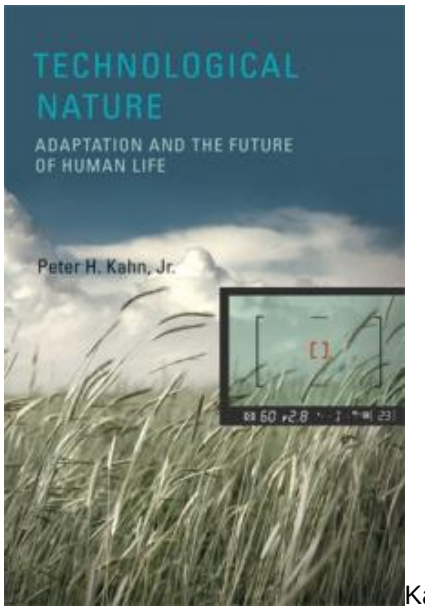
The Land I'll Never Own [1]

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Personal Essay by Peter H. Kahn, Jr.

Cohabitating with the Wild

Editor's Note: We're delighted to reprint this unusual essay as part of the TW Reading Series. Psychologist and environmental studies scholar Peter Kahn turns from his decades of academic research to a literary meditation, exploring how much natural settings have sparked his interior life and writing. This piece, in a slightly longer form, was originally published as "Cohabitating with the Wild" in the journal *Ecopsychology* (March 2009).



Kahn is the author of a number of books that explore nature and technology, including *Technological Nature* (MIT Press, 2011). He was working on that book during the cabin retreat he describes in this essay, and some of the same references appear in both—his research with inner-city children in Houston, for instance, or Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's memoir about living with the Ju/wasi San people of the Kalahari.

It's a rare glimpse at the way a researcher's academic studies are connected with personal reflections, other scholarship, even a harrowing solitary climb up Denali in Alaska. The ideas he developed for *Technological Nature* also inform his recent TW theme essay, "Environmental Amnesia," [5] a piece adapted from the introduction of the book.

For more information about his work, see Peter Kahn's website [6] at the University of Washington and the *Ecopsychology* [7] journal site.

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My successes in crossing the winter river came by my doing nothing at all. I could do that with my first horse. I bought her from an old-time cowboy for $150. I named her Valencia. She had spent her first years wild in the mountains. She knew the land and herself well. I'd edge her up to the river and nudge, give her full reign, hang on tight as she swam, and we would get wet and cold, and across.

One year, I tried crossing with a new Appaloosa filly. But when we hit the strength of the current, she didn't fight against it; instead, she started swimming partly downstream, which was crazy, because if we kept going with that trajectory, we would get slammed against rocks and drown. She was scared. I couldn't get her to swim harder against the current. Somewhere between a dozen seconds, I made my decision. I slipped saddle from her into the river and fought the current by myself to the other side. I made it okay. The Appaloosa somehow did, too, though she was farther downriver and cut up. I was shaken that I had let things get that close to the edge. She looked shaken, too. I think she trusted me less after that. I know that I trusted her less. I never asked anything like that of her again.

That was in my adolescence. I was living here on this land, 670 acres in northern California, an hour drive up a dirt road from the nearest town. This land was connected with an entire mountain range that I explored on horseback. I loved my horses. I kept company with them. I remember one colt as a young foal; in the summer's moonlight, I would often sit with him as he lay in the lush meadow grasses. But in keeping company with my horses, it always seemed more one-sided, with me enjoying their company more than they seemed to enjoy mine. That was especially true when I was on their backs. So, I stopped riding.

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Now, decades later, I drive up to my cabin, which feels full of cobwebs and dark. It's a few days before Thanksgiving 2008. I've not been here since the summer. I light a fire. I sweep. I start to unload supplies: my computer, sleeping bag, duffle of clothes, cooler of vegetables, bags of food, bags of books, and a container of gasoline. I walk with a dim headlamp over to the outhouse. It's a deep hole in the ground with a few boards over it. It's simple. Not much can malfunction with this system, and nothing had in my absence. I walk into the pole shed and survey what I can with my headlamp. I see the chainsaw and wrenches on the workbench, boxes of nails, chop saw, drawknife, a shovel, pickax, digging bar, lots of pack rat droppings. I walk around the wood pile, stacked with rounds of oak, madrone, fir, and pine, which I had cut last year, now covered by a large green tarp. I walk to the studio. My headlamp shines on the earth where the skunk and I had dug out the hornets' nest last summer.

There's something about my needing to walk these areas, even in the dark, upon arriving. It's a re-meeting of place and events and spots of time without language. It's seeing what's new. It's knowing that what's new might be what's dead.

