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Blue Jays and Other Storied Experiences

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This was the heart of the trouble that I had in school. Many of the stories that should have been told about animals, about how they live, their different ways, were never told. I don't know what the stories were, but when I walked in the woods or out on the prairie or in the mountains, I could feel the boundaries of those stories. I knew they were there, the way you know fish are in a river. This knowledge was what I wanted, and the only way I had gotten it was to go out and look for it. To be near animals until they showed you something that you didn't imagine or you hadn't seen or heard. Barry Lopez, "Lessons from the Wolverine"

I used to regard blue jays as bossy, belligerent alarmists, a belief which was confirmed regularly when I watched them at birdfeeders. Chickadees and other smaller birds would scatter when one arrived to either hammer open a sunflower seed, spraying other seeds in all directions, or to cram its crop with as much food as possible before flying off to stash it. Blue jays would also show their assertive side whenever I walked along the wooded river banks near my home. More often than not their calls announced my arrival and marked my progress along the trail, as if I were an owl or some other threatening presence.

What I now recognize, thanks to poststructuralist theory, is that my interpretation of blue jay behaviour was determined as much by Burgess books ("Sammy Jay") and parental commentary as by my personal observations.¹ More so, perhaps. I had learned what to expect of blue jays, and found what I was looking for. The preconceptions that I brought to my experiences also made it hard for me to explain or even notice that blue jays could feed amicably together or sit quietly side by side on a branch. I could see them gorging themselves out of greed, but was less inclined to entertain the possibility that they might be prudently storing away sustenance for the cold Canadian winter.

I am grateful to poststructuralism for helping me gain insight into the socially constructed contours of my lived experiences. It has made me a more circumspect animal watcher, for one thing, and it has taught me to hold myself accountable for what I learn to see. This has been a significant personal development, particularly in relation to my work in conservation advocacy and environmental education where it has alerted me to the cultural and historical specificity of the origins, objectives and knowledge claims of the programs in which I am involved. It has freed me to see anew and to question prevailing beliefs, and at the same time to seek out and listen to a diversity of opinions and explanations.

Nevertheless, I have become increasingly uneasy with the claims of some post-structuralist theorists according to whom, for example, "meaning and consciousness do not exist outside language."² I do not share this vision of a world whose meaning is given and spoken solely through human voices. The blue jays are busy at something, deliberately so, though the sense of their activity may elude me. Moreover, if I watch carefully enough and with an open heart and mind, they shape my understanding and co-author any account of their behaviour that I might formulate. I am simply unable to unilaterally assign meanings to what they do.

This paper has its roots in my desire to affirm meaning beyond the realm of human discourse. My intent is to reflect on the place of nature experience and on the role of nonhuman natural entities in what I term the storied creation of nature. My remarks are based on a set of admittedly eclectic readings in ecofeminism, phenomenology, sociobiology, anthropology and environmental history. Although seemingly haphazard, they were selected with a goal in mind: to find a position from which I can comfortably advocate nature experience as an essential and often missing element in environmental education and advocacy.

The Extinction of Experience

For urban-dwelling North Americans, occasions to experience and learn from wild nature - nature that is untethered, unmanicured and unmanaged - are rare and becoming more so. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most compelling is the extent to which the urban landscape has been altered and tailored for human needs and convenience. Our most common and significant encounters with living, nonhuman entities, when they occur, consist largely of interactions with cultivated plants and domesticated animals. And while these may be satisfying and edifying in their own right, we are faced nonetheless with what Gary Nabhan and Sara St. Antoine call "the extinction of experience," a term used originally by insect ecologist Robert Pyle to refer to the loss of direct, personal contact with wildlife caused by the local extirpations of native species.³

"The extinction of experience" denotes an experiential impoverishment to which many if not most people have become accustomed and resigned. This deprivation cannot be accounted for solely, however, by the lack of opportunities for hands-on, visceral contact with wild nature. The correlation between what has been lost in terms of species and natural areas and what we are experiencing is not so simple. Indeed, the extinction of experience has as much if not more to do with our failure to esteem, seek out or even notice our wild, nonhuman neighbors. It also has to do with our failure to attend to our own bodies and to the ways in which we, as natural beings, as animals, respond to light, heat, tastes, textures and so on.

