

“One relational cosmology, many epistemological paths”

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Introduction

I bring greetings in the name of the Lutheran World Federation, the communion of 149 Lutheran churches around the globe from Geneva Switzerland where I serve as Program Executive for in the area of theological education and formation. But prior to that, I was formed by life in various parts of the world. So I want to introduce myself to you as a husband, father, and caretaker of different peoples and places that I love and that have formed me, and one of those places is the Appalachian Mountains in the Eastern US where I grew up and was blessed by the worldview and stories of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, and all of this plays into my understanding of who I am and where I am in the world.

So now, here we are. I am grateful to Lutheran Education Australia for the chance to contribute for the second year in a row! It went so well last time online. But thinking of education and formation, it is such a gift to be in person, in real, embodied relationships, which is part of my keynote for today.

I also want to share my gratitude for the way that LEA honours your identity as part of the global Lutheran family through the Lutheran Church in Australia and New Zealand and so I greet Bishop Smith and all of our friends in the LCA-NZ.

For all of our educators and guests here who do not identify with the Lutheran tradition, I want to begin with a basic affirmation of Lutherans' commitment to education by recalling the importance of education in Luther's project. Luther and Melancthon ensured that primary education was a right for all girls and boys because they knew it was the seedbed for the faithful formation and reformation of the social, ecclesial, economic and political spheres. Education continues to be a centre that holds as our confession compels us deeper into the work of social and ecological transformation, reconciliation and peacebuilding in our age.

Last year I spoke about the link between Lutheran theological methods and transformative pedagogy, and provided a sort of global perspective of how that is lived out across our Communion in various ministries of Early Childhood and primary Education and acute care for children on the move, or returnees from conflict. Today I want to hone in on an impulse that I take from the conference theme...**One Voice, Many Paths**. There is such a dynamic and creative tension in that theme. I am going to focus on **Many Paths** in terms of **epistemological diversity**.

I will begin theologically, then anthropologically. And then, hopefully with some degree of satisfaction for a room full of experienced educators, I will circle back to point to some pedagogical implications of **Many Paths**.

A Philosophy of the One and the Many

So I want to begin with the theological frame. I don't know if it was intentional, but the theme of this conference lands squarely within one of the first and greatest philosophical questions about the universal and the particular...the One and the Many.

At its heart, it is a question about diversity and relationship. **What** am I, and **how** do I relate **to** these other beings that are so different from me and the world around us?

One of the first recorded disagreements about the One and the Many happened between two Pre-Socratic Greeks, that you see in Raphael's painting, "School of Athens" in the Vatican. Parmenides is on the left, and Heraclitus on the right. Parmenides believed that there was a True, unchanging knowable reality, a Oneness of being that was permanent. You see him standing with his foot on a block of stone. The only reality is this One being that exists, and we are all statically related to one another in that fixed order. The appearance of diverse bodies and diverse beings is due to our perception. Fear not. In a world of diversity that often comes into conflict, Parmenides wanted you to be assured of the triumph of a single order over chaos. Difference, diversity, change, and movement is an illusion.

Heraclitus countered this argument by moving, and by asserting that the universe was in flux. Time and space were real. We certainly share the same being, but the universe is creatively becoming, and so, too are each of us in it. This is because there was a creative force from which all life processes. *Panta rhei* – everything flows. His enduring image was that of a river. He is the one who said we cannot step into the same river twice, because it is changing as it flows. So you see him here sat with his feet out, as if in the waters' edge. But for Heraclitus, this contingency is not chaos. Our becoming is the order. We are participating in the creative order of a living Word, a *Logos* that is constantly creating and recreating. And here is the important point – our becoming requires relationships.

Heraclitus shifts the focus from what we are, to why we need each other. Because we can be the same "stuff" – you, the trees, the fish and me. But our bodies are not static, dualistic individuals. Rather our interdependent relationships to one another, with their synergies and the resistance, influence our becoming. Together, we become something more.