It's lonely. The cabin is still cold. Nothing smiles. Nothing speaks. I drove two days, with the racket of the truck and with the radio and CDs competing for space in my head. I know that in the days to come I will hear the sounds of this place. But tonight, there's nothing. The silence almost hurts.

I'd been thinking on the drive of a friend's daughter, sixteen years old, just diagnosed with cancer. A colleague of mine just was, too—his at the late stages, and he's also going to fight a brave battle. Crises are opportunities, they say. I think that's true. They're like edges, and that's often where the action lies. The fecundity of nature by the water's edge. Different ideas that meet and clash and re-create into something new amid the chaos of the urban confine. But it's also true that in stillness lies growth. The stillness of long hot summers, the days when the heat merges into the melons and they ripen big and sweet, when nothing else walks the land, or at least wants to walk it until the sun goes down. One can choose stillness, or at least try to.

But crises often come when they do. And though crises can lead to meaningful redirections in a life, they can also overwhelm and be cruel and crush. They say that God doesn't give a person more than he or she can bear. But I don't think that's true. I was listening to the bible preachers yesterday on the drive through Christian country, which seems to lie between urban areas of most anywhere in the U.S. The preachers were saying that God is omniscient: He is all-knowing. They were saying that God is omnipotent: He is all-powerful. They were saying that God is all-good: He cares about each and every one of us. It's a holy trinity that no one has ever made sensible in human terms. I've known good people who have been given more than they could bear, and they died bereft and full of anger. The death of six million in the gas chambers, with their gold fillings plucked from their mouths. All-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. It doesn't parse. It would be a comfort if it did.

Within some hours, I've swept, cleaned dishes, lit the propane hot water heater while kneeling in the mud behind the cabin, and put food away and a clean white sheet on the bed. I've showered hot and long under the oak. I've feasted on tortillas and beans. As it becomes colder outside, it becomes warmer inside. The fire blazes. The silence softens. Contentment deepens.

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During the warmer months here, the ground squirrels are something to watch, flippin' and floppin' and lounging on the porch railing, and chewing on apples they pull off the tree by the side of my cabin. The babies clamber on top of one another, race about, stand on their hind legs, listen, and dive quick into one of their holes.

Last summer, I was writing at my desk, totally focused—and *ouch!* A half-second later, I said, "I can't believe it happened again!" The same squirrel as in the previous year, the one with the scruffy back, had come into my cabin, walked through the kitchen, down two steps, nipped me on my foot, and then raced out. What was he thinking! He didn't draw blood. Was he rabid? Probably not, for I doubt then he could have lived a year. Maybe it was a territorial thing. Maybe it's his yearly rite of passage. Maybe it's his way of greeting me.

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If you go to a zoo, you can sometimes see a child, or even an adult, throwing food or a pebble at an animal, such as a lion, leopard, bear, or great ape—even when the signage says not to. The person is trying to get the animal's attention. Why? Perhaps because, for the entire history of our species, we have not only been aware of wild animals, but we have been aware that they have been aware of us, and the desire for that form of interaction persists in modern times.

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In the early 1990s, in one of my research studies, a colleague and I interviewed economically impoverished black children in Houston about their environmental values. We talked with the children about whether animals, plants, and open spaces played a role in their lives, and if so how—whether it was all right or not all right to throw trash in their local bayou, and why, and whether their judgments generalized to people elsewhere with different environmental practices.

Often their reasons were *anthropocentric*, meaning the children focused on protecting nature so as to advance human goals. Occasionally, their reasons were *biocentric*, meaning they believed nature had intrinsic value or rights. One child said, for example, that it was not all right to pollute the local bayou because "water is what nature made; nature didn't make water to be purple and stuff like that, just one color. When you're dealing with what nature made, you need not destroy it."

One fifth-grade child, in particular, spoke elegantly and at length about his biocentric views toward animals. This child, Arnold, was a vegetarian. In the interview, Arnold often equated humans with animals and said that what we accorded to humans, we needed, by implication, to accord to animals. "Bears are like humans, they want to live freely," he said. "Fishes, they want to live freely, just like we live freely."

Elsewhere, Arnold moved beyond similarities in physical appearance between animals and humans ("[fish] have mouths like we have mouths") and pointed to the functional equivalencies between animals and humans as the basis for his according animals moral consideration. For example, he said: "[Fish] need the same respect we need. Fish

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don't have the same things we have. But they do the same things. They don't have noses, but they have scales to breathe."

