

# WILDERNESS' CALL FOR OPENNESS

David Strong

Or we can open ourselves to the meaning of a life in the wilderness and be patient of being overtaken in our wandering by that which can make us at home in this condition.  
Henry Bugbee, **The Inward Morning**

## Introduction

Openness to discovery, to what is other, is an esteemed virtue in the Western tradition. Even **The Odyssey** praises the wonder that moves one to explore the world in all its strangeness. In our waking moments we seek to cultivate an Athens which not only tolerates but actually nurtures a Socrates. We scorn Galileo's colleagues who refused to look through his telescope and see for themselves the satellites of Jupiter, because they already knew on good authority that there could be no more than seven heavenly bodies. We welcome the study of cultural diversity and Eastern philosophy in our colleges and universities. Moreover, in the culture at large we think a person is closed-minded, indeed, not to welcome the new-fangled products technology makes available to us. Whether or not we personally use a computer, video-cassette player, microwave oven, rowing machine or nintendo, most of us think it unwise to resist the introduction of these into our daily lives and culture.

Nevertheless, there is an important and not so obvious way in which openness to otherness is at risk in our present circumstances. From light switches to microwave ovens, from stereo systems to styrofoam cups, from freeways to airports, our lives in our present setting are immersed in technological devices. Albert Borgmann has shown that these modern devices detach us from what he calls "things". Devices close down and narrow our experience of these original things. Setting the automatic thermostat in one's house and putting it out of mind does not bring one into contact with the sights, smells, sounds, seasons, family and friends, skills and disciplines that the open hearth or even a wood burning stove does. Eating a Chinese-style frozen dinner does not involve us deeply in the culture, take us to a region of China, or yield insights into Taoism. More to the point, peddling an exercycle does not bring us into contact with a trail, the character of the day, or the natural world. A well-made nature film may image for us sights we are likely to see in Alaska, but, as I will show later, wilderness is really something more and other than what the film brings us into contact with. The film's light and sky are really no replacements for the light and sky of a Sunday afternoon. Nor does a cross-country skiing exercise

machine bring us into contact with the world of Yellowstone. We remain cut off from it.

The general pattern Borgmann sees here is a change from things to devices. A thing, in the sense he uses it, gathers and bears a world, interweaves means and ends, and engages us on many levels, including bodily, mental and social levels. Things range from hearths to guitars. Devices, on the other hand, **procure** one aspect of the original thing, the warmth of the wood burning stove, and **disburden** us of the rest, the world of the thing. Thus, devices narrow our experience of the original thing to only one or a few aspects and close us off from the world of the thing. The world of the thing is taken over by the machinery of the device. The central heating system is his paradigm here.

A key point to realize here is that devices impoverish experience. This makes it imperative that we have things that correlate to our experience. In order to have rich and profound experiences, we need to encounter something other than devices, we need to encounter things. What is the significance of this point?

Traditionally, whether we are open or not is thought to depend fundamentally on our attitude. We need a change of heart, to become empty, to suspend judgement about our beliefs, etc. But this need for a change of heart is thought and articulated in circumstances very different than those which have become problematic in our time as I have shown above. In these earlier circumstances there were things to be open to and openness was exacted by them. Thus, the responsibility to be equal to things and circumstances was located with the self.

Against this, technology annihilates the claims things make on us to open to them because of what in fact devices do. In construction and structure they make it impossible to experience the richness of things and the world things bear. Citizens of a society dominated by technology are finally claimed by disburdened consumption and little else. Work has become degraded to a mere means to a paycheck; the paycheck itself the means of all means to commodities which are used up quickly without preparation or celebration and tossed aside. Openness to rich and profound experiences, in a condition thoroughly dominated by technology, is uncalled for and precluded. More fundamental than our openness, **openness requires the conditions, the things, which evoke it.**

Since our circumstances are not completely transformed by technology yet, there remain openings, things, to be open to. Wilderness is one of these things. Unlike devices, literal wilderness is a place we can be open to and will not repel openness.

Unlike reading a book while peddling an exercycle, wilderness does not divide mind and body, even in moments of contemplation. Rather it unifies our mind and body. So wilderness offers us some thing to be open to. **What is there?** Moreover, it instructs in the way of openness by exacting openness. How so? How does wilderness call **for** openness on our part?

