

Embracing "Fields of Influence" While Exploring Alternative Paths of Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper uses narrative and reflective methodologies to examine pedagogical practices that enable the production of meaningful relationships. I suggest that the term "fields of influence" encapsulates practices that enable some people to influence relationships with others. The narrative invites readers to consider how the embodied qualities such as care, commitment, familiarity, patience, inclusion, invitation, opportunity, generosity, consistency, deliberate living, contemplation, encouragement, validation, feeling, and etiquette contribute to these pedagogical fields of influence.

Résumé

Au moyen des méthodes de narration et de réflexion, j'examine les pratiques pédagogiques qui facilitent la création de relations véritables. Je suggère que l'expression « champs d'influence » résume les pratiques qui permettent à certaines personnes d'exercer une influence dans leurs relations avec d'autres. Le lecteur est invité à considérer comment certaines qualités contribuent à ces champs d'influence dans le domaine pédagogique, dont notamment, l'intérêt, l'engagement, la familiarité, la patience, l'inclusion, l'invitation, les occasions, la générosité, la cohérence, les gestes délibérés, la réflexion, l'encouragement, la validation, les sentiments et les principes de déontologie.

The current gently tugs our boats down river. We spot a moose taking in the early morning sun and grazing on a feast of fresh green shoots from the river bottom, unmoved by our presence, curious perhaps as to our purpose. It is an effortless paddle to the point where we are expected to meet Dave, the research biologist also known locally as the Falcon Man. As we meander around the corner, a freighter appears on shore, an unlikely spot to wait where bent willows block all passage to the shore. I feel a great sense of anticipation as we approach. This is a man revered for his understanding and compassion for birds and treated with such admiration by local people who know of him I am hoping this impression will not be upset. For twenty years I have lived here and known about him. I have listened to casual talk about the huge impact his "way of being" has had on the people he meets, and I am acquainted with him through these stories. But today I will meet him for the first time and recognize him as something more than a legend. I will know him as the face and character of conservation biology, as the mentor to novice researchers, as an influential grandfather to conservation minded youth and educators, and I will come to understand him as a personality that exercises influence.

This paper is a result of spending time on the river. Having observed this gifted teacher engage a large group in conversation that evoked genuine concern for peregrine falcons, I was left inquiring about how it is that some people actively connect other people to the conditions that shape themselves and their relationships with other non-human forms. It is about the pedagogical practice of the production of meaningful relationships, and the fundamental part of this process that enables some people to influence these relationships. I believe the term “fields of influence” describes this practice, or better, this way of being.

Fields of Care

In *The Natural Alien*, Neil Evernden (1985) introduces the idea of “fields of care” where we describe ourselves, not as discrete objects in a neutral environment, but rather, as beings in relationships within a lived world. For Evernden, seeing ourselves in this way might be fundamentally transformative. From this perspective, we do not “really experience the boundary of the self as the epidermis of the body, but rather as a gradient of involvement in the world” (p. 64). This naturally evolves, expanding our attention and responsibility to a greater sphere. This represents a different concept of being human—it represents being-in-the-world, and it represents humans as a “fields of care.” Seen this way, our sense of who we are in the world is altered. Who we are includes feelings of care and affection beyond our bodies; we are a larger sphere of self and care. We are our interactions with other living forms.

Although he might not refer to it as such, I sense that Dave experiences life as a “field of care” in his relationship with the falcons. He has spent the past 24 summers living along this stretch of water, going back to the same nest sites in a hopeful attempt to understand what conditions are at the root of their unstable population. *His commitment is my teacher.*

His children were raised on the river and now they too have dedicated themselves to wildlife biology, enduring, energetic, and selfless. They understand that to do it this way, they will be “poor but rich” he tells us with certain optimism.

As we paddle further down river we hear the sweet sound of a songbird. Carrie identifies it as a “white crowned sparrow” and we look around trying to spot its perch or see it in flight. We laugh; the songbird is an imitation of the same bird by Dave, who goes on to repeat other calls. The man who has lived so many summers on this river has integrated his calls into the chatter and landscape of this riparian area. He tells us of the importance of the songbirds, kestrels, small-eared owls, flickers, and gray jays as a source of food for the peregrines. “The male does all the hunting and brings the food home for the female to clean and prepare before feeding their young.”

