



Boon and Earth

AN EXPERIENTIAL GUIDE

ANDREA OLSEN

FOREWORD BY JOHN ELDER

PREFACE BY BILL MCKIBBEN

This book is dedicated to my father,
who taught me to love the land.
And to my mother,
who encouraged a world view.

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Front cover: Torii, white pine. Windsor, Vermont.

Sculpture by Herb Ferris.

Mud Portrait. Photograph by Erik Borg.

Title page: Authentic Movement project. Photograph
by Erik Borg.

Back cover: Photograph of author by Bob Handelman.



DAY 2

Attitudes

The failure to develop ecological literacy is a sin of omission and of commission. Not only are we failing to teach the basics about the earth and how it works, but we are in fact teaching a large amount of stuff that is simply wrong.

—David Orr, *Ecological Literacy*

Our attitudes inform our actions; the way we think affects what we do. One prominent view in Western culture is that nature is a “thing,” an object with utilitarian value to be bought and to be sold. With this consumerist focus, we may consider the empty field, the lake, or the mountaintop to be property, a storehouse of resources, or a challenging landscape to conquer or control.

Another view offers a radical alternative: that nature has intrinsic value in and of itself. We can experience the world around us as an organic living thing. It is not object but subject. It has interiority, subjectivity. It has something to teach us, and it inspires respect. When we have this attitude, the natural world can evoke awe and astonishment, stimulating connection to the sacred, integrative forces of life.

The same attitudinal values are prevalent about the body. One predominant view, perpetuated by our educational and medical habits, is that the body is an object, a machine to be repaired when it breaks down. It is our property to do with as we please. It is a resource to get us from here to there, a commodity to help us get what we want, a storehouse of resources, a challenge to control, to conquer or overcome.

VIEWS

Many students want to “gain control” over their bodies. I have to remind them that this is not our goal. The task is to learn to listen to the intelligence of our home. When we value what the body has to tell us, we create a dialogue with our senses. The same is true for the earth. The task is to develop a relationship with the details and cycles of life around us. In this way, we are participants in a larger story. Control limits possibilities; dialogue invites surprise.



Hayloft, painting by Philip Buller. Watercolor on paper, 22 in. × 33 in. Collection of J. Slovinsky.

A young psychology major wrote of her childhood close to forests and rivers and her years of caretaking the land. Then she said, "You know, I treat the environment much better than I treat myself." An athlete remarked, "This is a new experience for me; I've been abusing my body all of my life." A student from Manhattan said, "I realize that I am most comfortable in rural Middlebury when I am near the highway. I need to hear traffic to fall asleep." As we listen to our bodies, we hear the stories of our lives.

The only time my life has been threatened was when living at a wildlife sanctuary. In that protective environment, our bluebird boxes were regularly smashed, and my husband was chased by men with baseball bats because of our assumed role in restricting land use. One young man in particular considered any "environmentalist" fair game for harassment. On my afternoon walk in the neighboring countryside, he would drive his pickup truck as close as he could, making me jump off the road. After a few weeks of intimidation, I decided to stand my ground. As he sped in my direction, I stood in the middle of the road, waving both arms for him to stop so that we could talk face to face. I leapt to the side just as he rushed past. I could have died. Being considered a spokesperson for the earth puts your life on the line; not speaking up threatens life as well.

Our neighbor tells of visiting a professor of ornithology for help in identifying a bird. The teacher responded, "Wouldn't you also like to know something about how it lives its life?" A bell went off in his mind: there is more to identification than naming. It's the matrix of relationships with the world that gives us insight into another species, not just its label.

The radical alternative in body attitude would be that the body has intrinsic value in itself. It has interiority, subjectivity. It has much to teach us if we learn to listen. We can consider that we are part of a vast interconnected system, rather than separate from the world around us. We are nature too.

As we recognize our interconnectedness with the rest of the earth, we begin to see the world from a relational perspective, supported by our context rather than in isolation or at odds with it. We experience the air, the water, the soil, the animals, the people around us, and our own bodies as familiar. In this view, both body and earth are home.

