

## Nature Institute Events

Depending on when you receive this newsletter, the following events at (or near) The Nature Institute may still be forthcoming:

- *Goethean Explorations of Light, Darkness and Color*, a course with Henrike Holdrege (Mondays, November 14 & 28, and December 5 & 12). This course is designed for the Free Columbia Art Course with limited space available for others to join. We will work from direct observations and explore color phenomena within the natural world.
- *Franz Marc: A Painter in Search of the Being of Animals*, a talk by Craig Holdrege at 11 Maple Avenue, Philmont, New York (Tuesday, November 29, 2011, three miles from The Nature Institute). Craig will discuss and show slides of the work of early twentieth century painter, Franz Marc. As part of the expressionist group, “The Blue Rider,” Marc strove to express something of the essence of animal nature in his paintings. The talk is offered as part of the Free Columbia Art Course.
- *Guided Night Sky Observation* with Henrike Holdrege (only on clear nights); November 12 & 21, December 12 & 19.

### **Winter 2012 Intensive: Cultivating Perception and Flexible Thinking**

This course from February 12 – 17 with Craig and Henrike is intended for farmers, gardeners and others interested in developing a deeper relation to the land and plants.

Can we learn to perceive and understand nature in a truly ecological way? Can we understand plants as dynamic beings that relate to the earth and cosmos in which they are embedded? Can our thinking become as alive as nature herself? These questions will guide the activities in this course. To stimulate the transformation of our capacities, we will carry out exercises in flexible thinking and careful observation. We will engage in explorations of the qualities of plant form and growth and also become familiar with the rhythms of the sun, moon, and planets in relation to the fixed stars.

This course will be held in collaboration with the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association and Hawthorne Valley Farm. For registration information about this intensive as well as an additional week-long course devoted to biodynamic agriculture, contact Hawthorne Valley Farm Learning Center: 518-672-7500 x252; caroline@hawthornevalleyfarm.org

### **Mathematics Alive!**

Henrike and Marisha Plotnik will lead this workshop for middle school teachers on March 16–18, 2012 (Friday, 4 pm to Sunday noon). Marisha is an experienced high school math and physics teacher and a middle school math teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School in Manhattan. Contact The Nature Institute for more information.

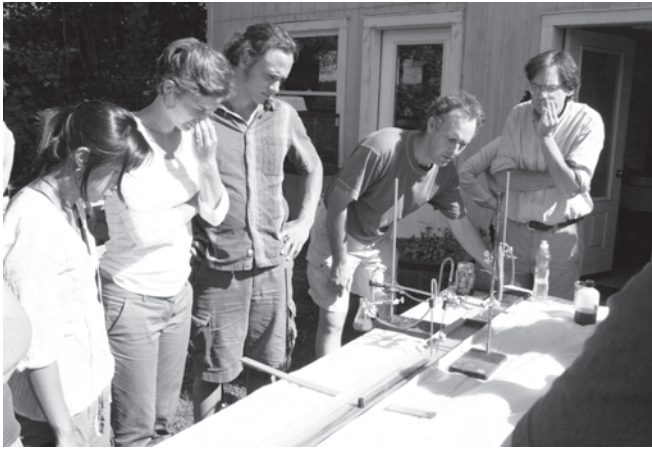
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*The following events have taken place since publication of the last issue of In Context:*

### **Professional Development for Science Teachers: Forming Living Ideas & Learning through Experience**

In early July, a dozen science teachers from around the country and abroad came together at The Nature Institute to explore how to invigorate science teaching. The course aimed to cultivate the teachers’ capacity to help students experience phenomena from a variety of perspectives, and where direct experience is not possible, to portray phenomena in a way that engages the students in their thinking, imagination, and feeling. This year we focused on water and fluidity. We observed and considered water from a variety of perspectives and worked to characterize and form a vibrant concept of this special fluid that is so fundamental to life. We worked collaboratively to try to





understand how our thinking as scientists can become more fluid and how as teachers we can become more conscious of flow and rhythm in teaching. Diverse experiences and experiments, as well as a daily seminar with Jon McAlice on pedagogical themes, provided ample opportunity for teachers to enrich and revitalize their teaching capacities. Here are some reflections offered by three participants in this summer's course:

*I continue to find this course enriching and enlivening. The substance of the program continues to help me to develop my teaching. Equally important is the confluence and shared presence, questions, experiences, etc., of the participants who are all attending to develop in their profession as science teachers.*

*As with any good course, I have more questions now than when I arrived...I know these questions will find their way into my teaching...the more questions I have, the better a teacher I am.*

*The course, as in years past, is fertile ground for me in terms of ideas for my own teaching. Practicing the observation helps wake something up — an awareness, or thoughtfulness — that I would like to bring into my classroom. I find inspiration here for ways I can develop and improve my teaching.*

### **Public Summer Course: Polarities in Nature and the Nature of Polarity**

Thirteen participants from the U.S. and abroad gathered at The Nature Institute in mid-June to explore the nature of polarity. The course guided the participants on a path of discovery through dialogue and experiences of polarities in the world. Through practical exercises the group carefully attended to polarities, discovering the dynamic tension, relation and movement between “opposite” poles as an essential feature of all life, without which the world would be static. One participant shared this thought: *“I’ll not feel*

*lonely with my little Goethean trials in class anymore. If I do, I’ll remember there is a concrete community of people striving for this approach.”*

The course included projective geometry, observation exercises, and phenomenological explorations of polarities in plants, animals, and the human being. We also did clay modeling each afternoon with Nathaniel Williams. This rich curriculum enabled participants to deepen and enliven their awareness of polarities as creative and generative forces in the world.

