

The Practice of the Wild

by Gary Snyder

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The Etiquette of Freedom

The Compact

One June afternoon in the early seventies I walked through the crackly gold grasses to a neat but unpainted cabin at the back end of a ranch near the drainage of the South Yuba in northern California. It had no glass in the windows, no door. It was shaded by a huge black oak. The house looked abandoned and my friend, a student of native California literature and languages, walked right in. Off to the side, at a bare wooden table, with a mug of coffee, sat a solid old gray-haired Indian man. He acknowledged us, greeted my friend, and gravely offered us instant coffee and canned milk. He was fine, he said, but he would never go back to a VA hospital again. From now on if he got sick he would stay where he was. He liked being home. We spoke for some time of people and places along the western slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, the territories of Concow and Nisenan people. Finally my friend broke his good news: "Louie, I have found another person who speaks Nisenan." There were perhaps no more than three people alive speaking Nisenan at that time, and Louie was one of them. "Who?" Louie asked. He told her name. "She lives back of Oroville. I can bring her here, and you two can speak." "I know her from way back," Louie said. "She wouldn't want to come over here. I don't think I should see her. Besides, her family and mine never did get along."

That took my breath away. Here was a man who would not let the mere threat of cultural extinction stand in the way of his (and her) values. To well-meaning sympathetic white people this response is almost incomprehensible. In the world of his people, never overpopulated, rich in acorn, deer, salmon, and flicker feathers, to cleave to such purity, to be perfec-

tionists about matters of family or clan, were affordable luxuries. Louie and his fellow Nisenan had more important business with each other than conversations. I think he saw it as a matter of keeping their dignity, their pride, and their own ways—regardless of what straits they had fallen upon—until the end.

Coyote and Ground Squirrel do not break the compact they have with each other that one must play predator and the other play game. In the wild a baby black-tailed hare gets maybe one free chance to run across a meadow without looking up. There won't be a second. The sharper the knife, the cleaner the line of the carving. We can appreciate the elegance of the forces that shape life and the world, that have shaped every line of our bodies—teeth and nails, nipples and eyebrows. We also see that we must try to live without causing unnecessary harm, not just to fellow humans but to all beings. We must try not to be stingy, or to exploit others. There will be enough pain in the world as it is.

Such are the lessons of the wild. The school where these lessons can be learned, the realms of caribou and elk, elephant and rhinoceros, orca and walrus, are shrinking day by day. Creatures who have traveled with us through the ages are now apparently doomed, as their habitat—and the old, old habitat of humans—falls before the slow-motion explosion of expanding world economies. If the lad or lass is among us who knows where the secret heart of this Growth-Monster is hidden, let them please tell us where to shoot the arrow that will slow it down. And if the secret heart stays secret and our work is made no easier, I for one will keep working for wildness day by day.

“Wild and free.” An American dream-phrase loosing images: a long-maned stallion racing across the grasslands, a V of Canada Geese high and honking, a squirrel chattering and leaping limb to limb overhead in an oak. It also sounds like an ad for a Harley-Davidson. Both words, profoundly political and sensitive as they are, have become consumer baubles. I hope to investigate the meaning of *wild* and how it connects with *free* and what one would want to do with these meanings. To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions as they are—painful, impermanent, open, imperfect—and then be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us. For in a fixed universe there would be no freedom. With that freedom we improve the campsite, teach children, oust tyrants. The world is nature, and in the long run inevitably wild, because the wild, as the process and essence of nature, is also an ordering of impermanence.

Although *nature* is a term that is not of itself threatening, the idea of the “wild” in civilized societies—both European and Asian—is often

associated with unruliness, disorder, and violence. The Chinese word for nature, *zi-ran* (Japanese *shizen*) means "self-thus." It is a bland and general word. The word for wild in Chinese, *ye* (Japanese *ya*), which basically means "open country," has a wide set of meanings: in various combinations the term becomes illicit connection, desert country, an illegitimate child (open-country child), prostitute (open-country flower), and such. In an interesting case, *ye-man zi-yu* ("open-country southern-tribal-person-freedom") means "wild license." In another context "open-country story" becomes "fiction and fictitious romance." Other associations are usually with the rustic and uncouth. In a way *ye* is taken to mean "nature at its worst." Although the Chinese and Japanese have long given lip service to nature, only the early Daoists might have thought that wisdom could come of wildness.