Arnold continued in this way—caring, sophisticated, and principled—through most of the interview. But his consistency showed some strain under another line of questioning. The interviewer asked Arnold whether mosquitoes also need the same respect that humans need. Arnold laughed and said, "Not really." The interviewer asked why not, and Arnold said:

> Because mosquitoes, they begin to get on your nerves a little bit. And they make little bumps on you. but I don't really like mosquitoes. But it's still wrong to kill 'em, though. Because they really need to live freely, too, just like every insect, every bear, any kind of type of human, they need to live freely 'cause everybody needs to live freely.

The Dali Lama was also once asked about mosquitoes. The Dali Lama said that if a mosquito lands on him, he brushes it off. If it comes back, he brushes it off again. If it comes back a third time…*slap!* And His Holiness slapped his arm in demonstration and then let out a hearty laugh. Arnold had laughed, too, and his reasoning was not too far different. To my mind, neither the Dali Lama nor Arnold has entirely solved this problem.

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November has turned to December. I've been settling in. Initial days were for writing, and then there were late afternoon and evening activities with people on the land for Thanksgiving. That's now shifted to more solitude, as many in the other cabins in this small community have left. A friend asked what allows me to settle in faster rather than slower. I said something like "luck," but I think I meant something like "grace." It seems to emerge somewhere in that space that's at once willful and will-less. I'm still trying to understand it.

This afternoon, I dropped down to the river, a few miles away, off trail and steep with large firs and oaks and a few buckeyes, to the river's edge, and then looped back around. As I entered into one of the meadows, I saw a doe and her older fawn off to my right. Their backsides were mostly facing me, as were their faces, with their necks turned at about a 120-degree angle. I kept running up the meadow, which had me slightly circling them, and as I did so, the mom kept tracking me by bending her neck farther with my every stride. It was close to dusk, but from what I could see, she had bent her neck and head more than 180 degrees. At any point, she could have simply switched directions and tracked me from a more comfortable angle. My guess is that she didn't want to risk losing sight of me in that moment of transition.

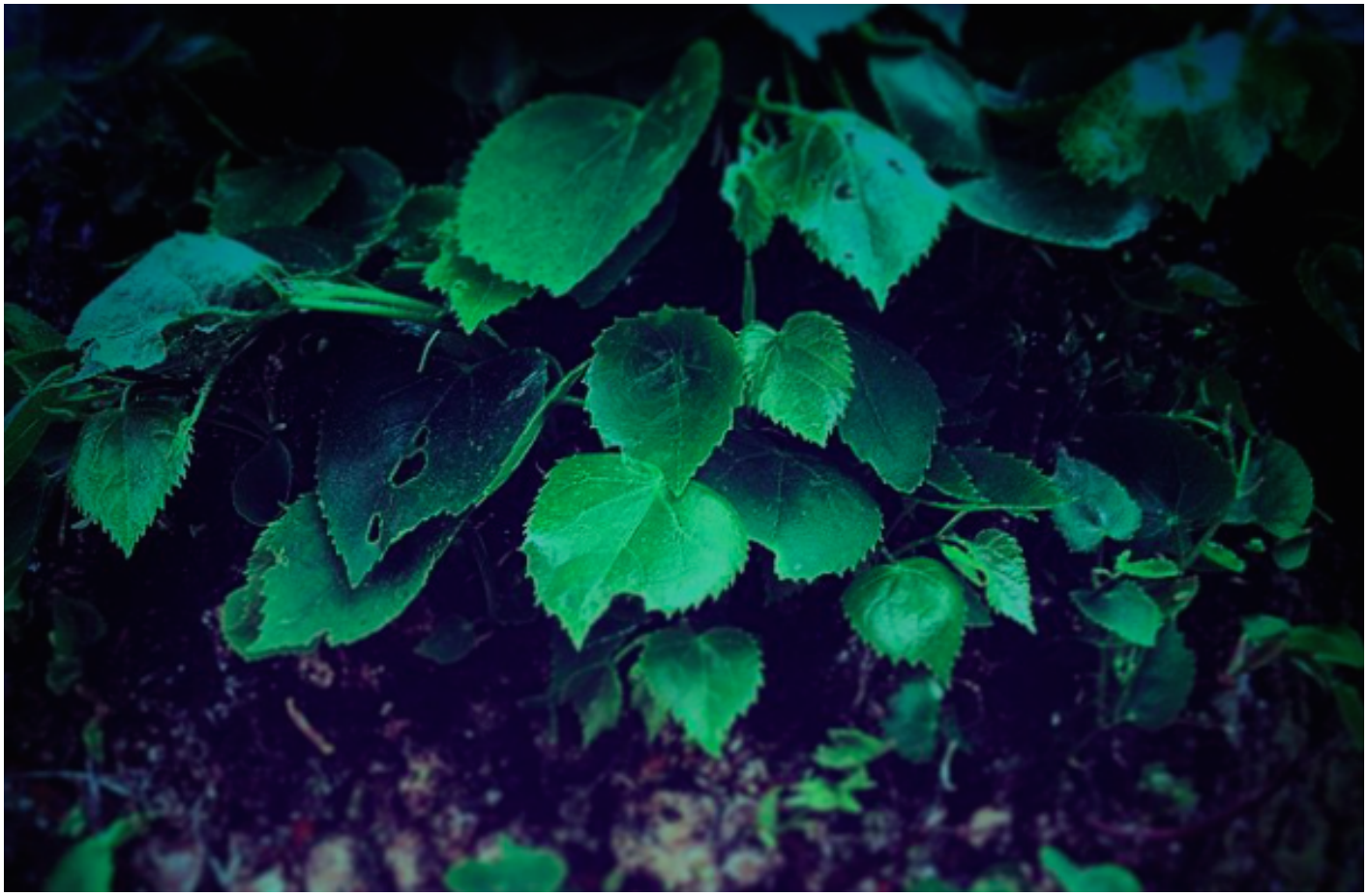
Back at my cabin, the sliver moon is now in the southern sky. Then it just happens. Everything is radiant, alive with joy. It's the feeling of youth, of endless possibility, with a strong body and an awakening spirit. It's contentment in the moment, but without any effort, perceptions flow in, flow over. The clarity of thought, pureness, joy. I just live in it. A minute. Ten minutes. And I think this is what I want to bring into my interactions with people in the city, but it doesn't work, I can't tap it, and I wait and wait, and the days there turn into months. Is the environment so strong that it out-tussles me in the city no matter the desire?

