, and Francisco describe how traditional understanding of being human is historically identified by many North American Indian cultures as a lifelong spiritual journey undertaken by each person, regardless of tribal identity. It is often described as a quest for wholeness, manifest in a series of stages that begin in childhood, when young people first learn their cultural stories, and are encouraged to play-act roles, rituals and responsibilities modeled by other community members. As childhood is left behind, indigenous cultures prepared young people for transition to adulthood and facilitated elaborate rituals to accompany this transition. In adulthood, individuals embraced new responsibilities in the natural course of being human as providers, defenders, parents, healers and eventually elders. Preparation to die, too, was regarded as a natural stage in the journey, as was death itself.

Gregory Cajete asserts that learning involves a transformation that unfolds through time and space. "Pathway, a structural metaphor, combines with the process of journeying to form an active context for learning about spirit. ... Path denotes a structure; *Way* implies a process. ... learning and teaching unfold through time, space and place forming a path through life. It is a simple fact, basic to human nature yet, elegantly complicated in its expression" (Cajete, p. 55).

Cajete also says "seeking peace and finding self were by-products of following a path of life that presented significant personal and environmental challenges", a process he equates with 'individuation' (described in chapter 1, and further in this chapter). "Finding one's path," he adds, was not an easy task and occurred in stages over one's entire lifetime. Further, each stage was distinct from all others and required detailed preparation and practice on the part of individuals for achievement. In seeking one's path, "one learned to put forward the best that one had; one learned the nature of humility, self-sacrifice, courage, service, and determination. Indian people understood that the path to individuation is filled with doubt and trials. They understood that it was a path of evolution and transformation" (Cajete, p. 211).

In the native tradition, education that supports individuation by its nature strives for wholeness and a level of harmony between individuals and their world.

Such a precept, Cajete says, also represents an ancient foundation of the educational process of all cultures.

> In its most natural dimension, all true education is transformative and nature centered. Indeed, the Latin root *educare*, meaning 'to draw out', embodies the spirit of the transformative quality of education. (Cajete, p. 208)

Jamake Highwater, an Indian artist and author, asserts that the development of the individual should not be confused with ego-centric individualism identified in Western society. Rather, the native human emerges in a context wholly responsible to the tribe, developing in the process a "communal soul" (Highwater, 1981, p. 169). "The Indian individual is spiritually interdependent upon the language, folk history, ritualism, and geographical sacredness of his or her *whole* people" (p. 172).

Beyond the context of tribe, Highwater asserts that native peoples also developed a spiritual sense of being in relation to all aspects of their surrounding physical environment and of the non-material *cosmos* that included totemic and ancestral spirits. "Indians are encouraged to make contact both individually and as a group with the underlying spiritual powers of the cosmos. Every adult Indian tends to agree that the basis of success in life is much dependent upon not only one's own efforts, but also the symbiotic relationship with forces that put the individual and the tribe in touch with the 'mighty something'" (Highwater, p. 82).

With respect to education, Cajete suggests a mutually-empowering relationship between learner and educator, much distinct from the teacher-authoritarian role of conventional education. Learning, he says, is a co-creative act in which learner and educator join forces to "mutually undertake a pilgrimage to a new level of self-knowledge" (Cajete, p. 219). By co-creating a learning experience, "everyone involved generates a critical consciousness and enters into a process of empowering one another" (Cajete, p. 219), thus enabling a new level of empowerment and benefit to the entire tribe.

To sum up this perspective, learning *to be*, and learning how to call forth one's highest self synchronously with one's tribal members, while acknowledging and honoring the sacred and interdependent nature of one's existence, were/are the goals of traditional native education. As distinct from conventional education, learning in

the native Indian tradition is interwoven with the challenges of personal growth, preparing oneself for living in interdependence with others, and preparing oneself for living in balance with ones' surrounding environment.

Ancient Spiritual Traditions

He who dwells in all beings but is separate from all beings, whom no being knows, whose body all beings are, and who controls all beings from within - he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal. (*The Upanishads (Brihadaranyaka);* trans. by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, 1983)

"[Jesus said:] The Kingdom is inside of you and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves then you will become known. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty" (*The Gospel According to Thomas,* quoted in Singer, 1990)

Ancient Spiritual (or 'wisdom') traditions refer to various culturally distinct, spiritual orientations including Buddhism, Sufism, Hinduism, Christian and Judaic Mysticism, Islamicism, Taoism, and others. These traditions find their roots in cultural texts and practices dating back as far as 2,500 years in and around Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean, and they survive today in a global body of cultural practices that extend beyond political or tribal boundaries.

Western researchers who first examined these traditions comprehensively include the Russian G.I. Gurdjieff who, according to Tart (1986), studied with Christians, Muslims, Indians, Tibetans and others, looking for the core of spiritual truth in the 1870s, then returned to the west and went on to create his own derivational spirituality to share his findings. In 1890, James Frazer produced *The Golden Bough,* focusing on mythological tales from many cultures, including the great spiritual traditions, and in 1901, Richard Bucke authored *Cosmic Consciousness,* a wide-ranging treatise on mental and spiritual activity that included an investigation of ancient traditions. In this century, psychologist Carl Jung studied the symbolic roots of many spiritual traditions and incorporated his findings into many of his works, as did Aldous Huxley, author of *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944), which illuminated various commonalties with respect to notions of 'being human'. In the latter half of this

century, researcher Joseph Campbell produced a prolific body of work focused on the mythology of spiritual traditions, especially in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), his series *Masks of the Gods* (1962-77), and his last text *The Power of Myth* (1988). Campbell says he derived much of the inspiration for his work from the work of Jung. Another popular student of eastern spirituality and author of *Nature, Man and Woman* (1958) and many other books was the late Alan W. Watts. Most recently, psychologist Robert May in *Physicians Of The Soul* (1982; rev.,1988) synthesizes a wide-ranging exploration of spiritual traditions, including describing his experiences in undertaking their practices.

Many other people have authored texts and translations focused on specific traditions and, according to Grof and others, interest in spiritual traditions has never been higher in western society than it is today. Far from being comprehensive, I will present here some of the notions of self as outlined in some primary sources and allow certain researchers and practitioners to represent their findings.

According to Campbell (1988), "being fully human" is described in culturally-specific myths, parables, songs of spiritual traditions, in their more formal or directive texts, and it is inscribed in artwork, symbolic systems, mystical representations and culturally-specific rituals that transmit to individuals various aspects of the experience of achieving selfhood. Campbell says this "literature of the spirit" circumscribes a universal "grounded sense of being" which consistently points out that authentic selfhood can be attained by all persons who undertake a "lifelong journey". This experience is not meant to imply a literal trip but an "inward journey" or "pathway to the soul" undertaken in stages to ultimately merge an individual's consciousness with the contents of his or her unconscious (Campbell, p. 36).

The undertaking of this journey, he adds, is universally accompanied by elaborate and sophisticated symbolic representations, including the circular *mandala* (Sanskrit), "symbolically designed so that it has the meaning of a cosmic order." Attainment of selfhood is synonymous with "being in your mandala", the space for "finding a center and ordering yourself to it," and for the "conjoinment of opposites in unity." A cyclical pattern is meant to represent the habitual, generational nature of such journeying for individuals in "The Great Chain of Being".

Robert May draws many comparisons between spiritual traditions and modern depth psychology, seemingly the result of his background studying psychology. Like Jung and Campbell, he suggests there exists fundamental commonalties among the spiritual traditions with respect to notions of authentic selfhood, despite many ritualistic, liturgical and technical differences. For example, he says the goal of each of the spiritual traditions is to "instruct us human beings in exile on the way back home! 'Home', depending upon the language is 'the Tao,' [der.:Taoism], 'the Promised Land' [Judaism], 'the Kingdom' [Christianity], 'Nirvana' [Buddhism], 'Brahman' [Hinduism], or 'Allah' [Islam]. 'Home' is the Source. It is from the Source that our 'true Selves' were created" (May, 1988, p. 214). Further, he says the spiritual self, or "Kingdom of your true Self" is "that which is within us which unites us with our fellow human beings" (May, 1988, p. 221) and can be activated in each of us. According to May, the conjoinment of opposites, when "two become one", is also a common theme in Buddhist, Taoist, Gnostic, Judaic and Hindu culture. "It is the meaning of the sacred name: YHWH [der.: Hebrew]. ... Spirit and Matter, God and Creation, Shaddai and Shekhinah [Hebrew], Yang and Yin [Taoism], are 'Not two.' This is the Cosmic Unity," adding "True Self ... is your identity in God or the Tao."

May also links many examples of the "inner journey" to culturally-specific propositions and myths. The story of Moses in the Old Testament, for example, May cites as representing a call to inner consciousness, first identified in Moses' encounter with a mystical burning bush, which May suggests was a metaphor of Moses' *"inward light."* (May, 1988, p. 50). Next, May interprets the story of God revealing to Moses that I AM, or YWVH "is His Name forever throughout all generations," as representing the ego's discovery of the self. "The discovery of I AM", he says, "is a monumental discovery on the Spiritual Path" (May, 1988, p. 51).

To support this contention of inner journey, May illuminates various culturally-specific processes that lead to heightened self-realization, or call to self-awareness, as a critical step on the path to authentic humanity. Yoga, meditation, prayer, fasting, sacred chanting, dancing and movement, are all described as supportive in helping put individual practitioners in greater touch with their true selves. They are necessary, he says, because "The greatest wound that all of us have is our alienation (or 'exile') from God, and likewise, from our true Selves" (May, 1988, p. 201).

Alan W. Watts, author and student of eastern spirituality, also describes how spiritual traditions foster the notion of interdependence, similar to that espoused by native Indians. Specific to a Buddhist perspective, says Watts, is a figure-ground or object-subject relationality that cannot be made separate. Fundamental realities, he says, are recognized as "the relations or 'fields of force' in which facts are the terms or limits" (Watts, 1958, p. 57). Later he describes how from a Buddhist perspective an individual experiences greatest strength "in realizing the fullest possible relation to its environment — a relation which is hardly felt at all when the individualized consciousness tries to preserve itself by separation from the body and from all that it experiences" (p. 102).

To Watts, what is ordinarily denoted as the body is an abstraction, a conventional fiction of an object distinguished from its environment, without which the body has no reality whatsoever. Various practices, such as yoga and meditation, can help one experience and understand cosmic relationality, and Watts suggests "the mysterious and unsought uprising of love is the experience of complete relationship with another, transforming our vision not only of the beloved but of the whole world" (Watts, p. 184). In concert with love, Watts links mystical vision, leading one "into clarity and peace" (Watts, p. 204), with what is always available to those who seek it in their practice of living meaningfully.

Though the above perspective is brief, and the reader is encouraged to look to works referred to above for more detailed treatments, commonalties are found among the world's great spiritual traditions with respect to actualizing human authenticity. Living the authentic, meaningful life calls one to recognize *being and living as process*, including distinct seasons of development.

Ancient spiritual traditions developed complex rituals and activities and drew on elaborate myths in order to facilitate personal growth and 'higher' consciousness so that individuals might lead a more authentic life. Many learning institutions, organizations, and mentors continue to practice and evolve these practices today, sometimes in a polyglot of forms and some promising life-enhancing breakthroughs to the student. I have personally participated as a student of several activities — yoga, meditation and certain 'rite of passage' experiences to name three — from

which I experienced an enhanced sense of psychological and physiological well-being. As an educator, I have also introduced and observed the use of these and similar activities with students and noted similar beneficial results. I have observed that young people are eager to learn about and participate in such activities as part of their personal quest towards authenticity.

Insights from Depth Psychology

Late last century and early this century saw the emergence in Western society of depth psychology as an institutional, academic pursuit, beginning most significantly with Freud's insights on the nature of the human unconscious. Freud's research, according to psychologist Rollo May, led to the creation of psycho-analysis and set the dominant direction of psychological investigation and thought for much of this century. The 'Id', 'Ego' and 'Superego' represent the principal design structures of the consciousness Freud conceptualized, informed by his study of dreams and other human behaviours.

May and others credit Freud as the pioneer who initiated scientific research into the realm of human unconscious, but May suggests that it was Freud's pupil Carl Jung who developed a broader conceptual framework related to human psychology, especially with respect to the unconscious. Currently, Jungian psychology continues to grow in scope and increase in popularity (Singer, 1990) and it has significantly influenced the development of transpersonal psychology (Rowan, 1993), which additionally incorporates threads of humanistic psychology. In undertaking a literature review focused on notions of 'selfhood', I determined developmental, Jungian, humanistic, transpersonal and existential psychology to be of most relevance, and I offer the following brief overview.

Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology has the longest history of study of any branch of psychology, having its earliest roots in the writings of Plato and other Greek philosophers. More than two thousand years later, treatises on the development of the human psyche were written by the French philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712-78), Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and founder of the kindergarten movement Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Formalized academic studies

focused on human development evolved in Europe and North America last century, leading to the adoption of various 'schools' of psychological thought early this century, among them 'Behaviorism' or stimulus-response associationism, and 'Gestalt-field' psychologism.

Despite their divergent theoretical and practical bases, both behavioural and gestalt-field psychology survived well into this century and significantly influenced learning theorists, parents, children, therapists, educators, students, and others. This century has also seen the rise of many additional branches of developmental psychology, leading to discoveries about learning, brain development and neurological functioning, consciousness, cognition and memory, and developmental needs. In addition to academically-trained psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Kurt Lewin, Erik Erikson, Heinz Kohut, and Jean Piaget, some of this century's foremost contributors to developmental psychology have been philosophers, sociologists, anatomical scientists and biologists.

With respect to the present research project, I sought out reference material that I felt most germane — that is, knowledge appropriate to the psychological domain of self-development, which is fertilized from studies of human emotional development. Subsequently, I identified a pattern with which I felt most aligned, that being a set of developmental priorities for enhancing a sense of self, and for this, I am especially grateful for the insights provided by Vancouver family psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld.

Developmental psychologists like Erikson and Kohut have identified certain psychological priorities or needs which attend healthy emotional development. First is the need, starting with the youngest infant, to attach to an adult, and most preferably the mother. This is borne from a biological-social 'strategy' dating back to the roots of human evolutionary history, which serves to protect offspring during their most vulnerable developmental period. "In this way, the predisposition to nurture children spread throughout the gene pool", says child psychologist Paul Klein (1995, p 40).

A need to attach to adults and receive loving nurturance is retained throughout the child's emotional development, and is thought necessary for providing the psychological security that allows one to differentiate and develop a separate sense

of self. Attachment and orientation to adults is sought unconditionally and emotional health is most stable when 'satiation' of this need is achieved. Conversely, when a child's attachment needs are frustrated, anxiety arises; when chronically frustrated by lack of attachment, a child shows various symptoms including anger, loss of ability to trust, loss of capacity for intimacy, and a diminished ability to empathize with others. According to Neufeld, various processes, for example, crying and talking, help an individual to overcome developmental impediments, though if such 'adaptive functions' are also stymied, development may be arrested prematurely and/or other psychological abnormalities may arise.

A second emotional priority identified by Neufeld is the need to differentiate and develop ego-strength, so that one might further the process of individuation. "Individuation *is* the goal of development," he says. Some researchers identify individuation as a developmental drive resident throughout one's life, that is especially significant for preparing young people to function separately, learn about their world, acquire self-esteem, and integrate or socialize into the world around them. Individuation is made possible by a successful history of emotional attachment, and by making room for venturing forth, self-exploration and discovery, failure and self-accomplishment. Individuation stifled can result in chronic appetitive behaviour and/or frustration until the need is satiated.

To Noddings, proffering care is a necessary precondition for facilitating and supporting 'confirmation', which I interpret as an enabling response in support of individuation. She writes,

> When we attribute the best possible motive consonant with reality to
> the cared-for, we confirm him; that is, we reveal to him an attainable
> image of himself that is lovelier than that manifested in his present
> acts. In an important sense, we embrace him as one with us in devotion
> to caring. In education, what we reveal to a student about himself as
> an ethical and intellectual being has the power to nurture the ethical
> ideal or to destroy it (Noddings, 1984, p. 193).

A third priority is the need to integrate or socialize into a supportive community. Healthy socialization, Neufeld says, relies on the experience of healthy separation, that is, healthy individuation. If separation is incomplete due to immaturity or arrested development, a child can become anxious, insecure and hostile. Neufeld

characterizes 'true' socialization as the adoption of form and convention in order to fit into society, synchronous with preserving a sense-of-self and one's individuality.

A fourth priority, and the last discussed here, is the need to understand our own self-hood and derive meaning from our existence. This is often referred to as our spiritual quest, which forms the basis of much research from existential, Eastern and metaphysical philosophy, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, as well as many religious and 'New Age' doctrines. According to some researchers, North American society is presently experiencing significant popular resurgence in spirituality, manifest as rising enrollment in spiritual organizations and study of traditional and contemporary spiritual literature (Jones, 1996; Glendinning, 1994). Spiritual questing is also considered by some as an aspect of individuation that enhances human emotional health and contributes to personal sense of wholeness. In my experience, and according to much psychological research, most people – young and old – seek to derive meaning from their existence.

The four priorities listed above - namely loving attachment, individuation, socialization, and spiritual questing - comprise a developmental blueprint for optimal emotional health and maturity. The basic drive to complete development is ever-present in humans, yet an optimal outcome is by no means guaranteed for all. As mentioned above, many interventions can interrupt or impede optimal development.

Jungian Psychology and the Notion of Individuation

According to Rowan (1993) and Hall (1986), Jung made very significant contributions this century to advance the understanding of human psychology. In particular, Rowan highlights Jung's insights regarding myths, symbols and systems of psychic 'alchemical' transformation and his conceptual description of the 'Self', made up of the dominant 'Collective Unconscious' and the less significant 'Collective Consciousness', in which the 'Ego' fulfilled its role. Jung also popularized the notion of individuation, which he denoted (1943/1965) as the process of "becoming one's own self" or "self-realization," as well as marking it out as "the central concept" of his psychology (Rowan, 1993, p. 209).

In his study of ancient spiritual traditions, and especially Christian Gnosticism, Jung discovered the existence of universal unconscious forms or *archetypes* that he identified as "part of the inherited structure of the psyche" (Jung, 1965). Additionally, he uncovered the universal occurrence of the circular image, or *mandala*, resident in spiritual cultures and a recurring theme in his dreams and the dreams of his patients, which he interpreted to represent "psychic totality; self-representation of a psychic process of centering".

In his final text, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* Jung lamented that modernity seems fixated on "the here and now", producing a humanity "fallen victim to unconsciousness." He emphasized a need to join the conscious with the unconscious in a process that would signify "total consciousness", the essence of which is "self-knowledge". The destiny of humanity, he suggested, "is to create more and more consciousness" (Jung, 1965, p. 326), and his closing words seemed to hint at a broader consciousness: "Yet there is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things" (p. 359).

Jung has been criticized (Dalal and Wehr, quoted in Rowan, 1993) for excessive reliance on empirical evidence in carrying out his research, as well as allowing elements of racism and sexism to enter into his work. Notwithstanding these criticisms, his ideas have spawned much additional research and refinement, especially related to the interpretation of dreams and archetypal symbols and the process of individuation.

Orthodox Jungian psychologists (analysts) today focus on the interpretation of dreams to determine the contents of a person's (analysand) unconscious and their conscious behaviour, then suggest one or more interventions that could further the process of individuation. Building on Jung's notion, psychologist James Hall says individuation is a basic process of all human life that serves in "bridging the gap between the potential treasures of the archetypal and the world of ego-consciousness" (Hall, 1986, p. 15), and "by which the potentialities of a particular psyche unfold in the course of a life history" (p. 49).

The concept of individuation has also played an additional role in shaping the thought of developmental psychology. For example, psychologist Louis Schippers

asserts that the goal of human development is individuation and self-differentiation from the family of origin, and that "adulthood is expressed in the ability to be individuated" (Schippers, 1994, p. 25). This proposition is echoed by Vancouver family psychologist Gordon Neufeld who refers to individuation as "the ultimate agenda" (1994), manifest as discovering and 'actualizing' one's true self. Neufeld adds that healthy psychic development is possible in children and adults only when sufficient security and nurturance is provided by parents, teachers and other supporting agents.

Giving room for the emerging self of the child means *valuing being over doing* [italics mine], existence over expression, originality over correctness and appropriateness (Neufeld, 1994). Complete individuation, Neufeld adds, leads in turn to healthy self-orientation which provides a basis upon which future attachments can be successfully developed and sustained, and from which "empathy, stability and integration are able to spontaneously emerge." Neufeld further believes that impeding or stifling individuation can lead to prolonged ego-centricity, immaturity and frustration, and provoke indifference and violence. Schippers makes a similar point: "Healthy autonomy can become pathological individualism if the person does not progress toward healthy connectedness and interdependency" (Schippers, 1994, p. 25).

In various texts, researchers also describe this process as one of psychological or developmental maturation. Says psychotherapist Marsha Sinetar, "The immature, underdeveloped personality is impulsive, opportunistic and self-involved. In the mature human, greed and self-obsession have given way to generosity, selflessness, and a disciplined will that can give to others" (Sinetar, 1986, p. 55). Sinetar's and Schippers' assertion about the development of impulsivity and pathologic individualism provides some understanding of the roots of the more contentious human behaviours.

Humanistic Psychology

"The more whole the person becomes, the more whole becomes the world"
(Maslow, 1971, p. 160)

Gaining prominence as an academic discipline since the 1950s has been the domain of humanistic psychology, which sought to move from the clinical, objective study of the human psyche to a more holistic and subjective, or compassionate, understanding. Chief among its developers and practitioners were Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, both of whom authored many studies and texts and, through their practice, significantly influenced patient-analyst relational dynamics. They also introduced several important concepts that gained prominent public acceptance, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Each in their own way championed 'client-centered' therapy toward an ideal of personhood or 'self-actualization'[9] through nurturance, love and empathic understanding. In addition to influencing psychotherapy, Humanistic psychology has had significant impact on educators, corporate personnel developers, motivational consultants and practitioners of healing arts.

Rogers, who pioneered 'encounter group' gatherings as a form of psycho-therapy, asserted that the self-actualizing human, that is, he or she who is achieving and optimizing psychological health, is more reliant on a nurturing environment to facilitate self-awareness than previously described by psychologists. The fully functioning person, he wrote in *Freedom To Learn*, requires unconditional acceptance "to become acquainted with elements of his experience which have in the past been denied to awareness as too threatening, too damaging to the structure of the self" (Rogers, 1969, p. 281). Such an experience would, in turn, make possible a greater range of psychological choices available to the conscious mind, as he described later in *A Way of Being*:

> With greater self-awareness, a more informed choice is possible, a
> choice more free from introjects, a *conscious* choice that is even more in
> tune with the evolutionary flow. ... when a person is functioning fully,

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[9] 'Self actualization' as defined by Maslow implies a level of psychological maturation synonymous with 'self-transcendence'. For a description of eight ways Maslow suggests a person self-actualizes, the reader is referred to Chapter Three of *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, entitled "Self-Actualizing and Beyond", by Abraham Maslow (1971, Penguin)

there are no barriers, no inhibitions, which prevent the full experiencing of whatever is organismically present. This person is moving in the direction of wholeness, integration, a unified life (Rogers, 1980, p. 128).

Abraham Maslow offered a similar interpretation, believing that helping a person to move toward full humanness was facilitated through heightened awareness of one's identity. "A very important part of this task is to become aware of what one *is*, biologically, temperamentally, constitutionally, as a member of a species, of one's capacities, desires, needs, and also of one's vocation, what one is fitted for, what one's destiny is" (Maslow, 1971, p. 31).

For Rogers and Maslow, the goal of humanistic therapy, of which self-awareness was an integral step, was nurturance towards an ideal state of self-actualization or personhood. To Maslow, this meant striving towards "the development of the fullest height that the human species can stand up to or that the particular individual can come to. In a less technical way, it is helping the person to become the best that he is able to become" (p. 162).

As an educator, I feel myself very aligned with the ideals of Rogers and Maslow. I also recognize some of their influences in institutionalized education, though nurturing their ideals is often antithetical to the aims of conventional schooling and the mass processing of young people. In addition to the aims of humanistic psychology described above by Maslow, I am attracted to the relational characteristics between client and therapist as described by Maslow and Rogers. For example, they espoused a growth-nurturing client-therapist climate steeped in genuinness or 'congruence', acceptance or 'prizing', and empathic understanding. Persons in an environment infused with these attitudes, Rogers said, "develop more self-understanding, more self-confidence, more ability to choose their behaviors. They learn more significantly, they have more freedom to be and become" (Rogers, 1980, pp. 133-34). Later he adds, "When persons find themselves sensitively and accurately understood, they develop a set of growth-promoting or therapeutic attitudes toward themselves... The individuals' greater understanding of and prizing of themselves opens to them new facets of experience which become part of a more accurately based self-concept" (p. 159)

This assertion is similar to that espoused by Maslow who provides a description of an appropriate climate to foster self-actualization. The efforts of the therapist, he says, are not to impose his or her will upon the patient, but rather "to help the patient — inarticulate, unconscious, semi-conscious to discover what is inside him [sic]. The psychotherapist helps him to discover what he himself wants or desires, what is good for him, the patient, rather than what is good for the therapist. This is the opposite of controlling, propagandizing, molding, teaching in the old sense" (Maslow, 1971, p. 15). Later, he adds, "what the good therapist does is to help his particular client to unfold, to break through the defenses against his own self-knowledge, to recover himself, and to get to know himself." Through this process, the client would come to understand that "the best way for his client to lead a good life is to be more fully himself" (p. 50).

Maslow also asserts a psychological need for love in the process of self-growth, allowing a person "to unfold, to open up, to drop his defenses, to let himself be naked not only physically but psychologically and spiritually as well. In a word, he lets himself be seen instead of hiding himself" (p. 17).

Existential Psychology

"I found that it was not so easy to know just what one's self was. It was far easier to want what other people seemed to want and then imagine that the choice was one's own." (Field, 1936, p. 97)

"I am, therefore I think, I feel, I do." (May, 1983)

Existentialism, a uniquely western train of thought, is basically concerned with *ontology*, or "science of being", according to psychologist/psychotherapist Rollo May. The endeavour of existentialism, he suggests, is "to grasp reality" and "to understand man by cutting below the cleavage between subject and object" (May, 1983, p. 58).

For May, existentialism, is also "an attitude which accepts individuals as "always becoming ... always in a dynamic self-actualizing process, always exploring, molding himself [sic] and moving into the future" (p. 139).

According to historian Richard Tarnas, traces of western existential thought were first made explicit in the Protestant Reformation and the appeal of Martin Luther to the "primacy of the individual's thought" (Tarnas, 1991, p. 243). Tarnas further roots existentialism in the 19th and 20th century work of Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, Kafka and Camus, whose writings reflected "a pervasive spiritual crisis in modern culture," and exposed the "naked concerns of human existence." These existential authors, says Tarnas, situated western individuals as caught in a struggle for meaningful existence between the moral guidelines espoused by religious authorities and modern scientific rationalism, in a world where individual thought appeared smothered "by the ubiquitous collectivity and conformism of mass societies" (p. 388).

Tarnas and others view existentialism as a response to a particular set of circumstances unique to the western world, and as a cultural force from which has emerged much influential art, literature and political action. According to May, existentialism also shapes the direction of a branch of psychology and psychiatry that addresses a unique human quest in western society to discover a reason for existence, to find answers to "the questions that are deepest and most fundamental" (May, 1983, p. 10).

May says "being" can be defined as the individual's 'patterns of potentialities,' forming a unique pattern in every individual. He identifies several principles inscribed in existential psychology that directly address the notion of human existence,

1. every existing person is centred in herself

2. every existing person has the character of self-affirmation, the need to preserve his centredness

3. all existing persons have the need and possibility of going out from their centeredness to participate in other beings

4. the subjective side of centeredness is awareness

5. the uniquely human form of awareness is present as self-consciousness

In this context, he defines consciousness as a "capacity to transcend the immediate concrete situation, to live in terms of the possible" (May, 1983, p. 29) and

self-consciousness as a uniquely human characteristic. "Man [sic] is the being who can be conscious of, and therefore, responsible for, his existence. It is this capacity to become aware of his own being which distinguishes the human being from other beings" (p. 96).

May, too, grounds human identity in a capacity for self-transcendence, "given in the ontological nature of being human," and observed in the very human activities of abstract and objective thinking. "The unique characteristic of the human being," he writes, "is the vast range of possibilities in any situation, which in turn depends upon his self-awareness, his capacity to run through in imagination the different ways of reacting in a given situation... The self is the capacity to see oneself in situations of varying possibility" (p. 149).

For May, self-transcendence implies not escape from reality, but a deeper connectivity to the known world, and the possibilities that can arise in the course of dialectical relationship. "Self implies world and world self," he writes. "There is neither without the other, and each is understandable only in terms of the other" (p. 122).

An additional point is made by May on this subject, that existence implies a dynamic quality as well as a condition. "*Human being*: being is a participle, a verb form implying someone is in the process of *being something*... Being should be understood, when used as a general noun, to mean *potentia*, the source of potentiality" (p. 97).

For a human to be self-determining, he says, requires first the ability to call oneself to self-awareness, then manifest the courage to actively shape his or her destiny based upon such self knowledge.

I have discovered few detailed research reports into purposeful self-awareness in psychological literature, though one significant account is detailed by Joanna Field in *A Life Of One's Own* (1936). In it she described her own symptoms of *existential despair*, identified through a process of self-examination, and the various steps she enacted to deepen self-awareness and heighten self-control.

"I had undoubtedly been quite at sea about how to live my life," Field writes, "until I had learned to make that active gesture of separation and detachment by which one stands aside and looks at one's experience" (p. 219). This is essentially a

process of existential (self) analysis described by May, and it led Field to some remarkable conclusions about her own existence.

In the process of calling herself to awareness, which she accomplished through journal-writing, rigorous self-examination, dream analysis and meditation, she became conscious that this process itself was self-rewarding and it validated many ways by which she created knowledge:

> I found that there were different ways of perceiving and that the different ways provided me with different facts. There was a narrow focus which meant seeing life as if from blinkers and with the center of awareness in my head; and there was a wide focus which meant knowing with the whole of my body, a way of looking which quite altered my perception of whatever I was. And I found that the narrow focus way was the way of reason... But it was the wide focus way that made me happy (p. 13).

This discovery led her to conclude further "what mattered most to me seemed to depend on my powers of perceiving, and that these were, to some extent, under my own control" (Field, p. 113). Other rewards also followed:

> Experiencing the present with the whole of my body instead of with the pinpoint of my intellect led to all sorts of new knowledge and new contentment. I began to guess what it might mean to live from the heart instead of the head, and I began to feel movements of the heart which told me more surely what I wanted than any making of lists. And since what filled my mind when I was relaxed flowed out so easily into action, I began to see all sorts of possibilities in the effect of deliberate and controlled imagination (p. 177).

Finally, by way of summary, she writes,

> It was only when I had begun to try and observe my own experience that I had discovered that what I had casually assumed of myself, what I had tried to be and felt I ought to be, was something quite different from what I was - that there was in fact something urging me to a purpose which I did not know (p. 213).

The case illuminated here is not meant to represent the field of existential psychotherapy, nor does it suggest that greater meaning in life is guaranteed to those individuals who enter into a deep study of the field or embark on a program of

existential therapy. Yet it does, I believe, affirm two propositions set out by May, the first, that "the core of the existential approach is the taking of existence seriously," (R. May, 1983, p. 169) and the second, that "the important thing is *to be* existential" (p. 170).

I perceive the core dynamic of conventional education to be greatly at odds with the principles of existential psychology, as outlined above by May. One's existence and self-concept is largely compromised when another 'standardized' agenda is aggressively and coercively imposed, as is the common experience in conventional public education for up to 12 years duration. I recollect I was often confused and distraught as a young child by this practice, just as I am today. I also perceive today an unspoken dynamic manifest in conventional education involving giving up more and more of one's self, as a student progresses from primary through secondary school, to an increasingly standardized curriculum. Perhaps this is one reason why the *In-School Survey* of 1993 (see **Appendix I**) reports students believing school to have decreasing relevance to their lives as they progress toward graduation.

In order to preserve the principles as outlined by May, conventional educators need to resolve this fundamental dilemma. As Gatto points out, there are historical precedents for supporting 'student-centered' education (Gatto, 1991), and programs like *Sudbury Valley*, USA; *City-As-School*, USA; *Walkabout*, USA; *Summerhill*, UK; *Productive Learning*, EEC; and *Wondertree*, Vancouver, are ongoing, successful programs that acknowledge students 'exist' and allow them to choose their own course of study.