Thoreau says, "give me a wildness no civilization can endure." That's clearly not difficult to find. It is harder to imagine a civilization that wildness can endure, yet this is just what we must try to do. Wildness is not just the "preservation of the world," it *is* the world. Civilizations east and west have long been on a collision course with wild nature, and now the developed nations in particular have the witless power to destroy not only individual creatures but whole species, whole processes, of the earth. We need a civilization that can live fully and creatively together with wildness. We must start growing it right here, in the New World.

When we think of wilderness in America today, we think of remote and perhaps designated regions that are commonly alpine, desert, or swamp. Just a few centuries ago, when virtually *all* was wild in North America, wilderness was not something exceptionally severe. Pronghorn and bison trailed through the grasslands, creeks ran full of salmon, there were acres of clams, and grizzlies, cougar, and bighorn sheep were common in the lowlands. There were human beings, too: North America was *all populated*. One might say yes, but thinly—which raises the question of according to whom. The fact is, people were everywhere. When the Spanish foot soldier Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his two companions (one of whom was African) were wrecked on the beach of what is now Galveston, and walked to the Rio Grande valley and then south back into present-day Mexico between 1528 and 1536, there were few times in the whole eight years that they were not staying at a native settlement or camp. They were always on trails.

It has always been part of basic human experience to live in a culture of wilderness. There has been no wilderness without some kind of human presence for several hundred thousand years. Nature is not a place to visit, it is *home*—and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places. Often there are areas that are difficult and remote, but all

are *known* and even named. One August I was at a pass in the Brooks Range of northern Alaska at the headwaters of the Koyukuk River, a green three-thousand-foot tundra pass between the broad ranges, open and gentle, dividing the waters that flow to the Arctic Sea from the Yukon. It is as remote a place as you could be in North America, no roads, and the trails are those made by migrating caribou. Yet this pass has been steadily used by Inupiaq people of the north slope and Athapaskan people of the Yukon as a steadily north-south trade route for at least seven thousand years.

All of the hills and lakes of Alaska have been named in one or another of the dozen or so languages spoken by the native people, as the researches of Jim Kari (1982; 1985) and others have shown. Euro-American map-makers name these places after transient exploiters, or their own girlfriends, or home towns in the Lower 48. The point is: it's all in the native story, yet only the tiniest trace of human presence through all that time shows. The place-based stories the people tell, and the naming they've done, is their archaeology, architecture, and *title* to the land. Talk about living lightly.

Cultures of wilderness live by the life and death lessons of subsistence economies. But what can we now mean by the words *wild* and for that matter *nature*? Languages meander like great rivers leaving oxbow traces over forgotten beds, to be seen only from the air or by scholars. Language is like some kind of infinitely interfertile family of species spreading or mysteriously declining over time, shamelessly and endlessly hybridizing, changing its own rules as it goes. Words are used as signs, as stand-ins, arbitrary and temporary, even as language reflects (and informs) the shifting values of the peoples whose minds it inhabits and glides through. We have faith in "meaning" the way we might believe in wolverines—putting trust in the occasional reports of others or on the authority of once seeing a pelt. But it is sometimes worth tracking these tricksters back.

The Words Nature, Wild, and Wilderness

Take *nature* first. The word *nature* is from Latin *natura*, "birth, constitution, character, course of things"—ultimately from *nasci*, to be born. So we have *nation*, *natal*, *native*, *pregnant*. The probable Indo-European root (via Greek *gna*—hence cognate, agnate) is *gen* (Sanskrit *jan*), which provides *generate* and *genus*, as well as *kin* and *kind*.

