

In Love with The Land

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I

I stand at the kitchen sink, doing the dishes. The dishes which prove infinity by virtue of their constancy. I look up and out the window, away from the comfort of my chore. My gaze drifts east into the Sanctuary's young sugarbush where, two nights ago, lights flickered throughout causing me to blink and stretch my aging eyes. The little distant lights remained, like December fireflies, like some Morse Code calling out to me.

Fairy lights, I thought - as though this were a reasonable explanation.

Sometimes the land calls me to come walk where coyotes sang last night, or to sit so still in a circle of young saplings that the deer will venture close, will hoof and snort, and look me in the eyes.

Sometimes it is the invisible that calls. Fairies, Sprites, Spirits of the land, rising up to tell their stories.

In just such a way the woods are calling me this morning. And I am resisting. It's no wonder I bargain with the land. It's no wonder I postpone and make my excuses when the invitation comes. It's scary, to feel the tug, knowing that a little "vision quest" awaits me and the land itself will facilitate.

So I resist, until I make my peace with the inevitable - (surrendering to it a day or two later) - and walk off over the knoll, down to the creek, crossing it like a threshold onto the land. Entering a kind of dreamtime.

The first occasion when I purposely took the land as my teacher was several years ago when I was afraid for my physical health. I headed out, allowing a place to choose me, stopping in a grassy clearing surrounded by young white pines and maples near a shale-y outcrop. The ritual defined itself as a wheel - with me at the hub turning slowly, by degrees, pausing, breathing deep, eyes closed, gathering force, then opening them seeking wakefulness. And understanding.

I had asked the resident spirits to show themselves, to teach me about my fear about being human. I was seeking so hard, blinded by expectation, that I looked right past the young white pine who stood before me. It was of no consequence to me; I was looking for something "important." A sign. Suddenly, by the grace of the land, my consciousness shifted and I looked *into* the young pine. In it I recognized a gentle teacher, and friend, who had been waiting.

The land, then, can become a most trusted teacher - in a most non-ordinary way - when we pause on it, quiet ourselves, and open our senses. Within contextural agreement we open to a larger, unprescribed experience of what it means to be alive, to be human - individually wrapped

quanta in an infinite, undulating, atomized reality. We're not on a magic carpet. We ARE the magic carpet.

It is a challenge for us to be still anywhere, but perhaps doubly so on the land. We sense innate danger. That's why we come to it full of activity, ramrodding through with our chainsaws, snowmobiles, bulldozers and all-terrain vehicles. Even our gentler busyness like hiking, cross-country skiing or wildcrafting will deny us full advantage if we don't pause, seek the stillness, and listen. We sublimate and sedate our emotions as we make our daily rounds, giving wide berth to our potential and staying clear of clarity.

So it's no wonder I resist the invitation and take great comfort in simple, orderly tasks like doing the dishes.

II

When Dionondehowa Wildlife Sanctuary & School became a nonprofit land trust I felt confident that this - our little line in the sand - could provide an opportunity for humans to rethink our relationship with the land and our basic economic principle of "land as commodity."

We sensed that these 175 acres (217 acres in 2006) might provide an actual physical pause in the landscape, offering pause in the vigorous human activity on the land and a pause... to reflect... to remember that our relationship with the land is fundamentally emotional. We don't own the land; it owns us. At the root. Upon further reflection we can dispense with ownership altogether and experience, instead, the symbiotic embrace.

Looking back now I see that Geoffrey and I may have had good instincts but we had no idea what awaited us and continues to unfold on this small patch of the whole crazy quilt. Little did we know - with our highly charged, symbolic gesture of buying-land-to-give-it-back-to-itself that it was as much the land's idea as ours. Not to imply that the land has interest in the schemes of developers or in town board tax issues, but to say that when we thought we'd fallen in love with the land we were really seduced by its beauty and its essential intelligence.