Transpersonal Psychology

Psychologist June Singer acknowledges Jung as the first researcher to use the term 'transpersonal' though Rowan identifies him as one pioneer in a field that also includes the 19th century psychologist William James, Roberto Assagioli and, from later in this century, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof and Ken Wilber. Singer and Rowan agree that transpersonal psychology builds on several ideas introduced by Jung to develop a broader conceptual framework in accounting for the full range of human conscious and unconscious behaviour.

Rowan, himself a transpersonal psychologist, says the transpersonal field includes "experiences involving expansion or extension of consciousness beyond the usual ego boundaries and beyond the limitations of time and/or space" (Rowan, 1990, pp. 6-7). He says the transpersonal is "a realm of personal discovery", which is "very familiar to us already" (Rowan, p. 13) and manifest in inner voices, intuition (the child self, magical self, role-playing self, autonomous self, surrendered self, intuitive self), creativity, and 'peak experiences.'

According to Rowan, transpersonal psychology carries an underlying assumption that "each human being has impulses toward spiritual growth, and the capacity for growing and learning throughout life," and that these impulses can be facilitated and enhanced by transpersonal psychotherapy which "changes working *on* yourself to working *with* yourself" (Rowan, p. 89).

Stanislav Grof, a psychologist who pioneered the therapeutic use of LSD and LSD-simulating experiences in Czechoslovakia and the United States, says the field of transpersonal psychology extends beyond Jungian psychology to include transcendental and transphenomenal realms of reality which, he says, Jung largely ignored. To him, the transpersonal has the potential to reach all aspects of existence or, "in principle mediate experiential connection with any aspect of the phenomenal world and with various mythological and archetypal domains" (Grof, 1988, p. xvi). He points to growing interest in transpersonal psychology as a response to a powerful and important "impulse in human beings to connect with the spiritual domain, resembling sexuality but more fundamental and compelling" (p. 250).

In the realm of the transpersonal, Grof distinguishes two primary and innate modes of human consciousness, the *Hylotropic* and the *Holotropic*. The *Hylotropic* mode translates as normal everyday experience of consensus reality experienced as matter-oriented consciousness, objective reality, with definite boundaries that inscribe a limited sensory range and limited segment of the phenomenal world. *Holotropic* consciousness, however "can reach one's biological, psychological, social, racial and spiritual history and the past, present, and the future of the entire phenomenal world, and access many other levels and domains of reality described by the great mystical traditions of the world "(p. 41). It aims toward wholeness and totality of existence, and characterizes certain non-ordinary psychological states, such as meditative, mystical, or psychedelic experiences. As well, he adds, the

access non ordinary dimensions of existence" (p. 239). To live fully up to one's potential, Grof says it is essential to acknowledge the Hylo- and Holotropic aspects of one's being, cultivate them, and become familiar and comfortable with both of them.

Schippers (1994) suggests that midway between ordinary and transpersonal consciousness is to be found a transitional level most characterized by the feeling of interdependency, "the capacity to be a self in the context of another, for relatedness beyond individualism" (pp. 26-27). In this transitional state, a person additionally increases the capacity for empathy and tolerance and acquires an understanding about experiences of giving, receiving and universal neediness. He further believes "the capacity for experiencing interconnectedness in the transpersonal sense is based upon the successful attainment of interdependency," (p. 27) or experiencing this transitional level.

Though I perceive a role for introducing meditation and other practices that encourage empathic and integrative understanding, I have not experienced any attempts to introduce any of the therapeutic precepts of transpersonal psychology into education. This is unfortunate because in conventional education there is present interest in fostering heightened empathy as a life skill among students, and as means to foster heightened environmental citizenship. Yet, many of the aims of life skills programs and 'environmental education' are classroom-based and curriculum-driven, which, as I have experienced, courts a considerable amount of indifference and/or resentment among disinterested students. More appropriate might be the introduction of some non-conventional activities, gleaned from the realm of transpersonal psychology, as optional activities for interested students who want to understand and experience a different kind of consciousness.

So Who Am I, Really?

"It is possible that there is not one truth, but many; not one real experience, but many realities; not one history, but many different and valid ways of looking at events." (Highwater, 1981)

The cultures described in this chapter inscribe distinct spiritual and psychological orientations which have emerged from widely differing life-histories. In particular, the practice of western depth psychology is rooted in scientific rationalism and, as such, is fundamentally more reductionist and analytical than the ancient spiritual traditions and native American Indian cultures which evolved, in some cases, over thousands of years, and in general are more holistic and intuitive. Notwithstanding these differences, there are commonalties.

With respect to manifesting one's self, native Indian cultures and spiritual traditions are grounded in an explicit conception of self as emanating from, and revolving around, an "essential place within", and the concept of 'centredness' or 'centering' is reflected in many cultural practices and symbol systems. Self-hood emerges as awareness of self in a dynamic and interdependent cosmos. By way of comparison, the branches of psychology described herein also describe one's self as a bounded, yet fluidly interactive structure, latent with capacity to transcend ego-centrism and participate in an ego-less state of mind. This overlap of defining characteristics suggests the further possibility of a shared sensibility: an ecology of being.

Conceptualizing an Ecology of Being

We can experience things - can touch, hear and taste things - only because, as bodies, we are ourselves included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds and tastes. we can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us. (Abram, 1996, p. 68)

Modern western man, says Rollo May, has created a dilemma. After reducing something to an abstraction, he then embarks on a process to persuade himself it is real. Thus, the only experience we believe to be real is that which precisely is not, and "we deny the reality of our own experience"(May, 1983, p. 94). I agree with this statement, and have many times witnessed or experienced refutable pronouncements of objectivity and blanket Cartesian reductionism. In my lifetime I have come to

understand my own objectivity as a subset of a broader shared or interdependent reality, akin to an ecological perspective

For example, *I know* that in almost all experiences I have participated in, by sheer will I came to be a co-designer of the outcome and especially responsible for the feelings that emerged, many of which I cannot accurately describe through my native English language, because it simply isn't sophisticated enough. I also *know* from giving and receiving love, nurturing and observing my baby daughter, using other people to learn about my self and willing my self to learn about others, and from dwelling in other cultures that silently transmitted the appropriate norms of behaviour, that the phenomenon of my existence can be transcended. I *know* that personal differences can co-exist in harmony and that contact and closeness can be preserved despite vast perceptual differences, and I *know* that I am made up of the past, present and future.

My sentiments, and the evidence of *tacit knowledge* acquired, and earlier described by Highwater and Field, are consistent with the findings of scientist Michael Polanyi who, writing in his book *Meaning* (1965), questions the foundational assumptions of 'objective' inquiry.

> the process of knowing (and so also of science) in no way resembles an impersonal achievement of detached objectivity.... scientific inquiry is accordingly a dynamic exercise of the imagination and is rooted in commitments and beliefs about the nature of things. It is a fiduciary act. ... It depends upon a firm set of beliefs (Polanyi, 1965, p. 63).

Taking this point further, feminist researcher Patti Lather says the objective viewpoint that underlies Western thought is "inadequate for understanding a world of multiple causes and effects interacting in complex and non-linear ways, all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities" (Lather, 1991, p. 21).

This concept is also being operationalized at the interface of research where, according to Lather, "inquiry is increasingly recognized as a process whereby tacit (subjective) and propositional (objective) knowledge are interwoven and mutually informing" (Lather, 1991, p. 66).

What Polanyi implies without name when he says "we comprehend a living being at all levels by our subsidiary awareness of its particulars," other writers explicitly describe as an *ecological, cosmological,* or *holistic* perspective.

In sociological terms, this orientation can be identified as supporting a sense of self situated as an individual entity harmonizing the needs of one's ego through differing developmental seasons, in relation to and with a nurturing human community, and as a unique entity in relation with the surrounding physical and non-physical world.

As illuminated in the introduction, sociologist Edith Cobb believes the science of ecology represents an appropriate instrument "for the study of reciprocity and mutuality among categories of thought," (Cobb, p. 24). This, to me, is a comprehensive concept from which to make rich meaning en route to further conceptualizing an *ecology of being,*.

In support of this contention, philosopher John Riker asserts "We are webs — networks of interrelated needs, emotions, capacities, and character traits – and are inextricably interwoven with the networks of society, culture, and nature." Riker also suggests an epistemological orientation that reflects our 'networked selves': "The only kind of thinking that can penetrate these webs and understand them is thinking that is itself webbed, thinking that can weave synchronic nets into the environment and diachronic nets through time" (Riker, 1991, pp. 150-151).

A fundamental interdependence is also described by Highwater, who writes "The relatedness of the individual and the tribe extends outward beyond the family, band, or clan to include all things of the world. Thus nothing exists in isolation. Individualism does not presuppose autonomy, alienation, or isolation" (Highwater, 1981, p. 172).

Additionally, biologist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who developed an epistemology linking 'Mind and Nature' from his research into cybernetics, the science focusing on organizational and systems theory, proposed a similar orientation. Bateson asserted that all living and non-living systems, and our total evolutionary structure, inscribe "mental processes" and thus demonstrate "immanence" of mind. Human actions arising from the minds of individuals, he says, always exist as a subsystem to a larger system which is influenced by human intervention, but is not

wholly dependent upon it. Accordingly, Bateson suggests it is a fundamental epistemological error "when you separate mind from the structure in which it is immanent," or assign pre-eminence to specific human volition. "The unit of survival," says Bateson, "is *organism plus environment*" (Bateson, 1972, p. 483).

Ecology thus offers a comprehensive self-reflecting system for the western mind to grasp the totality of existence, including analytic and holistic modes of consciousness, and provides the basis for the broadest and most inclusive science of being yet to emerge in this society. An ecology of being may also be available to each of us.

Steps to an Ecology of Being

As described above, authentic selfhood is available to those persons who perceive the world from an ecological, cosmological, or holistic perspective, allowing for transcendence of objective reality. The achievement of authentic selfhood requires calling oneself to awareness or consciousness of the complete existence of oneself, in other words, understanding the integrated and interdependent nature of existence. The condition of these precepts is always one of mutual and simultaneous inclusion.

I call movement toward authentic selfhood movement toward an *ecology-of-being*, and it is appropriate to discuss how striving toward an ecology of being might be accomplished in terms of an educational project. For an ecology of being does not represent a static end-point as much as it does a dynamic condition focused on certain aspirations which are neither dependent on age nor culture, but are interrelated and almost always available to the enthusiastic practitioner(s). These aspirations include nurturing the developmental priorities listed above, namely attachments, individuation, socialization and integration, and helping to understand one's existence.

To assist in nurturing developmental health in oneself or in others, psychologist Gordon Neufeld has developed an eight-week 'Creative Parenting' seminar course to interested people in Vancouver offering insights and practical examples. Briefly, he suggests that parents, care-givers and educators recognize the universal characteristics of these processes, and make room for them in self-relating and relating to others. Other insights from his course which I found most germane to the

present research project included understanding that behaviours were/are indicators of emotional health, that individuation and ego-differentiation was/is a goal of healthy development, and that healthy socialization and integration was/is possible only after individuation.

Though Neufeld provides little insight here, supporting a need to understand one's existence and make meaning from living includes fostering higher awareness or consciousness of self and self-in-relation to the surrounding world, including other organisms (human and non-human) and the conditions of one's immediate environment. As described earlier, heightening consciousness and individuation are meant to support natural processes that lead an individual to a greater awareness of self, self in world and self in relation to others. This process is also marked out as one of psychological or developmental 'maturating'.

Psychologist and consciousness researcher Charles Tart defines consciousness itself as a dynamic and patterned mental process involving the systematic interaction of psychological structures with an innate tendency towards stability and integrity. Tart and others make the point that *we are already conscious and individuating*, though not necessarily highly aware (self-conscious) of our own inner processes in relation to others and the surrounding world. To Tart, "we are 'asleep', compared with what we could be. We are dreaming. We are entranced. We are automatized. We are caught in illusions while thinking we are perceiving reality" and "We need to awaken to reality, the reality of the problems caused by our fragmented selves, so we can discover our deeper selves and the reality of our world, undistorted by our entranced condition" (Tart, 1987, pp. x-xi).

Depending on their background, individuals may have deeper experiences and understandings of heightening awareness of themselves as sexual, emotional, mental and spiritual beings through myths or cultural practices, such as rites of passage and meditation exercises. Enacted with the support of a community of like-minded individuals, the process of heightening awareness is akin to 'coming of age' during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and in the later seasons of life such practices strive to complete a development cycle of *being fully human*.

In western society, such is not often the case. As was pointed out earlier, individuation implies ego separation and development, leading in turn to healthy

self-orientation. Maturity is identified as the time when the healthy self becomes the engineer of his/her own destiny, which includes making room for attachments and interdependence. Yet, as was previously pointed out, when individuation is impeded or arrested pre-maturely, the results can be traumatic. Sullwold (1987) and others make the case that the trend in western culture "has been toward the development of the individual" concurrent with the breakdown of authentic communities, thus eliminating the most supportive context for individuation. Sullwold says the elimination of support for meaningful adolescent rituals at a time when children long for support, is especially pathologic.

Rollo May also claims that individual isolation, as it is transmitted through western education and even our language, further impedes the process of gaining awareness, and he suggests it is no simple task to overcome this situation. He says calling oneself to *awareness of being* is a basic goal of existential psychotherapy in which a skilled counselor nurtures a patient to recognize "not 'I am the subject', but 'I am the being who can, among other things, know myself as the subject of what is occurring'" (May, 1983, p. 104).

Implied in existential psychotherapy is also an invitation to identify the sources of restriction in one's life, and the possibilities for experiencing greater freedom. To help accomplish this, May says the task of the therapist is to ask of the patient, "*Where* are you?" not "*How*?" (May, 1983, pp. 162-63).

May's sentiments are corroborated by psychotherapist-researcher James Doak who says the basic conditions that contribute to emotional dysfunctionality such as suffering, dissatisfaction, compulsive habits, depression, anxiety, poor interpersonal relating and apathy are "loss of self, a decided lack of self-acceptance and self-support, and lack of personal integration", or lack of opportunity to reconcile the differences of our "outer and inner" worlds. Doak approaches psychotherapy as a process of expanding self-awareness, establishing a greater sense of self-acceptance and for helping unify "all that we are" to improve psychological health. Implicit in this awareness, he suggests, is an emancipatory satisfaction, analogous to meditative bliss,

> When we find a way to live life from the two innermost places within us, the body and observing self, we are in the truest contact with who we are. The outside world becomes less important in determining our

sense of happiness and peace. To the degree that we are able to center deeply on who we truly are, we are free. Although we may enjoy the outer trappings of living, we are not dependent on them and we don't confuse them with who we are. We can be happy in a cave or a castle (Doak, 1987, p. 148).

To transpersonal psychologist Grof, habitual cultivation of transpersonal consciousness can lead to "the spontaneous emergence of deep ecological consciousness and awareness ... (in which) level of aggression decreases considerably and the sense of connection and fundamental unity with the world leads to sexual, political, national, cultural, and racial tolerance" (Grof, 1988, p. 263). "In practice, this means to be in touch with ones' inner life" which he suggests is available through "focused self-exploration on one's unconscious and superconscious," (p. 271), through meditation, participation in shamanic rituals and trance events, sensory exploration, supervised psychedelic work, or other means.

Highwater also points out that the experience of altered or expanded consciousness is inscribed in native rituals such as vision ceremonies and spiritual journeys, facilitated through fasting, chanting, drumming, the use of psychoactive plant mixtures and other techniques. "The basis of success in life," encouraged collectively and individually of each Indian, he says is "to make contact" with the underlying spiritual powers of the cosmos, the "mighty something", or *orenda*, to better understand the nature of their true existence (Highwater, 1981, p. 82).

What is available to us as higher consciousness and awareness, apparently, is already within us and *always available*. Spiritual teachings, cultural practices and other techniques developed by western researchers offer the opportunity of realizing higher awareness as a fundamental stage of the journey to authentic selfhood because it is part of *our essential being*.

This is not to suggest the enlightened state is the goal for habitual dwelling, it is not considered especially practical for dealing with the exigencies of consensus reality! Yet the capacity to momentarily transcend our selves and understand the situation of our selves within an expanded reality in connection with everything else suggests our existence is one of communion and potential.

To Sinetar (1986), "As the individual's whole seeing and whole-thinking develop — as he [sic] begins to separate from his own 'little' perceptions, ego-interests and

preoccupations — he is able to open up into a relationship with others, a relationship based on a life which is becoming more authentic" (p. 52).

Nurturing Authentic Learning

This chapter has drawn from various cultural insights in identifying processes and paths to authentic selfhood, and thereby circumscribing an *ecology of being*. Key processes in achieving an ecology of being include the stages of individuation and expansion of ego to a transpersonal or ecological state of consciousness, and self-reflection. Healthy individuation requires caring, loving and empathic relationships, which in turn inspire healthy re-integration or socialization.

Authentic learning is supported by those processes that help nurture authentic selfhood on the path to an ecology of being e.g. processes that foster individuation and expansion of ego to a transpersonal or ecological state of consciousness, and self-reflection. Such learning will be unique for each individual, reflecting the unique circumstances of his or her existence throughout all seasons of life.

This conceptualized terrain, including the body of processes described herein as supporting an ecology of being, informs the theory and practice of Virtual High. Though various aspects of this conceptual terrain, such as the insights from developmental and humanistic psychology, have been used as the basis of previous educational projects, Virtual High uniquely draws from a wider field of cultural theory and practice and explicitly identifies itself as a program where young people can engage in authentic learning in the context of community. As supported in the previous chapter, conventional schooling is predominantly oriented to a body of practices that ignores or diminishes authentic selfhood.

Research in the following chapters is focused on describing the processes of Virtual High, and evaluating and reflecting upon the ways in which authentic learning and authentic human growth toward an ecology of being, as conceptualized in this chapter, is instantiated.

Chapter Four

BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUAL HIGH

My frustration in conventional education led me to abandon mainstream teaching as a vocation four years after I began. I could no longer satisfactorily resolve the crisis of confidence I had in an education system that forever seemed preoccupied with procedural and technical minutiae. Supporting authentic human growth was always given lower priority than serving the needs of the system, for which I began to develop chronic bitterness and cynicism.

Not long after I quit teaching I started to consider the possibilities of creating an educational opportunity that would allow teenagers to guide their own learning according to their own interests and needs. I soon met Brent Cameron, who had pioneered *Wondertree,* a self-directed learning program for children he had initiated in Vancouver in the 1980s, to support his young daughter's learning interests. As I read his M.A. thesis describing Wondertree (1990) I discovered many of the characteristics hinted at by educators who espouse a lived experience of being with and truly observing children, as opposed to manipulating them. I found myself in agreement with the unique political dynamic he highlighted:

> Each child maintains his repertoire of choices, and negotiates and models appropriate choices within the context of the group and the society at large. The group is necessarily small, and the political context of the group is accessible to the child. Authority is authorship, the rules are "agreements" authored within a process of consensus (p. 79).

I also found myself aligned with what he outlined as the heightened, natural learning abilities of all young people:

> The consequences of my participation in our daughter's desire to communicate and express herself provided the initial seeds and first insights into a new relationship with the learning process. These experiences became foundational to the underlying principles and methodologies for Wondertree. If children could learn to talk without being taught, what would happen if they learned to read, to do math, to learn their entire school curriculum without being taught? In fact, what would an optimum inter and intra-personal environment look

like to support natural learning throughout childhood, and throughout life? (Cameron, 1990, p. 83)

Significantly, Cameron organized the processes of Wondertree in reflection of the ongoing events he observed in his daughter Ilana's natural development, including

(modeling) observations of a child learning to talk without formal instruction

(consensus) respect for the positive intentions of each individual

(natural learning process) natural enthusiasm, curiosity, and desire to make sense of the world in ever increasing contexts and levels of complexity with finer distinctions (Cameron, 1989, pp. 88-89).

I was impressed with the integrity I observed in Cameron's work and in the relationships he enjoyed with the young people around him - mainly Wondertree students. Just before I met him, he had wound down the first Wondertree program in support of his students who had become teenagers and desired a different learning experience. Nonetheless, he and I began developing plans to modify the Wondertree program to support teenagers who had an interest in directing their own learning and enriching their education with varied and unconventional experiences.

From that impetus, in September 1993, we created and launched *Virtual High* out of a refurbished, somewhat dog-eared mansion in Vancouver. Created as an independent program, in contrast to a 'public' school, the mission and purpose statement, and objectives set out in our literature are listed below.

• Mission and Purpose

Our *mission* is to enfranchise young people with opportunities and choices, information, access to technology and skills for self-guided learning experiences appropriate for the Information / Environmental Age. Our *purpose* is to research and pilot new educational models that foster cooperation, natural and lifelong learning, heightened environmental citizenship and uses of technology that enhance community-wide living in support of human fulfillment (Cameron, Maser, Green et al, 1995, pp. 37-38)

• Objectives of the Virtual High program

to give learners opportunities to self-design learning paths, facilitate learning breakthroughs, and to be in-the-moment aware of one's own process

to enhance learning by using methodologies derived from scientific insights in human development, and by using interpersonal skills modeled by 'learning experts' and mentors

to empower learners/mentors with insights into intra and interpersonal processes and to develop teamwork skills using cooperative problem-solving (solution-creating) strategies

to provide opportunities for learners to develop environmentally, economically, and socially responsible skills in using information-focused technologies

to enfranchise learners/mentors with opportunities to become partners in educational entrepreneurial activities that enhance self-responsibility and make a positive contribution to present and future life on earth.

The program design reflects many theoretically-informed assumptions that Cameron and I held with respect to learning, self-awareness, relationality, responsibility, stewardship, and use of computers. Our assumptions, much aligned with the conceptual roots of an ecology of being as described in Chapter Two, and previously articulated in a report written for Human Resources Canada in which the author participated as a writer/researcher (Cameron, Maser, Green et al, 1995, pp. 17-22), are reprinted here for clarification.

Human Nature

• human nature is a totality of subjective and shared experiences. It is inclusive (ontology), distinctive (epistemology) and relational (ecology)

The human condition arises out of social, psychological and ecological interdependence, as reflected in the experiences of individuals. This condition illuminates an epistemology that situates an individual as the center of one's experiences (Bateson, G.), and inscribes an ontology by which individuals are able to articulate their universe of being, including beliefs, feelings, thoughts, etc. Such an orientation is aligned with findings from modern depth psychology (esp. Jungian,

humanistic, transpersonal and existential psychology), physics, cybernetics, biological sciences, systems theory, perennial philosophy and is consistent with the underlying assumptions found in many indigenous cultures worldwide.

Learning

• *Learning arises uniquely in each individual according to a constellation of biological and psychological factors and is based in universal ecological and spiritual perspectives*

Biologically, humans posses innate desires to learn in order to survive and sustain optimal physical and mental health throughout one's life. The learning patterns of individuals are also shaped by psychological needs to attach, separate and mature through the process of *individuation*, and integrate within a larger social context. Maturation through the fulfillment of emotional needs leads to healthy, balanced individuals able to take from and give generously to their communities of support. Suppression can lead to frustration which can manifest as psychosis or pathologic behaviour (Neufeld; Gilligan, 1984).

Ecologically, human beings evolve in interconnected webs of living and non-living entities that make up life on earth. Insights from patterns that consistently emerge from cross-cultural traditions, and threads that weave a common theme through many of the new sciences make explicit innate human potential - beginning with children - for transcendence of purely physical reality to experience broader or higher consciousness, AKA 'peak experiences', and transformational experiences (Maslow, 1972; Highwater, 1981; Grof, 1988; Cobb, 1977).

Socially, humans are born into cultural groups and raised according to complex and varying social characteristics. Learning is partially shaped by cultural attitudes and beliefs, and culture to culture these attitudes vary widely (Lave and Wegner, 1991).

• *young people are all natural, responsible learners*

According to Rosenberg and Warner (1976) and other researchers, all humans are natural self-learners. Infants and babies who naturally self-learn master a panoply of skills and cultural traits, including what is considered one of the most difficult psychological tasks of a lifetime - acquiring language. The optimization of natural learning is dependent

on the 'satiation' of developmental needs including the need to feel secure, a need to self-challenge and individuate, and a need to confidently integrate into community (Neufeld)

• *each person has individual learning styles predicated on specific, internal representational systems (visual, auditory, kinesthetic etc.)*

Researchers place the number of naturally-occurring internal representational, or intelligence systems resident in each individual between 3 and 7. Bandler, Grinder, Dilts and DeLozier helped identify visual-auditory-kinesthetic modes (1980), and Gardner (1983) suggests there are seven personal intelligences - linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and logical-mathematical. These approaches are slightly different interpretations of a learning continuum, in essence pointing out the unique ways in which each individual - baby or adult - interprets the information she/he receives and develops their own learning strategies.

• *learning is optimized when it arises out of individual desire*

Learning initially arises out of innate biological and developmental needs. As babies grow into children, they continue to be "passionately eager to make as much sense as they can of things around them" (Holt, 1986) and, as they develop, pursue different interests according to unique needs and tastes. When enthusiasm is allowed to flower, an urge to enhance one's own learning according to uniquely-defined interests guides and leads people to highly fulfilled and productive lives, from childhood to the time of death (Czismenthalyi, 1990).

• *the optimal learning relationship is based on mutual trust, respect and agreement*

Learning arises naturally according to self-determined needs, beliefs and desires. Learning is not dependent on [formal] teaching. Teaching is appropriate only when the learner requests specific instruction or guidance. A teacher-learner relationship is optimized when it arises out of mutual agreement to be in relationship. Enthusiasm is sustained in a caring, open relationship. When a teacher is able to competently match the learning style of the learner, natural learning is enhanced.

• one is engaged in learning throughout one's life

Learning is an active process that extends throughout one's life. During a lifetime, an individual has differing learning needs, interests and preferred styles. Learning is based on the ability of an individual to experience his life now and to make informed choices and empowered actions to influence his context of living.

Learning about Learning

• people can develop a higher awareness of their own (internal) learning processes, can actively modify these processes and /or apply new processes, leading to enhanced learning

One learns whether one is aware of it or not. Some learners develop excellent strategies in some areas and others not. A learning consultant, aware of methodologies and epistemologies of learning, can guide a learner to become aware of her own strategies. It is then possible to change strategies that don't work well into more effective strategies. Once aware of these processes, learners can reflect on their own personal achievements or challenges to learning and choose specific processes for change. For example, it is possible to develop awareness of the visual submodalities (shape, colour, texture) as a strategy to enhance memory, and it is possible by using association strategies to enhance meaning.

Learning and Community

• natural learning is enhanced in a consensual and supportive community

According to researchers, human cultures have sustained themselves in consensual and supportive, multi-age communities for millennia. Consensus is simply characterized as an ethical process for unanimous agreement and mutual support, operationally incorporating a negotiation strategy that resolves challenging issues and encourages mutual success. It can serve as an organizing principle around which learning communities are intentionally created. Consensus is distinct from conventional democracy (majority wins, minority loses) and, when achieved, it can foster a conflict-free environment in which to pursue learning interests. Communities can also enable learning by offering and operationalizing support for learning of all kinds. Consensus and support are thus mutually synergistic. Consensus also

helps to create purposeful links between community members thus making it easier to give and receive support and work toward consensus when challenges arise in the future. A multi-step negotiation strategy can be used to facilitate mutual understanding and consensual agreement.

• *Learning is optimized in communities based on mutual respect*

A person who has consistently experienced respect in relationships is more likely to exhibit respect for others in relationships. If, according to one's own sensibilities, a child experiences respectful behaviour from others then they may learn to understand the nature and role of respect in relationship. One of the first human needs is attachment or bonding and this need is realized when the parents are respectful and responsive. Children model respect as a natural consequence of being respected, a process that continues through adolescence and into adulthood. When an individual receives and grows in a context of respect then he/she develops a personal and inclusive mature sense of self.

If family relationships do not provide a nurturing foundation to meet the bonding needs of children, then the expectations of a patriarchal school system are more likely to disrupt the development of children. Families can respect the bonding and attachment needs of children, and learning communities can extend this context of nurturing lifelong. These models are traditional to many cultures around the world that maintain a respect for the natural development of the individual. The Balinese in Indonesia and the Mbuti in Africa are two remote cultures noted for their harmonious and balanced lifestyles. These cultures, and many others, have demonstrated for thousands of years a sense of community, sustainability and individual fulfillment that Canadian society might well emulate.

Learning and the Body Politic

• *young people are competent to make thoughtful and responsible decisions appropriate to their learning needs and respectful of the needs of others*

Though the existence of the public education system depends on children, it has created an exclusive culture of adults and professionals which rarely consults children and their families, and it does not enfranchise them as co-designers of the educational process. We are

gradually emerging from an era when children had less rights than they have today, it is improving. Unfortunately, 'ageism' (discrimination due to a young person's age) impedes young people from making their own learning choices according to their unique needs and interests.

Young Canadians today face unprecedented social, environmental and technological challenges. For them to adequately mature and assume responsibility as future leaders, they deserve equal rights with adults in choosing their own learning paths and full access to resources and opportunities that support their learning interests. The political nature of the existing factory model of education is not a suitable environment to establish consensus relationships based on equality. First, the ground rules have been established without the consent of children and young people; second, the high numbers mitigate against the establishment of working discussion groups. (see *Declaration of Learner's Rights and Responsibilities*, **Appendix II**, for elaboration of a new perspective that includes children and young people).

Learning and Information Technology (IT)

• *IT can enhance or impede learning, depending on a constellation of factors including the needs, beliefs and related experiences of its users*

Tools and operating systems of IT are capable of enhancing and/or limiting the personal power of its users. IT is most appropriate when the learners themselves determine if and how IT may serve their needs and interests. If learners are open to teacher input, and ask for information, direction or advice, then we have an appropriate environment for mentoring. Natural learning grounded in relationship and discovery is diminished when IT is used to extend and intensify the instructional paradigm. When IT is imposed in contravention to the interests of learners, the experience can evoke a negative response and further impede learning. Researchers are also recognizing that pathological behaviours (addiction, violence) may result when children who do not experience positive and authentic bonding with other people (esp. parents and other adults) turn to IT to satiate these needs (Healy, 1991)

• *exploratory play and experimentation with IT can guide young learners to optimally discover for themselves the functional operations of IT*

Young people, including children, are naturally curious about, and eager to make sense of the world around them, including the tools and

systems of IT. They observe others interacting with IT tools and systems and then play and experiment with these tools and systems themselves to determine for themselves various functional operations (Papert, 1993). Concurrent with play and experimentation, learners are competent to determine how IT can support their learning needs and interests.

- *it is appropriate to allow learners of all ages using IT to have opportunities to interact with professional cultures adapting to IT, and to measure the results of their learning/work against results gained in professional cultures*

One's life and the experiences one has in interdependence with his/her world form the context for learning. Most observers of western society understand the dynamic and rapid evolution presently shaping and re-shaping society due to the introduction of IT. This situation is ever-changing and professional cultures are reforming their organizational structures to keep pace with the positive developments that IT affords. Accordingly, in professional cultures, learning tasks are most often undertaken and achieved in a context of rapid adaptation, best facilitated by small groups which work together to attain a range of goals (Kline, 1992).

Reducing learning of IT to isolated, abstract tasks, as is routinely done in conventional schools, is inconsistent with the dynamics of professional cultures today. Young people deserve opportunities to compare and match the results of their learning of IT to the results attained in professional cultures; learning in isolation, and the learning of tasks felt by the learner to be irrelevant, can lead to frustration and resistance to learning in general.

At the time of this writing, Virtual High is in its fourth year with approximately 30 full-time students, 13-18 yrs., split fairly evenly between males and females. Working out of an aging, though refurbished Victorian-style mansion, the program is very distinct from conventional schooling. For example, in keeping with an emphasis on self-responsibility, students have the opportunity to chart their own learning course, hire (and fire) their own instructors, and they are given the responsibility for achieving their own results. Students also participate in consensus management, which is the governing political process of the community.

In Virtual High my role is much less a teacher than adult mentor or 'learning consultant' for students, giving feedback on a range of processes (e.g. relationship development, learning strategies) and supporting the objectives described in our literature. I also share administrative, public relations, and fund-raising duties. It has been a very exciting project to nurture and, at times, I have also been stretched to my limits to meet other challenges of the program.

Evolution of Virtual High

Since its inception, Virtual High has generally adhered to its initial conceptual foundations, though some minor modifications over time have occurred as a result of different students entering the program and new issues arising. Most significantly, Brent Cameron and I initially conceived a vital and uniform role for Information Technology, and computers especially, yet what emerged in the student group was less uniform interest in formal computer use and training than we envisioned. Some of the young people coming to Virtual High have been keen and focused computer users (as discussed in the following chapter) and some have chosen not to focus on them at all. Quite simply, their learning interests have been in other areas. Arising from community consensus, then, computer use is less stressed in our promotional literature than initially, though Brent and I continue to urge students to learn basic computer word processing, desktop publishing and computer networking skills.

