

Description of the Lines of the hand activity

Jan van Boeckel



An important question in the context of thinking about sustainability is how we relate and feel connected to places in the natural world, to landscapes. This relationship, however, may undergo deep changes in different phases of one's life. The felt bond, at any moment, is partly informed by prior experiences and shaped through our memory. What do we carry with us as a "storied remembrance" of places we have been before and the sensory perceptions we have felt there? And can such places in nature and "memories of the senses" be evoked through art and imagination?

The lines of the hand activity is about engaging the imagination as fully as possible, and the point of departure is merely a pencil drawing of someone's palm lines on a white piece of heavy cardboard. This uncommon circumstance, of using very basic materials and a theme related to one's own body, makes the activity at once more intimate and personal. Through that, the participants seem to enter a different than ordinary space. We see the lines on the palm of our hands every day but we seldom really pay attention to them.

The lines of the hand activity challenges the participants. Can imagination help them to feel a sense of *re*-connection to nature? Could this ability facilitate their capacity to retrieve what they carry as memory of place along with them from childhood onwards (while they themselves may not be necessarily aware of this)? This artful activity is basically an effort of introspecting one's memory of sense of place. In general, we seldom pay attention to the lines on our hands. This is also the case with many other aspects of our body and the living earth around us; we usually simply take them for granted. The lines of the hand activity is aimed at igniting the

imagination and to encourage looking at familiar things with fresh eyes – important aspects of art practice.

An important aspect of sustainability is to encourage people open their senses more fully towards their environment and to develop a caring attitude for it. The lines of the hand activity is aimed at enhancing the participant's openness to environmental experiences; however, in this case, the participant's relationship to the more-than-human world is, as it were, approached "from the inside out." How it "is" to be in the imaginal landscape has to be retrieved from memory, evoked by the imagination and all the combinations between these. In that sense, the activity can also be done inside a building, with little or no sense perceptions of an immediate natural environment.

One of the outcomes can be that it demonstrates to the participants, in a very embodied way, how rich the power of imagination potentially is and how easy (but also: how hard) it is to imagine and/or retrieve memories of past sense perceptions. It brings along the challenge of formulating them to others – which may feel childish or crazy, but this is done in a safe, small group environment. One talks about the lines in the hand palm of another participant, at the same time as somebody else is speaking about one's *own* hand lines. Further, the activity presumably allows for reflection on what landscape is and how we relate (or *not* relate) to it. Ideally, it also provides space to talk about the differences between fantasy (taken as a pure mental construction), imagination, and visualization in the mind's eye.

Lines of the hand consists of the following stages.

1. Introduction

As main facilitator of the activity, I will start out by pointing out that this workshop will be about our embodied knowledge: our sensorial perception, our memories and our imaginative capacity. I am interested to see what happens when we look at imagination not as a tool of our will, but as a mode of engaging with and of relating to the world in a following mode rather than in an intentional (purposive) way. As an opening, I tend to tell about reports on prisoners in complete solitary confinement. It is said that some of them were actually able to endure the extreme conditions and did not go insane because they were able to engage in an imaginal dialogue with another living creature in the cell – be it a mouse, a cockroach, or even an ant. The prisoners would relate to this creature as a *Thou* (Buber, 1950) rather than an "it," and it became a living relationship for them. By investing their imaginative capacities in the encounter, they found a way of keeping a very basic sense of social and cultural relations intact, picturing themselves in a richer world than the one afforded by the concrete walls of the cell block. I then suggest to the participants that, with this activity, I would like them to dwell for some time in their own imagination, to see what they can retrieve (or what spontaneously emerges) from there.

2. Each participant drawing the lines of the hand

Each participant is invited by me to make a (not too detailed) pencil drawing of the main lines on the palm of one of their hands. To make the drawing, they should use their unschooled non-writing hand. The reason for using the “wrong” hand is to cause an estranging, defamiliarizing effect and to direct the focus to the lines of the one hand that is most predominant in our everyday actions. It is important that the participants don’t spend too much time on the drawing, as the lines shouldn’t be too elaborate and detailed; the sketchier they are the better.

3. Splitting up in subgroups (about 4-5 participants in each)

Here the participants are asked to form subgroups consisting of four to five persons each. Within each small group they exchange the cards, so that each participant has the hand line drawing of somebody else. Each subgroup appoints one member to specifically report later to all the participants on what has come up in their specific subgroup. Before the subgroups split apart, participants are asked if they can try to experience themselves as being *in* a landscape, a landscape that is formed by the lines on the paper (the hand lines of another participant). They should try to feel the different sensory experiences that being in this landscape seems to bring along. This can be a memorized place or landscape, but also something that comes from the imagination completely. Then the subgroup finds a quiet space for itself.

4. Focusing on the drawing of the lines of the hand

The participants of the subgroup spend some minutes meditating on the drawing of rather abstract lines each of them holds in their hands. Subsequently, the members of each small group tell each other of how it is to be in this imagined territory, one after the other, until all have had their turn.

5. Reporting in the bigger group

When all small groups are ready, the facilitator asks them to assemble again together with the others in the larger group, forming a circle. Here, the reporters are invited to share with the others what took place. The facilitator leads this conversation. What were the kinds of sensory experiences that the participants talked about in their group? Which ones came up first? Which were easier to describe, and which ones more difficult? Was there a difference between participants who talked about themselves as being *inside* a landscape and those who looked *at it* from a distance? Their answers provide openings, e.g. for a dialogue about our (culturally-biased) predominantly visual-centered relation to landscape, compared to perceptions of people in so-called primarily oral cultures. Visually-centered people tend to regard landscape as something that unfolds itself in front of us, as a map we hold in our hands.

6. Return of the lines of the hand drawings to their makers

The facilitator then asks the participants to request their respective partners in the exchange to return to them the card with their own hand lines.

7. Haiku poem making

The next step is that participants take their own hand line drawing along on a short walk in the local area, in search of a physical spot that would, in some way, “resonate” with the drawn lines on their card. They should look for some kind of resemblance in patterns. Once found, this resonating part of the environment is then the location where the facilitator invites them to compose a *haiku*-like poem.¹ In this short poem they should try to respond to the “gift” they’ve received of one of the other participants trying to imagine him- or herself as being in a landscape formed by one’s own lines in the hand.

8. Reassembly of all participants

When a participant has finished composing the haiku, he or she then returns to the large circle of whole group together. When everybody has returned, the poems are read out loud (but only if the maker would voluntarily choose to do so, there is no pressure).

If time allows, we have a group conversation – with those of the participants who like and dare to speak out – on how this activity makes sense (or *doesn’t* make sense) in the context of the engaging with the issue of sustainability.

¹ A *haiku* is a three-phrase poem, and this form of poetry originates from Japan. Haiku typically take aspects of the natural world as their subject matter.