



Curriculum Encounters Through Walking the City

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Abstract:

In this paper, the author explores how the practice of walking the city may open curricular spaces to nurture a deep engagement and feelings of enchantment with the world. By disrupting the taken-for-granted sensibilities of our everyday urban lives and being open to the unexpected voices, bodies and more-than-human beings who co-exist in urban spaces, the author contends that when we *slow down* and become attuned to our surroundings, possibilities of transformation can emerge. In this interdisciplinary unfolding, the author first shares how walking allows us to experience time and space to accentuate our relations, engagements, and being in the world. Through narrative and photography, the author then reflects on encounters from recent walks through the city of Calgary, addressing notions of self-reflexivity, play and experience. Through these walking encounters, this paper reflects on considerations for embodying a curriculum to promote a modern ecological ethic.

Keywords: walking; enchantment; phenomenology; lived curriculum; interdisciplinary; being in the world

In Jane Bennett's (2001) work, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, she explains the disenchantment of modern living "as a place of dearth and alienation (when compared to the golden age of community and cosmological coherency)" (p. 3). While living in Ottawa I felt a sense of pulsing excitement, enhanced by beautiful green spaces and bustling markets. My daily walks to school, work, or to fulfill common errands, provided me with a dynamic energy and sense of community. When I first moved to Calgary, my experiences living in this city seemed cold, distant and foreboding, in comparison. The vast layout of this city makes having a car almost a necessity for survival; here, walking for recreation seems reserved for designated areas, which, ironically, are only accessible by car. With this privileging of the automobile and subsequent promotion of individual private lives, I often feel severed from the bodily rhythms that ground me.

Having lived in other cities around the world, I have witnessed similar challenges in urban living—continuous urban sprawl, dog-eat-dog tensions, repetitive home structures, and densities of consumerism—however, at first, navigating around Calgary heightened my awareness to the discontent that can be present in these spaces. I looked around and saw others with eyes fixed firmly on their objectives, having no room for public joy or spontaneity, such as going for walk without an agenda. Wandering through the city, I've had difficulty finding an authentic public space—a place with a sense of community, aesthetics, and energy. At times, this has left me with an empty heart, isolated and unambitious.

Living in a city that is in close proximity to the Rocky Mountains, the obvious solution for my unhappiness is to escape the confines of the city and head west to the mountains. As an outdoor educator, I feel this pull, and agree with Henry David Thoreau (1862/2001) that "in wildness is the preservation of the world" (p. 239). For me, Thoreau suggests that my desired connectedness to earth and community-minded values rest in natural "wild" places. I do enjoy walking the mountain trails; I feel my mood become lighter and it seems I can live an expanded, more holistic version of myself when I dwell with the land in this way. However, as a car-less person, living a graduate student lifestyle, I am interrupted by the colonial and anthropocentric undertones that accompany this "escaping the city" to find purity and peace in the nearby wilderness. This makes me wonder how I might look at and move with the city space differently, so as to feel the same felt-sense of interconnection that accompanies me in my favorite wild places away from my urban home.

Ironically, in my recent reading of *The Abstract Wild* by Jack Turner (1996), I realized that I have been misreading Thoreau for years—mistaking his famous quote for *in wilderness* is the preservation of the world, not *wildness*. This realization makes my interpretation shift significantly from wilderness as a place to wildness as an embodied experience. This improved insight helps shift my understanding that one's body is inherently connected to the rhythms of the earth wherever it is, and I must, therefore, shift my attention to how my body is in place, not what place my body is in. I still believe that my felt-sense connectedness with the natural environment is more vivid and accessible in wilderness places, but I am more aware that if I only rely on the mountains to feel expanded, then the city will continue to dishearten me. To be enchanted in the city, I must learn to dwell in this space. This is to say, by reading Thoreau correctly, that I, as a body, see that I may be able to actively

mediate connectedness in the city through the act of walking, to resist the disenchantment, by changing how my body is in place.

My urge to feel more alive in the city links me back to Bennett's (2001) conceptualization of living an enchanted life: "to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday" (p. 4). I wonder how might the two—disenchantment and enchantment co-exist in the city space? Bennett (2001) insists that a sense of enchantment can be nurtured with thoughtful approaches in our everyday, such as "[honouring a] sense of play, hon[ing] sensory receptivity, and resist[ing] the story of disenchantment of modernity" (p. 4). Resisting the story that I first set about my time in Calgary signals to me the importance of listening to the wisdom of my heart and body, and not to solely rely on my cognitive way of knowing this urban place.

