

Sentimentality and Commonsense: An Earth Day Prescription

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Sentimentality

From Kathleen Dean Moore,
"The Moral Equivalent of Wildness"

Every year in September, before the semester begins at Oregon State University, I bring my Philosophy 438 class, entitled Philosophy of Nature, to the mountains for a week. The students come from all majors; marine biology, political science, geography, forestry, and a very few from philosophy. We camp on a little lake in a forest of sub-alpine fir and white pine, just under the broken talus slopes of a jagged mountain.

One morning after our excursion on the lake, we all sat in sunlight that made us squint, reading Henry David Thoreau. In the meadow where we had convened, frost glittered on each seed head and blade of grass, and mist rose in ribbons across the lake.

A person "needs wildness the way a garden needs its load of muck," Thoreau wrote, and none of us disagreed, there in the meadow with dragonflies clattering past and bathed in a great cloud of sunlight.

Thoreau went on: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." But, the students noticed, he didn't waste much time defining *wildness*. He talked instead about what the muck of wildness nourishes in people: energy, strength, courage, independence, alertness, a way of seeing that penetrates ordinary expectations, joyous gratitude that goes beyond mere gratefulness. If the natural world is to be preserved, he implied, it will be because of how wildness transforms us.

My students thought they knew pretty much what Thoreau meant, because for five days they had been gorging on wildness, swallowing it in great gulps, as if they were starved. Each of them had been transformed that week into the sort of person who canoes on a wilderness lake late at night, in the silence, in the presence of the moon. They knew that expansive feeling inside. They knew that gratitude. They knew that connection to the moonlight night, the joy that can't be distinguished from love.

The question now I asked my students was: Could we bring the values of wild places with us when we drove back down the mountain? Could we hold on to them in our neighborhoods? What if it's true that we need wildness the way a garden needs

muck, that the preservation of the natural world depends on wildness? Most people don't, *can't* live in the wild anymore. What, then, will nourish and preserve us?

Maybe I should have asked not how we can *bring* wildness into our lives, but how we can *remember to notice* the wildness in every sweating pore, every stewed carrot, every solid step; in the morning air noisy with rain; in the reeling stars. Or maybe this is the question: How can we live *always* as we do in the wilderness, with that same respect and care for what is beautiful and beyond us?

From Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

To speak truly, few persons can see Nature. Most people do not see the sun. At least they have very superficial seeing.... The lover of Nature is he whose outward and inward senses are, like the child's, still truly adjusted to each other....

That person's intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through a man or woman, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, "this is *my* creature, and despite all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me...."

The greatest delight which the fields and woods ministers is the suggestion of a mystical relation between human and vegetable. I am *not* alone and unacknowledged. The (trees and grasses) nod to me, and I to them.

Reflections

Trina and I spent the better part of last Monday afternoon at Walking Iron County Park, just west of Mazomanie. One of the notable features of that little-visited site is its pasque flower prairie—several open acres where this delicate, spring-time plant blooms for a short time in great profusion. Sure enough, last week pasque flowers and prairie smoke were in ample evidence.

This was our second annual pilgrimage to see the flowers and hike the moss-covered path beside meandering Black Earth Creek. In early spring it is empty and quite serene at Walking Iron Park—a perfect place to celebrate the changing of the seasons.

"Most people don't, *can't* live in the wild anymore," Kathleen Dean Moore remarked. "What, then, will nourish and preserve us?" In response I

would say, “Interludes like this, even if they last but a few hours, are deeply nourishing, *and* they provide the inspiration and energy we need to work for a sustainable world.

There are different ways of being sentimental about nature, but that which is most useful is born of and strengthened by direct, unmediated contact with a living landscape. The experience doesn’t always have to be uplifting, either. Sometimes it is sobering, evokes sadness, and awakens compassion. To watch as yet another pristine patch of the Sonoran Desert disappears in favor of a new development, or as a village of upscale outlet stores replaces several acres of coastal pine and scrub, can cause a deep ache in one’s heart—as it did to me last month.

