

RE PAGES

Retreat Report

By RE Director Julianne McCall



In the world of RE, this retreat was one for the history books! Compared to the last couple of retreats, there was almost double the number of children and youth participants this season, half of whom were attending for the first time! With such perfect weather and the diverse setting to complement our weekend's curriculum, there was no shortage of fun and discovery,



especially under the care of such thoughtful teachers as Janie Spencer-Bellet and Karen Frey for the RE classes and Elizabeth Imm and Miriam Pia for the toddlers. Behind the scenes

were RE Committee members Jeanette Wild-Sievers, Vicki-Jane Roberts-Gassler, and Linda Gheysen generously providing assistance when it was most needed.

Nature and environmentalism comprised this retreat's RE theme, fitting perfectly into the grand concept of "A Sense of Place." Through hikes into the woods surrounding the castle, tales of Native American legends (from the book, **Keepers of the Earth**, by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac), and discussions and activities of all kinds, the children and youth explored the qualities of nature that make it special, the aspects of

human curiosity and imagination that compel us to explain what we experience, and the vital role we must adopt to ensure that nature continues to thrive and support all life on the planet, as only it can. Each group, the Starters and Treasure Hunters (ages 4-9), the Explorers (ages 10-12), and the Teens, pursued the theme differently, as you'll read below. Rev. Derek McCullough was kind enough to spend time with all groups, spurring thoughts about home, travel, and other influences on our perspectives. Saturday's activities culminated in the RE that night with everything from describing the intriguing process of creating a soul collage to acting out a favorite Native American legend from Anishinabe heritage, **How Fisher Went to the Skyland: Origin of the Big Dipper**, to demonstrating the ancient practice of animal cards to simulating the changing sounds of a raucous rainstorm.

On Sunday, the entire crowd was back together one last time for a memorable Thanksgiving-like feast. Only this time, instead of the traditional turkey, succulent stuffing, and buttery mashed potatoes, our celebration of gratitude consisted of bitter lemons, tart grapefruit, and sour grapes, teaching us that nature (and life) doesn't always make it easy for us to feel thankful for our circumstances. However, with a little shift in perspective (or perception), even the worst experiences may prove to be opportunities for growth and fulfillment. Perhaps mirroring life, after treating our taste buds to the sour-inhibiting powers of miracle berry tablets, we concluded that even the sourest lemons become fruits of unsurpassed sweetness.

Starters and Treasure Hunters



What a great retreat it was! I was blessed to have the Starters and Treasure Hunters groups, which were five

four-to nine-year-olds (and periodically a two-year-old joined us).

The children learned stories from the Native American cultures with themes about creation, helping one another and the interconnected web of life. They made turtles from clay to go with the creation story **The Earth on the Turtle's Back** of the Onondaga Tribe.

During a couple of walks we collected nature materials (throwing bunches of fall leaves, as well) and these 'treasures' together with art supplies were used to make unique and fascinating memory booklets. The booklets were completed with photos and signatures from other children and youth retreaters.

In native traditions, animals have spirits or qualities and these can be used as medicine or power, if we align ourselves with them. The children chose their totem animal for the weekend. The animals they chose were fox, badger, horse, raccoon, butterfly and dolphin, with our two-year-old visitor choosing mouse. It was revealing to see how their animals fit them. We read about and talked about what strengths these animals can show us.

In the afternoon Bettina Lande-Tergeist came to tell us a story that tied in perfectly with the larger retreat theme of a sense of place. We had been talking about where the Native Americans lived in what is now the US and Canada and that the stories we read showed their keen sense of place in nature and their connection to the web of life. Bettina asked the children whether they had a favorite place, where they came from and where their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents came from. In her research into her family history, Bettina discovered that her great-great-grandfather had built the synagogue in a town in Poland. The town remembered her grandfather Lande. Although the synagogue was in ruins, eventually funds were found to restore it. We discussed how a place could give us a sense of belonging. We in the EUU are so often displaced that Bettina's talk was just perfect. Then we took a walk to the castle, where we talked about how old it was and whose place it was. Big thanks to Bettina for her contribution.

I had a wonderful time with this group and I learned a lot from them. Thanks parents for having such interesting children. Thanks to the Rev. Derek McCullough for his chat with us. Thanks to Julianne McCall for her totally over-the-top inspiration, preparation and energy. How lucky the RE Program is to have her! Thanks too to Karen Kyker for her wisdom and help and to Vicki-Jane Roberts-Gassler, who, as always, was my sounding board.

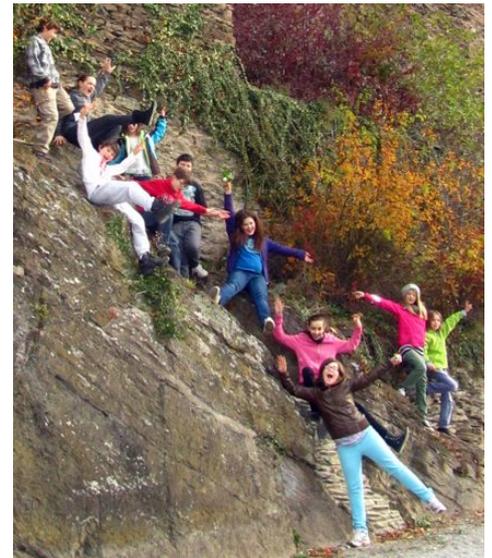
-Janie Spencer (Totem Animal, Bison)

Explorers

This group of eleven preteens had a "wildly" good time, beginning with an excursion into the woods around the castle grounds, first as human beings tromping along the scenic path, then as ear-pricked deer (cup your hands around your ears, making them seem bigger, to get

a sense of how well deer can detect the slightest sounds), ready at any moment to camouflage against the disappearing foliage of the autumn season (or jump behind the nearest bush, as was more often our case). Before returning inside to our habitat (at least, for the weekend), a Native American tale of the plant life cycle was shared while interesting leaves were collected from the forest floor for a later craft project, "Leaf printing."

Several Native American stories were shared throughout the day, providing a good look at how humans were explaining the world around them long before the invention of scientific tools. What sets the Native Americans apart from some other religions and cultures is that they seldom really believed their stories represented "absolute truth." Rather, according to most historical analyses, the stories were a means of establishing traditions, and therefore, communities.



Putting ourselves in the moccasins of the Native Americans 12,000 years ago, we concocted our own legends describing the adventurous beginnings or magical alterations of living beings or objects we encounter in nature. Creativity flourished!

One of the main conclusions of the weekend was that we must actively participate in preserving nature, especially upon realizing how significantly it inspires us, how limited natural resources can be, and how the environment supports our lives in every way. Displayed on a huge poster in the main area of the venue were our top fifteen suggestions for ways to improve our care of the environment.

Among them were simple practices like saving water by turning off the faucet or shower when you're not directly rinsing, choosing to eat more sustainable food products that are locally grown and in season, preserving natural habitats for wild animals, shutting off the lights whenever you leave a room, composting food waste, and reusing everything possible, from canvas grocery bags to plastic food containers. One of the most important ideas conveyed throughout the retreat confirmed that each and every person can help in this movement to protect our one and only precious environment, and we all contribute to building the world in which we want to live.

Julianne McCall

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