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WILD WITHIN, WILD WITHOUT

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A still, cool, moonlit night. Our breath, upon contact with the night air, vapourized into soft, formless clouds. Despite the chill, we stood motionless taking in the scene before us. The climb had been worthwhile. The lake below shimmered brightly, fringed by dark shaggy spires of the northwoods. I felt sure we would contact them here.

Spreading my legs and taking a deep breath, I began to howl. Low and deep at first, but building higher as it went. "Ar-r-o- o-o-o." Around me, my friends joined in one by one. Soon our chorus came echoing back across the lake. Standing silently once again, we strained to catch even the slightest hint of a response.

Overhead nighthawks swooped and soared. From a snag nearby a great horned owl challenged everyone with "who who-who who?". A bull elk emitted an explosive grunt from nearby stand of aspen. Presently he strode out and onto a small ridge to our right. There he stood, frozen in silver and gray by the moonlit. The mammoth rack glistened. But no response from the ones we sought. Then, just as we were about to break the silence between us, the answers began.

First, from directly across the lake, came two howls. Their primal call reached deep down inside each of us and pulled at something. I felt the pull, but before I could find out what it was, a chorus of three joined in from an island to the far right. Their songs blended with the first howls as my senses went numb.

Spellbound, I stood gazing across the lake and secretly running with the pack. But the chase couldn't be finished. The cold had penetrated, sending spasms of shivering over my body. Reluctantly I let the vision dispell. Soon the notes of the last howl faded into the returning silence and we slowly turned our backs on the lake and walked back to the camp.

All my life, I've been drawn to the wild. When not much more than a toddler, I frequently strolled into the woods surrounding my grandparent's home. Under

the beaked hazel's coolness, my nose twitched with the peppery scent of rotting vegetation. Here and there shafts of sunlight lit emerald fronds of sarsaparilla and fern. Seemingly miles above me, summer breezes stirred aspen leaves and caressed spruce boughs. With each step deeper into the forest, tantalizing possibilities for exploration and discovery appeared for me.

But frantic parents usually ended these little forays very quickly. They feared that I would lose my way, despite my assurances of "I come back". They probably also envisioned me becoming a tasty little snack for some fierce large animal. Once a large blackbear had calmly strolled into the yard, surprising everyone. I don't remember being afraid and the incident certainly did nothing to deter my wanderings.

As I grew older and stronger, my Grandfather and I took long walks through the woods. With his big warm hand wrapped around mine, we followed paths not made by human feet. He seemed to know so much about the forest and its denizens. In summer's soft mud, he pointed out deer and elk tracks, while in winter's powdery snow, he explained rabbit runs. Frequently, Grandfather offered peanuts to squirrels and grey jays. When they weren't around, the less aggressive chickadees could be coaxed closer with broken bits. Knowingly, Grandfather provoked my growing feelings of kinship with the wild.

Many years later, the feelings guided me into university to learn more about wildlife. Training in the "subversive science" of ecology made me keenly aware of habitat destruction and species extinction. I wanted to help save wildlife and, like most students, was led to believe that knowledge and research would provide the necessary solutions. The opportunity to test this belief came one summer while working as a park naturalist. I had volunteered to assist with a study of the park's wolves. The study sought to reveal interrelationships with other animals, particularly prey species such as deer, elk, and moose. To obtain this information, individual wolves were live trapped and tranquilized. Then the biologist measured weight, took a blood sample, and fitted a radio collar around the wolf's neck. With the radio collar, the wolves could be easily tracked by airplane, truck, or snowmachine.

One afternoon a trap caught a small black wolf. While one of the biologist's assistants and I stood watching the wolf, a warden loaded the syringe with the tranquilizer. He then cautiously approached the wolf with the syringe mounted to the end of a long pole. With a quick jab, the syringe found its mark and soon the wolf slumped to the ground. Quickly we moved in. The wolf, we discovered, was a young female, almost all black except for a small white blaze across her chest, and weighing 98 pounds. Just as we were packing up a call came over the truck's radio announcing another trapped wolf several miles away. The warden hopped into the truck and drove off, leaving the assistant and I to watch over her.

Typically a drugged animal revives smoothly and without too much discomfort,

but not this time. Suddenly, as we watched in horror, wracking convulsions began to sweep over her body. The lips curled back in an ugly grimace and the teeth gnashed and ground together. With the passing of the first wave, we saw that she had stopped breathing. Frantically, we knelt down and pumped her chest. No sooner had breathing commenced when another wave of convulsions would hit. How many times we pounded those beautiful sleek black sides, I can't remember. So many times, I thought we had lost her, but finally the convulsions stopped and the heaving sides told us that she had passed through the worst. Eventually she struggled to her feet and staggered off into the woods. A simple human err of mixing drugs had almost cost the life of one innocent being.

