

# **A FIELD GUIDE TO NATURE'S WISDOM**

by

Jim Conrad

I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in.

*George Washington Carver (1864?-1943)*

Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another.

*Juvenal (1st 2nd century AD)*

But ask the animals, and they will teach us, or the birds of the air, and they will teach use: or speak to the earth, and it will teach us, or let the fish of the sea inform us.

*The Bible, Job 12:7-10*

## FINDING WISDOM IN NATURE

This book is based on two of my -- Jim Conrad's -- beliefs:

1. Humans are part of Nature, and as such are governed by the Laws of Nature as much as any other thing in the Universe.
2. Living in harmony with Nature makes us healthier and happier, and enables us to reach higher levels of spirituality.

But, who is to say what the Laws of Nature are? How do we know what's harmonious with Nature and what isn't?

When an innocent sparrow falls from its nest and dies as ants begin eating it while it's still alive, are we to interpret this as a sign of an evil Creator, or a Creative Force that may be interested in honing the genetic heritage of species but who has no interest at all in the welfare of any particular individual... or is the sparrow's experience just what happened, and nothing more?

Everything in Nature can be interpreted in many ways. First we struggle to receive Nature's lessons, and then the really big work begins of trying to interpret what wisdom those lessons impart.

The following essays are excerpted from the "Naturalist Newsletter" I began issuing as a hermit in the Mississippi woods back in 2001, and still do from other locations. Each experience described in the essays can be thought of as one of Nature's lessons. At the end of each "lesson" I note what that particular lesson taught me -- fully realizing that if I live a few more years someday later I may interpret the lesson completely differently.

Certainly I'm not trying to pass my opinions off as "truths glimpsed by an enlightened hermit." I'm just sharing my writings, hoping that they'll be interesting or at least entertaining to others, and maybe

even helpful to some who also are trying to figure out what being a sentient being on Earth is all about.

A few of the essays I've tweaked a little because I've found clearer ways of expressing the thought, or maybe even changed my idea somewhat. Why not? The idea is to evolve, grow, struggle for ever-clearer vision, not to put something on display as if it were a diamond.

That's all. Thanks for your interest.

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### **ON A SYMMETRY IN THE HUMAN CONDITION<sup>1</sup>**

The sea, the sky, deep forests and other awe-inspiring features of Nature can communicate non-verbal wisdom to us. This communication is part of a beautifully symmetrical dynamic that possibly may even constitute a Law of Nature.

The Law, if it be one, rules that whenever evolving life reaches a certain stage of sophistication, it engages a certain paradox. On the one hand, eons of "survival of the fittest" have produced a species that is profoundly aggressive, self-centered and indifferent to the welfare of other species. On the other hand, once a living thing reaches that stage of sophistication, gorgeous feelings, insights and spiritual yearnings spontaneously and irrationally blossom forth, as when the sea speaks to us.

This dynamic, heavy on one end with ignorant cruelty and violence but ethereal on the other with artistic and spiritual awakenings, is structured like much of reality. In the real world every deed seems to hold within itself the seed of its own essential oppositeness. Too dogmatic socialism becomes fascist dictatorship. Eat too much good chocolate and you get bad fat. Pray on your knees too much for good health, and your knees go bad.

Maybe when the sages speak of yin and yang, the Middle Path in a world of extremes, and maybe even salvation in the context of

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the January 12, 2009 Newsletter

"original sin," they're confirming this inescapable symmetry of reality's components.

And isn't it symmetrical, and maybe a good joke, that we humans consist of a spark of divinity incorporated in animal bodies?

The tricky part for humanity is to survive as we pass across that evolutionary threshold where we abandon our instinctual, genetic-based, unsustainable behaviors and begin living in rationally thought-out ways harmonious with Nature's imparted wisdom.

Of what good is reflecting on this matter?

The good comes from being able to look at humanity and all its misdoings, yet still find hope that there's a bright future for our species.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Nothing is completely one way.*

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**"HOW PRETTY HE WAS... "<sup>2</sup>**

Once when I had access to a microscope I spent a whole morning gazing into a single drop of pond water. I watched one-celled Amoebas and Paramecia migrating majestically through transparent, sunlight-charged water. I watched Hydras somersaulting across the slide surface, and there were wiggling green Euglenas with whiplike tails, and long strands of Spirogyra alga inside which strands of chloroplasts elegantly spiraled.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the January 19, 2003 Newsletter

At the end of the session I straightened up my creaky spine, withdrew the slide from beneath the microscope and... then what?

I had become an admirer of the myriad little beings in that drop of water. Could I just wipe the slide on my sleeve and ignore the consequent genocide? I ended up carrying the droplet back to the pond from which it came, the theory being that my heart having been opened to these little beings counted for something.

The experience reminded me of a quotation from a book by Charles de Lint:

*"... he had understood, better than anyone ... the beauty that grew out of the simple knowledge that everything, no matter how small or large it might be, was a perfect example of what it was."*

How wonderful it would be if every day each of us could open our hearts to at least one newly met thing.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*The more we know, the more we feel.*

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**STORM JOG<sup>3</sup>**

Saturday morning at dawn I awakened sweating in my sleeping bag, for during the night the air had turned unseasonably warm and humid. I jogged wearing only shorts and shoes, and before long I was good and sweaty, feeling as if I were a detached awareness with my body on auto-pilot running below me. That is a good feeling, when the body is working well and the fresh air rushing into the lungs feels like high-octane fuel, and the trail below invites you on and on.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the January 20, 2002 Newsletter

Suddenly a roaring sound filled the trees and heavy rain could be heard coming through the forest at a distance. In a second the gloomy warm air all around was sliced through by a fist of cold air exactly as if it were a blast off of ice. Double-speeding back to the trailer, the wind howled and the trees bent, and my lungs and heart revved to a fast-paced cadence.

Beautiful it was to run in the wind, to be hard and fast in a grand theater of gentle rage.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Sometimes it's enough to just "be."*

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**HUMMINGBIRDNESS<sup>4</sup>**

At age 60 I'm aware not only of my body changing but also my mind. For example, sometimes when I'm watching a hummingbird hoping it'll land so I can get a good look, it simply vanishes. My mind has slowed so that it no longer registers a hummingbird's quicker bursts of flight. Similarly, at the computer I may click on a certain program and as I wait for the proper screen I realize that the awaited screen already has appeared, just that my mind hadn't caught the change. These things didn't use to happen.

On the other hand, nowadays a flitting-by hummingbird means more to me than it used to. For example, the word "hummingbird" instantly brings to mind the Ruby-throats at my mother's kitchen-window feeder back in Kentucky long ago, and the name "Long-tailed Hermit" evokes the large hummingbirds with curved beaks and pointy tails I used to watch feed at red-flowered hibiscuses next to the dark green jungle at the Maya ruins of Palenque in torrid

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the January 21, 2008 Newsletter

lowland Chiapas. I was doing that one winter morning when that gal from Chicago came along, the bank vice-president in her broad, pink hat and white slippers, the same morning the space-shuttle Challenger exploded... On and on, hummingbird associations.

But, it's more than just memories and associations. Now I recognize a definite hummingbirdness, the presence of a certain hard-working, fast-moving, gay etherealness present not only in the bird world but also throughout reality in all its dimensions. There's hummingbirdness during certain strains of inspired music, in the way certain molecules are structured, in certain people's demeanor.

And there's more than just hummingbirdness. There's wind-in-trees-ness, summer-cloud-ness, Bach fugueness, big-river-ness, empty-beach-ness, on and on. When I was young, the individual manifestations of all these manners of being -- the birds or fugues by themselves -- were just themselves. Now I understand that each separate thing, each moment, each feeling is a lovely variation on a simple but profound theme eternally flowing throughout the Universe, themes such as hummingbirdness.

Moreover, there's actually a limited number of themes, and as I age that number diminishes as, say, I realize that summer-cloud-ness is the same as empty-beach-ness, and that both are really just space-for-feeling-ness. I suppose that eventually I may see that there's only one theme in all of human-detectable reality, and that's pure existence.

What does it all mean? At age 60 already I see that that's a wrong-headed question, for, really, there's no question at all.

There's recognition, however, that all this stuff -- this reality, this life, this passing from one moment to another -- is very artfully staged by something, the thing I call the Universal Creative Force. Moreover, each of us has a good seat for watching what's going on.

So, at age 60 I'm missing a few hummingbird wingbeats, but there's more texture, depth and meaning to what I do see as I catch onto



the theme thing, and gain insight into what the whole show is all about.

And that's a decent trade.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Maturing makes getting older worthwhile.*

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**ON THE JOY OF STUDYING FLOWER ANATOMY<sup>5</sup>**

Most mornings Vladimir drops by with a handful of flowers and for two or three hours we sit at a big table in the semi-open "Pavilion" next to my lodging. With our books open and using a hand lens (jeweler's loupe), we dissect and analyze the blossoms, figuring out which species they are.

It's enormously gratifying to see Vladimir getting hooked on the experience, and learning his lessons fast. However, "learning" isn't what I regard as the main purpose for the exercise. To me, the process itself is what's important. What's important is that two people sit for awhile on a pleasant morning filling their minds and spirits with the stuff of flower anatomy.

Part of why doing this is important is simple to explain. It bears upon my belief that nature study is therapeutic and soul nourishing. The main way that works is this:

Instead of occupying our brains with the affairs of everyday life -- the body's hungers and woes, concerns about status and identity, broodings about what did and did not happen or might happen -- we are immersing our psyches into the mystery of the mustard flower's curious four long stamens and two short ones, or maybe

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from the January 28, 2006 Newsletter

the richly brown basal cross-markings of the white-flowered Neomarica's obovate outer perianth segments. Just imagine how a day's general feeling is transformed by a vagrant scent of dissected gardenia blossom lying on a wooden table.

To a certain extent the brain is like a box that can hold just so much. You start filling it with flower stuff, and other less agreeable stuff starts toppling out. The end result is a brain that's more flowery than before.

Another way of saying this is that we are displacing self-centered, often unsustainable and even self-destructive thinking patterns with cogitations suggested by universal, sustainable, natural paradigms. Seeing an unusual pollination strategy designed to assure that a blossom will have its bee, we are confirming the interdependency of all things. Smelling the gardenia on the table, we are assured of the fundamentally benevolent nature of the Universal Creative Force.

A mustard flower is the true prophet.

Of course the average person is bound to reply, "Sure, that's nice, but this is real life, bills have to be paid and work must be done."

So, that's the crux of the matter. The matter is that the definitions of "real life" and "what must be done" are more open to debate than the vast majority of us recognize.

I profoundly believe that most of us most of the time stay busy doing things not really needing to be done. In fact, most of what most of us do most of the time is ultimately destructive in terms of maintaining a sustainable living space, and often self-destructive as well in terms of our enjoying healthy bodies and souls.

Where did the idea come from that we all need to buy so much and live such antiseptic lives? Why do so few of us experiment with lives that are voluptuously yet somewhat ascetically feral? Is there not a mellow, microbe-friendly, flower-sniffing Middle Path between neurotic cleanliness and orderliness on the one hand, and lazy rottenness and degeneration on the other? Cannot "real life" be a

Middle Path coursing through a field of flowers, and "what must be done" the sniffing of those flowers?

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Studying Nature is therapeutic.*

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**WITH A SONG IN MY HEART<sup>6</sup>**

Here's something from one of my Web pages:

"Even when newly hatched White-crowned Sparrows are kept where they can't hear any kind of bird song, when they're about a month old they begin singing simple notes. This bird babble, known technically as subsong, continues for about two months. When the birds are about 100 days old, their subsong 'crystallizes' into a form that thereafter doesn't change much. The singing of White-crowned Sparrows of this age who have never heard other birds of their species sing is not nearly as rich and pleasant to hear as that produced by birds who have grown up hearing their own species sing. Nonetheless, experienced birders can definitely hear the White-crowned Sparrow element in their song."

Think of it: The power of the genetic code is so great that it enables a bird to sing its song, even if the bird has never heard that song before. Melodies can be passed through the dimension of time encoded in the genomes of living things.

Further down that page I make the point that when a female Canvasback duck is about a year old and builds her first nest, she builds a nest exactly like all other Canvasbacks, even if she has been kept in isolation, and couldn't have learned Canvasback nest-building technique from other ducks.

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from the February 1, 2004 Newsletter.

These facts cause me to wonder to what extent the songs and "nesting instincts" in our human hearts are genetically fixed. Just how much of each of us is any more than what our genes say we have to be?

That's one question that nudged me into this hermit-naturalist's life. The same impulse that made me a Dixieland-loving trumpet player for most of my life sets me to improvising on the fixed melodies inscribed in my genes, and this world around me seems like an appropriate good stage.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*"We" are both our programming, and what we do with that programming.*

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**ODOR OF YELLOW JESSAMINE<sup>7</sup>**

Near my trailer Yellow Jessamine, *Gelsemium sempervirens*, climbs into young Sweetgum trees and dangles a few of its bright yellow, foxglove-like blossoms fairly low. Saturday afternoon after a long hike in the cool sunlight I passed by this plant and of course I had to take a sniff.

Though the odor was almost timid, for a moment it hit me like a good kick in the stomach -- the mingling of sparkling sunlight, fresh air and this unexpectedly sweet perfume evoked a practically suffocating half-second pang of romantic yearnings and memories. In that half second pure Eros tinged with poesy and "music of the spheres" rampaged through my soul like all the redneck hounds of Hell.

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from the February 3, 2002 Newsletter

This is one of the problems with being a hermit, of keeping things simple for long periods of time: Little things like incidental flower-whiffs can knock you flat. If I had been nibbling cellophane-wrapped K-Mart candy all morning, or if lately I had been indulging my libidinousness, that Yellow Jessamine flower's odor would hardly have registered.

This experience recalls one of my theories. And that is that, in the end, most people who lead lives of regular lengths usually end up amassing pretty much the same measures of the world's pleasures and pains, its ecstasies and anguishes. If a life lacks down-home sensuality, then more ethereal satisfactions blossom out of nowhere, and vice versa.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Self discipline leads to unforeseen pleasures.*

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**ON BEING TURNED ON<sup>8</sup>**

When I see Karen's enthusiasm for fossils, rocks and crystals I can't avoid reflecting on the fact that we humans are sorted out so that each of us by nature is turned on by something that many others ignore. You can see how this feature of the human condition has evolved. If a primitive tribal community were to be composed of nothing but soldier types, or nothing but music lovers, you can imagine the problems. Every healthy community needs a diversity of personality types exactly as every healthy ecosystem needs a diversity of life forms.

For my part, I can't recall when I was not turned on by the mysteries of nature, particularly of trees. If I had been born into a Paleolithic tribe, surely I would have been a medicine man or a shaman

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from the February 9, 2003 Newsletter

wandering about with my bag of herbs and dried leaves, working all kinds of voodoo and magical cures, and I would have worshiped alone in the forest.

In a primitive society maybe rock-loving Karen would have been honored as one who during droughts could be counted on to locate hidden springs, or maybe she would have been called upon to heal with quartz crystals.

Humans are capable of many kinds of passionate predispositions. There are those powerfully turned on by gardening, the dignity of teaching young people, the beauty of caring for horses, police work, hunting... on and on. Anytime a community-size group of randomly selected people is brought together, almost certainly it'll be possible to fill all the community's necessary jobs with people eager to work at whatever they are passionate about.

Someday we shall turn from the regimentation, uniformity and mediocrity the gods of commerce, consumerism and self gratification require of us, and demand our right to work at things we're passionate about. When that day arrives, each child in every community will be watched closely to see what gifts and passionate predispositions he or she has been born with. And once we see what that child's natural inclinations are, then all our energies will be mobilized to cultivate and encourage this new citizen to realize his or her full potential.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Know yourself, then follow your own star.*

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**SONGS WITHOUT WORDS<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from the February 9, 2009 Newsletter

Last Tuesday, February 3rd, not only was my mother's birthday but also that of composer Felix Mendelssohn. To commemorate the day Public Radio highlighted Mendelssohn's music, and so it was that during my campfire breakfast I found myself listening to one of his most famous works, a piano piece called *Lieder ohne Worte*, or Songs without Words. Mendelssohn believed that music conveys feelings and sentiments more effectively than words, and here was his proof.

Morning sunlight dazzlingly slanted through the pines illuminating sharp, silvery ice crystals inside my water jugs. Great white clouds of steam billowed from my campfire stew and from inside me when I exhaled. A titmouse peter-peter-petered his spring song while crows cawed in the distance, all mingling seamlessly with "Songs without Words."

And I thought: All the world is a song without words. This blossoming of spring, this oncoming greening of the land, this gradual warming into summer, this bringing of myself into a whole new year, all is a song with innumerable tones, more intermingled melodies than I can discover, and more meaning than I can comprehend. And it is all expressed much more elegantly in terms of this ice, this fire, these birds, this stew and steam, than can be articulated in words.

Long I sat, well until after the music had stopped, the fragrance of a warming frosty morning, the sound of breezes stirring among cold-crisp pine needles, vagrant smoke from my dying campfire circling around a squirrel in an oak tree.

All songs, all songs, and I wondered what the use was to get up from my rocking chair and return to that world just beyond the heat of my campfire so fixated on words and, worse than words, numbers. Long I sat, feeling songs surging around me calling forth other songs from far away and from other times and dimensions.

But, in the end, I did get up and simply walk out of the song and all its evocations and echoes.

For, the effects of a song are one thing, and a song itself is quite another.

In my rocking chair I had been affected by songs without words. Now by walking into my own life -- of embarking into that morning of chainsawing firewood and planting narcissus bulbs for Karen, and later computerizing the whole day -- I was singing a wordless song of myself.

And by choosing what I did and how I did it, I was touching each of my moment-tones with color, texturing the composition I made of myself with what I did and how, and wherever the day ended there would end my own day's song without words.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Certain wisdom cannot be articulated in words; it can only be felt or sensed.*

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**ON THE BEAUTY OF HUNKERING DOWN<sup>10</sup>**

Much of this week has been both cold and wet -- a painful combination in an unheated trailer. Sometimes I had to crawl into my sleeping bag just to keep it together. In times like that, you can't be very creative. You just have to "hunker down" and wait for time to pass. I am glad to have had these days. Let me explain.

First of all, once such a trial is over, it's as if you have acquired a new measure of inner strength. By undergoing physical hardships and denying natural instincts to flee to warmth, and by stubbornly following a secret star even when from the outside what's going on looks appallingly dreary, you gain something internally of great value.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from the February 10, 2002 Newsletter



Second, last week when I described the effect on me of sniffing a Yellow Jessamine blossom, the point was less that Yellow Jessamine really smells good than that by exercising self control most of the time I am priming myself for later forays into a realm of sensuality that no debauched hamburger eater can imagine. When these cold days finally pass and cascades of golden sunlight gush over me, who do you think will FEEL the return of spring more acutely than I? One reason I live the way I do is simply because I love to FEEL alive, strong, hungry, aggressive... I like to feed my senses. There have been times in my life when that meant eating a lot, other times when it meant being with special kinds of women. Right now it means priming myself so that the odor of Yellow Jessamine just knocks my pants off.

A third reason for hunkering down during a cold spell is this: I am convinced that there is no greater Earthly "sin" than to needlessly abuse and endanger the living system -- the ecosystem -- with which the Creator has graced this good Earth. And I know that when I flip a switch to warm my feet I am ordering electricity to be produced, which increases greenhouse gasses and radioactive wastes. I will not belabor the point.

Every human appetite translates into environmental destruction, and it is up to each of us to identify for ourselves how much destruction we are willing to be responsible for.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Simplify.*

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**SPARROW COLORS<sup>11</sup>**

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from the February 16, 2003 Newsletter

It's interesting that sparrows can be divided into two general groups based on whether their breasts are streaked or unstreaked. Both chest types provide sparrows with good camouflage. You can imagine a bug looking upward, seeing the Swamp Sparrow's dark, gray chest very like the wintry sky behind it, or the Song Sparrow's strongly vertically streaked chest blending with sky-reaching tussocks of grass or sedge behind it. Chests are also lighter than back colors, to compensate for shadowing.

The backs, or tops, of sparrows are essays in brown and black splotches and streaks. From the falcon's perspective they look very much like the floor of a field or a forest's leaf litter.

Therefore, sparrow colors and patterns make sense. Still, sparrow patterns are so elegant and the colors are so sublimely complementary that the mind rejects the idea that such effects could arise from mere Darwinian selection. One senses a hand at work here that creates with flair. If this Creator were to walk into the room, you'd not be surprised if She were whistling a jaunty little tune.

I think that the question of whether one finds a sparrow's plumage pretty or not is a good measure of how comfortable that person is with reality at large. I am struck by the general "earthiness" and "homininess" of sparrow colors and patterns. Since I regard "earthiness" and "homininess" as hallmarks of a peaceful, happy, sustainable life, it seems that sparrow colors and patterns abstractly express something to which I aspire. It's as if what I regard as the Creator's guiding principles for life on Earth were somehow expressed in terms of sparrow plumage.

I'm not suggesting that Nature teaches us to live exclusively in a subdued manner harmonious with earth-tone sparrow colors. After all, the Creator also produced Cardinals, Blue Jays and Painted Buntings.

But, if in your bird field guide you scan the species from cover to cover, you'll see that maybe 80% of the species are, you could say, modest looking but elegant -- like sparrows, sandpipers and

thrushes. Maybe 18% are colorful (but not spectacular) or somehow novel in appearance, in the manner of woodpeckers and hummingbirds. And only a handful are outright bodacious, like the Cardinal and Blue Jay.

So, I would say that if in nature the Creator provides paradigms upon which we humans should pattern our lives, the bird field guide reveals one view of the matter: The enlightened and fulfilled life will be 80% modest and dignified; 18% colorful but not gaudy, and; maybe 2% outright rip-roaring.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Calm down, but not obsessively.*

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**PICKLE JUICE<sup>12</sup>**

Monday morning I awakened groggy and annoyed because Eastern Woodrats had thumped and bumped all night beneath the trailer. This was unusual because the rats have done this all winter and usually I find their presence good company. Often I have to laugh, imagining what shenanigans must be going on below for such unlikely noises to be produced.

"Pickle juice," I concluded.

The plantation manager periodically cleans out her refrigerator and sometimes I am the beneficiary when she sends my way her sour milk (good in cornbread batter), fungusy cheese, and delicacies such as pickleless pickle juice (also good in cornbread batter). Well, the day before the woodrats, she'd set next to the garden gate a jar with pickle juice in it and I had used it.

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from the February 24, 2002 Newsletter

Like so much in the American diet, this pickle juice contained outrageous concentrations of salt. Just a little salt causes me to retain water so that within an hour or two I get blurry-eyed, my ears ring, I can't think or sleep well, and later feel grumpy. One day all's right with the world, then some salt slips into my diet, and the next day the world is wretched and insidious.

This is worth thinking about.

For, is the real "me" the one with or without pickle juice? What are the implications when we discover that we think and feel basically what the chemistry in our bodies at that particular moment determines that we think and feel? And if what we think and feel isn't at the root of what we "are," then just what is the definition of what we "are"?

Actually, I can shrug off that question, but only because a larger one nudges it aside. That is, is "reality" like Chopin's gauzy, dreamy etudes, the way I experienced it on Sunday, or more like Schönberg's angry, disjointed, atonal piano pieces, the way I experienced it on Monday after taking into my body the pickle juice?

Thoughts like these have led me to distrust all my assumptions about life no matter how obviously "right" or "wrong" they appear at the moment. I have long noted how huge blocks of my behavior appear to depend exactly on how much testosterone happens to flow in my blood. An acquaintance's tendency to weepiness corresponds precisely to whether he's taken his blood pressure medicine and another's whole personality depends on her remembering to take her lithium pills.

In the end, however, we have to accept certain assumptions just to get through the day, even if we don't quite trust them. I have chosen two insights in particular to serve as bedrock on which all my other assumptions about life and living rest.

One insight arises from meditating upon the grandness, the complexity, the beauty and majesty of nature -- the Universe at

large -- and thus I recognize that the Universe has a Creator worth contemplating. (This has absolutely nothing to do with religiosity, by the way, for religions are manmade institutions.)

The other insight is that love in whatever context is worth seeking and sharing.

This latter insight is the one that keeps me hanging around in this quaint biological entity, my body, with or without pickle juice.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Things aren't necessarily as we perceive them at the moment.*

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**WALKING<sup>13</sup>**

Once again I am discovering the therapeutic value of walking. We all know how it tones up the body, but what's meaningful to me now is how it massages the mind, levels moods and clears the way for incisive thinking and nuanced feeling. Open sky, hot wind, straight road, I go clomp, clomp, clomp, hour after hour, until the days pass like sun- dazzled gossamer streaming past on the wind.

There's something to be said for staying in one place, having routines and knowing where you'll sleep tonight. However our culture says that stay-at-home thing until it's blue in the face, so I'll say something different, that cutting loose is good, that wandering disreputably is sweet, and that one foot before the other is honest meditation on the Creator's works.

Jets, trains, buses and cars have their places, but in terms of value to the human spirit they miss the point. There's more meaningful

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<sup>13</sup> Adapted from the March 2, 2005 Newsletter

difference between the north and south sides of a tree trunk than between an alley in Calcutta and an alley in Pittsburgh. Thus even walking is too much of a fast-changing thing, but human spirits are restless so in the end walking is the best compromise.