I find myself reflecting on the impact the family unit has on raising their young. I think about Dave’s days on the river with his family growing up here engaged with nature, and I think about my family and the time and care spent out on the land, embracing the lessons of nature. These activities provided opportunities for shared experiences, and influence.

Fields of Influence

If a child is to keep alive his (sic) inborn sense of wonder... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share in rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in. (Carson, 1952, p. 45)

These words by Rachel Carson ring true for people who have shared the company of an interested parent, friend, or skilled interpreter in the natural environment. In my experience, relationship with the natural environment is formed and strengthened by being active in the environment. Investigations by Corcoran (1999) support this, and present an understanding that the love of nature is contagious. He identifies prominent influences as being primarily the family, and subsequently, other significant practitioners such as teachers, older friends, and camp counselors. Very often their own capacity to influence and care comes from their personal experience and practice of the world, including time spent on the land, love of life forms as realized through biology classes, or attitudes and beliefs influenced through the culture and people-shaped upbringings. Some practitioners suggest that we cannot make an authentic impact with children if we have not already embraced the land, other life forms, and love of life, with some authenticity ourselves. For example, David Jardine (1996) explains, "we cannot deepen their wisdom of and attention to the Earth and its ways until we have first taken on the work of this wisdom and attention ourselves" (p. 54).

Likewise, as educational practitioners, we cannot extend our influence—we cannot be a field of influence—without first experiencing a "lived world." If we are to become fields of influence, then we must first be "fields of care" in our own practice of "being in the world." Concurring with philosopher E. F. Schumacher, Evernden (1985) suggests that as we practice this routine and develop habit, the reality of the world we inhabit expands. However, "the catch is that the individual must become capable of perceiving more, just as the athlete becomes capable of greater physical accomplishments than he (sic) could before he prepared himself" (p. 104).

Biophilia

Thinking of people as "fields of care" invokes notions of "biophilia." Biologist E.O. Wilson (1984), coined this term biophilia to describe "an innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (p. 1), or our innate affinity of all living things. Taken literally, biophilia is life-loving. Wilson then comes to the conclusion: "to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place greater value on them and on ourselves" (p. 2).

Stephen Jay Gould (1991) suggests that "we will not fight to save what we do not love" (p. 14). Biophilia, David Orr (1994) suggests, is revealed through the practice of love and "the art of biophilia ... requires us to use the world

with disciplined, concentrated, and patient competence" (p. 144). Seen this way, biophilia must become a conscious part of how we think, including how we do science, indeed how we think in all fields, and how we educate. In my view, students of biology are often attracted to the study of science because of love of life. However, too often, their formal studies require a purging of this inherent biophilia. Too often students are required to defer to dominant cultural beliefs requiring them to treat nature as a machine to be dissected, interpreted, and manipulated (see also, Evernden, 1985, p. 20).

Predominant Cultural Beliefs

This art of biophilia, and the idea of "being in the world," seem to contradict what we have come to "know" within systems of Western epistemology. Many have argued (e.g., Berman, 1984; Evernden, 1985) that our operating worldview, the one we commonly call scientific, is derived from Cartesian assumptions. Beyond his methodological reliance on mathematics, Descartes assumed a separation between thinking matter and extended matter. As Evernden put it, "Descartes [built] a barrier between man and nature and [invited] us to guess what is on the other side" (p. 53). The Cartesian legacy, then, is one of dualistic thinking, a mechanistic view of the world, and a radical separation of subjects (typically us) and objects (everything other than, or beneath, us). These ideas continue to influence our response to the natural world. As Evernden again points out "the sense of separation which Descartes bequeathed to us may well be the most potent adversary of environmental thought" (p. 54). It has led to an anthropocentric view deeply embedded in our culture that humans are the centre of creation, the source of all value, and the measure of all things. "In accepting this dualism we agree to remain ignorant of our degree of involvement and interrelatedness" (Evernden, 1985, p. 76).

E.F. Schumacher in *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1977), famously recounts how everything that most mattered to him seemed absent from the maps of life and knowledge that had been given to him through his schooling process. In a moment of epiphany he realized that his perceptions were not at fault, and that it was these societal maps that needed changing. These maps are human-made and can, therefore, be changed through human activity. If this is so, and we wish to redraw our epistemological maps, what is missing?

