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The **Flow Learning**[®] Sequence

I. AWAKEN ENTHUSIASM

Stage One lively and playful activities make learning fun, instructive, and experiential—and establish in the students an enthusiastic rapport with teacher and subject.

II. FOCUS ATTENTION

Stage Two activities, by offering simple challenges to the physical senses, help us become more calm, attentive, and receptive to nature.

III. OFFER DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Stage Three activities create a deep connection with a natural site or object in nature. These activities are generally quiet and profoundly meaningful.

IV. SHARE INSPIRATION

Stage Four activities use the creative arts to clarify and strengthen personal experience. These activities nurture an uplifting atmosphere conducive to embracing noble ideals.



Chapter Five

FLOW

To function productively and safely, mammals and birds deploy two different kinds of attention: narrow and broad. In many birds, for example, each brain hemisphere specializes in one type of attention: the left focuses on detailed tasks and the right maintains a global awareness. Birds use their right eye, which connects to the left hemisphere, for precision tasks like picking out seeds amidst the grit on the ground. They use their left eye, which links to the right hemisphere, for vigilant awareness. Since birds observe predators more easily with their left eye, a bird detecting a hawk with its right eye will turn its head to examine the hawk with its left eye.

Human beings also use two focusing modes. As Iain McGilchrist described them in *The Master and His Emissary*: “wilfully directed, narrowly focussed attention” and “open, receptive, widely diffused alertness to whatever exists.”¹⁷ The first mode concentrates on the details, the second on the big picture.

Doing and *being* express respectively the states of narrow focus and global awareness. *Doing's* goal-oriented nature fixes on a one-dimensional track, a focus that makes it highly efficient. “*Being* mode, on the other hand, is characterized by direct, immediate, intimate experience of the present.”¹⁸ *Being's* intrinsic qualities include openness, calmness, and stillness. Taking the time to BE fully with nature awakens in us humility and gratitude.

Young children naturally live in the present. One morning, I saw my friend Carol walking very quickly with her little daughter Julia along a footpath near my home. Julia, who was only three, wanted to stop and look at many fascinating things along the way. But Carol appeared to be in a hurry, because she repeatedly turned and urged Julia to walk faster.

The following Saturday, I saw Carol and Julia out walking again. This time, Julia was in the lead and Carol was following. When Julia stopped to pick up a leaf or pebble, Carol stopped to admire it with her. The tempo of the outing was relaxed and pleasant, as if they had all the time in the world. It was beautiful to see an adult lovingly reinforce a child's natural appreciation of nature.

Several days later, I saw Carol and made a point of telling her how touched I'd been to see her walking with Julia on Saturday. I mentioned how different their walk had seemed from the weekday morning when they'd been hurrying along together. Carol said, "Oh, the first time you saw us, we were on what I call a 'time hike.' We were late for nursery school, and because Julia doesn't understand time like we do, she can't see any reason to rush.

"I don't want Julia to lose her ability to relax and enjoy things as she grows up, so on Saturday mornings we go on what I call 'being walks.' We go where Julia wants, and we pick up leaves, look at insects, and spend as much time enjoying nature as she likes."



As we grow beyond early childhood, it is essential that we stay close to the *source* of life. Just as snow in the higher mountains replenishes moist alpine meadows, enabling a luxurious growth of diverse flora, the right brain's heightened awareness inspires and vitalizes the left-brain's interpretation of the world. For plants to flourish during the brief alpine summer, they rely on a continuous snowmelt from higher elevations. Similarly, it is intuition's higher, more expansive awareness that inspires all true works of art, all profound thought, and all genuine innovation.

Create an Intuitive Flow

Kriyananda (J. Donald Walters) writes in *Education for Life*, "True greatness focuses on reality, but the explainers get their knowledge and belief systems from books *about* reality. . . . Education must above all be experiential, and not merely theoretical."¹⁹ In another work, Kriyananda explains, "Intellectual knowledge . . . does not touch a person inwardly. It is not based on direct experience, but only on the thoughts, opinions, and experiences of others."²⁰



As Albert Einstein explored the laws of the universe, he kept himself in a state of receptive intuitive awareness: "I very rarely think in words at all,"²¹ he wrote. Instead of using mathematical equations and words, he thought in pictures and internally manipulated images, feelings, and musical architecture. Einstein worked intuitively first, then employed logic as a second step.

