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Wild Journeying Way

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I

For more than half a century I have been a wilderness journeyer. During this time my sense of the wild and wilderness has undergone a number of transformations. These changes correspond to the four stages of awareness that crystallize in the Way of Wild Journeying. The four stages can be articulated using Nature and wilderness literature. The four stages are,

1. Awareness that our identity as humans is defined by our ego- self separateness from wild Nature;
2. Awareness that our identity, as achieved through separateness, alienates us from wild Nature — which is both within and outside;
3. Awareness that alienation is intensified by being placeless (EuroAmerican, for example), leading us to seek reunion with wild Nature through journeying in wilderness places;
4. Fully unified awareness is attained through wilderness experience and we realize that wild journeying maintains unity with our ecological Self in harmony with all our relationships. It is taken up as a spiritual discipline called the Wild Way.

Let us explore the historical context of this evolving awareness.

In this essay "wilderness" refers to a place, area or region, whereas "wild" refers to the powers and energies found in places, other beings and ourselves. Wild energies are spontaneous, open and creative. A domestic animal has wild energy, but rarely shows it; most of the time it is fenced, conditioned and controlled. Urban humans also live under controlled conditions. It is difficult to realize our wild nature and larger ecological Self in urban settings. This is why many of us journey to the wilderness to rediscover the wild in outside places. Wild places help us to reconnect with our own deep self. Let us consider the four stages of this development in more depth.

We first become aware of our identity as humans by defining differences from the wild. Culture is a controlling, mediating process. This awareness is represented in Emerson's essay "Nature". Emerson recognizes that spirit (wild creative power) is infused in Nature. For him this reflects the spirit that is in humans, which comes from a Spirit that transcends Nature. This emphasizes our differences from Nature. When we feel one with it, we believe this is because our body is of Nature. But all Nature in this view is dependent on a greater spiritual reality beyond it (God or the Absolute). This spiritual energy is beyond Nature, but it is expressed indirectly in wilderness. Cities cover it over. The sacred power is hidden in, but ultimately transcends Nature.

Historically this estrangement is part of a dialectical process that moves towards reconciliation and reconnection with Nature. During the Middle Ages Christian cosmology separated humans from Nature. Modernism holds onto this dichotomy in its reaction against Christianity. For Modernism the soul is separate from the world, and it becomes merely a ghost in the body machine. Late Medieval Christianity is other worldly; the sacred source lies outside of Nature. Modernism is this-worldly; there is no sacred, only power to control Nature for human ends. To recover a sense of the sacred in embodied life requires us to know the wild source within Nature, and hence our own nature. We leave the city to journey in a place where the wild is free of human controls. The wild energies found are sensed as being the same as those found within ourselves. What is their source?

The root meaning of the word "religion" is to bind back to the source. In this sense to go on a religious or sacred journey is to seek the source of our being, the past and present root power of our lives. It is to seek ultimate transformation or salvation from alienation and incompleteness. In Buddhism binding back to the source is called enlightenment. It is to realize our Buddha nature that all beings have. It is experienced as Nirvana- -which is perfection. In Christianity it is salvation or unity with God through Christ as Savior; this Kingdom of Heaven is unqualified perfection. In traditional Christian doctrine God is outside of Nature.

In North America, some urban people rediscovered the holy ground of Earth. They were aware that the source they sought could be found in wild Nature. They knew that visionary unity with deep powers of life could be realized in wilderness settings. They discovered how to reconnect to the wild in direct, action oriented ways, such as meditative walking in wilderness. Wilderness is a special setting, a landscape of wild places mostly free of culture. We call this meditative journeying the Way of Wild Journeying, or simply the Wild Way, because it is a spiritual discipline, the outcome of the fourfold process we are describing. Here we use the word "way" on a par with the Taoist "tao" to refer to a way of living in harmony with Nature as the sum total of all that is here and now.

The second stage of awareness of the wild way is expressed in Thoreau's essay "Walking". Thoreau appreciates Emerson's work, but sees that it stops short. Thoreau recognizes that its spiritual culture is European. There remains a sense of division from Nature and a nostalgic longing for something beyond this world. Emerson's transcendentalism wells up, arises from his lack of literary and experiential grounding in wild places in North America. His spiritual forebears are mostly Western European. Modern European literature, and especially English literature, does not know wild Nature in itself. This is partly because most of its wild Nature is controlled, mapped and managed. To see Nature as it is depends on access to wilderness and to our own inner wild nature. Identity, awareness and place are networks of reciprocal relationships. When we

are ecologically aware, we know that we need wild places in Nature to help us realize our wholesome wild energies.