Consider for a start, Leesa Fawcett (2000) who says, "The dualistic tendencies of Western thought separating the emotional and cognitive function to limit and control the human experience, particularly knowledge of the 'other'" (p. 142). And so, how do we receive a richer understanding of the other?

In reflecting upon the work of authors like Næss (2002), Saul (2001), and Orr (1994), and through experiences observing my subject "Dave," I believe

we are undervaluing, or even missing, the knowledge of emotions, feelings, and empathy in our educational maps. And, we will need to compliment accepted means of information gathering and documentation (resting on separation of fact and feeling), with other ways of obtaining information. Here I suggest we pay attention to learning through example, mentorship, imagination, intuition, and the *influence of others*. Herein lies a course to some of the blank spots on maps drawn through the lens of Cartesian epistemology, a course that leads us to alternative epistemological waters.

The Pedagogy of Influence

When asked how he has tracked falcon habitat over the years Dave pulls out a tattered map that represents some recent work and continues to explain that some of the figures remain in a collection of data entries filed and retrieved as needed for his enquiries. While he doesn't avoid discussion about this aspect of his vocation, he seems far more interested in engaging in talk about the winter migration of these magnificent birds to Central and South America. They then return before winter is done and come back to the same nesting area. We pull up on a sandbar facing the basalt cliffs. Dave's skillful ear picks out the sound of the several songbirds, and yes, the peregrines. He spots a pair perched on a dead tree high above the riverbank and before long he picks out the nest. It's unusual for the pair to be together on the tree at this time of day, the krill call from them is poignant. "The male would usually be hunting, unless of course there is no young to hunt for." He surveys the nest. No sign of the nestlings. After some time he speculates that perhaps the young have not survived and thus the unusual behaviour of the pair.

The comfort I was feeling a moment ago is disturbed by this conclusion of a broken family. In a few short hours I have come to know these falcons and engage in their story. That particular pair came together this year after her mate had died. *His familiarity (with this pair) is my teacher.*

Dave's personal stories and history have helped me make a real connection to this place and these beings. I am sad—we are sad; we are truly disturbed by this news. This shared connection—this shared compassion; *this single opportunity, an invitation to engage with nature, has been my teacher.*

In "Birding Lessons and the Teachings of Cicadas," David Jardine (1998) speaks of the ecological pedagogy that evolves out of coming to know a place in the way that Dave knows this place along the river. Dave's attitude to directing discussion away from data and into the experience of intimacy about the particular pair, and the particular area, tells us something about his insight, and the deliberate nature of how he expresses this carries importance.

We settle in for lunch as Dave shares anecdotes of other trips along this river, and relays information about how critical it is that he finishes up his work in a few short days. If the timing is not right the young will fly the nest and there will no longer be an opportunity to make the needed observations. After completing observations of nests in this area of the basalt cliffs he still has a long way to go

in the evening, a hundred kilometres perhaps. In a couple of short days he will meet up with another group in the Tombstone Mountains along the Dempster Highway north of here.

My son will be in that group of young conservationists and I wonder if he will be influenced in a way similar to what I have experienced here today. I am struck by the unwavering dedication this man has to both the birds and us. *His generosity and consistency are my teachers.*

He seems to have endless time for us although he just alluded to an eventful agenda. His generosity reveals itself in his commitments and in recognition of the priority to share this knowledge. His consistency reveals itself in the dedication that has preceded the deep-rooted understanding and feelings as he moves through the challenges he faces in his practice. In the company of this particularly skilled interpreter it is obvious that he is a “field of care.” From my observation, it comes about as a result of choosing to respond in a deliberate and intentional manner to nature. He lives what he believes is right, by taking care and sharing. *How can we live more deliberately? This idea leaves an impression with me, and that is my teacher.*

Living Life Deliberately

On announcing his early retirement, the Norwegian Philosopher Arne Næss (2002) said he “wanted to live rather than function”; he wanted to “jump off the train in which [he] had been travelling too long” (p.176). It was no longer invigorating to keep a job that demanded so much time and attention, and where routine played too great of a role because most activities had to conform to a timetable. He chooses to live his life deliberately, responding to what comes up spontaneously rather than to a set of schedules.

