

Earth Stewardship

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

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A major factor in our relations with animals is that, like small children, they generally do not act in ways that are convenient. In other words, they are WILD. This applies not just to animals, but to all the lower kingdoms. Apart from the domesticated animals and agricultural crops, we are faced with a profusion of unruly behaviour. And, all too often, the reaction has been to try to destroy or enslave nature. We have whitewashed this process, saying we are "taming" nature. But when we use the word "tame" to refer to something, we often mean something like "lacking in vitality, spontaneity, passion." So, to "tame" a being or a landscape suggests the snuffing out of something essential. It may be that in future, we will arrive at a truer meaning of "taming", of the kind suggested in *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. In the little Prince's interaction with a talking fox, we gain a sense of "taming" as a deep and intimate understanding, a friendship - i.e. right relationship.

Talking animals are a key feature in many myths and fairy stories. Why? Perhaps for at least two related reasons. First, by giving animals the gift of speech, we acknowledge that animals are conscious beings with their own interior life, and therefore deserve that we pay attention to them. Second, this gift points towards a vision of a far future where the kingdoms will indeed intercommunicate, for the greater glory of the Whole. The author Ursula Le Guin makes a related point when she says of our current era,

"...for the people Civilization calls 'primitive,' 'savage,' or 'undeveloped,' including young children, the continuity, interdependence, and community of all life, all forms of being on earth, is a lived fact, made conscious in narrative (myth, ritual, fiction). This continuity of existence, neither benevolent nor cruel itself, is fundamental to whatever morality may be built upon it. Only Civilization builds its morality by denying its foundation.

By climbing up into his own head and shutting out every voice but his own, 'Civilized Man' has gone deaf. He can't hear the wolf calling him brother--not Master, but brother. He can't hear the earth calling him child--not Father, but son. He hears only his own words making up the world." (p.11, *Buffalo Gals and other Animal Presences*)

This current block in our ability to relate to the other kingdoms explains why we live in an era of damaged ecosystems. More and more people are recognising this danger, and are finding ways to re-establish the perennial links we have recently broken. Creation spirituality is one such attempt, counting among its spokespeople Matthew Fox, Brian Swimme, and Thomas Berry. To quote Thomas Berry, "Since all living beings, including humans, emerge out of this single community there must have been a bio-spiritual component of the universe from the beginning. Indeed we must say that the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects. This has been recognized from an early period by the indigenous peoples of the world." Another term sometimes used is "deep ecology", which is a philosophical approach to the problem. And Satish Kumar, the editor of "Resurgence" prefers to talk of "reverential ecology".

All of these are efforts to reconcile us once more with 'wild-life' and 'wilderness'. Of course it is understandable that humanity's instinct is to try to control this wildness. After all, it is not long ago that forests were places dark and perilous. The majority of people, even in the industrialised nations, were still prey to the vagaries of climate, soil and wildlife. Even today, this is the norm for billions of people. The intense struggle to win a living through farming is something largely unknown to city dwellers. It is not surprising that many in less rich nations are keen to leave their farms behind, migrating to the slums and shanty towns that surround large cities.

The cities supposedly stand as shining examples of our triumph over nature. There, steel, glass and stone obey our whims, and everything that is needed for life is drawn into the city through its

arteries of transport. Perhaps migrants are taken in by this glamorous picture of apparent triumph. But the reality is darker, as many face unemployment or underemployment, with little social safety net. Even those who get jobs will often face either dangerous working conditions or extremely long hours, or both. And the success of the city is achieved at a cost that cannot be paid indefinitely. Each city has an 'ecological footprint', a metaphor used to depict the amount of land and water area a human population would hypothetically need to provide the resources required to support itself and to absorb its wastes, given current technology. For virtually all cities, this footprint far exceeds the land they occupy. As an example, a study in the year 2000 found that London's footprint was roughly twice the size of the whole of the UK! This is in an era when the UN calculates that the number of city dwellers in the world just recently surpassed the number of rural dwellers, so the problem looks set to get worse.

