The Peacock Mosaic
by John Silliphant

It’s easy to forget, but back in September 2020, people were stressed. The pandemic had changed everyone’s life. Some people were isolated; others lacked personal space. Most people were suffering in some kind of way. Including the kids.

With low enrollment, our school, East Bay Waldorf School, in El Sobrante, CA, had closed for the year, leaving our kids school-less.

We scrambled. Teachers, now without jobs, connected together and formed backyard pods. Our kids would meet in person, outdoors and masked – walking in the hills, and making the very best of it. But with our 4th grade school day ending at 12:30, it didn’t give parents enough breathing room. As a solution to this problem, the parents came up with a plan to extend the days by teaching what we called “Enriching Afternoons.”

Our plan was to pair up and co-teach the absolute best of what we each had to give. Turns out, as a small group, we had some real value to offer. For instance, we had professional chefs teach cooking classes. We had a symphony flutist teaching music. We had a semi-professional soccer player coaching soccer. And we hired a guest permaculture teacher.

Myself and another parent, Dawn, asked ourselves... if given the opportunity to teach just one class to these kids, what’s the single most valuable thing we had to offer? At this very stressful time, we felt that we could help them connect more deeply to themselves, and share with them the essential lessons we had each picked up for living a more connected life.

We called our class “Finding True North.”

During our first quarter, we taught meditation and chanting, and covered different themes, with fun and meaningful exercises. When we taught about kindness, we put inspiring messages out into the world in various ways, and left treasures for others to discover. We taught about compassion by leaving sugar for ants to find, or birdseed for the birds and squirrels. We wrote letters to elders living in care facilities. We taught gratitude by creating a string of hearts with thankful messages for our backyard hosts. We experienced love by sharing in a circle all the things we appreciate about one another. We paid attention to this moment – now, practiced lucid living, and letting go. It was a special class, and a very precious opportunity for us as well.

During our final quarter, we decided to offer a collective gift to everyone at the school. By the 3rd grade chicken coop on campus, there was a wall that had recently been
stuccoed. As if by some Divine providence, a parent, Nicole, had been collecting special tiles over many years, and generously offered them for us to use. We had no idea what the kids would create, but we hoped it could be special.

For several classes, we had the kids meditate and look within themselves – deep within – to their core or center. And within that sacred place, we asked them to visualize their own unique gem that could be found there. When everyone had discovered theirs, we asked what it would look like to bring these gems together in a collective mosaic piece. The kids began imagining. They drew up their different ideas. Some kids drew sun scenes. Others, space scenes. One had a volcano shooting out gems. We discussed the various ideas and how we might bring them together. As the ideas began morphing, a kindergartener, Evelyn, who was also participating in the class with her older brother, thought of a peacock and made the suggestion. There was an immediate and collective ‘a-ha!’ All the kids were in complete agreement. Their combined gems would take the form of a peacock.

In an empty, unused room, I laid down brown paper, identical in size to the wall, and marked out the electrical panel, conduit runs, etc. I also mapped out a grid composed of lines, and circles that would enable me to later transfer the design to the wall.

For one whole class, the kids simply played with the tiles to discover designs that best conveyed gem-like peacock feathers. When they were ready, they began the actual design. We would begin each day with meditations and chanting to ensure our creative work was coming from a mindful place. While most the kids were designing, other kids would take turns meditating and ringing a singing bowl to keep the room vibrations high, much like Tibetan monks might do while creating sand mandalas. By the end of the quarter, which also ended the school year, the kids had finished their design. It was beautiful. They even designed the background stars and chose the paint colors. Now it would be up to the parents to figure out how to meticulously and laboriously move the design from the room floor to the stucco wall. Oy...

There was a lot of love and mindful guidance behind this class and project, but the design itself was, truly, created by the kids.

While this whole process was happening, another kind of movement also began to emerge. The teachers who had kept the flame of the school alive in the backyard pods, our 4th grade class cooperative, and many heads, hearts, and hands, all came together – again, each bringing forward our very best – to re-birth a school of our collective dreams. It is now known as Wildcat Canyon Community School, a beautiful endeavor founded on the highest of ideals.

As it turns out, it takes quite a lot of effort to dream up and manifest an actual school. As it moves along, what may be most essential is to always maintain that close connection with our True North, and to never stop dreaming. Our work here is to keep the light bright for our kids. Our adorable, precious, sacred little ones – each a unique gem in the world. May we all give our gifts, and always walk in beauty.
Artists: Ananda, Annabelle, Cameron, Ishan, Kaile, Johnathan, Tenzin, Tessa, Wesley, (and, of course, Evelyn)

Special Thanks to Nicole DeCarion, Rosalyn Shyu, and Dawn Kali