This philosophical idea is expressed biologically at the cellular level of human development. Within the first few days after conception, our cells have divided into dozens of identical unspecialized cells called a blastocyst. There is no difference in these cells. There is no diversity among these "totipotent" cells. But according to where those cells are in relationship to one another in that blastocyst, they will specialize into different tissues. Some close to the outside will become our nervous system, some in the center will become part of our digestive or endocrine systems, those around the outside become muscular or skeletal tissues. And it is their proximity to one another that triggers their different genetic expression. In fact, when these pluripotent embryonic stem cells are isolated and grown in a lab for therapeutic use, they do not differentiate. Their relationships influence their becoming from one to many.

These are not just questions between two Greeks. The implications persist today. These questions about the benefit or threat of diversity or plurality are at the heart of hot political debates about who we are as nations, social theories about gender and families, and the natural and social scientific discernment about what makes for justice and peace in the world.

So, what can we say theologically? Theologically, this process of relational becoming is the basis of *constructive theology*. The theological question at its heart is echoed and told in every narrative of cosmogenesis, every creation story across all cultures. All creation narratives are, in part, asking, do we exist in a static, zero sum, dualistic universe where each

must exert individual power, and therefore are normally in some interpersonal or cosmic conflict? Or are our mutual relationships the source of our creative power?

A Trinitarian Theology of Diversity

Theologically, Christians approach this question, not philosophically, but according to what has been revealed about what God is. And while there are thousands of verses in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that talk about what God *is like*, the only place in the Bible where anyone makes a claim about What God *is*, in God's being in 1 John. God *is* love.

But theology is not just knowledge about what God is. Theology gives us a fundamental orientation about who God is for us and who we are for the world. Theology shifts the focus from the substance of God to how we subsist in God. Like Heraclitus, from substance to relationship, because Love requires a relationship. Each religion claims some revelation that reveals the nature of these relationships. For Christians, the deep incarnation of Christ and the Scriptures' witness to Christ reveal that Divine Love is expressed as a Trinity - a relationship of communion.

“Communion” implies a union of diverse things. In the case of God, it is a mystery of three subsisting in one perfect relationship of Love. That *perichoresis*, the dance of a perfect unity of diversity, is the mystics' way of experiencing the mystery of the One and the Many. In other words, the one and the many is not a reality to fear, or a philosophical problem to solve. It is a mystery that gives us the creativity to make meaning and to know how we belong to each other.

Theologians and philosophers will recognize this as a doxological claim. The shape of God provides us with a key for understanding the diversity of being in the world, as a gift; relationality and the many paths of becoming in time and space.

The mystics like St. Bonaventure Hildegard von Bingen, and Julian of Norwich describe the Trinity as a Divine communion of Love. And a communion of love has two moves – creativity and reconciliation. The Trinity breathes out and breathes in. A relationship of Love creates the goodness and beauty of a diverse beings that grows and becomes. And when that community of life is divided or excluded, Love reconciles, breathing back in so that community can once again become in the creativity of reconciled diversity. Love creates and love reconciles.

So what if creativity is the *imago dei*, the image of the Triune God that we bear? Not rational thought or static identities like race or gender, or anthropic power, which are all derived after creation and the birth of culture. But the image and likeness of God is a life giving relationship of diversity in harmony that is creative.

That doxological claim about what God *is* is relational. The Trinity is the source of life in which we live, move and have our being, as Luther says. But it is also an ontological claim. That claim has implications for understanding the reality of what we are in our nature. Social and biological diversity are the wisdom of God woven into the fabric of creation.

The narrative arc of the Bible can be read this way. Our creation story is not a story of violence or cosmic rupture. It is a story of creativity that holds diversity in balance: day and night, water and land, sky and sea, animals of the air and field, humans keeping and

safeguarding the balance. Ours is a creation narrative of creative harmony. Sin, on the other hand, is narrated as a disintegration of that unitive consciousness. Adam and Eve turn in upon themselves, and as they turn away from their relationship to other creatures this has the effect of focusing on their individual state, and therefore being ashamed of their nakedness. The disintegration of our relationships, a dualistic separation of our bodies from our spirit, of ourselves from other species, from God, and eventually from the Earth itself.