Hello there sky-high vultures, hello wind and sunlight and heat, hello body feeling itself alive and working OK, hello insect-buzz in the weeds, here I come world clomp, clomp, clomp, smiling at the Tamarind tree down the road, such deep shadows where I shall drink some water and take a nap and dream of walking farther down the road.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Walking is almost magically therapeutic.*

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**SONG SPIRIT<sup>14</sup>**

Biologists are trained to avoid being anthropomorphic when interpreting animal behavior -- they don't assume that ducklings follow their mothers because they love them. I believe in that admonition, but I fear that in our culture we have gone too far with it, and this reduces our sensitivity to, and appreciation for, other living things.

The Brown Thrasher at his appointed time overcoming his wintry sulk, then flying to the tallest treetop to sing his loudest and clearest has this week been what I think of as a local outburst of the Creator's spirit. Each morning when I passed that singing bird I tipped my hat in form of a silent prayer.

For, I believe that the Creator's spirit flows everywhere, and we -- we humans and birds and everything else -- are part of it, the way

<sup>14</sup> Adapted from the March 9, 2003 Newsletter

that notes are part of music. The Creator's spirit wrought something out of nothing, crafted unfathomable beauty and complexity out of chaos, and right now evolves the Universe and all things in it to ever higher levels of sophistication, and ever more exquisite manners of being and conceiving.

So, I think I know the Brown Thrasher's feeling, though I try to avoid anthropomorphism, and I know for sure that the bird's brain is wired much differently from my own. I know the thrasher's feeling because each of us is part of the same general flow of the Creator's spirit flooding through the Universe.

The bird doesn't sing because he's happy in a human way, but I am confident that he is indeed tickled through and through by the Creator's spirit flowing through him, just like me.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*The Spirit is in everything.*

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**LYING, ROBBERY & MURDER** <sup>15</sup>

Humans are subject to the same laws of Nature as all other species. This week I've been thinking about this in the context of news about the collapsing international monetary system. Here's something that's occurred to me:

In Nature there are many examples of lying (orchid flowers shaped like female insects to trick male pollinators), robbery (Magnificent Frigate Birds stealing meals from seagulls) and murder (predators eating). When we find lying, robbery and murder so widespread in Nature, and recognize that humans are absolutely embedded in and dependent on Nature, it shouldn't surprise us that those vile

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from the March 9, 2009 Newsletter

features of human nature show no signs of dying out. In a sense, Nature tells us that these behaviors, if nothing else, can be part of a sustainable system.

On the other hand, I find no analogy in Nature to human behaviors associated with "the consumer society." Where in Nature is there long-term expenditure of resources far exceeding income? Where is there vast abuse and wastage of vital resources, and where is there intense focus on the individual organism's WANTS, instead of the community's NEEDS? What sustainable natural community functions only as long as it grows, consuming ever more resources?

In short, it seems that, from Nature's perspective, the dominant traits of "the consumer society" are so much more heinous than lying, robbery and murder that they are simply not tolerated.

On the other hand, as the economic crisis unfolds, people are buying less and saving more. We are more likely to prepare our own food and pay attention to what we're eating. We're using less energy, and suddenly we even seem less interested in conducting unnecessary wars abroad, and sitting by as "globalization" transfers simple, local jobs to the opposite side of the planet.

These changes represent healthy, sustainable trends toward simplification and self reliance. If human economy really is governed by Natural Laws, then these changes constitute another case of "Nature healing Herself." This healing must occur so that further evolution can occur.

Evolution is hard and most real changes are painful. However, in the end, without evolution and change, many of the rewards of being a human struggling toward enlightenment and long term happiness and fulfillment are impossible.

The current economic disaster is the greatest opportunity for human advancement I've seen in all my lifetime.



**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Humans and human behavior are subject to Natural Laws.*

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**SLUGS, SNAILS & MU<sup>16</sup>**

Surprisingly often I receive mail from people I don't know, who don't introduce themselves, and who, without explaining the circumstances, ask me the most curious questions. The other day Ted Campbell of somewhere in Cyberspace sent an email consisting of one line:

"Can you tell me what if any good the slug or snail does."

Well, it's not a bad question to chew on.

For, the whole concept of creatures doing either good or bad invites further questions. Particularly, "What is good?" and "Good for whom?"

"Good for whom?" is the easiest to deal with because I can guess that Ted wants his answer in terms of "good for humanity," or "good for the ecosystem."

I won't touch the question of how an animal might be "good for humanity" because it smells too much of the religious concept that Nature has been created to serve mankind. Because of destructive, unsustainable human behavior encouraged by that notion, I regard it as the most dangerous element of our western, desert-originated religions.

Neither does asking whether an organism is "good for the ecosystem" strike me as appropriate. A prime feature of the Earth-ecosystem -- the biosphere -- is that all its components are

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<sup>16</sup> Adapted from the March 11, 2006 Newsletter

interconnected and its living things are mutually dependent. Science is just beginning to grasp how intricate, fragile and necessary these connections are. Therefore, in my opinion, no human is in the position to judge how any living thing is good or bad for the ecosystem. Moreover, we don't know the ultimate destiny of our evolving biosphere, so how can we judge whether the role something plays in it now is "good" or "bad"?

Somewhere, a long time ago, I think I read that the ancient Chinese had a special reply for any question asked from an invalid premise. The reply was "Mu." "What did they say when the blue sky hatched from its egg?" The best answer, shaking your head, is "Mu." "Of what good is a slug to the ecosystem?" "Mu."

So, "What is 'good'?"

"Goodness" and "badness" can be judged only from specific frames of reference. If your frame of reference is living pleurably without regard for the future, then a thorn in the foot is bad and a stick of chocolate is good. If your frame of reference is the Christian Bible, then my owning a Kentuckian as a slave is bad, but enslaving a Canadian is OK, as explained in Leviticus 25:44.

But, I don't know why the Universal Creative Force created the Universe in the first place, why She keeps it going in such mysterious ways, and what it all means. Consequently, my frame of reference just isn't broad enough for making value judgments about any part of Her Creation, including Her slugs and snails.

Therefore, Ted Campbell someplace out there in Cyberspace, "Mu" to you.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*A question doesn't mean that there's an appropriate answer.*

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## **THOUGHTS ON ANIMAL RIGHTS<sup>17</sup>**

The other day Newsletter subscriber Marian in Nevada wrote asking if she could quote me on her Animal Rights Forum. That got me to thinking about what I believe on the matter, and why.

To decide any complex, important question, we need to root our thinking in some kind of belief system -- such as religion, a society's codes of ethics, scientific data, or legal systems. On the question of animal rights I define my own belief system as "The way the Creator appears to have put the Universe together." In other words, "Nature is Bible." Here's how that can work:

In Nature, things aren't wasted, but are recycled, so for me it becomes a "sacred duty" to practice strict economy in my own life. Wastefulness is "bad." Similarly, in Nature it's clear that life evolved from one or a very few simple, isolated, living things to untold numbers of complex, interacting and mutually dependent beings. Therefore, in my own life I must struggle toward ever more sophisticated, multi-faceted insights and modes of behavior, and be communicative with and helpful to the communities of which I am part. Laziness, self indulgence and an acceptance of mediocrity are "sinful."

In terms of animal rights, it strikes me that on Earth the Creator's crowning achievement is the Web of Life, or the Earth ecosphere. In the Web of Life, no group of organisms is more highly developed than animals, and the most highly developed animal is the human.

What do I FEEL when I reflect on the subject of animals in this context? The insight that moves me most profoundly is that we animals are very beautiful creations. Beholding such beauty and realizing that I am part of it, my feelings blossom into the domain of spirituality. Therefore, my awe for animals is rooted in the realms of esthetics and spirituality.

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<sup>17</sup> Adapted from the March 14, 2004 Newsletter

In that context, my feeling for animal life only can be described as reverential. Irreverently treating animal life "goes against God's will."

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Nature provides answers to everyday problems.*

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**DIETER'S GARDEN<sup>18</sup>**

Walking through the woods I see frilly Woodsia ferns that for some reason strike me as looking perfectly at home where they are. This encounter sets the following train of thought to going:

I'm taken back to my early traveling days, to a delicious summer morning in Vienna, Austria in the 1970s, when I was visiting my friend Dieter. We were in the vast gardens of the old Summer Palace of Schönbrunn, where I had never seen so many roses, row after row of them, of perfectly trimmed hedges, and of acres of geometrically arranged curlicue-bedded tulips and irises and other bright blossoms.

"I never dreamed a place could be so pretty," I gushed to Dieter.

Dieter, one of the most dignified and refined individuals I've ever met, glanced at me with pity in his eyes. Art history was a passion with him, and to him Schönbrunn's gardens fell within that domain.

"You can think about it in evolutionary terms," he said, more or less. "Maria Teresa laid out the garden's plans in the early 1700s. Just a few years before that, there'd been a real question as to whether

<sup>18</sup> Adapted from the March 16, 2003 Newsletter

Vienna could survive the starvation brought on by a siege mounted by the Turks. In a real way, then, glittery, ostentatious Schönbrunn with its regimented flower beds and eternally clipped hedges can be seen as a reaction to those earlier times, a statement confirming Western man's newly acquired dominance over his environment."

"These gardens are bright and totally controlled like an infant's playroom," Dieter continued. "There's an obsession here with bright color, ignoring more complex possibilities such as the mingling of leaf textures or the interplay of form and shadows. There's a single-minded fixation on simple geometric precision while ignoring harmony with the landscape, for example, and local folk traditions. This garden is an effort by Maria Teresa and the people of her time to convince themselves that with militarism and science they could overcome what they regarded as the chaos of nature. When I walk in these gardens, yes, the bright colors are nice the way children's bright balloons are nice, but, on a higher level, I am oppressed by the garden design's total lack of mature spontaneity, and by its insensitivity to its natural and cultural context. It's almost as bad as your mowed lawns in America where esthetics among the masses also remains at an immature stage of development... "

The shock of having such a fully formed thought pregnant with so many alien assumptions laid before me left me speechless. Instantly I recognized veins of truth in his argument. All I could do was to sniff a rose and grin.

In later years I learned how plantings could be arranged so that, for instance, gatherings of leaves complemented certain blossoms. There have even been times in this life when I also felt oppressed by naked, straight lines of tulips marching across mowed American lawns, no matter how bright the tulips' reds and yellows were.

But, now in my graybeard days, somehow I feel as if I've wandered through and then out of the whole discussion, and when I see a tulip wherever it is I just feel like dropping to my knees and poking my nose into its brightness.

Still, I'd like to visit Dieter again, to see how his ideas have evolved. I'm sure that, as always, his insights will have developed beyond mine. I would like to broach with him this idea:

From what I've seen, the most sophisticated gardens are those aspiring to look natural. Therefore, might not the final stage of esthetic development be when one loves best what is indeed natural -- the wild forest, the marsh, the meadow?

I would like to ask Dieter if any garden he can imagine could equal the loveliness of the embankment I visited this week, where native Blunt-lobed Woodsias unfurled so graciously among their homey little moss and liverwort companions.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Mature tastes trend toward naturalness.*

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**ANT BENEATH A LEAF<sup>19</sup>**

The other day I passed beneath a water-starved Castor plant, looked up, and saw an ant feeding from one of a pair of nectar-secreting glands atop a yellowing leaf's petiole.

As I stood looking I wondered what it felt like being that ant exactly where it was, doing exactly what it was doing.

I tried to imagine being ant size adhering to a translucing, yellow platform amidst converging lines, the blue sky summery-clouded beyond, feeding on musky nectar, my own scent-trail and the trails of other scents leading down the petiole.

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<sup>19</sup> Adapted from the March 17, 2008 Newsletter

Such identity-trading exercises are useful. We humans survive only because we're accepted members of an intricate web of interdependent beings. Sometimes we really should reflect on how those other beings are feeling, what they need, and how and why we should share the world with them gladly.

Other organisms' perspectives are relevant. Humans share 98% of our genetic makeup with chimpanzees, so it's to be assumed that chimps feel a lot like we do, even if we can't understand what they're telling us. If humanity keeps evolving, something later will emerge from us as different from us as we are from chimps, and that new kind of being will "feel" things more complexly than we by about the same degree we "feel" more complexly than chimpanzees. Will that new brainier-than-humans species ever think it worthwhile to reflect on how any lowly human must be feeling?

If it doesn't, it'll last no longer than we humans will if pretty soon we don't concern ourselves with the feelings and value of other organisms.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Humans are part of a family of living things, and that implies the need for empathy among us.*

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**HONEST IGNORANCE<sup>20</sup>**

This morning as the eastern horizon just began to pale I stepped from the trailer and heard what sounded like heavy raindrops pelting the satellite-dish solar cooker. It wasn't raining anywhere else so I walked over and saw that large, dark beetles were plummeting from the sky and bouncing off the shiny aluminum dish

<sup>20</sup> Adapted from the March 28, 2004 Newsletter

onto the ground, apparently attracted by the aluminum's brightness. The beetles were a species of Shining Leaf-Chafer of the Scarab Beetle Family, closely related to Japanese Beetles.

What mysterious urgency caused this hoard of never-before-noticed beetle species to pick now to fly skyward, and be so vulnerable to the radiance of my satellite-dish solar cooker? I had caught part of a strand of events leading from one mystery to another, and could hardly even guess at causes or affects.

In fact, these days with so many extraordinary events blossoming all around me, I would say that after "awe," the sensation I am most experiencing is that of feeling ignorant. My lack of knowledge about the most ordinary and near-at-hand phenomena is absolutely appalling. I brush away a few leaves on the forest floor and what I see there fills me with a sense of shame for my stupidity.

And yet, there is a certain charm in honest addleheadedness. For, the people I most admire assure me that they feel even more astonished about things and more simple-minded than I. Mostly I am speaking of people who are scientists and good teachers, or just regular folks who constantly, like me and my Sunday-morning beetles, bounce into things and fall back looking and feeling dumb.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Awe and admiration increases with information.*

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**GREEN TO MAKE THE HEAD SWIM<sup>21</sup>**

All around my little trailer too-close-together Sweetgum saplings flaunt their new leaves right at eye level. Their profound greenness when the sun shines through them just makes the head swim.

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<sup>21</sup> Adapted from the April 7, 2002 Newsletter



Above, the big Pecan trees are just beginning to put on leaves, so by looking up one can see blue and gray, but throughout the normal day I feel like a fish in an algae-filled aquarium left in the sun. The fish analogy is fitting because it's as I'm breathing this greenness, swimming and dreaming in it, absorbing it and having it flow through my veins.

The other morning I was staring into this three-dimensional super-greenness while listening to the radio about the upcoming Shuttle mission to the International Space Station. The juxtaposition of this green-staring and radio listening conjured a flash of insight, or maybe even a vision.

But , first, you should know that the Space Station is a gangling thing bristling with solar panels. So, my fleeting, radio-listening "vision" was this:

*The Sweetgum saplings around me right now are doing exactly what they're doing at the orbiting Space Station. Both the Sweetgums and the Space Station are deploying solar panels to capture solar energy needed to function and stay alive.*

For a split second I could see my Sweetgums as just as vulnerable and desperate for energy as the people in the Space Station, and I could see so clearly that, once all romance is swept away, the basics are the same everywhere.

Both the Sweetgum saplings around me and NASA are confirming and celebrating a fundamental formula around which Earth life has crystallized. That formula is this:

**the sun --> capture of sunlight energy --> that energy used to grow and evolve**

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Recognize the energetics of Life, and revere solar energy.*

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## **NEATNESS AS ABOMINATION<sup>22</sup>**

A fellow in the vicinity has been busy this week bulldozing trees and bushes from a ditch running across his large, flat, grassy field. Someone remarked to me how wonderful it is that "things are getting cleaned up around here, really looking neat now."

Let it be known that when it comes to neatening up the landscape for neatness' sake, what I see is habitat destruction, and there's nothing neat about it.

Above I use the word "abomination" advisedly. I am aware of the word's religious connotations, for many of us never see that word except in the Bible, where many things are classed as "abominations before the Lord." I use the word not in a religious context, but in a spiritual one, and in my opinion the destruction of life-giving habitat purely for the sake of appealing to the local community's concept of "neatness" is abomination before the spirit of the Creator.

For, when you look into the Universe and at the web of life on our little Earth, you see plainly that the Creator blossoms diversity out of nothingness, evolves sophistication out of awkwardness, and leaves strands of interdependency among all things. Whatever in spirit goes against this grand and beautiful theme of the Creator is "abomination."

The bushes and trees along that little ditch across the field provided a tiny island of habitat for a gorgeous diversity of living beings. A thriving local ecosystem of mutually dependent living things existed in an ocean of ecologically unstable monoculture grass. It was a polyphonic song sung in a desert.

And its destruction for the sake of neatening up the landscape is an abomination.

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<sup>22</sup> Adapted from the April 11, 2004 Newsletter

**THE WISDOM IN IT:***Too often orderliness and cleanliness mean sterility.*

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**BLACK VULTURE AND CONVERGENT EVOLUTION<sup>23</sup>**

Monday afternoon as I sat working at the computer suddenly there was a solid bang atop the trailer. I assumed that a limb had fallen from the big Pecan tree above me. But then I heard claws scratching the aluminum top and all I could think of was the time a large iguana fell onto my tin roof in Belize.

My trailer is so small that I can stand in the open door and peep over the roof. I did that and there was a Black Vulture, *CORAGYPS ATRATUS*, with a wingspread of about 54 inches (1.4 m). Naturally he instantly exploded into a huff of whooshing wings, and vanished behind some trees. I suppose I was lucky to get by with whooshing wings, for vultures have been known to indulge in projectile vomiting when upset. During my brief look at the creature I clearly saw the bird's powerfully hooked beak, beautifully designed to tear into flesh, just like a hawk's.

This brings up an interesting fact.

My old, tattered and moldy birding field guide, copyright 1966, places vultures along with hawks and falcons in a single order. In other words, the authors of that book in 1966 assumed that vultures, hawks and falcons were all very closely related, having shared a common ancestor not far back in evolutionary history. One problem with that idea was that vulture feet are famously weak, while the feet of other predator birds are typically powerfully built.

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<sup>23</sup> Adapted from the April 13, 2003 Newsletter

Recent results from genetic sequencing show that our New World vultures are most closely related to storks and ibises, not hawks and falcons. Come to think of it, if you make a Wood Ibis black, and shorten its beak and legs, you pretty much have a vulture...

This is a beautiful example of convergent evolution. Millions of years ago there was an ecological niche open for birds to fill, that of eating carrion. Since the carrion-eating "job" is done most effectively by birds who look and behave in a certain way, eventually, as Old World hawky birds evolved to fill that niche and New World storky birds did the same thing, the two unrelated groups of birds came to look and behave very similarly.

It's the same phenomenon that causes many Australian marsupial species to look like similar mammals here, though they are not at all closely related. Also it accounts for southern Africa's succulent Euphorbias being so like our American cactuses.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Certain ideas, or models, or paradigms flow through reality. If we recognize the concept in one environment, maybe when we find it elsewhere, we can transfer insights from the old environment to the new.*

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**ON THE BEAUTY OF CONVERGENT EVOLUTION<sup>24</sup>**

The vultures' convergent evolution got me to thinking about the fact that again and again in Nature you find very unrelated species evolving to look like one another. The reason is always the same: There's an optimum appearance and behavior for a species exploiting any specific ecological niche, so whatever ancestry the species has occupying that niche, its appearance and behavior will

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<sup>24</sup> Adapted from the April 13, 2003 Newsletter

gradually evolve to the "optimum appearance and behavior" for that niche.

For me, the pretty part of that process is the confirmation that abstract ideals exist in Nature and that, existing, they manifest themselves in the "real world." These abstract ideals are like ghosts suspended in eternity, beckoning parts of the changing world around them (species) to come closer, to assume the character of the ideal's essence -- to become a material manifestation of the spiritual ideal.

Thus the Ghost of Carrion-eating Birds for millions of years called toward the bird world, and out of the mists stepped Old-World members of the hawk order, and New-World members of the stork order. After millennia of walking toward the Ghost of Carrion-eating Birds, the Old-World hawk volunteers and our New-World stork volunteers now look almost the same.

So, what ghost beckons us humans forward as we evolve? What is the abstract ideal toward which we humans are walking out of the mists? What will be our final appearance and behavior?

For me, the search for an answer to those questions almost defines what it means to be a spiritual (not a religious) person. One's spiritual quest must be to glimpse the thing toward which humankind walks, and to keep consciously approaching that Holy Ghost, metamorphosing appropriately during the process.

My own journey is at an infantile stage, and I see the Ghost only at a very great distance and through profoundly disorienting mists. Yet already I can tell you two or three things I'm sure this Ghost favors.

She favors vitality over inertness. She favors evolution over inaction. She favors diversity over uniformity.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Be vital, struggle to grow, cherish diversity.*

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## **MOMENTS OF PERFECTION<sup>25</sup>**

This week the world has been fresh and vibrant. Showers came and went leaving plants sparkling in spring sunlight, birds put on shows, new flowers blossomed every day, it was neither too hot nor too cold, and the mosquitoes weren't bad. The big Pecan trees above my trailer now sprout leaves and dense, dark clusters of catkins of male flowers. Bugs swarm among the catkins eating pollen and worms attack the succulent new leaves, so birds rush from branch to branch eating bugs and caterpillars. On Saturday morning several Orchard Orioles and Baltimore Orioles, both bright-orange-and-black species freshly arrived from the tropics, along with some warblers and woodpeckers, made a gaudy circus above me.

Some afternoons white-topped thunderheads built up, and sometimes I just had to escape from the computer and go watch how the clouds' towering tops billowed into the dark-blue sky. There's power and purpose in these enormous, rumbling, dark-bottomed clouds. The binoculars show how edges of the cloud boil and seethe and you can imagine the howling, cold winds and mighty electrical charges at play inside the clouds. But then take down the binoculars and there's just pretty white against pretty blue, and perhaps later there will be a pleasant shower.

Right before dusk there's a fresh spurt of activity among the birds and I walk along the woods' edges looking into the interiors of trees lighted by low-slanting sunlight. What a pleasure just seeing the colors of birds and butterflies in these theaters of glowing green leaves and black limbs gilded with orange sunlight.

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<sup>25</sup> Adapted from the April 14, 2002 Newsletter

If I had a million dollars I could never purchase the pleasure and contentment I have enjoyed for free during this single past week.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Look around.*

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**A PERFECT BLACK-NECKED STILT** <sup>26</sup>

The other day I got to see an elegant little Black-necked Stilt standing stiffly in shallow water. With my binoculars I feasted my eyes on the black-and-white-tuxedoed little bird with slender, shockingly red legs, his perfectly proportioned, needlelike, cocky little bill definitely up-turned, and white, bushy-looking eyebrows.

I lay there with ants beginning to bite wondering about this: Why should one bird species give the impression of having a more perfect appearance than any other? For example, on the page of my field guide illustrating the Black-necked Stilt also one finds the Black Oystercatcher and the Lapwing. The latter two species are handsome, interesting-looking birds, but I'd never consider them as "perfect" just based on their looks. But, yes, there's something "perfect" about that Black-necked Stilt.

Here's how I have it figured out:

Throughout the Universe there flow a certain number of elemental themes. I visualize these themes as being like ribbons of every color and texture slowly undulating in open space. An example of a universal theme might be "gaiety." Another, "nobility." There's "harmony," "aggression," "generosity" ... on and on. Moreover,

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<sup>26</sup> Adapted from the April 14, 2007 Newsletter

when I think about it, each of these themes is paired with its opposite, which also constitutes a theme -- "somberness" with "gaiety," "meanness" with "nobility" -- always the yin and yang of things inextricably paired.

The themes noted above are expressed in terms of human traits -- "gaiety," "nobility" -- but the Universe's themes are expressed in all kinds of ways. The quality I call "gaiety" sometimes manifests itself beautifully in pieces of music, but also it appears in a blue-flowered Jacaranda heaving in the wind on a sunny day. This "feeling" can also express itself abstractly, as in the spirit displayed in the robustly branching phylogenetic Tree of Life where, say, the orchid branch suddenly explodes with joyous diversification of blossom designs and colors. In fact, nowhere does the thing I called "gaiety" express itself as rambunctiously as in the fact that the Universe itself consists of something instead of nothing, and that that something lustily, singingly, dancingly evolves.

People appreciative of music know that some pieces are more successful than others in expressing something -- the "something" being some kind of universal theme, such as "robust young love" or "nostalgia." Therefore, maybe I sense something "perfect" about the Black-necked Stilt because that species, like some exceptional pieces of music, expresses a universal theme more "artfully" than some other bird species.

What could be the theme the Black-necked Stilt so perfectly represents?

I guess it's something not as general as "gaiety" or "nobility." It's something more specific, maybe "elegant cockiness" or "playful conservatism."

Refined Japanese in ancient times displayed their understanding of the connection between things of the material world and abstract notions when they ceremonially associated fragrances of incense with particular poems or moments of history, in the exquisite ceremony known as "listening to incense." In a similar manner, today any reflective person can find smiling associations between the



Universe's elemental themes and certain people, songs, tree species... and bird species.

The fulfillment of this proposition is arrived at when we not only recognize universal elemental themes, but also reflect on the themes and choose which ones we can most nobly identify with, and then live our lives in harmony with those themes.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*There's fulfillment in harmonizing with nature's themes.*

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**LIBERACE ROOSTER, GLORIA CHILDS HEN<sup>27</sup>**

Most people here keep chickens, some behind fences but mostly just running loose. When I first arrived I began noticing a certain rooster and hen couple who always stayed together, apart from the others. The rooster was very handsome but so cowardly that when he found something to eat he'd cluck the way he's supposed to in order to call the hen, but when the hen would run toward him, instead of mounting her like a decent rooster, he'd get visibly agitated and run away. Toss him corn and he'd run from that, too, and he ran in a tight, prissy manner, as well. I called him Liberace because he was so outrageously elegant, and soft.