The word gets two slightly different meanings. One is "the outdoors"—the physical world, including all living things. Nature by this definition is a norm of the world that is apart from the features or products of civilization and human will. The machine, the artifact, the devised, or the extraordinary (like a two-headed calf) is spoken of as "unnatural." The other meaning, which is broader, is "the material world or its collective

objects and phenomena," including the products of human action and intention. As an agency nature is defined as "the creative and regulative physical power which is conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena." Science and some sorts of mysticism rightly propose that *everything* is natural. By these lights there is nothing unnatural about New York City, or toxic wastes, or atomic energy, and nothing—by definition—that we do or experience in life is "unnatural."

(The "supernatural"? One way to deal with it is to say that "the supernatural" is a name for phenomena that are reported by so few people as to leave their reality in doubt. Nonetheless these events—ghosts, gods, magical transformations, and such—are described often enough to make them continue to be intriguing and, for some, credible.)

The physical universe and all its properties—I would prefer to use the word *nature* in this sense. But it will come up meaning "the outdoors" or "other-than-human" sometimes even here.

The word *wild* is like a Gray Fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight. Up close, first glance, it is "wild"—then farther into the woods next glance it's "wyld" and it recedes via Old Norse *villr* and Old Teutonic *wilthijaz* into a faint pre-Teutonic *ghweltijos* which means, still, wild and maybe wooded (*wald*) and lurks back there with possible connections to *will*, to Latin *silva* (forest, savage), and to the Indo-European root *ghwer*, base of Latin *ferus* (feral, fierce), which swings us around to Thoreau's "awful ferity" shared by virtuous people and lovers. The Oxford English Dictionary has it this way:

- Of animals—not tame, undomesticated, unruly.
- Of plants—not cultivated.
- Of land—uninhabited, uncultivated.
- Of foodcrops—produced or yielded without cultivation.
- Of societies—uncivilized, rude, resisting constituted government.
- Of individuals—unrestrained, insubordinate, licentious, dissolute, loose. "Wild and wanton widows"—1614.
- Of behavior—violent, destructive, cruel, unruly.
- Of behavior—artless, free, spontaneous. "Warble his native wood-notes wild"—John Milton.

Wild is largely defined in our dictionaries by what—from a human standpoint—it is not. It cannot be seen by this approach for what it *is*. Turn it the other way:

- Of animals—free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.

Of plants—self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.

Of land—a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine.

Of foodcrops—food supplies made available and sustainable by the natural excess and exuberance of wild plants in their growth and in the production of quantities of fruit or seeds.

Of societies—societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem.

Of individuals—following local custom, style, and etiquette without concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. "Proud and free."

Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, "bad," admirable.

Of behavior—artless, free, spontaneous, unconditioned. Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic.

Most of the senses in this second set of definitions come very close to being how the Chinese define the term *Dao*, the *way* of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. Both empty and real at the same time. In some cases we might call it sacred. It is not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma* with its original senses of forming and firming.

The word *wilderness*, earlier *wyldernesse*, Old English *wildeornes*, possibly from "wild-deer-ness" (*deor*, deer and other forest animals) but more likely "wildern-ness," has the meanings:

A large area of wild land, with original vegetation and wildlife, ranging from dense jungle or rainforest to arctic or alpine "white wilderness."

A wasteland, as an area unused or useless for agriculture or pasture.

A space of sea or air, as in Shakespeare, "I stand as one upon a Rock, environ'd with a Wilderness of Sea" (*Titus Andronicus*). The oceans.

A place of danger and difficulty: where you take your own chances, depend on your own skills, and do not count on rescue.

This world as contrasted with heaven. "I walked through the wilderness of this world" (*Pilgrim's Progress*).

A place of abundance, as in John Milton, "a wilderness of sweets."