After the first year, we also determined a need to introduce a vehicle by which students could strengthen the structure of their learning at Virtual High, and so presented the idea of crafting individual learning plans, with which all students agreed. Learning plans, accompanied by a schedule, described later, have since become a staple requirement and continue to contribute to students' self-organizing abilities.

Toward an Understanding: Virtual High in Space and Time

Virtual High merits 'thick' description as an entity existing in 'time and space' for its very distinct features as a learning or schooling environment created for young people, and as a context for 'relationality', e.g. the relationships of self-to-self, self-to-other, self-in-community, and self-to-environment. Learning and living in Virtual

High emerge as a constellation of processes that blend time and space characteristics with aspects of relationality.

The following study of Virtual High is distinguished in two ways. First, and subject of the next chapter, is an empirical, or first-order description of characteristics which can generally be deduced by the casual onlooker or visitor to Virtual High. They are the surficial features of the program that have arisen in some cases by intentional design but also by happenstance, then discussed and worked into community affairs. The space and time characteristics are seen to significantly influence the learning experience in Virtual High and provide an opportunity to discover the context of authentic learning and relationality and reflect on the lived experience of an ecology of being. These characteristics also help to distinguish Virtual High from conventional school.

Chapter Five

VIRTUAL HIGH IN SPACE AND TIME: FIRST-ORDER REFLECTION

The Setting of Virtual High

Virtual High resides in a four-storey Victorian mansion in a midtown Vancouver neighbourhood. In a rental agreement with the landlord, we have converted nine bedrooms into student office spaces, so that each of the 25-30 students has a separate desk and workspace in a room. The building is characterized by a 'homeyness' far more than an institutional feel, a significant reason why students enjoy coming here and staying late. I attribute this homeyness to golden, inlaid wood floors, plaster walls that have shifted over time and now show a few chips and cracks, unique room shapes, and a lush outdoor space. Some days, clutter and dust seem to rule which discourages those (including myself) who prefer a more sanitized space; but after a weekly cleaning the efficiency and cleanliness rise and meet everyone's satisfaction.

On first entering the main level, one steps into the entrance hallway, flanked by a coat closet and notice boards. Notices posted include media articles about VH, articles of interest for parents, literature for visitors, in-house news releases that I mainly write, VH agreement notices, messages for students and letters and cards from ex-students or visitors -- the current posting being a letter from ex-VH student David Muncaster describing his adventures on a trip to Nepal and India. I share an office with the other two learning consultants Brent and Sunder[10] next to the front door, from which we often greet students, parents and visitors. At the end of the hallway, one enters a small dining area, 'the cafe', furnished with tables where students and others eat, play chess, talk with each other or on the phone, work, read, or leave their possessions. It is adorned with a wooden latticework made by Brent and several plants. The cafe joins onto a large, efficient kitchen, often a center

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[10] Subsequent to the third year of Virtual High, Sunder resigned as learning consultant to travel with her daughter, and Brent moved on to co-create a unique program for a group of 18-24 year old youths called *Insight Out*, which presently operates out of the ground level of Virtual High. In the absence of Brent and Sunder, Jeanne and Drew, personal development (IPEP) mentors during the research year, joined Virtual High to work as fulltime learning consultants with myself.

of student activity, and opens into the largest meeting room in the house known as the main meeting area. Here is where community meetings are held in the round, with up to 35 people squeezing in with chairs and cushions. A large white board hangs at one end beside which a moderator sits or stands, and other walls show off student art works and a colourful aboriginal mandala. The last two rooms on the main level are a small music room and the science area.

On the ground level is Deb's (the office manager) desk, surrounded by filing cabinets, phone, FAX machine, photocopier, printer, and various supply shelves. Students have complete access to their files and all equipment with the *proviso* that they learn to use the equipment appropriately, and if they damage something, they are willing to help repair it. The ground level also houses our modest library, including a selection of reference books and guides, specialized collections, and a shelf of distance-education materials. In the middle of the room is a round, wooden table, with seating for up to 12, around which take place many intimate meetings and workshops. We have used the round table purposefully, to inspire egalitarianism and attentiveness, and meetings around the table, often using an adjacent blackboard, are usually efficient and respectful. The art room, a quiet separate space flooded by natural light entering by wall and ceiling windows, has a baroque feel to it signified by large colourful canvas paintings in process, ornate wall masks hung about, and clutter. After I finished drywalling and painting this room in the first year of Virtual High, students have directed all comings and goings here, including meeting, studying and experimenting with art mentors they have hired, nurturing their own artworks, or using the space for quiet meetings. Students have also assumed all responsibility for procuring supplies and cleaning up.

The top two floors house student offices, a multimedia-computer room, a shower-cum-darkroom, a bedroom where Sunder has lived for two and a half years and three bathrooms. Each room is distinct, as befits the architecture of the day when the house was built. Students are given their choice of office space, mates and arrangements. Some have taken to re-painting, scraping, refinishing, and decorating their offices with plants and posters. Tables, desks and chairs are available for all students, with the option of providing their own from home. In addition, each room was wired in the first year in an overnight blitz by Brent, to provide access to our in-house computer network, the *WonderNet*, and students need only plug in an adapter

from their desk to log-in for messages, and send e-mail. Office use varies from minimal daily occupancy to heavy nocturnal use as a full-blown computer 'garage' where two students habitually strip down computers and experiment with retrofits and new programming designs. Office groups are responsible for maintaining the livability of their offices, including cleaning and harmonizing relations with office mates and adjacent offices, and wholesale office shifts have taken place to coalesce project teams and even expel habitually careless or distracting students.

Immediately outside the building is a large yard ringed with laurel hedges and punctuated with large shade trees, an asphalt basketball/badminton court, a picnic table, an organic garden, and a storage shed. It is a very pleasant space that is maintained by the community and well-used for meetings, meals, cigarette breaks, solitary work, play and the occasional special event.

Comments by VH visitors about the facility and its use are most generally favourable, with many commenting on efficient and energetic use of the building. The following, by visiting teacher Mark Kato in 1995, is fairly typical:

> The small setting of the school enhances a feeling of community amongst the staff and students. Everyone feels a sense of ownership of the school and its efficient functioning. The house atmosphere is at once comfortable and relaxed, but also a place of work and learning.

Given our successful occupancy of this space, as attested to by city hall officials, neighbours, visitors and the resident-user community, I have suggested on many occasions that similar buildings to ours could be found in any neighbourhood in North America and put to similar, cost-effective use.

Thematic Projection of Virtual High

Virtual High is as distinct in its thematic orientation from conventional schooling as is the building itself distinct from a conventional school facility. This distinction is apparent to visitors perusing our literature and/or touring the center.

What is projected in our literature and learned in a visit is that our program is process-oriented, emphasizing 'self-responsibility and self-awareness in the context of community,' according to our most pre-eminent phrase. We also overtly project in literature, and vocally on first contact, support for self-directed learning, self-development and questing for excellence, entrepreneurism, environmental and

personal (holistic) health, and self-discovery through experimentation with information technology (especially personal computers).

Projecting support for these processes reflects the original interests of Brent Cameron and myself, from when we were envisioning Virtual High. At that time, we weren't striving to be all things to all people, but we were interested in offering a program that matched our interests and seemed consistent with several emerging, global trends. Initially, we projected our ideals and mainly attracted people who were interested in what we were offering. Over time, our initial ideals, with some modifications and input from the young people who make up most of the community, have been ongoingly endorsed as the philosophical underpinnings of our community. Obviously, the extent to which the processes of Virtual High match the assertions in our literature and from first contact bear examination, but the comments below, gleaned from letters by two new applicants to Virtual High and a returning student, seem to match up with the program orientation.

> (from Nolan, 15) In the past I have felt very constrained in my ability to accomplish learning goals through school. It has always been my belief that when I graduate school I will finally begin to realize my goals. This is because the curriculum of public schools is very conforming. I am interested in many of the subjects that are taught in school, and feel it is important to have a wide base of knowledge. However, the way in which these classes are taught precludes truly understanding any of the information because they are brief and theoretical. Writing this letter makes me realize how much more I have enjoyed self-directed learning, be it teaching myself to fix a bike, painting and drawing in my mom's studio, or tuning my skis with my best friend. Self-directed learning could be the key to my future. I am really excited with the learning opportunities that may lay ahead of me at Virtual High.

> (from Rachel, 15): I think I could really benefit from it (Virtual High) because I want to learn more but just have not found the motivation. I feel I could get it there because I know I am not standing alone, I have the support of a whole community.

> (from returning student Stephen, 15): In the past half year (since joining VH) I have done the following: -- I've made new friends; I've become a vegan; I've become a lot more open-minded; I've participated in the *Globe '96* conference as a representative of the *VillageQuest* project; I've become almost perpetually cheerfully and optimistic; I've

overcome my fear of speaking in front of people; I've learned to speak up more; I've lost weight; I've made a really wacky character for Kalev's role playing game!; and I've learned to stand up for myself more. I'm certainly having a wonderful time here and I think that what I'm learning is really useful. I'm still not sure what I want to do for a career, but I think that Virtual High is the best place for me to figure it out and work to achieve my goals.

First Contact and Joining the Community

Young people are invited to join Virtual High only after an extensive process of touring the learning center or spending an afternoon there, perusing available literature, filling out an application form including crafting a letter of interest and scheduling and completing a formal interview with learning consultants and often one or more Virtual High students. Parents are also asked to participate in an interview, which usually lasts between one and two hours. In most cases students or parents have learned about Virtual High by word of mouth, through the media, or they've attended an open house or coffee house that is regularly scheduled during the year.

In joining or first contacting the community, most students note the positive and respectful atmosphere. Says Stephen, who joined in the middle of a year,

> In early December, I spent a day there to observe what goes on during a normal day. As I was heading up the stairs to the building's second floor that morning, a small group of learners came down the stairs and greeted me. One of them immediately smiled, shook my hand, and said, "Hi, I'm Jeff. Good to meet you. You're Stephen, right?" That left a lasting impression on me. While another institution may have excluded a visitor and allowed them to view the goings-on from a good distance, I felt very welcomed.

If a young person presents an application and arrives for an interview, what is most helpful to determine are the clear reasons why a student wishes to apply. About an equal number of applicants in the first four years have been divided between those who had clear reasons why they wanted to join, e.g. 'wanted to join a community', 'wanted to focus on subjects not offered in school such as film or computers', and those who were less sure about what they wanted to do, but were sure they didn't wish to continue in conventional school. It seems apparent that the program optimally suits those students who are most clear in their reasons about

what they 'do' wish to do in their lives, rather than those who most strongly represent what they 'don't' wish to do.

In an interview, asking a student why he or she wishes to come to Virtual High is often the first question. We also try to determine the student's most enthusiastic learning interests, emotional attitudes, willingness to live up to the spirit of our community agreements, previous learning and schooling history (though we have rarely viewed academic transcripts), and the nature of relationships with others, including family members. It is helpful to learn what, if anything, the student feels they are especially good at, as we often use that as a reference point when students take on new learning challenges or seem blocked. Family dynamics are also observed during the meeting and noted where supportive or confrontational, believing as we do that family relationships are significant indicators of ability to enter into community. A discussion focused on the family is important in helping learn about someone's history and the level of support within the family for joining the program. We also try to determine and clarify any expectations that parents might have for their child entering Virtual High that they might have not have previously explicated.

If there is agreement from all parties, then the student is invited to join the community for a month, as a trial period, during which he/she gets to choose whether to stay in the program, and community members get to decide if they wish the applicant to join the program on a permanent basis. Most applicants are invited to join for a trial month; only a few times have students been declined such an invitation. Usually at a timely community meeting, the new student is introduced and other community members are encouraged to make them feel welcome and help introduce them to the processes of Virtual High.

We now have an expectation that by the end of their first month new students will have completed an initial learning plan (discussed below) that specifies their learning goals, and will have presented it to a learning consultant with whom they have chosen to work. At the end of the first month, an attempt is made in a community meeting to review the new student's situation and decide upon continuance in the community. Usually, some feedback is offered to the new student, such as 'I wish you wouldn't play your music so loud,' or 'I really appreciate your punctuality,' and on only one occasion has a student been asked to leave, because he was not trusted. Most students joining the program complete at least one year; but a

few have chosen to leave believing the program did not suit their interests. All students are free to leave the program at any time.

We strongly suggest that students contribute at least $100 per month, or 1/6 of the total fees, in keeping with our emphasis on self-responsibility. This has been met with quite favourably by parents and students, and we learning consultants have helped students generate this revenue, through on-site and off-site enterprises, and by helping students create a resume, prepare a portfolio, rehearse for a job interview, complete a job application, etc.

Community Meetings, Consensus, and Agreements

Among the first experiences that launches the year for students and learning consultants in Virtual High, and an experience that is repeated each week at a mutually-agreed upon time, is the community meeting. By agreement, everyone is expected to attend the meeting, and attendance is consistently high. They average two to four hours duration (the longest being around seven) with some students coming late, others rising and announcing their leaving. Prior to the official start of meetings, people trickle into the main room, exchange greetings and condensed stories, jockey for seating, and settle in. Under 'agenda', written on the white board, people write topics they want discussed, or they bark it out to a self-appointed moderator. With most people settled in, the moderator usually calls out "is everybody here? okay, let's get started." Then the doors are closed and the meeting begins.

Our practice in meetings and agreements in Virtual High is to be in consensus, or mutual agreement. It is a skilled form of democratic decision making aimed at deriving common purpose and resolving conflict. It also honours the voice and integrity of each individual. When practising consensus, each community member is obliged to support the choice of another, remain neutral, or 'hold' their support. Agreements go forward only when every member is in agreement to support a decision, pro-actively or from a neutral stance. Thus, one member may 'hold' their support, and they are then called upon to articulate their personal reasons for holding their position.

Says sociologist Marcia Nozick (1992),

> Consensus decision making ... serves to put into practice the idea that everyone's opinions are of equal value. Consensus is founded on the traditional Quaker belief that each person's experience holds a *piece* of the truth and that only by welding together the *differences* of opinion (even when they seem to contradict) can we arrive at a greater truth, a unified vision. Consensus is the most democratic, grassroots form of decision making because it allows all people, whether they are in a majority of minority, an equal say in the political process and its outcome. (p. 106).

I never formally experienced consensus as an organizational practice before Virtual High. To my knowledge, it is rarely practised outside of certain religious, educational, or indigenous (native American) settings. Prior to the inception of Virtual High, Brent described to me how consensus had worked favourably in his Wondertree community, and we agreed to suggest it as an operating principle at our first community meeting. All the students agreed to try it out, though, with rare exception, none had formally experienced it, like myself. To our pleasant surprise, it has worked exceptionally well, and we have adopted it as a fundamental ethic and attitude fostering good will and respect. We have also discovered challenges in the use of consensus — it sometimes takes much time, patience and attentiveness to work out a solution acceptable to all. In one experience the first year, we discussed a proposal brought to the community by two university researchers for three days! before ultimately rejecting it because one student had "a bad gut feeling" that he "couldn't really explain" about the project. Though we heard many perspectives supporting the project, we agreed, in the end, by consensus, to support this student, believing at the time that his health was more important to maintain.

Three years later, Travis offers the following reflection:

> Two people came to do a research project with Virtual High. It had something to do with gender. They did not appear remarkable in any way, but something wasn't right... Perhaps it was because they were only including the women in their study? Maybe, but that's not all of it. Something just wasn't right.

> And that's the only explanation I can offer. Despite three years to think about it, I don't understand any more about my reasons for holding that process than I did then. Then again, I didn't spend much time thinking about it, then or afterward.

The meeting went on a LONG time. I am somewhat amazed that by simply displaying enough emotion and not budging from my position I was able to stop those two researchers from doing their job. I manipulated people. I was a tyrant, in a sense. But I don't regret it. I found out afterwards that some other people felt as I did, but couldn't voice their concerns, even to the extent that I did. I also found out that some people had concerns but didn't see them as strong or valid enough to voice.

Sometimes the right decision can come from where you least expect it. Sometimes the tolerant, powerful people will let slide something that a petty, ignorant person will fight against with all his strength, and in the end we'll discover that the ignorant person has the best viewpoint for the group. Other times, of course, the opposite is true. This is where the power of consensus decision making lies: it takes longer, but as long as the participants are willing, the best decisions can, and often will, be reached.

In other cases, consensus decision making has helped bind our community together with common vision and support on a remarkable number of issues, including the hiring of mentors, cleaning responsibilities, drug and alcohol use, project and workshop initiation, punctuality, stay-over and sleeping arrangements, resource and budget support, equipment usage, computer game use, and others. It also under girds a general set of community agreements crafted in the first year, modified since, and posted on the main notice board and shared with all potential community members – student and mentor alike. The agreement document from the most recent year is included here:

Virtual High Learning Community Agreement, 1995-96,

between learners, learning consultants and other contracted persons

• I agree to participate in a process of consensus in the resolution of challenges and problems, to help ensure a mutually beneficial/supportive outcome.

• I agree to create positive and respectful relationships with others in Virtual High and direct my activities to ends that positively influence my learning and the Virtual High learning community. I also agree to be honest in my relations and communications with others.

• I agree to take responsibility for regularly cleaning a chosen site in the Virtual High facility and to share responsibility for helping fulfill other chores that may arise and require attention.

- I agree to attend the weekly learning community meeting. I also agree to notify other learners in my absence and arrange to learn the details of any missed meeting.

- I agree to daily log on and check messages on the WonderNet, and respond as promptly as I am able to requests.

- (learners) My family and I agree to make my payments (parent and learner portion) at the beginning of each month, and I agree to submit first and last month parent portion of payment at the time of my entry into the Virtual High program. Learners agree to make payment from their own bank account using personal cheques.

- I agree to use Virtual High equipment carefully, to return all equipment cleanly and promptly, and to take responsibility for repairing any damaged items.

- I agree to attend community, project and individual meetings and workshops on time.

There is also consensual agreement not to have sex at Virtual High and not to use drugs or alcohol on the premises. By consensus, it has been agreed not to write this agreement into the above document, though it is commonly discussed with potential community members and comes up with about bi-monthly regularity as a discussion topic in community meetings.

As a set of operating principles, the VH community agreements are generally well met. Minor slippages are commonly overlooked and often easily forgiven; habitual disagreement is usually brought to the community as a meeting topic to be discussed and hopefully resolved. Some of the discussions have continued over weeks and even months, and some have consistently emerged on about a monthly basis as ongoing threads, the major ones being about cleaning and computer game-playing.

Our community meetings are very important forums for exchange, even if about one third of the community habitually keep silent at meetings. New students are commonly reluctant to join in the sophisticated discussions in which young people are given decision-making powers as well as power to speak their minds in the company of adults without fear of reprisal or marginalization. In the context of fostering positive, win-win relationships, we learning consultants originally introduced some communication techniques in the first year, which, when tried and

tested by students, met with their approval and are now a distinguishing feature of communication throughout our community. These techniques are passed on to new students in formal workshops and informally through modeling by experienced community members. They are reflected in the community agreement listed above and include the willingness to state one's opinions respectfully and without making another person 'wrong', a deliberate replacement of the conjunction 'but' with 'and' to help expand a discussion thread instead of contracting it, and an acknowledgment that personal feelings and emotions are valid and worthy of declaration when sensed. We also ask for commitment when an agreement is reached, and that all community members state as best they can what it is that they 'want' with respect to a particular issue being discussed.

In the course of a community meeting, it is common for the group to move through up to a dozen topics, some of which are rife with potential for controversy and disagreement. Yet, with the incorporation of the techniques above and now a long of history of peaceful resolution, I cannot recall a single meeting topic that has not been resolved to the satisfaction of all members. I think this is a very significant aspect of honouring the young people in Virtual High as valid and valued human beings, for it seems true that every person I know, including my three-year old daughter, *wants to be known* and to have their feelings, opinions and beliefs validated. In the course of many pseudo-Socratic lectures I led as a public-school teacher (a technique in which I had been coached at teacher's college) I shut down and discounted many student answers in a bludgeoning rush to impose my 'right' answer. In its wake I inevitably left bad feelings and frustration, indifference, and a false sense of authority, because often I was speaking on some topic about which I had little expertise.

In our Virtual High community meetings, the first order of business has been to announce upcoming events, trips, guest arrivals, community comings and goings, followed by respectful acknowledgments to each other of some achievement, assistance, or community contribution. I have personally acknowledged students for shifting behaviours, experiencing a personal breakthrough in diet, work, getting a job, and many other things, and have found it rewarding to do so. Next, we often have a guest or two in attendance — sometimes a potential student or mentor, someone with a project offering, maybe a visiting teacher — and we invite them to represent themselves and briefly explain why they're visiting. If students are interested in

meeting further with a guest, a meeting time is usually scheduled on the spot, so we can move on to the main agenda topics.

In working through our main meeting topics, group attention is usually significantly focused, sometimes punctuated by long pauses while members gather their thoughts. At times there is good-natured humour or heartfelt emotion, including tears and crying. The discussion excerpted below reflects a typical exchange, dealing with a topic of considerable significance to the community, namely the playing of violent computer games in Virtual High, to which some of us are in favour and some are opposed. This topic was commonly discussed in the past year, when there was more of it happening than any previous year. As is occasionally true, we learning consultants sometimes speak longer on certain subjects in an attempt to broaden the scope and context of the discussion.

> **Brent:** I hear about how if I slash someone in with a sword in the game, it doesn't mean I'm going to go out and stab someone. But I know the kind of relationships we have in violent games are not about sitting down and talking to somebody or something, it's about killing and shooting them. I think right now Sunder is saying 'stop', and I agree with her. So the people who play violent games need to get our agreement to play. I'm here to make people feel safe, and I won't support violence in this space. So I'm saying 'stop', I don't want violent games in this space.

> **Sunder:** Is this for me to clarify? I think actually what Brent said does a lot of clarifying for me, I've had a lot of fun with violent games in my life and I went to the PNE and did their 'virtual reality' game and I enjoyed it. I have similar feelings of sort of elation when I kill someone in a game. I think it has to do with coming to a goal. What I very seriously want, is to explore ways to feel elated besides chopping people up. I don't want to get too nit-picky about violent games. It's not that I don't want it played in the room while I'm not in the room, I just don't want any violent games in the house at all.

> **Dory:** Brent, I don't understand how you don't support people playing games behind closed doors and such.

> **Brent:** Sky's mom came in here and I came up behind her and she said she could feel my energy, and I'm saying that people's energies change when they're playing violent games.

> **Jesse:** Some people say this place is a business place and I don't want it to be that, I want to play games, any kind of game. It feels like this

discussion is going to be a win/lose situation where not everybody is going to be happy, and I want this to be a happy proposal.

Alex: I have a proposal, how about if people play absolutely no games for two or three weeks.

Ilana: For me, I could talk about the violent games, but for me it's an energy, and an energy around it, and I think it's really important that we deal with that energy. I don't think that if we get rid of those games it will take away the energy.

Over the course of the next hour, we did reach agreement to go 'cold turkey' on violent computer games in Virtual High for one month (a complete cycle of the moon). Everyone was in favour of the agreement, or neutral about its support, and those originally opposed felt supported enough to risk giving up something they liked doing in order to support the community or possibly discover something else. Some agreed not to play games under any circumstances, some felt they wanted to play them at 7-Eleven or other arcades. In subsequent meetings, we discussed how the agreement was going, and how people were doing. A couple admitted breaking their own agreements, while others thought the house was more peaceful. Sky, a veteran games player, said on a national radio show ('*As It Happens*') that he thought not playing games had given him a lot more time, which he liked, and he'd personally decided not to play games for three months.

A few months later, the issue emerged again. Some of the games players had slipped back into old habits, and some newer, powerfully seductive games were being tried out in the community. Again, when the issue is discussed, as below, the context reflects real-world ideals and feelings, and the exchange takes place at a broad, rich level.

Sunder: I think it's a really good idea to have a purpose and live in terms of that purpose. I also think that playing violent computer games has a lot to do with habit and addiction. I want to address that. I really want to be as loving as possible and in this building with this community. I want a place where those images of violence aren't around. I don't want them in a room with the door closed, I don't want it happening. I work on myself a lot, and I want to change some of the images that are being put out in the world. This brings a whole lot for

me around Rose (Sunder's 7-year old daughter who lives with Sunder in the building every other week). She really notices. She doesn't watch very much television. She's very careful about the movies she watches. Sometimes they're more violent than what she wants in her mind. I don't exactly want to protect her, because I want her to have strategies to deal with the whole world. I do want to support her to keep her mind free. I don't want killing babies, destroying images happening in the building, that's my specific proposal, and there might be a lot of ways to approach that, including finding our purpose as a community.

Devon: The issue for me about violent games is I don't like them. I walk into the office. Jeff's in there, I ask "'what're you doing?'" "'Playing Doom!'" and I feel sad. And I leave, I don't hang around anybody doing that. Now I don't want to pull a guilt trip, but that's how I feel around violent games. So I'd like it to stop because I feel happier around here when they're not being played.

Jesse: I'm totally in support of what Sunder and Devon have said. Can we all just agree on that? I've heard Sunder say many times what she wants and I'd like to support her getting what she wants. That's what I feel and I think it's time we commit or not commit.

Unknown: What do you mean by violent games? I mean what happens if I come in and play violent rap music. Does that matter?

Jesse: yeah, I think so. (others nod affirmatively)

Sky: I was wondering if we could have them infrequently, maybe once or twice a month max.? I agree with the proposal, I was just wondering if this is possible.

Jesse: Let's put it this way. In this building, I haven't seen a single agreement not violated, so it is possible.

Brent: If you're into violent games, then violation is obviously the underlying theme. Go for it.

Sky: I've lived without violent games, I have for a month and half now.

Brent: So make your decision. He's asking for a commitment.

Sky: I agree with him.

Michael (me): I'm holding right now. I want more clarification before I commit to it and that's what I'd like to address.

(a hand count is asked from those people opposed to committing to an agreement not to play violent computer games. Several go up, and it's decided to let them speak)

Jeff: I'd like to speak. I notice that I like to play violent games more now than ever before, and I also think I'm more in control of my life than I ever have been before. And I notice that when people stop feeling powerless in their life, like in school, they put their energy where they can assert themselves and have control. For some people that's violent games, for others it's something else like sports. Anyways I just wanted to point that out. Now I play violent games once or twice a week, I play *X-Men* or *Network Doom*, and it's fun. It's like Hide and Seek. So I don't want to completely disallow computer games, and it hasn't been working for me to just let everybody play them whenever.

Michael: If I can speak now, I think this discussion is really rich, and I'd like to go back to what Sunder suggested and that is clarifying our purpose. I think clarifying our purpose relies on clarifying our values and that's my proposal: to clarify what values we want to represent in this community. I think there's room for people to negotiate their sense of purpose from those values, and some exceptional arrangements to that, should we choose to go for a peaceful community. You know if peace is one of the values that we want to practise here, then we can commit to that, and I think something like that is really worth committing to. Yesterday we had a discussion with Ryan around his habitual, and what I mark out as abusive, use of games and I said, 'Look, if I see you playing another computer game around here, I'm going to withdraw support for you being here.' I thought about that later and I wasn't really happy with my response, and I don't think it empowered Ryan in any way. I think what would really help is to clarify values and then we eliminate a lot of the conflict. Or if we don't eliminate the conflict then we can go to a deeper level and identify how a certain value, maybe peace, is in conflict with something else in your life and we can continually work toward specific resolution. So I propose we clarify the values in this community, that we perhaps craft a mission statement so that we have purpose here, we know what we're going for here. I'd say right now we don't know what we're going for, we have not done that work in the last 2 1/2 years. And I'd say if we have a commitment not to habitually play violent computer games, then we might have a week where we play violent computer games, or somebody like yourself, Sky, says 'I'd like to have an exceptional clause in my agreement' to play these once a month. You'd get my support for that. If I know that most people here are committed to a purpose and a set of values, I trust all people here to live up to that. I

think clarification of purpose will eliminate a lot of conflict and misconceptions here. I'm done.

Brent: I want to mark out that Sunder said in the beginning that this is not about banning or making a decision over anyone else. She very eloquently said this is what she wants, and Devon said this is what he wants. Their experience here is happier here without the experience of violent computer games, and yet they're willing to be here and be disappointed and be somewhat upset by the experience because they know that experience is of value for people who want that value.

This discussion soon wound down without specific agreement on playing violent games, but with an intention of discussing the issue in subsequent meetings because it was of such a complex and significant nature. What actually happened in subsequent weeks is that games playing dropped significantly as students committed to completing their academic courses and we prepared, as a community, for three public presentations we made in the late spring. Despite that lack of any cohesive agreement on the topic of violent computer games, I think the community was brought closer together through discussing this topic because so much of the dialogue was respectful and addressed real situations. One of the really important outcomes in the violent game discussion, and typical of community meetings, is that the adults do not invoke censure, nor do we necessarily get what we want. That, of course, would undermine consensus, which we feel is far more valuable to uphold than superficial authoritarianism, as is commonly the case in institutions like school. As Nozick (1992) identifies,

It is the *process* of working through conflict which builds unity, not any particular outcome. Where majority rule works by suppressing conflict and by ignoring or denying minority positions, consensus brings conflict to the surface to be debated openly and worked through to a resolution. (p. 106)

To myself and many other community members, our meetings have modeled an appropriate process to help discuss many issues of importance from various perspectives and, on many occasions, consensually resolve disagreements. Upon reflection of the many, many exchanges and processes I have experienced in my life, I assert that our community meetings have evolved into a more elegant, empowering and satisfying process for decision-making and relationship-building than almost

any I can think of. Jesse, a VH student since the first year, offers the following synopsis of BGMs:

Pop your head into a Big Group Meeting and you will quickly notice something. You'll notice that young people and their consultants, male and female, are having equal chance to represent themselves to the rest of the community. Everyone is on display and everyone has something at stake in the decisions that are being put forth. Over my three years at Virtual High, I looked forward to the day of the week where we all put aside our busy lives and sat together...for what from as short a time as forty-five minutes to six hours. I loved it! I loved the opportunities to hear my friends' ideas and notice what I had to bring forth. I learned the importance of succinctness. VH-ers can be curt and up front, I have to be ready for feedback from any side.

At times I observed discussions which were repetitive where they need not have been, and there were minor inefficiencies in the way the meetings were run which caused unnecessary frustration. However, these concerns were overall mild and we addressed many of these concerns in the meetings themselves. Overall, BGMs have been a wonderful learning experience for me. My experience both as a consensus group member and facilitator have been and will continue to be invaluable tools in my life.

Another student, Jeff, is also enthusiastic in his support of BGMs:

I have always enjoyed attending the big group meetings, or BGMs, as we call them. The BGMs are really a practice ground for going for what I want, and respectfully supporting other people. It's a real challenge to be able to communicate an idea to someone, that possibly conflicts with their own, and still be entirely respectful of their point of view.

When first I came to Virtual High, I didn't speak much, and yet I always enjoyed the quality of discussion. Not only did we deal with community logistics, but we discussed many more issues that gave way to, what was then, so many new ideas for me. It was really amazing and I marveled at what was being said.

With practice and experience, I've learned to have more things to say and to be able to represent them effectively. The meetings are run so that everyone gets to say what they want, and then we can all make a decision about something together, so that everyone is satisfied. Often the way it works, is a topic is brought up, we talk about it enough so that everyone knows what the situation is and what people's thoughts

are on it, and then someone makes a proposal for what to do, and it gets modified and re-proposed until everyone agrees.

Learning Plans and Personal Focus Work

Many students and their families are attracted to Virtual High because they have heard they 'can do anything they want' in the program. Many young people have personal interests they would like to focus on and so are interested in joining the community, and some are extremely frustrated by school and would like to unhook from its processes. In any case, as a vehicle to help foster focus, self-responsibility and self-awareness, we have introduced the Personal Learning Plan. Trying to keep track of where students were at in their experience in Virtual High and in their lives proved to be daunting in the first year without some record and commitment and so, in the second year, we began asking new and veteran community members to complete a plan by the end of their first month in the program, providing the information below to serve as a record of their commitment for themselves, learning consultants and their parent(s):

- **Biographical Sketch:** who are you, what are your main interests, what have been your most successful learning experiences, what goals would you like to pursue, and why!

- **Learning Focus:** what specifically are you going to concentrate on in order of priorities?

- **Resources:** list the resources you will need to achieve your learning goals, including texts, software, videos, mentors, activities, and any travel plans

- **Assessment / Evaluation:** how specifically are you going to assess and evaluate your development and growth?

