

Encountering the Other

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The editor, Willem van Vliet-, asked me to set a context for this essay. I remember in the early 1990s speaking with Holmes Rolston. He had recently written *Philosophy Gone Wild*. Most of the book comprises eloquent formal theorizing, including the argument that a valid environmental ethic needs to be grounded in experience of the wild. He ends with several chapters on some of his own walkabouts in the mountains. I asked him whether he believed that formal theorizing and direct experience could be integrated more substantively in written discourse. In his quiet way, he said that that project might lie with others.

It's now some 15 years after that conversation, and I think again about the importance of grounding writing on wildness and ethics deeply in experience, and yet moving at least at times beyond the personal voice, to ideas and commitments of potentially universal claim, substantiated at least at times by scientific evidence. It's a genre with a modest history: E. O. Wilson's (1984) *Biophilia*, for example, or Richard Nelson's (1989) *The Island Within*, David Abram's (1996) *The Spell of the Sensuous*, and Jack Turner's (1996) *The Abstract Wild*. But as Holmes Rolston intimated, it's also a genre with a future. This essay, and a recent one ("**Death in the Hills,**" *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(1), 354-357), can be read as my own movement in this direction.

1. It started simply—a four-day jaunt into the nearby mountains with my 12-year daughter, Zoe. We planned a route that would be lively but not too adventurous, and by the afternoon of the second day we had followed trails to a spot on a river that we hoped to could navigate down. We first try to skirt the edges, but the canyon walls are too steep. Then we try in the water itself, but in too many places it's waist-high or higher. I tell Zoe, it sure looked easier on a map. We retrace miles on the trail we had just come down, top out on a ridge, and then take a different angle to the same river, some three miles below where we had been. On the third day, we bushwhack down the river. It's a day to savor. Sometimes we clamber down rocks and boulders. Other times we traverse the slopes above. A

few times it's steep enough that we slide our packs down ahead of us and follow on our bottoms. We discover lovely pools for swimming. We read aloud, lunch in hand. By the afternoon we find a nice place to camp.

The hard part of the trip is behind us. We swim some more. I'm relaxed. I'm too relaxed. I'm barefoot. I jump across to the ledge of another rock, and my right foot slips off and I'm plunged down. I know right off that my foot is in bad shape. I'm waist-deep in fast water. I bend over the rock and try to let the initial pain subside. I pull out of the water. Zoe sees my foot first, and I can tell by her reaction that it's bad. She wants to throw up. When I look, I see that the ball of my foot has hunks of flesh dangling out, jagged cut, bleeding. I start feeling faint and worry about shock. Blood is pouring out on the rocks. Zoe's scared. I tie my bandana tight around the wound. I'm feeling faint and curl up on the ground. I tell Zoe it's going to be okay, that the thing she absolutely has to do is stay strong and keep it together, and that I can't take care of her right now. My initial wooziness subsides. I realize I'm lying in the direct hot sun, with current rushing on both sides of me. Zoe helps me get back to shore. It's too hot in the sun. I rinse out the bandana, retighten it over the wound, stick my foot in my boot, and then my good foot in the other, and hobble over to a rock outcropping that has a sliver of shade. I tell Zoe that she needs to cross back over the river and retrieve our other clothes and the water bottles, and to be careful with the current.

When she rejoins me, I ask her to read aloud from a book, as I want to hear her voice, as a comfort, which it is—deeply so—as I rest. An hour goes by too quickly.

I know I must look again at the foot. Zoe helps me back to the river. As if for the first time, I see the flesh dangling, raw meat, and I again get woozy. Ain't no brave man here. Zoe tells me I'm brave. Zoe says it's going to be okay. I push the flesh back in, apply seven butterfly bandages and adhesive tape, and put the foot back in the boot. I tell Zoe that I think we should hike out now because I don't know what shape the foot will be in come morning, and what does she think? She thinks that's a good idea. We've already done a day's hike. She tells me I'm doing great. She tells me she can carry extra weight in her pack. She tells me it's going to be okay. We start ever so slowly down river, over rocks, one step, then another, and another. Zoe starts gently singing a song that has connected us in years past. I join in, and we sing together, my voice chalky, hers trying to take on some of my burden, and I cry softly.

