



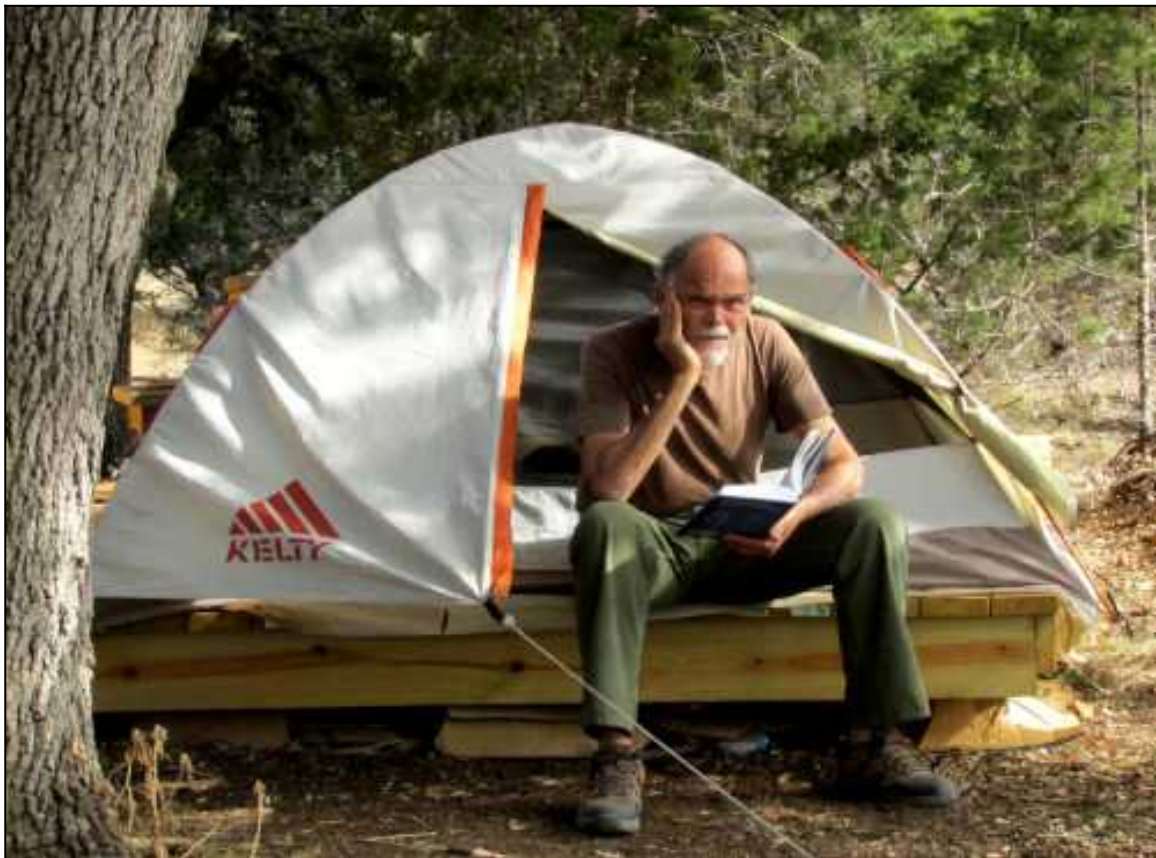
**NATURE =
STUDY
MEDITATION**

*Mother Nature
as Therapist in
Anxious Times*

"The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, Nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy amidst the simple beauty of Nature."

Ann Frank: born 1929 in Frankfurt, Germany; died 1945 in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, stateless, aged 15

This is a living *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*, changing whenever it feels right to do so. You're reading the March 1, 2023 edition.



On the previous page you see me, naturalist Jim Conrad, who in 2020, at age 73, wrote the first edition of this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*. I'm camped on a property in southwestern Texas, where I bartered two hours of physical labor each day to pay for the camping site, daily access to the property owner's electricity (for a laptop), and wifi connection. Both before and after the Texas visit, I lived in various places in Mexico and elsewhere.

I have no formal training in psychology, philosophy, theology, or even good writing. However, during my life as a naturalist -- a naturalist being one who seriously studies Nature -- my experience has been that Nature study, with its attending natural experiences, and despite the upsetting, suffering world around me, makes me somewhat happy, and is even therapeutic. Forgive me, then, during the following *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*, for so often referring to my own personal experiences. It's because my path to general happiness and therapy is the only one I know, and I want to tell you about it.

All text and pictures in this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition* are offered into the **public domain** to be freely used by anyone anyplace however they want, just like Nature's air, water, and -- if you really think about -- everything else.

In this tree of thought, feeling and intuition, the **trunk** introduces our concepts. Theme-setting **branches** sprout **twigs**, which variously develop our branches' themes. Most twigs are accompanied by entries from Jim Conrad's years of weekly *Naturalist Newsletter*, indicated below with a ✓ The *Newsletters* have been **fruits** of the tree itself.

TRUNK

Here's how it's been for me over the last half century of practicing meditative Nature study:

You identify something in Nature, then look up its name to see what's interesting about it. You keep gathering information and having experiences with that thing for as long as you can.

If you're lucky, you'll do this for the rest of your life, with lots of plants, animals, fungi, algae, rocks, cloud types, stars, ecosystems, geological formations, natural processes... and people, because people are part of Nature, too.

You do your studies in a special meditative way, always focusing clearly on the thing at hand, its manner of being, its importance, its beauty and any message it may have for you. At a certain point -- months or maybe years into your studies and experiences -- something mysterious and wonderful happens:

Spontaneously, Nature begins imparting to you certain insights, feelings and intuitions which in a long-term, sustainable way make you feel better, more complete, and happier, even in a world gone crazy, and on a suffering planet.

If you've been hurt emotionally or have become depressed, Nature study of the kind described here is therapeutic. And it's Nature Herself conducting the therapy sessions.

Not only that, but maybe your healing and more positive feelings, along with your blossoming insights and intuitions, can be interpreted as indications that you're on the right path -- that Nature is "rewarding" you for consciously making the effort to refine -- to evolve -- your mentality and sensitivities in harmony with the rest of the evolving, refining Universe.

That's a perfectly unprovable idea. However, if throughout the history of Life on Earth, Nature has nudged biological evolution in the direction of producing an ever greater diversity of species, species on the average displaying more mental ability and complex feelings than species who came before them, why wouldn't it be unsurprising to find that Nature encourages us individual humans to refine our own evolving mentality and sensitivities, and our behaviors?

It happens that one of the effects of refining ourselves in this way is that you can't avoid wondering about certain existential questions: What's going on here? Why am I a consciousness in a biological body on Earth in this particular corner of the Universe? What am I supposed to be doing with this life?

This brings us to a completely unexpected matter. That is, long-term, serious meditative Nature study not only is therapeutic and thought-provoking, but also it encourages spiritual development.

Nearly always, for all people, finding happiness is less a matter of "finding" happiness than changing what one's personal concept of what happiness is, and how much a human can expect to have of it.

The following *tree of thought, feeling and intuition* at first glance appears to consist of a hodgepodge of ideas and reported experiences. In fact, it *is* a hodgepodge, but it aspires to be a tree-like hodgepodge.

Our tree's trunk branches, then those branches branch and rebranch, on and on, this way and that, always searching for light. With luck, our tree will be for you as it is with real trees in Nature. That is, as you read, what's expressed here will interact with your own ideas, intuitions and feelings -- as a real tree engages with its physical environment -- to form an ecology of mind pregnant with ever more potential, and poetry.

Finally, here are certain facts about Nature in which our own tree is rooted:

FACT #1: Humans are just one species among Earth's living organisms.

FACT #2: We are animals who have evolved like all other living things. To avoid disharmony and unhappiness with our world, our evolutionary past must be considered. That's because fundamental human urges emerge from a genetic heritage developed over millions of years; we have genes whose programming often generate urges which are in the long term self-defeating and self-destructive for us.

FACT #3: Our human brains enable us to overcome inappropriate, genetically based impulses, even as they invite us to explore aesthetic, emotional and spiritual levels unavailable to other species.

FACT #4: In the end, nothing can be completely understood in a universal sense. It's all mystery. However, we can think about things, have feelings about our experiences, exercise our intuitions, and maybe even laugh at whatever is going on with us and this Universe. In such a way, if we're lucky, we can realize our natural allowance of "happiness," and our spirits can be healed, if we need it, a fair amount of the time.

BRANCH #1: MUSHROOM BEGINNING

MUSHROOM ON A LOG

In the spring of 1966, I was a mess. One day I felt so disgusted with myself that, just so my parents wouldn't have to look at me, or I, them, I walked into a swampy forest about half a mile from the farmhouse where I lived and simply sat on a fallen tree trunk. I didn't go home until sundown. The next two days, it was the same.

On the third day, however, my suffocating sense of shame dissipated

enough for me to notice a mushroom emerging from a log on the forest floor just a few feet in front of me. *This was the exact moment in my life when my benumbed mind and spirit began the awakening process I want to tell you about.*

That day, sitting on the log in the woods, I asked myself: Why was that mushroom growing on a log and not on the ground? I got down on my hands and knees and looked at the mushroom closely. Beneath its top, what were those thin partitions radiating outward from the stem? Was the mushroom poisonous? Could I eat it?

That night in my mother-bought M volume of *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia* for 1959 I looked up "mushroom." The mushroom's top was called a cap, and the partitions were gills. Reproductive spores fell from the gills, to be carried away by the wind. The mushroom itself was just a reproductive structure arising from a body of white, cobwebby hyphae growing inside the prostrate tree trunk, decomposing it.

The next day I went back and for a long time just looked at that mushroom, seeing it in a way I'd never seen anything else before.

In a way, you could say that over the next few days the mushroom and other inhabitants of the little woods drew me into a state of intense *enchantment* that has never ended. "Enchantment" both in the sense of being under a spell, and of experiencing great pleasure.

For over half a century now, many thousands of times I've reproduced the procedure just described, though in a more practiced manner, with natural things like birds, wildflowers and rocks. I'd identify something, look it up and learn all I could about it, then keep learning more and more about it as the years went on, and here's what always happened:

It always -- *always* -- made me feel better.

And back when my mushroom story took place, I desperately needed to feel better. My first year at the university had been rough. Because of poor grades, I'd qualified for probation the first semester. Moreover, I was a pimply, 340 pound (154kg) teenager burbling with hormones, too ashamed of my flabby body and too bashful ever to say hi to a girl. I'd come to college without knowing how to take good notes in class, and I didn't socialize, for I didn't know how to do that, either.

However, during all my troubles during upcoming years in college, I never forgot those experiences in the woods back home. Just remembering my mushroom days helped me deal with my inadequacies as a university student. In fact, I was thinking about the swamp back home when one day I walked into the college bookstore, just to have something to do.

One of the store's shelves offered books about meditation, with covers promising greater tranquility and general happiness. I bought a book, learned some simple meditation techniques -- sit quietly, close your eyes, watch your breath -- which actually made me feel better. My Nature studies back in the swamp had helped me more, but now I'd found a second path, one available when I couldn't go into the woods.

HOW NATURE STUDY IS MEDITATION

Eventually it occurred to me that Nature study itself is a genuine meditation. Meditation is defined as contemplating or reflecting, as opposed to simply noting something, or learning about it without digging into "what it all means."

Since any form of meditation, including what eventually I began thinking of as Nature-study meditation, requires real effort and intent, it's worthwhile looking at why meditation in general is worth the trouble. According to the Healthline.com website, here are some of the clinically confirmed health benefits granted by various forms of meditation:¹

Meditation...

- reduces stress
- reduces anxiety
- promotes emotional health
- enhances self-awareness
- may help overcome addictions.
- helps control pain
- can decrease blood pressure
- improves sleep
- lengthens attention span
- may reduce age-related memory loss
- can generate kindness

In terms of meditative Nature-study, the above-mentioned "lengthens attention span" is almost an understatement. Many times I've been so absorbed in watching ants capture a grasshopper, or maybe photographing the interior structure of a flower, that suddenly -- because I'd been holding my breath while focusing so intently on what was at hand -- I found myself gasping for air. Sometimes for days or weeks at a time I've worked on some particular mystery, such as determining which frog species was leaving a certain kind of gelatinous egg mass in a barnyard watering trough.

The above list mentions "generating kindness." I know exactly what is meant. The more you understand and experience the things of Nature, the more *empathy* you feel for them. Even a spider, if you get to know one, with



its perfect web, its daily and nightly routines, its nervousness shown if something big and possibly dangerous gets caught in the web, the unexpectedly pretty and artful colors and designs on the spider's cephalothorax, those eight eyes looking back at you when you get close... even spiders can be welcome neighbors you're glad to show kindness to by leaving them alone.

An important feature of any meditation is that it can be performed anywhere. That's especially true with Nature-study meditation, exactly because Nature, we'll see, *is* everywhere, because it's *everything* .

HERMIT DAYS

Meditative Nature-study, as part of the makes-you-happy process, nearly always makes a person more mellow, empathetic, and certainly more knowledgeable about the surrounding living world. If the process continues long enough, eventually the new you may feel somewhat at odds with the life you've been leading. You may feel like you need to *change* your way of living, so that you're more in harmony with the natural world you're starting to discover.

However, it's *hard* to change in substantial ways.

It's especially hard when living in a society very much at odds with your new knowledge and feelings. If you change much, often people think of you as disrespectful of traditional values, maybe of being deviant, of wanting to draw attention to yourself, or they just think you're crazy. In societies obsessed with earning money and keeping busy all the time, if you take the time to think, deeply experience and meditate -- even if you've worked hard to reach the point where you're ready to change -- you may be considered by many to be lazy and parasitic on everyone else. I know this from experience.

Let me tell you how I became a hermit.

After acquiring an MSc degree in Botany at the University of

Kentucky, first I became a park naturalist in Kentucky, then I did botanical work at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis. For the Botanical Garden I collected plants for taxonomic study in several tropical American countries. Everywhere I traveled I saw enormous environmental destruction. Then for many years I worked as a freelance writer, mostly publishing on Nature themes, visiting about forty countries in the process. I made just enough money with my magazine articles and books to keep doing what I was doing.

During that time I saw with my own eyes the sad state of the planetary biosphere. Studying the history and local manias of the places I visited, everywhere I learned confusing and troubling facts about human nature, behavior, and the inevitable consequences thereof. The world was in trouble -- the people, and life on Earth in general.

Early on I began wanting to disengage from the way things were going, and try to live in a way I thought of as appropriate. However, making such a big change was too hard for me. Years, decades, passed without my having the courage to make the appropriate big changes.

In the fall of 1996, my relationship with a lady in Belgium failed at the same time I learned that my mother was dying of cancer. Upon my mother's death, back in the US, I moved onto a large, historic plantation south of Natchez, Mississippi, which I'd visited years earlier while working on a magazine story. There, in early 1997, at age 49, I became a Nature-studying hermit.

I moved into the tiniest, most hangdog-looking, used trailer you can imagine, parked in seclusion in a piney forest. The years that followed turned out to be the beginning of the happiest, most creative and productive period of my life.



photo by Dr. Sigrid Liedt, Universität Bayreuth, Bavaria, Germany; June 6, 1999

I lived the Mississippi hermit life for about 7½ years. My trailer occupied a long-abandoned, semi-open spot where years earlier a house had collapsed leaving nothing but a rusting tin roof. However, electrical lines to the former building remained, and I got connected. In 2001 I ran a wire through the woods to a hunters' camp, tapped onto their phone line, and went online with a computer I'd put together from three or four broken-down ones.

During those early days of the general public having access to the Internet, I began creating websites, doing the HTML code one keystroke at a time. My first website offered free web pages to small ecotourism undertakings all over the world. This was before Facebook and other such services, so I got plenty of takers in many countries.

Though sometimes months passed without my speaking to a single person, on the Internet I was in daily contact with people in fascinating places all over the world, doing interesting things.

At that time my thoughts and feelings began blossoming in ways it had never even occurred to me that were possible. For example, I began conceiving of information flow from one node of human mentality to another -- with me as one node among a world of others -- as like energy flow in an ecosystem, from one species to another. Facts were sub-units of ideas and concepts, just like plants and animals were sub-units of Earth's forests and oceans, and I was one of those sub-unit animals in the Mississippi forest. Such insights had been impossible with my former mindsets.

But, before continuing, here's this:

During my Mississippi hermit days I began issuing a weekly "Naturalist Newsletter" mostly concerning the plants and animals around me, but also often carrying essays about my Nature-inspired thinking and feeling. Numerous of those essays are included in this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition* because they provide different perspectives about the particular subjects we'll be dealing with.

Different perspectives are needed because many ideas considered here are like a hard-to-see star: You look directly at it and it disappears, but you look a little to its side and your peripheral vision registers it, even though you can't focus on it directly.

Nature study teaches that there's a lot in life like that.

Here's a *Newsletter* suggesting one aspect of what life was like during those days. It was issued from my camp via a dial-up modem, and accompanied by a sonorous *Pshhhkkkkkk-rrrrkakingkakingkaking-tshchchchchchchcch-*ding*ding*ding*" gushing through wires running from my little trailer to the hunter's camp, and beyond and beyond and beyond... It's dated January 5th, 2003:

Cold Days at Peace

This has been a chilly week with several frosty mornings. With the plastic tarpaulin over my trailer, the windows plugged with Styrofoam boards, and blankets draped over the ill-fitting door, inside the trailer I remain comfortable, even cozy. With windows and door-cracks sealed, it's dark inside and feels like a small cave.

At night I remain toasty inside a good sleeping bag and during days the heat of my computer and my own body keep the trailer's small space warm enough. I wear several layers of clothing and often work at the keyboard in fingerless gloves. My main problem is that sometimes the oxygen runs low and I must let in fresh air. Then heat escapes like a frightened wren.

This entire last summer I never once turned on a fan (most days I wore clothing only for jogging and working in the garden), and I'm hoping to make it through this winter without once using the small electric space-heater kept for emergencies. Some years I've managed, others I've needed the heater, though never for more than a few minutes each day. This week last year we had a 14° (-10°C) morning and I was glad to have the heater then.

I used to keep quiet about my living style, especially about my insistence on not wasting energy. I know that most people who see how I live regard me as either despicably miserly or else mentally unstable. When our hunters meet me on the road some of them address me as if I were a child, or the village idiot. Though they can hear that I speak normally, they haven't the resources to interpret my appearance in any other way.

When I am in a regular US home and either the air conditioner or heat pump drones on and on, it weighs on me. I cannot but keep thinking of the vast environmental destruction caused in the name of my physical comfort. Land lost to coal mining, the production of greenhouse gases, radioactive wastes... all to produce energy to have me feel

cooler or warmer without needing to add or remove clothing.

When at night I turn off my energy-efficient computer and my little 40-watt, high-intensity reading lamp, not an electron flows in my trailer. While I sleep, no ecological violence is committed on behalf of my comfort, and maybe that's one reason I sleep so soundly and awaken so glad.

During my school years of formally studying biology, organisms around me had become what books and professors told me they were. I knew names of organisms by noting clusters of field-marks. Populations had distributions that were mappable. Species occupied specific ecological niches. Sometimes certain animal behaviors could be learned but most behavior was instinctual. However, in the Mississippi woods, my life merged with many lives in ways books and professors didn't tell me about.

To hint at what I mean, here's another *Newsletter* entry, this one dated June 13, 2004. By this time I'd moved to another spot in the woods, this location with a barn with an old cow stall which I used as an office:

That Wren

Just after dawn on Tuesday morning I realized that something was missing. For several days the Carolina Wrens had been carrying bugs to their second-hatched brood of the year. I'd grown accustomed to their perpetual flying in and out of the tool room across from my computer room in the barn. Tuesday morning all was quiet, so I knew that the nestlings had left their nest. In times past I've seen that once the nest is abandoned the whole family avoids me for a week or two.

However, in mid morning I heard a beseeching peep from inside the barn's garbage can. Inside was one of the nestlings barely keeping his head above the water pooled there after recent rains (leaky roof). I could imagine the whole sequence of events: One by one the nestlings had been coaxed to fly from their nest on the high shelf in

the tool room and this one had made it out of the room as far as the trashcan's rim, but he'd bungled his first landing, tipping into the can. Once his feathers were wet he couldn't fly out. The family had gone on without him.

I dried him off and set him on the barn's concrete floor outside my door where for a long time he just sat looking around. After an hour or so he began peeping and hopping about. Finally around noon one of the adults returned flying here and there and the classic Haiku by Kobayashi Issa came to mind:

*That wren--
Looking here, looking there.
You lose something?*

A plaintive peep, a sturdy reply, a flutter of wings upward, and within moments an open beak was plugged with a green grasshopper.

After a few more feedings both birds disappeared the way wrens are supposed to on the first day of fledgling.

As a hermit in Mississippi, for the first time in my life I felt that I had the time to think things out until I was satisfied that at that time I could go no further with the thought. Now I confronted emotional issues, made decisions about how to deal with them, and made the needed thinking and behavioral changes, if I could. And now I gave free reign to my curiosity, letting it guide me wherever it led. A big limitation in that life was that the days were far too short to deal with everything I wanted to. However, by dusk, I was always so pleasingly-tired that sleep was welcome.

And here's something important: All during those years, and all the years since, I don't believe I ever developed a single basic idea that I'd not briefly thought about before, or at least glimpsed an insight concerning the matter.

In fact, I believe that already as a teenager I intuited the general outlines of all the insights I now have, but which I didn't begin seriously paying attention to until the hermit days. Probably all us humans are the same way. All of us, I bet, when quite young, have moments of deep insight, but normally we ignore them, forget them, and lose them.

During my hermit days I consciously tried to remember and salvage those youthful insights. Once I'd retrieved one, I'd focus on it, examine what it was trying to say, and think about the implications.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry in which I was reviving and nurturing one such insight that had been riding around inside me since the 1960s. Eventually this insight would become an important cornerstone in my Nature-study-therapy, old-man philosophy. It's dated September 9, 2001:

Hypoglycemia & Spiders

I've been watching a Garden Spider lately. This has got me thinking about an experiment I read about long ago. Different chemicals were given 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.

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 quickly, things 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 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 realize that as I'd 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 by the fact 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.

Moreover, 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 more 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.

A few months after writing the above, one night some packrats

triggered further thoughts on the matter. The following *Newsletter* shows how during those days my Nature-inspired thoughts were building upon one another, just like biological evolution proceeds by causing new, more sophisticated species to arise from preexisting ones. The following is dated February 24, 2002:

Pickle Juice

Monday morning I awoke groggy and annoyed because the Eastern Woodrats introduced in the December 9 *Newsletter* had thumped and bumped all night beneath the trailer. This was unusual because the rats have done that 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.

Kathy 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, Kathy had set next to the garden gate a jar with pickle juice in it and I had used it.

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, you have to accept certain assumptions just to get through the day, even if you 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 on 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 man-made institutions.)

The other insight (having nothing to do with pickle juice) 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.

RELIGIOSITY VS. SPIRITUALITY

Above, I use the word "Creator" and refer to the Universe as a creation. Also, I make a distinction between religions and spirituality. It's true that my meditative Nature-studies *spontaneously* brought about in me a new focus on my spiritual state. Moreover, part of that new spiritual awareness was the insight that religiosity and Nature-

inspired spirituality are two very different matters.

For me, religions are systems of belief usually based on sacred texts, and which require adherents to believe certain points of dogma. Religions usually have a priesthood which conducts rituals and ceremonies in a communal context.

