

Fall 1998

# Turning to earth: Paths to an ecological practice

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TURNING TO EARTH: PATHS TO AN ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Natural Resources

September 1998

**UMI Number: 9907592**

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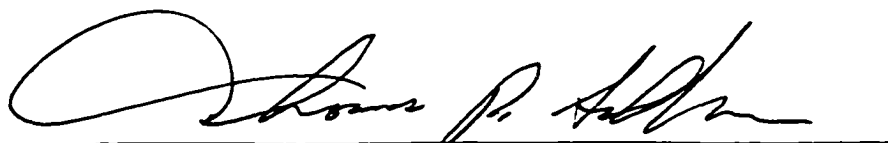
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June 24, 1998  
Date

For the island  
and the family it joins



## Acknowledgments

In preparing this dissertation, I walked a 'less traveled' road. The work involves interdisciplinary research in environmental humanities, a creative but amorphous blend of ecological philosophy, environmental literature, religious studies, education and ecopsychology. On this journey into the academic outback, I received a wealth of guidance and support from faculty members and administrators, family and friends.

My advisor, Paul Brockelman, and committee members – Melody Graulich, Barbara Houston, Sarah Sherman, and Tom Sullivan – have been true guides. They provided essential direction while sharing in the exploratory spirit of this reconnaissance. From the outset, they recognized that this project was more than an academic exercise for me. Historian Jill Ker Conway recalls being told by her graduate advisor: "One's research should always involve some element of therapy... It only counts if it's really close to the bone" (*True North* 34). My research does strike close to the bone and my committee has honored and supported that dimension of the work. In their capacity to join intellectual rigor and compassionate concern (for their students and for the world at large), they are exemplary teachers.

Professors John Tallmadge (of Union Institute), and John Elder and Steven Rockefeller (both of Middlebury College) kindly offered advice and encouragement. They have worked diligently for decades to foster discussion of environmental humanities in the academic community. That dialogue is

also being nourished by a network of active and concerned scholars and writers, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE).

Through the course of my program, the University of New Hampshire Graduate School demonstrated exceptional vision and commitment in supporting interdisciplinary research. They provided tuition scholarships, a research enhancement grant, travel funds to present at the 1997 ASLE conference, and a generous dissertation fellowship. I am indebted to the Graduate School for all its support, particularly the fellowship which allowed me to focus full-time on writing during the last year.

In many universities, where learning is structured by traditional departments, interdisciplinary research can prove challenging. The University of New Hampshire has made the process not only easy but enjoyable. The Natural Resources Doctoral Program (under John Aber's capable leadership) offered an ideal academic niche in which to pursue these studies. The Farrington Fund, within the Department of Natural Resources, generously helped cover my conference travel expenses on several occasions.

I also extend thanks to Peg and Jeff Balano for providing "a room with a view," an inspiring setting in which to reflect and write. They have been kind and considerate neighbors throughout my years of doctoral study.

While most of this work is based on literary accounts, I did spend time with one of the primary authors (whose case study constitutes the opening chapter). My interview fell at a time when Terry Tempest Williams had multiple commitments crowding in on her life. Despite these pressures, she

was exceptionally gracious and attentive. I appreciate her honest sharing and generous heart. She inspires by example.

This project is the culmination of many years' work and reflection. Through the course of this exploration, my parents have consistently supported my choice of 'less-traveled' roads and trusted in my vision. I am grateful beyond measure for their abiding love. My grandparents Marnie and Ben Schaufler left a legacy of kinship that continues to nourish our family and a place that will sustain each generation to come. Elizabeth Farnsworth, Edward Geis, and Cynthia Krum are cherished friends, gifted with spirit, integrity, humor and a passion for the Earth. On the long road to this degree, I was fortunate to share the journey with three wonderful fellow travelers in the Natural Resources Program: Penelope Morrow, Mary Westfall and Mary Catherine Clipson.

Dorrie, my faithful canine companion, helps keep me connected to Earth. Lastly, I give thanks to this rugged and island-rich coast. Here my spirit is moored.

## Preface

Each year my home state holds a coast-wide cleanup day in which several thousand volunteers collect tons of accumulated debris from beaches, rocky shores and salt marshes. For several years I was charged with organizing this marathon event. The cleanup was deemed a success because every year we recruited more volunteers, gathered more garbage and got more media coverage. Yet a month or two after the cleanup, the debris would be back. Despite federal legislation that bans ocean dumping of plastics, the oil containers and soda bottles kept drifting in. It didn't take long to realize that we could keep chasing after this garbage for years without ever stemming the tide. To help prevent pollution at the source, we began distributing educational posters and running public service ads.

Yet still the debris washed in.

Only then did I realize that more information would not solve the problem. Behavioral change cannot be reduced to a simplistic equation where 'right information' leads to 'right action.' Individual choices are often based as much on values and assumptions (whether conscious or not) as on cognitive information. People were not tossing debris into the ocean because they did not know that plastics can endure for centuries. They were dumping their trash overboard because they saw the sea as a vast wilderness that would absorb it. And they believed the items were -- as marketers claimed -- 'disposable.' Changing these beliefs would clearly take more than posters and fact sheets.

As my focus turned to the root causes of ecological degradation, it became harder to work on superficial educational campaigns. When describing ways to reduce runoff pollution, I wanted to include more than the usual tips: "reduce use of lawn chemicals" and "keep your car well-tuned." Why not rethink grass monocultures as an aesthetic standard? Why not examine our cultural addiction to automobiles? When promoting the potential tax benefits of conservation easements, I wanted to discuss the entrenched view of land as 'property' and the significance of a spiritual bond to place.

My compulsion to raise these broader issues finally propelled me back to academia (where there is often more license to ask such weighty questions). I had first begun pondering these issues years earlier -- as an undergraduate -- working on a thesis that explored the dynamic relationship humans have as complementers to, participants in, and destroyers of the natural world. My last two years of college were spent reading a broad array of ecological writers, compiling their collective wisdom on ways to re-vision the place of humans within nature.

Subsequent years in the environmental field, writing and producing educational materials, reinforced my early conviction that restoring ecological health would require a fundamental change in our individual and collective beliefs and practices. To explore potential avenues of transformation, I began doctoral studies in ecological ethics and spiritual values.

My coursework exposed me to contemporary theories in a wide range of emerging sub-fields: environmental ethics, ecopsychology, earth-centered

religions, ecocriticism, systems theory and ecological economics. This intellectual smorgasbord offered a bewildering array of ideas for transforming the way we think about the rest of nature. Yet amidst all the intellectual theories, economic models and philosophical arguments, it was still not clear what might inspire new values and practices. What would touch people deeply enough to transform them, changing not only their minds but their hearts? What might it take to 'convert' people to Earth?

I thought back to the writers featured in my undergraduate thesis. Many of them recounted their evolving relation to the natural world in terms that inspired reflection. Their life stories held a vital power for me that abstract theories lacked. From their personal accounts of transformation, I drew faith in the possibility of ecological renewal.

My experience could be anomalous (it would not be the first time), but I came to wonder if the most direct route to inner transformation might lie – not in cognitive schemes – but in the creative and imaginative power of story. Narrative can draw one closer to 'truth' than facts can. A growing number of scholars attest to the powerful role narratives play in shaping spiritual understanding and moral action (see, for example, Brockelman and Gilligan). Perhaps the life stories of certain writers could reveal the inner process by which people turn to earth, coming to live in ways that sustain the whole of nature. Research into the lived experience of ecological writers would never yield 'hard data' or factual conclusions, but it might provide vital new symbols and narratives. Seeking inspiration as well as information, I chose to research writers whose stories hold the power to open minds and touch hearts.

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## ABSTRACT

### TURNING TO EARTH: PATHS TO AN ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE

by

F. Marina Schaffler  
University of New Hampshire, September 1998

In highly developed countries like the United States, conventional approaches to environmental change emphasize systemic measures such as policies and regulations. Yet many intractable environmental problems appear to be rooted in the perspectives and practices of individual citizens. Efforts to restore 'outer ecology' may depend, therefore, on transforming 'inner ecology' – the constellation of spiritual and moral values that guide action. This dissertation examines the inner dimensions of ecological change, demonstrating how individuals redefine their relation to earth through a process of 'ecological conversion.'

In assessing the dynamics of conversion, this work relies primarily on the testimony of six 20th-century American writers: Edward Abbey, Rachel Carson, N. Scott Momaday, Scott Russell Sanders, Alice Walker and Terry Tempest Williams. An interpretive analysis of their autobiographical works illustrates key catalysts and characteristics of the conversion process. Ancillary research in ecological philosophy, religious studies and ecopsychology informs the hermeneutical analysis of their narratives. Through this interdisciplinary study, significant commonalities in their spiritual and ethical transformations emerge. Six thematic chapters discuss the recurrent patterns evident in their life narratives: remembrance (formative childhood influences); reflection (introspective periods); revelation (epiphanic insights); reciprocity (ecological

interdependence); resistance (public testimony); and re-storying (narrative and ritual arts). Collectively these elements constitute an exploratory model of ecological conversion (in the context of contemporary Western culture).

Through the conversion process, individuals cultivate an ecological practice – a deliberate and sustained set of actions intended to reinforce their responsible participation in the natural world. This practice represents a spiritual discipline, a mindful effort to renew and deepen connections with the greater whole. Each practice reflects a convert's particular worldview and circumstances, as well as shared values and visions. This work describes parallels evident in the ecological practice of selected writers. While the findings are preliminary and based on a small sample, they reveal dynamics of 'inner ecology' that could prove significant in efforts to transform environmental attitudes and actions in American culture.

## INTRODUCTION

*All around us, we can see people trying to solve by logical argument, or by acquiring of information, problems that can only be dealt with by a change of heart.*

- Mary Midgeley  
British Philosopher

Ecological problems pose an unprecedented challenge for Western society. Technological and regulatory measures no longer appear capable of addressing crises such as global warming and habitat destruction. Many environmental problems in highly developed countries like the U.S. stem from the choices individual citizens make in respect to consumption, recreation, diet and transportation. Americans express a strong concern for environmental health in general surveys, yet often live in ways that are vastly destructive to local and global ecosystems. This disjunction between stated desire and actual practice reveals the force of unexamined beliefs and assumptions. Achieving greater congruence between internal values and lived practice may depend on a transformation of 'inner ecology' – the spiritual beliefs and ethical values that underlie action. This internal shift represents more than a reform of old habits: it involves "... a change in the self sufficiently deep and lasting to bring about a change of conduct and bearing in the world" (Conn 55). Such a substantive change is not apt to be effected solely through cognitive information, regulations or economic incentives. These methods have fostered some environmental reforms but have failed to prompt an enduring "change of conduct and bearing" in the American populace. A fundamental shift in citizens' actions and attitudes

may hinge on a transformation made from the inside out – involving spiritual, moral, mental and practical dimensions of being.

This work examines the morphology of inner ecological change. It begins defining the catalysts and characteristics of 'ecological conversion,' the process by which individuals form and sustain a spiritual and ethical bond with the earth. The term 'conversion' connotes a religious transformation (*re-ligare*, in Latin, meaning 'to bind together'): through conversion, an individual reconnects with the ecological whole, re-visioning her place in the world and reforming her life accordingly. Scholar Steven Rockefeller observes that religious change depends not on intellect but on will, "the staking of the whole being" on a particular vision (*John* 114). When an individual stakes her being on a vision of ecological wholeness and connection, the contours of both inner and outer ecology can change.

### The Context for Conversion

Ecological conversion assumes that individual change occurs in response to internal beliefs and values as much as to regulation or education. This perspective counters the culture's dominant emphasis on external forms of effecting change (through political, legal and technological means). The prevailing focus on external reforms merits questioning given the magnitude and diversity of environmental problems facing Western society. Why, for example, has the American environmental movement – active for more than 30 years – never turned its gaze inward to reflect on the psychological and spiritual roots of destructive habits? Why does the academic field of Environmental Studies define itself exclusively in terms of science and policy, neglecting virtually all consideration of how philosophy, religion, psychology and literature shape

environmental values and practices? Why do politicians and decision-makers scrupulously avoid discussion of inner change, even as they acknowledge the limits of legislative solutions? And why does the media focus solely on symptoms of environmental destruction (such as dramatic oilspills and choking smog) without addressing their internal sources (*e.g.*, the cultural dependence on automobiles)?

The resistance to examining inner ecology in Western culture reflects a widespread conviction that the environmental crisis is outside us, rather than being a function of our attitudes, values and actions. This view reflects the culture's abiding division between humans and 'nature,' a dualism that splits the ecological whole into hierarchical halves. The human-nature divide, which has cleaved Western thought and human identity since the Enlightenment, still marks the contemporary environmental movement. The emphasis on sound 'management' of natural resources, for example, assumes that humans 'oversee' other species, rather than participating with them in an inclusive ecological community. Even advocates of radical environmental change – such as deep ecologists and preservationists – often reinforce a dualistic view (arguing, for example, for 'nature' to take precedence over humans or for protection of pristine wilderness areas 'untainted' by any human presence).

This pervasive ecological schizophrenia is reinforced by Western culture's legacy of anthropocentrism. Humans, seen as the crowning glory of all evolution, are thought to stand apart from – and above – 'nature' (the repository of all other life forms). In this perspective, humans are entitled to use other beings and the elemental earth as "natural resources" without concern for their intrinsic needs. Anthropocentrism effectively sanctions environmental exploitation. Some of the

most contentious debates in contemporary environmental ethics revolve around these issues of human privilege and entitlement: What 'belongs' to humans? (Or, as writer Wendell Berry prefers to ask, to what do we belong?) What rights and responsibilities do humans have toward other species?

Philosophical infighting on these issues – often premised on a quest for definitive principles or rights – can make anthropocentrism seem like a purely academic concern. Yet it permeates nearly every facet of contemporary lives and lifestyles. Many ecologically destructive activities in American society can be traced back to this legacy of anthropocentrism and estrangement from the natural world.

Increasingly, these dominant values are being challenged by practitioners and theorists in the fields of ecofeminism, deep ecology, ecopsychology and sustainability. They cite the need for radical environmental change, in the etymological (and often the political) sense. Radical measures (*L. radix*, root) seek to address the heart of environmental problems, changing the pattern of values and assumptions that fuel destructive practices. Restoring the health of outer ecology, they assert, depends on a renewal of inner ecology.

Calls for an ecological awakening are growing more insistent yet little is said about *how* such a change might occur. If environmentally destructive practices are grounded in entrenched values and beliefs (such as anthropocentrism), what might transform those fundamental views? How might inner ecological change help restore outer ecology?

This work explores the dynamics of ecological conversion in an effort to illuminate the vital interconnections between inner ecology (the values and perceptions that guide our beliefs and practices) and outer ecology (the collective

web of life and elemental matter in which we participate). The distinction made here between the two forms of ecology is not meant to reinforce the classical human-nature split. Inner ecology is strongly shaped by our participation in the natural world, and outer ecology comprises human culture and constructs as well as what philosopher David Abram calls the 'more-than-human world.' Inner and outer ecology constitute halves of an indivisible whole.

This exploratory model of ecological conversion covers terrain not yet charted by traditional disciplines (such as religious studies, philosophy, and sociology) or even the fields of ecocriticism, ecological philosophy and ecopsychology. Informed by diverse theoretical insights, this work illustrates key dimensions of an internal process that has eluded definition. The elements of conversion recorded here are descriptive rather than prescriptive. They do not constitute a "how-to" guide or moral doctrine; rather, they sketch the outlines of a complex transformational process and suggest patterns that warrant further attention.

There appear to be few studies documenting conventional forms of religious conversion and virtually none that examine the process by which people turn to earth. Conversion – in any form – stubbornly resists both empirical study and religious or sociological characterization. It represents "an experience to be lived and tasted, rather than theorized about" (Griffin 10). Quantitative research rarely illuminates this subjective process and even qualitative methods (such as ethnographic interviews) fail to capture its complexity. The best evidence of inner change may be found in the written testimonials of those who have undergone a transformation and reflected on its dynamics and outcome. Writers' accounts of inner change often reveal more



about conversion than could be gleaned from other sources. One critic notes that "since the artist is, by vocation, more aware of his motives than most people, and better able to express himself, it seem[s] likely he would offer illuminations which the writings of sociologists... and statisticians lacked" (Alvarez xiii).

Informal accounts of ecological conversion commonly appear in autobiographical works of 'nature writing.' This literary sub-genre includes an eclectic array of prose and poetry, ranging from natural history essays and journals to romantic poetry and transcendental reflections. What links these diverse works is a common concern with how the ecological whole operates and where humans fit within that dynamic web. In reflecting on their formative life experiences, many nature writers (or what I term ecological writers – see subsequent note on language) record a gradual process of turning to earth, in which their perspectives and practices change appreciably. The evidence of their conversions is often subtle, though, and scattered (with threads appearing in numerous different narratives). It may be for this reason that the process of ecological conversion has drawn little notice from scholars and critics. With several notable exceptions (see Slovic, O'Grady, McClintock and Paul), few works explore the dynamics of spiritual and moral transformation in ecological writers. My research addresses this oversight by tracking key patterns of change in the conversion narratives of numerous writers.

The methodology used in this process is highly interdisciplinary, drawing on religious studies and ecological philosophy to interpret literary texts. While narrative accounts constitute my 'primary data,' my analytic approach is not that of a literary critic. I examine the narratives of ecological writers through a religious lens, using spiritual concepts (*e.g.*, conversion, practice, and revelation)

to characterize the process, and drawing parallels between ecological and conventional forms of awakening.

Viewing ecological transformation as a process of conversion extends the parameters of contemporary environmental discussion. It highlights the spiritual and moral dimensions of change and the need for a whole-hearted reassessment of how we live. Yet employing a term freighted with so many meanings can prove hazardous. The most problematic connotations are those that associate conversion with zealous adherence to dogma or an evangelical edge. Ecological conversion, by my definition, is neither dogmatic nor fundamentalist. Its converts do not adhere to a rigid ethic or devote their lives to the quasi-institution of environmentalism. Their faith in earth is grounded in experience rather than in religious or political doctrine. Ecological converts come to view earth – the elemental and living web in which all beings participate – as a sacred presence and guiding force in their lives.

These converts tend to stand outside institutional and creedal faith traditions. Yet their lives seem to be governed by a strong sense of the sacred, an abiding wonder and gratitude in the mystery of being. Spirituality, in this ecological sense, constitutes "living in accordance with the dynamism of life" (Boff 168). Without reliance on religious intermediaries, each convert seeks to forge what Emerson termed an 'original relation to the Universe' that reflects his or her lived experience. (Such a relation, while original in many senses, is clearly still informed by the perspectives and narratives of the larger culture.) Converts to earth tend to affirm their covenantal bonds with the whole through various forms of 'ecological practice.'

An ecological practice grows gradually and organically during the course of a conversion. As the spiritual and ethical transformation unfolds, the ecological practice extends and deepens – reinforcing changes in the convert's inner ecology. An ecological practice constitutes a spiritual discipline, a conscious and consistent effort to live in accordance with core values. It is not the product (or culmination) of conversion so much as the form that supports it. Through mindful effort, an ecological practice deliberately affirms connections to the whole. While the shape of a practice may vary over time (as certain dimensions go through cycles of activity and dormancy), the overall commitment to the practice tends to remain steady. Without that sustained commitment, conversion would be incomplete.

An ecological practice (like other modes of spiritual practice) engages the whole being. It touches every dimension of life from the intellectual and emotional to the physical and practical. In this respect, it differs from what are commonly termed "environmental practices." The latter terms refers to mundane habits and household actions intended to benefit the natural world. Environmental practices such as recycling or using non-toxic cleaners may be small manifestations of a larger ecological practice – a holistic commitment to live in ways that honor one's existential state of interdependence.

While termed a singular 'practice,' the lived expression of ecological connections can take diverse forms, reflecting the unique circumstances and disposition of the convert. Each form of ecological practice is particular to the individual but many reflect shared values and experiences. Two individuals may express a common principle through markedly different forms of practice. A concern with the welfare of other beings, for example, may take the form of

vegetarianism in one person while another subsistence hunts with bow and arrow (pursuing prey in a manner that seeks to honor the spirit and life of the animal). Such variations in ecological practice may reflect differences in culture, gender, class and education but these correlations have yet to be documented. Given the varied forms that an ecological practice takes, underlying commonalities in belief can be hard to identify. I address this challenge by portraying in thematic chapters the shared patterns that emerge from individual conversion narratives.

### Turning

The turning metaphor, common to many accounts of conversion, suggests movement -- a turning from past beliefs and practices toward new modes of perception and relation. One model of conversion posits this change as a dramatic shift in which the convert -- like Saul on the road to Damascus -- is overcome by a forcible sense of calling. This "Pauline" model, popularized through countless revival meetings, has come to be seen as the predominant means of spiritual awakening. Consequently, I began my research looking for evidence of sudden and marked transformations in ecological autobiographies. There were few. Gradually I realized that changes in ecological writers generally follow a different model -- a slow, progressive form of conversion. This gradual turning, while less abrupt than the stereotype, is no less active. In fact some evidence suggests that subtler conversions have more lasting effects than sudden turns in which "the behavior and motives may change but the 'self' remains intact at a deeper level" (Tallmadge "John" 65, 64).

Incremental forms of turning typically involve a cumulative process of integration, excavation or both. Integration involves "not so much a change of

direction as an augmentation," a steady accumulation of insights and convictions (Richardson *Emerson* 184). In this view, conversion is a process one grows into (with the direction of that growth set early in life). Through integrative experiences, a convert may rejoin abandoned or neglected parts of the self. This process can occur, for example, when someone returns to live in the region where he was raised – reconnecting with a place that once was part of him. Or it may happen through the act of writing, re-collecting neglected dimensions of one's past.

Paradoxically, conversion can also occur through a progressive exfoliation of accumulated masks and habits. Converts may characterize their transformation – not as "gaining" a new identity or integrating parts – but as an excavation down to an 'essential center,' a foundational sense of belonging to the whole. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan asserts that "growth comes from removing and removing, ceasing, undoing, and letting ourselves drop down or even fall into the core of our living being" (Jensen 129). What lies at the core is not so much a static set of values (ecological commandments carved into the bedrock of being) but a mode of connection to the world (a spiritual sense of kinship that informs one's modes of perception and relation).

An inner excavation may lead a convert to forfeit beliefs and practices that do not accord with core values. At times, these acts of relinquishment can hold overtones of repentance, reminiscent of more conventional forms of conversion. Repentance traditionally implies a recognition of past sins and a resolve to live differently. While this dimension is less pronounced in ecological conversion, the turning does represent a simultaneous movement *from* past ways *toward* a new vision.

Turning suggests a straight trajectory from old life to new but conversion may involve a cycling back, a re-turning. "Conversion narratives," scholar James Dorsey notes, "often contain a cyclic pattern of conversion and reconversion" (3). Returning creates a spiral of growth where old patterns and perspectives are continually incorporated into the new. In this view, cycling back to past experiences does not constitute 'backsliding' or regression; it represents an essential step in a creative evolution.

Religious scholars are divided as to whether converts turn of their own volition or are moved by 'the hand of God.' Converts to conventional faiths often portray their experience as a forceful calling in which God directs them down paths they would never have willfully chosen. While ecological converts resist orthodox language (preferring such terms as mystery, wonder and synchronicity), they often affirm that their spiritual paths are 'guided' in a sense they cannot fully explain.

Certain experiences seem to predispose individuals to ecological awakening. Some of these are consciously planned (*e.g.*, a solo wilderness retreat) while others are wholly unanticipated (*e.g.*, a debilitating loss). Ecological converts tend to seek out opportunities for spiritual communion with the natural whole: they are, in writer Edward Abbey's words, "prospectors for revelation" (*Journey* 65). Yet their quests are not always rewarded. Conversion, they learn, cannot be choreographed. The process happens only through a fortuitous mix of choice and chance, when "will and grace are joined" (Buber 58).

Because ecological conversion is a subjective and variable process, it is difficult to characterize with a single model. The experience eludes facile descriptions, having no definitive list of prerequisites or outcomes. "An event of

deep transition," scholar Charlene Spretnak notes, "creates its own rules" (32). Ecological conversion is subject to the same ambiguity that has – for centuries – marked the study of religious conversion. Some scholars conclude that what constitutes an authentic or appropriate spiritual transformation is "fundamentally an unanswerable question" (Anthony 328).

While resistant to empirical and deductive methods of research, the morphology of ecological conversion can be examined through narrative and inductive approaches. These modes reveal spiritual and moral dimensions of conversion that elude more conventional research methods. Stories open doors to the imagination, drawing on symbols, metaphors, myths, and parables to vividly portray dimensions of transformation (Metzner "Ten" 48).

A narrative approach to understanding conversion is particularly appropriate in assessing writers' transformations, since their paths are often shaped by the lives and works of literary predecessors. Ecological writers draw on a rich legacy of nature writing that extends back centuries, through American Transcendentalists (such as Emerson and Thoreau) to British Romantics (such as Blake, Coleridge and the Wordsworths). The conversion experiences described by contemporary ecological writers at times recapitulate those recorded by their predecessors. These narrative echoes suggest that ecological conversion is not a new phenomenon confined to late 20th-century America. The depth and breadth of its cultural roots, though, have yet to be explored.

The contours of ecological conversion outlined in subsequent chapters surfaced through an inductive mode of research, drawing on the written testimony of numerous converts. The patterns derive from their accounts, rather than being imposed on them. This hermeneutic approach honors the subjectivity

and variability of each individual's process, while accenting shared experiences. The common elements of ecological conversion do not 'define' the process in any authoritative sense but constitute a preliminary model that can guide further investigations. Key constituents of ecological conversion include remembrance (significant childhood influences); reflection (introspective periods); revelation (epiphanic insights); reciprocity (ecological interdependence); resistance (public testimony); and re-storying (narrative and ritual). It would be premature to describe these six elements as necessary or sufficient preconditions of ecological conversion, given the limited sample of writers included here. This work marks the first attempt to characterize a 'model' of ecological transformation so its findings are necessarily preliminary, neither comprehensive nor conclusive. Studies involving a wider pool of individuals might reveal other significant dimensions of conversion.

Even among the six primary writers, each individual does not report experiencing every element (certainly not to the same degree). Different patterns seem to dominate the conversion narratives of each writer. Yet there is, amidst the variability, a surprising degree of commonality (in that most of the primary and secondary writers report experiences that fall within these categories).

The patterns evident in these ecological narratives can be likened to models depicting more conventional forms of religious conversion. Scholars James Loder, Lewis Rambo and Paul Brockelman suggest that while conversion is a "dynamic, multifaceted process," it can be depicted in a "sequential stage model" (Rambo 6, 17). The stages are not wholly discrete but "paradoxically both chronological and simultaneous" (Brockelman *These* 169). Rambo identifies seven stages of conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment



and consequences (17). Loder cites five steps: conflict-in-context; interlude for scanning; insight felt with intuitive force; release and repatterning; and interpretation and verification (3-4). In Brockelman's model, there are seven stages of spiritual transformation: awareness of non-being; religious longing; interpretive vision; commitment and support; mystical experience and existential transformation; spiritual integration; and compassionate loving and caring (*These* 170-93).

The stages outlined in these models of spiritual transformation share clear thematic ties with elements of ecological conversion. For example, 'resistance' coincides with the category of "commitment" outlined by Rambo and Brockelman, and 'revelation' parallels Brockelman's stage of "mystical experience" and Loder's "insight felt with intuitive force." The pattern of 'reflection' evident among ecological writers can be likened to the stage that involves a "quest," "interlude for scanning" or "religious longing." The process of ecological conversion, though, remains resistant to any sort of sequential model. It involves elements (distinguishable parts of a larger whole) or patterns (recurrent themes or characteristics), rather than discrete stages or steps in a linear journey. Ecological conversion represents a dynamic mobile, in which each element circles at its own pace – moving intermittently at times – but always in tandem with other elements.

As the mobile metaphor suggests, conversion is not a singular event but an ongoing process. The testimony of ecological converts supports Thomas Merton's assertion that "we are not converted only once in our lives but many times" (Griffin 177). The convert's path is one of "permanent revolution" (Loder 19).

This 'revolutionary' perspective challenges the classical vision of conversion as a means to spiritual certitude -- a serene inner state unruffled by concerns of the material world. Psychologist William James reports that conversion commonly fosters visions, ecstatic happiness and a sense of the world transfigured (244). Seeing conversion as a path to nirvana, though, can distort both the process (portraying it as a form of spiritual self-help) and the outcome (overlooking the demands of a lived practice in the material world). Ecological conversion offers no haven of spiritual bliss apart from the destruction ravaging the natural world. It does not lead people *out of the world but deeper and deeper into it*.

Turns toward earth are fraught with the dynamic tension of polarities that cannot be reconciled: the necessity of death to nourish life; scarcity amidst nature's fecundity; the resilience and acute fragility of natural systems; and a stability that inheres within constant change. These paradoxes in outer ecology often mirror ones within. Many converts find themselves challenged to embrace life in the face of relentless loss; distinguish sufficiency from surfeit; and cultivate the strength to be vulnerable.

One of the strongest paradoxes with which ecological writers contend is the simultaneous pull toward individualism and collectivism. They recognize the need for broad social reconstruction and acknowledge that each individual's existence (both physical and spiritual) depends on the collective. Yet by temperament and intellectual tradition, these writers tend to be concerned with their individual experience in the world. This perspective reflects the traditional focus on the autonomous self in European cultures. The Western literary canon defines that self as limited to the physical body but some ecological writers

extend their consideration to how the self is situated within the broader ecological community. Because their vision simultaneously embraces individual and collective views, they are caught between conflicting perspectives. They represent what religious scholar Donald Capps terms the "aesthetic self," a personality type sensitive to the contradictions of human existence and intent upon confronting them through creative work (*Religious* 8). Ecological writers often rely on art to help them negotiate the liminal realm between inner and outer ecology, a margin marked by great fecundity and friction.

Tensions generated by these paradoxes can prove overwhelming. Writer Terry Tempest Williams speaks for many ecological converts in asking "where do we find the strength not to be pulled apart by our passions?" (*Desert* 44). The question is far from rhetorical. There are times, some writers admit, when they are torn asunder by the polarities. Despite this struggle, though, they resist the false promise that paradoxes can be effectively resolved. Among the thematic elements of conversion outlined in this work, there is no chapter on 'resolution.' Converts learn that the discipline of an ecological practice entails holding the poles together, knowing there can be no lasting reconciliation. This ongoing effort is evident in many of their life stories.

Conversion, by definition, implies a transformation that is not only internal but is made manifest in the world. The convert is not called simply to revise his intellectual views or moral precepts but to adopt a new way of life. To some degree, therefore, every conversion must produce outward signs of inward change. With conventional forms of conversion, that evidence is often clear: a convert adopts established practices -- reading prescribed texts, attending communal worship and participating in religious rites. Evidence of change can

be harder to discern in the case of ecological converts. Inner transformation may be clearly manifest in environmental action (such as ecological restoration work or political lobbying) but it may also surface in more subtle forms. It is important, scholar Dick Anthony notes, not to measure spiritual transformation solely by "observable consequences in the mundane sphere" (41). Not all dimensions of an ecological practice are concrete, tangible actions taken in the public (or even the familial) arena. Significant consequences of conversion may not be readily apparent to any outside observer. If – for example – an individual comes to experience a deep sense of reciprocity with other animals, he might commune silently with other beings, learn more about native flora and fauna, or quietly mourn the loss of a neighborhood tree. None of these responses would necessarily be evident to others. As the conversion proceeded, and a sense of reciprocity grew, the convert might make more obvious changes – such as eating less meat or conserving wildlife habitat. Conversion doesn't necessarily lead to increasingly overt or radical expressions of change but its forms do evolve continually. Evidence of change is neither static nor standardized, making it difficult to assess by empirical means (which rely on 'objective' measures and uniform modes of expression). The best evidence lies in the personal testimony of those who have lived inside the conversion.

In recounting their conversion narratives, ecological writers may be impelled by a sense of religious testimony. Few writers are inclined to proselytize overtly, but many do attest to the sacred quality and import of their experiences. In sharing accounts of their own ecological awakening, they can inspire others. Critic John Tallmadge notes that ecological writers face a dual challenge: they "seek to win their readers' trust and inspire emulation while at

the same time challenging their normal behaviors and fundamental beliefs" (Callicott 114). These goals coincide with those of religious writers who fuse accounts of inspiration with exhortations to change. Both forms of literature tend to be grounded in optimism and a belief in human potential. Critic Scott Slovic reflects that nature writing is (as Wallace Stegner observed) a "'literature of hope' in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness may lead to wholesome political change" (18). Many writers hope that their own accounts of conversion will help others turn toward earth.

