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Earth, People and Poetry: The Forests of Pablo Neruda

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As a young boy, I remember reading that fabulous Greek myth about the sailors being lured by a mysterious siren call. Every morning and evening this summer, I felt a similar magnetic call. But camped at the edge of an old growth forest on the west side of Glacier National Park, Montana, it was the lure and enchantment of the forest itself.

It was during one of those magical moments, among huge cedar trees dripping with Spanish moss, that the words of the Noble Prize winning Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, drifted into my thoughts.

I always felt myself stifling as soon as I left the great forests, the timberland that drew me back like a mother...My life is a long pilgrimage...always returning to the woods of the south, to the forest lost in me.

It was for this special bonding, which Neruda speaks so eloquently of, that my wife and I decided on a camping trip among old growth forests for our family vacation. We wanted out two boys, as well as ourselves, to attain a deeper understanding and commitment to the fight to save our forests.

In the early 1900s, Neruda's bonding to forests and wilderness began with experiences in Temuco on the Chilean frontier. ¡POEM! Temuco, heart of water Heritage of foxglove: long ago your house in the wood was cradle and bell of my song and fortress of my solitude.

He was later to end a poem about his origins with "...I come from below, from the earth."

Instead of leaping over most of the country, Amtrak took us westwards at ground level. Neruda called it "land sailing," as his father was a ballast (gravel) train conductor, trains were also part of Neruda's youth. When his father's train would stop deep in Chilean forests to quarry rocks, the young Neruda would explore. The brakemen and ex-prisoner, Monjie, would take him on natural history excursions. It was Monjie who introduced Neruda to the golden carabus beetles, birds and most memorable, the giant rauli trees. Later, he was to rediscover wilderness by horseback.

He once exchanged gifts with a young neighbor he never saw. His friend left him a small model of a sheep, past through a fence hole. Neruda gave him what he considered of equal value to him, a huge pine cone from one of his forest adventures. Fifty years later he would write, "...that communion, that revelation, that pact with the wilderness, is still part of my life."

One evening while my children worked feverishly on a campfire as only children can, I continued to be mesmerized by the pillow and cradle topography of the nearby old growth forest. In my mind's eye, Neruda's word came to life:

The southern Andean forest is populated by huge trees set apart from one another; giant larches and mayten trees, as well as tepa and coniferous trees. The rauli trees have an amazing girth. I stopped to measure one. It had the diameter of a horse. The sky overhead can't be seen. Below, leaves have fallen for centuries, forming a layer of humus the hoofs of the mounts sink down into. We were passing through one of primitive nature's great cathedrals.

The incessant rain that contributed mightily to the growth of these great forests, was the young Neruda's constant companion. He called it nature's piano and it was to its beat he wrote his first verses. Later he would say, "I want a rainbow for my inkwell!"

In the early cold war year of 1948, Neruda, holding revolutionary views, was hunted by the Videla regime of Chile. He returned to the forests he loved under conditions he could never have predicted. He hid at a logging site run by a reactionary, wealthy businessman, Señor Rodriguez. With deep pathos, he witnessed a logging operation.

The saws cutting the huge logs ground out their shrill lament all day long. First you heard the deep underground thud of the felled tree. Every five or ten minutes the ground shuddered like a drum in the dark at the hard impact...giant work of nature, seeded there by the wind a thousand years before...The forest was dying. I heard its lamentation with a heavy heart, as if I had come there to listen to the oldest voices anyone had ever heard.

Discovered by the landowner, Neruda and he had a raucous confrontation in a one room cabin. Fortunately, Rodriguez enjoyed Neruda's poetry and guaranteed his safety. The poet made his escape over the Andes into Argentina.

Upon visiting a Blackfoot reservation on the east side of the continental divide, I reflected on Neruda's respectful lines dedicated to the Native People of Chile. ¡POEM! The Araucanians turned into roots. They were stripped off leaf by leaf until they were only a skeleton of the race, a tree already leafless; it wasn't so

much the ancient suffering since they were fighting like madman, like stones, like sacks, like angels; it was that they, the brave ones, felt themselves losing ground, the earth giving under their feet; the blood no longer resigned in Arauco; the kingdom of theft had arrived and we were the thieves.

