

Cultivating Compassion: The Connection Between Humans, Nature and Kindness
by Karen Olchs

The Peace of the Wild Things
Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
(*Selected 30*)

I wake easily, no alarm needed. I get goose bumps as the cool air touches the parts of my body not covered by my sleeping bag. When I open my eyes, I see the glimmer of early morning light on the lake, hear the gentle lapping of the water along the shore, hear the birds in the woods, and see the first rays of the sun dance through the canopy of trees. Compared to the usual haze in which I wake up in my other life away from this place, I am wide awake and feel rested and calm.

I pull on some clothes and make my way up the hill to the smells of breakfast cooking. We all start to emerge from our tents and three-sided open cabins, some looking rumpled, some bright-eyed, to converge to start our day together at Saltash Mountain Camp. Some carry food out from the kitchen to our outside dining area. We sit down to enjoy our breakfast together. Much of the food that we eat comes from gardens and

animals that we have tended and cared for with our own hands. After breakfast, we will gather up on the hill for Silent Meeting, a time where each day we gather in reflective silence together. After Meeting, campers and staff will scatter to plan the next hiking or canoeing trip, work in the crafts barn, tend to the garden, or work on one of many outdoor work projects.

The common theme of singing and laughter permeate all of our activities, creating community-building at its best. The camp allows no electronic devices -- no iPods, CD players, radios, televisions, or Game Boys. The only entertainment is of the live kind involving singing and dancing and outrageous skits.

At Saltash Mountain, wilderness trips form the focus of the camp and become one of the main avenues by which community building happens. As young people learn how to survive together in the wild with very little, they come to know what it means to truly depend on each other. They come to understand what it means to be part of an interdependent community. An ethic of care and kindness prospers here.

For one summer, I lived in this community at Saltash Mountain, part of the Farm and Wilderness camps in Vermont, one of six camps originally started in 1939 by Ken and Susan Webb. Based on the simplicity of the Quaker ideals of “seeing the Light of God in everyone”, they created integrated summer camps at a time when this idea was scandalous. The setting of the camps in the mountains of Vermont was simple. As has been true all through the years since the camps first began, the focus rests on connection to the land, living in community, and the idea that “work is love made visible” (Farm).

The magic created at Farm and Wilderness comes from the idea that nature, or more correctly the wild, encourages us to listen. Our early hunter gatherer ancestors had to

listen carefully to their surroundings for their very survival. Cultures which continue the tradition of honoring the Earth keep such listening skills alive as an integral part of their cultures. Ecologist and philosopher, David Abram discusses the role that the shaman plays in Earth-based cultures in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Traditionally, the shaman holds a special role, acting as intermediary between the Earth and the people, consulting with the spirits of the Earth on such matters as harvest of plants, or appropriate times for a hunt. Focus on balance within the ecosystem within which the community lives remains the central focus.(7). In addition, the idea that the Earth and people are not separate, yet intimately connected and interdependent on one another is a core belief. People listen to the Earth and each other because they are seen with the same level of importance.

In industrialized culture, our loss of mastery in the skill of listening to the Earth has allowed us to become oblivious not only to the natural world, but to our fellow humans as well. Developing this attunement to the natural world, living in close proximity to the Earth, fosters our ability to slow down and listen, and engenders kindness in community with our fellow humans.

Abram describes the experience in the aftermath of a hurricane when all power and telephones were down, successfully stripping away all technological distractions normally standing between humans and the wild.

For those few days and nights our town became a community aware of its place in an encompassing cosmos... the breakdown of our technologies had forced a return to our senses, and hence to the natural landscape in which those senses are so profoundly embedded.(65)

Reconnecting with that place in us which knows our relationship to the wild opens up renewed ways of seeing and being. Abram points out that this sense is stifled by the very man-made environments in which we dwell (64). At Farm and Wilderness, living in tents and three-sided open cabins allows for an intimacy with the natural world which is missed by living inside. When you wake in the morning and smell the cool air, and hear birds and see light filtering through trees, or perhaps hear the rain coming down through the canopy of leaves, that intimacy with the natural world allows for a different perspective on seeing and being in the world. As a result, we invite a closer connection to the wild in to our lives.

In his book *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder makes the important distinction between nature and the wild. “Nature can be deeply probed...The wild is not to be made subject or object in this manner; to be approached it must be admitted from within, as a quality intrinsic to who we are” (181).

