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Cultivating Joy: Play, Rest, and Connection in Regenerative Cycles

Tim D. Howe
Portland State University

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Recommended Citation

Howe, Tim D., "Cultivating Joy: Play, Rest, and Connection in Regenerative Cycles" (2023). *Leadership for Sustainability Education Comprehensive Papers*. 18.

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Cultivating Joy: Play, rest, and connection in regenerative cycles

Cultivating Joy

Play, rest, and connection in regenerative cycles

Tim Howe

Portland State University

Part I: Preamble

Initial Meditation

What is the point if you're not led by joy?

What is the point of joy if it doesn't lead to wonder?

How does wonder matter without its search for purpose?

What is the purpose of purpose if it doesn't connect you to others?

And so on,

and so on,

and so on.

In many ways, the path that led me to sustainable leadership is a common one. My understanding of the world as a straight, white, male in a town managed and inhabited by those who looked mostly like me blinded me to the idea that there was material struggle, oppression and pain caused by systems, indeed even in my hometown. Like many experiences, it took me leaving, breathing, finding discomfort, and returning to recognize how Bend had shaped me, and how I wanted to move forward. Beyond the tepid and homogenous human culture of Bend, it took leaving and returning to recognize how deeply the arid landscape of Central Oregon, caught between the Badlands of the east and the forested thicket of the west, truly affected my disposition, priorities, and identity.

Cultivating Joy: Play, rest, and connection in regenerative cycles

In the last thirteen years, I have had numerous experiences in my education and career that pointed me towards sustainable leadership. I attended undergrad at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, where I experienced many extremes: extreme wealth in many of my peers, extreme culture shock in my five months abroad in Kenya and Tanzania, extreme disparity in Portland, as I volunteered at Roosevelt High School. Immediately after graduating, I moved to Wilson, North Carolina and taught 2nd grade, entirely unqualified and unprepared for what that entailed. A large part of my identity, and my perspective on leadership, came from the tension that arose from my presence in Eastern North Carolina. I was the only white male teacher in the school; my entire class was Black and Latinx in a low income area of the rural south, and my role was to prescribe students their aspirations. I don't believe I was a very good teacher, but I hope I was at least a solid presence in 50 students' lives. After leaving North Carolina, I worked as a recess and culture manager at several Portland area schools, followed by a stint as Assistant Dean of Admission at Reed College. I have been granted perspective on a wide breadth of the systems that make up the U.S. education system, from student to teacher, from admission to access.

In 2017, during a cross-country tour with a Portland band, I was rushed to a hospital and diagnosed with appendicitis. Due to an overloaded, convoluted and ultimately apathetic healthcare system, I was made to wait 13 hours before surgery, in which time my appendix burst. The common procedure, typically lasting no more than a few hours in a hospital, turned into a week, as I had almost died in the hallway (this is the story I tell, at least! While the clinical horror with which I was treated remains, the direness of the situation tends to wax and wane depending on the audience). I mention this time of my life because it was a reiteration of something that I had seen winks of throughout my educational and professional career: that when a system is set up to move people through it rather than to explore the depth of their being, it most definitely

leads to systemic oppression. This was true in the public education system that oppressed my students and their families; it was true in the hospital that almost killed me and charged me \$65,000; and it was true in the world of college admission, where everyone seemed like they were in the business of opportunity capital, rather than knowledge.

Through these life experiences, I learned about the value of systemic justice, about how racism creeps through the cracks of every facet of American life, about how my duty as a very privileged person was to step back and listen as much as possible, until the time came for me to step up and elevate voices that haven't been historically heard. I learned that leadership can take many forms and be successful on varying timelines, but that sustainable leadership thinks about its parts within the context of the whole, and as the whole as its parts, working in tandem to create collective impact.

Leadership Philosophy

Leadership is a process that is foundationally about listening, rather than acting. Leadership exists in many forms, but sustainable leadership prioritizes listening to the self, to one's peers, and to the Earth's needs and guidance, before pointing one's ship in any one direction. As a leader, I strive to take a holistic approach to every learning experience I facilitate, by inviting open-ended questions without clear answers, acknowledging my position as both teacher and student, and making sure we explore each subject through an interdisciplinary lens that accommodates each member of the conversation's background and experience.

Educational Philosophy

Deep learning begins when the borders between subjects and the power dynamics inherent in systems of education begin to break down. In its place, the process of leading and learning should build on what we already know intrinsically about the world: that ecological systems hold life sustaining models of relationship, that each student is capable of holding the role of teacher simultaneously, and that physical experiences nurture motivation, purpose and praxis. Rather than acting on the immediacy of self interest, the practice in investing in other's futures, human and otherwise, is paramount to how we make sense of the world in the present, and sustain it for future generations. All learning should be held in the pursuit of wonder and joy, as these are the driving factors that connect us to the Earth, each other, and ourselves.

Through this philosophy, I have determined three key cross-sections that can be explored and put to practice: understanding of place, understanding of others and understanding of self.

Understanding of Self (Self Understanding and Commitment)

When we look to the most internal level of understanding, we must explore our understanding of ourselves, both within our own bodies, and within the context of other beings and environments. In Bobbie Harro's "Cycle of Liberation" (2013), we are asked to "get ready", by empowering the self and raising our own consciousness. This is a clear starting point for how to engage with the rest of the teaching philosophy; introspection and recognition of your place within many intersecting systems prepares us for the next steps in the "Cycle of Liberation," building community, as well as the outer layers of my teaching philosophy, understanding others and understanding place. Meditation and mindfulness practices are also key factors in understanding one's place within larger systems, while allowing space to simply "be" without

want of production or growth, but only insofar as they remain focused on these tenants and not divorced from their original context in place of a productivity strategy.