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I was running a trail last summer around dark, and a skunk got on ahead of me, and we ran it together, and I didn't bite him, and he didn't spray me, and then we went our different ways. Sometimes, it's easy to get along.

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I have a colleague who argues that the answer is all fractal patterns. His question is why do people respond positively to nature. In a discussion, I asked him to imagine the exact same sunset on a winter's day. In one situation, I'm standing on my cabin's porch, hot tea in hand, a wood fire inside. The sunset feels peaceful and calming, restorative. In another situation, I'm two miles off course on a nearby mountain, trying to get tent-side before nightfall, and I'm looking at the exact same sunset, and my anxiety increases, because I know I need to pick up the pace and make good on my route finding or it's going to be a cold bivouac. The stimuli are the same, the same fractal patterns, but they engender very different human responses.

This difference suggests that the core psychological issues lie not simply in characterizing external nature but in the interaction itself. A few months ago, I thought about this in my meeting with an architectural firm to discuss the design of a new ski resort. In one of their drawings, they'd sketched a section of the resort where the local creek runs through and, above it, a little promontory with a man and a woman standing there and looking at the water. I tried to say it nicely: dull.

What are the meaningful ways of interacting with creeks, and how can they be designed in, or perhaps simply not designed out? Wading, swimming, splashing water on one's face or playfully onto a friend, a nap alongside under the hot sun, a family picnic, skipping rocks, catching tadpoles, surprising turtles, walking up and down the water's edge, changing one's activity—even the very way one crosses the creek or can't—based on the periodicity of the creek's runoff.

I like looking at a creek as much as the next fellow. But our lives need to go beyond looking. Life with nature needs to be meaningful. Hunting was canonical. Through it, one enacted many interaction patterns (such as reading the signs of nature, using one's physical body vigorously, and participating in the cycle of life and death) because one was hungry. The meaning was embedded in survival. As we take survival more and more out of our lives in nature (no need to hunt, just shop the aisles of a supermarket), then hunting or fishing becomes an end in itself for some, which is fine, but not meaningful activity for most others. Then it's a continuum where walking the land (which had been central to our

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hunter-gather life) is still meaningful for some of us, but not many, and thus "exercise" becomes a chore we force ourselves to do to stay healthy. It's really something to watch a hundred people running on treadmills in an inside gym with technologically circulated air.

At the talking start of "Just Walk On," one of the fine songs from the blues duo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Brownie says, "People, if you want to go somewhere and you don't have railroad fare, plane fare, train fare, boat fare, or don't have no fare period, there's one way of getting there; I've been using the method for 25 years or more, me and old Sonny, and it seems to have paid off." Sonny asks, "Well, how dat man?," and Brownie says, "Just walk on." And they sing it.

Now, it seems that if I say "walk on," people think of it as metaphor. When we design partial interaction patterns independent of their larger context, it's likely that people won't engage in the activity the designers designed for. In consulting on a project for a zoo, I remember they had a nature trail in a remote part of their grounds and virtually no one used it. The zoo designers were puzzled because they thought they were providing access to wild nature; but it's possible they were trying to have people enact an interaction too divorced from meaningful activity.