As the story goes on, the Tower of Babel is a story about the human will-to-power that leads us to impose uniformity to domesticate the diversity and contingency of creation. But the Pentecost story is the Spirit's rebirth of diversity that creates new possibilities to reconcile. And the Revelation to John culminates with that image of the new creation being transformed into that reconciled diversity that once existed in the Garden. The tree of life with its diversity of fruits and leaves exists for the healing all creation in the peaceable Kingdom.

We began in the creativity of diversity in harmony and we are returning to it. In the arc of the Biblical narrative, this Alpha and Omega point shape our understanding of our relationships here in the meantime. That is a cosmology that shapes who we think we are as diverse creatures, and our different ways of knowing. So here is the anthropological question about who we are, and its implications for how we make meaning in a world of diversity.

A Theological Anthropology of Diversity

As a theologian, I like good questions. And there are a few good theological questions in the Bible. And Jesus asks one of them. "Who do you say that I am?" The way we answer that question, makes all the difference in the [*Paths*](#) that we follow, pedagogical paths included.

It can shape how we know and how we learn. So, who do we say that we are?

The word human comes from the same root as humus, meaning "earth". The Hebrew word *Adam* is not a name, but a diminutive of the word *Adamah*, meaning red clay, or earth. So, Adam means Earthling. Humans are made of the same stardust as all other creatures, filled with the same breath of life. And we bear the creative image and likeness of a Divine relationship of Love.

The Hebrew creation story suggests that the impulse to create Eve, which is again, not a name, but a word that means *the Life Bearer*, was companionship. Again, a life giving relationship. And remember that this relationship was primarily between the human and more-than-human creatures before it took on any gendered aspects. So the focus of these relationships between the human and more-than-human world was initially epistemological.

The Hebrew describes the way that the Earthling came to know these diverse beings with whom we share our common home. Genesis 2:19 says, "God brought the [the animals] to the human to see what he would name them." Knowing, and therefore naming, grew first out of a relationship. Notice here this is not a nominal or scientific gaze upon the other. This is an embodied experience of diverse beings brought together that leads to deep relational knowing. This is epistemologically significant for what it means to be a human in a more-than-human world.

Here I want to point to a commitment that is found in LEA's Lifelong Qualities for Learners: "As central to their mission and ministry, Lutheran schools seek to nurture individuals who are aware of their humanity"

And God is certainly aware of our humanity. In history, God revealed God's self to us in a diversity of embodied ways. Let's consider the stories of the birth of Jesus and the way that God chose to reveal the incarnation Divine Love in the world. We have two accounts, in Luke and Matthew that tell three different epistemological stories.

In Luke, God reveals this good news via a visitation of angels to shepherds in the fields. The message was "Peace all people and the Earth". So already, it was a message meant for the entire creation, and the animals participated in that revelation.

In Matthew, God revealed God's self by means of a star to magi from the East. And to the chief priests and scribes they read the scrolls to deduce the message.

The shepherds are a presumably illiterate or pre-literate people who live close to the land. They perceive the message orally. It was a spoken message. Magi are a group of proto-astronomers from a totally different culture who see the message through their observation of the natural world. The priests are a literate class who read their knowledge via received texts.

So what we have is an epistemological diversity of ways that God makes known this one message. **One Voice, Many Epistemological Paths**. God is a good teacher. God had an IEP ready for each of these groups of learners.

Now, when it comes to the relationship between revelation and human reason or perception, Lutherans have a tradition to build upon.

In the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, Luther publishes a set of theological and philosophical theses that critique Aristotle, and sets up what many people think is a conflict between revelation (which is a religious or faith based epistemology) and reason (which can be rational, or philosophical, or phenomenological ways of knowing). But it is not accurate to think of it as a conflict. It was more of a defence of the roles of reason and revelation.

