

The Axe Handle Academy

A conversation with Ron Scollon

Ron Scollon

Background readings:

Axe Handles, Gary Snyder

Mencius, Mencius

Continuous Harmony, Wendell Berry

Elements of a Post-liberal theory of education, CA Bowers

The First Day: Thematic Comparative Literature

In July on sunny mornings you can often find Ron Scollon sitting on a slabwood bench on the porch of The Gutenberg Dump enjoying a cup of Darjeeling tea. By eight o'clock the sun is already high and on the day we began this interview it was backlighting half a dozen fishing boats on their way into Haines Harbor after a night of fishing. The Black Current Press found Ron on this day with his guitar. He was playing a set of Preludes by Manuel Ponce. His mind was on anything but the Axe Handle Academy when we began the interview.

BCP: Ron, we've been hearing you and Suzie and Dick Dauenhauer talk about The Axe Handle Academy now for what must be at least a couple of years, but I'm not sure yet what it is. Could we start with a simple statement? What is, The Axe Handle Academy?

RS: I could give you a couple of simple statements but I'm not sure they'd really help. Gary Snyder said The Axe Handle Academy is 'an imaginary university of proto-humanism.' Another description we made recently was that it is a school for making schools; that was really a pun on the idea of a tool for making tools. For a while we said it was a bioregional, thematic, humanities-based curriculum. Now we like to say it's a school of ecological arts. Does that help at all?

BCP: School of ecological arts? What's going on there?

RS: Well, we want to steal ecology from the biologists and the naturalists a little and at the same time bring the arts down to some kind of responsibility to the earth.

BCP: We'll have to come back to that later, I imagine. And you'll need to explain the shift from the humanities to the arts, but right now I want to pursue another line. You mention Gary Snyder and, of course, he published a collection of poems called *Axe Handles*¹ a few years ago. Is there a connection there?

RS: Yes, that's where we got onto the axe handle idea. The title poem in that collection refers back to an old Chinese poem, old even at the time of Confucius, fifth century B.C. The gist of the poem is that when you are cutting an axe handle out of a piece of wood you are using an axe in your hand to do it. The model for your work isn't far off; it's right there in your hand.

In Snyder's poem he is cutting wood with his son Kai, They decide to fix up a small hatchet for him and then Gary remembers the poem as he learned it from his teacher then reflects on how this is the essence of culture, axe handle making axe handle, the model and copy going on and on.

At the time *Axe Handles* was published we were puzzling over ways to get educators to take Tlingit oral literature seriously. A bunch of us here like the Dauenhauers or the people at the Alaska Native Language Center and a lot of others had been working for some years preparing transcriptions and translations of Alaska Native literature but not much of it was being used in literature courses in our schools. We thought along with the Dauenhauers that if we included Tlingit literature in a course in comparative literature that would also have in there Homer or Melville or other great writers, literature teachers might see that the same problems of reading and interpretation come up in all literature and that they could use the same approaches with their students.

The problem we had was that many teachers were hesitant to get into teaching great literature at all because they hadn't read a lot of it themselves and that was usually under duress in some undergraduate course years back. We were thinking that Shinichi Suzuki, the Japanese violin teacher, had the right idea; you teach the parent right along with the child. So we figured we'd teach comparative literature to teachers right along with their students.

It was right about then that *Axe Handles* came along and we saw right away that that was the model we were working with and since then we've been talking about it as the axe handle model of education. Nothing new about it at all. Your students learn more from what they see you doing than from anything you say. If they see you reading and enjoying good literature they'll do it too. If they see you spending your time in classroom management they'll become manipulative little monsters without much substance to their thought.

In the axe handle model the first place anybody looks to improve education is at himself or herself and asks: 'What am I modeling? Am I the kind of person I want my students to be?' You practice what you preach, that's all it comes down to,

BCP: So comparative literature is the heart of The Axe Handle Academy?

RS: Well, not the heart so much as the seed, The method of modeling is really the heart. The comparative literature is where we began, Our first interest was selfish in a way. We wanted a good excuse to go back and read some of the great literature we'd read some years ago but drifted away from in developing our 'professional' careers. It's funny, but when you work in education, or linguistics, or anthropology, or sociolinguistics you find you hardly ever read anything really worth reading. It's all just 'keeping up' with the field. We wanted to get back to the literature we'd enjoyed earlier and also to start filling in the gaps in our own educations. You get tired of the junk and the good books are really just a lot better than the other ones. You start forgetting that if you haven't read one lately.

BCP: What kind of gaps did you want to fill in?

RS: Well, I wanted to read *War and Peace*² for one thing, but 1,400 pages is something you don't get into easily unless you're ready to stay in it until the end. That was kind of funny. We'd just written our essay *The Problem of Power*³ and felt that we'd developed a pretty good understanding of some of the issues of power. Then I read Tolstoy. The old guy had it all worked out 100 years ago. Between that and *The Secret History of the Mongols*⁴ you can get a pretty good idea of power in the histories of Napoleon and Genghis Khan.

BCP: What else?