- **Schedule / Time Line:** how are you going to allocate your time each week, month, and over the year?

In most cases, new students have not previously been asked to provide this information, and a learning consultant volunteers to help them craft their first plan. We meet with them and provide them with models of completed plans, and usually have one or more meetings to help them clarify and to assure them the plan is akin to a map that is useful for preparing for and starting a trip. It usually takes one or two drafts over two or more days to write up a first plan. Sometimes the first draft is very spotty, similar to a minimal response on a school assignment. When that

happens we encourage them to go to a deeper level with the information. For example, many students have little experience representing themselves and declaring 'who they are' with any depth beyond age, gender and grade level. Yet, on second take, and with some help, they can craft an informative description of themselves, with some important details about past learning experiences and some specific information about their goals. Information about previous learning successes can also shed light on preferred learning styles, e.g. logical, visual, auditory, etc. We learning consultants often try to discern this information and refer to it later in interactions with students.

We also encourage students to cast about to discover which resources they will want to use in their work, and discover how they might be available. Some Moneys from the operating budget have been allocated for individual use, and we encourage students to compile a 'wish list'. Next, we share with them our feelings that it is important to discover what is an appropriate way to assess their work or finished product, with help from a professional, through a working test, a sit-down exam, or some other kind of evaluation. Finally, students are able to plan individual schedules once they bring forward their personal commitments, including jobs or an interest in staying home one day per week, and the student group meets and decides upon a collective schedule for the workshops and mentors they have agreed upon along with other meetings and a common cleaning time.

A few weeks or more after students complete their first plan, we check in with them to learn about how they are adhering to it. Some feel they are on-track, some wish to make some modifications which we encourage them to do, and some have significant trouble sticking to it. When that happens we try to discover the reasons, which may vary from a lack discipline, choosing unrealistic or inappropriate goals (by their judgment), or choosing goals they felt their parents wanted them to achieve. At this point we ask students what they would like to do. Sometimes they agree to do the work in spite of feeling coerced and sometimes we facilitate a family meeting to help everyone clarify feelings and expectations and hopefully reach consensus on all learning choices.

Below is an example of a completed, ambitious learning plan, by Ilana, equal in spirit to the guidelines above, and equivalent to a grade 10 level, which Ilana wished to achieve. The revised plan also represents the first Ilana had completed in her life:

ilana cameron's plan for the year (1994-95)

outline for the Year -

October - December, focus on music, writing and spanish.

January - March, focus on socials/history, science, math and music.

April - June, focus on my current passions.

My goal for this year is to trust myself completely. I am making the commitment that i will stretch myself. I will know that i have done what i wanted to do when i exhibit my art at the coffee house, when i have published my book of poems, when i have read and talked to all the people that i want to i know. In the case of watching movies and reading books, i will be writing articles, columns and reviews for Blue Fish magazine. My focus is on Music, other cultures and on writing (blue fish magazine, poems, stories, screen play). I also will challenge my fears and my assumptions about myself and the world around me.

Courses i am going to take in 1994/1995

spanish / sewing / art / science / math / cooking / piano / singing / music theory / publishing / creative writing

• *MY MAIN GOAL FOR THE YEAR IS TO FOCUS.*

HISTORY/SOCIALS

- I will read books written by or about indigenous people, focusing on Australia and South America / read these books written by Canadian women (read them before Christmas) *Ruffles on My Longjohns*, Isabel Edwards; *During My Time, Florence Edenshaw Davidson a haida women*, by Margaret B. Blackman; *Mutant Message*, Marlo Morgan; and *Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin. After reading the books listed above, I will write a review of them for *Blue Fish* magazine (to be created and published in Virtual High) / watch Canadian movies and write an article or a column about them for *Blue Fish*.

GOAL FOR HISTORY/SOCIALS - to learn about what women and native people went through while Canada was being settled. To learn about indigenous cultures around the world, and to go meet them, so i can learn from them.

- no mentor at this time

LANGUAGE ARTS

- read these books before Christmas: *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson; *Stone Angel,* by Margaret Lawrence.(find new authors and books) /

explore and find new bookstores / read 100 books! / get myself out into the world as a poet / write an essay, a few short stories, a review of a book and a movie, write an article / publish my poems, and get them out to bookstores / keep a journal on Virtual High, write it every day / read books written by people who have gone to live with indigenous people / write a column for *Blue Fish* magazine / write a screenplay / send poems to magazines for publication / enter poetry contests / go to and read at poetry readings

GOALS FOR LANGUAGE ARTS - to go to poetry readings and read my poetry, to   enter as many poetry contests as i can, to get my self published book out into the world. I also want to seek out all the good bookstores in Vancouver and just hang out in them, finding jewels.

MENTORS: Sunder Green and Kathleen Forsythe

SCIENCE

- explore ethnobotany, find an enthobotanist to mentor with / learn about classification of organisms, natural history (evolution, adaptation), human biological systems, intro to chemistry, energy / create a mentorship with someone at Wild Rose College, learn about medicinal plants.

GOALS FOR SCIENCE - to expand my medicinal plant and edible forest food knowledge so i can survive in an old growth forest. To read about medicinal plants of the Amazon Rainforest.

MENTORS: Rick Martin (practising biologist) and Michael Maser (former geologist)

MATH

- study numbers + variables, roots, radicals + real #,s equations and inequalities, deductive geometry, the circle, 3-D geometry, statistics (intro). / later in the year, talk to an archeologist about what math skills they need to do their work / read book Einstein's dreams / read books about Women mathematicians throughout history (write article for *Blue Fish* magazine) / learn more about the history of mathematics / study mind stretchers, problem solving, mind games, sharpen my noodle! / study math as it applies to music / focus on math processes, not just answers.

GOALS FOR MATH - to learn math beyond the actual details, to learn about the people that invented it, the people that were pioneers in it, focusing on women mathematicians.

MENTORS: David Muncaster (VH math whiz) and Mike Hartner (professional mathematician)

MUSIC

- get my skills to higher levels so that i feel comfortable performing / compose some songs / perform one of them / take lessons from Veda Hille (& do all my homework from her) / work on my music reading / work on my ear, listen to music and figure out what key it's in etc. / buy myself a pitchpipe / learn more piano theory and technical info from Budge Schachte / learn circular breathing, after i can and before the end of June, circular breath for 10 mins / start a band / sing every day, more and more! / learn to play a song on the cello / take singing lessons from Penny Sidor / go to Australia and find a didjeridoo mentor

GOALS FOR MUSIC - to be able to hear a song and figure out the key and the   chords, to do harmony easily, to be able to improvise with Veda, to perform at Coffee Houses, to expand my knowledge and skills, more and more and more!

MENTORS: Budge Schachte and Veda Hille (two Vancouver-based practising, professional musicians), singing mentor, Penny Sidor

ART

- put up an exhibition of my paintings at a Virtual High Coffee House / make papier mache sculptures, and bowls, or whatever / paint 20 paintings, each time exploring new styles and techniques / put together grama bunty's story and my photos and exhibit it at a Virtual High Coffee House.

GOALS FOR ART - to paint and paint, to sculpt and sculpt to draw and draw, to go beachcombing and collect wood to paint on, to exhibit my photos at the Coffee House.

MENTORS: Tanya Deacove and Linda Schmid (two Vancouver-based practising, professional artists)

LANGUAGES

- talk to Patricio about Ecuador and what is happening with the indigenous people / speak Japanese with Devon for an hour a week / learn spanish / by the end of the year be able to have a conversation with someone who speaks spanish / be able to read Neruda's poems in spanish / translate one of my poems into spanish / write a letter to Cesar and Juan in spanish / plan a trip to Mexico and Ecuador, for this spring or next year.

GOALS FOR LANGUAGES - to go to Mexico or Ecuador or both and stay with a family and learn spanish from them. Speak Japanese with Devon every week. Be able to read in spanish.

MENTOR, Patricio

BUSINESS EDUCATION

- get a job at a place where i will gain valuable skills and experience / find inventive, creative, diverse, and innovative ways of making money / get my money situation onto a spreadsheet / be able to put away money into a saving's account, $50 a month / read **Zen and the Art of Making a Living**

GOALS FOR BUSINESS ED - to make a living by doing things i love, to have savings account that grows ans grows, and to put everything that i do with money down on a spreadsheet.

PERSONAL

-**wake up every morning** and: get up earlier than usual / play my didjeridoo / meditate / stretch and do yoga and dance foundation / eat miso in soup or in cereal, 3 times a week / play the piano / visit with my cats / write in my journal / make tea out of herbs in the garden or of herbs i have bought / drink ginger tea 3 times a week

during the week: make bread / listen to CBC / paint / draw / play the piano / sing / play the didjeridoo / write / bike lots and lots / do African dancing

I agree to be true to myself, and to follow my dreams, sincerely, **ilana cameron.**

Three months later, Ilana, who has spent less than two weeks of her life in conventional public school, negotiated out of the Virtual High 'grade 10-equivalent' program because she felt constrained by the morning schedule we had created for academic focus work. She modified her learning plan accordingly, dropping science, business education and math. She continued to focus on all other areas, producing especially inspired art and music, and diligently working in a learner/mentor relationship with painter Tanya Deacove, singer Veda Hille and musician Budge Schachte, who are all practising and professional artists.

During the following year in Virtual High, Ilana, now 18, created another learning plan, with many of her efforts concentrated on her artistic work. In the past year,

especially, Ilana has also reached out to embrace some other significant learning experiences for which she received community support. These included traveling with three other VH students to northern Scotland for three weeks in October to attend an international 'Eco-Villages' conference, traveling to Ireland for three weeks in February to research her genealogy, and traveling for three weeks in June with two other VH students and her dad (learning consultant Brent) to attend a United Nations conference on urban sustainability (*Habitat II*). This past year, Ilana also bought and learned to play the aboriginal 'Digeridoo', and for several weeks she worked night and day to edit and publish the first two editions of *Blue Fish* magazine, an in-house project she had been attempting to launch for two years.

At our graduation ceremony this past year, Ilana stood with six other students in a ceremonial circle in the yard of Virtual High, surrounded by returning students, parents, mentors and friends, where she told everyone that her experiences in Wondertree and Virtual High were the most beautiful ones of her life. She said she had done so much growing in the programs and was very sad to leave. In a separate interview, she told me about how shy she was when she first started in Virtual High, but through the many different challenges and the opportunities we brought to her (such as being interviewed for a media profile), she greatly enhanced her inter-personal skills.

> I have really grown and have a really strong confidence most of the time around other people. Now I'm pretty comfortable speaking in big groups, being interviewed on the radio, whatever. I still get nervous but I have a strong confidence in doing that now. In that respect it feels really good, I'm so much more confident expressing myself around other people.

With respect to her self-directed growth in the area of writing, Ilana talks about the importance of choosing from a broad base of learning options to nurture her interest and hone her skills.

> Rebecca started a writing group the first year and then Sunder started one up the next two years. With both of them it was a wonderful experience in learning how to let words flow out. And also to be in a supportive environment to share my writing. I explored getting more and more practice at expressing myself that way. And so that was one aspect of writing and also learning how to write essays and then writing a couple of science essays and getting some great feedback

about how to be better at writing essays. And also writing articles, that kind of thing. So it was both, the very creative 'let it out' kind of thing and also really learning how to write professional things. Learning how to do cover letters and professional sort of stuff.

As indicated above, Ilana also recognizes that she experienced the benefit of nurturing her own learning interests in the company of skilled practitioners with whom she chose to work. This experience has helped to make her aware of learning processes of direct significance to her life because of their origin in self-generated enthusiasm.

A similar experience is noted by David Muncaster who attended Virtual High for two years and nurtured various learning interests focused on architecture and design and contributed to *VillageQuest* (a Virtual High project to design and create an urban 'eco-village'). Experiences David had in Virtual High included hiring his own math mentor to help him prepare for and complete a first-year-university-level calculus course, being hired by other students to teach them math (successfully), prepare and present a speech to 200 architects on sustainable living, and complete a weekend workshop at a Hare Krishna ashram. In an essay he wrote to the community, which was subsequently published in a local magazine, David is forthright about how his awareness changed in Virtual High.

In Virtual High my life changed from being mainstream to being visionary in nature. I went from public schooling to alternative learning, from complete ignorance about my diet to eating only vegetarian food, from financial illiteracy to some basic financial knowledge, from being' employee oriented to being entrepreneurial in mindset, from visiting a doctor to seeing naturopaths, chiropractors and learning about preventative healing, from unawareness of the spiritual aspect of life to a daily practice of yoga, chanting, and meditation. I basically went from living unconsciously, to living consciously. There was a daily awakening and increasing of my awareness about the choices I make in my life.

At Virtual High, I had the feeling that everything I do here is important, that every project is one that makes a difference in the world.

After attending Virtual High, David, now 19, completed his grade 12 at a local community college and achieved a scholarship to attend a prestigious architecture school in the US. Like Ilana, David was an enthusiastic learner who strived to take

advantage of every learning opportunity offered or supported in Virtual High. Interestingly, he reflects that some of the most significant learning he did arose through the common processes there, like being in community, and from participating in or listening to general conversations.

> I could learn a lot more from you guys (learning consultants)," he says, "because it was talking about your life and your experience and personal advice. It wasn't some kind of distance or some kind of curriculum we had to cover. It was just in everyday conversation. You guys would say things that would just kind of light something up inside of me. Some of the things in Virtual High that would just make the biggest difference were just conversations that happen just spontaneously whatever. Not necessarily in workshops but just conversations I've had with different LC's or different people at different times. In BGM's I'd come out with some great realization at the time and feel really good in the group with everyone.

As well as being confident of the benefits of choosing to attend Virtual High over conventional public school, David reflects positively on the importance of being valued, and acknowledged, saying,

> Being part of Virtual High has meant so much to me. Everywhere I go, I now have a story to tell. I have done something unique with my life that most people find interesting. I have opinions and beliefs on many matters that most people overlook.

Ilana and David's multifaceted experiences are fairly typical of the breadth of student experiences. Some students, however, have been more focused, say, on film and video, or music, choosing and hiring appropriate mentors to work with or self-exploring options within a particular field. This has been especially true for several male students who have self-designed their learning around personal challenges to achieve expertise in particular computer-based domains (e.g. animation, internet research, desktop publishing, multimedia programming).

During three years in Virtual High, Devon, now 16, personally helped to design a commercially-successful software application (the *Power Smart Game* ©) and a software application for the Ministry of Education to complement 'Algebra 12'; he also helped develop and lead two two-week computer workshops for summer courses at BCIT (an opportunity I facilitated by helping him craft successive proposals and joining in meetings with BCIT coordinators), he taught himself 'HTML'

programming and helped develop both the Virtual High *World Wide Web* site and then a *Habitat II* web site so that he and others could post daily information during their trip to a United Nations conference in Istanbul. Though Devon focused on computer work during his time in Virtual High, he was also supported in researching and experimenting with nutrition and a vegetarian diet, participating in a 10-day meditation workshop in Washington state, and he greatly enhanced his writing and public presentation skills. In some cases Devon needed no direct assistance in achieving his goals. In other cases he sought and received guidance from learning consultants and various mentors. Devon is now contracting his services to a multimedia company at $30/hour, saving money for a sailing trip to Costa Rica, and developing his climbing skills. He has already received an offer for a half-scholarship to an internationally-renowned computer animation college.

With respect to focused academic work, students choosing to pursue course work in Virtual High have achieved varying results ranging from high to limited accomplishment. At the high end, some students have experienced very successful course completion, including one student who diligently self-completed four grade 12 correspondence courses in Virtual High and subsequently entered a prestigious computer college, and five other students who achieved A-level grades completing computer-mediated courses introduced in 1995 by the Open Learning Agency ('New Directions In Distance Learning' program). One of these students completed grade-12 English in four weeks, much to the surprise and acknowledgment of the community. Four other students also successfully challenged university-level correspondence courses. Other students pursuing correspondence courses have tended to draw out course work for a protracted period of time, sometimes completing, sometimes not, and sometimes drawing themselves, parents and learning consultants into a frustrating experience.

Academic work is generally a contentious issue, with some students vociferously opposed to it after frustrating experiences in schools and others questioning its value. We learning consultants encourage students to keep an open mind with respect to academics and recognize the value of course work with respect to their specific long-term learning goals. We can help them achieve this understanding only after working closely with students, coming to understand their interests, and illuminating a path to their learning outcome. Most often, this is an heuristic process,

in which we try to demonstrate authentically the steps required for achievement, e.g. putting students in touch with a mentor who can reflect on the knowledge base necessary for achievement in a given field. I feel this process has successfully been done in Virtual High on many occasions.

It is also worth mentioning in this section that a few students who have attended Virtual High did not set out to achieve much nor did they. In contrast to those students who entered the community with clear learning goals in mind, or with much motivation, a handful of students entered Virtual High mainly because they were disgruntled with conventional school. In some cases, they crafted learning plans with ambitious goals yet they consistently eluded accountability and breached agreements. In most cases, these students sooner or later found themselves answering to the community and/or their parents for their lack of willingness to follow through on learning plan agreements. In some cases they found support to make adjustments and breakthroughs. We learning consultants also take some responsibility for not working closely enough with some students to nurture them to higher levels of accountability. Those students who were not willing to be fully accountable slid through our cracks until the end of the year, at which time they moved on.

Group Workshops, Learning Projects and Special Enterprises

Much of the work at Virtual High takes place in group workshops under the guidance of a mentor, or subject specialist hired by students. The hiring process involves establishing interest by more than one student in pursuing a particular study or project, inviting and previewing potential mentor work, and negotiating the terms of agreement with respect to a mentor-generated proposal (addressing availability, desired payment, scheduling, etc.). Mentors are almost always practising professionals in their field of interest who demonstrate a special ability to be in relationship with young people.

Some potential mentors are declined after first preview, usually due to perceived relationship problems or lack of perceived relevancy. But in the first three years of Virtual High, students have hired and scheduled mentors (including myself) to lead workshops in entrepreneurism and financial management, music, computer programming, personal development, yoga, tai-chi, art, general science, physics,

media studies, health and wellness, creative writing, massage, dance, Neuro-Linguistic programming (NLP) and communication strategies, film and video, math, city planning and architectural development, and marketing.

In most cases, mentors lead workshops that are closely linked to real-life skills, interests and projects, offering much opportunity for student interaction and reflection on their life-work. In most cases, workshops do not follow text-books or formal courses of study, but a mutually-agreed upon path of study. Some (e.g. art, music, massage, film and video) include much opportunity for pragmatic, hands-on skill assistance, others (e.g. science, media studies) have included much circulation 'off-site' to take advantage of local resources, such as museums, the local coastline, and local businesses. Some (e.g. physics, math) are quite narrowly focused, while others (e.g. *VillageQuest* project, *health and wellness*) are broad-focused and holistic. Some workshops are sustained throughout the year, and some have folded 'mid-term' due to waning interest. Sometimes unforeseen obligations constrained the hired mentors and they regrettably canceled their contract.

Several workshops or learning projects have also arisen from student interests which are rather less formally-defined, but nonetheless have nurtured significant groupwork and discovery. As an example, a group of students worked with Sunder in the second year to dig up a portion of the back yard and develop an organic garden. As part of the project they pooled their collective knowledge of organic gardening, visited other local sites, and spent several days digging up the yard and seeding for food crops, flowers and herbs. Over the next few months they tended the garden and eventually harvested corn, tomatoes, greens and herbs. The third year, the garden project was shared by some veterans and new students, and spawned enough interest to lead several students to investigate organic gardening on trips to Scotland and the U.S., and it inspired one student to convert his home yard to an 'urban permaculture' space. At the time of this writing, the garden is in thriving bloom, and a new group of learners, including myself, has met and learned from the experienced gardeners, all of whom are moving on, how to sustain the garden over the coming year.

Two other noteworthy projects or enterprises developed and sustained in Virtual High since the first year, include the *VillageQuest* project, and the *Power Smart Game* ©, both of which have grown to include students and outside professionals.

VillageQuest began as a comprehensive project to investigate the notion of sustainability coupled with an interest in designing and building an 'urban village'. At first an interested student group met regularly with Brent to discuss their ideas and visit several local sites to learn more about sustainable technologies and environmentally-friendly activities, such as composting and 'solar aquatic' sewage treatment. They soon enrolled the assistance of several interested professional architects and environmentally-focused entrepreneurs who came to Virtual High to share more detailed explanations of their ideas, and the project group began to explore the possibility of developing their ideas on a plot of city land.

From that time to the present, *VillageQuest* has continued to spawn much student learning and project development. For example, as a result of student and project interest, a local artist/architect developed a workshop site in the Virtual High library in which he constructed a precise architectural scale model of a sustainable urban village over a two-month period with the assistance of David, a Virtual High student keenly interested in social designs that fostered community. As well, the *VillageQuest* student team described their vision in a keynote address, including a self-created multimedia presentation, to more than two hundred architects gathered at a professional conference; four students traveled to an international 'EcoVillages' conference in northern Scotland to discuss *VillageQuest* and to learn about similar projects worldwide; three students and Brent traveled for three weeks to a United Nations conference focused on urban sustainability called *Habitat II* in Istanbul, Turkey, where they met world leaders and posted information daily on a World Wide Web site they created for global Internet access; and *VillageQuest* has garnered two significant awards for societal contributions. In the context of *VillageQuest*, the student team has significantly honed their research, writing, communication and analytical skills to professional levels of expertise by creating pamphlets and proposals and presenting their ideas to hundreds of people, and the project has apparently initiated several students on career paths.

David, who used his *VillageQuest* experience to help him gain entry into a prestigious school of architecture in the US., describes the project and his involvement, below.

> During my two years at Virtual High, *VillageQuest* became my focus,
> my life. It is about creating a modern village of about 500 people,

within a city, where we eat together, share garden tools, and can walk everywhere we need to go.*VillageQuest* is about helping our culture to evolve from an industrial, factory-model paradigm, to one embodying more human-scale and organic qualities. Virtual High itself is the seed for this village, bringing together 30 families to create a learning environment more meaningful to us than the public school system.

After two years, we had put together a pretty hot multimedia presentation, a fantastic display for the Vancouver Art Gallery, and a professional quality scale model that brings together the basic principles of a sustainable village. It was my job to create a large plastecine model of the living space within the village, as well as organize the Vancouver Art Gallery display. ... *VillageQuest* continues to be the path I am walking.

Another similarly significant project taken root in Virtual High is the ongoing development of the *Power Smart Game* ©. This is a software application originally created by a group of 12-14 year-olds and their mentors in the first Wondertree program for B.C. Hydro, that encourages young people to make energy-saving changes in their own homes and save money. In Virtual High, Brent coordinated the continuing development of the original game, and has made available management and programming opportunities for interested students. As a result of corporate contracts, the game has been modified by students for three additional utility companies, and it has been colourized and developed for IBM computers.

About seven students have been ongoingly involved in game development, participating in marketing meetings at corporate offices, honing programming and graphics skills, and participating in authentic business world experiences. They have logged time in corporate boardroom negotiations, met project delivery deadlines, been well-paid, and even experienced greatly overdue payments.

The Virtual High student logging the most *Power Smart* experience is Devon, who was a peripheral member of the original development team when he was 10. In his *Power Smart* experience at Virtual High, he assumed a co-management and leadership role in the completion of the game for the clients mentioned above. Myself and the entire community (including his mother and co-learning consultant, Sunder) have seen Devon totally focused on several occasions over three years working diligently (sometimes past midnight), and completing self-defined tasks to his own

satisfaction. For his efforts Devon earned approximately $10,000, and could earn significant royalties on future game developments, which are still being negotiated.

I've always considered Devon's energies well-spent in the *Power Smart* project and encouraged him, given the experiences he had and the personal achievements involved. At various times, he took well-deserved breaks to learn about and practise meditation, hone his climbing skills, and participate in other Virtual High activities. Now 16, he plans on moving on from Virtual High to other experiences, including a major sailing trip and playing a leadership role in introducing new students to Virtual High. He relates the following about his experiences working on the Power Smart game in Wondertree and Virtual High:

> I've been working on the *Power Smart Game,* in different capacities, since I was 10 years old. I started off as one of four programmers creating the original product in 1991, and played a relatively minor role. It seemed huge at the time, and I thought that I was quite important to the whole project. I was being paid $9.00/hour, which I thought was a fortune. The money I made went towards a computer of my own, and with it I continued to develop software of my own.
>
> I didn't do much more with the game until I was 13, and started coming to Virtual High. Then I took on the project from a far different position. Instead of an assistant programmer, I was THE programmer. I completely shifted points of view from being an employee with little responsibility to being the project manager.
>
> The financial rewards are obvious. Yet what is worth more than the money, and probably harder to identify, is the maturity I gained from being trusted with such a major responsibility. There were so many times when I didn't want to even LOOK at the Game anymore, and yet I kept at it, kept working on it, and finished it every time. For a long time I was a one-man team, doing everything on my own, from graphics to programming to packaging. When I finally had other people supporting me and taking on some of the work, I felt so relieved. It took a lot of trust for me to give bits of my responsibility to others, and BY trusting, I learned even more about teamwork and cooperation.

Additional special enterprise projects involving many Virtual High students, and facilitated by learning consultants, included the development of several additional Internet 'World-Wide-Web' sites for outside clients, the mounting of several public relations exhibits at various conferences, and the production of several student film and video projects. All these projects required significant creative efforts and long

work hours, and they fostered the cultivation of inter and intra-personal skills, research skills, communication skills such as writing and public speaking, and planning and execution skills. What I also observed in many instances were students aspiring to, and achieving, professional levels of expertise, sharing responsibilities, and ultimately, experiencing growth in personal power.

To me, participation in special enterprise projects has been one of the most significant areas of authentic achievement made possible through Virtual High. This opinion also appears to be borne out by students, parents and other third-party observers. Following a comprehensive public presentation of Virtual High activities by students and learning consultants at the Vancouver Planetarium in the late spring, one senior couple approached me to say, "this evening has been one of the most inspiring events of our lives. To see your students present their work so sincerely, and professionally, was very impressive."

Patrick, father of VH students David and Katherine, interacted a lot with the community in the first three years, and appreciated the breadth and diversity of learning activities his children experienced.

> They have experienced a far more diverse learning experience than probably would be involved anywhere else. They had an exposure to an extraordinary amount of real world activities in terms of people they dealt with, activities, government, planning. They came in contact with lots of people that excel in one way or another in what they are doing. They had an opportunity while they were very young to interact with a lot of adults. There is something of a miracle about that kind of relationship. I think that results in an acceleration of their ability to do all kinds of different things in different areas. They have entered the adult world in a very kind of natural way as opposed to a 'you're a student' and then you're into the 'adult world'. The process at Virtual High has brought them outward into the world in a very real way. That has a been a strengthening feature.

Use of Technology / WonderNet

Step inside Virtual High and you probably won't go far before encountering a learner using some kind of Information Technology (IT) whether taking notes in a workshop or meeting on a laptop computer, taping a video, creating an animation on a desktop computer, or surfing the Internet. As stated earlier, learners entering VH are gently encouraged to invest in a computer after they determine which kind might

suit their interests (laptop or desktop). Virtual High offers three on-site computers, a scanner, two printers, a FAX machine, a video camera, a photocopier, a CD-ROM and various supporting hardware and software.

Some learners enter Virtual High with significant expertise in using IT, and gain additional expertise throughout the program. More often, learners enter with little or no expertise and acquire some degree of proficiency over time. For many learners, Virtual High is a program in which they gain their first significant experience in using a computer and other IT. A noteworthy example is the experience of Ilana and Kate who compiled their first video, transferred it to computer, and entered the product in a *Knowledge Network* competition in which they were awarded a computer for first prize.

One of the first experiences learners often have is in logging in to our computer bulletin board known as *WonderNet* (now known as *Paidea*) . Virtual High learners also have many other computer-based experiences, including experimenting and developing expertise with software, creating their own software, beta-testing software for professional developers, playing computer-based games, using CD-ROMS, 'surfing' the Internet for research and other purposes, and instructing others around computer use.

Some Virtual High learners have developed sufficient facility that they are contracted outside of Virtual High for personal or classroom instruction. Learning consultants have been helpful to these ends, for example, arranging meetings between learners and outside parties, and encouraging learners to meet professional expectations with respect to punctuality, communication and quality of work. In this practice, some learners have been able to generate sufficient remuneration to cover their learner fee requirement at VH ($1000) and some have earned considerably more.

In Virtual High, learning consultants openly acknowledge learner expertise and often seek their advice in troubleshooting software and hardware. Some learners and a learning consultant (Brent) have also participated in the modification of the (computerized) *Power Smart Game* , described in the preceding section.

In May, 1994, three educators from San José, Ca., visited Virtual High with the intent of researching educational uses of IT. After spending a complete day

interacting with, and observing learners' work, they completed a report appended to this thesis (see **Appendix III**), and excerpted here:

> We were impressed with the learning that goes on at Virtual High. The software these learners create, including *Hardwired Café* [an in-house, CD-ROM development project] and *Power Smart*, is engaging, educational and of exceptional sophistication and quality. We were equally impressed with the learners' enthusiasm towards their school. In the meeting we observed, learners were clamoring for the school to stay open on the weekends and late at night. The learners at Virtual High do meaningful work that is relevant and challenging. They create, develop and market educational software. ... We all feel that Virtual High's approach to learning is unique and effective and that elements of Virtual High's project-oriented activities and ideas could be applied (with significantly upgraded technology) to the Lynbrook curriculum. (*Summary Report on School Site Visitations*, by Tom Avvakumovits, Russ Moore, Duvid Pugh, 1994)

Other teachers looking in on Virtual High with respect to use of IT have also submitted comments. Says teacher Mark Kato, after a computer studies class visit in January 1995, "I liked ... the availability of computer hardware for educational purposes for all learners. That technology is viewed as a tool, rather than a be-all, and end-all, and that the staff and learners seem to have found much more potential use of this technology than other schools is impressive."

And teacher Karen Jones, also a visitor, describes our use of computers and technology as "a means of engaging in real world situations, not merely as a way to learn pre-made software packages. This extends the school boundary far beyond the limits of its physical plant." She adds, later, "it seems that rather than promoting isolation, the computer can be used to broaden interaction between learners through group projects (software design) and networking (the *WonderNet*)."

Virtual High learners also have valuable insights on their use of IT in the program, occasionally contrasting it with their previous experiences. Jeff, 16, who entered VH in spring 1994 with limited computer experience, says since he joined the program he has learned a lot about IT, and especially how to use leading-edge graphics and animation software. With a laptop he shares with his brother and other VH-based equipment, he's also enhanced his programming and word processing skills, his

graphics skills creating images for *Power Smart*, and he uses the *WonderNet* to communicate with other learners and do Internet-based research.

> It's definitely been a positive experience learning about and with
> computers at VH," he says. "Here I can learn what I want on the best
> equipment I can get and I really like that. In school I had little interest
> in computers, because I had to do what I was told, they didn't have
> any good computers, and they just wanted me to practice typing.

Katherine, 17, also joined Virtual High after leaving public school where she says she had very few experiences with computers. Her parents purchased a laptop computer for her and she has used it principally for note-taking, report writing and communicating via the *WonderNet*. Last year she learned Hypercard© programming and worked on modifying the *Power Smart Game* for which she earned some money. Last year, through a Virtual High connection, she joined the design team for an environmentally-focused computer game being created by a local company.

By her own admission, Katherine is not a "techno-junkie" although she now feels very comfortable using computers in support of her main learning interest which has become researching environmental sustainability for *VillageQuest*.

As for learning about and with computers, Katherine seems very comfortable with the Virtual High discovery approach, saying,

> the most fun way to learn about computers is by self-exploration, and
> its great to have people around to help you out if you have a problem.
> I also think it's wonderful that we talk things out as a community
> instead of setting out rules on what you can and can't do.

Parents of Virtual High learners have initiated discussions focusing on uses of IT, ranging from support of our approach and praise for students learning to make distinctions about game use, access to questionable information available via the Internet (pornography, racist literature, etc.). They are generally satisfied with use of, and discussion about, IT. Patrick, father of VH learners Katherine and David and a business planner with a communications company, offers the following comments.

> Virtual High involves each learner having 24-hour-a-day access to
> personally owned hardware in the form of a personal computer. They
> often begin by eating, sleeping and talking with their computers —
> literally. They are introduced to a range of software tools. This degree
> of 'flight time' is only possible in a regime where individual 'ownership'

of the 'property', the computer, is possible and artificial institutional barriers to their assimilation into the culture, the way of doing things, is unconstrained. This does not even occur in business today much less in the public school system.

I suspect that Virtual High learners have developed a literacy and competency which is embedded at an unconscious and inherently unknowable level except as might be measured in future by external results in the marketplace for ideas and performance. The use of the information technology tools in Virtual High at such an "intensity" and in such a unique learning framework will lead unquestionably in my view to "new pathways" — if not immediately identifiable, then in the tracks its "graduates" leave in future life.