With his non-exploitive outlook, Pablo Neruda was quick to empathize with Native Peoples fighting colonialists and the Araucanians sensitive stewardship of the land. Did Neruda foreshadow the science of Human Ecology by some twenty years as he intertwined earth, people and poetry? In October, 1943, at the age of thirty nine, with the emotions of his involvement in the civil war years in Spain still fresh in his memory and World War Two raging, he visited the Inca ruins at Macchu Picchu, high in the Andes of Peru. What Waldon Pond was to Thoreau, what Utah's deserts were to Edward Abbey, Macchu Picchu was to Pablo Neruda. He came to terms with himself and the world. ¶POEM¶In the steep zone-forest and stone mist of green stars, radiant jungle-Mantur explodes like a blinding lake or a new layer of silence. ¶POEM¶Come to my very heart, to my dawn, up to the crowned solitudes. The dead kingdom is still alive. ¶POEM¶And over the Sundial the sanguinary shadow of the condor crosses like a black ship... ¶POEM¶Behold me from the depths of the earth, labourer, weaver, silent herdsman:... Throughout the earth join all the silent scattered lips and from the depths speak to me all night long as if I were anchored with you, tell me everything, ¶T¶chain by chain, ¶POEM¶link by link, and step by step. sharpen the knives that you've kept, put them in my breast and in my hand, like a river of yellow lightning, like a river of buried jaguars, ¶POEM¶and let me weep hours, days, years blind ages, stellar centuries. Give me silence, water, hope. Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes. ¶POEM¶Cling to my body like magnets. Hasten to my veins and to my mouth. Speak through my words and my blood.

Listen to his choice of words as he put it years later.

Earth, people, and poetry are one and the same entity tied together by mysterious subterranean passages. When the earth blooms, the people breath freedom, the poets sing and show the way.

Whether it was native peoples or miners, Neruda felt the connections of the people and mother earth, deep within the sinew of his bones. In his last conversation with his good friend and writer, Volodia Teitelboim, he talked of the Araucanians and their language which he considered among the most beautiful in the world.

He disliked the artificial boundaries erected by his species. Dying of prostate cancer in the winter of 1973, he expressed the desire to return to the great forest in the south of Chile "...where I could get back in touch with the earth."

Now the people and the forests of Pablo Neruda's beloved homeland are threat-

ened by the "free trade" of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The 1973 fascist coup, which resulted in the death of President Salvador Allende and thousands of progressives, has left Chile wide open to transnational corporations who equate trade with no people or environmental limits.

As the U.S. grassroots environmental movements take more initiatives to fight Gingrich's Contract on America, events in Chile are both enlightening and compelling. Transnational mining companies have been able to ignore environmental safeguards along with the unions that could fight for them. These companies have paved the way for the transnational timber corporations. Although weakened by seventeen years of military rule, Chilean unions sharply oppose any trade agreement that lacks protection for the environment.

Pablo Neruda died just thirteen days after that 1973 military coup. The tenacity with which the Chilean people continued to celebrate Neruda's poetry is also instructive. Under conditions that surely would have cost them their lives if apprehended, people etched passages from Neruda's writings on wooden fence pickets surrounding the poet's former house at Isle de Negro.

Perhaps they were inspired by the rest of "Earth, People and Poetry" quoted earlier.

When tyranny darkens the earth and punishes the people, the loudest voice is sought out and the head of the poet falls into history's deep well. Tyranny cuts off the head that sings, but the voice at the bottom of the well returns to the secret springs of the earth and out of the darkness rises up through the mouth of the people.

As grassroots environmentalists begin to enter the fray, including battles of the national and international significance, a spiritual renewal is needed. The poetry of Pablo Neruda can be called upon. From his earliest collection of poems, *The Invisible River*, he leaves us this gem. ¡POEM! I greet you Hope, you who comes from afar, you flood with your song the sad hearts. You who give new wings to old dreams...

And how did our "touch the earth" approach fare with our children? As we bedded down one night at our campsite, a howl, followed by a series of yelps, could be heard in the distance. I turned to see if my older son was awake. He was. We spoke no words. He just smiled. Thank you, brother coyote. Thank you.

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