

Naturalist Jim Conrad on  
**NATURE, MAN AND  
THE UNIVERSAL CREATIVE FORCE**  
Essays from his Naturalist Newsletter

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If you do want to send some money or let me know what you think about the essays, my mailing address is at [www.backyardnature.net/j/writejim.htm](http://www.backyardnature.net/j/writejim.htm)

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I thank the owners of the places where I lived during the years when I wrote the following.

**PREFACE**

In early 1997, at age 49, I pulled a tiny, hangdog-looking trailer into the woods of a large plantation a few miles south of Natchez in southwestern Mississippi and began living there. Mornings I'd work in the plantation's garden, then the rest of the day I'd study and work on the Internet. I'd strung wires through the woods for the Internet connection.

During my years there, thanks to the Internet, I always felt well connected to the world, even though sometimes I spent entire months without speaking a single word to anyone. On the Internet I created several web sites and exchanged emails with people all over the world

Still, in 2001, I began worrying that I was losing my ability to order my thoughts in a way that permitted me to communicate with others. Though I could think abstractly better than ever I was becoming an awful word-groper. Also, maybe

around that time I was beginning to miss being part of some kind of human community.

Consequently, each week I began issuing, via email, a newsletter. The idea was that this weekly exercise would make me think in patterns of the kind needed for regular conversation. Before long I felt my talking powers returning, plus I was gratified by how many people subscribed to the newsletter. Gradually a nice little cyberspace-based community crystallized around the newsletter.

In 2003 I had to leave the plantation, but a newsletter subscriber invited me to move onto his unoccupied property a few miles east of Natchez, adjoining Homochitto National Forest. I took my trailer there and continued my work and issuing the newsletter as always. The next year I left there and began spending my winters in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and my summers in various places -- California's Sierra Nevada mountains, central Kentucky's Bluegrass Region, then in 2006 I began staying in Mexico year round, first in the Yucatan, then Querétaro state, and most recently in Chiapas state.

Therefore, the following essays were written at different places. Usually you can't know where they were written, but that's OK, since nearly all the essays deal with topics that are not geography based. In fact, at this publication date I don't see that having the following essays in alphabetical order in any way violates the book's integrity. Basically I'm saying the same thing again and again, just with different words.

I'm saying that all of Nature is a blossoming, and I'm here inside the blossom watching it, agog.

You can find current information about where I am and what I'm doing by clicking on my name at my main web site at <http://www.backyardnature.net>.

As I always say to my newsletters subscribers, I appreciate your interest in what I have to say, and I hope you keep paying attention to the world around you, too.

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## **6 MIRACLES OF NATURE**

While reading Bill Broder's *The Sacred Hoop* I was surprised to see his reference to Earth's "three miracles." Those miracles were:

- **that things exist at all**
- **that life came out of things**
- **that life became conscious of itself**

My surprise is that I had believed that I had thought up "The Six Miracles of Nature" all by myself, yet his three miracles were included in my six. Well, more

than once in my life what I thought were original ideas (even original tunes) turned out to be old hat.

Here are "my" Six Miracles of Nature:

- **that things exist at all**
- **that things began evolving as soon as they existed**
- **that life came out of the evolving stuff**
- **that life evolved into many forms**
- **that life became conscious of itself**
- **that mere consciousness evolved into an ability to learn and to reflect**

When something came out of nothing, the Universe could have remained an infinite volume of hydrogen atoms equidistantly suspended in space, but it didn't. Miraculously, matter began coagulating, changing its nature in many ways, engendering stars and planets, antimatter, black holes and all the rest.

Similarly, when life arose it could have remained like a virus, simply replicating itself for eternity. Instead, something charged the spirit of life with the capacity to evolve, so that now we have amphibians, birds, mammals, and whatever may emerge later.

And when life became conscious of itself, it could have remained concerned merely with the pleasures and pains of the body, and it could have restricted its thoughts to the brain's genetically fixed patterns. Instead, now, at least briefly, some of us can sometimes rejoice in the abstract patterns of music and art, we can laugh at the good joke that we are ourselves spiritual beings stuck in animal bodies, and on occasion we can even glimpse the unity of all things.

Maybe the Creator's crowning achievement on Earth so far is that some of us sometimes reflect back on the Creative Force out of which everything has sprung so rambunctiously and elegantly, recognize the beauty in it all, and feel awe and honor to be part of it.

Astronomers, geologists and biologists can tell us approximately how long ago each of the first five miracles occurred. The First Miracle came about approximately 4.8 billion years ago, if I remember correctly the last figures I saw, and the Third maybe 4.3 billion, and then, if self consciousness arose with the first hominids, the Fifth Miracle ignited possibly 35 million years ago.

I think that The Sixth Miracle is occurring just now -- "now" being the last few millennia. This blossoming is taking place as a greater and greater percentage of us *Homo sapiens*, at least sometimes, at least briefly, project our minds beyond thoughts dealing with the daily maintenance and navigation of our bodies -- the hurting feet, the mechanics of acquiring mates, power and status, etc.

The Sixth Miracle flashes into being whenever any one of us reflects on the Cosmos, the selfless and beautiful abstract patterns in music and art, the pale-orange broomsedge field lightly touched with frost at dawn as the White-throated Sparrow sings its "I'm here" song... and is moved to emotion.

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## **99.97% AND A QUESTION**

The other day a scientist being interviewed on National Public Radio made the point that all humans on Earth share about 99.97% of their genetic makeup. Even some 98% of our genes are the same as those found in chimpanzees.

These numbers are profoundly important, and I think every schoolchild should be encouraged to think about their implications.

Technically, the concept is pretty simple. Our genetic makeup consists of encoded information. The encoded information is a set of instructions on how to put chemicals together to keep life going.

The reason we humans share so much of our genetic code with one another and other living beings is that our different bodies use the same biochemical processes to stay alive. Both toads and humans breathe, and most of the genetic instructions for using the oxygen we inhale are the same for both toads and humans. Both humans and elm trees respire, and many of the chemical pathways accomplishing this are identical for trees and man. When this how-to information was encoded in the genes of the earliest, very simple life forms, it was passed on in the genes to subsequent generations who built upon the information as they evolved into new, more complex species.

One consequence of accepting these facts is that it's easy to conceive of the Creator as being very engaged in formulating the code of life as it evolves and becomes more sophisticated through time.

Another consequence of thinking like this is the notion that -- because the Creator has been working so hard on Earth-life's genetic heritage for at least 3.85 billion years -- the genetic code is worthy to be regarded by us humans as "sacred."

Moreover, why shouldn't we rejoice at discovering that the Creator has placed each of us in a huge family of mutually dependent members of a rainbow of races and species, all sharing a huge percentage of the same life processes, feelings, potentials and aspirations? And why shouldn't the most holy act of all be that of loving and respecting all forms of life so intensely that you can't stand the idea of destroying them needlessly?

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## **A SONG IN EVERY TREE**

The other day Alex somewhere in cyberspace wrote with regard to my short book "One Year in the Life of a House Sparrow." He said that having had House Sparrows brought to his attention, "... all of a sudden there is 'a bird on every corner, a song in every tree.' If you don't allow for it, your mind doesn't register. People don't expect sparrows to be fascinating, and thus ignore them."

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

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

Several times in my life I've drifted into the no-seeing mode myself. Sometimes it was because I was trying too hard to achieve something -- maybe to succeed in a job or maintain a relationship with a woman -- and sometimes it was because of my obsessive personality, which can give me tunnel vision as I drive things into the ground, if I don't watch. So far I've always been able to shake myself out of these ruts. I'd consciously and ceremoniously take a few days of walking around reexamining my priorities and reshuffling my strategies for life. Then I'd forgive myself for having been so dumb and unfeeling, and make a new start.

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

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

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## **BARKLICE AND WORLDCOM**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The officers of WorldCom have found that by scrambling toward the top of their world's money-pyramid (in Capitalism, money is analogous to energy in real life) without respecting their environment's basic ecological principles (honesty, established procedures), today they find themselves in a mess, and a lot of people have been hurt. In contrast, in my little trailer not far from WorldCom's corporate headquarters, it seems that by anchoring my body close to the bottom of the Earth's energy pyramid not far from barklice, in an environment where my mind and spirit are given free reign, I enjoy a healthy, sustainable contentment and enthusiasm about life's potentials.

It's like having a good view from a pyramid's top.

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## **BARN SWALLOWS & BEETHOVEN**

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

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

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

As the storm broke and the Loblolly field heaved beneath wind and rain, those swallows took their time getting to safety. And I could only look on dumbly and feel ashamed that in my own life maybe I have been too slow at catching most of the jokes around me, and too clumsy ever to dance.

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## **BIRD THERAPY**

Though quite possibly I am the most contented person I know, I have to say that anytime I look at a healthy, free wild bird it makes me even more cheerful. Just seeing the Tropical Mockingbird with the blue sky behind him, perched on the gracefully arching, yellow petiole of a fan palm next to my door swaying idly in the summery afternoon wind makes me smile all inside.

In fact, often I've thought that if I had a millionaire friend I'd urge him or her to set up a sort of clinic where people with the blues or even hardcore depression could come, and I would raise their spirits back to healthy levels by introducing them to nature study, with bird-looking being the main therapy. It would be like an old-time sanatorium, except that instead of healing with hot mineral baths and weird diets I'd heal with bird fieldmarks and flower anatomy.

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## **BLACK COW, FOGGY DAWN**

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

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

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

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

In college I was assured that I was laughably anthropomorphic. Well, now I'm older than my professors at that time and I've certainly had more field experience



than they, stuck in their offices and classrooms. Now in my white-bearded, bald-headed augustness I do hereby proclaim what I should have loved to hear any authoritative individual say back then: All higher animals have feelings, and often those feelings are as intense, meaningful and beautiful as human emotions.

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

For, once we accept that other living things are of the same stuff as us, it becomes easier to see that what endangers them also endangers us. Not by diminishing humankind but by elevating other living things around us will it become clearer that all of us survive only as long as the biotic community of which we are part continues to function -- continues producing clean air, clean water, wholesome foods, open space... for us all.

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

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## **BOTFLY REVELATION**

I remember sitting quietly looking at one of the sores on my right forearm when the grub inside the sore extended its white neck to its breathing hole. The white object appearing at the hole forcefully made the point that a foreign creature had taken up residence inside my body rather as a mouse might move into an old house. Until then I had imagined my body as being somehow inviolable with regard to such overt abuse.

Of course I knew that every human body is occupied by untold numbers of bacteria, viruses, amoebas, mites, worms and other life forms, but this was different. I was coming eye-to-eye with a creature who had its own needs and priorities without regard to my own mindset.

This situation clashed with the general notion that I think most of us have most of the time, and that is that since we are thinking beings with air conditioning and perfumed soap we are excused from obeying the more messy laws of nature in general. Certainly the main Western religions teach that we humans have a touch of divinity in us, and that as such the Universe exists as a stage for the

fulfillment of human destiny. My botfly maggots didn't seem to respect my spirituality.

In fact, my botfly larvae suggested that the Creator of the Universe is more interested in biological diversity -- more focused on the production and sustainability of a vast rainbow of mutually interacting species -- than in the momentary comfort or dignity of any individual organism, such as me.

During the years since my botfly revelation I have seen nothing to contradict that insight.

We all can see how human activity is impacting the Earth at this moment. Are not most of us in some kind of trance-like state of denial, believing that if we hike into the land of botflies, somehow we shall be exempt from getting bled ourselves? That if we spoil our Earth, somehow angels or a benevolent Creator will save us? Or even that spoiling the Earth is OK, because, when we all die, us good folks will go to Heaven?

One also wonders how the current Administration's attitude toward the Endangered Species Act and environmental protection in general squares with the nature of our diversity-loving Creator.

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## **CALLUSES**

This week I've been grubbing Red Buckeye saplings from the hayfields and this has hardened the very slight calluses on my hands. I do just enough hoeing, scything and shoveling to keep respectable hints of calluses on my fingers and palms. These calluses got me remembering and thinking.

For two or three summers during the 80s I worked in Ulm, southern Germany, home to "Europe's tallest cathedral." During my Ulm days, whenever I visited the cathedral I always went right to an obscure little carving in an out-of-the-way corner portraying a naked man absolutely shaggy with long fur. Apparently he was a famously pious hermit back in 1377, someone who swore off clothing and other of man's conventions, and in reaction to Germany's habitually cold and rainy weather grew long hair all over his body.

So, the body can react to harshness in some surprising ways. Corned feet once served our barefooted ancestors well. Long before humans had tools and worried much about clothing, maybe all humans looked like the shaggy hermit in Ulm's cathedral. For, the time since humankind emerged from the Stone Age is just a tiny flash at the end of many millennia of humans evolving in the context of small family or tribal units, on the open savannah and in the forest.

It's logical to think that today our inherited human genetic code continues producing humans meant to function in our ancestors' long-enduring world, not our recently appeared one.

Moreover, our minds, like our bodies, must react to stimuli and the lack of stimuli as if we were still in those distant times. But instead of protective calluses, corns, and shaggy hide, the mind must protect itself with mental armor. Much of my thinking this week has been about what that armor might be.

I think that maybe the most common mental armor is self delusion. Many of us have lost our identities as important members of any family or tribe, so our minds imagine us as centers of our own mental galaxies -- thus the "Me Generation" and the general decline of broader social structures depending on voluntary effort.

Similarly, today the mind reels before the complexity of the societies we humans have invented. I think that the mind's main "callus" protecting us from this is our tendency to withdraw into and identify with gross simplifications -- inflexible, black-and-white doctrines like racism, nationalism, communism, the trickle-down economic theory, and the world's many religions.

Grubbing up a Red Buckeye sapling in the middle of a sunny, windswept hayfield, I stare dumbly at the muddy, oversized root, and the sunburned, wrinkled hands holding the root. Crows call and I hear myself breathing. And more than a little I sense the out-of- whackness of being what I am, being just here, doing this, the way I am in all this greenness and blueness and odor of crushed grass and earth-smell on the wind and the oily smell of my own skin in the sunlight, the cool wetness in my mouth, the feeling of fresh air rushing into my lungs... indulging in the illusion that Red Buckeyes need to be grubbed out...

And what could I do but just laugh and keep grubbing?

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## **CHARLES'S CHOIR**

The other day the plantation manager hired Charles, a local day-worker, to come sweep out the Chapel. Charles and I have been buddies for years so when trouble arose he came to me at the garden.

"What's that sound down in the Chapel?" he asked, and I replied that it should be quiet there.

"It sounds like people singing in a choir," he insisted, and this was so unlikely that I just laughed, figuring he'd heard echoes of birdcalls, and suggested, "Must be ghosts... "

A very worried look spread across Charles's face. He said he wasn't going back there unless I went with him. When I got there I found that the manager had placed a high-frequency "squeaker" in the chapel, one of those things supposed to clear out rodents by hurting their ears.

After we'd shared a good laugh I got back to my work and began thinking about what different worlds people must live in, depending on whether they can or cannot believe in ghosts.

When I lived in Belize most of my friends closed their windows at dusk, despite the heat and humidity, because they believed that malignant spirits entered on the night air. (Probably the belief arose to explain the effects of malaria-bearing mosquitoes entering windows at dusk.) The cook at the jungle lodge where I worked swore that once he had met "duendes," a Belizean kind of spirit without thumbs, who simply vanished as he passed them on an isolated road at night.

When I was a child, I was a believer. My parents told me how a swampy woods in view of our western Kentucky farm was so big that it connected with "Black Lake Bottoms," which everyone knew as a place in which hunters had disappeared, a swamp so vast that it was actually part of all other of the Earth's combined wildernesses. I heard from my mother about shimmering, pale Swamp Angels there who with their very long fingernails hovered above the moldering ground, ready to tear out the eyes of anyone who entered at night. I remember as a child lying in bed quivering as the owls in that woods hooted, and the hoots echoed off the swamp's big trees.

In the 70s when the price of soybeans soared, the vast swamps of my childhood were converted into soybean fields. Maybe this occasioned the biggest psychological shift of my whole life. The day they bulldozed and burned the last big forest near our farm and I saw that where owls had hooted among Swamp Angels there was just mud and weeds, my relationship with the metaphysical world was changed forever.

But, the question remains: Is it more beautiful for the mind to project Swamp Angels into a forest and to thrill at the prospect of meeting them there, or to know what's "really" in that forest, and to find that now your thrills are of a subtler, more lonely kind?