European philosophical culture was estranged from its own wild Nature as it destroyed its wilderness and wild places. This estrangement generates the pathologies of nihilism that haunt Modernism because it defines inherent value out of the world. This same alienation drives us to seek expansive integration and wholeness — hence the word holiness. There is a need to return to the sacred to retrieve it. When we leave a place and return to it, it is possible to know it more fully.

Living in cultivated surroundings indoors in the cities, crops our imaginations, fences our feelings, and constricts our bodies. Wholeness requires that these be integrated and allowed full expression harmonized by a spiritual path or way. Lacking regular contact with wild nature in wilderness places, we get out of touch with our inner self. Our vitality and visionary capacities wane. We can become quite ill on several levels. Thoreau's way to wholeness — his prescription — is to walk every day for at least four hours. He says that from Concord, Massachusettes he can just "head west" to be in the wild. In the native wild he awakens in an aesthetically deep context. The spiritual power of places is expressed in their beautiful aesthetic wholeness. This beauty holds values (ethics) that guide us.

Thoreau sees the importance of stories and myths for giving us a deep sense of Nature as an encompassing order and beauty we participate in. Myths are created where Cosmos and cultures meet in specific places. Thoreau appreciates the mythic metaphoric power of words like "saunter". "To saunter" (in Middle English) meant to go in search of the holy (whole-some-ness) land. A saunterer is a knight having chivalry — a code of respect and honor. He or she is a pilgrim — which implies religious aspiration — seeking the holy land (the ultimate wellness and completeness). Thoreau says that practicing sauntering does not require going to the European old world. A knight of walking can find the holy land, a sacred place, in North American. Holiness, and our own wholesomeness, is found most reliably in wilderness. It is there that we find our wild selves. So the way of wild sauntering is journeying and travelling to the sacred, that reveals itself most clearly in wild places. These have their own power, will and integrity.

The third stage in the way of wild journeying is manifest in John Muir's life. While Thoreau describes the spiritual aspects of sauntering, Muir realizes them through intense awareness in wilderness (sacred land). Let us consider the etymology of "to saunter" more deeply. Its root means to muse or meditate. Thoreau saw wilderness sauntering as a type of meditation or musing through which we come to realize our own wild nature. Muir's wild meditational experiences revealed that to do wild journeying is to be in the holy land. This is most easily realized in wilderness places precisely because it is there that the wild is free. The wild and our own inner nature are the same. We realize that

by nature we are free, spontaneous, creative beings.

When civilized and domesticated we are like cattle for Thoreau and machines for Muir. We act out the modern metaphor of the world and body as a herd of machines. We internalize the machine image over Nature's body, and create human organizations as if they and we could be machines. We begin to get machine-like ourselves, concealing our original wild vitality. We become routine, constricted, and mechanically systemized. We create artificial machine-like environments (modern cities) that conceal wildness. We become captives of our machines both physical and social. The more hidden the wild is for us, the more numb and dead we feel. We lose our spontaneous vitality and our energy to be unique, playful, wild, insightful, joyful beings. We lose our natural creative and ecstatic engagement with the world and other beings.

Persons who only have civilized "knowledge" from dusty books and newspapers (and TV and computers — we should add), Thoreau says, do not know the world. They believe that reading gives them some special knowledge. But what they know in this way is mostly second hand. Its reliability is extremely difficult to ascertain. Authentic knowledge must be grounded in first-hand experience. We are saved from self-conceit by coming face to face with our own ignorance in the wilderness. In realizing ignorance our minds open to become, like Muir, fully awake and attentive. We do not know what will happen next in wilderness. The landscape is alive and changing, constantly evolving with a will of its own. It is a Great Mystery.

Muir saw that as we recover our wild self by sauntering in sacred places, we become deeply identified with these places as we come to know them. We become their lovers and defenders. Muir's own identification with wild places rings with authenticity. He realizes the ecological Self.

The fourth stage of unified awareness, that the way of wild journeying is a sacred art comes together when Arne Naess, Willi Unsoeld and others articulate the Gandhian dimensions of modest nonviolence that should be part of mountaineering and defending wilderness. (Gandhi learned from Thoreau's writings on nonviolent civil disobedience.) The fourth stage crystallizes the lessons learned from cross cultural philosophy articulated by writers such as Gary Snyder and Dolores LaChapelle. We realize that our original discoveries of the way of wild journeying resonates with the insights of Taoism, Zen, Laung Gompa walking of Tibet, the marathon walking of Japan's Mt. Hiei monks, and the vision quests and walkabouts of Aboriginal peoples. Wild journeying is akin to the spiritual journeying of Shamanism. Such journeying is the source of primal narratives, from which deep meanings arise in ecosophic (ecologically wise) art, myth and other cultural forms. It is a way to ultimate transformation.