Slowness is an important piece of learning (Nelson, 2016), and rest in the face of a system designed to move is a radical notion (Hersey, 2022). Ample time should be put into slowing down, breathing in one's surroundings, and remaining present in the moment. This process of slowing down and envisioning should become a practice, not simply a solitary step of preparation. Slowing myself enough to notice how I feel and what the land and beings around me feel has been an especially difficult task, but this only strengthens my resolve. Teaching should be a process of noticing, and noticing happens only when you make time and space for it.

Understanding of Others (Bio-cultural Relationships)

Be it human relationships or otherwise, our connection to those who live around us is fundamental to our ability to learn and lead. Popular education, the practice of democratizing a learning environment with the understanding of all involved as both teacher and student is integral to framing what learning is (Wiggins, 2011). Social hierarchy and dominant paradigms of power in academic settings seek to reinforce capitalist and white supremacist power dynamics, and leave much of the context of what we purport to know on the table.

Conversely, the concept of popular education finds solutions to the gatekeeping of academia by amplifying two lenses: that everyone you ever meet will know something you do not, and that theory is only as good as its ability to be practiced (Freire 1970). Social constructivism, which seeks to create meaning from our relationship to others and how we interact (University College Dublin, 2015), is a helpful framework for this element of my teaching philosophy, as it finds our understanding of ourselves and the Earth through our

interactions with others. As explored by Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) the meaning I make of societal systems is socially constructed, holding together the intersections of my own identity. If my teaching philosophy is based in different dimensions of understanding, then the process of envisioning is the joints at which the different dimensions (place, others, self) intersect and co-mingle. Just as our understanding of ourselves is intrinsically linked to our relation to the life forces all around us, our understanding of others is innately linked to our understanding of place, as praxis is only valuable through experience.

Understanding of Place (Systemic View of the World)

As the most external element, *understanding of place* is more situated in setting and time than it is technique. Understanding of place acknowledges that where one learns (and leads) is inherently as important as what one learns. Further, understanding of place recognizes that knowledge is cyclical (Kolb & Fry, 1975), based originally on our understanding of nature—as well as indigenous knowledge of praxis—and most sustainable and effective when experienced with one’s full body, outside the confines of an academic vacuum.

Just as important as the setting itself is the teacher/student’s (re)connection to the setting and to each other. As Write (2015) puts it, “[Experiential learning] is not a set of tools and techniques to provide students with a range of experiences, as it is frequently misunderstood to be. Rather, it positions learning as a continuous process in which students bring their own knowledge, ideas, beliefs and practices—at different levels—to their understanding and interpretation of new information” (p.2). By allowing students to situate themselves within an experience, students take what they already know, and apply their surroundings to render a unique understanding of their environment. Understanding of place is not simply a recognition of the

space in which you sit, but a conversation with her, and all of the beings that fill her space, creating a truly sustainable community (Armstrong 2018).

Tools for Sustainable Change

Joy and wonder around the process of learning, two distinct but interrelated concepts are the fundamental connecting principles to the three intersections of my leadership philosophy. As an example of biomimicry (Brown, 2018), these principles should flow freely and bring life to our understanding of place, others and self. To create wonder, I believe one has to explore the meaning made out of the world and one's relationship to it. Wonder, when pursued by the student, is in righteous defiance of a teaching model that forces an objective or goal on the student. Wonder is the potent catalyst for discovery and joy of learning.

While the dominant paradigm found in our society today asks us to seek equilibrium, it's rare to find systems, especially self-organizing systems that account for change outside of the system, that seek such balance. Indeed, equilibrium is the end result of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, but it is exactly that: the end. As Wheatly (2007) states in "Leadership and the New Science", "The more entropy there is, the less the system is capable of changing. At equilibrium, there is nothing left for the system to do; it can produce nothing more. If the universe is a closed system (there being nothing outside the universe to influence it), then it too must eventually wind down and reach equilibrium ...While a self-organizing system's openness to disequilibrium might seem to make it too unpredictable, even temperamental, this is not the case. Its stability comes from a deepening center, a clarity about who it is, what it needs, what is required to survive in its environment." (p.76) This is a reminder that we must embrace the movement, change, unbalance and conflict that we often seek to eliminate within our systems.

Often, the path forward emerges from strings of moments, from the connections we find inherent to our surroundings and ourselves, but rarely does the path emerge “on time,” or with synchronicity. Learning has the distinct capability of being considered either closed and stationary or self-organizing and regenerative, depending on how you view the goals of the process. In order to allow for forward momentum, we must embrace entropy by seeking joyous moments that allow for deeper understandings of place, other and self.

Part II: Academic Synthesis

It seems as though we’ve hit an impasse. We are at the precipice of multiple systems failures that span from our food production, to our systems of education, to our economic models. Unfortunately, these failures are symptoms of our economic and social models working as intended by the hands of capitalism and white supremacy. We have built our society on models of perpetual, unsustainable growth, a model that simply cannot be found in nature. In most cases, growth is punctuated by deterioration, destruction, obliteration or erasure, but since power is given to those who benefit from this pattern, thus the cycle repeats itself. For reasons explored in eco-philosophy fiction such as Daniel Quinn’s (1995) “Ishmael” and Starhawk’s (1997) “The Fifth Sacred Thing”, as well as the afro-futurist work of Octavia Butler, the western world has prioritized short term gratification over long term investment or reflection on historical truths.

Thesis Statement

As dominant systems continue to lean towards unsustainable patterns, fueled by models of white supremacy and capitalism, these paradigms can be challenged by prioritizing joy and wonder as essential inputs rather than measurable outcomes. This paper seeks to imagine the ways

in which failing systems that promise eternal growth and insatiable power dynamics can be in part dismantled through creating the conditions necessary for joy to take precedence over productivity.