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## **CHILLY FOG & CABBAGE LEAVES**

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

It was drizzle with fog. We couldn't see the other side of the canyon and sometimes everything more than two trees away was whited out. When it's like that the world is reduced to tones of gray, and things look flat. Trees are silhouetted and sounds are muted. Not a bird sings. Everything is subdued.

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

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

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

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

When our eyes clearly show us that we're the one seeing the bird's bright colors, when our ears tell us we're the very listener to the bird's pretty song, it reminds us where and what we are. Except when chemical imbalances are involved, active people in stimulating environments that provide positive reinforcement seldom get mentally ill. But, when the fog comes, color drains from the landscape, things go flat and sounds are only monotonous, maybe it's hard for some of us to keep grounded.

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

tabs of who and what I am as the rest of me become absorbed in the thing I'm concentrating on.

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

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## **CICADA NOSTALGIA**

Calls of the Annual Cicada always fill me with a special nostalgia. The sound evokes memories of heat-choked summer days in Kentucky during my childhood, and the feeling I had then of being surrounded by wide fields of soybeans and tobacco framed all around by dark green swamp forests on the horizon. The heat, the sunlight, the dazed feeling, the rustling of cottonwood leaves and the lonely sound of cicadas calling...

But, it was more than that. It was while taking long walks in that environment that I began sensing and longing for the undefined, unimaginably magnificent and profound SOMETHING that surely lay just beyond my little world -- or maybe in that world itself -- if I could just figure out how to find it. The cicada calls became a kind of Ommmmmmmmmmmmmm for me, the sound of transcendent mediation, and of infinite possibilities.

This week the cicadas reminded me of this quotation from St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380):

"All the way to Heaven is Heaven."

I wonder if anyone else out there has a touch of cicada nostalgia these days, and is in any way touched by St. Catherine's insight?

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## **CLOGGED EAR**

About once a year my left ear gets infected, and this week has been its time. This has seriously reduced my bird-spotting ability.

That's because most birders develop an uncanny talent for precisely locating the positions of singing birds with their ears before they begin looking with their eyes.

I seldom notice this ability until it's gone. This week, with one ear closed down, I have been at a loss to say whether a bird was before me or behind me, to the right or left.

There's a benefit to this loss, however, assuming that the hearing returns as it always has. That is, this reminds me of what an amazing invention the human body is. I am reminded of all the things that can go wrong with a body to affect not only its hearing, vision and the other senses, but also the sense of balance, blood-sugar level, the functioning of the heart and brain...

Sometimes I reflect on the fact that back in 1947 the button on my body-machine was pushed, and I've been going every since with very modest maintenance, just providing it with fuel. In college I studied the chemical pathways involved in metabolism and respiration, how blood pH is buffered... It is all so complex, so majestically ingenious. It is amazing that we can ever feel good for a moment, yet I feel good nearly all the time. Every moment of feeling good is a tremendous gift.

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## **COLD CROW OVER WINDY GRASS**

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

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

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

A crow launched from a big Black-Cherry tree, or maybe it was blown from it, for it looked out of control, flying sideways and dipping and cawing. Seven black

birds, maybe grackles, but my eyes were too teary to focus well, and those black birds erupted from the hayfield's boiling grass and went after the crow. At a time like this, they went chasing a crow!

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

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

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

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

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## **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°F (-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 being either despicably miserly or else mentally unstable. When our hunters meet me on a 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 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 upon me. I cannot but keep thinking of the vast environmental destruction being 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.

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## **COLORS AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT**

Sometimes I just pause and take in all the colors, textures and patterns around me. For instance, so I can sit in the sunshine and write this, I open the door to my room.

Beneath the 15-ft-high ceiling the room's walls are painted gold. The doorframe, the pipes bracketed to the walls carrying electrical wiring, and the metal bars across my high windows are all blue. The ceiling is white concrete between 26 closely spaced, rusty-red rafters. The ceiling fan is white. The tiled floor, cool to my feet, is a mosaic of patterns -- green, pink, cream, brown, gray tiles, and a few multicolored tiles with snowflake designs and arabesques.

The room's stone walls are nearly three feet thick, so windows and doors are inset amongst their own dark shadows. The ten-ft-high, dark brown doors are of heavy, rough wood, and opening them occasions scraping and screeching appropriate for a medieval dungeon. The sunlight pouring through, though, undoes all heaviness and gloom, and the floor tiles shine like a cheerful song. On the patio floor just outside a sunning green snake slips into the shadows of a thicket of bamboo palms. A yellow, black and white Great Kiskadee shrieks from a banana tree with glossy, green leaves.

Drinking in all these sensations it seems to me that I could hardly live without them. Yet most people would say that they could hardly live without central heating and cooling, soft beds, sealed windows and plush carpets, even though the main effect of these items is to cushion, muffle, tone down, make tepid, sanitize and generally drain from our lives the sensations that right now I cherish and need.

In fact, in my opinion, one reason so many people are neurotic or basically unhappy is that they live sensory deprived lives. Maybe obsessions with immoderate booze, drugs and sex are unhealthy attempts to reclaim the sensations our ancestors felt with the changing seasons, dawn and dusk, and simple living.

In modern, consumption-focused society, I think that when it gets cold there are more reasons than for sustainability to put on a sweater instead of turning up the thermostat. There are more reasons for long walks and weekends at the park than exercise and cheap fun. And there are more reasons to fill one's head with flower anatomy and bird fieldmarks than merely to identify what is at hand.

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## **COMFORTING VISIONS OF VULTURES & MAGGOTS**

A friend and I have been exchanging notions on what we want done with our bodies when we die. She's all for cremation, because she likes the idea of recycling her body's nutrients into her garden.

I regard cremation as acceptable, but not preferable. My problem with cremation is that the petrochemical-powered burning process doesn't benefit a rainbow of natural decomposers. I prefer for critters and microorganisms to benefit as they convert my fat to simple compounds of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen, my protein to simple nitrogenous compounds, and the calcium phosphate of my bones to ions of calcium and phosphate in solution.

My preferred first step for this process is for my body upon death to be devoured by vultures, chambered by maggots, and to have my bones gnawed on by any animal disposed to gnaw them.

I did not come lightly to this viewpoint. My middle-class, rural Kentuckian beginnings set me into the world with all the usual, culturally appropriate belief systems and sensibilities. Every reevaluation I ever made of my culturally bestowed predispositions was a painful process. I suppose that nothing would taste so good to me right now as a fried baloney sandwich with white bread and lots of mayonnaise. However, on mostly ethical grounds, I banished that pleasure from my life over 35 years ago.

It seems nearly always to be the case that every significant circumstance is compounded of features arrayed in opposition. This often means that there's a narrow and forbidding gate to paradise. In the present instance, the consoling vision of my remains diffusing back into the mother ecosystem must be attended by the knowledge that the appetites of vultures and maggots will comprise the vehicle of my release.

I accept this as a condition and, in fact, insist on it -- as one final gesture of generosity toward the mother ecosystem, and as one last ceremony confirming my confidence in the boundless magnanimity of the Creator of that ecosystem.

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## **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!

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.

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## **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 onto my screen.

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

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

In fact, it occurred to me that 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 esthetics 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...

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.

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## **CONSERVATISM & LIBERALISM IN NATURE**

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

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

For example, the flow of evolution of Life on Earth toward ever greater complexity and interconnectedness is quintessentially liberal, but the species themselves represent conservative, fairly static expressions of local ecological niches (Species evolution appears to proceed in "jerks," not gradually, as Darwin originally supposed). Similarly, the lifespan of an individual human can be seen as a liberalistic gushing forward, beginning in a self-absorbed, ignorant state and maturing into ever more broad-mindedness, and concern for the larger

community. However, the society-imposed routines, prejudices, and unquestioning allegiances to established power structures, which basically define a person's identity and facilitate the accumulation of material wealth, are fundamentally conservative in nature.

You can see that I'm thinking in terms of classical conservatism (the idea of conserving the status quo, of being traditional) and of classical liberalism (embracing change, diversity and experimentation). Politicians often depart from these ideals for their own short-term gain, and this is never pretty. For instance, there's nothing conservative about Bush's deficit spending, and there's nothing liberal about Kerry's voting to make war in Iraq.

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

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

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

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## **CRACKING PECANS**

For the last couple of months, about twice a week I've been spending an hour or so in the afternoons cracking pecans. Once I get a goodly number of pecan halves in my can I grind them into meal with the butt of my hammer's handle. Later when I'm cooking my cold-morning oatmeal porridge with its herbs and dribbled- in eggs I throw in a handful of pecan meal. I find that the flavor of fresh pecan meal cooked in porridge is much more robust than that of raw pecans.

I enjoy my pecan-cracking sessions, and I regard that as a good sign. There have been periods in my life when my mind was too unsettled and my spirit too distracted to really enjoy simple, repetitive tasks. I think that two main changes in my life are responsible for my present pecan-cracking tranquility.

First, at age 56, fewer hormones are flowing in my body, so I no longer must deal with perpetual libidinal urges to go find a woman. How I pity young people whose hormones rage through their systems like mine used to, and older people who think they need to keep their hormones stirred up. Anyone who decides that he or she wants no more children -- or never wants them in the first place -- should have access to medicine that neutralizes sexual hormones. What a shame that so much creative human energy is so often distracted by the same impulses that give dogs in heat their general character.

Second, at last I am mostly rid of my addictions. When I was a kid on the Kentucky farm during the 50s and 60s, my family picked up hickory nuts each fall, and during the winters we spent long, contented hours cracking them. Then we got a TV. Soon we all craved junk food, the newest gimmicks, and we wanted to be like people on TV. Many old traditions ended, while our addictions to excess bore us all along as if we were leaves adrift on a river. Now I am out of that river and no longer feel the need to hustle to pay for my obsessions. The things I really like turn out to be very inexpensive, or even free.

So, every morning when I taste that wonderful pecan flavor in my steamy oatmeal porridge, and I feel the wholesome pecan essence suffusing through my body, I am so thankful that now, at long last, I can sit with a hammer and a rock and simply crack my pecans in peace.

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## **DANDELION SALAD AND POKE**

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

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

If you decide to pick some leaves for a salad, be sure they haven't been peed on by dogs, doused with herbicides, or coated with exhaust fumes from passing cars. Also, my experience is that once the big flush of fruiting heads -- the

puffballs -- have lost their fuzz, the leaves are beginning to be bitter. At locations south of Kentucky it may be too late to enjoy the tasty salads I have. Finally, I wouldn't bother with the stunted kinds of dandelions found in most lawns because they might be too tough and bitter. The leaves I've been picking are from fields that haven't been touched for a while, and the leaves stand up like dark green, glossy rabbit ears at least a foot high.

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

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

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

So, there are insights here.

The first insight is that the Earth is bounteous and good. The second is that it's not enough to simply make the mental flip enabling you to appreciate things like Dandelions and Pokeweed. You also need to know the art of taking advantage of these gifts, without which you may end up poisoning yourself as I did. In the past this art was communicated to us through traditions passed down to us from our families.

Yet a third insight can be mentioned here. Not only have most people never learned about the wonderful things the Earth offers freely, but agencies within our culture actually cause people to despise them. Lately I've heard more than one person's disparaging words about Dandelions.

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

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

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

The last was acquiring contempt for those things not hyped on TV and in magazines.



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

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

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## **DAYS OF PERFECTION**

Let it be known that I am not one to become so absorbed in nature's intricacies and minutia that I ignore the broad, simple glories of perfect days arriving unannounced and unexpected. If I'm engrossed in the wing venation of a wasp or the exact nature of a leaf's margin, and it's an afternoon golden and balmy served up like a sweet apple on a silver platter, I will reach for that apple.

The nights this week have been glorious. A bright, waning moon and temperatures at dawn as low as 48° (9°C) made for cozy, profound sleeping. Awakening as the first light glowed in the east, sharp coldness sent me springing from the sleeping platform right into my jogging shoes, and within moments I was running through ghostly fog, water droplets coalescing in my beard. Every day this week friendly breakfast fires provided mugs of steaming mint tea, and my skillet-size cucumber "omelets" made with fresh dill and jalapeños always baked to a handsome brownness. I'd work in the garden as the sun burned off the fog, and then on the Internet I'd find my tasks pleasing and fulfilling. Sometimes I'd just wander around checking on seedlings, seeing whether the cuttings were taking root, and making sure the potted plants were healthy. Balmy, late afternoons were occupied with odd jobs and listening to *All Things Considered* on Public Radio, and then as the chill grew moment by moment I'd read into the night as the crickets grew ever more silent.

I am grateful for it all, grateful to be at a peak of sensitivity, grateful to be healthy, and to have discovered how hard manual labor mingled with creative thinking and freely given service to the broader community produce in me something like happiness. I am so grateful for everything that when I pray I never pray asking for favors, only to give thanks to the Great Unknown that puts the is in is.

Golden days, golden days...

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## **DIETER'S GARDEN**

On the day I hiked through the woods after admiring the Woodsias I experienced this train of recollections and thoughts:

The notion that the Woodsias had looked "so perfectly at home where they are" took me back to my early traveling days, to a delicious summer morning in Vienna, Austria in the 1970s, when I was visiting my friend Dieter. We were in the vast gardens of the old Summer Palace of Schönbrunn, where I had never seen so many roses, row after row of them, of perfectly trimmed hedges, and of acres of geometrically arranged curlicue-bedded tulips and irises and other bright blossoms.

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

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

"You can think about it in evolutionary terms," he said, more or less. "Maria Teresa laid out the garden's plans in the early 1700s. Just a few years before that, there'd been a real question as to whether Vienna could survive the starvation brought on by a siege mounted by the Turks. In a real way, then, glittery, ostentatious Schönbrunn with its regimented flower beds and eternally clipped hedges can be seen as a reaction to those earlier times, a statement confirming Western man's newly acquired dominance over his environment."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **DOVE HUNTING SEASON OPENS**

Monday was the beginning of Dove Hunting season here. I didn't know that until one morning as I jogged down Roxie Road a friendly neighbor pulled up next to me, rolled down his window and with his shotgun lying in the seat behind him told me as I trotted along. He wanted to be in the fields with his gun cocked when the sun's first rays cut through the fog.

I suspect that I'll be rubbing shoulders with hunters until next February or so, so I'd like to be clear about my attitude toward hunting and hunters. Nearly everyone seems to assume that I, being a hardcore vegetarian, regard hunters as my mortal enemies, but that's hardly the case.

The main hunting in this area is for deer. Since the larger predators, mainly wolves, have been exterminated here, if hunting didn't remove deer, then the deer population would explode. And, to me, starving deer seem much worse off than shot ones.

It's true that I regard anyone who enjoys killing animals to have a poorly developed sensitivity to life. However, there are plenty of things to which I am apparently insensitive. Some would consider my hermit ways to be proof that an important part of my own humanity is underdeveloped. I haven't met too many perfect people.

To me the important point about hunters is this: At least they have come to terms with what killing an animal is all about. I regard this as a much more enlightened state than simply eating animals without thinking about the creature who was killed in order to provide the food eaten. I regard walking into a supermarket and

buying ground-up animal flesh neatly packaged under cellophane and stickered with a price as profoundly more obscene than blowing out the brains of any animal in the woods or fields.

If I have a choice between being around a hunter or an average person who simply pays others to kill and prepare their animal-based meals without reflecting on what actually is going on, I generally prefer the hunter.

That being said, if I have the choice between being with a typical hunter and being alone -- I'll generally prefer the latter.

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## **DUMB LOVE AND PATRIOTISM**

When I left the farm for college in 1965 already it was occurring to me that maybe life wasn't as black and white as I'd thought.

For instance, my parents were very loving, and my mother expressed a lot of that love in the form of rich and abundant food. Thus I grew up feeling wanted and cared for -- something that has given me a sense of worth and stability my whole life -- but already in 1965 I weighed over 300 pounds, and I got up to 340 before finally I took control.

Therefore, are all forms of selfless, well-meaning love unqualifiedly good? Having emerged from love-inspired fatness with hypertension, hemorrhoids, flat feet and hypoglycemia, I'd say that even selfless, well-meaning love can have a dark side.

Though I would never qualify my parents' love as anything less than perfect, my childhood experience suggests that love comes in dumb and smart forms. Dumb love is expressed without consideration for the consequences, while smart love takes into account more than the moment's hankerings.

Patriotism is a form of selfless, well-meaning love, and as such there are dumb and smart forms of it.

Dumb patriotism appears whenever the flag is followed no matter who is carrying it, and wherever it is going. Smart patriotism considers the who and where of flag-following.