RS: I'd read *The Analects*⁵ of Confucius in high school but I couldn't really remember much. It seemed to me that any philosophical system that had remained the basis of the longest continuous culture the world had known might be worth taking another look at. So I went back and read that again and also the rest of Confucius as well as Mencius⁶ One of the nice things about China is that you can get a good start on a classical education in the study of the 'four books', *The Analects*, *The Great Digest*, *The Unwobbling Pivot*,

and *Mencius*, a couple hundred pages altogether. And that was the stuff that really got me excited.

BCP: Confucius and Mencius?

RS: Yes, especially Mencius at first. I found him easier to understand than Confucius when I was first getting into it. One little piece I really liked said,

If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom; if others do not return your courtesy, look into your own respect. In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose.⁷

That's an extension of the thought of Confucius and another version of the axe handle idea. Concentrate your efforts on getting your own act together. Confucius says in one place that when the sages of old wanted to bring the empire into order they first brought their own households into order. And in order to bring order into their own households they first disciplined themselves. And in order to discipline themselves they studied being very careful with their words. To do that they extended their knowledge to the known universe.⁸ That's the real key to the Axe Handle Academy, to set about improving the world by getting your own piece of it in order first.

BCP: When you start talking about improving the world it sounds like you have some kind of political action in mind.

RS: There is nothing more political than education. That's something we often forget. Your knowledge and your discipline form the basis of your actions, your political life, and a lot of that is formed by your education. I'm not talking only about school but about education.

BCP: What do you mean by your discipline? That isn't a terribly popular word these days, is it?

RS: No, I don't suppose it is, but I like it better than calling it philosophy or faith or political position. In this we're getting a lot from reading Wendell Berry. You could start almost anywhere but there's a real good essay called 'Discipline and Hope'⁹ that covers a lot of the ground we're trying to cover. What I mean by discipline is whatever guides your value system and sets limits on your greed and your hedonism and your laziness.

Here's what Berry says:

Do what you feel like, they say—as if every day one could 'feel like' doing what is necessary. Any farmer or mother knows the absurdity of this. Human nature is such that if we waited to do anything until we felt like it, we would do very little at the start, even of those things that give us pleasure, and would do less and less as time went on. One of the common experiences of people who regularly do hard work that they enjoy is to find that they begin to 'feel like it' only after the task is begun. And one of the chief uses of discipline is to assure that the necessary work gets done even when the worker doesn't feel like it.¹⁰

BCP: So is The Axe Handle Academy a political activity or organization as such or just in the broader sense of being concerned about education?

RS: The Axe Handle Academy isn't a political organization at all but I do want to recognize the political implications of education, that's why I bring it up. Remember the emphasis is on improving the world by getting your own little piece of it together first. Berry talks about trying to cut through the political and public noise of the media and getting down to one's own experience and one's own common sense. I think a lot of the political thought, if you can call it that, of the last

decade or so has run in just the opposite direction. You hear people saying, 'What's the use of doing anything but getting all I can get for myself until those guys in power get their act together?'

Here's where history helps me. It's easy to believe we live in the worst of times with crooked or mindless leaders and everyone else motivated only by blatant self-interest. Or others seem to think we're right on the edge of some utopian electronic revolution that will sort of settle all that at last. Then you read Confucius or Mencius who were struggling with the problem of knowing what is the right way for a good person to live in bad times of corrupt leaders. It is interesting to see that for the 25 centuries that we've had writing to keep track of things our better thinkers have struggled with the fact that their lives are likely to be lived out against a background of indifference or even hostility.

BCP: Well isn't that the lesson of virtually all of our great religious leaders?

RS: Yes, it is, but what I enjoy so much about these Chinese thinkers is the very pragmatic view they take of getting along in day-to-day life. Mencius says, 'A great man need not keep his word nor does he necessarily see his actions through to the end. He aims only at what is right.'¹¹ In other words, don't get so carried away with your own self-righteousness or your principles that you forget to do what's right.

BCP: So the philosophy of The Axe Handle Academy is really Confucian?

RS: It is, but I want to be careful there too. As you know, you have to separate the writings of Confucius or Mencius from the 25 centuries of bureaucracies and governments that is also thought of as Confucian. You can get a lot of commentary built up in 25 centuries and I'm not sure how much of it is really relevant to today. It's the same as making the distinction between the teachings of Jesus and the tremendously complex history called Christendom. That's why we're so interested in comparative literature, it helps you to put one great thinker up against another in a way that clarifies both.

BCP: Can you give me an example of that?

RS: Sure, When Dick Dauenhauer and I taught the comparative literature course we had the students read both Mencius and Huckleberry Finn to get at the idea of conflict of loyalty and duty. One student wrote up a little sketch in which somehow Mencius shows up on the raft with Huckleberry Finn on the way down the Mississippi. She had Huck Finn and Mencius discussing whether Huck's treatment of Jim was right or not. That's the sort of thing we're trying to do. We want to ask: 'What would Mencius think about this or that? What would Mark Twain say?'

BCP: I've been wanting to get back to the comparative literature courses. You say you were trying to get at the idea of conflict of loyalty and duty. Is that where the thematic humanities-based curriculum comes in?

RS: When we started putting together the comparative literature materials we had a meeting at Dick and Nora Dauenhauer's in Juneau. Suzie and I sat down with Dick and Nora and first of all cranked out our great books list.

BCP: It seems like everyone was doing that for a while.