Blue jays are calling, even in our urban centres, but it seems that we have forgotten how to hear them. Our inattention is not surprising given how we are socialized about nature in modern Canadian society. In schools, for example, the direct, intimate knowledge of wild nature counts for little. It is assumed that students learn best about nature in an indoor science classroom where nature experiences are heavily mediated through both theory and technology. The entities encountered are not alive, wilful and sensitive, but rather are made to order - on the page of a book, on a video screen or in the form of a dead specimen. The stance of the learner, in any case, is that of a controlling mind who studies, measures and manipulates abstract or lifeless objects. The world created by the senses is rendered inconsequential as are the organic life contexts of both the learner and that part of nature which she/he aspires to know.

Mainstream education is a head-centred experience. Despite a long-standing recognition of the limitations of overly cerebral approaches, we still teach for the most part as if learning were a cognitive activity only. The body and bodily knowledge are denied. Sitting immobile at desks for hours on end with our eyes focused on the written word, we forget the vast wild world around us and in us. We forget, as Gary Snyder points out, that "the conscious agenda-planning ego occupies a very tiny territory."⁴ It *seems* to take up all the room, leaving no space for an insight like the following:

But isn't waiting itself and longing a wonder, being played on by
wind, sun and shade?⁵

Educational practices give experiential grounding to the notion that mind is separate from body and humans separate from the rest of nature. In so doing, they reinforce taken-for-granted values and beliefs, leaving us stranded in a head-centred, human-centred world. Surrounded and supported in our day to day existence by televisions, cars, sidewalks and shopping malls, we are fooled into thinking that we are self sufficient. We experience our estrangement from nature as both normal and inevitable. As Erazim Kohak writes:

On a primordial, intuitive level, we preform our conceptions of nature not in an intimate interaction with God's living nature but amid a set of artifacts which conform to our construct of reality as matter, dead, meaningless, propelled by blind force.⁶

Ecofeminists offer a different but complementary explanation for essentially the same phenomenon. They link the commonplace stance of detachment from nature to the privileging of values central to masculine identity in Western culture: rationalism, competitive individualism and instrumentalism. These values, I would add, *are promoted explicitly and implicitly* within the formal education system. This is evidenced at the high school level, for example, by the

emphasis put on math and science, by the standard organization of classroom space into rows, by methods of evaluation such as examinations and by the primary reason given for learning in the first place: to get good marks, to get ahead, to succeed.

Ironically, even when the pedagogical goal is to develop students' abilities to think critically about societal norms, patriarchal values may underlie the project. In such cases, the freedom of the individual is often upheld as the highest value, and it is to be obtained through rational analysis and critique. Unchallenged and even championed is what Janis Birkeland calls the egoistic conception of human nature - "the image of Man striving for self-realization through independence from necessity (nature) and freedom from social constraints (community)."7 This is widely understood to be the implicit goal not only of education, but of humanity as a whole.

That this cult of the autonomous individual is desirable pedagogically or otherwise is far from evident. For one thing, as Stephanie Lahar points out, in positioning ourselves as distinct and separate vis-a-vis our life context "we stop being aware of the shapings and natural containments that a particular environment places around human practices and social structures."8 We become inattentive, in other words, to our very real dependence on others and to the ways that our actions affect them. Over-consumption, toxic contamination, desertification, species extinction and starvation are some of the more tangible repercussions.