Capitalism

Our current economic system, capitalism, is at the ideological heart of the ecological failure and socioeconomic divide we are currently witnessing. As J.E. Steigletz (2011) puts it, “The breaking of the social bonds and trust—seen in our politics, in our financial sector, and in the workplace—will, inevitably, have broader societal consequences. We have explained how the long-term success of any country requires social cohesion—a kind of social contract that binds members of society together. Experiences elsewhere have shown, however, the fragility of social cohesion. When the social contract gets broken, social cohesion quickly erodes.” (Stieglitz pg. 135) Capitalism has ensured humans have lost their agency as individuals and their power as a collective, leaving only the animated bones of our remaining humanity to compete against each other for the illusion of a slice of the pie.

Even still, capitalism, which is working just as it was designed (Cooper, 2018), has recently been showing noticeable cracks. The term “late capitalism” has been used to describe the current state of a failing system that favors the wealth of fewer and fewer individuals over the well-being of a collective (Lowry, 2017). The world can be seen in its entirety for the first time in the history of humanity, and thus capitalism has taken upon itself to quantify, measure and silo everything in its entirety, in an attempt to commodify everything, which Joanna Macy (2017) has

identified as “The Great Unraveling.” This unraveling has been the intentional severing of a social contract between the ruling class and workers that has eroded over time.

Statistician Nic Marks (2010), in his Ted Talk, describes how our paralysis in the face of looming threats around climate change, social calamity, and global collapse has been exacerbated by a miscalibration of progress.

One of the problems that we face, I think, is that the only people that have cornered the market in terms of progress is a financial definition of what progress is, an economic definition of what progress is -- that somehow, if we get the right numbers to go up, we're going to be better off, whether that's on the stock market... This is somehow appealing to human greed instead of fear. (Marks, 2010, 1:45).

Indeed, capitalism itself is an unsustainable economic system, but has also debilitated our will to act by appealing to our fear of collapse. Fear is an immense motivator of how we make decisions (Javanbahkt, Saab, 2017), and capitalism uses two powerful tenants in tandem to manufacture compliance: fear and desire.

Capitalism, and the consumerist approach it urges in its captives, creates the conditions necessary for an emotional and spiritual desert. This measurability and commodification of all elements extends its tendrils past the physical to the emotive. When emotion and spirit can be commodified, they can also be consumed, wasted and discarded (Illouz, 2013). In truth, we live in a world of great abundance, where scarcity is produced artificially to keep the mechanisms of an economic system that necessitates perpetual need over presence and gratitude (Kimmerer, 2016).

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2016) explains how in capitalism, contentment is considered the most radical result. In a system designed to grow forever, abundance undermines the role scarcity

plays. Even still, gratitude can serve as a reminder to the absurdity of this system. “Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the economy needs emptiness, or at the very least, the perception of emptiness.” (p. 111) Kimmerer acknowledges the importance of gratitude as a practice in abundance, and abundance in a world that does not necessitate the paradox of scarcity for survival creates community.

White Supremacy

If capitalism is the heart of our ideological body, white supremacy creates the muscular system by which our body moves and flexes and structures itself. White supremacy is the mechanism through which capitalism is filtered, especially in a global society that has been conquered throughout. This social system of oppression was constructed to give power to a global minority by extracting labor and removing the humanity of black and brown people, a process that pointedly and intentionally mirrors the economic system of capitalism. Activist Tema Okun (2022) describes white supremacy as a constructed power, designed to serve capitalism, commodify and dehumanize all living things, and extend an invitation to many, even if it ultimately serves a drastic few (Okun, 2022). In Okun’s definition white supremacy serves as a virus that can be caught by all, even if its symptoms are unequally experienced by those most disenfranchised by its process. This is the very definition of an unsustainable system: one that seeks firstly to empower the few, and ultimately destroys itself by its own means of survival, constantly seeking new land or body or spirit to prey upon. When the powerless have been devoured, a system meant to compete will devour itself.

Education

Every aspect of our education systems has been commodified and colonized, a fertile ground to conquer, rather than one that we grow around. The world of higher education is a distinctly colonized space, one that is increasingly necessary to inhabit if one desires a living wage, but one that has prioritized a banking model of business over fostering exploration and discovery in its students (Freire 1970).

One must only look at the ways in which the price of education has exploded in the last quarter century. In Suzanne Mettler's book, "Degrees of Inequality", Metzger explains how the fumbling of political policy leads to exorbitant increase in inequality. "As polarization worsened [in the early 1990's], the government became more dysfunctional and less capable of managing existing policies effectively...plutocratic government filled the void, as only moneyed interests managed to overcome the gaping partisan divisions and to compel cooperation—on behalf of the privileged." (Mettler, pg. 74-75). Mettler further describes the role of entities that publicly claim to advocate for students, that the industry's primary concerns rest with the sustainability of institutions represented, not broader access to college or college completion rates. Mettler captures how education, a fundamental element of human development, has been organized under the same principles that are actively destroying life on Earth in an attempt to close price margins and cull measurable outputs. Under late capitalism, education has gone from process to product, and the tenants of the system that do not render overt and immediate results that reassure stakeholders have been deprioritized and defunded.

Our current system of education stands in stark contrast to traditional ecological understandings of development, as well as educational theory that devalues a standardized

approach. In “Original Instructions”, Melissa K. Nelson (2008) describes the ways in which “human thought and Eurocentric conditioning tries to divide and fragment us”, a practice that is echoed especially in our education system. Students are separated by standardized testing, often tracked from grade to grade, often unable to leave the track they are put in. The history of modern public education in America was sown with the seeds of segregation that have only bloomed today, with more than a third of U.S. students attending a school that is predominantly populated by the same race or ethnicity (Carillo 2022).