The focus in this work on literary testimonials is not meant to suggest that writers are predisposed toward ecological conversion or that their transformational experience is qualitatively different than that of non-writers. Nothing in my findings indicates that writers are particularly prone to conversion (although some evidence suggests that the act of writing may foster the turning process). No studies to date have compared conversion experiences among different professions but this work assumes that a broad range of individuals in diverse occupations undergo ecological conversion. Writers are the focus of this work simply because they document thorough accounts of their journeys.

### The Convert's Word

The writers discussed in this work generally recognize that their truth is subjective (and that their values are not universal norms), but they appear determined to live by certain principles. They characterize their lives in terms that counter post-modern views (which repudiate the concept of 'a self' or postulate the existence of many selves). While acknowledging the power of cultural conditioning, converts to earth stop short of deconstructionism. They

tend more toward essentialism – defining identity in terms of a “bedrock self” that provides continuity in the midst of dynamic change (Williams PI). Because an essentialist view characterizes most of the primary writers, this work depicts ecological conversion in those terms. I rely on concepts the writers themselves use because I seek to portray the ‘truth’ they experience. While their views are open to post-modern critiques, my intent is not to deconstruct their conversion narratives.

Nor do I seek to argue the merits or hazards of subjectivity. Because my primary research draws on autobiographical narratives, the findings cannot be seen as objective or factual ‘truth.’ The personal accounts in this study are authentic only to the experience and recollection of the individuals involved. They represent a narrative rather than an historical truth, what scholar Richard Holmes calls the “ultimate truth of private fact or feeling” (Batchelor 17). The writers involved in this study readily acknowledge that their autobiographical narratives are recollections of experience, not ‘authentic’ accounts. Edward Abbey even offers the disclaimer that his “persona” in essays is to some degree a fictional creation (*Abbey’s* xv). Because their work is creative, writers cannot help but ‘re-create’ themselves. Nonfiction writing involves “the backward search through happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of life to search out a pattern, themes, a meaning...” (Butala xvi-xvii). Through this process, writers invariably edit their experience and even themselves, potentially distorting the ‘historical record.’

For some readers this unavoidable subjectivity may render meaningless any interpretation of their accounts. Anthropologist Franz Boaz, for example, asserts that autobiography is useful only for “the study of the perversion of truth

by memory" (Bataille 88). His remark reflects the positivist tradition that permeates Western thought, in which the only valid truth is an empirical one. However, the 'truth' of spiritual transformation never conforms to such a measure. Being an inherently subjective and non-rational process, conversion holds truths that defy cognitive explanation (as Pascal observed). Therefore even 'flawed' and 'subjective' autobiographical accounts merit study.

### Cast of Characters

In researching the conversion experiences of ecological writers, I examined their works through a bi-focal lens. My focus was split between a wide-angled survey of numerous ecological writers and a more detailed examination of works by six individuals. This attempt to synthesize micro- and macro-levels grew from a desire to situate the primary subjects in a larger context (as part of a broader community of writers and ecological converts). By viewing both levels simultaneously, I was better able to perceive the patterns among individual life stories.

Although a sampling of just six individuals cannot fairly 'represent' a complex, multicultural society, I did strive to obtain some diversity among the primary writers (in terms of race, geography, economic and ethnic backgrounds, religious traditions and academic training). There are three women (two Caucasians of European descent, one African-American/Cherokee) and three men (two Caucasians of European descent, one Kiowa/Cherokee Indian with some European ancestry). The writers hail from Pennsylvania, Georgia, Tennessee/Ohio, Oklahoma/New Mexico and California/Utah, with a comparable geographic spread covered in their adult lives.

I selected the six primary writers because they have written extensively about the dynamics of their conversion process and reflected on its impact in their lives. Many nature writers record their experiences outdoors in eloquent and compelling terms; however, far fewer seem to undergo a foundational conversion and commit themselves to a conscious and sustained ecological practice. The primary writers in this study represent that minority. They express an intent to lead integrated lives "in which their experience and knowledge of the natural world are consistent with their social and political vision, their spiritual lives, and their aesthetic" (McClintock 20). Their ecological practice comes to define every facet of their life and identity. This holistic commitment to earth is not evident in writers who focus solely on a mystical or scientific appreciation of nature.

In tracing the ecological conversion and practice of numerous writers, I found interesting parallels surface. Some of these commonalities are outlined following brief biographical sketches of the six primary writers.

*Edward Abbey* (1927-1989) was born in the Appalachian foothills of Western Pennsylvania, the son of a subsistence trapper/forester and a church choir director. At age 17 Abbey hitchhiked to the West coast, falling in love en route with the Southwestern desert.

After four years of military service, Abbey attended the University of New Mexico (under the GI bill) to pursue a BA in Philosophy. He went on to finish an MA, writing a thesis on anarchy. After an aborted effort at doctoral study, Abbey pursued creative writing and a series of jobs for supplemental income (including 17 seasons as a fire lookout and park ranger).



While Abbey considered himself foremost a novelist, he is best known for nonfiction essays which reflect his vehement concern for preserving the Southwest, his irreverent humor, and his iconoclastic nature (and rampant inconsistencies). The works that reveal most about Abbey's turn to earth are *Abbey's Road*, *Desert Solitaire*, *The Journey Home* and his published journal compilations (particularly *Confessions of a Barbarian*).

*Rachel Carson* (1907-1964) also grew up in Western Pennsylvania, the youngest daughter in a family that was land-rich but cash-poor. Her mother was a choir director while her father worked a variety of short-term jobs. Carson attended college in Pittsburgh, changing her major from English to Biology. She continued her studies at Johns Hopkins University, obtaining an MS in Zoology. Shortly after she finished, both her father and sister died, leaving Carson with financial responsibility for her mother and two nieces.

Carson secured a job with the federal Bureau of Fisheries, and worked her way up to become Director of Publications. Outside work, she drafted essays about marine life which eventually took shape in three books, two of which became best-sellers. The success of *The Sea Around Us* enabled Carson to leave her government post and purchase land along the Maine coast where she spent part of each summer (living the rest of the year near Washington, D.C.).

Carson's freelance career soon was subsumed by the research and writing of *Silent Spring*, a treatise on chemical pesticide hazards. During work on this book, Carson was diagnosed with malignant breast cancer and numerous other illnesses (she died in April 1964, just eighteen months after the book's publication). *Silent Spring* generated a strong backlash from industry and drew the attention of Congress and the President, making Carson a national celebrity.

Her personal reflections on ecological conversion are most evident in *The Sense of Wonder, Always, Rachel* (collected letters) and in *The House of Life*, a biography by her editor and friend Paul Brooks.

*N. Scott Momaday* (1934- ) was born in Oklahoma and raised in Arizona and New Mexico, spending extensive time at the Navajo reservation in Shiprock and the Jemez Pueblo. His father (a full-blood Kiowa Indian) and mother (of Scottish, French and Cherokee ancestry) taught school in these communities. Exposed to diverse cultural traditions early in life, Momaday developed a strong interest in the factors that shape personal and cultural identity.

Momaday graduated from the University of New Mexico as a political science major, then received a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship to attend Stanford University. He later pursued a doctorate in American Literature. Momaday's first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, won a Pulitzer Prize which drew him into a role as spokesperson for the renaissance in American Indian Literature (during the 1960s and 1970s).

Alongside teaching in California and Arizona, Momaday has written books of autobiographical prose, fiction, and poetry. He also works as a professional artist, showing paintings and drawings in the U.S. and Europe. Momaday's writing and art often fuse tribal and ancestral stories with personal and historical reflections. These cultural threads are interwoven with the land itself, which Momaday considers an incontestable part of his genealogy and identity. The works that best depict his turn to earth are *The Man Made of Words*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and a series of interviews (by Charles Woodard) entitled *Ancestral Voice*.

*Scott Russell Sanders* (1945- ) spent his earliest years on a farm in Memphis, Tennessee. Subsequently his family moved to a military reservation in Ohio where Sanders remained throughout childhood, living amidst a paradoxical mix of plentiful wildlife and even more abundant weaponry.

Sanders received a scholarship to Brown University where he excelled academically (graduating first in his class) but struggled socially (as an indigent Midwesterner among more affluent Eastern peers). He went on to complete a Ph.D. in literature at Cambridge. Despite multiple job offers from universities on both coasts, Sanders and his wife Ruth decided to settle in her hometown of Bloomington, Indiana, where he began teaching at Indiana University. They bought a house in town and have remained in it for more than two decades, raising two children there.

Sanders has written short stories, novels and science fiction books but is best known for essays that center on experiences in his homeland and on recollections of youth. Much of his work is tinged with despair, redeemed by an abiding faith in the natural world and the potential of human community. Elements of his conversion to earth are evident in all his essay collections: *The Paradise of Bombs*, *Secrets of the Universe*, *Staying Put* and *Writing from the Center*.

*Alice Walker* (1944- ) grew up in rural Georgia, the seventh child in a sharecropper's family. Walker was particularly close to her mother, a woman of Cherokee and African ancestry devoted to caring for her large family and supporting the local church. Walker's innate shyness as a child was compounded by self-consciousness over being blind in one eye (due to a childhood accident in which a brother shot her with a BB gun). She excelled in school and received scholarships to Tuskegee College and Sarah Lawrence University. Walker

completed her first book of poetry in her senior year of college and has written consistently thereafter – poetry, essays, articles and novels. She lived for several years in the South and in New York City before settling permanently in California.

Throughout her adult years, Walker has advocated for causes she holds dear – civil rights, solidarity with Central America and Cuba, the abolition of female circumcision, animal liberation, and care of the earth. She supports these causes through her writing and through active protests and demonstrations. While Walker is best known for her novels (particularly *The Color Purple*), she has written numerous personal essays reflecting on her upbringing and ancestral legacy; on selected political causes; and on the challenges of living – as an outspoken African-American woman – against the grain of mainstream American society. The books that best depict her ecological conversion include *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, *Living by the Word*, and *The Same River Twice*.

*Terry Tempest Williams* (1955– ), raised in a Mormon household in Salt Lake City, Utah, was given great freedom in childhood to explore the outdoors. She formed a deep and enduring bond with one grandmother, an iconoclastic woman passionate about the natural world and distrustful of church orthodoxies.

Williams' early enthusiasm for untamed nature led her into academic study of natural history and on to complete an MA in environmental education. As part of her graduate work, she taught on a Navajo reservation, learning about indigenous perspectives and practices. Her reflections on that time appeared in her first book of essays, *Pieces of White Shell*. Williams subsequently became

Naturalist for the Utah Museum of Natural History (working there for two decades before leaving to write full-time).

Williams' stories and books on her experience in the natural world emphasize what she terms an "erotics of place" – a passionate relation to the ecological whole. The works that reveal most about Williams' turn to earth are *Refuge*, *Desert Quartet* and *An Unspoken Hunger*.

These six individuals became the focus of my research through a process that was both systematic and intuitive. Since the dynamics of inner ecology are invariably influenced by the milieu in which an individual lives (*e.g.*, historical period, cultural setting and economic class), I chose writers from one country (the United States) during a clearly defined historical period (the late 20th-century). All of these writers published their major works after 1945. Consequently they shared in the cultural climate of post-war America, the rapid technological development and material growth of the 1950s as well as the Cold War backwash. They also felt the influence of the environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s, part of a broad wave of social rebellion and youthful idealism.

Underlying these trends in popular culture are epistemologies that exert a subtle but persistent influence on American society. Throughout the communist hysteria of the 1950s and the protests of the 1960s, American culture was shaped – as it had been for centuries – by the perspectives of Biblical faiths and scientific materialism. These belief systems permeate every facet of contemporary discourse, from political rhetoric and sociological research to literary essays. Since neither tradition holds ecological integrity as a core value, those governed by such beliefs may undergo a more pronounced conversion than individuals in

societies less estranged from the natural world. (A cross-cultural comparison of conversion experiences, involving a wider pool of subjects, would better demonstrate how the character of the conversion experience is informed by the larger culture.) While familial and religious values are often formative, many individuals also derive assumptions from schooling and cultural osmosis.

All of the primary writers in this work completed college, and five of the six received graduate degrees. This level of formal education would be less noteworthy if they had grown up in middle-class homes with college-educated parents. However, only one of the six writers had college-educated parents and only two had a middle-class upbringing. Four (Rachel Carson, Alice Walker, Edward Abbey and Scott Russell Sanders) were raised by parents with little formal schooling and limited economic means. This fact counters the prevailing notion that nature writers are a privileged leisure class with time to reflect that working-class people cannot afford. The majority of these writers grew up in crowded households with few material goods, ate out of subsistence gardens, and attended college on scholarships. All of them have attained more economic security in adulthood, but still appear to live modestly by choice.

While most of the primary writers grew up with limited economic means, they were privileged in non-material ways. They all had intact families with parents who – for all their foibles – were concerned with the welfare of their children. These writers also had access to untamed natural areas in youth and were given freedom to explore those places (a theme developed in Chapter 2).

Given their subsequent conversions to earth, it is interesting to note that five of the six writers grew up in church-going families and two-thirds had a parent active in church leadership (*e.g.*, directing the choir). Despite this early

religious indoctrination (or perhaps *because of it*), none of the writers has maintained an active church affiliation in adulthood. They reflect on their early church experiences with some ambivalence – expressing appreciation tinged with anger, and nostalgia for a potential never realized. The early influence of church may have helped open these writers to a spiritual outlook on life – a recognition of ineffable forces at work in the world. That conviction appears to have grown with time, even as their formal church ties withered.

If relinquishing their old religious affiliations proved hard, no writer reports this: while they draw occasionally on the teachings of childhood faiths or other spiritual traditions, their primary sacral allegiance is to Earth. These writers do not identify themselves as spiritual hybrids (*e.g.*, Christian-Pagan) nor do they show any history of being serial converts, perennially seeking new forms of faith. Those who do label themselves spiritually choose unconventional descriptors, such as Terry Tempest Williams' term "naturalist" and Edward Abbey's appellation "Earthiest" (*i.e.*, one who places his faith in belonging to the elemental web of being). While these writers stand firmly outside authoritarian and doctrinal institutions, few of them suggest that a spiritual concern for the earth is fundamentally incompatible with institutional faiths. They neither discredit nor embrace the work of contemporary theologians who seek to reconcile doctrinal faiths with an earth-based spirituality (see, for example, McFague and Rockefeller/Elder).

The commonalities shared by the primary writers – in spiritual allegiance, family backgrounds and cultural milieu – exist alongside marked differences. The transformation within each individual is influenced by a wide range of variables, including gender, geographic setting, race, ethnicity, temperament,

and interpersonal bonds. Even with this small sampling of writers, I could not begin to account for how these variables affect the course of each person's conversion. This study notes these factors only when their influence is readily apparent (*e.g.*, with Momaday's Kiowa heritage or Williams' Mormon upbringing); it does not speculate on variables that the writers themselves do not directly address (*e.g.*, the influence of gender on the conversion process). While such information would extend our understanding of ecological conversion, it is beyond the scope of this preliminary exploration.

Because it highlights commonalities among writers, this work tends to focus on certain key characteristics and experiences of each individual. This methodology, required for a comparative analysis, can be faulted for masking the inevitable inconsistencies and ambiguities within each writer's life. One danger of this approach is that the writers are portrayed as models, ecological 'saints' rather than flawed and fallible seekers. In an effort to dispel that impression and more fairly portray the complexity of their experience, this work does cite some of their internal contradictions. However, the structure of a comparative study precludes a thorough exploration of all the tensions inherent in their ecological practice.

It is important to underscore that these writers – while clearly gifted at the art of narrative – are not exceptional in their spiritual or moral capacities. If they were extraordinary individuals, the patterns drawn from their narratives would be of limited interest. Because they are fairly representative of the larger population (seemingly ordinary, complex people with an average share of foibles), their accounts of conversion become highly relevant – suggesting that a broader societal turn toward earth may be possible.



In sifting through the life stories of the primary writers, I have tried to empathically enter into their narratives -- assuming the role of a literary 'participant-observer' rather than a critical outsider. The subjective and spiritual nature of these accounts dictates an empathic approach to research. My reading has been informed by a wide variety of secondary materials: theories of religious conversion; developmental psychology; moral theory; ecological philosophy; and ecocritical theory. However, I did not come to the primary works with a pre-existing theory that I sought to test. My academic training lies in ecological ethics and values, not in literary criticism so I examined the spiritual and moral dimensions of these pieces (not their style, voice or narrative technique). My concern was not *how* they wrote but *what* they claimed to experience. Through a close reading of their autobiographical works, I sought to retrace the path each writer journeyed to see if their individual paths converged on any common ground.

Given the small sample of writers involved in this study, the claim to a shared experience of ecological conversion may seem inflated. Based on the lives of just six individuals, how could one propose an "exploratory model" of anything? Yet preliminary research into the lives of other ecological writers appears to confirm the presence of transformational patterns that merit further study. What seems to unite many ecological writers -- despite markedly different experiences of American culture and nature -- is a common vision of belonging to Earth. The individuals featured in this work participate in a loose-knit community of contemporary writers, artists and "back yard activists" who hold a shared ideal of ecological communion (Nelson "Back" 3). Because its members are independent (uniformly resistant to institutional ties), geographically

dispersed and non-doctrinal, this community cannot fairly be termed an organized "political" or "religious" movement. There is no creed or mission statement binding them and few organizational links. These individuals are joined by a fine and barely visible web of words. Most have not met in person but share in each other's lives through printed stories. Increasingly these filimentary bonds are being reinforced through communal gatherings. Regional workshops and national conferences (such as the 1996 Watershed symposium at the Library of Congress and biennial meetings of the Association for Study of Literature and the Environment) provide opportunities for individuals to plan, celebrate and commiserate together.

Terry Tempest Williams, one of the few writers to name this informal network, calls it the Coyote Clan. In many Native American traditions, coyote is the archetypal trickster, whose chameleon nature embodies paradox. Coyote is profane and sacred, elusive and omnipresent, callous and compassionate, cultivated and wild. Williams envisions members of the Coyote Clan as having a similar tolerance for paradox, acknowledging the inherent contradictions in the world and in themselves. The Clan is supported by a deep ecological faith, a trust that "the earth re-creates itself day after day" (*Coyote's* 19).

The term 'clan' seems an apt description for the affiliation among contemporary ecological writers. Clan implies a sense of common origins, which these writers clearly share. They readily acknowledge their debt to literary forebears in the nature writing tradition and to predecessors in oral cultures, the first people to shape stories on this continent. Clan also suggests a sense of kinship -- echoing the original Greek roots of ecology (*oikos* meaning "household"). All these writers see their familial households as belonging to the

larger earth household (which at present constitutes a troubled and broken home). They share in a desire to heal the ecological household: part of what fuels each individual's transformation is a vision of broader societal conversion. These writers are not bound by an ideology (in the doctrinal or political sense) so much as by idealism – a shared commitment to transform the world.

### Chapter Overview

Bedrock, the opening chapter, explores the ecological conversion of writer Terry Tempest Williams as a way of demonstrating how key patterns of the process manifest in one individual's story. A fifth-generation Mormon, Williams is devoted to her extended family and her home terrain – the Great Basin region of Utah. These bonds shape the path of her ecological turning – through childhood experiences outdoors; familial mentors; revelatory experiences in the natural world; and a growing commitment to 're-story' the land through narrative and defend it through local activism. Williams' accounts persuasively demonstrate how the distinct elements of conversion come together in one life story. This detailed profile sets the context for subsequent chapters, each of which synthesizes material from numerous writers around a unifying theme.

Remembrance, the second chapter, cites commonalities in the formative experience of the primary writers (all of whom shared a strong affinity for the natural world as children, found support for this bond in a relative or mentor, and gained inspiration from the works and lives of established nature writers). The marked parallels in their experience suggest that contact with the natural world and with mentors (both familial and literary) may set the stage for a subsequent turn to earth.

Reflection, the third chapter, describes how periods of enforced introspection lead writers to reassess their place in the ecological whole. Times of psychic transformation can occur in response to an experience of loss, illness, estrangement or despair. While such periods prove emotionally taxing, they can awaken in writers a sense of compassion that guides their ecological practice.

Revelation, the fourth chapter, illustrates how writers experience epiphanic moments of insight that renew and reconstitute their lives. These profound glimpses into a larger mystery often affirm their sense of belonging to a sacred whole. Revelatory experiences can inspire fundamental changes in ecological belief and practice, changing the course of a writer's path.

Reciprocity, the fifth chapter, demonstrates how writers consciously work to strengthen their identification with other members of the ecological community. They cultivate empathic modes of relation, seeking to counter the cultural taboos and engrained fears that separate humans from the rest of nature. A recognition of reciprocity often fosters a broader vision of ecological community.

Resistance, the sixth chapter, discusses how ecological writers – motivated by their deep affinity for the natural whole – devote themselves to responsible action on behalf of earth. Some bear witness to environmental degradation through writing and public testimony; others take direct action through ecological restoration, land conservation, monkey-wrenching or civil disobedience. Their actions testify to their deepening bond with earth.

Re-storying, the seventh chapter, portrays how ritual and narrative arts inform the conversion process. In telling stories and in living out stories, writers often deepen their sense of belonging within nature. Imaginative and creative

arts become a means of simultaneously celebrating and reinforcing connections within the ecological community.

### A Note on Language

Individuals who write about their personal relation to the natural world tend to be awarded the title 'nature writer.' As a sub-genre of English and American literature, nature writing is typically defined as "a first-person, nonfiction account of an exploration, both physical (outward) and mental (inward) of a predominantly nonhuman environment..." (6). This literary niche tends to be dominated by Caucasian men of European descent. Writers with ecological concerns may also be labeled "environmental writers," a term commonly applied to those who advocate for the natural world and discuss specific threats to its health. "Environmental writing" is allied more closely with journalism than literature.

The authors discussed in this work clearly stand outside both these nominal boxes. Their writing does focus on outer and inner exploration but stretches to incorporate more than "nonhuman environments." Their essays and nonfiction works center on their lived experience within the ecological whole. For this reason, the term 'ecological writer' seems the most appropriate appellation. This term suggests an integration of human and natural realms (dissolving the traditional divide that separates them). Ecology explores the existential interdependence that defines our lives. It is, as psychologist Thomas Moore notes, "a sensibility, not a political position..." (Tobias 140). While some ecological writers are politically active, their works tend not be defined by a particular ideology or partisan stance. Rather, they understand ecology in a philosophical and practical sense that reflects the term's early roots (*oikos*

meaning 'household' or 'home' in Greek). What unites these writers is an abiding desire to be at home on earth and express that deep sense of belonging through words.

In deference to their sense of ecological communion, this work does not rely heavily on the words 'nature' and 'environment' (which traditionally connote a realm apart from humanity and culture). Instead I use expressions such as 'the larger whole of nature' or the 'ecological whole' to convey the vision of belonging and interdependence these writers express. This 'natural whole' encompasses human life and culture, but not without differentiation. By employing holistic terms, I am not suggesting that all value resides in the collective unit and none in the individual being. I simply mean that the value and identity of the individual is always situated within a communal context (and that community encompasses all forms of existence).

The word 'earth' denotes the interconnected web of being which joins all life and elemental matter. The term is capitalized when it implies a writer's view of that web as sacred.

The term 'spiritual' is central to the concepts of ecological conversion and practice. It is a slippery word, though, that has slid into popular usage while eluding firm definition. In the context of this work, it refers to the recognition of a creative or divine presence (*i.e.*, energy or spirit) that animates the living and elemental world. This conviction of a sacred essence within the world resists formulation into doctrines or creeds, and may be experienced most acutely outside the context of institutional structures. For this reason, the term spiritual is preferable to 'religious.'

In quotes within this work, the words 'man' and 'he' are occasionally used to depict the average person or the human species. These passages draw from works written when generic male words were standardly employed. While sympathetic to concerns over male-dominated lexicon, I chose not to replace this language with gender-neutral terms because I believe linguistic change should address the present not the past. The themes of these authors should make evident that they intend no bias or separatism.

### An Invitation

In terming this work a 'model' of ecological conversion, I was concerned that it might sound like a technical, pseudo-scientific formula. I tried to soften those connotations by adding the adjective 'exploratory' – to emphasize that the outlines of conversion depicted here are essentially field sketches from a bushwhack into uncharted terrain. By illustrating some preliminary patterns of ecological transformation, I hoped to find themes that would resonate with the lived experience of diverse individuals. (Many of the elements I discovered in the stories of ecological writers came to inform my own path, as the epilogue makes evident.)

This work maps the contours of inner ecology in the words and images of several dozen writer-guides. You are invited to join in the reconnaissance – using their conversion narratives to reflect on your own evolving relation to earth. I encourage you to read this work with an inquisitive spirit: the model is here for you to explore.

## CHAPTER I

### BEDROCK: ONE WRITER'S PATH

*The enterprise of conservation is a revolution, an evolution of the spirit.*  
- Terry Tempest Williams (*Unspoken* 87)

The varied paths writers traverse in their turns to earth cover common ground. Subsequent chapters map this shared terrain, drawing on the life stories of the six primary writers as well as many secondary ones. Before exploring that thematic collage, though, it may be helpful to attend to one writer's story – seeing how the varied dimensions of ecological conversion take form in the life narrative of writer Terry Tempest Williams.

The following sketch of Williams' ecological conversion illustrates the dynamic interplay of elements that foster a turn to earth. (This synergistic force is less evident in subsequent chapters where each element is discussed in isolation.) The patterns evident in this individual portrait may help demonstrate the complexity and variability of the transformational process. Williams' story depicts the wide array of factors – internal and external; deliberate and unplanned; individual and communal – that shape the course of an ecological conversion. (Most of these details are drawn from her autobiographical writings and were confirmed through personal interviews.)

For Williams, conversion to earth involves both a turning and a re-turning. She grew up strongly attached to the Great Basin region of Utah, her family's homeland for five generations. Experiences outdoors and time with



mentors nourished her connection to the land. While her ecological practice is rooted in the spiritual, physical and emotional bonds to earth forged early in life, it has also led Williams in new directions, drawing her into political activism. Through a spiraling process of turning and returning, Williams deepens her partnership with the land.

In turning to earth, Williams has turned from the religious and cultural patterns that once defined her. Forging a new relation to earth has led her to forfeit orthodox tenets of Mormonism, traditional roles and rules for women, and puritanical inhibitions about sensual experience. This process of exfoliation has taken decades. Each person, Williams believes, carries a "huge cloak of conditioning:" the central question then becomes, "how do you strip away and how do you find what is bare-bones and essential?" (personal interview, cited hereafter as PI). Williams' inspiration in this quest comes from her home region, a land eroded by strong winds and flash floods, cracked open by frost and parching heat. The desert is a potent metaphor for relinquishment, Williams explains, because "what is essential remains and everything else is washed away" (PI). She strives to model her inner ecology after the desert ecosystem. The land teaches Williams to let go old habits and assumptions and attend carefully to what lies at the core, what she terms the 'bedrock self.'

Bedrock imagery recurs frequently in Williams' narratives and in works by other ecological writers. In geological terms, bedrock is the stratum closest to the molten heart of earth, the creative center of volcanic power. It is foundational yet fluid. Metaphorically, bedrock can be the ground supporting one's deepest convictions. Edward Abbey claims to take his stand on a "bedrock of animal faith," placing ultimate trust in the regenerative capacity of the elemental earth

(*Desert* 268). Stable ground can lie within one as well. Scott Russell Sanders describes his need to dig "down to some bedrock of feeling and belief," a place close to the molten core of being (*Staying* 175).

In Williams' view, the bedrock self joins inner and outer ecology, fusing each individual to a larger web of being. Just as geological bedrock is not reducible, the bedrock self is an indivisible part of a vast whole. This vision of self dissolves the long-standing philosophical divide between androcentric individualism and holistic ecocentrism. It opens the way to "the possibility of being simultaneously ego- and eco-centric, individuated and integrated, and — once and for all — both human and 'natural'" (Libby 2). The melding of self with the larger whole represents a spiritual union. Williams sees bedrock as "solid, expansive, full of light and originality," reflecting the existence of an inner light within each being (*Refuge* 135). In her view, a spark of the divine fires the creative core of our lives

The light of the bedrock self' is exposed only after surface layers erode, suggesting that loss is essential to the transformational process. A deeper commitment to earth, Williams concludes, can only be reached through a protracted process of excavation. To reach bedrock she digs down through accumulated layers of religious indoctrination, cultural socialization and familial patterning. In the process of this excavation, Williams has to relinquish comforting beliefs and tradition as well as constricting dictates. While some losses are liberating, others are unredeemed. Turning to earth, Williams finds, involves a consistent practice of relinquishment. She enters fully into the process, convinced that change works inexorably on every individual whether or not one

resists. "Nobody escapes life," Williams holds: "one way or another it erodes you" (PI).

### Remembrance

Long before she formed words to express it, Williams forged a bond with the land. Etched in her memory are indelible images from the landscapes of youth: the mountains around Jackson Hole, Wyoming; a beach in Riverside, California; the scrub oak terrain of the Wasatch foothills; and the briny shallows of Great Salt Lake.

Williams recalls hiking up to a waterfall in Wyoming when she was four, supported by her mother and grandmother holding each hand. At the water's edge, they lowered her to drink from the clear pool. It was, Williams reflects, "an initiation into this fountain of knowledge, spirituality, vitality, life, curiosity" (PI). This early baptism into the source of life – both real and metaphoric – led Williams to seek spiritual sustenance in the natural world. That pure mountain pool held the soul's elixir that Robert Frost describes in his poem "Directive": "Here are your waters and your watering place./ Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" (377). Williams takes her directive from the sacred sites of youth. She visits them to recapture a baptismal sense of immersion in nature. There is, she believes, "a constant communion and sacrament that we have to go back to again and again... to renew our vows, if you will" (PI). Religious metaphors underscore the spiritual quality of Williams' kinship with the natural world. Her 'vows' to follow an ecological practice are renewed by sacramental moments of 'communion' in nature, times when she is made "whole again beyond confusion." Earth is the wellspring that feeds her ecological conscience and activism.

Williams' early devotion to place was fostered by family members, particularly her beloved grandmother Kathryn Blackett Tempest. Mimi, as she was known to the family, assumed the mentoring role Rachel Carson describes in *The Sense of Wonder*: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder..., he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in" (*Sense* 45). Mimi gave Williams her first field guide to birds (at age five), and took her on hikes and ornithological outings. She also introduced her granddaughter to mythological and spiritual dimensions of the natural world. During Williams' childhood, Mimi read her way clear of the Mormon orthodoxy, immersing herself in works by Carl Jung, Krishnamurti, and Marie-Louise von Franz. Through Mimi's example, Williams learned to question established doctrines and cultivate faith in her own perspectives.

Mimi held a "clandestine vision" of a dynamic spirituality intimately bound to earth (PI). On a hike Williams took with her grandmother, they sat beside the decomposing trunk of a fallen Douglas fir – sifting sawdust from the tree through their fingers. Mimi confided that she placed her faith in this rich, red evidence of a return to earth, more than in any heavenly God (PI). Her subversive spirituality lent Williams an essential vision of alternative values and beliefs in the midst of orthodox Mormon culture. Williams notes that since her parents were strict adherents to Mormonism in those years, "...the tutelage of my childhood really rested in the arms of my grandparents" (PI).

Alongside the orthodoxy that marked Williams' immediate family, there was a deep appreciation for the natural world. All four Tempest children (of whom Terry is oldest) were encouraged to play outdoors in the Wasatch foothills

that lay beyond their home in Salt Lake City. Williams credits her father with introducing her to the "physicality of the natural world," taking her hiking, swimming and hunting, and teaching her about native soils and landforms (PI).

Williams gained further encouragement to bond with the land by reading classics of environmental writing during adolescence. These books introduced her to new philosophical views and helped her see the natural world in political terms. Works by Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson impressed on Williams the strength and grace of lives governed by a strong ecological conscience. These literary mentors proved inspirational, reinforcing Williams' love for the land and her sense of moral responsibility. Their words became her "sacred text" ("Bedrock" 107).

Williams' intellectual horizons stretched farther at age 18 when she attended a program at the Teton Science School in Wyoming. The school's director, Ted Major, was the first Democrat she ever recalls meeting. His emphasis on asking questions and entertaining new perspectives proved revolutionary for Williams. "That experience," she reflects, "opened a door in me that I could never close again" ("Hearing" 20). During two subsequent summers of work at the Teton Science School, she strengthened her skills as a naturalist and her conviction that environmental work was her vocational calling.

The school introduced Williams to a supportive community of naturalists and writers (such as Marty Murie, Barry Lopez and Gary Snyder) who shared her passion for the land. From them Williams drew inspiration to bushwhack into new personal and professional terrain. The question "do I dare..." became her mantra during those years:

Do I dare go get a master's degree in Environmental Education so I can share this? Do I dare go to the Navajo reservation and really look at this other culture?... Do I dare take a real job (at the Museum of Natural History)? No woman in my family had ever held a job... (PI)

Williams' courage to venture beyond established norms was amply rewarded. The ecological coming-of-age that began at the Teton Science School reached its peak during her year teaching on a Navajo reservation. The rich lessons of that time, documented in *Pieces of White Shell*, reverberate through all her later works. Immersion in an oral culture that was deeply attuned to the land reconstituted Williams' own sense of language, listening and belonging. It gave her a deeper appreciation for the power of narrative and the value of having strong roots.