Today in America most people are indulging in dumb patriotism. Dumb patriotism has caused us to stand by while being led into an unwise, unjust and horrific war. It has caused us to accept bankrupting spending policies that have weakened us as a nation, and it has created an environment in which atrocities are committed in our name.

Though decades ago I took responsibility for my body, to this day I must deal with the hypertension and hemorrhoids of my childhood brush with dumb love. In the same way, future generations will find democracy and freedom much harder to nurture because of scores being settled after America's current indulgence in dumb patriotism.

How does all this fit into a naturalist's newsletter?

It is because I am in love with the living things of this planet. The things I love are being destroyed, and they are being destroyed at an accelerating pace. Here are the prime destructive agents:

1): Unrestrained consumerism, which is a subset of dumb love, the love of granting one another and oneself instant gratification

2): War making, which is fueled largely by dumb patriotism in many countries

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## **EVOLVING, COALESCING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

This week I received a book from Newsletter subscriber Margaret Gee in Australia. Margaret was the book's editor. The book is a collection of thoughts, feelings and philosophies from celebrities and ordinary people worldwide.

In the book, writer Jeffrey Masson tells how he has discovered that many animals appear to have access to certain deep feelings, and that to him those emotions are pure and intense. Dan Millman, former world trampoline champion, says that the four purposes of life are: to learn; to serve; to mature, and; to live moment-to-moment. Author Naomi Wolf recalls the Buddhist saying that everyone we meet is, in his or her own way, "fighting a mighty battle."

Receiving the book was special not only because it was a gift from a stranger on the opposite side of the Earth, but also because it was an example of something that must happen if we are to stop destroying the Earth and its living things. What happened was that Margaret recognized the beauty and worth of diverse honest insights. Her recognition was itself an insight, so she became part of the insight network. She shared her insight with me, so I became part of it, too. Now I share them with you, and you become part of it.

The problem is that the world is full of people claiming to have insights. George Bush's insight is that America must make war in Iraq and, as our social networks decay, reduce taxes for the rich.

The beauty of insights, however, is that the Creator has set within each of us a bit of elemental wisdom harmonizing with the whole manner in which the Universe is structured. This is why it's necessary for us to stay sensitized to nature's paradigms -- the Nature-Bible. Above, when you read that the feelings of animals are pure and intense, that we must keep learning and to serve others, and that we are all fighting our own mighty battles, didn't the elemental bit of wisdom inside you glow and sing a soft song, letting you know that what was said was true?

In contrast, when false doctrines are expressed -- even if one's unrestrained hungers and addictions require paying lip-service to them -- one feels a shameful turning-away inside. The elemental bit of wisdom inside each of us dampens in the presence of dishonesty and ignorance, and we can feel that.

With communications so easy nowadays, we can share our insights quicker and easier than ever before. The elemental bit of wisdom inside each of us now connects along threads of mutual recognition in cyberspace and elsewhere with other elemental bits of wisdom crystallizing in amazing places worldwide, causing a whole new protective fabric of social consciousness to coalesce and evolve.

Maybe, after all, we shall be able to stop ourselves from destroying Life on Earth.

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## **FOCUSING**

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

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

For example, this morning with my binoculars I walked around focusing my lenses on individual things, just looking at them for a long time, as if I were standing before a piece of art on a museum wall, and I kept looking until I was satisfied that it had seen something important there.

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

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## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

This week's cicada nostalgia also reminded me of how I discovered some of the heretical thought patterns and belief systems that now make me who I am. Many of those ideas were accidentally smuggled to me in the form of discarded paperbacks of the world's classic literature. These were brought to me by my mother when each day she returned from working long hours in the book-selling drugstore of the next town. Usually the paperbacks had their covers ripped off because when a book was damaged the clerk could do with it what she wanted and no one was charged...

Somewhere among those classics I was introduced to the Four Noble Truths discovered by the Buddha around 500 BC. They are:

- # that man's existence is inseparable from sorrow
- # that the cause of suffering is craving
- # that peace is attained by extinguishing craving
- # that this liberation may be brought about by following the Eight-fold Path:
  - 1: right attention to one's understanding
  - 2: right attention to one's intentions
  - 3: right attention to one's speech
  - 4: right attention to one's actions
  - 5: right livelihood
  - 6: right effort
  - 7: right mindfulness
  - 8: right concentration (through sitting yoga)

At times in my life I have practiced several kinds of yoga and meditation, same as I have studied all the major religions. Today I still practice certain yoga and meditation techniques, but I've laid aside all the religions, and even the Four Noble Truths have come to seem flawed. I can no more identify with "Man's existence is inseparable from sorrow" than with "Man is born in sin." Also, I suspect any creed based on "right" anything. However, for me, "peace is attained by extinguishing craving" comes close to hitting the mark.

This week the forest has been profoundly deep and dark, and with that worrisome blackish tinge like a minor chord being struck during a vigorous melody in C, I have walked the fields sometimes with a brooding mind. However, it has been a great pleasure deciding to rededicate myself to certain aspects of the Four Noble Truths.

This week, memories and meditations have been like bright wildflowers blossoming out of season, just when they were needed.

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## **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 mentioned earlier. While admiring them and cogitating in the manner outlined above, 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 cataloguing 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 adoration. 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 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 Earth. 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.

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## **FROST AND GREEN TOMATOES**

On Monday, knowing that the freeze that night would kill the tomato vines, I went around collecting green tomatoes, to store until they ripened. It seemed easiest to pull up each plant by the roots, then hold the vine before me as I plucked the tomatoes, so this I did. However, it felt funny.

I felt queasy because all summer I'd babied those vines, and the vines had been good to me. I'd eaten from them, watched Green Anoles and Fence Lizards stalk quarry among them, I'd savored the architecture of their blossom anatomy and watched individual flowers gradually develop into perfect fruits. Yet now I broke roots and stems, plundered half-grown fruits, and tossed the mangled plants onto the ground to be forgotten.

The uneasy feeling haunted me all day, and I wondered why. Something here touched a deep chord within me. Something toyed with my subconscious.

After a couple of days I understood. The act of uprooting treasured tomato vines before the first big frost was nothing less than a metaphor for how I have conducted my own life at many critical junctures. Again and again in this life I have come to understand something that had been hidden to me before, and then I have quickly and irretrievably uprooted treasured, even sacred and certainly society-encouraged notions and beliefs, I have abandoned comfortable and safe routines, and at those times I have left much in my wake to molder as it would.

When I had those pitiful tomato vines in my hands, prematurely ripping off their long-nurtured fruits, it was exactly like the day in the mid 60s when I became a

vegetarian, like the day in the mid 70s when I stopped being a botanist at the Missouri Botanical Garden, never again to lead a standard life. It was like so many times I have behaved absolutely rationally, and perfectly within the letter of the unspoken contract between the world and myself, and accomplished a change that all too often was accompanied by pain on many levels.

These words you are reading right now, and my being where I am and what I am, are part of the most recently planted, modest little tomato plant just poking from the soil, the latest seedling of many that have vined and fruited, and been pulled up before it faded naturally. We'll just see what happens to this one as my own Big Frost draws nearer and nearer.

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### **GASOLINE MAKES PISTONS MOVE**

During Buck's visit he told me a story about his father, and when Buck does that he's going a long way back because Buck is well into his 80s. His story went something like this:

"When my father was teaching me how the engine that ran the sawmill worked he opened up the engine and showed me where the pistons were. He explained that gas fumes exploding above the pistons made those pistons go up and down, and the pistons were connected to a crankshaft in a way that made the crankshaft turn, and the turning of the crankshaft is what moved the blades that cut the lumber. And then he said, 'When gas fumes are being used up there above the pistons, you make sure that back there at the blades there's lumber being cut.'"

In other words, don't waste the gasoline.

I remember those kinds of notions being expressed by my people when I was a kid in rural Kentucky. Back then I thought of such sentiments as hillbilly talk, for I had seen that people in movies and on TV didn't say that kind of thing. Today, however, I'm of the opinion that such thinking suggests a much more sophisticated and realistic assessment of what has value in this world and how humans should behave, than the general principles currently guiding our culture.

Why is this matter relevant to a naturalist's newsletter?

It is because I love living things and there is nothing more threatening to Life on Earth than the behavior of people who would ridicule the kind of close accounting favored by Buck's father.

In my opinion, when someone jumps into a car and drives someplace just to buy a hamburger, that is the moral equivalent of environmental terrorism. When

people set their air conditioners at too cold a level and claim it's OK because they're working hard and paying for the electricity, it is a display of profound ignorance with regard to the environmental costs in producing and delivering that electricity, and they are showing how uncaring they are for those who will come later and have to pay the real costs. When voters allow themselves to be seduced by political demagogues, especially war-making ones, it is a rebuke to the Creator who endowed us with brains that when used enable us to see through such people.

How I long for the days when average folks with rough hands and honest smiles, and often with very little formal education, were endowed not only with the wisdom to speak in favor of frugality, self discipline, simplicity and country-style wholesomeness, but also the gumption to conduct their lives according to those sustainable principles.

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## **GRANDMA'S BLACKBERRIES**

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

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

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

If you could see Laurel Hill Plantation from the air, you'd see a large rectangle of forest surrounded on three sides by encroaching fields, pastures and suburban sprawl reaching out from Natchez 12 miles to the north. (St. Catherine Wildlife Refuge keeps swamp forest on the western boundary.) And it's funny to think why this island exists, why I'm able to live the life I have here with blackberries flowering just spitting distance away.

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

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

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

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## **GRANDMA TAYLOR**

Those of you who have been with me for years know that when I lived out of state and made my yearly visits to Kentucky it was to see and stay with my Grandma Taylor in Calhoun, in western Kentucky. Last Sunday morning Grandma died. Though that little corner of Kentucky is thickly populated with uncles, aunts and cousins, Grandma was my last close relative.

It's only recently that I began realizing one way Grandma contributed to my being the kind of person I have become. Her contribution escaped me for a long time because Grandma and I disagreed on some important points, and it was easy to focus on our differences. Grandma was hard-core Southern Baptist, so our opinions on race, the nature of the Creator and some other things conflicted. We never fought, but we have sat at the table with our jaws set as if we were biting nails.

But, the way I figure it, anyone born in 1911, who started a family during The Depression and raised seven children -- the last two mostly by herself -- can be excused for not believing as I do. She clearly never had the time or resources to develop a worldview based on the implications of the size and complexity of the Universe, of the behavior of subatomic particles, of organic evolution, and the genetic heritage and history of humans.

In fact, when I think about it, Grandma accomplished precisely what I aspire to do.

That is, she absorbed what information and insight she could during the times during which she lived, in the community in which she found herself, and then she lived according to the principles she recognized. Well, I try to do the same thing. It's just that I have access to different information and I define my community differently. Grandma and I have always agreed that if you say you believe in something, you are obliged to live accordingly.

Under difficult conditions, Grandma fought her way into a hard-headed religiosity swinging the dual clubs of Bible verses and Billy-Graham pronouncements pretty much as I have bashed my way toward a homebrew spirituality wielding the cudgels of science and natural paradigms.

In a way, then -- different as we have been -- Grandma and I are essentially the same stuff, the same melodies the Creator has played in different keys.

It's more than even that. My experience with Grandma has made it easier for me to see and believe the thing that Nature is always saying through Her passion for diversity: That even opposites can enrich one another, and be worth caring about.

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## **GRAPE ETHICS**

On National Public Radio they are presenting a series of segments on the subject of ethics. On Tuesday they explored the question of how unethical it would be -- if at all -- to steal a single grape in a supermarket. Some people insisted that it wasn't unethical at all while most took ambiguous positions saying that it depended on the circumstances. Only the professional ethicist asserted that taking even one grape was unethical. He further explained that in classical times people based their ethics on what was good or bad for society while today the ever-more-dominant paradigm is "It's OK if I don't get caught."

In my opinion, an eco-ethical equivalent of the pilfering of a grape is the leaving on of lights when they are not needed. That's because we all understand the following connections: Burning lightbulb --> power plant --> burning coal or oil, or nuclear power --> pollution or radiation --> death of plants and animals.

The ethicist on National Public Radio made an elegant point: He said that in classical times people cared about daily ethics not because they hoped to gain material reward from it, but because they felt that by being ethical, even in tiny, grape-stealing ways, it made them and their society stronger.

In this same week when it was announced that Los Angeles's air quality is worsening for the first time in many years, and our president nixed higher fuel-use standards for cars, and continues to encourage suburbanites to buy gas-guzzling SUVs, how refreshing to have someone remind us that the ethical use of a single grape (or a single lightbulb) can have far-reaching consequences for both society and individuals.

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## **GREEN TO MAKE THE HEAD SWIM**

All around my little trailer too-close-together Sweetgum saplings flaunt their new leaves right at eye level. Their profound greenness when the sun shines through them just makes the head swim. Above, the big Pecan trees are just beginning to put on leaves, so by looking up one can see blue and gray, but throughout the normal day I feel like a fish in an algae-filled aquarium left in the sun. The fish analogy is fitting because I feel as I'm breathing this greenness, swimming and dreaming in it, absorbing it and having it flow through my veins.

The other morning I was staring into this three-dimensional super-greenness while listening on the radio about the upcoming Shuttle lift-off, and about the project in store for it upon reaching the orbiting International Space Station. The juxtaposition of this green-staring and radio listening conjured a flash of insight, or maybe even a vision.

My fleeting, radio-listening "vision" was this: The Sweetgum saplings around me right now are doing exactly what NASA is doing with the orbiting Space Station. Both the Sweetgums and the Space Station are putting out their solar panels to capture energy needed to function and stay alive. For a split second I could see my Sweetgums as just as vulnerable and desperate for energy as the people in the Space Station, and I could see so clearly that once all romance is swept away, the basics are the same everywhere.

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

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

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## **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.

My first impulse was to not even react, for to do so would have been to walk into the trap set by the Bush Administration, the goal of which is to stir up fear and hatred among a certain sector of the electorate, to distract them from the fact that they are being asked to vote against their own economic interests.

However, 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. Moreover, just about any strategy furthering those blossomings is acceptable.

Among plants, sometimes flowers possess both male and female sex organs, sometimes they are unisexual and on different plants, sometimes unisexual and on the same plants, sometimes flowers are designed so they can't self-pollinate, other times they have to pollinate themselves, and some plants skip the sex scene altogether by reproducing vegetatively.

Among animals we find everything from the male seahorse who carries the eggs, hatches them and takes care of the young, to the "polyandrous" Spotted Sandpiper whose females may lay up to four nests 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'd like to review online notes of a series of university lectures dealing with parent-offspring conflict, including infanticide and the effects of high population densities on higher mammals, go to <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~phyl/weektwelve.html>

If you have access to a science library or can use a search engine artfully, references to technical, academic papers detailing homosexual behaviors in a wide variety of primates, from langurs to orangutans to pit-tailed macaques can be accessed at

[www.androphile.org/preview/Library/Articles/Werner/Werner20.24.htm](http://www.androphile.org/preview/Library/Articles/Werner/Werner20.24.htm)

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. A semi-technical paper at the University of Texas with the title "Biological Correlates of being Gay - Biological Determinism?" is available at

[www.utexas.edu/courses/bio301d/Topics/Gay/Text.html](http://www.utexas.edu/courses/bio301d/Topics/Gay/Text.html)

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.

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## **HONEST IGNORANCE**

This morning as the eastern horizon just began to pale I stepped from the trailer and heard what sounded like heavy raindrops pelting the satellite-dish solar cooker. It wasn't raining anyplace else so I walked over and saw that large, dark beetles were plummeting from the sky and bouncing off the shiny aluminum dish onto the ground. Apparently they were attracted by the aluminum's brightness. The beetles were a species of Shining Leaf-Chafer of the Scarab Beetle Family, closely related to Japanese Beetles.

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

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

And yet, there is a certain charm in honest addleheadedness. For, the people I most admire assure me that they feel even more astonished about things and more simple-minded than I. Mostly I am speaking of people who are scientists



and good teachers, or just regular folks who constantly, like me and my Sunday-morning beetles, bounce into things and fall back looking and feeling dumb.

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## **HONEYBEE STING**

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

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

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

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

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

I with great pride claim biological relationship, just where is the "sense of identity," the "consciousness," or "the soul?"

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

Of course once you start thinking in this direction, then you come face to face with Gaia -- the Earth- Ecosystem-self-awareness-complex. In other words, maybe the Earth does feel, and react, like a single living organism. Certainly a lot of what happens appears to support that idea. For example, ecosystem-destroying humans on an overpopulated Earth are analogous to germs infecting a human body. As the human body reacts to disease by producing antibodies to control the germ population, Gaia's body does the same thing as diseases, famines and wars appear among us humans.