In what follows, I will share my journey as I take on the challenge of resisting disenchantment through nurturing a practice of walking the city. This practice has shaped my understanding that a curriculum aimed at a modern ecological ethic will require a recognition and loving attachment to the places we live *with*. To express how I arrived at this place, I will first explore the act of walking and how I see that this process of slow travel is able to connect us to the earth. Following this, I will share narratives and photographs from my recent experiences as a pedestrian in Calgary. Throughout, I ask the pedagogical question: What curricular spaces might open to us as we walk in the city? I contend that when we slow down and become more attuned to our surroundings, possibilities of transformation can emerge.

Walking: A Modality of Relating, Being and Engagement

I have known for a long time that I generally feel more awake, spirited, and connected to the world, after taking a walk. Beyond the practical locomotive act of getting from point A to point B, walking activities, such as a daily walk along the shoreline of the bay in my home town of Belleville, Ontario, or extended hikes and mountaineering adventures with students or friends, have been central to my life happenings, as have the spaces I have formed a relationship with.

My early third-grade memories include purposely missing the school bus so I could enjoy the *freedom* of walking home. Then, later in my school years, walking marked the social event of the day, when a group of us would meet at the old red mailbox on the corner. Walking the neighbourhood streets daily with my peers shaped different exchanges than those in the fixed classroom setting. Additionally, some of my most cherished memories stem from joining my grandparents on their daily stroll. Although not completely aware of it at the time, hearing their stories of being in the world, which often connected to their interests in the local flora and fauna, and how they saw layers of family history transcribed in the landscape near their home, helped me understand myself in relation to those who came before me. I attribute, to these early walks, my strong sense of direction and adventure, the harmony I feel with nature, and the notions of well-being that inform my research.

My background as a physical educator leads me to consider the action of the body while walking. I understand the functional mechanics and physiology of my body; I know that there are

multiple systems simultaneously at play and the benefits are many. Yet, I am drawn to this mysterious sense that my body in action provides a sense of *grounding* within daily encounters and my movement seems to move me *into* relation. I think about the generous advice regularly offered by my mother: *go for a walk and let the fresh air clear your head*. The undertone of her sentiments, as I now interpret them, are to take a break from overthinking, that moving will allow me to live in the present and romanticize possibilities. As a student who spends a lot of time sitting and thinking, *clearing my head* is indeed about re-activating my body through walking. It seems that when I start to walk I gain clarity on the ideas and conceptual structures that have been causing confusion at my desk. My creative energy is sparked and my understanding is enriched by what I encounter, thus reiterating a need to balance the thinking body with the moving body. Going for a walk is a luxury that I continue to enjoy.

Edmund Husserl (1931/1981), in his description of walking, suggests that the space-time changes of our bodies in self-motion allow us to live in the present as “animate organisms” (p. 241) among various “pre-constituted external things” (p. 247); he suggests that “the fixed system of places of all external things available perspectively to me is already constituted by means of self-moving. . . . I can bring myself as animate organism close to every thing and object” (p. 250). Rebecca Solnit (2000) further supports my analysis of his dense text by stating, “it is the body that moves but the world that changes, which is how one distinguishes the one from the other: travel can be a way to experience this continuity of self amid the flux of the world” (p. 27). Now, when I return to my hometown, it seems that there is a living memory of my grandparents along the trails that we walked many times together—I go there to find comfort and grace, and to remind myself of who I am in relation to my ancestors and upbringing.

The pace that I walk is average and steady, yet it is much slower than the cars and bicycles that wheel past me. In the past, I would choose running over walking because of my fixation on the fitness and training benefits, however, the slow stride I embody while walking allows me to attend to the details of both my surroundings and myself in a unique way. The slowness forces me to resist disenchantment—to resist the constant cultural expectations and perceptions of urban expediency that entwine me. I can linger with introspection and lull in the aesthetics of simple virtues—such as listening patiently and noticing the creative patterns in the nature around me; completely being in the moment. I turn the corner and catch myself as I slip on the ice beneath my feet—reminding myself that the ability to walk, to experience the world in this way, is a privilege, one not to be taken for granted.