Having grown up in a homogenous Mormon community, Williams found the diverse perspectives she encountered among the Navajo both challenging and enlightening. She gained an abiding respect for contemporary tribal people and their ancestral bonds with the land. Her ecological coming-of-age awakened her to the importance of natural interconnections and to the diversity of values and practices among human cultures.

Williams continues to be nourished by the spiritual springs that fed her early life. She still lives in her home terrain, surrounded by extended family. She goes on pilgrimages to the settings of her early 'initiation' into earth. She wears the turquoise jewelry her grandmother Mimi wore, a symbolic link to the spirit and influence of her most passionate mentor. She returns to the "sacred texts" of her first literary mentors. And she continues learning the language and culture of native inhabitants (crafting, for example, a libretto that honors a local mountain in the language of the native Ute tribe). For Williams, the art of remembrance is

not a passive or nostalgic gesture but a means of engaging the full depth of one's being in the present. The present must incorporate the past, she believes, even as both give way to the future. Williams relies on her writing to hold the whole together. She sees her stories as "an attempt to heal myself, to confront what I do not know, to create a path for myself with the idea that 'memory is the only way home'" (*Refuge* 4).

### Reflection

Williams recalls her childhood passing in a predictable succession of seasons and birthdays until her fifteenth year. Then that stable pattern shattered. Her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent surgery. The cancer went into remission but Williams never regained a sense of security. Death was no longer an abstraction but a felt presence in her daily life. It brought a heightened sense of immediacy and intensity to all she did: "I've never felt that I had the luxury of putting things off," she explains. From the time of her mother's first diagnosis, Williams forfeited the mindlessness of superficial living: "all of a sudden, life [came] acutely into focus" (PI).

When her mother's cancer returned twelve years later, Williams was swept into a profound period of grief and relinquishment. Through four years darkened by the impending deaths of her mother and grandmothers, she struggled to find meaning amidst loss. Her anguish was deepened by the simultaneous flooding of the Bear River Migratory Bird Sanctuary along Great Salt Lake, a natural refuge that had long given her spirit solace. Record-level rains caused the lake to rise, depriving migratory birds of the fertile marshlands they had frequented.

Williams felt displaced and disoriented as the cornerstones of her identity – family and nature – washed out beneath her. Navigating through a landscape void of familiar bearings, she saw her life come to pivot on the question – how do we find refuge in change?

I am slowly, painfully discovering that my refuge is not found in my mother, my grandmother, or even the birds of Bear River. My refuge exists in my capacity to love. If I can learn to love death then I can begin to find refuge in change (*Refuge* 178).

Williams' poignant sense of life's fragility intensified as she realized her own health was at risk. Because of exposure to atmospheric radiation (from above-ground atomic tests in the Western desert), Williams may not escape the fate of her mother and grandmothers. Nine women in her family have contracted cancer and seven have died from it. Williams has been told by her oncologist "it is not if you get cancer, but when" (*Unspoken* 127).

Williams has faced her fear of death by holding herself close to relatives in the dying process: "I cared for them, bathed their scarred bodies,... held their foreheads as they vomited green-black bile, and ... shot them with morphine when the pain became inhuman" (*Refuge* 285-286). Through this grueling experience, Williams comes to honor death on its terms, even finding dignity amidst the destruction. Her change in perspective is evident in an encounter with a whistling swan that had recently died. Williams consciously attends to the bird – straightening its body and smoothing its feathers. Through patient care and imagination, she brings warmth to the cold anonymity of its death:

I looked for two black stones, found them, and placed them over the eyes like coins. They held. And, using my own saliva as my mother and grandmother had done to wash my face, I washed the swan's black bill and feet until they shone like patent leather.

I have no idea of the amount of time that passed in preparation of



the swan. What I remember most is lying next to its body and imagining the great white bird in flight (*Refuge* 121).

In this act, Williams delves into grief until finding the grace within it.

Encounters with death lead Williams into a realm where contradictory forces are inseparably joined. Beauty cannot be found apart from destruction or stability apart from change. She comes to see paradox as shaping the contours of both inner and outer ecology. Williams' home terrain reminds her that opposing qualities can be held together. She sees Great Salt Lake as an embodiment of paradox, calling it "the liquid lie of the West." It is wilderness by the city, a vast oasis in the desert that cannot be drunk, with waters both tame and treacherous (*Refuge* 5). Dwelling -- literally and metaphorically -- on the shores of paradox, allows Williams to face loss and suffering without despair, and even without hope. Williams comes to realize that hope can feed denial, obstructing one's capacity for change. Hope seeks a different outcome -- the remission of cancer, a permanent cure, life over death. It denies what is in favor of what might be. T.S. Eliot depicts the spiritual challenge of relinquishing hope:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope. / For hope would be  
hope for the wrong thing... / there is yet faith. / But the faith and the  
love and the hope are all in the waiting (186).

Like Eliot, Williams concludes that one must let go hope and abide in faith, a conviction of meaning in things as they are.

Confronting death "in such a visceral way over such a long period" has deepened Williams commitment to be fully present in the moment, engaged and connected (PI). In the face of an uncertain future, Williams seeks to follow a path of mindful participation in the moment. Her perspective can be likened to the

Buddhist stance of non-attachment, in which one surrenders to the unfolding mystery of being without becoming vested in a particular outcome.

Williams' experience of loss has challenged her to reconsider truths and norms she once accepted. Raised with admonitions not to "make waves" or "rock the boat," she spent years muzzling herself in a "culture that rarely asks questions because it has all the answers" (*Refuge* 285). Williams abandoned this passive stance after recognizing that the epidemic levels of cancer in her family and community could be due to silent complicity in practices that threatened public health. In her move toward outspoken resistance, Williams drew strong support from her grandmother. Mimi, in her final bout with cancer, had experienced labor-like pains and passed a bloody, malignant tumor. When Williams visited her in the hospital, Mimi told her granddaughter: "when I looked into the water closet and saw what my body had expelled, the first thought that came into my mind was 'Finally, I am rid of the orthodoxy.' My advice to you, dear, is do it consciously" (*Refuge* 246). Williams chose to heed her grandmother's counsel.

### Revelation

In stepping away from religious orthodoxy, Williams has come to trust convictions born of experience. Her ecological practice is nourished by a sensual immersion in the natural world. Through attunement to her surroundings, Williams can at times attain revelatory glimpses into a wider ecological and spiritual reality. Her faith in mystical connection comes in part from the teachings of family and church. Williams was encouraged as a child to look beyond surface appearances. Her father, a pipeline contractor who works with geological substrates, repeatedly cautioned her "nothing is as it appears" (PI). From her grandmother Mimi, Williams learned of depth psychology and the

potential power of dreams and intuitive insights. Even the Mormon faith of her youth held a sense of the fantastical, affirming the individual's power to hear voices and have visions. In keeping with that tradition, Williams had a vision at age 17, after two days of prayer and fasting on a remote ranch. Ironically, though, the vision affirmed her reliance on internal truth over church doctrine.

Williams no longer couches her appreciation for mystery in conventional deistic terms. She refers, instead, to the need for "coyote consciousness," a recognition that life runs far deeper than what is visible at the surface. Williams sees the spiritual realm of existence as rife with surprise: she values the way life improvises. There is a 'trickster' quality in the natural world and in ourselves that Williams trusts for its very fickleness.

Dreams can reveal the mystery that lurks, coyote-like, in the shadows beneath consciousness. Just before being told of her mother's ovarian cancer, Williams dreamt she was in imminent danger, hiding under her grandmother's bed as black helicopters approached the house. Similar premonitions come to her in waking. She terms them "moments of peripheral perceptions... short, sharp flashes of insight we tend to discount..." (*Refuge* 24). There are even times when dreams and reality merge. For decades, Williams was plagued by a recurrent nightmare in which a blinding light burned over the desert's mesas. Williams recounted this dream to her father after her mother died. He replied that Williams *had* witnessed such an explosion during an atomic bomb test in 1957 (when she was two). Sitting on her mother's lap during a drive through Nevada, Williams had seen a gold-stemmed mushroom cloud light the sky, as the earth shook and radioactive ash sifted down on their car.

The revelation that her nightmare was real incensed Williams, converting her private grief into a fierce commitment to political activism. Further research confirmed that her family's high incidence of cancer could result from their being downwind of atomic blasts planned and orchestrated by the federal government. "It was at this moment," she recounts, "that I realized the deceit I had been living under... [Now] I must question everything, even if it means losing my faith..." (*Refuge* 286).

Williams' faith has also been challenged and reconstituted by encounters with what she terms the "immediacy of life, even in death" (Jensen 311). The most profound epiphany occurred as she witnessed her mother's passage into death. Williams sat by her mother's side, holding her hand, and breathing in unison with her:

Faint breaths. Soft breaths. In my heart I say 'Let go... let go... follow the light...' There is a crescendo of movement, like walking up a pyramid of light. And it is sexual, the concentration of love, of being fully present. Pure feeling. Pure color. I can feel her spirit rising through the top of her head. Her eyes focus on mine with total joy – a fullness that transcends words (*Refuge* 231).

Williams attests to how this experience transformed her sense of the spiritual, making it more engaged and relational or what she terms 'erotic.' In her view, the 'erotic' involves an intimate bodily immersion in the world – a felt experience of natural cycles and elemental being. "The erotic is about love," Williams explains, "[about] our deep hunger for communion... it's that notion of surrendering to something greater than ourselves" (Jensen 312). Williams views the erotic in both sensual and sexual terms. It represents a passionate connection in which heart, body and mind join with the spirit and 'physicality' of the natural world. The force of this connection can fuel a turn toward earth.

Williams believes that an erotic connection to the cycles of life and death provides a "core of serenity in the middle of huge oscillations. Williams does not seek to be free of turbulence or struggle. What she desires is a spiritual equilibrium that allows her to remain centered in the midst of mystical peaks and painful troughs." Her goal is "to be present in those waves and emotional tides but to possess a solidarity of soul" (Jensen 314).

Williams is best able to hold this spiritual balance when in contact with the natural world. She appears to feel most grounded outdoors, particularly in the desert and around Great Salt Lake. On those windblown shores, Williams attests to how she is "spun, supported, and possessed by the spirit who dwells here. Great Salt Lake is a spiritual magnet that will not let me go. Dogma doesn't hold me. Wildness does" (*Refuge* 240). In such revelatory moments, Williams affirms that her spiritual bond to earth is not mediated by words or institutions. The experience of communion is the only evidence she needs that spirit infuses the elemental world.

### Reciprocity

Williams cultivates an engagement with place that emphasizes bodily connection: "I believe our most poignant lessons come through the body, the skin, the cells..." she asserts: "it is through the body we feel the world, both its pain and its beauty" (Jensen 313). Williams' physical bond with earth is evidenced in *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape*, a work recounting her intimate encounters with elemental matter. In crafting this piece, she explains, she sought to shape a text "born out of the body, not out of the mind. So in a sense you feel it before you comprehend it. Which is what I think happens when we go into the land" (PI). The rituals described in *Desert Quartet* seem to grow spontaneously

from the physical and spiritual union of person and place. They reflect what Williams claims she most loves and fears: passion (5). Only through opening our bodily selves to the natural whole, she believes, can we grasp the extent of our spiritual connection: "To restrain our passionate nature in the face of a generous life" is a form of spiritual deprivation (*Unspoken* 64). Spiritual bonds are revived through an 'erotic' connection to place.

Williams' narratives are often drawn from time spent alone outdoors, attending to other forms of life. She experiences these 'solitary' times as deeply relational -- a means of dialogue with the land. To better enter into this exchange, Williams cultivates the art of listening. She credits her Mormon upbringing with teaching her to listen to elders, and Navajo culture with teaching her to walk in nature on "listening feet" (Yuki). In quieting down, Williams suggests, individuals attune themselves to other beings and the spirit of place: "what I love about the natural world and absolutely rely on," she reflects, "is stillness. Where you can sit and it enlarges your heart." This act of conscious centering can help to heighten spiritual receptivity by awakening wonder and awe. Williams' focus on sensory wakefulness has come to inform her understanding of prayer. As a child, she thought prayer involved talking to God. Now she understands it more as a form of listening (PI). Prayer offers a means of attending to the voices of Earth.

This felt sense of kinship, she believes, can inspire conservation: "If people have a relationship to the land, I believe they will do everything within their means and power to protect it. Because it becomes family and people will defend their families." The 'familial' bond to other beings, she concedes, is as complex and challenging as it is among human relatives: "the nature of family is tension.

But it is also great joy" (PI). When one's sense of family extends to other beings, the potential for conflict magnifies. Despite these tensions, Williams relishes the paradox that accompanies interdependence – the demands and rewards of being inescapably bound in community. Her tolerance for ambiguity allows her to pursue visions for ecological change in the context of her native community, a conservative Mormon enclave.

### Resistance

Williams counts herself a "member of a border tribe" within the Mormon community, separated by the chasm between her earth-centered spirituality and orthodox church tenets (*Refuge* 286). She still values the communal strength and high ideals of Mormon culture but no longer abides by its religious tenets or gender roles. Her independence, outspoken feminism, and commitment to creative expression counter Mormon norms dictating that women be docile mothers, devoting their creative energies to child-rearing.

Williams' choice to forego motherhood has incited scorn and derision among some Mormons. She notes that "the most threatening and subversive aspect of *Refuge* wasn't talking about a Heavenly Mother,... [or] about power or hierarchical structure... It was the aspect that Brooke and I don't have children" (PI). One critic (a scholar and self-proclaimed "life-giving Mormon" woman) suggests that because Williams rejects "the ultimate Mormon woman's experience: childbirth," she cannot claim to be a midwife to her mother's soul (in attending her death). The critic asserts that because Williams "simply refuses to give birth," she is only suited to be "midwife to a dead flock [of sheep]" (Bush 157-158). Such vitriolic critiques have affirmed Williams' decision to step beyond the Mormon orthodoxy.

While declining to follow church dogma, Williams maintains a strong sense of religious devotion. Her spiritual allegiance to Earth fuels a commitment to write and act on its behalf, despite cultural and societal resistance. "It is the desert that persuades me toward love," Williams attests, "to step outside and defy custom one more time" (*Desert* 46). Love calls forth a moral response that prompts her to challenge societal norms. Resisting these collective interdicts, though, opens her to judgment. The censure comes from total strangers, community acquaintances and family members. Even within one's own community, she reports, "you're not understood, or you're misunderstood, or you're projected upon because you represent the breaking of taboo..." (PI).

Although Williams is devoted to her extended family, her primary allegiance is given to earth and to other species. (a choice evident in her defense of an endangered tortoise species, even though its habitat obstructed a development project on which her father and brother were working.) Williams attributes her strong ecological concerns to her intimate bond with place. "Through an erotics of place," she asserts, "our sensitivity becomes our sensibility" (*Unspoken* 86). Williams implies that a spiritual, aesthetic and emotional attachment to land nourishes a sense of moral responsibility. While ethicists routinely dispute this claim, it does seem to reflect Williams' own experience. Her sensitivity to place has awakened both an ethical sensibility and a resolve to engage in acts of societal resistance. Williams has testified before Congress on several occasions, spoken at political rallies, served on the boards of environmental organizations, and helped spearhead major legislative campaigns. In all these political acts, she strives to incorporate her aesthetic, spiritual and moral sensibilities. For example, Williams co-edited a chapbook on Utah's



wildlands for members of Congress as a means of affirming "the power of story to bypass political rhetoric and pierce the heart" (*Testimony* 7). In civil disobedience actions at the Nevada Nuclear Testing site, Williams has engaged in group dancing, drumming and singing. She perceives no innate conflict between creative expression and political acts: both serve as means of honoring one's connection to earth.

Williams holds a strong faith in the potential of what she terms "responsive citizenry," the capacity ordinary individuals hold to effect change and improve social and environmental conditions. While Williams readily concedes that this country's democratic potential is far from being realized (in part due to concentrations of power), she believes that citizens can still effect change if they "choose to be sufficiently outraged" (PI).

Over the years, the focus of Williams' political resistance has shifted from national to local efforts. She claims to feel more satisfaction and challenge in grassroots work done close to home – projects such as a course co-taught with a community gardener for under-privileged girls; a 'nature school' held for neighborhood children; and a libretto written in collaboration with members of the local Ute tribe. While work in one's home community involves untold challenges, Williams holds that it is worth every ounce of struggle: "It's not easy. You're suspect. You take risks. Yet they can't discount you because of the family and the time you've spent here. And they know your heart" (PI).

Balancing the call of engaged citizenship with the solitude that writing demands has proven challenging. Williams long ago relinquished the vision of a writing life apart from the tumult of politics. Yet it is a constant struggle for her to accommodate both "the obligations of a public life and the spiritual necessity

of a private one" (*Unspoken* 133). To help maintain this balance, Williams structures her life by the seasons. Spring and fall are times for travel – teaching, lecturing, and political work. Winter is hibernation time, a season of solitude and quiet for writing. Summer is devoted to family and time in the natural world. This cyclic pattern helps Williams define her limits and live within them.

In both individual and collective efforts at societal resistance, Williams gains sustenance from knowing that she belongs to a broad community network that encompasses diverse individuals who share a tacit commitment to be "quietly subversive on behalf of the land." Williams portrays members of this clan as both joyful and fierce, able to "cry louder and laugh harder than anyone on the planet" (*Unspoken* 78). This characterization reflects Williams' view that passionate resistance and an accompanying sense of moral responsibility are essential to any ecological practice. The more joyful one's experience of place, the more fiercely one must defend it.

### Re-storying

Williams' spiritual affinity for the land inspires her to sculpt stories that may awaken an ecological conscience. The power of narrative can engage the heart and imagination, she believes, transforming the lives of both writer and reader.

Williams' written accounts often depict the central paradoxes of her life – being "a radical soul in a conservative religion," a woman devoted to family with no children of her own, a writer who cherishes privacy and solitude yet is compelled to acts of public testimony (PI). Through creative writing, Williams works with opposing forces to find what Thomas Merton termed "the hidden wholeness that lies beneath the broken surface of our lives" (*Palmer Active* 29).

The surface contradictions may never be reconciled, but imaginative and ritual arts can reveal a larger unity.

Williams views writing as a ritualized way of "walking into unknown territory," encountering the mystery that inheres in the world. Since the writing self is ahead of the living self in some ways, the act of writing -- like that of meditation -- can reveal inner wisdom (PI). Williams treats the practice of writing as sacred, lighting a candle and placing a bowl of water and treasured rock on her writing space. These objects symbolize for her the spirit that moves through one, the source behind the ideas, stories and words. She likens the creative process to birthing, noting that many stories are held for several years before coming to term. That "long gestation period," she suggests, is part of the spiritual practice of writing. "You hold those stories until it's their time...; it's about mindfulness" (PI).

Mindfulness is also fostered through creative ritual, which Williams defines as the "formulas by which harmony is restored" (*Pieces* 69). Williams believes that the world is animated and that certain rituals and obligations are essential to acknowledge those spirits. Even as a child, she recalls having an "incapacitating sense of ritual" that extended far beyond her family's Mormon practices (PI). She sensed that ritual was a means of "reciprocity with the gods," a way to enter into dialogue with the creative spirits that enliven the world (PI). Williams now views ritual as essential to an ecological practice because it helps affirm a spiritual connection to the natural world. In a culture of fragmentation and estrangement, rituals can bind humans back into the larger web. Many of Williams' rituals are spontaneous and evolving responses to the character of a

particular moment and place – bathing in a river at sunrise, forming figurines from native clay, or gathering stones into spiral forms.

Williams supports the resurgence of communal celebrations as well, such as ones that honor shifting seasons and returning wildlife. Yet many contemporary rituals, she believes, have lost integrity and meaning. After her mother's death, she rebelled against funereal procedures that robbed her mother's carapace of dignity: "I stood ...enraged at our inability to let the dead be dead," Williams writes. "And I wept over the hollowness of our rituals" (*Refuge* 235). The challenge, she comes to realize, is to revitalize desiccated rituals and create new traditions that can affirm connections to the ecological whole.

Williams continually develops new rituals and creative modes of celebrating her bonds with earth. An ecological practice is not a static set of routines, in her view, but a continual improvisation. It engages all one's creative and political energy into what is both a lived art and a spiritual discipline. Williams cherishes her links to the past and the grounding power of tradition, but she has learned the spiritual necessity of relinquishment. The paradoxical pull between conservation and change is but one of many contradictions within which she dwells. In some ways, Williams' ecological practice pivots on paradox: the counterbalance of opposing forces and cycles helps center her in the midst of flux. The challenge, she notes, is to find the calm at the storm's center, cultivating a "solidarity of soul" (Jensen 314).

Williams holds this center through an embodied ecological practice that continually reaffirms her 'erotic' attachment to home ground. Her spiritual bonds with the land take form in an array of acts that are – at once – creative, moral and political. Turning to earth consciously and unequivocally, Williams takes

action even in the face of uncertainty (Chandler). The challenge, she maintains, is not to retreat into dogma but to learn to be satisfied without answers. Williams places her faith in the open-ended nature of life. "The story is not finished," she insists. It is always in process; there is no ending. "And that's what we have to trust" (PI).

Our dreams of safety must disappear  
The mountain we love is the mountain we fear  
Leap before you look –

- Terry Tempest Williams  
"Timpanogos: A Prayer for Mountain Grace"

## CHAPTER II

### REMEMBRANCE

*The remembrance of childhood is a long remembrance, and the incidents often make milestones in a personal history.*

- Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman Within* (Cahill 34)  
Southern novelist

*I have climbed into silence trying for clear air  
and seen the peaks rising above me like the gods.  
That is where they live, the old people say.  
I used to hear them speak when I was a child  
and we went to the mountain on a picnic  
or to get wood. Shivering in the cold air then  
I listened and I heard.*

*Lately I write, trying to combine sound and memory,  
searching for that significance once heard and nearly  
lost.*

- Paula Gunn Allen, "Recuerdo" (*Bruchac Songs* 7)  
Laguna Indian writer and critic

Many ecological writers sense in their early experiences outdoors a significance "once heard and nearly lost." In childhood they were often immersed in the natural world, their senses saturated in the experience of being. The elemental world permeated their hearts and minds. "Human imagination is shaped," writer Barry Lopez observes, "by the architecture of the world it encounters at an early age" ("Conference" 3). For ecological writers, that 'architecture' often comprised intimate and accessible natural areas; relatives and mentors to guide explorations outdoors; and books and stories about lives in the wild. These early influences appear to shape the course of their conversions to

earth. Through remembrance of childhood roots, writers often strengthen their ecological practice – consciously renewing their bonds to the ecological whole.

Recollections of youth may reawaken a long dormant sense of belonging to the natural whole. Adults steeped in traditions of rationalism and individualism can find it hard to regain the intimate sense of connection they experienced early in life, before their identities calcified. Through conscious acts of remembrance – recalling images and stories from childhood – some manage to dissolve the accumulated 'psychic armor' that defends the self from the outer world and from inner depths (Roszak *et al.* 114).

In the process of ecological conversion, a narrowly bounded sense of self can give way to a more inclusive sense of interconnection. This enlarged identity, being a subjective quality of relation, is hard to label or define. Environmental philosophers refer to it as the Ecological Self (a concept outlined by Norwegian deep ecologist Arne Naess), educators as "ecological identity" (as described by Mitchell Thomashow), and Buddhist practitioners as "interbeing" (a term coined by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh). The prevailing concept of adult identity in Western culture excludes non-human beings, the elemental earth and any concept of home (which Naess defines as "where we belong as children") (Sessions 226). Scholars such as Naess and Thomashow suggest that a 'widened' and 'deepened' sense of self fosters greater identification with other beings and with place. Writer Scott Momaday describes this change in identity as a horizontal mode of perception – "an extension of... awareness across the whole landscape" (*Man* 34). A "wide angle" view of the land and its life forms places humans within the context of the ecological whole so that a person's "idea of himself comprehends his relationship to the land" (39).

This intuitive sense of interrelation, which appears central to the ecological practice of many writers, may grow from childhood experiences outdoors. All six primary writers (and most secondary ones) had access to natural areas in youth and spent extensive time there. These explorations occurred in a diverse range of habitats – from vast and desolate desert tracts to moderately "cultivated" farm regions and heavily used, even abused, landscapes (like the military arsenal on which Scott Russell Sanders lived). Each writer bonded to his or her native habitat regardless of how tame or wild it was. Their written accounts of childhood attest to a deep process of 'imprinting' that joined them to place.

The years of middle childhood (from ages six to 12) appear to be an important period for bonding to earth, according to educators and developmental psychologists (Sobel "Beyond" 13). During this time, children begin exploring their immediate surroundings and cultivating empathy for other beings (15). Through active exploration, children make themselves 'at home' in the natural world. They often build forts, dens or tree houses and create elaborate maps of their local environs. Scott Russell Sanders characterizes this childhood terrain as "the landscape you learn before you retreat inside the illusion of your skin" (*Staying* 12).

Children at this age can enter fully into the gestalt of place, feeling the 'wholeness' of the world through all their senses. Psychologist Edith Cobb, in *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, explains that children tend to experience the natural world in a "highly evocative way" that gives them a sense of "profound continuity with natural processes" (Sobel *et al.* 28). Being less constrained than adults by an ego-bound sense of self, children often grasp ecological linkages



intuitively. Scott Momaday, for example, recalls the permeable identity he experienced riding horseback as a child:

After a time the horse became an extension of my senses, touching me to the earth, the air, and the sun more perfectly than I could touch these things for myself. Separate creatures though we were, there were moments when there was practically no telling us apart. We were one whole and distinct image in the plane – indeed more than an image, an entity of substance (*Man* 77).

Psychologist Edith Cobb describes this fusion of self and environs as "a revelatory sense of continuity – an immersion of [the] whole organism in the outer world of forms, colors, and motions..." (88). In place of individuals with discrete identities, there are dynamic patterns of relation. This perspective comes easily to children in younger years who tend to make no clear distinction between the external world and their own inner (imaginative) reality (Kelsey 94). A fluid interchange between outer and inner ecology may be what allows the natural world to imprint so deeply on children's imaginations. As Momaday observes, there are moments when inner and outer realities seem to merge. Cobb suggests that these vivid experiences are universal among children, and can be consciously fostered by adults (93). Stories in the Revelation chapter support this view, demonstrating that such illuminations occur throughout adulthood in many ecological writers.

The moments when inner and outer ecology merge can give rise to lasting visions and dreams. Many ecological writers attribute their spiritual views to early experiences outdoors that sparked their imaginations and evoked an enduring sense of awe. Terry Tempest Williams describes the desert terrain in which she grew up as a setting that "turns us into believers..." (PI). Its sparse beauty and bountiful paradox continue to shape her spirituality. Even writers

who resist using spiritual language acknowledge the enduring impact of childhood experiences in nature. Edward Abbey, who disavowed doctrinal religion, could still write:

... my deepest emotions – those so deep they lie closer to music than to words – were formed, somehow, by intimate association in childhood with the woods on the hill, the stream that flowed through the pasture... the sugar maples, the hayfields... (*Down* 111).

The primal sense of connection to earth that marked Abbey's childhood evolved into a lifelong sense of kinship. His recollection of that early bond appears to have nourished his ecological practice throughout adulthood.

Alice Walker also draws inspiration from her early spiritual empathy with other beings. For many years, she lost that intimate sense of connection before discovering "there is a very thin membrane, human-adult-made, that separates us from this seemingly vanished world, where plants and animals still speak a language we humans understand" (*Anything* 129). Peeling back that 'membrane,' Walker finds her childhood sense of an animate world still intact. This discovery renews her compassion for other beings and her resolve to protect the earth.

The depth of feeling children hold for their home terrain can nourish the growth of an ecological conscience. The basis of ethical action, many writers assert, is not rational rights or principles but love and spiritual devotion. "We can be ethical," writer Aldo Leopold reflects, "only in relation to what we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in" (*Sand* 251). Leopold's assertion finds support in the lives of many ecological writers. Their commitment to responsible action appears to grow from the emotional, sensory and imaginative bonds to earth forged early in life.

### The First Essential Adaptation

For some individuals, bonding with place represents a process of mythic dimensions: "there can be the matching of your own nature with this gorgeous nature of the land," scholar Joseph Campbell suggests: "it is the first essential adaptation" (Cousineau 8). By 'matching' oneself to a habitat, a person can come to identify with the land. The terrain of home shapes the contours of mind, heart and imagination.

Muscogee Creek poet Joy Harjo traces her identity back to this "first essential adaptation," bonding with the soil of her home ground:

When I was a little kid in Oklahoma I would get up before everyone else and go outside to a place of dark rich earth next to the foundation of the house. I would dig piles of earth with a stick, smell it, form it. It had sound. Maybe that's when I learned to write poetry... (Bruchac *Songs* 92).

Harjo suggests that intimate contact with native soil awakened her capacity to listen to the land. The creative impulse behind her writing, she believes, grows directly from the earth.

Harjo's story depicts the importance of sensory contact in fostering an adaptation to the land. Soil is not only touched and smelled; it is heard. Writer Sharon Butala observes that in her youth, air had a "vibrant color" as well as texture and scent (7). These multi-sensory experiences from childhood are often held – not as cognitive recollections – but as kinesthetic memories. Bodily imprinting may account for the sustained intensity of early memories. "The great bequest of childhood," educator Louise Chawla suggests, "is that it is a period of fresh, passionate response... [during which] a child absorbs sensations that give life to the growing imagination and help sustain it in maturity" (*First* 43). Because

the sensory channels of children are fully open, they may be more attentive to place than adults.

This acute perceptual attunement can foster creativity – as Chawla suggests – and it can deepen the emotional bonds that prompt moral action. The growth of love may depend on focused attention, the capacity to be fully present to another being. While children often have this gift for whole-hearted concentration, adults must consciously foster it. By reflecting on their own youth and by being around children, they may recall the art of attentiveness. Scott Momaday observes that spending time with children can help recall the acuity of early perspectives: we "stop and catch our breath and understand that those ways of seeing the world are still very good" (Woodard 44).

Some of the most vivid childhood memories that people recall involve experiences of youthful delight outdoors. The exuberant tone of these works may reflect nostalgia for the comparative simplicity of an age when time seemed more malleable and less mental static clouded one's senses. Yet the enthusiasm also reflects a deep affinity for other beings. African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston recalls her passionate bond to place:

I was only happy in the woods, and when the ecstatic Florida springtime came strolling from the sea, trance-glorifying the world with its aura... [I] listened to the wind soughing and sighing through the crowns of the lofty pines. I made particular friendship with one huge tree and always played about its roots. I named it 'the loving pine'... (Cahill 58).

Hurston's all-embracing love of place, like that of many children, comes to focus on an individual being. Friends and mentors in youth are rarely confined to the human species; they may be found in the 'person' of a tree, animal, rock, cave or creek. By cultivating a "particular friendship" with a non-human being, a child can extend her capacity for ecological connection. This experience constitutes

what philosopher Martin Buber terms a relation of reciprocity, where the 'other' is not met as an object but as a fellow being (58). Buber suggests that a capacity to treat the other as "Thou" (rather than "It") is essential to sustaining just and moral relations. This ability, if learned in childhood, may contribute to a sustained practice of ecological reciprocity in adulthood.

Early moral sensibilities may be reinforced by childhood experiences of ecological kinship that become "touchstone memories" (Sobel *et al.* 28). These memories can act as a standard for measuring subsequent experiences of spiritual and emotional connection. Most writers view "touchstone memories" – not as ideals to recapture – but as sources of inspiration that help ground their ecological practice. Writing of the forest she knew in childhood, novelist Barbara Kingsolver claims "much of what I know about life, and almost everything I believe about the way I want to live, was formed in those woods" (Barbato 282). Kingsolver suggests that her moral and spiritual views – indeed her personal philosophy of life – grow from her childhood attachment to place. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan draws a similar conclusion, reflecting on her extended childhood visits in Oklahoma: "I think my umbilical cord is buried there," she writes: "Everything there, the land, is the oldest part of me and the wisest" (Bruchac *Survival* 130). In acknowledging that the land is the "wisest" part of her, Hogan concedes the limits of human knowledge. The wonder held in the ecological whole, she suggests, can never be fully plumbed. This existential sense of humility, formed early in childhood, comes to inform her ecological practice.

Writers appear most apt to acquire a sense of humility when raised in unforgiving natural settings. Reflecting on his youth in the wooded Appalachian foothills, Edward Abbey writes:

... that sultry massed deepness of transpiring green, formed the theatre of our play... the forest – in which it was possible to get authentically lost – sustained our sense of awe and terror in ways that fantasy cannot (*Journey* 224).