### **Goethean Science and Social Process**

Craig and Henrike spoke to the local community in late September about how the Goethean approach, commonly applied to the natural sciences, also bears fruit for the perception and understanding of social relations and processes. This talk arose out of Craig and Henrike’s experiences during their trip to South Africa, where they worked with the Proteus Initiative. They also showed slides of the unique flora and landscapes in the southern Cape region. (See the separate report in this issue.)

### **Rudolf Steiner and Natural Science**

Craig gave a talk as part of the Oct 21–23 weekend celebrating Rudolf Steiner’s vision, sponsored by the Berkshire-Taconic Branch of the Anthroposophical Society. Craig discussed Steiner’s view of natural science: its significance in the evolution of human consciousness and the importance of a further development of science as exemplified by Goethean phenomenology.

### **“Sowing the Future”**

In collaboration with our neighboring Hawthorne Valley Farm, The Nature Institute sponsored for the third year an event in early October to raise awareness about local agriculture. The main activity was hand-sowing a field of hard red winter wheat at Hawthorne Valley Farm.



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## Out and About

*Experiential Math and Science in the Middle School.* Henrike Holdrege taught a weeklong course (three sessions per day) at the Sunbridge Institute in Spring Valley, New York, in June. It was attended by eleven educators (middle school and home-schooling teachers) and dealt with middle school geometry, astronomy, and optics and color. Both method and content were discussed, and participants were treated to an array of experiments, demonstrations, and activities that they can use for their teaching.

In October, Craig participated in the annual meeting of the *International Association of Environmental Philosophy* in Philadelphia. He participated in a panel, along with Luke Fischer (University of Sydney) and David Macauley (Pennsylvania State University, Brandywine), on “The Seasons: Phenomenological and Environmental Perspectives.” Each of the three panelists spoke about a particular aspect of the topic. Craig addressed “The Seasons Embodied: The Story of a Plant.” (*In Context* readers might not be surprised to hear that Craig spoke about the skunk cabbage.)

Henrike and Craig traveled to Toronto in November to give a public weekend workshop on *Learning to See the World of Life*. The workshop is sponsored by the Christian Community.

Craig will participate in a weekend invitational conference on *phenomenological science and science teaching* with experienced high school science teachers from western North America. The conference will take place in January 2012 at the Summerfield Waldorf School in Santa Rosa, California, and is co-sponsored by the Center for Contextual Studies and The Nature Institute.

At the end of January Craig will travel to Viroqua, Wisconsin, to lead a workshop for biodynamic farmers on *Schooling Observation & Thinking: A Goethean approach to studying plants and animals*.

In early April Craig will give a weeklong course at an International Conference for Waldorf High School Teachers in Kassel, Germany. His topic will be *Schooling Observation and Thinking: The Foundations of Science Education*. He will also give a talk to the 200 or so conference participants on “What is Education For?” This conference attracts people from many European and also Asian countries where professional development courses are not available. Half the courses are given in the English language.

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## A Trip to South Africa

When Henrike and I arrived on July 29 at the airport in George, South Africa, the sun was just setting. Our friends and colleagues, Sue Davidoff and Allan Kaplan, picked us up and drove us to the Towerland preserve, where we would spend the next two weeks. Looking up at the night sky we saw Scorpio straight overhead. To the south in the sky were many bright stars, the part of the southern sky that we never see at home. In the middle of the night we got up and saw Orion—the constellation appeared, in relation to how we see it in North America, upside down and right-side left. I couldn't get used to that! Sirius, the brightest of all fixed stars, was *above* Orion. These celestial experiences told us that we were on a different part of the planet—we knew we were in the southern hemisphere. When you look to the heavens you can know where you are on earth.

The beautiful but simple retreat center (no electricity) that Sue and Allan have built over many years lies on the cusp between agricultural land (mainly livestock farming) and the pristine fynbos wilderness. The fynbos is a unique floral region in the Cape area of South Africa with hundreds of indigenous plant species and a remarkable diversity of plants. Just try to imagine over 600 species of heather (the genus *Erica*). The fynbos consists mostly of shrubby vegetation, characterized by the heather family, the protea family (*Proteaceae*), a family of grass-like plants called *Restia* (*Restionaceae*), and geophytes (bulb producing wildflowers such as amaryllis, gladiolas, and lilies). We arrived in early spring and each day new flowers opened to greet us. It was a feast for any plant lover's eyes. But I shouldn't forget the birds: there are also endemic bird species, and in particular we were able to observe the sugar



Towerland Retreat Center, South Africa. Above: outside looking up into the Fynbos. Below: participants at work inside the elliptically shaped course room.

birds and sunbirds close-up — they were not shy. They feed on the nectar-rich flowers of ericas and proteas and pollinate them.