Trina and I were in Jacksonville, Florida, visiting my parents, and together we visited a new Outlet Mall at the southeast edge of that sprawling city. At one corner of the complex, near where the sidewalk ended and a few feet from the entrance to a store, I spied a small, feathered figure. It was midday and he—or she—was standing on the pavement, great yellow eyes fixed on the door, erect but motionless. It was a Florida burrowing owl—confused, lost, bemused, or stunned, I wasn’t sure which. I stopped several yards away, and we considered each other. Several animated young shoppers approached and I interrupted them, pointing out the owl. They responded like they’d seen a creature from another planet.

What on earth was it doing there? I had to imagine that the owl was homeless, displaced, like so many of its wild companions, by the new commercial complex. Where would he go? Every time I visit that area, bulldozers have cleared a few more acres of habitat. There, before my eyes and in all his pathos, stood a living symbol of the hidden costs of a culture of consumerism and chronic discontent.

I find experiences like this upsetting, but not depressing, because they motivate me to attend more carefully to my own small corner of the world.

This is very different from the kind of mawkish sentimentality induced by derivative experiences; from watching “Animal Planet” or visiting the controlled environment of a zoo or an aquarium. Too often, “entertainments” like these end up “deifying the same Nature our culture is engaged in plundering,” as MIT professor Leo Marx puts it.

The single greatest threat to one-third of the world’s bird and animal species is habitat loss—an issue seldom addressed by these institutions.

Pollution and over-fishing are killing the world’s oceans, but aquariums provide little insight into either the cause or the solution to these problems. In fact, they offer the misleading impression that our ocean ecosystems are both diverse and healthy, and they thus breed complacency.

Environmental sensitivity and responsibility will grow as we move away from the carefully

edited and artificially constructed jungles and oceans created by the folks at Disney and reenter the *real* world with all its pain and all its grandeur. Our appreciation *for* that real world will increase as we acquire new knowledge and learn to recognize where local problems and opportunities lie. As Dave Foreman says, “when

conservationists know and love specific places and specific critters, they’ll work their hearts out for them and require politicians to pay attention too.”

Finally, poets and prose writers like Annie Dillard, Scott Russell Sanders, Terri Tempest Williams, Aldo Leopold, Mary Oliver, and David Wagoner are able to evoke a proper and productive form of sentimentality. When it’s too bitter to be outside, I recommend them as complimentary sources of spiritual inspiration and practical wisdom. This is David Wagoner:

Stand still.

The trees and bushes beside you are not lost.

Wherever you are is called “Here,”

And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,

Must ask permission to know it and be known.

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,

“I have made this place around you....

No two trees are the same to Raven,

No two limbs are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on *you*,

You are *surely* lost.

Stand still. The forest knows where you are.

You must let it find you.

Commonsense

From Jared Diamond, “Twilight at Easter”

Why were the Easter Islanders so foolish as to cut

down all their trees when the consequences would have been so obvious to them? This is a key question that nags everyone who wonders about self-inflicted environmental damage. I have often asked myself, "What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last palm tree say while he was doing it?"

Like modern loggers, did he shout "Jobs, not trees!"?

Or: "Technology will solve our problems; never fear, we'll find a substitute for wood."?

Or: "We need more research, your proposed ban on logging is premature."?

Similar questions arise for every society that has inadvertently damaged its environment, including ours today. It turns out that there is a series of reasons why people in any society—whether Easter Islanders, Maya, or ourselves—make fatal mistakes that will look foolish to their successors.

They may not anticipate a problem, because of the problem being unprecedented in their experience. Today's over-harvesting of the ocean's seemingly inexhaustible fisheries, for the first time in human history, is one example. They may fail to see the problem when it does arrive: initially global warming was difficult to distinguish from just the usual year-to-year fluctuations in temperature. Conflicts of interest may prevent them from addressing a perceived problem. For instance, dumping toxic waste into rivers is bad for people living downstream but saves money for the company doing the dumping....

The parallels between Easter Island and the modern world are chillingly obvious. Thanks to globalization ... all countries on Earth today share resources and affect each other, just as did Easter Island's eleven native clans. Easter Island was as isolated in the Pacific Ocean as the earth is today in space. When the Easter Islanders got into difficulties, there was nowhere to which they could flee, or to which they could turn for help; nor shall we modern Earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our troubles increase.