In contrast, Nature-inspired spirituality recognizes no sacred text other than Nature which, we've seen, is everything. Natural spirituality requires no particular dogmatic belief, no rituals or ceremonies, there are no priests, and -- here's the most critical difference -- instead of being a static belief system, natural spirituality evolves as an individual's experiences and insights grow and mature.

Admittedly, many great thinkers of modern times *don't* make this distinction, at least not publicly. Albert Einstein maintained that the strongest and noblest motive for scientific work was "...the cosmic religious feeling."²

Maybe Einstein avoided using the word "spiritual" because, in some circles, during his time and ours, the term has been associated with such practices as shamanism, astrology, healing with crystals, witchery, rebirthing, past life regressions, drumming, pyramid power, etc. The blog of *Psychology Today's* website currently includes an essay entitled "Why Do Spiritual People Seem So Flaky?"³

However, by qualifying his feeling as "cosmic," Einstein made clear that his context was the cosmos -- "cosmos" being the whole Universe -- not any structured, Earth-base, human-practiced religion. His "cosmic religious feeling" was inspired not by a prophet or sacred text, but by all-inclusive "Nature," Einstein's "cosmos."

If we're to think clearly about the spiritual content of meditative Nature study -- and the more one studies and experiences Nature, the more spirituality becomes important -- the more inclined we become to separate ourselves from any human religion.

The following *Newsletter* entry from February 8, 2004, issued from the hermit camp two years after the above pickle-juice essay was written, was written when I was still a bit touchy about certain features of the US Bible Belt culture:

Frog Eggs & Religions

One morning this week while listening to Public Radio I wandered over to the little pond beside the barn to check on the frog eggs. While admiring them and cogitating, the radio reported that officials in Georgia sought to remove the word "evolution" from that state's school curricula.

That juxtaposition of my frog-egg reverie with the news from Georgia cast me into a certain combative mood. How dare they seek to rob me of one of the most important words I use when cataloging the wonders I ascribe to the Creator. This news from Georgia got me to thinking this: Maybe now is as good a time as any to clearly and concisely explain why I am so anti-religious -- why I am a hardcore, dyed-in-the-wool PAGAN.

It is precisely because I regard all religions as artificial, unnecessary barriers between people and the higher states of spirituality to which they naturally aspire.

We look into the heavens, experience love, or contemplate frog eggs, and we become aware that something, somewhere, has created these marvelous things and circumstances, and that this Creator and the creation itself are worthy of reverence. Human spirituality begins like this and should continue through our lives in the same vein, perpetually growing and maturing. The highest calling of every community should be to nurture its citizens' quests for spirituality, to inspire them toward ever-more exquisite sensitivities and insights, and to encourage them to love, respect and protect that tiny part of the creation into which we all have been born.

Instead, religions divert the energies of our innate spirituality-seeking urges into the practicing of mindless ceremonies and rituals having little or nothing to do with the majesty and meanings of the Universe. Religions insist that we must disbelieve the evidences of our own minds and hearts, and submit to primitive scriptures interpreted and transmogrified by untold generations of clerics who, history reports, all too often have hustled to promote their own bureaucratic and political agendas, and continue to do so today.

In my opinion, anyone wishing to "get right with God" should begin with cleansing from his or her own life all traces of religion. And the first step in doing that is to get straight in one's mind what is religion (dogma in scriptures), what is spirituality (one's personal relationship with the Creator and the creation), and what is love (intense empathy and well-meaning). You do not need to believe in someone else's curious dogma in order to be spiritual, or to love your neighbor and do good works.

Finally, why is a diatribe like this appropriate for a naturalist's newsletter? It is appropriate because this *Newsletter* springs from my passion for all that is natural -- the Creator's Earthly creation. Natural things on our planet are now being destroyed at a rate greater than at any other time in the history of the human species. That destruction is being committed at an ever-increasing rate by human societies such as our own that are more and more rationalizing and excusing their excesses in terms of religious doctrine.

As this is being written in 2022, with an extra eighteen years behind me of meditative Nature-study since the above was issued, I no longer bear such strong feelings of resentment against Bible Belt culture. Still, today the points raised in the essay are more important to consider than ever, so the essay is staying in this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition* exactly as it is.

BRANCH #2: NATURE AS TEACHER

CAN NATURE TEACH?

This question is particularly important for us because the entire Nature-study therapy process is premised on the notion that it can, and does.

Therefore, to accept the teachings, first we must be clear that the entire proposition of "Nature as teacher" is acceptable.

The Nature-as-teacher concept came into my life slowly. Only after a few years of Nature-focused hermit life, when I was in my early 50s, did I find myself consistently thinking of Nature as a teacher. The following is a typical *Newsletter* entry from then, showing how the notion was starting to take root and help my thoughts get better organized. It's dated July 18, 2004, issued from the woods near Natchez, Mississippi:

Homosexuality in Nature

The other day one of my favorite local folks dropped by to share some of his delicious blueberries, and to chat for a bit. This time his remark that got me going was that I knew how progressive he was on matters BUT, when it came to gay marriages, he just couldn't take it, and surely Nature doesn't put up with things such as that.

I couldn't ignore my friend's assertion that Nature doesn't put up with such things as homosexuality.

For, 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. 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 bisexual flowers are on the same plants, sometimes flowers 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 lay in as many as four nests in a 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.

If you can use a search engine artfully, you can find technical academic papers detailing homosexual behaviors in a wide variety of primates, from langurs to orangutans to pit-tailed macaques.

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

In short, it's simply wrong to say that homosexual behavior is never natural.

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.

With regard to the morality of it all, I would say that at this time when so many young people desperately need love and care, and so many gay couples want to provide stable family structures for providing that love and care, the Bush doctrine of institutionalizing laws to prevent gay couples from enjoying the kind of legal and social support non-gay families already have, is immoral.

Moreover, since the Creator has made it so that among higher mammals homosexual behavior increases in populations under stress, and humanity right now, because of overpopulation and inequitable distribution of resources, is under enormous stress, 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.

IS THE NATURE-AS-TEACHER CONCEPT VALID?

A good beginning to answering that question is to see whether there are people internationally recognized for their intelligence and wisdom, who affirm that indeed Nature is an excellent teacher.

For example, **George Washington Carver** (1864?-1943) expressed it very nicely:

"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."

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) said:

"Look deep into Nature, and then you will understand everything better."

Thomas Berry (1914-2009) said:

"The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not objects to be exploited. Everything has its own voice. Thunder and lightning and stars and planets, flowers, birds, animals, trees, -- all these have voices, and they constitute a community of existence that is profoundly related."

Juvenal about 1900 years ago wrote:

"Never does Nature say one thing and wisdom another."

Rachel Carson (1907-1964) wrote:

"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"

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) believed:

"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."

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) wrote:

"I go to nature every day for inspiration in the day's work."

The Christian-Hebrew Bible, Job 12:7-10:

"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,"

Bernard of Clairvaux (St. Bernard) (c 1090–1153) wrote:

"Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters."

Isaac Newton (1643–1727) wrote:

"Nature is pleased with simplicity. And nature is no dummy."

And **William Wordsworth** (1770-1850) wrote it very succinctly:

"Let Nature be your teacher."

The following is a typical *Newsletter* was written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued from a ciber 8 kms to the west in Pujiltic, Chiapas, MÉXICO:

Happiness

Last Monday after issuing my Newsletter from Pujiltic and buying fruit at the market I was hiking up the dirt trail to 28 de Junio, the sunlight stinging and the heat heavy. A fellow stepped from a sliver of shade below a sugarcane wall, proposing to accompany me awhile just to chat.

He'd spent some time harvesting tomatoes in Florida so he knew a bit about the US and he came up with a thought I've often played with: That, relatively speaking, life is much harder here but somehow people here, on the average, seem happier than up there. To make his point he told me how delicious it'd be when he reached home in a few minutes and could sit beneath a shadetree with his shirt unbuttoned enjoying a few breezes and, since it was Easter Week, maybe he'd even splurge and split a beer with his brother-in-law.

"And some tortillas and some chili, ¡Chiiiiin-GA... !" he said with an ain't-life-wonderful tone of voice.

The fellow reminded me that with regard to the concept of "happiness" humans can be very elastic. It may be a good time to keep this in mind because, from what I hear on BBC Shortwave, economic conditions up North are squeezing many people who may have bought into the notion that "money + possessions = happiness."

Among some, a happiness crisis may be pending up there.

For my part, my own often-repeated formula for long-term "happiness," is: Try to live in harmony with the most obvious paradigms apparent in Nature.

My own take on "What Nature Teaches" boils down to these uncomplicated suggestions:

simplify

live frugally & don't waste

respect all parts of Earth's Web of Life

struggle to contribute more, feel more, to be alive

That's what I see plants and animals everywhere doing; those are basic principles for beautifully sustainable, evolving life and, therefore, happiness.

BUT, WHAT IS NATURE?

With so many smart and important people speaking of Nature as a fine teacher, surely there's something to the concept. Still, at the heart of the Nature-as-teacher concept, a certain issue needs to be cleared up. That is, just what *is* Nature?

Above, St. Bernard refers to "trees and stones," but when Einstein and Isaac Newton direct us to Nature's teachings one suspects that they're referring to something beyond that.

In the Google search engine if you type the keywords "define Nature" you're told that Nature is:

"the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations."

Probably this definition is accepted by most people, but in this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*, it is not. Fact is, the definition of Nature has been discussed and debated for a long time.

Freya Mathews, Environmental Philosopher at Australia's La Trobe University, refers to "a spectrum of meanings" for the word Nature. She says that in its broadest sense the term encompasses everything that falls under the laws of physics⁴, a definition that clearly includes humans. For Mathews, then, in stark contrast to Google's exclusion of "humans and human creations," people are part of Nature.

In their 2020 essay "What does 'Nature' mean?" Frédéric Ducarme and Denis Couvet write that "It appears that this word aggregated successively different and sometimes conflicting meanings throughout its history."⁵ Ducarme and Couvet divide Nature's many definitions into four main groupings. Curiously, the common notion that Nature is just butterflies, wildflowers, and such doesn't appear to fit any of those groupings. Nor does the belief of Baruch Spinoza, who back in the mid 1600s, writing in Latin, was the first *modern* philosopher to articulate an "all-inclusive" definition of "Nature," really meaning *all*.

Spinoza wrote that in all the Universe there is only one "Substance," which is absolutely infinite, self-caused, and eternal. In his Book IV of the *Ethics* he called that "Substance" *Deus sive Natura*, meaning "God or Nature." He said that while God/Nature has no thoughts or feelings, we "modifications" or "modes" can have them. Since we "modifications" are manifestations of "God or Nature," it seems that to Spinoza even thoughts and feelings are part of Nature.

And that's the definition that *feels* right in our meditative Nature-study context.

Furthermore, one reason to highlight the insight that "humans are part of Nature" is that it's clear that Freya Mathews was right on yet another point: The belief that humans are separate from Nature normally is accompanied by the belief that we humans have moral

dominion over Nature. And today that belief is proving catastrophically wrongheaded on a planetary scale.

This is from the *Newsletter* of November 1, 2005 written at Hacienda San Juan Lizarraga one km east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatan, MEXICO:

Putting a Price on Nature

The other day, for an online magazine in Holland, I wrote an essay on how -- if we are to save Life on Earth -- we humans must awaken from our hypnotic trances, begin seeing things clearly, and change our behaviors. Dirk Damsma, a professional economist at the University of Amsterdam, wrote saying that he agreed, and asked me what I thought about protecting nature by putting a price on it.

"... as soon as nature can be priced, protecting it can become profitable," he suggested. Here was my reply:

I disagree with your idea that placing a price on nature is the best way to protect it.

The workings of market forces seldom live up to the promise of their theoretical underpinning, supply and demand. Market prices are much distorted by such things as subsidies, sales taxes, embargos and the rapacious, self-serving behavior of very rich and powerful people and organizations. There is no reason to believe that if we apply market principles to nature the things of nature will ever be designated as having prices even approaching their real values.

For, with nature the stakes are higher than with the things market principles are concerned with. A manufactured cog can be stored, reused, sold at discounts, etc., but once a species goes extinct, millions of years of evolutionary wisdom are simply lost, never to be reclaimed. When a rainforest is destroyed, a rainforest does not grow back. The destruction of a rainforest changes soil and microclimate

conditions so drastically that what grow back are weeds, not rainforest.

You might say that I need to be realistic, that I need to compromise just a little and accept practices real people in the "real world" can handle.

I say that the "real world" of Western-style commerce as it has become with neoconservative globalization is so perverse, so self-serving and so void of all feeling for average people and other living things that there is nothing realistic about it. Just look at the price Americans must pay for their medicines.

Awakening from the trance we are in must be a holistic experience. Putting a price on the components of nature would be no more than a gimmick that would perpetuate the false notion that nature is composed of discrete, independent parts. Also, it would perpetuate the lie that we can spend ourselves out of trouble without needing to change our own behaviors and our ways of seeing the world around us.

On a spiritual level, it would be just as insulting to the Creative Force of the Universe for the things of nature to wear price tags than it would be to place a monetary value on a mother's love for her child, or the way you feel when you "go home," or when you gaze into the starry sky at night.

IDENTIFYING NATURE'S TEACHINGS

Accepting the concept of "Nature as teacher" does not imply that if we see a snake capture and swallow a frog, we humans should be carnivores. Acceptance of the concept *does* imply this: If you befriend a certain animal, maybe a canary in a cage, and begin noticing that your canary has moods and idiosyncrasies, that maybe the bird is smarter or dumber than other canaries you've known, that maybe the canary shows some affection for you, and if as you gain this familiarity

you begin feeling empathetic toward this canary... maybe you should honor your impulse to be kind to and protective of that canary.

Moreover, when you think about it, since your canary's personality probably is similar to that of other bird-brained animals, such as the Earth's 30 billion or so chickens, maybe for the same reasons you wouldn't kill and eat your canary you shouldn't kill and eat chickens, or pay others to kill them so you can eat them. In fact, since pigs, cows and other animals may display even more emotions and forms of mentality than your canary, maybe you should be a vegetarian...

In other words, Nature's teachings may be interpreted in different ways. But, how? The answer is, instead of blindly accepting received ideas and practices from your society, to identify Nature's teachings, *you must consult your own clarified thoughts and feelings.*

Happiness and therapy are achieved by unrelentingly refining our own thoughts and feelings until we have confidence in them. Then we should modify our behavior to harmonize with our new insights and sensibilities. It's an evolutionary process; it's never ending personal growth and maturation.

This is from the *Newsletter* of October 31, 2010 issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruins in Yucatán, Mexico:

Wendell Berry & the Maya

Eric in New York sent an essay by Wendell Berry, a much respected professor, writer and farmer in Kentucky. In the essay Berry describes his agrarian economic perspective this way.

"I would put nature first, the economies of land use second, the manufacturing economy third, and the consumer economy fourth.

You can see the wisdom in this. Since all things humans need derive from Nature, Nature's welfare should be humanity's first concern. More than anything, manufacturing and consumption should reflect

what Nature sustainably can provide. Moreover, some resources, such as clean water and rich agricultural soil, should be protected as priceless.

Today's dominant economies practice exactly the opposite of this wisdom. Today Nature is destroyed by economies geared to provide what people want, not what they necessarily need, and everything has a price. And often that price is way out of line with the resource's actual value.

Wendell Berry states his wisdom clearly and artfully, like many others, yet this wisdom goes unused. For every person enlightened and changed by lucid thought, ten thousand others just want more, more, more.

Can anything be done to cause the generous, life-saving messages of Wendell Berry and others to take root in today's world?

Most of my life I haven't thought so. However, living among the Maya, now I'm starting to wonder. The reason is that every day I see how a "basic assumption about life" profoundly affects everyday behavior.

For example, Maya society is rooted in a basic assumption about proper human interactions that is completely different from what motivates us Northerners. To the Maya, nothing is more important than solidarity with family, friends and community. We Northerners say we believe in those things, but you know how we let our families split up, or friends drift away, and our communities decay as individually we work very hard for money and status, or at least for conformity with those around us.

So, is it possible that one or more changes in basic assumptions about how humans should interact could cause the philosophies of Wendell Berry and the Maya to become more attractive to humanity in general? Could such a paradigm shift save Life on Earth?

Maybe. Such changes in basic assumptions occur all the time. For example, the belief system of the old farmers I knew in rural/small-town Kentucky back in the 1950s was more like today's Mayas' than that of today's rural Kentuckians. During my 63 years of living I've witnessed a profound cultural paradigm shift take place in rural/small-town Kentucky. I think that the messages of TV mainly caused it. Maybe heightened awareness arising from the Internet will engender the next big change.

If such a profound change happened once, maybe it can happen again. And maybe this time the change will trend toward the wisdom of Wendell Berry and the Maya, not against.

NATURE'S TEACHINGS & ETHICAL LIVING

We're "ethical" when we conduct our lives in accordance with moral principles. "Moral principles" are guidelines to live by. However, moral principles are not fixed; they may change over time, and according to context.

Notice that the *whole concept of ethical living is relevant only in a community context*. If only one human lived on Earth, that human would do what he or she wanted or had to do, and the whole matter of ethical living would never come up. When we consider ethical living, by definition we're thinking about people's relationships with one another and to their communities.

In the past, ethical living basically meant doing what was generally approved by those around them. Nowadays the matter is much more complex.

For example, one person may feel "ethically obligated" to work hard for a church project to build new houses for homeless people. Another person may feel "ethically obligated" to oppose the building of new houses and urge instead the repair of old homes to be offered the needy. Repairing instead of building something new would save wood,

thus conserve trees needed by the "greater community" of Life on Earth.

In other words, to live ethically, thinking people need to recognize the various communities they belong to, to consider what the "approved behavior" is for each community, and to recognize that their membership in some communities requires more devotion and sacrifice than for others. For meditating students of Nature, Nature offers Her own insights into "ethical living":

Nature's teachings follow the logic of long-term sustainability of communities. Simple rational thought derives from that message that the welfare of the greater community takes precedence over those within it, and of individuals.

Nature manifests this wisdom at many levels, but nowhere is it expressed more clearly than in the manner by which biological evolution proceeds. Life on Earth evolves through the accumulation of changes of the genetic code at the *species* level, not that of the individual organism.

Genetic mutations and random low-level changes in the genetic code do occur in individuals, but they're not preserved over many generations unless they encourage the long-term survival of the *species*. If the mutation makes the individual less adapted to environmental conditions, the individual has a greater chance of dying early, thus is less likely to contribute genes to the species' gene pool. But if the mutation improves adaptation, it's more likely to be incorporated into the species' gene pool, and the species evolves in a more sustainable manner.

The following *Newsletter* entry dated July 19, 2009 was issued from the Siskiyou Mountains west of Grants Pass, Oregon, as my thoughts about Nature-informed ethical living finally were taking form:

Ethical Living

You don't need to be religious to benefit from having a firm foundation for ethical living. The most eloquent, authoritative and promising of all institutions capable of informing us on ethical living is Nature.

Nature's authority for teaching us ethical living lies in this fact: As a piece of music reflects the general mood, thinking and creative method of the composer, Nature reveals the basic impulses of the Universal Creative Force. In religious terms, Nature shows us "the Will of God."

Nature is highly structured. A system of ethics can be interpreted from that structure.

For example, Nature is structured so that resources are recycled; things are not wasted. These facts amount to an ethical teaching. Nature says: It is good to recycle; it is bad to waste resources.

Nature's elaborate structure further reveals the Universal Creative Force's passion for diversity. Thus a second of Nature's teachings is that humans must cherish and hold as sacred the diverse forms and manners of being of living things.

Nature on Earth grows ever more complex as time passes. Species continually evolve toward higher, more sophisticated, more sensitive and more informed states. From that I learn a third teaching: that also I must constantly reassess who and what I am, and change myself to accommodate new information and new insights.

These are three of Nature's most obvious teachings. If we were to think hard we could come with many more teachings and develop a body of "sacred literature" as impressive and much more appropriate than any gilded Bible, Koran or Torah.

However, in humanity's current early stage of evolution during which most of our behavior still is rooted in genetic programming -- matters of sex, territory and status -- embracing just the three teachings listed above make a good start.

Just those "Three Commandments" provide a sound basis for anyone who wishes to live ethically on a small, fragile Earth.

BRANCH #3: HOW TO STUDY NATURE

WHY BOTHER?

It takes effort and self discipline to meditatively study Nature. Our "being happy" and "getting therapy" reasons for studying Nature may sound too theoretical and doubtful to some, so here are more reasons in case you need them:

- **The feel-good reason:** It simply feels good to be outside snooping around, moving here and there, keeping your eyes and ears open, looking for new things while trying to understand old things, as the Sun shines, the wind blows, birds sing, butterflies flit, mushrooms emerge, bugs scamper...
- **The brain-food reason:** Any scientist or serious student can tell you that once you begin studying Nature it really is true that "the more you know, the more you realize how little you know." Your curiosity leads you on and on. Anyone who seriously gets into Nature will never, never be bored.
- **The "it's-beautiful" reason:** It's a blast to see the different ways sunlight filters through bright leaves in fall, to discover intricate patterns of venation in the wings of tiny insects, to thrust your mind deep into the dynamics of ecological systems, and finally to see yourself as part of a gorgeous Universe.

- **The "get-a-philosophy" reason:** Once you realize that Nature is so complex, huge and beautiful, you can't avoid wondering what it all means. Why are we humans placed amid all this, and what are we supposed to do about it? Plenty of answers are available, all worthy of consideration, and that process of consideration is called "philosophy."
- **The "understanding-the-Creator's-plan" reason:** Some people believe that all that's going on in the Universe must be part of some kind of plan, and that we humans have a part to play in it. The "Nature as Bible" concept provides clues. Moreover, Nature's suggestions don't sound bad at all. Are not the lessons of recycling, of preserving clean air and water, of sharing the ecosystem with other living things, of the individual's responsibility to the broader community, etc. not worthy teachings?
- **The "doing-what's-right" reason:** It's clear that the current pollution of the oceans and the air we breathe, of cutting forests, destroying the soil, causing the extinction of species, etc., will result in disaster for all of us. What is to be done to turn things around? Nature has millions of years of experience with sustainable patterns of living, and shows us how to survive, if we heed Her, if we "do what's right."
- **The survivalism reason:** If you believe that for some reason the infrastructure supplying you with food and drinkable water may eventually break down, it makes sense to know enough about Nature's ways to be able to grow, prepare and store your own food, and to secure your water supply. To garden effectively, you need a general idea of what soil is and how it functions, how to germinate seeds and protect plants from an enormous range of insects, diseases and nutrient deficiencies. Learning all that is Nature study.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry from January 28, 2006, issued from near Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán, Mexico:

On the Joy of Studying Flower Anatomy



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 come from.

It's enormously gratifying to see Vladimir getting hooked on the experience, and learning his lessons fast. However, "learning" isn't the main purpose for the exercise. To me, the process itself is what's important. Two people are sitting awhile on a pleasant morning filling

their minds and spirits with the stuff of flower anatomy.

Part of why doing this is important is that Nature study in general is therapeutic and soul nourishing. We're immersing our psyches in the mystery of a mustard flower's curious four long stamens and two short ones, and the richly brown basal cross-markings of the outer, obovate perianth segments of the white-flowered *Neomarica*. And just imagine how a day's 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. 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 what often are self-centered, 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 interdependence 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 replies, "Sure, that's nice, but this is real life, bills have to be paid and work must be done..