As I reflect on my upbringing and immersion within urban environments, various incidents as an urban pedestrian and wanderer come to mind and signal, for me, the best way to come to experience the intimacies of a place. Constantly, I am exposed to new details—the conversations I have with my neighbours, being greeted by the dog on the next block, the short-cut through the fence leading to the secret path, the songs of the local birds, the crisp wind on my face during the winter, or the smells of lilacs in the spring as I go through the park—I get to be *enchanted by* and *in* the world daily. As these encounters awaken my senses and emotions, I feel soothed and grounded, and this allows more openness to embrace the exuberant existence of the world around me. My

enchantment with the melody of the birds, the children laughing in the park, or the feeling of aliveness that accompanies the coolness against my skin, surpasses the urban tensions that surround me. I become attuned to the unique rhythms of the local.

In Canada, we are fortunate to watch the seasons change four times a year and walking daily allows the unique opportunity to witness marvelous transformations. For example, in my hometown, walking the bay trail during early spring I can appreciate the new aquatic life. I especially like the goslings—observing their progression of growth and skill provides a sense of awe that would be missed if travelling at a greater speed. Comparably, a few weeks ago, I was hesitant to leave my warm home to a minus-30-degree morning in Calgary. Yet, after bundling up in my snow gear and gathering up the courage to step outside, I was reminded of the rewards that accompany such adversity: the reflective solitude of an early winter morning, the quiet provided as the banks of snow absorb the noise of a nearby freeway, and the sense of gratitude for all I have helping me through these dark, cold and trying months. The next morning, I opened the same west-facing door to be greeted by the warm chinook winds of the Bow Valley. These winds, blowing from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, are a natural phenomenon that brings a dramatic shift in temperature, often breaking up long stretches of cold and dark days. A welcome gift.

While walking, I consider how instructive the process is for me as a researcher and environmental educator; it helps me question cultural interpretations of space and nature, my bodied presence, and my layered relations to place. While I am drawn to Husserl's explanation to understand the body in motion and how this alters my subjective insights while walking, I am left uneasy with the hints of anthropocentrism that accompany the *self* as the *animate organism* moving among *inert objects*. This interpretation does not fully illuminate the deeper connection, reverence and spirit of reciprocity with other humans and the non-human beings in my midst that my time spent on foot is cultivating. As I feel the earth beneath my feet, my walking body feels balanced and connected. Thich Nhat Hanh (2011) furthers my understanding of this reverence with his discussion on walking meditation. He encourages us to take nurturing steps, to walk with our breath, to be at home with the earth.

Both Martin Heidegger (1953/2010) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) further Husserl's ideas of consciousness with more embodied, existential and ontological interpretations and help me further explain how walking might allow us to be deeply engaged in the world. For me, this experience of deep engagement involves being responsive to the other, being present with our emotions and senses, embracing the unfamiliar, and expressing gratitude. It is a chance to grow, in that I find myself more attuned, knowing that we are all connected.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) encourages us to be attentive to themes of perception and relationships with the world, suggesting that our being in the world is associated with our embodied experience of sense perception, not merely a *body* moving in space. This compliments Bennett's (2001) theory of enchantment by sharpening the senses and rejecting, as David Abram (1996) states, "the lingering assumption of a self-subsistent, disembodied, transcendental ego [of Husserl's philosophy] . . . the

body itself is the true subject of *experience*" (p. 45; emphasis added). My reading of the world, and its reading of me, stems from persistent exchanges between my body and its surroundings:

"underneath the anatomized and mechanical body that we have learned to conceive, prior indeed to all our conceptions, dwells the body as it experiences things, this poised and animate power that initiates all our projects and suffers all our passion . . . the body is by very means of entering into relation with all things." (Abram, 1996, p. 46-47)

The walking journey goes from being self-contained to being in relation to the earth through our emotions and perceptions.

At the heart of Heidegger's hermeneutics is the ontological issue of *being-in-the world* (Dreyfus, 1997). Heidegger maintains that we are not merely objectifying subjects but are always *in* the world. He titles this being *Dasein*, and asserts that it incorporates components of care, existence, temporality and authenticity. This immersion in the world influences my wandering activities because it stresses how our perspectives are based in our cultural, political, historical, linguistic and bodily place in the world. Many factors shape our perspectives, which in turn shape how we see truth. As Kenneth Liberman (2007) says: "there is no unmediated encounter with nature" (p. 38). For example, lately in my hometown, with milder winters, the Canadian geese who live in the grasslands along the edge of the bay have not been migrating south for the winter, and having more resident birds has resulted in an explosion in the goose population. The mainstream local discourse typically focuses on how the birds influence *our* use of land—on *their* aggressive behaviour and their taking over *our* golf courses and city parks—instead of any investigation around the underlying human behaviour generating the flux. So, when we are walking towards a group of geese, because of our own disenchantment, we believe a bird attack is a possibility, which influences not only our manner of walking, but also our response to these non-human lives, which, in turn, also impacts their responses to us.