The first week at Towerland was facilitated by Sue and Allan, while Henrike and I were participant observers. The topic was “Building Living Thinking into a New Social Practice.” Most of the twenty participants work either as consultants for NGOs or within NGOs that are concerned with social justice, the environment, or both. Most were from South Africa, but there were five Brazilians, as well as individuals from New Zealand, Germany, and the UK. For many years Sue and Allan have worked as consultants to help organizations find their way through difficult situations and to develop practices than can help them become more conscious of the living and evolving organic

nature of organizations. In this work they have been inspired by Goethe’s approach, which is why they spent three months in 2002 working with us at The Nature Institute.

The purpose of this week was to bring together people familiar with the way Sue and Allan work — in part people who had studied with them. Through consideration of case studies brought by different participants, the aim was to see how this Goethean-inspired practice has become part of practioners’ work and to distill some of its essential characteristics — without making it into a schematic “toolkit” or method, which, evidently, often happens. It was clear in the way that Sue and Allan facilitated the process during the week that they were keen to keep it as alive as the complex social phenomena we were considering.

The second week had the theme, “Towards a Thinking which is Alive,” and was led by Henrike and myself. Half of the participants from the previous week stayed on for this course and a dozen new participants joined us. Henrike led us each day through exercises in geometric transformation, while I led plant study and facilitated dialogue concerning Goethean methodology. It was wonderful to have the diverse fynbos plant world right outside the classroom door so that we could get to know this unique plant community while also exploring phenomenological methods.

During these two weeks we were enriched by meeting all the different people and by dwelling within a remarkable natural environment. One experience we had during the two weeks was in a sense the capstone for the time we spent in South Africa. Over the years, Sue and Allan had discovered in the Towerland wilderness area different rock overhangs and small caves with ancient paintings from the San people (also called Bushmen). As we stood before these paintings we were in awe. The delicacy and dynamics of the seemingly simple figures and scenes were stunning. There were small figures and large figures, dancing groups, family groups, a variety of animals — elephants and antelopes being most prevalent — and forms that were both human and animal. We felt in a sense transferred into the different time and conscious-

ness of these ancient people who brought their intimate relation to the world into these paintings. Their presence was still discernable as a deep feeling, a feeling that can connect us as modern human beings with our fellow humans who lived here hundreds and thousands of years ago.

Mid-August found us in Cape Town. There we gave a public weekend workshop with 25 people on “Transforming Thinking” which was sponsored by the local anthroposophical society. After that I led a three-day workshop with 20 participants on “Seeing Nature Holistically,” which focused on plant study. A certain culmination of both these workshops — applying differently to each of them — was the study of plants that belong to the Protea family. This remarkable family is represented by hundreds of different species in the fynbos. After we had looked carefully at the more typical flowers of other plants, we were prepared to discover what open secrets the Protea flower has to reveal. The Proteas we observed appeared to have big flowers, but with more careful study we discovered that these “flowers” are in fact flower heads consisting of many, often colorful and feather-like bracts surrounding numerous highly reduced flowers. The Protea showed us how “inventive” the plant world is, modifying its leaves into flower-like forms, and reducing its flowers to linear structures. The father of plant taxonomy, Linnaeus, probably had little idea how on-target he was when he named this family “Proteaceae,” taking Protea from the Greek God Proteus. Proteus is the God of the sea who can take on



The flower heads of two different species of Proteas: left, *Leucospermum cuneiforme* and right, *Protea repens*, commonly known as the sugarbush, since it contains copious amounts of nectar that birds and other creatures feed on.

all shapes, disguising himself and yet remaining himself in every guise. It was Goethe who came back to Proteus as the image he used in describing his discovery (that is, intuition) of the archetypal plant, when he wrote: “It came to me that in the organ of the plant which we are accustomed to call the leaf the true Proteus lies hidden, who can conceal or reveal itself in all formations. Forward and backward, the plant is always only leaf” (*Italian Journey*, 1982, p. 363; translation modified by Craig Holdrege). In our explorations of Proteas we were confronted with one of those special guises of the plant and were rewarded with a sense of joy and appreciation when we were able to more clearly discern the characteristics of this unique expression of plant-being.

Craig Holdrege

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## Crede Grant in Goethean Phenomenology

This year The Nature Institute sponsored a \$1,000 grant in Goethean Phenomenology. The funds were donated to The Crede Fund of the organization Think OutWord, which has a number of grant programs. This is the second year of the Goethean Phenomenology grant program. The 2011 application deadline was October 15 and the grant recipients will be announced in early December. For more information about the Crede Fund or to donate to support the grants, visit [www.thinkoutword.org/grants.html](http://www.thinkoutword.org/grants.html).