In Paolo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970), Freire introduces the idea of the “banking model of education” which explores the way in which education simulates the same power dynamic found in a capitalist economic system. The banking model maintains that students are meant to be influenced vessels, open to a change in consciousness around their own oppression, rather than given collective ownership over the community in the class. This system of education limits and debilitates its members (teacher included!) and presupposes that the only value a student can maintain is their ability to consume and store knowledge, similar to a worker’s value deriving from what they can produce. Freire introduces the idea of popular education as a direct challenge to the banking model, leveling the power dynamic in a classroom by democratizing who teaches and who learns. The result is a collective consciousness that builds upon itself, finds meaning in others, and creates trust between its constituents.

The systems we currently perpetuate are designed intentionally to maintain our understanding of the world as disconnected from a collective. Our cultural consciousness relies on what information we receive and how we are able to process with others, and without a fundamental shift in how we understand our collective consciousness, our institutions will stand to uphold the dominant status quo. (Orr, 1994; Sterling, 2001).

Separation from nature

What would compel us to shoot ourselves in the collective foot, to burden our futures with the illusion that production and growth can last in perpetuity, and that the will of stakeholders, several degrees attached from the material process, are more important than those most affected by the outcomes? Our perceived disconnection from the world of nature has led to a pattern of excusing ourselves from the ecological and societal atrocities in pursuit of models of unsustainable growth (Vining et al., 2008). These models identify and separate individuals as components to be manipulated towards measurable outputs, rather than recognizing each individual as inherently connected, our stories, human and otherwise, intrinsically tied together. As adrienne maree brown puts it,

In a capitalist society like the United States, every aspect of our survival—from food and water to healthcare, childcare, and elder care—is based on our success at being an individual in the world: *Do we compete well enough to make good money so we can live a good life?* (brown, 2017).

While competition is a pillar of natural systems, brown explains that only humans compete when it isn't necessary. It is this tendency that we often rely on to justify our own removal from the natural world.

Though humans may compete for personal gain in unique ways, the fact remains that our interconnectedness with all things is inherent within us; we can't escape our ties to the world, hard as we may try. We are all a part of the very ecological systems we try to destroy. As Robbins (2020) states in "Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction", when we assume nature to be a determinant and fixed influence, our humanity within non-human systems is lost entirely. As a

result, “nature” is considered linear, one-way, and determinant of cultural development, even as we could (and can) observe our ecological systems transforming through industrialization (Robbins, 2020). As we symbolically remove ourselves from what makes us a part of a greater ecology, we ultimately eradicate the ecology we claim to be removed from.

Philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2010) explores this idea in the video series “Examined Life”. Zizek argues that our understanding of nature is one that fundamentally misinterprets our role as peripheral, or perhaps above it, rather than intrinsically a part of it. Zizek argues that all of our behavior, morality removed, is innately natural, not separate from nature as we have convinced ourselves. This conceptual divorce away from ecology and towards ideology is what has allowed us to perpetuate unsustainable models of growth and wealth over ecological balance. He argues for a world that leans towards our inherent artificiality, towards a world based in mathematics and numbers, searching for the beauty, poetry and spirituality of our perceived flaws. While Zizek’s approach is characteristically unconventional, the message is plain: what we see as our biggest weaknesses as humans are exactly what we hoist as our excuse for allowing the systems we created to continue to deteriorate.

Often, it seems like the only holistic measure or practice society has endured is that of integrating its desire for immediate gratification across systemic functions. The areas in which we are most connected as a global community are often the ones that perpetuate unsustainable mechanisms (Stigletz 2011). It seems while we cannot find the will power to act collectively towards more sustainable ecological outcomes, we still find ourselves working collectively to mirror the cyclical destructive nature of our economic systems.

Joy

One may struggle to see how the conversation of joy and wonder fits into one of failing systems. Surely capitalism, white supremacy, and the many facets of our failing systems are tied up in more tangible, practical, perhaps fiscal means. These failing systems are in part doing so because of the willingness and intention to remove users (re: captives) from their essential functions, two of which being joy and wonder. Thus, it is just as important that we define these parts by what they are as it is to define the systems by what they deprive us from.

At its most fundamental definition, joy is a positive emotion that arises from a sense of well-being, satisfaction, and contentment. It is often accompanied by feelings of happiness (not to be mistaken for joy), pleasure, and delight, and manifests as a physical sensation of warmth, lightness, or excitement. Joy can be experienced in response to a wide range of stimuli, including personal achievements, social connections, creative expression, and natural beauty. It is often distinguished from other positive emotions like happiness or contentment by its intensity and transience, its intrinsic nature, and its association with a sense of inner peace and fulfillment (Lama, Abrams, Tutu 2016). Joy is inherent within us, fundamental to our understanding of the world, and, while typically a fleeting emotion, one that we can tap into and recall, as if we have access to tap a wellspring. In short, joy is an elusive but renewable resource.

This definition of joy is relatively clinical, prescriptive even. The importance of joy's ability to not only reflect but create abundance in an individual or group cannot be overstated. This abundance is often described as connection, peace, understanding, or simply an overwhelm of emotion. Joy, however, is not prescriptive, and thus can be both cultivated and felt through many filters. Thus, the origins of joy in one's body are hard to trace because of this wide array of

inciting moments. Immense joy can be felt through personal accomplishment, camaraderie, love, laughter (Gay, 2022), movement (McGonigal, 2021) spiritualism, gratitude (Steindl-Rast, 2001, Kimmerer, 2016) and meaning. It can also be the result of hardship, suffering (Abrams & Tutu, 2016), pain (Bloom 2021), grief (Gay, 2022) and growth (Swindoll, 2014).