### Preparing To Be Open

Unlike fast food, wilderness requires that one turn toward it in preparation. Obviously, one has to decide to go for a backpack trip and that itself usually calls for a wish-list of imagined places and decisions about how much time one has and where to go. A long trip calls for much preparation; a short trip may call for an hour's preparation, given that one has an established practice of backpacking out of which one moves to retrieve equipment and knows what to bring for food, etc.

Backpacking teaches one to be mindful about the body in advance. Mountains give me the measure of the shape of my body. I am disgusted with myself when I am soft, weak, and breathing heavily. I resolve to stay fit over the next winter. Hence, mountains call for getting into and staying in shape: not just running but climbing muscles, and not just muscle tone but toughened feet. Backpacking makes me think of my body over a lifetime, worrying about my back and caring for my bones and knees. Alpine meadows make emphysema and cigarettes abhorrent to me.

While packing one's pack, wilderness teaches one to imagine the future body in various actually possible worlds. Sweating climbs, windy passes, storms, blizzards, gales, heat, evening, morning, noon, night, sleeping body, cold body, body in the dark, hungry, tired, sore, pleased, viewing, bear endangered, fall endangered, cuts and broken bones, blistered, sexed, clean.

The practice of backpacking teaches one to mind equipment ahead of time, so that it will **let** one **be** on the trail. The boots I buy require a long break-in period, if they are not to prove impossible on the trail. Mindful of this, one would rather not wear them on salt beaches.

Backpacking teaches that time has a definite character and is consequential. What comes to pass in preparation time must be grasped then or not at all. One cannot run to the store or throw it in the microwave. To forget the matches is to not have them.

### Beckoned To Open

But preparation is never just "body building" as on a Nautilus machine; it is preparation **for some thing**. The mindful body finds itself anticipating hiking with the subtle changes in light and warmth in late February. Images of past and future hikes begin drifting in and out of mind. As the year turns toward us, we open ourselves to it and become excited with the lengthening of days.

All these February changes, however, probably would not stir the mindful body in this way had not one already been open to mountains as a beckoning direction in the landscape of one's life. Who knows what will speak to us and take hold? Mountains teach us that we do not know who we are; rather, we find out who we are by living out our lives with things. That is, openness requires us to respond affirmatively to what wonders us in order to grasp what there is and who we are. A refusing self is indeed alone, homeless, in the universe, with some idea of its failure and

how things should have been. Mountains teach us of true wonder and lasting mystery, of pause and humility. They make us skeptical of decisions too rationally decided in advance, as if all that counted were more and the latest—an all too standardized living.

### Openness Through Avoiding Misery

Misery and destitution can beget openness. Odysseus, Job, Buddha and the pioneers have all shown us this possibility, but no one goes to the wilderness to have a miserable time of it, if it can be avoided.<sup>2</sup> A backpack trip can be miserable for those completely out of shape. No one wants to spend the entire time focusing on one's shaking muscles. Blisters, too-heavy a pack, a drenching cold rain all are to be avoided. Such narrow and bodily focuses can suddenly expand and open one up to the wilderness, as our tradition shows, but this experience was born of a time when misery could not be avoided; now, when it can be avoided in wilderness, **seeking** this beneficial side of the experience seems wrongheaded. Rather, feet, legs, and body, when avoiding genuine misery, are open, let be, to encounter the wilderness: bedrock feels solid underfoot, a steep trail yields a splendid view, evening settles quietly on a lake near one's campsite.

Experienced hikers are better than beginners at avoiding misery. They have a frame of mind which takes into account the potential for misery in the landscape and avoid it or risk it only for good reason. From habit one is attuned to the environment—seeing the sunny alpine country with the possibility of a storm in mind. Experienced hikers can enjoy a tremendous storm in a dry place, or, knowing one will be dry, one can risk getting drenched.

Through such avoidance, one is not only let be to encounter things, one is also open to equipment—a dry parka, a tent that withstands bad weather, a warm, down bag, a foam sleeping pad. These are good technologies which respond to harsh, threatening, or, at least, genuinely hard claims.