Interdisciplinary Fabric of the City: Unexpected Encounters

Heavily influential on my perceptions and conceptualizations of walking—Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000) makes apparent that one cannot walk, or think about walking, without being led to other subjects, "walking is a subject that is always straying . . . although I came to think about walking, I couldn't stop thinking about everything else" (pp. 8-9). I resonate with her words as my mind, and body, always wander in fascinating directions while on the move:

"to use a walking metaphor, [walking] trespasses through everybody else's field—through anatomy, anthropology, architecture, gardening, geography, political and cultural history, literature, sexuality, religious studies—and it doesn't stop in any of them on its long route." (p. 4)

This interdisciplinary unfolding of "walking the city" provides a wealth of curriculum waiting to be encountered. The following narrative captures some spaces as they opened to me, and I opened to them, on my recent walks around the city of Calgary. By including photos to accompany the text of my encounters, I hope my experiences are brought further to life, just as the city was brought to

Walking the City

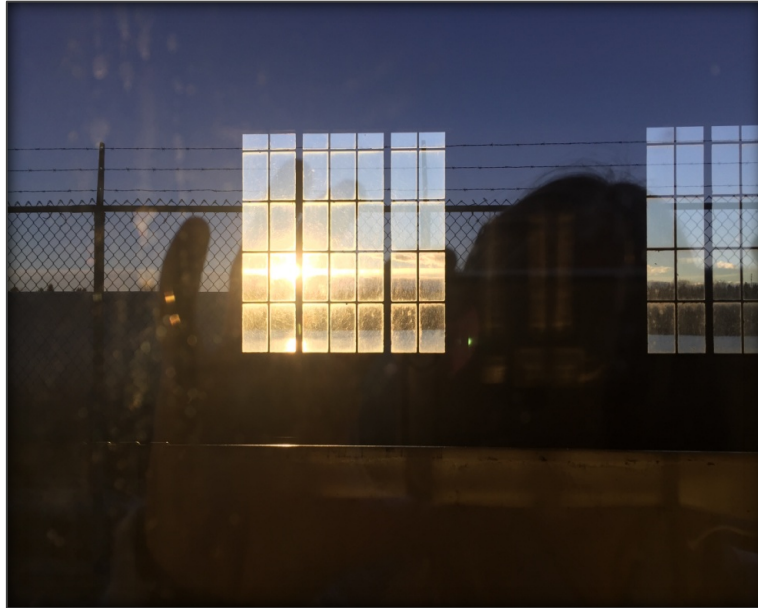
life for me. As I set out on my walks, I did not go with the intention to take photos, but realized I often stopped my walk to capture the moments where I felt most enchanted. I moved with the place but also paused to appreciate small parts, which in turn connected me to the whole in new ways. For this method, I take inspiration from the work of Sarah Pink (2013) and Gillian Rose (2007) who provide me a foundation for observing and being part of the urban environment in a participatory way. In so doing, I attempt to expand notions of how deep experiences can be communicated and represented. For me, including the images honours the rich layers of curriculum as lived (Aoki, 1993) in the city, as well as the participatory spirit and embodied practice of my walks.

Self-Reflexivity

Walking on the Glenmore Dam trail, over the Glenmore Reservoir, I appreciate the body of water that flows beneath me—I am reminded of my home in Ontario. Growing up along the northern shore of Lake Ontario, I spent much time in my childhood exploring its sandy shorelines and skipping rocks with my grandmother. I reflect further that my formative years were centered in, on, and around water. As a competitive rower and swimmer through secondary school and university, being *in* or *on* the water was where I felt most at *home*. Training each morning was not only excellent exercise that offered picturesque sunrises, it also taught me to *read* environmental conditions, and offered unique vantage points of the city, shared by only a small community of rowers.

My strong connection to water is amplified by my moving to Calgary with its noticeable absence of water. This is my first time living in a land-locked location and, thus, I read this landscape differently than someone who grew up here. I find it interesting that, when I head out walking, my body will instinctively head towards the river or reservoir pathways. Being away from my loved ones, who are mostly in Ontario, will often come to me with painful emotions. The waves of homesickness. This was difficult for me to comprehend at first, since I had lived away from home many times before, but in these emotions, I am struck by the bodily awareness of my surroundings. I head to the water.

