

Ecoliteracy

- Peter Shepherd, Mullumbimby, Australia

Two fellas from Nigeria recently wrote about the connection between illiteracy and war. They pulled out statistics, they gave examples; they were careful to point out that it was just one connection, although a primary one. If they used language a bit academic, a bit distant, maybe we can forgive them – their country has been torn and retorn by violence so much I'm sure their hearts, at least, know what it's like to be ripped out and crammed in ice.

But they got hopeful. *The way forward*, they said, *is through peace-building education*. So far an initiative, backed at such levels, no less, than the UN, has focused on primary school children. It's about the intergenerational long-term, the UN literature says; it's gonna take time. Our two Nigerian friends reckon this hasn't worked, and never will. To translate their academese into commonspeak: what's the use of learning you p's and q's only to walk out the school gate into a society that kicks the shit out of you at so many levels? The real lessons, they said, are on the street, and in the home, and much of it isn't pretty. Peace-building education has to move into those places, they summarised, the places where the kids who aren't at school are, where the adults are at – all the key role models - and it needs to be in a language that makes sense to those people.

The essence of their position is this: teach the adults literacy, as well as the kids, and peace is more likely to follow.

The heart of literacy is the power to communicate and engage. To understand other points of view, and to be heard. Big stuff. The Aussie government lists five types of official literacy: prose (reading), numeracy, document (forms), health, and problem solving . Or, to put it another way: being able to write a resume, being able to read the rules, being able to balance the books, create new ways of making money, and not take sickies. Of course, that's my take on it. But consider this: According to the official surveys, Tasmanians are dorks, and Canberrans are geniuses. I think it's safe to say that the official survey may have left out some very important questions; ignored some critical types of literacy.

Like Ecoliteracy. This is the one that interests me, and for a number of reasons. Let's try just a few: global warming, food shortages and rising costs, the death of rivers, species extinction, cancer clusters, asthma. Ecoliteracy is the ability to understand the primacy of the language of nature, its interconnections, its limits. It means being able to read the signs – the words – that tell us what's real. Ecoliteracy then means, further, to find a language that engages us to take action. Even deeper, ecoliteracy is a way of reading and communicating across generations. So ecoliteracy, beyond the ability to read and count,

is more deeply concerned with relationships, and the ability to survive and prosper harmoniously.

All this is on my mind as I'm walking the laneway of my neighbourhood. I'm glancing at the clouds without any idea of what their shapes and dramas may tell me about the coming weather. Looking at a jumble of green shapes not knowing whether I can eat them or not. I'm wondering why this laneway isn't planted out with fruit trees for us all to share, and then wonder how to talk to the neighbours about it. I know how to operate a computer but not the right timing for propagating fruit trees or for planting spinach, or what native alternatives are available. The magpies are calling and I don't understand what they mean. I'm trying to be a parent and I don't know which elders to turn to. How can I teach my daughter how to live lightly and healthily on the earth, when all my time is spent working three jobs, paying bills, cleaning, trying to relate, stressing? Allowing myself to be herded down a path that leaves a bright-eyed child and green earth behind?

I am illiterate. I desperately need to learn to read. And write.

But here's hope: I remember watching black cockatoos crackle over Nightcap and seeing the storms that inevitably followed. *Stormbringer*, I named them to my daughter. Ants would invade indoors when rain was due in a few days; huntsman spiders, if it were a few hours. Kookaburras in the evening: rain tomorrow. All these languages of rain coming. The sudden breeze – *here comes the storm*. And the voice of the storm itself: a deep bucket-thudding symphony could mean floods – pay attention. And notice the flow of the land, the paths of water, of neighbours, of buses, of ants, of birds. Which soil holds water, which stays dry? Where is the shade in winter?

And what I thought was Spring contains, in different weeks, the cicada birthing season, the cowboy beetle season, mulberry season, the time of perfect tiny trees in the clover patch. What use is "Spring" here? The song of rain spills for three months in "Autumn". A farmer gives me a lift who's lived here for 60 years. "Nine months of rain is what we normally had. Cyclones, too." The wipers squeak across the eyes of his ute. He squints: "Seems pretty normal to me."

Paying attention. Spending time in a place. Maybe these are some of the first lessons of ecoliteracy. Listening, too; finding a language that sidesteps blame - what social researcher Hugh McKay calls "the work of heroes." Listening with respect; taking responsibility. A language that connects.

I don't know. But I want to. I see people with dirt under their fingernails; see families walking rock pools; hear the stories hewn from long association by "old timers". I need those stories. So does my daughter. Already she's taught me that "Old Wollumbin" is the grandfather mountain. I didn't know. It was there in the geology and history, buried in language so cold and disconnected I was blinded to the story beneath. She still has one of the most important ecoliteracy skills, my daughter: a sense of wonder. I'm relearning.

So much hope, like the absurd abundance of black bean seedpods she brings home to make boats with. Her friend Darcy has planted one of the seeds.

It's growing.

ACE Byron Shire, as part of the International Adult Learners' Week, is running an afternoon and evening of Ecoliteracy readings, discussions and interactions on Thursday September 4 in Mullumbimby. It's free, with supper, but registrations need to be made through ACE on 6684 3374.