Liberace's red hen companion was one of these "novelty breeds" whose feathers curl back on themselves, giving the chicken a comically fluffed-out look. She was overly plump and so perpetually busy rushing from one place to another that I suspected her of being a bit too nervously effusive, at least in hen terms. I called her Gloria, after Gloria Childs, and could almost hear her thinking in a high, squeaky voice, "Ah, another magnificent grass seed, how *maaaaaarvelous!*"

<sup>27</sup> Adapted from the April 14, 2008 Newsletter.

I had it analyzed that Liberace needed a hen like Gloria because Gloria was so enthusiastically excited about everyday details that she didn't seem to really notice or care about Liberace's cowardice. And Gloria needed a companion like Liberace who wasn't so fixated on sex that he'd never give her enough space to effervesce and get excited over every little detail of everything, which was just the way Gloria was.

Then one day Gloria disappeared. Liberace spent days by himself wandering out in the tall grass. I feared for his safety because three times I've seen a Gray Fox out there.

Eventually Liberace took up with a sleek, too-young hen. It wasn't long before several other hens joined his flock, and now when he called for them to come and eat something real or feigned, he actually mounted them when they bent over to see what was there, instead of running away. Moreover, each day he visibly grew more muscular, more aggressive, and began crowing -- good crows, too, as good as any cock-a-doodle-doo out there.

Then Gloria reappeared. The family who owned her had broken up, there'd been a custody battle over the chickens, and part of the settlement had been that Gloria would return. Now her wings were clipped. Liberace and Gloria spent a whole day awkwardly looking sideways at one another. The next day Liberace was back with his small flock of young admirers and Gloria began a new life of wandering from the periphery of one loose flock to another, sometimes even Liberace's, though Liberace hardly seems to notice. The world had gained another good-looking, flamboyant rooster, but lost a good-natured hen so absorbed in the world's details that she didn't require her rooster to be a hero.

I'm telling this story to remind us that all living things possess their own dignity, importance and life stories. In this light it seems proper to suggest that no one should ever eat the flesh of another living being without reflecting on the fact that a sentient, feeling individual has given up the rest of his or her life to make that moment of swallowing possible.

From what I've read, "primitive people" knew to pray for animals they'd just killed, or at least to thank them. Each time we buy cellophane-wrapped flesh while background music plays in the supermarket and we don't even wonder what the creature was like from whose body that flesh came, we further desensitize ourselves to the wonder of life itself. This desensitization limits human spiritual and emotional development.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Other living things share in the spiritual unity.*

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**FOCUSING** <sup>28</sup>

With so many things in nature going on right now, my mind tends toward diffusion. For example, my thoughts are snared by the fluty song of the Orchard Oriole, and then come reflections on how this bird has just arrived from tropical America, and then I remember all the habitat destruction there and here, and then the question arises as to who will eat the bugs who eat the plants around me now, if not the Orchard Oriole, and what that will mean for these forests and fields... And there are dozens of such birdsongs and other things snaring the mind all the time, hundreds of meditations and questions associated with each, and thousands of potential scenarios...

Something tells me it's not good to let the mind think diffusedly all the time, or even most of the time, so regularly I yank my mind out of that mode, and do focusing exercises.

For example, this morning with my binoculars I walked around focusing my lenses on individual things, just looking at them for a

<sup>28</sup> Adapted from the April 18, 2004 Newsletter

long time, as if I were standing before a piece of art on a museum wall, and I kept looking until I was satisfied that I had seen something important there.

I focused on a certain freshly emerged green oak leaf with sunlight rampaging through it. I don't believe there has ever been a design in all of Paris more expressive and perfect than the curl of that leaf just as it was during that particular moment of sunlit perfection. I focused on a feather with dew on it. I can't recall any painted picture in any museum anywhere evoking such pathos as that wrecked, wet feather. For long moments I beheld a yellow oxalis blossom all surrounded by green grass, and I saw -- really saw, saw as well as my mind could see at that time -- the grain in a weathered fence plank, and a cluster of pebbles in the sand at the creek's edge.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Struggle to keep the senses sharp.*

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**A PROFOUNDLY ENCOURAGING THOUGHT<sup>29</sup>**

The best moment of Friday's birdwalk came toward the end when for the first time during the walk I entered a broad open area, the Loblolly Field. During the whole walk I'd not heard or seen either a Field Sparrow or a Prairie Warbler, but as soon as I was in the field I heard them both, within seconds of one another.

Anyone familiar with the calls of our birds knows that the songs of these two species are similar in that both calls ascend the musical scale while accelerating in tempo, like a dropped penny circling on a tabletop. Their main difference is that the warbler's call is buzzy, while the sparrow's is crystal clear.

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<sup>29</sup> Adapted from the April 25, 2004 Newsletter

So, of all the birdcalls I heard Friday, why did these two species occupying the center of a large field both possess such similar, ascending, ethereal calls? And why do these birds' calls approximate what I myself would compose if I were asked to create a short musical phrase conveying the feeling of being a small thing earthbound, looking into the open sky with its expressive clouds, light-charged blue spaces, and its profound openness?

On Friday as I walked across the big field the notion occurred to me that maybe the big field had a message, and that the species known as Field Sparrows and Prairie Warblers -- birds as unrelated to one another as rabbits from mice -- were both evolving toward expressing it. Both species were in the process of reaching for the ultimate perfect timbre and phraseology for expressing the field's message, and already they had evolved to the point where their expressions were similar.

In fact, maybe every spot on Earth has a certain mood, or states a certain truth, and if you are a species evolving there, or if you're a human sensitive to what is going on there, what eventually, inevitably results is a glad, simple, songlike expression conveying that feeling or insight, passing it on to others.

Gloomy, shadowy forest brings forth haunting, fluty thrush calls. The break of dawn on foggy mornings erupts in good-natured turkey gobbling. The perspective of high perches watching over lower worlds is the hawk's cry. Absolute freedom of movement inside the open sky itself is Chimney-Swift twitter, and the sound of being earthbound looking into the open sky -- that's the upward sweeping, tempo-increasing call discovered independently by both the Field Sparrow and Prairie Warbler, in an occasion of convergent spiritual evolution.

If such is the case, it can be important, for it suggests that when finally all our forests, fields and marshes are destroyed, if just one sprig of crabgrass remains on an eroded knoll, and there comes to this place just one child to behold what is there, think about it, love it, and hear what it has to say, then wisdom and hope can be reborn again.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:***Natural themes are expressed in natural things.*

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**GRANDMA'S BLACKBERRIES<sup>30</sup>**

I wrote to my Grandma Taylor in Calhoun, Kentucky that blackberry thickets here were just white with blossoms, and her reply was sad. She said she missed seeing blackberry thickets the way they used to be, missed seeing the pretty blossoms and going gathering the purple-staining berries.

It's more than that Grandma is in her 90s and can't negotiate the fields. The problem is that in my ancestral part of Kentucky small farms with hedgerows that used to separate fields have been absorbed into very large farm businesses, and the new corporate farmers are not the rabbit-hunting type so they just don't care that when they bulldoze the old field boundaries they wipe out habitat, which is another name for blackberry thickets. The fact is that my part of Kentucky has gotten cleaned up, neatened, sprayed senseless, channelized and leveed, paved over, and generally ticky-tack-sprawled to death in the name of Wal-Mart and the right of people to be fat, have hypertension and buy big-screen TVs.

I can visualize the white-flowered blackberries in Grandma's fading memory, for they survive in full glory here with me now, healthy and spectacular at this very moment out in the field between here and the Hunters' Camp as I type these words.

If you could view this plantation from the air you'd see a large rectangle of forest surrounded on three sides by encroaching fields, pastures and suburban sprawl reaching out from Natchez 12 miles

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<sup>30</sup> Adapted from the April 27, 2003 Newsletter

to the north. (St. Catherine Wildlife Refuge keeps swamp forest on the western boundary.) And it's interesting to think why this island exists, why I'm able to live the life I have here with blackberries flowering just spitting distance away.

At the root of the reason is slavery, which enabled the plantation's first owner to prosper and pass on his property to many generations. And the reason now is that selling hunting rights is very important to the current plantation's owner, and my blackberry thicket makes fine deer browse and cover, and that makes the hunters happy, who pay to hunt here.

I owe my presence here, then -- and my nights of good sleep, my accomplishments on the Internet, my current writings, this Newsletter and the friends I've met because of it -- to the enslavement of Black folks, and to hunting.

As I have written before, The Creator has a fine sense of humor.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Sometimes you just have to laugh.*

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**PRIMITIVE MAGNOLIAS<sup>31</sup>**

This week the Tulip Poplar's wonderful flowers got me thinking about the relationship, if any, between their special beauty and the fact that, according to the fossil record, flower structure and gene sequencing, the Magnolia Family to which the Tulip Poplar belongs has long been regarded as the most "primitive" of flowering plants. There were magnolias during dinosaur times about 130 million years ago.

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<sup>31</sup> Adapted from the April 27, 2003 Newsletter

Botanists point to many "primitive characters" exhibited by Magnolia Family members -- for example their woodiness, their simple and alternate leaves, and their showy flowers with long floral axes, poorly developed styles and stigmas, leaf-like stamens, spiral arrangement of parts, and their pistils being separate from one another. ("Modern" families include the sycamores, walnuts, oaks and dogwoods.)

Is there a connection between the beauty of species in the Magnolia Family, and their primitiveness? In our culture we seem to find a special relationship between primitiveness and beauty.

About three years ago a shrub called Amborella, found only on the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific, suddenly became famous. Of all living flowering plants on Earth, it was revealed to be the most closely related to the very first flowering plants. Amborella is not in the Magnolia Family, nor are its flowers particularly large and showy. In habit it's a normal, medium-size shrub with cream-colored blossoms. They don't seem to have much to do with magnolias.

So, the Magnolia Family is primitive, but apparently the great beauty of most of the species in it isn't closely tied to their primitiveness.

I have no regrets about learning this, for the unspoken, unwelcome corollary of the "primitive = beautiful" equation is this: Inevitable evolution perpetually nudges us all toward what is more efficient, but gray; toward what is more productive, but mediocre.

Now that I think about, when I look into the skies at night, or ruminate on the matter of subatomic particles, I find no paradigms in those worlds to support the notion that "primitive = beautiful," and I have to wonder wherever that idea got started. On the other hand, the facts that great things can arise from plain beginnings, and that special beauty can appear anyplace unexpectedly, do fit paradigms glimpsed in the cosmos and in the mathematics of the inner world.



Before, the Magnolia Family's beauty was to me like the beauty of Gauguin's Tahiti paintings. Magnolias seemed to support the idea that being unsophisticated, rustic, elemental -- in and of itself -- might be reason enough to explain their beauty. But now I see this: Gauguin's paintings are wonderful not because the Polynesians were simple folk, but because Gauguin was a great artist. Likewise, being primitive doesn't make Earthly things beautiful. What does is the craftsmanship of the Universal Creative Force that produced them.

Step by step old prejudices and assumptions fall away, and new ideas and insights appear and evolve. This week it was the flowering Tulip Poplars who guided me.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Understandings and sensitivities should evolve and mature.*

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**THE MIDDLE PATH<sup>32</sup>**

I have grown accustomed to people referring to my views as extreme. They assume that even I accept that I am an extremist. However, I think of myself as a true disciple of the Middle Path.

It is a matter of perspective. I am taking the long view.

Humans have been around for 5-7 million years. Until only about 300 years ago when the Industrial Revolution began, people were NOT spending most of their waking hours doing repetitive, often unfulfilling jobs for businesses and institutions. The manner of life we now accept as normal and inevitable has occupied us during only about 1/500,000ths of our existence. Our society's priorities of

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<sup>32</sup> Adapted from the May 2, 2004 Newsletter

attaining mostly unnecessary material wealth, and our obsessions with individual personal liberty and self gratification instead of the maintenance of a healthy and just society, constitute a very recent phenomenon.

Our society's present consumption-oriented manner of living must be and will be replaced by a different system, if only because it is unsustainable. The most obvious reason it is unsustainable is because maintaining the kind of lifestyle we live consumes resources faster than they can be replaced, if they can be replaced at all. Unsustainable behaviors either change or go extinct. To my mind, to persist in indulging in unsustainable living patterns is extreme. It is not extreme to try to live sustainably.

Moreover, the life I live is hardly an extreme case of "going back to nature." I buy cornmeal and wheat flour milled from grain grown in other states, wear clothing sewed together on the opposite side of the planet, ride a bicycle that is a marvel of engineering, and use very sophisticated technology to learn about the world and keep in touch with others. I take what I need from the outside world and in the process produce more pollution as a consequence of my purchasing than I like. Very much of what enriches and gladdens my life comes from far beyond the gardens, forests and fields around me. If anything, in seeking the Middle Path I err too much toward consumerism myself.

In my view, average US consumers are extremists. As they gather so much needless clutter around them and focus on their own hungers, their own comfort and their own status in an unsustainable social system, they are abandoning sustainable living patterns pioneered by many kinds of living organisms during 3.5 billion years of life on Earth.

In contrast to this extreme behavior, I am truly the most mild-mannered, hard-nosedly conservative, middle- of-the-road person I know. Moreover, for the future I aspire to orient myself even more directly upon the sustainable Middle Path.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*In an extreme environment, moderation may seem extreme; extremism may seem moderate.*

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**STUMBLING<sup>33</sup>**

The most pregnant moment of Friday's walk came when I stumbled on a tree root. When I tried to catch myself my other foot also got caught, so I ended up flailing my arms wildly, sending binoculars, field guide and cornbread everywhere, and landing about as ungracefully as possible.

At age 55 I'm in inordinately good shape, yet, still, my reactions are clearly slowing. Each year the hearing goes a bit, and now when with my right eye I watch a bird that's just a tiny speck in the sky... that speck disappears and reappears as a dirty spot flutters exactly where I try to focus. The old body is giving way. The senses are dulling. The face of the future grins at me plainly.

Yet, I wouldn't want to return to my earlier years. Maturing (as opposed to merely growing old) has its compensations equaling and possibly surpassing the delights of simply being young and healthy.

For example, sometimes during my birding walks I recall how my birding technique has changed over the years. When I was younger I had to check each bird's field marks in my field guide before I felt sure of its identification. I had to see the White-eyed Vireo's white iris, and the Yellow-rumped Warbler's yellow rump and white throat. Now I know my birds by clusters of characters, seldom even needing to use binoculars. I know birds by their silhouettes, by the way they move, by what habitat or niche they occupy, and by their

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<sup>33</sup> Adapted from the May 4, 2003 Newsletter

songs and warning calls. Friday I listed 24 Red-eyed Vireos but I never got a good look at a single one.

Thus, gaining maturity as a birder, even as my body has deteriorated, I've become a more effective birder.

I have no doubt that as years pass my body and senses will deteriorate at an accelerating rate. However, also I'm sure that -- as long as my mind remains intact -- intangible, maybe even mystical, benefits of a maturing, evolving spirit will more than compensate for my physical losses.

Friday, I stumbled. As I flailed my arms, looking perfectly ridiculous, the entire train of thought outlined above flashed through my mind in an instant. By the time I hit the ground already I was beginning to laugh, so delighted that in this blur of a life I'd just lived I'd glimpsed myself evolving from a sensory-intoxicated and physical-world-enslaved infant to the kind of seeing-and-hearing-OK-without-good-eyes-and-ears, balding and gray-bearded stumbler I am now.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Things tend to balance out in the long run.*

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**DANDELION SALAD AND POKE<sup>34</sup>**

I'm lucky to have arrived here exactly when Dandelion leaves and Pokeweed shoots are perfect for eating. Several times since I've been here I've gathered fistfuls of Dandelion leaves, snipped them into stamp-size sections, poured oil and vinegar over them, sprinkled on a tiny bit of salt, mixed it all up, and, boy, it was good. I'd forgotten how good Dandelion salad tastes.

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<sup>34</sup> Adapted from the May 4, 2006 Newsletter

Dandelion connoisseurs often let their freshly picked leaves soak in saltwater about half an hour before composing their salad. Also, they tend to mix in other kinds of leaves on the premise that the pure Dandelion flavor is a little robust for refined tastes.

If you decide to pick some leaves for a salad, be sure they haven't been peed on by dogs, doused with herbicides, or coated with exhaust fumes from passing cars. Also, my experience is that once the big flush of fruiting heads -- the puffballs -- have lost their fuzz, the leaves are beginning to be bitter. Finally, I wouldn't bother with the stunted kinds of dandelions found in most lawns because they might be too tough and bitter. The leaves I've been picking are from fields that haven't been touched for a while, and the leaves stand up like dark green, glossy rabbit ears at least a foot high.

Most of my life I've also picked Pokeweed shoots. I'd just take the top eight inches or so of the shoot, keeping in mind that the purple stem below the shoot is poisonous. I'd cook the shoots, then pour off the water, put the shoots onto a plate, add salt and pepper and, when I felt particularly affluent and skinny, smear it all with butter.

Well, one recent morning, since I don't yet have my campfire routines down pat, I decided to forego the boiling in water and just snip the shoots directly into my skillet, sauté them and then scramble my eggs into them.

That tasted pretty good but apparently skipping the parboiling wasn't a good idea. I think my shoots, even though they were just the green tops, retained enough poison in them -- which usually gets poured off with the water -- to make me sick. I lost that breakfast about five minutes after I ate it, and I didn't feel well the whole day.

So, there are insights here.

The first insight is that the Earth is bounteous and good. The second is that it's not enough to simply make the mental flip enabling you to appreciate things like Dandelions and Pokeweed. You also need to know the art of taking advantage of these gifts,

without which you may end up poisoning yourself as I did. In the past this art was communicated to us through traditions passed down to us from our families and communities.

Yet a third insight might be that not only have most people never learned about the wonderful things the Earth offers freely, but agencies within our culture actually cause people to despise them. Lately I've heard more than one person's disparaging words about Dandelions, and more and more hedgerows where Pokeweed lives are being bulldozed.

It seems that our culture has passed through three doors on its way to alienating itself so thoroughly from Nature's bounteousness.

*The first door was losing the art of taking advantage of what was given freely.*

*The second was forgetting that there ever was something free in the first place.*

*The last was acquiring contempt for those things not hyped by sales people.*

Well, maybe one way to start the journey back to the first door might be to go out and pick Dandelion leaves for a nice salad, and eat them with proper ceremony and thankfulness. Or have some nice buttery Pokeweed shoots.

Just remember to cook that poke, though, and then throw the water away!

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*We have lost much, but we can learn it again.*

### **WHY DESTRUCTION MIGHT BE SO MUCH FUN<sup>35</sup>**

The neighbor continues "neatening up the landscape." Day after day the bulldozer has its way and during each morning jog I see the consequences. One day a line of trees is vanished, the next a hedgerow. It's especially painful now when so many creatures are nesting. On the other hand, maybe it's best to destroy the nests and kill the young now, for without habitat there will be nothing to sustain them later.

One unsettling thing about jogging by a spot where a hedgerow or large tree stood before, but now there's nothing but flat, bare dirt, is that nothing is left screaming about what is missing. It's not like the empty feeling left by an extracted molar, where you can insert the tip of your tongue and feel the weirdness of the tooth's absence, the unnaturalness of it, the awful loss. You just jog by and wonder if maybe you were wrong about that hedgerow or tree being there in the first place. In the morning fog, the emptiness looks perfectly natural, totally at ease with itself.

This phenomenon of natural things going missing, and their absence not being a screaming affair, fits neatly with similar situations. How simple it is to walk up to a wildflower that has been developing for months, and stomp it in a second. How easy to drain and fill a wetland that has needed centuries to develop.

It seems that reality is structured so that destruction is quick and easy, while creation is always a painful and difficult thing. The only reason I can figure out that the Creator would fix things this way is that She so much enjoys the process of creation. After all, a glimpse into the Universe shows that everything is evolving, so surely creation is the Creator's main passion. With such an obsession with the process of change, and with eternity and the whole Universe as the context, why should the Creator be especially fond of what we think of as static, stable ecosystems, ephemeral as they are on our relatively evanescent Earth?

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<sup>35</sup> Adapted from the May 9, 2004 Newsletter

How else can it be explained that in this culture the extermination of those little islands of life is adjudged appropriate and good, while my wish that they would be left alone has no standing at all, in fact is generally regarded as the quirky whims of a crank?

Surely with each shove of the bulldozer's blade the Creator smiles anticipating the fun eventually She'll have starting over, blossoming life and order again where the bulldozer today destroys it.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Maybe we find it so easy to destroy the biosphere that sustains us because The Creator would be perfectly happy to start over again.*

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**THE MEANING OF LIFE<sup>36</sup>**

I've always mistrusted that phrase, "The meaning of life." It's because the word "meaning" carries with it an implied context of rationality. Yet, it seems to me that anyone who asks that question should be expecting a reply that is spiritual, if not mystical.

A Red Mulberry with its sweet, purple-staining fruits got me thinking about this. There I was in the cool twilight beneath the tree looking up through those big, sun-speckled mulberry leaves, seeing the pretty green, red and almost-black fruits, my sunburned, wrinkled, veiny hands among them plucking mulberries and getting purple-stained, and hearing the wind in the tree, and birds singing, seeing the animation of leaves in the wind, experiencing a kaleidoscopic, shimmering, wholly unexpectedly beautiful and perfect moment, and this thought came to me:

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<sup>36</sup> Adapted from the May 11, 2003 Newsletter



This tree's task was simply to create reproductive propagules (seeds) and to get them dispersed into new areas where its offspring might prosper. There were so many ways this goal could have been accomplished, yet the Red Mulberry's approach was to create a strategy involving all this sunlight, wind, birdsong and sweet fruit. How elegant! How original! How generous of the Creator to have settled on things this way!

If someone were to propose that "the meaning of the fruit is that the tree may reproduce itself," then all that was meaningful to me that day as I myself became the Red Mulberry's dispersal agent would be eliminated from the discussion. The word "meaning" is too narrow to use when considering something as wonderful as ripe mulberries.

In the same way, any statement beginning with "The meaning of life is that..." automatically declares itself as an analysis too arid to listen to.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Some questions arise from premises so wrong-headed that they cannot be answered the usual ways.*

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**NOSTALGIA, WISTFULNESS, OR WHAT?<sup>37</sup>**

These days as the spring bird-migrants arrive, familiar birdsongs are settling onto the landscape. As I type this an Indigo Bunting sings his heart out in the Broom-Sedge field across the hedgerow, and this strikes a chord deep within me. The song brings to mind long summers when I was a kid on the Kentucky farm. Hearing it now I almost see, almost smell and feel, the big, flat, heat-

<sup>37</sup> Adapted from the May 11, 2006 Newsletter

smothered fields of soybean, corn and tobacco around our house, where Indigo Buntings always sang from nearby power lines.

I've been regarding the feelings these callings elicit as nostalgia. However all the dictionary's various meanings of "nostalgia" appear to embrace a yearning to return home. In fact, the word nostalgia is based on the ancient Greek "nostos" meaning "a return home."

However, hearing the Indigo Bunting right now, though stirring up powerful feelings and associations, doesn't really make me want to return home. Therefore, it's not nostalgia this birdsong calls forth.

The thesaurus reminds me of the word "wistfulness," which at first glance seems to be my bunting feeling. However, the dictionary says that wistfulness is "Feeling or evincing yearning with little expectation of gratification" and the word is derived from "wishful."

The problem with "wistfulness," then, is that it also implies that I'm wanting something -- "wishing" for it. But, again, the fact is that this birdsong-feeling I'm having isn't making me want anything. I'm just happy to hear it, and to associate a lot of good memories with it.

After fiddling with the thesaurus for some time I'm thinking that maybe in English we just don't have an appropriate term. "Sentimental," "romantic," "dreamy," "emotional," "longing" ... none hit the mark.

Maybe the lack of exactly the right word reflects a feature of our English language. That is, English is the tongue of a target-obsessed people. We tend to think that everything exists for a purpose. Most of us can't get our heads around the notion that maybe it's enough for some things to simply exist as themselves in their own places, no strings attached.

"*We/a see/a*, etc.", Newsletter reader Leona in Missouri writes me that her Indigo Bunting is calling. She describes her birds as "filling the misty mornings with song, and they don't quit, they survived and they are again with us. I am getting so old and creaky I just sit and listen, and sitting, one eventually sees the singers."

Leona and her Indigo Bunting and me with my Indigo Bunting all singing and sitting, beautifully. And maybe the neat thing is that we don't really have a name for this thing we're doing.

The Tao says that that which calls itself the Tao is not the Tao. Maybe Leona not having a name for this bunting thing, and I having no name for this almost-nostalgia thing... maybe we're both onto something real.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Some things are beyond words.*

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**ODOR OF FRESHLY GROUND WHEAT<sup>38</sup>**

Thursday morning Diana decided to make bread. She began by pouring several cups of red wheat and white wheat grains into her mill and grinding her own flour. The fresh flour issued a hearty, wholesome aroma of a transcendent nature. In fact, I'd like to expose someone having a nervous breakdown to that precise odor. I wouldn't be surprised if it brought peace to the poor soul. And if that didn't becalm the person's spirit, then we could try the odor of freshly baking homemade bread...