To recharge his intuitive inspiration, Einstein would often go sailing or play the violin or piano. Late one night, after reaching an impasse in his scientific work, Einstein went into the kitchen and played his violin. After immersing himself in the music, he suddenly stopped and exclaimed happily, "I've got it!" Only then did he return to his study, the solution to his problem now clear in his mind.

Einstein used his imagination to discover the laws of the cosmos. In 1905, his five revolutionary scientific papers fundamentally changed the way we look at the universe. In those five papers, Einstein did not include one footnote or citation. His discoveries were intuitive, therefore fresh. One modern physicist admitted that if Einstein submitted his papers today, they would be tossed in the trash because of their lack of references.

Genuine intuition has a feeling of *rightness*. “If I hadn’t an absolute faith in the harmony of creation,” remarked Einstein, “I wouldn’t have tried for thirty years to express it in a mathematical formula.”²² Two scientific expeditions tested his theory of relativity by measuring the location of the stars behind the sun during a solar eclipse. The expeditions concluded that the sun’s gravity did indeed bend the path of starlight, which changed the apparent location of the stars and distorted space-time, confirming General Relativity theory. Einstein stated confidently, “I was convinced that their conclusions would tally with my hypothesis. I was not surprised when the eclipse of May 29, 1919, confirmed my intuitions. I would have been surprised if I had been wrong.”²³

“Ineffable” means *beyond the power to describe*. Profound nature experiences are too subtle for the intellect to convey fully. A definition can never take the place of the thing defined. True knowing, said philosopher Henri Bergson, comes by “transport[ing] oneself to the interior of an object” to discover its “ineffable quality.”²⁴ Calm, interiorized feeling draws the life force and awareness naturally to the heart center, and in doing so connects one’s heart to the heart in all things.

Movement and Change Require Energy

Matter is inert. Because of this inertia, matter has an aversion to movement, exertion, or change. One encounters obstructions and problems when dealing with inert matter that do not arise when dealing with a fluid medium.



In the United States by 1815 the “roads were rutted dirt paths [and] all but impassable in wet weather.” It cost the same amount to cart “a ton of goods thirty miles inland from an American port” as it did to ship “the same goods across the Atlantic”²⁵—a three-thousand-mile journey. Since transporting goods by inland waterway cost 95 percent less, a canal-building boom began in the early 1800s. Water, a more flowing medium than inert earth, enabled one horse to tow on a canal barge as much merchandise as forty horses could carry on land.²⁶

Einstein’s equation $E=mc^2$ (“e” stands for energy and “m” represents mass) proves that, under the right conditions, matter and energy are interchangeable. “Phase change” is the scientific term for the change of a substance from one state to another—from, for example, solid to liquid. To change matter from solid to liquid, or from liquid to gas, requires energy; without energy, nothing would ever change or move.

Energy is also required to move the minds of students. Preconceived ideas, past memories, moods, and habitual ways of being—all those can inhibit the students’ ability to embrace new beliefs and behaviors. In chapter 1 we discussed how it is the right hemisphere’s open, spontaneous, flowing mindset that enables people to learn new things, to express noble human qualities, and to grasp the subtle nuances of things in their full context.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The world belongs to the energetic.”²⁷ Flow Learning is a teaching system that creates an accelerating flow of energy and inspiration. During its four-step process, players become harmoniously part of nature.

By creating a sequence of playful activities through cumulative stages, Flow Learning elevates play to deep play, and in doing so removes human barriers that separate us from the natural world. Because they are committing their whole being energetically to the class topic, Flow Learning participants can experience greater purpose, focus, openness, and depth of understanding: all ingredients essential for true learning.

Inspire Higher Feeling, Thinking, and Behavior

Johann, a professional German forester, described to me a profound change in his relationship with the forest: “I was trained in my profession to see trees as a commercial commodity. But now, after experiencing the Sharing Nature forest exercises, I realize that the grasses are my friends, the trees are my friends, that every living thing in the woodland is my friend. This, for me, is a new way of looking at trees. This awareness is going to fundamentally change the way I work with the forest.”