RS: William Bennett was still at the National Endowment for the Humanities then. We had had dinner in Anchorage because I was on the board of the Alaska Humanities Forum, one of the Endowment's programs, and Mr. Bennett was in Alaska for a conference. At that time he was going around asking people what their list of great books was and from that he had made up a list he was recommending to everyone to use as a minimum for high school graduation.

Even though everyone wanted to quarrel with Mr. Bennett's list—it didn't represent literatures outside the Greco-Roman-European tradition, there weren't enough women on the list, 1984 was only on the list because it happened to be 1984, not because it was great literature—we thought the general concept wasn't bad. Why not pull together our own ideas of what would be some (not all) key works we thought high school students should know.

The list we ended up with was a lot broader than Mr. Bennett's because it included a lot of Asian works and also we put in quite a few contemporary ethnic American writers as well as literature from Third World writers. What was most unusual though was that our list had Frank Johnson's *Strong Man*¹² right in there with *Crime and Punishment*, *The Odyssey*, and *Oedipus Rex* or Susie James's *Glacier Bay History* along with *The Analects* and *The Federalist Papers*.

We believe that these classics of the Tlingit oral tradition are in every way as worthy of our study as the works of Mencius, Homer, and Sophocles and while the others have literate history on their side and we want that in our course, the Tlingit stories have our own land and communities on their side.

But more than just having something in them from our own part of the woods, the work of Dick and Nora Dauenhauer shed a wonderful light on the dynamics of the literate-oral transformation. While it is fun to speculate on Homer and the formation of the Western literate tradition out of its roots in the art and stories of the Paleolithic past it is also a lot of fun to work in a contemporary emerging literate tradition where the oral tradition is still alive and well.

BCP: In other words it's not just a sentimental or romantic view of Native American literature that makes you want to include works from the Tlingit and other contemporary oral traditions in your comparative literature courses.

RS: Well, it's pretty hard to be romantic about a living tradition once you get engaged with it. The power of the tradition and the people takes over, whatever your own goals might have been to start out.

BCP: I think I'm getting a better idea of your interest in comparative literature. What's behind the thematic approach?

RS. We had this big list of books to read. Everyone was pitching for his or her favorites, of course, so the list grew pretty quickly. We talked about some of the standard ways people in comparative literature organize their materials, by period, by style, by genre, by critical tradition, and so on, but more than anything else we wanted this reading to be meaningful to teachers and their students as well as to ourselves. So we decided to arrange things by themes that we thought were important for all of us to think about.

It didn't take us long to get a list of themes. We had 'alienation' right at the top of the list because we'd all been doing a lot of thinking and talking about our contemporary inability to think in terms of our connections to the earth and to our own traditions. We thought that would be a good place to start for ourselves and, following the axe handle approach, thought that if that was a good one for us to try to work on it would be good for others as well.

Dick's got a good bit of the old Germanic scholar in him so as we started suggesting themes he made a fantastic chart with themes down one side and across the top 'Ancient Greece', 'China', 'Africa', 'Tlingit' and so forth. Then we just took our list and filled in the holes. That way we figured that if someone took the whole course they would get a reasonable coverage of the literature of the world at the same time they were working out some ideas about the themes.

BCP: Couldn't you have found something a little more upbeat than 'alienation' to start off? This was for high school use, wasn't it?

RS: That's funny. That's what one principal said too. But we thought then (and still do) that alienation is right at the heart of many contemporary ills and that we shouldn't avoid that.

BCP: So did this actually work? Is this something that you've actually taught?

RS: We ended up with four units designed to be a full two-semester sequence at the high school level. Then we cooked up a couple of courses called 'Teaching Comparative Literature I' and 'Teaching Comparative Literature II' as two 3-credit college courses for teachers. To give you an example, in the 'alienation' unit we read Melville's little story *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Maxine Hong Kingston's, *China Men*, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and two versions of *Bear Husband*, one by Tom Peters and another by Frank Dick.

BCP: That's one quarter's worth of reading? Isn't that a lot?

RS: It's a lot more than most of the teachers who took the course had done in that much time, that's for sure. But then we're asking for a different kind of reading than people usually do in literature courses. The point isn't to get into the details of styles or periods so much as to get at the question of alienation. In other words the theme is what organizes the readings and you try to keep focused back on that.

BCP: And does it work? or did it work?

RS: These courses have really worked very well for us. The University of Alaska in Juneau offered the courses by audio-conference and we had students in five or six different places, one teacher in Juneau, that was Dick, and me in Haines. We met by audio-conference once a week and talked about a different book each time more or less.

Remember the axe handle approach isn't that we've got the knowledge and that our students are going to get it from us through a lecture. The point is that we're all reading the same book as a way of stimulating our thinking and our discussions about alienation. In other words, the point is to model the use of good literature in addressing contemporary issues.

BCP: So you are the axe handle by which the teachers model their own teaching and learning and then the students learn from that?

RS: That's right. In each case one or the other of us usually hadn't read the book until we came to it in sequence. There was just too much reading for us to run on ahead of the students. We just talked about them as they came up.

But let me give you an example of how this worked for one of our students. He was teaching American Literature and had his readings all set up before taking our course. Now our idea is that what we're doing is an example or a model, not some rigid curriculum to be followed. So he did the appropriate thing; he used his own readings but started organizing the discussions around the theme we were discussing in the class, alienation.