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 biosphere, and often what we do is 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.

THREE STEPS FOR LEARNING ABOUT NATURE

Now to the nitty-gritty of actually studying Nature. And keep in mind that meditative Nature study includes what's in your backyard, if you have one, as well as weeds in local abandoned lots and sidewalk cracks, park pigeons, clouds, gravel...

Our meditative Nature studies involve a three-step process, each step undertaken with a focused and open mind, a mind especially alert to connections between what we're paying attention to and everything else, a mind sharply focused on what's being done, seen, thought, felt and intuited, all the time.

STEP 1: Identify something.

STEP 2: Find out what's interesting about the thing identified by looking up the name in a book or on the Internet.

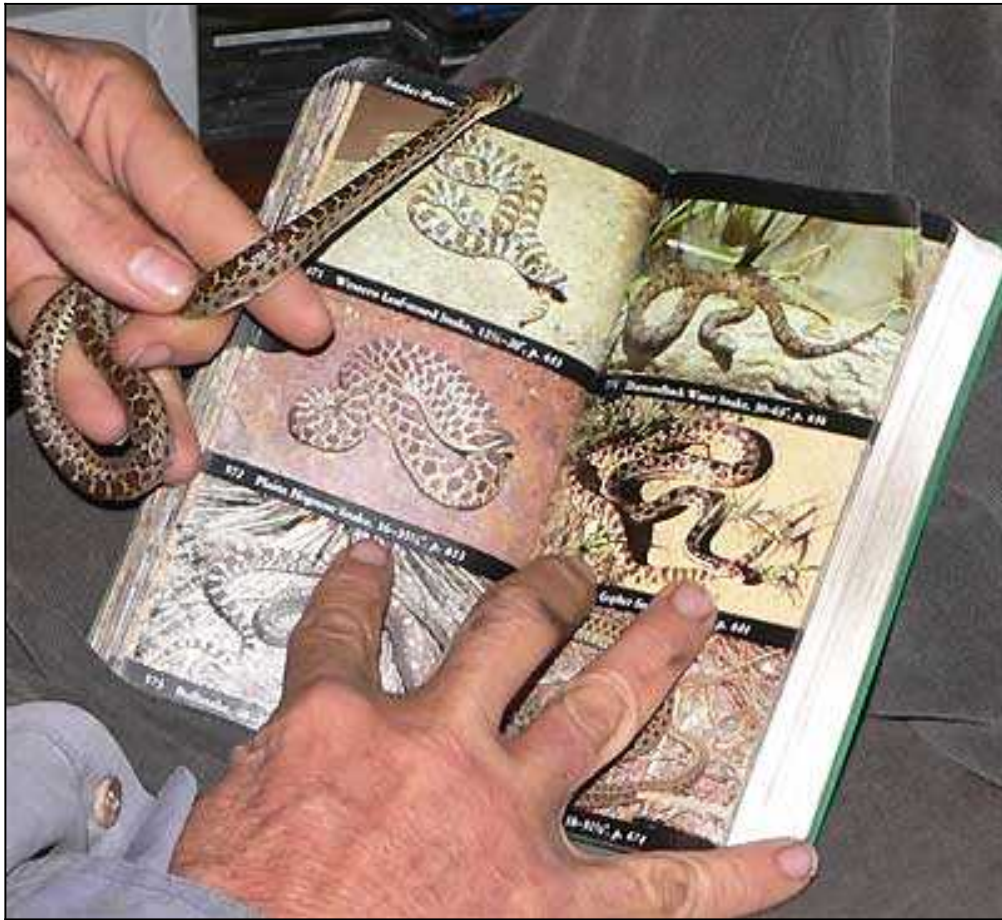
STEP 3: Over the years keep gathering information and Nature-study experiences. Organize the information and take notes or make drawings or photographs to remind yourself of the good experiences, maybe in your personal Nature Notebook. The Notebook can be the regular type, or maybe kept on your computer or somewhere on the Internet, maybe someplace where you can share it with others, like a social media platform, but be sure to back up your work so it isn't lost or removed. Remember that anything stored "in the cloud" is just stored on someone else's computer, which is risky.

Our approach to studying Nature begins with identifying something.

However, getting the name of something, if you don't have someone beside you telling you -- which bypasses part of our meditative process -- can be a challenge.

However, it's also *fun*. Maybe it's because of the hunter-gatherer instinct we've all inherited from our ancient ancestors. Instead of catching a fish or digging up a particularly big, tasty tuber, our quarry is the name, and that quarry is every bit as challenging to "catch" as a wary rabbit.

Many people already have learned the pleasures of redirecting their hunter-gatherer instinct onto the Nature-study path, so there's plenty of identification-helping infrastructure to help you. Here are three of the most important "Nature study tools" helping us in the hunting and gathering of names of natural things:



- **Field Guides:** You have a snake you want to identify, you open a special kind of book called a **field guide** -- like the one shown above -- and you match your snake's features with images and information in the book. Basically you thumb through logically organized drawings or pictures until you see something matching your unknown organism. (The snake above is the Pacific Gopher Snake, illustrated in the middle of the page on the right.) Most good book stores sell field guides and on the Internet if you search on such keywords as "field guide snakes," you'll be amazed how many snake field guides are available for so many places. You may want to do a more limited search, such as "field guide snakes Ohio."
- **Identification Keys:** If you're identifying something with many look-alike relatives, such as most grasses and beetles, often the

picture-matching approach just won't do. A more technical method is needed, one obliging us to notice obscure features such as the number of tarsi (segments) on an insect leg's lower part. We need to use identification keys. Using a key, if your unknown tree bears one leaf per node, you go to section B. If it bears two or more leaves per node, go to section BB. Then more choices lead you on and on, until you come to a name. Keys on the Internet may be interactive. As you type in information such as flower color, number of stamens, fruit type, etc., the number of possible identities decreases until you're left with just one, and that's what you want... if you've submitted correct information and are using a good key. On the Internet, search with keywords such as "key out ferns California."

- **Internet Image-Searches:** Certain Internet search engines enable us to find images of identified organisms similar to our unidentified ones. For example, when an image-search is made on the keywords "bird Texas red black," hundreds of thumbnail photos pop up from many websites showing bird species found in Texas that primarily are red and black, such as Red-winged Blackbirds, Scarlet Tanagers, and Vermilion Flycatchers. Only one species perfectly matches the bird being identified, though. For image searches to be effective the key words searched on must be chosen wisely. Without specifying Texas, red and black birds from all over the globe would have appeared, making it harder to find the one being looked for. The process is less effective for identifying insects and other such big groups with many look-alike species, though if you know the general kind of organism, or even its family or genus, you can narrow the search by typing something like "long-horned grasshoppers Nebraska."

Once you've identified something, then there's a whole world of books and great websites offering all kinds of information about the species. But *acquiring the name is the necessary first step.*

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated April 1, 2006, written at Hacienda San

Juan Lizárraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán, México:

"Like Seeing Things for the First Time"

Speaking of my Natchez friend Karen, this week she applied for the Bronze Level of our Worm-eaten Leaf Award, for which she qualified by submitting a list of at least 33 plants and animals she had identified in her own neighborhood.

I'm gratified that Karen writes that when she was obliged to scrutinize organisms closely enough to identify them it was "like seeing things for the first time." She was amazed that not only are so many details of organisms interesting, mysterious and beautiful, but also that such details exist in the first place. How many of us have really looked closely at the elaborate venation in a mosquito's wing, or the precise manner by which a stamen's anther opens to release its pollen? Identifying organisms causes us to focus on such details, and we are enriched and enlarged in the process.

Karen remarked that probably people going through the identification process for the first time like she is actually get more of a kick from what they see than experts who deal with these things daily. I agree that usually that's the way it happens, but I think it's important to know that there are very satisfying levels of appreciation beyond that of the first-time acquaintance.

In fact, Nature study is like paying attention to music, in that there are different levels of appreciation, and that ever more refinement is needed to accomplish those levels. Moreover, each level of appreciation can be as intense and pleasurable as any other.

For example, any child can enjoy music with a hot beat and titillating lyrics, and the great masses of people don't grow beyond that stage, asking no more of the world of music. Yet, some individuals who have inherited fine sensibilities, or who have worked hard to sharpen their

senses, can enjoy subtle tonal modulations, the interplay of subsidiary melodies, artful variations on themes, etc. Yet another level of music appreciation becomes available when one can visualize the history of music and thus recognize how any particular piece of music relates to that evolutionary history.

In a similar way, the first steps into Nature study can be pleasurable to anyone able to enjoy splashes of color and intricate designs in unexpected places. Yet, as with music, higher levels of appreciation exist.

Analogous to music's tonal modulations, subsidiary melodies and variations on themes, are nature's mosaic of interdependent ecosystems, the species living in those ecosystems, and the manner by which all living things are related. A Hairy Woodpecker and a Downy Woodpecker are variations on a woodpecker theme. The forest in which they live is a symphony. Nature itself, like inspired music, is the Creator's actual blossoming.

Life on Earth has a history just as music has, and what an insight to see birds as little more than small, feathered dinosaurs. What a kick to one's notion of what it means to be human when we finally see the significance of the fact that human embryos while developing inside the mother's womb have gill slits like our fish ancestors and we later possess a tail.

There's a level of appreciation beyond even these, available to both music and nature lovers -- in fact, to lovers of all kinds. That pleasure becomes available when at last we realize that music, Nature and everything else in the Universe are one thing, the Universal Creative Force knowing Herself.

There's an even more exquisite pleasure available to those who consciously struggle to assist the Universal Creative Force to know Herself by being as sensitive to the rest of the creation as possible. It can be like being a tone in a fugue fully aware that it is a tone, and

that it is needed where it is, as it is, as part of that full symphony.

SEEING SMALL, SEEING FAR AWAY

When I began studying Nature seriously, soon it became clear that until then I'd ignored most of the world around me. I'd been focusing almost entirely on the narrow world of human scale -- things I bumped into, held in the hand, etc.

To see features of Nature smaller than my scale, I needed a magnifying glass. The most commonly encountered magnifying glasses look like big, transparent lollipops. They're nice, but I much prefer a smaller, more powerful kind consisting of two stacked lenses which fold into a handle, like the one at the right. This special kind of magnifying glass is called a **hand lens** or **jewelers loupe**. Sometimes hand lenses can be pricey but if you look around you may find inexpensive ones. In a store's toy section you might find adequate ones, maybe even as part of a detective kit, in which case you also end up with a false mustache and shiny badge.



For seeing far-away things, you need a pair of **binoculars**. Many kinds of binoculars exist, and the most powerful ones usually aren't the best for our purposes. When you bring a high-powered pair of binoculars to your eyes, it can be hard to point them exactly right to see what you're looking for.

Binoculars are rated by numbers such as 7 x 35, or 8 x 40. The number on the left of the x is the magnification. Therefore, a pair of 7 x 35 binoculars magnifies 7 times. The number at the right of the x gives the diameter of the binocular's largest, or outside, lenses -- the objective lenses. 7 x 35 binoculars have objective lenses 35mm across. The greater the objective, the more light is let in (which is

good), but the heavier they are (which is bad).

Everyone has his or her own preferences, but in my experience average users wanting good magnification, clear images, but not something too heavy to carry all day in the field, might choose something like 7 x 35 or 8 x 40.

When you first start using binoculars sometimes it's hard to find what's being looked for. That problem vanishes as you gain more experience, and there are tricks to keep in mind. When something comes along you want to see better, like a bird in a bush, bring the binoculars up to your eyes as you keep staring at the thing. Just slide the binoculars between your eyes and the target. Hold them securely with both hands and pay attention to whether the binoculars seem to be pointing where they should. If you can, have your feet firmly planted on level ground and somewhat spread apart. Keep your elbows close to your chest.

In the field, it's a good idea to keep a **digital camera** handy. Even cameras on some phones often do a good job. However, remember this: In my own Nature-study photography, maybe 80% of my pictures are close-ups -- really close. Such pictures are sometimes called **macro photos**. Things get interesting when you start paying attention to how stamens cluster inside flower blossoms, and most flowers are smallish to begin with. Faces of spiders are amazing, and important in identification. If you photograph an insect which later will need to be identified, remember that the structure of tiny legs and mouth parts can be crucial in insect identification. On snakes, scale pattern on the head is important. When you photograph in Nature, think "close up"! You might want to test your camera/phone for macro-photography before you buy it.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated March 2, 2014, issued from the valley of the Dry Frio River in northern Uvalde County, southwestern Texas, USA:

Focusing Down

Nowadays animals and flowering plants doing interesting things are relatively hard to come by here, not only because it's winter but because of the drought. The landscape is brown and dusty, tall grass in fields and along roads has faded gray and bear no flowers or grains, and their blades are brittle and tattered.

So, instead of wildflowers we look at lichens and algae. Instead of mammals and birds, it's insects and snails. This is worth thinking about.

For, it's easy enough just to accept winter's monotony and grayness, while a certain mental switch is needed to go from scanning fields with binoculars to surveying rock surfaces with a magnifying glass. A certain mindset must be cultivated before you can thrill to graceful pirouettes of a paramecium in a drop of water, when swallows aren't available in the sky.

For me, two main reasons make these efforts to change perspective worthwhile. First, it's just fun to discover all these unusual and otherwise gorgeous and mind-boggling living things around me, which I've overlooked until now.

Second, on a spiritual level, it's comforting to see that the Universal Creative Impulse devotes exactly as much energy and art arranging details of the microscopic world as She does with what we see every day in macroscopic forests and fields. This supports the idea that the entire Universe is exquisitely ordered at every level as She evolves, like an opening blossom. And part of that blossoming is us humans, snugly inside everything, able to look around and think and feel, if we make the effort.

Of course there's the same message -- in some ways maybe even more vividly expressed -- when we shift our minds to "focus up," to behold the details of the unknowably vast and complex Universe

beyond Earth.

Everywhere, everywhere, there's attention to detail, everything working smoothly, everything just as it should be, gradually evolving toward... what?

THE NAMES OF THINGS

So, yes, the most powerful "tools" for studying Nature are mental -- which means that they're absolutely free for everyone, and all you have to do to use them is to be conscious of their availability, and to take advantage of them. One of the most important mental tools for us consists of the *names* of the organisms we meet.

Here's an example of using the name-tool:

You identify a wildflower called Jack-in-the-Pulpit, *Arisaema triphyllum*. The identification process already has caused you to examine the species' strange flower arrangement consisting of tiny, unisexual blossoms closely packed on a slender, vertical, finger-like, spadix-type flower cluster, the "Jack," surrounded and overtopped by a leafy spathe, the "pulpit." You've also noted the plant's solitary, three-parted leaf, distinguishing the wildflower from other North American members of the Arum Family, the Araceae.

So now you *look up Jack-in-the-Pulpit's name*. You find that another common name for the plant is Indian Turnip, and that it's small, potato-like corms are edible when cooked or sliced and dried -- but that they contain calcium oxalate crystals which cause awful pain if you try to eat the corm raw. Traditionally, indigenous Americans used the root medicinally for various ailments. And you read about the species' distribution, its use as a garden plant, and much more. The more you search for information on the name, the more you learn, and the more Jack-in-the-Pulpit wildflowers become part of you. They mingle with your experiences with the lush, cool and shadowy, musty-smelling, springtime forests with birds calling, where Jack-in-the-

Pulpits grow. What started with looking up a name changes you in some small way, further sensitizes you, refines you.

All that being said, the names of things can be a bit tricky. But, that's OK, since figuring them out and using them expertly is *fun*.

First of all, some names are more slippery than others. When a North American birder says, "Hey, an Evening Grosbeak came to my feeder yesterday," everyone knows which bird species is being talked about because the English names of North American birds have become fairly standardized in numerous field guides. It's almost the same with North American trees, wildflowers, ferns, snakes, frogs and lizards, though sometimes one species will go by two or more English names. A few mushroom species have settled English names, but most don't. Relatively few mosses, algae, or invertebrates such as insects and spiders have firmly established English names.

When looking for information about a particular species, unless it's for a bird, usually you'll have the best luck if you search on the species' technical or scientific name, sometimes called the Latin name, most correctly referred to as the **binomial**. I'm typing these words beneath a big *Quercus fusiformis*, commonly known as the Texas Live Oak. Do a search on *Quercus fusiformis* and you'll see exactly the species of tree I'm beneath (also that the species sometimes is known as the Escarpment Live Oak).

However, even binomials -- scientific names -- can mess you up. For example, some experts consider the *Quercus fusiformis* above me to be a mere variety of the Southern Live Oak typical of the US Deep South. Those sources refer to the tree above me as *Quercus virginiana* var. *fusiformis*. Moreover, when they write it out fully, it's "*Quercus virginiana* Miller var. *fusiformis* (Small) Sargent." The other parts of the name, not italicized, are names of experts who published and/or later altered the binomial name. Technically, the experts' names are useful and required, but in discussions like ours they mostly encumber us.

Nowadays binomials are trickier than ever because the genes of so many species are being "sequenced." Often the genes indicate that past guesses as to how things were related to one another were wrong, sometimes very wrong, with species not even being assigned to the right genus or family.

In the name *Quercus fusiformis*, the genus name is *Quercus* and the species name is *fusiformis*. You understand the significance of that when you know that all the world's 600 or so species of oak belong to the genus *Quercus*. Similarly, all the 160 or so of the Earth's maple species belong to the genus *Acer*. Humans belong to the genus *Homo*, as in *Homo sapiens*. If earlier a tree was erroneously considered to be an oak, and was assigned to the genus *Quercus*, the first part of its name must be changed, and that's really frustrating to anyone who learned the "old name." This happens fairly regularly and it's just a problem we have to deal with. Even so, when we want to be absolutely sure about our identifications, binomials are much more useful than common English names.

On one of my backyard Nature website pages about names, I provide the following story, showing one way the names of things can help us better see and appreciate the world around us.

A Birding Trip to South Africa

Let's say that you're a North American and one day you're able to visit South Africa, and you've become very interested in birds. You pack your binoculars and a notebook, fly to Johannesburg, buy a field guide to South African birds, take a bus into the hinterland, and bright and early one morning begin listing every bird you can identify.

As you begin listing, you may surprise yourself by already recognizing a few species, for South Africa's towns are full of House Sparrows and European Starlings, just like American ones, plus, out in the country there are other familiar species such as Barn Owls, Pintail ducks and Cattle Egrets. The vast majority of South Africa's birds, however, will

be new to you.

Some of these new bird species will strike you as amazingly familiar, even though you're sure you've never seen those exact species before. You'll see, for example, birds that you know beyond all doubt belong to the woodpecker family (chisel-like beaks, stiff tail feathers, feet with two toes forward and two facing backwards), but they will belong to entirely different genera.

Maybe you'll see South Africa's Olive Thrush or Groundscraper Thrush, which will remind you in many ways of the American Robin, which is a kind of thrush. In fact, not only do these species belong to the same family as American Robins, they are members of the same genus. They are just different species.

And then there will be species that simply throw you for a loop. You'll surely see bee-eaters, which are rainbow colored as if painted by children using all the brighter crayons. Your field guide will tell you that bee-eaters are in the same order as kingfishers, though in a family not occurring in North America. Kingfishers? You look at those bee-eaters for a while, see that their flight is a little stiff and direct like the kingfishers', their calls are loud and simple like the kingfishers', and kingfishers can have some pretty colors, too, and their beaks certainly look kingfisher-like...

Finally, if you visit the right spots in South Africa, you'll see Ostriches and Jackass Penguins, representing two orders not represented by even a single species in North America. Adding whole new orders to one's Life List is a very big event in any birder's life.

A big event, that is, if you know what a bird order is. It's the same with the concepts of family, genus, and species. If you don't understand about orders, families, genera and species, you'll miss some of the most important insights to be gained whenever you meet a new species.

Of course, these reasons for dealing with names and classification are as valid in our own backyards as in any foreign country. If you've gravitated to butterflies, for instance, and your Life List now includes sightings in all the major families -- the swallowtails, the milkweed butterflies, the brush-footed butterflies, etc. -- then one fine day suddenly you spot a Yucca Giant Skipper of the Giant Skipper Family, and you've never seen any of the giant skippers, what a blast seeing the features peculiar to that family!

But, it'll only be a blast if you know the name of what you've seen, and if you know exactly how this species fits in with everything else -- its **classification**.

Finally, if you are ever to speak intelligently about why biological diversity is important on our planet and in your own neighborhood, names and classification will be very important tools for you.

To give you a feeling for how these groupings relate to one another, here's a simplified analysis of how they apply to the animal called the human being:

kingdom: animal

phylum: chordate (with a notochord, like vertebrates)

class: mammal (with hair, female produces milk)

order: primate (apes and monkeys)

family: Hominidae (great apes)

genus: Homo (including extinct species)

species: sapiens

You see, at every step down the classification ladder, the thing that we are is narrowed down. At first we're just animals. Then the phylum grouping separates us from all animals not producing a notochord at least during early stages of development (all vertebrate animals have notochords, but sponges, insects, worms and much more don't). On down the ladder we go until we land at the species level, and at that point we know that we're just talking about one kind of animal, and

that animal is *us*

THE PHYLOGENETIC TREE OF LIFE

Another mental tool to keep in mind is the Phylogenetic Tree of Life. Here's an introduction to it.

The above step-by-step classification of human animals, *Homo sapiens*, is a very streamlined version of how things really are. For example, it begins by going from the animal kingdom to the chordate phylum, but that doesn't mention about 21 other phyla, such as the sponge phylum, the flatworm phylum, and the rotifer phylum. Even starting with the animal kingdom, we leave out the plant kingdom, the kingdom of fungi, eubacteria, and more. Often it's said that six kingdoms are recognized, but in fact there's debate about the number, plus certain organisms don't seem to belong to any of those, and to top it all off there's debate about whether certain entities such as viruses are actually alive. Maybe they're just very complex molecules.

The **Tree of Life concept** tries to include all the subdivisions, and show how during evolution one kind of thing gave rise to two or more new things. The Tree of Life actually is more like an enormous bush branching from the base, with certain branches rooted in obscurity.

For meditative Nature Study, it's not really necessary to master either the classification system or the branching Tree of Life based on it. However, at least keeping these concepts in mind, and sometimes relating your finds to them, adds a whole other dimension to your studies. For example, the Tree of Life representing us humans as one branch tip among millions shows us better than anything else that all living things, humans included, are family. We humans are entangled amid zigzagging, repeatedly branching, ever lengthening branches of the gorgeous Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life has most of its branches ending inside the tree where they're no longer visible from outside the tree. This reminds us that

99.9% of species that ever evolved now are extinct. That's a sobering thought when we see how rapidly the planetary biosphere is collapsing before our eyes.

By the way, it's possible that more than one Tree of Life exists showing all living things that began from one very simple being. When the urgency with which life establishes itself in so many unexpected places is noted, it feels right to think that maybe Life on Earth arose several times, and possibly is arising right now in many places, including far from Earth. For more information on this fascinating idea, do a web search on "polyphyletic origin of life." But, the organisms we're likely to meet throughout our lives probably belong to just one tree. For more examples of the Tree of Life, do a search on "phylogenetic tree of life." It's worth meditating on that Tree.

Here's an entry adapted from the September 27, 2009 *Newsletter* issued from the Siskiyou Mountains west of Grants Pass, Oregon:

The Tree of Life



When I finished nibbling the elderberries I was about to toss the remaining inflorescence stem aside when I noticed how pretty it was.