As a participant in a Sharing Nature workshop, Johann interacted with trees in a variety of innovative ways. First, he and his co-participants, foresters from all over Germany, built a tree together. Several foresters acted out each tree part—tap root, lateral roots, sapwood, cambium, phloem, and bark—and in doing so experienced the nature and function of that tree part kinesthetically.

Johann was then guided through a visualization of himself as a deciduous tree, living through the seasons of the year. During the guided imagery, Johann planted himself firmly in the earth, spread out his branches, drew nourishment from the sun and sky, and turned air and light into life. With his sheltering branches, Johann cooled the summer air and warmed the winter air, thus making a more favorable



environment for other life forms. Reenacting a tree’s existence and function enabled him to *experience* personally the role trees play in the forest ecosystem and to *feel* in himself many of the noble qualities of trees. By imagining himself living as a tree and nurturing the nearby plants and animals, Johann strengthened his sense of stewardship and love for the earth. Adopting the role of a tree and offering sustenance to the life around him, Johann felt the energy of life flowing through his body and a marvelous sense of vitality, resilience, and wholeness.

Earlier in the workshop, Johann, blindfolded, had “met a tree”; through his senses of touch, smell, and hearing, he explored the tree’s unique features. Johann was then asked to remove his blindfold and—guided by what he remembered about his tree and the path leading to it—find his tree again.

Johann also interviewed a venerable tree: “What events have you seen in your life?” Trying to feel the tree’s response to this question, he looked for signs that could tell him how wind, high water, snow, fire, or an animal might have shaped the tree. He reflected on the many dramatic and commonplace events the tree had witnessed during its centuries of life.

The day closed with a song accompanied by graceful arm movements, an exercise that allowed Johann and his fellow foresters to celebrate their kinship with the forest and all living things.

Focus On the Flow



The variety of learning modes enhanced Johann's imagination, intuition, reason, empathy, and love, as well as his kinesthetic and sensory awareness, and thus enriched his appreciation and understanding of trees. Sharing Nature exercises activate multiple centers of perception and cognition; they stimulate different parts of the brain and strengthen the neural connections between brain regions, thereby enhancing understanding, long-term memory, and creativity.

If you want to motivate people, first touch their hearts, because it is their feelings that will inspire their thoughts and behavior. If one's experience is mainly mental, one's viewpoint on the subject tends to be materialistic. As a trained, practicing forester, Johann understood tree science well; but his scientific training had caused him (in his own words) to see trees simply as "a commodity."

Intentional, multifaceted exercises enriched Johann's whole being. As he experienced the forest in a more living, nuanced way, Johann himself became a more empathetic human being.

During times of pristine outdoor awareness, the attention flows spontaneously from vivid scene to vivid scene. All the senses enlivened, the observer and the natural world observed are one.

Pristine awareness sees life as constantly new, fresh, and alive; while in this elevated state, observers easily embrace new ideas, feelings, and attitudes. The right brain, which expresses our higher human qualities, has an open, spontaneous, and flowing mindset. When immersed in life's flow, our consciousness is fluid and no longer fixed, and we continuously encounter novel and exciting territory. After participating in a Flow Learning session, a Chinese woman enthusiastically remarked, "I felt as if I had discovered a new continent."



Focus on the flow; don't become overly preoccupied with the details: This core Flow Learning guideline appears in *Sharing Nature with Children* as two of the five tenets suggested for good teaching: "Be Receptive" and "Look and Experience First, Talk Later." *Be Receptive* means: maintain an attentive awareness. *Look and Experience First, Talk Later* means: connect with the world *as it actually is* before attempting to analyze and interpret it.

In chapter 1 we learned that when a South African interspecies communicator, while hooked up to a bioresonance machine, communed with an animal directly, the right side of her brain became active. When she began to analyze the results of her communication, the left side of her brain became active. Without first truly connecting with the animal, she said, she would have given an account of her interaction with the animal that was inaccurate and made-up. Her account would have reflected her own past learning and thoughts rather than the animal's true voice.

When the intellect wanders far from actual life, its accuracy decreases—much like the "message" in the Telephone Game. Players form a line. The person in the front of the line whispers a selected phrase to

the player behind him and so on until the message reaches the last person in line. The final player repeats out loud the original message as he or she understands it. The garbling of phrases such as “*A dog named Moose ran loose through the spruce forest chasing a goose*” are cause for much merriment.

