

MALS Reflective Essay
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The Human Ecologist's Treatise of Liberal Studies: Personal Ecology, Private Transcendentalism, and Public Intellectual Discourse

Turning from you, I dared to seek something more certain than knowledge, more intellectual than faith, and sweeter than love. Who is more foolish than me?

-St. Augustine

I find myself on the 5th floor of my undergraduate university's science and engineering library, contemplating how to sum up two years' worth of liberal arts courses, numerous essays, countless notes and informal compositions, and e-mail correspondence. I am far from North Carolina – I am completing this degree distantly through the electronic ether – but this program has grounded me. The writing, the words, the symbols, the metaphors – these are all present in the four primary facets of my studies: geography, history, art, and philosophy.

I want to make ideas, not *things*. I want my questions to result in action, not talk.

I value ideas. However, ideas are abstract things that exist in individual minds. They can only be understood in the context of language (to describe them) or through action (which may not be named, but must be done in order to have made the connection). What I, Ingrid Lindstrom, values may not coincide with another individual, let alone a multiplicity of them. But let me set aside this difference momentarily - I asked my MALS professors and myself what the image of an idea might be, since I value ideas. I don't believe all values are abstract, like ideas are. Some people consider ideas to be things, which are tangible and describable. I am not interested in making *things* until I associate my inspired thought (idea) with the method of communicating it. In this liberal arts program, I have delved deep into issues of spiritual belief, of biological assessment and measurement, of historical narratives and literary treatments. These are not just ideas – they *require more*. More what? More study, more data points, more think thanks, more discussion? Ideas require more from **me**.

We need to have values in order to have problems. Metavalues are what we need to have to get along with everyone else. Without aggrandizing too much, my portfolio represents a comprehensive treatment of a paradigm of nature, history, and the self: only I

can communicate my education, and only I can discern how these thought experiments will shape my future goals and ambitions.

When I think about the future, I don't know if I can measure the consequences and possible conclusions to the "what ifs?" How will I know I am right, until the future happens? So, I feel that everybody must come to some kind of terms with the unknown, the degree of uncertainty about a given resource, or issue. I am attempting to measure my success of concepts learned, ideas grappled with in terms of metaphors, questions, imaging, and interpretation.

In our modern, globalized society, learning how to learn, dealing with changes, and adapting, may very well become more important than the acquisition of facts and data. Without a quantified world, perhaps my valuing of ideas may become the dominant paradigm. We fear what we don't understand. We believe we understand what the future may hold for us, because we use history to discern patterns, trends, values and behavior. If we surround ourselves with the familiar, the unknown seems less daunting. Familiarity, in our class discussions, is comprised of faith-based systems, music, art, literature, and rituals. We're raised with values, not tools. And yet, we utilize, use, make, surround ourselves with these physical items that change and manipulate communication, information and the very people that use them. I address knowledge in several ways in my studies – as in, there are several ways of knowing. One may know the world and one may know the self through the media, literature, faith and belief systems, and the methodologies of science. If I am to create ideas, then discerning patterns, revolutions, rhythms, and trends are essential in how I will approach the world after I finish the program.

Nature: that which is itself so.

I thought that nature was the condition in which an individual has an experience. Coming into MALS, I considered that the mechanistic model of "nature" removes agency from the individual and groups of species, or that an ecosystem was an abstract construct that fits the machine model. As I took courses in Biorhythms, and Livable and Sustainable Cities, I came to understand that the observer creates the system, not its components. As an example, the herring gull isn't aware it's a "vital part of the trophic level of the Gulf of Maine

ecosystem," it's interested in being a herring gull. Thus, nature does not have "environmental problems," *we* do, because we have preferences. I discuss these preferences and choices with regard to how the individual responds to nature, to society, and to the self.

The thematic (not necessarily critical, but a combination of objective and subjective interpretations) sections I have included in my portfolio have helped me define the role of the individual in several avenues of the liberal arts. I was initially drawn to write about the transcendentalists because I have a personal need to understand Nature, since I feel I did not grow up with it - only having studied biology and philosophy as separate, wholly academic components in previous years. As I hope to have transcendental and Romantic intellectual history inform my future studies, finding connections between Earth-centric dialogues, historical treatments, societal concerns about the environment, and the "perfectibility of the individual" trope have been very fruitful. And yet, as my journey in the MALS program continued, my definitions, metaphors, and stories about transcendental and Romantic philosophies expanded to include modern social thought about environmental paradigms, and belief systems - ones that can't merely be qualified or quantified by ideas alone.