And, beyond Gaia, the Universal self-aware complex...

So, this was the train of thought blossoming from my bee-sting. How wonderful to be a thinking human animal.

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## **HORSE MANURE & BUCK'S TRUCK**

On Tuesday I hiked upslope to my friend Buck's house where we'd agreed to meet and use his truck to haul horse manure from a neighbor's place to our garden. I hadn't seen Buck since last October but it didn't surprise me that when we met he just sort of nodded, didn't gush all over me, or even offer to shake my hand.

Buck is an old fellow who has worked hard all his life and accomplished a good deal. He sees things with a level eye and doesn't care much more about social graces and clean work-britches than I do. When I was a farm kid in Kentucky back in the 50s my impression was that you only shook hands with preachers and insurance salesmen. All other people you looked in the eye and you could see what they thought of you, and you knew they could see what you thought of them, so what was needed beyond that? Hand shaking was superfluous city-stuff, and if we'd known about the kind of embracing and face kissing some people do nowadays we would have regarded it as perverse.

Buck's truck was a 1928 Model AA Ford. You could start it with a hand crank if the battery got low. When we were climbing back upslope with our manure the truck stopped and I thought we were out of gas because the gauge registered zero. However, Buck rocked the engine and saw the gas-needle bob up and down, so he figured if there was enough gas for the float inside the tank to bob up and down we weren't out. He blew on the fuel line to unclog whatever he suspected to be stuck there, and then the truck started with no problems.

The admirable thing about the old Ford is that it's so simple that its problems can be diagnosed and usually they can be fixed without a lot of fuss. Using such an unpretentious vehicle, you're more in control of your life. This same dynamic functions at all levels of living. The more simple your life and the more self-sufficient you are, the less vulnerable you are to a host of potential aggravations and dangers. When I see new cars in which you can't even open the windows by turning a handle, I just want to spit.

How pretty it was to haul manure with my friend Buck. What a noble thing we accomplished that day. With what savoir faire Buck blew on the fuel line, and with what grace we pulled the whole thing off!

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## **HOT, BREEZY AFTERNOON THOUGHTS**

Sometimes an afternoon's heavy glare and dry heat gets to you and you just have to lie down. However, you never nap for long. By early afternoon the wind has grown beyond being just a friendly, cooling breeze. Always, just as you are about to doze off, it blows over a potted plant, a heavy wooden window-shutter comes undone and crashes against a wall, or a gust simply blows through the room so rudely that you have to get up and look around.

On such drowsy afternoons when the wind keeps you awake, you feel that the whole rest of the world must be quietly at siesta, somehow more at ease with the wind than you. You look around, the palm trees gyrate, dust swirls through the bougainvillea gate, iguanas keep their heads low atop the ruin walls, and you think, think, think...

This week on such afternoons I've been thinking about an insight that has grown in me over the years. Of course I can't be sure that I'm seeing things clearly. I only know that the insight feels harmonious with how I perceive Nature to be. Certainly I'm not the first to come up with the thought. However, I did come to it in my own way. I feel a responsibility to share the insight, for it provides a possible answer to a kind of question I have heard many ask in desperation. Here is one form of that question:

"Why do innocent, beautiful people suffer and die, sometimes horribly?"

The insight is very simple, yet it is based on an assumption not very popular or understandable in our culture. In fact, the assumption is almost the opposite of what our culture imagines. Here it is:

When a human or any living thing is born, it is not a matter of something unique arising from nothingness. Rather, everything is one to begin with, just that now there's another ephemeral opaqueness or maybe a tiny hole in the Great Unity's fabric. From the Unity's perspective, this opaqueness or hole is characterized by its lack of information, its lack of understanding, and its lack of senses arrayed so that the fabric and design of The Whole can be perceived, understood, and loved.

Why does the Universal Creative Force bother causing uninformed, clumsily equipped beings to arise and evolve?

I think it may be so that the Universal Creative Force can examine and know Herself by way of what we living things see and feel. We are not only words She uses in Her poetry, tones in Her music, but also we are nerve endings with which She experiences Her own being and Her own evolution. We must be made simple and crude, and made so that we must die before we understand much, else the opium of enlightenment would blunt our pains and end our fears, and the Universal Creative Force's nervous system would be anesthetized.

When the innocent child dies of leukemia and everyone hurts in so many ways, then the Universal Creative Force feels through our pain the value and beauty of that child. The sharper our pain -- as well as the greater our joy over other things -- the more exquisite is the Creator's sense of self.

Many insights can blossom from believing this. One important to me is that surely there's no greater responsibility for each of us living things than to perpetually struggle to sharpen our own senses, sensibilities and understandings, so that we may hurt more, feel greater joy... so that the Universal Creative Force may do the same.

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## **HOT WATER & CHINESE**

The next morning, Saturday, at the same time as on Friday morning, I was awakened by a nearby flash of lightening and subsequent bone-jarring thunder. Maybe the arrival of the geese a day before the cold-front was no coincidence.

All day Saturday it stormed and rained here, dumping over 3 inches (8 cm) of rain on us, in addition to the inch of rain the day before. Once I'd managed to prepare my campfire breakfast during the deluge, I found the storm much to my liking. For, it provided an unexpected quiet period for me.

Most people seem to think that here in my little camp I spend a lot of time "hanging loose," just goofing off. In reality, each day I spend mornings working in the gardens and nearly all the rest of the time developing my Internet projects. I suspect that my days are at least as structured and intense as are the days of those of you with regular jobs. This is because I believe in what I am doing, and feel an urgent need to press on exploring the potentials of this life, especially now that it is clear that human society on Earth will never be the same as it was before.

So, Saturday morning I couldn't garden and there was too much lightening to have my computer on. Therefore I did what I often do in such enforced rest periods: I fixed a big mug of hot water, and studied Chinese. People in our culture underestimate the pleasure in drinking simple hot water, especially steamy, pure rainwater. During my recent travels I as struck by how people often habitually sipped liquids -- coffee, sodas, Strawberry-Kiwi herbal tea, beer, whatever. To my mind, these people focused so exclusively on titillating their taste buds that they overlooked the more fundamental pleasure of simply refreshing the body with pure water.

Tickling taste buds and gratifying the body with exactly what it needs are unequal pleasures. The one, though certainly having its place, is superficial, fleeting, and often damaging to the body or even addictive. The other is a natural and necessary maintenance, and when the water is hot on a chilly, stormy day its drinking satisfies in a deeply, perhaps atavistic, manner. Drinking hot water on such days has calmed the spirits of a million generations of our ancestors in their caves and dark lodges. Drinking hot water can be a kind of communion with them, and with the spirit of simple survival in a hostile world. I also find studying Chinese to be a deeply satisfying experience. I am afraid that people nowadays have forgotten that learning, by itself, can be gratifying.

So, as rain tapped on my roof and I drank steaming hot water from my mug in this drenched little corner of the forest I wandered into the psychology of Chinese people as manifested by how their written language has evolved. The Chinese character for "good" consists of the symbol for "woman" next to the symbol for "child." How can you but be impressed by a culture that expresses itself in such a simple but profound manner? And what pleasure it is for the mind to be reminded on such a morning as Saturday's that the Chinese character for "fragrant" is nothing less than the symbol for "grain," such as wheat, set with the symbol for "sun."

Thus -- the sun warming a field of wheat produces a fragrance. The glow caused by these insights harmonizes beautifully with the glow brought by steaming water on a rainy morning.

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## "HOW PRETTY HE WAS... "

My cousin Miles Carroll writes "This week I found a crippled finch. I put him on top of my shed and watched him. By the afternoon he was dead, and I sure hated to see him go after holding him and seeing how pretty he was."

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

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

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

When I read Miles's letter I also remembered a quotation from a book by Charles de Lint:

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

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

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## HURRICANE KATRINA

I've spent each of my last ten or so summers in the woods outside Natchez, Mississippi. If I had stayed there this summer today's Newsletter wouldn't have been issued, for there'd be no electricity to power the computer and maybe no phone.

My heart goes out to everyone whose lives were upset by Hurricane Katrina, and I know that a goodly number of Newsletter readers find themselves in that group.

I think that this is a good time in which to reflect on that feature of human nature which made this disaster worse than it had to be. This is an important subject because the same tendencies are directing us all toward even greater disasters.

When New Orleans was founded in 1718 by Sieur de Bienville, engineers on the scene said from the very beginning that it was a bad location. It was a classic case of science being overruled by politics and big business.

Today science points to water tables already too low in places where politicians encourage more growth and big business builds new homes. Science shows that wetlands are vital to Earth's Web of Life, but politicians and big business drain swamps and pave them over. Science says that global warming will cause catastrophic consequences for the entire Earth, but the President says that dealing with it would be bad for American business.

At some point we must begin respecting the fact that when it comes to something as important as the continuation of Life on Earth, the ephemeral concerns of politics and big business should not be allowed to trump the hard-won, eternal facts of science.

The thinking process must not stop there, however. The next insight to face is this: Politicians and big business are doing no more than providing the goods and services demanded by the general public.

At the root of the current disaster, and most of the catastrophes soon to beset us, lies undisciplined consumerism by the great majority of US, the people. It is WE who require that the holy facts of science be denied in order for politicians and big business to accommodate the demands of our own intemperate appetites.

If any one of us is asking what we can do to turn things around -- even if we believe that our efforts will be futile -- surely the best answer is for each of us to exercise more self discipline, deny our appetites at least a little, simplify our lives, become more self sufficient, and sensitize ourselves to the spiritual aspect of being a biological being profoundly enmeshed in and depending on a gorgeous Earthly ecosystem.

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## **HYPOGLYCEMIA & SPIDERS**

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

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

This reminds me of an experiment I read about long ago. Different chemicals were given to a spider to see how each chemical would affect the spider's web.

Most striking was how the spider given marijuana's active ingredient produced a sloppy web with many incorrect connections and holes. On the other hand, when the spider was given the active ingredient in LSD, the web produced was perfect, as if the chemical had increased the spider's power of concentration.

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

I wonder about these things a lot, especially because I am hypoglycemic. If I happen to stoop for a while and then stand up, things 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 I realize that as I tunnel-walked my thoughts and insights had been profoundly limited.

In other words, several times a day I remind myself that the very dumb can never know just how dumb they are. I am also struck that during the first few moments of "being myself," I can still recall exactly how it was to be "tunnel walking," and I am appalled at how self-centered and narrow the tunnel-walking headset was. Also, during those first moments of "becoming myself" there's a rushing feeling -- it's as if my soul were being instantaneously derived from the bright melodies in a lush, gorgeous symphony. The whole process is like passing from being a Republican to a Democrat to a member of the Green Party.

By the same token, how can I know that when I'm "normal" there isn't an even more lucid state beyond that, one in which I could "be myself" if I only had the brain to go there?

In fact, because of very brief moments of insight accomplished during moments of meditation, I am sure that those higher levels of enlightenment do exist.

Recollections of insights understood during those brief moments of enlightenment have a little to do with why I am now a hermit in the woods. However, now in my "normal" state, I am really too dumb to explain to you clearly how my reasoning works

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## **IF THERE WERE AN EINSTEIN TADPOLE**

In his essay "Religion and Science," Einstein considers man's religions from an evolutionary perspective. He notes that primitive religions concern themselves with gods who manifest themselves in more or less understandable forms (as plants, animals, rocks, symbols, humans), and their main job is to grant favors and protection. A later-emerging type of religion conceived of there being a single "God of Providence" ("providing god") rather like a celestially based, stern but loving patriarch in a large family. Our current major religions, including Christianity, are of this kind. Finally, there's what Einstein calls the "cosmic religious feeling," which conceives of a universality (which I would think of "the Creator") to which it is pointless to pray for favors, but which is so majestic and awe-inspiring that by reflecting upon it one is "filled with the highest kind of religious feeling," as Einstein writes.

If my dishpan tadpoles were somehow to begin feeling a need for religion, I wonder what gods they would come up with? I suppose that some might begin worshipping certain alga cells some one of them had espied glowing a certain way suspended in the water in a beam of sunlight, or maybe they would worship their own reflections in the dishpan's shiny aluminum. The more sophisticated tadpoles might sometimes catch a glimpse of me with my magnification glass looking down at them -- this huge eye-in-the-sky, the God of Providence who thumps them cornbread -- and they would produce tadpole priests and tadpole mullahs and tadpole rabbis who would assiduously and interminably interpret and reinterpret the meanings of every little thing I did.

And if there were an Einstein among them, I suppose he would just keep quiet and write in obscure forums, suggesting that it is hardly to be expected that the God of the Cosmos would be at the beck and call of every wiggly little tadpole in a dishpan... though in truth it is quite wonderful for this brief moment in eternity to be granted the perspective of a tadpole in sparkling water temporarily pooled on a random, laughing hermit's warped and moldy, falling-apart, outside table.

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## **IGUANA FIGHTS, MONEY & ENLIGHTENMENT**

During the half hour of watching two iguanas fight I found myself thinking about this question: Why did nature create this species so that males must fight, and subordinate males on the periphery must suffer such frustration?

Of course I knew Darwin's answer, for here I was seeing "survival of the fittest" at work -- evolution being powered by "natural selection." The strongest, most dynamic male would get to pass on his genes to the next generation, while the weaker or less adapted males would not.

Since I am on record as regarding "Nature as Bible" -- as believing that enlightened human behavior should be harmonious with paradigms observable in nature -- one might assume that witnessing this iguana fight might convince me that human competition of all kinds is good. Since the iguana fight was natural, maybe I should champion the highly competitive free market system, and maybe I should even agree with the claim made by many evangelical Christian groups that material wealth is a reward from the Creator for hustling.

There are different levels of interpretation for everything. At one level, two male iguanas fighting over territory and females are indeed like two capitalists competing over resources and customers. On the other hand, fighting iguanas and consequent rewards and punishments are not ends in themselves. They are no more than the means by which the evolutionary process fuels itself through natural selection. Evolution is the greater thing here, with greater implications for my philosophy of life, not fighting. Therefore, what is the meaning of evolution?

The only way I can set my teeth into that question is to try to identify trends in the examples of evolution I see around me every day. After all these years of reflecting about the matter, I think I can list at least these three important trends of Earthly evolution:

- **Things generally evolve from simple states to more complex ones**
- **The more highly evolved a system, the less it wastes and the more it recycles**
- **The most highly evolved creations, we humans, have certain traits that less sophisticated creations don't, including the abilities to feel compassion, to recognize beauty and create art, and to think things out and act accordingly instead of always behaving instinctually**

Viewing my own society from the perspective of these three insights, I find that I must condemn some of its dominant features. For:

- **It replaces diverse, often very complex and beautiful social systems with a single simple one based on earning and spending money.**
- **It wastes and destroys resources needed by all living things while providing short-term material gain for a very few.**
- **It reduces too many humans with enormous emotional, intuitive and artistic potentials to desensitized and/or psychologically damaged automatons blindly serving the narrow interests of a few.**
- **It fills our heads with ads and political propaganda instead of teaching and encouraging sustainable, loving ideals.**

Therefore, fighting iguanas mean this to me: That I have a mind and a spirit perfectly capable of seeing beyond images of instinctual aggression -- be it battling iguanas or consumption-focused society. I can aspire to higher meanings and principles.

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**INTELLIGENT DESIGN**

Over the years often I've written about plants and animals whose features were so remarkable that they seemed almost inexplicable. I've used phrases such as "evolving toward" and I've even referred to "the Creator." This has caused some to assume that I am a proponent of "Intelligent Design."

Though the definition of "Intelligent Design" hasn't yet crystallized well enough for me to take a final position on it, my first impulse is to reject it decisively.

First, the name itself, in my opinion, misses the mark. My experience with nature suggests that the Universe has come about not through an intelligent plan but through something more akin to a creative, spiritual impulse. This impulse is majestically magnanimous and artful, yet not terribly concerned about the comfort or welfare of each of its individual creations

Second, I believe that one must judge a religion or any social or political construct not by its Holy Scripture or manifesto, but by how the concept manifests itself among people in everyday life. Intelligent Design is advocated most forcefully today by aggressive, materialistic, right-wing Christians with whom I don't want to be identified.

Yet, I am in awe of and profoundly respectful of the things of the Universe, and I am not reluctant to refer to the Universe as a creation. Since any creation has to have been created, nor am I averse to thinking in terms of the Creator. I sense a Universal Creative Force evolving things forward, and since we must use words to describe concepts, the term "Creator" is OK with me.

