

Of Beargrass and Multitudes

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From the time I was a child playing hide and seek in the orange groves of southern California, I sensed something was wrong with my world. During the 1960s, a thermal inversion over the Los Angeles basin was deadly. Sometimes, a *Smog Alert* would be called: Schools closed, businesses shut down, elderly and children were told to stay indoors and to move about as little as possible. The smog became so thick, I remember having trouble making out the juniper bushes across the street. The sky was darkened with a heavy, pinkish-gray glow, and my eyes stung and watered looking out at it. A Smog Alert was not like a snow day, no one could go out and have fun—my chest hurt if I breathed too hard. Even so, eventually the rains came or the Santa Ana winds would blow, and life would go back to normal. Yet I have never forgotten those thickened winter days when life stopped and children couldn't play.

When I was fifteen years old, my family took a road trip through some of our country's great National Parks: Zion, Bryce, Tetons, Yellowstone, and finally Glacier National Park. As we made our way through these indescribably magnificent biogems, I was aware of something stirring in the depths of my consciousness. One day, as we drove up Going to the Sun Highway in Glacier National Park, the feeling grew stronger. At the top of the Continental Divide, in the shadow of Mt. Reynolds, holding soft, white cone-like beargrass and alpine flowers between my fingers, I suddenly connected with my surroundings. The mountains themselves were breathing, and I was inhaled and exhaled along with the beargrass. As I looked into the choppy green-blue waters of Hidden Lake, out at the looming thunderstorm on the horizon over the North Fork watershed, I realized that I could breathe; not only clean air but my spirit as well. This corridor is in the center of the Crown of the Continent, containing some of the most intact wildlife in North America, along a 10 million-acre ecosystem that spans the Rocky Mountains through Montana to Canada's warm springs in Banff National Park. I felt the immense expansiveness of this living system and my interconnectedness to life within it.

Like John Muir, “I found that going out was really going in.”

After high school, I moved to a small, sheltered town in the quiet Flathead Valley nestled against the Rocky Mountains near Glacier National Park. Besides my frequent hiking, rock climbing, backpacking, and cross-country skiing in the land I loved, I taught Sunday School classes in a small Christian church. Another love of mine is working with children of all ages, looking into their wide eyes as the stories and parables come to life. Every September I taught from the book of Genesis. I remember using flannel backed paper figures on a flannel cloth board to bring the stories to life. Whenever there was a multitude gathered in the story, I placed the same little group of paper figures on the board. It became a big joke, the multitude at Sodom was the same as the multitude at the crossing of the Red Sea and the Sermon on the Mount later in the lessons. Even though the class laughed, the symbolic significance of my paper multitude contrasted sharply with what constituted the Old Testament chosen people. The flannel multitude made me think about the values of inclusiveness and compassion I had taken from the stories and parables in the New Testament. Stories like the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery, parables like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and teachings in the Sermon on the Mount became strong patterns in my search for meaning that have influenced me to this day; yet, I have come to believe that the immense intelligence, within which we all live and move and have our being, reveals its truth to human consciousness in different ways. Or maybe its truth is like the many colors in a kaleidoscope—each culture has interpreted the meaning of existence in unique ways, abstracting its own distinct color from the truth perceived by members within the culture. Yet, like a kaleidoscope, the patterns shift as we coevolve with one another through time. Human cultures are unique but changing, like the Earth’s bioregions.

After leaving my little nest in the Flathead Valley, I spent four years in the wilds of Alaska. Once when I was cross-country skiing in the backcountry, I looked out at the cathedral-like mountains, splashed with yellow birch trees of the short Alaskan autumn already under snow, without roads or lampposts to light the way, and I caught my breath at the sudden feeling of primal communication that rose within the center of my body reaching out to the wilderness surrounding me. I paused, feeling as planted as the wild cranberry

bushes at my feet daring to grow through the permafrost in this remote Alaskan tundra. I belonged. We are all interconnected through our universal search for meaning, but we need to rediscover who we are, to become indigenous. I believe in the interconnectedness of our biological and spiritual natures. We often forget that we live in a specific place, a local bioregion, with its own watershed, mountains and valleys, and indigenous plants and animals, and that others do too. I believe that understanding our place in the imminent, physical world does not deny our place in the transcendent world, that, in fact, our very survival depends on the marriage of these worlds.