Because never forget that Luther was a spiritual theologian. He experienced the presence of God in the world (*sheer freedom*). In an Advent Sermon he wrote, "God has written [the gospel] not only in books, but also in trees and other creatures." Firm in the logic of this confession of the real presence, Luther knows that the Trinity is immanently present behind the "masks of God" (*larvae Dei*), which include all of creation. Luther writes, "God is fully present in all creatures, and I might find God in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for God is there."

But reason and our experience of the world can be ambiguous. There is predation, disease, accidents and violence, after all. So Luther says, if we go out into the world looking for God, we might trip over the stone, burn ourselves in the fire or drown in the river looking for God. So to safeguard us from anxiety or worse, Luther was clear that the only place where we can

be sure of an unveiled revelation of our relationship to God (*coram Deo*) are those things that proclaim the revelation of Christ as gift and promise, particularly the Word and sacraments.¹

But, we must use reason to discern the relative justice, goodness and beauty that we perceive in our social, political, economic and ecological relationships to the rest of the world.

Luther knew that all forms of knowledge (political, social, scientific, etc.) need to be involved to discern (*tentatio*) the civil use of the law (*usus civilis*) how we are to use our freedom to love our neighbour and all creation (*coram mundo*) as we live out our vocation in all other sectors and disciplines of life. This was on clear display when Luther wrote economic and agricultural treatises on *Trade and Usury*, and refers to the most current scientific knowledge available in his response to the plague, which was often quoted during the acute days of COVID-19.

This is why in public education, Luther is happy to keep Aristotle's books on Logic, Rhetoric and most significantly, Poetics.² Because *Poesis* a task of making meaning. For Aristotle, this was not only art or poetry as we think of it today, but it was *techne*. *Techne* describes artisans of many things, from fabricated goods to the fine arts. *Poesis*, making, creativity required mimetic practice to perceive and embody the knowledge, even the knowledge embodied in muscle memory. For example, think of the technical practice it takes to combine theoretical knowledge and muscle memory in order to know how to play a musical instrument.

There is an aesthetic to Luther's appreciation of a diversity of epistemological sources. In his early work on the Psalms, listen to the way he writes about perception in mind, body and soul, "Thus the Creator has created all things in wisdom, so that they may minister in such countless functions and services not only to the body...but also to the soul, which can grasp the wisdom, as far as the mind and the heart are concerned...Indeed, the more profoundly a created thing is recognized, the more wonders are seen in it, namely, how full it is of God's wisdom."³

Luther affirmed the need to deeply engage the world around us in contemplation, with all of our diverse human faculties, because God is a Poet, and every creature "are the verses and songs that God makes and creates."⁴ Luther believes that receiving the good news through word and sacrament liberates us and sends us "leaping and dancing for the great pleasure"⁵ to rediscover the world and our relationships with other creatures. He writes, "we are beginning to acquire once again the knowledge of the creatures that we lost through Adam's fall. [After

¹ For further insight into the historical context of Luther's claim regarding the hiddenness of God, the real presence of Christ, and the capacity of the finite to contain the infinite, see my chapters: "After Justification: An Ecotheological Look at the Holy Spirit as Gift and Promise" in *We Believe in the Holy Spirit: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identities*, Chad M. Rimmer and Cheryl M. Peterson, eds. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlanganstalt/ Lutheran World Federation, 2021. 79-96. And "A Simple Way to Invoke: Seeing the Ubiquity of Christ Through a Mystogogical Look Behind the Veil of COVID-19", in *Church After the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, ed. Springer, forthcoming.

² "To the Christian Nobility" (*Luther's Works, American Edition (AE)*, vol. 44, p. 201). Also see <http://www.ccle.org/luther-on-education/>

³ Dictata super Psalterium, LW 11:15-16 (WA 3:534.3, 28-29).

⁴ Lectures on Genesis, in LW 7 :366 (WA 44 :572 .25-26). Oswald Beyer also discusses this in *Martin Luther's Theology*, 16.