Underlying the environmental crisis is a crisis of attitude. We are coming to the end of our nonrenewable resources, such as fossil fuels. We are also coming to the end of renewable ones, such as clean water, clean air, and healthy soil. This is true of the body as well. We can no longer count on resiliency in our structure: our bodies are too busy recovering, attempting to filter internal as well as external toxins. Yet we can consciously cleanse our systems and balance our energy, just as we can protect the resources around us. Our attitudes toward our bodies have everything to do with the health of the earth.

As we open our senses and attend to the earth, we encounter grief. Emotional memory is encoded since childhood, associated with specific terrain: the beach explored on family vacations, the tree climbed in moments of retreat, or the room where a child was born. All too frequently, loved ones are gone, places paved over—in reality or in our hearts. Earth systems, too, are dying. Forests, songbirds, and the air in our lungs are in trouble.

Grief is a natural response to loss. Engaging our grief requires softening our guard. The process includes several essential stages: acknowledging our denial, allowing emotion, accepting death as part of life, and expressing through creative forming—giving voice to the forceful feelings that occur. Our attitudes toward our grief affect our ability to feel and to act.

Environmental Studies is one of the fastest growing majors at universities across the country. Alternative health care is a growing force that challenges traditional medical practices to include a holistic view of the body. Books, magazines, and art reflect environmental perspectives and healthful incentives. There is no discipline, institution, or individual exempt from environmental concern and responsibility. As we become aware of our underlying attitudes toward our bodies and toward the places we call home, we experience the dynamics of living an interconnected life.

Any integrative experience is a spiritual experience, humanist John Dewey reminds us. One component of mystical or spiritual involvement that underlies ecological concerns is the feeling of being an integrated part of the whole planet. Aesthetic experience nurtures this sensibility in people. Thus, the arts have an essential role to play in encouraging us to face the unprecedented challenges of our time.

Our attitudes can be affected by information, inspiration, or direct experience. We can learn how a lake is polluted by reading the newspaper, seeing a painting, or finding a dying loon on the shore. Each instance connects person to place in a moment of alertness.



DAY 29

Art and the Environment

First, we must understand that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. . . . While every artist must discover this presence and accomplish this connection in some manner, the best artists are those who carry us deepest into this experience of communion.

—Thomas Berry, “Art in the Ecozoic Era,” *Art and Ecology*

DIMENSIONS

The forest around our house in Maine is being cut. Alert, we are confronted by the complexity of human nature. If we get too emotionally involved, we'll just get depressed. Stories that are full of despair don't go anywhere unless they encourage positive action. A Passamaquoddy elder watches the logging trucks pass, loaded with hemlock trees. “They are taking the babies now,” he says. At ninety, he still makes birch bark baskets honoring the woods. Many around the globe employ art as a way of caring without shutting down. I pick up my pen.

The connection between arts and the environment is threefold. First, art is about wholeness. It connects disparate parts into a unified view. Second, art explores the unknown. The creative process inhabits the edge between what is known and what is not known, a place of heightened possibility. Like an ecotone, the dynamic edge zone of ecosystems that offers the richness of two overlapping habitats, creativity is a place of great potential. And third, art sensitizes us; as we feel, we also care.

The creative process begins with an attitude of play. To be receptive to creative insight, we relinquish our desire to achieve. We can invite the muse and allow connections, but we can't force or control the process. An attitude of play encourages attention to the moment, rather than outcome or results.



Sculpture by Michael Singer. Concourse C, Denver International Airport. Photograph by David Stansbury.

It evokes a willingness to open our carefully developed self-image to divergent possibilities, to be naked in the sensuous stream of experience. As we look for the moment of delight in the routine, the experience of awe in the familiar, we rekindle connection to the creative forces around us.