Since joy can be cultivated through so many means, I found it helpful to see when individuals felt joy and how it was perceived. While interviewing several people on their idea of joy, one interviewee described joy as “the creation of future nostalgia, or a future memory to be re-visited one day.” Another explained their understanding of joy as “a feeling of happiness that accrues interest,” which points to joy’s ability to not only regenerate, but create new meaning. Another said they knew joy to be a feeling that comes with a sense of security and understanding with your surroundings; joy can create a sense of connectivity with the Earth, the beings around you, or yourself. Interviewees claimed to experience joy in the process (not the product, specifically!) of creating music with friends, completing a first marathon, feeling like their needs were being heard at work by supervisors, and saying grace at Thanksgiving (even if this was the only time of year when this was a practice).

In Ross Gay’s poetic exploration of the relationship between emotions and circumstance, “Inciting Joy” (2022), Gay finds the ways in which we can cultivate the conditions necessary for joy to be created and replicated. Incitements range from the specific, such as growing a garden and finding obscure or unique covers of classic songs, to the more abstract, like creating meaning, and processing grief (p. 218). The throughline in his writing is how joy is built through our ability to connect ourselves to others and the Earth. In Gay’s approximation, joy is an extended hand, to our fellow human or more than human, in times of pain, mutual understanding, accomplishment, knowledge and justice. Burns, Vaught and Bowman (2015) discuss the importance of inner work

and collaboration in their Leadership for Sustainability Studies. “Leadership can ... be understood as an inclusive, collaborative, and reflective process, rooted in values and a living processes paradigm (p. 134). The parallels between leadership as relationship and joy as relationship are beautifully reflected in one another; both reliant on an understanding of self, understanding of others, and understanding of spatial context.

Of all these examples, there is a throughline of belonging and connection. This connection can be to another human, a life force, an ecological system, or to one’s sense of self. Further, it seems joy can be felt through a sense of belonging, regardless of how long you have belonged. One can look at Craig Finn’s career-long public mantra in his band The Hold Steady, declaring nightly on stage to his fans (who loyally holler along) “there is so much joy in what we do here,” before offering to the crowd a chance to be a part of the performance, either inviting the crowd on stage, or giving the cue for the crowd to throw glitter and confetti on his signal. Finn (2004) ends most performances with his song “Most People Are DJs”, in which he concludes his performance (an allegiant crowd prepared to recite the final words together) “We are all, we are all, we are all The Hold Steady.” He extends his quaking limbs to the audience, as if to signal that the band has once again welcomed 500 new members to its league. This illustrates how joy can be felt collectively, and can be considered a field, an energy that can be communicated from party to party, across time and space (Wheatly, 2006). Because joy comes from intrinsic fulfillment or the remembrance of deep pleasure, it acts as a self-perpetuating motor, building layers of happiness from a physical or tangible nothingness.

Wonder

Ultimately, this paper is primarily designed to explore the relationship between joy and the ways in which we create sustainable cycles, but I would be remiss if I omitted the role of wonder. When paired with joy, wonder creates a fascinating regenerative system.

The writer Caspar Henderson (2017), author of “A New Map of Wonders”, notes that joy and surprise are key elements in the experience of wonder. Wonder creates moments of emergence, in which we can form bonds with those around us and with the Earth (Brown, 2017). Joy and wonder’s intrinsic connection has been noted by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2018): “Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.” (pg. 327) Kimmerer’s sentiment reminds us that through wonder and joy, we are offered abundance, which can create community and derail our failing systems of scarcity. Steve Paulson (2021) remarks on the power of awe, wonder’s astonished cousin to create feelings of the sublime. “One of the remarkable qualities of awe is its capacity to sublimate our sense of self and trigger feelings of transcendence. This is a common occurrence in religious experiences but is not limited to those with a spiritual bent.” (p.6) Awe and wonder engage us with what we know about ourselves, what we do not know about the world around us, and points us towards the blank spaces in between.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define joy and wonder as the processes through which we connect our mind and body, our identity to others, and our existence to our surroundings. Joy allows us the honor of feeling a part of a whole, and wonder extends our joy outward, like tendrils ready to grasp and be grasped. Joy and wonder are cultivated by our ability

to make meaning from the Earth, and offer back a culture of abundance. With abundance comes the means for a sustainable system, more energy produced than put in, more to share, more to connect, more to love.

Measurable Outcomes

Part of why our systems are failing is our focus on measuring production, rather than process, or our ability to embody our motivation as our main purpose. For many corporations, especially since the global pandemic, “joy” and “wonder” have become the buzzwords *du jour*, market analyzed and marketed to a work base that has been burnt to a crisp. *Forbes*, the financial culture juggernaut publication, has explored how injecting “joy” in the workplace is a necessity for today’s tumultuous economy and tenuous worker base. Marie Hattar (2022) explains how to recontextualize the role of joy as a mode of productivity, rather than a dysfunctional human nuisance. “Don’t see creating joy as an overhead cost; instead, view it as a critical investment that can create alignment and positively impact the business. A recent survey Gallup and Workhuman undertook found that creating a culture of recognition can save a 10,000-employee company with an engaged workforce up to \$16.1 million in turnover costs annually.” (Hattar, par. 6)

Hattar’s suggestions for instilling joy in the workplace are not overtly insidious; she invites readers to create more space for flexibility, collaboration between coworkers, and employee development. What Hattar maintains, however, is that joy is obtainable through quantifiable steps, that joy is an output or result meant to serve productivity, rather than a state of being in which productivity is one potential byproduct. That joy and productivity must hold hands, that one must serve the other to find value is itself a questionable thought.

Alternatively, if the system doesn't remove joy or wonder outright from the equation, it finds ways to disassemble it, segregate it from its essential function, and market it as a measurable outcome, just as it would treat students in a modern educational setting, or a food source from its original context. The World Economic Forum (2022) describes the benefits of happiness in the business place, creating a "flow state" for workers, as well as a sense of stability within the workplace. While more happiness and stability in the workplace are a noble pursuit, the idea that joy should be used as a method of efficiency and productivity inverts joy's essential function, serving an economic system over the human who cultivates the emotion.