Those are the reasons why people see the collapse of Easter Island society as a metaphor, a worst-case scenario, for what may lie before us in our own future.

From Wendell Berry (1989 Commencement Address at the College of the Atlantic)

The favorite adjective of the environmental movement seems to be "planetary." The word is used, properly enough, to refer to the interdependence of places and to the recognition, which is desirable

and growing, that no place on the earth can be completely healthy until all places are....

Nevertheless, the question that must be addressed is not how to care for the *planet* but how to care for each of the planet's millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each one of which is in some precious way different from all others....

Only love can do this work, and love does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution ... but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field. It is not, by its own desire, a heroic endeavor. It exists by its willingness to be anonymous, humble, and unrewarded....

So, my friends, as far as you are able, make your lives dependent upon your local place, neighborhood, household, which thrive by care and generosity.... Find work, if you can, that does no damage. Enjoy your work, and work well!

Reflections

One evening, shortly after returning from my sabbatical, I was sharing with a local environmental advocate some of my observations about Arizona, where we had stayed for four months. I expressed concern that in the foreseeable future burgeoning population growth, poor planning, and a scarcity of water were likely to produce an environmental and social crisis in that region. Although local and state officials were taking "baby steps" in the right direction, those efforts seemed quite inadequate to the scope and scale of the problem.

My conversation partner's response startled me. Environmentalists, he suggested, have created "a culture of complaint" and won't admit that the war has, in most respects, been won. The environmental agenda, he said, has become a top priority. From this individual's comments I got the impression that what remained was little more than a mopping up exercise.

It is perhaps true that we are making progress toward ecological and economic sustainability. Although you cannot yet find them on most showroom floors, American automakers are *finally* touting hybrid technology. Wind-farms are popping up

on the Midwestern and Western landscape. Here at home, MG&E has agreed to stop using coal to generate electricity. Conservation tillage practices on American farms have reduced soil erosion by 40% in just the last two decades. An interstate agreement to protect the Great Lakes has been reached. Wolves in Wisconsin are now plentiful enough that they may no longer qualify as “protected” species. Black bear once again roam Louisiana; Wyoming boasts black-footed ferrets, and four pair of whooping cranes returned this Spring to Wisconsin.

Looking abroad, 20% of Denmark’s electricity now comes from wind, with 50% predicted by 2030. Ethanol accounts for 40% of Brazil’s automotive fuel and that figure should double in a few years. India’s dairy herds, fed with crop residue, are now the largest in the world. China farms more fish than it catches in the ocean. Fifty years ago, South Korea’s hillsides were practically barren but today 65% have been reforested.

But while none of these accomplishments is to be sneered at, we are hardly in a position to declare the battle won. More people may now be marching in the right direction, but it is far too early to take a collective sigh of relief.

Consider if you will the recent findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a four-year study involving 1,360 scientists from 95 nations. According to this report, 60% of the ecological systems that sustain life on earth are being degraded or used unsustainably; 10-30% of the mammal, bird

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and amphibian species are threatened with extinction. The planet’s waters suffer from widespread pollution, coastal dead zones, and the likely collapse of a number of global fisheries.

Dr. Walter Reid, director of the assessment, points out that while living conditions for much of the world’s

population have improved over the last 50 years, this has exacted a heavy environmental cost and simply cannot continue.

A millennium report from the National Academy of Sciences presents the problem another way. Around a quarter of a century ago, humanity’s collective demands first surpassed the earth’s regenerative capacity. That gap has been growing by

about 1% a year and now exceeds 25%. In other words, we are gobbling up the planet’s natural capital at an alarming rate. As Lester Brown, Director of the WorldWatch Institute points out:

Although some ecologically destructive trends have been reversed at the national level, not one of them has been reversed at the global level.... We are crossing natural thresholds that we cannot see and violating deadlines that we do not recognize. These deadlines, determined by nature, are not politically negotiable....