The intensity of natural forces in such settings can awaken a healthy measure of spiritual respect for powers that cannot be fully measured or known. Terry Tempest Williams recalls how in her childhood the natural world was not a benign backdrop but an incontrovertible presence. Her early visits to Great Salt Lake were no typical 'day at the beach': "The ritual was always the same. Run into the lake, scream, and run back out. The salt seeped into the sores of our scraped knees and lingered. And if the stinging sensation didn't bring you to tears, the brine flies did" (*Refuge* 33). She and her brothers would retreat home, salty and sunburned.

Surprisingly, confrontations with nature's humbling and discomfiting dimensions do not seem to detract from the intensity of children's attachments. Ecological writers who face these challenges early in life come to respect the unruly sides of outer ecology. While they experience fear and challenge in the natural world, their accounts are often tempered by philosophical reflections. Few of the writers in this work report encountering unmitigated terrors or disasters within the natural realm, and those who do downplay their severity. In this regard, ecological writers demonstrate an unusual acceptance of natural cycles. Their sense of security seems to encompass the inherent fluctuations within the natural world. If they experience the deep-seated fear of nature that supposedly characterizes many children and adults, they rarely record it in published writings. Among all the autobiographical accounts I surveyed, there was only one writer who admits that fear overshadows her experiences

outdoors. She confesses wryly: "How I envy those robust, cheerful Muir-like ones who are always comfortable and uplifted in the wild! For me, it can be harrowing, and always sobering..." (Hinchman 63). While few ecological writers find nature consistently 'comforting' and 'uplifting,' they do seem to trust in natural patterns. (Their faith in ecological cycles may even surpass their trust in other humans -- a preference many people would judge problematic. Leslie Marmon Silko, for example, reflects on the lasting effects of her childhood faith in the natural world: "I still trust the land... far more than I trust human beings")(Yellow 18). Many writers find the forces of nature less threatening than what Edward Abbey terms the "tyrannizing" forces within human society (Abbey's 124).

A child's faith in ecological patterns can be undermined by the degradation or loss of a cherished place. Numerous writers attest to deep scars left by severance of their childhood links to the land. Scott Russell Sanders describes the emotional aftermath of his family's relocation from a farm in Tennessee to a military reservation in Ohio: "The move from South to North, from red dirt to concrete, from fields planted in cotton to fields planted in bombs, opened a fissure in me that I have tried to bridge, time and again, with words" (Writing 171). When a child's continuity with place is shattered, even the imagination cannot fully restore the loss. Sanders seeks to mend the broken link through creative writing, but it remains a 'fissure' in his soul.

For Sanders, the loss of the farm was compounded by the horror of living amidst munitions bunkers on a military arsenal. This experience left him with an enduring conviction that "we build our lives in mine fields" (Paradise 7). That childhood sense of impending annihilation has intensified with his growing

awareness of rampant ecological destruction. Sanders now fears that the future of the species may recapitulate his own past, with the world becoming a poisoned reservation. He envisions the fences of the military arsenal encircling the whole planet, so that there is no longer hope of moving outside.

Other writers witness the alteration of habitats that were landscapes of the imagination. The woods where Abbey played as a child were subsequently clearcut and the underlying mountain strip-mined. The outer desecration, he found, mirrored a profound inner desiccation:

Something like a shadow has fallen between present and past, an abyss wide as war that cannot be bridged... memory is undermined and the image of our beginnings betrayed, dissolved, rendered not mythical but illusory. We have connived in the murder of our own origins (*Journey* 225).

In 'murdering' our places of origin, Abbey suggests, we vandalize our very souls. Abbey and Sanders employ a similar metaphor – of a 'fissure' and 'abyss' that cannot be bridged – to portray their irreparable sense of separation. Since the places that were part of them have been destroyed, they can never be whole again. Their accounts suggest that "the first essential adaptation" to the land has lasting repercussions throughout life. Both the loves and losses experienced in that time of youthful imprinting can lay the foundations for a committed ecological practice.

### Strong Green Cords

Many ecological writers characterize their childhood bond to the land in maternal terms – as an umbilical cord joining them to the nurturing earth. This metaphor suggests the physical, emotional and psychological sustenance people receive through their link to the land. The birth cord that ties a child to place may run through a parent or other relative who is deeply attached to earth. Alice



Walker describes how love for her mother strengthened her own attachment to place: "There was a strong green cord connecting me to this great, simple seeming, but complicated woman who was herself rooted in the earth" (*Same* 24). Walker's parents raised their family on rich Georgia soil, cultivating their love for the land through work in a large subsistence garden. Walker characterizes her family as pagan since they lived as "country dwellers" spiritually allied to Earth (*Anything* 17). Her parents' attachment to the land shaped Walker's own appreciation of place.

Many ecological writers acknowledge how relatives helped guide their "initiation into earth" (Williams PI). These mentors shared in their explorations, fed their hunger for knowledge, nourished their passions, and inspired them by example. Scott Russell Sanders recounts how his father routinely dashed outdoors at the call of geese and carried him out – as an infant – to watch thunderstorms from the front porch. "I learned from my parents a thousand natural facts," Sanders reflects, "but above all I learned how to stand on the earth, how to address the creation, and how to listen" (*Secrets* 230). His most essential lesson was not a skill but an art: an attentive and spiritual mode of relation. In learning "how to stand on the earth, how to address the creation, and how to listen," Sanders developed the rudiments of an ecological practice. The quality of attention and reverence his parents modeled became a standard governing the growth of his own ecological sensibility.

Sanders also found a role model in his high school science teacher, Fay Givens, a woman whose wonder in the natural world was so intense that she literally trembled when she spoke of it. Givens' devotion to plants made her subject to ridicule, but Sanders found her passion inspiring. He came to share her

conviction that the miraculous abides in the common: "She taught me that if we could only be adequate to the given world, we need not dream of paradise" (*Staying* 186). From Givens and his parents, Sanders learned that reverence toward the world is not merely an option but an obligation. The beauty and mystery of the world call forth a response: to refuse that call, Sanders comes to believe, is an act of acedia.

Scott Momaday received similar encouragement from mentors to acknowledge the wonderment of being. He learned from the example of relatives like his Kiowa grandmother, Aho, who embodied "a reverence for the sun, a holy regard that now is all but gone out of [hu]mankind... an ancient awe" (*Way* 8). Her mode of living reflected a long tribal heritage that bound Kiowa Indians to the cycles of nature. The "ancient awe" that marked Kiowa rituals continues to inform Momaday's own ecological practice. In a similar manner, Alice Walker draws inspiration from African ancestors whose tribal traditions held them close to the land. She reports that some of these ancestors even "visit" her in dreams, encouraging her quest to rekindle a spirituality bound to earth. While few ecological writers have such rich tribal legacies, many do find mentors who nurture their capacity for awe and wonder.

The infectious zest these mentors display for natural mysteries often moves children more deeply than demonstrations of technical knowledge. Rachel Carson, although trained as a scientist, downplayed the need for mentors to provide answers or explanations: "I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel..." (*Sense* 45). Feeling calls for a heightened mode of receptivity, "opening up to the disused channels of sensory impression" (52). Carson's most devoted mentor, her

mother, modeled this acute receptivity and passion despite having little scientific expertise. The technical knowledge Carson acquired came from books and formal schooling. What her mother offered was less tangible but more real: "More than anyone else I know," Carson wrote after a lifetime living alongside her mother, "she embodied Albert Schweitzer's [philosophy of] 'reverence for life'" (Brooks 242).

While reverence may appear to be a passive stance – of silent and humble appreciation, it can spark a commitment to assertive action. Rachel Carson writes that while her mother was "gentle and compassionate, she could fight fiercely against anything she believed wrong..." (Brooks 242). That paradoxical mix of fierce compassion became a potent force in Carson's own life, particularly in her protracted campaign against the misuse of pesticides.

Terry Tempest Williams learned fierce compassion from her grandmother Mimi, an avowed environmental activist long before the birth of the ecology movement. Through Mimi's support and example, Williams grew to face "life directly, to not be afraid of risking oneself for fear of losing too much" (*Refuge* 119). Edward Abbey gained a similar inner strength from the bond with his father who was a practicing socialist. Abbey absorbed some of his father's philosophical views and all his faith in a life of active resistance. In the dedication to his book *The Journey Home*, Abbey credits his father with teaching him "to hate injustice, to defy the powerful, and to speak for the voiceless" (n. pag.).

While the strongest mentors are often family members or friends, ecological writers also find models of compassionate resistance in works of environmental literature. Authors such as John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Henry

Thoreau depict many practices modeled by personal mentors: receptivity, reverence for other beings and the elemental earth, and an abiding commitment to "speak for the voiceless." Contact with these literary mentors extends and reinforces the influence of relatives.

### The Alchemy of Words

Books read in childhood broadened the vision and affirmed the aspirations of many ecological writers. Some gained an appreciation for the more-than-human world through animal stories in books by Ernest Thompson Seton, Thornton Burgess, Jack London and others. Terry Tempest Williams' family, for example, would return to cherished animal stories each winter, reading them aloud (PI). "We were constantly reading everything we could about animals," she recalls.

Treasured books of youth can ignite the imagination, transporting a child to realms beyond their everyday existence. For some children, books can awaken a lifelong passion. Rachel Carson spent time as a child exploring the woods and streams of her family's 65-acre tract in Western Pennsylvania. Yet her focus came to rest on a habitat she knew only through reading. Carson recalls how "as a very small child I was fascinated by the ocean, although I had never seen it. I dreamed of it and longed to see it, and I read all the sea literature I could find" (Brooks 110). Carson did not visit the sea until after college, but it was part of her inner terrain from early childhood. Her enduring fascination with the sea ultimately led her to write three books exploring its mysteries. Terry Tempest Williams recalls experiencing a similar draw to unknown realms in childhood. For her, the lure lay not in the sea but in the air. When her grandmother gave her Peterson's *Field Guide to Western Birds*, Williams poured over it endlessly – "dreaming about

the birds, imagining the birds long before I ever saw them." They became "an extension of family," she explains, mentors from the more-than-human world (PI).

Books may be particularly important for individuals who do not come from "storied" cultures or traditions. For them, books can serve as "teaching elders," sharing the culture's accumulated wisdom and helping them interpret their experiences outdoors (Snyder *Practice* 61). Writer Scott Russell Sanders refers to the restorative and transformative power of words as the "alchemy" of reading – where marks on a page transmute into vital and sustaining narratives (*Writing* 170). Even for children raised in storytelling traditions, books can prove transformative. Scott Momaday, Alice Walker and Terry Tempest Williams grew up in cultures that valued storytelling, yet they all found that literary 'elders' extended their vision and helped give voice to values held deep within.

Children raised in urban settings, with limited opportunities to experience natural realms, may depend on books to foster a relation with the larger ecological whole. Among the writers considered in this work, few individuals have urban backgrounds (a pattern that suggests the importance of childhood access to natural areas in fostering ecological conversion). For the rare individual who grew up without such contact, books may have afforded a vicarious means of bonding with the natural world. Writer Gary Paul Nabhan, who grew up in an industrial city, attests to how books helped 'place' him: "not until I began to read the literature of natural history could I articulate my belief in the Earth as grounding and faith and guide" (Nabhan/Trimble 30). In this sense, books can serve as sacred, inspirational texts.

The power of these works often rests as much in the character of the authors as in the merits of the works. Many classics of ecological literature – *Walden*, *A Sand County Almanac*, *Silent Spring* and *The Outermost House* – reflect the principles that governed the authors' lives. Edward Abbey and Scott Russell Sanders both note that they are touched most deeply by the works of those who demonstrate moral vision, courage and a recognition of the larger whole. They look to these writers not only as gifted artists but as ethical exemplars. Terry Tempest Williams, who began reading works by ecological writers during adolescence, found in the example of their lives a template for shaping her own path. She believes it is imperative to attend to these literary mentors: "We can never forget the power of impassioned, informed voices telling their story, bearing witness, speaking out on behalf of the land" ("Bedrock" 105).

Through literary mentors, ecological writers often gain courage to find their own voices and articulate their convictions. The solidarity lent by literary mentors appears particularly important for writers who grow up with views that differ markedly from the perspective of family and friends. Williams, for example, found little support for her ecological convictions among peers who adhered to Mormon conventions. The "impassioned, informed voices" of literary mentors, therefore, helped lend her courage to challenge the status quo and articulate her own perspective.

### Re-turning

For many writers the wellspring of ecological conversion rests in childhood. The imaginative fusion with place that occurs in early years allows the land to imprint deeply on their psyches and souls. Most children experience the natural world as both real and imaginary – a landscape that simultaneously

embodies the actual and the possible. This perspective can, as Rachel Carson notes, awaken a sense of wonder and dissolve some of the established boundaries that separate humans from the rest of nature. By forming friends and adopting mentors across species lines, children extend their capacity for relation. Among many ecological writers, this childhood impulse appears to evolve -- by adulthood -- into a steadfast compassion for other beings and a commitment to 'speak for the voiceless.'

Recalling their early devotion to the land seems to strengthen writers' trust in natural cycles and their sense of belonging to a larger whole. In this way, remembrance can be a "religious" act (in the oldest, etymological sense). It 'rejoins' lost and neglected dimensions of the self, rekindling connections between person and place. Through acts of remembrance, many writers uncover the roots of their ecological practice. They come to see how significant experiences with the land shaped their turns to earth. These childhood connections may be essential prerequisites to any subsequent ecological practice: "those ties with the earth and the farm animals and growing things..." writer Willa Cather once observed, "are never made at all unless they are made early" (243). Ties made early, these writers demonstrate, can hold throughout life.

## CHAPTER III

### REFLECTION

*I think all human beings have to go through this because eventually, inevitably we are alone and there is that peace no one can give you, really, other than coming to grips with and confronting your own life and your own destiny, what work you have done and what work you need to do.*

- Denise Chavez (Balassi 12)  
Chicano playwright and poet

Seeds of an ecological practice sown in childhood may be nourished in later years by times of intensive introspection. During such periods, individuals commonly reassess their calling in life and their place within the natural whole. The contours of inner ecology change as old assumptions erode, familiar bearings disappear, and new convictions take root. Times of reflection can reaffirm spiritual bonds to the earth forged early in life and foster moral action based on those connections.

Paths to an ecological practice often lead through challenging inner terrain. Writers describe periods in which they must relinquish the familiar and find new sources of strength. Between the loss of the known and the emergence of the new stretches a temporal chasm – what Terry Tempest Williams terms a "deep trench" of reflection (PI). Entering this trench represents a metaphoric descent into earth, a journey to elemental depths. One's scope of vision is constricted, forcing the mind inward. Time in the trench calls one to "trust in the darkness, trust in the invisible; [that] is the act of courage which the convert must summon up from the deepest part of his being" (Griffin 136). Yet these times also



provide a chance to regain energy and perspective. Religious scholar James Loder defines reflection as an "interlude for scanning" in which one searches for solutions -- not actively or aggressively, but attentively -- waiting, wondering and following hunches (37). Time in the trench can prompt deep psychic transformation, strengthening a person's resolve to pursue an ecological practice.

Periods of reflection can reveal the essential paradoxes that tug one persistently in contradictory directions: the pull of stability and push of change; the necessity of death to nourish life; the simultaneous draw toward solitude and community. Within the trench ecological writers dwell in the dynamic balance of opposing forces. Instead of seeking to reconcile the polarities, they come to value the creative tension inherent in paradox. Through reflection, writers may adopt a more fluid and cyclical outlook on life and begin *feeling* their turn to Earth. They come to sense their conversion as "a revolution, an evolution of the spirit" (Williams *Unspoken* 87).

Individuals may enter into reflection deliberately, be compelled there by circumstance, or be moved by a combination of choice and chance. Ecological writers often consciously invite reflection by choosing to dwell in places where natural patterns predominate. In this way, they can attend to the patterns of inner and outer ecology, and to the resonance between the two realms. The act of writing, for many individuals, also becomes a means of fostering introspection.

Other reflective periods are neither anticipated nor welcomed. Writers may descend into the trench following a debilitating illness or the loss of a cherished place or friend. Introspection can also be sparked by a pervasive sense of estrangement from the broader culture. Being sensitive to the contradictions in society and the destruction of natural habitats, ecological writers may succumb

to depression and despair. Reflective periods constitute a 'test of faith' in many respects, an invitation to reassess what lies at the core of one's life. By clarifying what matters most, periods of reflection enable individuals to redirect their energy. Through this process ecological writers often affirm the centrality of the Earth to their identity and practice. Time spent in the trench of reflection seems to renew their commitment to live in ways that honor their spiritual and moral bonds to Earth.

### When Hope Recedes

Reflective periods can lead writers to confront their obdurate denial of ecological degradation. They may begin to question how it is that the world has become so degraded and distressed "without a nursing response from us?" (Moore 274). The collective refusal to address ecological damage defies both heart and reason. It challenges ethical and religious injunctions to honor creation and counters base instincts of self-preservation. The perplexing incapacity to respond appears to stem from acute denial, a mental paralysis known as 'psychic numbing' (a phenomenon first noted by psychologist Robert Jay Lifton in response to the threat of nuclear war). When facing the potential of vast devastation, the mind may "disassociate" – shutting down or compartmentalizing to avoid total breakdown (Glendinning 109). One can, for example, comprehend the death of an individual animal or the loss of an ecosystem. When confronted with the extinction of countless species, though, the mind ceases to process information in a meaningful way.

Rachel Carson found herself succumbing to 'psychic numbing' in the 1950s when she began to consider the implications of atomic science. In a letter to a friend, she confessed:

Some of the thoughts that came were so unattractive to me that I rejected them completely, for the old ideas die hard, especially when they are emotionally as well as intellectually dear to one. It was pleasant to believe, for example, that much of Nature was forever beyond the tampering reach of man...

These beliefs have almost been part of me for as long as I have thought about such things. To have them even vaguely threatened was so shocking that, as I have said, I shut my mind – refused to acknowledge what I couldn't help seeing (*Always* 248-9).

Carson's experience of denial is typical of what many ecological writers undergo when they witness environmental loss. Rather than risk despair, they suppress all feeling or cultivate false hopes for a panacea. Hope can lead one in quest of a miracle cure, as Terry Tempest Williams learned when her mother had cancer. The path of greater integrity, she found, rests in facing loss directly and abandoning illusions of control. Williams came to concur with Edward Abbey's counsel: "Better a cruel truth than a comfortable delusion" (*Voice* 12).

As individuals absorb the full implications of ecological destruction, denial may give way to an overwhelming sense of defeat. Despair represents a different, but no less potent, form of psychological paralysis. When swamped by a dark tide of despair, one may lose a sense of vision and purpose. Times of reflection can help writers regain some inner equilibrium.

Despair may arise in response to the chasm that stretches between the inviting possibilities of an ideal society and the stark realities of the status quo. Ecological writers who hold high ideals for themselves and their communities can feel this discrepancy acutely. A devastating sense of living "in a fallen world" struck Kentucky writer Wendell Berry, for example, when he visited the mine country near his home (*Long-Legged* 45). Berry witnessed poverty, alienation, social deprivation and ecological devastation on a scale unprecedented in his experience. He returned home in a state of existential defeat, filled "with a most

oppressive and persistent sense of the smallness of human hopes before the inertia of institutions and machines" (25). His visions for social and ecological harmony were pulverized by the sheer force and magnitude of industrial destruction. Berry eventually overcame this paralyzing despair by reflecting on the experience, writing his way from hopelessness into renewed moral resolve.

Despair can also stem from a personal failure to realize ecological and ethical ideals. Writers conscious of their complicity in a flawed culture are particularly vulnerable to such feelings. Edward Abbey depicts this psychological bind in his admission: "I live falsely. I do not practice what I preach. I wanted a life of freedom, passion, simplicity; I lead instead a life of complicated deals, petty routines, rancorous internal grievances, moral compromise, sloth, acedia, and vanity" (*Confessions* 309). By not embodying his own values, Abbey unwittingly feeds the corrosive habits of the larger society. The failure to realize personal ideals makes it harder, in turn, to believe that the larger culture can ever extricate itself from moral and ecological quagmire.

The quest to live with ecological integrity is invariably compromised, given the fallibility of human nature and the exigencies of contemporary society. Modern living, Scott Russell Sanders observes, affords no moral purity: "The choice is not between innocence and guilt, the choice is between more and less complicity" (*Writing* 61). Those who choose to live in mainstream Western culture must continually compromise their ecological principles and ideals in personal, professional and political spheres. This cultural complicity in environmental degradation can erode hope for meaningful change. Efforts to shift prevailing mindsets and systems may come to seem farcical. Visions of radical transformation recede, leaving the dubious consolation of small victories

and resounding defeats. Rachel Carson voiced her exasperation at this debilitating pattern: "Life is such a queer business -- great visions, great opportunities opened up, and then a door slammed. I don't understand it; I never will" (*Always* 227). Setbacks in one's own ecological practice and in efforts at societal action can shake one's faith in the possibilities for sustained ecological change.

While few writers escape the broad reach of doubt and despair, many weather the darkness without losing sight of their ideals. Edward Abbey attests to his success navigating through dark spells:

The despair that haunts the background of our lives, sometimes obtruding itself into consciousness, can still be modulated, as I know from experience, into a comfortable melancholia and from there to defiance, delight, a roaring affirmation of self-existence. Even, at times, into a quiet and blessedly self-forgetful peace, a modest joy (*Abbey's* 195).

Confrontations with despair can lead to a "modest joy," a recognition that one is graced with existence in a less-than-perfect world. For ecological writers with unbridled idealism, reflection can initiate a sobering but essential period of growth -- an opportunity to reflect on unexamined values and assumptions. Individuals intent upon preserving pristine 'wilderness' and living with ecological purity may come to acknowledge that there are no untrammelled places and no perfect forms of ecological practice. The acute anguish and remorse provoked by ecological destruction may be tempered by the recognition that the natural whole will endure, even if in a diminished state.

Many individuals find, to their surprise, that hopeless periods prove to be cathartic. Loss and despair can free one from the hold of unconsidered assumptions, reflexive responses and preconditioned patterns -- opening the path to a more conscious mode of ecological living. Over time, despair may

modulate into spiritual humility, a conviction that one participates in a larger pattern, the full extent of which may never be glimpsed. This existential humility can fundamentally transform an individual's identity and relation to the whole. It can temper idealism while simultaneously reinforcing a resolve to act on behalf of Earth. Limiting the scope of possible action seems to lend individuals renewed focus and energy to undertake what measures they can.

### Sojourns Outdoors

The humility awakened in times of hopelessness is often reinforced through experiences outdoors. In their turns to Earth, writers may encounter – not just the psychic wilderness within – but elemental forces without. Through the intimate relation of inner and outer ecology, the presence of untamed nature can touch the human heart and imagination. Ecological writers commonly make sojourns into the natural world to awaken themselves to unrealized dimensions of being. Nature's power to evoke inner transformation is confirmed by scholars of religious conversion who conclude that "natural beauty" is among the most common antecedents of religious experience (Hardy 81). That finding confirms centuries of testimony from writers who describe how experiences outdoors have deepened their sense of belonging within a vast and mysterious universe. (Several such accounts appear in the next chapter, Revelation.)

This sense of mystical interconnection may be most pronounced when an individual is alone, with attention wholly focused on the experience of place. For this reason, ecological writers often choose to spend time in natural places without human accompaniment. Their craving for solitude, commonly judged as misanthropic, can be a means of deepening relations across species lines. Scott Russell Sanders writes that his hunger to interact with non-human species

reflects not a "distaste for humanity, but... a need to experience my humanness the more vividly by confronting stretches of the earth that my kind has had no part in making" (*Paradise* 65). Stepping beyond human company and culture, Sanders suggests, prompts a deeper appreciation for the mystery of existence. By evoking a sense of wonder and humility, solo experiences outdoors often awaken and sustain an ecological perspective.

Some of the most renowned texts in environmental literature chronicle extended times of solitude: *e.g.*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. Interludes in natural settings, while often characterized as "retreats" from civilization, are more aptly a meeting with – and merging into – nature. Thoreau writes that his goal in living at Walden Pond is to face life deliberately, to participate fully in the experience of being: "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life," he asserts, regardless of whether it proved "mean" or "sublime" (80). In their sojourns outdoors, Thoreau and other writers do not aim for religious reclusion, withdrawing from the material world to worship a transcendent deity (Lynch). They seek to enter into a larger whole, immersing themselves in the more-than-human world.

Engagement in the broader ecological community can transform one's identity. Apart from human company, an individual may begin to bond with other species and forms of matter, moving from a relation of detached objectivity to one of intimate kinship. The ideal Thoreau sought was a fusion of identity: "I to be nature looking into nature" (Albanese 99). Terry Tempest Williams seems to approach this ideal at times during solo visits to a bird refuge. Apart from other

humans, she is able to sense the patterns of life about her. The solitude, she writes, "sustains me and protects me from my mind. It renders me fully present... There are other languages being spoken by wind, water, and wings. There are other lives to consider..." (*Refuge* 29). The quiet of solitary reflection allows Williams to acknowledge the web of 'interbeing' that sustains the ecological whole.

A participatory sense of relation can dissolve the hierarchical distinctions that traditionally separate species. Other beings, once seen as objects, become subjects in their own right – what Henry Beston termed "other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth" (25). More than a shift in perspective is implied here. There is a profound difference, as philosopher Martin Buber observed, between an "I-It" mode of relation and an "I-Thou" one. When a writer is immersed in the fabric of nature, a utilitarian view that objectifies the 'other' may give way to a reverent appreciation for that being's intrinsic value. In this way, intensive contact with the natural world can evoke an ethic of kinship that informs one's ecological practice.

Edward Abbey, who worked in remote settings as a seasonal park ranger and fire lookout, found that close contact with other species irrevocably changed his world-view. In his essay "The Crooked Wood," Abbey recalls how he walked daily through the tranquil depth of an aspen grove. He found himself beginning to wonder about "those beings, alive, sentient, transpiring" that surrounded him. Overcoming his skepticism, Abbey concludes that in the company of trees, he is surrounded by beings with a "conscious presence" (*Journey* 208). This realization challenges his empirical and analytical training, affirming his deep childhood



affinity for trees. Numerous other writers attest to how the vivid immediacy of nature, when full focus is given it, can confirm the sense of belonging in an animate world.

While experiences in the natural world often evoke positive sentiments, they can also induce fear. Nature's steady patterns can give way to unforeseen crises (during floods, droughts or hurricanes, for example), forcing individuals to reassess their fundamental relation to the ecological whole. In *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams chronicles the rise of Great Salt Lake as it floods a migratory bird refuge that had become her spiritual sanctuary. The ecological damage without comes to mirror psychic losses within. Distinctions between outer and inner landscape dissolve as Williams seeks some solid ground. The only refuge, she comes to realize, lies in embracing change -- in moving with the swelling, swirling waters. Facing the wilds without helps Williams recognize the need to honor the wilds within.

Encounters with the wild and destructive sides of nature can test the commitment of ecological converts, providing a potent reminder that a turn toward Earth is not a move toward stability, security and endless bounty. The Earth offers great constancy in its seasonal cycles and shifting population dynamics, but not without a measure of chaos. Those individuals who spend extensive time outdoors learn to honor nature's fierce spontaneity. Humility becomes an essential survival skill. Living in desert country, Terry Tempest Williams has had to contend with rattlesnakes and scorpions, heat stroke, flash floods and a hiking accident that split her head open "like a peach hitting pavement" (*Refuge* 242-3). These experiences have bred a healthy respect for natural hazards but have not diminished Williams' devotion to the natural

world. Reflecting on the liabilities of an outdoor life, she suggests that physical challenges build character and foster humility. In the presence of elemental powers, the senses grow more acute as control diminishes: "To enter wilderness is to court risk, and risk favors the senses, enabling one to live well" (*Refuge* 244). Williams concludes that an ecological practice – in fostering spiritual and moral bonds with other beings – necessarily entails some risk. One cannot hold heart and senses open, she finds, without experiencing acute moments of loss.

### Meeting Death within Life

Painful times of relinquishment often prompt writers to reassess their life purpose and deepen their ecological practice. Grief shatters complacency, opening the way to new modes of seeing and being. The security and comfort of familiar patterns erode, carrying with them certain constrictions. Loss leads into a paradoxical realm in which one is challenged – simultaneously – to let go and receive, to empty and refill, to die in order to live more deeply. Writer Gretel Ehrlich observes that loss "constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life" (x). As individuals reflect on the place of death within life, they may gain a greater appreciation for both the fragility and resilience of life.

The transforming power of loss is evident in Terry Tempest Williams' book *Refuge* and in the personal letters of Rachel Carson. Both women faced the death of close family members early in adulthood. By the age of 30, Carson had lost her father and sister (and subsequently both her sister's children died young). Williams, at age 34, became matriarch of her family, having lost her mother, grandmothers and four other relatives to cancer. These losses forced both writers to accept the incontrovertible presence of death within life. In

response, they chose to live – in Carson's words – "more affirmatively, making the most of opportunities when they are offered, not putting them off for another day" (*Always* 332). Recognizing the unearned gift of one's own life can rekindle a desire to live consciously.

The early loss of family members may have helped strengthen Carson's capacity to face her subsequent illness and premature death. During work on *Silent Spring*, an expose detailing the carcinogenic effects of synthetic chemicals, Carson was diagnosed with malignant cancer, severe arthritis, iritis and a host of other ailments. Her subject matter gained a poignant immediacy as she realized her own disease could stem from exposure to toxic pesticides. Part of Carson's determination to complete *Silent Spring*, despite crippling medical conditions, grew from her hope that this work might spare others a similar fate: "Knowing the facts as I did," she wrote, "I could not rest until I had brought them to public attention" (Brooks 228). Carson found she could face death only by doing her utmost to sustain the greater whole of life.

Death's imminence reinforced Carson's abiding sense of life's essential beauty and integrity. Reflecting on the "closing journey" of migrating Monarch butterflies, and on her own approaching demise, Carson wrote to a friend: "... when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to its end. That is what those brightly fluttering bits of life taught me this morning. I found a deep happiness in it – so, I hope, may you" (Brooks 327). Carson's revelation, making momentary peace with the life-death cycle, helped deepen her spiritual love for the world and her commitment to moral action. Carson worked persistently in her final years to share her ecological perspectives through writing. One of her greatest griefs in dying

young, she noted, was to leave with so much writing 'still in her.' For Carson, the recognition of life's fragility led – not to a sense of fatalism – but to a stronger ecological faith and practice.

Even without the threat of death, debilitating illness can foster a turn toward earth. Many writers describe periods of loss or illness that induce reflection. A confrontation with "suffering and inevitable non-being" is an essential prerequisite to spiritual transformation, religious scholar Paul Brockelman suggests (*These* 170). These experiences can serve as a formidable 'test of faith,' forcing one to reassess foundational beliefs. For those who place their trust in natural cycles, a prolonged illness can prove to be spiritually – as well as physically – disabling.

During three years of acute suffering from an undiagnosed case of Lyme disease, Alice Walker struggled to make sense of her experience. She felt betrayed by nature and fearful of spending time outdoors (since she had contracted the disease from ticks and could get reinfected). Yet in the midst of doubt and despair, she still drew sustenance from "the sight of trees, the scent of the ocean, the feel of the wind and the warmth of the sun," all of which remained "faithful" to her (*Same* 32). Walker's dilemma here is typical of more traditional religious converts: she simultaneously doubts and depends on her primary source of faith. She cannot rely on the beneficence of nature (as one might with an omnipotent God), but still can take sensual and spiritual comfort in its presence. Walker found that as her body weakened, her spirit grew stronger: it was "as if my illness had pushed open an inner door that my usual consciousness was willing to ignore" (32). Her physical disability led her on a path to new spiritual growth. Walker came to view her disease as a protracted invitation to

reaffirm her faith in -- and love for -- the whole of nature (42). The unpredictable course of her illness acted as a spiritual rite-of-passage -- reminding her to attend to connections and practice relinquishment. As Walker learns, loss -- whether of health, work, friends or dreams -- dispels the illusion that we are shapers of our own destiny. Loss drops us unceremoniously into humility, acknowledging that we dwell amidst mystery. The illness that threatened -- at first -- to derail Walker's turn to earth came in time to reinforce it. Her experience serves as a case of what Buddhist psychologist Joanna Macy terms "positive disintegration" -- a challenging phase of relinquishment that precedes a reconstruction of belief and identity. (Macy and other writers do not imply that all losses or tragedies are redeemed in this way, but many of the ones recorded in ecological autobiographies ultimately do have some positive outcome -- leaving open to speculation the question of whether there are experiences of unredeemed 'disintegration' that go unrecorded.)