The experience on the river, listening to Dave’s stories about what is important and witnessing his devotion and deliberate choices about how he conducts himself in his field work, leaves an impression. Although he could impress us with the litany of studies and data from his area of expertise and numerous years of practice, he chooses to enlighten us with an experience. In my observation, this is reflective of how his scientific knowledge is just a small part of his complex emotional and cognitive knowledge—his *amor intellectualis*, as Næss (2002) calls it. Consciously or not, Dave recognizes opportunities “to connect in surprising and imaginative ways, to show other possible avenues, and to open up solidarity in unexpected places” (Fawcett, 2000, p. 139).

Feelings as “Way of Knowing”

“Well look at that, they’re going to make a liar out of me after all,” an attentive Dave spoke out, bringing us rushing over to the spotting scopes. “There’s always something more to learn about these guys.”

Dave was excited. Our earlier sadness at the apparent empty nest had now turned to joy. Even though he did not seem to be watching, Dave’s sustained focus

on the nest site revealed a little nestling slightly to the right and out of the nest. From our vantage point it looked like a rock, but to the trained eye it was recognizable even though it had not moved since we arrived. We lined up to view the youngster through the scope. It was an awkward bundle of creamy white down and disproportionately large feet. The adult pair still perched in the tree seemed unmindful of our observations. It impressed me that Dave had continued monitoring the scope over lunch as though trying to figure out what knowledge eluded him. *His patience was my teacher.*

I realized that this man who had already spent so much time out here continued to observe, and observe yet again. Perception is a key to understanding feelings and emotions and he seemed cautious about interpreting the actions of the pair without more careful observation. He appeared to care deeply about the fate of the young birds; he felt. In our short lunch break I had observed that his methodology for developing this “way of knowing” included listening, watching, and waiting. His earlier musical talents for songbirds were developed through imitating, practicing, and repeating. He was ready to model to us a “curious, caring engagement with the rest of nature;” “his willingness to learn while he taught helped to validate my questioning stance, thereby lifting the burden of ignorance” (Bell, 1997, p. 139).

Arne Næss (2002) speaks of the success of teaching being fully realized only if learners and teachers concentrate now and then on something for which they have a burning interest. He maintains that people can only learn properly when their feelings are engaged. The shift in attention to an active peregrine nest had recaptured our interest. Dave in the meantime had spent some time finding out who we were as a group. He was successful in engaging us in an exercise of “inducation” as Næss describes it, which is the nurturing of innate values like wonder, creativity, and imagination. The time on the river, the good company, and the presence of a skilled interpreter was doing just that.

For Næss (2002), reason and feeling are interactive. As a group, we were successfully engaging in the dialogue between reason and feeling. People commented on how different this teaching session was compared to what they thought it would be. They had long since put away their notebooks and were now sketching. I believe that the view of knowledge explored by writers like Bell (1997), Evernden (1985), Fawcett (2000), Næss (2002), and Schumacher (1977) was realized in this place and time.

I watched carefully as Dave prepared to go up to the crag to do his work. His tools were basic, an old rope and harness with a repelling device, a helmet, a small plastic bag filled with a small set of pliers, a few leg bands, a pair of tweezers and some medicine.

“As a biologist we’re supposed to be cold,” he states, “but I always carry a few little things up to help if I can. When the eyases (a term referring to the nestlings of birds of prey) are young they are prone to getting maggots in their ears. They will eat away at the birds and mean a sure end. One of the things I try to do when I am banding and taking blood samples is to be conscious of what condition they are otherwise in. After I clear out the maggots I put a little

medicine in there. Hopefully it helps but I don't really know because I can't go back and check later."

"Those of you who want to come up can come now. Sometimes it's hard to get a view of what's happening from up there because when I disappear below the top you can't really see me." A few of us enthusiastically take advantage of the invitation and follow him to the boat, across the water and up the most direct corridor to the top of the crag. Dave is nimble as he crosses the scree, conscious of the activity our actions have stirred up in the adult birds. He doesn't suggest we hustle he just sets the example. Once on top of the crag Dave sets up the single rope around two trees and repels down to the nest. The obviously disturbed adults are uttering a shrill call and circling frantically. When he is alone they will dive within a few feet of him trying to intimidate. Today apparently they are more concerned about the rest of us.