Milton's usage of wilderness catches the very real condition of energy and richness that is so often found in wild systems. "A wilderness of sweets" is like the billions of herring or mackerel babies, in the ocean, the cubic miles of krill, wild prairie grass seed (leading to the bread of this day, made from the germs of grasses)—all the incredible fecundity of small animals and plants, feeding the web. But from another side, wilderness has implied chaos, eros, the unknown, realms of taboo, the habitat of both the ecstatic and the demonic. In both senses it is a place of archetypal power, teaching, and challenge.

Wildness

So we can say that New York City and Tokyo are "natural" but not "wild." They do not deviate from the laws of nature, but they are habitat so exclusive in the matter of who and what they give shelter to, and so intolerant of other creatures, as to be truly odd. Wilderness is a *place* where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order. In ecology we speak of "wild systems." When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all the members are present at the assembly. To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. Human beings came out of that wholeness, and to consider the possibility of reactivating membership in the Assembly of All Beings is in no way regressive.

By the sixteenth century the lands of the Occident, the countries of Asia, and all the civilizations and cities from the Indian subcontinent to the coast of North Africa were becoming ecologically impoverished. The people were rapidly becoming nature-illiterate. Much of the original vegetation had been destroyed by the expansion of grazing or agriculture, and the remaining land was of no great human economic use, "waste," mountain regions and deserts. The lingering larger animals—big cats, desert sheep, serows, and such—managed to survive by retreating to the harsher habitats. The leaders of these civilizations grew up with less and less personal knowledge of animal behavior and were no longer taught the intimate wide-ranging plant knowledge that had once been universal. By way of tradeoff they learned "human management," administration, rhetorical skills. Only the most marginal of the *paysan*, people of the land, kept up practical plant and animal lore and memories of the old ways. People who grew up in towns or cities, or on large estates, had less chance to learn how wild systems work. Then major blocks of citified mythology (Medieval Christianity and then the "Rise of Science") denied first soul, then consciousness, and finally even sentience to the natural world. Huge numbers of Europeans, in the climate of a nature-denying mechanistic ideology, were losing the opportunity for direct experience of nature.

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A new sort of nature-traveler came into existence: men who went out as resource scouts, financed by companies or aristocratic families, penetrating the lightly populated lands of people who lived in and with the wilderness. Conquistadors and priests. Europe had killed off the wolves and bears, deforested vast areas, and overgrazed the hills. The search for slaves, fish, sugar, and precious metals ran over the edge of the horizon and into Asia, Africa, and the New World. These overrefined and warlike states once more came up against wild nature and natural societies: people who lived without Church or State. In return for gold or raw sugar, the white men had to give up something of themselves: they had to look into their own sense of what it meant to be a human being, wonder about the nature of hierarchy, ask if life was worth the honor of a king, or worth gold. (A lost and starving man stands and examines the nicked edge of his sword and his frayed Spanish cape in a Florida swamp.)

Some, like Nuño de Guzmán, became crazed and sadistic. "When he began to govern this province, it contained 25,000 Indians, subjugated and peaceful. Of these he has sold 10,000 as slaves, and the others, fearing the same fate, have abandoned their villages" (Todorov, 1985, 134). Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, ended up a beaten, depressed beggar-to-the-throne. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca came out of his journey transformed into a person of the New World. He had rejoined the old ways and was never the same again. He gained a compassionate heart, a taste for self-sufficiency and simplicity, and a knack for healing. The types of both Guzmán and Núñez are still among us. Another person has also walked onto the Nō stage of Turtle Island history to hold hands with Alvar Núñez at the far end of the process—Ishi the Yahi, who walked into civilization with as much desperation as Núñez walked out of it. Núñez was among the first Europeans to encounter North America and its native myth-mind, and Ishi was the last Native American to fully know that mind—and he had to leave it behind. What lies between those two brackets is not dead and gone. It is perennially within us, dormant as a hard-shelled seed, awaiting the fire or flood that awakes it again.

In those intervening centuries, tens of millions of North and South American Indians died early and violent deaths (as did countless Europeans), the world's largest mammal herd was extinguished (the bison), and fifteen million pronghorn disappeared. The grasslands and their soils are largely gone, and only remnants survive from the original old-growth eastern hardwood and western conifer forests. We all know more items for this list.