Art making requires an act of surrender as well as the rigors of ordering. We are re-created as we create. In the process, we draw on all the experiences we have known—experiences of family, of birth and death, of intimacy and of place—and also from experiences we have never known, tapping our collective imagination. As we risk opening new doorways and facing new perspectives, creative investigation can seem frightening and overwhelming. Even when the process becomes familiar, beginning a new work can feel like entering a vast darkness from which we will never emerge. The creative process is dynamic. As we become familiar with the actual sensations of not knowing, both tactile and emotional, we open to new experiences. Replacing fear with curiosity, we practice possibilities for expression that penetrate our identity.

Although it begins with playful curiosity, art making requires practiced skill in a particular medium. Each creative impulse takes a specific shape, and each shape speaks its own content. Days, months, and years are spent developing the necessary reflexes, neuromuscular patterns, and refinement of perceptual modes that underlie the spontaneous emergence of a phrase, gesture, or motif. Familiarity with the physicality of materials heightens expression through a particular medium, affecting the way pen moves on paper, feet spring from floor, and sound vibrates in chambers. Investigation of both person and materials melds into product. Although a creative life can be described as egotistical or self-involved because of dedicated focus, it also involves merging with others. In many ways, the more personal the investigation, the more universal the findings; the more embodied the experience, the more transcendent the product.

Just as the creative process requires inner attention, it also commands a report to the larger community. If it were enough simply to journey and discover, the poem would be left in the journal, the dance would never be completed, and the symphony would remain in the imagination of the composer. Communication is part of the creative process, even if the product is shared with only one other person. At some point the work of art has its own identity, and the role of the artist becomes that of witness to the wild and mysterious emergence. Part of creativity is returning again and again to the emptiness. Many artists feel they are recipients of or benevolent hosts to the visions, images, words, or songs that move through them.

Each art form has its own relationship to environmental concerns. Through the medium of creative writing, poet Mary Oliver and nature writer Barry Lopez rehabilitate our relationship to both body and earth with stories of the land. Musician John Cage reminds us that silence equals sound, and Paul Winter includes the voices of whales and wolves and the acoustics of canyons in his recordings, enlarging our view of community. Visual artist Andy Goldsworthy arranges stones in unusual settings; Magdalena Abakanowicz includes the human figure as part of the landscape.

A former student, working as an editor, asks me to write an article for an environmental journal. When I send her recent writings, she calls back excited. "Yes, just localize and personalize your views," she says. The irony strikes on various levels: the pleasure of being taught by my student, the ease with which she assumes that stories of place belong in the fabric of academic views, and also the insight embedded in her youthful words, "Be more direct and more personal," offering a challenge to each of us for a lifetime.

A Tibetan student, raised in Dharmasala, India, began her senior thesis, "Youth in the Tibetan Diaspora." In the middle of the semester she stamped her foot in my introduction to dance class and exclaimed, "Whenever I dance, I feel so angry—especially when I show my own choreography."

In creative work, anger is often a doorway emotion. So I suggested, "Consider all you have been through, all your country has suffered, all the topics your thesis immerses you in each day, which need integration. Anger may be the guardian at the gate of your own impassioned voice."

There are many gateways to creative projects—excitement, boredom, irritation, hunger, avoidance, depression, or hyperactivity. Each may signal charged experience waiting for attention. Personal projects help us learn our own creative inroads and process, while demanding impeccable work. But don't stop at the doorway, walk through and see what is actually there.

Dancers Eiko and Koma perform in rivers; Ron Brown, in urban streets; Liz Lerman, in shipyards—creating a dialogue with place. Filmmaker Ken Burns focuses on history and stories. These are artists committed to making the unseen visible, to awakening our senses to vital connections with the earth.

Although artwork generally stands for itself, artists are often eloquent spokespersons for the earth. Those generally classified as environmental artists care deeply enough to engage in the lifelong process of articulating their experience with the natural world, including humans as well as living and other-than-living entities. They involve body and place as essential components of expression. As we are willing to embrace and merge with the environments around us with all of our senses open, we inhabit the land we live in and fulfill our animal nature. As each person communicates her or his findings back to the community, we amplify creative potential.