⁵ LW 21:300 (WA 7:548.9).

having received the promise] we can look at their creatures much more correctly... We recognize the might of the Word in [God's] creatures... [others] pass over this artfully and look at creatures the way the cow looks at a new [barn] door."⁶

Oswald Bayer agrees that this enchanted view of the world gives us a renewed "sense and taste for the finite"⁷, for what can be heard, felt or tasted when we engage with the full epistemological diversity of our human senses.

So, before making the turn towards some pedagogical implications, I want to settle for a moment on epistemological diversity as a fundamental anthropological reality.

I grounded my own research on the role that a phenomenological relationship with nature plays in the ecological formation of a child's sense of identity. Specifically, I related to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his work on field perception. As we learn or simply move through our surroundings during a day, Merleau-Ponty shows how our field of perception creates sensory overlaps or intersections of our different senses. Our brains are constantly learning from the sensory information, colors, smells, even the energies and intentions of other beings towards us that fill our surroundings.

This is the source for Zoom fatigue, one Oxford study showed. Normally, our brains passively pick up so much input from beings and our environment that help us make sense of what we are looking at or listening to. But on Zoom, our brains are actually searching to fill in the missing body language and extra sensory input that should be coming from the head in that digital box. It is exhausting because your brain works overtime in the background searching for that information that is just not there. We need more aesthetics to make meaning.

Merleau-Ponty called this intersection of the senses *synaesthesia*. Synaesthesia is a condition where the stimulation of one sensory mode creates a simultaneous stimulation of another sense in another part of the brain. So for instance, a person who experiences synaesthesia will hear a bird sing and see the color purple. A Synesthete might see stars and hear the tinkling of diamonds. Smelling smoke might make their skin burn. Or Tuesdays might be yellow.

There is a neurological basis for this. Different areas of the brain that are in close proximity can create synaptic neural connections. Again, this is about the relationship of sectors in close proximity to each other. Studies estimate that likely around 4% of the population experience some degree of synaesthesia. That is 4% of your students. It may be higher, because of under-reporting. After all, if it is perfectly natural for a student to hear you read a story aloud and see colours, why would they ever report it to you? I remember one time when I asked my son what fruit he wanted to eat for a snack, he told me he wanted apples, because apples smile.

Today neuroscientists are not treating synaesthesia as a pathology. There are even theories that we are all born this way, but as our brains are forming socialization and education introduce patterns learning in discreet epistemological ways, causing our brains to lose this synaesthetic capacity. And of course, people who lose sensory faculties such as speech or sight strengthen perception through senses. So, intersectional, diverse ways of learning may be a gift of human nature that we unmake, or *uncreate* in our educational and socialization

⁶ WA TR 1 :574.8-19 (no. 1160) (Translation, Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 108.)

⁷ Bayer, Oswald. *Martin Luther's Theology*, 169.

patterns. Incidentally, J.M. Barrie's book, *Peter Pan* begins with the idea that all human babies can understand the language of the birds, and we just forget as we grow older.

Merleau-Ponty describes perception not as discreet moments of learning such as reading, computing, or crafting. But like Heraclitus, our being-in-the-world is a constant flux of synaesthetic participation. Learning happens when we open ourselves to the totality of our sensory diversity.

David Abram, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*⁸ has demonstrated this in remarkable fashion, by studying the relationship to between language and perception of the natural world. He shows how preliterate cultures such as those preserved by Indigenous or Aboriginal Peoples never forgot how to listen to creation. Serious dialogue with Indigenous or traditional religions reveal that many shamans or healers do not actually claim access to special revelations of knowledge. They nurture their capacity to perceive what the natural world is communicating. What people from western traditions call "animism" or "totemism" is not actually magic. It is a practice of deep attentiveness to our intersubjective relationship to the more-than-human creatures and the land.⁹ Think of our friends, the Aboriginal People who walk in dreamtime through the land. They simply hear the stories told by what they see and experience where they are as they are moving through the land, seeing and feeling.

It requires a practice of being open to being addressed by the more than human world. Haven't you seen the light break through a canopy of leaves in a wonder-filled way? Or perhaps a bird alights near to you with a look or an approach, or a spider spins a web in a particular way that seems to call your attention, somehow. Do you know that feeling of letting yourself be addressed by the more-than-human other in the world?