When we walk in the sacred space of wildness, we journey into primal spiritual practices predating agriculture. The earliest wanderers found that when they walked rhythmically they could unify themselves through meditative breathing

and thereby harmonize themselves with the spiritual powers of Nature. Out of this harmony spontaneous visions and stories emerge as creative responses to the unity of world within and without. Our journeys and visions in the aesthetics of the wild are the source of our power to create cultures celebrating the spontaneous beauty of Nature. We thereby participate directly in Nature's ongoing creative processes and activities; our designs and activities arise from the power of the places that we love. This is reflected in the art and Nature spirituality of Aboriginal peoples the world over. Those who practice wild journeying in North America appreciate the place specific wisdom (ecosophies) and beauty of its Aboriginal cultures.

We are describing the maturing in North America of a spiritual discipline (a way) that is indigenously rooted in the primal energy of its wild places. We note its thematic resonances with practices in Europe and Asia. Many of these died out because the land and mind were cultivated and controlled. Wild journeying reemerges in Europe to a degree in such activities as pilgrimaging, aviking, and more recently in mountaineering.

In wild journeying we realize that the flourishing beings in wilderness enlarge and enlighten us. We value our unique selves but also value being part of everything else. Each wild being has intrinsic value, while manufactured things and spaces have mostly instrumental value. The self (ego) does not confirm other beings; they confirm self through the larger ecological Self. The circle is complete when this unity is in daily life in everything we do.

The practice of wild journeying enables us to come home to live with deepening roots in our places. We respect the homes and ways of other beings. From this rootedness, diverse cultures emerge that reflect the diversity of Earth's and Nature's creativeness. The Art or Way of Wild Journeying is both means and end. To practice it is good in itself and also leads to other goods. It raises our quality of life. Let us teach our children how to practice so they can keep the wild free and flourishing in their lives.

II

In learning wild journeying focus on basics. In wilderness travel these are walking, breathing, and harmonizing with the aesthetics and energies of wild places. The most direct way to this harmony is through first unifying ourselves by means of coordinating our breathing with our walking pace.

The breathing and pace of beginners is not harmonized. They walk erratically, talk a lot, breathe in a shallow, ragged way, with lots of stopping. They are often not even conscious of this. This is not wild meditation walking. One must be focused and aware for sustained periods. Meditation walking is conscious unification of ourselves with walking and the wild. When so unified our walking

is "the blue mountains walking" (Dogen). Many spiritual practices such as Yoga, Taoism, Tantra and Zen use sound and breathing as means of unification. In martial arts vocalization is used to unify oneself for the moment of attack. Produced with the whole body, the sound unifies through vibration and flowing breath. In wild journeying we learn to breathe with the mountains and so we achieve total mind-body unification in harmony with wild energies. This is the essence of the Way as a spiritual union with the source.

A good place to start is to breathe in a fully conscious way while walking on a trail at a set pace. Through sustained practice we regulate and deepen our breathing until it is in tempo with our body movements. One way to learn this is by focusing on exhaling.

Many of us breathe in a shallow way without fully exhaling. If we focus on exhaling completely with each step (or with each two, or three, depending on our speed and the slope) while walking, we can bring our breath and movements into harmony with the precise slope and lay of the land. We breathe in wild air, and exhale our mental and physical divisions timed with our rhythmic steps. This coordinated breathing and rhythmic movement heightens our awareness and we become open and receptive. Our sense of space includes an unlimited, timeless silence. We relax into our deeper selves; as awareness expands we experience wild energies.

The basic practice of wilderness walking, with harmonious breathing and set pace, can be learned by such techniques as full out breathing with audible exhalation through the mouth, followed by relaxed, smooth, deep inhalation through the nose. Vocalization is used to strengthen this unifying process. Each exhale is vocalized as "Ho!" These audible exhales are a soft resonating chant. Hours of sustained practice bring the best results.

Walking in the wilderness with harmonious breathing richly oxygenates the body, tunes our metabolism, and raises our vitality. It integrates our sensuous, affective, and cognitive elements with its intense positive energy. With natural harmony our actions become beautiful. Continuous practice is physically and psychologically healing, as well as enlightening. This basic meditation practice also can be learned by counting breaths to correspond to our pace, adjusted to terrain and physical condition.