2. We come to a point where we'll need to part from the river and head to the top of the southern ridge. A pause. Zoe and I squat by the river. Verdant surrounding beauty, dense lilies and ferns, the sun's angle shining west to east, up canyon. I splash water on my face. I see it first in my peripheral vision, and then turn directly to it, some 20 feet away, as it moves quietly out of the river's flow and stretches out on a rock. I was at its level, and perhaps that's why I wasn't sure about the head. I remember some years ago, I asked my neighbor Andy, who ranched his homestead for a lifetime, whether rattlesnakes ever swam in rivers, and he assured me that they could and did. Over the years, I have seen them in woodpiles, along trails, along creeks, out in the meadows, sometimes almost under

foot, on blacktop, and once in my cabin, on my writing desk. Never in a river. Maybe it was the late afternoon sun glowing and glistening on its diamond back. Maybe it was one of the chemicals my brain was producing to keep me going with this injury—adrenaline, endorphins, I'm not sure. But I know that I have never seen an animal so completely itself, its vitality and power heightened by its stillness, composure, not being other than it was, but fully that.

An encounter with the wild. Not wild as in seeing a predator or prey, stark death. Not wild as when I was at 17,000 feet soloing on Denali, wind howling. But wild in the sense of an Other that has its being centered independent of human life. I had the overriding perception that till now I've only seen vestiges of what animals had been or could be.

Decades ago Laurens van der Post was telling us in his writing that the lions of the Kalahari no longer roared with their completeness and vitality, and that human encroachment was taking its toll on the last of the Bushmen and animals alike. At that time, I thought van der Post here a bit fanciful. Isn't a roar a roar? How the heck could he tell? What would be the evidence? I suppose you could record a handful of different lion roars, and ask people to rank order them in terms of their "fullness as a lion." But much of a Beethoven quartet is lost on an untrained ear. What if we have lost the ability to hear the wild? I remember seeing "Happy" the elephant at a national zoo. She was a large African elephant standing for a lifetime in a space that I could measure easily in yards. She did not look happy to me. Couldn't other people see that? What if we have also lost the ability to see?

3. Aristotle begins *Nicomachean Ethics* by saying that "the good, therefore, has been well-defined as that at which all things aim." He then develops a teleological account of the good, wherein each kind of inanimate object and animate being has an ideal way of functioning. In some of my academic research over the years, my colleagues and I have conducted interviews with children about their environmental views and values. We've been in diverse locations: an African-American community in Houston, Texas; in Lisbon, Portugal; and deep in the Brazilian Amazon. In the interviews, children sometimes articulated something of this Aristotelian teleological account of non-human life. A Houston child, for example, explained that it's not all right to throw garbage in their nearby bayou: "Because water is what nature made; nature didn't make water to be purple and stuff like that, just one color. When you're dealing with what nature made, you need not destroy it." A Brazilian child similarly argued against polluting their local waterway, the Rio Negro: "Because the river was not made to have trash thrown in it, because the river belongs to nature." And perhaps my favorite: "Without any animals the world is like incomplete, it's like a paper that's not finished."

Teleological reasoning may well be universal, cutting across cultures, and emerging intellectually perhaps no earlier than around 9 years of age. But it's not common; at least it wasn't so in hundreds of our interviews.

And now I worry that even if this form of reasoning became pervasive—if somehow, in schools and pop culture the talk of the town was of seeking from a moral stance

nature's fullness and flourishing—could it remain an empty intellectual form because of the paucity of content? Or even worse: could the form still work fine on impoverished content? In other words, would it be possible to quote Aristotle, speak cogently about the teleos of nature, and then point to Happy the elephant and take delight in nature's completeness and the animal's flourishing? I'm afraid it could be.

Thus the need for encounters with the Other, to bring it experientially into our being, so that we don't lose it—or if is already partially lost, to regain it—our ability to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell that which exists outside of human domination. In his book, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, Paul Shepard (1998) writes: "Modern life conceals our inherent need for diverse, wild, natural communities, but it does not alter that need" (p. 134). He moves on to say: "We face decrepitude of body and spirit caused by sedentism, the psychoses of overdense populations, failed ontogenies, and cosmologies that yield havoc because they demand control over, rather than compliance with, the wild world—cosmologies based on the centralized model of the barnyard" (p. 137). Of course, for us to encounter the wild we need a wild to encounter, and as we lose the latter we lose the former, and vice-versa, and I really don't know how to convey what we're missing and at what cost when people read Shepard and haven't a clue about what he's saying.

