

# Spring Awakes!

## Entwining Performance Arts with Restoration Ecology - a Personal Recollection

*Your footsteps fall softly on the dirt trail as you pass by trout lilies, white and red trilliums in bloom, and bright green fiddle heads slowly unfurling underneath the canopy of stately old cedars and spruce....as you round the corner, there in the river you see three empty music stands...from the bank, you watch in silence as three horn players, clad in hip waders, converge at the stands and play an homage to the river, then wade away in separate directions...you move on ... around the next corner...in a grove of beech trees is a group of singers dressed in white, attended by painters working silently at their feet, depicting the understory up and onto their clothes as they sing the poetry of Kathleen Raine's "Spell of Creation"...at another turn of the trail, you watch as a woman in a long velvet gown silently greets you and then suddenly hikes herself up onto a branch of a very large pine tree. She continues to climb up, then sing, her soprano voice soaring throughout the forest canopy and dueting with the birds of spring...later along the trail, an actor emerges from behind a massive cedar tree and recites David Wagoner's poem, "Lost":*

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.

*The final words echo in your ear as you continue along the hike known as Spring Awakes!*

Ignatius Jesuit Centre is a place of peace for me; a place of rejuvenation, inspiration and hope. The centre blazed into my consciousness during the community campaign to stop the building of a Big-box store adjacent to the property, and a few years later, it offered the perfect crucible in which to blend some significant yet disparate elements of my life which, when woven together with care, turned into a community based celebration of spring which in turn raised funds to support the Old-Growth Forest. Music. Trees. Performance. Community. Event Planning. Environmental Stewardship. The convergence of these several

pathways in my life, when combined with the energies of enthusiastic co-creators, resulted in “Spring Awakes!”

Since childhood, I have loved trees. As well as tending a large vegetable garden, with the constant guidance of my mother and father, we regularly planted trees into our yard. When the family home was sold during my adulthood, it was surrounded by large and gracious trees – connected to my vivid memories of planting little seedlings as a child.

In the neighbourhood I now call home, I have facilitated the community planting of over 1000 trees into the river corridor to increase biodiversity and to ameliorate invasive species. It is with great satisfaction I now watch the park turn “red” every fall – with the flourishing of Sumacs, Red Oak and Sugar Maple among the many other plantings.

It was around 2010 when I learned through Leslie Work about the Old-Growth Forest Project at Ignatius Jesuit Centre which included the planned removal of the dam on Marden Creek. Removing a dam? Who ever heard of that? I felt a jolt of inspiration - that a community could come together to activate this major restoration ecology work and that lands would be set in trust to grow trees for *at least 500 years*. I wanted to know more.

Soon afterwards, I attended a *forest walk* created by Canadian Composer and Environmentalist, R. Murray Shafer. I was deeply inspired by the site-specific performances by musicians and singers stationed throughout the woods and by the river - performances which blended with the natural environment in magical, resonant ways.

Ondine Chorus, a band that I co-founded with Shannon Kingsbury, was already exploring site-specific performances of acoustic music based on our compositions and arrangements of delicate and complex vocal harmony. As Co-Artistic Directors, Shannon

and I were always on the hunt for unique spaces in which to sing – indoors, in beautiful acoustic spaces, and outdoors, in beautiful natural spaces, always in a quiet context where we could hear ourselves singing collectively.

In addition to Ondine Chorus, I knew that finding such performance spaces would also benefit Evenine, women's choir, and Season Singers, a theatrical choir for children, both of which I directed, and it would create opportunity for many other artists, colleagues and students in our community.

Walking through the Old-Growth Forest Project lands with Leslie Work as our guide was uplifting. She explained various facets of the project such as removing the dam to allow the creek to flow, planting the open hayfield into native trees by starting with berry-bearing bushes so that the birds would end up assisting in the planting work, and that the time frame for the project was *500 years*. I felt a convergence - things that mattered deeply to me began to entwine themselves into what I saw as a special celebration of spring. We would provide a unique performance experience for hikers throughout the magnificent woods of the Old-Growth Forest Project, engage artists to create site-specific performances and invite attendees to contribute financially to the project by buying a ticket to attend. It would be a celebration of the magical blossoming renewal of the natural world coming to life again after winter sleep which would in turn foster support for the Old Growth Project.

With Co-Artistic Director Shannon Kingsbury and the many artists and many volunteers who contributed so generously, Spring Awakes! was imagined and realized. It continued as an annual celebration for seven years. Each spring, a new collection of one-of-a-kind performances of music, song, dance, poetry, drama as well as an education element about the Old-Growth Project were created and offered up in surprising ways, never repeated over the years, and always celebrating the renewal of spring.

If you walk the lands of Ignatius, you may come upon some collections of hand-made cotton prayer flags – a beautiful project facilitated by Lynda Lehman, who provided materials and the invitation to attendees to create their own flag in response to the completion of their Spring Awakes! hike. The flags were strung together and later hung up in the woods as a memento to the event. As time passes they will fade and disintegrate, taking the inspiration of their making back down into the soil and the woods from which it came.

It is this long-term vision which inspires me the most; knowing that generations from now, people will walk underneath the gracious shelter of very old trees and move through a forest that was once enlivened with singing, music making, poetry, dance and storytelling - an artistic amplification and social celebration of one of the most dependable and uplifting experiences we all share – the greening of the trees and the blossoming of the flowers; the return of spring.

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