Borne of my use of IT in and out of Virtual High, I find the technology generally useful for writing, communicating, researching, desktop publishing, charting, spread sheeting and presentation purposes. I learn new skills most often by experimentation (I rarely read manuals!) and, occasionally, I am frustrated. When this happens, I usually seek out a person who can help me, and it is often a Virtual High learner with greater expertise. I have declared my competency in the skills above and am available for learners to come to for help, which they do. This is an arrangement that optimally supports the learning of skills in the context of relationship.

I have also made many observations of learners using IT and I believe that the ease with which they acquire new skills reflects the context of learning in Virtual High. Rather than rely on teacher-mandated or Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) curricula, our learners are empowered to direct their own learning, to which end they discover for themselves if IT is helpful.

Accordingly, I see Ilana and Willow scaffolding each other's desktop publishing skills to publish their magazine *Bluefish*; the two Ryans and Stephen working together and deeply enhancing their competency at administering the *WonderNet*, and doubling their typing speeds in a couple of months; and Sky cramming to learn computer-based video-editing skills to help Josh, Greg and Travis complete their films for entry in a competition. In preparation for their trip to a UN conference in Turkey, I see Brent and three students create an Internet-based 'Web' site, on which they post information from Istanbul to the rest of the world. And so on.

Use of IT also includes significant dialogue, and there has occurred intense discussions in weekly Big Group meetings about the use of violent games, what constitutes violence, what kinds of messages help to enroll others and encourage resourcefulness, and about whether we wish to spend budgeted funds on IT. These are rewarding discussions.

In summary, use of IT in Virtual High is distinct from conventional use in many other educational settings and it has received the support of Learning consultants, learners, parents and other educators. In Virtual High, IT is introduced into a context of learning and community interaction consistent with the conceptualization here of an ecology of being: optimizing trust and care of others, independence, self-confidence gained from exploring, and creating and mastering self-defined skills.

Coffee Houses

It's late Friday afternoon. Jeff, Devon, Ilana and Wes are working in the kitchen, wiping down the counters, rolling out pastry, stirring a vat of steaming chili, and heaping up bowls of corn chips. In the main room, the couches have been evacuated and replaced with cafe tables on which Katherine is arranging tablecloths and candles. At the front of the room, a plywood stage has appeared, on top of which Alex is organizing microphones, booms, cables and speakers, equipment which he and I rented three hours before from a local music store. Guitars come out, mike levels are checked, a ghetto blaster is cranked up.

Such is the preparatory routine for VH coffee houses, a tradition in its third year, offering an open mike for students, visitors and parents to share music, skits, and poetry. For many students, coffee houses timed about every six weeks to two months, are one of the most significant social events. It is a time for friends and family members to visit Virtual High and enjoy a unique event characterized by creative and heartfelt performances, student catering, and a friendly, supportive ambiance.

There is more to coffee houses than just socialization. Bathed in candlelight and savoury scents, these events have enabled students like Ilana playing her 'Digeridoo', accordion and piano, singers Katie, Karen, Katherine and Serena, magician-in-training Kalev, bassist and drummer Alex, and others, to hone their performance skills. Mixed in with student performances we've also enjoyed belly dancing, professional musicians and improv comedy, adding up to an eclectic blend of

talents. I've also enjoyed performing at coffee houses, playing country-blues guitar, solo and in various ensembles.

It's nine-thirty. There's almost no place to sit in the main room or the cafe, and it is crowded in the main hall. Three girls and one mother are singing an Irish folk song on-stage, followed by cheers and applause. Fred introduces me to his grandfather, who Fred has brought along to show off VH. Fred's grandfather is helping pay Fred's tuition, and he tells me he deeply appreciates how much Fred is apparently enjoying VH. In the kitchen, students cook, mix fruit smoothies, and wash dishes. Students waiting on tables dart in and out. Devon tells me they are definitely going to turn a profit. The floor is sticky. I head on-stage as a back-up harmonica to a couple of songs by children's entertainer Raffi, who is a community supporter and just dropped by with his girlfriend. We're followed by Kalev and Ilana doing improv poetry. They get an ovation. I open the front door to get some more air and end up conversing with Josh's dad about the songs he wants to sing.

For Alex, acknowledged in VH as 'Mr Coffee-House', the events also offered him the opportunity to develop his audio skills as he came to assume responsibility for setting up the stage and ensuring the sound equipment was present and working. Over the three years he was in Virtual High, Alex's main interest was music and audio technology, and he focused almost exclusively on these, hiring a local musician as his music mentor and using coffee houses as a testing ground for audio tech skills. Over successive coffee houses, Alex gained expertise in renting equipment, setting up and taking down a stage, troubleshooting and repairing damaged equipment, and mixing sound, all of which he says has been of value to him as he has since moved on from VH and seeks a job managing and playing in a rock band. Here, he describes his coffee house experiences:

> When I first came to Virtual High my main focus was playing music, and when coffee houses started to develop I discovered a whole new level. I became more and more interested in the stage and performance. Each time we put on a coffee house it seemed a new problem or hurdle would arise, and so learning to deal with these kept me on my toes and proved invaluable at future events. At first the sound system was very basic, but every year it would improve. Learning at first how to build a makeshift P.A. from various stereo components was fun and challenging but through lots of use it became harder and harder to recreate the same awe-inspiring sound. When there was room in the budget we started renting from local music stores, then I had to learn

what kind of gear we needed for the space we have. For me having the responsibility of stage and sound just kept leading me on to new things to learn about. And now all the skills I have are put to use almost daily.

To Katie, now in her fourth year at VH, coffee houses also create an opportunity she values and has not experienced in any other venue.

I have really enjoyed the coffee houses that I've gone to and I've sang at many of them. It is a cool environment to share the songs that I have been working on, and to just enjoy singing with my friends. I enjoy singing a lot, and I even more enjoy sharing my singing with an audience. I've also waitered in a few of them, and I like that because I am part of the kitchen team, and I sometimes make a bit of money.

It's eleven o'clock. The crowd has thinned to about half. Katherine is singing on-stage. Ryan's father says he'd like to go home soon. Ryan negotiates and dad agrees to let him stay the night before departing. Ryan's dad picks a great lead guitar, I learned tonight, observing him accompany three different performers. I also learned in casual conversation from Josh's mom she is soon moving to Nelson, leaving Josh to live with his father, her ex, and then in another chat with Josh's dad, I learn that he is returning to school full-time next year. Josh tells me in passing his mom will continue to help pay his tuition but he must pay half. Dad, apparently, has never supported him financially. Josh needs to get a job, and solicits my assistance. In the cafe I start stacking chairs, and Alex announces at 11:30 "that's it", he wants to strike the stage before he leaves at 12:30. In the kitchen all the pots and dishes are stacked and in formation for the dishwashers. I'm told the profit is slightly less than expected but the food was considered especially delicious. Next time, Devon says, he'll charge more. If the floor were any stickier I'd be spending the night. I pack up my guitar, lock up the downstairs doors and head for the front door at midnight. In the cafe a CD is playing and the cleanup crew is still going strong. I say goodnight to Brent who is still talking to a parent, then I confirm with Alex that I will return the rented equipment the next day if he packs it up. "Thanks for your help," he says to me, as I head down the front steps, "it was a great night." My mind is buzzing as I wait for my car to warm up. It's been another very satisfying coffee house.

Intensive Self and Community Development

Toward the end of the second year of Virtual High, Brent put forward a suggestion of holding a three-day 'intensive', community workshop. Brent and

Sunder, too, had previously participated in various intensive workshops and felt such an experience in Virtual High could provide an opportunity for deeper personal and community introspection and contribute positively to personal growth. Without hesitation, the student group, including several students who had recently completed similar weekend workshops, said yes. Brent, Sunder and I agreed there was reason to be clear about the intent and parameters of the workshop, so we drafted a set of agreements around participation which was sent home to be signed by parents.

The workshop was designed as a three-day stay-over event, in preparation for which everyone procured a supply of food and adequate bedding and personal supplies. The main agreement was to being in the group for all three days, unless otherwise negotiated with the community. As well, physical violence and drug activities, including alcohol, were prohibited for all participants.

Brent also circulated the following list of spiritual principles to help guide participants:

- Human awareness is love, and we ultimately live from positive intent.

- Emotions are real. Own them and learn about yourself from them.

- You have choices and options in every situation.

- The context for this event is that if everyone is happy then we have an optimum state.

- We all share the air, and the vibrations from one to another resonate on many different levels.

- There is nothing that anyone 'has to do', or 'should do'. We are all fine just as we are. The questions are 'what is worth doing' and 'what are the consequences' of my actions.

- We are each masculine and feminine in nature; we all make decisions and inclusions.

- This event is an opportunity to develop new understandings and personal resources for greater harmony and balance in the world.

- This event is an opportunity to move through your personal fears and to challenge yourself and accept the challenge and guidance of others for a deepening of our inter and intra-personal relationships.

- Boldness has power, magic and genius in it! Stretch your mental and emotional limitations during the workshop and discover hidden resources never before imagined.

With a tangible excitement on a hot morning in May, we pushed our comfortable chairs out of the main room so we could kneel on cushions, then closed the doors. We formed a big oval looking at each other, and began what proved to be a remarkable event. Over the next three days we laughed, cried, shouted, whispered, dozed, and trembled. Some students experienced remarkable breakthroughs, while others shared personal secrets they had never revealed to their parents or siblings. We talked about feelings of personal inadequacy, moments of personal ecstasy, sexuality, relationships, and each participant asked for and received feedback, sometimes acutely frank, about how they were being experienced by others. For my part, I talked about my father's temper and how, though I found myself occasionally repeating it, dealing with it had sometimes drained my emotional health.

On successive nights, we talked past midnight before breaking to sleep, eat breakfast, and begin again. Unfortunately for me, this workshop came when I had been experiencing a severe fever, and I left a couple of times for rest (it turned out to be viral meningitis). Nonetheless, we wound up the workshop with a closing circle, each participant acknowledging its value. For Katie, the workshop provided her with an experience of deeper personal power in the context of supportive community.

> The first 3-day-intensive I participated in was very powerful for me. I felt it really bonded the community together strongly. Most of us had been together for about two years and we got to an even higher level of trust and love for each other. On one of the days, I had an experience of strong personal power - really being in my body and speaking from my heart. I said or did the things that I knew were right to do, and I am pretty sure, from feedback that I got afterwards, that I positively affected a few other people by doing that. In other 3-day-intensives, I haven't had as strong a personal experience, and yet in every one that I've been in, I've stretched myself, and also felt love for everyone and from everyone.

Subsequent to the first workshop, we have held two other successful, three-day intensive events, as well as introducing several periods of intensive self-development over three-week periods. In the most recent year, learning consultants took responsibility for initiating a three-week workshop in September to help introduce

new students to some of our processes, to offer returning students an opportunity to practise leadership skills, and to meld the two groups and foster community cohesion. The September workshop also was a time to bring in potential mentors and allow the students to choose and hire their selected mentors and to craft their learning plans.

After our Christmas break, we also initiated the new year with a three-week workshop to deepen some of the development work we felt would be valuable and to further strengthen community. In both workshops, we introduced exercises to enhance inter- and intra-personal communication skills, personal awareness, goal-setting, and self-responsibility and follow-through. In this workshop we also created an opportunity for students to receive feedback from each other, and the learning consultants, about how they were being perceived in the community. To initiate this, Brent handed out worksheets on which each student was to identify six people in the community with whom they would like to share a year-long 'boat trip', and why. On the back they were to list six people they would *not* like to travel with, and why.

Next, Brent made a histogram on the board ticking off each person as 'included' or 'excluded' on the imaginary boat trip, matched with the determining characteristics. Interestingly, there were groupings of people strongly included, strongly excluded, and a pretty neutral group. Following, we had a significant and frank discussion over two days, about personal behaviours and habits and the effects others felt from them. For example, many people had chosen Devon as a fellow adventurer for their boat trip, as he was perceived positively as 'hard working', 'courageous', 'reliable', etc. On the other hand, Fred was excluded from many people's trip because he was perceived as 'non-communicative', 'nerdy', 'afraid'. Checking in with Fred, he said he would like to be included on the trip, and he was willing to hear from others about how he showed up as non-communicative, nerdy, and afraid. Students then told him, in a supportive manner, they wished he would communicate more with them beyond a basic grunt that had become his habit, that they would rather he not follow them and tell them in great detail about his computer programming, and that they would rather he show them something and explain it in general terms. Fred received the information and said he would try to put the suggestions into practice.

This discussion, mainly focused on students excluded from the 'trip' to offer them feedback and support, evolved over two days into another exercise whereby each of us listed a positive characteristic for each other community member, and then we went walked around a grouping of tables and distributed them under each person's name. We stood in a circle looking at them for a moment, with Brent talking about how each of us shows up positively, too, and the significance of seeing the virtues in each human being. This experience was warmly received, offering each a chance to say something nice about others, though they might have other feelings as well. I received the following listing: dedicated, friendly, comprehensive and balanced, knowledgeable, courageous, softy, good friend, humorous, and others, which made me feel good about myself and gracious towards community members. One student, Will, who had been significantly excluded from the boat trip and received substantial criticism from the community for dishonesty and aggression, was acknowledged by the community in this exercise for being, amongst other things, enthusiastic, humorous, playful, artistic, and having beautiful eyes an engaging smile and a sweet heart.

Other activities in this three-week workshop included a day of students 'shadowing' their parents to increase their understanding of how their parents conducted their affairs and to learn about the range of issues arising for each parent. Students also completed a 'mandala' of 12 characteristics they wanted to embrace or cultivate in their lives, participated in various meditation exercises to inculcate awareness and relaxation, and finished a comprehensive 'personal ecology' index that I fashioned to provide them with more awareness about self and emotional health, physiological health, family dynamics, media consumption, personal creativity, and the factors that enhanced or diminished their wellness.

Students say this workshop and other personal development programs we have undertaken in Virtual High have given them valuable insights into the processes of their lives. They also report that they have gained many worthwhile skills. One of the important, weekly personal development workshops we initiated in the third year was a program called Intensive Personal Development Program (IPEP), led by Jeanne and Drew, two experienced personal counselors who have subsequently joined Virtual High as learning consultants. Jeff is forthright about the benefits he experienced in this class.

What I gained from IPEP, I think, was the ability to look at how I'm behaving and to identify patterns and things I want to change. Getting feedback from others, as well, is something we do. That is one way to go about personal development, and I have enjoyed it and found it very valuable.

This matches the intent of the learning consultants in offering personal development work to the student community. For myself, such work allows me to share my perceptions and insights with greater precision within this community, and accordingly deepen my learning-mentoring relationship with young people to offer them more choices and personal power in their lives (including allowing them to offer feedback to me). This is gratifying work that provides multiple opportunities to 'get real' in my relationships and feedback with other community members, including Brent and Sunder, and allows me, for example, a secure environment to bring in my toddling daughter, as I have since she was born, and entrust her to student care, for which I am deeply grateful.

Brent says the personal development work embodies what is essential to human community. To him, Virtual High is "a place for dynamic interaction in all kinds of ways, driven by the needs and the aspirations and the fears and the joys of the entire community. It is an interaction that is freely expressed, openly offered, openly encouraged, and really defers to and appeals to the absolute essence of what it is to be human and what it is to be in relationship and in community."

Family Participation

In the three years of Virtual High, family dynamics have played a significant role and have been addressed from various perspectives, beginning with initial interviews, and also including formal and informal conferences, regular parent-group meetings and levels of parent participation including mentoring.

In initial meetings between learning consultants and potential students, parents are included to: help determine their support for their child's participation in the program, assess the nature of family relationships, and clarify any expectations or concerns parents may have about their child's enrollment. Parent enthusiasm for their children to participate has ranged from very high to very low, and the learning consultants have decided it is important to try to discern how parental support can be optimized. Often, we have dealt with fears about "lack of a structured

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environment," or how their child can qualify for a post-secondary institution. Respectively, we suggest that Virtual High, with its emphasis on self-responsibility, requires more personal structure than a conventional 'other-directed' school, and that there are increasing opportunities for non-conventional entry to post-secondary college or university, as demonstrated by other ongoing, similar programs to Virtual High, such as the *Sudbury Valley* program in Cambridge Massachusetts, or *Summerhill* in England.

In initial interviews, we've recognized an important need to clarify parental expectations for those joining the community, especially with respect to enrollment in academic courses and the fulfillment of the student portion of the tuition fees. Sometimes we have learned after asking that parents expect students to complete certain course requirements that had not been made explicit to the child. As a result, we have refereed some challenging negotiations between parent and child to reach agreement on this issue.

Learning consultants have invited parents to communicate with us any time they would like to raise a concern, and call a formal meeting if they would like to clarify an issue or meet for a briefing. As a result, many family meetings have taken place at Virtual High, in restaurants and coffee shops, at family homes, over long walks, and over the phone. These conversations, most often with their child present but sometimes not, have often delved to profound levels, sometimes stirring up deep affirmations, fears and conflicts, and occasionally illuminating unbalanced family dynamics. The following notes derive from a parent meeting that I called to discuss Will, a student who was having habitual difficulty living up to community agreements for various reasons.

> **Thursday Feb 29, 6:00 pm: meeting with Will Hogan, mother and father (Jim & Diane)**
>
> The intent of meeting is to review Will's experience to date, and especially February when I said I wanted evidence of behavioural shifts away from aggression and follow-through on agreements, esp. re-punctuality and attendance.
>
> I tell Will I have noted a shift in his behaviour away from aggression, confirmed by some other students, but I think his commitment and follow-through is still weak. Diane chimes in: "that's it. That's always the problem with William." Will quickly retorts, "Well, if you'd stop

bugging me, I might do something. But when you say something to me, it makes me want to do just the opposite."

I cut in and ask Will why he wants to be here ... he says he knows VH is a place where he can learn self-responsibility and all about computers.

During the next hour, we talk about Will's continuation in VH. I say I'm only willing to support him if he provides me with a schedule and learning plan that he is prepared to be impeccable in following through; if he doesn't, I say, I'll withdraw support for him to be there. He agrees, saying he wants to complete his science and English course, and Jeanne and Drew's workshop. Then we talk about including his work and home schedule as well, so he has the big picture of his life. He agrees to place a draft of his learning plan and schedule is to be on my desk by early tomorrow afternoon, and also available to his father.

We next discuss Will's ambition to go into engineering, sharing a concern that if he *doesn't read now*, this will be a difficult task! I suggest engineering is a profession that attracts Will because he operates using primarily visual and kinesthetic modes of intelligence, based on my observations and what I know of his talent for art and fixing things. I suggest he should continue developing his talents as a way to heighten his skills, which could possible open some doors into the engineering and other professions. I encourage him to build art into his sched, and he also agrees.

We then spend a lot of time talking about two more important subjects in Will's life: his relationship with his mother and his pot-smoking habit.

With respect to his mother, Will says she is coercive and aggressive and apparently sabotages his plans and positive feelings. This is often demonstrated during our meetings in hostile exchanges, and this one is no exception: "Like yesterday," he says. "You said 'when you get kicked out of Virtual tomorrow, it's into the work force for you'." "I did not say that William," she says. "You did so!" he shoots back, "that's exactly what you said." "Well," she replied. "that's the way it is in our house. We've tried school after school after school, and if this fails, the only thing left for you is working. School is not for you. I've always said that." "Look mom," he says with rising tension. "I wish you'd stop saying that. That's why I don't get anything done."

"William," his father interjects, in a calming tone. "I think your mother and I are very supportive of you finishing your courses. We just need

to see some results." "Okay," Will says, "I'm going to do that. I wish you'd believe me."

Momentary pause. Mom jumps in. "Well William, one reason you don't get anything done, is because you don't get enough sleep. You have to go to sleep at a reasonable time if you want to get anything done the next day. You have to stop talking on the phone all night."

"Mom, I don't talk on the phone all night", he replies. "That's Andrew (Will's twin, academically inclined brother). I'm in bed by 11 o'clock."

"William, what are you talking about! You are never in bed by 11."

Apparently, we have opened a can of worms here in discussing phone use, and they go round and round for several minutes before I go for a treaty. I negotiate an agreement for Will to check in when he's not coming for dinner and when he's going to be late (as long as mom doesn't harangue him) and mom agrees not to harangue him. They also agree to having a family meeting at home with Andrew to resolve the phone use crisis.

Next, we discuss Will's pot smoking, with his parents expressing a great deal of concern over this, to which Will responds that he doesn't see a lot of difference if he smokes an occasional joint versus their drinking habits. I suggest that should not really be the topic, that what's worth talking about is Will's use. I say that, as one who has smoked grass, and had a lot of other experiences, 'getting high' is absolutely worthwhile, and human cultures have done it for thousands of years. His father agrees. Mom says nothing. There's lots of kinds of highs, I continue, like climbing a mountain, and following through a self-generated idea. Will says he feels great when he finishes a piece of art he's working on.

Okay, I say, then I challenge Will to work beyond getting high with pot to something new. "You've been there and done that, now figure something else out. I know lots of people, good friends who started smoking pot and got stuck, and it took over their lives. And they haven't got much done. If you're going to use it, I caution you to learn to use it wisely, and know when it's getting in the way of you doing something else, something more important."

The exchange with his parents on this topic is surprisingly courteous, even punctuated with a few jokes, which surprises me considering his parents seem to be developing their feelings from very limited knowledge about pot. I suggest he might educate his parents about pot use a little, maybe even smoke a joint with them!

The meeting ends soon after, pleasantly, all agreeing it's been a good meeting, and with agreements in place. Will is staying longer at VH, for a party, and agrees to have the car home by 11:00. (finishing time: 8:15)

Two months later, Will was asked to leave the community for his continued lack of follow-through on agreements. I was the last hold-out in the community in support of him staying, yet it became apparent the community was no longer interested in accepting his excuses, so we told Will good-bye and had several closing discussions with his father on the phone. Jim was supportive of our action, and sent the following letter to the community, which was read at a Big Group Meeting:

Dear Michael,   April 9, 1996

I was very sad to learn on Thursday of Virtual's decision to withdraw its support of William. Diane and I are in no way critical of your decision as it is consistent with our agreement discussed in our family meeting in February. Honestly we are sad, as we saw first-hand the real potential that Virtual is providing young men and women who are in crisis in the public school system.

While at Virtual, William's respect and consideration for others has greatly improved. Although William's progress may not be significant, there has been definite improvement. This is particularly true, if we take a moment to re-visit his progress since his first "intensive" in early October. Today Will is a better person.

We realize that the support William now requires is even greater, as the help and assistance of Virtual is not available. In a quiet and peaceful meeting on Thursday, William acknowledged to Diane and I, his reliance on the "Big Lie" as a means of survival. Never before has William been prepared to acknowledge his compulsion so openly and with apparent sincerity. Time will only tell if Will is being honest with us and everyone he must deal with. Will has expressed to us his appreciation for Jeanne and Drew and will miss their help and assistance. If possible, is there any way that Will would be able to benefit from their help either within Virtual or as outside consultants?

Michael, Diane and I thank you for the support given Will and ask that you convey our appreciation to Brent, Sunder, Maureen, Deb and all the young men and women who are participating in Virtual's program, as collectively everyone has been most helpful.

We endorse the objectives and philosophy of Virtual. It is most unfortunate that Will's time and for that matter, our time, at Virtual

has been too short, though very worthwhile. Yours Truly and Kindest Regards,

JAMES O'LEARY HOGAN

Including parents as part of our resource team, and inviting them to share their expertise, has also been very worthwhile. In the three years of Virtual High, students have hired parent-experts for workshops in music, massage and healing arts, math and physics, and other subject areas and special projects. Parents are also welcome to make presentations to the student body illuminating personal, authentic experiences. For example, Kalev's mom - a Ph.D. scientist - presented a workshop to the science class describing a research project studying frogs in Costa Rica, and Byrun, Rogan's dad, described in detail how he was suing a municipality for continuing to violate anti-pollution laws. Such interaction has helped strengthen the sense of community, enhance a students' experiences of the real world, and provided valuable expertise. In most cases, parents have enthusiastically volunteered their time for workshops, thereby offering a cost-savings to the community, or they have negotiated an exchange of some sort, usually involving training or use of computers, or help with personal business needs.

Finally, parents also are encouraged to play a role helping students outside the center, and many have done so, helping their child and sometimes several others. This kind of work, or experience, has been in service of various tasks, most often facilitating work projects, for example computer-related projects (e.g. Web-site or CD-ROM development), administrative and inventory chores, construction, and others. We have also enrolled parents in 'shadowing' experiences, involving the opportunity for students, usually their child, to follow them for a day as they go about their business. Including parents in these processes has also contributed to strengthening students' experience in authentic activities beyond the walls of Virtual Hall, and enhanced family relationships.

About the role of Virtual High in family, Mariasha, mother of Joshua, who was the first student interviewed and accepted into Virtual High and is now returning for a fourth year, says:

> For me it's a great place to let my kid go to. ... It's got good community support and good peer support, I just let go and trust that process. It

made it really easy. In public school I did not have a moment's peace. ... (Josh) was treated very cruelly in the education system. Nobody would say 'hey look at this kid, he's really suffering and unhappy.' And then when I was having my open heart surgery and he had to spend a whole year in the school, nobody ever said "How are you doing? What's happening?'

It's funny because we were out for a walk on the beach and I asked him well what are you going to do now? And he said well I've got to go back home (which is his dad's place) and clean up. And I said what do you mean? And he said well I gotta go get my room cleaned up. I said 'oh has somebody sort of nagged you? He said 'No I've been assessing my performance in all areas that I'm wanting'. Well that blew me away. So I think if that's how peer pressure works that's been a really good thing. He's taking responsibility. What he says he's going to do, he is more into doing.

I asked Mariasha, whom I have come to know through formal and informal family-learning consultant meetings, group parent meetings, and coffee houses, how she describes Virtual High to others, to which she replied,

It's a life school, where Josh is learning things that are going to make a difference to him in how he conducts his life. And that if he ever really needs to learn trigonometry he can go and learn that but he is so ripe for the kind learning that he is getting (here) in terms of community and shared vision. He was really starving for that kind of friendship. Hey I think it's worth it! To know that you live in the community and that the community really cares about you and will nurture you in the areas that you are interested in at the time you are interested in. ... And if you want to learn the other stuff, you'll learn it when you need to learn that.

Field Trips

By the nature of a relatively small student body, the ability to circulate off-site on various field trips throughout Vancouver and the Lower Mainland is a much appreciated feature of Virtual High. As a community, we also look with interest to local events and are willing to spontaneously change our schedule to take advantage of a special conference, or guest seminar or workshop. It is apparent that there are many sites of interest, and many events taking place locally, that offer learning potential. So, by public bus, our little yellow school bus, Brent's van, my car, or by bicycle, field trips consisting of as few as one student, or as many as the entire

community, have characterized VH since its opening. As trip costs are most often low, (and sometimes absorbed by learning consultants) there are many reasons to participate in field trips and take advantage of local resources.

Like most aspects of the community, participation on field trips is optional, and when the learning focus is highlighted, those students most interested step forward to participate and trip satisfaction is optimized. This eliminates any need to discipline disruptive students, which seems to characterize public school field trips. What we have often done, in fact, is make deep contact at the other end of our trip with resource people, or carefully observe special processes.

For example, after a trip to a local computer graphics business for one of their weekly free tours, Brent and I took a group of students back a few days later for a special meeting with the president, who ended up taking on two of our students as special protégés, at no cost. They worked with him for about five months, and he subsequently offered one of them a half-scholarship to attend his training program.

In another example, I was becoming frustrated at how two students were leaving garbage and dirty plates in their office, in which they were 'cannibalizing' several computers and experimenting with different hookup combinations. I had explained to them, with little result, that I did not think that was an appropriate way to create a lab site, nor did I think it was safe. I had no wish to harangue them, so, subsequently, I invited them to join me on an afternoon field trip to UBC to view how professional researchers maintained their lab sites in various science buildings. Together, over two hours, we toured several science buildings, poking our noses into dozens of labs, querying researchers, and coming to a broader understanding of what passed muster. They learned that my entreaties were borne out in professional practice, and after they returned the cleanliness of their office improved markedly.

Since the inception of Virtual High, we have gone on dozens of trips, large and small, to parks, businesses, seminars, to meet special people, put on presentations, and attend conferences. For a computer conference that specifically restricted access to people over 16, I provided briefcases and ties and dress shirts for students under 16 to wear to see if that helped them gain entry. It worked perfectly. For a science program in our second year, a group of 10-12 students and their mentors (including myself) went on 15 local trips visiting special sites which greatly enriched our study.

One such trip was a two-a.m. trip to a local beach, with parents, to view a meteorite shower.

Assuredly, taking advantage of local resources and events has been important to the learning experiences in Virtual High, and is easily done without putting much pressure on our budget. It merely requires flexibility and resourcefulness.

Cleaning

To the learning consultants, it seems generally true that the young people attending Virtual High have little life experience in taking personal responsibility for managing the results they create in their lives. With that in mind, we learning consultants advocated that an important aspect of community and personal self-management is a willingness to share in the responsibility of cleaning and maintaining our learning center. These jobs need to be done and, to date, all students and learning consultants have been willing to be responsible, on a weekly basis, for cleaning some space in Virtual High whether it be a hallway, staircase, bathroom, the outside, or doing the laundry.

This does not mean chores are always done, or even done to an agreed community standard. Each week, over three years, gaps have arisen or been noted in the cleaning schedule. Maybe Travis has forgotten to take the garbage out to the lane, or Greg has not shown in two weeks to cut the grass. Accordingly, the topic is brought forward at the community meeting, or else brought to the student's attention. Phone calls have also been made home to contact absentee students, or those who left before their chore was complete, to remind them of their community responsibility. They are encouraged to work something out, to arrange for their chore to be completed by another student, or to return to the center to do it. For new students, especially, they may have had little previous experience assuming such a responsibility, and this can take some getting used to.

A particularly memorable experience occurred the first year when the cleaning just was not being completed to a sufficient, sanitary level, leading to bad feelings by those who were trying hard to keep the center clean, including myself. Rather than getting more aggressive, we learning consultants decided on a different, surreptitious strategy to heighten awareness. I phoned a friend and arranged for him to 'spontaneously' visit the center posing as a health inspector from city hall. He

arrived, intentionally, when we were having a BGM, and he informed the group he was conducting a surprise inspection. Complete with clipboard and forms, he made a brief tour and told the group the cleanliness was inappropriate and his intention was to close the center down in a few hours, after he returned with the necessary lock. Students implored him to reconsider, to which he replied there was a slim chance over the next few hours for them to remedy the situation. Needless to say, the community sprang to action, with some of the most reluctant students scrubbing toilets and floors with an attentiveness they hadn't previously shown and within a few hours the center was sparkling clean. Then, the 'inspector' returned, made a brief tour, and announced the cleaning was satisfactory. At that point, I informed the group the 'inspector' was a friend of mine, and the scenario had been staged to raise awareness and hopefully initiate a new level of cleanliness. The students were delighted by the ploy, and, indeed, the trick worked to help raise student willingness to clean to a more appropriate level.

It seems we have all had to adapt to each others' cleaning standards. For my part, I am an organized, neat worker, and I have had to make concessions to allow for differing cleaning standards and for new students to become habituated to this responsibility. Cleaning has been an important topic of community dialogue, and a fairly regular topic in the BGM, but the students, and veterans especially, have become a more or less self-managing and efficient cleaning group that require little prodding to initiate cleaning or follow through on chore responsibilities. Cleaning has now become instituted as a weekly activity in the community schedule, during which we crank up some music and focus on completing chores, and, following special events like coffee houses, a group of workers is almost enthusiastically convened to clean up.

For the most part, students have embraced cleaning as an acceptable and appropriate feature of Virtual High, with some benefit to other aspects of their lives.

Jesse, after three years, seems to fully appreciate personal value in cleaning and service to the community, remarking:

> Cleaning might be one of the most important things I did at Virtual High. It helped me clarify my sense of service to the planet and help me better manage myself. I learned that the issue for me was not cleaning, it was about me being responsible, able to respond to my

environment. When I first started at Virtual High, I took on the principles that the house is clean and that I would make sure that the space that I use was in a better condition when I left than when I came in. To this day, I still believe in these ideals, and they are not always the easiest things for me to maintain.