A couple of days after he started in on this new approach one of his students came up to him after class and said, 'Mr. Estrem, is this OK?' He said, 'What? What do you mean?' The student said, 'This. What we've been doing the last few days. It doesn't seem like school.' A lot of teachers have that experience once they break out of the expert model and start using the axe handle approach. It's usually a little scary to start engaging your students in a serious discussion because you can't control where it is going to come out. But if you are genuinely concerned with the problem you are talking about your own interest and intelligence will keep you in touch with the discussion wherever it might go.

BCP: So these are courses you've actually designed and taught. Is that The Axe Handle Academy?

RS: That's really just the beginning. That's how we got started, with just the comparative literature courses, but we were really headed at a much more comprehensive view of education than just a high school language arts program.

BCP: It sounds like we might need to take a break here. It sounds like you've got a lot more to say there. Maybe when we continue tomorrow we can go into where you went with The Axe Handle Academy after developing the comparative literature courses. Does that sound about right?

RS: Sure. I want to get into the bioregional core of the idea and that'll take a little while. I'd rather have lunch right now.

The Second Day: Bioregional Studies

Two sunny days in a row isn't a record in Haines but it is something everyone appreciates. When we started up on the second day, Ron was sipping his usual morning Darjeeling and enjoying the morning sun.

BCP: Yesterday you said the comparative literature courses were just where you started with The Axe Handle Academy, that they were the seed but not the heart. You said the axe handle model of education was the heart. I think you quoted Mencius on that—to improve the world you first look to your own behavior. I think we'll probably get back to that but what I'd like to know more about is what you called 'bioregional humanities' or 'the ecological arts'. Have you shifted your perspective there or just your way of talking about it?

RS: It's really the same thing but we've been groping around some trying to find the right way of saying it. Right from the beginning when we started talking about alienation in our comparative literature courses we were always trying to get at something more than our social alienation or our sense of individual rootlessness. We were trying to get at our technological and spiritual alienation from the earth. We think that's right at the bottom of the other ills.

BCP: So you really are engaged in something a lot broader than what is usually meant by comparative literature.

RS: When we talk about the public school curriculum with the comparative literature we're already reaching out beyond the usual language arts, reading, spelling curriculum. We're getting into social studies, history, and even anthropology. Some school people we were talking to wanted to know what we were going to do with the rest of the curriculum, math and science and the rest. To fit comparative literature in the way we were doing it we were already moving things around quite a bit.

The Dauenhauers at Sealaska Heritage Foundation asked us to write up a little position paper on how it all might work out if someone really wanted to rearrange their curriculum. From the Tlingit point of view our standard arrangement along discipline lines doesn't make a lot of sense.

So we rearranged everything into three core areas, Cultural Studies, Bioregional Studies, and Communication Studies. The comparative literature courses would fall into the area of cultural studies. We put the work we've been doing over the years on interethnic communication into communication studies and then drafted up a course called The Life of the Land as our first course in bioregional studies.

BCP: Just so it doesn't slip away on us, can I ask here how your work in interethnic communication figures into this? I don't see the connection.

RS: Some of the ideas for The Axe Handle Academy got going one day when I was working for a school district. We often get asked to conduct workshops for school districts and other organizations where they have a client or staff population of mixed ethnicity. In this particular case the school district was being accused of discrimination by the family of one of their students. They were hoping that some training in cross-cultural or interethnic communication might help.

I usually think a lot can be done in that area through workshops, at least getting people to see the issues they'll have to work with, but on this particular day I was skeptical and said that first we had to come to some agreement about what the overall purpose of schooling was because without that we might really be working at cross purposes. I volunteered to go first.

I said the purpose of schooling was to enculturate, to teach culture, to make students members of the culture. Our problem as I saw it was that we were working without any solid notion of what our

culture was. The school was coming at it as 'culture' was just certain aspects of Western European civilization. The family may have been coming at it as 'culture' was their traditional native culture. I wasn't sure there but in any case I argued that either approach was wrong.

The idea of mono-culture is simply not possible to maintain in contemporary Alaska, probably not anywhere. This particular school district had some dozen strongly motivated special interest ethnic groups competing for attention. The entire State of Alaska is economically tied directly to both the religious and economic belief systems of Near Eastern oil producers. And our position on the Pacific Rim argues for an increasing awareness of Asia in our day-to-day affairs. We see logs cut in our backyard going onto Chinese and Korean ships. And then our Russian past is largely forgotten in schools at the same time that the Defense Department is shoring up military units in a strategy of trying to achieve a world balance against Russian presence in the Pacific.

In other words I argued that day as I do now that comparative culture is the conceptual core of education. In that view an ability in interethnic or cross-cultural communication is essential for anyone's success in this sort of world, not just something a school district should undertake for remedial purposes.

BCP: Did the school district buy that argument?

RS: The superintendent said it was absolutely inspiring. He'd never thought about such things. I couldn't say whether in the long run that district has really done much different yet but that's where we pinned down the comparative culture core of The Axe Handle Academy. That's where the communication studies component comes from and it balances out the comparative literature studies.

BCP: I see that connection now. Can we go back to *The Life of the Land*? That was the course you developed for the bioregional studies component, wasn't it?