### Dwelling on the Margins

While not every loss is turned to advantage, many ecological writers do find that the seeming 'handicap' of being marginalized by mainstream culture actually fosters their turns to earth. Maintaining a critical distance from prevailing beliefs allows individuals to reflect critically on cultural patterns and practices. Freed from reflexive participation in societal norms, they can pursue paths outside the mainstream. Ecological writers typically choose lifestyles that foster reflection and favor creativity over convention. Being less constrained by customary expectations regarding marriage, family, household, work and religion, they more readily embrace new modes of understanding and practice.

Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams and Alice Walker, for example, all chose family patterns outside the norm. Carson spent her adult life in a matrifocal household that comprised her mother, herself and – at various times - her nieces and grandnephew. As the primary breadwinner, Carson was freed from many domestic chores, allowing her more time for creative writing. Like Carson, Williams has close bonds with three generations of her family. Yet she and her husband Brooke have chosen not to become parents. Without child-rearing duties, Williams can invest more creative energy in writing. Walker valued growing up in a large family but has found she treasures the freedom of a more solitary life. After raising her daughter (as the primary single parent), Walker has balanced times of partnership with generous doses of solitude. All three women configured their lives in ways that foster their writing. Knowing that motherhood in a conventional nuclear family affords little chance for creative reflection, they opted for paths outside that model.

Other writers part with societal norms by valuing attachment to place over 'career advancement.' Scott Russell Sanders and Wendell Berry, for example, both moved from native soil early in their careers to follow promising academic jobs. Despite professional success, they felt displaced – deprived of some essential nourishment that only place could provide. As they acknowledged this sense of loss, their loyalties shifted. Both chose to return to home terrain, taking less prestigious positions to be in the places they loved. "I cannot have a spiritual center," Sanders came to realize, "without having a geographical one; I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in a place" (*Staying* 121).

Stepping beyond the confines of social convention can free writers to consider new modes of perception and relation. Sanders reports that being outside mainstream social circles (*i.e.*, being a poor Midwesterner among affluent Easterners during college) has sharpened his powers of discernment. Watching and listening on the margins, he writes, "I was free to envision a way of life more desirable and durable than this one that excluded me" (*Writing* 173). Looking past surface appearances allows Sanders to construct strong foundations for his own life – building it on a core connection to Earth and family. He credits his ecological practice – in part – to his peripheral social status.

Alice Walker believes it was her "position as an outcast" growing up (due to race and a childhood accident that blinded her in one eye) that lent her the capacity to "really see people and things, to really notice relationships..." (Gates 327). This ability to recognize interconnections may have nourished her compassion and moral concern for others. Walker suggests that in ways both metaphoric and literal she has one eye focused on the world about her and one eye focused on the world within. Through this dual vision, she is better able to reconcile inner and outer ecology. Walker strives to deepen her ecological practice by honoring both realms.

The perspective writers gain by dwelling on the periphery enables them to question some of the culture's prevailing beliefs. "The orthodox presume to know," Wendell Berry writes, "whereas the marginal person is trying to find out" (*Unsettling* 174). In their quest for better answers, ecological writers often question traditional divisions between humans and other animals, culture and nature, the civilized and the wild. These dualities have marked Western thought

for centuries, defining philosophical theories, political views and literary forms. Even 19th-century nature writers maintained this split, dwelling in culture while making "occasional and transient forays" into untamed nature (Emerson 71). Many contemporary writers prefer to challenge this long-standing separation, viewing nature and culture as inextricably intertwined.

Ecological writers act – within the larger society – in a role somewhat like that of shamans, who in some primal cultures mediate between humans and the "larger community of beings" (Abrams 6). The shaman ventures into new spiritual and intellectual terrain, carrying back insights to the larger community. This demanding role requires one to learn "what it means to be dismembered and brought to wholeness again and... [to face] the powerful realities, both positive and destructive, of the spiritual world" (Kelsey 17). Some shamanic traits are evident in ecological writers who work to acknowledge the spiritual dimensions of nature and to restore ecological wholeness. Rachel Carson, for example, experienced the process of writing *Silent Spring* as a kind of shamanic journey. She reports entering a realm where she had never been before, "perhaps where no one has ever been. It is a lonely place," she conceded, "and even a little frightening" (Strong 184). Carson's commitment to heal the larger community fueled her quest and sustained her courage in the face of fears and setbacks.

The shaman's role, while a demanding one, does afford critical insights into the dominant culture. Despite its tensions and ambiguities, the marginal existence holds a vitality that stimulates creative reflection. For this reason many ecological writers prefer dwelling on the periphery: "I am – really am – an extremist," Edward Abbey observed, "one who lives and loves by choice far out on the very verge of things... That's the way I like it" (Bishop 37). While few



ecological writers are as extreme or anarchistic as Abbey, many find they can best live out their ecological values from a vantage point on the 'very verge of things.'

Some ecological writers, though, find that insights gained at the margins are overshadowed by a debilitating sense of alienation. This pattern is particularly evident among Native Americans and other minorities who can experience a "destructive dissonance" from dwelling simultaneously within two irreconcilable cultures (Allen *Sacred* 9). Norms and values of tribal life are often "hopelessly opposed" to the dictates of Western industrial society, leaving individuals who live in both cultures caught in an untenable bind (49). Making peace with this dual heritage can prove challenging.

Scott Momaday explains how his mixed ancestry prompted reflection on his roots: "My father being a Kiowa and my mother being mostly European, I guess I had a sense of living in those two areas as a child and it became important to me to understand as clearly as I could who I was and what my cultural resources were" (Balassi 7). By pondering their origins, writers who are displaced within the dominant culture can regain some sense of grounding. As the previous chapter demonstrates, Momaday's Kiowa legacy has rooted his ecological practice in ways the dominant culture could not. He suggests that anyone caught in a bicultural bind can regain wholeness through a deep sense of fusion with the land, recognizing that "nature is not something apart from him... [It is] an element in which he exists" (Capps *Seeing* 84). Reflection on ecological – as well as ancestral – roots allows writers to mitigate the 'destructive dissonance' of living in disparate cultures. As they acknowledge their participation in the whole of nature, their ecological practice deepens.

Even writers not trapped between cultures often acquire the habit of reflection. These introspective periods can be likened to what psychologists consider the final and most prolonged phase of grieving in which people reorganize both internal and external dimensions of their lives (Roszak *et al.* 138). Writing can be a means of documenting the subtle shifts in perspective that occur through the course of reconstructing one's life. By faithfully recording mundane events and ideas, the writer compiles a narrative collage. As the stories accumulate, patterns become evident. Detailed journals that Terry Tempest Williams kept through four years of poignant and protracted loss became the basis for her book *Refuge*, a reflection on the spiritual necessity of making peace with change. Writing helped Williams navigate through that difficult and uncertain period. By enabling her to see patterns, it gave her a "greater sense of trust in the process of life" (PI). Many ecological writers find the reflective act of writing helps restore their inner equilibrium. When they feel discouraged or overwhelmed by personal challenges or societal problems, they rely on writing to regain perspective and stamina. Edward Abbey noted that he kept a journal, in part, as a way of writing himself back "into sorts" (*Confessions* 318).

Writing can even be a vital life line leading back from the edge of an abyss. Alice Walker recalls a time when writing literally returned her to life. Faced with an unwanted pregnancy near the end of college, Walker lay in bed for three days with a razor blade under her pillow, contemplating suicide. In preparing to leave life, she explains, "I realized how much I loved it, and how hard it would be not to see the sunrise every morning" (Gates/Appiah 328). Walker had an abortion and wrote, in the subsequent week, almost all the poems that appeared in her first book. It was the writing of those poems, she reflects,

that "clarified for me how very much I love being alive" (Gates/ Appiah 330). Writing can validate the truth of hard experience – whether the moments are crushing or healing. Walker learned through this and subsequent experiences that she relied on writing to attend – simultaneously – to the world about her and the world within. Personal stories become a means of dialogue between the two realms, helping deepen her ecological practice.

### Upon Reflection

As the accounts in this chapter demonstrate, occasions that prompt reflection can exact a high emotional toll – in grief, despair, confusion and disillusionment. Many writers who face these difficult emotions find that conscious introspection allows them to transmute their raw feelings into a renewed resolve to value life and care for the earth. The experience of suffering, philosopher Albert Schweitzer suggests, converts the "soft iron of youthful idealism... into the steel of a full grown idealism which can never be lost" (Orr *Ecological* 140). Time in the trench can act as a tempering process, strengthening the individual's character and their resolve to sustain the integrity of the ecological whole. Loss precludes a return to comfortable but outmoded ways of being. In the spaces held open by grief, there is room and time for new seeds to germinate.

Reflection often proves to be a critical time of reassessment, lending the perspective and courage necessary to center one's life on core values. Spiritual dimensions of ordinary existence can be illuminated, renewing one's faith in the unfathomable mystery of being. Through transformative periods of reflection, many writers come to derive greater spiritual sustenance from their experience in the natural world.

While reflection -- almost by definition -- implies an isolated individual process, its effects are both communal and relational. Many writers emerge from times of solitary reflection with a renewed desire to embrace community -- not just among humans -- but among the larger family of beings. This affirmation of ecological kinship may be the greatest gift of a writer's time in the 'deep trench' of reflection.

## CHAPTER IV

### REVELATION

*You know those moments you have when you enter a silence that's still and complete and peaceful? That's the source, the place where everything comes from. In that space, you know everything is connected, that there's an ecology of everything. In that place it is possible for people to have a change of heart, a change of thinking, a change in their way of being and living in the world.*

- Linda Hogan (Jensen 3)  
Chickasaw Indian poet

In their conversions to Earth, many ecological writers experience transformative moments when they know – beyond doubt – that ‘everything is connected.’ They sense the tangible but invisible bonds that join all life and elemental matter. These luminescent moments can awaken a sense of reverence, a heartfelt conviction that spirit inheres in the world. Revelatory experiences, by disclosing the miraculous within the ordinary, hold the power to reconfigure a life. Many ecological writers report that epiphanic moments shape the course of their turn toward earth, strengthening their ecological faith and practice.

The power of revelatory moments is at once profound and elusive. Epiphanic insights defy the bounds of reason: their transformative power is not felt in a ‘change of mind’ so much as a ‘change of heart.’ Poet Rainer Maria Rilke terms these encounters “indescribably swift, deep, timeless moments of... divine inseeing” (Chawla *First* 189). Rilke’s image is akin to Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” metaphor, suggesting a capacity to look simultaneously without and within. In “divine inseeing,” the divine sees into one even as one sees into the divine. There is, in revelatory moments, a spiritual exchange that carries one

beyond ordinary perception. One enters a 'timeless' realm that reveals unexpected dimensions of being. This experience typically awakens a strong sense of awe and humility.

A strong spiritual response can occur even among individuals who stand outside formal religion. Few ecological writers envision the sacred in conventional Christian terms as a transcendent deity in human form (Jaggar & Bordo 99). What holds ultimate meaning for them is not what lies beyond this world but the mystery embedded within it. Relinquishing the traditional quest for salvation and meaning in a life hereafter, ecological writers adopt the heretical view that "the environment, nature, is the ground of a positive and sufficient joy" (Lyon 19). The earth, rather than being a stepping-stone to transcendent realms, becomes the focus of their spiritual faith and practice. Through attention to the elemental world, writers often gain ample spiritual inspiration. "Only petty minds and trivial souls yearn for supernatural events," Edward Abbey asserts, "incapable of perceiving that everything -- everything! -- within and around them is pure miracle" (*Abbey's* 195).

Part of what makes the natural realm seem miraculous is the way all the elements and beings are joined in a unified but dynamic whole. Some writers depict the ecological web in classical terms as the "balance of nature;" others acknowledge the presence of randomness and chaos without wholly forfeiting their intuitive sense of an overarching order or harmony. The way the world adheres is no mere accident, they insist. What holds it together and sustains it, though, is hard to define. Writer Laurens van der Post describes this abiding harmony as "the pattern that we call God" (Anton 16). His appellation captures the ecumenical vision many ecological writers hold of a sacred presence

imminent in nature's creative unfolding. The 'pattern' they call God is not a static entity but a dynamic and fluid force of growth and decay and becoming. As writer Mary Daly suggests, God may more aptly be a verb than a noun.

Contemporary views of spirit within nature derive both from personal experience and from the long tradition of Romanticism that marks nature writing. For centuries, writers have depicted the natural world as the handiwork of God, a testimony to Divine creativity. This perspective is particularly evident among 18th- and 19th- century works, where natural forces are typically seen as imbued with divine power (a presence alternately beneficent and fierce). The land appears sublime – beautiful and awesome, but also terrifying and alien (*i.e.*, inescapably 'other'). Contemporary writers tend to perceive the natural world in less deistic terms, and are acutely conscious of its fragility as well as its power. Yet their understanding of nature as 'sacred ground' is inevitably informed by the Romantic tradition.

Like their literary predecessors, contemporary writers report sensing aspects of the divine within nature – in fleeting moments of epiphanic insight. Glimpses into the mystery of being can take the form of visions or illuminations; a sense of fusion with the greater whole (what Alister Hardy calls "ecstatic mysticism"); or a transformed vision of oneself and one's surroundings (35). Common to all these forms is an intense clarity of perception, a sensory attunement to every dimension of being. Revelatory experiences can deepen an ecological practice by cultivating the art of attention, where an individual learns to perceive – not just an object in isolation – but a subject in relation. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh terms this mode of relation participatory understanding in that one enters empathically into the experience of another (*Being* 38). Through

this fundamental shift in relation, writers can attain a deeper sense of belonging in the world. Their identification with other beings can foster their turn toward Earth, strengthening their will to sustain the health of the whole.

### A Truth Surpassing Reason

What sets revelatory insights apart from mundane experience is the internal conviction of their significance. "Crystalline moments" (as writer Anne Morrow Lindbergh termed them) register at a level beneath reason, with a certainty that brooks no dissuasion (109). They embody paradox, being clear and convincing insights that point toward impenetrable mysteries. The exceptional clarity of a "crystalline moment" may be evident only to the subject involved; to others, the experience can seem vague or implausible. One of the greatest challenges writers face is to find language that fairly reflects the intensity of their revelatory experiences. Evelyn Underhill, in her book *Mysticism*, depicts the irony of this dilemma: "there is no certitude that equals the mystics [yet] no impotence more complete than that which falls on those who try to communicate it" (331).

Accounts of naturalistic revelation, like traditional forms of religious "testimony," tend to be denigrated in a secular culture that readily dismisses "nonordinary states of consciousness... as avenues to spiritual awakening, psychic revelation and physical healing" (Glendinning 168). The "truth" revealed in epiphanies rarely conforms to the positivist views that dominate Western thought. Individuals trained in scientific rationalism can find it hard to trust the wisdom of their inner senses. (Writers from cultures more open to mystery – such as many indigenous traditions – appear to hold greater trust in their inner senses.)



Scott Russell Sanders has found that his empirical training cleaves mind and heart, leaving him struggling to reconcile a pervasive skepticism with the heartfelt truth of personal experience. On a visit to his childhood home long after his father's death, Sanders approached trees that he and his father had planted decades earlier. Touching their bark, he began to cry and called out to his father, sensing his presence nearby. Moments later, Sanders heard a cry overhead and looked up to see a bird circling slowly above him. "It was a red-tailed hawk for sure;" Sanders affirms, "and it was also my father. Not a symbol of my father, not a reminder, not a ghost, but the man himself, right there, circling in the air above me" (*Writing* 7). Anticipating the reader's skepticism, and assuaging his own, Sanders continues:

The voice of my education told me then and tells me now that I did not meet my father, that I merely projected my longing onto a bird. My education may well be right; yet nothing I heard in school, nothing I've read, no lesson reached by logic has ever convinced me as utterly or stirred me as deeply as did that red-tailed hawk (8).

Sanders' adamant faith in the truth of his experience is characteristic of those who experience revelation, whether in the context of traditional or ecological conversion. The defining quality of such "convictional experiences," writes scholar James Loder, is the "imaginative leap to certainty" (17, 24).

That certainty is not grasped by the mind so much as embraced and held by the heart. Moments of inspiration are -- in the etymological sense -- an inbreathe of spirit. Their lucidity derives from a creative force that is more than personal; it is universal, even divine. The strength of this force is manifest in revelatory experience. Rachel Carson, for example, recalls in a letter to a friend how music helped 'breathe spirit' into a writing project:

Later, listening to Beethoven, the mood became, I suppose, more

creative, and rather suddenly I understood what the anthology should be – the story it should tell – the deep significance it might have. I suppose I can never explain it in words... It was a mood of tremendous exaltation, I wept. I paced the floor (*Always* 204).

This experience, while deeply emotional, might not be considered revelatory were it not for Carson's conviction of its meaning. She concludes her description of the experience: "only when I have felt myself so deeply moved, so possessed by something outside myself, can I feel that inner confidence that what I am doing is right" (204). For Carson, as for many traditional religious converts, the force of revelation is felt so powerfully that it appears to originate outside herself, a foreign force that "possesses" her. This perspective, while seeming to support the traditional view of a transcendent deity, demonstrates how spirit can manifest in the world. This creative force, Carson suggests, awakens her "inner confidence," enabling her to meet the moral and practical demands of an ecological practice.

### Ecological Epiphanies

'Convictional experiences' such as Sanders and Carson describe occur with some frequency among ecological writers and the general populace. "There can be no doubt," scholar Alister Hardy asserts, "that such experiences [as revelatory visions] are more common than many people might suppose" (33). Thirty-nine percent of respondents in one study reported having had mystical experiences (Kelsey 12). Quite often these events are triggered by encounters in nature. A study that assessed potential antecedents of religious experience found "natural beauty" among the most frequently cited triggers (Hardy 28).

Anecdotal evidence from autobiographical narratives corroborates this research. For centuries, ecological writers have been recording glimpses of a

reality wider and deeper than ordinary consciousness allows. Revelatory experiences recur so frequently in nature writing that they have become a trademark of the genre. William Wordsworth's "intimations of immortality," Henry Thoreau's calls to awaken, John Muir's ecstatic encounters with "Nature-God," and Annie Dillard's visions of an illumined life represent prominent examples, but similar moments are recorded in countless other works. Ecological writers can be characterized as "prospectors for revelation," individuals who seek out numinous encounters and consciously sift through their experiences to locate valuable nugats (*Abbey Journey* 65). This prospecting often becomes an enduring avocation so that crystalline moments are scattered through the years "like diamonds on purple velvet" (*Abbey Confessions* 17-18).

The form and character of each 'diamond' is different, reflecting the light of the particular moment. Revelations occur outdoors in both wild and domesticated settings (not always in places of natural beauty). Epiphanies may occur indoors as well, when the conscious mind is engaged in reading or disengaged in sleep. Given the variety of precipitating factors, the commonalities among responses is surprising: most people report experiencing a feeling of clarity, intensified sensual awareness, wonder, and a peaceful sense of belonging. Revelatory moments can be critical "turning points" in the course of a conversion, shifting one's perspective markedly or confirming long-held convictions. For writers who have grown up with a strong attachment to Earth, epiphanic experiences may transform a long-standing spiritual devotion into a renewed resolve to live differently.

The insight concentrated in epiphanic moments can redirect the course of one's life. While ecological epiphanies are not "visions" in the traditional religious

sense, they do represent moments of intense perception where one sees – in a sense – more than is actually there. One's intuition and imagination literally recognize (perceive anew) a reality the mind cannot fully grasp. Like the multisensory experiences children have, epiphanic events may imprint deeply on the heart. They often become guiding memories to which individuals return for perspective and reassurance.

A well-known example of an ecological epiphany appears in Aldo Leopold's collection *A Sand County Almanac*. Recalling his early years as a forester when he was "full of trigger-itch," Leopold describes how he and colleagues responded to the sight of a mother wolf and cubs by "pumping lead into the pack... with more excitement than accuracy." The gunfire brought down the old wolf and Leopold reached her "in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then," he reflects, "and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain" (138). That incident marked the beginning of a profound shift in Leopold's attitude toward the natural world, moving him from a utilitarian perspective to a life-centered ethic where the human is not "conqueror of the land community... [but] plain member and citizen of it" (240). Leopold's empathic identification with the mother wolf awakened an appreciation for the wisdom inherent in the natural world. The humility occasioned in that moment came to inform his life philosophy and practice.

Leopold's experience illustrates how profound insights can break the surface of consciousness, sending ripples across the breadth of one's life. Writer Lynne Bama found her life transformed in the wake of a fleeting epiphany she experienced while visiting Wyoming:

I had climbed the ridge intently, concentrating on my footing. Only when I got to the top did I turn around and discover that the clouds on the other side of the valley had blown away. What had seemed to be a complete landscape had miraculously enlarged, and I found myself staring at an enormous volcanic rampart, its face streaked and marbled with veins of new-fallen snow.

I sat down on a rock, stunned by this unexpected, looming presence, by the eerie combination of nearness and deep space and silence. In that moment the shape of my life changed. Two years later I moved to Wyoming and have since lived nowhere else (Stine 50-51).

Epiphanic moments represent quantum leaps in perception, where one's vision is -- as Bama suggests -- "miraculously enlarged." The ordinary appears extraordinary as one glimpses a non-visible dimension of being. Memories of these experiences may continue guiding a person's path for decades. Returning after a quarter-century to the mountain ridge where her epiphany occurred, Bama reports being struck by the gulf "between what I knew then and what I know now" (52). That momentary flash of insight decades earlier sparked an ongoing quest to know the land in its entirety and learn from its stories. In this process, Bama moved -- as Leopold did -- from a vision of bountiful nature and unmarred beauty to a keen realization of how the surrounding ecosystem had been diminished. While this deeper awareness of place brought pain, it helped awaken an enduring sense of devotion to the land.

Given their transitory nature, epiphanies could be dismissed as insignificant flashes of illumination that rapidly recede into the dark hollows of memory. The stories of Bama and Leopold refute this view. Their experience suggests that these insights, once imprinted on the imagination and conscience, can strengthen an ecological practice. They become benchmarks by which people measure their moral and spiritual evolution. An acute vision can remain in

memory as a landmark, helping a person navigate the subsequent course of his or her turning.

One way that epiphanic moments foster conversion is by prompting a desire to comprehend the intricacies of the ecological whole. The questions occasioned by these intense moments can reverberate within writers for years. Leopold's insight, for example, spurred him to learn more about the "wisdom" that sustains a balanced and synergistic relationship between a species and its habitat. In stretching the horizons of thought and conscience, epiphanies can help individuals reconstitute their relation to the natural world.

Another way revelatory insights foster conversion is by providing an ongoing source of reassurance and inspiration, reaffirming one's faith in the indwelling mystery. Rather than turning to conventional creeds and texts for reassurance in difficult times, an individual may rely on the memory of a convictional moment. Edward Abbey's first glimpse of canyon country had this salutary effect, remaining in his imagination through trying years of military service abroad. He writes:

...through all the misery and tedium... of the war... I kept bright in my remembrance... what I had seen and felt - yes - and even smelled – on that one blazing afternoon on a freight train rolling across the Southwest (*Beyond* 52-53).

His freight train epiphany – a fleeting but powerful glimpse of all that is "free, decent, sane, clean, and true" – sustained Abbey's will to live through the war and lured him back to make a home in the Southwest (53). That revelatory glimpse of canyon country came to nourish his commitment to place. Abbey later wrote that he had long looked for somewhere to take his stand: "Now that I think

I've found it," he asserted, "I must defend it" (*Journey* xiii). His ecological practice grew in large measure from his deepening devotion to desert country.

### Callings

Epiphanic moments can also hold a sense of destiny, calling the writer toward possibilities not yet envisioned. Rachel Carson recounts an experience during college when she caught a fleeting glimpse of where her life might lead:

Years ago on a night when rain and wind beat against the windows of my college dormitory room, a line from [Alfred Lord Tennyson's] "Locksley Hall" burned itself into my mind – "For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go."

I can still remember my intense emotional response as that line spoke to something within me seeming to tell me that my own path led to the sea – which I had never seen – and that my own destiny was somehow linked with the sea.

And so, as you know, it has been. When I finally became the sea's biographer, the sea brought me recognition and what the world calls success (*Always* 59).

This intuition of Carson's demonstrates the improbable but potent power of revelatory moments. Carson had – by early childhood – developed a passion for the sea, reading all she could about this mysterious realm known only through books. The revelation in college confirmed the 'truth' of her youthful passion, lending her confidence to embark on studies in marine biology (a path college administrators strongly discouraged, given her aptitude in English and the obstacles facing women who entered science). Carson trusted her intuitive insight enough to disregard others' advice and follow this mysterious calling to the sea.

Carson's account confirms what scholars have found among traditional religious converts: that "the feeling of being guided is certainly very strong in the lives of many people" (Hardy 54). This sense may be particularly acute among ecological writers who attend carefully to both inner and outer worlds (Roszak *et*

al. 300). The experience of 'guiding moments' has convinced Scott Momaday, for example, that "those things are not accidental to me – they seem to me to be arranged in some pattern, like the pattern of the universe" (Woodard 13). Our inner lives, Momaday holds, follow a 'pattern' that derives from the creative force shaping the outer world. He suggests there is a continual resonance between the physical world and our psychological and spiritual reality. Carson suggests a similar correlation in noting that she became a "biographer" of the sea. For her, outer ecology was not a collection of objects – but a community of subjects (Carroll 215). She saw the sea as a complex, multifarious character whose life story demanded to be told.

Like Carson, writer and ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan experienced a strong sense of calling in late adolescence. He had dropped out of high school and was working outdoors to repair tracks at the local steel mill. One day he glanced up to see six blue herons flying low through the grimy air. He watched them circle as if looking for a stopover site. Finding only shallow ponds beside slag heaps, they slowly flew on. Nabhan's heart went with them, he recalls: "I felt welling up within me a profound desire to know those birds better" (*Geography* 36). That experience illumined a vocational path Nabhan had never considered. Turning from the railroad work his father and uncles had done, he began training himself as a naturalist. He felt guided and affirmed in his choice by that enduring vision. The improbability of a "crystalline moment" happening in that sooty scene made it all the more persuasive for Nabhan: "Even in the most damaged of habitats, in the drudgery of the most menial labor, whatever wildlife remained could still pull at me deeply enough to disrupt business-as-usual" (36).



The accounts of Abbey, Carson and Nabhan all depict revelatory experiences that happened late in adolescence. Other ecological writers – such as Terry Tempest Williams (in her vision on a remote ranch) and Alice Walker (in her return from a contemplated suicide) – also report enduring insights occurring at that age. This pattern among ecological writers corresponds to studies showing that the majority of traditional religious conversions occur during adolescence (Conn 144). There appears to be little scholarly speculation as to why these revelations occur with such frequency in young adulthood. It might coincide with developmental needs to establish a vocational direction or with the spiritual questions that accompany the consolidation of one's identity. While many of the writers in this work experience revelations throughout adulthood, their epiphanies in adolescence seem particularly critical in directing their spiritual and vocational paths toward earth.

The insights that occur later in life – while still illuminating – often serve to situate the 'convert' within the vaster mystery of being. Ecological writers attest to how fleeting visions have affirmed their sense of living – as Jung wrote – "in a unified cosmos... an eternity where everything is already born and everything has already died" (67). Aldo Leopold claims to have witnessed an evolutionary continuum while watching a pair of endangered sandhill cranes lift off from a Wisconsin marsh. In those elemental creatures, he glimpsed how the land had been a hundred years before, and then traced how the whole span of history had shaped these primitive birds (Stewart 151). That fleeting vision extended Leopold's understanding of wildlife, helping him recognize the evolutionary story evident in the grace and form of each wild being (Stewart 151).

An evolutionary consciousness may come more readily to Native American writers whose "tribal sense of self [is] as a moving event in a moving universe" (Allen *Sacred* 147). Scott Momaday suggests that this perspective derives in part from a view of the land as sacred. In holy places, he writes, ones touches "the pulse of the living planet... You become one with a spirit that pervades geologic time, that indeed confounds time and space" (*Man* 114). In many native belief systems, evolution *is* revelation. The turning of seasons, the movement of stars, the cycles of growth and decay are all thought to reveal a sacred presence. The divine, in their view, is not unveiled in rare moments – an occasional 'diamond' along one's path. Instead, the numinous manifests in countless forms every time one recognizes or creates what Latin Americans call *milagro pequeño*, a small miracle or holy moment (Tobias 152).

An appreciation for this unfolding mystery can lead to a new view of spiritual identity, what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead terms "process theology." The process view is akin to Native American perspectives in conceiving the world as a dynamic web of infinite interconnections. The divine does not direct the unfolding pattern of being; rather, as Laurens van der Post notes, *God is the pattern*. Without deliberate theological study, many ecological writers seem to arrive – intuitively – at a 'process' view of the divine.

#### Different Divinities

Revelatory moments may be particularly significant for ecological writers who resist the hierarchical structure and authoritarian stance that marks many formal religions. These writers rely on their own unmediated experience outdoors as a source of divine revelation. Their spiritual faith and belonging is affirmed – not by communal doctrines or creeds – but by personal experience.

Through their communion with the natural world, they find symbols and rituals to sustain a faith not bound by institutional religion.

Contemporary nature writers commonly seek the divine within nature, parting ways with their 19th-century predecessors who typically read nature in metaphoric terms (looking for signs of a transcendent God). Edward Abbey took particular issue with the traditional view that nature symbolizes a distant deity: "That land, those mountains, those canyons and rivers," he wrote, "you don't get religion from them; they are religion" (Bishop 17). Abbey's view has clear implications for a spiritual 'turning.' The conversion he advocates is not to a lone 'creator God' but directly to the divinity of creation. Abbey finds spirit dwelling within the myriad forms of matter about him – living and non-living. "If I have a religion," he concedes, "it's pantheism, the belief that everything is in some sense holy, or divine, or sacred" (Balassi 55). Writers who hold this view experience their time outdoors as an immersion in the sacred. Like Abbey, Alaskan writer Richard Nelson stresses that a sacramental baptism into Earth is not symbolic or representational. It is a vivid, sensual confirmation of the spiritual. Nelson reflects:

Anyone in the forest can partake directly of sacredness, experience sacredness with his entire body, breathe sacredness and contain it within himself, drink the sacred water as a living communion... open his eyes and witness the burning beauty of sacredness (*Island* 52).

The pantheistic view Nelson and Abbey hold is less common among ecological writers than panentheism (which sees the divine as *simultaneously* transcendent and imminent). The perspective of preservationist writer John Muir is still favored by many contemporary writers: "All of the individual 'things' or 'beings' into which the world is wrought," Muir wrote, "are sparks of the Divine

Soul variously clothed upon with flesh, leaves, or that harder tissue called rock..." (Albanese 99). Panentheists hold an inclusive view of the divine as 'illuminating' every being – both living creatures and elemental matter. Their deity represents the unity that dwells within multiplicity: Alice Walker captures the far-reaching stretch of this theological view: "God is everything that is, ever was or ever will be" (*Anything* 3). The divine force envisioned by panentheists is a deity defined by imminence, present in the unfolding drama of everyday life. God, or the Great Mystery, dwells in the *milagro pequeño*.

### The Practice of Attention

For some writers, the small miracles and holy moments recur so frequently that they no longer seem extraordinary. Revelation becomes a common phenomenon, one dependent on a "devotional practice" of sensory attunement to outer and inner terrain (Roszak *et al.* 203). This process uses the whole body as a spiritual instrument, a means of attending consciously to all dimensions of being within and around one (Highwater 76). Feminist theologian Beverly Harrison refers to this practice as a "spirituality of sensuality" (8).

Writers who cultivate an "embodied" spiritual practice often find that it reinforces their turning to Earth. Conversion becomes a process of awakening, literally and figuratively 'coming to one's senses.' Listening and seeing with the whole body, one attends to the spirit that inheres in the world. Many ecological writers consider this practice a means of dialogue with the divine. Poet Mary Oliver confesses: "I don't know exactly what a prayer is: I do know how to pay attention..." (94). The art of deep attention, can be a means of worship even when an individual does not know 'exactly what a prayer is' and has no formal name for the divine.

In cultivating this art, some ecological writers draw inspiration from their literary predecessors. Critic Scott Slovic observes that an interest in the "psychological phenomenon of awareness has characterized ecological writing for centuries" (Glotfelty 351). Henry Thoreau, for example, modeled deliberate contemplation – attending faithfully to the character of events in the natural world. Careful scrutiny, he found, revealed a "magical resonance" within the ordinary (Buell 153). This 'resonance' hints at the intricate and infinite connections that hold together the whole – bonds that are at once real and intangible, mundane and magical. To sense these connections, writers may have to abandon "purposiveness [and] linearity," consciously being still and humble, relinquishing expectation (Butala 147). In their quest to attain these ideals, writers often turn to Eastern or Native American cultures for guidance.