It is often said that the frontier gave a special turn to American history. A frontier is a burning edge, a frazzle, a strange market zone between two utterly different worlds. It is a strip where there are pelts and tongues and

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tits for the taking. There is an almost visible line that a person of the invading culture could walk across: out of history and into a perpetual present, a way of life attuned to the slower and steadier processes of nature. The possibility of passage into that myth-time world had been all but forgotten in Europe. Its rediscovery—the unsettling vision of a natural self—has haunted the Euro-American peoples as they continually cleared and roaded the many wild corners of the North American continent.

Wilderness is now—for much of North America—places that are formally set aside on public lands—Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management holdings or state and federal parks. Some tiny but critical tracts are held by private nonprofit groups like The Nature Conservancy or the Trust for Public Land. These are the shrines saved from all the land that was once known and lived on by the original people, the little bits left as they were, the last little places where intrinsic nature totally wails, blooms, nests, glints away. They make up only 2 percent of the land of the United States.

But wildness is not limited to the 2 percent formal wilderness areas. Shifting scales, it is everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. Deer mice on the back porch, deer bounding across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners. There were crickets in the paint locker of the *Sappa Creek* oil tanker, as I worked as a wiper in the engine room out in mid-Pacific, cleaning brushes. Exquisite complex beings in their energy webs inhabiting the fertile corners of the urban world in accord with the rules of wild systems, the visible hardy stalks and stems of vacant lots and railroads, the persistent raccoon squads, bacteria in the loam and in our yogurt. The term *culture*, in its meaning of “a deliberately maintained aesthetic and intellectual life” and in its other meaning of “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns,” is never far from a biological root meaning as in “yogurt culture”—a nourishing habitat. Civilization is permeable, and could be as inhabited as the wild is.

Wilderness may temporarily dwindle, but wildness won't go away. A ghost wilderness hovers around the entire planet: the millions of tiny seeds of the original vegetation are hiding in the mud on the foot of an arctic tern, in the dry desert sands, or in the wind. These seeds are each uniquely adapted to a specific soil or circumstance, each with its own little form and fluff, ready to float, freeze, or be swallowed, always preserving the germ. Wilderness will inevitably return, but it will not be as fine a world as the one that was glistening in the early morning of the Holocene. Much life will be lost in the wake of human agency on earth,

that of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Much is already lost—the soils and waters unravel:

“What’s that dark thing in the water?
Is it not an oil-soaked otter?”

Where do we start to resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild?

Do you really believe you are an animal? We are now taught this in school. It is a wonderful piece of information: I have been enjoying it all my life and I come back to it over and over again, as something to investigate and test. I grew up on a small farm with cows and chickens, and with a second-growth forest right at the back fence, so I had the good fortune of seeing the human and animal as in the same realm. But many people who have been hearing this since childhood have not absorbed the implications of it, perhaps feel remote from the nonhuman world, are not *sure* they are animals. They would like to feel they might be something better than animals. That’s understandable: other animals might feel they are something different than “just animals” too. But we must contemplate the shared ground of our common biological being before emphasizing the differences.

Our bodies are wild. The involuntary quick turn of the head at a shout, the vertigo at looking off a precipice, the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath, the quiet moments relaxing, staring, reflecting—all universal responses of this mammal body. They can be seen throughout the class. The body does not require the intercession of some conscious intellect to make it breathe, to keep the heart beating. It is to a great extent self-regulating, it is a life of its own. Sensation and perception do not exactly come from outside, and the unremitting thought and image-flow are not exactly inside. The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us. There are more things in mind, in the imagination, than “you” can keep track of—thoughts, memories, images, angers, delights, rise unbidden. The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas, and that is where a bobcat is *right now*. I do not mean personal bobcats in personal psyches, but the bobcat that roams from dream to dream. The conscious agenda-planning ego occupies a tiny territory, a little cubicle somewhere near the gate, keeping track of some of what goes in and out (and sometimes making expansionistic plots), and the rest takes care of itself. The body is, so to speak, in the mind. They are both wild.