David Jardine (1998) spoke about going to a place familiar from his childhood. In reference to returning to that familiar place many years later, he mused, "in a knowledge of ways, I do not simply know. I am also known" (p. 96). "Even more unsettling than this, as we know this place so are we known by it" (Palmer cited in Jardine, 1998, p. 96).

We notice the high-pitched calls becoming more intense the closer we get to the nest. From our vantage point we can see Dave stoop over the nest, focused entirely on the task at hand. "There are three," he says. Then that's it.

We attempt to ask him questions assuming he will walk us through the process of banding and blood samples. There is no response. We later find out he doesn't want to create a further disturbance for the young ones unfamiliar with the human voice, although I suspect it's also a question of efficiency and care—a mindfulness. He stays focused. Within a few minutes he finishes, briefly holds up one of the little ones for us to see before returning it to its nest, then repels down the rest of the face. He sends the harness and helmet back up the rope with an invitation for someone to share this exchange. I quickly recognize the opportunity and am eager to rappel to the bottom to join him. Timing is important however. "Don't stop at the nest," he suggests, "we need to go now, it's been long enough." *Inclusiveness, and encouragement to have this personal experience, coupled with the validation that I could assume this responsibility—all conveyed through modeling mindful conduct—has been my teacher.*

Etiquette and Feelings

The Dave I saw on the river was mindful of how his interactions were affecting the falcons. He had a scientific task to accomplish and his site visit was carefully planned and executed. Yet, his conversation was filled with reference to feelings of care and concern for the falcons, more so than for the data. "As a biologist we're supposed to be cold," he acknowledges, but his notion of etiquette, the rules of personal behaviour in a polite society, is not to be intrusive. The usual approach, prevalent in Western epistemology, is to put knowledge about animals first, then our response to them next. This type of

thinking then shapes our ethical response to them. Dave on the other hand puts response to animals first and his knowledge of them second. In this way he is exercising “environmental etiquette which consists of practices of courtesy, grace, generosity of spirit, considerateness” (Cheney & Weston, 1999, p. 127). It is etiquette of feelings and care.

In conversation with Bob Jickling, Arne Næss (2000) asserts that children learn that scientific knowledge is “something opposed to myths and the undue influence of feelings, and values” (p. 55). “There is an underestimation of the cognitive values of feelings” (p. 53). Dave on the other hand acknowledges his own feelings, and works on the edge of Western science—challenging its conventional boundaries. Through his quiet unassuming actions he impresses the importance of how we are to move in nature, how we are to carry ourselves. He is less concerned about giving us scientific information that he has collected over 24 years, and more interested in presenting this “way of being” with the falcons. He took a keen responsibility in responding to their cries when we were interfering with their lives, by being efficient and moving out of the area quickly. His knowledge and understanding clearly includes emotions, feelings, and empathy. By acknowledging his feelings, he is valuing these feelings towards the falcons. And, these values are his field of care; they are the deliberate choices he makes in approaching the nest site and the birds themselves. For Dave, ethics as etiquette come first.

Arne Næss, in his *Life's Philosophy* (2002), asserts that what we need is a kind of education of feeling. I see this in Dave's practice. His teaching influences the emotional development of the people he is with. Emotional development is involved when we learn “to regard other living creatures as genuine fellow creatures with a need for self-development” (Næss, 2002, p. 115). In our field experience we learned about falcons as social creatures with needs, cares, and purpose; we learned something about the similarities between ourselves, as human beings, and other living creatures.

I made an entry in my journal when I returned to the rest of the group still situated on the sand bar. In part, it reads:

We can't reach the thoughts of the Falcon . . . or can we?

They can't reach ours . . . or can they?

Tears speak of something that is written in a space hovering above this page.

In a place around this book, but not in it.

I don't like this journal now—sometimes, today, yesterday, words are inadequate, a picture's inadequate, a line is inadequate.

All that really is genuine about this is taking up a space around this book . . . around me . . . inside me.

Fields of Influence I call it.

I just came off this mountain now and make a symbolic attempt to place this experience into something besides a teardrop, besides a krill sound, besides a wingspan or fluffy feathers.

Fear, emotions fill that bird

Fear, emotions fill me when someone's disturbing my babies.

Fields of Influence . . . the bird to me, and I to the bird, the biologist to me

—not me to the biologist.