Wildness is a state that all of us have in our deep cellular memory. It has been covered by layers upon layers of distractions and things which distance us from that wildness, but ultimately, I believe we are all open to this cellular memory. I saw evidence of this at Farm and Wilderness. When we become aware of this place of wildness within ourselves, it opens up avenues of connecting with other humans.

Snyder speaks of the process of how humans have become further and further removed from the wild. He describes the state of wildness as being akin to a state of wholeness. “Human beings came out of that wholeness, and to consider the possibility of reactivating membership in the Assembly of All Beings is in no way regressive”(12).

I would argue that to return to that state of wholeness, or connection with the wild, presents one of the keys to a deeper connection with each other as humans.

As civilization “progressed” it actually regressed, in the sense that people became, as Snyder describes, more “ecologically impoverished” and “nature-illiterate” (12). The traditions of listening and respecting the land diminished when land was seen as a commodity and means of production. People became less and less familiar with the medicinal plants that they had previously known and intuitively used to heal themselves. As industrialization started to creep its way into many cultures, so began the loss of Earth-based knowledge, and connection to the wild. The wild became not so much a place where people lived, but a place where they journeyed and visited. Rather than experiencing the wild from within, as a part of the ecosystem, humans became outside observers traveling through and observing the landscape.

Snyder speaks of the stories of various cultures, their connection to place, and how that ties them to the land (7). In his book, *Wisdom Sits In Places*, Keith Basso spends time living and working with the White Mountain Apache tribe in order to unravel the mystery of a people, a culture, and their relationship to the Earth. In his work with tribal members, their mapping project reveals an amazing and strong connection to the land via storytelling and language. The very naming of places is always tied to a story, and those stories tell of the connection of the Apache to the land (19-22). The stories serve as a thread to connect the community to each other as well. Stories of place are passed from generation to generation, keeping stories alive which teach morals and lessons for younger members of the community (24-27). The cultural listening, both auditory and visual, expresses the Apache’s deep, soul level relationship to their land. In a sense, the

Apache might view themselves and the land as one and the same. The reciprocal nature of the relationship means they are also more connected to one another.

For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth...which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the way they think. Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person. (34)

As is true in the White Mountain Apache culture, storytelling and the power of place play a major role in the lives of the Laguna Pueblo people of northern New Mexico. Leslie Marmon Silko tells of this connection in her book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. Spending her early years wandering the mesas has given Silko a familiarity and comfort in the land of her people. Like the Apache, the Laguna Pueblo people believe that no separation exists between themselves and the Earth. They live as an integral part of the land around them (27-29). It would be inconceivable to think of themselves as separate, in any way, from the Earth. The Earth and Sky are viewed as sisters, whose interactions with humans are part of an interconnected circle of life. Silko talks about how the Laguna people depend, in the same way that the Apache do, on the land for their survival (34). The act of listening to the Earth is profound for this very reason. The Pueblo people have lived on these mesas for thousands of years. Being attentive to the weather, the wild ones and the land, as well as other human beings has ensured their survival. As with the Apache, story plays a vital role in cultural celebrations

(38). The importance of remembering and honoring via the stories maintains a sense of being deeply rooted in place.

As is true of most indigenous cultures of North America, the Hopi of northern Arizona believe that the land sustains them and that all life, human or other, is vital and treasured (Silko 40). The kiva, an underground chamber, is a central part of the Hopi community where sacred ceremonies are held. Here in the literal womb of the Earth, Hopi cultural ties to the land could not be more explicit (Abram 218).

Not a belief unique to North America, Wangari Waigwa-Stone, a Kenyan woman recounts to Terry Tempest Williams in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* that her culture sees all life as a circle of reciprocity.

My people believe if you are close to the Earth, you are close to people...What an African woman nurtures in the soil will eventually feed her family. Likewise, what she nurtures in her relations will ultimately nurture her community. It is a matter of living the circle. (137)

Even indigenous people who have been separated from the land and the roots of their culture express the magic that happens when one returns to the land. Robin Tekwelus Youngblood returns to the land of her Okanagan heritage and describes the sense of belonging that she feels. Her connection to the land where she has ancestral roots is intense. Youngblood mourns the distance that has been created by industrialization and technological advances of the modern age (83-85).