Virtual High is often messy. It has occasionally become a sty. Mud tracked all over, papers everywhere, window sills covered in dust... an all round mess. As a community we have attempted many solutions, but for me, what worked was realizing that my integrity was tied up in my presentation, and the presentation of my environment. I discovered that there is a direct connection between how I feel and my ecological perceptions. When I am healthy, happy and on task, my environment reflects cleanliness and order. When I am in a hectic rush to produce something, my environment becomes chaotic, yet has a vibrant feel. Stuff may be all over, but it is obvious that the stuff is in use. When I am in a depresses state, usually my environment is in a state of decay. I look around and I feel anxiety because I wouldn't know where to start cleaning, even if I wanted to. Quite often, the surest way for me to change my state from pessimistic depression to optimistic happiness, is for me to stop doing anything, take a deep breath, look around and find something simple for me to do to make my environment more healthful. From that first task, another simple one appears. Then another. Then another. And soon, I'm cleaning and feeling better. An hour or two later, I've pulled myself out of the mire of my feelings and clutter.

This is a very important realization for me, and I came upon it during my first year at VH. At first, we had addressed the issue of cleaning on a rotational basis. People got to try out a job and then switch to another one. Mid-way through the year, a few of us decided that we would rather have a longer relationship with the cleaning area, to understand the intricacies of the job and to experiment with developing a personal routine. I decided to take on the mainfloor bathroom, as I figured it would be a challenge for me. It turned out that I loved doing it. I actually enjoyed scrubbing the toilet, cleaning the walls, washing the sink, rinsing out the shower, and getting rid of any marks on the mirror. One week, I had been having a tough time. I was just not excited with life. The house was a mess. I had forgotten to do my job all week, and it had been under heavy use. I looked at the room and it was yucky. I felt a little overwhelmed. I took a deep breath and decided I would just do the sink quickly. But then since I was there I might as well do the mirror. Ok, it wouldn't be so bad to do the toilet. Well, the walls do need to be done, and it actually is kind of nice, just

getting something done. Oh look at that floor, imagine how nice this room is going to look when I'm done. Some finishing touches, and 'voila', a room to be proud of again. Ok, so what's next on the things I can do... Without realizing it, I had picked up my energy and was off on a creative spree, once again excited about life and what I could do. Since then, I have come to realize that it is my life work to examine the relationship between myself and my environment.

Learning Consultant Interaction and Planning

It is worth discussing, in the context of this chapter, some of the elements of learning consultant interaction and planning. In the three years of Virtual High, we learning consultants have worked closely together formally and informally discussing how we can optimally support the young people coming to our program, how we might contribute to the strength of our community, the nature of family dynamics, insights from our personal experiences, and planning specific activities. I and my colleagues have said, usually after our work has pushed us to the limits of physical and emotional resourcefulness, that being a learning consultant is sometimes extremely burdensome, drawing deeply on our counseling, relationship, home maintenance, and other skills. We continue to feel we are doing pioneering work, necessitating working on a limited budget and having oceanic patience, ingenuity, clarity of vision, and showing up with convincing personal integrity in demonstrating our work to the uninitiated and enrolling support of new families and other people and organizations. [11]

Notwithstanding the frustrations, I am still thrilled to come and co-create Virtual High each day, as the work is personally very satisfying. It is especially satisfying to see the young people in Virtual High gain more awareness and demonstrate more personal power in their lives than when they first joined the program, and know that I helped contribute in some way. To know that Travis, who participated in the program for the first three years, told a group of educators that "had it not been for Virtual High" and our willingness to encourage him in pursuing his own interests, and

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[11] The work of being a learning consultant is of a distinct nature from teaching. To prepare for this work is to come to a different kind of understanding and complete a training offering various experiences, and honing skills necessary to optimally support natural learning and human development. As an organization, Wondertree has previously prepared and completed two levels of training, an introductory and advanced level, and there are plans to offer more in the future.

care for his concerns, as when we rejected a research project that he alone objected to, he would have committed suicide, is to feel deeply affirmed in our work. The same is true for Josh and Stephen, who both came to VH overweight and in deep personal despair from public school, yet, respectively, after a year and six months in VH, and encouragement and insights from learning consultants and fellow students, both have embraced vegetarianism and turned their health around. Josh, who has mainly used his three years in VH deepening his expertise of film, and film-making, says Virtual High has been "incredibly beneficial," a place where he has gained "knowledge in almost anything that I want to know about. Also stuff I didn't know about, like the way I communicate with people, and the way I show up on this planet."

As for Stephen, last spring he stood on-stage in front of more than three hundred people in a public presentation at the Vancouver Planetarium which was his first presentation ever, and described Virtual High as a "very positive influence" in his life, beginning with his first visit when a student stopped him in the stairwell, extended his hand and said "you must be Stephen. Welcome." Though we learning consultants helped Stephen prepare for his presentation, I cried when I listened to his presentation having experienced his amazing transition over six months, from an angry young man who was "shutting down" according to his mother, to a robust and engaging young man, largely as a result of providing him with the opportunity to be affirmed in the world as a real and valued, fellow human being. By the end of last year, Stephen, who applied to come back to Virtual High, had assumed a leadership role in the Big Group Meetings, was staying enthusiastically each night until 10 pm before walking home, was participating and co-managing a role-playing game with other students, and had lost 20 pounds. His mother, an M.A. theologian, and his father, a provincial judge, said in a family meeting focused on Stephen's re-application, that they were "very supportive" of Stephen continuing in Virtual High, with high confidence of his success, despite his lack of academics, which they had strongly defended in a first meeting as imperative.

When together, informally or formally, we learning consultants mainly update each other on newsworthy administrative items and share our insights following activities and student and family meetings, swapping reflections and ideas. In general, we work much closer, emotionally, than any team of educators I ever

experienced when teaching. For example, I am grateful for Brent's voluntary support for me during the birth of my daughter, from evening through dawn, on one of our only holidays the first year. We have shared many moments that challenged us as learning consultants, as when Brent and I and Sunder worked over several evenings trying to shift a family from screaming at each other in turmoil to supporting each other. Eventually we asked that particular student to leave the program and encouraged the family to seek counseling elsewhere.

In the course of our work, we also regularly share ideas, resources and strategies to deepen our effectiveness as learning consultants and to understand student behaviours, in addition to our own personal processes. We also have tried to be present, as an ensemble, for initial student-family interviews so that we can collectively discern student patterns of interaction and family dynamics, and thus assess the appropriateness for entry, or 'flag' noteworthy characteristics. Most often, we have worked well together, in largely an apprenticeship role, though occasions have arisen where we have challenged each other on a significant personal level, as when I criticized Brent for his messiness, suggesting he was hypocritically modeling carelessness for students while advocating the opposite, and when Brent and I discussed with Sunder how her behaviour and especially her mood swings made it increasingly difficult to work closely with her. In all cases, we have have also offered support for each other and affirmations for each others' contributions to the program.

Virtual Reality: Beyond Empirical Analysis

The above empirical description represents a mapping of Virtual High, a first-order reflection of lived experiences therein. The map is important because it helps in distinguishing unique spatial and temporal configurations, including the arrangements supporting self-growth in the context of community. But the map only reveals part of the story. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the extent to which Virtual High nurtures an ecology of being as previously characterized, therefore, this mapping needs to be complemented by a second-order probe of Virtual High, an ontological interrogation that examines and explicates the existential meaning of relational experiences therein. Relationality is chosen as the context of discovery here because it is through relationality that existential, authentic meaning grows into

awareness: self-to-self, self-to-other, self-to-group, and self-to-environment relationality. It is to this level of study that I now venture.

Chapter Six

VIRTUAL HIGH IN SPACE AND TIME: SECOND-ORDER REFLECTION

Our primary (psychological) need is for relationships, and our personality is structured around the internalization of our relational experiences. (Jones, 1995, p. 192)

The study of various aspects of relationality in Virtual High discussed in this chapter, should 'thicken' the description so far and illuminate significant and subtle forces residing in the group of people that comprise the Virtual High community - students, learning consultants, mentors and instructors, and family members. Many of these relational forces arise authentically in the *nature* of human existence (outside the context of Virtual High) yet they are also attended to in the program. This study focuses on the relationality of self-to-self, self-to-other, self-to-group, and self-to-environment as an heuristic to deepen awareness of the meaning of lived experiences mapped out in the preceding chapter.

Some of the processes of Virtual High draw these relational forces into higher awareness, helping improve community and family relations, and fostering growth. Describing and accounting for various aspects of relationality in this chapter is based on interviews and observations, and covers a spectrum of opinions. In this interpretation, I have striven to locate my response within a conjectured 'circle of understanding' that includes the interpretive voice of the subject and the community. This is not just a technique enacted as a means to an end; it serves the principle of consensus — an honouring of 'the other' — that I and community members habitually practice in Virtual High.

Self-to-Self Relationality

Investigating 'what is true' for one's self is precisely one of the significant opportunities of Virtual High, purposefully re-cognized and experienced in the program by various ways and means. In Virtual High, Brent, Sunder, I, and others have striven systematically to call the self into higher awareness to nurture self-health and individuation, enhance self-responsibility, and ultimately 'deepen' our

community. Self "processing" is honoured as the foremost concern for every person in our program, as emphasized through the articulation of individual learning and behavioural goals, and all the expected learning outcomes. We learning consultants are also agreed that acknowledgment of self represents the ground of relationality, and prefigures the conditions for learning to be optimized

As described earlier, the application process to Virtual High involves describing oneself autobiographically, and articulating one's goals and achievements. This helps to initiate self-awareness, and the results are often a good indicator of a student's level of awareness and self-motivation. Reasonably often, the response is a minimally perfunctory sketch including the scantiest details. "I'm 15 years old and I want to get my grade 12. I really like computers and snowboarding, and I think school sucks," said a note from one applicant.

There are also applicants who provide a more comprehensive accounting of themselves. In the letter below from Capri, 14, she expresses a significant level of self-awareness, though she also acknowledges a significant, conscious recognition and gratitude for the experience of being called to higher self-awareness through our request to craft a self-focused application letter.

> I began to think about why I wanted to attend Virtual High. Was it because I didn't want to sit in a desk staring at someone's head all day? Was it because I didn't want to do page after page of the same thing for years? No, it was the need to get an education on life and skills I really need. It was the need to be in a learning environment where I could not be afraid of walking down the halls or telling people my ideas. It was the need to explore and work on my talents or things that need improvement. ... My one learning goal is to learn to love learning. At the school I'm at now learning is boring and very uninteresting. I want to be able to not fall asleep in class or finish first and have something to do."   ... Thank you for encouraging me to write this letter, I didn't know I had opinions and could express them.

Following application, acceptance and initiation into Virtual High, students' self awareness grows with the adaptation to community processes and the development of a learning plan, emphasized as a goal for the end of the first month. We learning consultants try to 'tune in' to how a student is doing in adapting to our unique processes and culture, offering encouragement to new students to relax and discern our patterns, and not worry about "figuring everything out." We recognize that there

can be a lot of new information to be assimilated and adapted to, and we want to leave room for natural growth appropriate to individual 'chemistry'. Not surprisingly, for students joining Virtual High from a home-schooling background, there seems to be higher level of self awareness and self motivation than those young people joining after years of conventional schooling. I believe this reflects how homeschooled students are often more habituated to calling their personal goals and opinions into awareness, whereas conventionally-schooled students often show the results of years of training in self-denial and subjugation to the agenda of others, including teachers and influential peers.

Most students have been initiated into Virtual High in either September, at the beginning of a new year, or in January. A few others have joined in mid-season, but this is not especially convenient, so we try to avoid it. With the agreement of the community, we learning consultants have taken responsibility for crafting and leading a three-week experiential workshop for all students in both September and mid-year to introduce some self-development processes and strengthen, or deepen, our community.

Informally titled the 'Three-Week Intensive', or 'Self-Actualization program', the exercises introduced by Brent, Sunder and myself (described in the previous chapter) reflect many of the practices we had experienced as adults at other workshops focused on self and/or relationship development. Curiously, there is a plethora of self and relationship-focused workshops and experiences available for adults today, yet very few similar opportunities exist for young people, especially in conventional schools. To me, this unfortunate and unbalanced situation reflects a societal attitude of disregard and stereotyping of the self-health of young people. Often, adult responses to emotional behaviours emerging from a teenage person are often gross simplifications reflecting objectification and a lack of understanding. This objectification is exemplified in the modern era by strategies of segregation so pervasive in schooling and is further compounded by media and segment-marketing techniques that have recently re-produced the young person as a commodity for consumerist exploitation. As reported in *Adbusters* magazine (Fall, 1993), "The Product is You!," in reference to an advertising industry-wide strategy to target and exploit young people.

The typical responses referred to here, invoked consciously or unconsciously, project a denial of the self when transmitted to a young person. This outcome can be reinforced by 'direction-oriented' messages commonly targeted at young people in schools and, often, from parents: "you *should* do this", "you *must* finish this", "you *need* your education if you want to do anything with your life," all of which imply that the receivers of the message are incapable of interpreting for themselves. This amounts to a denial of self.

The emotional outcome for young people receiving these messages over a prolonged period of time is, understandably, hostility and frustration, indifference and /or depression and other stress-related syndromes. I empathize with their reaction because I have a similar response when I consider such messages directed at me, without any specific request for guidance. As indicated earlier, young people are today suffering an unprecedented emotional crisis, manifest in rising levels of violence, drug abuse, depression and other stress-related illnesses, and suicide, the roots of which are partially found in self-denial.

Self processing in Virtual High takes many forms. Sitting around in a circle in a Big Group Meeting describing to other community members why they have chosen Virtual High, and what issues or goals are most important to them, is commonly how most students first experience Virtual High. Some students enter Virtual High with low self esteem and seething with frustration, others with a yearning to accomplish a personal goal, others with a willingness to participate in overall self-development. This exercise helps set the stage for deeper self-development work, as in our three-week programs, in which we "invite" students to reflect as significantly as possible upon the conditions of their lives.

In this context, for example, I have significantly relayed my experiences of dealing with my mother's protracted history of cancer, the challenges of being a father and a husband and a son, and I have described how I have striven and achieved some measure of "excellence" in my life (by my evaluation) in writing, performing music, studying earth science, playing sports, and in some other areas.

Ultimately, what Sunder, Brent and I want to share and model is our human essence, including will and courage, fear and vulnerability. Far from dominating these workshops, or other personally-focused meetings with our stories, we have triggered

a flood of student self-contemplation, which can be manifest in heart-wrenching and humourous stories, crying, confessions, breakthroughs, and vows of silence. We have purposefully designed the workshops and any personal development to be challenging, and most students have participated very enthusiastically in all activities and self-challenges.

One of the most significant examples of self-growth that occurred during the first three years involved Joshua, a student who entered Virtual High in our first year, 20-kg overweight, asthmatic, allergic and depressed. He had been diagnosed in school as learning disabled with fine motor skill deficiency, and had several school reports that suggested his lack of production was because he was "lazy." In a first meeting with Brent, myself and his parents at his home, Josh seemed gentle, with an easy sense of humour. After telling us he really wanted to come to Virtual High to study journalism, film-making and photography, we accepted him.

In the first few months Josh seemed to sail along adequately, making friends, adjusting to our processes, and also hiding out from many activities with a range of excuses. He had signed up to complete a correspondence course and, despite assurances from him that the work was being done, he successfully eluded us in our attempts to verify this. Finally, one winter day, his mother called a meeting and demanded that Joshua present evidence that he was completing the course work. He then produced the course materials, unopened and still shrink-wrapped! Josh said that he wasn't completing the course because it was his mother's idea, and he wasn't interested in academics, he had other ideas, especially studying film and film-making.

Fair enough, said Brent, but what about the excuses? Josh insisted that there were many things he couldn't do because of his weight, asthma and allergies. At that point, Brent strategically called his bluff, saying if Josh wasn't willing to take self-responsibility for his health and attitudes, he didn't want him in Virtual High. What was Josh's worst fear? Brent asked. "Getting thrown out of VH," Josh replied. "Okay," Brent said, "you're out. I won't work with anyone who lives in terms of their fears." Josh stammered for a moment, tears welling up in his eyes. Brent waited a minute, then offered Josh a drink of water. "Now, do you want back in?" Brent asked. "Yes," said Josh. "Okay, Josh, I will support you returning here on the condition you are willing to work towards improving your health, and stop shifting

your responsibilities to everybody else here. Are you ready to do that?" Again Josh said yes, and with his mother's consent, he was re-accepted into the community.

Brent, who had previously owned a health food business and is quite knowledgeable about nutrition, told Josh he had observed his diet and believed many of his health problems were rooted in a steady consumption of junk food, pasta, cheese and wheat. He suggested Josh eliminate them. Josh said he had "never eaten vegetables". The meeting soon dissolved, but the next night Brent took Josh into the VH kitchen and cooked him a vegetable stir fry. With a few students watching, Josh choked down the first few bites, before saying it "wasn't bad". A few days later, Brent introduced Josh to a personal friend, a Ph.D. herbalist who had a local health clinic. He diagnosed Josh as having *Candida*, a chronic yeast infection, and he counseled Josh on what foods to specifically avoid and gave him an herbal prescription.

To shorten a long story, three years later, Josh, now 18, reduced his weight by about 40 pounds, and he no longer has any health problems save an eruption of exczema related to some lingering sensitivity. For the most part, he is a faithful vegetarian, and exercises judicious control over what he consumes. During his time at Virtual High, Josh has mainly focused on film-making, taking a university-level course in film theory, gained experience on various professional film sets around the city (with my help), created his own two-minute film which was selected for the finals in the B.C. Student Film and Video competition, for which he traveled to a week-long workshop in Penticton and interacted with various professionals. At the end of his third year, with community support Josh also overcame a significant shyness to twice stand in front of large groups of strangers and describe his experiences at Virtual High and introduce his film before screening it.

Now in his fourth year at Virtual High, Josh describes his self-development experiences in the community as "very beneficial," feeling that he has gotten a lot healthier after taking "a look at myself," and that he has received "a lot of loving support to work through my processes." He also suggests the processes we have helped guide him into have helped him learn other valuable skills.

> It's knowledge in almost anything that I want to know about. Also stuff I didn't know about, the way I communicate with people, the way I show up on this planet. I learned a lot through that, through

NLP skills and other things. ... It's given me more insights, lots of insights into how I work and how my patterns go. And when they don't work for me, when I don't like them, I work to change them.

Joshua's mother, Mariasha, also believes the self-development work has enabled Josh to acquire valuable skills and experiences.

I think he's got a grasp on accountability, not some sort of flotsam letting the wind blow you wherever you get blown. He's prepared to take responsibility. I had to go to the wall at 48 before I got that one. I think that is the most valuable lesson you can learn.

Josh has also worked with all the learning consultants and received ample feedback about the results he created for himself. We are unanimous about the positive changes we've seen in Josh, and we continue to support him in "going for it" and acquiring all the personal power he can in his life. To my mind, he shows no evidence of learning disability, though I believe we learning consultants helped draw his awareness to certain patterns that were dominating his life and offered some strategies by which he could overcome them and achieve more positive results.[12]

There have been many stories of self-growth similar to Joshua's during the first three years of Virtual High. Many of the students reflect on their experience of self-development and anticipate future self-challenges in re-application letters submitted at the end of the third year of operation.

From Kristina, 16, applying for her second year:

I think that even though I had a slow start at V.H., that V.H will do me a lot of good and teach me a whole lot. My reason for coming back next year is to continue my relationship with the community, learn what I am interested in, set myself some goals and learn how to be more responsible to get to my goals and to keep my agreements to friends and to the community. ... Being around this environment certainly has an effect on me, for instance I have started eating a lot

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[12] Just before final submission of this thesis, Josh decided to withdraw from Virtual High to move on and try to start a professional film career. As his final challenge in the program, Josh responded affirmatively to my request to help create a Virtual High video that could help us raise funds. Subsequently, during a three-week period, he directed, edited and produced a very commendable 12-minute video, based on a script I crafted. Myself and others were very impressed with Josh's diligence, resourcefulness and professional comportment throughout the production and, in his final BGM, I acknowledged Josh as "absolutely ready" to move on to his next challenge in life.

healthier and I find myself telling people about the problems with the environment. I also find myself not doing drugs as much as I used to, and quitting smoking is one of my first priorities.

And from Jeff, 16, applying for his third year:

This last year, I feel that I've grown a lot. I feel like I've contributed a lot to the community, in just day-to-day activities. I also feel like I've done more specific things around here. I've participated in most of the presentations and events in one way or another. I've played a pretty big role in the further development (adventures?) of the *Power Smart Game* this year, as I did last year. Lately, I think that I've reached a place where I can accept more responsibility and complete it. ... Right now, my goals are mostly to my health and relationships, as well as academics. What I'm going to do, then, is the most and best I can at everything. This means that I'm going to work as much as I can at my academics, as well as do a good job with the (Planetarium) presentation, website development, participating in the community and climbing.

One of the most interesting students to have attended Virtual High is Kalev, now 18. He came into the program after attending several public schools, accompanied by reports that testified to unique qualities that did not mesh with school expectations. He is emotionally very sensitive and gifted with creative abilities, and especially inclined toward studying games and magic. In many ways, the program has offered him support and opportunities for self-growth he wouldn't receive elsewhere. Below is his re-application letter for a fourth year in Virtual High:

When I look back more than a couple of months I find the picture I get of me is that I was rather immature. Last fall there was a group of new students who took a little while to get used to the way of things around here. I don't really remember myself doing anything then, except looking forward to the spring when I was sure that doing the 'breath work' would solve all my problems, and I was enthusiastic for Kushad's group (exploring sexuality) to begin. This spring has helped me discover some incredible things. First, in Kushad's group I found a place where I could play and even by the end of it discovered what it meant to be totally vulnerable. During the three-week intensive, Michael led a group down to the beach to think about feedback we had given each other and ourselves. The word I had in my head was 'Risk', though I was more interested in playing on the sand cliffs. I felt compelled to go to the top. However, it soon got too difficult to climb

up so I started to head back down. I remembered my word, 'risk'. So I turned around, climbed the cliff, and made it to the top.

Jeanne and Drew's class has held some very frightening experiences, as well as some very interesting ones. The 'breath work' in the hot tub, though it didn't solve all my problems like a magic wand, was still very nice to do, as it let me yell in a safe environment. This spring I have learnt more than any other time in my life before.

Kalev's father, David, has been actively involved in the program since the second year. A university math professor and engaging intellect, David recognizes the unique attributes of his son, and has often come into the center to discuss Kalev and clarify the intent of our support. He now seems very comfortable with the self-development aspect of Virtual High, based on observations and interactions with Kalev and other students, and he offers the following perspective:

It is difficult to look back and reflect on Kalev's schooling. Such reflection invites questions; "What would have happened if ... ? Was it a good idea for my son to go to Virtual High?"...Virtual High is a learning community, with the emphasis on community. It is difficult to explain just what this means. ... Virtual High creates the possibility that learning consultants, without exception, can be trusted and respected. This does not mean agreed with but rather related to as one human to another and not as a pupil to a teacher. Learning becomes a co-discovery. A high school might contain friends and probably will contain enemies. Again, that is just the way schools are. Virtual High creates the possibility of a learning community that requires everybody to relate in a constructive fashion with everybody else. This again does not mean that every body likes everybody else but rather individual differences and preferences are part of the acknowledged structure of the community. The likes and dislikes are respected. And I guess that it is this last feature that for me distinguishes Virtual High from a traditional school. Virtual High is a learning community that actively works on the development of both mutual and self respect.

Will this serve my son? I have no doubt. Kalev left the traditional school system at the end of grade nine. He left his high school with no regrets. There was one counselor but no teachers that he had any interest in returning to visit. As far as I know, there is not a single student that was at his high school when he left that he has contacted (or has contacted him). He was alone. His self acknowledged personal challenge in going to Virtual High was to learn to create a community for himself. He has learned to do this.

The comments below, from a mother, Aviva, also allude to a broad sphere of influence of the VH program, and a sensed positive affect of the program on her son's self-motivation and self-responsibility.

> After a year and a half in the nurturing and stimulating environment of VH, Noah demonstrates a mature responsibility for his learning and a high regard for himself and others. Where he refused to get up in the morning when he was in grade six, he is now on the bus to Vancouver (from Tsawwassen) at 7:45, fully responsible for his own morning routine and day's organization. He has established a physical routine for himself, organized a lunch group where he cooks, one lunch/week, written and produced a short film, studied Shakespeare, the Great Myths and French classics in translation.

Self-to-Other Relationality

> *Through the process of joining and separating again and again we learn to establish our identity in relation to others. The ebb and flow of closeness and distance maintains the dynamic balance between autonomy and connection.* (Jones, 1995, p. 137)

> *"When persons find themselves sensitively and accurately understood, they develop a set of growth-promoting or therapeutic attitudes toward themselves ... (making) it possible for a person to listen more accurately to themselves, with greater empathy toward their own visceral experiencing, their own vaguely felt meanings. ... The individuals' greater understanding of and prizing of themselves opens to them new facets of experience which become part of a more accurately based self-concept.* (Rogers, 1980, p. 159)

In Virtual High, self-to-other relationality takes place in several contexts: student-to-peer, student-to-learning consultant, student-to-mentor, and learning consultant-to-learning consultant. In this discussion, I focus on the first three contexts, believing them most germane to the present research focus.

In interviews with potential students and families, learning consultants purposefully represent Virtual High as a program offering students co-operative relationships with other students, and more egalitarian relationships with adult learning consultants and mentors. Students have almost all said they first experienced Virtual High as having very unique processes which called upon them to

adjust some of their behaviours, including how they relate to other students and adult authority figures.

Among the student group, emerging relationship patterns range from superficially respectful to developing significant friendships, working partnerships, and a few love-interests - patterns consistent, in my mind, with adult relationships. With one exception, there has been no physical violence between students in the first three years. Though very few new students have known even one other student before joining, they are usually significantly interacting within a few days, after having been introduced in a community meeting or through a WonderNet message. One of the communication strategies we learning consultants have habitually and purposefully introduced early into community practice is that of 'conscious conversing,' borrowed from the field of neuro-linguistics. This process involves the skill of first listening to consciously discern another's beliefs and other patterns or 'modes' of representing information visually, kinesthetically or auditorally. Another part of the process is striving for heightened sense of rapport with another, often involving acknowledging another's beliefs and concerns and/or 'matching' their patterns of communication (modes of representation, breathing, and posture)

These techniques are commonly practised by counselors to heighten empathic understanding and they have also been adopted by many business and sales people to heighten communicative effectiveness. In our community, I believe they have helped to create rapport and therefore 'connectiveness' and belonging. "Part of the way we do things differently here," and "very useful," is how Josh and other students describe these strategies.

Worth considering, too, is the psychological influence on student relationships of inscribing co-operation and respect as agreed-upon community processes, and inviting students to practise honesty and candor in relating to others. Though new students are generally reluctant to interact until they are confident they can safely expose their-*selves*, where safety comes from having experienced a demonstration of these practices either as an observer or participant, I have observed most new students moving to significantly practise these relationship dynamics within one to several months.

Following a period of adjustment, then, I have come to know the entire student community as a group of young people interacting co-operatively, respectfully and practising honesty and candor in their relating to other students, in workshops, in personal meetings and in informal encounters in the stairwell and kitchen. For example, I have observed the following:

- Brad asking Fred in a Big Group Meeting to "stop following me around like a puppy dog explaining every detail about your computer programming. Don't take this personally, I'm just not that interested in that. Can you do that?" and Fred agreeing to stop his annoying habit.

- Ilana, a veteran student, and Willow, a new student from Washington state, working together day and night in the multimedia room to create their magazine *Blue Fish*. Working together, they wrote much of the copy, studied and learned the sophisticated desktop publishing program, scanned graphics, photocopied and revised their material until they completed the project, which was ceremoniously acknowledged in the community and for which a professional magazine publisher heaped much praise and appealed to Ilana to work with him on a joint publication.

- Katherine and Jesse methodically working together in their office until two a.m. creating an oral and computerized presentation of *VillageQuest* for a group of City Hall planners the next day, carefully choosing images and rehearsing their script, offering feedback and editing the presentation until they were both satisfied it would be effective.

- Noah asking Jeff in the stairwell for "feedback about how I'm doing in being more mature" and Jeff replying "you're doing better and I think you could show a little more attention in the Big Group Meetings, especially if you weren't always trying to be funny," with which Noah agreed.

The following posting and response from the *WonderNet* between Travis and Jeff, after Travis was questioned about his willingness to follow through on his commitments, represents a fairly typical exchange on our 'Net, rich in candor and acknowledgment:

> Travis: Commitments. (Gulp.) I haven't been keeping them. But you know what? As I was writing here I thought of something. The schedule you [Brent] want me to do. It's perfect. Because if I have a schedule, and on that schedule there is a block of time that says

"CLEAN LIBRARY NOW," then I will be able to do it. I will. Right now I'm letting things slide by, including my chores. The schedule is exactly what I need. Some structure. Right now I have nothing to do, so I do nothing. I want to do things. I remember how good it felt to finish that animation for Larry. Wow, I thought, I had done something. Something tangible. They're right, it does feel good. ... Learning how to live and work with this group of people can be difficult. There are things I have to learn, things I have to unlearn. (Same thing, in a way.) I think I've made a breakthrough just now. I'm very close to overcoming fear of failure. Possibly my biggest fear.

Jeff: Travis, you say: *'I want to do things. I remember how good it felt to finish that animation for Larry. Wow, I thought, I had done something. Something tangible. They're right, it does feel good.'* ... I was reading this and it really is true. It makes me feel really good when I finish a card for *Power Smart* or even just finish writing an adventure for the roleplaying group. It really gives me a feeling of accomplishment and value that I think everyone needs something like this at VH.

Interaction between learning consultants and students, and mentors and students, is of a different nature than student-student interaction, and distinct from most student-teacher relations in conventional schools. Consciously and unconsciously, we learning consultants assume many different roles in relating to students, challenging, supporting, acknowledging and hearing them, as well as modeling certain behaviours and attitudes and sharing some of our intellectual and emotional processes. Assuredly, students' relating to us is of a dynamic and blended nature, reflecting their history with us and with other adults, especially parents and teachers.

In three years of Virtual High, direct student-learning consultant interaction has ranged from quite high, which I would characterize as up to two hours of personal contact each week, to minimal, or about five-ten minutes each week. Formal, personal meetings up to an hour in length, every one, two or three weeks, are fairly common between students and learning consultants in an office, private room or local coffee shop (which I prefer). Some students seem content with informal meetings or minimal contact and meetings are not insisted upon. Either students or learning consultants can request a meeting at any time and a meeting is often held within one or two days, reflecting a mutual attitude of cooperation that is commonplace between students and learning consultants.

Formal meetings that I have participated in or observed are commonly led by learning consultants and characterized by gentle conversation focused on the student. Discussion revolves around student workshop participation, accountability to learning plans, new or waning interests, student breakthroughs, chore completion and feedback about what we have observed or heard from other community members. As we consultants are equally interested in the emotional processes of students, meetings often go to a deep personal level as well, during which we may discuss family and peer situations, and personal health. Care is taken by learning consultants to note or tease out in conversation patterns or beliefs that may bear on present circumstances, for example, language patterns, relationship dynamics, or self-self dialogue. Subsequently, we consultants may offer some relevant suggestions as to how we perceive the student might be further empowered in his/her life, and we may seek agreement to a self-challenge that we feel is appropriate. Below are my notes from two fairly typical student meetings I participated in, and a student reflection.

> Troy: (Monday Feb 26) - I met with Troy at noon and, given it was a beautiful day and my understanding of Troy as a very kinesthetic person, I suggested we go for a walk into the local neighbourhood, with which he readily agreed. As we walked, we first talked about his reading habits, and the task I gave him last week, which was namely to observe how he read - when he read well, and why, and when he did poorly and why, to the best of ability.
>
> "I did what you told me to do," he immediately said. "What were the results?" I asked. He went on to describe how he'd read a Louis L'Amour novel for a long time, and he could remember it really well, but he had a frustrating experience trying to read a newspaper article focusing on computer viruses. "it was pretty dry," he said.
>
> I asked what he remembered about the L'Amour novel. He recited the story from visual clues he'd stored, evidently, L'amour being a pretty visual writer. I suggested this was an important clue as to how Troy processed information, that he was favourably inclined toward visual and kinesthetic information, and possibly resisted other kinds of intellectual knowledge, which he felt was pretty true.
>
> I suggested he might help himself process other kinds of information by creating visual clues or sequences, or simultaneously create a kinesthetic experience, by standing and reading, or taking a bath, or punctuating his work with activity breaks ... Most important, I said, he

should now experiment to find something that works. He said he'd do this for next week.

Next we talked about his work load. Given there are four months left in the program, that he is only partially through one of three courses he signed up for, and that he is also committed to playing lots of hockey and working two days a week for his parents, I suggested he scale back his commitments to two courses - science and Spanish - to complete them by the end of May, and only then to consider going for his English which would carry him through the summer. I said I thought it would be most important for him to have a successful experience in completing two courses, instead of being frustrated in trying to complete three.