In our commodified contemporary lives we often act as though art, including the images and creative activity around us, has no "real" impact. Yet images touch the part of the body that speaks in symbol, as dreams do. Carl Jung, in *Man and His Symbols*, writes: "Man today is painfully aware of the fact that neither his great religions nor his various philosophies seem to provide him with those powerful animating ideas that would give him the security he needs in face of the present condition of the world. . . . Since nobody seems to know what to do, it might be worth while for each of us to ask himself whether by any chance his or her unconscious may know something that will help us." As we acknowledge the resource of art in our lives, we recognize its role in community and our potential involvement both as creator and as participant.

In many ways, the core of community is creativity, instilling the sense that each individual is participating in the unfolding of possibilities. Moment by moment, one is responsive to and responsible for the overall effect. Just as the presence of creativity affects community, its absence too has an impact on our daily lives. When commercial enterprises and competition alone form the heart of a society, interactions become empty and lifeless. Human engagement requires more than buying and selling to inspire our humanity; we need cultural models that pose questions, inspire celebration, and encourage participation and integration.

Until recently, art in some way reflected the splendor inherent in the natural world. Works were created by individuals who themselves had access to nature in their daily lives. A tendency toward beauty is prevalent in the environment. Patterns, in both macroscopic and microscopic perspectives, reflect mathematical order, seeming fractals of a cohesive whole. Water, seashells, muscle fibers, air, and even the galaxies themselves are formed of consistent spiral structures. From the elegant symmetry of a chambered nautilus to the slowly rotating Milky Way galaxy, the chaos of human experience is embedded in an implicate order.

Even if the artwork itself challenges or offends, the artist's process includes a weave of inner and outer experience leading to wholeness. Etchings by Kaethe Kollwitz depict the horrors of World War II while instilling faith in the beauty of human creativity. Igor Stravinsky's symphonies were

shocking at the time, yet they reflect an inner order. Art is not imitation; it creates a work with integrity, and life shines through on its own. Eventually, the artwork stands alone, without its creator. It has its own presence, place, and breath. For each artist, creativity is about integration, both reflecting and participating in the underlying rhythms of cohesive form.

From an anthropological perspective, one role of art has been that of mediator between the ordinary and the extraordinary forces of the universe. Certainly, poetry and dance, removed from economic exigencies because they rarely make money, have long been seen as a direct link between the mundane and the spiritual. The original call of art was to tell the truth, to inspire truth in others, and to sway the resident gods and goddesses for good crops, fertile soils, and healthful life. This role provided connection to natural forces, an invitation to encounter honesty, and a mode of participation in wisdom beyond human limitations.

But our attitudes about art are shifting. In this century, many Americans view art as a leisure activity or an economic ploy rather than as having intrinsic value. As we commodify art and creativity, we see art as other and creativity as foreign, rather than familiar. In the process, we risk losing access to our deepest visions and our intuitive resources. Conversely, as we reclaim creativity, we engage the unknown on a daily basis and listen for truth. In this time of environmental crisis, we seek a new relationship to nature, to our bodies, and to our creative voices.

In human evolution, through our bipedal, tool-making, language-using way of life, human brains emerged with the capacity to create music and art, to deduce mathematics and to reason. Yet this same creative potential has also produced destruction of the earth. The two branches grow from the same trunk. In the past century, when war was the norm on our planet, journeys into the unknown reflected our own destructive powers. While commercial media insist on portraying the constant smile to sell products, art makes the shadow visible. In the past, stories or paintings included favorite landscapes remembered. Now they are eulogies to a meadow destroyed, the giant sequoia cut down, or the manatee threatened.

Retained from our reptilian ancestors, the limbic system of the brain registers newness. One structure in the limbic ring in particular, the amygdala, reacts to anything out of the ordinary, unusual, or different. Limbic arousal alerts the autonomic nervous system for survival responses in case of threat, stimulating a readiness in humans for fight, flight, freeze, or friendly (smiling, talking) reactions in the body. This limbic stimulation is what keeps us turning the page when reading a dynamic book, on the edge of our seats in a suspenseful film, and ready to flee at a startling sound. It is also what invigorates and exhausts us the first time we listen to atonal music, watch a contemporary dance concert, or walk down a busy urban street.