Here, by my cabin, my outhouse engages me in walking outside at all times of day and night, in whatever the weather might be, in sickness and in health—it's the most marvelous thing. It sets into motion dozens of other interaction patterns of different forms at different times (walking under the night sky, reading the signs of nature, fear, encountering an animal, being recognized by a non-human other)—and it's meaningful activity, tied to the body's function. The same with the shower, outside under the tall oak. Hot water flowing over the human body mixed with snow (as in my shower this evening) or cold rain or bright moonlight.

Designs that engage people in meaningful interactions with nature will often, when enacted well, have interaction patterns that are overlaid and toppled on themselves. I love Shakespeare's use of language this way. While contemplating his intent to murder the king, Macbeth says, "I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself/And falls on the other"—and there the soliloquy ends, with language toppling.

Many of these ideas are implied in Piaget's constructivist psychology in the sense that development arises through mental processes of assimilation and accommodation, which engage through interaction with a physical and social world—but only get engaged when there is meaning. As a graduate student, I always thought Piaget had found something deeply right in a grand theory based on biology, adaptation, genetic epistemology, structuralism, meaning, and constructivist interaction, though it has taken me this long to begin to find my own voice within this space.

Many psychological nature-restoration researchers have used static pictures as their points of departure. It's almost as if they've set the field on the wrong course, with nature viewed passively, as if they've disembodied *homo sapiens* into mere modern perceptual receptacles. John Searle wrote a good book titled *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992) that remains particularly relevant as the world turns to brain science and other essentially mechanistic accounts of humanity.

Now, we need something like the rediscovery of the wild. Perhaps interaction and meaning comprise the core structure of such a rediscovery.

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What does it mean to settle in here? For these two months, as I'm working on a new academic book, it means I'm unshaven and not showered when I sit down to write, and it's before dawn. It means that on another day, I write until 11:00 p.m., go to bed, and then I'm up in a few hours and write for the rest of the the night, nap in the morning, and have lost track of weekdays and weekends. It means that there's time to notice. I brush my teeth. I put chestnuts on the wood stove for breakfast.

Odd, how the silence I described on my first night here was pounding in my head. It was as if I were coming off drugs, and noise was my drug. This morning, there's lovely sound in this light rain, and the blessing of silence between the drops.

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At the time last year when the grasses had started to fade and the river ran low, I was carrying rounds of madrone out of the woods, lifting each to my waist with arms wrapped around and walking them to my truck. At some point, the thought came to me: *I wonder if I have to worry about scorpions.*

I hadn't seen a scorpion for several years and hadn't been thinking about them. But when I went back for the next round, it caught my eye. I saw it wedging its way into a thin crack of the log that was next for me to carry.

Could this event be explained by the theory proposed in 1991 by Roger Ulrich and his colleagues—that because it was adaptive in ancestral times, humans still unconsciously and quickly process fear-relevant nature stimuli? Perhaps I'd seen this scorpion a few minutes before so quickly that I hadn't known, but then the perception moved from the unconscious to the conscious, and that's why the thought arose. Or maybe I was the recipient of a fortunate coincidence. Or maybe it was a Jungian synchronicity with the cosmos conspiring on even the smallest of events.

I used a small twig to fling the scorpion out of the crack. Later that evening, I uncovered another under a partly rotten log in my woodpile, and I smashed it. I may not actually understand the idea of cohabitation. The first part of a poem by the fifth-century mystic Kabir goes as follows (from Robert Bly's 1971 translation):

> I don't know what sort of a God we have been talking about.
>
> The caller calls in a loud voice to the Holy One at dusk.
> Why? Surely the Holy One is not deaf.
> He hears the delicate anklets that ring on the feet of an insect
> as it walks.

Kabir conveys a lovely quietness of relation. But what does it mean for the Holy One to hear a scorpion, especially the one I killed? Can one kill and cohabitate?

That was Arnold's question, too.

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One night last summer, I awoke to a skunk a few feet from my head. I was sleeping on the porch outside the studio. The skunk was rooting in a specific spot, trying to dig in, but was stopped by some rocks. I tried to scooch the skunk away because I didn't want it to spray, but I didn't want to scooch so hard that it sprayed *me.*

Then I had an idea. The next evening, I got out my digging bar and pried the small rocks apart as quickly as I could. That opened up access to a hornets' nest, but I found out fast there were more than a few dozen hornets—there must have been hundreds—and they looked like thousands flying mad. I wasn't fast enough, because I got stung.

The next morning, I checked it out again. The skunk (I assume it was the skunk) had uprooted the nest and pulled out what I assume were the larvae for its dinner. There were no more hornets. I'd never thought of being in partnership with a skunk before. So, for cohabitation, that's better than the scorpion I smashed in my woodpile. Or I guess better for me and the skunk; not so good for the hornets.