Richard Nelson similarly maintains that our inability to acknowledge and honour our ties results in our failure to understand what sustains us:

Probably no society has been so deeply alienated as ours from the community of nature, has viewed the natural world from a greater distance of mind, has lapsed to a murkier comprehension of its connections with the sustaining environment.9

Like other writers included in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Nelson is drawing attention to the risks inherent in our blithely sanctioned separateness from the rest of nature. Editors E.O. Wilson and Stephen Kellert also warn of undesirable consequences. Wilson reminds us that the human brain evolved in a biocentric, not a machine regulated world, and that as a result we are attuned to and reliant on affiliation with other living organisms.10 Kellert's research outlines the many evolutionary advantages for humans of nature experience including, among others, physical fitness, enhanced creativity and the development of language and myth.11 Their assessment of what is at stake in terms of pure self-interest is sobering, even if one disagrees with their sociobiological assumptions.

The implications of the *extinction of experience* reach much further of course. This is immediately apparent when one steps outside a uniquely human-centred

frame of reference to consider the global ecological crisis in all of its horrific manifestations. Industrial society's massive and unrelenting abuse of plants, animals, soil, air and water is rooted in our express dissociation from them.

Pyle contends that any conditions which reduce intimate nature experience "create a cycle of disaffection, apathy and irresponsibility toward natural habitats."12 His words indicate that the all-too-common stance of detachment from and disinterest in the nonhuman is learned - indeed created by *experiential deprivation*. Kohak calls it a "curious phenomenon" and likewise links it to deficient experience.13 We learn to love what has become familiar, writes David Orr, a comment which bodes ill for wild nature, since it implies that our lack of contact leads to an inability to care.14

Writers from a variety of disciplines are calling for a juncture between education and direct sensory experience. This is not to imply, however, that what takes place in schools is not direct sensory experience of sorts. Obviously it is; yet that which students are directly sensing is by and large of human design and fabrication: human constructs and human constructs translated into artifacts constitute the object and referent of their thought and discourse. In learning about nature, there is a radical experiential difference between reading a book, dissecting a calf's eye and having a chickadee take a peanut out of one's hand while in the schoolyard. Each event is orchestrated to some degree, yet only the latter allows for an encounter between two living subjects: nature presents itself in a wild and wilful ball of feathers.

Living things hold our attention, write Aaron Katcher and Gregory Wilkins, which is why interactions with them create such rich opportunities for learning. They advocate the teaching of natural history as opposed to "the science of the invisible as it is now taught." Nature should be studied not merely as subject matter, they maintain, but as "the world common to teacher and student" for which both must assume responsibility.15

Knowing Nature

To thus situate teaching and learning in the life worlds of those involved requires the reworking of the very notion of what it means to know nature. To this end, the ecofeminist concepts of "self-in-relation" and "embodied knowledge" can be helpful. The first rejects the prevailing atomistic construction of self and stresses the fact that relationships are not extrinsic to who we are or to what and how we know. While distinct as humans and individuals, we are nevertheless continuous with the rest of nature, and defined by those bonds. The second idea contests the privileging of the universal and abstract in knowledge claims: it underscores the need to embrace bodily lived experience - the personal and the particular as well as collective memberships and realities - in teaching and learning. Together,

these concepts challenge the subject/object, knower/known dichotomies which are assumed in traditional approaches to education. Relationships of respect, care, compassion, gratitude and responsibility open up possibilities for knowing that are denied to the detached observer.

Indeed, the stance of the objective, disinterested knowledge-seeker is being challenged in other fields. Scott McVay, for instance, considers it to be more a myth about the way scientific advances occur than a reality. In his essay, "A Siamese Connexion with a Plurality of Other Mortals," he suggests that *intimacy rather than objectivity is the key to understanding*. He recounts the experiences of a number of scientists - some as well-known as Charles Darwin and Konrad Lorenz - to support his position. For instance, with regard to Nobel prize winner Barbara McClintock and her work on maize, he quotes Evelyn Keller:

In McClintock's working philosophy, the familiar virtues of *respect and humility* take on a new significance. To her, nature is characterized by a complexity that vastly exceeds the capacities of the human imagination. Organisms have a life and order of their own that scientists can only begin to fathom (...) Her vocabulary is consistently one of affection, kinship, and empathy. In speaking of her microscopic work with chromosomes, she says, "I actually felt as if I was right down there and these were my friends ... As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself."