Artists seek the balance between what is new—stimulating limbic alertness—and what is familiar—allowing the relaxation necessary for layered association and connection. In music this might be the ease of a familiar rhythm or a melodic line amid disparate sounds, evoking a sense of participation on the journey of the unknown. Eventually, what used to be “different” becomes

During childhood, I visited the Art Institute of Chicago each year with my father. There I learned to recognize artists and epochs by their style. Once, we attended a Picasso retrospective: enormous rooms detailing one person's view. Walking by the early rose and blue periods, with paintings of Salinbanques by the sea; strolling through the giant round women lounging on their canvases; and adjusting to cubist fragmentation, I thought: this is what it means to experience life through art.

When writing a book, there is a time in the process in which it begins to have its own life. The experience changes from leading to following. "At this point," a colleague says, "it's no longer like leading a pet; it's like tracking a wild animal." Creative projects pose questions; if we don't discover something new in the process, the work is lifeless. A builder describes a similar experience in constructing a house. "At a certain point it becomes its own creator. If you force it into something it's not, it's going to cause problems." And then he adds, "It takes a fair amount of letting go of your identity, to let it have its own energy, its own personality." A choreographer reminds me, "A dance isn't really good until it does you."

the norm, and the dynamic edge of the art form shifts to new or very old ground to heighten arousal. Art has long played a role in healing, for the artist as well as for the audience. It activates deep internal processes integrating the new with the old, the foreign with the familiar.

Creativity encourages diversity. Yet the unusual person in a family, school, or community; an odd tree or weed in a cultivated landscape; or the mysterious lone wolf or bear in the wild often are viewed as a threat to order. How do we incorporate difference in our understanding of the ordinary? It is helpful to recognize that creativity is a natural phenomenon, producing images that have meaning in our lives. The influential part of the mind that creates symbols remains largely unexplored. Our creative response to life is essential to our survival, inherent in our structure, just as the basic characteristics of life are present in each cell's capacity to reproduce, to metabolize, and to respond to changes in the environment. Human nature is reflected in our urge to create, to participate, and to respond.

Each of us needs a form to contain and transmit the deep experiences of our lives and to help us articulate and communicate our feelings and insights. We have grown accustomed to high-end art: perfect recordings, museum paintings, and multimillion-dollar films. But creativity is personal. As we participate in the process, we recognize that it is not just about observing, not just about buying and consuming, alienating ourselves from our own creativity. It is about participating in the creative universe we live in. Steven Rockefeller, biographer of the great humanist John Dewey, offers the view that art is inherently integrative. It is more than the sum of its component parts. There is magic, mystery in wholeness. In this way, creativity and spirituality are linked. Good art, as with any integrative experience, brings us directly into contact with the numinous, the unknown.

Those of us involved in environmental work particularly need avenues for expression and for celebration. Daily awareness of the environmental crisis can drain our inner resources and pollute our biological systems through despair and grief. Participating in artistic endeavors on a daily basis nurtures connection. Creative expression is a lifelong process that occurs in overlapping sequence. Part of our task as creative individuals is to decide which resources are for personal play, recovery, and healing; which are ready to be formed and communicated to others; and which are to be nurtured and contained for future expression. There is no need to burn out, to overextend our resources as individuals, just as we are depleting the earth. A creative life embraces the hard work of play, sustaining our capacity for spontaneous joy while translating our findings, our best insights and intuitions, to the larger community. Time spent in creative exploration allows recovery as well as expression, replenishes our body as well as our commitment to attend to the earth.¹

As we feel, we care. In our busy lives, creativity helps us remain sensitized both to the complexity and to the hidden order that is beyond our rational understanding. As we open to our creative potential, we recognize we are part of the mystery.