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It's now the middle of December. Snow covers the land.

At night, the temperature drops below freezing. None of my pipes are insulated, so to keep the water from freezing and then expanding and cracking the pipes, I have to leave water running at night. Just a bit. But it means turning off the

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hot water heater each evening so that water can run through those lines, too. Each morning, I see long icicles on the oak by the outside shower from the spray during the night.

This morning, as I'm writing at my desk, a bear is on my porch. I'm not completely surprised. It started with my propane refrigerator not working when I arrived in November. I got it to a repair shop and am still waiting to hear whether the repair will cost $60 or $800. The smaller amount means the burner was dirty. The larger amount means the entire cooling system has had it. In the refrigerator's place, I've been using an insulated cooler, which works well enough in winter. It's especially easy, like now, when I can stuff the cooler half full with snow. But I'm also aware that over the last year a bear has gotten into a few people's cabins and ransacked their kitchens for food. So, I've been keeping my cooler on the porch, visible from a window, and hopefully close enough that I'll awaken at night if a bear starts tossing it around.

Last week, I saw bear tracks about a half mile from my cabin. That's why I'm not completely surprised this morning. I agree with Arnold that bears want to live freely; in the process, it would be good if they don't eat my food.

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The bear comes back a few days later. I'm quiet in the kitchen and watch him lumber onto the porch. By now, I've permanently moved my cooler inside the cabin. He's in no rush. He looks like he has no worries. He ambles the length of the porch and turns partly around, where he can look through a window into the kitchen. That's what he does. We're now a few arm's lengths from one another. That's when our eyes meet. Me to him, bear to me. Then I feel the explosion. It's a jackrabbit's jump in a bear's body: muscle and power and mass in motion.

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During part of the 1950s, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas and her family lived with the Bushmen (or San people) of the Kalahari Desert. She writes about her experiences in her 2006 book *The Old Way*. The Kalahari initially looked wild to the Marshall family, if by "wild" we mean strange and unknown. But the desert wasn't wild in this way to the Ju/wasi

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group of the San. Thomas believes that most if not all the land of Nyae Nyae was known to the Ju/wasi, an area covering about six thousand square miles; all the existing watering holes were known: seven holes the Ju/wasi considered permanent and eight semi-permanent ones that could go dry during drought years. The Ju/wasi were psychologically comfortable in their landscape. It was their home.

But still, the Ju/wasi encountered wildness of other forms—in chasing down a bull eland in 120-degree heat, in the migration of birds. Wildness was most obvious with predators, especially leopards, hyenas, and lions. Hyenas occasionally would come into a camp and take bites out of sleeping people; that's their style, to get mouthfuls of flesh and not to kill first. Lions could catch and take down what they wanted. "No other creatures of the savannah sleep as deeply or as soundly as lions, but after all, lions are the main reason for not sleeping soundly," Thomas writes.

Both the lions and the Ju/wasi lived by the watering holes. Lions are dangerous predators, but very rarely attacked a Ju/wa. Why? In Thomas's explanation, she shows how it looks for a people to cohabitate with the wild.

Part of the Old Way, she notes, entails avoiding conflict whenever possible. Hyenas and lions, for example, visited the watering holes at different times of the night, thus avoiding one another and avoiding conflict. The Ju/wasi followed the same principle. At one point, Thomas describes a day-long foraging trip with the women. She got up early to join them, only to discover they were taking their leisure. She initially didn't understand. She thought if there's work to do, get started on it early. That wasn't what happened. "So at the Ju/wa camp," she writes, "we sit around not doing much of anything until almost midmorning when the sun is at forty-two degrees." Later, she understood: Walk the veld when the predators rest. That meant being active during the hottest part of each day. The Ju/wasi were not at the top of the food chain.

The lions also did their part. They were not particularly interested in eating people. Thomas offers several reasons. For one, lions preferred larger prey—not that they would pass up smaller prey if needed, but it was not their first choice. Second, "lions are very intelligent, as are all cats, and also profoundly good observers, and can be open to suggestion, unless they are already excited with their minds made up," she writes. Third, and perhaps most important of all yet least often considered:

> [L]ike most other mammals, young lions do as their parents do, preying upon what their parents prey upon, learning techniques and patterns of behavior from their elders. Man-eating is a learned behavior, and if lions of the past didn't start it, their descendants would have a good chance not to be thinking about it and therefore not to pick it up. So, if the lions of Nyae Nyae did not hunt people, perhaps it was because their parents hadn't done so.