Some will say, so far so good. “We are mammal primates. But we have language, and the animals don’t.” By some definitions perhaps they don’t. But they do communicate extensively, and by call systems we are just beginning to grasp.

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It would be a mistake to think that human beings got "smarter" at some point and invented first language and then society. Language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence, animals that we were/are. Language is a mind-body system that coevolved with our needs and nerves. Like imagination and the body, language rises unbidden. It is of a complexity that eludes our rational intellectual capacities. All attempts at scientific description of natural languages have fallen short of completeness, as the descriptive linguists readily confess, yet the child learns the mother tongue early and has virtually mastered it by six.

Language is learned in the house and in the fields, not at school. Without having ever been taught formal grammar we utter syntactically correct sentences, one after another, for all the waking hours of the years of our life. Without conscious device we constantly reach into the vast word-hoards in the depths of the wild unconscious. We cannot as individuals or even as a species take credit for this power. It came from someplace else: from the way clouds divide and mingle (and the arms of energy that coil first back and then forward), from the way the many flowerlets of a composite blossom divide and redivide, from the gleaming calligraphy of the ancient riverbeds under present riverbeds of the Yukon River streaming out the Yukon flats, from the wind in the pine needles, from the chuckles of grouse in the ceanothus bushes.

Language teaching in schools is a matter of corralling off a little of the language-behavior territory and cultivating a few favorite features—culturally defined elite forms that will help you apply for a job or give you social credibility at a party. One might even learn how to produce the byzantine artifact known as the professional paper. There are many excellent reasons to master these things, but the power, the *virtu*, remains on the side of the wild.

Social order is found throughout nature—long before the age of books and legal codes. It is inherently part of what we are, and its patterns follow the same foldings, checks and balances, as flesh or stone. What we call social organization and order in government is a set of forms that have been appropriated by the calculating mind from the operating principles in nature.

The World Is Watching

The world is as sharp as the edge of a knife—a Northwest Coast saying. Now how does it look from the standpoint of peoples for whom there is no great dichotomy between their culture and nature, those who live in societies whose economies draw on uncultivated systems? The pathless world of wild nature is a surpassing school and those who have lived through her can be tough and funny teachers. Out here one is in constant

engagement with countless plants and animals. To be well educated is to have learned the songs, proverbs, stories, sayings, myths, (and technologies) that come with this experiencing of the nonhuman members of the local ecological community. Practice in the field, "open country," is foremost. Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind. Walking is the exact balance of spirit and humility. Out walking, one notices where there is food. And there are firsthand true stories of "Your ass is somebody else's meal"—a blunt way of saying interdependence, interconnection, "ecology," on the level where it counts, also a teaching of mindfulness and preparedness. There is an extraordinary teaching of specific plants and animals and their uses, empirical and impeccable, that never reduces them to objects and commodities.

It seems that a short way back in the history of occidental ideas there was a fork in the trail. The line of thought that is signified by the names of Descartes, Newton, and Hobbes (saying that life in a primary society is "nasty, brutish, and short"—all of them city-dwellers) was a profound rejection of the organic world. For a reproductive universe they substituted a model of sterile mechanism and an economy of "production." These thinkers were as hysterical about "chaos" as their predecessors, the witch-hunt prosecutors of only a century before, were about "witches." They not only didn't enjoy the possibility that the world is as sharp as the edge of a knife, they wanted to take that edge away from nature. Instead of making the world safer for humankind, the foolish tinkering with the powers of life and death by the occidental scientist-engineer-ruler puts the whole planet on the brink of degradation. Most of humanity—foragers, peasants, or artisans—has always taken the other fork. That is to say, they have understood the play of the real world, with all its suffering, not in simple terms of "nature red in tooth and claw" but through the celebration of the gift-exchange quality of our give-and-take. "What a big potlatch we are all members of!" To acknowledge that each of us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is not just being "realistic." It is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being.