Holding it against the sky to see its branching pattern better, the inflorescence pleased me less with its gracious symmetry and harmonious proportions than by the paradigm it imparted to my mind. For, in it I saw a model of the Tree of Life -- the branching and rebranching and rebranching and rebranching scheme by which Nature's gorgeous diversity of species has arisen from a single sort of living thing.

The same pattern of endless rebranching arising from a single beginning corresponds to the history of the Universe itself where everything arose from the single instance of the Big Bang. The history of all computers arising from a single first one, the history of all great thoughts and movements arising from single first inspirations, the history of all religions arising from the single impulse for spirituality... The Tree of Life pattern is the most natural and powerful of all paradigms.

It's good to meditate on the Tree of Life. For, much in our lives is diminished by assuming that reality is static, and that its parts are either one way or another. That kind of thinking requires us to choose good or bad, right or left, in or out, with or against...

In fact, everything in the Universe that is consequential, worthy and lovely reveals its majesty most when understood as part of an ongoing evolutionary process whose profoundly interrelated parts possess values and characters that vary, and are relative, depending on perspective.

The world, life, the future, every dimension of reality, all are patterned on the Tree of Life, the spent elderberry inflorescence. Let religions and raging schools of thought insist on their monolithic, unchanging dogmas, their demands for yes-or-no or come-or-go, but, let ME meditate on the elderberry's Tree of Life, the Tree of Life's elderberries, the simple little elderberry tree freely at hand.

MORE MENTAL TOOLS

Years ago a woman in Kentucky told me that one bonus for having married her policeman husband was that he'd taught her how to look into a woods. Before, she'd seen only the forest's outer leaf covering.

Her husband had trained her to consciously look between dense branches, through openings, into the forest's shady interior. There was more to see close to the ground, so she needed to look low, at least at first. Beyond the forest's obvious leafy covering, now she could see tree trunks, branching bushes, and leaves of different sizes, shapes and dispositions.

This manner of learning to look into a forest, not only at the exterior, might be referred to as the **"flipping-a-switch-in-your-head" tool**. It's like a switch because really there hadn't been much teaching involved, and the revelation of how to do it came fast. By the time the husband had finished explaining how it was done, already the desired switch in the woman's head had been flipped. Others might say that "the light had been turned on." The woman had simply needed to be told that the looking-into-the-forest process was available, and to have a very general idea of how to do it.

Another powerful mental tool is **visualization**. Once I met a hunter in the woods walking around as if looking for something. He was visualizing the forest one day soon around dawn when he'd be there with his gun. In his mind's eye he was conjuring the image of ghostly deer grazing amid bone-chilling fog drifting among trees, deer nervously sniffing the wind, looking around and twitching their ears in every direction, signing to one another with body language, low grunts and snorts, sniffing scrapes -- currents of mutual recognition, rank and sexuality subtly ebbing and flowing as he, the hunter, hidden, watching, waited for exactly what he wanted. To be a successful predator, he needed to merge into that image in a way that the deer wouldn't detect his presence, and intention to kill.

This same visualization skill is invaluable to those of us just wanting to see and know things, to get deep feelings for what we're seeing, and to have insights and intuitions on how they fit with everything else.

The hunter's visualization skills had begun to develop when he was a child with his father showing him how grazing deer left snapped-off wildflower stems, how male deer scraped their antlers on tree bark to scratch off velvet, and how sometimes bucks scratch their heads between the antler bases by rubbing there on a tree trunk, leaving hairs sticking in the bark.

Over the years, as facts like these accumulated, the hunter's mind spontaneously developed the power to visualize deer being themselves, and when and how they might make themselves vulnerable to him, the predator.

It's just a different version of the same story running through this entire *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*, of many diffuse facts magically crystallizing into feelings, insights and intuitions. If I wanted to see a Woodcock at the edge of a swamp at dusk, I'd use the same visualization process.

This *Newsletter* entry is dated January 31, 2010, issued from Hacienda Chichen adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruins in Yucatán, Mexico:

Sparrow Tao

Many times I'd hiked down the trail where the Olive Sparrows hopped, scratched and pecked so contentedly as the sun came up, warming us all in such a pleasant manner. However, until that morning, I'd never seen them.

In fact, in that spot I'd never seen the White-eyed Vireo who that morning came working through the brush right beside me so close I could clearly see his strange, white eyes. At that spot I'd never heard the Laughing Falcon cackling as he passed thirty feet overhead,

peering down so very calmly at me, then sailing on.

I'd never seen all those things at that spot because during earlier visits I'd always needed to get somewhere and be back by a certain time.

Already you can see where this discussion can lead to: That slowing down and paying attention enriches one's life. However, that point has been made here many times, in many contexts, so is there a deeper meaning in this particular experience with the sparrows on the woodland trail.

That's been this week's "thought experiment" -- to uncover and analyze various levels of meanings, to see if there might be a "final message" Nature sends in such moments, a message beyond which no further messages are possible, or necessary.

What I've decided is that probably there is, and maybe I know it. The final message, once something is viewed from every angle, is that the most insightful thing to be said is... nothing.

Everything speaks for itself much more profoundly and eloquently than any words can portray. Two sparrows on a woodland trail hopping, scratching and pecking, and me being there seeing them and feeling what I felt, is just what it is, and that's perfect and final enough.

MINDFULNESS



Meditation itself is one of our mental tools, so it's good to focus more on that. Many schools of formal meditation are recognized, and they all require intense focusing on what we're doing. Among the kinds of meditation, there are Metta or "loving-kindness," Zen, Transcendental, Vipassanā, Buddhist and more. The meditation meshing best with our meditative Nature study is **mindfulness meditation**.

Mindfulness meditation encourages us to remain aware and "present" in the moment. For example, instead of being annoyed by having to wait in line for so long, the practitioner notes the wait without judgment, while calmly noticing the sights, sounds and smells being experienced.

In meditative Nature-study, we mindfully pay attention to the chirping cricket on a summer night, listening for variations of expression in the

chirps. Presented with a flower of a plant belonging to the Mustard Family, we remember that species in that family generally produce four petals, four sepals and six stamens, and that this exhibits a beautiful geometry.

Beyond that, we admire this creation with such fixity and openness that we find a certain *feeling* being expressed in the flower's structure. A certain *insight* blossoms within us when we think about the mostly springtime flowering, weedy and swampy ecology of many Mustard Family members. We feel a certain *empathy* when visualizing the blossom's history as a flower bud and its future as a fruit. On and on the process unfolds, until the mustard-flower-blossoming process becomes part of us.

We do this for the same reason that anyone practices any form of meditation: It makes us feel better, maybe even *happy*.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry issued in mid summer when it was too late for springy things and too early for fallish ones, in an ocean of bird-quiet heat and greenness, August 25, 2002, from the hermit camp in the woods just south of Natchez, Mississippi:

On the Pleasures of Paying Attention

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 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. 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 the 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 wholeheartedly experience the Creator's works, to rejoice in the mere act of doing so, and to be grateful for having had the opportunity.

Below is one of my favorite pictures, taken in June, 2008, at Pipes Lake in Homochitto National forest, southwestern Mississippi. Late one hot afternoon I found my friend Jerry Litton sitting near the lake not moving a muscle, watching something very closely. When I asked what was happening, without turning his head Jerry replied, "I'm just waiting to see what happens with the sunlight. Before long the lake will be a mirror, and who knows what things will look like then?"

Jerry was paying profound attention, and he was a happy man.



BRANCH #4: KNOW YOURSELF

At this point in our *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*, you have a general idea about what meditative Nature-study is all about. The main points that should have been grasped are that the happiness and therapy-if-needed promised comes about through Nature-inspired

changes in yourself. The end result is a spiritual awakening, in which one's very definition of happiness is expected to change.

Such a transformative process is so unfamiliar to most of us that it may seem a little scary, or simply unlikely to work. Now our idea becomes to consider certain facts and observations supporting the notion that the whole thing may be worth the effort. We begin by looking at some basic facts about us humans.

ARE WE JUST ROBOTS?

As a farm kid growing up in Kentucky I saw with my own eyes the sharp differences in behavior between dog breeds. The Collie liked to stick close to me during long walks in the fields, but the English Setter always orbited around us, poking his snout here and there, too obsessed with sniffing out birds to care much for simply walking along fields.

All dog breeds are members of the same species, *Canis familiaris*, so when particular dog breeds consistently exhibit distinctive behavioral characteristics that are not taught -- such as the shepherd's herding instinct, the setter's pointing instinct, the terriers' instinct for digging into holes of foxes, moles and such -- those behaviors must result from predispositions the dogs inherited in their genes.

However, that isn't saying that all of a dog's -- or of a human's -- behavior is genetically programmed. Dogtime.com's "Dog Breed Center" recognizes genetically based instinctive behaviors of many breeds, but in doing so makes clear that "Even within breeds, there's enormous variety in the way a dog acts and reacts to the world around them.⁷ " In other words, genes *predispose* a dog, but training and random life experiences can change a dog's daily behavior.

This point is important for us because we've accepted that humans are no less animals than dogs. Moreover, all of us animals have evolved according to the same more-or-less Darwinian principles of

evolution (survival of the fittest) and, as with other animals, much human behavior is predisposed by our genetic heritage. However, like dogs, we humans can learn to suppress many or maybe all our innate behavioral predispositions if we want to change.

Beyond that, here are two more take-home messages with regard to the matter:

- Since biological evolution, based on evolving genes, proceeds much slower than the evolution of social behavior, gene-influenced predispositions can be expected to be **out-of-date** for modern life.
- The inevitable conflict between our out-of-date predispositions and today's social and psychological needs is enough to explain why so many of us are unhealthy, depressed and unhappy.

To get a handle on how powerful innate predispositions can be, consider the White-crowned Sparrow.

Even when newly hatched White-crowned Sparrows are hatched in incubators and thereafter kept where they never hear any bird songs, when they're about 100 days old they begin producing sounds approximating the song they'd sing in Nature. Their song is not nearly as rich and pleasant to hear as that produced by wild birds, but experienced birders can definitely hear the White-crowned Sparrow element in it.⁸

Metaphorically, our human genes also carry "songs" in them. Our songs establish our general life-tone or mood. Our songs are our predispositions, perhaps directing us to be more like an obsessively hunting bird dog than a mellow, walking-by-the-side collie.

For a long time, the science known as **behavioral genetics** has used genetic methods to study the nature and origins of human behavior. Many experiments in this field examine the behavior of identical twins who share the same genes but may or may not have lived similar lives. To date, behavioral genetics has arrived at three major conclusions:

- 1. All behavioral traits and disorders are influenced by genes.*
- 2. Environmental influences tend to make members of the same family more different, rather than more similar.*
- 3. Gene influence tends to increase in relative importance as individuals age.*⁹

However you interpret the three major conclusions of behavioral genetics, it's clear that genes profoundly affect our behaviors, and that we can countermand many of the demands our genes make if we want to badly enough.

The following is an adapted entry from a *Newsletter* dated April 19, 2009, issued from the Siskiyou Mountains west of Grants Pass, Oregon, USA:

The Next Revolution

Revolutions, Nature teaches, can lead to wonderful outcomes. One of the greatest revolutions in Earth's history took place when a group of extremist fish couldn't take it any longer and moved onto land, becoming the ancestors of amphibians and other future land-based animals. Another big revolution was the one set afoot by a comet 65

million years ago, which killed off the dinosaurs but led to the ascension of mammals with their big brains.

Right now a revolution is igniting every bit as momentous as those earlier ones. As fish crawling onto land posed the question, "What'll happen when animals escape the limitations of the sea?" the revolution just now beginning asks this:

"What'll happen when humans escape the servitude imposed on them by their genetic heritage?"

The background is the fact that humanity's genes were wonderfully fine-tuned for early primates on the African veld, but human cultural, intellectual and spiritual evolution has proceeded much faster than its biological evolution. Consequently, nowadays humanity's out-of-Africa genetic programming continually sabotages further human advancement -- in fact threatens all Life on Earth.

The revolution beginning right now demands that self-destructive, Life-on-Earth-threatening values and manners of living dictated to us by our genes be replaced by values and manners of living based on rational thought.

Our genes say eat high-calorie foods until sated, but rational thought counsels that we eat what the body needs. Genes formulated to assure compulsive hunting and gathering among our ancestors now predispose us for gross materialism and overexploitation of resources, while rational thought reveals that for the sake of the biosphere humans must be content with a minimum of material goods. Our genes predispose us to follow the home-area's flag wherever it goes, but rational thought demands that no flag be followed carried by madmen, demagogues and the ignorant.

There's no flag for this current revolution. There's no leader, no Little Red Book or Bible, and no cigar at the end of the ride. There's only one individual at a time spread here and there across the surface of

the planet asserting his or her personal will over negative, genetically based impulses arising from within. The revolution will succeed when enough of us, despite our gene-based natural urges, begin choosing healthy, psychically satisfying, sustainable living patterns.

RIGHT BRAIN, LEFT BRAIN

And then there's this: At the hermit camp in Mississippi, in 2008 one evening I was listening to National Public Radio's "Fresh Air" featuring an interview with Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, who was coming out with her book *My Stroke of Insight*. That interview, about a right-brain, left-brain experience, was of enormous interest to me, and launched me on a long thought process that continues today. At this writing, Dr. Taylor, an internationally recognized neuroanatomist, has her own website where you can learn more about her and her experience.¹⁰

Here's an entry from the *Newsletter* of July 7th, 2008 resulting from my hearing the interview:

Right Brain, Left Brain

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.

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 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 her early days of 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 undergo completely different experiences. Such folks often find themselves overwhelmed as their left-brain hemispheres obsess on the details and ordering 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 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.

After listening to the Public Radio broadcast mentioned above I looked for more information on the Internet and found that hardly anything on the subject could be said without mentioning Dr. Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara. He was generally

recognized as the foremost expert on right-brain left-brain phenomena -- often known as split-brain research. Wikipedia's Michael Gazzaniga Page, along with much more information, tells us about Gazzaniga's "Patient W.J."¹¹

Patient W.J. was a WW II paratrooper who was hit in the head with a rifle butt, after which he began having seizures. Gazzaniga treated the problem by splitting the corpus callosum connecting the patient's two brain hemispheres. Afterwards, Gazzaniga experimented by flashing visual stimuli such as letters and light bursts into the patient's left and right eyes. Our eyes' optic nerves cross on their way to the brain, so stimuli flashed to the right eye are processed by the brain's left hemisphere.

The brain's left hemisphere contains the language center, so when stimuli were flashed into the right eye, the patient's language-capable left hemisphere enabled him to press a button indicating that he saw the stimulus, plus he could verbally report what he had seen. However, when the stimuli were flashed to the left eye, and thus the right hemisphere without the language center, he could press the button, but could not verbally report having seen anything. When the experiment was modified to have the patient point to the stimulus that was presented to his left eye -- and not have to verbally identify it -- he was able to do so accurately.

The same patient with his corpus callosum severed also experienced conflicts between the two separated hemispheres. If he reached out to open a car door, the other hand might try to stop the hand doing the opening.

Another of Gazzaniga's patients, "Patient P.S.," was a teenage boy who underwent the same surgery. When the word "girlfriend" was flashed to his left eye, and thus his right hemisphere, he could not verbally say the name of his girlfriend, but could spell the name "Liz" using Scrabble tiles. This suggested that even though verbal language was not possible in the right hemisphere, a certain form of

communication could be resorted to by gesturing and left hand movements.

There's still debate about how to interpret the above results, though the basic facts as stated are not questioned. The debate is about what scientists and philosophers call the "mind-body quandary" -- the relationship between our minds and our physical brains.

On one side of the debate are those supporting the notion that consciousness and reasoning are practically mechanical phenomena, and that a human has almost, or absolutely, no **free will**. On the other side is the traditional view that we humans do have free will, with nothing obliging us to "want what we want."

Whatever the case is, the above experiments at the very minimum must cause us to suspect that we ourselves may not quite be what we've always believed. Also, maybe there are mental possibilities which we're not taking advantage of, simply because we don't know about them.

On the matter of free will, here's an entry from the *Newsletter* of January 2, 2020, issued from Tepeakán, Yucatán, Mexico:

Spinoza on Free Will

Friend Eric in Mérida lent me his book *Spinoza's Book of Life* by Steven Smith. It's an overview of Spinoza's very hard to read book *Ethics*, first published in 1677. I'm interested in Spinoza because of his influence on monist thought, for I'm a blossoming monist. Monism isn't a religion but rather a manner of thinking about the Universe/Nature.

For centuries a big question has been whether humans have free will, or are we just acting out what we're obliged or programmed to do? The no-free-will position is formally known as determinism, and as science discovers more and more human traits determined by our

genes, with more and more of our behavior found to be determined by hormone levels and other physiological states of our bodies determined by genes, the trend for a long time has been toward the determinist position.

Spinoza says that free will and determinism aren't incompatible, but rather that they're two ends of a chain that must be held together. At first, Spinoza seems a convinced determinist. He writes that the more a person insists that he's free to do as he wishes, the more that person is ignorant of what causes his behavior.

However, his main thought on the matter is that free will can be attained if we learn why we think and behave as we do, and then, considering all the facts rationally, act accordingly, based on our decisions. Not only does studying ourselves and the world we live in free us, but, also, "The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God," he wrote, expressing a very monistic view.

An important feature of this insight is that once we understand why we behave as we do, if we succeed in changing our behaviors we may regret, it helps us forgive ourselves for past errors.

Knowledge is a form of power that not only interprets the world, says Spinoza, but changes it.

WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS?

Michael Graziano (not Michael Gazzaniga of split-brain fame), a neuroscientist at Princeton University, once told an audience that "consciousness is a kind of con game the brain plays with itself."¹²

He said that the brain is a computer that evolved to simulate the outside world, and one of its internal models is a simulation of itself, which results in an illusion. The illusion is a ghostly presence -- a self -- inside the head. "But it's all just data processing," he said.

Dr. Graziano doesn't find the "inner voice" each of us has to be mysterious. What he wonders about is why brains, as machines, insist that they have this property, this sense of self. If our brains are merely physical computers, why don't they let us know from the beginning that it's all "just data processing"? Why the con game?

While you digest that question, here's an entry from a *Newsletter* suggesting that having a more flexible and expansive view of ourselves and the Universe actually might be quite nice, maybe even contribute to our general happiness and needed therapy. It's dated January 23, 2020, when I lived in a tiny stone hut deep in the thorn forest not far from Tepakán, Yucatán, México:

Honeybees & Φ

Honeybees pollinating the galaxy of Goldeneye Sunflowers around the stone hut rush from blossom to blossom, staying at each flower only a second or two before hurrying to the next, never resting, like slaves with a demonic master. Why didn't honeybees evolve so that workers could occasionally rest, letting their bodies recoup?

It's because evolution has "figured out" that in terms of survival of the honeybee species, foraging workers must work exactly as hectically as they do. If workers suffer early deaths from overwork, it's easy to replace them. As always, Nature's interest is in preserving and refining the species, and if that means short, often miserable lives for individual members, so be it.

But, the situation isn't as stark as that. From my monist perspective, in which everything in the Universe seeming to have its own identity is just a manifestation WITHIN the One Thing, defining where the individual being begins and ends can become tricky.

For instance, maybe hurrying honeybees on Goldeneye Sunflowers are more analogous to hemoglobin molecules on my body's red blood cells, than to the whole me. Hemoglobin molecules transport oxygen

in circulating blood of vertebrates, just as honeybees transport nectar through air to their hive. Who says that a being's interior agents must function within a single physical body, instead of flying through air on wings? Why can't the whole honeybee colony be analogous to me?

Moreover, since I'm convinced that beings besides humans can think and feel at different levels and in different ways, among honeybees, where is the seat of mentality, of consciousness?

I'd hesitate to ask such questions in public were it not that others much smarter than I are asking the same question.

For instance, neuroscientist Giulio Tononi, whose integrated information theory is a major force in the science of consciousness, has invented a unit called phi, Φ , for measuring the consciousness of entities. The word "entities" is used because maybe not only living things but even devices like thermostats may manifest at least glimmers of consciousness, of subjective selves.

Standing among honey-smelling Goldeneye Sunflowers, I sense all around me a vast symphony of entities glimmering and gushing consciousness and subjective selves utterly entangling with one another, and I sense many forms and levels of mentality and feeling nested within one another. There's the lone honeybee nested within the hive, the hive nested within the blossoming forest, the forest within Gaia the living Earth, and Gaia nested within the Solar System, which is nested in a galaxy nested in the Universe, and the Universe itself is nested as one expression of the One Thing...

In a Universe composed of 90-99% Black Matter undetectable by humans and their instruments, but recognized by human mentality paying attention to distances separating paired galaxies circling one another -- among other indications -- what's to prevent human mentality from sensing that it's possible, if not probable, that the whole shebang, from the One Thing down to this field of Goldeneye Sunflowers alive and emotional in terms of honeybees and me with

my hemoglobin molecules -- at all levels and in all dimensions -- is majestically supercharged and supersaturated with singing, dancing, honey-smelling Φ ?

Since writing that essay I've learned that instead of referring to the Universe's 90-99% black matter, it's more acceptable to distinguish dark energy from dark matter. Currently it's reckoned that about 68% of the Universe is dark energy while a rough 27% is dark matter. The rest -- everything in the Universe ever observed with all of humanity's senses and instruments -- adds up to about 5% of the Universe.

KNOW YOURSELF

At least two sets of genetically based impulses predispose us to be "who we are." One set of urges consists of those shared by the whole human race, such as the sexual drive. Urges of the other set express themselves at the organism/individual level, perhaps predisposing a person to be a gardener, say, instead of a soldier. The two different sets of predispositions overlap, providing a few gardening soldiers, and their order or priority change during one's lifetime, but the two categories are interesting to think about.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry issued from the woods near Ek Balam ruins in central Yucatán, Mexico, on May 31, 2018, addressing the set of our predispositions working at the organism/individual level:

"Know Thyself"

"Know thyself" is being considered here because, for me, that advice is a prime teaching of Nature. Each human is born with his or her unique set of genetically based predispositions, except for identical twins, and even the predispositions of twins diverge as different life experiences create different people of them.

Since such creative energy has gone into making my own personal package of predispositions, it seems clear to me that one of my

primary tasks as a human is to recognize what my predispositions are. And, once I have figured out that, to take my predispositions into account in everyday life. My thinking is that I wouldn't have been created with definite predispositions if the Universal Creative Impulse hadn't "wanted" them to direct the course of my life.

When my Brazilian friend Iolanda was a child, she fantasized about having her own little cart on which she'd push around pans of water, soap, washrags and towels, antiseptics, bandages and drugs, and when she'd find people needing care she'd provide it. She grew up to become a nun caring for the very poor.

Even I seem the product of unambiguous genetic programming. When I was maybe twelve or thirteen I found myself on Saturday afternoons sitting at the kitchen table with information about plants and animals gathered from various sources, and writing about them in my own words. I knew no one else who did such a thing, but I felt compelled to do exactly that, and it felt good, and still does.

It's easy to see why such varied predispositions would be adaptive for the human species. In any random collection of humans, when the community reaches a certain size, automatically there are citizens predisposed to serve as teachers, farmers, handworkers, warriors, artists, exemplary parents and spouses, hunters, merchants, community leaders, etc. Our genetically programmed predispositions set us up to be useful in our respective communities.

