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# The Wild and the Sacred

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## The Wild and the Sacred

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE\*

A thundering rhythm echoes across the damp field, into the trees and back toward us, through us. The drummers have taken the stage. The mosh pit is starting to heat up. "Feel the pulse," one of the drummers cries out. "It's the pulse of the forest, the pulse of your heart." No one here needs much persuading. We have traveled to this remote corner of northern California because of the forest. What is left of it. We are here because one of the last remaining stands of ancient trees, the Headwaters Forest, is under frenzied assault from Pacific Lumber Company, because we know this might be one of our last chances to do anything about it. Everyone here knows how bleak the prospects are, how much work remains to be done. We are here in part to organize, to plan strategies of resistance, to show by our physical presence that we will not stand quietly by while these ancient trees are razed.

We are also here to pray, to worship, to give ritual expression to our feeling of kinship with this place, these trees. Which is why, restless after hours of speeches, we happily relinquish ourselves to the rhythm of the drums. All around the field, people begin rising from the wet ground, begin dancing, swaying, laughing. Five thousand of us, embraced by the forest, dancing to celebrate, to deepen our resolve, to rekindle our hope. For a moment the world seems simple, whole. The disappearance of the trees seems an illusion, an impossibility; on all sides of this damp field, we are surrounded, sustained by their presence. Nor does the clear-cut hillside that has unleashed tons of mud on the nearby town of Stafford seem real. Even the machinations of Maxxam Corporation, owners of Pacific Lumber, and their attempts to pay off junk-bond debts with trees seem, for a moment, to have no weight or substance. There is only this pulse, this rhythm, this forest, all of us, dancing and moving together in the soft afternoon light of this autumn day. There is only this wordless celebration of community, sol-

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idity, ecstatic wonder. It feels sufficient in that moment to let the pulse of this wild place carry us, console us, renew us.

A second image: it is just before dawn at Redwoods Monastery, several miles to the south and west of this field. Eight figures sit silently in a small, cinderblock chapel. As the light slowly fills the space, the shape of a simple square altar emerges. Behind the altar, a wall of glass twenty feet high. Just visible through the glass is another figure, tall, graceful, silent: a huge redwood tree. Its presence is particularly strong this morning. It is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Since at least the time of Constantine, Christians have been meditating on this great mystery, the saving wood of the cross, or as some would later call it, the verdant cross. The tree on which salvation was won. Today, in this place, we approach the great mystery in silence.

A third image: a young woman wakes up, opens her eyes, and looks around. She sees branches and sky and, inches from her face, a northern squirrel looking at her. Suddenly she remembers: she is living in a tree. She has been living in the branches of this redwood tree, one hundred and eighty feet above the ground, for over a year. The tree is called Luna. Her name is Julia. She is here because she loves this tree and this forest. The ground beneath the tree is nearly bare: most of the other trees have been cut. The land is owned by Pacific Lumber Company. Julia and all those supporting her lonely vigil here are trespassing. But she says she will not come down until she receives an assurance that Luna and what is left of the surrounding forest will be preserved.

These three images are part of a single complex reality: the struggle to save what is left of the Headwaters Forest in northern California. It is a many-faceted struggle, involving ecological research, community organizing, political action, legal maneuvering, and economic calculation. But it also involves something else, elusive and mostly hidden, but essential: spiritual awareness and practice, a sense of what it means to see the wild and the sacred as part of a single, indissoluble mystery. One can see this expressed vividly in the struggle to preserve the Headwaters Forest. But it is also, I believe, a much wider ranging phenomenon. Increasing numbers of activists, poets, and scientists are finding the language of the sacred indispensable for describing the deepest impulses at work in us and in the wild world. So too, growing numbers of religious practitioners are finding themselves drawn to articulate their relationship to the sacred in terms of the wild.

I want to consider here the meaning of this growing convergence of the sacred and the wild in contemporary discourse and practice.