Although McVay is fairly guarded in his assertions, the examples he offers speak volumes about what it means or should mean to know nature. Essential are the "habits of mind that evoked the notion of biophilia" - wonder, delight, openness, tenderness, attentiveness, tenacity, patience, reverence - and regular, intimate contact.¹⁶

The Storied Creation of Nature

The first time I saw an eastern screech-owl, I did not see it - at least not initially. The bird was in plain view, and I stared at it intently, but try as I might I could not distinguish it from the gnarled old tree where it was perched. Not until my birding companion told me exactly what to look for - colour, size, stance - could I put it together. In retrospect, I have seldom been so aware of constituting my experienced reality.

This instance serves to illustrate, I think, how experience involves much more than mere perception. Indeed, as David Stewart and Algis Mickunas point out in their guide to phenomenology, it requires an active synthesis of perception, retention, expectation, memory and imagination.¹⁷ Experience is not given. It

does not stand on its own. Rather, it is intimately and inextricably enmeshed with our personal and collective histories.

William Cronon speaks of "the storied reality of human experience" to refer to our active participation in the creation of any 'event.'¹⁸ While he focuses primarily on the making of history, and thus on the larger social narratives through which we make sense of a series of events, this storying of reality takes place at many levels: from that of constituting a unified object (eg. the screech-owl), to that of characterizing an entity (eg. the bossy blue jay), to that of understanding one's place in nature as a human being (eg. the disinterested observer). The story metaphor works powerfully against positivist notions of objectivity. *Storied reality is meaningful reality, and imbedded therein are our attitudes, values and beliefs about the world we know.*

I grew up in southwestern Ontario, where the towns and small cities are surrounded by farmland. To me as a child, nature was corn fields and cow pastures. Oblivious to the impacts of monocultures and cattle, and a fond consumer of corn and beef, I regarded them as nature benign and bountiful. The same fields and pastures appear entirely different, however, to me as an adult - more like aberrations rather than exemplars of nature. *They* have not changed, of course - except perhaps for extending a little further into the woodlots - but *I* have, and so consequently has my experience of them. I now bring to bear my fears, hopes, loathings and affinities as a nature advocate and know them in a new way. They are judged according to the logic and lessons of a different story.

As a child I inhabited a world storied predominantly according to the capitalist, industrialist and humanist values of mainstream Canadian society. Needs and interests other than those of humans were for the most part written out. Narrative authority, as Cronon explains, is achieved by obscuring large portions of reality which in this case included the wild nature that had been ploughed under or driven out of the countryside.¹⁹ The potential encounters to be had with those particular manifestations of nature were likewise erased, as was any recognition of the value of such encounters.

Luckily for me, this predominant societal narrative was undercut to some degree by the experiences provided and encouraged by my parents and grandparents. Although they were as caught up as most people, I suppose, in the values of the time - dreams of material progress and so on - they paid attention to and took delight in the scent of wild roses, the endless diversity of stones, the quacking of mallards and reflections of moonlight on water. The one-and-only visit of a tufted titmouse at our birdfeeder, for example, was an incident referred to for years afterwards. It became part of the Bell family lore. So did the appearance of an albino blue jay. More common events were noteworthy too, like the return of crows in the spring or the annual fruiting of wild strawberries which we eagerly anticipated and fully indulged in year after year.

It is interesting that Nabhan and St. Antoine point to the oral traditions of

plant and animal stories as one of three requisite conditions for fully expressing biophilia. They refer specifically in their research to the knowledge of tribal elders, which, sadly, is being lost along with biodiversity and opportunities for nature experience.²⁰ But their remarks apply equally, I think, to modern industrial society. My parents and grandparents are no longer living, and with them has gone a knowledge of and appreciation for plants and animals that few people seem to possess or even suspect is possible. The reawakening of such understanding is indispensable, I believe, in efforts to rework the larger societal narratives which shape and encompass human/nature interactions generally. At the very least it represents a means of bringing to the fore modes of teaching and learning that are contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract.