A stance of mindful non-attachment lies at the heart of many Eastern modes of spiritual practice. Indirectly, these ideas have shaped the ecological practice of Western writers, largely through the works of non-Asian adherents (Fox 367). Aldo Leopold's thought, for example, was shaped by the Russian mystic and philosopher Peter Ouspensky. Rachel Carson was strongly influenced by Albert Schweitzer, an Alsatian-born medical doctor whose "reverence for life" ethic grew from his study of comparative religions and his time in African tribal villages. Schweitzer's own philosophical vision crystallized in an epiphanic moment after days of intensive concentration. Traveling by boat along an African river one evening, his attention drifted to a herd of hippopotami wading in the water. As he watched them, the phrase *ehrfucht* came into his mind "unforeseen and unsought," an experience he described as an iron door yielding (Schweitzer 185). *Ehrfucht*, which is commonly translated as "reverence for life," actually

connotes a harder-edged awe, a wonder tinged with humility and even fear (Fox 367). This understanding of reverence holds echoes of the 'sublime,' acknowledging the power of forces beyond human control.

Schweitzer's concept has influenced many ecological writers because it captures the essence of the revelatory moment – an experience of awe before the mystery of being, tempered by an enduring sense of humility. Writers who pursue an ecological practice often report that sensual engrossment in the natural world renews their will to moral action. Wonder in the complementary diversity of the world can undermine the capacity to act heedlessly or selfishly, oblivious to the larger whole. "Reverence for life" speaks to both the spiritual and moral dimensions of a conversion to Earth: it acknowledges that devout attention constitutes a lived form of prayer.

Some writers find that an attitude of reverence grows organically from the creative process itself. "The discipline of the writer," Rachel Carson observed, "is to learn to be still and listen to what his subject has to tell him" (Brooks 2). She underscores the vital need for humility and patient attention, acknowledging the sacrality of one's subject. The writing process is a devotional practice like prayer, Carson implies, a means of listening to the voiceless dimensions of being. When the subject of one's attention is fraught with mystery and paradox, this practice can prove difficult. Both in her books on the sea and her treatise on pesticide contamination, Carson was challenged to share – through writing – a complex and ambiguous subject. The creative strength of Carson's work derives from her capacity to attend simultaneously to outer and inner worlds, articulating the correspondence between them.

One way that ecological writers attend to the inner world is by consciously recalling images and visions from dreams. They readily acknowledge the transformational force of dreams, but cannot explain its source or form: "I have powerful dreams," Scott Momaday affirms, "and I believe they determine who I am and what I do. But how, I'm not sure. Maybe that is how it ought to be. Mystery is, perhaps, the necessary condition of dreams" (Bruchac *Survival* 186). Momaday affirms that mystery invariably leads to humility – acknowledging how little of life one can fathom. Edward Abbey echoes this sentiment. Recalling a dream that left him with "an afterglow of sweetness and happiness," he speculates that it may not even have been a dream: "Indeed, it might have been the opposite – an awakening. A brief awakening that slips through my grasp, elusive as a rainbow of light, when I try to cling to it" (*Beyond* 45). Other writers also explore this liminal realm where dreams draw one into a larger reality. They let go of the dualism between waking and sleeping consciousness, in favor of an "awakened" life that joins conscious and unconscious wisdom. The only way to remain awake, they suggest, is to pay attention to inner and outer terrain, and the dialogue of dreams that joins them.

#### Repercussions of Revelation

Revelatory moments are critical junctures in the turning to earth because they reconstitute relations between inner and outer ecology. By fostering the spiritual and moral links between the self and the larger world, these moments transform perception and – more fundamentally – identity. An epiphanic experience can evoke wonder and humility before the mystery of creation, reinforcing a spiritual faith in the unfolding pattern of being. As the accounts in this chapter

demonstrate, many individuals interpret their revelations as guiding their turns toward earth, fostering a stronger 'reverence for life.'

Those who experience the sacrality of the world in vivid moments of insight may be moved to take action on behalf of Earth. Epiphanic moments can strengthen a sense of moral obligation to the natural whole. "What the transforming moment does," scholar James Loder explains, "is place people inside their convictions..." (119). It grounds their morality and theology in the felt experience of ecological interconnection, rather than in philosophical theories or religious doctrines. As the writers in this work demonstrate, a heartfelt belief in the Earth's sacrality can lead to new modes of thinking and living. Individuals who recognize the complex web of mutual dependencies that support them are able to make choices that benefit the larger whole.

While epiphanies themselves may be sudden, transfiguring illuminations, the resulting moral responses tend to be more subtle and gradual (making them hard to identify). Not all revelations lead directly to visible shifts in moral action, but most appear to strengthen a spiritual sense of participation in a sacred whole.



## CHAPTER V

### RECIPROCITY

*... A covenant of mutual regard and responsibility binds me together with the forest. We share in a common nurturing.*

- Richard K. Nelson (*Island 52*)  
Alaskan writer

Ecological writers often envision their bond to Earth in spiritual terms as a "covenant" of "mutual regard and responsibility." Through this reciprocal relation, individuals cultivate a deep affection for other beings and an abiding concern for their welfare. A sense of spiritual kinship with the whole of nature can come to inform their ecological practice, fostering a moral resolve to "share in a common nurturing."

What contemporary writers call 'covenants,' their 19th-century counterparts called a "correspondence" between humans and nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who popularized the term, held "a belief in the subtle mirroring of man and nature, a sharing of vital rhythms" between the two (*Slovic Seeking* 21). Emerson saw the dynamic exchange between humans and nature as continually shaped by the hand of God (a transcendent deity whose divine effects were manifest in earthly beauty). Contemporary perspectives on reciprocity rely heavily on these Transcendental roots, but also draw support from Native American beliefs, Eastern practices and – most importantly – individual experience. Ecological writers seek to articulate a relation between humans and the rest of nature that reflects both their intimate connection and their independent identity. Writer Dolores LaChapelle underscores that this

reciprocal exchange is not an idealized union in which humans 'become one' with nature. It is, as Taoists note, a "sensitive interference... an evocative resonance among things..." (White 170). The term resonance suggests an energetic exchange that touches every dimension of being – physical, spiritual and moral.

In making a 'covenant' with the whole of life, writers acknowledge the physical and spiritual interdependence that underlies moral obligations. Empathic identification with other beings can foster an enduring ecological conscience and a commitment to responsible action. Given an existential state of connection, the only choice left one is between "responsible and irresponsible dependence" (Berry *Unsettling* 111). Many ecological writers seek to follow a path of 'responsible dependence' by working to sustain the well-being of the broader community.

Their efforts to foster a 'common nurturing,' though, may be deemed misanthropic. Western culture tends to overlook or deny the ecological truism that all forms of life dwell within a web of dependencies. The principle of reciprocity counters many entrenched societal tenets, from Biblical injunctions to "subdue and dominate" other beings to capitalism's drive toward "natural resource" exploitation. Adamant in its individualism, American society fosters an illusory sense of independence that can thwart the recognition of reciprocity. Ecological writers strive to overcome this handicap by honoring their experiences of kinship within the natural world and by actively resisting societal dictates (as the next chapter describes).

A sense of empathic identification with other beings can lead a writer to re-vision community as both a social and ecological construct. The animals,

plants and elemental matter that share one's home terrain come to represent neighbors with common needs and concerns. This appreciation for shared interests – across species lines – diminishes the distance between humans and other animals. An extended vision of community can inspire a renewed sense of belonging and commitment to place. Many ecological writers choose to foster a broader kinship by devoting themselves to a particular region, simultaneously learning from the land and caring for it. Through a deliberate effort to 're-place' themselves, writers may deepen their ecological practice.

### Kinship

In occasional encounters with other beings, individuals can experience an unaccountable sense of kinship. These 'meetings' close the chasm that typically divides humans from other animals, offering what Carson termed an "intuitive comprehension of the whole life" (*Edge* viii). Empathic understanding lends every 'object' the status of a valued subject – a being of intrinsic worth rather than an incidental accessory or backdrop. Meeting another being as subject (or in Buber's terms, as 'Thou') can represent a sacred encounter. The bond in such moments is not one of union – a complete merging of identity – but of communion, an experience of spiritual kinship. Through empathic effort (and a relinquishment of psychological defenses), one may enter into the life of another being, momentarily sharing its experience in the world. This communion does not result from psychological projection or anthropomorphizing (making an animal more human so its experience is intelligible to one) but from an extension of feeling that appears to be almost instinctual.

The annals of nature writing hold countless stories of encounters with creatures who are incontrovertibly 'other' and yet kin. For the human

participants involved, these moments of felt relation can hold revelatory power – imprinting on heart and memory for life. Anthropologist and writer Loren Eiseley recalls a brief dance he shared with an African crane at the Philadelphia Zoo. The bird, being "under the impulse of spring" and recognizing in Eiseley a creature of appropriate vertical height, "made some intricate little steps" in his direction and extended its wings (*All* 153). Eiseley tried to match the bird's sophisticated courtship dance:

I extended my arms, fluttered and flapped them. After looking carefully... to verify that we were alone, I executed what I hoped was the proper enticing shuffle and jigged about in a circle. So did my partner. We did this a couple of times with mounting enthusiasm when I happened to see a park policeman sauntering in our direction (153).

Eiseley was forced to abandon the dance, walking away with studied nonchalance under the policeman's watchful gaze. Reflecting back on the encounter decades later, Eiseley notes that his fleeting exchange with the crane "supersedes in vividness years of graduate study" (153). That momentary meeting of unlikely partners in an ancient dance touched Eiseley's soul at a level beneath cognition.

Other writers attest to experiencing a similarly strong – even mystical – sense of communion in their encounters with animals. Rachel Carson recalls traversing a beach one night when her flashlight beam surprised a small ghost crab, lying silent amidst "the all-enveloping, primeval sounds" of wind and water (*Edge* 5). As a marine biologist, Carson had seen hundreds of ghost crabs in other settings, yet she reports: "suddenly I was filled with the odd sensation that for the first time I knew the creature in its own world – that I understood, as never before, the essence of its being" (5). Understanding, in this sense, comes closer to

mystical identification than to rational cognition. Such a meeting – across species lines – can hold an air of enchantment: "In that moment time was suspended," Carson writes, "the world to which I belonged did not exist..." (5). Entering into the dark and "primeval" world of this lone crustacean, Carson momentarily relinquishes her ordinary 'reality.' She falls into what T.S. Eliot calls 'time not our time,' an elemental world in which humans play no part.

Experiences that reveal extraordinary dimensions of being hold a fairy-tale quality that makes them seem implausible. They attest to a spiritual reality that disrupts rationalistic norms in which 'sane' adults do not dance with cranes or drop into deep timelessness. Yet many writers trust in the apodictic truth of their experience, refusing to dismiss these events as a play of the imagination or inconsequential fantasy. Even those like Carson and Eiseley, well-schooled in scientific rationalism through their academic training, readily relinquish that perspective in the face of compelling connections with other beings. These encounters remind them of a reciprocal relation to animals the larger culture has all but lost. In glimpsing the 'essence' of another creature, they sense the potential for a life where such exchanges would not be anomalous but routine.

The power of these encounters with other beings often extends beyond the initial 'revelatory' moment, reverberating in heart and imagination through the sort of kinesthetic imprinting children experience – recollections held as much in body as in mind. One may literally 'incorporate' the transitory experience of these connections, embracing them as reminders of one's own animal nature. Vivid experiences of a "common nurturing" among species can build the spiritual foundations of an ecological practice.

## Cultivating Reciprocity

Experiences of engaged reciprocity suggest the presence of a powerful bond joining diverse forms of life. Scientists E.O. Wilson and Stephen Kellert call this innate affinity for other creatures "biophilia," and suggest that it may be strongly encoded in humans. Whether or not this draw to other life is genetically programmed, as the "biophilia hypothesis" posits, it clearly exerts a strong influence in many individuals' lives. The desire to affiliate with other species can draw one into encounters that prove transformative (as Eiseley's account demonstrates). Biophilia may help build an imaginative bridge that enables humans to "look at another from within" (Fromm 82).

Scott Russell Sanders, for example, recalls his impulse to enter into the experience of otters he saw playing in the Boundary Waters wilderness. Watching the exuberant creatures awakened Sanders' interest in their experience of the world. He sought to "feel the world for a spell through their senses, to think otter thoughts" (*Writing* 123). The capacity for such empathic connection, Sanders believes, holds redemptive power:

... the yearning to leap across the distance, the reaching out in imagination to a fellow creature, seems to me a worthy impulse, perhaps the most encouraging and distinctive one we have (123).

Sanders suggests that the biophilic impulse is not only a "distinctive" gift of humans, but a potential moral resource. It may help close the gap that divides us from the rest of the animate world. Perceptual sensitivity can foster ethical sensibility. Looking at another from within may be an essential prerequisite to feeling for another from within. Empathy and compassion may depend on our capacity for attunement to other beings.

In much of modern society, the impulse to identify with other species is overridden by rational arguments, cultural taboos and emotional responses. The prevailing scientific worldview leaves little room for experiences that cannot be verified by empirical analysis. Profound encounters with other species are summarily dismissed as flights of the imagination or products of a writer's 'artistic license.' Often, strong cultural taboos against contact with other species limit the likelihood that such encounters could even occur. As Eiseley found in his dance with the crane, one must look about carefully before such exchanges and abandon them in the presence of other humans.

The opportunity to meet another animal on its terms can also be blocked by inbred fears. Even among writers devoted to the natural world, appreciation for other life forms is qualified at times. Fear – whether culturally imposed or warranted by genuine risk – may overtake sympathy for other beings. Alice Walker, for example, was raised to believe that snakes were "dangerous, frightful, repulsive, [and] sinister" (*Living* 143). This early conditioning has endured, despite Walker's cognitive knowledge that many snakes are harmless and her spiritual conviction that they are entitled to life. When a snake took up residence in Walker's garden, her abiding fear won out over reason and spiritual compassion: she allowed a friend to kill it. Walker felt guilty for having the snake destroyed and has let subsequent snakes remain. Her ongoing struggle with this 'alien' species is emblematic of the difficulty individuals encounter in striving to realize the ideal of reciprocity. In a culture marked by deep-seated fears of 'nature' and the 'wild,' those who seek to deepen their ecological practice through reciprocity often have to examine cultural assumptions and confront personal fears.

Terry Tempest Williams chooses to confront her fears through deliberate immersion in desert habitat – a harsh and unforgiving setting whose aridity, extreme temperatures and vast barrenness deter most forms of life. She faces the risks of this region consciously, having been scarred by canyon rock and threatened by the turbulent waters of flash floods. The ever-present dangers do not diminish Williams' love for the desert. They deepen it. The desert's unpredictable otherness draws her. To love the fierce and spontaneous energy of a wild place is for her the essence of an ecological practice. A reciprocal exchange, she implies, need not be tame and cultivated. It can celebrate the wildness within and without.

Both Williams and Walker hold that the strongest forms of kinship embrace difference and wildness. Reciprocity calls humans into relation with all species, not merely those that are 'useful' or 'beautiful.' Knowing the culture's penchant for sanitized forms of nature, they argue that kinship should not be confined to cute and charismatic species (cherishing otters, for example, over snakes). They struggle to acknowledge all forms of otherness, even when their admiration is tempered by fear. In this sense, reciprocity can become a spiritual discipline – a consistent effort to extend the reach of one's compassion.

Individuals who seek a deeper sense of kinship must contend both with their own fears and with cultural taboos that discourage sensory contact with other beings. There is a long tradition in American culture of treating the natural world as an aesthetic realm -- a 'gallery' where one may look but not touch. Physical contact is deemed appropriate only for utilitarian purposes: gardening, pruning, harvesting, or rewarding domesticated animals. Any physical expression of caring that extends beyond these roles tends to be ridiculed and



censored (as evidenced in the dismissive epithet "tree-hugger"). In their efforts to foster reciprocity, some individuals consciously resist these societal strictures.

Scott Russell Sanders takes obvious satisfaction in challenging these taboos:

I do hug trees... I hum beside creeks, hoot back at owls, lick rocks, smell flowers, rub my hands over the grain in wood. I'm well aware that such behavior makes me seem weird in the eyes of people who've become disconnected from the earth. But in the long evolutionary perspective, they're the anomaly ("*Honoring*" 29).

Sanders reasserts his right to participate fully within nature based on evolutionary precedent. Humans have not evolved beyond kinship, he asserts; they need to continually affirm their physical place within the whole.

One way to deepen the affinity with other species is through conscious participation in the food web. In a world where all life feeds on other life, poet Gary Snyder counsels, "we too will be offerings – we are all edible" (*Practice* 184). Participation in this cycle can foster a strong sense of humility, both a gratitude for the life that sustains one and an acknowledgment that one's own chance to nourish other life will invariably come. Reciprocity calls one to attend consciously to the dynamics of the food web. Identifying with other animals and plants does not preclude harvesting or consuming them. What reciprocity does require, ecological writers contend, is an appreciation for the sacramental nature of consumption and a commitment to treat fellow beings – even those one must kill – with respect and gratitude. Richard Nelson, a writer who supports his family by subsistence hunting and fishing, reflects on the conflict inherent in his role: "how strange it is to love so deeply what gives you life," he writes, "and to feel such pleasure and such pain in taking from that source" (*Island* 27).

The practice of reciprocity is fraught with paradox, perched precariously between honoring life and extinguishing it. Every being, Albert Schweitzer

observed, represents a "life which wills to live in the midst of life which wills to live" (186). Recognizing this dynamic, many ecological writers are convinced that the use and treatment of other species should be grounded not simply in respect for the rights of other beings, but in a spirit of profound reverence for their life and gratitude for their sacrifice.

### A Web of Dependencies

A reverential attitude challenges the prevailing utilitarian ethics that value human welfare over the interests of all other beings. Most contemporary ethics govern moral relations among humans without consideration for the needs or interests of non-human species. Reciprocity calls for a more egalitarian ethos. Reflecting on the vast web of dependencies that holds us in ecological community, Wendell Berry writes:

it is impossible, ultimately, to preserve ourselves apart from our willingness to preserve other creatures, or to respect and care for ourselves except as we respect and care for other creatures; ... it is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth (*Unsettling* 123).

Berry implies that a baseline moral standard should govern all interactions, within and beyond the human community. Any attempt to hold different standards -- caring for some while exploiting others -- ignores the essential reciprocity that enables our existence. 'Respect' and 'care,' in his view, are not functions confined to the human species: they are part of the 'common nurturing' that sustains all life.

Care involves an exchange between individuals; it cannot be given to generalized groups of 'others' (Noddings *Caring* 18). Reciprocity is holistic in perspective but particular in practice. By acknowledging what theologian Sallie McFague calls the "radical particularity" of each being, reciprocity avoids the

pitfalls of philosophical abstractions and political generalities that disregard individuals or deny differences among them (50). The welfare of each being and the relations among them are best maintained through a conscious practice of attention. Numerous ethicists and ecofeminists observe that attentive encounters with other beings can foster attitudes of care and compassion (Mathews 235). Morality, they assert, derives more from empathy than from any monolithic principle. It reflects one's response-ability, the capacity for attention and care. "Love [is] a kind of readiness," poet Duane Big Eagle writes: "The little decisions make a vision/ by which we come to live" (Bruchac *Songs* 23). Through a mindful mode of relation with the whole, ecological writers seek guiding principles for their lives. Skillful perception comes to represent a kind of devotional practice, seeing with "eyes, pores and hearts wide open" (Roszak *et al.* 203). Focused attention can reveal the unique qualities of each being and the varied threads that bind together the whole.

A focus on attentive relation challenges the customary view in Western culture of an isolate individual, wholly detached from others. It sees each being as embedded in relationship, participating in a network of cultural and ecological communities. From this holistic perspective, individualism appears to be an outmoded and destructive concept. Some writers view individualism as a fundamental cause of environmental degradation because it ignores the existential interconnections that mark our common life. In Western society, they note, a shared concern for the common good has given way to unbridled individualism – a conviction that everything in the universe exists for the individual's fulfillment. The trend toward hedonism and narcissism is continually reinforced by consumer culture and the entrenched view of nature as

a "resource" for human enrichment. Ecological writers often counter this view by asserting "that we are the belongings of the world, not the owners" (Berry *Long-Legged* 143). They challenge the hierarchy that places humans 'above' other animals and the land: humans do not dwell – in conventional parlance – *on* the earth but participate *within* an ecological community (Roszak *et al.* 212)

Scott Momaday describes humans as bound to Earth in a dynamic relation of "reciprocal appropriation." When this ideal is realized, people invest themselves in the land and simultaneously incorporate the land into their "most fundamental experience" (Capps *Seeing* 80). Momaday's view is cyclical and egalitarian, countering conventional beliefs that humans stand 'apart' from nature and 'above' other species. A reciprocal exchange seeks to sustain the well-being of each participant, without sacrificing the interests of the larger community. The collective identity rests on an ethic of kinship rather than one of competitive individualism. Momaday's vision reflects his tribal ancestry, where individual and communal identity have always incorporated the land.

Cultivating reciprocal relations with other beings can lead individuals to a new understanding of community. Kentucky writer and farmer Wendell Berry suggests that community is not defined by geography so much as by epistemology: "A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives" (*Long-Legged* 61). Ecological problems, Berry implies, stem from a resistance to acknowledge the promise and constraints of interdependence. Community is not simply a physical setting or social unit: it is a state of mind and heart that fosters genuine reciprocity – among one's own kind and across species lines. When individuals recognize their

existential state of interrelation, they can more readily answer the moral requirements of communal living. Compassion can extend from interpersonal relations to encompass all beings. In Edward Abbey's view, humans should offer other life – and the planet itself – "the same generosity and tolerance we require from our fellow humans" (*Abbey's* 135).

Empathic identification with the ecological whole is central to any practice of reciprocity. Yet writers who strive to "feel for the world" often conclude that even if one could embrace the planet in heart and imagination, one cannot take meaningful action on so vast a scale. Since love and moral concern depend on attention to the particular and known, they are best exchanged at a scale where there is genuine contact between individuals. The impulse to care may extend to global proportions, but a true response to the needs of others is confined to the local sphere. "No matter how much one may love the world as a whole," Wendell Berry writes, "one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it" (*Unsettling* 123). Writers who reach this realization often dedicate themselves to caring for one modest corner of the world.

#### A Partnership with Place

Writers who root themselves in one region may find that the terrain of home comes to define their inner ecology (*i.e.*, their grounding values and visions). The resonance between outer and inner realms can inform spiritual, moral and practical dimensions of an ecological practice. This dynamic is particularly evident among those Native American writers whose spirituality reflects "the reciprocal relationships between people and the sacred processes going on in the world" (Capps *Seeing* 14). While an intimate communion between people and place is hard to realize in contemporary society, many writers still

hold it as an ideal. Alice Walker acknowledges that even indigenous cultures fell short of maintaining the ideal, but she believes their model of commitment to place remains relevant: "the new way to exist on Earth may well be the ancient way of the steadfast lovers of this particular land" (*Living* 150).

Walker and others admire indigenous cultures -- not only for their 'steadfast' devotion to place -- but for their capacity to learn humbly from the land. In their own practice, many ecological writers look to the earth as a primary teacher. Scott Russell Sanders, Terry Tempest Williams, and Gary Snyder write of 'apprenticing' themselves to place, learning natural and cultural history from native people, from books and -- most importantly -- from the land itself. Indigenous people have a relation to the land that extends back generations, providing a wealth of accumulated knowledge and a tribal sense of kinship. Outside that context, a partnership with place can be more difficult to cultivate and sustain. For someone living in a transient and fast-paced society, "it is a spiritual discipline to root the mind in a particular landscape" (Sanders "Landscape" 66). The discipline involves an acceptance of limits -- relinquishing professional opportunities that would uproot one and adapting to the region's topographic, climatological and ecological constraints. Through this discipline, Terry Tempest Williams has come to meet the desert ecosystem on its terms, treasuring its harsh and arid character rather than trying -- in the manner of her Mormon ancestors -- to convert it to a fertile garden. Scott Russell Sanders has apprenticed himself to his home ground in Indiana -- learning the arts of tracking, ecological restoration, field sketching and photography in an effort to hone his senses and foster his appreciation for place ("Honoring" 27). Such an

apprenticeship to the land represents an extended commitment – one measured in decades.

The process of rooting oneself in place can dislodge old patterns of belief, opening one to new views. Psychologist Thomas Moore describes it as a move "from a mental to an erotic view of ecology – erotic in the sense that our longing, attachment and intimacy with place is [*sic*] considered more important than abstract ideas or ideals" (Tobias 138). Moore confirms what many ecological writers conclude from the 'truth' of lived experience: their spiritual and emotional bonds with the land typically hold more weight than cognitive theories or established ethical principles. They derive their moral guidance less from principles than from attending carefully to the 'radical particularity' of beings in the world about them.

Writers who make a covenantal bond with place may come to view the land -- in a sense -- as a life partner. Loving a place, writer Richard Nelson suggests, is akin to loving a person: "it only develops through a long process of intimacy, commitment and devotion" (*Island* 185). The bond to land may grow to encompass many elements vital to a thriving marriage: a commitment to mutual nourishment; fidelity; and a capacity for growth and improvisation. The marriage metaphor is significant because it implies a responsibility that extends beyond romantic attachment. Marriage allows for an unparalleled depth of understanding, and for continual transformation in the context of stability. That slow process of deepening devotion can enrich an ecological practice.

Disciplined attention to place often yields symbols, metaphors and stories that nourish a writer's imaginal life and creative expression. For those who enter into partnership with place, the land becomes what Dakota poet Thomas

McGrath calls a "locus of the imagination" (Sanders *Writing* 158). Creativity comes to seem less like a function of the individual and more like an expression of the dynamic relation between imagination and the world. Creativity thrives at the generative margin between inner and outer terrain. The words that we have "for the inner experience of the divine, ... [and] the intimacies of life," theologian Thomas Berry suggests, are due to "the impressions we have received from the variety of beings around us" (11). The language and imagery that define inner ecology reflect the creative powers shaping the outer world. Creative forms of expression help fuse inner and outer ecology, joining people and place into an irreducible whole (as the next chapter illustrates). In this respect, writer Conrad Aiken observes, "we ourselves are language and are land" (Cobb 67).

Writers wedded to place may find that the land comes to be – not just a source of creative inspiration – but a source of faith. Eudora Welty considers her homeland in the South "my source of knowledge. It tells me important things," she asserts. "It steers me and keeps me going straight... It saves me" (Cahill 95). Welty's account suggests that one's ecological grounding may dictate the shape of a personal credo. Place is not a secondary influence on Welty: she names it her primary source of knowledge, the force that "steers" and "saves" her. These words reveal her sense of the land's sacrality. Welty places her faith in home terrain; it becomes the source of her spiritual and moral guidance. Other writers express similar sentiments, acknowledging how their native ground lends them spiritual insight and direction. Terry Tempest Williams consciously forfeits Mormon dogma in favor of wildness, confirming her allegiance to the land: "to deny one's genealogy with the earth," she writes, is "to commit treason against one's soul" (*Refuge* 288).



Writers who receive inspiration and guidance from the land often consider that gift part of a larger reciprocal exchange. What they receive from a place corresponds to what they offer it in care and attention. Writer Richard Nelson reflects that "every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way its bounty is received" (*Island* xii). What makes a place remarkable is not simply its intrinsic properties but the "mutual regard and responsibility" evident among members of its ecological community (52). Place is not a static, material construct so much as a dynamic dance of interrelated beings. The quality of place, therefore, is determined by the thoughts and actions of its residents. Scott Momaday describes this participatory view of place: "sacred ground is in some way earned. It is consecrated, made holy with offerings – song and ceremony, joy and sorrow, the dedication of mind and heart..." (*Man* 114). Sacrality comes, to some degree, from the devotion of people to place. Through the practice of spiritual and ritual arts, individuals can 'recreate' holy ground.

### Humility

Momaday touches on a theme central to ecological reciprocity. A reciprocal relation between people and land is – at heart – spiritual and moral. Reciprocity requires the practice of certain values, the meeting of given obligations. In Momaday's view, the relation must be governed by "appropriate" behavior (Capps *Seeing* 81). What constitutes "appropriate" action is informed not only by mind and conscience, but by heart and imagination. The greater one's imaginative power and capacity for empathic identification, the more powerful one's moral sensibility can be. Reciprocity is jeopardized by societal beliefs and practices that suppress the capacity to enter imaginatively into the life of other

beings. The resulting loss in empathy can carry over into a moral negligence that endangers the ecological whole.

Rachel Carson was among the first writers in this century to decry this vital loss of perspective. Western society has succumbed to a fateful hubris, she asserted, losing a sense of its rightful place within nature: we fail "to see ourselves as a very tiny part of a vast and incredible universe, a universe that is distinguished above all else by a mysterious and wonderful unity that we flout at our peril" ("Man" 8). In Carson's view, humans now place too much trust in the technological wizardry of their own creation, and fail to honor the integrity of the larger ecological whole. This classic demonstration of hubris, she feared, would lead (as it does in ancient myths) to fiery tragedy. Subsequent ecological writers have echoed Carson's call for humility, citing further evidence of humans' physical and psychic dependence on the larger universe. Cultural historian Theodore Roszak calls the denial of this dependence the "epidemic psychosis of our time" (Gablik 41). The cure to this life-threatening ailment, some ecological writers hold, lies in acknowledging our existential state of reciprocity.

Knowing it may take considerable time to heal the larger society, individual writers take action where they can – cultivating an ecological practice grounded in humility. As Richard Nelson envisions it, humility involves "living respectfully with the community of nature, making gestures to acknowledge that respect and trying to be mindful of the equality among all things" (*Island* 97). Like Momaday, Nelson underscores the importance of actions that reinforce reciprocity. The commitment to continually reaffirm spiritual and moral bonds with other beings and the Earth is central to an ecological practice. Each gesture

made to the "community of nature" can help bind an individual back into the whole.

Writers who seek a partnership with place and a conscious kinship with other creatures come to see nearly all their choices in a moral light. Their ethical response appears to grow from an attention to ecological community and an affinity for other beings. As their connections to the life around them deepen, they find themselves transformed. "The more you engage with the land," writer John Tallmadge observes, "the more willing you are to let it change you" (*Meeting* 186). Ecological converts strive to attend to the world about them and to the emotions awakened within. "Feeling is the basic bodily ingredient that mediates our connectedness to the world..." ethicist Beverly Harrison suggests: "if we do not know what we feel, we cannot be effective moral agents" (13). Reciprocity fosters ethical action because it calls forth compassion (literally-- the capacity to 'feel with' other beings). Compassion is rooted in passion or eros, a love for the world that is whole-hearted and embodied. Reciprocity depends on an intimate relation with the world that touches every dimension of being.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESISTANCE

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed.*

*I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,*

*with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.*

- Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources"  
Feminist Poet

Recognizing how much has been destroyed, many ecological writers seek to "reconstitute the world" through social and political change. Turning *to* Earth, they find, necessitates turning *from* many of the beliefs and practices that dominate Western society. Writers come to envision their lives as a "counter-friction" (in Thoreau's words), helping to slow the engines of technological and industrial culture (Glotfelty 303). Writers exert this 'counter-friction' through writing and a range of conservation actions – from lobbying and protest measures to wildlife rehabilitation and ecological restoration. Acts of resistance can extend an ecological practice from a private affirmation of interconnection to an active "testimony," an open declaration of one's spiritual and moral allegiance to Earth. Resistance enables individuals to act upon their ecological conscience: writers "moved by all [they] cannot save" become motivated to save all they can.

The impulse to resist ecological degradation is fueled, not only by feelings of guilt and grief, but by experiences of joy and kinship in the natural world.

These positive sentiments appear to be critical determinants in shaping and sustaining an ecological practice. Ecopsychologists report that when environmental action is taken "in direct response to a strengthening bond with the land, it leads to more substantial and pervasive change than that induced by moral condemnation and other types of external coercion" (Roszak *et al.* 91). Anecdotal evidence from the lives of ecological writers supports this view. Their turns toward earth seem to stem more from a deepening bond with the land than from outside forces. As the last chapter illustrates, individuals are often moved by a felt sense of connection with other beings. They seldom recount being similarly swayed by technical information – even when the content is alarming and the presentation designed to evoke a strong response. What awakens their will to resist is a fierce sense of identification with other creatures and the elemental earth. Their accounts of inner change confirm Aldo Leopold's observation that an ethical response to the land depends upon an affective connection of love and understanding.

The transformation individuals undergo – from a casual appreciation for the natural world to a passionate devotion and sense of moral obligation – is often evident in their autobiographical works. With Henry Thoreau, for example:

Nature was initially more a pastime... Increasingly it became the environment in which he felt most comfortable. Then it became an occupation [both literary and botanical]... and finally a cause (Buell 138).

Many writers follow a similar progression in their turn toward earth. Rachel Carson moved from a recreational interest in bird-watching and beach-combing to a career in science writing, and finally to a whole-hearted engagement in environmental advocacy. Carson came to feel she was "bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could. If I didn't at least try I could never again be happy

in nature" (Brooks 13). The need for active resistance may be felt so acutely that it seems like a spiritual calling, a powerful summons deriving from a source beyond rational explanation. Efforts to resist such directives may prove futile, as Carson learned.