A beautiful feature of the way all this is done is that when a person does what he or she feels most inclined to do, it makes them happy. I don't know anyone happier than Iolanda and I, even though neither of us has much money, and we're often considered by others to be cranks. My happiness, I judge, is fundamentally based on my own self knowledge.

Certainly Spinoza recognized the importance of self knowledge, and tells us exactly why: Only when we understand ourselves can we

control our emotions, and that's the primary condition for sustained and rational happiness.

The corollary of knowing oneself leading to happiness is this: That by ignoring our personal predispositions we become unhappy.

In fact, maybe the great failure of our modern Western society is that so many of us have confused the needs of a materialistic capitalism with our own personal natural needs. We believe what we hear day and night -- that having this, consuming that, makes us happy.

It doesn't, at least not for Spinoza's sustained and rational happiness. Moreover, my reading of history is that any society in which a large part of the population isn't happy not only is a sad society, but a dangerous one, because of societal neuroses that inevitably develop among unfulfilled, unhappy people.

BRANCH #5: DEPROGRAMMING/ REPROGRAMMING

GOOD GENETIC PROGRAMMING

One way to think of inherited behavioral predispositions is to see the behaviors as "programmed" in our genes -- the way that computers are programmed to do specific tasks. The influence of genes on our own behavior is so profound that we need to understand our programming. For one thing, there's "good" programming and "bad." In this twig, we're looking at "good" programming.

During my hermit days in Mississippi I received an important lesson on programmed behavior when one day I was walking through the forest and suddenly found myself airborne and sailing backwards. I'd

almost stepped on a snake or at least something snaky. Thing is, I'd reacted so quickly that I'd jumped before realizing that it was only a tree branch curved like a snake. Wondering how that happened, I looked into the matter.

Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux may have an answer. He proposes that two sensory roads connect the eyes with the brain's amygdala. The amygdala is a roughly almond-shaped mass of gray matter inside each cerebral hemisphere, best known as the part of the brain driving the "fight or flight" response. Also it plays a pivotal role in memory.

Of LeDoux's two sensory roads, the "low road" bypasses the time-consuming, decision-making cerebral cortex, shunting impulses directly from the eyes to the amygdala. In the amygdala there's a memory stored telling us that if we're about to step on or touch something snaky, we need to jump back. The slower "high road" between the eyes and amygdala channels stimuli to the cortex before the body reacts, giving the cortex a chance to say "It's only a curvy tree branch," and to decide that there's no reason to jump.¹³

The high-road/low-road theory is debated, but anyone who has ever jumped back from a snake or snakelike thing without thinking about it will agree that the response is amazingly fast, that it must be an **innate** and not a thought-out response, and that our brains must be hardwired for the response. We inherited that hardwired response from ancestors who jumped back faster than those who didn't, and never lived to be our ancestors.

Just for the fun of it, here's my favorite snake-jumper story, from my hermit days in Mississippi, carried in the *Newsletter* dated September 22, 2002:

Rattlesnake Alive

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 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.

GOOD GENETIC PROGRAMMING GONE WRONG

The innate snake-escape response is "good" programming. It's easy enough to think of examples of the troublemaking "bad" kind.

Consider human tongues, which are equipped with five kinds of taste buds: those for tasting sweet, salty, sour, bitter and "umami." The umami taste rounds out the overall flavor of a mouthful of food.

Sweetness has its own taste buds because that taste was important during early human evolution. Sweetness was so important, in fact, that we humans are genetically programmed to crave sweet foods¹⁴.

That's because sugar-rich fruit was an important source of energy for our primate ancestors. When our ape and early-human ancestors ate more sweet fruit than they needed, the fruit's energy-rich sugars were converted to fat stored in their bodies. The fat was good for our ancestors, for whom when food was scarce the body drew its energy from it.

You know the rest of the story. Today humans with the inherited urge to eat too many sweet foods end up with bodies dripping with fat, their doctors warning of heart disease.

Many such **primal urges** are so deeply ingrained that we share them with our reptilian ancestors -- urges such as those for food, shelter, status and sex. And we all know that such impulses can neutralize and cancel out rational thought.

Evolutionary ecologist Eric Pianka got into hot water because of his acceptance speech for the 2006 Distinguished Texas Scientist Award from the Texas Academy of Science. Certain members of the acceptance-speech audience thought he "endorsed the elimination of 95 percent of the human population" through a disease such as an airborne strain of the Ebola virus. Pianka replied that his remarks were taken out of context. Still, his life was threatened by irate parties.

Pianka was concerned about humanity's population explosion, driven by the primal, genetically based urge to procreate. Because of low life expectancy and high infant mortality, on the African plains our ape and early human ancestors had good reason to keep producing baby after baby. However, just in 2020 the human planetary population increased by $\pm 81,000,000$ people¹⁵, so, obviously, this trend must end.

At this writing, Pianka has his own web page at the University of Texas web site, entitled "Can Human Instincts Be Controlled?"¹⁶ There he writes, not mincing words, that "Unless we can change our behavior, humans are facing the end of civilization." Further he writes:

"We must control dangerous human instincts, especially denial, revenge, tribal loyalty, greed and our urge to procreate."

Here's an entry from the *Newsletter* issued from my hermit camp in the woods just south of Natchez, Mississippi, USA, dated September 1, 2002:

Tadpoles Over the Edge

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 tadpoles' development.

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 wash 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?

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 the arrogance and aggression that's screwing up our world right now?"

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 memorable 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 exists apart from nothingness or pure energy -- where there is stuff of touch and movement, stuff that interacts and evolves -- then tadpoles over the edge become inevitable, and so do hermits with 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.

SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

Genetically based programming of the kind discussed above is one kind of programming we must deal with; Social programming is another.

I'm an expert on social programming because as a kid on our little farm in rural western Kentucky there was nothing I loved more than gobbling down greasy sausage patties from freshly killed hogs, sandwiched between halves of big, hard-crusteD, greasy-bottomed biscuits made of white flour and lard, flavored with smoke off Grandma Conrad's coal-burning stove. If it wasn't sausage it was fried chicken dripping with grease, not at all like Colonel Sanders' Kentucky Fried Chicken™. Heaven was late fall when there was plenty of freshly pressed and cooked-down, locally produced sorghum molasses to pour over those greasy biscuits heaped with smears and chunks of fresh homemade butter. Eventually I weighed about 340 pounds {154 kg}.

Since then, I metamorphosed. In my college Junior year I lost all my

surplus weight. Since then I've weighed what's normal for my height, have been a vegetarian very conscious of my nutrition, and in my thirties I began exercising daily, which I still do at age 75 (during 2023 rewrite).

And yet, with all those decades of healthy eating, drinking, exercising wisely, and consciously struggling for ever higher levels of self realization, and even though I now automatically associate overcooked, greasy food with the physical and emotional misery suffered from being so fat, if you put before me a greasy sausage patty sandwiched between halves of a buttery biscuit topped with sorghum molasses, I'll salivate like a Pavlovian dog.

That's social programming. If instead of growing up in rural Kentucky, 1950s society, I'd come of age in, say, a village in Senegal, maybe today I'd freak out over *thiakry*, a kind of couscous pudding in which millet granules are mixed with milk, sweetened with yogurt, combined with dried fruit such as raisins or desiccated coconut, and spiced maybe with nutmeg.

So, I'm here to tell you that *social programming is just as hard to overcome as genetic programming.*

Here are some examples of effects of social programming that in my opinion should be obliterated by thoughtful deprogramming:

- *blind consumerism and materialism*
- *racist and sexist stereotypes*
- *unexamined political and religious beliefs*
- *the assumption that any legal, socially approved job is OK, even if the work destroys the environment, contributes to unjust or unneeded wars, or hurts other living things*
- *the assumption that marriage, having children, pursuing a career, and living in one place for an entire lifetime is the only proper life course*
- *the spiritual position that the deity is in one place (Heaven)*

judging and condemning, and the Creation (everything else) is elsewhere

The good news about trouble-making social programming is that it's the same as with inappropriate genetically based programming:

When we identify social programming we don't like, we can neutralize it -- if we try to hard enough. Moreover, also as with problematic urges from genetic programming, when we overcome our inculcated, inappropriate social impulses, it feels good.

The following *Newsletter* entry was issued on August 29, 2010 from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá ruins in Yucatán, Mexico. In it I mention the Six Miracles of Nature, which we'll consider later.

On the Beauty of Raising Hell

The human species became Earth's most dynamic lifeform by outcompeting other species for the resources we needed. Our brains enabled us to outthink the species we hunted, and to domesticate other animal and plant species. Our ancestors struggled for dominance aggressively, self-servingly and piteously. Had a race of flower-sniffing, nonviolent vegetarians like me mutated into existence, we wouldn't have lasted long; instantly we'd have succumbed to neighboring clans coveting what we had, and maybe wanting to eat us.

With humanity's evolutionary history, it's amazing that on the average today we're such a docile, peaceable species. Only occasionally, as when we're under stress or experiencing mass hysteria, does serious aggressiveness break out.

Since we all have this inborn urge to raise hell under stress, it's worth thinking systematically about the matter.

To my mind, hell raising by definition is shocking and disruptive.

Therefore, drunken or drug-induced behavior, reckless driving, public cursing -- none of that is hell raising because it's so commonplace and therefore not shocking. Society even gives a wink and a smile to such behaviors through its mass marketing and entertainment.

When Beethoven wrote his Ninth Symphony with that final movement the most stirring and revolutionary in all music history, that was raising hell.

When a spontaneous mutation occurs in a species and a new feature arises to be passed on to future generations, that's Nature raising hell, shockingly and disruptively foregoing the usual step-by-step approach, willing to gamble with life while knowing that probably the mutation will be maladaptive or even lethal, but just possibly it might be something grand.

A form of hell raising that's particularly pretty to me is when somebody challenges and refuses to go along with humanity's comfortable, established but biosphere-shattering and Life-On-Earth-threatening traditions and agreed-on social mindsets and behaviors.

In fact, the most beautiful forms of hell raising are those arising when one thinks and thinks, and feels and feels, and loves and loves, and in doing so gets so mad that he or she actually does something creative and decisive in response. Maybe something like wearing lighter clothing when it's hot, or just putting up with the heat, instead of using an energy-greedy air conditioner.

That's shocking or at least weird to "normal behaving people," and it's certainly disruptive to society's dominant power structures and vested interests, and it really is beautiful.

HOW TO DEPROGRAM YOURSELF

The Internet hosts plenty of web pages and videos eager to help us deprogram and reprogram both our genetic and social programming.

They offer reprogramming techniques for attaining better sleep, a more fulfilled sex life, for eating a healthier diet, for a more positive attitude, to learn things as you sleep, on and on.

Browsing through a few offerings, here's a sample of some of the most eye-catching advice:

- On Erik Rittenberry's "Deprogram Yourself and Come Alive" page¹⁷ twelve books are considered essential reading. Here are the first five:
 1. *Waking Up*, by Sam Harris
 2. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, by Joseph Goldstein
 3. *Hiking with Nietzsche*, by John Kaag
 4. *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*, by Michael Pollan
 5. *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*, by Alan Watts
- On Sofo Archon's "Escaping the Matrix: 8 Ways to Deprogram Yourself" page¹⁸ the first suggestion is to "Break free from the shackles of organized religion."
- On Maria Erving's "Deprogram Yourself: You were born to be free" page¹⁹, it's emphasized that "You need a certain sense of self-awareness and also courage to break free from what you have been born into."
- On Gregg Prescott's "How To Deprogram Yourself" page²⁰ the writer tells us, "I often ask people, 'If there was no such thing as money, then what would you be doing with your life?' This will give you an idea of what your life purpose should be if you were not influenced by the almighty dollar."
- On Tony Robbins' "How to Reprogram Your Mind" page²¹ it's

said that the very first step you need to take is to "gain absolute clarity on what it is you want. Learn how to stop overthinking everything and focus on your goals. What is your desired outcome?"

- On Antares' "Deprogram Yourself" page²² we're advised that "Sooner or later everybody gets the urge to deprogram himself or herself. It's inevitable. You can't stop water from flowing just by throwing a heap of rubbish in the drains."

So, how does one actually deprogram and then reprogram oneself? Here are the steps I took:

1. Recognize that you're programmed.
2. Decide on which programmed behaviors you want to change or end -- keeping in mind that if you remove a behavior, it should be replaced with something.
3. With Maria Erving's "certain sense of self-awareness and also courage to break free from what you have been born into," just do it.
4. When or if you find yourself failing or backsliding, don't give up. Conduct a little private ceremony of contrition and renewed dedication, and try again. And again and again, if need be.
5. If you fail completely, if you've given it an honest try, forgive yourself. Really, the Universe doesn't care whether you succeed. As we'll see later, you're a nerve ending of the self-examining One Thing, and She's not a judgmental type. She just wants you to struggle toward your maximum potential, and that's what you're doing, even if you fail.

The following *Newsletter* entry is dated October 2, 2016, soon after I arrived at Rancho Regenesis in the forest near Ek Balam ruins north of Valladolid, Yucatán, Mexico:

Disconnecting

In this new life most efforts take more time and energy than in most of my earlier lives. Using the Internet or buying bananas requires about an hour of biking round-trip to Ek-Balam town. About a third of that time is spent negotiating an alternately very rocky or muddy woodland road. It's hot and humid, so I get drenched in sweat. To buy fancier food such as granola and carrots, a trip to Tizimón is needed, taking over two hours round trip. Here bike tires must be kept underinflated so the tires don't split along their seams, and this causes peddling to be much harder than otherwise.

But, this is fine. A trip to town is like a body-training visit to the gym, except that the trips are free and much more interesting. Putting the body under stress and sweating copiously several times a week is good for me. I feel great afterwards, both physically and mentally.

In fact, intentionally I also do other things "the hard way" and "the slow way." We have a gas stove here I'm invited to use, but I cook my meals over a campfire. I like the daily ceremony of composing a meal, building a fire, then watching and smelling the fire and food as they mature -- white smoke, orange flames, odor of cooking onion, oil sizzling at a flapjack's edge or rainbowing atop a stew. The daily campfire is a sensory experience that enriches me, as do the bike rides to town and back. And, writing these essays in longhand before biking to where there's electricity for the computer is even more of a meditation than before.

Sometimes people ask if the time I'm spending biking, pulling weeds for burro food, and building campfires wouldn't be more enjoyably spent doing something more important. That's a good question because it highlights the question of what's important.

For, when I look at how the rest of the world spends its time, more and

more I'm thinking that most of what's being done out there would be better left undone. Typically that's because the activities are environmentally damaging, or serve doctrines, dogmas, or assumptions about reality that are destructive. It's not always like that, of course. Always there are dedicated teachers, genuinely concerned doctors and nurses, those who clean up messes or grow wholesome food, or inspire us with their art or powerful insights. I'd like to be like those folks all the time, but I can't, not all the time.

In fact, in my time and place, it turns out that often the most positive, loving thing I'm able to do, is to disconnect from the world around me -- disconnect from the Dominant Paradigm of mindless consumerism and unsustainable growth -- and do it with such concentrated dedication and intention that it qualifies as an act of guerrilla philosophy, or guerrilla spirituality.

But, disconnecting doesn't mean "doing nothing." Maybe the most engaging feature of disconnecting -- besides the fact that it may be the most positive, loving gesture a person can make toward sustaining Life on Earth, and the human potential for living in dignity -- is that we who do disconnect often end up very busy doing such agreeable tasks as watching the world go by as we bike to town for bananas, or pulling weeds to feed to the burros.

REPROGRAMMING YOURSELF

I think the above authorities on reprogramming were dealing with the question of how to reprogram just one or a few behaviors that may be bothering you -- reprogramming to lose weight, for instance. In contrast, here we're dealing with changes that create a whole new you, inside and out. And if it happens with you as it happened with me, as your long-term, meditative Nature-study progresses, you won't need to worry much about reprogramming. Just study and experience Nature regularly and intensely, and reprogramming takes place spontaneously. It works like this:

The Universe/Nature/Great Spirit/One Thing manifests a rainbow of **paradigms** that repeat again and again at different places and in different contexts, and often are nested within one another. A paradigm is a pattern or example of something that can serve as a model. During long-term meditative Nature-study, and with the experiences the studying affords, Nature's paradigms simply seep into you, changing you automatically. If all day long you're subjected to the paradigm conveyed by blaring hip-hop with a hard beat and angry, aggressive street-talk, at the end of the day you'll feel and probably behave differently than if you'd experienced the paradigm imparted by a day of softly played Chopin etudes.

That's the way it is with long-term, meditative exposure to Nature, except that with Nature the paradigm is more deeply rooted and long lasting. With Nature's paradigms, when your exposure reaches a certain point, spontaneously -- like a crystal materializing in a supersaturated solution -- you're indelibly impressed with it. You're changed, matured, elevated to a higher level of spiritual awakening.

It just happens. It's mysterious -- among the most mind-blowing features of this whole thing we're doing here.

Here's a *Newsletter* dated August 3, 2003, issued from the hermit camp near Natchez, Mississippi.

Composting the Dominant Paradigm

My dictionary's first definition of "poor" is, "Wanting in material riches or goods."

I wonder if the dictionary's editors meant to be as profound with their definition as it seems to me they were? For, in their choice of words they reflected this society's dominant consumerist paradigm by employing the term "wanting," when, in my mind, they should have written "needing..." A person is poor, I believe, when someone is "needing" of material riches or goods, not just "wanting" them...

I became especially sensitive to these opposing concepts of being poor this week while draining water into the bathtub prior to washing my Kentucky quilts for the first time in a long, long time. That morning as the water poured, I made my rounds seeing what new plants were blossoming or producing fruit, how high my Moonflower vine had grown in the night, whether new mushrooms had sprung up, how my anoles and fence lizards were doing, and I was feeling prosperous and fortunate beyond description.

Yet, I could probably qualify for welfare because my yearly income is so low. Despite my sense of affluence and despite my having much more than I really NEED, and certainly not WANTING more "material riches or goods," the world around me often classifies me as "poor." Moreover, many would be annoyed that on a weekday morning I myself was not in a car hurrying someplace to a paying job.

The crystalline, soul-pleasing water gushed from the ground joyously gurgling and splashing after long confinement in the aquifer. The sun sparkled in the water and I drank deeply and bathed in it, and watered my plants and compost heap with it. What enormous potential I envisioned for us -- me and this water -- and how many degrees of fulfillment I experienced at that moment!

Of course, drilling the well had been a major expense. However, if you figure the amount of service the well will provide during many years of operation, the cost will be seen to be almost negligible. To me, drilling a water well fits nicely with the Tao's "Middle Path" philosophy: It's not free, but it's hardly gross self-indulgence, either.

I wish I had a way to compost this culture's dominant motivating paradigm that assigns one to poverty simply if little money is at hand, and declares that one is wasting his or her time if not perpetually employed with earning a weekly salary. I should like to shred that paradigm and ceremoniously dump it into the straw and dried pig manure of history, then stand yodeling and lustily pee on it.

What pleasure it would be one morning to see it black and spongy, steamy in the morning air and smelling wholesome and well intentioned. If I could do that, I believe I should enrich the whole world many-fold, and happiness would emerge everywhere like well-formed mushrooms from perfect compost.

REBOOTING LIFE

Sometimes computer screens freeze or start flickering, the cursor starts bouncing about, or the whole thing generally freaks out and you can't do anything. Then you may need to "reboot" the system, meaning turn off the computer, then turn it back on again. Doing this, you might lose work you didn't have time to save before the problem began, but often it's the only option.

Human lives are like that. In my own life, much of my deprogramming and reprogramming has been accomplished by thinking things out, then simply making the changes. Sometimes I've identified role models, then tried to be like them, or read about alternative ways of being, and tried be the way I imagined I should for that alternative life. All attempts accomplished something, but, still, I never attained what I sensed was possible. In my life, nothing has helped more than "rebooting my life."

My first major reboot was leaving home for college. On the farm, for example, no matter how hard I tried to lose weight, when I passed the refrigerator sometimes it was impossible to resist having a little snack. In college, I lived off-campus, in rooms where there was nothing but a bed and a desk -- no refrigerator to "cue" me to eat; no TV offering to distract me; no mother eager to indulge me.

After college I got a job and was married, which involved big changes, but, really, I was just doing what my genes and society had programmed me to do. My second big life reboot was becoming a hermit in the Mississippi woods, at age 49.

The following *Newsletter* entry was dated November 5, 2007, written at Yerba Buena Clinic near Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, México:

Bea's Sugar Maples

The other day Bea in Ontario wrote to me about how powerfully she was being affected by her local landscape's autumn beauty. She was especially touched by a woods of yellow Sugar Maples glowing intensely beneath a deep-blue sky.

Who knows why the gorgeousness of this particular autumn in Ontario affected Bea more profoundly than in other years? Who knows why this year she's discovering delights and pleasures in Nature's corners and niches that until now she's overlooked, passed by, or simply ignored.

I've experienced such intense periods of sensitization to Nature myself. It's a feeling very like what religious people must experience when they're "reborn," or mystics feel at various yogic stages on the path to nirvana. There's enormous relief in finding that there's something beyond everyday human experience that's beautiful through and through, something offering teachings that can guide one through a lifetime, something always there that FEELS solid and GOOD.

A point to be made is that the almost-ecstatic state Bea describes never returns with the same intensity as when experienced the first time. The sad thing is that most people who find the delicious feeling Bea describes drifting away -- when their enthusiasm for life begins fading once again, when they start forgetting the insights their sharp feelings once gave them -- simply accept the losses as natural, as part of getting old.

It doesn't have to be that way. The awakening Bea is experiencing constitutes just one door one can pass through. It's the first "rebirth"

that should open the door to a subsequent "rebirth," and then after that there should be yet another. Each "rebirth" is even more beautiful, meaningful and transformative than the previous one.

The first "rebirth" derives from what we can experience with our physical senses: Bright colors, engaging textures, moving melodies, odors of life itself -- Bea's golden Sugar Maples, birdsong, the odor of rich soil on a perfect autumn day.

The second "rebirth" arises from intellectual inquiry. One learns about the evolution, taxonomy and ecology of maples, one learns about the dynamics of bird populations, one learns about the complexity of soil, of galaxies beyond our own, of subatomic particles... Seeing that Nature is so complex, yet all Her interrelated, interdependent parts harmonize and function perfectly together, one is filled with awe.

The third "rebirth" is a spiritual one (not religious). The implications of Nature's beauty and perfection lead to the inescapable insight that something is going on in the Universe far beyond the influence and understanding of humanity.

And, whatever that "something" is, it's so dazzling, profound and eternal that it would seem to make sense that the goal of any intelligent, sentient being should be this: To harmonize one's behavior with Nature's teachings, or paradigms (love of diversity, recycling of resources, cooperation among mutually dependent parts, etc.).

Being touched by a grove of Sugar Maples on a sunny autumn day should be just the beginning.

BRANCH #6: BEYOND WORDS

CLOUD-THINKING

At a certain point during my own Nature-inspired spiritual development, I found that I couldn't describe to others much of what I was understanding and feeling. For a long time I thought it was because I simply didn't have the intelligence or depth of insight to articulate those things. However, I kept remembering this passage from the *Tao Te Ching*, the first line of the first chapter:

The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao.

Eventually I decided that much of what I wished to express was already hidden in other minds, even if the people with those minds weren't aware of it. By not directly addressing the inexpressible stirrings within myself, but rather hinting at them from different perspectives, others would sometimes seem to glimpse what I was trying to express.