The Radical Brackets of Nature Experience

Story-telling, writes Cronon, inevitably defines included, excluded, relevant, irrelevant, empowered and disempowered. Bad story-telling, he adds, has "wreaked havoc with the balance of nature." Educators and activists, therefore, need to confront what he terms "the challenge of multiple competing narratives."²¹ The stories that we choose to live by guide not only our thoughts, but also our actions. They have consequences for which we must accept some degree of responsibility.

But how do we choose the stories? How do we distinguish between one that is desirable and one that is not? Is the choice arbitrary; or, as Kohak suggests, is it a given of lived experience which humans can know? There is no easy answer to this question, but to start, I agree with Catriona Sandilands that "any authorization we might look for in the truth of nature is epistemologically and politically suspect."²² The fact that nature can be and has been used to justify completely contrary courses of action clearly points to the danger and inappropriateness of moral realism. Our conceptualizations of reality are not value-free. We thus need to be cognizant of the assumptions underlying our stories and of the direction in which the various plotlines can lead us.

One narrative that I find particularly disturbing, for example, and which is ostensibly based on the facts of nature, is that articulated by Dorion Sagan and Lynn Margulis in "God, Gaia, and Biophilia." Beginning with the Gaian premise that the atmosphere, hydrosphere, surface sediments and all living beings on Earth behave as a single integrated system, the authors proceed to argue that humanity's purpose may be to colonize the universe, for in this way Gaia would reproduce itself. Equally unpalatable corollaries to their argument include: that from the view of an evolving planet, the decline of "charismatic vertebrates" is like the "trimming" that goes on in an expanding corporation; that conservation on an evolving planet is like "an iron gate barring access to visions of the future;" and that "the decline in species diversity may be balanced by an increase in

technological diversity - a trade-off that may ultimately enhance the longevity of the biosphere.”²³

This is not a story that I would choose to live by. Like the Gaians, I look to nature for guidance, but I come away with a fundamentally different lesson. My story is grounded in the Earth, permanently. My task, as I see it, is not to learn how to leave the planet, but to live on it, and attending to the needs of those with whom I am in relation is central to that task. I cannot disprove the Gaian hypothesis, of course, especially by deferring, like the Gaians, to the authority of nature. Nevertheless, I take comfort in the fact that nature speaks itself in many voices. Diverse experiences and therefore multiple interpretations result from the interplay between self and others. Nature can never be contained, and certainly not by a narrative that exonerates humans from any responsibility in their relationships with other living creatures.

We should not be discouraged from looking to nature for guidance even though it can be experienced and comprehended in many ways. As Kohak writes:

The search for a more adequate conceptualization of nature and of our own humanity must, I am convinced, begin with a radical seeing, encountering the cosmos and ourselves within it in the full richness of meaningful experience.²⁴

Such an encounter would require the deliberate setting-aside of limiting theories and presuppositions, which in the phenomenological tradition is referred to as bracketing. Kohak elaborates, for example, on the radical bracket of solitude which frees us from the distraction of other people so that we can rediscover forgotten meanings. The purpose of bracketing, he explains, “is not to abolish theory but to set aside its claim to autonomous validity as an arbiter of reality and to put it in the perspective of the lived experience wherein it is grounded and of the purpose which led to its generation.”²⁵

Nature experience in and of itself can be such a bracket. It is not necessarily, but it could be. For one thing, it represents the possibility of escaping the almost irresistible fascination of human artifacts. Encounters with nature open up our experience of the world so that, sometimes at least, it can outshout us. As Kohak explains, we are deafened by our commonly held presuppositions: “We lack the humility to watch the chipmunk, busy at his tasks, to let him present himself.”²⁶ If we attend to it, the chipmunk, like any wild creature, can challenge our understanding by its very existence.