Carson was planning a book on evolution when a letter arrived seeking her help alerting people to the dangers of pesticides. Knowing pesticide use would be a discouraging and politically controversial topic, Carson sought out another writer for the task. Unable to find one, she conceded to draft a single magazine article. Despite her status as a best-selling author, three magazines rejected the proposed article. Finally, Carson's conscience compelled her to bring forth a full book on the topic, sacrificing her personal interests in service to the larger community. "Knowing the facts as I did," she reflected, "I could not rest until I had brought them to public attention" (Brooks 228).

After committing herself to the task, Carson persisted despite a series of debilitating illnesses and personal setbacks. Her resolution is characteristic of writers who decide to act upon their ecological convictions. Once they take up a cause, they tend not to relinquish it. These writers experience cycles of dormancy and activism, but rarely do they retreat into complacency or censor their societal critiques. Their experience suggests that when individuals progress far enough in an ecological conversion, it may be difficult to turn back. Conscience impels them to express their moral convictions through writing and other forms of societal resistance. Yet initially this expression can be hampered by entrenched modes of thought and perception.

## Against the Grain

Ecological writers face the challenge of resisting what is second nature to them – their most fundamental ways of seeing and knowing. Growing up in American culture, they participate in an intellectual tradition that cleaves the world into dualities: humans and nature; reason and emotion; spirit and matter; life and death. This heritage conditions the individual to see the world as a collection of discrete (and often opposing) objects rather than as a dynamic interplay of related beings. Ecological writers can be caught between a felt experience of interrelation and their intellectual indoctrination (which posits that rational objectivity constitutes the only valid 'truth'). Some individuals choose to resist the dominant tradition by embracing dualisms and revaluing alternative modes of knowing. Honoring aesthetic, affective and intuitive modes of perception, they seek to widen the collective angle of vision in society.

Rachel Carson, for example, insisted that rational and empirical approaches to environmental change be complemented by aesthetic and emotional modes. She challenged the cultural bias toward factual knowledge and rational objectivity, advocating for what feminist psychologists term an understanding that "involves intimacy and equality between self and object," rather than separation and mastery (Belenky 101). Understanding invites one to withhold judgment and empathically enter another's frame of reference. In this way, it becomes as much a mode of relation as a form of knowing. Carson describes how her understanding of marine life grew through sensual and imaginal participation in the life of other beings:

To understand the shore it is not enough to catalogue its life.  
Understanding comes only when, standing on a beach, we can  
sense the long rhythms of earth and sea that sculptured its land

forms...; when we can sense with the eye and ear of the mind the surge of life beating always at its shores – blindly, inexorably pressing for a foothold. To understand the life of the shore, it is not enough to pick up an empty shell and say 'This is a murex,' or 'That is an angel wing.' True understanding demands intuitive comprehension of the whole life of the creature... (*Edge* vii-viii).

What is essential, Carson holds, is not the Linnaean impulse to label other life forms but the art of sensing "with the eye and ear of the mind" wide open. She underscores the need for a form of knowing often denigrated in Western culture: intuition. Carson resists the tendency within science to discount the significance of non-rational hunches. The scope of ecological connections, she asserts, can only be grasped by drawing on intuition and imagination – modes that enable one to comprehend the "essential unity that binds life to the earth" (viii).

An intuitive grasp of ecological interconnections can carry a writer beyond the constrictions of a narrow, ego-bound identity. Broadening one's perspective situates the self within a context of limitless connections:

ecological thinking... requires a kind of vision across boundaries. The epidermis of the skin is ecologically like a pond surface... [not] a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration. It reveals the self as ennobled and extended... as part of the landscape and the ecosystem (Bowers 204).

The "extended" identity that characterizes ecological thought and practice can be likened to the expanded consciousness that occurs in the practice of meditation. Writers may experience moments of mystical insight in which they see beyond conventional boundaries of awareness. These revelatory moments constitute powerful but transitory glimpses into a world of intricate and infinite connections. The force of these epiphanies can sustain an ecological practice only when individuals consciously value their insights and resist the societal



pressures that discount them. In this way, resistance is necessary to reinforce revelation.

Revelatory 'truths' often manifest in mythic and metaphoric terms, as well as mundane ones (Abbey *One* 179). To recognize these deeper patterns, a writer must attend to how the spiritual illuminates the material. This capacity for discernment is rare in a secular culture that values efficient functioning over improbable grace. Scott Momaday suggests that profound vision can be obscured by a utilitarian view – which deems the world useful, but not beautiful (Woodard 69). To see the world on its own terms, he asserts, is both a moral and perceptual act. Ecological writers tend to cultivate a contemplative mode of seeing that fuses physical, spiritual and moral dimensions of being.

This solitary discipline serves the larger community by providing new perspectives. The writer holds a mirror up to society, offering new visions and understanding (Williams PI). The role can prove therapeutic both for the individual and the collective. "We're given art to heal ourselves," Alice Walker suggests, "and by extension to help other people heal themselves" (Gates 322). Art creates spiritual bonds as well as material objects. Through creative expression, a writer can simultaneously transform inner and outer worlds.

Many ecological writers view their work as a means of fostering community, linking people to one another and to the earth. When anticipating what she will write, Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan notes, "I ask myself how best to let my words serve" (Balassi 154). Hogan's phrasing reveals a spiritual vision: her words are offered in 'service' of something larger – a harmonious relationship with Earth. Like other ecological writers, Hogan seeks to 'bear

witness' both to the rending of the ecological web and to the sacred integrity that persists amidst losses. Both forms of witnessing are seen as a matter of moral, even religious, duty. To acknowledge the beauty inherent in the world is an act of reverence; to testify to the Earth's degradation is an act of atonement. Those writers who witness to both dimensions of being find their work is religious in the oldest sense (of *religare*) – binding together the whole of being. Their desire for a reconciliation with Earth often leads them into resistance, challenging the forces and institutions within society that perpetuate environmental destruction.

### Structures of Power

Many of the ecological writers in this work demonstrate a distrust for technology, industry, and the institutions (*e.g.*, corporations, commercial media, and malls) that serve – in their view – to reinforce a homogenized and vapid consumer culture (Norris *Dakota* 23). They see these forces as inimical to both human well-being and ecological integrity. Edward Abbey, an anarchist by inclination and training, considered all institutions of dubitable value but those that prevail in industrialized society he found especially abhorrent. Millions of citizens, he argued, now feel "fear and detestation" at the "plastic-aluminum-electronic-computerized technocracy rapidly forming around us, constricting our lives to the dimensions of the machine, divorcing our bodies and souls from the earth..." (*Abbey's* 126). Abbey considered the forces of technological culture not just distasteful but inhumane, dividing humans from one another and rest of nature. Because they sever the spiritual, moral and physical bonds joining people to place, corporate capitalism, mechanization, and materialism tend to erode an ecological practice. In challenging these pervasive forces, individuals may evolve from a state of passive resistance to one of radical criticism (Balassi 2). "You can

best serve civilization," they conclude, "by being against what usually passes for it" (Berry *Continuous* 42).

Abbey and other writers resist both the practices and premises of the technocracy. They consciously obstruct efforts to standardize, upgrade and streamline processes for maximum efficiency and minimal human or natural contact. They challenge the assumptions used to justify technological 'improvements': that material progress is an unmitigated good; that increased speed and efficiency are always desirable; and that bigger is automatically better. Many ecological writers consider these unexamined assumptions as hazardous, built on precarious moral foundations. What distinguishes human actions, Rachel Carson noted in a speech shortly before her death, "is that they have almost always been undertaken from the narrow viewpoint of short-range gain... [In the technological age], if we know *how* to do something, we do it without pausing to inquire whether we *should*" ("Man" 10). To make technological advances without ethical self-scrutiny, Carson concludes, is not only ill-advised but pathologically self-destructive.

Carson's final book *Silent Spring* vividly demonstrates how this congenital myopia afflicted government and corporations in the technological boom following World War II. The book discloses how the economic interests of chemical manufacturers drove governmental decision-making, resulting in practices that jeopardized public health and ecological well-being. After the book's release, Carson testified before Congress and appeared on several national television programs. She did not relish the media spotlight but was gratified to have her concerns heard. She felt it was "in the deepest sense, a privilege as well as a duty to have the opportunity to speak out -- to many thousands of people --

on something so important" (*Always* 259). Her individual act of resistance, in researching and writing *Silent Spring*, mushroomed into a widespread campaign that helped launch a new wave of environmental activism.

The impact of Carson's work can be attributed in large measure to her deep sense of moral conviction. While the content of her argument was compelling, it was her evident concern for the earth that often caught and held people's attention. Senator Abraham Ribicoff, who chaired the Congressional subcommittee that heard Carson's testimony, recalls how her words were those of a "true believer" (Lear 454). Carson – in her writing and public appearances – bore witness to the moral obligation she felt humans have to maintain the beauty and integrity of the natural whole.

Carson's success is notable in its singularity. Despite the emergence of a vocal environmental movement and the publication of countless texts on ecological degradation, no subsequent environmental book has generated such a strong public response. Carson's lone victory points to the difficulty writers face in publishing protests against established corporate and governmental powers. Marketing pressures and fears of litigation and often quell publishers' interest in iconoclastic ecological texts. Aldo Leopold searched for years in the 1940s to find a publisher willing to take his text, *A Sand County Almanac*, a series of lucid essays that articulate the basis for a new ecological ethic. The manuscript was finally accepted for publication mere days before his death and had to be edited and printed posthumously. A rejection letter Leopold received illustrates the challenges facing writers whose work falls outside the 'mass market' concerns of mainstream publishing. Knopf editor Clinton Simpson wrote Leopold in part:

I wonder if you would consider making a book purely of nature observations, with less emphasis on the ecological ideas which you have incorporated into your present manuscript? ... These ecological themes are very difficult indeed to present successfully for the layman... [and] the idea that the various elements... of nature should be kept in balance would end by becoming monotonous (Callicott 99).

As Leopold and many subsequent writers have learned, economic pressures often favor "entertaining" books over material that could provoke substantive reflection. A cultural penchant for escapism (evident in literature, advertising and epidemic rates of addiction) often thwarts efforts to disseminate ideas and foster societal resistance. Widespread denial (the 'psychic numbing' described in Chapter 3) makes it hard for writers to focus public attention on ecological concerns. This situation is compounded by a pervasive resistance to discuss matters of spiritual or ethical import in mass media, political debates or trade publications. Individuals who construe humans' relation to nature as inherently spiritual and ethical are apt – in a secular and hypermaterialistic society – to be considered misguided or even threatening (because their views challenge the assumed 'right' to exploit nature for maximal profit).

#### Grassroots Action

Recognizing the limits of verbal suasion, many ecological writers choose more direct means of resistance. These range from radical, defensive efforts (such as protest actions and 'monkey-wrenching') to protective and remedial approaches (such as land conservation and ecological restoration). Measures undertaken at the local level can become a means of affirming the bond with one's natural community. Many writers extend their ecological practice through grassroots action on behalf of the land.

Edward Abbey came to experience his community as a cause – one worthy of a lifetime's work. In the vast expanses of the Southwest, Abbey reported finding "something to fight for that will never desert me in my lifetime" (*Confessions* 8). Abbey's passion for place led him to undertake monkey-wrenching, a deliberate effort to "oppose, resist and sabotage the contemporary drift toward a global technocratic police state" (*One* 177-78). He depicted extreme cases of sabotage in fiction (such as a plot to blow up Glen Canyon Dam), but confined himself to lesser measures in practice. Biographers and friends report that Abbey removed billboards and sabotaged road-building machinery to slow the pace of highway construction. In his monkey-wrenching, Abbey condoned selected use of sabotage (the crippling of constructed objects) but opposed terrorism (acts of violence against living beings). Abbey's actions strike many readers as extreme, but he felt that the pace and magnitude of environmental destruction warranted a radical response. Abbey felt obligated – not just to work toward new modes of living – but to actively dismantle the old.

Other writers choose to pursue more gradual and incremental means of change. Rachel Carson and Terry Tempest Williams, for example, have worked to conserve natural areas through legislative measures and outright acquisition. Carson described her efforts as a way to take "care of a spiritual security, by 'laying up treasures' in an earthly heaven" (*Always* 214). The deliberate use of religious language denotes Carson's conviction that land protection is holy work, a means of honoring the sacrality of Earth. Ecological resistance, for Carson, is as much a religious devotion as a political act.

In other writers, the spiritual discipline of resistance is practiced through patient efforts to revive the health of depleted habitats. Wendell Berry and his

family, for example, have spent decades restoring the ecological balance of their farm along the Kentucky River. Berry eschews commercial pesticides and fertilizers and favors draft horses over diesel-burning technology. His communal, agrarian philosophy grows directly from his daily practice: "It seems to me inescapable," he writes, "that before a man can usefully promote an idea, the idea must be implemented in his own life" (*Long-Legged* 85). Through land conservation and stewardship, writers become active participants in their home habitats. Attentive to seasonal changes, shifting species dynamics, and nuances in weather, they come to an understanding of place that surpasses knowledge. Their efforts to restore the outer landscape renew their inner connections to the whole. In this way, grassroots action can cultivate a sense of community that extends across species lines.

A growing sense of kinship with other beings compels some ecological writers to advocate for animal welfare. Rachel Carson, a devoted amateur ornithologist as well as a professional marine ecologist, saw her efforts to restrict pesticide use as vital to ensuring the health of wild and domesticated animals. She also expressed her concern for animals more directly – lobbying the Food and Drug Administration to free dogs used in laboratory research and writing Congress in support of reduced animal testing. Shortly before her death, Carson drafted the foreword to an expose on factory farming called *Animal Machines*.

The kinship that poet Linda Hogan feels for animals finds expression in work caring for birds of prey injured by cars, shooting, trapping or ensnarement. She describes her volunteer job in a wildlife rehabilitation center as an "apprenticeship" in which she is the "disciple of birds" (148). (Here again religious language reveals the spiritual quality of this bond.) What these hawks,

owls and eagles require of their human caretakers, Hogan asserts, is that "we learn to be equal to them, to feel our way into an intelligence that is different from our own" (150). She considers her rehabilitation work a path toward reciprocity, a tangible means of healing "the severed trust" between humans and the earth (153). This recognition of mutual 'interbeing' comes to characterize the lives of many ecological writers.

### Political Testimony

Actions taken to restore the essential trust between humans and other species can lead individuals into the political realm. Many writers feel they have a moral responsibility to be engaged in communal decision-making, exercising their full rights as democratic citizens. They see environmental advocacy as a vital dimension of civic duty. Being citizens – not just of human society – but of a larger ecological community, they feel obligated to represent those who cannot participate directly in the political arena. That responsibility is typically met through grassroots organizing, participation in nonprofit work, and legislative testimony. The example Carson set in the 1960s, fusing creative writing and political advocacy, has been followed by many ecological writers: *e.g.*, Alice Walker, Wendell Berry, Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams.

Other writers hesitate to enter the political sphere or even acknowledge that their writing has political implications. Despite the inspiration his work has given the American Indian Movement, Scott Momaday denies being political: "that's not my disposition, somehow. I'm not a political person" (Balassi 63). Momaday prefers to view his writing as moral: his focus rests on underlying values, not on the tactics of societal reform. This perspective may be particularly prevalent among Native American writers who often view politics – and the



cycles of life – from a long-term perspective. Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie

Marmon Silko asserts:

... the most effective political statement I could make is in my art work. I believe in subversion rather than straight out confrontation. I believe in the sands of time... (Coltelli 147-8).

These writers tend to view their political role as an indirect one of "provoking social reflection and change" rather than personal involvement in legislative initiatives (Buell 135). Whether their bent toward indirect testimony stems from personal preference or cultural influences, it reveals the ambivalence that often marks writers efforts to fuse art and advocacy.

Those who do enter the political fray rarely confine their public testimony to legislative hearing rooms. When calls to action go unheeded by politicians, some individuals resort to acts of civil disobedience. They follow the dictates of conscience over the letter of the law. Through demonstrations and protest actions, they try to awaken the public conscience and influence those in power.

Among ecological writers, the precedent for such action was set by Henry Thoreau who was jailed briefly for war tax resistance. Contemporary writers continue to risk imprisonment in protests against the military. Alice Walker has joined in numerous demonstrations and civil disobedience actions at military sites (protesting the export of arms to Central America), and Terry Tempest Williams has done "direct actions" at the Nevada Nuclear Testing Site. Frustration with the legal system first sparked Williams' interest in civil disobedience:

to our court system it does not matter whether the United States government was irresponsible, whether it lied to its citizens, or even that citizens died from the fallout of nuclear testing. What matters is that our government is immune (*Refuge* 285).

Williams concludes that a system capable of inflicting death on its own citizens has to be changed.

Both Williams and Walker see their nonviolent protests as necessary to ensure the greater peace of the human and ecological community. Neither one delineates between "peace actions" and "environmental actions." Military destruction, in their view, represents one manifestation of an exploitative power structure that endangers all forms of life. They declare their allegiance to Earth and act on its behalf, striving toward an ideal of "conscious harmlessness" (Walker *Anything* 42).

Ecological writers who step into the political realm often find that its demands disrupt the contemplation and concentration needed for a creative life. The pressures of media interviews and press conferences can exhaust them, while extensive travel deprives them of essential time with the people and places they love. One way to reach a middle path between civic responsibilities and creative needs, Terry Tempest Williams believes, is to serve a political 'tour of duty.' In her vision of democracy:

Each of us takes our turn [working on large-scale issues] and then we step back into community... If we each take our turn, no one is beat up too much. No one gets too tired, too burned out. We realize that it's a rotation. And we can give each other strength and inspire one another (PI).

Williams followed this formula in her work for Utah wilderness preservation. On that issue, she reflects, her number came up. She poured energy into lobbying, grassroots organizing, and co-editing the book *Testimony*, a chapbook on Utah wilderness lands distributed to every member of Congress. After President Clinton established the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, Williams stepped back to work on local concerns. She recognizes that the issue of Utah

wilderness preservation is far from resolved: it will resurface periodically as it has for generations. What is essential, she believes, is that "each generation takes its turn" (PI).

Rachel Carson expressed similar sentiments during the political fervor following *Silent Spring*'s publication. Given Carson's media success, environmental activists anticipated a formula that could be repeated. They invited Carson to undertake a best-selling 'sequel' that would stimulate debate on other long-neglected environmental concerns. Carson's response was polite but firm: "One crusading book in a lifetime is enough" (Lear 452). Carson had devoted six years of her life to the research, writing and public defense of *Silent Spring*. She rarely begrudged the demands imposed by the book and never seemed to consider abandoning the project despite a host of medical and personal challenges. When she completed the manuscript, though, she sensed that her moral obligation was met. Carson wrote a friend expressing relief at having repaid her 'debt' to the natural world:

Last night the thoughts of all the birds and other creatures and all the loveliness that is in nature came to me with such a surge of deep happiness, that now I had done what I could – I had been able to complete it – now it had its own life... (Brooks 272)

In a world wracked by ecological ills, it can be hard for writers to discern when their obligation to earth is met. Carson is one of the few writers to make peace with what she could do. Even that relief may have been fleeting, more a consequence of exhaustion than conviction. Within months of concluding she had 'done what she could,' Carson had thrown herself into public lectures, television appearances and Congressional testimony. Given the steady stream of issues requiring attention, writers are pressed to balance the inner imperative to

live in ecological communion against the exigencies of a society slow in its collective turn toward Earth. Being a 'counter friction' to powerful societal forces can wear one down physically, emotionally and spiritually (as many active writers attest). To sustain their commitment, they often strive to balance resistance and reverence.

Resistance comprises measures taken 'against' current practices and policies. It represents a reactive stance, often grounded in anger or fear. Reverence, in turn, grows from awe, wonder and profound humility. It is a sensual and spiritual affirmation of unity amidst seeming diversity, and of integrity amidst apparent chaos. An ecological practice, many writers attest, depends on maintaining a precarious balance between these paradoxical forces. Writer E.B. White described this existential tension as being caught between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor it. The challenge, White and others conclude, is to hold the poles together -- simultaneously savoring (in moments of revelation for example) and saving (through conscious acts of resistance).

For the writers who dwell within this paradox, the art of savoring comes to inform the acts of saving. Their efforts at resistance are continually shaped by their creative sensibilities and spiritual bonds to Earth. As their language demonstrates, their conservation work represents a form of spiritual devotion as well as of political action. Carson, for example, termed her pesticide campaign a 'crusade' while Williams characterizes her wilderness advocacy as a form of religious 'testimony.' This fusion of the spiritual and political appears to strengthen their ecological practice. Devotional acts in the public sphere can reinforce a sense of reciprocity and open the way to new visions for living in the world. Those visions often take shape through the arts of ritual and story.

## CHAPTER VII

### RE-STORYING

*To create is to involve oneself as fully, as consciously, as possible in the creation, to be immersed in the world.*

- Wendell Berry (Merrill xviii)  
Kentucky writer and farmer

For many ecological writers, creative immersion in the world comes through narrative and ritual arts. These spiritual and aesthetic forms of expression can deepen and extend an ecological practice, catalyzing individual change and strengthening links to the community. In the process of turning to earth, individuals may come to live out new stories and rituals – ones that renew their connections to creation. The transformational power of these arts is evident in every dimension of ecological conversion – from the recollection of childhood stories to ritualized gestures of reciprocity. Many ecological writers depend on ritual and narrative to re-vision their identities and strengthen their bonds with earth. They seek out stories and practices that foster what Scott Momaday terms an “appropriate” relation to the natural world. (While there is no communal consensus on what constitutes “appropriate,” writers appear to derive sufficient moral guidance from their personal experiences of remembrance, revelation and reciprocity). By creating and circulating narratives of ecological wholeness, these writers strive to ‘re-story’ themselves and the larger culture. The function of story, in their view, is not solely to entertain or to exercise aesthetic sensibilities. Re-storying implies a capacity to change the narratives by which we live.

Storytelling and ritual acts hold the power to ignite both imagination and conscience. As previous chapters illustrate, a vital ecological practice depends on a capacity for empathic perception (comprehending – through intuition and imagination – the life of another being). Certain narrative and ritual forms can strengthen this capacity to recognize ecological interconnections. They illuminate the links between the known and the unknowable, the real and the ideal – allowing one to experience the force of spirit within the elemental world. In this way, meaningful stories and rituals can deepen a sense of reciprocity and moral responsibility. Critic Scott Slovic notes that "imaginative engagement" often serves as "the first step toward active concern" (*Seeking* 15). Stories can foster a strong sense of empathic identification that awakens the conscience and impels action. Identification suggests a merging of individual stories in which another being becomes interwoven into one's own life narrative. The 'active concern' that results from this intermingling is less a product of guilt or moral duty than from a celebration of interdependence. Narratives and rituals provide a means of sharing the joy, wonder and heartache evoked by our existential connection with all being.

The life stories recounted in this work demonstrate vital ways in which narrative and ritual arts foster a turning to earth. Stories and sacred rituals can awaken remembrances, recalling the 'unbounded' identity of youth (when participation in place was so complete one did not feel distinct from the whole). Narratives that restore links to the past often reveal a spiralling continuum of continuity amidst change. They can steady one in the 'deep trench' of reflection, reaffirming a cyclic view that sees struggle and setbacks as part of a larger narrative. They can recapture the vivid intensity of revelatory insights,

sustaining the transformative power of those moments over time. Stories can even spark reflection or revelation by leading one to wonder, question and turn inward for answers (Strauss 4).

New narratives and rituals help writers reconstitute themselves and resist prevailing practices. By recrafting their own life stories, writers begin changing some of the collective narratives by which they live (e.g., the Enlightenment 'story' of an irreparable split between humans and nature, mind and heart, spirit and matter). Creative arts hold the power to revise these timeworn scripts, devising new means to strengthen ties with the elemental earth. Stories help bind humans into the web of being, as indigenous cultures have recognized for generations. The turn to earth may hinge on the power of narrative and ritual to touch the heart and imagination, changing people from the inside out.

#### Re-storying Self

Many ecological writers consider story central both to what they do and to who they are. Narrative represents more than the craft of writing: it becomes a mode of seeing and being in the world. They come to view their own lives as unfolding stories (Brockelman *Inside* 94). This perspective can open the way to a new vision of identity and creativity. Scholar Peter Dorsey defines conversion as "the inevitable moment that occurs when one sees one's life as text" (5). That text is not a simple story line tracing a linear path. Each individual's life story is embedded within familial stories which are — in turn — held within cultural narratives. Re-storying the self, therefore, can lead to broader societal transformation.

For writers, this process of reconstruction may begin in the fusion of imagination and language. Scott Momaday observes that "when we are drawn

into the element of language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and are created" (*Man* 169). The 'creative' power of writing is not confined to shaping fictional characters and tales. It rests in the capacity to re-create the self. Stories can foster ecological conversion by stretching the margins of identity -- opening the way to new beliefs and practices. If one's life is text then through narrative and ritual arts one can re-story both the self and the world. This ongoing process represents a progressive conversion by which one may integrate the varied dimensions of self and strengthen bonds with earth.

The power that narrative holds to 're-story' and 're-create' individuals and society is rarely acknowledged in mainstream Western culture. Narrative forms tend to be "lost arts" in a society that favors technological and solitary forms of 'entertainment' (such as television and computer games) over communal forms of creative expression -- such as ritual, ceremony, dance and story. Children may be entertained by storytelling, but most adults dismiss it as irrelevant. Given the cultural emphasis on secular rationalism, narrative and mythological modes of understanding are commonly seen as useless forms of fiction or fantasy. People still exchange stories (speaking, for example, of a 'story' heard on the news or at the office), but do not view them in the context of mythic life narratives.

In contrast, American Indian cultures often view story as fundamental to human existence. For the individual and the tribe, identity is defined in terms of story. Scholars Annie Booth and Harvey Jacobs note that "the Native American has a personal investment in vision and imagination as a reality, or as part of a reality..." in contrast to non-tribal people who readily dismiss those dimensions of being (39). This indigenous view allows for a unity that contains both an empirical and a visionary reality. It counters the traditional distinction between



'fact' and 'fiction' maintained in most of Western culture (Murphy 44). Scott Momaday notes that in his Kiowa tribal tradition "we are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves" (Balassi 64).

Momaday cites his experience living out a Kiowa legend as evidence of how imagination can suffuse identity, gradually re-storying the self. In keeping with Kiowa tradition, Momaday was given a tribal name as an infant. He was called *Tsoai-talee* (Rock Tree Boy) after a boy in Kiowa legend who is transformed into a bear and chases his sisters up a tree. They jump into the sky and turn into a constellation while the boy becomes the geological formation known to the Kiowa as Rock Tree (because it resembles a giant tree stump). Momaday was taken as a young child to the Rock Tree landform that gave rise to the legend and has returned on subsequent pilgrimages.

For Momaday this tribal legend is not a quaint fiction whose primary value is nostalgic or symbolic. The story is a guiding, sometimes overpowering force in his life: "I've struggled with my bear power through [the] years..." he reflects. "The bear sometimes takes me over and I am transformed" (Woodard 13). Dwelling within this story keeps Momaday grounded in his native land and tribal identity. Narrative becomes a means of remembrance, a way to integrate the personal and ancestral past into the present. Through narrative Momaday experiences a communion so deep it borders on union: he *is* the Rock Tree, the stars *are* his sisters. This profound identification with elemental matter deepens the spiritual and moral dimensions of his ecological practice, fostering a lived sense of reciprocity with other beings. Momaday has moved about for professional opportunities and lived abroad, but because he is Rock Tree Boy he carries his tribal home ground within him. Place is not so much *where* he is but

who he is. In this way, Momaday is able to live in what he terms an "appropriate" relation to the land.

This level of identification with the earth can prompt a deepened sense of moral accountability. Momaday, for example, describes the light pollution affecting his home region as not just an 'energy concern' or 'environmental problem' but as a moral issue. Recalling his time watching stars as a child, he expresses concern that his children will be deprived of the same opportunity. By missing that experience to bond with the elemental world, they might lose the accompanying stories. This prospect Momaday says "threatens me at my center. The stars are very important to me mythically. To think of losing the stars represents to me a very deep wound" (Balassi 62). When one *is* place, exploitation of the land is felt as a violation of the self.

For writers steeped in Cartesian modes of thought, this depth of identification can prove difficult. Western intellectual traditions reinforce binary modes of thought and perception that sever humans from the rest of nature. One could argue that the entrenched rationalism evident in American culture is *itself* a narrative or even a mythology, yet the cultural commitment to 'scientific truth' tends to preclude any such interpretation. This legacy makes it difficult for writers of European descent to relinquish the prevailing view of an autonomous self bounded by the physical body. Stories within the dominant culture tend to reinforce a sense of separation from 'nature,' rather than a mythic identification with the land. Literary critic Scott Slovic demonstrates this entrenched dualism when he notes that a "facile sense of harmony, even identity, with one's surroundings... would fail to produce self-awareness of any depth or vividness" (Glotfelty 352). Identity is defined in opposition to an "other," Slovic suggests: in

this view, any harmony with "one's surroundings" threatens the autonomous self. In contrast, writers less influenced by Western intellectual traditions often believe "self-awareness" *depends* on identity with one's "surroundings" because the self comprises place. The latter view, common to many indigenous people, allows for a relational understanding that diminishes the divide between self and other, people and place.

By apprenticing themselves to tribal cultures, some ecological writers come to adopt a more relational perspective. Terry Tempest Williams, for example, spent a year living among the Navajo – an experience that helped her recognize how story acts as a communal adhesive:

Storytelling awakens us to that which is real... It is the most pure form of communication because it transcends the individual... Those things that are most personal are most general, and are, in turn, most trusted. Stories bind. They are connective tissues. (*Pieces* 134-135).

Williams' experience with the Navajo taught her that personal stories constitute links within a larger narrative that 'binds' people to each other and to the land. She came to appreciate the power that story holds to build community (whether defined by family, region, spirituality or politics), gradually affirming shared ground and forging new commonalities. She also came to depend on narrative arts as a means of dialogue (both with humans and other beings). From the Navajo, Williams learned how stories foster the arts of listening and attending – inviting one to wonder and reflect.

By prompting reflection new narratives can undercut materialistic and utilitarian patterns of seeing and being, demanding new codes of ethical conduct. Apache Elder Benson Lewis describes the potential force of this moral prod: "Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right. Stories make

you replace yourself" (Nabhan/Trimble 21). Narrative awakens one's conscience as well as one's imagination, Lewis suggests. By prompting moral reflection, stories can evoke a more conscious pattern of living. That inner transformation may be so profound that the individual comes to live out a new story: the self is 'replaced.'

This process of re-storying can be slow in the absence of communal storytelling. Because dominant American culture lacks a tradition of oral narrative, ecological writers derive many of their 'guiding' stories from written works. Books and other media can act as a moral prod but the effect may not be as strong or lasting as with oral stories (ones potent enough to 'work on you like arrows'). In crafting and sharing their own narratives, many ecological writers hope to inspire readers to act with greater moral responsibility. The challenge, Scott Russell Sanders asserts, is to make others "feel the ache and tug of the organic web," to help situate them within the larger natural whole (*Secrets* 226). Writers like Sanders clearly see their own narratives as more than accounts of personal turning. They seek to craft inspirational texts, sharing stories in an effort to educate, to heal and to guide others in their turns toward earth (*Berry Dream* 124).

### Re-storying Place

The process of sharing stories can strengthen community ties, both those among humans and those binding humans into the larger web of being. Narrative can literally re-place people by renewing their links to the land. "To restore any place," writer Gary Paul Nabhan observes, "we must also begin to re-story it, to make it the lesson of our legends, festivals and seasonal rites" (*Elder American* 680). Nabhan's work as an ethnobotanist, preserving native plant

species and the indigenous cultures built around them, has given him insight into how narrative joins people and land. Many communities with whom Nabhan works have lost crucial environmental knowledge as mass media and formal schooling became the dominant means of informational exchange. Stories and legends about how and why certain plants grow are no longer exchanged, depriving people both of practical knowledge and a spiritual affinity for place. The path to ecological restoration, Nabhan now believes, lies in sustaining the stories that reinforce communal ties to the native habitat.

Narrative can serve as a means of communication and communion between people and land: "through the stories..." writes Laguna Indian Paula Gunn Allen, "the gap between isolate human being and lonely landscape is closed" (*Sacred* 120). The reciprocal exchange sustained by narrative is vital, Allen implies, both for human inhabitants and for the land. Allen holds the belief (common to many indigenous people) that the land is storied, its elemental existence intertwined with narrative. In this view, imagination does not exist apart from reality but is embedded within it. Narrative permeates the elemental world, a vital part of what binds together the whole.