RS: The big problem with everything anthropological and comparative is the pretty quick drift into relativism. It doesn't take a lot of comparative work in literature or culture before you start seeing that just about everything imaginable has been done somewhere or believed in somewhere and you begin to wonder what to believe yourself. You ask yourself what's the basis of your own discipline?

We struggled with that for a long time and didn't really get it pinned down for ourselves until we wrote *The Problem of Power*.¹³ There we followed Confucius and asked: What are the 'organic categories'? What is more fundamental than anything else for us; we'll build from there.

BCP: Descartes started by accepting his own existence. Is that where you started?

RS: I suppose so. But we added a couple of things. The most basic, which Descartes and a bunch of philosophers since him didn't consider important is that we eat food. So we started there; Our food comes from the earth. That's one of the organic categories. You tie things back to that and you probably won't go too far wrong.

Remember, this is the common knowledge of mankind. If you go back to Gary Snyder's beloved Paleolithic, 40,000 years back, and look at human culture from then up to now to see what's normal human knowledge and normal human behavior, you'll see that everyone has always taken care of their food supply first; and that means take care of the earth. That's where *The Life of the Land* came from.

BCP: What kind of course is *The Life of the Land*?

RS: We built it around four modules so it would parallel the comparative literature courses somewhat. We called them: Mapping, Origins, Emanations, and Equilibrium. In the first unit you

take a stab at mapping your bioregion. As anyone knows who has tried it, it gets harder to do the more you consider it. Do you go by biotic shift, watersheds, migration patterns of human and animal species, by where your aboriginal subsistence techniques apply or what? The point isn't to make the map so much as to uncover the complex network of relations within and across bioregions, so you don't worry too much if it seems hopeless to finish the task.

In the Origins unit we ask students to do a simple survey of something like their breakfast table and then try to trace all of those items back to their source in the earth.

Again, the point isn't that you'll succeed so much as to start unpacking the tremendous technological, social, economic, and political overlay between the earth and our day-to-day subsistence. It's easy to forget how totally dependent we are on people and networks and distribution systems for all the little things we use from one day to the next.

BCP: Let me interrupt a minute. It seems like a study like that would be duck soup in a remote Alaska village but a terror in some place like San Francisco.

RS: Maybe, but once we ran across and bought a pomelo in a little store in Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories and since then I've wondered how it got there.

BCP: A lot of us don't even know what a pomelo is let alone why it should be in a store in the Northwest Territories,

RS: Some people call it a Chinese grapefruit. We used to get them all the time in Honolulu. I'd never seen one anywhere else. So we were surprised to find it in such a remote place. And when the best price on nashi, Japanese apple-pears, in Alaska is in Bethel when it's 20 below outside and snowing and blowing you wonder if it would be simple for anyone anywhere to trace the connections between the earth and their own breakfast table.

BCP: What's the Emanations unit?

RS: There we do the reverse. In the Origins unit we look at the origins of the things we use each day. In the Emanations unit we do a survey of things that originate in our own bioregion and try to find out where it all goes. It is the same thing in a way, and with the Equilibrium unit we tally up the net gain or loss of our bioregion. Are we a net importer or exporter of food, goods, people, energy, water, or whatever.

The point of the whole course isn't to get these things pinned down because it all keeps changing anyway. The point is to use the exercises as a way of getting to know home and how it relates to the earth. You can't do it without messing around in geography, history, economics, politics, local government, business and all the rest.

Nanao Sakaki has a fine piece in a longer poem that goes like this:

If you want to know the land
 Learn the weeds.
If you want to know the culture
 Check the craft.
If you want to know the future of the land
 Listen to the folk music.
If you want to know the people
 Know yourself.¹⁴

That last line is a straight take off on Mencius.

BCP: I can see now how in a way your theme of alienation runs right through this scheme from *Bartleby* to cross-cultural or interethnic communication to studying the technological overlay on our day-to-day subsistence. Are these all courses that you teach? In other words what kind of a reality are you talking about? Is this all imaginary?

RS: We've taught each of the comparative literature courses once and I did a one-credit introduction to The Axe Handle Academy last summer for teachers in Fairbanks. We haven't done *The Life of the Land* yet. Responsive Communication is our basic course in Communication Studies and we've done that many times as a workshop or seminar for all kinds of agencies from school districts and colleges to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Now we're working up a course we're calling Comparative Languages and Cultures to be a kind of introduction to comparative language study. As a high school course it will present a survey of four languages in four semesters as a way of dealing with the common foreign language requirement of two years of study.

BCP: From what you've said so far all of your development has been in courses for teachers. Is that where you got that about being a school for making schools?

RS: We do some consulting work with schools and I'm on the school board here in Haines as well and so we found it most natural to tie our activities to public school structures. But that's not our main interest in the long run.

BCP: What is your main interest?

RS: You might say our curriculum development is the school of education branch of The Axe Handle Academy but we're really mostly working with a much broader group of people than teachers. We think there's a big gap in education in our contemporary society. Up until not too long ago a person could get a reasonable education by the time he or she was 25 and then between work, reading, family, church and other things keep it up. It may be because of the way things are changing now but there seems to be a large group of people coming to mid-life feeling that they'd like to take some time to stop and think, to read something, to reorient their lives some and there's really not a lot available to help people do this,

BCP: Are you talking about the mid-life crisis?