Creative process

10–60 minutes

- Consider your creative process. When are you receptive to intuitive knowing and images: walking late at night or early mornings, listening to music? What interrupts this process for you: fatigue, too much talking, stimulants? How do you “cue” your creative imagination: do you need to sit still, move, take a walk? Where do you work best: indoors, outdoors, in a crowded café?
- Look around the space where you work. How much clutter is in the way? Empty the space of everything that is not essential. Ask your body what is useful in your creative environment and what is distracting. When you bring something new into the room, consider removing something old. Take time to remove what is keeping you in the past rather than the present.
- Create a dialogue with your process. Write about what you find.

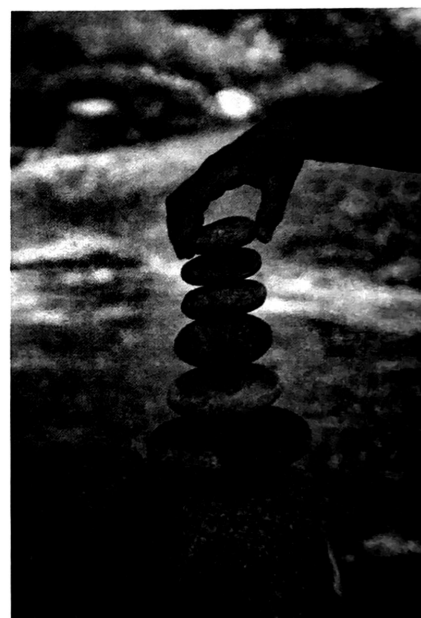
Arranging (alone or in a group)

40–60 minutes

Outdoors, in a clearing near different kinds of terrain:

- Take time to gather a group of natural objects from plants that can be found nearby: pinecones, nuts, seeds, bark, pieces of wood, fabric, leaves, and grasses. Add stones, shells, or containers of water as related. Choose something large for the center.
 - Utilize all your senses; smell, taste, listen, touch, look, move, and feel your inner responses as you make choices. 10 min.
 - Begin to construct an arrangement, without speaking. Consider the objects; consider the space around the objects—allow both to be important. Take all the time you need. Include the soil in your view. 20 min.
 - When you are finished, step back and notice the whole; then notice the parts. Walk around the perimeter. Where is the outside edge of your arrangement, what are the pathways leading toward it, and how do you know? Write or talk about your experience. 10 min.
 - When you are ready, begin to deconstruct your arrangement, returning each of the objects to its place. Notice how your arrangement looks at various stages in the process, the ways in which memory is instilled through touch and movement. 10 min.
 - Pause in open attention; experience the place as it was, before your creation.
- Indoors: Take time to arrange flowers or a group of objects. Be aware of positive and negative space: the elements and the space around them.

TO DO



Stacking rocks, Herb Ferris. Photograph by David Colton.

Visits

2–4 hours

1. Attend a theater, music, or dance performance. How is your body involved; what's the relationship established to place?

2. Visit a museum or outdoor sculpture. What attracts your attention? Notice your response, including ideas, feelings, emotions, sensations, and images.

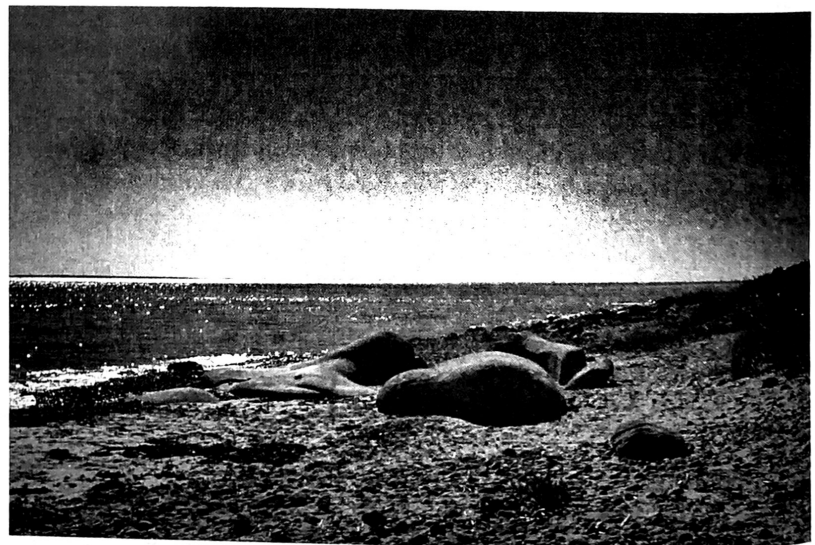
3. Visit a church, meditation center, or building that you like. What is its relationship to your body and to the place it inhabits?