The funny thing is that when you do something like make your own flour from freshly milled grain, or do some hoeing in the garden, or mend your clothing, not only do you end up saving money but also you find your life enriched, your health improved, and your effect on the ecosystem much diminished from what it would have been if you'd done something like watch TV or run down to Wal-Mart's.

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<sup>38</sup> Adapted from the May 15, 2005 Newsletter

In fact, I'm not aware of any great philosopher, religious teacher, prophet, guru or generally happy, well adjusted person who advocates the kinds of lives being chosen by most people nowadays.

Sometimes in the evening I sit overlooking the canyon to the west, gazing over the shimmering, hustling Central Valley, and I remember how once I was firmly embedded in the outside culture. I've been thinking about what advice I'd give anyone who wanted to simplify their lives and feel better. I've come up with a three-step program, and here it is:

**STEP 1: Replace addictions (drugs, food, hankering for status, money, fame, power, sex, etc.) with a program of eating properly and exercising.**

**STEP 2: Figure out what the Creator programmed you to do in life. You can be sure that you possess one or more unusual talents, passions or innate insights critically important to share with any healthy, just society.**

**STEP 3: Spend your life working hard at those things you believe in, and feel happiest doing.**

I find it enormously comforting knowing that life is hooked up in such a way that just by being true to what's inside ourselves, we magically increase the possibility that from time to time we'll smell the wonderful odor of freshly ground flour, and home-baking bread afterwards.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Simplify.*

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## STRUGGLING TOWARD A MORE ARTICULATE CROAK<sup>39</sup>

Perched inside the Black Willow while the Bird-voiced Treefrogs call, I know that the same urgency that makes the frogs croak also stirs me. Something here sets us both trying to express ourselves, vigorously to participate in the Universal blossoming, to be worthy parts of the Creator's majestic song.

With regard to the frog, I must say that no matter how beautiful and mysterious its call sounds, after a while it becomes a bit monotonous. One wishes for an unexpected flourish or improvisation. However, it's part of frogness that embellishments and jazzing are not allowed; such expressiveness lies purely within the domain of humans.

So far in human history nothing has affected the trajectory of our mental evolution more than the primal impulses of sex, power, property and prestige. Another way of saying that is that frogs fulfill their potentials, but not us humans. Sharp insight and enlightened living patterns just flicker here and there in a human landscape of animalish mediocrity.

Therefore, this week I have struggled to come up with something new to say, or at least an artful new way of saying what I always say. However, after a week of effort, I can't bring myself to showcase any thought that might distract from my usual theme: I just can't NOT repeat, ploddingly and monotonously, that the first step we humans must take to begin living up to our potential is to assure that our biological selves continue to survive; that our brains and spirits are capable of nothing if the animal bodies containing them aren't properly maintained, and that no animal body can survive without being enmeshed in a healthy ecosystem.

Therefore, I am like the Bird-voiced Treefrog after all. The Bird-voiced Treefrog repeats its simple message ad nauseam, and I have my message, too, which I likewise regard as so important that embellishments and jazzing are not allowed: *Shreeeep-shreeeep-shreeeep*; sustainable behavior, sustainable behavior, sustainable behavior...

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<sup>39</sup> Adapted from the May 16, 2004 Newsletter

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Sometimes you just have to stick to the boring fundamentals.*

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**COLD CROW OVER WINDY GRASS<sup>40</sup>**

Sometimes it's as if everything in a landscape chimes in with the same voice. In a concentrated, harmonizing instant lasting less than a second the voice sums up everything around you. You never know when such moments might crop up. At the end of life, maybe all that'll stick with us will be the echoes of such vividly alive moments.

I experienced such a moment the other day biking to the mailbox. We're on a ridge here so we're open to the wind. A cold front was blowing in and that day the wind made whole trees heave and twist, showing the silvery bottoms of their leaves and sounding like waterfalls. On our ridge the sky is wide open so clouds say a lot. That day everything said was dark, ragged and cold. Most upland here is in hayfields and pastures, so fast-moving, almost violent waves of grass rampaged across too-green hayfields.

It was hard keeping my balance on the bike, less because of the wind than because with dramatic, fast-changing clouds like that, it's hard to keep from looking at them. You want to know if that dark gray downpouring just to the west is about to soak you, and you want to see how that cloud curling upon itself so ominously will turn out. Looking up, you start falling to the side. Even the hayfields disorient with their inconstant, heaving borders. The coldness makes everything sharp, everything you feel, see, smell and hear is

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<sup>40</sup> Adapted from the May 18, 2006 Newsletter

sharp, sharpness and raw greenness roaring and heaving and you're right there inside it all.

A crow launched from a big Black-Cherry tree, or maybe it was blown from it, for it looked out of control, flying sideways and dipping and cawing. Seven black birds, maybe grackles, but my eyes were too teary to focus well, and those black birds erupted from the hayfield's boiling grass and went after the crow. At a time like this, they went chasing a crow!

In that half second of black birds converging on the crow alone in the terrible sky I saw it all and understood it all, how even at a time like this seven black birds can feel such rage that they'll leave cozy pockets down in the grass to go screaming and swooping in a gyrating senseless world. I understood it all in that half second, laughed at it all in a fast, convulsive way almost like inhaling a mosquito, and then it was all gone, all gone and everything not a millionth as meaningful and intense as it'd been just a second earlier.

I rode on, got the mail, and peddled back home, things still cold and windy, but now things not meaning much more than what they really were.

Still, that day, I had that half second of vividness, and in that half second the whole thing had managed to get itself inside me OK. Henceforward, all cold, windy things will have an element of crow-in-the-sky for me. All heaving, bubbling reality will be black birds crazily exploding out of ocean-grass, I know that for sure, and I'm going to remember just how cold-green that ocean-grass was.

In fact, when you meet me next time, that look in my face will be wind in a blustery, curdly sky, me trying to remember just how that curling black cloud resolved itself, and how that crow ever did get away.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Sometimes there are flashes of insight but who knows what to do with them?*

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**METAL<sup>41</sup>**

When I'm prying the violets from Ruth's flowerbeds I use a hunting knife with a steel blade. After some time of monotonous but pleasant work my mind starts floating and my senses habituate and empathize with the moist, crumbly soil and the yielding nature of plant tissue. In this organic mood it soon becomes vividly clear that the knife in my hand is absolutely an alien thing. Not even the limestone rocks that the blade sometimes scrapes against matches the knife's stiff, cold hardness. This thing stabbing into the ground so unfeelingly and slicing what refuses to yield is fundamentally otherworldly, and almost miraculous.

Our species, *Homo sapiens*, arose about half a million years ago. The Bronze Age arising from the Stone Age, in that context, occurred just recently, only about 4000 years ago. Since humans have been making and using metal only for less than 1% of our existence, you can say that for nearly humanity's entire existence we had no metal, had to skin animals with flaked flint, and grub roots with sticks and sharp rocks. Then someone discovered how to alloy copper and tin to make bronze, and in a relative wink of an eye this technological leap evolved into the world we have today.

As I work, it occurs to me that in the context of recent cogitations, this knife is contributing its own thought. It is reminding me that technology evolves at one rate, while biological and human social evolution proceed at much, much slower rates. We can see what a profoundly dangerous dynamic this is when we remember that today too often high-technology destructive power resides in the

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<sup>41</sup> Adapted from the May 25, 2006 Newsletter



hands of people whose minds are grounded in belief systems thousands of years old.

Specifically and most troublingly, a two-thousand-year-old religion may go into great detail about matters such as sexual politics and the rites to be celebrated on this or that occasion, but it won't say a word about what to do when the Earth becomes overpopulated with people, is faced with global warming and the oceans have become polluted and overfished.

*Exodus 35:2* very clearly and without qualification informs fundamentalist Christians that a person who works on the Sabbath must be murdered. Isn't this exactly the kind of thing you'd expect from a tribal elder in the Middle East 2000 years ago? But is it an appropriate message for today, right now?

I have heard people who distrust religions say that they put up with them because without them there'd be nothing to believe in, no guide for ordering society, and no compass for establishing goals in one's life.

To anyone needing something to believe in, I suggest that it is enough to believe in universal paradigms easily discernible in Nature -- such as the desirability of diversity, the necessity of frugal living and recycling of resources, and the beauty of simplicity.

Anyone wondering how to order society might consider the notion that it be ordered according to rational decisions made by well-informed, public-spirited people who have proven that they learn from what they see and experience. Most certainly society should not be based on a literature developed 2000 and more years ago and tinkered with by generations of clerics isolated from real life.

And if someone is looking for goals in life, then my opinion is that one's goal in life should be to struggle as hard as possible to see and understand the surrounding world, to reflect with a clear and penetrating mind on what is beheld, and to cultivate the sensitivities needed in order to exquisitely feel every moment in every day.

Finally, my opinion is that if there is any such thing as sin, then sin is voluntarily closing down one's mind.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*We must use the minds the Creator has supplied us with.*

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**ON THE PLEASURES OF LEAVING ANIMALS ALONE<sup>42</sup>**

On Wednesday morning while preparing breakfast, an adult bluebird arrived with a new fledgling. Their nestbox lies across a wide field so I wondered why the parent would bring the young bird to perch on the solar cooker not ten feet from me. While the fledgling perched there, the parent flew around catching bugs and bringing them to the big-eyed youngster.

In a similar vein, earlier I put up a nice box for the resident Carolina Wrens, but instead of using my box, which was at the barn's edge, they chose a little covey-hole not far above the entrance to the room where I do my computering. It was as if they wanted to be near me. Now the wrens' first brood is raised and they've established their second nest in a box of nails in the tool room across from where I work. Sometimes as I work, a wren hops into my room and just looks at me.

Even the Green Anoles, skinks and Fence Lizards seem to regard me as perfectly harmless, maybe even as a desirable companion. This means that if I'm not careful I'll step on them, for often they won't get out of my way as I walk toward them. A certain large Fence Lizard likes to sun on a post right at the barn's door and doesn't move when I pass just inches from him. At dusk, rabbits wander around right outside my door, Bobwhites visit my garden, and deer stand in the field gawking at me.

<sup>42</sup> Adapted from the May 30, 2004 Newsletter

I had the same thing at my previous location. Early readers of this Newsletter will recall the bats and Chimney Swifts in the well beneath my outside-kitchen roof (I have bats here, too), and how Prothonotary Warblers nested in the kitchen's hollow bamboo stems.

It's clear that if we leave animals alone, they are willing, sometimes even eager, to coexist with us. In doing so they enrich our lives. I'd much rather be part of a community with my wild animals, than to have a dog to bark at them, or a cat that would eat them.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Leave wild animals alone.*

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**WHY ARE SO MANY PLANTS MEDICINAL?<sup>43</sup>**

It seems that most plants I profile in the Newsletter turn out to have at least some medicinal value. For me this provides insight into the question "What is man's place in Nature."

I do not accept the view that "Every plant and animal was put here to serve humankind in some specific way." My opinion is practically the opposite of that. Instead of regarding humans as apart from and being served by nature, I see the human animal as absolutely enmeshed in the continuous web of all living things, each part of that web being appropriate and useful for its time and place.

The chemistry of life supports my view. For instance, most of the chemicals composing both yeast and man are practically identical. The proteins of both yeast and man are made of the same twenty amino acids, their nucleic acids of the same four purine and

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<sup>43</sup> Adapted from the June 1, 2003 Newsletter.

pyrimidine bases, and their carbohydrates of the same or similar sugars. The chemical pathway by which yeast ferments sugar to alcohol is identical with the pathway by which human muscle cells convert glucose to pyruvic acid. Combining ribosomes from microorganisms with the soluble fraction from a rabbit or a duck will synthesize protein all can use. In fact, at least when I went to school, the basic mechanisms of synthesizing and breaking down carbohydrate, fat and protein were considered to be identical in all forms of life known to exist.

With the above in mind, it's not surprising to read that 98.4% of our human genetic heritage is shared with chimpanzees, 75% is shared with mice, 30% with yeast, and 15% with the stomach-inhabiting bacterium *E. coli*.

These high percentages of shared genetic material indicate that the main work Mother Nature had to do in evolving all living things was to figure out such basic procedures as how to store energy in fats and carbohydrates, and how to tap that energy when it was needed. Once genes encoded that how-to information, later considerations -- such as whether an organism would have scales or feathers, or wear a shell or soft skin -- in many cases amounted to little more than tweaking an already-existing "general plan."

But, back to medicinal plants.

Plants and humans, then, in so many ways, are part of one big family, the Family of Living Things on Earth. We are related to one another by common ancestry and many shared features of existence. Since plants share so many problems with us, such as how to keep our tissue from rotting, how to keep the contents of our cells at a constant pH, and how to keep bugs from nibbling on us, through the eons they have evolved untold numbers of chemical solutions that might also work for us. We assume that certain tools are as useful when working on a nuclear reactor as on a bicycle, so why shouldn't a plant's chemical tools for survival sometimes be of value to us?

I find this view enormously satisfying. I like to reflect that Black Snakeroot, the Sassafras and the Pokeweed are all of the same stuff as I, that we are all "works in progress" being wrought during the same creative gesture, and all being constructed with the same building materials and tools.

On the other hand, this is also a scary thought when you think of all the broadband chemicals people release into the environment to kill "weeds" and other unwanted plants and animals. The chemical that throws a monkey wrench into the chemical pathways of mosquitoes and crabgrass may well be a monkey wrench in our own systems.

If you can just forget for a moment about your neighbor's drifting and water-borne insecticides and herbicides, what a delight to reflect on all the ways we living things are united. We are all harmonizing notes in a grand, Earth-wide symphony.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*That we are enmeshed in a Web of Life is both beautiful and perilous.*

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**CHILLY FOG & CABBAGE LEAVES<sup>44</sup>**

During the middle of this week an "Alaskan low" came through and for about 35 hours drenched us with 1½-inches of cold drizzle. It was appropriate weather for rocky little islands in the Aleutians, not a California dry season, but we got it anyway.

It was drizzle with fog. We couldn't see the other side of the canyon and sometimes everything more than two trees away was whited out. When it's like that the world is reduced to tones of gray, and

<sup>44</sup> Adapted from the June 12, 2005 Newsletter

things look flat. Trees are silhouetted and sounds are muted. Not a bird sings. Everything is subdued.

Such times have their charm for a while but after a couple of days you begin craving color, pure sounds, warmth -- just anything to stir the spirit. Sometimes I remedy the situation by going into the garden and putting my face right down next to whatever might be there -- a cabbage leaf or an onion sprout -- where there's a vividness of greenness, textures different from those in ordinary life, and all kinds of intricate designs. Always, when you throw your head into a different realm like that, you discover whole new worlds of stimuli. Always there are other worlds to explore just by shifting your mental frame of reference.

Friday morning National Public Radio aired a segment on people addicted to cutting themselves. When these people are stressed they react by slicing into their bodies. They bleed and hurt but it's an addiction hard to break.

At first the behavior seemed absolutely inexplicable to me. But when I thought about it I began seeing how it might happen. I think this pitiful condition may bear upon my experience this week with the fog, the somberness, and the grayness and flatness of things. It may give me insight into why I felt the need to go look closely at a cabbage leaf, and why I feel like I need to keep telling people to pay attention to things.

A self-cutter begins feeling disoriented, unsure of whom he or she is and unsure of what's supposed to be done. When they begin cutting themselves, see the blood and feel the pain, then they have proof that they are right there, right then. They see that in a world where everything seems messed up at least their bodies are working right, bleeding when they're supposed to and feeling pain at the right time.

When our eyes clearly show us that we're the one seeing the bird's bright colors, when our ears tell us we're the very listener to the bird's pretty song, it reminds us where and what we are. Except when chemical imbalances are involved, active people in

stimulating environments that provide positive reinforcement seldom get mentally ill. But, when the fog comes, color drains from the landscape, things go flat and sounds are only monotonous -- or when one feels completely out of control of life in general -- maybe it's hard for some of us to keep grounded.

Maybe when a very angry man puts his fist through a wall it's because he's feeling so desperately out of control that he needs the shock and pain to ground him better in the moment, his body, his home. Maybe when I'm concentrating on something and stick my tongue out, since the mouth and tongue have many more nerve endings than most parts of the body, what I'm doing is anchoring my consciousness in the present by feeling myself with my tongue, trying to keep tabs of who and what I am as the rest of me become absorbed in the thing I'm concentrating on.

Well, I don't see much harm in sticking out your tongue when you're concentrating, but I do wish I could show these self-cutters and wall-punchers the therapeutic value of consciously seeking out cabbage leaves on foggy days, point out to them the silvery slug trails, the leaves' pink-crinkly margins, their reticulating venations, the randomly arrayed, tiny brown-rimmed insect-punctures, the leaves' voluptuous concavities, the cabbagey odor when you put your nose right there on a leaf.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Our senses must be kept exercised.*

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**SEEING THE SKY<sup>45</sup>**

At Laurel Hill I could see a fair patch of sky above the Blackberry Field, but that was nothing compared to the vista available here.

<sup>45</sup> Adapted from the June 15, 2003 Newsletter

Wednesday a line of thunderheads with flaring white tops, billowy middles and brooding dark bases marched past. I could hardly take my eyes from them as they rumbled, grew sky-tall and spread their tops into classic anvil shapes. On Thursday a storm came with a white curtain of rain that moved toward me as I planted a Sweet Olive in the field. I could see and hear everything. The rain's white curtain inexorably coming at me was hypnotic. I just let the chilly drops splash onto me, totally drenching me. On Friday an even more magnificent storm came, and this time I squatted in the barn door experiencing it with the same mind that sometimes I use with Beethoven symphonies.

Most of the time, of course, in this sky there's just blue emptiness with a few vultures and hawks, and maybe some white cumulus clouds drifting northward. Sunlight from such a sky possesses a special cutting edge, like finely crushed glass. The moon in such a sky seems to converse with herself. All the time, beneath such a sky, you are aware of being a spectator. Sometimes when a very hot, dry, late- afternoon breeze stirs and the sunlight cuts into your skin, though you are rooted in a level field, you feel a certain precariousness, like being a dusty bottle about to tilt from a shelf in an abandoned shack.

Having hourly access to the broad sky changes you if for long you have grown accustomed to a burrowing style of life, burrowing through buildings, into computer screens and books, closing yourself up in imagined personal spaces. Being for long beneath the open sky is an act of decompression. Your psychology shifts from "burrower" to that of "bug on a table."

It's also a kind of coming to terms, for nothing reveals so elegantly the true nature of man's presence on Earth as a penetrating look into the broad open sky.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**



*Don't forget to look at the sky and really see it.*

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### **WHY BOTHER WITH BUTTERFLIES?<sup>46</sup>**

There are reasons for going butterflying beyond the mere fact that filling your head with butterfly colors and elaborate wing patterns, instead of the usual daily clutter, is pleasing, maybe even therapeutic. Let me tell you another reason why it's so important to me.

When I left the Kentucky farm for college in 1965, I almost flunked out my freshman year. Because of poor grades I was put on probation. One of my problems was that I spent so much time in the library studying issues important to me, not the mind- numbing stuff of my classes.

The two subjects I researched most were religion, because I wanted to know "which one was right," and the other was hypnotism, because nothing in the concept I had of humanity suggested any reason at all for the strange phenomenon of hypnotism to exist. What did it mean that humans were so suggestible?

You have seen that after a life of studying religion I currently aspire to being a deeply irreligious but spiritual person. My thoughts about hypnotism can't be expressed so succinctly.

I'm convinced that all of us, most of the time -- maybe nearly all the time -- conduct our lives under the influence of any number of overlapping hypnotic suggestions. Many of the trances we stay in are helpful, even necessary, but many are destructive.

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<sup>46</sup> Adapted from the June 26, 2005 Newsletter

I regard "being in love" as a powerful hypnotic state. Next time you see two lovers gazing into one another's eyes, notice how they use on one another the same repetitive, rhythmic, soothing techniques practiced by stage hypnotists. Having religious faith is hypnotic, and remember how often preachers repeat the same simple messages. Feeling stylish, feeling community spirit, feeling patriotic, feeling sexy or useless or successful or awkward, accepting stereotypes and prejudices, succumbing to mob behavior or team spirit... All these human conditions can be regarded as workings-out of hypnotic suggestions directed toward us by society or our own genetic makeup.

If there is such a thing as free will among humans, I am convinced that it never occurs to most of us to try to practice it.

Here's how butterflies fit into this discussion:

If I am as vulnerable to hypnotic suggestion as everyone else -- and I am -- then I want as many as possible of the trances I'm in to be induced by the Creator speaking in terms of butterflies and other beautiful and elegant things, and not by what other humans are saying and doing, who, after all, are only saying and doing what their own hypnotic trances permit them to.

So, after two days of wandering the mountains listening to the Creator's hypnotic butterfly-speak, what has been suggested to me?

The usual. That the creation is grand, to the point of being sacred; that life is beautiful, to the point of being worth living, and; that when a butterfly I'm watching lands atop my balding head, there's just nothing better to do than to laugh as gleefully as I will.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Focus on Nature to receive Nature's benevolent influence.*

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**A SONG IN EVERY TREE<sup>47</sup>**

The other day Alex somewhere in cyberspace wrote with regard to my short book *One Year in the Life of a House Sparrow*. He said that having had House Sparrows brought to his attention,

*"... all of a sudden there is 'a bird on every corner, a song in every tree.' If we don't allow for it, our minds don't register. People don't expect sparrows to be fascinating, and thus ignore them."*

Alex has discovered something important: Human minds are wired so that we grow blind to everyday things. Maybe it's an evolutionary defense against the fact that if we could see plainly how many things can go wrong with our bodies, how tenuously society is held together, and how fragile the planetary ecosystem is, we'd all go berserk.

The resulting desensitization, though maybe useful, produces a sad effect, because as we habituate and grow blind to the world's novelties and awe-inspiring features, apathy and detachment set in. Moreover, there's a positive feedback mechanism: As one thing after another drops from our radars, life grows less inspiring, and we see less reason to make efforts to know and care about the world around us. And when we just don't care, then we're more likely to live in ways that threaten and destroy Life on Earth -- which is the profoundly dangerous situation that has developed now.

Several times in my life I've drifted into the no-seeing mode myself. Sometimes it was because I was trying too hard to achieve something -- maybe to succeed in a job or maintain a relationship with a woman -- and sometimes it was because of my obsessive personality, which can give me tunnel vision as I drive things into the ground, if I don't watch. So far I've always been able to shake

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<sup>47</sup> Adapted from the June 29, 2006 Newsletter

myself out of these ruts. I'd consciously and ceremoniously take a few days of walking around reexamining my priorities and reshuffling my strategies for life. Then I'd forgive myself for having been so dumb and unfeeling, and make a new start.

Here's an important point: Each time I've made a new start, nothing harmonized with and encouraged my rebirth more than paying attention to Nature. When I paid attention, Nature was always there advising me: Simplify; don't waste resources; take care of your body; keep growing...

These profoundly important teachings are best taught by Nature Herself. The process works like this: We make ourselves available, and then Nature takes over, first slowly healing, then slowly pleasing, and finally slowly bringing us into new awarenesses and more sophisticated manners of being. And that process is pleasurable, and makes us happy.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Nature influences us in positive ways.*

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**BARKLICE AND WORLDCOM<sup>48</sup>**

In the growing dimness I lay watching my little herd of barklice while listening to All Things Considered on National Public Radio. As they spoke of the financial collapse and corporate corruption of WorldCom (based near Jackson northeast of here) the barklice grazed modestly on my back window's field of algae and fungus.

One way of thinking about life in general, maybe the most fundamental way of all, is to note the level each living thing occupies on life's Energy Pyramid.

<sup>48</sup> Adapted from the June 30, 20002 Newsletter

Algae on my window collect sunlight energy, storing it in multitudes of tiny algal bodies. My barklice eat the algae, thus transferring that stored sunlight energy into their own bodies. Maybe a spiderlike harvestman (Daddy-long-legs) will eat the barklice, then possibly a Green Anole living on my trailer's skin will eat the harvestman. Maybe the little Sharp-shinned Hawk who occasionally swoops through camp will eat the Green Anole. No one will eat the hawk, so the sunlight energy first collected by my window algae may end up fueling the hawk as it streaks through the woods at the peak of its own energy pyramid. It's a pyramid because untold numbers of algal bodies at the bottom must gather energy to fuel just one hawk at the top.

Most species occupy a fairly fixed position on the Energy Pyramid of Life. Humans, because we can think and have more flexibility in choosing what we eat, can choose our position on the Pyramid. A person who eats other animals is near the pyramid's top; I as a vegetarian am near the pyramid's bottom. On this pyramid I do not mind being closer to barklice than to hawks.

One reason is because every time energy transfers from one level of the pyramid to the next, a lot of energy is lost. On one of my Web pages I write, "In Eugene Odem's classic textbook *Fundamentals of Ecology*' it's stated that during the course of a year 20,000,000 alfalfa plants weighing 17,850 pounds are needed to fuel 4.5 cows weighing 2,250 pounds, which will satisfy the energy needs of a single 105-pound boy."

A second reason for being happy at the bottom of the pyramid is this: When a thinking human consciously chooses the barklouse path instead of the hawk's (not only in diet, but general energy-consumption in daily life), it seems that a magical thing happens. Somehow it appears that the energy conserved through making this conscious decision gets rechanneled into energy enabling greater liberty of thought, feeling, and spiritual awareness. I'm not sure how this works. I just see it happening. This observation seems to coincide with the teachings of the World's great religions.