I'm spelled by the rattler. Then I hear Zoe's voice. She says, Dad we should get more distance between us and it; you don't need to get bit today, too. I say quietly, it's okay. But her worry pulls me back, and we head up.

4. By dusk we had gained the southern ridge. I had been hiking in a boot that felt like I was walking in the river below, but the soggy sloshing was not of water but blood. I tried driving out that night, but after a few miles the exhaustion finally took hold. We pulled over. As Zoe made camp, I tore up a clean shirt and used it and more butterflies to re-bandage tightly what was left of the wet flesh, figuring that whatever I did now was the way it was going to stay. Zoe helped me to my sleeping bag, and under the moon we talked gently of the day, holding hands, drifting into sleep. The next day I used my big toe for the gas and braking, and we drove 3 ½ hours to our cabin. Batya would be happy to see us, we knew, and my goal was simply to be back in my wife's arms. Forget the doctors—I wanted her first. Zoe and I talked of how we would break it to Batya— slowly, on the gentle side. And so we did. She came running out to meet us at the truck. We said it was a wonderful trip. We're great. How has she been? There was a little bit of an accident, but we're fine. Joyous reunion. I stay in the driver's seat, smiling a million smiles. I see a million smiles coming back my way. Batya's radiant. Then she looks inside the cab, at my bandaged foot, at the clotted blood under the gas pedal. She figures it out quick enough. We tell her we're fine but that perhaps we'll want to head to town to check things out with a doctor. It was a joy-filled reunion.

We drive two hours to a doctor. A tetanus shot, five days of antibiotics. He tells me I had done pretty well but that next time I should bring a small roll of duct tape

on my journeys, that you can really close a wound with it. He spends two days a week in the local emergency room and sees plenty worse.

5. We stay the night at a motel. That evening, at the checkout stand at the supermarket, Zoe buys a *Cosmopolitan* magazine, curious about what it had that *People* magazine didn't. At the motel, she reads. It's not quite the magazine I had remembered. I'd call today's version super-sexed. On the cover, the lead stories call out: "Sex Survey: The Position They Crave." "You Won't Believe the Dirty Thoughts Dudes Have." "Love Being Naked." And "Sizzling Sex Tips: End Your Summer with a Bang!" Inside the magazine one can learn: "If your summer sex session gets too steamy to bear (read: you're panting like a couple of marathoners), take it to ground level and point a couple of fans toward you." One can learn other things more graphic as well. The next morning, in the motel room, Zoe shows me the first question in the "Cosmo Quiz": "At a job interview, you sense that your male interviewer is tuning out. Your moves: (a) lightly run your hand through your hair, then place it on your thigh. (b) Ask how he came to be such a key person at the company. (c) Wait for him to end the interview." I laugh at the options, and we talk about *Cosmo's* message to women for how to advance in a man's world: (a) flirt, (b) flatter, or (c) fail. *Cosmo* forgot option (d): say something intelligent. Zoe explains to me that girls read magazines that feature females four to ten years older than they are. Thus, she says, the teen magazines are really read by the preteens; and girls in her class, seventh grade, have started to read the *Cosmopolitans*. A week later, as I read from Zoe's magazine, which I asked if I could borrow, I see that she had taken the Cosmo Quiz and had underlined her answers. 15 points or more means you're a "Brazen Babe." 7-14 points means you're a "Hot-Impression Pro." Six points or fewer means you're a "Low-Impact Chick." Zoe scored three points. She had dug deep within herself on that hike out from the mountains. She's strong, gutsy, smart, beautiful, and proud of herself, in a society that says she's a low-impact chick.

How is it in our society that *Cosmo* as metaphor gains purchase? The Other becomes but a reflection of ourselves.

I remember perhaps an hour after the accident—but it could have been within 20 minutes, as I was recovering from first shock in the sun-drenched heat—Zoe had asked me one of her questions, as she is wont to do: "Dad, if you had it to do over again, would you do this trip, knowing it would end like this?" I immediately said "No way." But I think then she already knew the answer, days before I did.

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