Inputs

Perhaps it is a fruitless enterprise to try and define the inputs of a cycle. You quickly find yourself in a "chicken or the egg" conundrum, trying to define the origins of all things. Still, it's important to understand the recipe for sustainable, regenerative systems, especially in a context that favors linear understandings of outcomes (x goes in, y comes out, end of story). Burns (2021) defines an ecological design process as one that is cyclical, non-linear, and observable in countless examples in the natural world (Burns, p. 3). Burn's ecological design process invites five cyclical steps: observe, envision, shape, pattern, and engage-observe. In a late capitalist system, the Burns model rubs up against the speed-based, result dominant processes we have grown accustomed to.

This regenerative cycle can be found in the tenets of permaculture values, which seek to find balance between Earth care, people care, and equitable practices, or fair share (Holmgren 2022). By slowing ourselves to the natural rhythms of Earth's seasons and cycles, designing systems that work as well for the humans involved as they do for the more-than human world,

storing energy when it is created, and seeking creativity through and because of change, we can design systems that are more interested in regeneration than surplus. Permaculture design values intention and interconnectedness over competition and unconditional growth. This makes permaculture design a convenient analog for the ways in which we can explore the role of joy and wonder within regenerative systems: they exist to serve the continuation of a cycle designed in care.

Reflecting on the importance of the inputs of a system, especially when viewed through the lens of permaculture offers us a helpful framework for which to create an alternative systemic paradigm. In seeking slow solutions and ample time to observe before designing, we give ourselves the space to observe the world and her seasons at a natural pace, one that we have practiced for hundreds of thousands of years (brown, 2017). So too is the process of joy and wonder, each creating a counter balance to each other. Wonder incites motion and meaning-making, which creates the conditions necessary for joy. In turn, joy incites connection, understanding, and a radical deconstruction of oppressive systems.

Part III: Recommendations

Until this point, we have explored how our failing systems interact with each element considered an input. Capitalism extracts, abstracts, exploits and commodifies the levers of cyclical systems and white supremacy (et al) justifies the unequal distribution of economic resources, reinforcing the power dynamics within capitalist systems. The constructs of joy do not escape this system. Joy, something inherent to us on a purely biological level, can be stripped like sheet metal from a natural cycle, flattened and exploited as a scarcity, and sold back to us as a lifestyle or a prized item. Feeling blue about the state of policing in America? Find joy through

camaraderie in your choice of shampoo. Are you lost in a sense of meaninglessness at your job that sees you as little more than a cog in some senseless machine? Dig up the meaning of your own existence with corgi-shaped Post-It notes. When we view joy and wonder as quantifiable, measurable and discreet, we are offering up a corporate entity the blank spaces in a mad-lib about our own autonomy.

Thus, we must remember, constantly and with intention, that joy itself is regenerative, that it resides in something intrinsic and biological within ourselves (Clark, 2015), beyond our need for competition. It is amplified by community, and that seeking joy as measurable ends leaves us scrambling for ways to replicate it, leaving us vulnerable to capitalist structures to weaponize it against us. Joy is just as much what it is not as what it is. Joy is not a ping-pong table in the breakroom of a fancy startup, or a kegerator full of endless kombucha that interns are offered in between replying to angry emails. Joy is the means and conditions available to *use* the ping-pong table not in spite of the wishes of your supervisor or the ticking clock but *because* of them. We must cultivate the environment necessary for the ping-pong table to become a part of the day, for the workers to feel like they can create community around the ping-pong table, not see it as a threat to their productivity, nor a carrot at the end of a quota-driven stick. Joy in education is not the reward of play, it is play as the primary factor in a student's learning, a factor we should not "grow out of".

Joy is a powerful ingredient to leadership for sustainability, which focuses on the traits, situations and behaviors surrounding leadership, rather than relying on a linear model of leader-to-results (Burns, Vaught, Bauman 2015). Considering joy as an outcome causes us to break a regenerative cycle, but utilizing joy as a fertilizer for each step of a system allows each

step in the process to flourish. Prioritizing what goes into a system can remove the impetus on creating outcomes based on perpetual growth.

Ecological design

The Burns model of Ecological Design is a fantastic model through which to overlay (or perhaps infuse) the tenants of wonder and joy. Burns (2020) writes:

Ecological design is part of a shift to a holistic ecological paradigm in which, as human designers, we are not separate from the living earth and are deeply interconnected with other beings. An ecological design process thus engages our spirits----the consciousness of our interconnectedness to all life (p. 2) .

Just as joy can inform our sense of wonder and wonder for the world can be a joyous experience, Ecological Design is connective, spiritual and recursive. When we observe and engage with the living Earth, we invite moments of curiosity and wonder into our lives, thus cultivating the soil necessary for joy to take over.

Additionally, Ecological Design de-emphasizes the importance of measurable standardized outcomes in favor of the shaping process itself. While most design has a linear, outcome focused design process, ecological design focuses on the process itself, and how it embodies the dynamic relational nature of the universe (Burns 2020). This focus on process gives credence to the importance of connection, emergence and community, all of which are the building blocks to cultivating joy. Joy is happiness without concern for what happens (Steindl-Rast, 2001). Put another way, joy is what happens when happiness becomes your journey rather than your destination.