"The meek shall inherit the Earth" is another way of saying this. Yoga perhaps puts the concept to practice.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Living at the base of the ecological energy pyramid is beautiful.*

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**HOUSE SPARROWS AND ALLEGIANCE<sup>49</sup>**

European House Sparrows were introduced into Brooklyn, New York, in 1851. By 1900 the species had spread to the Rocky Mountains. Across North America during the last century House Sparrows have evolved into genetically different geographical races. In general, the northern populations are larger than those in the south.

The House Sparrow species is doing something that happens again and again during biological evolution. That is, a particularly successful species spreads over a broad geographical area and then starts fracturing into genetically distinct populations -- first into intergrading races, then more distinctive subspecies, and finally distinct species.

Before *Homo sapiens* became so mobile our evolution was on the same track as the House Sparrows', fracturing into distinct races that eventually may have become subspecies or separate species. However, now humankind's biological evolution is taking a U-turn as the various races mingle and become less distinct.

Mother Nature never loses Her taste for diversity, however. Right now it looks as if She may have failed at fragmenting our species genetically, but there's every evidence that She has a chance to

<sup>49</sup> Adapted from the July 3, 2005 Newsletter

split us into mutually exclusive, mutually antagonistic, belief-system-based communities. Since humans are animals subject to natural laws like all living beings, humanity's Culture Wars and its ever-more-vicious religious wars represent Mother Nature enlisting Darwinian competition from the field of genetics to do its divisive work in the realm of human ideas.

Will humanity escape fracturing into different new biological species only to find itself divided into permanent, mutually antagonistic domains based on political and/or religious beliefs?

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Instead of working for a world where "everyone is equal," it would be more natural to accept a world consisting of a mosaic of different society types peacefully coexisting.*

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**THE FIVE TRAININGS FOR MINDFULNESS<sup>50</sup>**

The other day Hilary in Mississippi sent me the link to a website for a Buddhist center near Memphis. Reading over the teachings of the Center's teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, I was touched deeply, as I always am when reminded of Buddhism's core teachings.

I have seen that Buddhism in many places has degenerated into a religion where people pray to Buddha statues, asking for Divine intervention in their daily lives. However, it seems to me that Buddhism in its purest form is not a religion, but rather an insight or philosophy. On the center's webpage, "The Five Mindfulness Trainings" are described.

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<sup>50</sup> Adapted from the July 6, 2007 Newsletter

The first reads, *"Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals."*

The second, as if patterned upon Nature's recycling of resources, says, *"I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those in real need."*

The third, as if patterned upon the interdependency of all Nature's components, says, *"I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society."*

The fourth, as if recognizing the joy arising from knowing and living by the Laws of Nature, says *"I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope."*

The fifth, as if recognizing the pain and destruction caused to Life on Earth by consumption-oriented societies requiring cut forests, stripmined land and the release of so much carbon into the air to feed their appetites, reads *"Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming."*

These teachings are ecologically sound. They are sustainable. They are harmonious with patterns expressed in the fabric and structure of Nature. The teachings are not inert commandments handed down from above, but rather invitations to sensitize, and then to change ourselves once we understand things more clearly -- to evolve to higher levels of being, as Nature always has evolved.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Ethical teachings of religions often coincide with how one behaves when inspired by Nature's influences.*



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**THOUGHTS ABOUT MAGIC<sup>51</sup>**

I gathered the clay and fired the cup spoken of earlier last Sunday. All week I've been thinking about the experience and now I have an insight to share.

The Natchez Indians living around the mound next to Second Creek one mile east of my camp, along present- day US 61, surely cherished the clay deposits I visited at the back of the plantation. Maybe those deposits explain why the Natchez placed their village where it was and not closer to the main Natchez settlement 10 miles north of here, or closer to the wildlife-rich Homochitto River a few miles to our south.

Some years ago I wrote about a Tzotzil-speaking village of Indians in Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. Nearly the entire village survived by producing unglazed pottery like my cup, though of course their work was much more artful. One day a lady told me where she got her clay. She motioned toward the west and in broken Spanish said "It's about two hours of walking away. There are two or three men there who dig out the clay, and it's good, clean clay..." I remember vividly that she spoke these words about "good, clean clay" with a profound sense of pride and respect.

I'm currently reading an old ethnological classic, "Argonauts of the Western Pacific," by Bronislaw Malinowski, about a group of ocean-going people on small islands off the eastern coast of Papua New Guinea back in the early 1900s. A central theme of the book is the overwhelming influence of magic in the natives' lives. Every outstanding feature of the landscape came about because of magic worked on it. This rock emerging from the ocean was an ancient hero turned to stone. This cliff was once the wall of an enchanted fortress. Magic made the gardens produce, and magic called forth wind and rain. Everything important in life was a manifestation of good or bad magic, magic handled adroitly, or magic bungled. The

<sup>51</sup> Adapted from the July 7, 2002 Newsletter

reason why good, clean clay was available at only one spot on one island in the region was explained in terms of magic worked by the two cultural heroes Torosipupu and Tolikilaki.

The "Argonauts" conception of their landscape must have been similar to that of the ancestors of my pottery-making Tzotzil speakers. And I suspect that the ancient Natchez Indians thought of this land the same way. In fact, from what I have read, whenever "primitive" people traveled across their native landscapes, it was a passage through a world buzzing with magic. Those worlds must have been so alive, so threatening and so full of unimaginable possibilities, that just being alive in that time and place was surely more exhilarating and exciting than we "moderns" can imagine.

Since magic was so important to ancient people and in our culture we recognize no magic, last Sunday I began wondering whether we of today have lost something.

I've decided that we have indeed lost something, but it's something we needed to lose. After all, the "Argonauts" magic was based on pure fantasy. I further decided that since the human species evolved during times when magic was an overwhelming influence in everyday life, probably even today we are genetically programmed to live in worlds where magic stirs our souls. Since we have lost our magic, maybe we need to replace it with something. Maybe this loss of the sense of the supernatural in our everyday lives explains why so many of us are disoriented, feel empty, or are just plain unhappy.

I believe that the thing with which we should replace our lost magic is the magic of real things -- things that, while real, are still too majestic and too mind-boggling for the human mind to grasp. I would say that the sky is magic, the forest, the behavior of subatomic particles, the drive behind evolution... There's plenty in this world that's as majestic and mind-boggling as, say, a ceremony to make rain, or a priest's forgiving of a perceived sin.

Last Sunday as I was returning from the bluff with my clay, gradually it dawned on me that I myself had become a magician

engaged in a magical ceremony. It wasn't the old kind of magic controlled by priests or sanctioned by sacred legends or holy books, but rather magic of a stronger kind. It was magic nascent in the Earth itself, magic free to anyone able to detect it and possess it. The flash of recognition informing me that my clay outcrop was special and offered certain potentials was the Earth itself saying that I had discovered one of its sacred places.

Later as I worked the clay, imparting to it form and function, and remembering what I knew of clay, how it looked under electron microscopy, how it behaved as a colloid in the soil solution, what minerals caused some of it to be gray, and some orange and some red, and just how long ago 700,000 years was (the age of the clay deposits), I was brewing magic. As my handsome, useful little cup came into being, crystallizing before me out of mere clay, my awe of the Creator and Her creation blossomed in a sacred manner.

And all week it has been thrilling to pass through this landscape where at any moment enchanted places might speak to me of magical possibilities.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Reality is miraculous.*

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**RIGHT BRAIN, LEFT BRAIN<sup>52</sup>**

The other day on Public Radio a brain specialist described her own experience with a stroke that left the entire left hemisphere of her brain nonfunctional. Though the stroke was a tragedy, it afforded the specialist an opportunity to study the right brain/ left brain situation.

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<sup>52</sup> Adapted from the July 7, 2008 Newsletter

The human brain's left side is logical, practical, and fact-oriented while the right hemisphere deals with feelings, beliefs, symbols and "the big picture."

The brain specialist explained how our two brain hemispheres cooperate to produce "us." After listening to her I visualized each human personality as being like a 3-D image suspended in space where light-like beams from two different brain-projectors pass through one another. Turn off one projector, or remove one side of the brain, and the resulting projected image, or personality, changes dramatically.

Maybe the most interesting feature of the brain specialist's story was how she found being without a left brain an ecstatic experience. During the early days of her not having a functioning left hemisphere she lived in a world in which she couldn't speak, but she experienced the effects of colors, textures and shapes with profound intensity, very much like someone on LSD. Sometimes during her rehabilitation, as her left brain gradually came back online -- as she learned again the complex facts of life and began realizing how she fit into a large, often frustrating and threatening world -- she often asked herself if she really wanted that left hemisphere back in her life.

Stroke victims who lose the right side of their brain instead of the left, as did the specialist, undergo completely different experiences. Such folks often find themselves overwhelmed as their left-brain hemispheres obsess on the ordering and details of life's events while being unable to judge which details are more important than others, and what they all mean.

In the workings of the two-hemisphered human brain, then, we see that the Creator isn't content having us humans all the time sitting around admiring clouds and feeling good. Nor does She want us to behave like super-rational automatons. She wants emotions to color our rationality, and She wants us to concern ourselves with both the minutia of life as well as the big picture. To me, the two-hemisphered brain is no less than a spiritual imperative to follow The Middle Path.

Thinking like this, The Middle Path reveals itself to be very much more than a compromise between opposites, or the meeting place of extremes. The Middle Path is a miraculous state as charged with its own possibilities as a human personality is when it ignites into being as a right brain hemisphere and a left brain hemisphere focus their energies onto the same spot, and self-awareness erupts.

In everyday life, how does one find The Middle Path?

Of course I would say that the paradigms of Nature reveal The Middle Path. And, as always, Nature's most easy-to-identify paradigms are sustainability, recycling, and passion for diversity.

Practice these elemental principles and the fogs part to reveal The Middle Path in all its glory.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Focus on The Middle Path.*

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**BLACK COW, FOGGY DAWN<sup>53</sup>**

At dawn a few minutes before the sun's red orb rises over the grassy hillcrest to the east, I jog on the ridge road, passing by a black cow chewing her cud and standing in green grass. White fog in the valley beyond frames the cow, making her into a silhouette. Pat, pat, pat go my feet on yet another morning after so many hundreds of morning jogs just like this one.

When I run, my body goes onto autopilot. I just ride atop the body, almost detached, watching images pass by. Today I'm running wondering what that cow is thinking, feeling, being.

<sup>53</sup> Adapted from the July 13, 2006 Newsletter

The other day on Public Radio a scientist spoke on new insights into the fact that higher animals may have emotions. How disheartening that this late in human social evolution we are still talking as if that were a revelation.

When I was a kid on the western Kentucky farm we had pigs, cattle, goats, chickens, ducks and other critters, and from the first it was clear to me that all our animals had feelings. I used to hide in the chickenfeed bin spying on the hens so even at ten years of age I knew that hens had individual personalities. With my own eyes I saw that there were flirtatious hens and no-nonsense ones, hens who took good care of their chicks and others who were more concerned with their own comfort and interests. There were nervous hens and mellow hens, lazy ones and hyper ones. When we had fried chicken for Sunday dinner I'd wonder: "Is it the flirty one, or the sneaky one? Who will be missing when I go spying next, and how will the community get along without her?"

In college I was assured that I was laughably anthropomorphic. Well, now I'm older than my professors at that time and I've certainly had more field experience than they, stuck in their offices and classrooms. Now in my white-bearded, bald-headed augustness I do hereby proclaim what I would have loved to hear any authoritative individual say back then: All higher animals have feelings, and often those feelings are as intense, meaningful and beautiful as human emotions.

Understanding this is important. It's important to know that humans and other animals are all members of the same evolutionary Tree of Life, all enmeshed inextricably in the same ecological Web of Life, all composed of the same chemicals, with neurons working the same way, the same laws of Nature applying to us all equally, all of us together feeling, thinking, evolving from the same ancestors toward the same destiny.

For, once we accept that other living things are of the same stuff as we, it becomes easier to see that what endangers them also endangers us. Not by diminishing humankind but by elevating other

living things around us will it become clearer that all of us survive only as long as the biotic community of which we are part continues to function -- continues producing clean air, clean water, wholesome foods, open space... for us all.

Black cow in green grass with a silvery, shimmering fogbank behind you, chew your cud and wonder at me pat, pat, pat down the little road atop the ridge. I leave you with this thought: That the most graceful element of this whole scene is that you reflect on me as I reflect on you, and we leave one another in peace.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Respect life wherever you find it.*

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**MELLOW MODULATION<sup>54</sup>**

Walking in the fields and woods now feels completely different from just two or three weeks ago. Earlier there was a sense of outward-rushing blossoming wherever I looked, but now the feeling is more introspective, more mellow. Of course the catalyst is that now instead of the days getting longer, they're getting shorter.

The same kind of mood-shifting happens in music. The term "modulation" refers to the changing of musical keys, especially without breaking the melody. One moment the music sounds bright and simple, the next suddenly it's dark and foreboding, yet the tempo may remain the same, and the music may be neither louder nor softer -- just that the key has changed. The Key of C usually sounds cheerful and uncomplicated but the Key of E-flat Minor typically sounds dark, serious and pensive. Andrew Lloyd Webber really jerks our emotions around with his in-your-face modulations in "The Phantom of the Opera."

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<sup>54</sup> Adapted from the July 18, 2004 Newsletter

Maybe we humans are so vulnerable to musical modulations because we evolved to intensely feel the modulations in the seasons around us. Our ancestors' nervous systems must have developed exquisite sensitivities to variations in sunrises and sunsets, to how the earth's odor changed depending on its content of moisture and organic matter, etc.

If the Earth and all of Creation is the Creator's music, and the Universe's discrete things are analogous to tones in human music, then why shouldn't the profoundly significant modulations of the Earth's seasons delight and fulfill us in ways mere music never can?

I hope that you are feeling the current seasonal modulation, too.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Don't overlook Nature's subtleties.*

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**HOMOSEXUALITY IN NATURE<sup>55</sup>**

Nothing is more experimental and broad-minded than Mother Nature. When you look at the Creation you clearly see that the Creator's plan is to create diversity at all levels of reality, and to evolve that diversity to ever higher levels of sophistication -- whether it's forming galaxies from hydrogen gas, or evolving life on Earth. Moreover, just about any strategy furthering those blossomings is acceptable.

Among plants, sometimes flowers possess both male and female sex organs, sometimes they are unisexual and on different plants, sometimes unisexual and on the same plants, sometimes flowers

<sup>55</sup> Adapted from the July 18, 2004 Newsletter



are designed so they can't self-pollinate, other times they have to pollinate themselves, and some plants skip the sex scene altogether by reproducing vegetatively.

Among animals we find everything from the male seahorse who carries the eggs, hatches them and takes care of the young, to the "polyandrous" Spotted Sandpiper whose females may lay up to four nests per season, each equipped with a different male incubating the eggs. Of course the common earthworm is both male and female, and some snails sometimes mate with themselves, producing offspring.

The higher up the evolutionary scale you go, the kinkier it all gets. Among communities of mice and other mammals, when population density reaches a certain high level where diseases and famine threaten, not only does homosexual behavior appear but also parents begin killing their own offspring. It's always the case that the Creator chooses the welfare of the community over that of the individual.

Among human populations, homosexuality occurs at a certain rate in all populations. Thus homosexuality is natural and inevitable. Data suggest that homosexuality may be at least partly genetically determined.

Why would the Creator create this state of affairs among humans? I don't know, but my own experience with human gays is that, on the average, they are more sensitive, insightful and caring than the rest of us, so maybe that's enough of an answer right there.

Moreover, consider the fact that the Creator has made it so that among higher mammals homosexual behavior increases in populations under stress. Humanity right now, because of overpopulation and inequitable distribution of resources, is under enormous stress. Therefore, the phenomenon of gays suddenly stepping forth to demand their right to establish stable family units while not themselves contributing to even greater overpopulation can be seen to be not only natural but also, literally, a godsend.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Whatever the Universal Creative Force created, we'd do well to assume that in the long run it's OK.*

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**BARN SWALLOWS & BEETHOVEN<sup>56</sup>**

One day this week I sat in my rocking chair in the barn door while the usual late-afternoon storm darkened the sky and growled. As I watched swallows cavorting over the Loblolly field, on the radio Beethoven's wonderful Eighth Symphony was playing.

The symphony's first movement is dark with wrathful emotions, yet every now and then there come bursts among the bassoons and drums that always seem to me like laughter. The whole piece is on the one hand deadly serious, yet, throughout, there are unmistakable explosions of horse-laughing glee. It's very like swallows playing in a stormy summer sky.

History tells us that when Beethoven wrote the good-natured Eighth he was ill and profoundly disturbed by the political events and wars of his time. In the same vein, whenever I hear the Dalai Lama speak, he seems to laugh a lot, despite the plight of his people under Chinese domination. When I was in India I met several holy people whose faces glowed with cheerfulness despite the poverty and degradation in which they lived. In this world of collapsing ecosystems and ongoing mass extinctions of species, The Creator populates the darkening sky with playful swallows.

As the storm broke and the Loblolly field heaved beneath wind and rain, those swallows took their time getting to safety. And I could only look on dumbly and feel ashamed that in my own life maybe I

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<sup>56</sup> Adapted from the July 20, 2003 Newsletter

have been too slow at catching most of the jokes around me, and too clumsy ever to dance.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*The broader your perspective, the more music and humor you behold.*

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**SNAKE BRAIN<sup>57</sup>**

You've probably heard that we humans have a three-part brain. Our brains are rather like a house that has had rooms added twice. Our "nuclear brain" is reptilian. As evolution proceeded and more complex mammals arose, a new wing of the brain appeared, the "limbic brain" or "mammalian brain." Finally, when we humans came along our much more complex behavior was made possible by a second new wing of the brain, the "neo-cortical brain (neocortex)" or "monkey" brain, which was set like a helmet over the reptilian and mammalian brains.

Our reptilian brain supports basic physiological functions such as circulation, respiration, digestion, elimination and mating. It's also involved in territorial behavior, pecking order, defense, aggression and the emotions of anger and fear. Reptiles are capable of these behaviors, for they have reptilian brains.

The more sophisticated mammalian brain is concerned with emotions of love, sadness, jealousy, and hope, so humans share these traits with "higher" mammalian species such as cats, dogs, horses and other warm blooded animals.

The more recently evolved "monkey brain" -- appearing only within the last 3,000,000 years or so -- enables humans to manifest higher

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<sup>57</sup> Adapted from the July 20, 2006 Newsletter.

functions of imitation, speaking, writing, planning and symbolic reasoning and conceptualization.

So, in order to save Life on Earth from the biosphere collapse well underway already, how can we enable the thought processes of the masses to blossom beyond the limitations of the human reptilian brain? How can we insert mammalian empathy and love, and monkey-brain rational thought and spirituality into the equation?

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Solve problems with the "monkey-brain" neocortex, not the limbic or reptilian brain.*

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**WALKING WITH CARL JUNG<sup>58</sup>**

On my walk near Pinal de Amoles last weekend so many people expressed amazement about my preference for walking instead of riding that it got me to thinking about why walking is important to me. It took several miles before I remembered the chain of events that got me to walking, and the insights that have kept me walking all these years.

Part of it is that it helps keep my body toned up, but really that's not the most important reason. More important is that it helps keep me together psychologically and spiritually. I think that without my long walks -- and walking *alone* is what I'm talking about -- either I'd eventually go nuts, or become so grouchy and negative I couldn't live with myself. Last weekend I also remembered how my long walks, alone, are rooted in my youthful studies of Jungian dream analysis.

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<sup>58</sup> Adapted from the July 20, 2007 Newsletter

Carl Jung, who lived from 1875 to 1961, was the Swiss psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. He emphasized understanding the psyche by exploring the worlds of dreams, art, mythology, world religions and philosophy. Back when I was about 20, using Jungian techniques, I trained myself to remember dreams and write them down immediately upon awakening. By interpreting my dreams I learned about my own psyche.

For example, "I" am a projection of any number of smaller personalities who reside inside me. Some of those personalities can more or less stand alone, but others are fragmentary. Some are male, some female, and some have no gender. Each needs to express him/her/itself from time to time, else one or more of these inner selves act up and my psychological ecosystem drifts out of whack.

When I'm walking, that's when these inner voices get to express themselves.

Sweat dripping from my elbows and isolation humming in my ears, the week's unsaid thoughts get said. All the little people and sub-people inside me bring up whatever issues have been bugging them, each of us looks at the issue from the other's perspective, and then the following night, what a fine sleep I have, and what peace there is inside me.

But, also, my experience with dream interpretation taught me this: Dream analysis is potent, and can be as dangerous as it is revealing. I quit it for the same reason I've never done drugs: Exploring the mind like that is like opening up your computer and poking your fingers here and there. It's not really something that should be done without great care and guidance. Also, as in quantum mechanics, in the dream world, just observing something changes it. And I don't have enough information to go changing my own building blocks.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*You and I are too mysterious to really understand.*

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**HONEYBEE STING<sup>59</sup>**

After I jog each morning I hose myself off but I keep sweating as I prepare breakfast at my campfire, as indicated by the honeybees who settle on my back, arms and legs as I work, sopping up the sweat. I just ignore them and try to avoid annoying them. But Wednesday one got between my legs and when I took a step she stung me.

When a honeybee stings you the first thing you should do is to see if the stinger has come off for, if it has, the poison sac will remain atop the stinger pumping poison into your skin long after the bee has gone. Remove the stinger as fast as possible. A sad thing about the bee losing its stinger is that the bee then dies within a few hours. By stinging you, the bee is committing suicide. Therefore, from the bee's point of view, the question of whether the stinging must take place is a critical one. Stinging is not done lightly.

A lot of thinking has been done about how bees could have evolved so that individuals are programmed to give up their lives for the community's sake. To understand the answer you have to think in terms of the bee community's genetic heritage being carried by the queen, not the workers. In this light, we are almost struck with a sense of injustice when we see how expendable the workers' lives are. There's nothing democratic or even-handed here. The workers are created simply to work for the community, to sting when there's a need, and then to die.

Some serious thinkers have proposed that among such socialized insects as bees, the "individual" should be better thought of as the

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<sup>59</sup> Adapted from the July 25, 2004 Newsletter

diffuse community of bees, not the individual bees we see at our flowers. In this concept the queen is seen as being like a gland secreting hormones and the workers are like corpuscles in the human circulatory system roaming about doing whatever the queen's hormones dictate. Is there really a rule in nature that a body has to be in one place -- that hormones must be transported in veins instead of on wings and six legs? We have examples of distinct species merging to form completely new life forms (fungi and algae merging to form lichens), so why can't the opposite be true, a single being manifesting itself as a community?

For me these insights are important to consider because part of the bedrock of my belief system is that I regard human beings as being no more than highly specialized mammals. In doing so I'm not at all belittling humans, but rather regarding other animals as much more complex, self-aware and beautiful than most people admit. Therefore, if what's spiritually important in me is my "sense of identity," my "consciousness," or my "soul," in the diffuse bee-individual to whom I with great pride claim biological relationship, just where is that "sense of identity," the "consciousness," or "the soul?"

Already it's known that human consciousness or sense-of-identity doesn't reside in any particular cell or group of cells, or nerve or organ. Even people who lose half of their brain continue thinking and functioning as regular humans, perhaps showing only a certain "flatness" in their personalities. This thing we think of as our consciousness -- our selves -- appears to just happen, maybe as a natural consequence of being embedded inside a lot of complex electrochemical circuitry. If that's the case with bees, then how pretty it is to think of the bee soul as being focused in the hive, but diffusing outward into communities of flowers in the fields.

Of course once you start thinking in this direction, then you come face to face with Gaia -- the Earth-Ecosystem-self-awareness-complex. In other words, maybe the Earth does feel, and react, like a single living organism. Certainly a lot of what happens appears to support that idea. For example, ecosystem-destroying humans on an overpopulated Earth are analogous to germs infecting a human

body. As the human body reacts to disease by producing antibodies to control the germ population, Gaia's body does the same as diseases, famines and wars appear among us humans.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Humans can choose between being Gaia's "sting" or her bees "diffusing outward into communities of flowers."*

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**CAMPING WITH OCTAVIO PAZ<sup>60</sup>**

On my hike I carried a copy of Octavio Paz's **Itinerario**. Paz, who died in 1998, was a Mexican Nobel Prize winning writer. It was hot and humid last Saturday so every now and then during my hike I'd find a shady spot with a good view, pull Paz's book from my backpack, and read awhile. At dusk, inside my tent atop an isolated peak with White-winged Doves cooing around me, treefrogs plinking and thunder booming across the next ridge, I read Paz then, too.

It's a shame Paz didn't know more about Nature. His world was human thought, human politics and human history. As such he restricted himself to just a tiny, tiny corner of the Universe.

What fascinates me is that despite this limitation Paz developed profound insights, and a belief system I'm more or less comfortable with. This doesn't surprise me, though. Often I've observed that all complex systems, be they biological ecosystems, mature political beliefs, the evolving Universe, or whatever, are pretty much structured the same. Study anything in very great detail and you gain insights applicable far beyond the field you're studying.

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<sup>60</sup> Adapted from the July 27, 2007 Newsletter



For example, Paz ends *Itinerario* with "The Universe is innocent, even when a continent sinks or a galaxy cinderizes." The concept of "bad" lies in human minds, he says. He sums up his insight by saying that "to fight against evil is to fight against ourselves."

What a hoot that Octavio Paz, prize-winningly working out the structure of the human condition by examining human thought, politics and history, comes to the very conclusion I have by looking at oak trees, ants and quartz crystals.