Write about your observations.

Place visit: Creating place-based art

Choose a medium to work with and bring it to your place. Bring your clarinet, your sketchpad, your notebook, or your camera. Stay simple; don't get too elaborate to begin with. Establish a creative dialogue with your place. Remember, your place is not a backdrop for creative work; it is a participant, a partner, a collaborator. If you have no familiar medium, choose one to try: a poem, a story, a painting, a few minutes of movement. See what emerges; allow surprise. 20 min. Write about your experience. 10 min.

Over time: Create an artwork based on some aspect of your place. Be informed; draw on all the information you have learned. Absorb this information deeply enough that it can be integrated into an expressive medium. Be specific as you connect to soil, animals, water, air, or plants. Draw from your stories and field notes. Art is filtered through your personal experience; it is distillation that creates a poem rather than a report, a dance rather than an exercise.



Passages, sculpture by Harriet Brickman. Fishers Island, New York. Sand, cement, seawater.

Specifically for dancers: Site works

Ten questions for site-specific works:

1. *Attitudes:* What is your relationship to the site? Is it a background for your dancing, a collaborator in the process, or the focus of the event? (Consider place as having intrinsic intelligence with much to teach you.)
2. *Scale:* What is your relationship to time? Do you know the geological, biological, and cultural history of this place? (Research, be informed, share your knowledge.)
3. *Memory and association:* What kinds of memories and associations do you have with this place? Are you working with fantasies, dreams, emotional connections? (Acknowledge that landscape is emotional and engages empathy, projection, expectation, association.)
4. *Training:* How will you train sensitivity to place? (Consider that you are nature too.)
5. *Constructing the dance:* How do you move to and through the landscape? Walk and feel your pathways. Consider weather, angles of light, perspective. Work at specific times of day. Consider the rhythm of the topography. Clarify beginnings and endings. (Know that there will be surprises; build them into your plan.)
6. *Relationship to audience:* How will viewers interact with the site, how many people can the site accommodate, where will they sit or stand, how will they know their place and the cues to begin and end? (Help viewers feel comfortable as participants.)
7. *Performance as ritual:* Is there a ritual component? Is anything given or received in the process, as an offering or exchange? (Repetition and intention create ritual.)
8. *Finishing your work:* How will you honor the site when you are finished? (Clean up; put it back as it was. Create a conscious ending to your relationship.)
9. *Articulating the process:* What do you want to communicate in posters, press releases, programs, rehearsal process, and performance? (Find clear language for place-based work.)
10. *Evaluating the project:* What are your criteria for a successful event? (Maintain your aesthetic values; open to a larger view.)

WRITING HOME: FIRE

My core burns. For nights now I lie awake. Outdoors at dawn, which comes early in Vermont, birds call to each other with determined voices. I sit under gray skies and watch the giant poppy break through its prickly pod. Already the bearded iris are extravagant in their blossoming. Red-wing blackbirds guard nests in the cattails; pale blue eggs, scrawled with brown, are hidden close to the water.

Yet I am longing for something I cannot name. Wind through branches ruffles papers and leaves, pointing the way. Yesterday I said to my stepson, "You could be offered the right school and the right job and not even know it. Instead, you would find everything wrong." Now I breathe in the meaning of these words in my own life, resisting joy with all my heart. I am in love with the man and the places I have chosen, without even knowing it is so.

Read aloud, or write and read your own story about creativity.