Abram shows how language evolved to disconnected from the the land and creatures. Early pictographs were often pictures of the beings or represented the sounds that the being made. The ancient Hebrew *aleph-bet* system maintained a great deal of this multisensory relationality, such as the letter "mem", which is the word for the Sea, and is made up of a series of ripples or waves. Or consider the word for wind or spirit, "ruah", which breathes when it is said properly. Think of the passages like Isaiah 55:11, "My Word goes out and will not return empty", and other verses where the **Word** is interactive and creative, not static **words** on a page.¹⁰ Scripture was meant to be spoken or read aloud, not read silently on a page, because the speaking and hearing had a creative, synaesthetic effect. Ezekiel ate the scroll. The psalms ask us to listen to the voice of creation proclaiming. Taste and see how the Lord is good. These are not metaphorical statements. Consider the Talmud and Kabbalist traditions where letters brought to mind sacred numbers, and altering letter combinations created new insight and interpretations. Some languages preserve these pictorial

⁸ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous : Perception and Language in a more-than-human world*, Vintage Books, 2017.

⁹ For a thorough consideration of this topic, as well the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty that serve as an interpretive framework, see David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous : Perception and Language in a more-than-human world*, Vintage Books, 2017. On Husserl (35-44), Merleau-Ponty (44-69), animism and totemism (116-121, 123, 130-135, 168).

¹⁰ Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), pp. 16–17, in David Abrams, *Spell of the Sensuous*.

relationships. One of the Chinese characters for peace or harmony (an) is the roof of a house sheltering a woman inside.

But the Greek language took the aleph-bet system and linked letters phonetically, rendering words as static semantic symbols that lost their mimetic or aesthetic connection to the being that they represented. So, the letters “c-o-w” communicate an animal to your mind. But the word “cow” bears no relationship or resemblance to the creature to which it refers. So in Greek, then Latin, words could now communicate meaning on their own. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates cries out, “You must forgive me...I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything.” “Written words,” he says, “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent.”¹¹

Now, why is this significant? Because most people from a western tradition think we are not animistic or shamanistic. Objects do not speak to us, correct? But when you see these lines on a page, do you not hear what they communicate? Let’s do an experiment. Read this next sentence slowly. But when you do, I want you to listen. Not just see the words, but listen to what you hear?

“The heavens are telling the glory of God, their voice goes out through all the Earth.”

As you read the words silently, do you not hear your voice in your mind? That is a kind of synaesthetic connection. When you read silently, you hear what you see. The words speak to you. They address you as soon as you lay eyes on them.

See, to Europeans from the western epistemological perspective, the way Indigenous people read the land and other creatures appeared as magical. But Indigenous people looked at Europeans who read in the same way. Because these lines on a page communicate the exact same knowledge to any of us who look at them, even if we do not talk or share. For First Nations peoples, reading appeared to be a kind of magic that they could not perceive.

One of the tools of colonialism is epistemological hegemony. Separate people from the land that communicates in this synaesthetic way. Teach them your symbolic and linguistic systems that had no tie to the land. Like the children in Peter Pan, if they are separated long enough, they will forget. Then, they must make meaning according to your symbolic way of thinking.

Abrams sums this up nicely with the quote, “When words begin to speak, rocks fall silent.” To separate humans from the land and our meaning-filled relationships to other creatures is a particular kind of violence.

The topic of my book, *Greening the Children of God* explores the poetry of Thomas Traherne.¹² He was a 17th Century Anglican priest and theologian who saw the Baconian divergence between the natural sciences and the humanities, namely theology, in the curriculum of schools at the dawn of the scientific revolution. And while he did not have phenomenological or neuroscientific theories of synaesthesia, he saw the deadly result of forcing children to privilege one single epistemological approach, particularly that of the

¹¹ *Phaedrus*, 275 d.

