

Encounters with Another Archdruid: An Obituary for Bill Devall

Jorge Conesa-Sevilla

In 1986, I had decided to do a Special Major at Humboldt State University. I was seeking advice and obtaining permission from the different chairs of the Biology, Psychology, and Philosophy departments when I went to see Bill Devall. He recommended I take two of his classes or classes from colleagues in the sociology department. This meeting was a very formal student-teacher exchange. Bill was not unknown to me—a familiar face in Arcata and Trinidad, California. I sat in zazen and often encountered the tall, lanky figure of Bill as he nodded by. He sat like a tree stump. I also bumped into him around Trinidad.

But only later, when I finally took his classes, did I come to realize I had met the local archdruid.

The first day of classes it dawned on me that the book we were reading, Deep Ecology, was written by him and “this other guy” George Sessions. Additionally, he asked us to read about Paul Shepard (Nature and Madness), David Brower (Encounters with the Archdruid, by John MacPhee), The Ohlone Way, by Malcolm Margolin, Gary Snyder and so many others—books that I still own and continue to read.

The class was small. The first thing I noticed was that everybody else but me knew who this guy was—really was. They sat in awe and admiration, hanging by every word Bill pronounced, deliberately, almost with effort—as a shy person forced to speak. Bill’s approach to teaching was seminar style, saying a few things--only what needed to be said--while soliciting our contributions, sometimes nodding or briefly responding to what we had said, sometimes not, staring at the distance through the window—longing for the Cascade Mountains. (His eyes had a way about them, a “skewness” that made him look like he was always in deep thought.) From time to time, he would become passionate, like an archdruid, and talk about “issues”--saving

this or that other old grove, lupine eradication, or how “yuppie” Eureka had become after the red district and canneries had been replaced by insipid malls. His Buddhist side thought out loud about when the prostitutes were part of the civic fabric of Eureka, when life used to be, well, real.

Not knowing any better, and believing with Bill that we were supposed to “kill” the Buddha should we find him in our way, I challenged him left and right, mostly because nobody hardly ever spoke except to try to impress him. At least that is how I remember things. I had been taking a few philosophy courses so I felt, in my cocky way, up to the task. For example, Bill would put a plug for biodiversity as a gold standard and sign of a healthy ecosystem, and I would point out that arid regions of the globe contained less biodiversity, but that this made them no less deserving of conservation efforts—The Sonoran Desert particularly. Of course, little did I know, Bill was using me, in his gentle and astute way, as a segue for a presentation about “intrinsic values.” And that’s the way it went, he would say “tomato” and I “*tomates.*”

He would ask us to volunteer for lupine-eradicating parties on weekends. Everybody in his class would eagerly raise their hands and then would write their names down—blisters, picks and shovels ready. He would look at me and me at him. Then, I would say something like, “Bill (we were on first name basis after I had crossed too many lines), but don’t lupines have intrinsic rights as well, aren’t they proving their biological toughness and adaptive qualities by doing something millions of species have done in the past, overwhelming the competition?” Bill’s argument was obviously sound, that we had introduced these species and that they were reducing the local, natural biodiversity. But then, logically, I would ask, “But Bill, aren’t we Catalans, the Spaniards or you the English also introduced and invasive species to Northern California, even more lethal than lupines? Shouldn’t we eradicate ourselves too?” My frightened classmates would look at Bill, then ignore me as usual, but kept on not-breathing which was an odd and scary not-sound. Bill would look at me and wink—a sophisticated Buddhist

gesture acknowledging insight. That was the point! Did anybody see that... that was the point?!

As a seasoned (and bruised) teacher I have come to understand and appreciate the joy and the important function that a naysayer can play and has in class dynamics—it makes things so much easier.

Bill allowed me to be stubborn in other ways, like doing a vision-quest as part of my final paper. He probably thought a retreat and a few well-deserved nightmares would do me some good. He did not lecture me on co-opting culture—as a sociologist, he knew that this is what humans do best. After all, what I intended to do was akin to asking a non-Catalan to climb a human castle (a *castell*) to the very top, risking injury. It was a very disturbing experience and I told him so (both are, a vision quest and climbing a *castell*, not that I ever want to climb atop the strong shoulders of my country men and women). The vision quest shook me down to the bone...I cried. He was very gentle, compassionate, gave me a hug, and said, “Now write your paper.”

From then on, and after having taken his classes, he would welcome me in his office just to catch up. I would tell him how impressed I was by Paul Shepard and he would give me others to read. One day he disappeared. Months went by and I did not see him. Finally, I caught up with him slowly climbing some stairs. He looked pale, thinner, sick, and the rest of his hair was falling out. I asked and he changed the subject. I told him I did not know what to do: stay in beautiful Humboldt County or go off to Toledo to do graduate school. He said, “Don’t stay, go, but keep fighting wherever you go...keep your practice.”

He gave me a hug in now very fragile and sinewy arms and sent me on my way to the reality of the world.

It has taken me almost thirty years to assimilate everything Bill taught me and continues to teach me (and Dr. Early also at Humboldt State). For one, humans keep revisiting good and bad memes. We renew our Earth vows in novo-Taoists forms that teach that sustainability starts from within and it is

harder to achieve than we ever imagined it to be, that this requires whole communities of humans teaching "The Way" across generations if these lessons are to take root, and that it takes courage for we always live in precarious, existential parameters that obligate humility rather than self-righteousness. This is not the easy path:

He whose inflowing thoughts are dried up, who is unattached to food,
whose

dwelling place is an empty and imageless release -- the way of such a
person is

hard to follow, like the path of birds through the sky. - Gautama
Buddha

That was Bill's way. Or, we become "takers," the name Anthony Hopkins' character Ethan gives (in the movie "Instinct") to civilized but nevertheless ignorant and ruthless humanoid-wasps (my description) who go on raiding for quick spoils and who live under the illusion of control. Also attributed to Gautama Buddha is the observation that "An ignorant man ages like an ox. His flesh may increase, but not his understanding." The Buddha did not say this, but it stands to reason that the more flesh there is to rot, then the more waste there will be, and the more decomposers it will draw to its diminishing self making of death an unsightly spectacle.

Bill also taught me that sometimes you have to "kill" the Buddha to see the lupines, sometimes you have to kill the lupines to see the Buddha, and sometimes you have to die inside in order to live. No one can do the killing or the dying for you. All this dying and living is absolute. One cannot wish it away, pay somebody to have it removed, or dull one's senses pretending it does not exist: Dukkah (suffering).

If there is a heaven (I feel more sympathetic toward Buddhism thus I do not know for sure), and if there are tall mountains in heaven, then I can imagine Bill Devall, hiking up at an easy and careful pace alongside Arne Naess,

David Brower, and John Muir. May their feet get tougher as they climb toward infinity.