Practices in cultivating joy

While it is quite fun to wax poetic about the novel importance of joy, describing it as too elusive to capture without offering directions on where to begin your pursuit would be reductive and unhelpful. Still, finding and containing joy is not unlike catching smoke with your bare hands: incredibly difficult and ultimately not a worthwhile pursuit; why on Earth would you try to catch smoke that way? Rather, we should be looking for the signs of the smoke itself; catching smoke only justifies abstracting its true intention. Likewise, we won't capture joy in the confines of a list of tips and tricks, but rather, we can seek the grounds, the conditions, and the relationships that allow joy and wonder to organically appear.

It's important to note that this list will not be exhaustive. Joy can be derived from a variety of places, and never does one factor alone allow its existence. This is in fact part of the problem we find ourselves in: the more we seek siloed solutions to systems-based problems, the less durable the solution becomes. My recommendations should not be viewed as a recipe, but rather, inspiring starting points for those interested in growing their own garden of joy and wonder. For the sake of simplicity, I offer five invitations that provide fertile ground for joy to grow: go outside, play, rest, struggle, and connect.

Go outside

The more time we can connect ourselves to our natural environment, the more we open ourselves to joyful moments. A recent study shows that even 30 minutes outside per week can lower blood-pressure levels, anxiety and depression (Shanahan et al., 2016). Leaving the confines of a walled-off space allows for creativity to flow, for you to create relationships with other people, other beings, and the land. Going outside is also a fundamental reclamation of one's body

and spirit; if capitalism seeks to capture, extract and commodify all things, then an indoor space serves as our very own lobster cage. Going outside can serve as radical resistance to the systems that keep us working towards a single function.

In the context of education, leaving the confines of school buildings designed with the same punishment-power dynamics of a prison (Tarbet, Foucault & Sheridan 1978) is an excellent option. Children who are offered exploratory outdoor time to play (one of the most underrated learning methods) gain social emotional competence as well as heightened levels of problem solving autonomy and social connections between their family and peers (Frost, 2010; Goodenough, 2008; Gray, 2011). Outdoor play creates dynamic relationships between a student, the other people in their lives, and the land on which they play.

While the concept of leaving an indoor setting could be considered more conventionally radical when applied to adults, the effects on the workplace could potentially be just as powerful. Especially in a time when work is not beholden to the physical realm of an office space, much joy can be cultivated from finding yourself outdoors. With the average American spending at least eight and a half hours a day in front of a screen (Condliffe 2018), it's no wonder a typical online colloquialism you may hear for seeking relief and a sense of personal happiness is "touch grass". The more we touch grass, the more we understand the absurdity of modern corporate life. Beyond a face-level recognition of the systems we have built, time outside can remind us that we are in fact part of a greater ecological system. While we have shielded our eyes from the part we play as part of nature (Robbins 2020), we have lobotomized a source of great joy: our interconnectedness to the Earth, and our role in protecting her.

Play

The fact that play hasn't breached the modern psyche as a lifelong necessary element of development speaks to the tenacity of a capitalist society that sees only the linear development and production of capital. Play serves a number of purposes: play promotes the setting of boundaries and the solving of complex creative problems and engages cognitive and social progression (Gray 2011). Play is a form of embodiment, which reconnects us to our sense of our own bodies, and to the land that it inhabits (Macnamara, 2012). Play engages the physical body with developing social dynamics in a way that builds new neural connections (Hamilton 2014). When new neural pathways form, we are able to build our sense of wonder.

There are benefits to both free play, play that requires no rules, no umpires, no coaches, as well as games that necessitate boundaries and limitations. Free play, especially when there is an element of controlled danger, develops the part of the cortex that builds social connections between those playing (Pellis 2010). If joy is the process of connecting to the world around you, free play is like connecting a car battery to that process.

Game play on the other hand invites its players to seek out the boundaries and limitations of the game in a safe and open environment. If a basketball player travels with the ball, they're not reprimanded physically or financially, but game play stops in favor of the opposing team. This willful assertion of a boundary without threat of long-term detriment is both a space to develop focus and technique. Referring back to adrienne maree brown's assertion that only humans compete when it isn't necessary, in the context of play evokes Bernard Suits' (2014) definition of a game: "The voluntary attempt to overcome an unnecessary obstacle"(p.43). While both brown and Suits may be correct, they approach the idea of competition from two separate lenses: one in

defiance of the scarcity mindset that capitalism encourages, the other from the radical subversion of the expectation that competition must be seen solely as a power play. The competition that a game beckons is one that exists only within the confines of play, and when handled correctly, is fertile ground for joy to bloom. Reframing competition as fleeting, inconsequential, and in pursuit of intrinsic joy is a reclamation of joy and wonder as inherently human.

Rest

Lest we fall subject to the belief that joy must be physical or exertive, or that wonder always derives from outward mobility, we must acknowledge rest as a viable wellspring for joy and wonder. Patricia Hersey (2022) explores this idea in detail in her manifesto *Rest is Resistance*. Hersey explains that “grind culture”, the idea that we are worth nothing more than what we produce (therefore we can obtain more perceived value if only we produce more) is a fallacy that has subsumed the western world, especially in the last fifty years. Rest brings a multitude of benefits to its benefactor, including design clarity, critical analysis, and dreaming. Reflection can also be considered a form of rest, as it helps learners make meaning and connections (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Rest is a symbolic and physical resistance to a capitalist and white supremacist structure of work. Rest brings space to our minds as a chance to dream and wonder. Rest allows our bodies to heal from the trauma we encounter in the world, to recharge, and to envision what true liberation entails (Hersey, 2017). Or put simply by Kermit the Frog, “someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection, the lovers, the dreamers and me” (Williams, Ascher 1978). Dreaming allows us to connect, make meaning, and find love in the everyday.