The experience irrevocably changed my perceptions of how to preserve wildlife. While I still saw the merits of scientific knowledge and research, I sensed something terribly important missing. Slowly the realization came: we, as a species, lack humility with respect to the wild. Instead, the usually unspoken assumption seemed to be that we were better than it. Nowhere is this assumption more evident than in the dictionary.

The Merriam-Webster (1974) defines the wild as: "living in a state of nature and not ordinarily tamed; growing or produced without human aid or care; waste, desolate; uncontrolled, unrestrained, unruly; turbulent, stormy; extravagant, fantastic, crazy; indicative of strong passion, desire, or emotion; and uncivilized, savage; deviating from the natural or expected course."

The first part of the definition suggests that wildlife and wilderness are wasted unless brought under control and put to use for human needs. For almost a century this perception has been applied to the forests under the guise of "sustained yield", "multiple use", and "integrated resource use". Additionally, scientific knowledge and research has been combined with the perception to rationalize the liquidation of old-growth forests for replacement by tree farms. Elsewhere native grasslands yield to the plow while rivers and valley bottoms disappear beneath huge hydro-electric reservoirs. Not surprisingly, but tragically, in Canada over 180 species are listed as endangered and as little as 15 years remain to secure protection of the fast disappearing wilderness.

The perception of wildlife existing almost solely as a storehouse that ought to be used for human needs didn't set well with me. It denied the existence of intrinsic values. Grandfather had encouraged a deep appreciation for the importance of wildlife for its own sake. This appreciation had been reinforced through reflections, if not meditations, while wandering along some deer trail or while gazing at a pair of eagles soaring high above the trees.

The second part of the definition appears to imply that feelings can't be trusted, especially strong feelings, since they could lead a person to become stormy, crazy, or uncivilized. The fears arise from confusion between surface emotions and a deep sense of knowing. The difference between the two can be likened to an ocean. As a storm passes over an ocean, it whips up waves. But far below the

surface, there remains a calm. A deep sense of knowing comes from this place of stillness. To get to it, I've discovered, requires pushing past the surface no matter how turbulent or stormy things may be. This discovery runs counter to the all too common practice of suppressing or restraining the feelings. In so doing, we painfully and disturbingly lose touch with who we really are.

The near death of that small black wolf shook up not only my beliefs about wildlife and wilderness management, but more fundamentally, my sense of self. I recalled my wanderings, from early childhood to adulthood, and the excitement of exploration and discovery. I never lost my way nor came to serious harm. Instead, I realized that I had been increasingly finding my way in wilderness. In its solitude, I was learning to listen and trust my deepest feelings.

By entering and exploring these feelings as I would a wilderness, I had embarked upon an incredible journey. Joseph Campbell, in his series "The Power of Myth" referred to the journey as "following your bliss", while Don Juan instructed Carlos Castenda to "follow the path with heart". I prefer the metaphor used by John Muir, the founder of Sierra Club, who likened the journey to the "pathless way". As I have observed true wilderness is pathless and also the journey is highly personal. No one else could take it for me nor had anyone else been exactly where I was going.

As with most wilderness travel, the journey is not easy. Numerous fears, like deep abysses, frequently block progress — fear of failure, fear of rejection, or fear of the unknown. When encountering a fear, I'm learning to find the stillness, listen to my deepest feelings, and to proceed with courage. Overcoming a fear usually requires hard work and some pain, because a fundamental perception of self and the world at large is being challenged.

The rewards, however, vastly overshadow the work and pain. With each fear successfully overcome, I grow in confidence and am able to push deeper into the spiritual wilderness created by my feelings. Equally important I grow more peaceful and happy. No longer greatly out of touch with my deepest feelings, I'm discovering the Real Me, the Wild Within.

A year or so after the drug mix-up, I sat on a grassy ridge overlooking a meandering creek. An early evening haze gathered in the valley as the sun slipped closer to the western horizon. Cupping my hands around the warm mug of tea, I prepared for a spectacular sunset. Suddenly a movement caught the corner of my eye and presently a tan and black wolf ambled onto an adjacent ridge with not much more than a couple of hundred feet separating us. After a few moments of intently gazing at me, it turned towards the seemingly impending collision of sun into earth. Later, as the fiery radiance retreated before the advance of twilight, the wolf stood up, stretched and vanished ghost-like into a nearby thicket. A shiver ran down my spine and the realization struck: the wolf and I were truly one in the spirit. By not reacting with fear, I had experienced a primordial bond with a wild animal.

Knowledge and its application as research are important to the cause of wilderness and wildlife preservation. But even more critical is self-realization. Only through this sometimes painful but always rewarding process can we find peace and happiness. Then we can live with humility and respect for the Wild.

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