Two questions form the center of this inquiry: What role does spiritual discourse and practice play in the effort to respond to and preserve wild places? Also: how might the growing attention to the wild contribute to the reinvigoration of our traditions of spiritual discourse and practice? These are not, of course, abstract questions. How we answer them will determine to a large degree how we act in the world. Which is why it is worth trying: the ability to address them in a meaningful way may well help us to discover the will and the understanding and the empathy to preserve and cherish what remains of our wild world and possibly what remains of the sacred itself.

### *The Wild and the Sacred*

I want to return in a moment to that clearing in the Headwaters Forest. Also to that monastery chapel. And yes, to the young woman living in a tree. And I want to keep the trees themselves before us, those beautiful, luminous trees. But first a few comments about these terms, the wild and the sacred.

"In wildness is the preservation of the world." As is so often the case with the really important questions, we return to Thoreau. More than a few observers have noted how significant it is that Thoreau did not say "in *wilderness* is the preservation of the world." No, not wilderness, not if one means by this term what Paul Shepard claims most of us *do* mean when we speak of wilderness: "a place you go for a while. An escape to or from. . . . a departure into a kind of therapeutic land management, a release from our crowded and overbuilt environment, an aesthetic balm." Shepard has long argued that our diminished sense of what wilderness is can be traced to certain ideas of landscape and scenery that place the human person emphatically outside of the scene. Art historians might object that the Western traditions of landscape art are rich and varied and ambiguous and cannot be reduced to such a simple view. Still, it is difficult to argue with Shepard's sense that we have largely succumbed to the corrosive effects of what he calls "an objectifying perception" of the natural world—a chronic and pervasive sense that we hover above or outside of nature but do not really participate or live in it.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it difficult to see how short a journey it is from this "objectifying perception" of nature to the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Shepard, *Traces of an Omnivore* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), 193-194. See also Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

widespread commodification of nature that we see in increasing evidence all around us.<sup>2</sup> A certain image of wilderness, itself highly commodified and often radically circumscribed (official “wilderness areas” comprise less than two percent of the land in this country), fits neatly into this sense of nature. It is consistent too with the chilling picture Jack Turner evokes in his book *The Abstract Wild*: we are heading rapidly toward a point where the only wild that will be available to us is an abstraction, a weak, faded trace memory of something that was once alive and vibrant and whole.<sup>3</sup>

This is why some, like Shepard and Turner and Gary Snyder, urge us to think less about wilderness—at least in the sense of a carefully demarcated “zone”—and more about that fundamental mystery that so fascinated Thoreau: wildness. If the idea of wilderness is to have any viability, they argue, we will need to recover and reimagine the meaning of the wild.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely what Snyder attempts to do in his magnificent essay, “The Etiquette of Freedom.” He acknowledges the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of defining this

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<sup>2</sup> For a devastating description and analysis of this phenomenon, see Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventure with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Perseus, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the term wilderness has lost its usefulness. As Wallace Stegner and many others have used the term, it is nearly synonymous with “wild” and has profound ecological and spiritual significance. In his famous “Wilderness Letter” of 1960, Stegner argued for the importance of what he called the “wilderness idea” as a kind of imaginative and spiritual resource: “The reminder and the reassurance that [wilderness] is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it” (Wallace Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall: The Making of the American West*, edited and with a preface by Page Stegner [New York: Henry Holt, 1998], 112). Of course such an idea presumes the existence of wild places. And many such places, including some of those that Stegner himself cherished, exist in designated wilderness areas. Still, to the extent that designated “wilderness areas” come to represent and encompass the wild, to sum up all that it is and can be, they inadvertently undermine and domesticate the very meaning of wild. It is just such domestication of the wild that Edward Abbey railed against in “*Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks*.” Abbey put his finger on the cultural myopia behind such thinking, a myopia that was (and still is) contributing to the reduction of wilderness areas to theme parks. See Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 54-71. But there is another danger: in thinking of and treating wilderness areas as “islands” within a “civilized” world, we actually contribute to their ecological degradation and to the extinction of species that need more than islands to survive. See David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions* (New York: Scribner, 1996). See especially chapter 9, “World in Pieces,” 547-602.

term precisely. "The word wild," he says, "is like a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight." Close to the root meaning is something elusive and mysterious. But certain things can be said, mostly in an adjectival voice:

Of animals—free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.