¹² Rimmer, Chad, *Greening the Children of God: Thomas Traherne and Nature’s Role in the Ecological Formation of Children*. Wipf and Stock. 2019.

predominate order, over or as alien from all others. In a Poem called, “The Sun and the Moon Forgot”, this is how he describes this epistemological violence:

“As if unmade, appear No more to me;
to God and heaven dead I was, as though they never were:
Upon some useless gaudy Book, When what I knew of God was fled,
The Child being taught to look, His Soul was quickly murdered.”¹³

That is heavy language. But his fear was realized when Newton’s mechanical approach to the natural sciences weaponized physics with Parmenides’ metaphysics of static hyper-individuation that set in motion an era of western scientific epistemological hegemony that Carolyn Merchant calls the *Death of Nature*.¹⁴ The Earth ceased being a place, held together by the Spirit and energy of relationships that gave meaning and life. Rather the cosmos became a simple space in which atoms were matter conserves energy by forces, repelling and gathering into various forms and bodies. This mechanistic individualism or dualism colonized our social and economic ideas so much that our political economies since that time have resulted in a sort of *Silent Spring*¹⁵ about which Rachel Carson warned. We no longer hear the singing of the birds, partly due to the loss of biodiverse species from the Earth Community, but mostly the loss of deep ecological relationships to them, and an inability to make sense of what they are saying to us.

Richard Louv observes how disconnecting children from the full epistemological field of their more-than-human surrounding creates what he calls a nature-deficit-disorder that is becoming a new facet of modern anthropology.¹⁶ With Louv, I propose that privileging one mode of learning is the disordered condition, and an openness to synaesthetic perception is more fully human. And in any case, if separation from the land and epistemic hegemony is the tool of colonialization, then surely for Lutherans one of the goals of liberating, decolonizing, and transformative education is to nurture a child to life by reconnecting them to diverse modes of learning that fit the holistic theological anthropology of who we are as God made us.

And I want to connect to a significant statement in LEA’s Framework that affirms: “ all useful knowledge and learning is God’s gift to people for their wellbeing; service to others through actions and relationships is a reflection of and response to God’s love for all”

I hear **Many Paths** as a call to promote a diversity of learning and learning styles is part of a spirituality of education. And here spirituality does not relate only to ethico-religious education or religious literacy. All modes of learning are spiritual, in the sense that each sense nurtures some aspect of our whole selves, and equips us for learning, and serving (*coram mundo*), in diverse sectors of life.

¹³ Traherne, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgiving*, 2.97., as quoted in Rimmer, *Greening the Children of God*, 234.

¹⁴ Merchant, Carolyn, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

¹⁵ Carson, Rachel, *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, 2022.

¹⁶ Louv, Richard, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. Atlantic, 2010.

Pedagogical implications

So, I want to close by making the pedagogical turn. What does this mean for a school?

I think educators in the Lutheran context should, like Luther, be the first to run “leaping and dancing” towards implementing epistemologically diverse pedagogies. Educators like Carol Gilligan and Nell Noddings¹⁷ were some of the first to push for learning *In Another Voice*.¹⁸ I will just name two categories among many dimensions of diversity:

1. The first stop for schools today is to acknowledge the pedagogical needs related to neurodiversity and multiple intelligences. Balancing more traditional means with the need for diverse approaches to interdisciplinary learning increases inclusion and equity for those who feel certain modes of learning are like magic. In addition to neurodiversity, this includes children who come from diverse cultural and gendered, and therefore different epistemological perspectives. For this reason I appreciate that the LEA Framework states in its Beliefs about Learners: “All learners are valued for who they are and whose they are”, and that “Learning is facilitated when individual needs of the student are met”.¹⁹ I don’t know what percentage of students in ECE or primary schools in Australia have IEPs (Individual Educational Plans). But the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) estimates that 4.5% of children have an acute need for individuation.²⁰ That is quite low compared to UNESCO’s 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM) that encourages inclusion as a way to overcome discrimination, stereotyping and stigmatization.²¹

And here I want to mention, by way of prayer, the LWF’s developing support of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ukraine. We are mapping need for ECE as part of our refugee response that will require trauma sensitive pedagogies. Trauma sensitive pedagogies are a particular sort of individualized approaches that are growing more necessary in areas of acute or post-conflict education.