How do you know? How can you know?

My children, my little babies, influenced by this field of care and then turn around

—influence others.

After joining up with the group again Dave says his goodbyes and prepares to head down river. It is early evening by now and he's unwavering in his commitment to carry on. As he disappears around a bend in the river I hear someone enquire further about what he does. Someone less familiar with his history replies, "Well I guess he's an ornithologist." An ornithologist is described as someone who studies birds. I feel defensive in reaction to that title; for now he had been qualified and named for something he "does" rather than for what he "is" in relationship to the way he lives. What he "does" is merely a system of classification and a method of categorizing him. What he "is" is interactive and conscious. If we are to attach a title to him perhaps he could be more closely described "as a phenomenologist who, in the ideal sense, is neither 'observing' nor even 'perceiving,' but rather is 'experiencing'" (Bell, 1997, p. 134). This activity is an epistemology of "knowing and being in the world" unlike that of conventional Western epistemology which translates the activity to "being, and knowing of the world."

Conclusion: Creating Conditions

A week later, I am home and reunited with my family. I had an opportunity to share my experience on the river with my children who have also spent time with Dave on different occasions through youth conservation opportunities. My oldest daughter was comfortable articulating the "field of influence" she experienced, being out on the land with him. She indicated it was easy to appreciate the type of experience he was trying to create because she has had shared experiences in the wilderness with her family. It occurred to me that these family experiences have created conditions for her to develop the emotional ability to respond to and assess matters of value. Anne Bell (1997) so nicely reflects that response: "When in the company of a skilled naturalist, for example, the learner soon comes to realize that it is not simply identifying what one sees and hears that matters, but cultivating the sensitivity to see and hear in the first place" (p. 137).

Once feeling that familiarity with the surroundings, my daughter knew what to expect and how to respond. In my daughter's words:

Dave invited and encouraged the group to learn or try new things. Although he's deliberately choosing to spend his summers on the river, he didn't push anyone to participate. Instead, he provided an opportunity to have an experience in nature. His style of teaching was to encourage by example and commitment. He left an impression on me because he was generous with his time and information and in providing an opportunity that otherwise would not have been available.

It was after this experience with Dave four years ago, that my daughter first expressed an interest in wanting to work in wildlife research and conservation. "I want to emulate him," she says. Incidentally it was my daughter's enthusiasm, and newfound focus on conservation biology four years previously that most influenced me in the manner and openness with which I approached my first meeting with Dave that day on the river. I too was immediately familiar and enthusiastic. These are the *fields of influence*; the circles of influence that spread out and are, to a certain extent, contagious.

My son was less reflective but equally receptive. He indicated his experience was very positive and that he himself had an opportunity to pull the maggots out of the nestlings' ears. Because of previous conversations with his sister, he knew what to expect, and like myself was quick to volunteer assistance. He added that this type of activity is rare without people who really care and are willing to share that with others. With time, the experience may become more significant to him. For me, *this time to contemplate is my teacher*.

Whether consciously or not, what Dave has done over the years through his field of influence, reaching so many people around him, has been to embody certain pedagogical qualities that invite response. At different points and intensity these include: caring, commitment, familiarity, patience, inclusion, invitation, opportunity, generosity and consistency, deliberate living, contemplation, encouragement, validation, feeling, and etiquette. Through these qualities, in the time spent with him, Dave provides opportunity and experiences for people to develop relationships with other non-living things. Bob Jickling (1992) explains that some forms of knowledge are developed and recognized only by those who have shared a common or similar experience. "We come to know that the experience can illicit emotions to which we may attach varying degrees of value and concern" (p. 179).

Dave embodies a "way of knowing" and understanding that transcends predominant cultural beliefs that reflect a mechanistic, categorized, and scientifically structured view of the world. Perhaps his field of influence *is* a relevant pedagogical model for others to pursue, and to recognize in themselves.¹

Notes

- ¹ This paper arises from my experiences in and near my home and are largely characterized by "human/nature" or "wilderness" encounters. Qualities that are important to the phenomenon "fields of influence" are also to be found amongst persons working and living in other contexts—in urban as well as rural settings, amongst the wealthy and amongst the poor, in social justice issues and in environmental issues.

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Notes on Contributor

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