As I attune my heart and steps to the rhythm of the mountain, I think that every person on earth ought to spend several weeks in the wilderness every year. It is a grounding experience, healing and thought-provoking. When you sit at the

ancient, untroubled base of a 300-year-old cedar tree, industrial waste is clearly a crime of untold proportions. When you feel the sap flowing through that tree and ask her to share her vision of the country she has overseen for centuries, cities are immaterial. As one lays upon the breast of the Mother, counting a profusion of diminutive wildflowers, corporate greed is the penultimate fallacy. (85)

On a trip to the west coast of Vancouver Island, I took a boat out to a small island covered with old-growth cedars. As I hiked, I was absolutely struck with a sense of awe which I had never before felt. Being in the presence of 1300 hundred-year-old western red cedar trees left me speechless, and I truly felt grounded and calm. I felt as though those trees called to that cellular memory of knowledge of the wild, a part of me buried deep, but still in existence.

How did we come to be so far removed from the wild and what have the implications of that separation been? The idea of objectifying the Earth has evolved as a central theme in western cultures. The “nature-illiterate and ecologically impoverished” (Snyder 12) state of humans allows for a culture which views the land as a commodity to be used and harvested. A true and deep knowledge of the land no longer exists; instead a distant, separate relationship has evolved which disallows any kind of true connection, and the ethic of care is almost completely lost. This objectification allows all kinds of atrocities to happen in the name of progress and civilization.

In his book *A Language Older Than Words*, Derrick Jensen expresses this ability of humans to destroy not only the environment, but each other, as a sort of cultural

amnesia. Jensen believes that in our “forgetting”, as he calls it, we create a space which allows the committing of atrocities to the environment and other humans (3-4).

Do we think about nuclear devastation, or the wisdom of producing tons of plutonium, which is lethal even in microscopic doses for well over 250,000 years?...do we consider that industrial civilization has initiated the greatest mass extinction in the history of our planet? How often do we consider that our [western] culture commits genocide against every indigenous culture it encounters? (4)

If western culture, as a whole, saw all living beings as precious and saw all life on Earth as sacred, the cultural amnesia he describes at length in his book could not exist. Neither destruction of whole ecosystems in the name of “progress” and the almighty dollar, nor genocide of our fellow humans, would be possible. At the very least, such destruction would not be as rampant as it is today.

To look at the disconnect which currently exists in western cultures, and to see how the progression of “cultural amnesia” covers us like a silent veil, gives us an awareness to begin to understand how a healing or reversal of this trend could come about. I believe that our connection to the land lies at the core of this healing.

Wendell Berry is a writer well-known for his thoughts on how people and land are tied together. In his essay, “The Body and the Earth”, Berry maintains that with the rise of industrialization came the romanticizing of the wilderness and the beginnings of the process of humans separating themselves from the land (272) .

In *A Language Older Than Words* , Derek Jensen interviews Jim Nollman, a man who has studied human and whale/dolphin species interactions. Nollman supports the

idea that our [western] culture is founded on the premise that the Earth is an inanimate object(71). He speaks about connection to nature and how our mechanized, technology-based culture has numbed us and removed us from that connection.

To be able to surrender to the knowledge that the garden and I are connected nurtures my soul. I wish more people could know this connection more often, and I believe people did know it before we became so dependent on machines and jobs and time. (69)

When the layers of muck – our technological, media-saturated, high-speed, corporate culture – get peeled away, I feel that our true nature begins to reveal itself. Our ability to be present, listen and be open to one another emerges. Our ability to feel is magnified. It is less possible to look at others as “other”, but instead to realize that we are all connected and not so very different from each other at the core. I feel strongly that the very fact of being close to the wild has a significant impact on the peeling away of these layers.

The psychologist Chellis Glendinning delves into the realm of what it means to live in a culture which is so entirely disconnected from the natural world. In *My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*, Glendinning speaks of people having a natural state of being which she calls our “primal matrix” (5). Her belief is that many cultures model this state. She says that, among others, the Dine/Navajo call it “standing at the center of the world”, the Lakota call it “walking in a sacred manner”. In these cultures, and many others, the implication is that humans are in balance and connected to the Earth. Glendinning states that our true essence is uncovered when we are living in connection to the natural world (6).

Caught in the clutches of a society that is characterized by dislocation and abuse,

our primal matrix becomes nearly lost to us...Most importantly, we remember it for ourselves when its power peaks through to our awareness, when we sense the magical aliveness of tender buds bursting on spring trees, when we feel a bond while gazing into the eyes of a furry animal...(6-7)

Because humans are so buried in distraction and so “dislocated”, we have moved far from our source or “primal matrix”. The smallest events or situations have the power to call us back to that place of remembering where we come from, where our true nature lies.