By contrast with the Telephone Game and many traditional learning modalities, Flow Learning’s recurring use of experiential activities keeps players connected to the original life source: nature. Especially helpful for this purpose are sensory awareness activities.



For a new driver to focus intensely on *all* the elements required for safe driving disrupts the natural flow and ease inherent to good driving. The flustered driver may spew a rapid stream of reminders to himself: *Are my hands in the 9 and 3 positions?—Remember to check the rear and side mirrors!—Am I driving too slow?—Am I in the correct lane?—Don’t forget to use the turn signals!*

Preoccupation with details blocks the flow and squelches the feeling of joy in the experience.

“Creativity,” it is said, “is intelligence having fun.” It is also the innate human drive to improve upon life. The left brain’s task is to make the implicit explicit, by making things clear, concrete, and organized, and thus understandable. It gives us the power to shape our world.

When I started playing *Tree Imagery*, in which players visualize themselves as a tree, I soon noticed that those who didn’t know basic tree biology couldn’t fully enjoy the experience. They were asking themselves questions like, *“Is my xylem on the outside of my phloem, or is it on the inside?”* Not knowing the parts of a tree, and how they function, they could not give themselves totally to the experience. It wasn’t until I designed the activity *Build a Tree*, in which players make a tree together, and act out each tree part—tap root, lateral roots, xylem, cambium, phloem, and bark, that *Tree Imagery* players could identify themselves fully as a tree.



By teaching scientific concepts experientially, Sharing Nature activities enhance intuitive understanding, thereby making learning compelling and joyful. Flow Learning instructors should judiciously weigh how much information to share in order to reap the true benefit of an activity. They should make sure their classes are neither too abstract nor too detail orientated. Keep in mind that “the intellect, with its analytical tendency, is more naturally attuned to static than to living realities.”²⁸

Modern cultures have a propensity to value facts over intuitive understanding. A Virginia scientist once proclaimed to me, “I don’t believe in anything I can’t see.” Paying attention to the virtual world it creates is a trait of the left hemisphere. Studies of the brain show, however, that people make choices not through a process of reasoning and weighing relevant facts, but “through an intuitive assessment of the whole before any cognitive processes come into play.”²⁹ In other words, we get a “gut feeling” about something and then provide the facts to support that feeling.

Within us lies the potential for far greater understanding than reason can ever provide. Flow Learning’s forte is facilitating a vibrant, living connection with the wholeness of nature. Its experiential nature activities keep participants continuously immersed in this wholeness.

Moreover, once a learner’s interest is aroused, any accompanying concepts and facts shared by the leader come richly alive.

Points for Reflection:

1. *Doing* and *being* express respectively the states of narrow focus and global awareness. The *doing* mode fixes on a one-dimensional goal, making that state highly efficient. The *being* mode is characterized by direct and immediate experience of the present.
2. As Albert Einstein explored the laws of the universe, he kept himself in a state of receptive intuitive awareness. He worked intuitively first, then employed logic as a second step.
3. "Ineffable" means *beyond the power to describe*. Profound nature experiences are too subtle for the intellect to convey fully.
4. Because of inertia, solid matter has an aversion to movement, exertion, or change. Obstructions and problems found when



dealing with inert matter do not arise when dealing with a fluid medium.

5. When immersed in life's flow, our consciousness is fluid. In this elevated state, observers easily embrace new ideas, feelings, and attitudes.
6. To change matter from solid to liquid, or from liquid to gas, requires energy; without energy, nothing will ever change or move. Energy is also required to move the minds of students.
7. Flow Learning is a teaching system that creates an accelerating flow of inspiration. Using a sequence of playful activities, Flow Learning removes mental barriers that separate us from the natural world.
8. "Focus on the flow; don't become overly preoccupied with the details," is a core principle of Flow Learning.
9. Flow Learning instructors should judiciously weigh how much information to share so that their sessions are neither too abstract nor too detail-oriented.
10. Within us lies the potential for far greater understanding than reason can provide. Flow Learning facilitates a vibrant, living connection with the wholeness of nature. Flow Learning lets nature experience be the teacher.