All techniques are transcended with mastery of the art. For a mature practitioner unity happens spontaneously with utmost simplicity. This holds for whatever he or she is doing. In daily life, as in the wilderness, practice harmonious, unified action. Wild journeying works with energy and power in a harmonious way as a spiritual discipline rooted in the wild energies of wilderness places and beings.

Long term practice of the wild journeying way enables us to be deeply relaxed while alert. We let go of our knots and habitual mind-sets. We live with a

joyful wild wholeness, the unity we had as young children, but now experienced with full awareness. We are deeply centered and connected with the places in which we dwell. Anxiety, a major problem for Moderns, releases when we feel no estrangement from Nature. We experience an endless flow of energy as the universal, living, spiritual power that moves through all beings and the world. It is not something beyond the world. It is in every place. We feel our home place as sacred energetic space. We know the source of Nature as it is, the timeless wild creative powers to which history is subordinate.

The historical ego of Western Modernism, as expressed in much of our literature, tries to control the world and make it into a finite artifact. The ecological Self has no such aim. It accepts the natural world as it is, with deep appreciation for the intrinsic worth of all beings. Practicing wild journeying brings spiritual healing and blesses our relationships. We share the wisdom of other beings and participate in their stories and ceremonies. Through the wild way we return to our original larger ecological Self that contains the conditioned awareness of the smaller historical ego. In a single lifetime we might have many personae but their continuity resides in the deeper Self.

The historical ego is incomplete and feels that time is running out. It feels trapped in limits and boundaries. It feels that the "other" is a threat to its own integrity and so it is defensive. This defensiveness can be passive withdrawal, spacing out, or aggressive action. When we awaken to our ecological Self, the historical ego finds its natural source (home); we lose our fear of the other. The ecological Self unifies both the timeless (sacred) and time (history). History is a temporal aspect of this larger, meaning-rich, timeless (or limit free) context.

Wild journeying ecstatically unifies us by movement and breathing in wilderness places. Like Muir, we find paradise in our daily lives. Core spiritual disciplines are not theories but active realizations of our source in the ecological Self. Thus, wild journeying is religious in the original sense of the word, which means the process of binding back to the source. When separated from this in urban life we suffer discord, conflict and sorrow. Wilderness and its preservation are necessary for the preservation and realization of whole humans as well as for its own inherent goodness. When we are fragmented, for whatever reason, we feel insecure, fearful and angry. We are unable to realize our aspiration for a perfect and complete way of being in the world, that is, for wholeness. We can get divided and over- developed in so many ways. Core spiritual teachings are practices for ongoing unification of ourselves to connect with our source in the world around us.

Wild journeying allows the deeper subconscious to surface, as we unravel the conditioned consciousness of our past. We come home to our natural selves in communion with communities of other beings. Our prayers are "May all beings realize themselves! May all beings Flourish!" We live in simple gratitude with deepening compassion and respect for others. We are in harmony with the universe. Our mission is then to help others. Through dwelling with others a

community of practice arises and inspires art and tradition. Our poetry and songs celebrate the Earth, as its beings speak through us. The way of wild journeying can be called the Art of arts. From it we learn artfulness in the heart of the aesthetic — how to walk and live in beauty.

Once we master the wild journeying way the wild can be found even in urban parks and gardens. By dwelling in wilderness places we see how to let the wild come back into daily life. We can bring the wisdom of the natural world home. Practicing the wild way removes our cultural blinders. It is the way of spontaneous creative wisdom and natural harmony. This spontaneous ongoing process of creation (cosmogogenesis) is Nature's way. When we are whole, we fully participate in creating meaning and value. From this wholeness diverse and ecologically wise, place specific communities and cultures emerge. The world is richer as a result.

Cultural diversity arises from appreciation for ecological diversity and depends on it. Thus, the wild journeyer does not seek a ruling worldview to which all people must conform. Nature and culture interpenetrate via the wild journey. The wild journeyer senses her/his whole body-mind and has a sense of the Cosmos. He/she is open to her/his own emptiness and so is filled with everything else. The essence of Nature and self is ongoing creative transformation in changing reciprocal interrelationships. Each being is respected and cherished as a self-organizing and self-realizing awareness (autopoeisis) striving to complete itself through love and action.

Through practicing wild journeying we complete ourselves and add to the totality of beauty and value on Earth and in the Universe. Our lives flow with deepening satisfaction, mystery and appreciation. There is endless discovery of new richness and beauty in the wild world. All beings have the power of love, the great creative energy at the core of spontaneous Nature. It is manifest in an infinity of wild places, with all their ongoing diversity.

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