Learning to be open to wilderness teaches us to be selective about technology, to appropriate devices. Avoiding misery does not mean avoiding every frivolous claim of inconvenience and discomfort. Such avoidance insulates one from things. Moreover, having to shoulder a pack puts 'what is really needed' in fresh light.

There are always times in wilderness in which one cannot avoid harsh claims that one would have avoided. One can get sick, hurt, lost, or drenched. Sometimes one has had to push too hard and is too tired to eat. To suffer these times, and be ready for more, shows moderation, authentic engagement, but to be repeatedly caught in such circumstances is inept -- i.e. unwoodsmanlike.

### Utter Containment

Sometimes in order to become open to a place we need to appreciate our utter containment in the place here and now. One must become undeceived of elsewhere and another time to come. Wilderness is like a ship in the sense that it is a place where our usual purposes and attitudes are bracketed for a time. As with boarding a ship, we don other gear, join new concerns, and leave old ones behind us as we lift the great pack to our backs. A mile or so in the wilderness and the experience of separation from cars, highways, and towns is similar to a ship undocking.

For a time, when one is adjusting to the coordinates of the mountains, what presences mostly is perhaps absence: absence of convenience, of news, ability to turn the channel, signs directing one what to do, an entertainment section for Saturday night, a hot bath, a telephone. What is present, too, is what one has not let go. On a daily walk, I may be nudged by the flying of geese, but many times my life is too noisy and too cluttered with schedules to follow their pull and come completely clean. That falls away more in wilderness for what is presently absent fades and leaves an opening to be filled by the actual presence of wild things.

Unlike earlier times when simplicity and confinement were necessary, backpackers undertake **voluntary** containment in the wilderness. Being in wilderness is more than being confined to a homestead cabin in winter in the last century and accepting the reality of it. One knows that nothing will have a more opportune moment to show than here. "Where if not here?" That causes me to reflect on what my life has been about. One has a strong desire to be fully in the place, and, so, one does not want a radio and seeing a Sony Walkman on a hiker indicates that the person sees the trail as little more than a treadmill.

From this strong desire to be in place one walks, from time to time, into the presence of things again. One walks again into an understanding of what it means to treat things as ends in themselves, to acknowledge them, and not merely to treat them as means, as mere instruments.

That is not to say that expectation cannot be a barrier to this openness. However, time and place work to break this barrier. We generally do not bring our usual projects to wilderness. Generally, meadows are not seen in terms of so many animal unit months, forest in terms of boardfeet, lakes in terms of so many acre-feet of water, or peaks in terms of so much extractable mineral. Generally, one is not concerned about legally protecting an area, and so one is not looking for reasons which count politically.

In contrast, the mood of the place is expansive. From clouds to critters to clover, wilderness is a kaleidoscope of shifting meanings. Like a room filled with people called to attention, human conversation and thought pauses before goats and birds. One learns to become coordinated with wilderness by following out its scittering stars of meaning. Perhaps not at first but after days of immersion in this sort of thing, one is here.

### Pressing and Impressive Claims of the Natural World

Unlike travelling in a Winnebago, hiking is a comparatively noninsulated way of being in the world. Avoiding misery, hikers, as pointed out, are often encountering forces that call for attention and dealing with in some way. Camping in the Salmon River canyon in Idaho, I was awakened just before daybreak by a sudden, roaring wind out of nowhere that flicked off the fly of my tent and hurled it straight for the Gorge rapids of that enormous river. As I bolted out to retrieve it, the entire tent, now without the weight of my body, came loose, lifted and tumbled end for end. Moments later, I found myself stretched out on the sandy shore, one hand on the flapping fly, and my legs flopped across the tent.

Climbing mountains can be instructive concerning these pressing and impressive claims. One must find the opening in the season, day and weather. One does not decide to climb a mountain in any season or time of day. It is always "this summer."

Occasionally one climbs a mountain because one just got started up it, but even on an extended backpack trip, when one is given more to whims, a mountain-to-be climbed usually arranges the day. It is best to remember the body in the world and climb in the cool of the morning, and best to get to the top before afternoon thundershowers make it dangerous.