The sound of the water flowing over the rocks, or the touch of the breeze that comes off the reservoir, both ground me and take me to the places and people who have shaped me. I can feel the warm spirit of my grandmother and hear the encouraging whispers of my mother. I am made more aware of the experiences which make up my identity and, with that awareness, I can approach this new place with more grace. As I see the reflection of myself in a glass pane, I am struck by the here-and-now. To be enchanted, I need to pay attention to everydayness. I need to see how the meanings I create are informed not only by what I see in front of me, but also by what is behind me, and by what I view of myself. In that way, the city then becomes a curriculum of the self.



Jennifer MacDonald. (2016, November 12). *Reservoir Generator Reflections*. Digital photograph.

Sense of Play

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, play involves being engaged in a non-serious way, but play can also fulfill a purpose if the player is drawn in and surrenders to the play (Gadamer, 1975/2004). Play, in this philosophical sense, is associated with the aesthetics of the arts, not to study objectively what they represent, but to question the experiencing, the "to-and-fro motion" (p. 109), between the person and the work and, more widely, the person and broader meaning-making in the world (Gadamer, 1975/2004)

Last year, in the spring, while walking along the Elbow and Bow River trails, I first noticed a number of small, playful signs (Broken City Lab, 2014). I continue to be captured by their game—wondering where the next one might be, and what it might say. They pop up in the most inconspicuous places and draw me in. Time seems to disappear as I play with the river in this way. My body slows down and the river opens to me as more than solely an inanimate thing flowing through the city and I am left wondering how to show gratitude towards the river.



Jennifer MacDonald. (2016, April 3). *Reading the River 1*. Digital photograph.

As the bends of the riverbanks and the beauty of the small rapids become more pronounced, I seem to breathe in the energy of the river as it flows past my feet. My walk home feels more enlivened; I seem to have left my worries behind. The river signs bring new meaning to *reading the river*, compared to what that statement means with my training as an outdoor guide—making decisions about safety, and teaching students how to navigate and maneuver. I begin to reconsider what it might mean to be a river, both literally and metaphorically. I am deeply reminded that the river is alive. In return, I question my responsibility and ethics to the river. I see, smell, hear and feel the river in new ways, and this allows me to respond, both to the river and to myself. The joy returns. I feel a new relationship with the river and an imaginative participation with the world that was previously lost to me.



Jennifer MacDonald (2016, April 3). *Reading the River 2*. Digital photograph.

Experience/Relation

Nose Hill Park is a place that helps me feel grounded in this large, sprawling city. As I walk up the hill, I notice my steps shorten and my breathing rate increase—a different perspective of space compared to the urban landscapes I explore. As I pay attention to my breath, my body feels free to wander aimlessly, off the linear path that I typically am forced to follow in the core of the city. I stand in awe gazing over the Prairie plains to the east and imagine how it might have appeared when the buffalo roamed this land.

The experiences I have in the park are *participatory*, as I find myself in a back-and-forth dialogue with my surroundings—I pay attention to my senses. Typically, I admire the rhythms of the Prairie skies, the sound of wind swirling amongst the tall grasses, and the feeling of fresh air on my skin. When I pay attention to the patterns in the swaying tall grass, I notice that it resembles the waves of Lake Ontario. I feel lifted beyond the mechanistic world and, away from the pavement, pay attention to the softer ground beneath my feet. I listen to the birds (magpies? chickadees? geese?), which juxtapose with the traffic from the nearby road and airport (BMW? Honda? Boeing?). I appreciate the counter-narrative and take notice of what grabs my attention differently each time. It is in this space I most vividly *experience* a separation between culture and nature.



Jennifer MacDonald (2016, November 7). *Nose Hill Views*. Digital photograph.

I appreciate that my visits to the park have cultivated a deeper meaning of living in this place, and a sense of interconnectedness with the land that I live on, work on, and play on. But, this makes me wonder: are we only *on* the land? Or also *with* the land? How might I embrace a lifestyle that coincides more with *being in relationship with the land* in the city? I experience these relationships with the land most vividly at Nose Hill. For example, once, while I was sitting on the grassy hill, in solitude, overlooking the city, I turned around and I saw two whitetail deer looking back at me. Our interaction was brief, but deeply felt. Our eyes caught each other and before I could react, the deer jumped back to gain a safe distance. This moment was intense and stands out from my typical walks in Nose Hill, as it instantly interrupted my thinking about human interaction with the urban environment to also include what it might mean to be an animal living in the city. I think about the land and all that it encompasses and I would like to strengthen this relationship. Questioning this inherent tension of park space in the middle of a city (and what both might mean) seemed like a wonderful beginning, as I am being asked to respond to my self-in-relation differently.



