

WILDNESS AND WILDERNESS

By Darren Bifford

Humility meaning honesty or the consequences of the world's 'foreign song' speaking either too quietly or too slowly to hear but nevertheless remaining and so we go on looking where we should listen...

If 'wildness' is anything equal to 'wilderness,' then my first encounter with wildness of any sort was from the rusty hide-a-way window of my parents' camping trailer driving over the rough and all too narrow back roads of the Okanagan Valley years ago. These were the days when my family attempted to be a family by going fishing with other families attempting to do the same. And whatever the success of the se rather forced and tense adventures, they marked the first departure from my suburban beginnings to some unkempt space outside of it; this was the idea of the wilderness: of the campground, of fishing lakes and fire pits, of packing up and leaving town, of burning our shoes in the coals, and breaking our fishing rods. ---And if wildness was anywhere, it had to be somewhere around here.

Overall, however, I didn't see much wilderness as a kid (the already scarce camping tips becoming more scarce as I got older). But I don't think this lack of trees, campfires, mountains and lakes has made me senseless to the wild. I have my suspicions, in fact, that the wild, whatever it may be, has little to do with camping trips and flights into the wilderness. I had thought as a kid that it was somehow the places we were to go, the unfamiliar away from home, the wherever-the-hell this bloody road would stop---that some wild secret would be found. I tend now to think, however, that wildness has very little to do with leaving. If it was present anywhere on these early family road trips, it was lurking not in where we went to, but in the anticipation, or in the desire to leave that was tangible in my father in days before we set off. Wildness is tied to how human beings live in the world and with each other, wherever they are, rather than with some idea of the world itself. Wildness is a quality given in the relationship with what is other than ourselves. It need not be dirty. The wild is not something to lay hold of,

nor is it a place to be found: rather, it exists with human in any and every place human being go about the business of living. I want to return to these ideas.

In thinking of wildness initially, apart from any thoughts of my family, a few things immediately came to mind: first, how the word itself has become tangled up (or beaten down) along the well-worn tracks of the provincial parks of the mind---clichés, that is. I think of men's groups (who have rented out a couple of plots in an out of the way campground for the weekend) where they give themselves totem names of wild Native American beasts and tie their ties and belts around their heads and hum and drum their way around the fire pit. I imagine the serious necessity with which these 'gatherings' are approached. Weeks in advance the preparations begin: the money for the all important weekend paid in advance; the old jeans are brought out; Swiss Army knives are purchased and toilet paper is packed secretly in the bottoms of backpacks. Wildness, like a lost dog or a lost dream to be retrieved. Wildness, placed exactly where it is that we are not; and it is expected that, if only the right methods are followed, and the right places found (Mt. Shasta, Sedona, Ariz., Nelson etc.), that we will at last recover the hairy diamond inside of our forgotten hearts.

Robert Bly, in *Iron John*, describes wildness and the wild man as a hairy, smelly, forgotten beast living at the bottom of a muddy pond. We are to throw him our magic ball and retrieve the wild in us. (Mental note: don't shave or shower; get a ball.)

In thinking of wildness, these all seemed to me more like attempts at wildness---at imitations rather than wildness itself. How quickly wildness becomes a provincial park! We put it in a box and mark it as what is foreign; we assign it a place and a time---we give it a form, and belittle it with expectations of its arrival: we would swallow it if it were a pill.

But if I began with provincial parks, it was to get them out of the mind. Wildness is something else entirely. Allow me to start talking a little abstractly.

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As I said initially, I think wildness begins and lives somewhere between ourselves and the world; the pores through which it breathes are given in and

through relationship. But provincial parks, being what they are, have little to do with relationship; they are spaces or over-used land---just as clichés are spaces of over-used mind---that have become lonely and false. They are without desire. Above all, I would like to stress their dishonesty---the refusal to see themselves as they are.

Wildness, then, has something to do with honesty. But the honesty, here, is more like an experience than a moral prescription. Honesty is a way of laying oneself bare to the world. It is a primary form of relationship.

I think wildness is a kind of exposure of the world in the space of which a human experience can lay bare. By 'exposure', I mean something like being exposed to the elements, to a foreign terrain. Exposure, here, calls human fragility into light. It is what happens when we step outside of the protected places we've cultivated for our living and necessities. In exposure, we come into clear relationship.

And that wildness in an exposure of the world means that it is nothing we can enact on our own. A wild man does not dress in a wild man's clothes, and only climbs trees on occasion. It is not all spit and venom.

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And so the chanting and the drumming, all our renamings of ourselves, the camping and the forever-long road trips---these are all secondary to wildness itself. Like the series of Zen sketches called the "Ten Bulls", when we begin looking for the bull, we have already gone wrong. (But, paradoxically, we cannot look: again, desire.)

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I come to wildness in the strangest places: take the library (not even an *old dusty one*) *just before it closes*. *I would have had to have been in it for most of the night, and, with any luck, would have been one of the last to leave.* The wildness comes when I take to wandering among the stacks where the people who I have loved but have died long before me have left their marks. The books give off the scent of human imprints. Lives lived and gone, but some measure of eros still remaining; vital things always there without expectation.

“Green points on the shrub
and poor Lawrence dead”

---W.C. Williams

Wildness will come with my first notice of the state of my coffee table in months: the things lying upon it unmoved, as though becoming natural kinds unto themselves.

My box of pictures that I carry with me from new home to new home; and with each move becoming more full: discarded selves that could not nor would wish to hold on to what has passed.

Wild: the quick and quiet moments.

Not a goal or refutation of the world, but a species of things in it that are most often missed. And this is just another way of trying to say the word poetry---and philosophy too---without actually having to use the words. Not that any of these activities mean anything on their own: they are what we do to call out the wild things; or maybe more like what the wild things do to us: their poisons and juices.

Rilke, a man who spoke well of wild things, and who spent years in patient faithfulness learning to sense them, sums up what I have trying to say with more success than I have said it. He writes, in one of his letters to Franz Kappus: “If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches.” (trans. M.D. Herter Norton)