The world is watching: one cannot walk through a meadow or forest without a ripple of report spreading out from one's passage. The thrush darts back, the jay squalls, a beetle scuttles under the grasses, and the signal is passed along. Every creature knows when a hawk is cruising or a human strolling. The information passed through the system is intelligence.

In Hindu and Buddhist iconography an animal trace is registered on the images of the Deities or Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Manjusri, the

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Bodhisattva of Discriminating Wisdom, rides a lion, Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Kindness, rides an elephant, Sarasvati, the Goddess of Music and Learning, rides a peacock, Shiva relaxes in the company of a snake and a bull. Some wear tiny animals in their crowns or hair. In this ecumenical spiritual ecology it is suggested that the other animals occupy spiritual as well as "thermodynamic" niches. Whether or not their consciousness is identical with that of the humans is a moot point. Why should the peculiarities of human consciousness be the narrow standard by which other creatures are judged? "Whoever told people that 'Mind' means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses," says Dōgen (the philosopher and founder of the Soto school of Japanese Zen) in his funny cryptic way.

We are all capable of extraordinary transformations. In myth and story these changes are animal-to-human, human-to-animal, animal-to-animal, or even farther leaps. The essential nature remains clear and steady through these changes. So the animal icons of the Inupiaq people ("Eskimos") of the Bering Sea (here's the reverse!) have a tiny human face sewn into the fur, or under the feathers, or carved on the back or breast or even inside the eye, peeping out. This is the *inua*, which is often called "spirit" but could just as well be termed the "essential nature" of that creature. It remains the same face regardless of the playful temporary changes. Just as Buddhism has chosen to represent our condition by presenting an image of a steady, solid, gentle, meditating human figure seated in the midst of the world of phenomena, the Inupiaq would present a panoply of different creatures, each with a little hidden human face. This is not the same as anthropocentrism or human arrogance. It is a way of saying that each creature is a spirit with an intelligence as brilliant as our own. The Buddhist iconographers hide a little animal face in the hair of the human to remind us that we see with archetypal wilderness eyes as well.

The world is not only watching, it is listening too. A rude and thoughtless comment about a ground squirrel or a flicker or a porcupine will not go unnoticed. Other beings (the instructors from the old ways tell us) do not mind being killed and eaten as food, but they expect us to say please, and thank you, and they hate to see themselves wasted. The precept against needlessly taking life is inevitably the first and most difficult of commandments. In their practice of killing and eating with gentleness and thanks, the primary peoples are our teachers: the attitude toward animals, and their treatment, in twentieth-century American industrial meat production is literally sickening, unethical, and a source of boundless bad luck for this society.

An ethical life is one that is mindful, mannerly, and has style. Of all moral failings and flaws of character, the worst is stinginess of thought,

which includes meanness in all its forms. Rudeness in thought or deed toward others, toward nature, reduces the chances of conviviality and interspecies communication, which are essential to physical and spiritual survival. Richard Nelson, a student of Indian ways, has said that an Athapaskan mother might tell her little girl, "Don't point at the mountain! It's rude!" One must not waste, or be careless, with the bodies or the parts of any creature one has hunted or gathered. One must not boast, or show much pride in accomplishment, and one must not take one's skill for granted. Wastefulness and carelessness are caused by stinginess of spirit, an ungracious unwillingness to complete the gift-exchange transaction. (These rules are also particularly true for healers, artists, and gamblers.)

Perhaps one should not talk (or write) too much about the wild world: it may be that it embarrasses other animals to have attention called to them. A sensibility of this sort might help explain why there is so little "landscape poetry" from the cultures of the old ways. Nature description is a kind of writing that comes with civilization and its habits of collection and classification. Chinese landscape poetry begins around the fifth century A.D. with the work of Xie Lingyun. There were fifteen hundred years of Chinese song and poetry before him (allowing as the *Shi-jing*—China's first collection of poems and songs, "The Book of Songs"—might register some five centuries of folksong prior to the writing down) and there is much nature, but no broad landscapes: it is about mulberry trees, wild edible greens, threshing, the forager and farmer's world up close. By Hsieh's time the Chinese had become removed enough from their own mountains and rivers to aestheticize them. This doesn't mean that people of the old ways don't appreciate the view, but they have a different point of view.