For, if humanity is to save Life on Earth, we must do battle with our own appetites, our own lack of empathy with other living things, our own insensitiveness, our own unsustainable traditions (especially inherited systems of thought such as religions and blind nationalism), and our deep-seated aversions -- in a rapidly changing Universe -- to change.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Though Nature's wisdom is most profound, wisdom can derive from knowledge and intimacy with other complex systems as well.*

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**CONSERVATISM & LIBERALISM IN NATURE <sup>61</sup>**

This week's thinking about the conflict between trees that use chemical warfare to protect their leaves, and the bugs and fungi who attack those leaves, got me thinking about conservatism and liberalism in nature. Here's how that thinking went:

All of nature flows in a great river of ever-evolving, profoundly experimental and somewhat romantic liberalism, yet within this river of liberalism occur innumerable eddies in which the local status quo is more or less conserved, and, when people are involved, mythologized.

<sup>61</sup> Adapted from the August 1, 2004 Newsletter

For example, the flow of evolution of life on Earth toward ever greater complexity and interconnectedness is quintessentially liberal, but the species themselves represent conservative, fairly static expressions of local ecological niches (Species evolution appears to proceed in "jerks," not gradually, as Darwin originally supposed). Similarly, the lifespan of an individual human can be seen as a liberalistic gushing forward, beginning in a self-absorbed, ignorant state and maturing into ever more broad-mindedness, and concern for the larger community. However, the society-imposed routines, prejudices, and unquestioning allegiances to established power structures, which basically define a person's identity and facilitate the accumulation of material wealth, are fundamentally conservative in nature.

I am convinced that in the broad scheme of things conservatism and liberalism are of equal importance. In the absence of liberality anything becomes like a crystal: Comfortable and beautiful, maybe, but forever stuck being the way it is right now. There are no currents of creativity, no blossomings, no births and rebirths, no magic anywhere. Yet, without conservatism, chaos reigns. There's such roiling, undisciplined confusion that nothing can take hold, nothing substantial can ever be produced, and there's no stable perch from which to admire the rest of Creation.

Therefore, as always, the trick is to follow The Middle Path. Do as Nature does, and artfully and lovingly mingle the two opposing inclinations. The forest follows the Middle Path when its liberal impulses send forth a great diversity of highly mobile, fast-reproducing and thus fast evolving bugs and fungi to consume the leaves of firmly rooted, slow-changing, trees. But nature protects its conservative components by granting them powerful defenses of their own. Because of this Middle-Path approach, the forest survives and itself continues to evolve and grow.

Battle-worn, fungus-splotched, tattered leaves are expressions of an ongoing, very messy but very beautiful working-out of the Creator's ever-contending conservative and liberal impulses.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Extremes can be valuable but in the long run the Middle Path is the most sustainable.*

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**RAIN IN MEXICO CITY<sup>62</sup>**

Late last Saturday afternoon I was killing time before my 9:30 PM bus back to Jalpan by wandering backstreets in Mexico City's central zone. As it should during the rainy season, around 5 PM dark clouds gathered on the horizon and soon the storm was upon us.

As storms went, it turned out to be a mild one. Still, I enjoy just about any storm, especially when it's in a new environment.

First the wind came, not real strong, but strong enough to blow yellow cottonwood leaves (probably the much-planted Fremont Cottonwood, *Populus fremontii*) down streets along with swirls of dust, discarded napkins, Styrofoam junk-food boxes, etc. Here in mid summer with no hint of autumn in the air, why should yellow cottonwood leaves so conspicuously blow down Mexico City's backstreets? My main association with windblown, yellow cottonwood leaves is one time when I was camping in backcountry Paria Canyon in arid southern Utah and a wind came driving yellow cottonwood leaves across the red-rock landscape.

I savored the juxtaposition of memories of Paria's yellow cottonwood leaves in such profound isolation, with these so very urban yellow cottonwood leaves. This kind of savoring, associating events and things in one place with those in another of long ago is a kind of mental exercise I do more and more as I grow older.

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<sup>62</sup> Adapted from the August 10, 2007 Newsletter

Maybe that's what really old folks are doing when you see them just sitting, surprisingly contentedly, long, long hours.

When the cold rain began I joined a mumbling old street-man who'd taken his bagged belongings into a corner the rain couldn't reach. Over his shoulders he wore a plastic garbage bag with a hole in the bottom for his head, like a poncho. But wind usually changes direction during a storm's latter half, and when it did it began drenching us. Mumbling to the sky the old man moved into an alley a bit too seedy looking for me, and I went to beneath a closed taco-stand's overhanging porch.

From there I saw lots of things, all kinds of people doing everything from cringing in corners as if the rain were killing them, to those putting on a show ignoring the rain, getting absolutely drenched, like two guys washing their own portable taco stand. A car hit a pothole full of rainwater splashing four women dressed for Saturday night on the town, and they all laughed uproariously.

I saw lovers making the most of intimate moments in the rain, dogs grinning as rain dripped from their tails, taxi drivers suddenly aware of their importance with heroic looks on their faces, a fat old woman in a purple dress watching everything through a coffee shop's window, half smiling, indulging the pleasure of such a special moment.

I can see how city people would love their city's moods and complex manners of beings, and how they might even claim that in a city one can learn all the lessons, see all the paradigms, and experience all the feelings that I, for instance, go into Nature to find. The city is an ecosystem, too, with its unfathomably complex web of interconnecting, interdependent parts, fast-evolving feedback mechanisms, and transcendent, soul-nourishing, driving dynamism.

But, there is one thing Nature has that no city does, and that is a proven record for sustainability. Even if a city has all the elements that can inspire and engage a healthy human soul, those elements are never present in the proper proportion for sustainability. For example, cities recycle resources, but not as single mindedly and

efficiently as nature. Cities have their music, but the themes and rhythms can change almost overnight. They're not at all eternal, like Nature's music of wind-in-trees, rain-in-the-forest, morning bird-chorus, and the exquisite music of life-evolving-forward.

In a way, urban structures and institutions parody Nature's. The parody can be entertaining and informative but, for the long haul and to inform one's spirituality, one must summon the more profound wisdoms of Nature.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Though Nature's wisdom is most profound, wisdom can derive from knowledge and intimacy with other complex systems as well.*

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**SOWING TURNIP SEEDS<sup>63</sup>**

As soon as water began flowing I dug up the ground next to the barn where the blackberries had made such a tangle and the Pokeweed had come up in profusion, and sowed turnips. Within five days the bed was green with baby turnip plants.

At least ten times every day I visit the turnip bed, though I know there won't be much new to see since the last time. It's clear that I go there for purposes other than to garden. I think it's purely for the magic of it all.

The seeds I sowed had been two years old. They'd resided in a brown paper bag during the frosts and drizzly days of two winters, they'd sat inside a junked refrigerator in a dusty shed at my former residence through any number of spring storms, they'd smoldered through long dog-days of summer, they'd heard evening crickets

<sup>63</sup> Adapted from the August 17, 2003 Newsletter

and katydids on at least a hundred fall nights, and during nearly all that time I was forgetting that they were there.

But then one morning early last week I walked over freshly broken ground broadcasting those seeds, moving my arm back and forth like a magician over a hat. The seeds were so small I couldn't see them as they fell or hear them hit the ground, only feel them leaving my hand. I strewed mulch over them and watered the area, and then for a few nights and days I waited as each seed sought and found within its own private darkness the life inside it.

Eventually, being born, each plant struggled up through Earth's mineral clottings and debris, resulting in a bed of thousands of dark green little plants, each with its two first notched leaves (its cotyledons) being perfect solar panels elegantly aligned for gathering star-energy for the synthesis of carbohydrate -- which someday I shall take into my own body as good-tasting, soul-pleasing fuel.

It's all magic, all mystery, all perfection. How curious that reality should be constructed in such a manner that a mere hermit working in a barn should be able to delight in such majestic goings-on.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Believe in the magic you see all around.*

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**ON REALLY SEEING A SEED<sup>64</sup>**

A seed is something Mother Nature thought up as an appropriate vessel for transferring information from one generation to the next. The transferal of this information is especially dramatic and artful because typically it involves a being at the end of one season

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<sup>64</sup> Adapted from the August 17, 2003 Newsletter

handing off the information to an unknown being living at the beginning of a completely different season. Moreover, usually the two seasons are separated from one another by a deadly winter or dry season.

To really see a seed, your mind must penetrate the seedcase and bypass the endosperm, radicle and plumule, and focus on the coded abstraction set within the chromosomes. I mean the DNA code, the code spelled out in terms of nucleotide sequences, the code that gives instructions within cells on how to make living things and keep them alive. As far as life on Earth is concerned, there's no more important information than this.

Deep inside those seeds, how tiny and fragile are the slender, spiraling molecules in which the code is written. You can scramble or destroy the information coded there simply by exposing the seed to X-rays, alpha, beta or gamma rays, to war's mustard gas, great heat or cold, or a host of other environmental factors or pollutants.

Richard Dawkins in "The Selfish Gene" writes:

***"We animals exist for their {the genes} preservation and are nothing more than their throwaway survival machines."***

Curiously, it turns out that much genetic material consists of many repetitions of the same information. It's as if the coded information were aware of itself and rejoices in reproducing itself, even if the replicated information is of no value to *us*, the biological organisms carrying it.

To really see a seed, you have to make yourself vulnerable to the notion that maybe we biological entities are only notes on a sheet of music, and what's really important is the music, not the notes -- that the Creator rejoices less in us carriers of information, than in the information itself. After all, the Creator has worked on us individual humans for only a few years, but the information held in any seed represents the crystallized results of experiments in life conducted during more eons than we can know.

To really see a seed, you must close your eyes and imagine a music in which the whole Earth is a single note in a vast melody that goes on and on.

Then, you get up and go look at your turnip patch and see all those little green plants with their solar panels directed toward the sun, and what can you do but laugh with delight?

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Things can be seen on different level.*

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**POKEWEED ESTHETICS<sup>65</sup>**

One late afternoon this week as I sat on the porch at cottontail-coming-out time I gradually grew aware of something beside me needing attention. It was the 5- ft-high Pokeweed that this spring I'd neglected to cut from among the Yews, knowing just how pretty a Pokeweed could become, and remembering how certain birds love its glossy, black-purple fruits.

And, it was true. Elegantly the simple, yellow-green leaves arced from pink lower stems transitioning to green outer ones, and perfect were the many long racemes of immature, green fruits. Each fruit arose on a pink pedicel issuing perpendicularly from the inflorescences' vertical axis. Each fruiting inflorescence bore larger fruits at its top, the fruits grew smaller toward the bottom, and then at the very tip tiny white, glossy, symmetrical flowers appeared. Long I sat admiring Pokeweed structure, color, texture, symmetry, worthiness and meaning, until darkness closed around us.

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<sup>65</sup> Adapted from the August 17, 2006 Newsletter



More than one person this summer, seeing the Pokeweed growing where it was, has pointed out to me that Pokeweeds are not typically left standing next to one's porch.

Lately I have seen a large field of clover bush-hogged "just to clean it up." No hay was made from the clippings. I won't remark on the loss to pollinators and other wildlife, and to one who loved how the wind made waves in the clover, just because of another person's ideas about "cleaning things up." Some years ago an old farmer in my home area bulldozed a bottomland forest I treasured, burned it without selling the logs, and let the land lay unfarmed "just to have it cleaned up."

The point is that the term "clean" as used here so violently and destructively depends hugely on one's ethical and esthetical frame of reference. Any ethical or esthetical framework not taking into account the needs and beauties of the surrounding ecosystem and other living things is unsustainable and dangerous. "Ugly," I would say.

But, who is to say that one person's ethics and sense of esthetics is preferable to another's?

To me, that question is like debating whether smoking is to be allowed in public places. Gradually the consensus is building that with regard to secondhand smoke the public good must be defended at the cost of individual freedoms. How strange that we should not already have had such a discussion, and come to a similar consensus, with regard to the preservation of the ecosystems that sustain us all as biological beings. Slowly it's becoming "ugly" to stand around with a white cigarette dangling from one's mouth. Why hasn't it become ugly to "clean out" a wildlife-sustaining hedgerow, or put a lawn where a garden or woodlot could be?

My own first introduction to the concept of beauty as a topic that could be thought about came with my out-of-school reading of Emerson's essay on Beauty:

***"There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful. And the stimulus it affords to the sense, and a sort of infinitude which it hath, like space and time, make all matter gay."***

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Paying attention enriches.*

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**REFLECTIONS ON BEING POISONED<sup>66</sup>**

Last Saturday afternoon as I was dealing with being poisoned by the Green-spored Parasol Mushroom there were times when my body was completely out of control. When the diarrhea came I couldn't rise from my bedding on the floor. I soiled everything -- my blankets, my clothing, the floor across the house to the nearest door. It was a mess. When I finally got outside, flies landed on me en masse, big greenish and bluish ones I seldom see, but I didn't have the wherewithal to shoo them off. I just lay in the recently rained-on grass letting it all happen. I could not swat flies, then, but I could think.

One thing I thought was that this was a preview of what's to come if the years keep piling on and the body keeps degenerating, which I suppose will happen.

I also remarked how pretty the sky was, how gaily the Chimney Swifts twittered and flew circles above me, and, with my body flushed with fever, how pleasant the cold, wet grass was.

Also I thought this:

What a marvel that life -- any life -- proceeds at all. When you reflect on everything that can go wrong with a body it's really a miracle that we can even walk around, much less ever have a good

<sup>66</sup> Adapted from the August 24, 2006 Newsletter

day. Here just one mouthful of a pretty, good-tasting mushroom had changed my chemistry for a moment, and everything suddenly had broken down.

I've often mentioned my belief that all of us, including myself, are entranced in various hypnotic states nearly all the time. Some of the trances, such as romantic love, are positive while others, such as the state causing us to do what everyone else is doing without thinking, can be destructive. Another powerful trance is the one that hides from us our absolute vulnerability to a whole universe of agencies, forces and unknowns that in an instant can end life -- as mine would have ended if I'd eaten much more than my single mouthful of Green-spored Parasol Mushroom. I truly believe that if we could clearly see how fragile life is and how many threats surround us, and are ticking away inside us all the time, we'd be paralyzed with fear and dread, and be unable to live meaningful lives.

We need our trances, then, yet our entrancements also anesthetize us, keeping us from noticing or caring that we are destroying the planetary ecosystem that sustains us. Humans have been created in a way that requires us to use our primate minds to overcome our reptilian-minded shortsightedness.

Anyway, what a miracle that today I can type these words after more or less fully recuperating from my Green-spored Parasol Mushroom. It's a perfect summer day with cicadas droning as they should drone on such an August afternoon, with a string quartet on the radio, the wood floor beneath my bare feet cool and good-feeling, and me looking forward to the afternoon biscuit baked over my campfire, slitting the biscuit open while it's still steaming and placing inside it glistening, red slices of homegrown tomato and white slivers of homegrown onion and a green leaf or two of lettuce and a light sprinkling of salt... and just eating that thing!

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Think about which illusions you are prepared to keep.*

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### **IT'S REALLY BEAUTIFUL, ISN'T IT. ISN'T IT... ?<sup>67</sup>**

I'd hiked over an hour through very pretty terrain before finally spotting something that caused me to call a halt to the march so I could photograph it. When Marcelino dismounted his mule and came back to see what I'd found the disappointment in his face was clear as he realized that my interest was in such a plain-looking sprig of greenness. He said:

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I nodded my head and tried to explain why finding Limestone Adder's-tongue Fern was so exciting, but I could see that his mind just wasn't accustomed to dealing with concepts like distribution patterns, evolution, unusual ecological niches and genetics.

"It's beautiful," he repeated rather dubiously. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Here's the subtext of that conversation:

Marcelino knew that plants can have an esthetic value, they can provide sustenance and medicine, they can invade cornfields, they can sting and scratch... But none of those characteristics could account for my photographing that plain-looking thing, unless somehow I regarded it as "beautiful."

In other words, from the several perspectives Marcelino could see the plant from, its being "beautiful," despite the plant's obvious lack of beauty, was the most likely attribute to explain my interest.

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<sup>67</sup> Adapted from the August 24, 2007 Newsletter

Of course the explanation is that, just as he had some perspectives I didn't, I also had some perspectives he didn't.

This is worth thinking about.

For, in everyday life, what perspectives do we lack in order for everything we see and experience to seem extraordinary and worth knowing?

By learning more about the world around us, can we not automatically equip ourselves with more perspectives from which to behold the ordinary things around us? And, by having more perspectives, won't we automatically be more likely to draw from ourselves more enthusiasm, more zest for living, more elemental gladness to be alive?

And is there anything more diverse, more esthetically pleasing and spirit-nourishing than Nature?

In other words, can't studying Nature make us happier?

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Studying, especially studying Nature, enhances quality of life.*

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**ON THE PLEASURES OF PAYING ATTENTION<sup>68</sup>**

These days are like the minimalist, modern music of Philip Glass. At first that music seems monotonously repetitive. But if you stick with it you begin noticing that the piece is forever changing. The same melody may be repeated again and again, but now it's in a different key, now it's accompanied by counterpoint, etc. Once you

<sup>68</sup> Adapted from the August 25, 2002 Newsletter

get the hang of it, Glass's music can be a pleasure, even a great one.

In the same way, these days seem all alike, yet every day there are delightful changes if you pay attention.

The process of learning to pay attention is itself a pleasure. Years ago when I began studying yoga and for the first time in my life focused on the joy of breathing, of stretching and relaxing muscles one by one, of merging with my own heartbeat -- it was like being born again. A similar awakening took place in college when I discovered a book on Japanese flower arranging. Day after day I would look at a certain few arrangements, constantly discovering new patterns, new color combinations, new tensions in the interplay of symmetry and asymmetry...

You can train yourself to pay attention. This Tuesday morning, for instance, I consciously made the effort to absorb what I could of the essence of a certain mushroom. For a good while I hunkered next to the mushroom smelling it, admiring its rich colors and unusual shagginess. I visualized its network of hidden hyphae gradually migrating throughout the leaf litter below us, then one recent day budding and sending up this mushroom. I visualized spores dropping from beneath its dusky cap at that very moment, riding air currents I couldn't feel, heading for unknown forests perhaps far away. I spoke to the mushroom, called it by its name, and this worked certain connections in my own head.

Yesterday I spent a good amount of time standing beneath an umbrella-size, star-shaped leaf of a 15-foot high (4.5 m) Castor Bean (known locally as Mole Plant), admiring how the sun caused the plant's leaf tissue to glow a certain bright yellow-green the mere seeing of which evoked the sparkling hum of sunlight during photosynthesis, of leaf cells dividing, and of sweet sap surging through the leaves' phloem. I imagined myself inside the leaf, sunlight- glowing and sweet-wet myself. Like the plant I felt myself sky-reaching, issuing strange flowers with primitive-looking bunches of stamens on repeatedly branching filaments, and with those crazy-looking, purple-feathery styles.

Whenever something touches you the way my mushroom and Castor Bean plants did me, it's an invitation by that thing to commune. Maybe there's no more beautiful thing a person can do than to consciously and whole- heartedly experience the Creator's works, to rejoice in the mere act of doing so, and to be grateful for having had the opportunity.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Pay attention in this life.*

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**TADPOLES OVER THE EDGE<sup>69</sup>**

During a late-afternoon rain on July 31, frogs left eggs in the dishpan in which I wash next to my trailer door, and each week since then I've reported on the developing tadpoles.

About an hour after I issued last Sunday's Newsletter a storm came up and simplified the dishpan's overpopulation problem. The dishpan lies beneath an awning from which water dribbles into it. During last Sunday's rain the dishpan overflowed. I stood there in the downpour watching tadpoles flow over the edge to certain death on the ground below. I let this happen because of my realization that there were just too many tadpoles there. Even if all the tadpoles somehow made it to adult frogdom, the local ecology could never support so many frogs. I watched as about half my tadpoles went over the edge.

Standing in the rain with all my conflicting feelings, this question occurred to me: Am I not to my tadpoles in their dishpan approximately what the Creator is to us humans on Planet Earth?

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<sup>69</sup> Adapted from the September 1, 2002 Newsletter

Having that insight so vividly placed before me, and remembering some times in my own past when I could have used a bit of divine intervention, I thought: "Obviously the Creator has made us tadpoles and humans this way, but why wouldn't it have been just as easy to formulate us so that neither tadpoles nor humans are predisposed to commit the excesses and errors that get us into these awful situations? Why build a frog whose vast majority of offspring must die before reaching adulthood, and why build humans programmed for arrogance and aggression to thin out our numbers, and also generally screw up our world?"

I cannot recall the path my mind took from the moment of that thought, but I can say that leading directly from it suddenly there arose a flash of insight. For perhaps a thousandth of a memorial second I understood that the moment the Creator cleaved matter from primordial energy, the die was cast for things being the way they are, frogs and people. I understood clearly that in any Universe in which matter existed apart from nothingness or pure energy -- where there was stuff of touch and movement, stuff that interacts and evolves -- then tadpoles over the edge become inevitable, and so do hermits with some hard memories and hemorrhoids.

During that micro-moment in the pouring rain I understood profoundly that without pain there cannot be pleasure, without darkness, light.

An hour after the rain, walking around still stunned by the intensity of my insight but already gradually losing the thread of thought leading to my discovery, I noticed that ants were tearing at the drying-out tadpoles on the ground below my dishpan table. Up close I even smelled the fishy odor of tadpoles coming undone.

Yet, it all seemed right. If during this last month my emotional currency had been invested in ants instead of tadpoles, I should now be as close to the ants as I am with the amphibians. And I would be rejoicing with them that during this recent rain these gelatinous packets of dark, speckled protein plopped onto the



ground from above, a kind of manna from heaven, just what the Queen and her colony needed.

And I stepped into the trailer laughing at the world, laughing at myself, just laughing.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Most deep thinking carried to its logical conclusion results in either suicide or a good laugh.*

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**MUSTARD-GREEN SPACESHIPS<sup>70</sup>**

A few days ago I sowed fall beds of mustard greens, kale and turnips, so now the beds are prettily green. When the seeds sprouted, first they produced two little leaves atop their stems opposite one another, and then the seedlings sat awhile before developing more growth. Technically those first two leaves are known as cotyledons. They have a special name because they're very different from the plants' other leaves, having been formed inside the seed before germination.

During that apparent resting stage between when the cotyledons appeared and when new growth developed, the young plants were actually working furiously, sending roots deep into the soil, and preparing for future shoot growth. During that quiet-looking stage I wasn't able to look at my pretty beds of greens, kale and turnips without visualizing spaceships orbiting the Earth.

For, both spaceships and seeds undergo voyages that are fundamentally alike. When they are launched or sowed, and activated either by signals from technicians on the ground or by

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<sup>70</sup> Adapted from the September 5, 2004 Newsletter

moisture in the soil penetrating the seed's seedcoat, the first stirrings inside the module/seed are powered by stored energy -- energy stored in the spaceship's batteries, or among the seed's atomic bonds. Once the module reaches its orbit or the seed has sprouted, typically both have used up their stored energy. At that point both module and seedling do the same thing -- they tap into a new energy source by deploying solar collectors. The spaceship has its black solar panels and my mustard plants have their photosynthesizing green cotyledons.

The orbiting International Space Station has most of its surface area consisting of solar panels. The Station looks both awkward and elegant, depending on where you put your head when you look at it. When I look at I tend to hear something close to "music of the spheres" -- which could be defined as the mentally perceived sound of real-world events harmonizing with the Universe's basic laws.

To me it's beautiful when humans and nature come to the same conclusion, even when the question is over such a simple matter as "Once something gets launched, then what?" The answer for spaceships, mustard greens, and humans with sustainable living on their minds is: "deploy solar collectors."

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Solar energy is beautiful.*

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**COMPUTER, COMPOST, BULLFROG & ART<sup>71</sup>**

This week I've had awful computer problems and I'm still not back to normal. For most of four solid days I've struggled to patch together parts from three old computers to make something that

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<sup>71</sup> Adapted from the September 7, 2003 Newsletter

works. This Sunday morning I'm still having problems, needing to pound the table to get an image onto my screen.

Thursday I took a break from my computer woes by going to say hello to the compost heap. I found it happily cooking along at an interior temperature of 138° (59° C). For a while I just stood there reflecting on how my activities could be so disrupted by a few electrons inappropriately digitally distributed, yet simply by lying there, all along this compost heap had been accomplishing exactly what it wanted.

My first thought was that, by keeping things simple, that heap had managed to reach a kind of Buddhist perfection. Its high cooking temperature resulting from the breakdown of complex organic materials into basic soil-building nutrients and particles seemed to me a kind of biological equivalent to the path to nonexistence and Nirvana. But then I remembered that, actually, a compost heap is quite complex. Its proper function depends on the well-timed interaction of trillions of living individuals and thousands of kinds of individuals, from bacteria to millipedes.

In fact, it occurred to me that simplicity and complexity often present themselves together as one thing. For example, this week Larry Butts up near Vicksburg sent me a picture of a bouquet he'd created for his wife. It was wonderful, containing thistles, honeysuckles, and lots of other "weeds" and wildflowers from along his gravel road. One might say, "Oh, it's so pretty because he's simply stuck a bunch of pretty things together," but a closer look reveals that the arrangement was successful largely because it adhered to certain laws of proportion based on complex geometry, and color esthetics that were actually quite subtle.