Of plants—self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.

Of land—a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine.

One can also speak, as Snyder does, of the wild character of food crops, societies, individuals, and behavior. The wild, in other words, most emphatically includes us, as well as human culture in all its manifold expressions. But it also transcends us, encompasses us, defying our best attempts to limit or circumscribe it or even to say precisely what it is. Perhaps it is the immensity of the idea (Snyder revises Thoreau, saying "Wildness is not just 'the preservation of the world.' It *is* the world.") that leads him to suggest that wild in the sense that he is using the word comes very close to how the Chinese define the *dao*, the *way* of Great Nature: "eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple."

Here, Snyder suggests, "wild" comes close to what we sometimes refer to as "sacred." Close to the Buddhist term *dharma* and its original senses of "forming and framing."<sup>5</sup> Or, we might add, close to the Jewish understanding of *hokma/sophia* (wisdom), understood as the enlivening life force sustaining the very "structure of the world and the properties of the elements." Close also to the Christian understanding of *logos*, adapted in part from the Stoics, understood as the generative utterance through which the universe came into being and by which it is sustained. It is in this sense that philosopher Erazim Kohák can say that: "The *logos* is the order of the *kosmos*, guiding alike the flight of the sparrow and the life of the sage."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1990), 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 10. On the idea

*Dao, dharma, hokma, logos*: here are terms that confront us directly and profoundly with the cosmological sensibilities of our great religious traditions, with the kind of informing spiritual principles that arise from paying close attention to the wild. Still, there is a danger here. It is the danger of abstraction. Which is why it is necessary to pause and consider, again and again, how the wild comes to us in the palpably particular:

In the blue night  
 frost haze, the sky glows  
 with the moon  
 pine tree tops  
 bend snow-blue, fade  
 into sky, frost, starlight,  
 the creak of boots,  
 rabbit tracks, deer tracks,  
 what do we know?<sup>7</sup>

What *do* we know? That question, arising at the end of Snyder's "Pine Tree Tops," echoes for a long time afterwards in the silence of the night. It is an important, troubling question. What *do* we know—about the lives of wild animals, about rivers, trees, the wind? How much has our *assumption* of knowledge obscured our vision, prevented us from seeing, feeling, loving what is continually unfolding before us? How much arrogance is wrapped up in that assumption of knowledge? To struggle with these questions is, I think, to find ourselves confronted with a profound spiritual challenge. It is the challenge of discovering whether we have the capacity to adopt a posture of genuine humility before the ever elusive, ever mysterious wild. In this sense I agree with Stephanie Mills that the question of the wild ultimately "shakes out as a religious question." The question, suggests Mills, is this: "Is nothing sacred? Are there no natural phenomena—cells, organisms, ecosystems—before which we might stand in humble awe?"<sup>8</sup>

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of the logos, see also Douglas Burton-Christie, "Words Beneath the Water: Logos, Cosmos, and the Spirit of Place," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 317-336.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Snyder, "Pine Tree Tops," in *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Mills, "The Wild and the Tame," in David Clarke Burks, ed., *Place of the Wild* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1994), 53.

Humility. From *humus*, ground or soil. It is a word, an idea, whose meaning we have hardly begun to understand. It suggests a kind of moral and spiritual disposition of lowliness, littleness. Not self-abnegation or self-loathing as some of our spiritual traditions have taken it to mean. Rather an honest acknowledgement of who we are, or who we might become: beings close to the earth, of the earth, aware of our kinship with other living beings, capable of looking out onto the world from below.