He said that sounded pretty good, that his mother also wanted to learn Spanish, and maybe they could help each other. I said that I'd looked at the Spanish material and it looked like pretty dry text, and that augmenting it with visual clues would be a really good idea. "like pictures from magazines?" he asked. "Exactly", I said, and music and poetry and other experiences that helped him understand the language in ways that were most suitable for him. "El arbol" I said, grabbing a tree trunk, "is not just a word on a page, but a living thing that feels like this!" I also volunteered to help him and his mother learn Spanish as I am pretty bilingual after living in South America. He said he'd look at his schedule, talk at home, and get back to me.

By then we were back at VH, after having walked for about 40 minutes, and we parted company.

Kristina: (March 27, 4:30-5:30) - we walked over to a coffee shop where I treated her to a coffee ... and we started off talking about her relationship with her step-dad, Terry. Kristina says she's been getting along much better with Terry and her mom since she started coming to VH two months ago, because she said she's "a lot happier", and not feeling "all the stress of public school."

Kristina said she still gets annoyed when Terry interrupts her conversations with her mom, and she either bottles this inside or chills out Terry. I asked if she thought she might know why Terry does this, to which she said she didn't know. I said that in my experience people do that who want attention, because they feel a little insecure. She'd never thought of Terry as insecure, and I said it's quite possible, given the very solid biological/family bond between Kristina and her mom,

that Terry might feel a little envious or insecure. I also suggested that when he interrupted she might be a little more aware of her feelings and more assertive. She could possibly jump back in, and say to her mom, 'let's continue this conversation later', and accommodate Terry, or she might touch him on the arm, look him in the eye and gently but firmly say something like, 'Terry, would you mind if I had a private conversation with my mom. It won't be long, and it's really important to me.' Kristina thought that was a good idea and she'd like to try that out.

We also talked about her first two months in VH, which Kristina said had been a real eye opener, "so different from school". She was really enjoying herself, she said, and she thought she had a lot to learn from the veteran students, especially about taking responsibility. She said she thought she was ready to take an academic course because she wanted to eventually get her grade 12, but she was unsure which course she might take. I asked what was she most enthusiastic about in her life. She wanted to learn to play guitar, she said, and she thought she might like to be a writer. I said I'd been a professional writer for ten years, and that it opens up many doors and was very satisfying. In our conversation, I learned she'd written some poetry and was attracted to creative writing, but she had pretty low confidence in her writing. I said she might try a creative writing course by correspondence, which could offer her some anonymity, and that there were several good writers in VH besides myself who she could count on for support and feedback to help bolster her confidence. In my experience, I said, most writers were people who started off taking 'baby steps' but they followed their heart and kept writing and honing their skills until they developed expertise. If she wanted to try writing, I invited her to "be courageous and go for it." She thanked me for the encouragement and said she would consider signing up for the course (which she did the next week).

Kristina's response, several months later, indicates an unexpected and positive response to this meeting:

At first I didn't know what to expect, because from my experience when a teacher wants a one-on-one chat, it surely means that there's a problem. But Michael took me out for coffee and we just sat having a nice conversation. Michael asked me about my family and a little bit about my background, he made me feel very comfortable, seeing that he was my learning consultant and it was important to get to know each other better. Michael did ask me a very interesting question and it was "Kristina, what do you want to do at Virtual High?" He was not

surprised when noticing that I was stuck on the answer because no one has ever asked me that before. He reassured me that it was not unusual not to know yet. I personally thought that our one-on-one meeting went great, and it made me feel better knowing that I would no longer be talking to a stranger in future confrontations. Thanks Michael.

David, after attending VH for two years, identifies that the learning consultants, and especially Brent, were very influential in his life, to the extent of providing role models. I remember him and Brent spending much time together in formal meetings and in numerous informal meetings in the stairwell, the cafe, in Brent's van, discussing design and *VillageQuest*, to which he was attracted. Below he discusses the nature of his relationships with us, and the deeper value he gained from these relationships:

> I learned from the LC's by them being role models rather than anything they said or supposedly taught me. It had nothing to do with the material taught, it was watching them and how they operate. Sunder and Brent are just so great to watch how they interact with people and their philosophies and all that.... I really like Brent's philosophy and values, for me he actually lives them; he doesn't just talk about them. He actually lives by them (and) he shares them.

Learner-Mentor Relationality

Ilana also describes the nature of her relationship with Tanya, the art mentor she hired in VH with other students, as a very significant influence to her personal development and her artistic ability. I think Ilana's response reflects a deeper connectivity consistent with our aspirations in Virtual High to help nurture the authentic growth of young people through their relationships with the mentors they hire:

> When we had Tanya as an art mentor I found that was a very rich experience. We spent much time in the art room together where she expressed her artwork and described how she did it, and helped me with mine. She wouldn't criticize or say you know "You don't have any skill," or anything like that. Instead she would go for feedback in the place of "You know if it had red there I would feel this." To this day when she sees one of my paintings I just feel so good inside because she just looks at it with such an amazing pointing. She says

"Oh I see how you were doing this and I get so excited looking at this. I love it. It's so great you are using that colour. Look at that." And she just has so much passion for it that I get inspired and happy that someone would look at it that way. That was a nice experience to be around someone who was so good at expressing herself.

Alex has much the same response reflecting of his relationship with the music mentor, Budge, a professional 'gigging' musician we consistently hired during the first three years of VH.

When I first started working with Budge I was quite confused about many things to do with music. Budge cleared up doubts I had and truly inspired me to create what I loved and still do love. The fact that Budge was a professional musician brought me a new insight as to what it would take to become one myself, and also introduced me to new styles, strategies, and what a pro player has to do on a daily basis to make a living. Certain musical ideas and a hard working attitude have become vital to my personal pursuit of musical expression. I'm also grateful that Budge has become a good friend.

Students have testified, as well, that self-to-other relational dynamics learned and practised in Virtual High have helped them communicate better inside and outside Virtual High, with positive spillover reported from other family members, other friends, and extending to other situations.

One father, Warren, reports enthusiastically that his son Ryan has shifted his conversational habits since coming to Virtual High from being fairly adversarial to being more caring, for which he is grateful. "I'll be talking to him," says Warren, "and I think it's an ease that he is exhibiting. That when he is talking he has moved from, or we have moved together, from an up-down way of conversing to more of an equal status."

And Jim, father of Will, who was asked to leave the community for habitual non-compliance with our agreements, acknowledged in a letter to the community the value for Will in learning skills of dealing with others. "While at Virtual," Jim wrote, "William's respect and consideration for others has greatly improved. Although William's progress may not be significant, there has been definite improvement. This is particularly true, if we take a moment to re-visit his progress since his first 'intensive' in September. Today, Will is a better person."

Self-to-Community Relationality

The autonomous self doesn't develop in isolation: community plays an important role by providing opportunities for creativity and self-growth and by recognizing the value of each person's uniqueness, which, collectively, makes up a community's diversity. The community provides a context for social relationships and fulfills the individual's need to participate with others. The need to connect with community, nature, the cosmos - the need to be part of a greater reality outside the self - is the need for integration. .. further defined as the need to belong, i.e., connect with something larger than oneself (community, nature, cosmos); the need for affection and relationships; the need to participate with others. (Nozick, 1992, p. 137)

As children come to see that their well-being depends on the well-being of others they will begin to reclaim and reshape the patterns of mutual support that have sustained human communities throughout millennia. (Smith, 1992, p. 3)

The complex web of relationships within which we exist involves a continuous flow of mutually determined interaction for which we can begin to take more responsibility as we understand our part in co-creating it. (Devall, 1986, pp. 41-42)

The previous chapter described some of the aspects of community experience in Virtual High, and illuminated some self-in-community dynamics. Self-in-community is most obviously experienced in and through community Big Group meetings, workshops, chore and resource sharing, trips, sleeping over, and special events like Coffee Houses and self-determined rituals and celebrations. Additionally, there are tacit experiences of self-in-community (often mediated experiences or ones in which community *mind* subtly influences perception) in and through dialoguing on *WonderNet*, personal meetings, and even through personal work. Despite its subtle characteristics, most community members are able to describe some of the felt influences of our community in their lives.

For myself, I experience *being-in-community* when I speak to groups of students and parents, when I represent the community, e.g. to the media or at public speaking presentations, when I discuss community events and issues with my wife, when I am thinking about the program and applying those thoughts to other activities (e.g. writing this thesis). To me, being in community is manifest as a felt sense of group interaction and consideration, care, challenge, and responsiveness. I am grateful for

being in community and the opportunities to experience group support for a multiplicity of my actions, voiced thoughts, proposals, reactions, and foibles.

What has been true for me in interacting one to one with other students, follows for being in community: How the community receives me and responds to me largely reflects how I am towards the individual members and community as a collection of individuals. I am respectful toward individuals and the community, and I receive much respect from the community; I am caring, in representing perceived community interests, and I receive much care and consideration; I challenge community members to higher levels of awareness and responsibility and, in turn, I am challenged for my views and actions.

As a significant community experience, I recall how, at midnight in the middle of an intensive workshop, I personally 'held' the entire community around a decision to allow a male and female student (boyfriend-girlfriend) to sleep together in a tent. I then experienced the entire community sensitively shift to my perspective over an hour-long discussion. I have also shifted my views in support of differing community views to help reach consensus. For example, in one BGM I supported a fairly unpopular view that two students be asked to permanently leave the community for habitually straining the community agreement around not smoking pot, and for being dishonest in relations with other community members. After much discussion, mutual consent was reached and we supported the two students in staying away for one week, during which time they were to take steps to face the deceptions they had created in their lives, including telling their parents about their pot smoking and general dishonesty.

During the first three years of Virtual High, my appreciation for being in community, both tangibly, as in participating in our weekly BGMs, and tacitly, as in the felt, residual or lingering experience of belonging even when I am alone, has grown, and I now consider this one of the most significant and positive characteristics of our community, though I had little idea of this before Virtual High. I feel more complete as a person, emotionally stronger, and more balanced in my relations with others. Generally speaking, I no longer rush to judge or act tempestuously, which I attribute in large measure to the tempering influence of being in community. Having experienced and witnessed many acts of personal honesty and courage in our community, I am more resolved to be courageous and honest in

my relations with myself and other people in my life. Two examples of these are Sunder's declaration of personal emotional problems and request for community support, and the voluntary admission by a group of students that they smoked pot in contravention to our agreement, for which they were willing to take responsibility for telling their parents and living up to the agreement in future, which they did.

Students also positively describe various community influences in their lives, including the value of working to resolve challenging issues through consensus, performing chores in service of the community, gaining from the experiences of other community members, modeling and working with other community members, and gaining community support for working on and through important personal issues. Many of the community activities of Virtual High, as described below by Ilana reflecting on her three years in Virtual High, take on the appearance of rituals, that is, signifiers of enhanced value, especially when they are habitually enacted:

> Ilana: We would have classes and workshops, and we would also learn how to live together, how to get the place clean, how to just be in relationship with each other. I mean basically it was like we were living together part of our lives.
>
> Michael: Has that been a valuable experience?
>
> I: Definitely. I find that living in community is such an important, valuable thing. ... I find it very important for me because I find it as a strong support to learn about myself and how I am with other people.
>
> M: Do you remember, can you think of a time in the last three years at Virtual High, when you've known you were 'in community'? Can you think of a specific example where the community really supported you?
>
> I: When I really feel it the most is times when we are celebrating and also when we are supporting each other in tough times. So in coffeehouses, and also when we have a Christmas Break party or an end of the year party, in those times when most of the community is there celebrating, sharing songs and stories. Whenever I perform in those or just am involved in those celebrations, I have a really strong sense of community. All of us celebrating together. And also when those times a community member has a family member crisis, or something going on, and in those times when we support each other and help each other. That's when I feel the strongest sense that we are a community.

M: Now we receive from community and community also seems to require a giving on our part. In what ways do you think you contributed to the Virtual High community?

I: "Basically by being part of it, by being there. Showing up as a community member and also being responsible for messes I make and for doing my weekly job and being there to help other people out if they need me to stuff envelopes. Just showing up.

M: Can you remember a time in three years where your commitment to that community deepened or you had a shift of some kind?

I: Yeah, I think for me a lot came together in the first three-day intensive. That was the first time that we as a group had gotten that close. I found that I was very excited and blown away on many levels. To be with a bunch of people and have us all get to such a close level with each other. I think that is probably when a lot changed. It's hard to say.

M: Now we were close physically. How were we close mentally, or emotionally?

I: We were letting down barriers and guards and just being with each other, open and freely ourselves and expressing who we really were with each other during those three days. And sharing deep parts of ourselves that maybe we hadn't shared with other people or sad parts or hard parts. Living from the clear place inside of ourselves and showing our love for each other.

Virtual High, to my perception, also provides young people a supportive and acknowledging community for their personal growth. This is manifest in many ways, ranging from being challenged to 'clean up' relationship issues, take more responsibility in their lives, and being supported in taking up personally designed challenges, much in the way a rite of passage is marked out in other cultures. Such rites are universally significant in introducing and preparing young people for entry into adulthood and, in Virtual High, we have encouraged students to create such a rite for themselves, for which they can look to the community for support. Below are my notes written at the moment David, a VH student for two years, visited the community on the eve of departing on a four-month, solo journey to India.

In the afternoon, we're having a fairly large group meeting planning a public presentation for later in May, when VH-alumni David Muncaster arrives to say good-bye, a few hours before his departure to India. Like Jesse's leaving, it's a solemn and moving few minutes, and

Brent and I mark out this moment as David's home-leaving, and initiation into adulthood. I briefly recount the occasion when I said good-bye to my parents in my home-leaving at 18 years, and Brent invites everyone to read the 'Final Thoughts' essay David has composed about his experience in VH and posted to our WonderNet bulletin board. About 1400 words, it's a sincere and moving account of David's two years in VH, marking out the joy and pain he felt in experiencing the very different discoveries he made along the way after he left the public schooling.

Along with all the others, I give David a big hug on his leaving, with sincere best wishes for a safe and adventurous journey. It's very, very gratifying to have played a part in the enrichment of Jesse's and David's lives, a richer and more profound reward, by far, than what I ever experienced in public school. In front of my eyes, and with my help and sensitive support, through various experiences, boys have become young men. Such is a challenging and sacred journey, absolutely worth supporting. Through David and Jesse, I have re-experienced the power and vulnerability of one's journey into adulthood, affirming for me the absolute sacredness of this daunting transition. I am moved beyond words.

The sense and significance of community including a sense of ritual was manifest at our self-designed end-of-year ceremony on the last day of June of our third year. By day we enjoyed an invigorating hike, swim and picnic at a local ocean side park. For the evening event, family, friends, mentors and students first squeezed into the living room to view a moving 4-minute video testimony from one of the mothers who had been hospitalized from an accident, expressing her appreciation for her two sons, and the community support she had received since her accident the week before. Next we enjoyed a massive pot-luck dinner, and then moved into the yard where an outer circle of friends and family surrounded an inner ring of students. Under a rising full (blue) moon, we learning consultants presented each student with a graduation present (juggling balls) and then especially honoured the eight students 'graduating' from Virtual High, marking this out as a very significant transition in their lives. Each student had an opportunity to mark this ceremony in his or her own way, and most chose to improvise a short speech. Below is excerpted Greg's heartfelt speech, which identifies the significant appreciation he felt towards the community:

This really amazes me that we constantly find new ways to be together. Where I've been I've never been able to come back here and

not be totally amazed and awestruck with the quality of caring and loving and nurturing.... To see everybody come together for my mom, for us. I don't know that I can ever leave this place, I really don't. I think I could be half way around the world and still be in the quality of this community, and the arms of this community. So thank you everybody, this means a lot to me. There are many of you here, in this lineup, almost all of you here who I would, if you ever needed me, I would be right back home.

Some potential students also perceive the attributes of being-in-community prior to being accepted into the community. Below is an excerpt from an application letter, in which the applicant enthusiastically expresses her yearning to join our community to experience integration and positive affective processes, which she links to her sense of authentic living.

I think I could really benefit from it (Virtual High) because I want to learn more but just have not found the motivation. I feel I could get it there because I know I am not standing alone, I have the support of a whole community. Speaking of community, that is another thing I like about V.H., it is a space where people are working together to keep it a healthy, happy place. I feel I could be a benefit to and also benefit from this because I'm constantly working on that at home. ... Something else I like about V.H. is that it's not just a school that you go in every day and get forced to work (and hate it) then are glad to go back home and dread going back but it's a living working community you do your own cleaning, cooking and just living, working, breathing together being REAL people IT'S GREAT AND I WANT TO BE A PART OF IT!

Evidently, the experience of being-in-community is significantly positive for most of the participating students, families, and learning consultants. Co-stewarding and experiencing the Virtual High community has also heightened my awareness of various processes that mitigate against experiencing deeper community, including the energy of violence, indifference and lethargy, disrespect, overreaching or inauthentic authoritarianism, and habitual tardiness, which myself and others have experienced. These forces, in fact, always seem present to some degree, and have elicited varied consequences within the community, from declarations of personal frustration to revising our community agreement document, to requesting student exemption, to taking more personal responsibility to support the community.

Self-to-Environment Relationality

> *The primal experience of space is not linear; it does not fit into the grid patterns so common in Western spatial orientation. The primal mind know space experientially. ... the primal person sees space as the sacred theatre of his life and the ritual umbilical cord that forever connects him to his divine parent, the Earth.* (Highwater, 1981, pp. 131-32)

8:40 am, Wednesday morning. I wheel my bike into the back yard of Virtual High, where I exchange greetings with a student working in the organic garden of which she is co-steward. I pluck up some litter, then step inside the center into full-throttle-bustle. Students coming in behind me, running up the stairs, running down stairs. The kitchen is chock-a-block with students hastily creating and consuming breakfast before our 9:00 community meeting in the main room. While exchanging numerous greetings, I steep a quick pot of tea, then navigate toward my office. There, Sunder is focused on her laptop, checking WonderNet and cackling. "Andrew is hilarious. For a 14-year old, he has an amazing sense of the absurd." I peel off my coat and survey a mound of magazines and brochures on my desk that weren't there when I left the night before. I pause in reflection. My desk commonly shows signs of nocturnal use when I arrive in the morning. A student moves in beside me and begins auditing the pile. "We were using your desk last night to work on the VillageQuest brochure." "Not a problem," I say, "I just wish you would take responsibility for cleaning it up before I come in." "It's nine o'clock," someone shouts into the room. "Meeting." There is general migration to the main room, and settling in on couches, chairs, and the floor, and some negotiation over cushions. I prefer a stool to help alleviate a chronic back pain. Bodies and furniture coalesce in a crude oval shape, facing the white board. In a few minutes the doors are shut and the meeting is called to order by a student moderator. "Okay, let's begin with any announcements."

For the next three hours, we sit, slump, shuffle, and stretch our way through our Big Group Meeting. There's some coming and going, of latecomers, guests, and special invitees, like Deb the office manager who shares updated budget information. A 10-minute break is stretched to 20 before we re configure ourselves and reconvene. One student is accused of nodding off, several others of making excessively distracting noises, two leave early for other appointments. I stand for some time, then squat on the floor in a discreet yoga pose to help stretch. People begin to stir as noon approaches, and soon the topics and discussions are complete, " I guess that's it. Meeting over. Remember to pick up your cups." "Thanks everybody," I shout out as is my custom. There is a rush of energy and bodies and a first wave heads to the kitchen, bathrooms, upstairs and outside. Another group lingers,

discussing the meeting, making other appointments, and rearranging the room. "Where's Fred?" someone asks, "he always leaves his Slurpee cup. "

Noon - early afternoon: Lunchtime envelops the kitchen and café as a storm of cooking, eating and cleaning, savoury smells, pulsating music, laughter, clanging cutlery, phones ringing, eventually downgrading to a gentle shower of conversation, footsteps, doors opening and closing. In the café, two chess games are played out under the throbbing sound of the dishwasher emerging from the kitchen as a primordial mantra. At one o'clock a student enters and announces "it's time for writing." "Great," says one of the chess players. "I won't be there today," says his partner, "I'm helping Brent fix the Quadra (computer) this afternoon." Another student approaches me. "Michael, my Dad is here. Are you ready to go?" "Ready as rain," I confirm. "Where are you going?" someone asks. "We're shooting my film downtown," comes the reply, "I hope I got everything. C'mon, Dad, Devon, let's go." I exchange greetings with Dad, grab my coat, tell Deb I'll be back in a couple of hours, and hustle out the door, carrying a ladder. "Good luck," Deb calls after us.

5:00 pm. Four students burst through the front door, fresh from a skating trip, instantly transforming the main floor with their energy. Now there's seven or eight in the kitchen, including two cooking a special curry dish that fills the air and entices all. "Skating was great," I hear through the din, "I thought you were coming." "I've got to cook for my lunch group 'cause I'm going to the City Hall presentation tomorrow morning. I'll come next week." "I'm going climbing tonight, I've got a competition this weekend in Seattle," announces another student, now pulling himself off the ground with the help of the door frame. "I really want to go to the Ridge tonight to see that Hal Hartley film," says another. "What's showing?" "'Trust.'" "It's excellent, I'll go with you." "Michael," a student voice heralds, "call for you on line two. I think it's Lisa."

Off the phone I head upstairs, where there's still seven or eight students, two scanning images at a computer in the multimedia room, another logged into the Internet, some rooted in their offices, others moving about from room to room like electrons. Music pumps from a nearby tape player. I meet a parent waiting for his daughter and he updates me about his son's trip to India then tells me about his upcoming sailing course. "I'll have to get you out in the boat sometime soon, Michael." "I'd love to Patrick," I reply. His daughter bounds up to him. "Dad, I think we're going to be here awhile. Would you be able to get me some food, or pick me up later?" "Sure I can do that," he answers. "Thanks, I'll show you our presentation if you want." They amble toward a computer. Thump, thump, thump. One of our larger students leaps the stairs and present himself inches away. "Michael, would

*you like to see a magic trick?" "Sure, I would just like to first fix the toilet.
"Okay, I'll be up in my office. I better clean it up if I'm going to stay here
tonight."*

*9:00 pm: It's quieter now. There are fewer students, after punctuated exit
parties and slow attrition. Six are signed up to stay through the night, four
of whom are doing focused work for their upcoming, multimedia
VillageQuest presentation to City Hall workers the next day. I work with
them for about a half hour, mainly offering my opinion on the computerized
text. Earlier, I also helped a student fix a faulty toilet float — the first time
she had ever examined a toilet reservoir, met over a cup of tea with a parent,
and watched a snatch of a popular tv. program showing in the mainroom to
a small audience. One enterprising student launched a hunt to discover who
was responsible for tramping mud throughout the building. Another worked
for more than an hour cleaning up the kitchen, including mopping the floor.
On the top floor, three students sprawled on their carpeted office floor have
been brainstorming all evening to create a role-playing game that sounds
very creative.*

*10:20: I say goodnight to Brent who is continuing to work with students
on the computer presentation. "We're going to be at this for a few more
hours," he tells me. I proceed on my way out the kitchen through a chorus of
"goodnight Michael"'s and out into back yard. "See you tomorrow," I say.
In the yard I retrieve my bicycle and push through the gate to the street.
Before I mount up, I meet another parent making a late drop of food, and we
exchange morsels of information. Then Sunder pulls up in the car, having
retrieved her son, Devon, from climbing. "See you tomorrow, Michael," she
says, "and say hello to Lisa and Robin." Devon calls me after as I start to
pedal. "Hey Michael, I'd like to go hiking with you soon." "Let's go next
week," I reply. As I slowly ride home, in a slight drizzle, I reflect on an
incredibly busy, rich and thrilling day, with some thoughts anticipating
more of the same the next. Though I'm accustomed to staying late only one
or two nights a week, what has just passed for me is otherwise typical of my
daily experience of Virtual High.*

The *nature* of Virtual High reflects its setting in an old, rambling house, complete
with all the attendant accoutrements or green space, garden, kitchen, wooden floors,
natural light, and plenty of maintenance challenges, such as arthritic plumbing. I
believe, after working in Virtual High for three years, this unique setting influences
many community activities and helps germinate many others that would not be
initiated in a conventional school setting. As such, I believe it is worth reflecting here

on the relational dynamics between community members and the environment of Virtual High.

At a fundamental perceptual level, it seems potential students and their families are attracted to the unique environment of Virtual High, or they wouldn't entertain the thought of joining the community, and we have had little trouble enrolling 25-30 students (I remember one student who took two steps into the center then turned to his parents and said "I like it already!"). Following entry, habituation to the environment, including adjusting or getting comfortable with the setting, and adapting to our unique processes such as living up to the spirit of community agreements, is accomplished quickly and quite naturally for some. For others it takes extra time and some supportive feedback.

Personally, I have appreciated the experience of working out of an old house that I help repair, paint, and improve, where I can cook, work in the garden or yard, of which I can be a co-steward. The rewards are felt at a deep level for personal gains, and also for aspects of inter-relationality, for the purposes of sharing or helping others to benefit. In the first year, I worked consistently for a month to help drywall, paint and complete reparations to the artroom, for which I have experienced the reward of student use. I have also worked individually and with students to create our science lab and music room, repair faulty toilets, rake leaves, garden, knock down, paint and patch walls, and replace broken windows.

In many cases, students have little previous experience in such 'house-work' or maintenance, and this has afforded them an opportunity to learn some new, predominantly manual skills. As in fulfilling weekly chores, general house maintenance and improvement projects have helped give students a heightened sense of responsibility and accomplishment, as well as some new skills, for which I perceive many benefits and for which students express their satisfaction. Interestingly, over time there has evolved close to unanimous enthusiasm and pride in participation in group cleaning of the center which is now included as a regularly scheduled activity on Monday mornings, as well as an increasing willingness by students to be responsible for chore follow-through even though they may be absent or sick. In such cases, absentee students often phone in and arrange for someone else to cover their responsibilities, though this is not without frustrating periods as when

absentee or new students demonstrate less concern for the ongoing upkeep of the center.

In addition to the personal rewards afforded to students through a shared stewardship of the center, I also perceive their growth and development toward authentic selfhood nurtured through other aspects of 'environmental interaction.' Many of these are inscribed in the above journal entry from a typical day at Virtual High, and some are isolated here for analysis:

- granting students separate offices allows them to experience privacy in pursuing individual work and in working with others, honouring their yearning for psychological autonomy.

- ensuring the center is available during evenings and through the night honours students' unique schedules and their impulses for learning and social interaction.

- allowing them complete access to all on-site equipment (FAX, photocopier, phones, etc.) honours students' yearning for autonomy and also their yearning to self-discover the conditions of the world around them, e.g. their environment.

- providing a kitchen setting has afforded a very significant opportunity for student dialogue about the various foods they consume. This has generated heightened personal and social awareness and has often led students to challenge themselves to learn more about nutrition, to experiment with personal diets, and to be open to receiving more information about other cultural beliefs, e.g. vegetarianism, Hinduism. It has also inspired creativity and allowed students preparing their own meals to experience heightened self-responsibility.

- allowing students full access privileges to 'staff' offices honours students' self-hood and has allowed them access to the adult world, about which they are eager to learn and experience for themselves.

I interpret the fact that students spend a lot of time at Virtual High in the evenings, over night, on weekends and on holidays, as further indication of their favourable response to the environment, and as a reflection of the significant bond most students have established with the center. Sometimes the offices and kitchen are very messy, demonstrating, in part, a sign of high use. Sometimes students spend a great deal of time cleaning their office spaces because they like 'their space' to be

clean. One student who left Virtual High then returned a year later wrote in her re-application letter how she was attracted by our unique 'environment', commenting: "It's so different when you walk into Virtual High. It's not just walking into a big house. It's like walking into a loving home. I've always felt a sense of comfort when I saw a familiar face smiling or smelled what was cooking in the kitchen. That is the kind of supporting environment I would like to learn and experience in."

Reflecting on his two years in Virtual High, David suggests our environment influenced his broader perceptions of the world in an expansive way, offering him a psychic anchor and facilitating his further growth and confidence:

> I have a place in the city, outside of my home, where I am always welcome. With its central location, it serves as a jumping-off point to so many interesting places in the city.... I know that I am well connected to a large network of people and resources. I know that I am not alone, and can get help at anytime. This makes me feel like 'the world is a friendly place,' that I have everything I need, and can create anything I want.

We have also made a point in Virtual High of receiving visits from interested teachers who have offered their reflections on the environment. One commented that she did not find the environment very hygienic, and another that 'God was nowhere to be found,' but in general the comments reflect favourable impressions about the ambiance, technological infrastructure and relational dynamics. Below are three such accounts:

> This is a letter to thank-you for the tour of your school. What I witnessed were very content, active learners at a time when most high school students would have long left for home. This is indeed a tribute to your school. The facility is warm and friendly and the community spirit within is very evident. (Mary Hanlon)

> It struck me that you place your computers in places that are very comfortable and accessible - a natural part of the environment, not only in a lab. I note, however, that your environment is not very much like a classroom, and I would think this accounts for your success where some schools fail with this setup. ... The atmosphere of your school is very refreshing and honest. I was struck with the fact that your environment is one where critical thought and reason are of the utmost importance, not to be threatened by curriculum. More power to you. What a relief to encounter a place as centred as Virtual High.... I have read that in projects of community creation and maintenance, it

is LOVE that is the underlying factor in predicting the group's success or failure. I can tell that love is very present at Virtual High. **(Oliver Sterzcyk)**

I found the atmosphere very relaxed and warm. There was a caring attitude among staff and students. ... The kitchen, living room and general layout of the school gave a sense of "home" to these students. In fact to many of the students, this was their home.... The feeling of 'family' was evident in the weekly group discussions. Any problems the students were having would be openly discussed and solutions were suggested. **(Bob Waugh)**

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION

We have to facilitate our children and ourselves in that ancient journey to find our face (to understand our true character), to find our heart (to understand and appreciate the passions that move and energize our life), to find a foundation (work that allows us to fully express our potential and our greatest fulfillment), and to become a complete man or woman (to find our Life and appreciate the spirit that moves us). We must again create the kind of education that creates great human beings. ... We are the creators of the world and realities we live in. We are the ones who must choose the path of our own learning. (Cajete, 1994, p. 68)

The individual in [a] nurturing climate is free to choose any direction, but actually selects positive and constructive ways. The actualizing tendency is operative in the human being. ... when we provide a psychological climate that permits persons to be - whether they are clients, students, workers, or persons in a group - we are not involved in a chance event. We are tapping into a tendency which permeates all of organic life - a tendency to become all the complexity of which the organism is capable. (Rogers, 1980, pp. 133-34)

It has been the purpose of this thesis to entwine three research tracks and circumscribe an educational project that models a rich opportunity for young people to live and learn according to an *ecology of being*.

Foreground to this study, and the first research track, has been a personal critique of conventional education drawn centrally from my personal experiences as a conventional school student and teacher. This critique presents some psychological considerations often overlooked in educational literature, draws some distinctions between schooling and learning, and identifies how pedagogical relationships might be broadened to include "ecological" characteristics formulated from heightened self- and environmental awareness, and providing more nurturing, consensual relationships.

The second research track herein is a literature review from various branches of modern depth psychology, and Native Indian and ancient spiritual traditions to

conceptualize an 'ecology of being' as constituted by an 'authentic' human nature. Ecology is used here as a guiding system of understanding that acknowledges an holistic and interdependent framework of living and learning. I suggest an ecology of being represents a dynamic ontological domain characterized by in situ *personal awareness and a striving toward healthful balance* of individual psychological forces (e.g. emotions, perceptions, impulses) within oneself and between self and other, self and community and self and environment. Literature I have addressed shows many cross-cultural commonalties toward such a conceptualized state, as informed by the stages of psychologic individuation, enhanced self-awareness, and expansion of ego to a transpersonal state of consciousness.

Healthy individuation is described by western depth psychology and Native Indian culture as a human striving for 'finding one's path' and developing ego-strength as facilitated by caring, loving and empathic relationships, and subsequent re-integration or socialization noted for its ego-less dynamic.

Enhanced self-awareness is exemplified by understanding one's self as existing in time and space in relationship with one's self, an 'other', in community, and with one's environment. Enhancing self-awareness can be made available through meditation, self-study, and relational exchanges that offer authentic feedback.