A large mountain usually calls for planning, at least the sighting of a good way up, and always calls for effort. Sweating is important. Unlike walking on the level, sweating from a climb brings about a welcome sea change in the body. Sweating is the difference, the impression, the pressing claims of the landscape makes on our body. By sweating we cleanse ourselves of impurities and become receptive of our surroundings.

Once one has begun a climb, one is within the pull of the mountain and turning back is not an easy, arbitrary decision. It is not like tossing a stick to see which way to go: There is a definite **up** and **down**. The climb is a task and one knows its general outline. Getting a second wind, breaking into a sweat, and becoming determined are all moments of a climb which remind of a way of being one may have forgotten outside of the wilderness. Climbing teaches resoluteness and that resoluteness is only possible in responding on the strength of claims things make upon one.

Though mountaintops are usually farther than the imagination places them, it is always slightly amazing to me how quickly I get above the treetops, the immediate landscape, and the valley floor. More and more landscape loops out before the climber like a sheet unfurling in a high wind. Unless forced, I do not like to peer around to the other side until I reach the top. Especially in glaciated high plateau country, the grassy, flowered slope one climbs may tease one to the edge of an overhang, jutting out over a thousand feet of definitive nothing. Always it leads one into the sense of the sudden whole.

Yet this impressive, sudden whole can mean nothing. This is the traditional problem of openness which Colin Fletcher calls the "expectancy barrier." We do not allow ourselves to be overtaken but overtake. Here the landscape seems near at hand and yet remains far removed.

Then, too, one can be open to the unexpected and still remain detached at a mountaintop. The air is thin; it is generally windy and cold. Trees, shrubs, grass and even earth were left below, leaving only bare, weatherbeaten rock surrounding the climber. There may be a distancing, blue haze hanging in the air and the noon light is usually harsh and absent of long shadows. Snowfields glare back sterile and old, covered with rocks and windblown dirt. Far below, the landscape falls out like a fancy map. One wonders what a bend in the river looks like down there and if the fish are feeding there in some imagined shimmering riffle, warmed enough so that the grasshoppers are moving in the grass of the streambanks. It is difficult not to rupture the strands of continuity between the peak and the trails below. On such a day we can take a look around but this is not the whole one welcomes most.

The fragrance and soft, warm, humid air of riverbottoms must stay in the vision from the mountaintops. When this happens, one's climb is like the kneading and rising of bread. One's mindful body must have mixed with the trails, meadows, cool shades, and springs until one can no longer see it like a newcomer. The mood of this kind of climbing is something one is entrusted to keep in tune with. It is not something one overtakes, but rather something one responds to on its strength just **as it comes to one**.

At such a top the round dance of the presencing of the fourfold earth, sky, divinity and humans may occur and one may even join in. Mountains are difficult subjects, more difficult than mountaineers often imagine.

Descent is much different than ascent. Sometimes it is not quite clear whether one has made it outside oneself on the ascent. One has stood at the top eyeing the landscape without knowing or possibly caring whether it had the look of being looked at or something more. The sense of harmony that overtakes one on the descent can let one know one was there while one was wondering about that shimmering bend in the stream below.

Running down through loose talus requires physical coordination and a trust in the unknown. It requires a life instantaneous with the event of each footfall-taking up, letting go, flowing. It brings one out of oneself. The sliderocks become like words that speak to the quick.

Pressing and impressive forces will not let one alone. They assist in opening one up unlike the commodious arrangements of the technological society. They can teach us to rely on subtle powers, that the terrible is not so terrible after all, and that the world can be a good place once more.

However, people who **merely** climb mountains or scale peaks are eyed with suspicion, a suspicion concerning the depth of their encounter with wilderness. The way that wilderness presents itself to them seems to be one of an adversary that they somehow have to struggle with and conquer. Climbing a peak can be a moment of self-glorification -- a crude achievement over crude forces.

### The Gentle Claims of Wild Things

Not avoiding pressing and impressive claims of wild things does not mean one is closed to the easily overlooked gentle claims of nature. For instance, it does not mean that one avoids pleasures, but rather, here, in wilderness, pleasures are let be in a respectful relation to them. Looked forward to pleasures are generally simple and specific. The feel of the trail underfoot in well-fitted boots. Lifting the great pack to one's back at the (rail)head. Setting up camp in barefeet in meadow grass at the end of a tough day's hike. Facedown, drinking cold spring water and sensing the enveloping spring-cooled air. A cleansing swim in a cold, clear lake. Warm food. The fragrance hanging in the air at sunrise. A thrush's trill in the twilight stilled woods. The reliably fine hour beginning halfway through the first cup of morning coffee.