Therefore, if the definition of "Intelligent Design" eventually proves to rest on the simple notion that a Creative Force seems to be creating the Universe in such a way that certain evolutionary trends and natural laws are detectable by human minds, I'll say that I'm a proponent of it.

However, if the final definition encourages people to pray for Divine intervention in their own lives and if the concept is identified with any particular religion -- particularly one tolerating unrestrained and unsustainable materialism -- then I shall not be a supporter of the concept of "Intelligent Design."

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## **JACK**

This has been a sad week. Jack, the eldest son of the plantation manager, was killed in a car accident in Houston. He leaves behind a young wife and a beautiful boy not old enough to have said his first word.

On Tuesday I went with the hired hand Master to dig Jack's grave near the Chapel.

Digging a grave for a friend is a somber job, and when you are in the grave and the family and friends come to see how things are going, you don't know what to do other than to keep on digging.

The grave is dark and the heavy odor of earth presses upon you. Sometimes you must rest and you stand up and look out and you see how sweet and bright the world is beyond the grave, and your own feeling for this thing called life assumes a genuine urgency. You feel like getting out of that hole and going walking in the sunlight, throwing your arms open to the sky.

You also think about the phrase "dust to dust," for as you are bent over digging it becomes very clear that "dust to dust" is more than a quaint phrase.

Jack had a good laugh and he was the only person on Earth I knew who had feet wider and uglier than mine. The last time we talked we sat in the grass just laughing at one another's feet.

While I was bent over inside the grave I reflected on the fact that something unseen behind all the dusty-smelling earth around me shows a great passion for life. Scientists now say that life appeared on Earth just as soon as the Earth had cooled enough for life to be possible. Creatures have been discovered living in hot-water vents in the oceans' deepest regions and in cracks thousands of feet below the Earth's surface where earlier no one dreamed that life could exist. The Universe seems to be a theater in which life is the crowning act.

Walking home in the afternoon sun, my body buzzing with the fatigue of a day of digging, it further occurred to me that we humans just can't know what lies beyond the end of life. Yet, because the Creator so obviously rejoices in rambunctious life, and has a sense of humor and a genius capable of creating things like giraffes, slime molds and Jack's feet, it seems a good bet that if anything at all happens to the "soul" at life's end it cannot be something that -- if we could just grasp the Creator's whole concept -- we would call bad.

Maybe it is all this simple: There was Jack and this was good and beautiful. Today is today, and dust passes to dust. Life goes on as ever.

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## **JUNE APPLES**

The plantation's orchard is in bad shape. Most of its trees have died and been cleared away, leaving only three apple trees, a number of pear trees, and a grassy meadow. Diseases, the recent drought and general neglect have taken their toll. Nothing seems to kill the pear trees, however, and the three remaining apple trees produce more than we can eat, to the raccoons' advantage.

Saturday I went apple gathering. I tarried beneath a tree and while gazing across the meadow where once dozens of varieties of fruit trees flourished, chomped down on a tart but sublimely juicy and tasty specimen that was green, with just a touch of burgundy on its shoulders.

As I ate I couldn't avoid remembering something from the Real McCoys, a TV show I watched with my family back in the 60s. In that episode a "city slicker" visited the McCoy farm. He was the most handsome, rich, physically powerful and certainly the most sophisticated person any of the McCoys had ever seen. The whole show was about how the McCoy men-folk dealt with their jealousies. At the end of the show Luke, the family's father, in a gesture of goodwill, and perhaps surrender, offered the departing visitor an apple. The visitor grimaced and said that with all his cares his stomach couldn't take it.

The show ended with Luke thinking that maybe his life wasn't so bad after all, as he chomped into that apple with full abandon.

Today I'm being glad that at this age I've managed to come down on the Luke side.

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## **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 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 to 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, 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; religions instead of spirituality directed our lives, and; we felt despair instead of the wonder and contentment we now know.*

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## **THE MEANING OF LIFE**

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

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

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

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

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

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## **METAL**

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

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

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

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

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

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

My steel knife blade shining in sunlight as it works the moist, crumbly soil suggests that it is a beautiful and powerful thing if you can pass through the fire of becoming something new, of evolving, evolving, evolving...

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

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

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

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

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### **THE MIDDLE PATH**

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

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

Humans have been around for 5-7 million years. Until only about 300 years ago when the Industrial Revolution began, people were NOT spending most of their waking hours doing repetitive, often unfulfilling jobs for businesses and institutions. The manner of life we now accept as normal and inevitable has occupied us during only about  $\frac{1}{500,000}$ ths of our existence. Our society's priorities of attaining mostly unnecessary material wealth, and our obsessions with individual personal liberty and self gratification instead of the maintenance of a healthy and just society, constitute a very recent phenomenon.

Our society's present consumption-oriented manner of living must be and will be replaced by a different system, if only because it is unsustainable. The most obvious reason it is unsustainable is because maintaining the kind of lifestyle we live consumes resources faster than they can be replaced, if they can be



replaced at all. Unsustainable behaviors either change or go extinct. To my mind, to persist in indulging in unsustainable living patterns is extreme. It is not extreme to try to live sustainably.

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

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

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

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### **MOMENTS OF PERFECTION**

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

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

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

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

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## **A MONTH OF EASTER**

Tomás, who each Monday morning arrives in his little truck with my 19 liters of bottled water, usually tarries at the gate for 20 minutes or so, chatting. Though typically I don't care for smalltalk, I do look forward to Tomás's ramblings not only because he's a friend but because his stories provide insights into the surrounding small-town Maya culture -- everything from which traditional meals are prepared for this or that festival, to how young men and women make contact with one another and get their business done.

This Monday I heard a lot about Easter -- a whole month of it. I lost count of all the events in the Christian calendar Tomás told me must be celebrated, and all the times folks here are expected to go to Mass, to fast, to feast, to watch a fellow lugging a heavy cross down the street, to get ashes on the forehead, etc.

I'm not at all against celebrations. In fact I believe that an enlightened society properly sensitized to the beauties around it would insist on many more holidays and celebrations than we have now.

The problem is that humanity has let its storekeepers and religionists decide on what's to be celebrated, and how. Thus the exquisite celestial event consisting of the Earth shifting on its axis so that the Winter Solstice arrives and days begin growing longer has been supplanted by Christmas with its over-the-top merchandizing and self-indulgences. And now when spring's rebirth of nature and all its living things should be celebrated with even more joy and ceremony than Tomás can visualize, there's all this Easter to-do.

I do believe that someday humanity will get its celebrating philosophies figured out. However, I fear that that time won't come until the most fragile and therefore the most exquisite of physical wonders are destroyed by human overexploitation of nature, and by wars wrought by religious fanatics.

But, someday, a chastened and wiser (a further evolved) humanity will find itself starting over from within the vast rubble field of Earth. Then we shall abandon childish mythologies and unthinking traditions, and begin celebrating those things truly and self-evidently much more mysterious, majestic and worthy of awe and adoration than what we celebrate now.

I wish I could participate in a future "Mystery of the Germinating Seed Week," highlighted by ceremoniously sowing useful and ornamental plants in gardens and indoor trays. "Welcome to Migrating Birds Week" will be celebrated with singing festivals and parades where the young-at-heart can strut and be flamboyant like the birds being welcomed. What a powerful moment it could be if bonfires were lit and prayers of thanks offered worldwide at the exact moment when the Winter Solstice arrives, and what a rip-snorting festival there could be to celebrate summer in all its gorgeous vitality, with fireworks and picnics on the day of the Summer Solstice.

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## **MUSTARD-GREEN SPACESHIPS**

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

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

For, both spaceships and seeds undergo voyages that are fundamentally alike. When they are launched or sowed, and activated either by signals from technicians on the ground or by moisture in the soil penetrating the seed's seedcoat, the first stirrings inside the module/seed are powered by stored energy -- energy stored in the spaceship's batteries, or among the seed's atomic bonds. Once the module reaches its orbit or the seed has sprouted, typically both have used up their stored energy. At that point both module and seedling do the same thing -- they tap into a new energy source by deploying solar collectors. The spaceship has its black solar panels and my mustard plants have their photosynthesizing green cotyledons.

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

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## **NATCHEZ-HERMIT BOOK UPDATE**

Months ago I told you that University Press of Mississippi had invited me to submit a manuscript for a book consisting of excerpts from this Newsletter, written during my years as a hermit in the forest outside Natchez. Last winter I put together some drawings for the book and this spring submitted it. This week I finally got the results of the long review process.

I am invited to resubmit the manuscript after removing statements relating to my political and spiritual beliefs.

I am NOT going to make those changes. Without reference to my political and spiritual beliefs my whole experience as a hermit and the way I am conducting my life right now becomes unintelligible, or else I must be seen as merely indulging my senses in Nature and lazily avoiding my responsibilities as an Earth citizen. It is my very strong belief that anyone with insights into the dangers facing Life on Earth, and human dignity itself, must not only change his or her manner of living, but also speak out.

Therefore I've decided to provide my Natchez Naturalist manuscript for free on the Internet. This way, not only do I avoid having to deal with publishing companies but also I find it very appealing that people can have the book without causing trees to be cut for the paper, and without all the other pollution and energy use resulting from the manufacturing and transportation of regular books. This concept pleases me so greatly, in fact, that I plan to make several books available, based on my various websites, all for free.

Already you can download the Natchez Naturalist book, without my drawings, at <http://www.backyardnature.net/j/books/>.

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## **NEATNESS AS ABOMINATION**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### **NERVOUS, UNSATISFIED PEOPLE**

My friend Jarvis in North Carolina sent the following lines:

"Carl Jung wrote about a conversation he had with a Native American chief who told him that his impression of most white people was that they have tense faces, staring eyes, and a cruel demeanor. The chief said, 'They are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something. They are always uneasy and restless. We don't know what they want. We think they are mad.'"

Jarvis continues:

"Commenting on this, Eckhart Tolle writes, 'The undercurrent of constant unease started long before the rise of Western industrial civilization, of course, but in Western civilization, which now covers almost the entire globe, including most of the East, it manifests in an unprecedentedly acute form. . . This collective dysfunction has created a very unhappy and extraordinarily violent civilization that has become a threat not only to itself but also to all life on the planet.'"

I can understand how the uneasy and restless manners of our Northern European ancestors evolved, as can anyone who has endured northern or central Europe's spirit-crushingly cold, sunless, wet or snowy falls, winters and springs. Imagine what it must have been like for ancient Europeans living in caves and primitive huts. During Paleolithic times, anyone who wasn't uneasy and restless with regard to gathering in plenty of firewood, of properly curing furs and storing nuts, roots and the like -- didn't survive long enough to produce us as their descendants.

A good guess is that our uneasy and restless manners are genetically fixed traits. Moreover, I suspect that these predispositions lie at the root of our obsessive

consumerism, and our tendencies to want more and more, even when we have enough.

It's important to understand the roots of our impulses for ever-greater consumption because our out-of-control consumption is destroying Life on Earth. Why is it appropriate to destroy vast forests to provide cheap lumber for buildings that are mostly unnecessary? Why do we keep filling in wetlands for more parking lots and subdivisions, while our urban zones decay? Why eat so much when we are already fat?

But, it's not enough just to say that we must end our unthinking, destructive manners. Our present self-indulgences must be replaced by other behaviors -- behaviors that on the one hand satisfy the needs of our genetically programmed "uneasy and restless" predispositions, but, on the other, are useful and soul-pleasing behaviors, not destructive ones.

Such ecosystem-saving and sanity-saving activities range from planting trees and gardening, to developing one's artistic talents, to producing well-adjusted, life-loving children and societies in which everyone can live in dignity and feel needed.

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### **NOSTALGIA, WISTFULNESS, OR WHAT?**

These days as the spring bird-migrants arrive, familiar birdsongs are settling onto the landscape. As I type this an Indigo Bunting sings his heart out in the Broom-Sedge field across the hedgerow, and this strikes a chord deep within me. The song brings to mind long summers when I was a kid on the Kentucky farm. Hearing it now I almost see, almost smell and feel, the big, flat, heat-smothered fields of soybean, corn and tobacco around our house, where Indigo Buntings always sang from nearby power lines.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Tao says that that which calls itself the Tao is not the Tao. Maybe not having a name for this bunting thing, Leona and I are onto something real.

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### **ODOR OF FRESHLY GROUND WHEAT**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **ODOR OF YELLOW JESSAMINE**

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

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

This is one of the problems with being a hermit, of keeping things simple for long periods of time: Little things like incidental flower-whiffs can knock you flat. If I had been nibbling cellophane-wrapped K-Mart candy all morning, or if lately I had



been indulging my libidinousness, that Yellow Jessamine flower's odor would hardly have registered.

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

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## **ON REALLY SEEING A SEED**

A seed is something Mother Nature thought up as an appropriate vessel for transferring information from one generation to the next. The transferal of this information is especially dramatic and artful because typically it involves a being at the end of one season handing off the information to an unknown being living at the beginning of a completely different season. Moreover, usually the two seasons are separated from one another by a deadly winter or dry season.

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

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

One of the most interesting features about genetic material has been explored in Richard Dawkins's book, "The Selfish Gene." In that book Dawkins claims that "We animals exist for their {the genes'} preservation and are nothing more than their throwaway survival machines."

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

To really see a seed, you have to make yourself vulnerable to the notion that maybe we biological entities are only notes on a sheet of music, and what's really important is the music, not the notes -- that the Creator rejoices less in us

carriers of information, than in the information itself. After all, the Creator worked on us for only a few years, but the information held in any seed represents the crystallized results of experiments in life conducted during more eons than we can know.

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

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

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### **ON SEEING LIKE A CAVEMAN**

This week I've been reading a collection of essays entitled "Vision and Design" by British art historian Roger Fry. Fry's main period of influence was between the two world wars, so his work is a bit dated but still it's a pleasure to experience his clear and incisive thinking.

Fry addresses a question in art I've often wondered about. The 14,000-year-old drawings of animal forms on the walls of Spain's Altamira Cave and other caves are vividly alive and invested with dynamic tension. They convey the feeling the artists must have experienced when seeing those things in real life. So, why does so much art of later times show very little of that vitality? Remember those Byzantine works so painfully stiff, so choked with ostentation, and void of feeling other than desiccated, formalized religious sentiment.

Granted that religious fanatics being in control of the government were responsible for the Byzantine aridness but, still, just how could humanity's artistic impulse have withered so dramatically after such an auspicious beginning as is on display in Altamira Cave?

I interpret Fry as arguing that Paleolithic artists saw images and portrayed them with an immediacy and intensity that became unavailable to Neolithic people (people like us) simply because our greater mental capacity made it hard for us to see images without immediately analyzing them. Once the analytical process interposes between what the artist sees and the artist's portrayal of that thing, the thread of immediacy that enlivens any work of art is severed. It's revealing that when a modern child first tries to draw a human body, probably the child sketches a head and hands, but leaves the torso reduced to a single line. That's drawing what's in the mind, not what's actually seen. What a struggle it must be for an adult artist to absolutely dominate the analytical impulse.

In fact, much of the art of modern times can be interpreted as trying to reclaim the artist's ability and right to portray what he or she actually sees, not what the artist's brain insists ought to be seen, or has forgotten what was seen in the first place.

This is a matter appropriate for a nature-lover's newsletter because artists who can really SEE and convey to others what they are seeing are among the most important people to be enlisted in the fight to save Life on Earth.

For, I'm convinced that the following three-step process has to be part of any effort to save Life on Earth:

- 1. Artists working in all media shall reveal to us the profound beauty in all living things, and the great dignity inherent in a rainbow of sustainable and ethical human lifestyles.**
- 2. Once people truly see the essential nature of these manners of being as revealed by artists, the public will grow to love them.**
- 3. Loving those things, people will become less willing to continue their destructive, unsustainable behaviors. Blind, self-indulgent consumerism will wither and entire ecosystems and sustainable philosophies will flourish. This will come about as the consequence of less pollution, fewer extractive processes of non-renewable resources, and more willingness to respect people of other shades and notions.**

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### **ON THE BEAUTY OF CONVERGENT EVOLUTION**

Back to the vultures' convergent evolution, which I find very satisfying to think about. Again and again in nature you find very unrelated species evolving to look like one another. The reason is always the same: There's an optimum appearance and behavior for a species exploiting any specific ecological niche, so whatever ancestry you have, if you as a species decide to occupy that niche, your appearance and behavior will gradually evolve to the "optimum appearance and behavior" for that niche.