Maybe it was just my imagination, though.

Whatever the case, coming at these matters sideways is the only technique I've figured out that offers any hope for developing some of the most beautiful insights inspiring this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition*.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry from February 3, 2020, issued from the forest near Tepakán, Yucatán, Mexico:

Clouds



Sometimes it's hard to keep up with clouds. If you're really paying attention, the sky can convey certain simple but profound messages whose moment of most lucid expression passes within a second or two, even if the clouds aren't moving fast.

For example, one late afternoon this weekend, just for a moment, the clouds were very expressive. Three different cloud levels were apparent. Small, white, ill defined, lower-level clouds moved faster and formed and dissolved quicker than the higher ones. At mid level, dark, billowy clouds with white linings were the most expressive, bringing a shower a little later, and even a clap of thunder. Watching them, I visualized vast bubbles of warm, moist air gushing upward, rapidly cooling and condensing into violently churning fog of the kind I've flown through in a small airplane that bucked and thumped frighteningly, though those clouds had been less stormy-looking than these. Then the highest clouds were thin layered, white ones with diffuse edges. Those were the calmest, the slowest moving, up where there's just cold, blue sky, ultimately yielding to the Universe at large.

To me, that late afternoon at my random little spot on Earth, it seemed that the clouds were talking about the three potential stages of a thinking human's spiritual journey.

The fleeting, ephemeral little scud-clouds at the bottom expressed childhood's perspective.

The dark but dignified mid-level clouds, on the one hand, brought to mind the sometimes upsetting, even ferocious inner conflicts of adults discovering their childhood beliefs and concepts to be inadequate; on the other hand, they also spoke of the soaring emotion and beauty attending the rational resolution of those conflicts during one's journey toward a more mature spirituality.

The top-level white clouds with diffuse borders represented our spiritual journey coming to an end. For, at the journey's end we find our own personal boundaries dissolving, our own sense of self-importance and separation from everything else in the Universe evaporating into the One Thing.

Like condensed molecules of water remaining part of the sky when the molecules detach from one another and the clouds dissipate,

when we humans vanish from Earth, the essence of what we've been here remains with the eternal One Thing.

THE MENTAL SWITCH FROM DUALISM

During meditative Nature-study, several powerful mental switches are available. None is more potent than the one helping us see beyond the **dualism** in which Western Society is deeply rooted. Many examples of dualistic thinking exist, but these are the two that most concern us here:

- *the premise that humans are separate from Nature, and can do with Nature whatever they want*
- *the assumption that the Creator/Great Spirit/One Thing is someplace else (as in Heaven, judging and commanding), instead of being everything, everyplace (no judgment or commanding involved)*

These two dualistic concepts, acting upon society together, tend to encourage people to feel little personal responsibility for the endangered planetary biosphere. Plus, there's the general assumption -- if not expressed explicitly as religious dogma, then at the back of people's minds -- that humanity is so special and unique that if we get into trouble on Earth, Divine Intervention will save us, or at least a fatherly hand will scoop up the "good" ones among us and carry us to Heaven.

Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood describes dualism as "**the foundational delusion of the West.**" She warns that it's a dangerous doctrine very much implicated in the environmental crisis.⁴⁰

Most Westerners, even if they're not religious, live in a dualistic world of "good" or "bad," human or animal, civilized or primitive, Caucasian or colored, male or female, master or servant, rich or poor, on and on.

Profoundly in contrast, a basic insight bestowed by long-term

meditative Nature-study is that what dualistically thinking humans see as "good" and "bad" depends on one's perspective, normally with a vast gray area between the judgments. Long-term meditative Nature-study spontaneously encourages within us a certain biosphere-based, community-minded disposition in which it's clear, among many other insights, that:

- humans are animals and part of Nature
- "primitive" societies sometimes behave more wisely and lovingly than "civilized" ones
- male and female characteristics come in many mixes and flavors
- no one is born to be a slavemaster or slave
- richness and poorness depend on much more than the amount of money one has

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated March 4, 2012, perhaps recommending a mental switch from the notion that maybe rational thought should be the basis for all our feelings and intuition. It's issued from my hut at Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá ruin in Yucatán, México:

Flâneuring in Dzitas

Last Sunday Newsletter readers Eric and Paul visited from Mérida. One of the much appreciated gifts they brought along was a book, *The Nature of Nature*, a hefty, 963-page, 2011 compilation of essays by the world's foremost experts in the very things we like to think about here. What is Nature evolving toward? How does human brain function affect our perceptions and thinking about Nature? In fact, what is awareness? And "being"? And, what does it all mean? Among the book's essays were those dealing with the string theory, consciousness and neuroscience, quantum interactive dualism, and eternal inflation.

I parked the book on my table and then the three of us plus my friend Malle went up to Dzitas, a little Maya town maybe 20 minutes north by

car of Pisté. The idea was just to walk down Dzitas' backstreets the whole morning gawking at plants in people's backyards, pigs and turkeys, cute kids, the local sinkhole. Along the way Paul introduced me to the French word *flâneur*, which means, approximately, "to wander aimlessly, relying on serendipity and an open mind and heart to make it a good experience."

We saw a man high in a Ramón tree with his machete cutting branches for his horse to eat; in a shop another man carved a stone flowerpot. Little girls peeped around hut corners and sometimes the fragrance of orange blossoms mingled with dust and the odor of wood ashes and pig manure. A little boy on his house's roof flew a homemade white kite, and all around that house other homemade white kites hung tattered and flapping among tree branches, each one with its own story.

Our *flâneuring* in Dzitas finished, back in the hut, in the big book on the table I gravitated to an essay by Christian de Duve, Professor Emeritus at both the University of Louvaine and Rockefeller University. He addressed the question of whether in Nature, beyond the uninspired, mechanist inevitability of the way things of physics and chemistry automatically interact and evolve there's "Something Else" -- something giving direction to evolution, something rejoicing when thinking beings gain insights and feel, something we might call The Creator, or God.

All the book's essays ended with formal conclusions so I turned to the conclusion of de Duve's essay to see what his great mind with access to all the latest theories and the most up-to-date data from experiments in all fields of science might conclude about this "Something Else" and the human condition. He wrote, using the pronoun "we" to mean "we humans":

"We are entitled to see ourselves as part of a cosmic pattern that is only beginning to reveal itself. Perhaps some day, in the distant future, better brains than ours will see the pattern more clearly."

So, in 963 pages of the most profound data crunching and struggling for insight, humanity's sages seem to be no clearer about "What's really going on here?" than are most of us who just stumble around in the woods, work in our gardens, and gaze into the sky.

Today, with the gentle feelings of our Dzitas flâneuring still buzzing inside me, and the heavy feeling of the big book still remembered by my hands, here is exactly what I think:

What is the basic human condition? It is a little boy flying his kite from a rooftop, with kite-eating trees all around, but the trees themselves are more beautiful than any kite.

What is the meaning of it all? It is the odor of Orange blossoms mingled with pig manure, carried by the wind that knows only to yield, yet touches everything, and would never presume to even ask such a silly question.

PANTHEISM, MONISM, & THE ONE THING

Before the terms pantheism and monism came to me, I had no words to apply to the totally all-inclusive concept for which those around me were using the words God, Divinity or Creator. To me, those terms were too associated with the Christian dualistic concept of a fatherly figure in Heaven judging and condemning. I needed a name for a Creator who was an all-embracing Creative Impulse, and thus was the essence of the Creation itself, not something set apart.

In Vedic Sanskrit the term *Brahman* came close or possibly was exactly the word I needed, though through the ages so much Hindu religious baggage has latched onto the word Brahman that its meaning is fuzzy. Like "love," it's a loaded term.

So, I came up with the homely term "One Thing." It meant *everything*, including the whole Universe and whatever is responsible for it, and everything beyond if there is a beyond. It includes things, processes,

thoughts, feelings, and surely states of being and sensations humans can't imagine.

Now I know that this insight has arisen in innumerable people over the ages -- and still comes forth in thinkers and otherwise ordinary people like me. Today that body of Nature-inspired insight often is referred to as **pantheism** or **monism**. In my *Newsletters*, when "One Thing" is written, or "Creator," or "Universal Creative Impulse," I'm thinking of the pantheist/monist/One Thing concepts, insofar as they mean **Nature = Universe = God**.

Still, if you look up the terms "pantheism" and "monism," you'll find the concepts are much subdivided and debated. For our purposes, we can forget about all that. One Thing just means One Thing.

Sometimes it seems to me that "pantheism" is the word used if you're coming from the direction of religion, but you say "monism" if approaching from philosophy.

The following *Newsletter* entry appeared on July 9, 2017, back when I was finally becoming able to effectively visualize the One Thing concept. This is from Rancho Regenesis near Ek Balam Ruins 20kms north of Valladolid, Yucatan, Mexico:

One Thing, a Rock, a Tree, & Me

A while back I wrote that I'd nearly decided that there's just One Thing. The idea is fun to think about and, if you accept it, there's all kind of guidance in it for everyday life. Here are some further thoughts developed this week:

In the beginning, as always, there was and is just One Thing -- everyplace, being, feeling and knowing everything. Then for some reason the One Thing saw fit, in many places in Her infinite fabric, to warp, undo, puncture, pinch Herself... No words exist to describe what was done, so we'll just use those, which at least convey the notion

that the One Thing here and there disarranged Herself in a way that the disarranged spots seemed to manifest less of the One Thing's perfect completeness.

For example, the rock beside my foot is one of those disturbances. It exhibits mass, can be touched, and reflects light. Those features of disarrangement represent a profound degradation from the One Thing's infinite presence (where nothing is isolated from anything else, and physically touching things isn't necessary) and infinite radiance (from which merely reflecting light is a great come-down).

It's the same with the tree glowing in sunlight beside me, just that its disarrangement is even greater than the rock's. The tree, being alive, not only has been banished from the One Thing's infinite presence and radiance, but also -- with its distracting urgency to conduct life processes such as growing and photosynthesizing -- it can hardly be compared with the rock's solid state of being itself, and the One Thing's steady-state omnipresence and infinite awareness.

And it's the same with me, except that I am even more disarranged, more degenerate, than the tree. Beyond sharing the tree's cluster of diminishments, I spend my life thinking, feeling and imagining about many individual things, instead of eternally participating in the One Thing's unending omniscience.

And yet, as a baby, I was even more diminished from the One Thing's completeness, for then my whole world consisted of my own narrow needs, my own immediate wants; I was unable even to imagine a One Thing.

But, with time, I identified with other people, things and ideas, and grew more and more beyond myself. Today as a graybeard my personal boundaries are dissolving as more and more I am charmed by, and profoundly empathize with, the rainbow Universe around and beyond me. My life, it seems to me as I look back, has been a step-by-step -- but usually plodding and circuitous -- journey back into the

One Thing.

And, why would the One Thing bother with such scattered disarrangements of Herself as this rock, this tree, and myself? Think of people who pinch themselves to make sure they're not dreaming. And the old Johnny Cash song where he sings "I hurt myself today to see if I still feel... "

Maybe we physical-world things expelled from the One Thing's completeness are the evolving One Thing's nerve endings, one of Her infinite ways of monitoring Herself, of knowing how She's feeling.

What I'm trying to express in this section already has been put into words much more elegantly and clearly by others. For example, in 1925 Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this:

"We are bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the invisible, to store it in the great golden hives of the invisible."

SPINOZA & MYSTICISM

Over the ages, many people have inspiringly expressed their monistic/pantheistic insights. Among writings to look for are those by Heraclitus, Marcus Aurelius, Albert Einstein, D.H. Lawrence, Michio Kaku, Carl Sagan, William Wordsworth, Robinson Jeffers, Henry David Thoreau, and Voltaire. For more, do a Web search on "famous pantheists" or "famous monists."

The first *modern* philosopher -- living in the 1600s -- to write about our way of seeing things was Baruch Spinoza. His writings, besides being in Latin, are hard to read. He tried to "prove" everything by deriving theorems, as if he were dealing with geometry. Happily, nowadays there's revived interest in his thoughts and a spate of fine books exploring what Spinoza was trying to convey.

Often the writings of monists/pantheists have been shrugged off as "mystical," as if mysticism always is disagreeable. It's true that

mysticism isn't rational or scientific, but that doesn't mean that it's useless. Long-term meditative Nature study affects us in a mystical manner, but those effects are very useful for keeping us more or less happy.

English literary critic Caroline F E Spurgeon, in her classic *Mysticism in English Literature*, pointed to two features of true mysticism:

*First, that it has been the leading characteristic of some of the greatest thinkers of the world, of whom she gives the examples of Plato, Plotinus, Eckhard, Bruno, Spinoza, Goethe and Hegel (all monists). Second, that none of these people was a lukewarm, indifferent, or unhappy mystic."*⁴¹

This *Newsletter* entry dated February 10, 2020 was written at Rancho Regenesis in the forest near Tepakán, Yucatán, Mexico:

"Dear Spinoza,"

Having no address for you, I post this little note in cyberspace, feeling that somehow it'll reach you. It's just that this morning when I first saw the little bed of beets glowing in early sunlight, for a moment it almost seemed as if you were there hovering about, smiling into the plantlets the way I do. Then I began daydreaming about what we might talk about if in fact your Earthly self came visiting, as you liked to do with your other philosophizing friends back in Holland in the mid 1600s.

Here's one question I have ready for you: You wrote that love for Nature/God spontaneously arises as we rationally search for the truth of things -- as we reason out the Eternal Truths of Nature/God. This love is personally transforming, you say, and in your case it seems to have made you the most modest, moral and ethical of Dutch citizens. That, despite many people hating you because you were a Jew banished by your community, refusing to convert to Christianity.

So, if the blossoming of this love really is so automatic as we

approach Eternal Truth, how come I know people who seem to have understood your proofs and conclusions very well, but whom I'd never think of as loving Nature/God in any transformative way?

In fact, it seems to me that Nature goes out of Her way to equip humans with an unending diversity of genetic predispositions, and ever-changing mental and emotional states, so no human reaction to any given circumstance can ever be predicted with certainty. Nature is simply in the business, I'd say, of evolving diversity at all levels in all dimensions, including human mentality and feeling.

Moreover, God/Nature Herself seems unsatisfied with the eternal perfection you attribute to Her, for She Big-Banged Herself into a whole Universe of "modifications" of Her "Substance," as you like to frame it. And, from what I can see, we modifications are as likely to be mutually antagonistic as we are mutually nurturing to one another. How does automatic love and eternal, absolute perfection fit into all this?

But, back in the 1600s, you didn't know about the Universe's black holes, the trickiness of curved and warped space-time, and all the lab results coming out nowadays apparently confirming some of the most outrageous, irrational predictions of quantum mechanics...

To tell the truth, nowadays I personally am not so sure that any Eternal Truths and absolute perfection exist at all, unless we simply define something as having those attributes. The only thing I'd swear to now is that from my perspective it seems that something really weird is going on. And one weird thing is that after 72 years of trying to peg down Eternal Truths and to approach perfection in my own clumsy way, now somehow I'm OK with just shrugging my shoulders and grinning about the Whole Thing, not coming to any conclusions at all. The Whole Thing, you know? No conclusions at all.

Anyway, see you around, Spinoza, and thanks for the visit.

Jim

DANCING WITH QUANTUM MECHANICS

For discussing the spiritual awakening that the meditative Nature-study process brings about, cloud-talking, mysticism and such as the above is digestible to some folks some of the time. There's another approach, which is to consider scientific facts.

Quantum mechanics describes the physical properties of Nature at the scale of atoms and subatomic particles. Subatomic particles include such hard-to-pin-down entities as photons, electrons, protons, quarks, muons, neutrinos and positrons.

One of the most important and elegant of all experiments conducted in quantum mechanics has been referred to as the **double-slit experiment**. Experts describing it can be found on YouTube, and Wikipedia provides a page dedicated to it.²³

Basically, the double-slit experiment proves that light and matter can display characteristics of both waves and particles, an insight that by itself has confounded a lot of very smart people. However, tinkering with the experiment has revealed an even more outrageous fact: Exactly as quantum theory weirdly predicted, *simply observing a particle's path -- particles like photons, particles of light -- changes the particle's behavior...*

Moreover, further tinkering with the double-slit experiment has shown that Nature seems to "know" whether someone will be looking at a particle, before the particle is sent through its slit.

All this strikes us as utterly impossible, even ridiculous to consider. However, this behavior also had been predicted mathematically before it was observed, and as more and more results of experiments come in, they appear to support the findings, not refute them.

This "knowing beforehand" causes some physicists to think that *consciousness* may have a quantum basis.²⁴

Physicist John Wheeler, who introduced the concept of wormholes and coined the term "black hole," proposed the experiment that indicated that particles such as photons "know beforehand" if someone will notice their passage through a slit. Wheeler suggests that our "noticing" the photon's passage may transform what was previously a multitude of possible quantum pasts into one history.

In this sense, Wheeler said, "we become participants in the evolution of the Universe since its very beginning." He thinks we may live in a "participatory universe," and that "*no phenomenon is a real phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon.*"²⁵

With stunning concepts like "participatory universe" and "no phenomenon is a real phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon" buzzing in our heads, and remembering Cloud-Talking's "... it becomes easier to conceive of us as being "nerve endings" of the evolving One Thing. As such, we find our own personal boundaries dissolving, our own sense of self-importance and separation from everything else in the Universe evaporating into the One Thing." And maybe we're ready for what comes next.

But first, here's either comic relief, or another effort to convey something that can't be said directly. It's an entry from the *Newsletter* of September 25, 2011, issued from Mayan Gardens Resort, where I served as Naturalist, north of Mahahual, Quintana Roo, México:

Tapdancing with Sandpipers

On online radio I hear a percussion showdown between a tapdancer and a drummer, and I decide that that's the way I want to do things, tapdance out the window onto the palmtree tops tap-tap, atop the seagrape tops tap-tap, onto the beach, the sandy beach with waves BOOM- swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh,

Bohm. He *majestically* described the Universe as an...

*"... undivided wholeness in flowing movement" in which the "flux of awareness is not precisely definable, and yet it is evidently prior to the definable forms of thoughts and ideas which can be seen to form and dissolve in the flux, like ripples, waves and vortices in a flowing stream."*²⁶

Those words by David Bohm seem absolutely harmonious with the "something beyond" I sense from the perspective of the spiritual monism I've dissolved into at age 75 (as I edit this edition in 2023).

And the description *is* spiritual in nature.

Bohm says that we things of the Universe are ephemeral, yet also part of a Universe-size "undivided wholeness in flowing movement." We're all participating in a "flux of awareness" that can't be precisely defined, but apparently that awareness came before "definable forms of thoughts and ideas." Entering the poetry of what he says, we humans recognize ourselves as "definable forms of thoughts and ideas" materializing and dissolving within the Almighty "undivided wholeness in flowing movement" with its unfathomable "ripples, waves and vortices."

The following is a *Newsletter* entry dated December 11, 2016, describing how sometimes back then the insights mentioned were beginning to cast an aura of enchantment around ordinary moments and events. It was issued from the woods near Ek Balam ruins north of Valladolid, Yucatán, Mexico:

Gaia on the Road to Temozón

The little family stores in Ek Balam and Santa Rita don't carry such exotic foods as granola and carrots, so sometimes I need to bike to the much larger town of Temozón about six kms south of the rancho. The first kilometer or so takes me down a deeply shaded dirt trail

through woods. This week the path is crunchy with curled, dried-up leaves fallen because the dry season has begun. It smells and feels like similar woodland trails up north at the end of a hot, dry summer.

The trail abruptly connects with the main highway between Valladolid to the south and Río Lagartos on the coast to the north. The highway's glaring openness and rush of double-trailer trucks, buses and local traffic, all loud and all in a hurry, come as a shock after being at the rancho. But, out on the highway peddling south, I remember that the open road also is good -- the broad sky with its expressive clouds, the wind and ever-changing scenery.

The dry season began about a month early this year, so herbs and grasses along the road are yellowing and starting to look puckery. The northern Yucatan always is arid, for it extends into that belt of aridness that wraps around the globe at about 30°N, in which are found the deserts of northern Mexico, northern Africa, the Middle East, Mongolia and other places. This arid zone is a product of the Hadley Cell -- hot, moist air at the Equator rising and dumping its water, then later descending at 30° N and S as dry air. If you travel from one end of this road to another you can watch the transition, in terms of trees being taller and less scrubby at the southern end.

Somehow thinking about the Hadley Cell and my place in it today makes me especially glad to be puffing out carbon dioxide that will be used during photosynthesis by weeds along the road to make carbohydrate for their own bodies. My CO₂ goes into them, and their oxygen photosynthesis-byproduct is sent back to become part of me. The farther south I go the more clearly I see myself as part of all this.

In fact, I'm glorying in the fact that sunlight-energy stored among atomic bonds in the carbohydrate of the granola I ate this morning right now powers up my brain to the point that I can see vividly that I am some kind of... song. I am a song that not only spews out CO₂ but also sweat and heat, and now look how all these byproducts of life majestically waft into the wind streaming around me, wind headed

north today in some kind of sub-pattern of the Hadley Cell.

Thinking like this makes me feel like part of something big, but the same thoughts remind me how tiny I am in the scheme of things.

Actually, long ago I figured out that "I" am hardly anything at all, just some kind of ephemeral, ad hoc perception given to imagining this world of weedy roadsides and grinning dogs on no other grounds than stimuli conducted to a brain-computer. The stimuli are caused by the effects of force fields of my own atoms and molecules interacting with force fields of atoms and molecules of other things. These atoms and molecules of both myself and the world around me are exquisitely configured, somehow having been aligned and mingled into sub-universes that interrelate in awareness-generating patterns. It's all so beautiful and mysterious that there's a basis for spirituality there.

So, the spirit moving me as I peddle into the wind here on the road to Temozón inspires me to say this: That today -- despite my evanescence and unimportance -- I claim to be nothing less than a scintilla of Gaia/the-Earth-as-One-Living-Thing, and that what there is of me rejoices in being one of a near infinite number of clouds of atoms and molecules configured to thrive on the Universe's poetic and well-meaning illusions, and to contribute to those illusions, as I'm doing right now.

BRANCH #7: LIVING IN A YIN-YANG UNIVERSE

THE MIDDLE PATH

Having considered all the above and become properly mystified, it's normal to feel a little airy-headed, even disoriented. Nature teaches

that long-term orientation lies with the Middle Path. Here's one way the Middle Path works for us:

When meditative Nature-study imbues us with empathy and understanding, people become peaceful and community minded -- community minded in the sense of feeling at home among other living things, including peaceful, community-minded people. The problem is that in both Nature and human history, peaceful communities eventually get replaced by other communities that are better adapted to take advantage of available resources or, just as likely, they are replaced, maybe exterminated, by aggressive, ruthless groups coveting what the peaceful communities possess.

At least in the short-term, greed-based violence annihilates peaceful cooperativeness, not the other way around.

However, it's not a hopeless situation for us peaceful cooperators. One way to frame the problem is to see it in terms of the Chinese philosophical concept of yin and yang, the dark and light sides of things. Generally speaking, yin is identified with yielding, darkness, the negative, while yang is action, light, and positive.

The hope we may have for peaceful communities is that once they clearly identify the yin and yang of their own situations, they have a framework for summoning the wisdom needed to identify and stay on the Middle Path.