2. Secondly, in LEA’s Belief about Learning, you affirm that “Learning goes beyond the academic: it includes the spiritual, physical, emotional and social” and “has **affective** and volitional dimensions as well as cognitive”. This belief highlights the benefit of interdisciplinary approaches to applying methods across curricula.

I am thinking of a child with dysgraphia who would struggle to write a biology paper, but can create a beautiful sculpture to raise public awareness of our relationship to our local ecology.

Interdisciplinary teaching across a curriculum can encourage students who thrive in one subject’s mode of learning to make meaning in another, by applying the methods of one subject matter to another field. For example using art or musicology to teach history, teaching

¹⁷ Noddings, Nell, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.

¹⁸ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1993.

¹⁹ <https://www.lutheran.edu.au/download/workshop-resource-framework/?wpdmdl=6947&refresh=62b87e6eefac81656258158>

²⁰ [https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/inclusive-education-teaching-students-with-disability#:~:text=Around%20one%20in%20twenty%2Dtwo,%25\)%20\(ABS%2C%202019\)](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/inclusive-education-teaching-students-with-disability#:~:text=Around%20one%20in%20twenty%2Dtwo,%25)%20(ABS%2C%202019))

²¹ <https://fr.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion>

biological sciences through environmental humanities like literature or poetry, or allowing mathematics students to create musical compositions for their summative evaluations in addition to the formulas and computations. Offering these opportunities for dialogical aesthetics between different disciplines encourages students to find their **Path** into a discipline whose internal logic or epistemological modes might seem otherwise magical.

In the Lutheran World Federation, we partner with local projects like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land's Environmental Education Center that teaches peace education and interfaith literacy through Earth care practices. Muslim, Jewish and Christian youth find that their common relationship to the land becomes a shared source of knowledge that unites diverse religious and social identities in one cosmological sense of home. And in our Climate Justice and Faith Certificate program that we run with Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and other partners, every student finishes their studies with a Capstone or Sacred Action Project that engages their interdisciplinary learning in a public facing initiative in loving service and action for the world.

Conclusion

This week, I am particularly looking forward to the workshops focusing on Turning Children into Action heroes, and Learning Through the Arts. And I am generally looking forward to hearing from you what kinds of epistemological diversity you see in your students? What ways of knowing are privileged or marginalized in your curricula? And how is this topic of epistemic diversity part of the pedagogical conversations in your school?

For now, I close with a word of gratitude to LEA, whose Beliefs about Learning Communities affirm that these "Learning cultures need to be intentionally developed". You develop your culture with a particular Lutheran ethos.

I hope I have contributed to that ethos today. I hope that I have affirmed the idea that for Lutherans the commitment to diverse epistemologies and interdisciplinary ways of learning honor and embody our full, Trinity-formed identity as human beings and in turn shapes the way we approach diversity in the world, seeking harmony out of our call to participate in making peace. To that end, allow me one last image.

Luther believed that music education must be kept in primary school, because making music is an experience of peace making. When you play music, you learn to play your note in rhythm and harmony with your fellow children of God in a way that reveals to everyone around an aesthetic of peace.

Alfred North Whitehead said peace "is primarily a trust in the efficacy of beauty."²² The theo-poetic, pedagogical path that I have tried to describe has an undeniable aesthetic. Lutheran Schools can connect revelation and reason in one relational cosmology of diverse peoples and the planet. In a world the needs creative synergy, our classrooms can make the aesthetic connections that honour the God-gifted diverse parts of our own selves so that each of us can be re-integrated by that cosmological, unitive consciousness and become a person at peace. Then we can learn to faithfully walk together along the many paths towards peace. **One voice, Many Paths.** Thank you.

²² Whitehead, Alfred North, *Adventures of Ideas*. Free Press, 1967.