RS: I don't like that term much because I'm not sure it's a crisis for many people. But a lot of people in our society find themselves somewhere around 40 or 45 ready for some reevaluation of their goals and even their values. Often they find they'd just like to do some thinking about what they've been doing up to then. For many of us, and I include myself in this group, a sense of ecological responsibility has come over the years into a central position in our thinking but we haven't really had the time or place or company to think through the reorientation this might mean.

BCP: So your main goal isn't really developing materials for the public school curriculum?

RS: It seems like we got to where we were making them up faster than anybody could implement them and yet we still had the same problem, getting people to feel comfortable with the conceptual reorientation this ecological approach to education would take. We figured out that what we were doing was really, again, the axe handle model. We don't want to make up more and more canned curricular materials. There's lots of that now. We want to encourage people to step back a bit and think about their lives, whether they are public school teachers or their students or corporate managers or loggers or fish and game biologists or whatever else they are. We're trying to provide the model and the circumstances for doing that.

BCP: What kind of things are you doing now?

RS: Well in a way, everything we're doing is a piece of The Axe Handle Academy. Right here we're running a little bookstore called The Gutenberg Dump where we carry about 1,100 titles ranging from bieregional things to comparative literature. We make sure that when we refer to something it is also on our shelves so somebody can go into it further.

BCP: That makes it a pretty unusual collection for a town of 1,000 people, but as the bookstore for The Axe Handle Academy maybe it is a little easier to understand the titles.

RS: We're just one of the bookstores of The Axe Handle Academy. Nobody is looking for territorial dominion here. We encourage everybody to get their own local bookstore to get the titles they need to pursue the ecological arts but if they can't get them then they can come to us.

BCP: Besides books and course development what other AxeHandle Academy activities are there?

RS: I've mentioned Gary Snyder because he's been doing this stuff longer than we have. Last summer he did a raft trip out of UC Berkeley right here in our backyard on the Tatsenshini River on the poetry of wilderness. That's an Axe Handle Academy course if ever there was one. This spring Dick and Nora Dauenhauer did an Elder Hostel course on the ferry up from Seattle on Tlingit literature and art. That's another example. And right now I have a small grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum to develop three reading and discussion groups in as many communities. That's a little Axe Handle Academy project as well.

BCP: So are you saying that wherever somebody is doing something that fits the idea of the 'ecological arts' that's the Axe Handle Academy in operation?

RS: Well, in a way that's right. That's all we're doing at the philosophical level. We're trying to help make sense out of what we and a lot of other people are already doing but aren't quite sure what to call it.

BCP: But there's more?

RS: I think what we're doing now is trying to firm it up a little and give it some tangible reality.

BCP: How are you doing that? Is there some kind of organization or structure?

RS: These things usually come down to that, don't they? We're going at this a step at a time. The full-blown Axe Handle Academy would amount to a full-time residential program somewhere. We think Haines is the best place. It's as beautiful a place as you'll find an earth and people like to come here. Tucked up here between the Chilkoot and Chilkat Rivers we're right on the top edge of a major ecological zone that extends way down into the California coast. In another view it's the Northern Pacific Rim connected by the ocean currents, the Kuroshio or Japan Current, the Alaskan Current, and the Equatorial Current running by Hawaii on back to Asia.

Yet if you run up the road here into the pass you cross one of the great divides in North America into the sub-arctic interior taiga forest. That runs all the way East to Hudson's Bay and beyond, way up north to the Brooks Range, and West to Holy Cross on the Yukon.

BCP: But you don't have a residential program, do you?

RS: No, just for ourselves so far. We think others might join us over time but the residential program is down the road a bit yet. The full-blown Axe Handle Academy will also have a short period seminar program, things we do for two to four or five days. We want to do something on coastal, alpine, and taiga ecological zone boundaries. We've got a nice day climb right here behind us where you can walk up through the zones from sea level to 3,600 feet and back just

walking out the front door. Then we'll pack up and hike around up in the pass and then down into the trees on the other side. In three or four days you could learn a lot about the ways ecological zones work and have a lot of fun in the process.

Dan Henry is a writer and an ecologist who lives here in Haines. He's been putting together a course on the rhetoric of wilderness. His background is in rhetoric and what he is doing is studying the actual arguments used in the conservation movement over the years from the point of view of what works and what doesn't. It often isn't the logic that is so compelling as the presentation. That's a course in rhetoric and the history of the conservation movement all rolled into one but we'd probably hike or kayak around some just to get into the mood.

BCP: Anything else?

RS: It's like an onion. The next layer out is our outreach seminars and discussion groups. We've been doing these for years one way and another; the only difference is now we're saying they're seminars in The Axe Handle Academy.

BCP: And the very outside layer of the onion is the idea itself?

RS: That's what it comes down to. The idea of the axe handle model—lot of people are involved in that; then there are the outreach workshops and seminars wherever we arrange them; then, soon we'll start up the short-term residential seminars and then if it all stays together we might actually find some people wanting to take two or three months away from whatever else they are doing to develop themselves in the ecological arts. That would be the start of a long-term residential program.

BCP: I think I'm getting a better idea of what The Axe Handle Academy is and isn't but, I've still got a lot of questions. I'd like to hear more about this switch in terminology from the humanities to the arts. Maybe we should hold off on these until tomorrow. What do you think?