In light of the foregoing, this is what I think simple commonsense would dictate:

First, act locally and advocate globally. Conservation cannot be, as Dick Cheney once suggested “a private virtue” for which governments and businesses bear little if any responsibility. It is, of course, true that the awareness, attitude, and behavior of private *individuals* need to shift. Otherwise, solutions and sacrifices imposed from above will foster only resentment and resistance. But if the burden rests solely on individual awareness, individual interest and individual initiative—on the solitary citizen or the sovereign consumer—the planet hasn’t got a prayer.

As Dave Foreman points out, it has taken a *huge* amount of effort just to preserve a few feathery and fuzzy species like the whooping crane and the black-footed ferret—and even here government and corporate assistance was solicited.

Furthermore, many of today’s most serious concerns are regional or transnational. These include climate change, the depletion of freshwater supplies, decline in the world’s fisheries, and over-population—all of which affect local ecosystems and local economies. While it is surely important for folks like you and me to work together on *local* environmental projects, global trends must also be taken into consideration. Local and global cannot be neatly separated into separate spheres.

Stabilizing the planet’s human population is also an absolute necessity. When the agricultural revolution began ten thousand years ago or so, human beings and their domesticated companions accounted for less than 0.1% of the earth’s *total weight* of vertebrates. In other words, 99.9% of the planet’s vertebrates were non-human, wild animals. Today these figures have flipped. The “wild” portion of the vertebrate world—including all the ruminants, elephants, great cats, birds, bears and small mammals—stands at 2%. Humans, their pets

and livestock comprise 98%. You don't have to be an ecologist to know that this is simply untenable.

Thirty-six years ago, when Earth Day was first observed, over-population was on most people's short list of issues to be tackled. To think that we could achieve sustainability while increasing the human presence on this planet made no sense. As Dave Foreman put it, "No matter how simply we try to live, the diversity of life just can't exist in the presence of too many human beings." But thanks to fierce resistance in recent years from the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the religious right, population control has become too controversial for any major environmental organization to take on. That, in my opinion, is unconscionable.

Third, our economic system has to take full account of "externalities"—the environmental, social and medical costs that aren't reflected in our businesses' bottom line. We are depleting our natural capital and generating too much hazardous waste because it remains cheap to do so.

Gasoline is a good example. Last time I looked, the pump price of regular in Madison was approaching \$3.00. That probably seems steep. But that price does not include the cost of tax subsidies to the oil industry, the military costs of protecting access to oil supplies, the health care costs of treating respiratory illnesses, or the cost of Hurricane Katrina and other symptoms of climate change.

In 1998—before the War in Iraq—the International Center for Technology Assessment estimated these and other "external" costs at roughly \$9 per gallon of gasoline burned in the U.S. If we add that figure to the cost of the product itself, we arrive at *not* \$3, but at least \$12 a gallon. "Many of our environmental travails are the result of severe market distortion," Lester Brown writes, "And the key to building a new economy is getting the market to tell the ecological truth."

Fourth and finally, each of us needs to cultivate the *habit* of conservation, mindfully incorporating it into our daily activities, making it part and parcel of a conscientious way of life. Some of us rode our bicycles or walked here today, but it was a special gesture, not a standard practice—made easier by the beauty and mildness of the morning. But the bicycle is perhaps the most efficient mode of transportation available and we live in one of the country's most bicycle-friendly communities. Let the bicycle, then, be our metaphor. And let it be our axiom to "live more simply so that others—including our own offspring—can simply live."

If this prescription feels like a sacrifice, it is probably because the orgy of consumption we've been on these past fifty years has come to feel "normal." We have to understand how truly exceptional, and ultimately unsustainable, this pattern has been. But if we will look for ways to restore our connection with the natural world, any loss of material satisfaction we might suffer will be more than made up for by unexpected feelings of spiritual well-being. To quote Emerson once more, "Nature says, 'this is *my* creature, and despite all his impertinent griefs, he *shall* be glad with me."

Postscript from Mary Oliver

I am sensual in order to be spiritual. I look into everything without cutting into anything....

What I mean by spirituality is not theology but attitude.... There exist a thousand unbreakable links between each one of us and everything else, and our dignity and our changes are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family, and there is no decency or sense of honoring one thing or a few things, then closing the list. We are at risk together, or we are on our way to a *sustainable world* together. In the end, we are each other's destiny.