To say that in the Old Way people cohabited with the wild does not only mean coexistence with nature—though that's a profound idea in itself. In the same motion, people affiliate with the natural world and the natural world affiliates with us.

• • •

Life changes. It can be a gift. Perhaps it always is, if we see it right. I'm not sure. To say yes to that completely is to look into the dying eyes of a child brutalized by war and to affirm it in some way, which I cannot do. Can the saints, really?

Regardless, through change, perhaps one can always have clarity and presence. It happens to me easier in the backcountry. One of my favorite rhythms is to start early and take many breaks in the day without unpacking gear—perhaps nestled into a rock with my legs dangling in a river or under a shrub cedar on a sparse high ridge, as I find shelter from the sun. It seems that the lighter I am, the more connected I feel. It happens in a different way on long summer mountain runs, as I'm in motion and part of the landscape with little more than shoes, tiny shorts, sweat, and myself.

Is it possible that as I age this sense of myself moving lightly through land is instead myself moving through time?

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My daughter Zoe was on the land for a few days. As we were walking back to our cabin at dusk, making our way through a stretch of forest, she said, "Dad, you made a trail here." At the time, we were stepping over fallen madrone trees, and I pointed them out. She said that, all the same, there was a trail here. She was right, though perhaps it's more accurate to say I had put in a small route through an area, for nowhere was there a path. Rather, it was more like certain movements through the woods went easy, and they kept going easy as long as you kept following them, and that's what Zoe had picked up on as she led.

I like routes like these more than trails. Routes are light. Routes allow for freedom to choose movement while still providing a knowable passage. Routes are not concretized in the land; one first has to feel the direction, the contours, before the route becomes known. Routes leave no history.

One of the things I appreciate as a member of this group of fourteen extended families is that it's not possible to think of the place as "my land." All significant land-use decisions require consensus, which take a minimum of a year, and often many years; and the decisions have not always gone the way I thought they should. I can't decide to sell this land. If I withdraw from this community, I get no money for my "ownership share." In these sorts of ways, the English language doesn't provide a good pronoun as a substitute for "my" and "mine." Usually, I speak of "the land," though I recognize that you need context to know what land I'm talking about.

Thomas writes that for the Ju/wasi, you "had the right to live where you were born, assuming that your mother was not simply passing through at the time of your birth." Moreover, the "Ju/wa territory belonged to those who were born there, whose rights were acquired through a parent who was born there, on back through time. The ownership could not be transferred."

It's something of this Old Way in which I "own" the land. I learned long ago that if I try for a stronger form of ownership here, it doesn't go.

• • •

Zoos reify the human drive to dominate the Other. Shame on zoos and shame on us for finding them pleasant. Would we similarly take a Sunday outing to San Quentin?

Ooh, look at that black person over there, honey, in that cage. Isn't he cute?

Hey, Dad, look at that big white guy with the busted tooth pulling the hair on the small guy, that's so cool.

Hey, Mom, that guy in that corner cage hasn't moved since we were here this morning. Do you think he's sad?

Oh no, honey, that's the same behavior as in their natural habitat.

But Mom, how about that other big man that has been stomping his foot in place for the last two hours, is that normal for them, too? Whoa now, would you look at that, a guy with his pants down forcing….

Zoos exist somewhere between a crack house and a prison block. Go to have a good time—and go at your own peril.

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Last May, I spent three days in Talkeetna, Alaska. I waited out the weather to get flown onto a low-lying glacier below Denali (Mount McKinley). Then I was off, and then that quickly, I was on. It was another world of snow and ice, of crevasses visible, hidden, and worrisome. Three days hauling 120 pounds skiing up the glacier: It was harder than when I'd tried the climb in 2003.

I sat tight through a day of weather. Then half-carries (60 pounds) from 11,000 to 14,000 feet, including the move up to 14,000. A quiet evening, but by morning, the wind blew hard and steady for most of eight days, at forty-plus mph, gusting to sixty, hammering my tent, and minus-ten degrees at night. I cooked in my snow cave. After a few days, I trusted my tent, and my mind went numb. If you leave your tent open an inch, it fills fast with snow drift.

In the middle of that time, the wind quieted for a day, and I climbed. At 15,200 feet, up fixed lines. Crampons now front pointed the ice. Not enough oxygen, step, two breaths, step, two breaths. I met the ridge at 16,000 feet, and the world opened up below: the cascading of mountains and glaciers to tundra in the distance, which I'd half-noticed fully while I half fully kept focused on my steps.