Likewise, some would say that in terms of maturity and sophistication no human society has ever surpassed that of China's ancient T'ang Dynasty. Among the most treasured relics of that society are haiku by the great T'ang poets. And what, at first glance, is more simple than a haiku? Here is one I recently wrote while sitting next to our pond:

*A silent bullfrog...  
Of what good is such a thing  
Just watching me sit... ?*

At first glance, it's childishly simple, saying almost nothing. Yet, if you reflect on it awhile, maybe you can see that this poem invites questioning of the definition of "good," and one's own expectations. Maybe even it reveals something about me as I question these particular things in this particular manner... all in 17 syllables!

It's as if in life at first everything is simple, but then you see how complex it is, but if you live long enough and if you mature enough, eventually you find simplicity in that complexity, but expressing that simplicity is not simple at all, for that, maybe, is the domain of art.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Maybe a function of art is to resolve the tension between a thing's complex and simple natures.*

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**FIELD CRICKET TINTINNABULATIONS<sup>72</sup>**

At this time of year, day and night, untold numbers of male field crickets chirp stereophonically from shadowy, dewy pockets in field grass, pastures, lawns, roadsides and even woods. In their ocean of sound you try to locate a single cricket but it's hard, for when you're close enough to discriminate one chirp from another the cricket grows silent. You wait for him to start up again but when he does he stops the moment you move forward. This way you know he's watching you -- if perceiving you through all those compound eyes and with a cricket's brain can be called "watching." You walk and walk and the chiming never diminishes. So many, so many, so many little black crickets in the dark green grass.

<sup>72</sup> Adapted from the September 7, 2006 Newsletter

All those singers are males calling for females. What are we to think of a creation strung together so that for days and nights on end these little black, glisteny beings call and call just for the matter of copulation? And that their singing is so pretty?

Radiant energy erupts from the sun to flow 93 million miles through empty space and floods onto our Earth. Falling on green grass, magical chemistry powered by sunlight photosynthesizes carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrate stored in the grass. Crickets eat the grass and other green stuff, transferring the sun's energy into themselves, and now that energy powers tintinnabulations in grass, endless chiming, endless chirping, and the chiming is all for sex. Sunlight to sex and song.

And so the dark green grass of fields, pastures, lawns, roadsides and woods these days is full of shadows and song, and one just walks and walks, smiling, smiling, smiling.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Sex and song are OK.*

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**TOAD-SQUASHING MORALITY<sup>73</sup>**

Last Sunday it drizzled all morning as I hiked the reservoir road. Thumbnail-size immature toads everywhere made it hard to walk without stepping on them. Each car on the road that day must have squashed hundreds of them. The toads reminded me of a mail I'd just received from Bea in Ontario. She'd written that as a nature-teaching mom she'd been struggling with the question "How much can a child safely handle nature without harming it." Is it right to let a kid hold frogs when you know it may be damaging their slimy,

<sup>73</sup> Adapted from the September 7, 2007 Newsletter

important-to-them coating? Or put caterpillars in a jar, when you know how exacting the caterpillars' environmental needs are?

Bea's letter, in turn, had brought to mind a philosophical crisis I'd passed through myself when I was a teenager back in 60s, in Kentucky, driving a car for the first time. How I loved sailing through Kentucky's hot, silky summer nights, the windows down, the radio blaring, the headlights starkly illuminating tall fescue grass along country roads billowing in and out as the car's accompanying air-bubble smashed through it.

But, the next morning, look at the windshield, all the splattered bugs. At that time I was deciding to be a vegetarian and was much impressed with Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on the beauty and sacredness of other creatures' lives. In that heightened state of sensitivity to other lives, how could I justify killing so many night-moths just to indulge my driving through the Kentucky night? For a while I quit driving altogether.

It took me a while to accept that, since I also was an animal, I had certain rights, and one of those rights certainly was mobility. I did quit discretionary driving, but also I went back to driving when I needed to.

Last Sunday morning I was thinking about all that, but also I was remembering what I'd just heard on internet radio (I'm a paid-up member of National Public Radio) where a guy promoting a traditional community's rapid gentrification had said, "We're a capitalist society and that means that if you have money you're allowed to do with it whatever you want."

Last Sunday's rain walk, then, turned out to be an exercise in making sense of a world where from moment to moment we must deal with extreme options. Thinking about Bea's letter and what the guy on the radio said obliged me to remember that there's always a Middle Path. There's a Middle Path between killing any creature that gets in your way, and perpetually wearing a mask to save tiny insects from being inhaled and killed -- a practice I've witnessed in the Jain community in New Delhi, India.

To my mind, the day after day, year after year struggle to develop your own insights and then calibrate your behavior to those insights is the most meaningful task any person ever undertakes. And if, beyond that, you can make out a Middle Path coursing through your understandings, and you try to follow it, that's beautiful.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Struggling toward the Middle Path is beautiful.*

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**TADPOLE CONCLUSION<sup>74</sup>**

Frogs had deposited eggs in the dishpan where I wash myself. I decided to just let "Nature take its course." I quit using the dishpan and watched what happened day after day. The eggs hatched, far too many tadpoles lived in the dishpan, and by last Sunday afternoon some of them were going belly up, though they'd dive to the water's bottom when I nudged them. The water was bright emerald green and smelly, and foam formed around the edges.

I placed the dishpan on the ground, hoping that in the night a raccoon would come and depopulate it. When I stood up regarding my sick dishpan ecosystem, a certain memory vividly took possession of me.

Some years ago I took a night-train from New Delhi in northern India to the far-eastern town of Cooch Bihar. At dawn in the slow-moving train I awakened to find outside my window the flat, grossly overpopulated plain of the lower Ganges, India's sacred river. It was countryside, but there were people, people, people... little people, very thin and very poor, standing staring at the train, their poverty, misery and desperation etched in every face, in their body

<sup>74</sup> Adapted from the September 8, 2002 Newsletter.

language, in the exhausted land itself. The odor of woodsmoke, moist earth, human and animal manure, people atop people... It was countryside but I felt claustrophobic. At least in the Bombay slums one always felt the possibility of escaping to a park, to a tea booth, to any dark corner, but here from horizon to horizon there was no escape from obscene overcrowding.

Maybe the most nightmarish thing, however, was that though I knew each person standing out there watching the train was a unique individual, as fundamentally different from one another and with as many natural talents as people in any mixed crowd anyplace, their poverty and misery had made them all the same, all having to think and do exactly what was most efficient and effective for staying alive in an ecosystem pushed to its very limit. And this process of forced conformity had created a monotonous ocean of dwarfed, somnambulant, hopeless-looking beings.

Monday morning after a night of Ganges-Plain dreams, all my tadpoles were dead.

Maybe it was a disease or algae producing toxins, but I suspect it was much simpler than that. Algae photosynthesize and produce oxygen during the day, but during the night they respire, using oxygen, and oxygen levels in the water drop. I think the oxygen in my algae-choked dishpan just reached such low levels during the night that my tadpoles died from asphyxiation.

I'll bet that if I had kept a graph with one line showing the rises and falls of oxygen in my dishpan water, and another line plotting the dishpan's ever-increasing tadpole biomass, days in advance I would have been able to predict the precise moment when the graph's lines intersected -- the instant when the dishpan's oxygen level dipped below what was needed to sustain tadpole life.

On Monday morning just after tipping my dishpan of dead tadpoles into the grass, I was listening to NPR's Morning Edition on the radio. Tabo Mbeki, host of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa, was giving a speech. I was busy



fixing pear-cornbread so I didn't get his words exactly, but I think they were something like this:

"We must take care of our Earth. It supports us, and it is sick. We know what some of the problems are and we know what we can do to ameliorate some of the problems. What a tragedy it would be if we did not now do what we see so plainly must be done."

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Using the brain can save us from some real messes.*

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**STICKERS<sup>75</sup>**

Most of the shrubs and small trees out in the scrub bear spines. Typically the spines are so small that they go unnoticed until you graze a limb or take hold of a trunk, and then you get scratched or punctured. When that happens, chances are that the tip of the spine stays stuck in your flesh. Then you either wait for the wound to fester and maybe the sticker will pop out, or you dig with needle and tweezers, or massage the wound, trying to "work it out." On any given day in the scrub I'll get one or two new stickers. You just live with them here, the way glass cutters live with finger cuts and Band-Aids.

The other day when it'd been hot for so long that my philosophical framework began losing its effectiveness in defending me against the world's indignities, and I was sitting with several hurting, festering fingers, it occurred to me that the Creator had been rather nasty in making spines the way they are. How simple it would have been to fix spines so that their tips don't lodge in wounds. Let them protect the plants by gouging or tearing into an animal's flesh, but

<sup>75</sup> Adapted from the September 8, 2008 Newsletter.

just keep those points from coming off and staying inside the wound the way they do...

When a breeze finally came along and I got my sense back, I recognized this discontent with the Creator was a relict attitude from my childhood back in rural Kentucky. I grew up believing that God and humankind had an agreement going -- that Nature existed for the use and pleasure of humans, and that if we humans did things the way our just, ever-attentive God wanted, He'd take care of us. So, as a child, I posed lots of questions such as, How do stickers in fingers fit into a universe made for humans by an ever watchful and just God we have a deal with?

Of course, if we want to question "justness" we can evoke instances more thought provoking than stickers in fingers. What was just about the New World's indigenous civilizations being annihilated by Europeans? During the history of Life on Earth, what was just about the five or so mass extinctions that caused entire species, genera and even families of plants and animals to go extinct?

I've come to the conclusion that the single most dangerous yet potentially manageable threat to Life on Earth is the religion-based human assumption that the Creator has a special deal with humankind. That belief is dangerous because it encourages reckless behavior. If a child knows that whatever thoughtless thing he or she does, the mother will swoop in and make things right, that child will get into endless meanness. Most of humanity religiously believes that there's something out there watching over us and taking care of us.

But, history and current events teach us that no agency will swoop in and save us if we screw up the Earth's ecosystem.

The most productive change we humans can make to save Life on Earth, then, is to upgrade our many, often mutually antagonistic religious beliefs. They should be replaced by the universal spirituality anyone spontaneously feels when his or her mind and

heart are opened to the majesty, beauty and miraculous nature of the Universe, the Creation.

A spiritual person can "praise the Lord" as fervently as any religious person, and the same is true about living ethically and lovingly. However, a spiritual person uninfluenced by religion will never make the error of believing that the Creator will step in and save us if we destroy the very biosphere that sustains us.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Seek spirituality, not religiosity.*

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### **HYPOGLYCEMIA & SPIDERS<sup>76</sup>**

My second Garden Spider has moved yet again, this time more into the tall grass and shrubs between my trailer and open-walled outhouse. I know it's the same spider because she makes a web much larger and more perfect than usual, though she herself is smaller.

It's worth thinking about the fact that I can know this spider, for many would say that such small creatures have no identities -- they are all the same.

This reminds me of an experiment I read about long ago. Different chemicals were given to a spider to see how each chemical would affect the spider's web. Most striking was how the spider given marijuana's active ingredient produced a sloppy web with many incorrect connections and holes. On the other hand, when the spider was given the active ingredient in LSD, the web produced was perfect, as if the chemical had increased the spider's power of concentration.

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<sup>76</sup> Adapted for the September 9, 2001 Newsletter

It makes one wonder how much our own realities are affected by whatever chemicals or hormones happen to be flowing in our veins at the moment. Could just the right knock to my head or a change in my diet convert me from a happy hermit to a nervous land-developer overnight?

I wonder about these things a lot, especially because I am hypoglycemic. If I happen to stoop for a while and then stand up, things will go black and I'm lucky if I can keep standing. Then as blood sugar slowly returns to my brain I become able to take a few steps, though I seem to see things through a tunnel. Finally I return to full consciousness. I think that this happens to everyone, but with me it is a daily, sometimes hourly event.

Thing is, during those few seconds when I'm able to walk but see things as if through a tunnel, I think I'm fully recovered, and actually feel happy that once again I can concentrate so clearly on the ground before me and I walk with such self assurance. It's only moments later when I'm really normal that I remember back to my tunnel-walking moments just a second or two earlier and I realize that as I tunnel-walked my thoughts and insights had been profoundly limited.

In other words, several times a day I remind myself that the very dumb can never know just how dumb they are. I am also struck that during the first few moments of "being myself," I can still recall exactly how it was to be "tunnel walking," and I am appalled at how self-centered and narrow the tunnel-walking headset was. Also, during those first moments of "becoming myself" there's a rushing feeling -- it's as if my soul were being instantaneously derived from the bright melodies in a lush, gorgeous symphony.

By the same token, how can I know that when I'm "normal" there isn't an even more lucid state beyond that, one in which I could "be myself" if I only had the brain to go there?

In fact, because of very brief moments of insight accomplished during moments of meditation, I am sure that those higher levels of enlightenment do exist.

Recollections of insights understood during those brief moments of enlightenment have a little to do with why I am now a hermit in the woods. However, now in my "normal" state, I am really too dumb to explain to you clearly how my reasoning works.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Don't be too sure about anything.*

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**RATTLESNAKE ALIVE<sup>77</sup>**

Friday morning I was working in one of the gardens when I heard my friend Master whooping and cussing. I'd never heard Master cuss so I figured he'd had a close call with a snake, and I was right. He'd been picking up limbs recently fallen from the pecan trees onto the plantation manager's lawn, and a 4-ft-long (1.2 m) Timber Rattlesnake had been coiled beneath a limb. Master had been reaching toward it when he realized what he was seeing. The snake's disruptive camouflage serves it well these days when dried-up, brown, yellow and green Pecan leaflets litter the ground.

I put the snake in a bucket with a top on it and in a pickup truck we carried it to the back of the plantation, where it was nudged over the steep loess bluff. During the whole trip, coming and going, Master never stopped telling the story of how he'd almost picked it up.

Interestingly, Timber Rattlers usually don't rattle. I heard only a couple of clicks while getting ours into the bucket. Of all the rattlers

<sup>77</sup> Adapted from the September 22, 2002 Newsletter

I've encountered here, only one rattled, and that one was so loud that I thought it was a cicada fallen to the ground. I was gathering twigs to burn in my campfire and, like Master, didn't see the snake until I was reaching right for it, looking around for the flustered cicada.

Anyway, when we returned to the lawn Master had to tell his story to the manager again. After he'd finished, as he was opening the truck's door a dry leaf stuck to the frame by a spider web made a crackling sound. Poor Master jumped a good yard backwards, his eyes popping and his face frozen in terror.

Here was a big man nearly as tall as I, his ebony skin instantly shiny with the sweat of fear, and his muscles taut as a mule's. How I admired his focus on that leaf, the manner by which his entire body and soul in an instant had been transformed from a rambling story-telling mode to total attention to the source of that simple crackle.

I laughed uproariously but I knew it was pointless to say that I wasn't laughing at Master's fear. I was laughing with delight, wishing that somehow I could manage such intensity of concentration while looking at the sky, the grass, the trees, the sunlight, my own hands.

How wonderful it would be to be rattlesnake alive to all things the way Master was at that moment contemplating a dried-up leaf.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Struggle to stay alert.*

**DAYS OF PERFECTION<sup>78</sup>**

Let it be known that I am not one to become so absorbed in nature's intricacies and minutia that I ignore the broad, simple glories of perfect days arriving unannounced and unexpected. If I'm engrossed in the wing venation of a wasp or the exact nature of a leaf's margin, and it's an afternoon golden and balmy served up like a sweet apple on a silver platter, I will reach for that apple.

The nights this week have been glorious. A bright, waning moon and temperatures at dawn as low as 48° (9°C) made for cozy, profound sleeping. Awakening as the first light glowed in the east, sharp coldness sent me springing from the sleeping platform right into my jogging shoes, and within moments I was running through ghostly fog, water droplets coalescing in my beard. Every day this week friendly breakfast fires provided mugs of steaming mint tea, and my skillet-size cucumber "omelets" made with fresh dill and jalapeños always baked to a handsome brownness. I'd work in the garden as the sun burned off the fog, and then on the Internet I'd find my tasks pleasing and fulfilling. Sometimes I'd just wander around checking on seedlings, seeing whether the cuttings were taking root, and making sure the potted plants were healthy. Balmy, late afternoons were occupied with odd jobs and listening to *All Things Considered* on Public Radio, and then as the chill grew moment by moment I'd read into the night as the crickets grew ever more silent.

I am grateful for it all, grateful to be at a peak of sensitivity, grateful to be healthy, and to have discovered how hard manual labor mingled with creative thinking and freely given service to the broader community produce in me something like happiness. I am so grateful for everything that when I pray I never pray asking for favors, only to give thanks to the Great Unknown that puts the is in is.

Golden days, golden days...

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<sup>78</sup> Adapted from the October 19, 2003 Newsletter

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Living simply makes you happy.*

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**OCTOBER PASSIONS<sup>79</sup>**

Something about late October always touches me deeply, and I know I'm not the only one. A friend writes how the other day the forest was so pretty, the air so thrilling and the sky so crystalline, that she almost cried. My mother used to express the same feeling when her town's late-October, golden Sugar Maples glowed in low-slanting sunlight as she came home from work.

When the want-to-cry emotion arises in such situations people get confused. Crying is associated with sadness, yet there's nothing sad about a beautiful, late-October scene.

What's happening in such cases is that Nature is communicating with us, sending us powerful messages through all our sensory channels. The messages are so important, so insightful and they come in such a rush that they disorient and overwhelm us. The most basic of all emotional responses, as babies show us, is the cry. Thus crying is perfectly appropriate when being spoken to so personally and so potently as Nature speaks to us on perfect October days.

In such moments Nature is saying that all is good, all is OK. The maples may be golden because frost has destroyed the leaves' green chloroplasts; the forest's rich, humusy odor may arise from the decomposition of dead organisms; the openness of the sky may bespeak the fragility of the Earth's thin film of life, and the smallness and vulnerability of our planet itself as it hangs suspended in a terrible expanse of dead, cold space... but, look, see how beautiful, so perfect, so long-lasting it all is?

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<sup>79</sup> Adapted from the October 27, 2008 Newsletter



Sometimes when I speak of Nature sending us messages I suspect that people must think that I'm either crazy or a crank. This week, however, as if addressing this very thought, Bea in Ontario sent me the following quotation from Vincent van Gogh:

*"It is not the language of painters but the language of nature which one should listen to.... The feeling for the things themselves, for reality, is more important than the feeling for pictures."*

After reading this I visited my own "Nature-Quotations Page" on the Internet at <http://www.backyardnature.net/101/quotes.htm> where I rediscovered the following:

*"I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in,"* wrote George Washington Carver.

*"Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another,"* said Juvenal about 2000 years ago.

*"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will teach you: or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you,"* it says in the Christian Bible, Job 12:7-10.

*"To see a world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour" ...wrote William Blake 200 years ago.*

*"The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not objects to be exploited. Everything has its own voice. Thunder and lightening and stars and planets, flowers, birds, animals, trees, -- all these have voices, and they constitute a community of existence that is profoundly related,"* wrote Thomas Berry not long ago.

*"The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction"* wrote Rachel Carson a few decades ago.

*"One impulse from a vernal wood May teach you more of man Of moral evil and of good Than all the sages can" ...wrote William Wordsworth in the 1800s.*

I am content to be with such message-hearing company.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Believe in Nature's advice.*

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**WHAT THE ORCHIDS TEACH<sup>80</sup>**

Finding the Lady's-Tresses Orchid this week got me thinking about orchids.

For, the Orchid Family is the most species-rich of all flowering plants -- of all angiosperms -- yet in terms of evolutionary history, orchids are newcomers. The evolution of living things proceeds more or less like a tree that starts as a single sprout, branches, and then the branches rebranch, and so forth, with the branches growing and rebranching at different speeds and with different degrees of vigor. Earth's first large, land-based plants (plants at the evolutionary tree's roots) reproduced with spores, and they appeared over 400 million years ago. Flowering plants did not come onto the scene until much less than 100 millions years ago. Moreover, orchids didn't appear among the flowering plants until relatively recently, geologically speaking, so they occupy only an outermost twig of the vast evolutionary tree. Yet this outside twig proliferates new species like none other.

What can we see about orchids that might explain their success? For one thing, orchid flowers have fused "traditional" flower parts (calyx, corolla, stamens, etc.) into very specialized structures favoring an efficient pollination system that no longer relies on powdery pollen. Despite the impression given by flower-shop orchids, most orchid flowers are much smaller than flowers of "more primitive" species. Orchid species generally occupy very narrow ecological niches -- they are very, very fussy about where

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<sup>80</sup> From the October 28, 2001 Newsletter

they live. Orchid seeds are nearly microscopic: A single pod may contain thousands of seeds, yet if just one of those seeds manages to germinate and grow into a mature plant the orchid is lucky.

If you think about it, the recent evolution of computers has followed the same path as that taken by orchids -- they are always evolving toward higher efficiency, miniaturization, specialization, proliferation, and as more and more computers join into networks there is consequent loss of importance for the individual... A good topic for a long night's discussion would be how human history and today's societies manifest these very same trends, and what this means to us today.

The orchids also show that nature doesn't put all of Her eggs into one basket. The Magnolia Family is considered to be one of the most primitive among flowering-plant families, yet in this forest around me the magnolias appear to be thriving quite as well as the orchids.

I personally find this last observation tremendously encouraging, for here the forest is telling me that as much as anything Nature loves diversity. In a world where orchids and Silicon-Valley yuppies appear to be poised to inherit the Earth, plodding magnolias still can offer their perfume and simple hermits can still smell of woodsmoke.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*There is wisdom in diversity.*

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**DOES NATURE TEACH PATIENCE?<sup>81</sup>**

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<sup>81</sup> Adapted from the November 3, 2008 Newsletter

Last Monday morning I arrived in Pisté at 9 AM for my weekly ciber connection, but my usual ciber wasn't open. "Gone to Valladolid to do her banking," the señora in the adjoining eatery told me. Bankless Pisté, sitting beside Chichén Itzá, one of the world's archeological wonders, hosts at least seven tourist-favoring cibers, but last Monday all were closed. For the next three hours I drifted between them until finally one opened and you got your Newsletter.

During my roaming from locked door to locked door I thought a lot about patience. Is it really a virtue? If I let myself, I can get real impatient, so patience is something I've had to learn to keep from fretting myself into a stew.

When a question like "Is patience a virtue?" dawns on me, I welcome it, because it offers a chance to practice the process of seeking guidance in Nature. Nature offers the soundest advice on everything, so it's important to keep in practice ferreting out that advice, and interpreting it.

My first thought was that, no, Nature shows little patience. Life on Earth arose as soon as the planet cooled enough to sustain it. Global warming seems to be destroying things much faster than anyone had predicted. When a system's ecology drifts out of whack, things go extinct and there's no second chance. Where's "patience" in all this?

As I digested that, a contrary thought came out of nowhere: Nature is like the old-time clockmakers I've run into back in Germany's Black Forest region who meticulously, obsessively or maybe passionately worked very long hours, nearly all their waking hours, and that kind of work required enormous patience, so Nature IS patient in that way.

There must be at least two kinds of patience: The type needed to deal with closed ciber doors, and; the clockmaker kind. The first one seems strictly confined to the interiors of human heads but the clockmaker kind is clearly eternal, the whole Universe in all its perfection having been created with it.

Therefore, here's what Nature says to me: If you want to be impatient about something as trivial as closed cibers, go ahead; you'll make yourself miserable but it's irrelevant to the rest of the Universe. However, if you want to live in harmony with the flow of the Universe, then be like a clockmaker conducting your life -- not rushed, but working at it steadily, meticulously.

Somehow getting that clear in my mind for the first time was liberating. What began as vexation over the internet's inaccessibility now morphed into time I had to unhurriedly take account of all around me: And, how blue the sky! How delightful the hot breeze blowing through town, the odors of hot tortillas, frying onions and sizzling chili sauce drifting down the street, and look at those Black Vultures circling high over town and the old man clanging his little tin bell selling fruit-flavored ices from his white pushcart, and how lovely the habitual good nature of everyone I meet, how alive they all are, me too, right now and here in Pisté, closed cibers or not...

So, that's how asking a question to Nature often turns out, I've found. You begin with a simple query, probably She shows you that the query's premise misses the point to begin with, but then to make you feel better She gives you an insight, and at the end of the day you feel a lot better just because you've been fooling with Mama Nature!

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Practice reflecting on Nature's Paradigms.*

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**ON THE PLEASURES OF SIMPLE TASTES<sup>82</sup>**

During the recent visit with my family in Kentucky I was regaled with several sumptuous meals which included such dishes as an apple

<sup>82</sup> Adapted from the November 10, 2002 Newsletter

salad with walnuts and honey, gooey pimiento cheese, and sweet banana bread. After a full year of hermit fare based on cornmeal, flour, oatmeal, vegetable oil, vinegar, and what I gather from the forest and gardens, the tastes of these aunt-made and grandmother-made foods were nothing less than explosive. Also I drank store-bought herbal teas with industrial-strength flavors.

The curious thing is that after three days these tastes did not please me. In fact, the constant presence of rich food began to bother me. My eating and drinking became like an addictive experience with gross superficiality, like being at the circus too long.

In regular life I delight in the taste of a freshly pulled raw carrot, a hot piece of cornbread smelling of simple cornmeal and hot oil, the mysterious astringency of an omelet based on a certain mushroom. When a meal consists of simple elements you have put together yourself, every swallow has a meaning. It's not hard to make the connections between what you are eating, and Nature and human society in general. There was corn growing, people harvested it and ground, packed and sold the grain, and now you eat it. There was a carrot, you pulled it from the ground and now you eat it. The sun radiated energy that flowed through space, bathed the Earth, the corn and carrot used that sunlight energy to convert air, water and nutrients into substance, and now you eat that substance. One eats with feet flat on the ground, in a knowing communion with the Universe's broad patterns.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Simplify.*

**"WEED"<sup>83</sup>**

A year or so ago Newsletter subscriber Greg in Wisconsin stumbled over one of my sentences in which I used the word "weed," and rightly so. I cringe a little myself when I use that word. However, I keep talking about "weeds" because of the need to communicate about mostly herbaceous, short-lived plants living in disturbed habitats, and, in English, the commonly accepted word for that concept is "weed."