RS: That sounds fine to me. This time of year with the sun shining all day I hate to spend it all working. Maybe next year we can do this up in the hills somewhere.

The Third Day: The Ecological Arts

Things were starting to get funny in Haines by the third straight day of sunshine. It is newsworthy when Haines is the hottest place in the state and most residents were looking longingly at the sky for signs of rain. We knew we had to finish the interview with Ron before the morning was over or lose him to the hills, so we plunged right in.

BCP: How'd you get from bioregional humanities to ecological arts? Comparative literature is solidly within the humanities and one entire component of the curriculum materials you developed is called Bioregional Studies.

RS: Over the past ten years I've spent a lot of time in and around the humanities from getting grants to do projects to sitting on the board of the Alaska Humanities Forum. But I've often been of two minds about the humanities. From the Renaissance on the humanities have taken an anti-authoritarian or anti-institutional position for which I've had a lot of sympathy. In a way the humanities formed the first concentration of opposition to the tremendous institutional and organizational power of the medieval church. In a real way the humanities have been the soil in which modern European thought has grown. Where would we be without our literature, our history, our philosophy and especially the critical tradition in these which again and again refuses to accept truth without subjecting it to the test of criticism and comparison?

BCP: Well, I suppose for one thing there would be no Axe Handle Academy outside of that critical tradition. It seems to me that in a way what you are trying to do is to revive the best of Renaissance humanism. Maybe the fact that you are tying it to a form of bioregionalism makes it a little different. Renaissance humanists seemed to strive for a kind of universalism, at least a European universalism that quite intentionally crossed national and local boundaries. But doesn't just calling it bioregional humanities handle that?

RS: We thought so for a while and that's why we talked about what we were doing as bioregional humanism, But there's something in that that kept nagging at us. One part of it was the position humanism gives to humans in the scheme of things. They're at the top of the heap, the head of the body of life, the arbiters of life on the planet, the pilots of Buckminster Fuller's spaceship. And I'd like to follow Gary Snyder's lead here and put us right down in there with the rest of the life of the planet, not above or below, just a part of it.

BCP: The Gaia Hypothesis?

RS: I think the life of the earth, the spirit of the earth, is the main reference metaphor. One of the unfortunate slants that some humanist thought has taken is a very anti-spiritual attitude toward life. I think we need to work to recover the spiritual in our overly rational, intellectualized lives. It was the cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman¹⁵ who pointed out that this is the first society on earth to try to live in a complete spiritual void. While we may ultimately succeed, for the moment it seems to be killing us.

BCP: So your point is that we need to overcome the humanist attitude that sets us off from the life of the earth.

RS: I flew over this little spot last winter and from up at ten or twelve thousand feet all you see is ice, snow, and rock. Only if you know where to look can you make out the highway and then there's this little cluster of buildings down at the bottom of a big hole. In that perspective it's hard to maintain that we're the head of things here on this part of the earth; it's more like we're the ankle or maybe an elbow—part, potentially useful, a real problem when we don't do our part right but hardly the head.

BCP: So you don't like the anthropocentric nature of the humanities?

RS: I think it can be a problem and we really need to start thinking a little differently about our place in the scheme of life on the planet. But there's another aspect of humanism we've been trying to work out and that's the core metaphor of the individual. Humanism and the humanities are based on the idea that mankind comes parcelled out in units of single individuals who are largely rational beings who behave largely autonomously.

BCP: The Renaissance man?

RS: Yes, at least since then we've carried the ideal image of ourselves as independent from each other. Our sciences as well have preferred an 'organic' analysis where you isolate the individual member of the species for study rather than look at ecological units.

BCP: But doesn't nature sort out into individual units for growth, adaptation and the like?

RS: It didn't have to be that way. We could have believed ourselves to be parcelled out in reproductive pairs or in extended families or in lots of other ways, but that's the image the Renaissance created for us and we're still struggling with some of the consequences of that image.

BCP: What consequences?

RS: One of the consequences of that image of individualism is that we're almost completely incompetent at thinking and acting ecologically because it feels to us like we're losing our freedom of self-determination. There's a fine book by Chet Bowers *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education*,¹⁶ in which he outlines the consequences of the Renaissance (or liberal) image of man.

BCP: Wait a minute. It sounds like you are about to take on liberalism. I might have put you more on the liberal end of things than the conservative.

RS: The label isn't the point, I don't think. But as Bowers points out, one of the results of the liberal or humanist belief that we're all self-regulating, autonomous individuals is that we easily deny all the connections to our past, each other, and the earth. We tend to see these connections as obstructions which it is our responsibility to free ourselves from.

BCP: So you are saying Wally Hickel or Bechtel Corporation are liberals and humanists?

RS: Ronald Reagan too! Language is a funny thing; you can get a guy like Ronald Reagan who advances the central humanist position that we're all rational, self-motivated, self-expressing individuals with the right to remain freely so and he's called a conservative and an arch-enemy of humanism and liberalism.