Who is the human ecological individual? What does such a person do; how does she act so as to be more than herself, a better self? Immediately, I recall Emerson's simple response to what transcendentalism is at its core: "A better thought, a higher emotion." My compositions and papers for MALS are attempts at explanations that describe, in social, biological, historical, philosophical, or literary terms, a human ecologist's intentions and values for man's relationship with the natural world. I would tend place them in the context of what is possible for an individual's relationship with her "self". The two are not mutually exclusive. Within each of the courses I've taken, I've discerned a strong sense of "relationships" between the self and nature.

Paradoxical questions arise for me are these: How can one be an individual, a self in the world when nature is multiple and plentiful? When does a group of individuals form a society? The second question is akin to "when does a stand of trees become a forest?" A human ecological answer is: when nature is larger than the self, then the individual is truly present. When the relationship with nature is formed through simple experience and

"being in the world," continuous change matches the depth of the relationship. I believe the silent melancholy or quiet desperation that frequently accompanies tackling issues of environment and society changes to a channel through which the natural world helps a person come into a relationship with the "self"; this paradigm shift is evident in several written responses I wrote for Modern Problems of Belief, and Religion and Ecology.

I am not a perfect student, do not possess a perfect mind, and for all my interdisciplinary leanings, cannot articulate a comprehensive statement regarding how I may "answer for myself" – this essay in itself is but an effort. In my studies, the perfectibility of the individual (the best choice, the foremost theory, the unparalleled explanation) is what drew me to the entire notion of what human ecology is: how to be one's best self in the world, in nature, and within the self. If all individuals strove for perfection, then it seems to follow that the entire society would also be striving for its own perfection. The two-fold dynamic between the individual and the society in which he dwells is complicated for me to describe, but there simply cannot be one without the other. Can there be a plural without a singular? Can there be a singular without a plural? The latter seems possible, but individuals do not exist in a vacuum, which is what the second question implies.

Perhaps perfection is attitudinal, instead of a complex of nature/nurture and moral propositions. To me, attitudes are personal values expressed at the individual level: reactions and acknowledgement of a given experience. I detail experience in an final paper I prepared for Clue: Detective Fiction; I concluded that commonality is something everyone can find in their private heart, but ambition and academic endeavor is something only few strive for publically - this may pose a paradox to the individual. To talk of perfection requires an objective rubric or explanation by which this commonality may be experienced and lived for all individuals, regardless of personal attitudes. The major thematic struggle that follows is: would the perfectibility of the individual be the conduit for the perfectibility of the society?

I have learned to love the questions as much as the ideas. However, neither is successful without structure. Methods and ordering systems were tools I gained from my courses in Age of Revolutions, Biorhythms, and Global Perspectives in Biology. In these

courses, my papers and projects were expected to adhere to a process that not only informs science, but inquiry itself.

Delineating what one set of questions means for another, how a person's actions influence another, if the two may form a paradigm in tandem as a possible outcome (given circumstances such as time, effort, and some relationship with nature) has been my most difficult challenge in outlining the themes and methods for this portfolio. During my very first course, Religion and Ecology, I thought I had coined a new term in processing the philosophy of nature, human ecology and the individual: "personal ecology". While it sounds compelling, it has no basis or tangible construction at present - it's an abstraction that I'd like to make concrete, somehow. Until I can, my main task is reconciling the individual's art, individual's geography, individual's history, and individual's philosophy with *how* they come to back to nature - how they reform that relationship with the natural world. This task is reflected in the essays I've chosen to include in this portfolio.

"Where do we find ourselves?" is a frequent Emersonian question. As I began to think about the individual's sense of human ecology, I recognized I must define "place" above other concepts, removing as many abstractions as possible. Inspired by a passage from Milton's "Paradise Lost", I recognized I needed to spell out whether the one's literal human ecology (paradise? hell? we decide for ourselves) exists entirely within the mind, or within *terra firma* places and the individuals that live there - places that are describable by experience and the world of the numina. My extensive research and planning for my ecological redesign of Orange Grove Industrial Park (Livable and Sustainable Cities) forced me to reconcile climate with character, and sustainability with a sense of self.

Perhaps a human ecology paradigm is neither paradise, nor abstract, but equivalent to the best of the individuals who strive to exist in such a place. For two years, the MALS program has been a place (a world, a field, a geography, an art, a philosophy, a history, a blank page, a full page, a question, an idea) for me to explore the issues that spark flame to my mind, and my abilities. Ideas are connections, relationships, systems, revolutions, narratives, people, and places. They are more than the mere words I use to represent them. In this program, I have written, I have defended, and I have explored. The liberal studies I have undertaken are only the beginning to a lifetime of inquiry. I know I'll continue to define and redefine human ecology - as long as I am human, and as long as there is a

tangible, physical, environmental ecology within which to live, I will continue to create ideas.