Chateaubriand wrote, "Forests precede civilizations and deserts follow them", which, in simple, stark terms, conveys one possible end-point of our planet-wide attempts to 'tame' the wilderness. And the poet Gary Snyder says, "There is learning and training that goes with the grain of things as well as against it. In early Chinese Daoism, 'training' did not mean to cultivate the wildness out of oneself, but to do away with arbitrary and delusive conditioning." (taken from *Good, Wild, Sacred*) But in our bid to remove wildness from the planet, humans are getting it back to front, seeking to control when we should first have the patience to try to understand the energies in motion and their purpose within the whole planetary scheme. To quote Gary Snyder again, "Nature is orderly. That which appears to be chaotic in nature is only a more complex kind of order." (Ibid.)

We can make the same mistake within ourselves, when we come across powerful currents of thinking and feeling, and instead of trying to understand how they arise, and what aspects of the soul they could potentially express if re-directed, we opt instead to suppress them. We are then taken off-guard, when the repressed energies leak out in strange, distorted ways, or come bursting to the surface in times of crisis. Maybe this hints at part of the reason for humanity's continuing urge to dominate wilderness. Being unable to tolerate the fact that there exist energies within ourselves that are simply beyond our control – not the least of which are the cyclical inflow of energies from the wider universe – we become obsessed with trying to control everything that surrounds us. We have to learn to submit to the fact that life is not like that – that we are constantly buffeted by energies, and that it is better to acknowledge this process and seek to understand it than to furiously deny it. It is only by understanding that we can learn to respond correctly, like a surfer on a wave.

One example of this submission is found in Tibetan Buddhist lore: "Marpa was told his teacher lived on an island surrounded by a lake of poison. He managed to get through the poison, only to find the teacher living in filth, with hundreds of dogs who continually attacked Marpa. When he asked for teachings, everything his teacher spoke was gibberish. Finally, Marpa gave up. He could no longer bear the vicious dogs, the filth, and the crazed speech of his teacher. He stopped taking notes, he stopped asking questions. He despaired of ever learning anything that would lead to his awakening. It was at that moment (of course) that everything became accessible and easy -- the dogs left him alone, the teacher spoke in clear and intelligible language, and Marpa received the teachings."

Perhaps this is an example of exhausting the lower mind, so that eventually, the light of the intuition can penetrate. Another technique for doing this is the Zen koan, a question unanswerable by the rules of logic. The act of submitting, of acknowledging that the lower mind simply cannot answer certain questions, is an act of humility. Likewise, along with the patience to understand, the humility to cooperate with other kingdoms is another virtue that wilderness teaches.

Also to be found in the wilderness are "power spots" or sacred sites. These places, revered by indigenous peoples, have existed for time out of mind. Gary Snyder describes sacred land thus: "Now we can rethink what sacred land might be. For a people of an old culture, all their mutually

owned territory holds numinous life and spirit. Certain places are perceived to be of high spiritual density because of plant or animal habitat intensities, or associations with legend, or connections with human totemic ancestry, or because of geomorphological anomaly, or some combination of qualities. These places are gates through which one can—it would be said—more easily be touched by a larger-than-human, larger-than-personal, view.” (*Good, Wild, Sacred*)

According to the Tibetan, sacred land is guarded by certain devas. He says: “For the *green* devas the path of service is seen in magnetisation, of which the human race knows nothing as yet. Through this power they act as the protectors of the vegetable plant life, and of the sacred spots of the earth” (*Cosmic Fire* p.913). He also suggests that, for certain major spots, this magnetization is first accomplished by the application of one of the Rods of Power. Apparently, the recognition of the sacredness of these sites “is but the preamble of a later and more definite recognition, which will eventuate when... etheric sight is normally developed.” (*Init. Hum. & Solar*, p.131)

Perhaps when we have etheric sight, we will once again be re-admitted to the sacred groves and springs, as places of worship and communion among all the kingdoms of nature. Until that time, we must seek to preserve them. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it:

“What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.”
(*Inversnaid*)

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