Now, with some distance and a few years passed, it occurs to me that I was invited here in the same way I am often invited from the simple pleasures of my kitchen out onto the land. Lately I see how it wants others to come onto it, too. And to be still. In my work as guide, as intuitive practitioner, I am, more and more, bringing individuals and small groups onto the land. Although we come with our own desires, fears and intentions, once we are out there - working and playing in concert with it - we can loosen our grip, allowing all the constricting forces to loosen their grips on us. With simple mind-and-heart exercises we begin to open, to release our embarrassment, our enculturated shame, to let the land teach us with its earth, air, heat, water, trees, mushrooms, wildflowers, four-leggeds, rocks, winged ones - the list is endless. It's quite a crowd out there when all is perceived as animate. Including those invisible forces like gravity. Or the wind. Or the spirits who - even when they hide, afraid or coy - are dancing with us.

One broader benefit of this therapy is that as we open, as we shed our fear, as we deepen our experience of nature as a mystical event, we must - by direct consequence - alter our concepts of ownership, of manipulation, of control, of the privilege we have claimed to contaminate and to conquer. All to our own detriment.

III

The practical struggles of creating a land trust were particularly challenging to me because - after a brief respite from years of environmental activism - I had to step again into the public realm where the mystical sense of the land - or anything else for that matter - is not acknowledged.

Through the process of creating a legal entity we had time to observe our own ideals in the context of the accepted system of property taxation and the earnest distrust of neighbor for neighbor.

Governing bodies and tax boards are not much concerned with natural beauty and certainly not as a source for joy and emotional well-being. For instance, a “view” might be taxed as a commodity. It might be valued high, comparatively, but it is always by way of the commercial, exploitive value - what the state would call “highest and best use.” No reference here to the wild ones, no codicil for mystical interplay.

In that arena we listened, as members of our town planning board discussed our plat. One of them said outright that he saw this as an act of generosity. Everyone else seemed to be suspicious that we were “getting away with something.” Or perhaps it was only the same uncertainty we all display when we are exposed to a new idea.

In my happiest fantasies I would have heard the board members saying, “Yes, this is a good idea! We could all make this kind of gesture to the earth. We could liberate the land from its ‘commodity’ status. We could determine other, better means of acquiring money necessary to plow and repair our roads.”

Instead we left that meeting feeling demeaned - as though our community saw our generosity as theft.

I didn’t have the courage in the face of their fear to stand up and speak from my heart about why we had made our commitment to the land and to a different - unpopular - sentiment. I was trained my whole life to fear tribunals; there may be some ancestral angst here, too. I was trained not to speak from my heart.

Now the land is retraining me. Part of my learning, which becomes part of my teaching, is that we must speak from our hearts about the land. We must speak from our emotional depths about our feelings for the land. For its beauty, its nourishment, its whimsy.

And scariest - most formidable of all - we must do so in public places: at board meetings, before legislatures, congress, world trade organizations, in schools, on t.v., radio, the internet, (social media). But especially before our governing bodies. As long as we deny the depth of our emotional connection with the land we allow its further exploitation and contamination.

It's not a matter of whether or not the earth can recover from us, given enough time. It's a matter of fledgling humans stepping more fully into our responsibility and compassion, into our humanity. Into our wings.

It is reasonable to fear ridicule when addressing your town board, or other authority, in a heartfelt manner. We are trained - collectively - on both sides of the bench - to ignore the emotional aspects of our relationship with the land. Certainly - if you do feel it - you are not supposed to reveal it when engaged in public debate about shopping malls, hog farms, or mining sites. In a crowd of cynics, emotion is seen as weakness.

In the face of this we must remain undaunted because when we *do* speak from our hearts we liberate those around us to do so, too. Allowing them to let down their guard, their masks, and the pretense that there's nothing going on here but business - business as usual.

Our equation for success has been for economic success and *that* equation has excluded the factor of natural beauty as a requirement for our sense of well-being, for mental and emotional good health. *And* our equation has been without respect for the autonomy of all other nonhuman inhabitants of the land. And sea. And sky. It has been an equation for perceived, immediate benefit and expedience - risking the future. And while I like to think that we are infinite beings, we are also grappling with a linear future. In that linear understanding of past-present-future we owe something to our *potential* - which is the future. And most certainly we owe something to the *moment* - which contains the future. And past.

So, gentle reader, by means of writing this, I hope to tug you again toward the land, to find a quiet place for being still, for deep listening, deep breath, and deep consequences as we find our place in the mystery of this unfolding shape-shifting dance.