Without story, the landscape is 'lonely' and bereft. Allen's view is akin to that of Aborigines for whom – in anthropologist Bruce Chatwin's words – "an unsung land is a dead land" (Sanders *Staying* 169). Land 'dies' when deprived of a harmonious relationship with its inhabitants. A reciprocal relation to the land therefore requires a devoted practice of re-storying, honoring place through narrative and ritual arts. Terry Tempest Williams, for example, envisions her participation in 'direct actions' at the Nevada Nuclear Testing Site as a ritualized means of restoring a 'dead' land wracked by atomic detonations. By entering the

site in festive costumes, dancing and singing, Williams and her colleagues seek to generate a new story -- and hence a new future -- for the land and those who live on (or in) it.

Ecological writers often feel called to heal lonely, unsung places through spontaneous rituals. Edward Abbey describes an evening in canyon country when he set up camp, built a cedar fire and began playing flute. His music was a song for place, he reflected; he was "doing only what is proper and necessary" (Abbey's 195). Abbey's comment suggests a deep sense of reciprocity, an attempt to attend to place. The sacred ritual -- with cedar incense and music -- constitutes an 'offering' of spiritual devotion. Through this humble act, Abbey cultivates a "proper" relation to place (*i.e.*, a moral stance that acknowledges the inherent qualities of the land). The place becomes a 'character' in his life story and he becomes part of its long, geological narrative.

Without the presence of story and song, the land can be vulnerable as well as lonely. Scott Russell Sanders recalls what befell the unsung geography of his youth. The rural region of Ohio where Sanders lived was populated by small-scale farmers, many of whom were devoted to the land. When the federal government proposed to construct a dam that would flood this fertile valley, no one organized resistance to the plan. Families were bought out and relocated. Sanders, like his neighbors, stood by watching helplessly as the terrain of his childhood drowned. He speculates that the absence of shared stories contributed to this displacement: "Our attachments to the land were all private. We had no shared lore, no literature, no art to root us there, to give us courage to help us stand our ground" (*Writing* 5). Lacking the cohesive force of common narratives and rituals, the community failed to unite in defense of its land.

Having learned from that loss, Sanders now works to build a "shared lore" that can better sustain the land and those living on it. His stories of place reflect an abiding attachment to home ground. Sanders has spent years traveling the back roads of "limestone country" in Indiana – going to farmers' markets, country fairs and grange halls – gathering stories from long-time residents and sharing them through essays so that others will have an art to root them in place. This effort to re-story his home terrain has deepened Sanders' ecological practice. Narratives reinforce both his spiritual bond to place and his sense of moral responsibility. "I am bound to earth," he writes, "by a web of stories" (*Staying* 150). The bond is covenantal, made for life: Sanders describes himself as married to the land "by narrative as well as nature" (167). Many other ecological writers see their relation to home as one of committed partnership. The prevalence of this metaphor in their works reveals the depth of their intimacy and interdependence with the land.

#### Writing as a Sacred Art

Sanders reaffirms his vows to the land through a devotional practice of writing. His efforts to give voice to place represent – not just a mode of creative expression – but a "spiritual practice" (*Writing* 166). He uses a Quaker term "centering down" to describe the deliberate quieting of mind and body that precedes writing. This inner stillness enables insights to surface from spiritual depths. Writing constitutes a devotional practice for Sanders in that it joins him to the rich soil of lived experience and to the ineffable realm of spirit. He writes to attune himself to the full breadth of being, both elemental and transcendental.

Sanders reports that he writes every day upon rising "in order to come more fully awake" (177). His expression echoes Thoreau's famous injunction: "We

must learn to reawaken and to keep ourselves awake" (79). For both writers, awakening represents spiritual enlightenment – an intensity of being that humans rarely if ever realize. Thoreau claimed he had never met anyone who was fully awake. While the ideal of a complete awakening may be elusive, ecological writers strive toward that vision through the art of attentiveness and the discipline of writing.

Writing can be a means of honoring both elemental and spiritual realms. Experience of the natural world may evoke a profound sense of reverence that fuels creative expression. This 'religious' impulse to praise creation surfaces even in those for whom the shape and character of the creator remains unclear. Edward Abbey, for example, scorned conventional religion – considering himself an "Earthiest" (one whose faith lies in the "apodictic rock" beneath his feet). Yet he saw his craft as a devotional practice: "writing is a form of piety or worship," Abbey explained. "I try to write prose psalms that praise the divine" (Balassi 55). The land constitutes Abbey's religion and writing his primary means of honoring the sacred. Writing can foster attunement to the more-than-human world, acting almost as a form of meditation. In this view, the craft of writing comes to seem less like an act of individual creativity and more like one expression of the creative energy animating the world. Laguna Indian writer Paula Gunn Allen reflects: "I think you touch into the mythstream that is always there... [a] part of the world...." Instead of asserting 'I wrote that piece,' "a writer will acknowledge 'I listened'" (Balassi 105).

By entering into the collective "mythstream," a writer can gain a stronger sense of participation in the ecological whole. The act of writing can teach the art of belonging, as writer SueEllen Campbell observes: "it is in nature writing --



perhaps almost as much as in wilderness itself – that I learn to recognize the shape and force of my own desire to be at home on the earth” (Glotfelty 136). Campbell erases the traditional dualism between the 'civilized' and the 'wild' by suggesting that one can be 'at home on earth' in either setting through the reflective practice of writing. Writing allows one to explore the contours of inner ecology, the "shape and force" of one's values and needs. This process can help to affirm long-held connections (such as those that surface through reflection and remembrance) or to forge new beliefs and practices (such as forms of reciprocity and resistance). By reinforcing dimensions of an ecological practice, the act of writing can hasten a turning to earth.

Writers often hold a foundational faith in the power of language to effect change. This belief can be particularly strong among individuals from oral cultures who view language as a vital means of communication with the larger natural world. Philosopher David Abram notes that primal people often see language in a more holistic and inclusive way than is customary in Western culture. Rather than being strictly a form of mental discourse, it becomes a "sensuous, bodily activity born of carnal reciprocity and participation..." (82). Language that is grounded in the body can facilitate communication and reciprocal relations among all species, not merely humans.

While this perspective is most evident in oral cultures, it also appears among some contemporary ecological writers (as evidenced in the calls for an 'erotic' connection to place and a practice of sensory attunement to other beings). Even writers who emphasize the need for a bodily connection to earth, though, must convey their message through the constricted medium of the printed word. Recognizing the greater power of spoken language to transform the imagination

and conscience, they can feel constrained by writing -- trying to distill rich, multi-sensory experiences into a concentrated, cognitive form. Terry Tempest Williams describes this feeling as one of being a waterfall channeled into a small pipe (PI). Spoken language provides a wider pipe -- allowing for more bodily expression and intonation in the process of storytelling. For this reason, ecological writers often strive to capture the 'sound' and 'feel' of oral storytelling within their written works. Rachel Carson would read her drafts aloud and have her mother read them to her, refining the text in response to how the language sounded and resonated within her. Powerful writing, she believed, had to echo in the heart as well as head. By understanding language as a sensual, bodily means of communication, writers can use words to reinforce their intimate bonds with place.

### Sacred Ritual

The embodied relation to earth fostered by re-storying is evident in ritual as well as in written and oral narratives. Many writers consciously affirm spiritual and moral bonds to the natural whole through sacred rituals. Whether improvised or adapted from earth-based cultures, rituals can help writers replace themselves within the more-than-human world. Ritual becomes a means of expressing humility and embodying one's gratitude in existence. Through a "systematic practice" of ritual, routine actions can take on "sacramental value" (Tallmadge *Meeting* 164). This shift is evident in preceding chapters as writers move from an aesthetic and recreational interest in 'nature' to a committed ecological practice. Ritual becomes a means of affirming the centrality of Earth in their lives. By joining physical and spiritual dimensions of life, ritual can help individuals perceive the sacrality of the whole. It becomes an attempt "not only

to express the inexpressible, but to enter into it" (Hull 54). Ceremonial acts can be simple and spontaneous expressions of sentiments that transcend words, such as Abbey's musical homage to canyon country. The impromptu ritual that drew Abbey into the elemental world – smelling cedar incense and hearing music echo off rock -- also joined him to the inexpressible. Ritual can dissolve the barriers separating the temporal and the sacred: in ceremony, everything in the world becomes symbol and sacrament (Boff 160).

Perceiving the sacramental quality of the elemental world helps writers affirm the spiritual basis of their ecological practice. The practice of ritual can – in Terry Tempest Williams' view – reinforce "those bonds that we feel with the Earth [until they] become a prayer" (PI). Williams suggests that ritual transmutes the fundamental relation of physical interdependence -- in which all beings live - - into a spiritual relation that honors the sacrality of the 'other.' Ritual moves people from community to communion, from dialogue to prayer. As Williams envisions it, prayer involves an intimate exchange with the spirit imminent in the elemental world and in all beings. Prayer depends on a language of the heart as well as head. This language crosses species lines, enabling a reciprocal exchange among all beings. To participate in this prayer, Williams suggests, requires an attentive mode of listening at every level of being. Prayer calls for receptivity and faith, trusting – in poet Linda Hogan's words – that "the earth cranes its neck to hear our prayers" (Bruchac *Stories* 282-3)

If one is attentive, the moment itself may dictate what ritual is required. Many of the rituals that Terry Tempest Williams describes are spontaneous ones evoked by intimate encounters with place. In her story "The Stone Spiral," Williams illustrates how sacramental acts grow from imaginative play. An

extended ceremony in which a couple constructs a stone spiral begins simply as "a game... something to move along a slow afternoon" (*Coyote's* 88). The contours of the ritual emerge from the dynamic confluence of landscape and imagination. The couple assembles rocks in a spiral tracing the color spectrum from black center stone to white outer stone. Each stone is awarded a domain of creation, with tales told of the creatures it rules. The couple brings water to quench the stones' "thirst," and inscribes the sand by each one with a family member's name. Every dimension of this elaborate ritual binds the participants more deeply to place until the stones literally become family.

As with this gathering of stones, place-based rituals may involve little or no human company. They are communal in a broader sense, being shared with other species and the elemental earth (like Abbey's flute serenade to the canyon). Terry Tempest Williams often goes to the desert alone to deepen her communion with Earth. The rituals and prayers that hold meaning for Williams are spiritual acts of improvisation that lie outside formal religious traditions. They unveil experiential 'truths' not readily acknowledged in the dominant culture. Through ritual, for example, many writers come to re-vision their concept of time as linear and finite. Rituals and narratives tend to be spiral in structure, with endings that lead back to the beginning. Seeing time in this manner frees a person to revise his or her path, to rewrite the chapters. The more linear view denies this option, considering "past" chapters as closed books.

Many writers opt for the more open-ended view: their faith in the unfolding process sustains them when they confront disappointments and setbacks. Terry Tempest Williams, for example, takes comfort in a process perspective – recognizing that our lives are stories being written (and

continually rewritten). In this sense, narrative becomes more than a creative art: it constitutes an article of faith. Story acts as a reminder that each chapter is part of a larger story, that each ending represents a beginning. Narrative allows individuals to rest within mystery, trusting a process whose outcome they cannot know.

By honoring this larger story, ecological writers can gain a sense of humility. Many of them are quick to acknowledge that their own works are small gestures pointing toward the ineffable. Because words are a powerful force in their own lives, they believe that stories can awaken the hearts and imaginations of others. This conviction drives their writing and activism. Yet it is continually tempered by an acknowledgment that the 'alchemy' of words is mysterious. The effects of one's writing can never be known: each person "write[s] as an act of faith" (Trimble/Williams 7).

Part of the humility that characterizes ecological writers derives from their perspective on writing: few view their craft as an exclusive gift that sets them apart from the less articulate masses. Instead of seeing themselves as an elite cadre (distinguished by their ecological enlightenment and creative talents), they believe that all individuals have important stories and the capacity to share them. Several ecological writers clearly demonstrated this conviction at the national Watershed conference held at the Library of Congress in 1996. Writers Terry Tempest Williams, Wendell Berry, Gary Paul Nabhan, and Barry Lopez were slated to hold a panel discussion on the topic "Writing from the Center." When the lecture hall filled, they turned the microphone over to the audience and asked to hear their stories. For the entire length of the session, they sat listening.

Many ecological writers hold a similarly democratic view of ritual arts, free from any sense of orthodoxy. They advocate for flexible and individualized means of strengthening spiritual and moral connections with the rest of nature. An ecological practice represents – in their view – an equal-opportunity practice, open to being done solely or communally, privately or publicly, deliberately or spontaneously. Given the spiraling course of their own turns to earth, these writers are reluctant to judge the conversions that others undergo. Many writers realize, early in their own turning, that many paths lead to an ecological practice. They tend to view this diversity of paths as promising, believing that varied forms of ecological practice may converge to create broader societal change.

#### Changing the Cultural Narrative

This idealistic vision suggests that as individuals ‘re-story’ themselves through narrative and ritual, they may begin subtly rewriting certain cultural scripts (*e.g.*, the human/nature dualism that underlies much ecological degradation). Re-storying becomes a means of resistance – challenging societal assumptions – and of reciprocity (entering into a larger, cosmological story in which the Earth – rather than the self – is the protagonist. This fundamental shift in perspective often manifests in the form of a renewed commitment to the ecological whole.

The progression from individual conversion to societal transformation faces obstacles, though. Because forms of ecological practice tend to be highly individualized (and the practitioners are independent and geographically dispersed), their stories are not readily disseminated. Unlike traditional religious adherents, ecological converts do not tend to have communities of worship or collective rituals that bind them together and help sustain their practice. This

lack of communal structures makes the process of ecological conversion hard to replicate. The diversity of paths that lead to an ecological practice (and the variety of forms a practice can take) opens the process of transformation to more people but tends to limit the extent of sharing among them. Narrative becomes an essential thread linking ecological converts, weaving their individual stories into a tapestry that holds new images, symbols and practices for restoring relations with earth.

These new narratives are rarely disseminated through institutional channels such as schools, camps and mass media (the traditional venues of environmental education). The subjectivity of ecological conversion makes it resistant to institutional structures (which often promote conformity and certitude rather than an appreciation of mystery). The narratives that ecological writers live by tend to be exchanged through more informal and experiential means (*e.g.*, participating in communal rituals, entering untamed natural areas or reading). These writers are not inclined to shape a comprehensive or static ecological dogma. They seek to create – for themselves and the larger culture – stories that center us within the whole of nature, showing us how to live in responsible relation.

## EPILOGUE: ONE READER' PATH

As the morning fog retreats to the outermost islands, a mass of cumulous clouds tumbles in from the west -- a mirror image of the surf foam ascending the beach. I tuck down in a hollow of the meadow by two hardy spruce trees. The tallest one, three times my height, is still a feisty seedling in my mind's eye, tucked improbably between rocks. I remember when it first set roots here.

I have shared this windblown perch with spruce and goldenrod, song sparrows and ants, for hours on end, days flowing into years and years into decades. Like these spruce trees, I hold tight to the sparse soil that nourishes life on this rocky isle.

It's a place of paradox, this sea-rimmed world of stone, sand and spruce. Rocks born of a volcano carry scars from glacial ice. What appears to be an island is really a mountaintop whose surrounding valleys flooded after the last glacier receded. Atop this ancient hill, with soil not sufficient to hide the rock, a surprising array of species thrives.

In ways both literal and metaphoric this island on the coast of Maine is the site of my spiritual turning and re-turning. It revives my senses and reminds me "what is bare-bones and essential" (Williams PI). With each visit to this sacred place I learn more about what it means to belong *in* the world, to participate consciously in creation.

When I reflect on my own conversion to Earth, most of the images and lessons derive from my elemental life here -- living in a cabin built from island



spruce, heating with wood, bathing in rainwater, composting wastes, rising and retiring with the sun. The contours of island life are continually shaped by cascading cycles of rising and falling tides, shifting weather and seasons, dynamic growth and decay. Joining in this elemental dance, I find myself turning. The illusion of independence recedes. In its place comes a conviction of interconnection felt in every fiber of being. I am no longer visiting on the island as a transient outsider. I become part of this community perched on the edge of an oceanic world. John Donne asserted that no man is an island. My experience in this tidal realm belies that view, confirming the wisdom of Anne Morrow Lindbergh. *Each of us is an island, she observed, continually washed by a common sea.* Living on the island, I sense the ebb and flow of that collective life.

### Remembrance

The island has been a steadfast mentor to me since infancy. Save for childhood visits there, little in my background would foretell a turn toward earth. I grew up in suburbs where pavement and brick predominated. Wildlife had long since retreated from those subdivided lots so I had few encounters with animals (except for the family dog and two short-lived hamsters). My brothers and I played outdoors some but our family never went hiking or camping. My first extended 'wilderness' trip, at age 13, was an unmitigated disaster – traveling to a remote part of Canada in the thick of black fly season with a challenging assortment of pubescent boys. That experience alone might have quelled my enthusiasm for the natural world had it not been for mentors – the places and people who stretched my vision beyond the confines of suburbia.

The island, where I spent several weeks each summer, became the "locus of my imagination" (Sanders *Writing* 158). In early years when the boundaries of

self are most permeable, I imprinted on Maine's rockbound coast. No other humans (save our family) lived on the island so our sense of community was not confined to our own species. Our immediate neighbors included resident crows, herring and black-backed gulls, voles, and a steady stream of migratory warblers. Just offshore eider duck chicks hardly larger than dandelion puffs would surf white-capped waters. While the seals and eider chicks were the most charismatic neighbors, I recall being equally attached to the more homely creatures such as barnacles and sow bugs. One June, my brother and I made daily trips to a yellow-jacket nest built among tree roots – bearing a paper plate laden with honey and marshmallows. (The yellow jackets accepted our neighborly outreach amicably.)

As children we had great latitude to explore the island – creating games and rituals, making forts and driftwood houses, scrambling through rockweed and wading into pungent blue-black mudflats. In a setting with icy waters, strong currents, steep cliffs and sharp rocks, my parents cautioned us of dangers but did not confine us. With their gentle guidance, the place taught us well.

Our family shared in the rituals of place – watching the sun's descent behind a neighboring island, looking for phosphorescence in the water, finding constellations in the night sky. Many of the rituals were both active and reflective, blurring the line between work and recreation. Even in routine tasks – gathering firewood, hauling water or bailing boats – we found the place continually reawakening us. A walk to the compost pile might reveal a monarch butterfly perched on goldenrod. The routine motion of sawing firewood might be interrupted by a loon's plaintive call. The remembrance of these moments, held through the winter, was renewed and deepened each June.

Suburban life could not match the intensity of island living. By high school I wrote an essay declaring my allegiance to Maine, stating (in the unequivocal tone of an adolescent) that while my mailing address and driver's license identified me as a 'resident' of Maryland, I considered Maine home. My attachment to the island spawned an interest in environmental issues that was evident by middle school and continued to dictate my educational path through college.

During adolescence I began discovering writers who shared a similar passion for place: John Muir, E.B. White and Wendell Berry. The works of these and other ecological writers became the focus of my college honors project. I compiled an anthology of poems and prose writing depicting their perspectives on ecological degradation and healing (at individual, societal and global levels). Looking back now at that work, I am struck that I never once used the word 'spiritual' to describe their writing. I called them literary and philosophical but had no language to depict their depth of wisdom or the power they had to touch my heart. A decade slid by before I began to recognize the cost of neglecting this spiritual dimension.

### Reflection

The realization came after years of professional work in the environmental field. I was in what looked to outward appearances like an ideal job -- writing materials for a coastal conservation group in Maine. It was a professional niche I had long sought -- with good colleagues, fair compensation and a flexible working schedule. Yet there was (as converts are wont to say) "something missing." The writing I did on behalf of earth was disconnected from my spiritual and sensory experience of the land. I described places that I had never

been, enumerated the economic benefits of open space, and outlined legal and financial conservation measures. This technical information was essential to convey. However it failed to get at the essence of conservation. Few of the families who conserved their properties seemed to be motivated primarily by financial considerations. They protected their land out of a love (a deep spiritual and emotional bond that typically went unacknowledged throughout the conservation process). The tactical dimensions of outer ecological work overshadowed the vital importance of this inner spark.

I came to see that this dynamic was not unique to land conservation. It was evident in most facets of the environmental field where political and practical pressures often preclude discussion of underlying spiritual and moral concerns. I knew first-hand the dangers of this trap. For years I had been caught in a torrent of professional demands that left little time for reflection (or revelation) and no chance to reassess values or shift life priorities. Almost all the environmental educators and activists I knew were caught in a similar reactive mode – scrambling to respond to crises and media-driven trends, advocate on pending legislation, and grasp at fleeting opportunities for conservation. In the midst of such pressures, discussion of spiritual and moral motivations for ecological work came to seem like a frivolous distraction – taking vital time away from the tasks at hand.

The longer I joined in this tacit neglect of inner ecology, the more discouraged I became. Our collective efforts to raise awareness and elicit behavioral change through cognitive means (such as curricula and reports) had a limited effect. Information was useful to those already ‘converted’ to earth, but it rarely seemed to inspire transformation among those estranged from the land

and unconscious of ecological cycles. Even apocalyptic environmental warnings seemed to produce apathy and denial, rather than a commitment to responsible action. I knew intuitively that a new approach to environmental outreach was needed but didn't know how it might be effected. What could inspire people to undertake a more fundamental change?

### Revelation

The answer to that question did not come in a blinding flash. It percolated through two hard years of introspection during which it became clear that I could no longer ignore the spiritual and moral facets of my work for the earth. There was no latitude to explore those questions in the context of my conservation job so I left and began full-time study of ecological ethics and values. Through several years of coursework and study, I examined inner ecology from nearly every conceivable academic vantage point. These perspectives helped me understand the source of our estrangement from nature. They offered limited guidance, though, on how we might begin restoring (and re-storying) a vital relation to the ecological whole. I finally stopped seeking the answer in scholarly theories and doctrinal theologies. I returned to knowledge born of my experience in the world:

A little too abstract, a little too wise  
It is time for us to kiss the earth again.  
It is time to let the leaves rain from the skies,  
Let the rich life run to the roots again.

– Robinson Jeffers, "Return" (*Elder Imagining* 7)

I began to see that my impulse to heal and restore the Earth is grounded – not in philosophical theories or legislative codes – so much as in a passionate bond to place, a "carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land..." (Abrams 69). My spiritual turning is propelled by a hunger for CONTACT with the world (as

Thoreau put it in a revelatory moment on Mount Katahdin) – an active immersion in the mystery and complexity of being. That engagement with the "rich life" of the world is what fuels my ecological practice. Taking action on behalf of Earth is as much an expression of spiritual gratitude as of ethical duty.

This realization changed the course of my doctoral research. I decided to focus on the lives of individuals who had consciously turned toward earth. Tracing their paths, I began to deepen and extend my own ecological practice. Their words and lives helped inspire me to "kiss the earth again."

### Reciprocity

As I embarked on this research, I returned to a 'sport' that I had learned more than a decade earlier. I use the term sport advisedly because in the past few years, sea-kayaking has become more of a spiritual practice for me than a recreational pursuit. It has baptized me in the elemental world of wind and water. During the past two summers, I traveled much of the Maine coast by kayak, paddling with a friend and camping on islands. I had never embarked on any such adventure before we left on our first three-week trek. While I was prepared in many senses (in terms of skills, gear and physical fitness), I was wholly unprepared for the way my heart would be touched by that extended immersion in the elements: watching silver beads of rain shower into opalescent waters; hearing waves caress the granite around three sides of the tent; molding my body to sun-warmed rocks, lying motionless as stone until the incoming tide crept over me. These moments of embodied connection have deepened my love for this coast and my commitment to sustain its natural and cultural integrity. On kayak journeys, I renew my 'vows' to place.

My time kayaking affirmed what I knew intuitively and found echoed in

the works of other ecological writers: I need to dwell in a place that nourishes my spirit. Having lived in Maine eleven years (and visited since infancy), I have sunk deep roots here. If I were to move away in quest of a good job, I would lose an essential piece of myself. Kayaking and mindful time outdoors have helped deepen my embodied connection to this coast.

### Resistance

This felt sense of reciprocity extends my vision of vocation. I realize now that work on behalf of Earth entails far more than paid employment. My work is my ecological practice – an amorphous blend of all the varied ways that I care for earth and resist its degradation. A passion for place drives my turn *toward* Earth while a stern ecological conscience steers me *from* destructive environmental habits. That conscience, evident by adolescence, must have taken seed in childhood.

I grew up with parents who take pride in quietly subverting the stereotypical 'consumer lifestyle.' In the course of my life, they have owned two cars (the first they passed on to my brother after 15 years, the second is going strong at 20). They run errands and commute to work by foot, bike and public transit. On a street of manicured, chemically treated lawns, their front yard is a veritable jungle of forsythia, azalea, transplanted Maine spruce trees and a colorful melange of perennial flowers.

Growing up on the 'very verge' of suburban culture made it easier for me to adopt and sustain values outside the mainstream. I acquired a habit early on of questioning reflexive consumption, and judging actions by their broader environmental impacts. By college, I had gained sufficient strength in my convictions to begin writing on environmental topics and working on political

campaigns against nuclear power and nuclear weaponry. Like Scott Momaday, I don't think of myself as a 'political person:' my need for privacy runs counter to that public role. Yet I take political action routinely when circumstances and conscience dictate action. Like the writers in this work, I've come to see resistance as a choice born of necessity. A life removed from politics is a luxury my conscience cannot afford.

As I neared the closing deadline on this book, my home community initiated an aerial spraying program to 'combat' the browntail moth (an insect whose hairs during molting can cause a rash like poison ivy). I researched the chemical being applied, wrote the local newspaper, made phone calls to town officials, and approached the state Board of Pesticides Control. My efforts did not prevent the spraying of 1,500 homes (and numerous unwitting bystanders), but did stop spraying in the town's nature preserves and may result in better notification requirements. While far from a resounding victory, this effort began opening a dialogue – inviting people to consider accommodating themselves to ecological cycles rather than employing ineffectual and potentially destructive chemical controls.

My efforts at resistance, like those of many ecological writers, focus on home terrain. I can best express my devotion to Earth in the place that awakens that love. In these varied forms of resistance – supporting local organic growers; advocating for (and using) safe bikeways; and living with minimal material goods – political action becomes indistinguishable from daily living. It seems that in much of the environmental movement the 'political' has become divorced from the spiritual and practical functions of living (captured in the Greek root of ecology, *oikos*: the household or home). There is a vital role for professional



advocacy work done by paid environmental lawyers, but in 'delegating' our political work to them we often abdicate our moral and practical responsibilities as ecological. Someone who runs an environmental advocacy group recently asked me where I stood on the spectrum that runs from "hard-edged advocacy" to reflective and contemplative means of honoring earth. My answer was shaped, not only by personal experience, but by the life stories of ecological writers. Each of us, I believe, needs to span that spectrum – engaging in environmental planning, lobbying and policy-making (to help sustain outer ecology) while striving concurrently to renew our spiritual and moral bonds with nature (thereby restoring inner ecology). If we neglect these inner dimensions (as so many individuals and organizations in the environmental movement have) then we risk working against environmental destruction without really knowing what we are working for. Tracing the lives of ecological converts, I was struck by their clear vision of ecological integrity and belonging. They are not simply turning *from* the destructive forces and habits of Western culture. They are turning *toward* a new vision of humans' place within the whole.

### Re-storying

In offering a new vision by which to live, these writers create a sense of possibility. One of the most insidious aspects of ecological destruction is that it can seem like a *fait accompli*, the inevitable by-product of 'Western civilization.' Ecological writers counter that apathetic view, expressing an infectious idealism through narrative and ritual. Their stories invite us to live with a greater appreciation for mystery and a deeper sense of responsibility. The vision I hold for my "one wild and precious life" is nourished by the personal stories of ecological writers (Oliver 94). They remind me to honor the wildness within and

without, cultivating courage to keep heart, mind and senses open.

“Listening” to their stories over the past few years has helped me re-vision my place in the world. From these writers I have begun to learn the lost art of belonging. The island is no longer simply a “setting” that I “visit.” It is central to who I am and how I live in the world. It continually reminds me that the turbulence of the marginal life is essential to creation. We all dwell in the intertidal zone between inner and outer ecology and between independence and interdependence. The island teaches – by example – how to hold together the most essential ecological paradox: recognizing that we are both distinct and joined, islands washed by a common sea.

The island renews my faith in the cyclic integrity of being. When I participate in the cycles – tracking the tides and moon and watching the subtle signs of seasonal progression – I can see my own life as a dynamic, unfolding spiral. It becomes easier to relinquish the crippling linear view that sentimentalizes the past and obsesses on the future – wholly obliterating the gift of the present moment. Time becomes fluid, like the currents that wrap themselves around this ancient mountaintop. Every moment is at once a turning and re-turning, echoing and amplifying earlier experience. As my own spiral draws wider, I see my path meeting and merging with those of other writers and ‘back yard’ activists. Their stories extend my vision of what is possible and renew my faith that we may find ways to live in keeping with Earth.

*And for ourselves, the intrinsic  
"Purpose" is to reach, and to remember,  
and to declare our commitment to all  
the living, without deceit, and without  
fear, and without reservation. We do  
what we can. And by doing it, we keep  
ourselves trusting, which is to say  
vulnerable, and more than that,  
what can anyone ask?*

*- June Jordan (Walker Revolutionary n.p.)*

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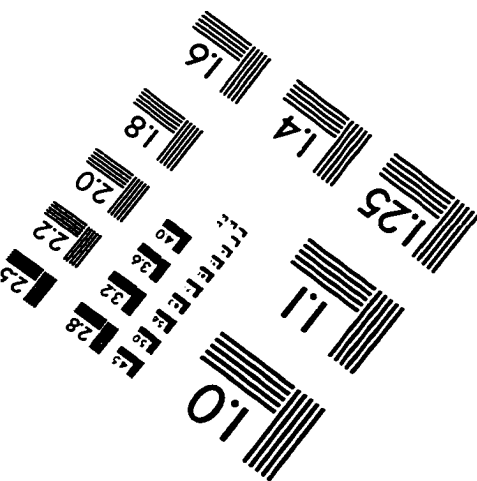
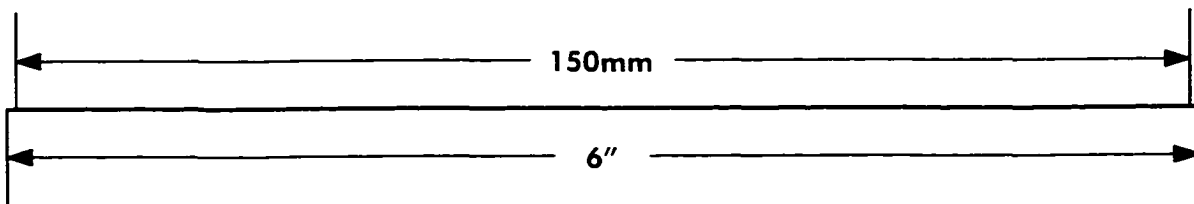
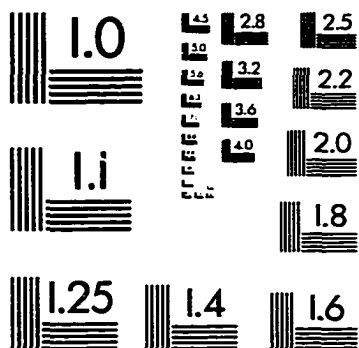
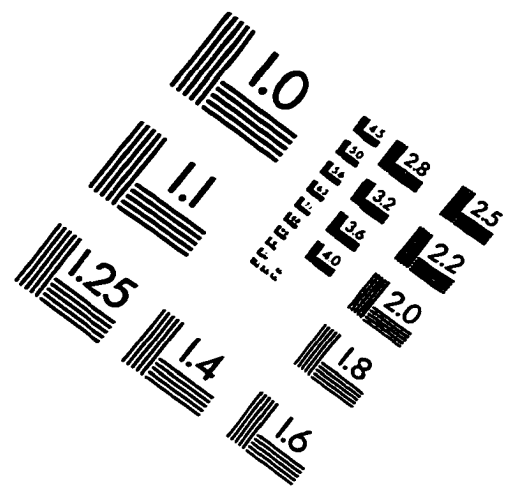
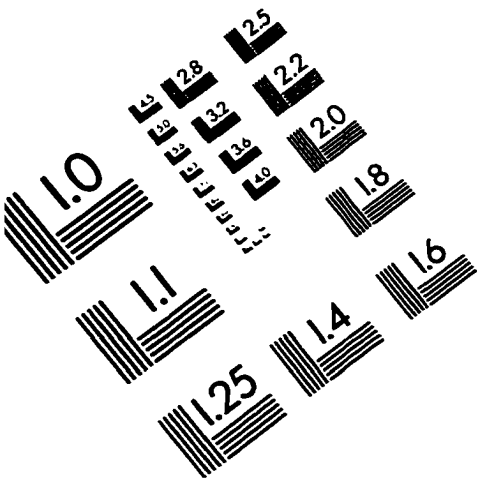
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