As an example, the campers at Farm and Wilderness experience transformation by growing the food that they eat, working in the gardens and hiking in the mountains, learning how to survive in the woods by their own hands, watching the wildlife that lives in the woods with them and watching the northern lights on summer nights. In working and singing and being silent together, they come to know each other without all the accoutrements that come with modern life. They are brought back to a place of remembering and connecting and they are able to feel that “magic aliveness” that Glendinning describes.

Young people are brought closer to what Glendinning would call their “primal matrix” by the fact that life exists in balance at Saltash Mountain. The campers are not only connected with the land, but each other. Living and working close to the Earth brings people together, and reveals their true spirit, as described by Liza Styles, who spent five summers living at Farm and Wilderness as a camper.

I have always thought that working alongside others, siding barns, feeding pigs, harvesting sweet peas in the rain, brought me closer to those who I was working and living with The fact that you are so much more immersed in nature and

the fact that you are working with your body have, to me, always been an integral part of the experience. In so many ways, F&W [Farm and Wilderness] is about getting away from the outside world.... I have always felt that I am my best person when I am there, and that I am connecting with the best version of those who I interact with. (Styles)

Various paths lead to the connection of Earth and human spirit. For some, such as Terry Tempest Williams, naturalist and writer of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, the connection to the Earth is visceral and raw at times. Sojourns into the desert punctuate her journey through the illness and death of her mother. Her connection to the land helps her deal with the grieving process in which she is immersed. Observing the birds and the lake provide solace and an anchor for her in the maelstrom of her emotions (21, 75).

I pray to the birds because I believe they will carry the messages of my heart upward. I pray to them because I believe in their existence, the way their songs begin and end each day – the invocations and benedictions of Earth. I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen. (149)

The natural world serves as Williams' teacher and guide on the path of dealing with her mother's cancer. Remarkably, she continually stops to look at the environment surrounding her, to study its subtleties and changes, and reflect on her personal pain (75,147). Her course of unearthing and questioning in relation to the natural world, the wild, reveals stunning insights. Through both the wildness of place and the wild

creatures, Williams finds her self and connects more deeply with her family. It is part of her process of coming in to her own and coming to terms with the changes in her life.

Great Salt Lake strips me of contrivances and conditioning, saying, 'I am not what you see. Question me. Stand by your own impressions.'...We are taught not to trust our own experiences. Great Salt Lake teaches me experience is all we have. (92)

We all have the ability to shed the distractions and layers which cover the remembering of where we come from, even those of us whose ancestral connection to the Earth lived generations ago. Just as we traveled from the place of being a part of the wilderness to being an outside observer, so we can return along the same path to listen in the way that so many of us have forgotten. As with many situations, the first step is recognition and awareness. Perhaps the next step is the realization of the healing that can occur when we allow that closeness to the wild into our lives. Just as Terry Tempest Williams found solace in the Utah desert, and Liza Styles found calm and connection at Farm and Wilderness, both women learned about listening and being still. Both Williams and Styles found that being in the wild allowed them to feel a greater wholeness as a person and to connect more deeply with the people around them. Even connecting with our inner selves leads to bonding in a richer way with our fellow human beings.

I believe the continuum is an interconnected web: connection to the land leads to connection to self which leads to connection to a greater community. As David Abram strongly articulates, "...it is only at the scale of our direct, sensory interactions with the land around us that we can appropriately notice and respond to the immediate needs of the living world" (268). Seeing the living world as both human and non-human, we are

able then to live in a more compassionate way, sensing and listening with care to all beings around us. If we can return to thinking of the Earth and the wild as being sacred, I believe there will be reciprocal amount of kindness that exhibits itself in human interactions.

WORKS CITED

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1996.
- Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits In Places*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 1996.
- Berry, Wendell. "The Body and the Earth." *Recollected Essays 1965-1980*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981.
- - - . *Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998. 30.
- Farm and Wilderness Foundation. *Farm and Wilderness: Summer Camps- School Year Programs*. DVD. Plymouth, Vermont, 2005.
- Glendinning, Chellis. "My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization". Boston: Shambala, 1994.
- Jensen, Derrick. *A Language Older Than Words*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2000.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
- Styles, Liza. Email interview. 13 May 2006.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1991.
- Youngblood, Robin Tekwelus. "The Place of My Ancestors." *Women in Wilderness*. Ed. Susan and Ann Zwinger. Orlando: Tehabi Books/Harcourt Brace and Co., 1995. 83-85.