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

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

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

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

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

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

These insights at first glance seem pretty general and unsexy. However, at this time when the flow of history is getting stuck in mindless conservatism, when fundamentalists deny the existence of biological evolution, and homogenizing "globalization" is the catchphrase of the times, maybe these insights are enough for now.

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### **ON THE BEAUTY OF HUNKERING DOWN**

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

First of all, the other day I was discussing this matter via email with my friend Rengyu in Bangladesh. I said that once such a trial is over, it's as if you have acquired a new measure of inner strength. Rengyu could relate to what I was saying, especially because at that time he was fasting during Ramadan. By undergoing physical hardships and denying my natural instincts to flee to warmth, and by stubbornly following a secret star even when from the outside what's going on looks appallingly dreary, I gain something I can't quite explain to someone who doesn't already understand, but I know that in the end I have acquired something internally of great value.

Second, last week when I described the effect on me of sniffing a Yellow Jessamine blossom, the point was less that Yellow Jessamine really smells good than that by exercising self control most of the time I am priming myself for later forays into a realm of sensuality that no debauched hamburger eater can imagine. When these cold days finally pass and cascades of golden sunlight

gush over me, who do you think will FEEL the return of spring more acutely than I? One reason I live the way I do is simply because I love to FEEL alive, strong, hungry, aggressive... I like to feed my senses. There have been times in my life when that meant eating a lot, other times when it meant being with special kinds of women. Right now it means priming myself so that the odor of Yellow Jessamine just knocks my pants off.

A third reason is this: I am convinced that there is no greater Earthly "sin" than to needlessly abuse and endanger the living system -- the ecosystem -- with which the Creator has graced this good Earth. And I know that when I flip a switch to warm my feet I am ordering electricity to be produced, which increases greenhouse gasses and radioactive wastes. I will not belabor the point. Every human appetite translates into environmental destruction, and it is up to each of us to identify for ourselves how much destruction we wish to be responsible for.

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### **ON THE BEAUTY OF RELATIVISM**

I was brought up by a squeaky-clean mother very steeped in the 50s mindset, cultural icons of which included frequent Pinesol moppings of the linoleum kitchen floor, Listerine garglings, crisply ironed handkerchiefs and spritzings of Old Spice throughout the day. Getting cozy with crap has required of me a good bit of mental gymnastics, for I am profoundly programmed to be revolted by it.

So, which of the two attitudes I have entertained toward crap is right? I think you can see that each attitude has had its place, depending on my context.

The quality of crap that makes it eligible for such conflicting opinions is that crap is complex stuff that works at many levels of reality.

If you can agree with that, then I ask you: Just what in this Universe is so simple and one-dimensional that it is not eligible for the same kind of conflicting notions? In my opinion, everything that IS, is so complex and mind-bogglingly interconnected with everything else that nothing is immune from our having two or more minds about it, depending on which way we're looking at it.

Moreover, just what is one to expect in a universe in which everything is always evolving, where we ourselves change so drastically as we gain new experiences and mature, where new things and new situations around us arise all the time, forever transmogrifying and adapting to everything else, surging forward and outward, all the time, all the time... ? In a Universe of perpetually, lustily, joyously evolving perspectives, how can anyone claim that anything has just one absolutely restricted meaning and value?

How are such thoughts as these appropriate for a naturalist's newsletter? It is because the thing I love most, Life on Earth, is being threatened by inappropriate

human thought patterns and consequent behavior. In my opinion, as a species we will never gain the insights needed to change ourselves if we continue indulging in belief systems based on concepts thousands of years old, the sacred scriptures of which arose long before it occurred to anyone that good people -- just because there are too many of us wanting too much -- can destroy the planetary ecosystem that sustains all life.

Relativistic thinking at least gives us the mental flexibility and the spiritual grounding needed for us to begin formulating ideas about what we need to do now.

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### **ON THE FIVE KINDS OF LOVE I KNOW**

A naturalist caring about Life on Earth, -- even a sometimes-hermit one -- must be concerned with love. Before explaining why, let me tell you what I have learned about love during my 58 years.

The first love is the one between baby and parents. It is unconditional and instinctual, of a general nature all higher mammals are capable of.

A later-coming love is more community centered. It is based on the instinctual need for identity and status within a protective power structure. This love expresses itself through social syndromes such as patriotism and religion.

Romantic love is mostly a hypnotic state and therefore, though potentially intensely satisfying, ephemeral. Some might say that "sexual love" fits here, but from at least one perspective sex is but a physiological process that only sometimes, though maybe ideally, accompanies romantic love.

A fourth love is the one in our culture typical after romantic love has lost its hold. It is based on mutual respect as well as economic and social realities.

I personally have evolved only far enough to further list a love of a fifth kind. With an unclouded mind and an untroubled spirit one beholds the Universe's majesty and senses its order and the gorgeous manner by which it is evolving. One empathizes with the flow of things and recognizes that no matter how ugly and hurtful life may seem to an individual human the Universal Creative Force does things in a fundamentally beautiful and magnanimous manner.

In my opinion, a person's prime spiritual goal should be to experience this fifth kind of love -- and other kinds beyond it if they exist -- and to help others experience them, too.

Here is my reasoning: Life on Earth is endangered by human activity. It's clear that merely knowing what the problems are isn't enough. We humans are too

vulnerable to self deception to be able to take action against an emergency of this scale and which is merely factual.

Only passion arising from the fifth kind of love can move us to the kind of self sacrifice and nobility needed to stop destroying Life on Earth.

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### **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 are.

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

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

Instead of occupying our brains with the affairs of everyday life -- the body's hungers and woes, concerns about status and identity, broodings about what did and did not happen or might happen -- we are immersing our psyches into the mystery of the mustard flower's curious four long stamens and two short ones, or maybe the richly brown basal cross-markings of the white-flowered *Neomarica*'s obovate outer perianth segments. Just imagine how a day's general feeling is transformed by a vagrant scent of dissected gardenia blossom lying on a wooden table.

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

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

A mustard flower is the true prophet.

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

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

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

Where did the idea come from that we all need to buy so much and live such neat, 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" be the sniffing of those flowers?

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### **ON THE PLEASURES OF LEAVING ANIMALS ALONE**

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

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

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

I had the same thing at my previous location. Early readers of this Newsletter will recall the bats and Chimney Swifts in the well beneath my outside-kitchen roof (I



have bats here, too), and how Prothonotary Warblers nested in the kitchen's hollow bamboo stems.

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

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

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

flowers with primitive-looking bunches of stamens on repeatedly branching filaments, and with those crazy-looking, purple-feathery styles.

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

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### **ON THE PLEASURES OF SIMPLE TASTES**

During the recent visit with my family in Kentucky I was regaled with several sumptuous meals that included such dishes as an apple salad with walnuts and honey, gooey pimiento cheese, and sweet banana bread. After a full year of hermit fare based on cornmeal, flour, oatmeal, vegetable oil, vinegar, and what I gather from the forest and gardens, the tastes of these aunt-made and grandmother-made foods were nothing less than explosive. Also I drank store-bought herbal teas with industrial-strength flavors.

The curious thing is that after three days these tastes did not please me. In fact, the constant presence of rich food began to bother me. My eating and drinking became like an addictive experience with gross superficiality, like being at the circus too long.

In regular life I delight in the taste of a freshly pulled raw carrot, a hot piece of cornbread smelling of simple cornmeal and hot oil, the mysterious astringency of an omelet based on a certain mushroom. When a meal consists of simple elements you have put together yourself, every swallow has a meaning. It's not hard to make the connections between what you are eating, and Nature and human society in general. There was corn growing, people harvested it and ground, packed and sold the grain, and now you eat it. There was a carrot, you pulled it from the ground and now you eat it. The sun radiated energy that flowed through space, bathed the Earth, the corn and carrot used that sunlight energy to convert air, water and nutrients into substance, and now you eat that substance.

One eats with feet flat on the ground, in a knowing communion with the Universe's broad patterns.

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### **ON THE WHITE NOISE OF LIFE**

The medicinal value of Red Clover is not the only issue muddied by there being too much uncritical information available about it. So much information, often contradictory, gathers around any important issue that it is like white noise. Too much half-heartedly confirmed information equals no information at all.

When I left the farm in 1965 and gained access to a university library and people with new kinds of thoughts I found that many of my assumptions about life and my place in it were suspect or outright wrong. In those days my white noise consisted of rural Kentuckian beliefs echoing among verses from the Tao Te Ching, TV scenes from Vietnam while learning flower anatomy, Blacks being beaten in Selma as I read Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, all the while dealing with my own soup of teenage hormones, and ignorance. I almost didn't make it through that blizzard of irreconcilable images.

However, I did find a way through my time of disorientation, and now I want to describe that path in case someday someone else wants to try it.

The path consisted of identifying certain basic paradigms of Nature, and trying to live in harmony with them.

By "paradigm of Nature" I mean any motif -- any theme or dominant pattern -- in Nature that repeats again and again in different contexts. As a hypothesis confirmed by experiments matures into a theory, a pattern exhibiting itself very frequently in many situations grows into a paradigm.

For me, a natural paradigm's importance lies in this thought: That if the Universal Creative Force displays a certain way of getting things done again and again in many disparate contexts -- frequently enough for a paradigm to be recognized -- then there's a good chance that that paradigm displays a pattern worth considering for my own problems.

Here are three of Nature's most obvious paradigms, which I try to live by:

- Natural resources are to be used sparingly, shared with other living things, and recycled
- Our living patterns should be sustainable in the long run
- Diversity is sacred

Other paradigms are sometimes glimpsed, and certainly other people are programmed to glimpse other paradigms besides these, but in my case just trying to honor the above three has been enough to structure the life I am living. Striving to live in harmony with them has bestowed on me a peacefulness and sense of meaning adequate for a whole lifetime.

With natural paradigms there is no white noise, for they become visible spontaneously and fully formed to anyone who seeks them. One gives himself or herself time to think in a peaceful setting where Nature expresses Herself, and the insights blossom clear and distinct. No white noise at all...

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## **"PAPAW'S DIRT"**

Before the package of Sassafras root arrived, cousin Eva Ray emailed me that the roots were still a little dirty but, she added, "It's Papaw's dirt."

What she meant was that the roots were dug from land that used to belong to Papaw Conrad, and therefore to us older folks in the family it was invested with a touch of sacredness. This was the dirt that Papaw plowed with a team of horses, the dirt on which he'd set his rabbit traps, and the dirt that stuck to his shoes when he just wandered around looking at things, which people used to do.

Maybe the two most profound ways to divide humanity into two parts are these:

- Those who do and those who don't have a feeling for family
- Those who do and those who don't have a feeling for the land

In the old days nearly everyone fit into the "do" part of each grouping. Nowadays the trend is definitely toward the "don't" sides. That's too bad, for my impression is that people living in emotional solitude are generally unhappy and dysfunctional in one way or another. Similarly, those with no feeling for the land tend to live their lives without regard to the environmental consequences, the cumulative effects of which, done by so many who also have no feeling, is to threaten all Life on Earth.

Of course there are remedies for this state of affairs, and they are simple and well known ones. Most religions, most philosophers, most Black mammies and backcountry Papaws all agree on them: "Live simply"; "don't be a hog"; "be decent to one another." But there's something in the human character that causes us to choose other paths.

Anyway, Papaw's dirt on the sassafras root was a double-barreled hello from my family and from the Earth. Many a good, hot cups of tea I have enjoyed this week ruminating on the thoughts these dirty roots stirred up.

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## **PICKLE JUICE**

Monday morning I awakened 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 this all winter and usually I find their presence good company. Often I have to laugh, imagining what shenanigans must be going on below for such unlikely noises to be produced.

"Pickle juice," I concluded.

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

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

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

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### **POKEWEED ESTHETICS**

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

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

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

Last week, telling about my friend Jarvis's refusal to eat a hamburger made from a soybean-fed cow, I touched on the matter of ethics. This week the Pokeweed has me focusing on esthetics. I regard ethics and esthetics as profoundly important in the struggle to protect and conserve Life on Earth.

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

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

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

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

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## **PRIMITIVE MAGNOLIAS**

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

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

Is there a connection between the beauty of species in the Magnolia Family, and their primitiveness?

About three years ago a shrub called Amborella, found only on the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific, suddenly became famous. Of all living flowering plants on Earth, it was revealed to be the most closely related to the very first flowering plants. Amborella is not in the Magnolia Family, nor are its flowers particularly large and showy. In habit it's a normal shrub.

So, the magnolias are primitive, but apparently their great beauty isn't closely tied to their primitiveness. I have no regrets about learning this, for the unspoken, unwelcome corollary of the "primitive = beautiful" equation is this: That inevitable evolution perpetually nudges us all toward what is more efficient, but gray; toward what is more productive, but mediocre, and; toward what is more promiscuous, but less vital.

Now that I think about, when I look into the skies at night, or ruminate on the matter of subatomic particles, I find no paradigms in those worlds to support the

notion that "primitive = beautiful," and I have to wonder wherever I got that idea. On the other hand, the facts that great things can arise from plain beginnings, and that special beauty can appear anywhere unexpectedly, do fit paradigms glimpsed in the cosmos and in the mathematics of the inner world.

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

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

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## **A PROFOUNDLY ENCOURAGING THOUGHT**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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### **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. If we should "put a price on nature," I can visualize our politicians spending billions on propaganda saying we are protecting Bambi, but not spending a cent protecting the habitat real animals need.

Furthermore, 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.

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## **QUANTUM MECHANICS & BALCHÉ**

On Sunday Gerardo from Mérida visited bringing along a newly released DVD on which experts spoke of the philosophical implications of recent discoveries in quantum mechanics. What does it mean that one thing may be in more than one place at the same time, that the future is not necessarily distinguishable from the present and the past, and that solids are hardly present at all, from certain perspectives being no more than illusions human minds create for their own utility?

Not two hours before seeing the film I had sat atop a building with Don Pedro from the village. I'd asked him if anyone around here still makes balché, the mildly intoxicating drink of the ancient Maya (they do) made from fermented honey and the bark of a tree growing here, *Lonchocarpus longistylus*.

The question led Don Pedro to tell me how until 15 or 20 years ago Maya farmers in this area sponsored a yearly ceremony in their cornfields presided over by a certain old man in the community who knew how to conduct the rites in Maya. In the center of the cornfield a bowl of atole (emulsified sweetcorn cooked and sweetened) would be suspended above the ground in a certain way, then at all four corners of the field balché would be offered to the spirits.

Don Pedro says that farther east, in the state of Quintana Roo, "where the people are more innocent," the ceremony is still conducted. He says it has disappeared from here because people no longer establish cornfields, in response to changing economic conditions. It's true that here the countryside supports a few citrus plots and fields of henequen, but mostly it's just abandoned, hurricane- and fire-ravaged scrub and weeds.

So, what is one to make of a world in which the secrets of quantum mechanics are being revealed even as balché continues to be offered to the spirits?

I find myself sensing that quantum mechanics is right about the timeless unity of all things, and the illusionary, brain-manufactured nature of the world we humans inhabit. However, at the same time I recognize the beauty in offering prayers of thanks.

In fact, if I had a cornfield, I think I'd invite the old man from town to come do his thing in it.

Giving thanks to the Universal Creative Impulse is always a fine, mind-focusing, self-orienting thing for a human to do.

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## **RAINDROPS**

This has been a rainy week with us. My clothing and books are mildewing and who knows what's happening to my computer circuitry? On the other hand, the garden's new beds of kale, mustard greens, collards and turnips are beautiful, and it seems the rains quieten the fire ants. The rain isn't cold so I have been able to enjoy some naked-hermit showers. It is good to stand in the rain naked, and to bathe in pure sky water surrounded by the forest's glistening leaves.

Sometimes snuggled within my beautiful Kentucky quilts I think about why raindrop sounds please me so. Maybe it's because of their randomness. There is randomness in the time between their splashes and in how loud each splash sounds. There is a randomness in the quality of each splash sound, depending on whether the drop hits a leaf outside my window, the tin roof or the sodden ground. Yet, all this randomness brings pure fresh water, which is life-giving. Here Nature is saying "Do not fear the quality of randomness in itself, for it can

be generous." I know that intellectually this seems a rather tenuous supposition, but maybe there's something at the subconscious level that needs such assurance... I don't know.

I think like this as I lie in my little trailer listening to the rain. People living in houses so large and closed up that they cannot hear raindrops suffer a great loss. Yes, raindrop sounds minister to the spirit in important ways, and that is one good thing about this week's rains.

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## **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.