I move among the ankles  
of forest Elders, tread  
their moist rugs of moss,  
duff of their soft brown carpets.  
Far above, their arms are held  
open wide to each other, or waving—

what they know, what  
perplexities and wisdoms they exchange,  
unknown to me as were the thoughts  
of grownups when in infancy I wandered  
into a roofed clearing amidst  
human feet and legs and the massive  
carved legs of the table,

the minds of people, the minds of trees  
equally remote, my attention then  
filled with sensations, my attention now  
caught by leaf and bark at eye level  
and by thoughts of my own, but sometimes  
drawn to upgazing—up and up: to wonder  
about what rises so far above me into the light.<sup>9</sup>

Such, Denise Levertov suggests, is the view from below. It is a child's view, a crawling-around-under-the-dining-room-table-among-ankles-and-socks view. It is a view marked by intense intimacy ("their moist rugs of moss, / duff of their soft brown carpets") and bewildering distance ("what they know, what / perplexities and wisdoms they exchange, / unknown to me."). A world beckons, but refuses to disclose its meaning. Still the child looks and looks, "drawn to upgazing," full of wonder.

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<sup>9</sup> Denise Levertov, "From Below," in *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 3.



In her book *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, Edith Cobb suggests that “Wonder is . . . a kind of expectancy of fulfillment. The child’s sense of wonder, displayed as surprise and joy, is,” she says, “aroused as a response to the mystery of some external stimulus that promises ‘more to come’ or, better still, ‘more to do’—the power of perceptual participation in the known and unknown.” One feels this sense of wonder pulsing at the heart of Levertov’s poem, that staggering sense of the “more” that is so palpably present to the child (the ankles of grownups pointing to but also masking their mysterious and never-entirely-knowable lives, the ankles of trees drawing the eyes “up and up” into their mysterious and never-entirely-knowable lives); the capacity for gazing out of that smallness into immensity and being held by that gaze. It is a capacity, Cobb suggests, that can be cultivated long after the first naïveté of childhood has passed, long after that initial sense of “more” has begun to diminish. “When it is maintained as an attitude, or point of view, in later life,” she says, “wonder permits a response of the nervous system to the universe that incites the mind to organize novelty of pattern and form out of incoming information. The ability of the adult to look upon the world with wonder is thus a technique and an essential instrument in the work of the poet, the artist, or the creative thinker.”<sup>10</sup>

The journey Levertov describes in her poem, in which the adult narrator struggles to recover the perspective of her child-self in order to enter more fully into her present experience expresses eloquently the difficulty of the challenge facing us: how can we retrieve the capacity for wonder? How can we learn again to stand in humble awe before the “more” that unfolds before us continuously, especially the “more” of the wild? These are at least in part aesthetic questions, that invite us to deepen our capacity to see and notice and respond to beauty. But they are also spiritual questions that call us to consider how the particular and varied life of this world beckons to us, envelops us, transforms us. And they are moral questions that beseech us to come to terms with our own complicity in the destruction of the world and our own responsibility for helping to heal it. Which is why the voices of poets and artists are becoming so crucial in the present moment.

In her 1991 essay, “Some Affinities of Content,” Levertov describes the increasing affinity between the way we experience (and

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<sup>10</sup> Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1993), 27-28.

speak about) the wild and the way we experience (and speak about) the sacred. As this sense of affinity grows and deepens, she says, we are beginning to see the reciprocal influence between poetic and spiritual discourse grow and deepen. As an example, she notes how Chinese and Japanese poetry and Buddhist thought and practice have influenced certain contemporary poets of the Pacific Northwest, how it has given rise in their work to what she calls “a more conscious attentiveness to the non-human and to a more or less conscious desire to immerse the self in that larger whole.” To a kind of “spiritual quest.” In reading this work, she claims, one is taken beyond the level of a casual observer, “to a universal level that speaks to the inner life.” Such poems “communicate not just the appearance of phenomena but the presence of spirit *within* those phenomena.”<sup>11</sup>