Struggle

The most conventionally contradictory of the paths towards joy is what most would consider the opposite pole to joy itself: struggle. Indeed, struggle, or perhaps its acidic little brother, suffering, is popularly considered either as a means to a joyful end (thus perpetuating a linear productivity paradigm) or something to avoid outright. Struggle can come in the form of an individual challenge (a difficult workout, a hot sauce challenge, writing a comprehensive paper for a masters program, finally going to therapy), a relational challenge (the loss of a loved one, talking out problems with your partner, being turned down by your dream job), or a challenge that extends beyond your field (fighting for a cause, finding or losing faith, coming out).

It has long been understood that the path towards joy is *through* suffering, not circumventing or avoiding it. The Dalai Lama discusses the importance of suffering to understand joy (Abrams & Tutu, 2016). This follows a long-standing Buddhist tradition of practicing the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the path that frees us from suffering (O'Brien, 2019). Put in blunter terms in *The Princess Bride* (Reiner 1987), "Life is pain, your highness. Anyone who says otherwise is trying to sell you something", or from Dolly Parton (2013), "the way I see it, if you want the rainbow you gotta put up with the rain." These philosophers show that an understanding of suffering brings the promise of pleasure, and that the removal of suffering itself is typically a capitalist pipedream.

Does this mean we should follow moments of pain and suffering in pursuit of the feeling of joy? Perhaps not in all cases, especially not those that create moments of long-lasting harm. Joy and pain are intrinsically tied, not simply in a spiritual way, but a biological one. Paul Bloom

(2021) explores the ways in which manageable, self-induced bouts of pain can be key in unlocking pleasure, fulfillment and meaning. This illustrates joy's ability to house itself in uncommon places, or in permaculture terms, creatively use and respond to change (Holmgren 2020).

Ross Gay (2022) describes grief, a subsidiary to struggle, and its relationship to joy. "Grief is the metabolism of change. ... It is an emotional *and* bodily process that calls to question the ridiculous notion that ever the two are not one. This alert to the body and mind being one and this same (which is also called the heart) is one of the wisdoms the griever offers us, though it is ancillary to, or a subsidiary of, what perhaps is the first wisdom of grief, the one they bring back to us like a fire, like the tablets: *everything is connected.*" (p. 218). Grief is a nearly universal expression of struggle, and offers itself as a form of connectivity between parties, between body and mind, between loved ones, and even between strangers. Struggle, suffering and pain, while unpleasant and even devastating in the moment, are the flashing neon signs that remind us that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. If joy and wonder are the processes through which we connect to ourselves, others, and the land, struggle is a necessary ingredient in creating new connections.

Connect

While the first four invitations ask you for something specifically, connection is less of an invitation to cultivate joy and more of a synonym for it. As we've discussed, joy can be described simply as a feeling if we view it as a simple outcome from a process, but if we define it as a process itself, the throughline between all invitations to cultivate joy is our willingness to make meaning from our experiences. If we must create a concise definition of joy, we could reasonably

conclude that joy is happiness that is experienced through our ability to connect, either to the Earth, to other lives, or to ourselves. Perhaps this is why joy is often brought up in a religious context: our ability to feel that we are a part of something greater is often described as spirituality.

The feeling of joy is not always immediately incited from this meaning making. Connections can take time to make, especially when we allow them to emerge naturally. The revelation that many of the challenges you face spawn from the way you were parented can be an incredibly heavy and unpleasant emotional experience, but understanding of how to proceed, and how to exist with this knowledge creates the conditions for us to grow new joy.

What I am proposing is that joy and wonder must be taken into consideration when designing new forms of leadership. Leadership in sustainability education has a central focus in holistic, systemic, connective and ecological ways of learning (Sterling 2002), as do the tenants of joy and wonder. Through this pedagogical system, we create connected communities, that in turn allow learners to practice leadership (Burns, Vaught, Bauman 2015).

Conclusion

The reframing (or perhaps reclamation) of joy and wonder as inputs into regenerative systems, rather than measurable outputs is a monumental undertaking that depends on the dismantling of the systems that seek only to commodify their outcomes. Fortunately, the practice of cultivating joy can come before we see the implosions of these dominant paradigms. It's a happy collision: one step of the process also being the outcome. Joy and its energetic bedfellow, wonder, reside primarily within ourselves; we are the foremost wellspring of these processes, so as long as we can find the tap, they will exist on Earth, renewable indefinitely, pending life on Earth remains.

If there was ever a place to cultivate joy within a system, it is that of education. Leaders in the field must reassess both the process and the outcomes they wish to obtain in educating students, because what we are currently witnessing isn't working. It is imperative that we re-envision joy as something more than a convenient byproduct of learning, but as the process itself by which we learn. Joy should be incited through play, rest and outdoor time not in spite of a learning outcome or as some kind of treat, but because it enhances our ability to make connections. Struggle and pain should be acknowledged as part of the process of joy, reflected upon as key components of our growth as individuals and communities.

Currently, I'm working on compiling these invitations into packages for non-profit organizations that have, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, lost their understanding of their own collective culture at work, and have lost their connection to their team. The packages will include reflections on where joy is cultivated, a variety of games, energizers, appreciations and meditations, and will be catered to organizations that need to find ways to bring their teams a sense of collective impact. This work is being commissioned by Portland's non-profit consulting group Solid Ground Consulting, who aim their focus at land trusts and non-profits in need of strategic organization. I would be lying if I said I didn't struggle with the bits of cognitive dissonance I feel, writing thirty pages on the elusiveness and boundlessness of joy, only to try and package it back to those seeking measurable outcomes. I try to cut my skepticism with the idea that work, of all places, desperately needs a starting point.

These packages have no intention to dismantle the systems of capitalism and white supremacy outright, and it would be foolish to think that joy and wonder alone will get us there, but joy, as we've discussed, needs no outright purpose. Of course, joy has benefits to the

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individual or the group who experience it, but joy exists beyond the boundaries of purpose. Joy simply is, and any chance we can take to simply *be* is a worthwhile input.

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