Co-authors in Creation

I once knew a man who used to hunt deer. He had given up hunting by the time I met him, and he did so because of two separate incidents. The first occurred while he was skinning a deer that he had just shot: for some unknown reason another deer - perhaps a companion of the first - refused to leave the site. It watched his every knife stroke from the edge of the woods until he had finished. The second involved an animal that he fully intended to shoot: Instead of fleeing it looked him straight in the eyes and held his gaze while it knelt down on the grass. The man could not pull the trigger, not then or ever again.

I recount this story to illustrate how nonhuman entities can shape our understanding and even contest the meanings that we seek to bestow on them. Cronon asks, "are nature and the past infinitely malleable in the face of our ability to tell stories about them?" Like his, my answer is no. Despite the immense power of narrative, natural entities are real things to which story-telling must conform. As he puts it:

... nature is hardly silent. No matter what people do, their actions have real consequences in nature, just as natural events have real consequences for people."²⁷

A better story, writes Donna Haraway, must offer a fuller, more coherent account of what it means to be human and animal.²⁸ To achieve this we must acknowledge the role of nonhuman entities as co-actors in and co-authors of the tales we tell. Jim Cheney speaks of language as a "listening" and as a "gift in which things come to presence."²⁹ It is in this sense that we can allow for and pay attention to the possibility of meanings beyond our own.

Another requirement is that the widespread, stultifying disinterest in wild nature be recognized as an unacceptable mindset that threatens and impoverishes us all. Nature experience is the antidote that I propose, and by this I mean intimate contact with our nonhuman neighbors, ever so humble. The wilder the better, perhaps, but an earthworm is every bit as wild as a black bear - in some cases even wilder. Borrowing from Karl von Frisch, McVay writes "*be in right relation with but one corner of the creation and the whole will become palpable and clear.*"³⁰ I like this piece of advice because it links clarity of understanding with rightness of relation and points to one's particular corner of creation as the place to begin searching for both.

Finally, it is essential that we pay attention to the narratives through which nature is experienced, valued and understood: as Katcher and Wilkins contend, children who throw stones at birds and children who feed birds are both responding to living things, but their choice of response is different - and a story underlies it. Experiences will be mediated, one way or another, through literature, religion, history, ethnicity, science, gender, class and so on. Educators

and nature advocates must take this into account in what they do, not only to better teach or to forward their cause, but to see more clearly where their stories are leading them.

Notes

1. Poststructuralism and postmodernism are often used interchangeably. My understanding is that postmodernism represents something much broader, that is a general incredulity towards modernist assumptions and the authority that rests upon them. Poststructuralism, in contrast, deals more specifically with the analysis of signifying practices and the ways in which language constitutes reality.
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10. E.O. Wilson, "Biophilia and the Conservation Ethic," in S.R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson eds., *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Island Press, Washington, 1993, p.31.
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12. As quoted in Nabhan and St. Antoine, p.239.
 13. Kohak, pp.5,7.
 14. David Orr, "Love It or Lose It: The Coming Biophilia Revolution," in S.R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson eds., *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Island Press, Washington, 1993, p.422.
 15. Aaron Katcher and Gregory Wilkins, "Dialogue with Animals: Its Nature and Culture,"
 16. Scott McVay, "A Siamese Connexion with a Plurality of Other Mortals," in S.R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson, eds. *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Island Press, Washington, 1993, pp.14,17.in S.R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson eds., *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Island Press, Washington, 1993, pp.192,193.
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 18. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History*, March 1992, p.1369.
 19. Cronon, p.1349.
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 21. Cronon, pp. 1349,1361,1366.
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 23. Dorion Sagan and Lynn Margulis, "God, Gaia, and Biophilia," in S.R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson eds., *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Island Press, Washington, 1993, pp.352,358,359,360.
 24. Kohak, p.182.
 25. Kohak, p.24.
 26. Kohak, pp.22,35.
 27. Cronon, pp.1372,1373.
 28. Donna Haraway, "Primateology is Politics by Other Means," in Ruth Bleier ed. *Feminist Approaches to Science*, Pergamon Press, New York: 1988, pp.80-81.
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30. McVay, p.11.

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