The same kind of cautions apply to the stories or songs one might tell about oneself. Malcolm Margolin, publisher of *News from Native California*, points out that the original people of California did not easily recount an "autobiography." The details of their individual lives, they said, were unexceptional: the only events that bore recounting were descriptions of a few of their outstanding dreams and their moments of encounter with the spirit world and its transformations. The telling of their life stories, then, was very brief. They told of dream, insight, and healing.

Back Home

The etiquette of the wild world requires not only generosity but a good-humored toughness that cheerfully tolerates discomfort, an appreciation of everyone's fragility, and a certain modesty. Good quick blueberry picking, the knack of tracking, getting to where the fishing's good ("an angry

man cannot catch a fish”), reading the surface of the sea or sky—these are achievements not to be gained by mere effort. Mountaineering has the same quality. These moves take practice, which calls for a certain amount of self-abnegation, and intuition, which takes emptying of yourself. Great insights have come to some people only after they reached the point where they had nothing left. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca became unaccountably deepened after losing his way and spending several winter nights sleeping naked in a pit in the Texas desert under a north wind. He truly had reached the point where he had nothing. (“To have nothing, you must *have nothing!*” Lord Buckley says of this moment.) After that he found himself able to heal sick native people he met on his way westward. His fame spread ahead of him. Once he had made his way back to Mexico and was again a civilized Spaniard he found he had lost his power of healing—not just the ability to heal, but the *will* to heal, which is the will to be whole: for as he said, there were “real doctors” in the city, and he began to doubt his powers. To resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild, we must first resolve to be whole.

One may reach such a place as Alvar Núñez by literally losing everything. Painful and dangerous experiences often transform the people who survive them. Human beings are audacious. They set out to have adventures and try to do more than perhaps they should. So by practicing yogic austerities or monastic disciplines, some people make a structured attempt at having nothing. Some of us have learned much from traveling day after day on foot over snowfields, rockslides, passes, torrents, and valley floor forests, by “putting ourselves out there.” Another—and most sophisticated—way is that of Vimalakitti, the legendary Buddhist layman, who taught that by directly intuiting our condition in the actually existing world we realize that we have had nothing from the beginning. A Tibetan saying has it: “The experience of emptiness engenders compassion.”

For those who would seek directly, by entering the primary temple, the wilderness can be a ferocious teacher, rapidly stripping down the inexperienced or the careless. It is easy to make the mistakes that will bring one to an extremity. Practically speaking, a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humor, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking brings us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness.

People of wilderness cultures rarely seek out adventures. If they deliberately risk themselves, it is for spiritual rather than economic reasons. Ultimately all such journeys are done for the sake of the whole, not as some private quest. The quiet dignity that characterizes so many so-called primitives is a reflection of that. Florence Edenshaw, a contemporary Haida elder who has lived a long life of work and family, was asked by the young

woman anthropologist who interviewed her and was impressed by her coherence, presence, and dignity, "What can I do for self-respect?" Mrs. Edenshaw said, "Dress up and stay home." The "home," of course, is as large as you make it.

The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom. We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed. We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt. We can chase off mosquitoes and fence out varmints without hating them. No expectations, alert and sufficient, grateful and careful, generous and direct. A calm and clarity attend us in the moment we are wiping the grease off our hands between tasks and glancing up at the passing clouds. Another joy is finally sitting down to have coffee with a friend. The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home.

And when the children are safe in bed, at one of the great holidays like the Fourth of July, New Year's, or Halloween, we can bring out some spirits and turn on the music, and the men and the women who are still among the living can get loose and really wild. So that's the final meaning of "wild"—the esoteric meaning, the deepest and most scary. Those who are ready for it will come to it. Please do not repeat this to the uninitiated.