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SENSING SMALL: ON THE ORIGIN OF ECO-PHILOSOPHY

William Degen Fleig
Oberlin College

About the Author: *William Degen Fleig* is a student at Oberlin College where he is majoring in religion. (OCMR Box 874, Oberlin, OH 44074, USA).

home

Baby boomerville. convenientmart, seveneleven, whitehenpantry. brick. concrete. steel. fluorescence... LIGHTS! suburbia. [Libertyvill, IL 60048.] It could not be more generic! Once a small farm town with a healthy downtown, it now has no center, no sense of self. I live in that American Mall that all the radicals keep warning us about. Forget their warnings. It's here. I wake up every morning and look out the window at faceless house after faceless house. *petunias blooming in the front yard. gas grill on the back patio. yellow dashes down the middle of the road. 6:39. 6:59. 7:07. 7:32. 7:42...rushing off to cram pointless buildings full of joyless people living pointless lives. the train is leaving - always on time. the conductor is calling. faces pressed to glass. styrofoam cups. morning coffee. the day's paper. the lawns below are perfect. faces pressed to glass.* Even the faces in my town are identical. No colour - none at all.... Unless, of course, it was crafted in a laboratory, tested on rabbits, packaged in plastic and paper, price-coded, purchased, and applied with a brush. *"my! you look well today, mrs. thompson."* Not to mention burnt in by solar lamps. We mold ourselves to look natural.

The cars stream by my house. It's like a huge circulatory system. The arteries are everywhere. McKibben thinks it sucks when a motor boat happens to be in his lake. He doesn't know the half of it. The cars, trucks, trains, motorbikes are everywhere. And late at night, when you think that you've escaped the hum of the engines.... There it is - the power lines. Crisscrossing the night sky, and invading my ears as I try to find peaceful sleep. *the hum and whir. dairyqueen, contempocasuals, blockbustervideo. the inescapable... the screaming, voiceless noise of home. steel and glass imports rolling through the streets.* There is a hollowness, an emptiness, an unnaturalness to the noise that is always in the air. Would you understand if I said that it was silent? So silent and unreal that it makes me want to stuff my ears with cotton? *the silence is so loud. listen to the hum of the streetlamps.*

searching

paths. gravel. fitness trails. fishing lakes. picnic tables. easy access to the parking area. God, what is Nature to me? How can I talk of biodiversity, untouched ecosystems, ecological spirituality, the value of...? What do I know?

I do not know the forest. I do not know the grassland. I know roads. I know paths. I know fences. I have never met the natural world on its own terms.

Down my road, about eight blocks east, runs the Des Plaines River. I can stroll down there easily. *five minutes*. There is a bridge that I can cross and walk down the eastern bank to stand by the water. *trash floats by. newspaper. word has it that there is a chemical lead a mile or so upstream. plastic bags. yogurt containers. motor oil cans... the rainbow's in the water. some commuter's styrofoam cup. a doughnut package. a rotting fish.* Some river! But suppose that I could forget the filth. Better yet, suppose that the river was unpolluted, clear. There still wouldn't be much meaning there for me. The hum would continue to ring in my ears. The lights would still be everywhere, making the night sky look like cotton candy. Rachel Wilson's house (just like mine) would still be staring at me from across the river. There is no meaning for me in the American Mall. It has no self. I don't want another goddamn place to picnic. I want - . *need* - Nature as it chooses to be, not as I choose to take it.

yearning

deep ecology. social ecology. ecofeminism. eco-anarchy. earthfirst! environmentalstudies. greens. leopold. camping. sea shepherds. nash. earthday. evernden. I have a longing for something else, yet I know that I'm not looking for another. I ache. I yearn. I literally feel pain. I feel disjointed, as if I had no connection with the world, with other people, with the ground that I walk on. I look for it in books. I search for it in the classroom. I fight for it in activism. It is not that I desire to be a part of the wild (although that would be fine); it's that I know that I need to be a part of the whole. Evernden said that what environmentalists are really fighting for is meaning. I am unable to find any meaning in the constructs that we surround ourselves with because so many of them are utilitarian. I feel little joy from a dishwasher; it does my job for me. I am set apart from my work, and I am set apart from my self. My pain is in the economy, expediency, efficiency, labour-freeness, functionality, productivity, effectiveness, adaptability of life. *everything is other. i am other. my acts. my creations. my thoughts. my place. it is all to own and not to be.*

place

Where do I start? Perhaps here... where I found an introduction to self: *sunny sunday. lying in the shade with my lover. restless. books at my feet. notebooks. pencils. bikes standing back to front in the arboretum's long grass. it's tangled in the spokes. flower petals in the air, landing in my hair. my books. my lips. shakespeare is being rehearsed. the accents sound strange. restless...* I don't

believe that I could have read another word from a textbook that day.

I do not feel much for the arboretum. Too many paths. I have gone there to try to escape from school and books and people and lawns... no luck. How can I get away from restrictions in a park surrounded by roads, invaded by paths? The hum carries all the way to the center of the woods, and the beam of the streetlights can be seen throughout. The arb is nothing more than a campus Club Med. Some getaway!

I got up, spring air tousling my hair, and walked about. I happened upon a bumblebee and followed it along. It flew down a hill, northward, toward Plum Creek. My eye followed it down, down, down to the creek. There, just a hop over the water, was a small mound of earth covered with grass and moss. Pleased, I started down the hill, walked barefoot through the creek, and stepped onto the mound. I sat down, dipped my toes in the water, breathed in, and looked. I didn't feel excited, just warm - maybe content. *warm. good. small. there is a hill in front of me. behind me. up twenty feet. trees all along. warm. the old stone wall along the creek is crumbling. i wish that i could see it falling. it and i wrapped up in time... an end to time. to the east there is a bend in the flow. i can see no farther than fifteen feet. good. and west... for perhaps one hundred feet. trees leaning, sun in their branches. and the light catches the creek as it rolls over rocks. small. there is a frog sunning itself on a rock. time has stopped. it floats. i feel small. good to be small. warm.* What is it about this place? There aren't any false constructs here. Even time ceases to matter. I am surrounded. My lover follows me down, and all I can say is "Isn't it great?" and "Isn't this beautiful?" I wish that I could explain.... I feel at peace. I feel small. I've found something inside me. It may not be much, but it is an introduction to self.

nighttime and i'm back. nighttime and it's quiet. damn those cars. there are no lights. i cannot see the lights! even the wind is cautious down here. If I'm very quiet I can hear the grass moving after I've lain on it. It is quiet here - I still cannot escape the pathological drone of motors - but if I listen, I can hear the creek, the grass, the wind.... There isn't the silent din that I'm used to. There's something moving! It was on the other side of the creek and now it's over here. There isn't any light. What is it?! It's lumbering toward me. It's probably a raccoon, but not knowing is fear. *what right have i to fear? to feel threatened? whose home? whose creek? it is I that am out of place. what right have I to observe it? it comes to me as it pleases.* But it is that sense of foreignness that is special. It is not that I do not belong, but that I am a part and not a ruler. I have niche. I am made minute. My fear, my size, my ignorance, my longing have given me a sense of place.

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