For example, if we can recognize our peaceful communities as the yielding yin element, the opposite yang extreme, then, is the greed-based aggression destroying the planetary biosphere, without which our peaceful communities are impossible.

In this context, the Middle Path consists of effectively defending the Earth's biosphere not with hate or any other emotional state, but rather with rational, compassionate, albeit possibly violent behavior. That may sound like an extreme yang-type, militant analysis, but when

the enormity of the implications of the destruction our planetary life-support system is considered, it's clear that a vigorous and effective defense of the biosphere is a relatively moderate Middle Path. An extreme path would be to exterminate the offenders, instead of simply defanging them, reeducating and reforming them.

The following *Newsletter* entry, issued January 12, 2009, was issued from near Telchac Pueblo in the northern Yucatán, México

On a Symmetry in the Human Condition

Maybe there's a Natural Law 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 an organism that is profoundly aggressive, self-centered and indifferent to the welfare of other organisms. On the other hand, once a being reaches our stage of sophistication, often gorgeous feelings, insights and spiritual yearnings spontaneously and irrationally blossom forth.

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

And isn't it symmetrical, and maybe a good joke, that we humans consist of sparks 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.

HAPPINESS AS A NERVE ENDING

Remembering that phenomena revealed by quantum mechanics are part of Nature's teachings, and recalling physicist John Wheeler's notion that *no phenomenon is a real phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon*.²⁵, here's another "thinking tool" that can help us into a yin-yang-framed, Middle Path manner of seeing things:

We humans and other sentient beings are "nerve endings" of the self-examining Universe/One Thing

Thinking of ourselves as nerve endings for the self-exploring One Thing provides right-feeling answers to many questions befuddling formal religions. For example, why do beautiful, innocent children -- no matter what the religion -- sometimes meet early, horrible deaths? It's because the One Thing is no more interested in any of the Universe's individual sentient beings than a human is concerned with any particular nerve among the over 7 trillion in the human body.

Admittedly, from the human perspective, this feels totally unacceptable. However, it appears to be the only answer that jives with what's seen in everyday life.

In a ying-yang Universe where "good" is expected to be balanced with "bad," what we humans regard as "bad" is necessary.

However, there's a silver lining to this dark cloud, and the nerve-ending concept provides it. The jolting reality that we are pretty much on our own is married to an insight that -- at least on what may be the highest spiritual level -- not only gives us humans a reason for existing in our nerve-ending state, but also provides a kind of guidance for conducting our lives.

As a nerve ending, the "reason for existing" is to experience our lives as they happen to be. The "guidance for conducting our lives" is that

we should register all the experiences of our lives as vividly as we can.

Physical and mental laziness, which make sluggish, unresponsive bodies and blunted perceptions, are "sins" to be avoided.

Moreover, by struggling constantly to refine our physical well being, our minds and sensitivities, not only do we do our jobs as nerve endings well, but also life is more agreeable and we feel fulfilled. And this agreeable feeling and sense of fulfillment qualify as forms of happiness.

We who have been born into societies which program us to believe that humans are the jewels of the Universe eligible for all kinds of protection and divine intervention in our lives -- if we believe certain dogmas -- might regard doing the above "job" as a piddling form of happiness, and a questionable reason for staying alive. However, at age 75 doing this rewrite in late 2023, after nearly dying from a severe viral respiratory disease and often thinking about the desirability of continuing my own life, I can tell you that sometimes this reason is all that seems left, and sometimes it's reason enough.

The following *Newsletter* entry is dated June 7, 2018, and written at Rancho Regenesis near Ek Balam ruins 20kms north of Valladolid, Yucatán, México:

Eating Granola (Muesli)

Each morning my breakfast consists of a bowl of granola (muesli) with a sliced banana. While eating this I wear reading glasses so I can focus on each oat and wheat flake, each puffed amaranth seed, each nut, sunflower seed, shred of coconut and raisin.

When I look at a flake of oatmeal, I visualize the Temperate Zone or high-elevation field in which it ripened -- no oats grow in tropical Yucatan. I think of what that flake of oatmeal might know of cool wind

in brilliant sunlight, how it might have felt amid its broad community of fellow oat plants (which are green grasses), the whole vast mass of them silently and diligently photosynthesizing, sunlight energy being used to make the oat grain's flaky, white carbohydrate from carbon dioxide gas and water vapor, therefore making something that can be seen, felt and tasted out of transparent gases.

I've seen the fields of red amaranth that probably provided my granola's amaranth seeds. They were in cool, arid, highland Mexico with snow-capped volcanoes rising in the distance, where earthquakes are frequent. I remember how chilly wind formed the amaranth plants into graceful waves, red waves beneath blue sky with gray, white-topped mountains at a distance.

I visualize bees pollinating the flowers that engendered the granola's fruits and nuts. I see the Coconut Palms in their coastal plantations, hot sand between slender trunks growing at angles in accordance with prevailing sea-breezes, birds noisily cavorting in the palms' crown of stiff, shiny fronds that woosh and clap in the wind. And I can get up from my seat right here to go lay my hand on the hard, green, glossy trunk of a banana tree, if I want to remember what they're like.

So, is it just fancifulness, this thing I do with my granola? As the granola's stored-up sunlight energy in all its kaleidoscopic and good tasting forms enter me and start becoming part of me, fueling these very thoughts I'm relating right now with energy not long ago emanating from the Sun, I think not.

For one thing, if my reading glasses could peer even more deeply into this particular hard-pressed oat grain I'm seeing now, the glasses' magnification leading me ever deeper into the oat-flake's substance, eventually a point would come when all human-recognizable form, touchability, color and taste would no longer exist. There'd just be molecules relating to one another according to their mutual electromagnetic charges and configurations. And, farther down, within each molecule, there'd be atoms with their electrons, protons,

neutrons and a host of subatomic particles, that relative to their relative sizes, lie enormous distances from one another, so that atoms are basically just force fields around packets of energy, instead of anything that human senses can deal with.

In truth, these flakes from oat and wheat fields, these nuts and raisins, are merely creations of our minds. Packages of Sun-leaving energy called photons bounce off electromagnetic force fields associated with atoms and molecules in my oat flake, enter a human eye and excite nerve endings. The brain combines inputs from lots of eye nerve endings receiving such stimuli and the brain says, "That's an oat flake." But, really what we're "seeing" consists of almost nothing but various forms of energy interacting to create force fields. The subatomic particles such as electrons and quarks that produce the force fields don't really have size, rather are just energized points that can be pinpointed mathematically, but not physically.

So, this oat flake in my spoon is like a computer screen's icon composed of pixels, except that computer icons are defined by binary code in a computer, while our mental images of things are graphic interpretations of our brains, which themselves are computers, but computers programmed with a language profoundly more sophisticated than a computer's binary code.

And, I wonder: Might not my daydreaming over the morning's granola be the same as what the Universal Creative Impulse does when She conjures the Universe's evolving configurations of energy and electromagnetic fields -- which we humans conceive of as rocks and wildflowers, stars and galaxies, and ourselves?

And, if that is so, as I delight in my morning's psychedelic granola with bananas, might not at the same time be the Universal Creative Impulse delighting in visualizing "me" this fine morning as chachalacas call from dewy woods edges and the dogs lie laughing and wagging their tails when they hear me whispering these thoughts to myself, just to hear what they sound like?

BEWARE OF SELF DECEPTION

It's hard to follow the sustainable Middle Path and to be a good nerve ending. It's so hard that on most Middle Paths we might want to follow, possibly the hardest barrier to overcome is our tendency to deceive ourselves, and that's because it's so easy.

We can even deceive ourselves about the meanings of insights revealed to us during meditative Nature-studies and experiences. Consider Nature's teaching that we should recycle. Does that mean that if we have a huge pile of empty aluminum beer cans in our backyard, Nature's teachings support our buying a big, automated beer-can flattener sold by the Chinese to make transporting the cans to the recycling center easier?

Studies show that **most people** ignore or rationalize negative information about themselves to maintain a positive self-image.²⁷ Early in human history that may have been a valuable adaptation for the species, maybe a way to keep from losing spirit when one needed to fight, or attack a Woolly Mammoth.

But now, with Life on Earth threatened by human behavior, self deception is an enormous threat. Today, self deception enables a large part of the population, maybe a voting majority, to believe that they're smart enough to see that the scientists are wrong about all those pollution-control laws, for example, because they're just part of an unpatriotic, left-wing conspiracy to attack capitalism.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated March 11, 2018, issued from the woods near Ek Balam woods 20kms north of Valladolid, Yucatán, Mexico:

Robin Kimmerer's Lichens

My friend Paul from Florida and Mérida visited Valladolid so we could sit in the park awhile talking. Paul kindly gave me a book he'd read and liked, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. I'd never heard of Kimmerer or her book, but the next day when a Danish visitor to the hut saw the book on my table he said his wife was reading it, so maybe it's a popular read nowadays. Kimmerer is a noted environmental scientist and a Potawatomi indigenous American.

To see if the book might make good company during my upcoming visa-renewing trip, I chose a randomly selected page and read a random paragraph. It described how the free-ranging cells of certain species of algae often combine with free-ranging cells of certain species of fungi to form distinct species of lichen.

Kimmerer described how scientists wanting to study the lichen-forming phenomenon placed appropriate cells of algae and fungi together in the lab, but at first no lichens formed under a variety of environmental conditions. Finally it was discovered that communities of cells of algae and fungi would indeed form lichens if they were stressed. When conditions were good for both kinds of cells, they preferred to keep living independently, but during a severe environmental crises they cooperated to save themselves.

At that point I slammed the book shut, not wanting to read more, because that single paragraph had set a train of thought going that I wanted to nurture.

For, that one paragraph suggested a message I desperately wanted to believe in: That at some point maybe we humans will start cooperating to save ourselves by stopping our destruction of the Earthly biosphere. And maybe we can even go beyond that and -- like simple algal and fungal cells forming more complex lichens -- create

something entirely new and transcendently worthy of the potentials of human mentality.

But then it occurred to me that, by denying myself further reading and taking the paragraph out of its larger context, possibly I was misunderstanding a higher-level message that Kimmerer had wanted to relate. I was behaving precisely like so many people nowadays who consciously and willfully deny themselves information that might conflict with what they want to believe.

This was a distinct possibility, too, because already I knew facts that seemed to be at odds with what Kimmerer seemed to be saying. My understanding from both ecology and history is that when populations of living things, including humans, come under stress because of limited resources, more likely than the cooperation shown by algae and fungi forming lichens, are wars, and Nature's old standbys, plagues and famine.

After several days of exploring the condition of having found a good-feeling ray of hope for what otherwise seems in nearly every respect a profoundly bleak future for Life on Earth, while at the same time admitting that the hope was rooted in my having chosen ignorance over an open mind, here's what I decided:

Ignorance-based peace of mind is a seductive pleasure hard to abandon.

It's a form of self gratification bought with mental and/or spiritual laziness and willful self deception.

It's an ugly, dangerous condition I don't want anything to do with.

So, I'm looking forward to reading the rest of Braiding Sweetgrass during my upcoming visa trip. I'm eager to flush from my system this brief exposure to a viral, potentially lethal way of managing one's mentality.

OUR BODIES OFF THE MIDDLE PATH

Having spent my childhood and adolescence with a very fat body way off the Middle Path, I can tell you that my physical condition profoundly affected my happiness and general sense of well being. I have a close friend who is a paraplegic who lives a full, productive life, so I know that with enormous will power and dedication to certain spiritual principles, happy lives can be lived even with bodies in very bad condition. However, as a general rule, *wrecked or poorly maintained bodies make it harder to be happy.*

In fact, I consider as one of the most important turning points in my life a certain day back in 1971 when I walked into the bookstore of Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green and spotted the little paperback *Diet for a Small Planet* by Frances Moore Lappé. Not only did that book focus on the environmental impact of meat production, but also it taught how to combine amino acids from plant-based sources in the foods we eat. Doing so enables the body to manufacture the protein it needs without our eating animals.

Having become a vegetarian around 1966, once I read *Diet for a Small Planet* I began juggling my amino acids, as I still do. At the molecular level at which our food's nutrients operate, our bodies absolutely need in certain relative proportions nine essential amino acids -- histidine, isoleucine, leucine, lysine, methionine, phenylalanine, threonine, tryptophan and valine. This is exactly like a car being unable to function at all without its hydrocarbons (gasoline), iron (steel body), aluminum (engine block), carbon (carbon fiber in frame), chlorine (moldings), magnesium (oil pans), etc.

Beyond all that, scientific findings overwhelmingly confirm the positive effect of proper diet on both our physical and mental states. For example, people eating *traditional* Mediterranean and Japanese diets, which tend to be high in vegetables, fruits, unprocessed grains, and seafood, compared with the typical Western diet, suffer 24-35% less risk of depression.²⁸ Since my form of vegetarianism has omitted

seafood, and I'm in great health at age 75, I'm sure that seafood is not necessary.

Along with proper diet, science also insists that exercise is absolutely necessary. The Mayo Clinic website lists "7 benefits of regular physical activity"²⁹, which include the following scientifically confirmed benefits:

Exercise...

- *controls weight*
- *decreases depression and anxiety*
- *improves mood*
- *boosts energy*
- *promotes better sleep*
- *improves sex life*
- *can be social and enjoyable*

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated October 24, 2005, issued from just east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán, Mexico:

Fat

During my recent travels I was struck by how people in the US are getting fat. I do believe I can see a change for the fatter just from last year!

I'm concerned about the US's fatness because my experience is that being fat makes it harder for a person to believe in himself or herself. When you're fat, there's always this thought riding around inside you: If you can't control what your own hands stuff into your fat body, how can you expect to have the character to change into the dynamic, disciplined person you want to be, and need to be if you're going to contribute what you want to, to the world around you?

This is a good question because to save Life on Earth we all need to

acquire enough character and self discipline to change our behaviors. We must begin living in a way that emphasizes quality and sustainability of life, not mere gross consumption. By overeating we are killing ourselves, but by consuming too much of everything else also we are murdering the beautiful planetary ecosystem that sustains us all.

Back in the 60s we had all the food we needed and the food was as good or better than it is now, yet back then average people were much less fat than now. Also back then the media were saturated with food ads, just as now. Therefore, it's not food or the media that has changed, it's us.

I think that what's happened is that we've let our minds slip into a kind of trance in which we are more vulnerable to media suggestion than back then. When you're being hypnotized, it takes awhile before your trance is deep enough for the hypnotist's suggestions to take hold. Back in the 60's, our society hadn't yet reached that state of suggestibility, but now we have. Day after day the TV tells us to eat, so we do.

What's really bad about our new vulnerability to mass-media suggestion is that we have succumbed to much more than suggestions to eat and eat. We also have become more vulnerable to mass-disseminated political sophistry.

From what I can see, presently our culture is saying that it's just too much trouble to pay attention to basic nutritional facts, and it's too much trouble to try to grasp the world's complex realities -- such as what inevitably must happen if Iraq is occupied by foreign forces.

In our trancelike condition, nowadays it's much easier to eat whatever the TV says to eat, and to elect whichever politician places the greatest number of smarmy, simple-minded ads on TV.

The result is fat, fat, fat, and George Bush.

ALTRUISM FEELS GOOD

In this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition* often we've mentioned the empathy that spontaneously blossoms within us, for the natural things we study meditatively -- remembering that humans are natural, too. This empathy encourages our concern, which translates into altruistic acts on our part, to protect those natural things we care about. And altruism, it's been scientifically proven, makes us feel better, maybe lending us a smile as go stumbling along. Among the happiness-nurturing effects of acts of altruism noted by the UK's Mental Health Foundation³⁰ are:

- Altruism may promote physiological changes in the brain linked with happiness
- Altruism improves our self-esteem
- Altruism encourages a sense of belonging
- Altruism often is practiced with other like-minded people, which enhances one's sense of community
- It simply feels good seeing our good work benefiting those we care for.

No one knows better than we ourselves what altruistic deeds we can perform in our everyday lives. On the planetary scale, the most altruistic effort we can make is to live so that our behavior causes the least environmental damage possible.

Becoming a vegetarian may be the single most loving gesture most people can make toward the planetary environment. The UN's GEO-6 Environmental Outlook edition of 2019 reports that 77% of the Earth's agricultural land is dedicated to meat production³¹ (ranchland, growing soybeans and corn for livestock feed, etc.). Wikipedia provides a detailed page on "Environmental Vegetarianism."³²

The UK's Good Energy LTD energy company provides a web page entitled "The Ultimate 20 Step Guide to Eco-friendly Living," at the top of which appropriately stands a quote from the *Tao te Ching*: "A

journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."³³ The eco-friendly steps propose that we...

1. *Turn things off instead of leaving appliances on standby*
2. *Use energy-efficient appliances*
3. *Switch to renewables*
4. *Eat less meat*
5. *Don't waste food*
6. *Compost*
7. *Recycle everything*
8. *Give up using plastic*
9. *Use LED light bulbs*
10. *Insulate your home*
11. *Use home delivery*
12. *Fix it, don't throw away*
13. *Use eco-friendly cleaning products*
14. *Don't drive*
15. *Use a microwave*
16. *Buy local*
17. *Don't fly*
18. *Grow your own food, if only on a windowsill*
19. *Plant trees*
20. *Choose personal care products that don't pollute; especially avoid those using microbeads, which occur in certain toothpastes, face scrubs and other products. In the US, most toothpastes with microbeads are made by Crest®.*

This *Newsletter* was dated January 14, 2018, issued from Rancho Regenesi near Ek Balam ruins 20kms north of Valladolid, Yucatán, Mexico:

Lucy's Revolution

I was showing Lucy and her partner around the garden. When asked what she did back home in southwestern England, she said, "I go from place to place teaching permaculture, making rich soil and helping gardeners get good harvests." She tends people's gardens for them and rehabilitates damaged soils; later I found that also, if she's asked, she'll talk about the whys and hows of her veganism.

Lucy doesn't say much about her feelings for the land, plants and animals in her life unless it comes up naturally in conversation. In college she felt like her classes were largely irrelevant to the big problems she saw around her. She quit school, learned how to make gardens and live in a way she believed in.

Lucy's low-key manner isn't what you'd expect of a genuine revolutionary, but the sustainable-Earth option she's offering in my opinion is revolutionary. Revolutions cause big currents of historical events to quickly change course. If enough people took Lucy's advice, there'd be a tremendous revolution.

Since Life on Earth depends on such a revolution in human thought and behavior coming about soon, it's worth thinking about what historically successful revolutions were like.

One feature of all successful revolutions I can think of is that they've all had a theme that normally was expressed in a short but stirring slogan, such as "liberty, equality and fraternity," or merely "Throw the bums out!" And the most successful slogans are those supported by a simple, easily recognizable symbol, such as the swastika, the Cross, and the hammer and sickle. Why are slogans and symbols so necessary?

It's because they efficiently and effectively encourage people to work

together on shared goals. If you try to convince masses of people to revolt, by talking sensibly to them, they start disagreeing on terms, concepts and procedures, and fall to arguing with one another. But, the human mind is configured so that if a pithy slogan -- even if the exact meaning of what the words mean is ambiguous -- is shouted often enough, with enough enthusiasm, verve and panache, and somehow associated on the subliminal level with time-tested feel-good causes such as loving the motherland, feeling brotherly to those sharing your racial and ethnic identities, and sharing your mythologies, most people tend to fall in line, no deep thinking needed.

But, in Lucy's revolution, what kind of slogan or symbol could possibly be successful? Something like "Up with permaculture and sustainability!" is too corny for anyone, but that's exactly what needs to be said. And what kind of symbol could ever grace Lucy's banner? A germinating bean, a singing bird, a bowl of granola topped with yogurt and strawberry slices? Imagine what Trump would say about such a banner, and how the voting millions would snicker.

So, Lucy's revolution probably won't get off the ground until a truly catastrophic environmental disaster comes along, something so obviously caused by inappropriate human thinking and behavior that anyone can see that a revolution is needed.

Still, I like to think of myself as being one of Lucy's co-revolutionaries, whatever slogan and symbol the movement eventually comes up with.

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AS A MIDDLE PATH

There's the yin of self denial so obsessive that you weaken your body, and your experience with the world is so austere and limited that you sour on life itself, then there's the yang of aggressive, self-gratifying consumerism and political thinking of the kind we see every day around us.

The Middle Path is voluntary simplicity, where you seek no more than

what you truly need.

As a teenager I was introduced to the concept of simple living in Mahatma Gandhi's *Autobiography*. In later years, words of the Buddha, Francis of Assisi, Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, Albert Schweitzer and others all reinforced the concept in my mind.

Two main features of simple living are freedom from excessive material consumption and freedom from mental/psychological distractions. As a happy hermit in Mississippi I grew much of my food and my purchases didn't amount to much more than monthly resupplying my stock of cornmeal, flour, cooking oil, vinegar... not much else. And my distractions were things like birds singing and flowers blossoming.

It was good. It's a simple concept so there's not much explaining to be done. You just grasp what's being said, accept it or not, then live it or not. Simple as that.

Or, maybe not...

Here's a *Newsletter* entry written back at my hermit camp in the southwestern Mississippi woods, dated September 7, 2003:

Computer, Compost, Bullfrog & Art

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 works. This Sunday morning I'm still having problems, needing to pound the table to get an image on 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 awhile 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 nothing is really completely simple. 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 aesthetics that were actually quite subtle -- whether while creating the arrangement Larry knew that his choices were sophisticated or not.

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... which at first glance looks easy enough, but in reality is hard to execute.

Anyway, if during upcoming weeks I miss putting out a Newsletter or two, it's because my old homebrew computer has finally bitten the dust, and I'll be back online eventually -- unless I lose track of time while keeping my compost heap company.

ONE THING & HIVE MIND

Maybe one reason it's been so hard for me to follow the Middle Path is that I possess genetic programming typical of a klutzy, dogmatic, fanatical, blue-eyed northern European, slightly modified by conservative rural Kentucky 1950s social programming, resulting in strong hermit impulses. All that gets entangled with Nature's teaching that the One Thing is obsessed with generating *communities* of diverse, interrelating, interdependent entities, which, it seems to me, drives us all toward participating in a kind of communal *hive mind*.

I'm an eating-breakfast-alone-by-a-campfire kind of person though humanity's flow seems to be cubicles with computer screens.

The hive mind concept was explored in our Honeybees & Φ essay, positing that maybe the main honeybee "mind" is diffused among the hive and workers in the field, not residing in individual honeybees. The implication is that maybe it's not just honeybees hive-minding, but also

us ever-more-crowded, cyber-connected humans, with our ever-more-interdependent activities.

Whatever the case, all this networking and interdependence is claustrophobic for me!

So, it's another of those yin-yang/Middle Path things, and another case of needing to reflect real hard, and struggle to recognize and follow the Middle Path to happiness.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated August 15, 2004, issued from the hermit camp in Mississippi:

Fine-Tuning the Middle Path

Regularly I refer to the Middle Path, that Golden Mean of Living I aspire to between the extremes practiced by our consumption-oriented society, and pure back-to-nature-ism. For example, I do without air conditioning because I'm concerned about the environmental destruction caused by mining the coal burned in power-generating stations, yet I use a computer and the Internet.

Newsletter subscriber Arjus in Holland writes pointing out that in real life it can be hard to figure out where the Middle Path is.

For example, right now the US electorate appears split right down the middle, half of us on the right of "average," and half of us on the left. Over the years our leadership more or less alternates between conservatives and liberals, so, are US policies and the lifestyles of our citizens in the long run averaging out to be following the Middle Path?