The classical liberal position is that the greatest good for all comes from each individual exercising his or her right to determine his or her own choices. One need only be guided by reason and self-interest. This is John Locke, Adam Smith, and J. S. Mill. The conservative position is that people are likely to be guided by their past and their connections and so you need to be watchful of the growth of self-interest. That's James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. Somehow in our period the terms have been reversed so that the classical liberal position of self-interest which is controlled only by reason is now called 'conservative' and the idea that we are socially grounded beings is called 'liberal'.

BCP. It looks like you might do better to avoid the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' altogether.

RS. The labels don't help much and 'humanism' really is starting to become a liability to anyone who is interested in re-energizing our connections to the earth, to each other and to the past.

BCP: But what about 'arts'? Surely there is nothing more associated in our thinking with the iconoclastic free thinker than the image of the artist. How are you using the term?

RS: It's true enough that the term 'the arts' even includes movie stars and I wonder about that; but there are several aspects of the term I still like. For instance, the real difference that divides the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities is that if you do something, it's the arts, if you write about it or criticize it, it's the humanities, The arts fall out on the side of action, the humanities fall out on the side of critical analysis. I'd like to think that The Axe Handle Academy was education for action not just critical analysis. There's lots of that going on. Go to graduate school and get Ph.D. if that's your interest.

BCP: But what about your courses in comparative literature or the rhetoric of wilderness; are those the arts?

RS: There we fall back on an older use of 'the arts' as in 'the liberal arts' (if you'll excuse the term 'liberal'). That gives us grammar, logic, and rhetoric from the old trivium and arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy from the old quadrivium; it's the revival of the old Renaissance universities in that case. The meaning I prefer is the use of 'art' as in 'the art of diplomacy'; it means a studied conduct or set of actions. That's where I see this all coming down to real life. The whole purpose of an Axe Handle Academy education is to be able to act appropriately on a basis of studied and practiced discipline.

BCP: O.K., so we've got 'the arts'. What are 'the ecological arts'?

RS: Well now, from here on out we're making it all up so it's anybody's game. I'd like to stay out of the game of making up new disciplines, a new trivium or whatever. So I'm not going to say biology is in but deconstructionist criticism is out. The trick is to ask ourselves about the things we are doing: What would be the consequences of thinking about this ecologically? What are our deepest mythological references for this? What discipline or practice is useful for appropriate action? A few questions like that are really enough to get you into a different way of looking at things. You don't need a lot more.

And then you try to get your organic categories down: Food comes from the earth; life depends on other life; meaning always originates in the past. There again it doesn't take too many to get the process rolling. Like Confucius, we're not looking for perfection so such as interesting improvement.

BCP. Well let's say I've gotten my answer to my first question. I asked you three days ago if you could say simply what The Axe Handle Academy is. You said, 'It's a school of ecological arts.' And I even think I have an idea now of what that means. Do you think you could give me a short summary statement to close this?

RS: It's worth a try. The Axe Handle Academy is a school of ecological arts. It is founded on the principle that students learn more from what they see you do than from anything you say; the teacher is always the central model. Its purpose is to provide an education in thinking ecologically as the basis for disciplined action. It takes as its main premises that our food comes from the earth, that life depends on other life, and that all meaning originates in the past. Its methods are comparative cultural study, its organization is bioregional.

At the present The Axe Handle Academy has two tangible activities, teaching comparative literature courses and seminars in responsive communication. It will soon increase its seminar offerings both in Haines and elsewhere. It may some day offer more extended residential programs. Meanwhile it will continue its development of courses both to offer directly as seminars and as a model for others who have an interest. A catalog of The Axe Handle Academy is now in preparation.

BEP: Somehow I feel that you could have said all that three days ago.

RS: I'm not really sure that I could have done that. The questions really led my thinking in the direction it has gone. Now, of course, there will be more questions and we'll have to wait to see where that discussion goes.

Note on the interview

This interview is a reconstructed and extended version of one that took place at The Gutenberg Dump in Haines on July 6, 1987. Gary Snyder interviewed Ron Scollon, Suzie Scollon, and Dick Dauenhauer on that occasion with Nanao Sakaki listening in. This version has played havoc with personae, reducing the original five to two, BCP and RS. The Black Current Press (BCP) is the publishing company of The Gutenberg Dump. The interview was written, not spoken, on the front porch in the hot sun. The Darjeeling tea, at least, was a reality.

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Note: This essay was downloaded from the website of The Axe Handle Academy.
www.gutenbergdump.net/axe.

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¹ Gary Snyder, *Axe Handles* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983).

² Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Books).

³ Ron Scollon and Suzie Scollon, *The Problem of Power* (Haines, AK: The Black Current Press, 1986).

⁴ Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984).

⁵ Confucius, *The Unwobbling Pivot, The Great Digest, The Analects* (New York: New Directions, 1951).

⁶ Mencius, *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books).

⁷ Mencius, p. 119.

⁸ Confucius, p. 29-33.

⁹ Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

¹⁰ Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, p. 117.

¹¹ Mencius, p. 130.

¹² Richard Dauenhauer and Nora Dauenhauer, *Haa Shuka, Our Ancestors* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987).

¹³ Scollon and Scollon, *The Problem of Power*.

¹⁴ Nanao Sakaki, *Real Play*. (Santa Fe: Tooth of Time Press, 1983). 'False Solomon's Seal' (no page number).

¹⁵ Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenmann, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart*, (New York: Knopf, 1974).

¹⁶ CA Bowers, *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987).