I think Levertov describes accurately something we see in increasing evidence all around us: the sacred or spiritual encountered through, mediated by the wild. Also: the wild recognized as integral to the experience of the sacred. This is not, of course, a new phenomenon. But its emergence as a prominent feature of our contemporary experience of the world is, I think, striking. The fact that this concern to reimagine the sacred in terms of the wild is arising with equal force among poets and artists, activists and religious thinkers suggests the richness of the new vision that is coming into being. And it points to the challenge of the imaginative task ahead. To borrow a phrase from New Testament scholar Amos Wilder, we are faced with the challenge of articulating a new “theopoetics” of the natural world that will help us to deepen our commitments for cherishing and caring for that world.

### *Toward a Poetics of Sacred Place*

Like the poets Levertov describes, many of those I encounter on that wet September day in Humboldt County appear to take it as axiomatic that the wild is shot through with spirit. All around me I see what seems to be a heartfelt and spontaneous response to the call to “immerse the self in that larger whole.” Not only for personal reasons, for the feeling of belonging that comes from that immersion, but also for the *sake* of the larger whole. This imaginative reweaving of self

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<sup>11</sup> Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 4-6.

and living world, in *all* its dimensions—ecological, literary, ritual, political—is characteristic of the emerging poetics of sacred place. The retrieval of ancient religious images and symbols is a crucial element of this poetics. But the significance of these symbols, what they actually mean to us, is being transformed by our contemporary experience—by our experience of an increasingly diminished natural world, and by a climate of almost irreducible religious diversity.

What James Joyce once said in reference to the crazy-quilt ethnic and religious inclusivity of popular, grass-roots Irish Catholicism—“here comes everybody”—seems an apt description of this Headwaters gathering. Visible by their signs, badges, or presence on stage are members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, representatives of the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, neopagans, Native American elders, Presbyterians for Ecological Justice, a rabbi representing the local Jewish community, and many others who might best be described in terms that river rafters and rock climbers sometimes use: “beyond category.”

The religious rhetoric and imagery is equally eclectic: there is recurring appeal to the biblical ethos of stewardship, to the idea that we have been given a “sacred trust” and need to be caretakers of the earth. Starhawk, a local witch, appeals to the ancient and enduring connections known to the wicca traditions which bind us to the natural world. A Buddhist monk leads us in meditation, recalling the sacredness of all sentient beings. And a rabbi chants, first in Hebrew, then in English, the haunting words of the psalm: “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence will my help come? My help will come from the maker of earth, stars, and sun.”

There is an altar dedicated to Judi Bari (the environmental activist injured in a mysterious car bombing) who is for many here a martyr. Perhaps the most striking reinvention of an ancient sacred form is the large altarpiece, a triptych modeled after medieval Christian examples, with a towering redwood tree visible on the central panel, images of animal species native to this habitat displayed along the two side panels and, all along the bottom, images of habitat destroyed by clear-cutting. This transposition of sacred symbolism is striking and meaningful for many gathered here. As I stand pondering these images I notice many others pausing before these shrines and descending for a moment into a place of mourning and silent reverence. Given all that has been lost, there is an inescapable sadness surrounding these shrines. Yet they are also places of hope, where

those who are mourning can and sometimes do give voice to their commitment to preserve the life that still remains. These improvised sacred symbols place the trees and the entire local biotic community at the center of the sacral yearning that has brought us here.