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## **A REASON TO SAVE A BIRD**

Last week I mentioned Melissa's "Wren Disaster," and said that my usual advice is to let nature take its course when disaster strikes a nest. A couple of Newsletter readers reminded me of a good reason to go against that advice. It is: "The experience of saving a bird or any wild creature can be enormously rewarding to the person who cares for it."

Carol in Tennessee wrote "I think sometimes the joy it brings may be worth it," and she told me about a man who nursed baby birds to health, and today can call his healed wards from the woods and they still feed from his hands. The effect is "magical."

Leona in Missouri told about reviving a "dead" robin her daughter Grace had brought home, and how the robin learned to peck at the house's window for worms. Leona writes "I would say that the exercise of saving the bird made an impression on Grace," who now is a pediatrician working with Native Americans and others "bucking the toughest of situations, who seem to be glad that somebody cares to at least try to help."

Also, I don't forget that many do not need a reason to try to save a bird. Neighbor Karen Wise, who, you may recall, saved a vulture not long ago and her van still stinks from the exercise, simply can't keep herself from trying to help, even when her brain tells her it's pointless.

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## **SEEING THE SKY**

At Laurel Hill I could see a fair patch of sky above the Blackberry Field, but that was nothing compared to the vista available here. Wednesday a line of thunderheads with flaring white tops, billowy middles and brooding dark bases marched past. I could hardly take my eyes from them as they rumbled, grew sky-tall and spread their tops into classic anvil shapes. On Thursday a storm came with a white curtain of rain that moved toward me as I planted a Sweet Olive in the field. I could see and hear everything. The rain's white curtain inexorably coming at me was hypnotic. I just let the chilly drops splash onto me, totally drenching me. On Friday an even more magnificent storm came, and this time I

squatted in the barn door experiencing it with the same mind that sometimes I use with Beethoven symphonies.

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

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

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

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## **SITTING IN THE RAIN NAKED**

One morning this week my campfire breakfast was interrupted by rain. It was a warm rain and I was wearing no more than jogging shorts, so I just slipped them off and sat in the rain naked. A sheet of tin over my fire kept breakfast going. It was nice sitting there feeling the rain on my back, and I don't think my breakfast, which consisted of fried eggs fixed with cayenne pepper, onion and garlic topped with juicy tomato -- all produce from the garden -- between two hot slabs of cornbread, could have been better. With a steamy mug of spearmint tea in one hand and my sandwich in the other, I listened to Public Radio's Morning Edition (I'm a dues-paying member of Mississippi Public Radio).

Sitting there hearing how the world was going, I just had to wonder if maybe someday soon each morning little twig-fire smokes like mine might not be announcing breakfasts all across the landscape. But instead of those smokes rising from beside isolated hermits rather enjoying themselves, they will be announcing clusters of desperate folks banded together for mutual defense and mutual support, and they'll be burning twigs because the energy grid will be destroyed. Of course, if things get bad, I won't be much better off than anyone else. A garden can be robbed as easily as a store, and mushrooms, while tasty, don't provide many calories.

I'm glad that I was born when I was, and that I've lived life the way I have. If I'd been born earlier I'd never have had access to the scientific knowledge that now reveals just how huge, complex and utterly intricately interconnected and beautiful the Universe is. I think my awe of the Creator must be greater than was ever possible for anyone who thought that the sun, moon and stars were just points of light suspended in the air not far overhead, and that living things were no more than what they looked like, instead of being evolving creations perpetually struggling toward ever higher levels of sophistication and self realization.

On the other hand, by living when I have, I've also experienced natural wonders that now are irretrievably lost to future generations (pristine coastlines, vast rainforests, mountain valleys before stripmining), and I've peacefully traveled in places where now it would be deadly to visit. None of today's young people will ever see or experience much of what I have, and I just wonder how that will affect them, how it will leave them less appreciative of the Creation and of life in general than I have grown to be.

I hope my forebodings about what's about to happen to this world are wrong. However, if I'm right, then all I can hope is that the next generation of folks sitting naked in the rain next to their little twig-fires may occasionally enjoy their breakfasts as much as I am now.

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## **SKY ORIENTATION**

Perhaps nothing has influenced my own spiritual development more than my gaining at least a hint of an insight into the enormity, complexity and beauty of the Universe. Dewy nights I spent in my backyard as I was growing up in Kentucky spoke more powerfully to me than the words written in any holy book or spoken by any human guru, mystic or prophet.

Jupiter with its elegant moons so clearly visible this morning averages being about 400 million miles away. I cannot really grasp what a million of anything is, so in my mind Jupiter simply swims in an unimaginably empty abyss too far away to relate to. Yet this distance is nothing compared to the distance of the next-brightest object in last night's sky, Sirius the Dog Star, which this morning stood not far from Jupiter. Sirius's distance from Earth is so great that light emanating from it takes 8.7 years to reach here.

Since a light-year bespeaks a distance of about 6,000,000,000,000 miles, Jupiter is only 0.00000145 of a light-year away. If my calculations are right, Jupiter averages only about 46 seconds away, traveling at the speed of light. Jupiter is 46 seconds. Sirius is 8.7 YEARS... Think of it. Meditate on it.

Yet, Sirius looks big to us mainly because it is so close. Betelgeuse, the bright star comprising Orion's right shoulder this morning, lies 300 light-years away. And there are many, many stars much farther away.

In fact, when I stepped into the field this morning and could see the constellation Andromeda a little to the north but otherwise right overhead, above my Pecan trees, there was a smudge plainly visible. This was the great Andromeda nebula, M31, and it was 1,500,000 light-years away...

This unthinkable distance is only possible because it lies outside our own galaxy. Our sun is just one of some 100,000,000,000 stars making up our own galaxy, which from the vicinity of M31 would appear as a tiny smudge in the sky. All the stars I saw this morning, except for those in M31, were members of our own galaxy, which is a little like a spiraling wheel. To see M31 I was looking through the clutter of our own galaxy, to see another galaxy, which was M31.

The first time I glimpsed the majesty in this arrangement, I no longer felt that any religion placing us humans at the center of the universe was appropriate. I lost all confidence in all religions, but at the same moment I gained by the same measure in the opposite direction an underpinning for an abiding spirituality. My awe in the Creator behind these workings only increases with every new discovery, every new return to a starry field.

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## **SLUGS, SNAILS & MU**

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

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

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

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

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

I won't touch the question of how an animal might be "good for humanity" because it smells too much of the religious concept that Nature has been created to serve mankind. Because of destructive, unsustainable human behavior



encouraged by that notion, I regard it as the most dangerous element of our western, desert-originated religions.

Neither does asking whether an organism is "good for the ecosystem" strike me as appropriate. A prime feature of the Earth-ecosystem -- the biosphere -- is that all its components are interconnected and its living things are mutually dependent. Science is just beginning to grasp how intricate, fragile and necessary these connections are. Therefore, in my opinion, no human is in the position to judge how any living thing is good or bad for the ecosystem. Moreover, we don't know the ultimate destiny of our evolving biosphere, so how can we judge whether the role something plays in it now is "good" or "bad"?

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

So, "What is 'good'?"

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

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

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

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## **SNAKE BRAIN**

Curious thing, this snake brain. I've been writing an essay on how humanity seems to be aware that human-caused disasters are about to change our lives -- global warming, consequences of nuclear proliferation and the all-out war between Islam and the other Abrahamic religions, for instance -- yet the vast majority of us just continue as always, as if we don't see what's coming. For example, when given a chance to vote, we even vote for politicians representing the status quo. Seeing the Northern Water Snake looking right at me but my image not registering in his brain as anything unusual, it occurred to me that maybe mass human behavior is governed strictly by our reptilian brains.

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

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

The point is, mob behavior and voting patterns of groups stirred up by demagogues deal with issues exactly within these reptilian domains -- territory, status, defense, aggression, anger, fear...

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

Note that the emotions of the mammalian brain -- love, sadness, jealousy, and hope -- seldom set mobs and stirred-up voting groups to action. One could say with good reason that a dog has more feeling, more empathy and love, than a mob. One could also say that our recent elections appear to have been contests between issues of the reptilian brain and those of the mammalian brain.

I hope you will have the fun of figuring out for yourself which political party's issues are most reptilian in nature.

The most recently evolved "monkey brain" -- appearing only within the last 3,000,000 years or so -- enables humans to manifest higher functions of imitation, speaking, writing, planning and symbolic reasoning and conceptualization. Neither is this mob stuff.

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

I don't have a clue.

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## **SONG SPIRIT**

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

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

For, I believe that the Creator's spirit flows everywhere, and we -- we humans and birds and everything else -- are part of it, the way that notes are part of music. The Creator's spirit wrought something out of nothing, crafted unfathomable beauty and complexity out of chaos, and right now evolves the Universe and all things in it to ever higher levels of sophistication, and ever more exquisite manners of being and conceiving.

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

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

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## **SPARROW COLORS**

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

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

Therefore, sparrow colors and patterns make sense. Still, you can't help feeling that something is going on here other than the sparrow species having blindly evolved random camouflage patterns. Sparrow patterns are so elegant and the colors are so sublimely complementary that the mind rejects the idea that such effects could arise from mere Darwinian selection. One senses a hand at work here that creates with a flair. If this Creator were to walk into the room, you'd not be surprised if She were whistling a jaunty little tune.

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

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

But, if in your bird fieldguide you scan the species from cover to cover, you'll see that maybe 80% of the species are, you could say, modest looking but elegant -- like sparrows, sandpipers and thrushes. Maybe 18% are colorful (but not spectacular) or somehow novel in appearance, in the manner of woodpeckers and hummingbirds. And only a handful are outright bodacious, like the Cardinal and Blue Jay.

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

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## **STORM JOG**

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

Suddenly there came a roar into the trees and heavy rain could be heard coming through the forest at a distance. In a second the gloomy warm air all around was

sliced through by a fist of cold air exactly as if it were a blast off of ice. Double-speeding back to the trailer, the wind roared and the trees bent, and my lungs and heart revved to a fast-paced cadence.

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

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## **STRUGGLING TOWARD A MORE ARTICULATE CROAK**

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

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

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

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

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

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## **STUMBLING**

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

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

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

For example, sometimes during my birding walks I recall how my birding technique has changed over the years. When I was younger, before I was sure of an identification, I had to check each bird's fieldmarks as cataloged in my fieldguide. I had to see the White-eyed Vireo's white iris, and the Yellow-rumped Warbler's yellow rump and white throat. Now I know my birds by clusters of characters, seldom even needing to use binoculars. I know birds by their silhouettes, by the way they move, by what habitat or niche they occupy, and by their songs and warning calls. Friday I listed 24 Red-eyed Vireos but I never got a good view of a single one.

Thus, with my maturity as a birder, acuity of mind has displaced most need to physically track down each bird and confirm its fieldmarks. With time, I have become more effective as a birder by learning to rely on experience, practiced judgment, and maybe something extra that accrues to any spirit that evolves and grows.

Such seems to be the case in all aspects of my life. I have no doubt that as years pass my body and senses will deteriorate at an accelerating rate. However, I am also sure that while this happens, as long as my mind remains intact, intangible, maybe even mystical, benefits of a maturing, evolving spirit will more than compensate for those physical losses.

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

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## **SYCAMORE TOTEM**

I know several people who identify strongly with certain animals -- their "totem" animals. With men usually the animal is an eagle, hawk or wolf. A couple of women friends have designated turtles as their totems, confirming their fondness for curling up at home and just lying low. One of my closest friends from college days assures me that she was a Sea Otter in a former life. When on the northeast coast of Ireland one day I watched some otters offshore, I had to admit that their quick, playful mischievousness matched perfectly the nature of my friend.

If I had to choose my own totem, I think it would be the Sycamore. Sycamores are big-bodied and love to be next to water. Their trunks lack the rough, corky ridges that protect the trunks of most trees, so the Sycamore, despite its size, is somewhat vulnerable. Still, Sycamores have a wonderful staying power. Along Sandy Creek it's something to see how the recent flooding rode down some of them. However, now most are coming back, reissuing leaves and resprouting twigs as occasional rain washes mud off the old leaf-tatters, step by step -- coming to life again just like me after this or that of my own disasters.

Sycamore flowers are tiny things jammed together into small balls. Over summer the balls grow as closely packed fruits mature, and then the balls break open in the cold months, releasing the fruits. Once a winter storm caught me walking in a bayou and as the big Sycamores around me heaved and snapped their branches, fruit balls exploded one after another and the individual parachuted fruits launched into the storm and wafted skyward as if carried by the very hounds of Hell. I like that. I identify with the Sycamore fruit's subdued approach, waiting for the right moment, maybe waiting so long, Buddhistically, that the right moment never comes, but, if it does come, willingly and with panache launching blindly into a perfect storm of hope.

I wonder if any Newsletter readers identify with a particular plant or animal? I'd enjoy hearing about it, and passing it on to others. My address is at the end of this newsletter.

My interest here is more than casual or literary. Sometimes I toy with the notion that an unknown number of "themes" (for want of a better word) flow through space and time. I visualize these "themes" as like long, colored, streaming ribbons in a perpetual wind. There's the "conservative theme," the "liberal theme," the themes of femininity and masculinity, and themes of aggression and peace, themes of parsimony and generosity, simplicity and ostentation... These themes sometimes "snap" the way a flag snaps in the wind and when there's a snap something is born, maybe a flower, maybe a song, maybe a romance or maybe a personality trait in a human. And the newborn thing always sings the song, in its own way, of its parent theme.

When we identify our totems, we are saying: "So, the theme from which I sprang has been there, too... "

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## **TADPOLE-INSPIRED THOUGHTS ABOUT LIFE**

Last week I told you how Gray Treefrogs had left eggs in the dishpan from which I bathe each morning after jogging. On that first morning, though the eggs were only a few hours old, I could already see black frog embryos suspended inside clear, gelatinous egg-masses. By the next morning the developing frogs had passed through the blastula and late embryo stages, and the slender larvae already had the shape of tadpoles, though they were still suspended in their gelatinous eggs. On the third morning the larvae were free of their jelly and were free-swimming tadpoles. Hundreds of them.

Each morning this week the robust froggy developments in my dishpan have set the mood for thinking about life in general. For example, one day I heard how recently discovered paleontological evidence suggests that Life on Earth may have originated more than once. Perhaps it arose earlier than we ever thought, then went extinct, and then life arose again.

Or perhaps Life on Earth has ignited several times, and continues to be generated even now, so that the living things around us today do not all necessarily share a common distant ancestor. Genetic sequencing indicates that some bacteria and virus-like and fungus-like organisms are so strange that it's simply hard to fit them onto a Tree of Life with only one trunk.

I personally find it easy, almost obligatory, to accept that life could have arisen several or many times on Earth. Moreover, if I had to guess, I'd say that throughout the Universe life has appeared innumerable times and continues to do so, for, from what I see with my own eyes, the Creator's life-forming and life-evolving instinct is irrepressible.

When I think of what must be the Creator's mood with regard to life, the gleeful rambunctious Finale in Beethoven's Seventh Symphony always comes to mind -- a piece that's powerful not with broad, sweeping gushes of conventional creativity but with an ongoing series of erratic eruptions of good-humored, unanticipatable genius and energy. Those hungry, wiggly tadpoles in my dishpan each of these mornings, they make me hear those melodies!

Infinitely expanding waves of laughing melodies, peals of energizing God-laughter rippling forever throughout the Universe... and I am sure that my squirmy little tadpoles are responding to tickles of those ripples, and when I see this and understand it for what it is, I chuckle and squeal, too, maybe becoming God-laughter myself.



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## **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 developing tadpoles.

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

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

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 memorial second I understood that the moment the Creator cleaved matter from primordial energy, the die was cast for things being the way they are, frogs and people. I understood clearly that in any Universe in which matter existed apart from nothingness or pure energy -- where there was stuff of touch and movement, stuff that interacts and evolves -- then tadpoles over the edge become inevitable, and so do hermits with some hard memories and hemorrhoids.

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

An hour after the rain, walking around still stunned by the intensity of my insight but already gradually losing the thread of thought leading to my discovery, I

noticed that ants were tearing at the drying-out tadpoles on the ground below my dishpan table. Up close I even smelled the fishy odor of tadpoles coming undone.

Yet, it all seemed right. If during this last month my emotional currency had been invested in ants instead of tadpoles, I should now be as close to the ants as I am with the amphibians. And I would be rejoicing with them that during this recent rain these gelatinous packets of dark, speckled protein plopped onto the ground from above, a kind of manna from heaven, just what the Queen and her colony needed.

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

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## **TADPOLE CONCLUSION**

Last Sunday afternoon some of the tadpoles in my dishpan were going belly up, though they'd dive to the water's bottom when I nudged them. The water was bright emerald green and smelly, and foam formed around the edges.