Jennifer MacDonald. (2016, November 7). *Whitetail Encounter*. Digital photograph.

Being “Called Awake” While Walking the City—A Curriculum of Ethics

Like my observations of living in a modern city, the conventional form of schooling, these days, is also highly structured, fixed and sedentary. Students sit passively and take in knowledge from the teacher. Often this knowledge is disembodied from the reality of the earth we live with. Even in most physical education classes, I have noticed students are striving to meet predetermined lesson objectives that tend to feed competitive and individualized attitudes. This leaves no time to wander, or for students to be called to other curricular spaces. There is little opportunity for being open, vulnerable, or present to the internal and external worlds (Huebner, 2008), that came to life on my walking journeys. Therefore, I suggest, that if modern curriculum continues to limit the encounters that a body can have with place, that the schooling experience will continue to play a key role in diminishing possibilities of ethical attachments with the world.

In this paper, I have shared my journey towards being open to moments of enchantment in an urban space where, at first, I felt little enjoyment. I have proposed that the act of walking allows for opportunities to embrace our being in the world, by resisting the throw of our everyday moods and routines (Heidegger, 1953/2010). In my wanderings, I have found that slowing down has allowed me to be more attuned to my existential being, and the deep embodied experiences that were already present but not at the forefront of my understanding. Felt memories, emotions and senses were all stirred and connected me to place in new ways. Only when I took the time to be more open to of these connections was I able to be in relation with other sentient beings in more meaningful ways. Ultimately then, I believe this type of activity can guide us to care about our own existence *with* the city, and, more largely, with the world, rather than merely existing in it.

Often my walks are spontaneous, where the colour of the traffic light will determine my direction of travel. My non-linear path often brings new encounters that leave me “called awake” (Kovan & Dirx, 2003, p. 99) to alternate ways of being and seeing. As I began to feel more alive and at home in Calgary, I also felt myself responding to others in a friendlier, more patient and caring way. Bennett (2001), drawing on the importance of embracing “moments of enchantment rather than striving for an enchanted way of life” (p. 10), stresses to me that nurturing a love for the world can lead to a sense of ethical responsibility:

“...it seems to me that presumptive generosity, as well as the will to social justice, are sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored with existence, and that it is too hard to love a disenchanted world... joy enhances the prospect of ethical engagement and that one of the tasks proper to ethics is to ‘en-joy’ the world.” (p. 13)

Bennett (2001) also notes that

“occasions during which one’s critical faculties are suspended and one is caught up in the moment can produce a kind of enjoyment—a sense of adequacy or fullness—that temporarily eclipses the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world’s often tragic complexities.” (p. 10)

There are many layered complexities in all modern cities, yet, if we take the time to notice, we are also continuously surrounded by the simplicities and poetics of human and non-human encounters. As poet Jan Zwicky (2003) reminds us, “we are *addressed* all the time, but we don’t always notice this” (p. L52; emphasis added). As I walk the city, resisting disenchantment, I am reminded of the many kinds of life and energy all around us—alive in the neighbourhood trees, in the patterns of the traffic flow, and with the people I meet while waiting for the bus. There are many teachings available to us within this urban space, if we open ourselves up to them.

Curriculum decisions are made constantly, by what we do and do not pay attention to; thus, responding responsibly, I propose that an ecologically-embodied curriculum might be best written *in* the city streets and *with* our non-human co-inhabitants. I believe the landscape of the city can foster what Phillip Payne and Brian Wattchow (2009) call “an embodied sensory-perceptual and conceptual-theoretical ‘sense’ or ‘possibility’ of place [while helping us to] . . . understand the relations of [our bodies] and nature, in space and time as they are experienced phenomenologically” (p. 15; from the paper’s abstract). The slowness of walking may bring to life deeper meanings embedded in urban function and require us to pay attention to our experience of the function. Similarly, it can challenge our preconceptions of wilderness, wildness and nature, to see the abundance of life already accessible in the domestic terrain. Through walking, I am made more aware that my body is in constant dialogue with its surroundings, often in mysterious ways, and this brings more enchantment to my urban life. I realize that the city stories all of us, and my walking, more than anything, helps me understand myself in relation to the world.

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