Eventually, the drumming and dancing subside. Bonnie Raitt takes the stage for a final song. It is the old Blind Faith tune, "Can't Find My Way Home," a fitting coda to this day so filled with longing for home, so fraught with feelings of homelessness. Then we move on to the last ritual act of the day, a procession—from the place of worship to the site of desecration, the mudslide in Stafford. We make our way slowly out of the field and along the side of a small country road, passing a phalanx of police officers dressed in riot gear. We walk with our posters, giant puppets, drums, sacred objects, up the hill toward Stafford. It is part carnival, part protest march, part religious procession. It is at once a gesture of solidarity with the people of that town and an act of remembrance, a way of saying: this place, these people, this event will not be forgotten. Stafford will not be allowed to become an "unfortunate consequence" of careless, illegal logging practices. In an attempt to help secure what is left of the town against the next big slide, we fill thousands of sandbags and place them against the now-stripped hillside. Will it be enough? Almost certainly not. But as one resident tells us: "We desperately need help. The first slides cleaned off the mountain so it's slick as glass. Any new slides will be like bullets—much, much faster than the first ones. Living here now is like living in the barrel of a gun."

This too is part of the poetics of sacred place—the often disturbing metaphors of fear and anxiety that emerge as the desecration of the places we inhabit deepens and spreads. "Like living in the barrel of a gun." A harsh and frightening image of what it feels like to live under the shadow of this once forested, now slick-as-glass hillside, an image that captures only too well our current predicament. Even more ominous, and harder to find language for, is the sickening, fathomless sense of loss that affects many in this community and throughout this region. Rooted in the mounting accumulation of losses—first the trees, then the hillside, then individual homes (seven were lost in the slide)—it opens out onto something both more basic and more profound. It has to do with the growing sense that we are losing what Thomas Berry calls "modes of divine presence." It touches on the sense that in a world made desolate, the presence of the sacred will be lost to us. And with it will be lost our capacity for intimacy, delight, and wonder.

These are ultimate, necessary realities without which life itself is unimaginable. Gradually, it begins to dawn on us that they arise from and are sustained by the living beings of this world, which are themselves ultimate and necessary. This sense of the *ultimacy* and *necessity* of what we are losing and what we still hope to preserve is emerging as increasingly integral to the meaning of sacred place in our contemporary discourse. The environmental movement still does not have a shared language of the sacred that can ground and galvanize the work of community building, political resistance, and ecological preservation. I wonder, though, whether the language of ultimacy and necessity might provide a place from which to begin.

I am thinking, for example, of the way Scott Russell Sanders talks about ultimacy: "The likeliest path to the *ultimate* ground," he says, "leads through my local ground. I mean the land itself, with its creeks and rivers, its weather, seasons, stone outcroppings, and all the plants and animals that share it. I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one. . . . If our interior journeys are cut loose entirely from . . . place, then both we and the neighborhood will suffer."<sup>12</sup> There are clear echoes here of the old philosophical-mystical idea of the ground of being, a depth metaphor that Sanders suggests is still useful for expressing our most far reaching sense of kinship with the natural world. But he also suggests we need to rethink how we understand this ultimate ground, and where to look for it. Not in terms of a disembodied transcendence (always a temptation for spiritual seekers), but only in terms of a radical immanence—a grounded transcendence, a "transcendence downwards" of the kind that poet Wallace Stevens expresses in his work. Only here, in the life and texture of particular places—noticed, cherished, cared for—can this ultimate ground be discovered. Detach our ultimate concerns from the gritty details of the place and "both we and the neighborhood will suffer." The work of reimagining the meaning of ultimate ground is a fundamentally poetic process. Not only because it demands that we take seriously the work of becoming intimate with and articulate about the proximate, local, and particular. But also because it demands that we find a way of binding together the seen and the unseen, the exterior and interior worlds in a single continuous movement.

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<sup>12</sup> Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), chap. 5.