To answer that question you must choose a criterion for defining the Middle Path. For me the Middle Path is the direction taken that carries life farthest into the future. In other words, it is based on sustainability.

Thinking of the Middle Path like that, and seeing with my own eyes the effects of mining, clearcutting, prodigious use of pesticides, and all the

other unsustainable practices required to maintain our level of consumption of goods -- I judge us to be a nation of extremists, departing in almost every way from the Middle Path.

This week I heard from Mournlight someplace in Cyberspace who told me how she was finding her own Middle Path. "I have a job I love most of the time... [It] provides me with the income necessary to pay for a piece of property which I dearly love, and which provides me great comfort." And she goes on to describe her stream, blackberry picking, and the Chuck-will's-widows calling at night. Most of the time she doesn't use air conditioning, and her house furniture is mostly stuff that's been thrown away by other people.

Hillary on the Gulf Coast uses fans and a water-filled livestock watering-tank for sitting in instead of air conditioning. In my book, every bead of sweat on that man's forehead has more value in a spiritual sense than a hundred SUV-driving fundamentalists' prayers.

I also heard from Mac up in Missouri who lives in an "earth contact house" that during cold months is heated by burning about a cord of wood a year. He also has a "sunroom greenhouse."

Mac used a nice phrase referring to the readers of this Newsletter: "Community of spirit." I like that. I think that much of the spirit uniting us is based on the fact that we tend to be folks trying in our own ways to identify and follow the Middle Path -- to do the best with what we have, while keeping in mind the impacts of our behaviors on all others, and Life on Earth itself.

Hearing from Mournlight, Hillary and Mac this week just tickled me a lot.

BRANCH #8: STUMBLING FORWARD, GRINNING

CRAZY MONK

At the crossroads this year, after begging all day I lingered at the village temple. Children gather round me and whisper, "The crazy monk has come back to play."

–Taigu Ryōkan (1758-1831)

Until now this *tree of thought, feeling and intuition* has been like a how-to book: How to use standard Nature-study procedures, and "thinking tools" like visualization and mind-flipping, how to change yourself, and how to cloud-think. In this last branch of our tree, it's time to make sure you understand what kind of happiness is being talked about.

It's been emphasized that, as meditative Nature study proceeds, Nature imparts insights. After years of doing this while paying very close attention to what's going on, you'll have been changed. Here's one way you're changed:

At the end, your understanding of what "happiness" is will have changed,.

What's that new form of "happiness" like? "Stumbling and grinning," and "Crazy Monk" suggest the answer, which can't be articulated in words, just hinted at.

It's a bit as suggested by Ryōkan's poem: There's life, in which we're all begging for this or that. Someday a crossroads comes along. You stand awhile sensing something grand beyond. But, the village temple stands nearby, so you go there and linger, and hear children laughing. You laugh with them and they call you crazy.

Here's an entry from the *Newsletter* of March 28, 2010, issued from

my hut at Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruins in Yucatán, Mexico:

The Beekeepers' Smiles

With the arrival of the dry season, Maya beekeepers acquire a new chore: Next to their hives they must keep troughs filled with water. Often the hives lie well away from any road. Therefore, deep in the forest often you meet these beekeepers trudging down trails bent beneath large, heavy plastic containers of water sloshing on their backs, held in place by tumplines around their foreheads.

I find that beekeepers in general are smarter, better educated and more philosophical people than average. Moreover, there's something else about them that until recently I haven't been able to put into words. That matter deals with a certain bittersweet disposition most of them seem to have, often expressed with a sad-seeming smile.

I think the basic smile arises from experiencing firsthand the bounty and richness of Nature. Why wouldn't one smile who spends his time gathering honey from forest and fields, who everyday beholds the mysteries of honeybee lives, who habitually sees golden honey transluced by sunlight, and who tells just by tasting whether a honey mostly comes from mango or acacia flowers?

And yet, these smiles are never exuberant or even long lasting. Always a certain air of sadness shades them.

Maybe it's because nowadays few young people show interest in such demanding work that pays so little. Maybe it's because ecosystems that once produced honey bounteously now produce much less, or because the honey they produce now lacks the delicate and nuanced flavors its once had. Maybe the greatest loss of all, however, is that nowadays few of a beekeeper's customers can recognize an exceptional honey when they taste it, the new notion simply being "the sweeter the better."

So, these old beekeepers keep plodding the forest trails, bent beneath their heavy loads, ever quick to flash a little smile if they meet you, but never eager to spend much time talking, and seldom smiling for more than a flicker. And somehow this beekeeper persona strikes me as a model I can admire.

By the way, you may have noticed that several *Newsletter* entries such as the above were written in a hut at Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruins in Yucatán, México. Those were good years for me and I'm grateful to the resort owners for providing the hut to me. I lived more or less as a hermit away from the general rush of things, but still interacting with the local Maya people and international tourists passing through interested in Nature. I offered free walkabouts through the resort's gardens. Here's a picture of the hut in which I lived for about 3½ years:



**Jim at the Hacienda Chichen hut, 2011
Photo © Eric Chaffee of Mérida, Yucatan**

NATURE'S BOOK OF REVELATION

Stumbling forward, grinning, we wonder what lies before us. Nature's *Book of Revelation* is open for all to read about what's coming in the future. We meditate on what Nature teaches, and revelations spontaneously come into our minds.

Remembering that science is one form of meditative Nature-study, one way we can read about what's coming is to consult natural laws recognized by scientists. The future will blossom before us as the laws decree it must.

No officially recognized list of the laws of Nature exists, but various laws are recognized within specific fields of scientific study. Of course, there's active discussion about what amounts to a law of Nature, even to the point of some saying that no real laws exist. However, it's still useful to consider what's often called natural laws by many serious scientists.

For example, among "Laws of Population Ecology," there's Verhulst's Law stating that at some point a population's growth rate is limited by its own density, through the process of individuals within the species competing for resources.

If we keep Verhulst's Law in mind and consider that yearly the Earth's human population increases by about 83,000,000 people, or 1.1% per year, we don't need to be mystics or prophets to intuit certain features of the future:

Verhulst's Law + 1.1% yearly population growth =

Sometimes in science natural laws haven't been formulated, but there's general consensus. Our vision of the future suggested by Verhulst's Law becomes more vivid when we consider the general consensus among social scientists that, among humans, population surges tend to cause conflict and competition for resources *if* unaccompanied by productivity growth and unmediated by strong

institutions.³⁴ In other words, as long as economic growth and strong institutions manage conditions, population growth can be accommodated.

So, in your opinion, will the world's economies keep growing indefinitely, and are our institutions effectively accommodating evolving economic conditions?

If you're unsure about that, remember renown ecologist EO Wilson's insight that:

"Members of most social groups in nature are largely in conflict with each other and at most cooperate in specific contexts. We need look no further than chimpanzee communities for an example, where social strife is stable -- there is no reason to expect it to change, given the selection pressures that are operating."³⁵

"...social strife is stable... "

And then remember that humanity itself constitutes a planetary monoculture of a single species, and that all monocultures are unstable for many reasons. One main danger in monocultures is that if a disease organism infects one host organism, soon the disease spreads among neighbors until the whole monoculture is infected.

Remember the planetary disruptions caused by the COVID-19 virus, which -- compared to diseases of the past, and current diseases which may mutate at any time to become more infectious -- is a wimpy disease. At this writing in early 2022, COVID's mortality rate ranges from about 0.3% in New Zealand to 3% in Brazil³⁶. In contrast, Bubonic Plague kills 50-70% of untreated cases, about 10-15% when treated.

Put the above facts together, think about them, and you see into the future.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated August 31, 2003, from the old hermit camp in southwestern Mississippi:

Mars's Next Visit

My cousin Jeff in Kentucky is as enthusiastic about space exploration as you can get. After reading my last Newsletter, in which I referred to this week's close encounter between Earth and Mars, Jeff wrote saying that he hoped that by the next time Mars comes this close -- over two centuries from now -- humans will be busily colonizing new worlds.

I just wonder if such will be the case. In fact, sometimes I think that there may be a universal natural law as inescapable as $E=MC^2$ that states this.

When any evolving lifeform reaches a certain stage of dominance over all its fellow creatures, because that lifeform's dominance will be a consequence of the aggression and self-centeredness encoded in its genetic heritage, that lifeform inevitably will destroy its own environment and therefore itself.

Maybe such a universal law doesn't exist, however. My hopefulness is based on how I feel when my body is in a steady state, my mind clear, and my thoughts turn to the grandness and beauty of the things around me -- the bugs, weeds, clouds, compost heap, people...

At those times, which are frequent, I feel that I enter a state of spirituality, or communion with the Creator, that empowers me to be more than the sum total of my body's hungers and mental predispositions. In that state, I drift in the opposite direction of being a collection of hungers needing to be satisfied.

In fact, maybe there's another law of nature that states this:

Aggression and self-centeredness dissipate in direct proportion to the extent to which one nurtures his or her spirituality.

By the next time Mars rolls around so close, whether we're colonizing other worlds or not, maybe we humans will be saying to one another, "The last time this happened, back in 2003, we had wars and mindless, ecosystem-shattering consumerism instead of reverence for the beauty and sanctity of Earthly life; we had religions instead of spirituality, and; we felt despair instead of the wonder and contentment we now know.

DEALING WITH DYSTOPIA

When I read Nature's *Book of Revelation*, it seems to me that humanity in general is entering a time of dystopia. A dystopia is a *state or society in which people suffer and endure many injustices, often under totalitarian or post-apocalyptic conditions.*

Already much of humanity lives in dystopias. Many dystopias are of limited scale, such as slums in certain big cities. You can gain a certain feeling for the current state of planetary dystopic conditions by browsing Wikipedia's "List of countries by Fragile States Index" page³⁷.

The above list can change fast, as the infrastructures of "highly developed countries" prove to be extremely fragile and vulnerable to pandemics, weather extremes, crop failures, faltering economic conditions, civil unrest, paralyzed or ineffectual or bizarre politics, etc.

All of us have seen movies portraying dystopias, so there's no point to dwell on the details. I only know that it will be experienced differently by each person.

With regard to what is happening and will continue happening at an accelerating rate to the Earth's biosphere, it's too sad to talk about.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated November 16, 2016 issued from Rancho Regenesiis, where I had a nice garden, near Ek Balam ruins 20kms north of Valladolid, Yucatán, Mexico:

Gardening in Dystopia

Neither up North nor here in Mexico do we have dystopias, but there are signs of a dystopic future. When I work in the garden, the garden seems to have something to say on the matter.

For, how will an average citizen deal with living in a dystopia? If you oppose the dictator, the dictator's thugs will kill you, or you'll go to prison as a risk to national security.

If the Earth's biosphere, or the part of it you inhabit, is utterly polluted, the soil eroded away, and most natural things are dead, you can't escape the fact that you're a biological being needing clean water and air, wholesome food and -- for your sanity -- a tree or butterfly here and there.

The garden says, as I work in it while thinking on the matter, that proper therapy for living in a dystopia is... to work in a garden.

The gardener knows how to mix sterile dirt with compost to make rich soil that food can grow in. Just seeing healthy plants with sunlight filtering among leaves, flowers and fruits makes the hopeless feel better. The gardener who gardens for a whole season or more is uplifted by seeing the promise of seeds fulfilled with a harvest. In any present or future dystopia where beauty and magnanimity have been extinguished, by working in the garden, beauty and magnanimity can be reclaimed.

Today, already many people live where gardening is out of the question, plus in the Temperate Zone at this season it's too cold to plant a traditional garden. Still, just having a potted Christmas Cactus or flowering begonia in the house can be cheering, and represent to the depressed and oppressed nothing less than a gesture of defiance against a dystopic future. Even sprouting seeds to produce nourishing, good tasting sprouts can put us in touch with the gardening essence.

As signs of a dystopic future become ever more apparent, to gather seeds and take up shovel and hoe in the garden is nothing less than to take up arms against those forces coming now to herd us toward dystopia.

TIPSY, BUT NOT DRUNK

In this branch we started out in the crazy monk and Mayan beekeeper modes and ranged into imminent dystopia. No wonder it's all become a kind of stumbling and grinning thing. But, keep in mind that our stumbling and grinning represents neither absolute sobriety nor complete drunkenness. Though the insights and intuitions bestowed on us through meditative Nature-study may dazzle us, making us giddy and airy-headed, if we get drunk on them, we're off the Middle Path, and lost.

By "drunk," I mean making something like a religion from what one thinks he or she is learning from Nature. Religions are rooted in indisputable dogma. Maybe the most illuminating of Nature's teachings is that things evolve, which dogmas don't. In other words, even if you think you're living according to Nature's teachings, keep examining your insights and intuitions, looking at them critically, searching for faulty thinking and feeling.

Also, the history of all major religions reveals another form of drunkenness. No matter how genuine, pure, beautiful and important the insights and/or visions inspiring the religion, once a certain number of disciples join together, the resulting religion begins degenerating into a mind-spinning corpus of crowd-pleasing myths, rituals, and general theater. Be wary of famous gurus of Nature-meaning, and popular books. Depend on your own mind and feelings, especially if they recommend refining your mind and feelings even more.

Here's a *Newsletter* entry dated January 14, 2008, issued from Yerba Buena Clinic near Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, México,

deep in Tzotzil-speaking country:

Worms & Magical Realism

I was talking with one of our workers when he grabbed his stomach and almost fainted. After some questions I diagnosed his problem as probably a bad case of intestinal worms. From there the discussion drifted into traditional cures and from there into witchcraft and local legends touching on the supernatural.

Here where native people in traditional dress walk among others wearing sunglasses and using cellular phones, and lethal poverty coexists with obscene excesses of richness, and powerful people display little or no education or talent, "magical realism" of the kind García Márquez wrote about is in the air, the sunlight, the very dirt we walk on.

I am surrounded by people of outstanding character and solid minds who at any moment of any day may tell me things the Northern mind simply can't accept. Impossible cures by barefoot curanderos, impossible feats of clairvoyance by neighborhood seers, impossible transformations of ordinary people into beings with demonic strength or character...

One night this week our three forest-protectors told me about a local creature something like a half-formed, half-alive monkey with mere slits for eyes. It emerges at dusk and after three spastic jumps on the ground suddenly sprouts wings and flies off as a bat. If it's unable to finish its three jumps, it dies. One of the men has found remains of the thing with tiny wings sprouting in its armpits, obviously having died just before finishing its three jumps.

I've given up saying that snakes don't sting with their tails. Even my Grandpa Conrad told me about such snakes in Kentucky back in the 50s, about "hoopsnakes" who take their sharp, venomous tails into their mouths, form themselves into hoops, and roll down hills.

Moments before spinning into your presence they straighten out and become poisonous spears that impale you.

In earlier years I have been here when level-headed eyewitnesses reported certain students at the Adventist university downslope becoming possessed, uttering impossibly bass-voiced blasphemies and fighting off teachers with impossible strength.

More than ever I am convinced that one of the greatest threats to Life on Earth is that we humans are so susceptible to -- often even prefer -- pure fiction.

In my opinion, one of the first steps of anyone wanting to mature to a higher level of sophistication should be this: To get straight in the mind what is really believed as truth, what might or might not be truth, and what is patently untrue.

Once the small handful of truths each person possesses are intuitively recognized, then those truths should be set aside in the mind, honored as sacred, and one's life should from that point on be based on them.

Isn't it true that in the whole Universe the only place where lies and half-truths are found is in the minds of unperfected sentient beings such as us?

WABI SABI

So, in dystopias, it's advisable to garden or at least cultivate a gardener's perspective, knowledge and impulses, and don't get drunk. For me, another piece of meditative, Nature-taught piece of advice is to manage our minds in a way that even amid vast devastation and suffering, you don't go crazy. Going crazy solves nothing for anybody.

Thinkers and feelers during dystopic times in ancient China, India and Japan seem to have been particularly successful in managing their own minds in order to survive. They have meditation, which calms and

helps us focus on rooted things, even amid an ocean of uprootedness. Besides meditation, there's the world view of traditional Japanese aesthetics known as *wabi sabi*.

Wabi sabi blossomed from Taoist tradition during China's Song dynasty (960-1279), then passed into Zen Buddhism, through which in Japan it crystallized into its current form. When summoned forth in a meditative manner, the spirit of *wabi sabi* can reveal exquisite meaning and beauty in the kind of stumbling forward life consists of.

The word *wabi* can be said to refer to "elegant beauty of humble simplicity," or maybe "poverty of the kind where you have everything you need, even if you want more." *Sabi* more or less connotes "the passing of time and subsequent deterioration," as well as "melancholy felt looking at natural settings, rural scenes, the autumn feeling."

In his book *Wabi Sabi Simple*, Richard Powell writes "It is ordered but not orderly, planned but not scheduled, simple but not simple-minded, and deliberate without being rigid."³⁸

For centuries the *wabi sabi* insight has evolved, and flowered, and survived until now, though in our society only a few let it into their lives in a transformative manner. Here I can do no better than to follow our meditative Nature-study approach and pass along to you the name *wabi sabi*, so you may "look it up" and maybe find in it something good for you. Wikipedia provides a good starting point with its Wabi-Sabi Page.

Embracing *wabi sabi*, maybe someday you'll find yourself in a tiny corner out of the wind, looking around at rubble, and you'll see a flowering head of windblown crabgrass rising above the rubble. Maybe you'll smile as you see before you manifestations of the seven aesthetic principles of Zen philosophy:³⁹

- *simplicity*
- *asymmetry or irregularity*

- *basic, weathered*
- *without pretense, natural*
- *subtly profound grace, not obvious*
- *unbounded by convention, free*
- *tranquility, silence*

Here's a final *Newsletter* entry, chosen only because it *feels right* that it should appear here. It's dated March 6, 2011, and was issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá ruins, Yucatán, Mexico:

A Walk in Pisté

In Pisté late morning it's already hot and windy with summery cumulus clouds overhead. Coconut Palm fronds crackle in the wind, dust clouds swirl past, and heavy sunlight on sweaty skin feels good. Tourist buses stream through town headed for the ruins, pale faces peering from windows, but here on the backstreets mostly people are walking or on bikes. A pickup truck cruises by with a loudspeaker atop alternately blasting salsa music and praise for pineapples on sale.

An Achiote tree beside a low stone wall next to the street is loaded with brown, burry capsules. Break open a capsule, rub the reddish-orange seeds on your hand and you get reddish-orange stain, the color of spicy achiote paste used in many Maya dishes. Tangles of Night-blooming Cereus cactus scramble atop other stone walls. Grackles screech and clack and whistle from deep inside a big Strangler Fig, and Social Flycatchers, shrill and piercing, call t-CHEER-CHEER, chee-TIQUEER. Little boys cheer as their black homemade kite ascends skyward making loops in ever-gustier wind.

Gliding, gliding, gliding, feeling bodiless, looking at weed flowers, picking up silvery-winged Monkey-Comb seeds, passing gaudy wall posters announcing a dance in nearby Xcalacoop, images of light and color drifting by accompanied by birdsong here, blaring radio there, fragrance of citrusy Lemoncillo flowers here, the woosh of wind there,

always the wind.

Honestly I'm not sure whether my friend and I are fighting when I interrupt our talk saying, "Look at that black dog smiling at us." Seeing the dog's sloppy smile and sparkling eyes directed right at us, she laughs so hard that I know we're not. She's just sending into me one of those probes of hers to see what's inside me, unconcerned about what she disturbs, or what the consequences might be.

Back on the main street it's hotter and much louder, and dustier. A lady's sidewalk rotisserie billows dense white smoke as juices drip from reddish chicken-halves being flipped. We walk through the cloud, my friend feeling good calls to the señora, "¡Huele rico!" "Smells good," and inside the smoke we enter another cloud, this of loud Mexican hiphop with such unlikely lyrics and joyful energy and sexy imagery that she looks at me and says, "Let's eat here."

In smoke and hiphop and with tourist buses rumbling over a speedbump just feet away my friend's orange-red chicken-half comes with rice, slices of red tomato, green lettuce, white onions, and hotsauce in a black stone molcajete. The giardia I've been battling for three months seems to be acting up today, sharp stomach pains and I'm a bit dizzy and feel feverish atop all the heat, so I just drink cold water, and soon feel better.

Actually I'm not sure it's my giardia acting up, or just the way I feel when this friend shoots her probes into me, or when she's doing things like sitting next to me as vividly aware as I that this smoke and the diesel fumes and this crazy hiphop beat somehow is something worth cherishing, worth getting misty-eyed about when I think about it, something that's smiling and generous and good, and even though I don't like breathing smoke, don't like eating beside speedbumps with crossing-over buses and don't like nutty hiphop, I know that we're so profoundly lucky to have it all exactly as it is right here and now, never to be experienced just so, ever again.

FINAL WORDS

This tree of thought, feeling and intuition expresses an old naturalist's opinion about how to find a certain happiness through the process of meditative Nature study. At the heart of the idea lies the miraculous fact that long-term meditative Nature-study reveals to us, among other insights, expanded notions of what "happiness" might be. Moreover, experiences with Nature impart to us the rootedness and strength to achieve that newly defined and discovered happiness, and therapy if needed.

Nature as experienced on Earth teaches us that we're all members of many communities, the largest and most important of which is the community of the Earth's biosphere. As mosses and ferns on the northern side of a boulder constitute a community within the community of an oak forest on a hill slope, which might be, for example, a community within eastern North America's Temperate Deciduous Forest Biome... communities nest within community, on and on, until there's just One Thing.

*Nature teaches **communitarianism**, which emphasizes the connection between the individual and community, and recognizes the community as more important than the individual.*

Note that communitarianism is not communism. A fascist as well as a communist, royalist or an anarchist, a deist as well as an atheist, can believe that the welfare of the community is paramount.

Moreover, Nature's irrepressible urge for spawning diversity ensures that as long as there are thinking, feeling beings in the Universe, those individual thinkers and feelers will be predisposed to adhering to all imaginable creeds and manners of being.

In such a way, Nature makes certain that the beauties, violences, injustices, opportunities, random strokes of luck and misfortune, spiritual exaltation, apathy, and a world of perversions and incomprehensible inspirations all will continue to be part of our natural

environment. That's the situation we have to deal with, to be happy.

On Earth, we humans have just emerged from primate ancestors who lived lives reacting to all the features of their environments, but not thinking much about them. Unlike other beings with less developed brains, we humans can now imagine behaviors that avoid self-hurt, and self-destruction. For example, all normal people have brains enough to understand that humanity can solve most of its current major problems by controlling its population numbers. Yet, from 2021 to 2022, the world population increased by about 65,810,000 people.

It's in the context of these insights that Nature teaches that the best two individual humans can do is to try to refine and mature ourselves, and live the lives that we ourselves feel is right for us. That's because, if we refine and mature ourselves enough, always honoring what our brains and feelings advise us, the communities to which we belong will benefit by our good works and examples.

Nature already has provided the orientation we need for deciding what kind of people we should be, by endowing each of us with natural predispositions and talents.

In the privacy of our own bodies, we can manage our minds so that whatever happens around us we can keep stumbling forward, sometimes able to grin at this or that, sometimes even being delighted, maybe in a crazy monk kind of a way, or in a *wabi sabi* one, and maybe a little tipsy from all we're thinking and feeling, but not drunk.

Clear minded, calm spirit, paying attention, harmonizing with our finer feelings...

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