As soon as I saw this I placed the dishpan next to the tray in which earlier I had deposited the vast majority of eggs left in my dishpan during the rain of July 31. You'll recall that subsequently something removed nearly all of the tadpoles from the ground-tray, leaving only three or four there, while in the dishpan on my outside table my overlooked eggs hatched, creating a tiny ecosystem overpopulated with tadpoles. Last Sunday I hoped that during the night something would come and similarly reduce the population in my dishpan.

As I placed my dishpan next to the ground-tray, the three or four tadpoles remaining in the ground-tray caught my eye. They were five to ten times larger than my washing-bowl tadpoles, though they were from the same egg mass. In their tray they darted from shadow to shadow like gleeful, mischievous Calibans, and I was ashamed of my lethargic, dying, runty little beings, for I felt accomplice to what had happened, though all along I had just "let nature run its course."

While regarding my sick dishpan ecosystem, a certain memory vividly took possession of me. Some years ago I took a night-train from New Delhi in northern India to the far-eastern town of Cooch Bihar. At dawn in the slow-moving train I awakened to find outside my window the flat, grossly overpopulated plain of the lower Ganges, India's sacred river. It was countryside, but there were people, people, people... little people, very thin and very poor, standing staring at the train, their poverty, misery and desperation etched in every face, in their body language, in the exhausted land itself. The odor of woodsmoke, moist earth, human and animal manure, people atop people... It was countryside but I felt claustrophobic. At least in the Bombay slums one

always felt the possibility of escaping to a park, to a tea booth, to any dark corner, but here from horizon to horizon there was no escape from obscene overcrowding.

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

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

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

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

On Monday morning just after tipping my dishpan of dead tadpoles into the grass, I was listening to NPR's Morning Edition on the radio. Tabo Mbeki, the host of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa, was giving a speech. I was busy fixing pear-cornbread so I didn't get his words exactly, but I think they were something like this:

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

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## **THE SKY IS BLUE**

Yesterday, the Winter Solstice, I took my Solstice Walk. It was sunny and breezy, and the old fields here on the plantation with broomsedge and blackberry brambles encroaching from the woods' edges were brilliant in their thousand

shades of rusty-brown and gray. Framed by such muted hues, the blue sky was simply overpowering with its dark blue.

The Solstice is a time to reflect, and after a while of hiking I found myself meditating on that blue sky. Is it not significant that the sky is blue?

Imagine all the colors the sky could be, yet it is blue, a color that sets the troubled mind at peace, that implies profundity and constancy. If you feel like lying on your back in the middle of a large field and letting the mind float, what color would you want the sky to be other than blue?

It's more than that we are simply accustomed to the sky being blue. I think the sky's blueness satisfies so profoundly because we humans have evolved beneath blue skies. Not only our simian ancestors on the African plains but also the little lemur-like first mammals and the first amphibian ancestors to pull themselves onto muddy shores -- first raised their heads to see a blue sky.

So what does it say that today the blue sky pleases us so? To me it implies that the Creator was not satisfied to just make a universe that worked well and looked good. It was important that those parts of creation evolved enough to have feelings -- we birds, coyotes and humans, for example -- could potentially feel content and be at peace where we are. Could indeed feel exultant just when walking around with the eyes open.

Having the sky blue, then, is a blessing and a confirmation, and I am using those terms in a spiritual context, certainly not a religious one.

Having a blue sky on the very day I celebrate the Solstice by taking a long walk in the fields is almost too wonderful to express.

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## **THOUGHTS FOR THE WINTER SOLSTICE**

In my opinion, tomorrow, the Winter Solstice, is the official first day of spring. Winter and summer just don't exist in my manner of reckoning. In past Newsletters I've described how I conceive of Nature at this latitude as "breathing out" the blossomings and new beginnings of spring, and "breathing in" the fruitings and dying backs of fall. Today is the last day of the current annual cycle's "breathing in."

A beautiful historical symmetry is manifesting itself at this very moment in the evolution of the human spirit, and the Solstice is the appropriate time to celebrate that. Right now, in our generation, just as the anachronisms and war-inciting tendencies of our religions are becoming so troubling, there is being revealed to

us through science enough to inspire humanity to a whole new level of spirituality.

Our generation is the first in human history to recognize that we inhabit a fragile dewdrop of a planet orbiting a mediocre star in an average position in a run-of-the-mill galaxy among many billions of other galaxies, in a Universe that is not only expanding, but expanding at an increasing rate. Only in 1995 did we learn for sure that other stars beside our own sun have planets orbiting them. There must be many billions of planets harboring billions of forms of life, and life-like states throughout the Universe. Before our time, no human ever had an inkling that the Creator's works could be as enormous, complex, mysterious and BEAUTIFUL as now we see they really are.

Nowadays, to be "a believer," it is no longer necessary to claim to believe in any ancient mythology. Now, for the first time in human history, anyone can confirm for himself or herself that humankind is enmeshed in such unending intricacy managed with such awful precision that "That which created everything is the Creator, and the Creator is good... "

This simple belief is enough to inspire a new spirituality more profound and more satisfying than any ever experienced on the face of the Earth.

Tomorrow begins a new spring and a new year. Tomorrow, on the Winter Solstice, as the Earth once again tilts on its axis in a way that causes days at our latitude to begin growing longer, we are given a sign that the Creator of the Universe remains on the job, and that the Creator's will continues to be as it always has been, and always will be.

An implication of that sign is this: We humans still have a chance to continue living and loving on a gorgeous Earth in a perfectly wonderful corner of the Universe -- if only we can learn to live sustainably.

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## **VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY**

One of my all-time favorite quotations is one by Friedrich Nietzsche. In general I regard the thrust of Nietzsche's thoughts as being a bit unsavory and small spirited. Still, he did make this point:

*"Most people don't really see something until it has a name"*

*( "Wie die Menschen gewöhnlich sind, macht ihnen erst der Name ein Ding überhaupt sichtbar." )*

With that insight in mind, I just want to place before Newsletter readers the following "name" of a concept I think needs more consideration, and that is "voluntary simplicity."

If you have some time this week to reflect upon life and the state of the world, I hope you will remember to conjure up that term and spend some time turning it over in your mind as if it were a mantra that could possibly open doors to new levels of happiness and fulfillment.

Several sites on the Web deal with voluntary simplicity. You might Google the term and let destiny lead you forward at your own pace. But be wary of sites trying to sell you things to simplify your life.

Simplicity is free.

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### **WARM BREEZES**

Most of this week has been breezy and unseasonably warm. It was good hearing crickets chirping in the full-moon nights and Spring Peepers peeping throughout the days. Before a cold front passed through on Thursday, deep in the nights I'd awaken and just lie listening to the whoosh of wind in the trees, and a small twig tapping against the trailer.

Usually as I work at the computer I listen to classical music on Public Radio. This week they've sprinkled fairly tired Christmas carols throughout their daily offerings so I've just kept the radio off. That resulting quietness reminded me of how nice it is to hear only the wind. It was a comfort, a "Joy to the World" in wind.

Maybe a hundred years from now sociologists and psychologists will shake their heads when they recall how today we tolerate in our lives such material, social and psychological clutter -- so many inelegant distractions. They will view us as we do London slum dwellers during the time of Dickens.

In my opinion, barking dogs, traffic noise, perpetually yammering radios and TVs, jets roaring overhead... they are more than inelegant: They are actually destructive to the healthy human spirit. Clutter, whatever the kind, fogs the vision, confuses the insight, mutes the music. Interminable distractions nibble at one's senses until mental fog, emotional numbness and spiritual torpor take over.

But, nature's sounds... the sound of breezes, the trickling water, surf at the beach, the heartbeat of a loved one... are actually therapeutic to a bruised soul. Maybe it's because these natural sounds remind us subliminally that a few solid realities do indeed exist, despite the evidence of the ever-shifting, choking clutter around us. Beyond the radio's inane noises, never-ending, majestically simple

and powerful melodies stream throughout the Universe, and one sound of such a melody is that of wind deep in a warm night.

And just think: You can also walk in the fields and see the wind swirling through the broomsedge, and walk in the forests and behold that wind swaying tree limbs and sending down occasional sprays of bright leaves...

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## **"WEED"**

A year or so ago Newsletter subscriber Greg Scott in Wisconsin stumbled over one of my sentences in which I used the word "weed," and rightly so. I cringe a little myself when I use that word, but I do it because of the need to communicate with a language that, like all languages, uses words whose meanings are only approximate, and too often reveal unfortunate cultural prejudices and misunderstandings.

American writer and transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson asked and answered: "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not been discovered."

A more usual definition is that a weed is a plant growing where it's not wanted.

Thus, the Passion Flower rambling along the plantation manager's garden fence, with large blossoms among the prettiest of the plant kingdom and a prized guest in many greenhouses and gardens, is a weed to the plantation manager.

I even have trouble with the word "weed" in the above list of Mississippi's ten worst ones. In places right around my trailer Japanese Honeysuckle and Chinese Privet overwhelm the local flora. Not far away, Kudzu overtops every bush and tree, gradually killing them with shade. In my gardens Johnsongrass is a plague. Yet...

Who knows what these plants' value will be as global warming stresses our native plants and animals, and fractures our natural ecosystems? Eventually our "weeds" will evolve subspecies and new species more adapted to our local conditions, and maybe those new taxa will generously contribute to the local ecosystem and stabilize it by dealing with the new climate better than our native species. Already one sees bees contentedly visiting Kudzu blossoms, and we all know that nothing makes a hummingbird happier than a Japanese Honeysuckle blossom in June.

In a certain way, an alien "weed" introduced into an ecosystem of native organisms is like an African drum-rhythm suddenly intruded into a dreamy blues. For a moment there's confusion, but before long the singer "gets the African beat in his blood," wraps one of his old melodies around it, and eventually has

something new that's more engaging than either the drum-beat or the old blues song.

I don't know what my final thoughts will be about "weeds." I do know that as time passes I find myself admiring and identifying with "weeds" more and more. One reason is that in this world where natural things inevitably succumb to mall parking lots and other manifestations of unrestrained human appetites, on an emotional level it's always safer to invest one's emotional currency with weeds than with native trees and wildflowers.

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### **WEEDY KIDS**

One of my favorite times of the day is late afternoon as soft, golden sunlight slants in low from the west illuminating my gardens. Illuminating my "weeds" might be a more honest way of saying it, for I don't deny that unless I have a definite reason for removing a weed, it gets to stay. Partly that's from my belief that diversity strengthens any complex system, even a garden (the Pokeweed draws a chat into the garden, who then also eats hornworms on my tomatoes), and another part is that I just like weeds, like looking at them, thinking about them.

One afternoon I was grinning at all the commotion in one of my weed patches -- all the bees going after their last nectar and pollen of the day, all the wasps looking for one more spider for provisioning their broods, all the hummingbirds getting one last sup at the Cypress Vines -- when a certain question occurred to me: If I had had children, would I have raised them like weeds? Would I have allowed my children the liberties to go where their inclinations led them, the way I permit my weeds to behave?

Probably my child-rearing philosophies would have changed over the years. Most of you know that I was a very fat kid, weighing 340 pounds the day I decided to take control of my life. I look back now at the self discipline and severe living regimens I imposed upon myself in those days and just shake my head, half amazed at the intensity of it all, and half ashamed at my unforgiving single-mindedness. I fear any child conceived during those years would have suffered from my strict formulas and rules.

I once had neighbors who raised their five kids like weeds. Basically the girls got pregnant in highschool and the boys ended up drug-heads and in jail. Weediness, Mother Nature teaches, is an effective strategy in chaotic, pioneer situations, but it's little appreciated in highly regulated, conformity-minded urban life.



Still, sometimes at dusk when the sunlight falls especially nicely in some particularly rank corner of one of my weed-jungles, it's almost as if the moment were wondering aloud what a weedy kid of mine might have been like.

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### **WHAT THE ORCHIDS TEACH**

My Ladies'-tresses got me to thinking about how the Orchid Family's fabulous success in producing so many species provides insights into nature's general tendencies. For me, recognizing "nature's general tendencies" is a bit like someone else in our culture searching in the Bible or some other holy book in the hope of understanding "what God's plan is." Here is what the Orchid Family teaches me:

First, in terms of evolution, this most-species-rich family of all is a newcomer. The evolution of living things proceeds more or less like a tree that starts as a single sprout, branches, and then the branches rebranch, and so forth, with the branches growing and rebranching at different speeds and with different degrees of vigor. Earth's first large, land-based plants (plants at the evolutionary tree's roots) reproduced with spores, and they appeared over 400 million years ago. Flowering plants did not come onto the scene until much less than a hundred millions years ago, thus they are situated about 4/5 of the way up the evolutionary tree. Moreover, orchids did not appear among the flowering plants until relatively recently, geologically speaking, so they occupy only an outermost twig of the vast evolutionary tree. Yet this outside twig proliferates new species like none other.

What can we see about orchids that might explain their success? For one thing, orchid flowers have fused "traditional" flower parts (calyx, corolla, stamens, etc.) into very specialized structures favoring an efficient pollination system that no longer relies on powdery pollen. Despite the impression given by flower-shop orchids, most orchid flowers, such as my Ladies'-tresses, are much smaller than flowers of "more primitive" species. Orchid species generally occupy very narrow ecological niches -- they are very, very fussy about where they live. Orchid seeds are nearly microscopic: A single pod may contain thousands of seeds, yet if just one of those seeds manages to germinate and grow into a mature plant the orchid is lucky.

If you think about it, the recent evolution of computers has followed the same path as that taken by orchids -- they are always evolving toward higher efficiency, miniaturization, specialization, proliferation, and as more and more computers join into networks there is consequent loss of importance for the individual... A good topic for a long night's discussion would be how human history and today's societies manifest these very same trends, and what this means to us today.

The orchids also show that nature doesn't put all of Her eggs into one basket.

The Magnolia Family is considered to be one of the most primitive among flowering-plant families, yet in this forest around me the magnolias appear to be thriving quite as well as the orchids.

I personally find this last observation tremendously encouraging, for here the forest is telling me that as much as anything Nature loves diversity. In a world where orchids and Silicon-Valley yuppies appear to be poised to inherit the Earth, plodding magnolias still can offer their perfume and simple hermits can smell of woodsmoke.

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### **WHY ARE SO MANY PLANTS MEDICINAL?**

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

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

The chemistry of life supports my view. For instance, most of the chemicals composing both yeast and man are practically identical. The proteins of both yeast and man are made of the same twenty amino acids, their nucleic acids of the same four purine and pyrimidine bases, and their carbohydrates of the same or similar sugars. The chemical pathway by which yeast ferments sugar to alcohol is identical with the pathway by which human muscle cells convert glucose to pyruvic acid. Combining ribosomes from microorganisms with the soluble fraction from a rabbit or a duck will synthesize protein all can use. In fact, at least when I went to school, the basic mechanisms of synthesizing and breaking down carbohydrate, fat and protein were considered to be identical in all forms of life known to exist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **WHY BOTHER WITH BUTTERFLIES?**

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

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

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

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

Without going into details I'll just say that I'm convinced that all of us, most of the time -- maybe nearly all the time -- conduct our lives under the influence of any number of overlapping hypnotic suggestions. Many of the trances we stay in are helpful, even necessary, but many are destructive.

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

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

Here's how butterflies fit into this discussion:

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

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

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

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### **WHY DESTRUCTION MIGHT BE SO MUCH FUN**

The neighbor continues "neatening up the landscape." Day after day the bulldozer has its way and during each morning jog I see the consequences. One day a line of trees is vanished, the next a hedgerow. It's especially painful now when so many creatures are nesting. On the other hand, maybe it's best to

destroy the nests and kill the young now, for without habitat there will be nothing to sustain them later.

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

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

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

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

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

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## **WITH A SONG IN MY HEART**

The other day I was cleaning up my writing on my birdsong webpage and read the following:

"Even when newly hatched White-crowned Sparrows are kept where they can't hear any kind of bird song, when they're about a month old they begin singing simple notes. This bird babble, known technically as subsong, continues for

about two months. When the birds are about 100 days old, their subsong 'crystallizes' into a form that thereafter doesn't change much. The singing of White-crowned Sparrows of this age who have never heard other birds of their species sing is not nearly as rich and pleasant to hear as that produced by birds who have grown up hearing their own species sing. Nonetheless, experienced birders can definitely hear the White-crowned Sparrow element in their song."

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

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

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

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

\*\*\* END \*\*\*