One learns to attend to the simple gratefully. In part, this means making efforts to become open to things. I sometimes meditate on streams and waterfalls, letting them pull my attention to them again and again while washing my cluttering thoughts away. This can be as good an invocation of place as any. Some practice fasting. I sometimes go to sleep with my glasses on, watching the stars as long as possible. When necessary to use, tents are oriented toward openings, such as downcanyon, or things, such as peaks or lakes, or events, such as sunrise. Fletcher testifies that the best dress for walking is nakedness.

Now nakedness is a delightful condition, and by walking you gain far more than coolness. You feel an unexpected freedom from restraint. An uplifting and almost delirious sense of simplicity. In this new simplicity you soon find you have become, in a new and surer sense, an integral part of the

simple, complex world you are walking through. And then you are really walking.

In part, one is taught to attend to the simple by the things themselves. Grouse, goats, porcupines; the sensuous curves shaping a valley floor; the calm stillness that descends with evening; these steal one's attention away from other matters. One learns here of another companionship. No attitude change or other preparation can substitute for being immersed in this for four or more days.

Wilderness is trustworthy but, like a friend or spouse, it does not guarantee. It can be powerfully instructive, as the above accounts suggest, but ultimately it does not force openness. Wilderness in its depth demands that we learn to rely on its subtle powers; but, ultimately, it does not force us to be equal to its depth. Ultimately, we must let ourselves be gentled by its more gentle claims.

### Overtakenness and Wilderness

In order to contrast the material shallowness of devices with the material depth of things, much of the above discussion has concentrated on the material conditions of wilderness, the pressing and impressive claims. Even the gentle claims of the wild have been articulated with an air of predictable events. The danger is that we take them as already settled matters, instead of responding to them in a way that allows them to be something more and other than our expectation of them. Unless we are overtaken from behind, as it were, we do not experience wilderness as wilderness. What overtakes is not under our control. That which overtakes must be approached with patience, carefulness, humility and reverence.

Much of our time in consumer culture is spent in acquiring and consuming that which is under our control. Life seems packaged entirely in this form -- a package making patience, carefulness, humility and reverence superfluous. In wilderness, however, one seems to be involved largely in getting more than one bargained for -- so much so that bargaining is a poor and misleading analogy. The rewards of wilderness are not realized by pulling the knobs of a vending machine. We must be receptive to being overtaken and we are overtaken often enough.

The Beartooth mountains, geologically considered, are a young range which was uplifted as a mass to heights of over 12,000 feet, then glaciated, leaving a high and broad plateau region scattered with lakes in the pockets of rolling, green alpine hills which sometimes break off with thousand foot dropoffs. When winding one's way down through the switchbacks to the Boulder river canyon bottom some 3,000 feet below with its gray ribbon of the road finally coming into view, one realizes, after a week up on Lake Plateau, what a distance one has come since leaving the car. Both literally and figuratively it gives one the impression of descending from the holy land.

This encounter generates in a hiker a standard, longing, and expectation which cannot be met within a life fenced in by production and consumption. It teaches one what it means to dwell, to be at home in the world. The danger of technological culture is that one becomes so ignorant of anything but modes of consuming that one is ignorant of what one is missing. Of what there is. Longing is experienced on the basis of lack. A highway crosses the Beartooths.

## Notes

1. Albert Borgmann, "The Device Paradigm" in **Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life**, (Chicago:U. of Chicago Press, 1984), pp.68-78.
2. Here and elsewhere I am indebted to Borgmann's chapter "The Challenge of Nature" in **Technology**, pp. 182-196.
3. Colin Fletcher, **The Complete Walker III** (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 51.
4. This Promethean climbing is a traditional example of the will to dominate; technological domination is uniquely different. To technologically dominate a mountaintop would be to secure it with a device and

make it technologically available, e.g. mountaintops secured with highways, trams, or helicopters.

5. Fletcher, p. 428.

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