American writer and transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson asked and answered: "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not been discovered."

A more usual definition is that a weed is a plant growing where it's not wanted.

Thus, the Passion Flower rambling along the plantation manager's garden fence, with large blossoms among the prettiest of the plant kingdom and a prized guest in many greenhouses and gardens, is a weed to the plantation manager.

Still most of us wouldn't quibble over referring to as weeds the Japanese Honeysuckle and Chinese Privet that are overwhelming the local flora right around my trailer. Not far away, Kudzu overtops every bush and tree, gradually killing them with shade. In my gardens Johnsongrass is a plague.

But, who knows what these plants' value will be as global warming stresses our native plants and animals, and fractures our natural ecosystems? Eventually our "weeds" will evolve subspecies and new species more adapted to our local conditions, and maybe those new taxa will generously contribute to the local ecosystem and stabilize it by dealing with the new climate better than our native species. Already one sees bees contentedly visiting Kudzu blossoms, and we all know that nothing makes a hummingbird happier than a Japanese Honeysuckle blossom in June.

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<sup>83</sup> Adapted from the November 17, 2002 Newsletter

In a certain way, an alien "weed" introduced into an ecosystem of native organisms is like an African drumbeat suddenly intruded into a dreamy blues. For a moment there's confusion, but before long the singer "gets the African beat in his blood," wraps one of his old melodies around it, and eventually has something new more engaging than either the drum-beat or the old blues song.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Currents of evolution can be hidden from us.*

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**SKY ORIENTATION<sup>84</sup>**

The awe I feel when confronted by the enormity, complexity and beauty of the Universe is what my spirituality is rooted in. Dewy, star-gazing nights spent in the backyard as I was growing up in Kentucky spoke more powerfully to me than words written in any holy book or spoken by any human guru, mystic or prophet.

Jupiter with its elegant moons so clearly visible this morning averages being about 400 million miles away. I cannot really grasp what a million of anything is, so in my mind Jupiter simply swims in an unimaginably empty abyss too far away to relate to. Yet this distance is nothing compared to that of the next-brightest object in last night's sky, Sirius the Dog Star, which this morning stood not far from Jupiter. Sirius's distance from Earth is so great that light emanating from it takes 8.7 years to reach here.

Since a light-year translates to a distance of about 6,000,000,000,000 miles, Jupiter is only 0.00000145 of a light-year away. If my calculations are right, Jupiter averages only about 46 seconds away, traveling at the speed of light. Jupiter is 46 seconds. Sirius is 8.7 YEARS... Think of it. Meditate on it.

<sup>84</sup> Adapted from the November 18, 2001 Newsletter



Yet, Sirius looks big to us mainly because it is so close. Betelgeuse, the bright star at Orion's right shoulder this morning, lies 300 light-years away. And there are many, many stars much farther away than Sirius.

In fact, when I stepped into the field this morning and could see the constellation Andromeda a little to the north but otherwise right overhead, above my Pecan trees, there was a smudge plainly visible. This was the great Andromeda nebula, M31, and it was 1,500,000 light-years away...

This unthinkable distance is only possible because it lies outside our own galaxy. Our sun is just one of some 100,000,000,000 stars making up our own galaxy, which from the vicinity of M31 would appear as a tiny smudge in the sky. All the stars I saw this morning, except for those in M31, were members of our own galaxy, which is a little like a spiraling wheel. To see M31 I was looking through the clutter of our own galaxy, to see another galaxy, which was M31.

The first time I glimpsed the majesty in this arrangement, I no longer felt that any religion placing us humans at the center of the universe was appropriate. I lost all confidence in all religions, but at the same moment I gained an underpinning for an abiding spirituality. My awe in the Creator behind these workings only increases with every new discovery, every new return to a starry field.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*The more you learn, the more profound can be your spirituality.*

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**THE MOON'S PASSAGE<sup>85</sup>**

Margarita in Querétaro writes that once she saw an old man lop off the top of a male Papaya tree on the third day of the new moon and the tree began producing female flowers, and later produced fruit. That letter tickles me not only because it provides more insight into tricky Papaya flowers but also because I like hearing how traditional people harmonize their lives with phases of the Moon. I don't put much store into most beliefs about the Moon's phases but I certainly accept that the Moon's workings are powerful and mysterious.

I didn't begin to appreciate the Moon's power until I started sleeping in deserts without a tent. On moonlit nights I'd awaken many times, for a moment gaze at the Moon, then immediately sleep again. I think we all must awaken often during the night, just that we don't remember unless something special is going on, like the Moon being there.

During my desert sleeps the Moon's brightness was extraordinary but what affected me even more was how each time I awoke the Moon had progressed a little farther along its journey across the sky. By night's end my stop-action memory of the Moon's passage imparted the impression that the Moon's movement had constituted a long, uninterrupted, hypnotic progression. The next morning I always felt as if the Moon had wrought something significant inside me but I never had a clue about what kind of change it had been, and I still don't know.

If you sleep beneath the Moon several nights in a row the effects only intensify. One reason is that each night during the period of the Moon changing from being a new moon to a half moon, then to a full Moon, its time in the sky lengthens. When the Moon reaches fullness, she rises as the sun sets, thus gracing the sky the whole night, and her face is never as bright as at that very moment. Our anthropomorphic subconsciousness naturally interprets this as the Moon being ever more attentive to things below her, ever more passionate about whatever and whoever she touches.

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<sup>85</sup> Adapted from the November 24, 2008 Newsletter

Margarita writes that when the man lopped the top off a male tree on the third day of the new moon eventually the tree turned female. It's understandable that the cutting would take place three days after the New Moon because by the third night anyone can see that each night the Moon is growing, spending more time in the sky and glowing brighter and brighter. All these details hypnotically suggest burgeoning changes at hand.

And, why wouldn't such a majestic passage of the Moon occasion profound changes, and why wouldn't those changes be harmonious with feminine benevolence -- such as gorgeous papayas coming onto a tree starting out as male?

What a magnificent reality we find ourselves in when such a lovely, mysterious, powerful influence can be so commonplace that most of us don't even bother to know what phase the Moon is in, or when and where to look for her.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*About 96% of the Universe -- what astrophysicists call "dark matter" -- can't be seen. In such a Universe, there's bound to be some things we can't figure out.*

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**THE SIX MIRACLES OF NATURE<sup>86</sup>**

It seems to me that the world around us would not be possible if during the history of the Universe six distinct miracles had not occurred. Here are those miracles:

*Miracle #1: That anything exists in the first place.*

<sup>86</sup> Adapted from the November 24, 2002 Newsletter

The Universe could have remained an empty void, but something went to the trouble to see that something came into being. This is surely the most transfixing and beautiful of all conceivable miracles.

*Miracle #2: That as soon as something existed, it started evolving.*

The Universe could have remained consisting of nothing but evenly spaced atoms of hydrogen, or of something even less complex and interesting, but it didn't. Astrophysicists tell us that within micro-fractions of a second after the Big Bang, already things were coagulating, sorting themselves out, and creating more and more complex systems.

*Miracle #3: That within this vast but dead Universe, life arose.*

Not only did it arise, but it arose relatively soon after the Earth had cooled enough to support life. It seems that the Universal Creative Force was in a hurry to create life.

*Miracle #4: That as soon as life arose, it began evolving.*

Life could have remained at a very simple stage, like primitive bacteria, doing nothing but reproducing. However, from the beginning more complex life forms began arising from the primitive stock, until today we have the rainbow of life that includes you and me.

*Miracle #5: That life evolved to the point that certain organisms could think.*

Early organisms, like primitive forms of life today, were very much like little machines whose every action was governed by onboard computers. They were capable of such reflexive behaviors as pulling away from fire. Then organisms arose with complex instinctual behaviors, such as birds, who may sing a certain kind of song without ever having heard it. None of these behaviors required thinking, however. But, eventually, certain higher animals began thinking, and for the

first time organisms began inventing tools and passing information from one generation to the next.

*Miracle #6: That certain thinking organisms became capable of inspiration.*

Here our concept of *inspiration* is similar to the theological one, which is "a special influence of a divinity on the minds of human beings." As such, the inspirations we are talking about are non-verbal, Nature-rooted ones constituting a blossoming of the spirit with emotional, esthetical and spiritual components.

This last miracle, Miracle #6, enables thinking organisms to be inspired. It's worth reflecting on the fact that identifying a paradigm leads to a certain kind of inspiration, so in a very real sense right now we are engaged in the struggle to ignite Miracle #6 in our lives.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*The Universe we live in -- including the subset we think of as Nature -- is miraculous.*

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**EGRETS, HERONS & IBISES<sup>87</sup>**

Out in the mangroves it's normal to see mixed flocks feeding together in areas of open water 2-4 inches deep. A normal flock of about 20 birds may be half Snowy Egrets, 1/3 White Ibises, with a sprinkling of Tri-colored Herons, Little Blue Herons, Great Egrets and maybe a Willet or two. Feeding in a group like this seems to scare up more fish for everyone, plus there are more eyes to scan for enemies.

After you watch such a flock awhile you see that each species has its own strategy and personality. Often the mixed flock I've been

<sup>87</sup> Adapted from the November 27, 2006 Newsletter

watching is more or less led by the White Ibises who wander about systematically probing the mud with their long, curved beaks, more interested in worms and other mud dwellers than fish. Snowy Egrets appear to follow the ibises stabbing at fish the ibises scare up, frequently getting into noisy fights with one another, and sometimes trying to rob an ibis of its catch. The other heron and egret species stay on the fringes and are less engaged with the group.

Then a Common Black Hawk comes YEEP YEEP YEETING, lands on a snag amidst the mixed flock and everyone flies away, the ibises looking over their shoulders in absolute disgust.

In other words, such a flock of birds shows structural elements similar to that of a typical human society. Most people I know resemble the no-nonsense, work-a-day, nose-in-the-mud ibises, or else the boisterous, redneck Snowy Egrets, or the timid little Willet or maybe the philosophical outsider, the hesitant Little Blue Heron, and then there's always the loud, obnoxious one who rampages into town upsetting everyone by insisting on having things his own way, like the Common Black Hawk.

However, one great difference between a flock of birds and human society is that a White Ibis is stuck with his living strategy for his whole life, while a human can change. A human has the potential to learn from mistakes and to consciously change his or her assumptions about life as more and more information and experience is acquired, and to change his or her behavior accordingly.

Yet, it seems to me that most people don't like to change at all. They may talk about wanting to change but what they really want is to keep securely to their daily routines, to not rock the boat and not take chances, not be different from everyone else, just behave acceptably and do what's expected of them. This, even when it's clear that our society's distinguishing living strategy -- that of being consumption-based and depending on continual growth -- is unsustainable, and threatens Life on Earth.

So, there I am sitting in the mangroves watching egrets, herons and ibises, wondering what will happen to all the exquisitely adapted plants and animals around me as global warming manifests itself, pollution keeps getting worse, as more and more people cut more and more firewood from the surrounding scrub, and overfishing continues until the oceans are fished-out. What will happen as these long established -- one could say traditional -- unsustainable behaviors continue, as most humans choose to keep doing what they've always done?

And I just wonder: Where did the loony idea come from that somehow it's family-oriented and God-fearing to behave traditionally and unquestioningly with regard to commonly accepted but destructive, unsustainable social values? Why do people think it's more "Godly" to unthinkingly accept "faiths" and traditions than to accept the Creator's gift of being able to think, and to change? Why do most people choose to live the lives they were born into, exactly as egrets, herons and ibises?

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*The Sixth Miracle of Nature --from which arises the inspiration needed to overcome inappropriate programming -- should be exercised.*

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**FROST AND GREEN TOMATOES<sup>88</sup>**

On Monday, knowing that the freeze that night would kill the tomato vines, I went around collecting green tomatoes, to store until they ripened. It seemed easiest to pull up each plant by the roots, then hold the vine before me as I plucked the tomatoes, so this I did. However, it felt funny.

<sup>88</sup> Adapted from the November 30, 2003 Newsletter

I felt queasy because all summer I'd babied those vines, and the vines had been good to me. I'd eaten from them, watched Green Anoles and Fence Lizards stalk quarry among them, I'd savored the architecture of their blossom anatomy and watched individual flowers gradually develop into perfect fruits. Yet now I broke roots and stems, plundered half-grown fruits, and tossed the mangled plants onto the ground to be forgotten.

The uneasy feeling haunted me all day, and I wondered why. Something here touched a deep chord within me. Something toyed with my subconscious.

After a couple of days I understood. The act of uprooting treasured tomato vines before the first big frost was nothing less than a metaphor for how I have conducted my own life at many critical junctures. Again and again in this life I have come to understand something that had been hidden to me before, and then I have quickly and irretrievably uprooted treasured, even sacred and certainly society-encouraged notions and beliefs, I have abandoned comfortable and safe routines, leaving much in my wake to mold as it would.

When I had those pitiful tomato vines in my hands, prematurely ripping off their long-nurtured fruits, it was exactly like the day in the mid 60s when I shocked by family by becoming a vegetarian, like the day in the mid 70s when I stopped being a botanist at the Missouri Botanical Garden, never again to lead a standard life. It was like so many times I have behaved absolutely rationally and perfectly within the letter of the unspoken contract between the world and myself, and accomplished a change that all too often was accompanied by pain on many levels.

Yet, if I had not passed through those painful times, the wonderful summer I've just had surely never would have come about...



**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Evolution can be painful, but it's necessary.*

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**WEED-SLIP<sup>89</sup>**

Descending the slope last Tuesday, returning through the cornfield belt, I slipped. In the forest the soil was soft and loose, cradling one's feet, but years of corn growing here had converted the soil to hard, slick mud. My right elbow hit a jagged limestone rock, one of many emerging from the land as soil erodes from around them on this steep slope. The part of my elbow that hit the rock was what my father used to call the funny bone, because when you hit it it's like getting an electrical shock.

That day my elbow hurt so badly that for a couple of minutes I just lay on the steep path with my teeth gritted and eyes clinched shut, unable to move my fingers, waiting for the pain to ease, feeling blood dripping from my elbow. My mind was in no better shape, in such a dark mood that the idea occurred to me that maybe this my fall was somehow appropriate after seeing such destruction, that when I did open my eyes all I'd see would be forlorn-looking corn and hacked-up forest, so why not just keep the eyes closed, maybe forever?

But, life is fixed so that eventually you have to open your eyes. I was lying on my side among weeds and the vision that came into focus before me wasn't at all what I'd expected. Long I stared, warm sunlight feeling good and the herbage I'd crushed when I fell issuing a fragrance sweet and minty. A soft breeze rustled peacefully among the cornblades. How pretty were those friendly statements of purple, blue, yellow and white against the soft, generous background of green.

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<sup>89</sup> Adapted from the December 10, 2007 Newsletter

Long I stared, until way after my elbow had stopped hurting and the blood had hardened to a blackish crust.

A while back I mentioned here that to protect my own sanity I identify with weeds, not more stable communities such as old-growth forests, whom I suspect to be doomed by climate change's storms, droughts, floods, fires, pestilences and such, if somehow they last long enough by escaping the workings of human commerce. Some readers said that this was a sad example of my "giving up."

Lying on my side among the weeds, looking at a purple *Cuphea* blossom nodding under the influence of a tiny black bee, I thought about that statement again. A reserve was in the process of being destroyed, putting me into a black mood. But now weeds, like so many times before, were good-naturedly charming me back to being myself.

I know that with my personality structure an unrelenting diet of seeing beautiful, noble things replaced by gross vulgarity makes me so cynical, so depressed, so simply crazy, that I'm no longer any good to anyone.

However, identifying with weeds, even in this eroding cornfield at the scene of an ecological disaster, suddenly I find myself smiling at an agreeable little band of brothers and sisters encouraging me on, telling me to keep blossoming and offering nectar and perfume to the wind and all visitors who come with sun-glistening wings or songs in their hearts.

How pretty were the weeds that day.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:***Something in Nature encourages hope.*

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**THOUGHTS FOR THE WINTER SOLSTICE<sup>90</sup>**

In my opinion, tomorrow, the Winter Solstice, is the official first day of spring. Winter and summer just don't exist in my manner of reckoning. In past Newsletters I've described how I conceive of Nature at this latitude as "breathing out" the blossomings and new beginnings of spring, and "breathing in" the fruitings and dying backs of fall. Today is the last day of the current annual cycle's "breathing in."

Moreover, a beautiful historical symmetry is manifesting itself at this very moment in the evolution of the human spirit, and the Solstice is the appropriate time to celebrate that. Right now, in our generation, just as the anachronisms and war-inciting tendencies of our religions are becoming so troubling, there is being revealed to us through science enough to inspire humanity to a whole new level of spirituality.

Our generation is the first in human history to recognize that we inhabit a fragile dewdrop of a planet orbiting a mediocre star in an average position in a run-of-the-mill galaxy among many billions of other galaxies, in a Universe that is not only expanding, but expanding at an increasing rate. Only in 1995 did we learn for sure that other stars beside our own sun have planets orbiting them. There must be many billions of planets harboring billions of forms of life, and life-like states throughout the Universe. Before our time, no human ever had an inkling that the Creator's works could be as enormous, complex, mysterious and BEAUTIFUL as now we see they really are.

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<sup>90</sup> Adapted from the December 21, 2003 Newsletter

Nowadays, to be "a believer," it is no longer necessary to claim to believe in any ancient mythology. Now, for the first time in human history, anyone can confirm for himself or herself that humankind is enmeshed in such unending intricacy managed with such awful precision that "That which created everything is the Creator, and the Creator is good... "

This simple belief is enough to inspire a new spirituality more profound and more satisfying than any ever experienced on the face of the Earth.

Tomorrow begins a new spring and a new year. Tomorrow, on the Winter Solstice, as the Earth once again tilts on its axis in a way that causes days at our latitude to begin growing longer, we are given a sign that the Creator of the Universe remains on the job, and that the Creator's will continues to be as it always has been, and always will be.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Honest evolution roots spirituality, which is comforting.*

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**THE SKY IS BLUE<sup>91</sup>**

Yesterday, the Winter Solstice, I took my Solstice Walk. It was sunny and breezy, and the old fields here on the plantation with broomsedge and blackberry brambles encroaching from the woods' edges were brilliant in their thousand shades of rusty-brown and gray. Framed by such muted hues, the blue sky was simply overpowering with its dark blue.

The Solstice is a time to reflect, and after a while of hiking I found myself meditating on that blue sky. Is it not significant that the sky is

<sup>91</sup> Adapted from the December 22, 2002 Newsletter

blue?

Imagine all the colors the sky could be, yet it is blue, a color that sets the troubled mind at peace, that implies profundity and constancy. If you feel like lying on your back in the middle of a large field and letting the mind float, what color would you want the sky to be other than blue?

It's more than that we are simply accustomed to the sky being blue. I think the sky's blueness satisfies so profoundly because we humans have evolved beneath blue skies. Not only our simian ancestors on the African plains but also the little lemur-like first mammals and the first amphibian ancestors to pull themselves onto muddy shores -- first raised their heads to see a blue sky.

So what does it say that today the blue sky pleases us so? To me it implies that the Creator was not satisfied just to make a universe that worked well and looked good. It was important that those parts of creation evolved enough to have feelings -- we birds, coyotes and humans, for example -- could potentially feel content and be at peace where we are -- could delight in merely walking around with the eyes open.

Having the sky blue, then, is a blessing and a confirmation, and I am using those terms in a spiritual context, certainly not a religious one.

Having a blue sky on the very day I celebrate the Solstice by taking a long walk in the fields is almost too wonderful to express.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Rooting spirituality in Nature feels good, feels right.*

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**WARM BREEZES<sup>92</sup>**

Most of this week has been breezy and unseasonably warm. It was good hearing crickets chirping in the full-moon nights and Spring Peepers peeping throughout the days. Before a cold front passed through on Thursday, deep in the nights I'd awaken and just lie listening to the whoosh of wind in the trees, and a small twig tapping against the trailer.

Usually as I work at the computer I listen to classical music on Public Radio. This week they've sprinkled Christmas music throughout their daily offerings so I've just kept the radio off. That resulting quietness reminded me of how nice it is to hear only the wind. It was a comfort, a "Joy to the World" in wind.

Maybe a hundred years from now sociologists and psychologists will shake their heads when they recall how today we tolerate in our lives such material, social and psychological clutter -- so many inelegant distractions. They will view us as we do London slum dwellers during the time of Dickens.

In my opinion, barking dogs, traffic noise, perpetually yammering radios and TVs, jets roaring overhead... they are more than inelegant: They are actually destructive to the healthy human spirit. Clutter, whatever the kind, fogs the vision, confuses the insight, mutes the music. Interminable distractions nibble at one's senses until mental fog, emotional numbness and spiritual torpor take over.

But, nature's sounds... the sound of breezes, the trickling water, surf at the beach, the heartbeat of a loved one... are actually therapeutic to a bruised soul. Maybe it's because these natural sounds remind us subliminally that a few solid realities do indeed exist, despite the evidence of the ever-shifting, choking clutter around us. Beyond the radio's inane noises there are never-ending, majestically simple and powerful melodies streaming throughout the Universe, and one sound of such a melody is that of wind deep in a warm night.

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<sup>92</sup> Adapted from the December 22, 2002 Newsletter.

And just think: You can also walk in the fields and see the wind swirling through the broomsedge, and walk in the forests and behold that wind swaying tree limbs and sending down occasional sprays of bright leaves...

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Simplify.*

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**WIND<sup>93</sup>**

I've slept in my tent on the beach every night since I've been here. This week it's been particularly windy, causing my tent's nylon walls and rainfly to shake and flap all night long. Awakening in the night I hear waves crashing and the Chit Palms' semi-brittle fronds clacking and scraping against one another. Whooshing, whistling wind piles sand against my tent's windward side. Rain showers come and go all night peppering the nylon. On Christmas Eve a tremendous roar during a storm awoke me. Marcia the hotel owner says it sounded like a waterspout hitting the beach, though it did no damage.

At dawn, particularly large, long-bodied mosquitoes encrust my tent. Toward the east, slate-gray, raggedy clouds with rain beneath them march toward shore shepherding rank after rank of silvery, choppy waves before them, offshore currents deflecting the waves downshore. While packing my tent I see in the sand that crabs have left leg-scribblings all around.

Carrying stuff to the hotel before starting my jog, my head reverberates with wind-roar/ tent-flapping/ wave-oscillating-and-crashing/ frond-scraping/ purple-cloud-oncoming sensations and those crab scribblings in shifting sand might as well have been

<sup>93</sup> Adapted from the December 29, 2008 Newsletter

hysterical, cuneiform script expressing my own effervescing, unanchored state of mind.

On that walk back to the hotel, every morning I am visited with the following insight, or revelation: That in this life any sense of security or permanency is dubious, if not outright illusionary.

But, as soon as I understand this, like a reflex, I also ask myself of what good it does to have insights like this. Usually by the time the hotel's dogs run to greet me I've forgotten why I'm thinking about revelations in the first place.

I'm just glad to have awakened on such a gorgeous morning, to have slept through a whole other windy night, and to have dogs so happy to see me, just because it's a new day, and we're all feeling pretty good and still liking one another.

**THE WISDOM IN IT:**

*Who knows?*

**POSTSCRIPT**

You've seen that the above essays were written years ago. Now I'm writing from the woods near Tepakán, Yucatán, México, in 2020, at age 72, and my understanding of Nature's messages are, I think, more mature now.

During the years when the above essays were written, one concept that slowly rooted in me was that of "The Six Miracles of Nature." An important feature of that concept was the insight that on Earth Nature apparently evolves toward ever greater diversity of ever more intimately



interdependent parts. Evolution's arrow seemed pointed toward evolving mentality -- the human mind. The Six Miracles concept is described in greater detail on the Web at <https://www.backyardnature.net/j/6/>

The next big insight that over the years developed was that everything in the whole Universe, including mentality and feeling, is just One Thing. When in 2019 I shared my insight with my philosopher friend Eric, he immediately presented me with a pile of books making it clear that I'm just one in a very long line of all kinds of people in all societies who have come to the same conclusion on their own. That insight is known as Monism -- not a religion, but a way of looking at things. My thoughts on the One Thing and Monism are at <https://www.backyardnature.net/j/6/one-indx.htm>

As I write these words In early 2020, I feel like I'm on the threshold of the next transformative insight, which crystallizes as I start digesting the implications of everything in the Universe being just One Thing, with us humans being ephemeral "modifications" of the One Thing's "substance," as Spinoza framed it back in the 1600s..

As I've aged, more and more I've been blown away by the beauty and spiritual significance of what I've experienced and felt of Nature/God manifesting and evolving with me part of it. Consciousness, feeling, like a symphony, each thing a different tone, with tones, melodies and themes nested within one another, coming and going, in all different keys, all different moods, always changing, always richer and more meaningful.

But, also, there's this aching sadness as I grow more and more sensitized to how the symphony becomes denatured by the destruction, death and misery caused to other living things by us humans with our insatiable greed and willful ignorance.

**END**