Freud wrote of dreams condensing unconscious material of the mind. It's in this way that dreams can be "overdetermined"—they mean multiple things because different ideas are jumbled together and overlaid on one another. That's what it felt like on the ridge. I was living two or three lives at the same time, each fully perceived and committed. In places, the ridgeline narrowed to a few feet wide and a misstep would have landed me thousands of feet below. I didn't look down. It scared me on the ridge. I fought through it. I tried to relax through it. I kept reassessing, upward or downward. I reached 17,200 feet, twenty feet higher than in 2003. *That will do it!* Lower on the mountain, I'd been mentally affirming—*I'm strong, I'm powerful*—and now heading back down the ridge, I affirmed that I was paying attention *I'm relaxed. I'm paying attention. I'm relaxed. I'm paying attention.* I was so tired. But each step needed to be right.

I got back to my tent by 10:00 p.m., back to more winds, to headaches and exhaustion. Several new storm systems

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were said to be heading in over the next ten days. I waited a few days to see if I could recover, but I couldn't, at least not in that wind. I stared up at the summit. I headed home.

I was aware of the many amazing climbers on this mountain. I'd guess, if I were comparing myself—and it's strange, because one does, or at least I did—all my efforts placed me at the bottom twentieth percentile. Some people climbed routes that were seemingly impossible, which they changed to routes that were still remarkable, but not without risks. The week before, a woman had reached the summit at the cost of her ten toes to frostbite. About that time, two male climbers put in a new route, but they'd disappeared on their summit descent in hundred-mph winds; after ten days, the search had been called off.

After my ascent, I slept in a bunkhouse of other climbers in town. One was Japanese. I said hi. He said hi. He was reading a climbing magazine. I learned later that he and two other Japanese climbers had initially comprised a party of three, before they split into two groups. His two other partners were the dead ones. It's so simple in the mountains. You make your own decisions. You live or die by them.

At times, I felt the mountain with a new sense. I was this small person crawling on the back of this enormous presence, sleeping on it, living on it, not exactly with it; it didn't feel me, but I couldn't exactly say it didn't feel me. It was quite lovely—animism in the non-living world, it seems to me, is more than an idea; it's a sense, an awareness—though when it got too hard physically or I got too scared, that awareness disappeared, and I was left just battling the mountain, the cold, my limitations, my fears, myself.

I brought a little notebook and pen on the climb. I was going to write. All the pages remain empty. Odd, how quickly words left me. But here, now, a few words to try to integrate this experience, me, back to myself, a new self that was a little worried of trying to fit into my preestablished patterns back home. But patterns can change, expand, re-form, deepen, patterns that Christopher Alexander—architect and founder of "pattern language"—says are alive like fire, ablaze. I was ready for the senses to awaken from the cold glacial snow to the softness of the earth, to the bio of biophilia, birdsong and woodland walks, gentle evenings with friends.

• • •

Over dinner with colleagues in a restaurant in Amsterdam, I looked at two men a few tables away. They were small in build, sitting intimately close to one another while eating. They were not touching, but psychologically they were connected. They looked almost homeless, the way people look when they appear older than they are and closer to death than they should be. Their faces were so strikingly intense, a little bird-like for one, hollowed for another. I wondered if they had AIDS. Their world seemed like it revolved around one another.

What can we ask of life? To love it deeply and awaken it and protect it and let it go altogether, simultaneously.

• • •

The goofy, the clown, the fool who smiles smart and makes us laugh, and laughs himself, and laughs at us as we laugh at him, he cries alone. He sees the baby at birth who dies in the cradled arms of the now childless mother. Needles puncturing veins in flesh-pocked forms. Aggression unhinged, vestiges abnormal of the hunter's heart from ancestral times. It garrotes humanity and comes away with nothing but plastic and service from minions who wish their masters dead. The grandfather's body coming to the young girl, again and again; and she, now a woman, offers as best she can a love too distant, too cold, to a daughter too distant and too cold. He sees such ghosts from the past that possess us still. The fool who tells Lear—"Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em i' th' paste alive. She knapped 'em o' th' coxcombs with a stick and cried, 'Down, wantons, down!'"—as if it's as easy to calm a raging heart. The fool who tells Lear: "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." The fool is abandoned by all when the laughter's done. The prophet is like the fool. Substitute praying for laughing. Substitute a church for a coffin. Substitute sanctity for stench. Hyenas eat first and kill second. It was done to Jesus on the cross, bled like a pig, prophesizes still, Father forgive them, and then his resurrection as Christian overlords of the death camps. Bible-thumpers spit truisms. But does Jacob's robe of many colors keep the hobo warm? It's the bum stretched out on cold concrete on a winter's day with months ahead that go no farther than the day behind.

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I write words and stare at them and wonder what they mean. Here on this land, in this place I love and where the joy is more to behold than elsewhere, or at least I find it so, the mind relaxes and trusts. Then the wilds of the mind emerge.

Publishing Information

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