Expansion of one's ego to a transpersonal state of consciousness is identified in developmental psychology as a pre-egoic or trans-egoic state linked to infancy and child-like consciousness, and to adult consciousness that is self-expansive, though not self-focused. In attending to an ecological framework, or an ecology of being, persons are situated in transpersonal interrelation to all other living and non-living entities. As Cobb says (1977), "life is a matter of mutual, functional interaction or intercourse with the environment" (p. 29). Ecological or transpersonal consciousness is associated with dream-states, meditative bliss, intuitive and holistic awareness, and it is commonly nurtured through various practices and therapies to improve personal health.

Authentic human nature requires authentic human growth, a cyclical process unique to each individual and represented by such cultural artifacts as mandalas, rites of passage, celebrations and ceremonies, stories and songs. Authentic growth requires 'authentic learning', the nature of which is appropriately self-determined by

individuals or mutually determined and agreed upon in learning relationships. The human growth cycle, from child to adolescent to young adult to adult and to elder, is characterized by pulses of individuation and grounded in authentic learning experiences. Successful or healthy completion of authentic learning experiences provides the psychological foundation upon which the individual may prepare for the next authentic learning challenge and cycle of growth. *Living presents all human beings with numerous challenging experiences*, with emotional and psychological issues uniquely presented to each of us, young and old. Striving to optimize personal resourcefulness as one is challenged is a goal of much psycho-therapy and counseling today, as it has been a goal of cultural practices for centuries of human existence.

The realm of conventional education, capturing and containing young people for years of their lives, has traditionally discounted authentic learning in favour of imposing a production-oriented curriculum. In fact, schooling, forsworn to a modernist and institutional agenda, fails to attend, for the most part, to the emotional and relational, or ecological, health of its students.

In conceptualizing an educational project that seeks to optimize authentic learning and emotional health, there is a need to expand utilitarian pedagogy to a practice in which relational health between learner and mentor is consensual, more deeply affirming of an 'authentic' humanity, and more likely to contribute to emotional well-being. To deep ecologist Bill Devall (1988), and others, such a project would be located in a consensually-based "organic community, simple in material goods but rich in individuation, communalism, awareness of the way things are, in affectional and spiritual connections with a specific landscape" (p. 51). Devall also asserts such a setting affords the possibility to "maintain relative ontological individuation while understanding our functional unity and relationship with the place in which we dwell. When my identity is interconnected with the identity of other beings then my experience and my existence depends on theirs. Their interests are my interests" (p. 69).

My experiences as a conventional school student and teacher were frustrating, and I quit teaching several years ago to co-initiate a unique learner-centered program, *Virtual High*, for teenagers. In Virtual High, learners are responsible for selecting their own learning challenges, hiring their own mentors, and co-stewarding the community

according to the practice of consensus democracy, a principle chosen for community governance.

Many of the thematic structures of Virtual High are aligned with the notions of authentic growth circumscribed above, and represent an outgrowth of the natural learning underpinnings of *Wondertree*, a similar program for younger children previously developed by Brent Cameron, my partner in co-foundingVirtual High.

The third research track of this thesis is an examination and explication of the lived experiences in Virtual High, to determine the extent to which this program contributes to the 'authentic' growth of its teenage members toward an ecology of being, as derived from the framework described above. This study, conducted in the main during a six-month period in the third year of Virtual High, consisted of interviews, personal observations and notes, and contributions from students, parents and other third-party observers.

Methodologically, the study is completed as a 'thick' and fluid, two-part, descriptive (phenomenological-hermeneutic) evaluation. Part one, an empirical description of the superficial features of Virtual High, is 'thickened' in part two, which is an examination and explication of the dynamics of self-to-self, self-to-other, self-to-community, and self-to-environment relationality.

There are many unique outcomes in Virtual High. By supporting students in being self-responsible for all aspects of their learning and living, most Virtual High students come to take more personal responsibility for the circumstances of their lives, their learning, their relationships, and their physical and emotional health.

By ascribing meaning to all aspects of their lives, and allowing them to focus their learning in self-determined ways, students focus on a wider range of activities than in conventional schooling. Many of these activities contribute to students' knowledge and deepen their experience of authenticity through participating in 'real-world' activities, like creating software for a business client, developing communication skills to present ideas to large groups, or learning and practising negotiation skills so they can resolve challenging issues with others. Students coming from home schooling or alternative learning backgrounds are generally predisposed to taking on a wider variety of learning challenges than students coming from conventional schooling backgrounds.

Significant personal growth is fostered and facilitated through community consensus decision-making practices that bring challenging issues into awareness for examination and mutual resolution. Being-in-community, commonly experienced in weekly meetings or through living up to community agreements, provides students with opportunities to experience the world of the other, expanding awareness of behaviours, perceptions and strategies, from which additional growth may arise as they adopt new behaviours, perceptions and strategies in their lives.

Much personal growth is also fostered through relational experiences with learning consultants. The practice of being a learning consultant in Virtual High uniquely inscribes the processes of *empathizing, including,* and *mirroring,* which provides authentic feedback to students on the results they are producing in their lives, to optimally nurture their growth. In contrast to my frustrating experiences as a conventional school teacher, being a learning consultant in Virtual High has been a very positive experience, allowing me numerous opportunities to be in authentic relationship with young people in support of their learning activities and personal growth.

Relational dynamics in Virtual High, then, are multi-faceted and, though different aspects of relationality may be distinguished, they often integrate with each other. Students, learning consultants, and parents perceive that through various experiences in Virtual High, students come to a higher awareness of their relationship patterns, which is considered by all to be a favourable outcome. Understanding and making conscious the nature of relationships requires unique strategies that learning consultants are skilled at, largely through self-training and participation in workshops that differ from conventional teacher training.

With respect to Information Technology, and especially personal computers, Virtual High also provides opportunities for students to self-direct their own learning and many students, young males predominantly, have experienced remarkable learning growth. This learning is also uniquely situated in the context of our consensus community, leading to learning beyond mere utilitarian skill development to a broader consideration of the domains of influence that follow technology use. Our successes with Information Technology understanding and skill development should be significantly noted by the B.C. Ministry of Education, a bureaucracy that has committed to spend upwards of $200 million to place more

computers in school classrooms before the year 2000, without any visible public debate on the issue or on the learning models, beyond conventional school settings, that might help to optimize such an experiment.[13]

Environmentally, Virtual High has come to signify many things to community members and visitors, most of which transcend empirical characterization. Like the sacred sites of Indigenous and spiritual cultures, Virtual High is a place-of-processes fostering meaningful growth, and hosting ceremonies, rites of passage and rituals linked to events that are reproduced as sacred stories, which in turn reproduce Virtual High as a sacred site. More than a place, more than a time-filling program, Virtual High blends temporal and spatial characteristics and offers an opportunity for dwelling in an environment that engenders autonomy, security, community, and care. As within, so without: by experiencing and co-creating home in Virtual High, students have also grown in Virtual High to become at home - ecologically, in the world.

I believe Virtual High nurtures authentic learning experiences that prefigure the authentic growth of its students, and thus contributes positively to what I describe herein as an *ecology-of-being*. Inscribed in Virtual High are emotional and intellectual experiences, some of which are readily observable, some of which are much more subtle and sensed; accordingly, learning processes commonly reconcile spatial and temporal characteristics into a "single, unified field of phenomena" (Abram, 1996, p. 217). Consistent with authentic growth, authentic learning is far less an end point than an on-going, lifelong dynamic.

Notwithstanding its attributes, Virtual High has its areas of critical concern. Foremost among them is a lack of follow-through in stated areas of responsibility, and this is a concern that has shown up with respect to community agreements and learning plan goals for practically every Virtual High learner at one time or another.

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[13] In 1994, a group of teachers from California, visited Virtual High to get ideas for introducing Information Technology in San Jose schools. They spent a day at Virtual High, mingling with students, and they spent the next day at Burnaby South, a new, state-of-the-art school of 2,000+ students, that the B.C. Ministry of Education nods to as its 'flagship' school with respect to Information Technology, and inculcating new skills.

In their final report, the teachers asserted they gained numerous ideas at Virtual High that they hoped to introduce in San Jose schools, yet they rejected the Burnaby South model. Their full, final report in included in this thesis as Appendix III.

Disputes have also arisen with respect to learning consultant agreements and responsibilities. Areas of concern, most often of a minor character, are often explicitly identified as a community or personal issue, addressed, and resolved consensually. Students have occasionally been asked to leave the program — from one week to permanently — though this has happened only after students have had several chances to resolve issues of dispute.

By way of summation, Virtual High demonstrates that young people are capable of assuming responsibilities for their own learning, and that educators can confidently extend their pedagogical practices in nurturing authentic learning and being in authentic relationships with young people. Virtual High is a unique and successful learning community offering young people growth-enhancing experiences and adequately preparing them emotionally and experientially to make a positive contribution to our society.

It is speculative at this time as to how transferable the 'Virtual High model' might be to other communities and especially to the paradigm of mass education. Learning consultants, myself included, believe the processes enacted in Virtual High to nurture emotional health, optimize self-directed learning, and foster community, unique as they are, are 'learnable' and could be available to any interested educator and any community with the political will to nurture the authentic growth of young people.

Yet nurturing such growth requires knowledge and awareness of such factors as the relational dynamics that help to optimize authentic growth, and a willingness to orient oneself to young people in a way that honours each individual uniquely, recognizing as Cobb suggests "each individual as a species in himself"; relating with each individual intimately, in mutually determined agreement. Critical to any new growth of this model would also be an understanding of Virtual High as an organic, consensual development, as opposed to a technocratic replication, and a sensed understanding of the processes that support its growth.

To borrow from Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), it would be inappropriate to substitute 'Virtual High-type programs' for conventional schooling if the rationality of schooling predominates and ultimately removes the opportunity for young people to be responsible for their own authentic learning. Virtual High, like its predecessor, Wondertree, is first and foremost oriented to

supporting natural and self-directed learning, which is distinct from the rationality
of schooling. Virtual High-type programs could, nonetheless, be supported by
Ministries and Departments of Education as educational options for those young
people and their families who choose similar paths of learning.

To those wishing to develop a 'Virtual High-type program', it is suggested it be
introduced where the aspects of relationality and "time and space" described herein
can be fostered. Conventional school settings, with their excessive scales of
bureaucracy, swollen student numbers and curriculum-driven approach, are not
considered appropriate to successfully accomplish this.

Unfortunately, despite near universal endorsement of Virtual High from fellow
educators and recognized educational leaders, a critical problem in sustaining
Virtual High rests on finding sufficient finances to operate the program (this includes
finding an additional $30-50,000 per budgetary year beyond tuition revenue and a
learning facility that offers more stability than the present, leased house, and
attendant licensing problems from Vancouver City Hall). To date, we learning
consultants have invested much time and secured little public money to help support
Virtual High. Ironically, Virtual High practices are apparently perceived by
bureaucratic decision-makers as falling beyond the guidelines for school programs,
despite our apparent success in nurturing student self-responsibility, which is a
stated goal of the current B.C. Ministry of Education. Courting bureaucratic decision-
makers, successfully or not, extracts a toll on our program in terms of occupying
learning consultant time and distracting us from participating in the program.[14]

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[14] At the end of the third year of operation, Virtual High was dealt an unexplainable
and near-devastating blow from the Independent Schools Branch, B.C. Ministry of
Education, when funding that had been extended to Virtual High to support students
taking academic courses was suddenly withdrawn retroactively, without warning and
after the the funding had been disbursed.

After much effort, Brent Cameron and myself learned the Inspector of Independent
Schools "didn't understand" the nature of Virtual High, nor how students were
successfully fulfilling graduation-equivalent, Distance Education courses, despite our
having fully apprised his office of our intentions and processes well in advance. Ten
months later, at the time of the final revision of this thesis, our appeal to the Ministry
has yet to be heard, and Virtual High funding continues to be compromised as a result of
this decision. Presently, we have retained legal counsel to help in our appeal to the
Ministry, based on interpretation of the *Independent School Act* and what we perceive as
'just entitlement' for equitable and unconditional funding to support the education of B.C.
youth.

Presently the program needs other champions, bureaucratic or corporate, to support our endeavors or else Virtual High will cease to exist.

Our society is changing rapidly and it is appropriate to introduce new models of learning and living to offer our young people. Focusing on authentic growth processes, such as calling into awareness self-nature and offering strategies to nurture self-responsibility as we strive to do in Virtual High, is appealing to students and parents, and valued for the results produced. Nurturing an ecology of being is a hopeful and self-renewing pedagogical practice, appropriate for the needs and learning aspirations of young people.

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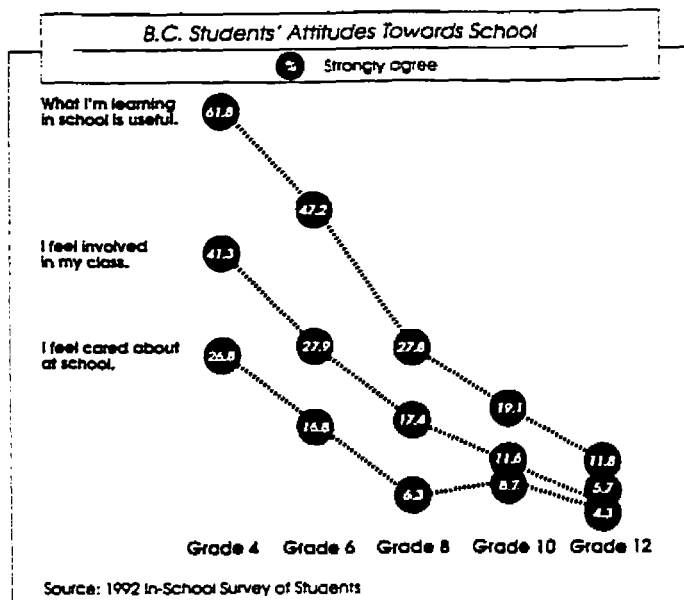
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Appendix Ia

Annual Report, British Columbia Ministry of Education , 1993, p. 50

B.C. Students' Attitudes Towards School

Strongly agree

What I'm learning in school is useful. **61.8**

I feel involved in my class. **41.3**

I feel cared about at school. **26.8**

47.2

27.9 27.6

14.8 19.1

17.4 11.6 11.8

6.3 8.7 5.7

4.3

Grade 4   Grade 6   Grade 8   Grade 10   Grade 12

Source: 1992 In-School Survey of Students

How Do B.C. Students View Their School Experiences?

The results of a 1992 survey of students in Grades 4 to 12 showed a decline in students' attachment to school as they moved through the primary and intermediate years towards graduation. A steep decline was noted in the percentage of students who strongly agreed that what they were learning was useful, and that they felt cared for and involved in school.

Regular attendance also declines as students move towards their senior years. The McCreary study found that while students generally like school and recognize the importance of education in their lives, skipping or cutting classes is a regular activity for many secondary students. The study found that about a third of students in Grades 7 to 12 had missed one or more days of school in the four weeks preceding the survey. However, the figure increased from 15 percent of Grade 7 students to just over 50 percent of Grade 12s.

The study concluded that dropouts often lack a strong connection to school. As a result, they are more easily discouraged from completing their education than students who feel a sense of belonging.

Appendix Ib

Excerpts from*The Unheard Voice*
British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1993, pp. 16-22

D.   Students' Conclusions

After hearing students share their insights at British Columbia Students' Forum '93, one thing becomes very clear - the student voice needs to be heard. This province's students are very aware of what they are now getting from their education and what they need to receive to be happy, contributing members of society. The Ministry of Education made a commitment to listen to the students and the students have matched this commitment by offering many practical and innovative suggestions for change.

Actually asking the students and using our ideas is the best thing I have seen the government and the Ministry of Education do.

Students responded to two key questions:
1.   What is the role/purpose of the secondary school in your life?
2.   How can the secondary school help you to become a life-long learner?

Their responses were many and varied. Important, recurring themes were easily identified.

Students specified several key roles that the secondary school currently plays in their lives. The major roles cited were:
- o   social interaction,
- o   achievement of a sound education.
- o   preparation for future life, and
- o   preparation for a post-secondary education or career.

Fulfilment of these roles meant, to many students, the achievement of the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful during and following secondary school.

Students delineated how the secondary school can help them to become life-long learners.
Important contributors to life-long learning were:

- O motivated, capable teachers
- O learner-focused teaching styles
- O curriculum that is interesting, varied and relevant to the world outside of school
- O a safe, open learning environment, and
- O positive, motivated students.

What action can be taken to ensure student needs are met as they strive to continue as life-long learners?

2. Implications for Future Action

The students participating in British Columbia Students' Forum '93 indicated the current roles or purposes of the secondary school and how the secondary school can assist them in becoming life-long learners. Considerations for action to meet the needs of the students include:

Social Interaction

1. Advocate students learning from teachers and other students.
   - *"More 1 on 1 teaching... student/teacher...student/student."*

   - *"Learning off your peers."*

   - *"Group oriented learning situations."*

   - *"Peer teaching will help you teach yourself."*

2. Value interaction as a learning activity.
   - *"Don't fight the socializing aspect of schooling as it serves a vital purpose."*

   - *"Socializing is important. Don't shut us up."*

Teachers

1. Review and update teacher selection and training.
   - *"The motivation level of teachers must be raised and implemented in their training to help them help us."*

   - *"Train teachers to enjoy teaching so they become encouraging."*

   - *"We want teachers who are knowledgeable in their specific areas."*

2. Find and/or keep teachers who are capable and motivated.
   o   *"One idea that I found to be interesting was the one about
        teachers' pensions. Teachers should be removed from the
        educational system before their old age affects their
        students' abilities to learn. "*

3. Encourage open, accepting and positive teacher attitudes in the classroom.
   o   *"[T]he teacher shouldn't act like a high rank authority;
        instead he/she should communicate or interact with
        students more often (in a) more friendly environment.
        This is best achieved if the teacher took psychology
        courses."*

   o   *"[N]ever put students down. "*

   o   *"Students should not be stereotyped - students should not be criticized. "*

4. Improve teacher evaluation practices.
   o   *"Teachers should be evaluated by everybody (other teachers, students
        and their parents) at least once every two years. "*

5. Examine the impact of the BCTF.
   o   *"Seriously consider the current teachers'
        union/employment system and the effects it has on the
        students. Is it all in our best interests?"*

Teaching

1. Promote a variety of teaching styles that align with student learning styles.
   o   *"Teach us different ways of learning (ie. oral, reading, teaching,
        listening).*

   o   *"Teach us to learn independently and in groups. "*

   o   *"Get away from men.orization - move towards comprehension. "*

1. Focus curriculum to the learner.
    o   *"Today you said curriculum and assessment should be focused to the learner. Remember when you take into account parents and administrators that we are the ones it will affect."*

    o   *"Open curriculum... more choices in courses... allowing students to excel in their desired areas."*

    o   *"Have programs that further assist your natural talents and abilities."*

    o   *"Create more programs for all different abilities and ways or styles of learning."*

2. Provide interesting material and resources.
    o   *"Show...[us] new ideas and techniques which are more interesting to learn."*

    o   *"More exposure to possible areas of interest."*

    o   *"Interactive and fun curriculum with a variety of opportunities."*

    o   *"We should have more education in technology so that our students can compete...."*

3. Improve curriculum relevancy to meet the changing needs of society.
    o   *"Adapting real life situations into the classroom (consumer education programs; real life assignments; guest speakers who are professionals in the area of study)."*

    o   *"Hands on education (eg. Biology lags; English/History plays or movies; Law field trips to law courts) to see how things we've learned are relevant."*

    o   *"Greater emphasis on the application of knowledge."*

○ *"Take into serious consideration how we can continuously upgrade the education system to meet the upgrading technology which changes so rapidly."*

○ *"How to conform to society's standards and laws, yet to be able to confront them with NEW and UNIQUE options and methods which could restructure these same standards and laws in the future."*

4. Explore assessment of learning.
○ *"I think that the letter grading A, B, C, I.P is a great idea. Today I realized that everybody learns differently, so why shouldn't the way we learn (and are assessed) be different."*

○ *"I think there should not be an I.P. grade because if students really work hard, they shouldn't need more time. In my mind, not having that would make me strive further. If we did have an I.P. I would probably slack off."*

○ *"Self-evaluation is the most important assessment of all. Nobody's evaluation of me is as valid.... Report cards should include letter grades for the teacher but the students should write their own evaluation."*

5. Expand learning assistance.
○ *"Consider what to do with underprivileged students whether they be poor or mentally challenged and make sure they fit in somehow."*

○ *"Just a thought for the proposal: In our school system, we have Learning Assistance for slow learners. What about Learning Assistance for academically talented students? There needs to be something for us! We get bored too often."*

Learning Environment

1. Create an open, safe and motivational environment for learning.
○ *"Trial and error - failure is o.k. - every experience is a learning experience."*

---

o   *"Make a more open environment so that we're not afraid to ask questions."*

o   .   *"Schools should consider ways of pushing the students forward instead of letting them just go at normal speed."*

o   *"The paramount consideration of education is to instill a hunger for knowledge - curiosity. Motivation is very important. If the student isn't motivated, there is no student."*

Increase Student Involvement in Education

1. Students feel strongly that they are being ignored.
    "[T]his forum...made me feel angry, confused and frustrated that my voice would not be heard and ... that my questions were not being addressed.... [M]any others shared this same opinion - whether they wrote it, spoke it or not."

2. Students are asking to be involved in shaping their education.
    o   *"This forum, or ones like it, establish a direction or guideline for student to see how to get involved - and why to do it."*

    o   *"At my school the kids aren't very involved so they were very surprised that they were being considered at this forum. It showed that there is something being done and people are listening. We should go back to the school and let them know this process is continuing."*

    o   *"I found it helpful to know students are finally getting to have a say in the final decision making. I think the school system is finally taking the initiative to meet everyone's needs."*

"If you say you can't, you can't.
Let your education help you strive
for everything you want to be!"

Appendix II

Declaration of Learners' Rights and Responsibilities

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Declaration of Learner's Rights and Responsibilities

1. As a learner I have the right to allow my own experience and enthusiasm to guide my learning.

2. As a learner I have the right to choose and direct the nature and conditions of my learning experience. As a learner I am responsible for the results I create.

3. As a learner I have the right to perfect the skills to be a conscious, self confident and resourceful individual.

4. As a learner I have the right to be held in respect. It is my responsibility to hold others in respect.

5. As a learner I have the right to a nurturing and supportive family and community. My family and community have the right and responsibility to be my primary resource.

6. As a learner I have the right and responsibility to enter into relationships based on mutual choice, collaborative effort, challenge and mutual gain.

7. As a learner I have the right to be exposed to a diverse array of ideas, experiences, environments, and possibilities. This exposure is the responsibility of myself, my parents and my mentors.

8. As a learner I have the right to evaluate my learning according to my own sensibilities. I have the right to request and the responsibility to include the evaluations of my mentors.

9. As a learner I have the right to co-create decisions that involve and concern me.

10. As a learner I have the right and responsibility to openly consider and respect the ideas of others, whether or not I accept these ideas.

11. As a learner I have the right to enter a learning organization which offers, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical support, and operates in an open and inclusive manner.

12. As a learner I have the right of equal access to resources, information and funding.

Appendix III

Summary Report on School Site Visitations,
by Tom Avvakumovits, Russ Moore, David Pugh, 1994

Lynbrook   High   School

1280   Johnson   Avenue

San   Jose,   CA   95129

(408)   366-7701

Mike   Hawkes   Principal

Fremont   Union   High   School   District

Summary   Report   on   School   Site   Visitations

by   Tom   Avvakumovits,   Russ   Moore,   David   Pugh   (31st   May,   1994)

Between April 21 and 24, 1994   David Pugh (Social Studies), Russ Moore (Science) and Tom Avvakumovits (Mathematics) visited three schools in the Vancouver, British Columbia area.   These schools included Virtual High, Burnaby South Secondary School and Capilano College.   The purpose of our visit was to gain insight and ideas regarding the incorporation of information technology and interdisciplinary activities into the Lynbrook curriculum.   What follows is a brief summary of our observations at each of the schools. Our presentation will also include a computer demonstration and video excerpts of the visit.

VIRTUAL   HIGH - Our first visit was to Virtual High.   This is a private learning community with an enrollment of approximately 40 students.   Instead of a typical high school campus, Virtual is set in a large four-story Victorian style house.   Upon arriving we were given a tour of the facility by technical advisor Martin L'Heureux.   Most of the rooms are equipped with computer workstations. There is also a

kitchen, a dining room and a larger room where the students and Learning Consultants (Brent Cameron and Michael Maser) hold weekly meetings. We observed one of the meetings but spent most of our time in the Mac based multi-media room where several students demonstrated various interdiciplinary computer projects that they were developing. One such project, entitled Hardwired Cafe, was a program that made use of sophisticated graphics and sound effects. The purpose of this software program was to enable students to sit down and have "lunch" with various pioneers in technology and go on a video "tour" with them. Through this encounter students would "pick the brain" of these individuals and learn about their achievements in a much more stimulating manner than by listening to a lecture. In another program entitled Powersmart, students "walk" through a house and learn about different ways in which to conserve energy. A student, for example, would be able to examine a particular light bulb in the house, find out how much energy a particular bulb uses, and make their own cost/benefit analysis as to what could be done to save energy and money for the household. This program is operated in conjunction with B.C. Hydro. In order to be implemented in the Bay Area it would require the purchase of the program by P G and E at a cost of (US)$100,000. In addition to these student-developed software programs, we were introduced to Wondernet. Wondernet is the Virtual High network where students can communicate and learn about a variety of different topics. For example, one such "bulletin board" was entitled "environmental issues" and students discussed various current issues regarding pollution and environmental degradation.

We spoke to several students at Virtual regarding their learning experience. All of them were engaged and enthusiastic about the program. They explained how they are given complete autonomy over what they learn. If a group of students decide to learn about British Literature or Trigonometry, they will hire someone knowledgable in that field to teach them. No student is forced to take any classes. All decisions at Virtual High are based on personal choice and consensus.

Evaluation: We were impressed with the learning that goes on at Virtual High. The software these students create, including Hardwired Cafe and Powersmart, is engaging, educational and of exceptional sophistication and quality. We were equally impressed with the students' enthusiasm towards their school. In the meeting we observed, students were clamoring for the school to stay open on the weekends and late at night. The students at Virtual do meaningful work that is relevant and challenging. They create, develop and market educational software.

While we were impressed with what we observed, some questions cannot be answered through observation. For example, how do university admissions officers regard such self-directed learning? How can the kind of enthusiasm generated by such a small "intimate" learning environment be duplicated on a large secondary school campus ?

We all feel that Virtual High's approach to learning is unique and effective and that elements of Virtual's project oriented activities and ideas could be applied (with significantly upgraded

technology) to the Lynbrook curriculum. It will be task of the Technology Commitee to pursue the implimentation of such activities, in conjunction with PacBell, during the course of the 1994-95 school year.

BURNABY SOUTH SECONDARY SCHOOL - Burnaby South is a large, modern school that accomodates approximately 2000 students. Our visit consisted of a tour conducted by Communications Director, Mr. David Wiebe. We visited classrooms and talked to teachers, students and administrators. The centrepiece of the IBM based technology at Burnaby South is a schoolwide television network. Each teacher has a TV and remote control in their classroom which gives them access to nine different educational and news channels in addition to showing any documentary or movie that they might have on cassette. All the VCRs are fibre optically linked to the centrally located Media Centre, thus requiring the teacher only to use the phone and the remote control in order to show any educational video. In addition to showing videos, teachers also had a computer terminal at their desk. They could type something on their monitor and have it displayed on the television to the class. In addition to visiting the Library Media Centre, Theatre, Office of Student Services and several classrooms (ex. History, Foreign Language, Science, Mathematics, Humanities, Art, Business, Special Education) we toured the Technology Lab. The Lab was divided into technology stations instead of the traditional rows of desks. Students in this Lab would learn about different types of technologies and then create their own project using several of these technologies. We observed a team of

students creating a users manual for some of their systems as well as another team of students designing a scanner.

Our tour concluded with a brief question and answer session with Mr. Wiebe and other tour participants. We also made a point of talking to students informally.

Evaluation: As a group, we have ambivalent feelings regarding the implementation of information technology at Burnaby South. While the technology is "cutting edge", the staff highly professional and enthusiastic and the campus aesthetically beautiful and and "user friendly", we found the technology in most of the classrooms to be controlled by the teacher and employed primarily as a teaching tool. Students do operate computers in the Library and some of the labs but are not allowed to use the classroom workstation or access Internet. When we inquired as to the rationale for this "hands off" policy one teacher adamantly replied that he did not want the students reading his E-mail and several staff members expressed fear regarding what students might "find" on the Internet. We are familiar with these fears but, to date, we have not found this to be a problem. at Lynbrook. As Lynbrook's approach to computer technology is focused on interscholastic student-based projects using the Internet, we do not see Burnaby South's mainstream classroom as a model we would choose to follow with regard to its' use of information technology.

A most impressive class at Burnaby South was the Technology Lab, headed by Mr. Mike Coutts. This was one facility where students were allowed to explore the various technologies available.   Upon

receiving instruction regarding the use of the equipment, students were given choices as to what projects they could create. The projects were interdisciplinary and all the students we talked to in the Lab were highly motivated. This is definitely one type of course we would like to create at Lynbrook.

CAPILANO COLLEGE - Our final visit was to the Applied Information Technology Centre at Capilano College. One of the Centre's teachers, Professor Crawford Killian, gave us a tour of their facility. The program at Applied Info-Tech is designed to teach students how to make use of all modes of communication through computers. Instead of already having a workstation at every desk, the desks have an access port where students can plug in their own computers (which they were responsible for obtaining). Students, however, did have access to several multi-media areas where they could take advantage of sophisticated sound and video technologies and other multi-media. We observed one student creating a video clip and enhancing it by adding classical music to the presentation.

Evaluation: We all had positive impressions of the Info-Tech Centre. Since class was not in session, it was difficult to make a thorough evaluation. What we did value was the layout of the classroom, the storage facility for students' computers and the opportunity the Centre provided for students to access state-of-the-art technology. Professor Killian also gave us several ideas regarding use of the Internet by students and explained, in detail, the range of instructional material available through the First Class server.

1.0 2.8 2.5
1.1 3.2 2.2
      3.6
      4.0 2.0
1.25 1.4 1.6 1.8

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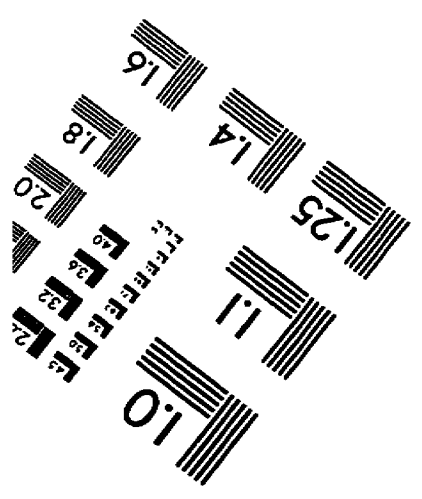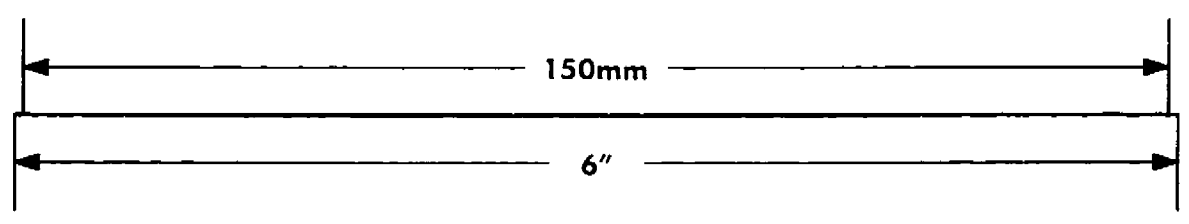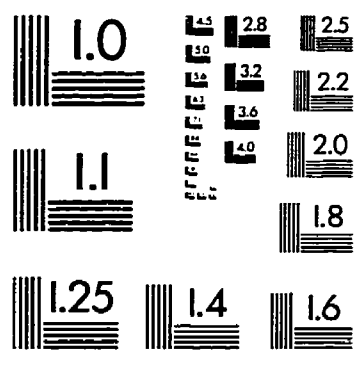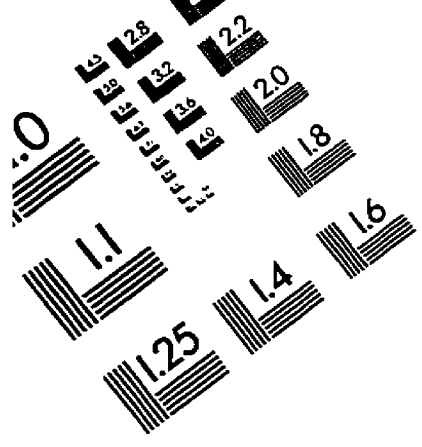
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