If the sacred has something to do with what is ultimate, it also has to do with what is *necessary*. Like wildness, for example. Like what one still encounters so vividly in the Headwaters Forest. We go to such places, live in them, dream of them, says Montana writer William Kittredge, “to renew our intimacy with a world that is natural and perhaps sacred. To me, sacred means necessary. We evolved in nature, with other animals. . . . Isolate us from nature too long, as individuals, as societies, and we start getting nervous, crazy, unmoored, inhabited by diseases we cannot name, driven to thoughtless ambitions and easy cruelties.”<sup>13</sup> Kittredge echoes here the diagnosis of Paul Shepard, who in *Nature and Madness* argues for “the necessity of a rich nonhuman environment” as crucial to healthy psychological development in human beings.<sup>14</sup> We need the sense of otherness the natural world brings to us, says Shepard. “[E]cological reality (flowers-bees, bears-salmon) become satisfying otherness in their own right and metaphorical sign images or messages about the inner world, the binding forces of human society, and the invisible spiritual realm.”<sup>15</sup>

It is in response to this rich, relational reality, in profound poetic response, through play, storytelling, song, and dance that we come to know who we are in the world, that we come to know the ground of our own being, the ground of the world, ultimate ground. Without this reality, without the fluid poetic process it calls forth from us, we will remain stunted, emotionally and spiritually impoverished. And we will end up imposing our own sense of impoverishment upon the physical world.

### *Trees*

I want to return, before concluding, to the trees, those wild, ancient, luminous beings which are for me among the most necessary traces of the sacred in the world. That seemingly endless expanse of green in the midst of which I stood that day on the edge of the Headwaters Forest. Luna, the great redwood tree standing on a high ridge deep in the Headwaters Forest, wild, intimate arboreal home for nearly two years to Julia Butterfly Hill. And that redwood tree rising up out of the damp earth outside of Redwoods Monastery chapel, a

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<sup>13</sup> William Kittredge, *Who Owns the West* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996), 108.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1982), 129.

<sup>15</sup> Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, 112.

being in whose presence I have spent long hours of silence. These particular trees, made sacred in part by the longing, by the range of affection they have called forth in those who love them.

And not only these trees but others that now come rushing back from my memory. The great firs of my childhood in the Pacific Northwest; the weeping willow tree in my back yard into whose cool green embrace I used to abandon myself as a child for endless hours in the summer; the giant cherry trees in the field across the street from my home, whose abundant, glistening dark fruit would lure me high into their gnarled branches year after year; the tiny almond tree in my garden in Oakland, always surprising me with its sudden appearance of shimmering white blossoms in late winter; the cottonwoods at the bottom of Barrier Canyon in southern Utah, bare and gaunt, through whose branches I first caught sight of those mysterious, ancient beings etched into the side of the sandstone walls; also the delicate flowering cherry trees outside the library at U.C. Santa Cruz, under whose canopy I fell wildly in love with the woman who would eventually become my life partner; the old half-dead apricot tree in our back yard in Los Angeles, from whose branches my young daughter would hurl herself and swing from a faded yellow rope, back and forth, legs splayed, filling the air with her laughter.

My life is unimaginable apart from these trees, from the memories and feelings that are as deeply bound to these trees as the trees themselves are to the earth. This web of associations, a kind of root system, holds me fast. The *trees* hold me. And I hold them. Or try to. And in trying to hold on—to the trees, to the memories they carry and embody—I find myself increasingly asking myself this: what does it mean to hold and be held by a tree? This may seem like a trivial question in light of the ferocious assault on our forests we are currently witnessing, a romantic and sentimental question we cannot afford to ask.

I do not think this is true. I think it is a crucial question, one that we need to ask and attempt to answer if we are to discover how to cherish and preserve all that is so rapidly disappearing from our midst. To ask this question is really to ask: what is a tree? Which is to begin considering how we imagine trees. It is to inquire into all the symbolic weight trees carry for us. Or fail to carry. And it is also to consider whether thinking about trees as symbols is really the right approach at all. Perhaps we have symbolized them too much already. Perhaps it is time to begin thinking of and responding to trees as,

well, trees. That is, have we perhaps arrived at the point that we need to learn how to simply leave trees alone, leave them to be what they are, learn again to notice and cherish and embrace them for the wild beings they are?

First, though, a word about symbols. Maxxam Corporation bought Pacific Lumber Corporation, owners of huge parts of the Headwaters Forest, for one purpose: to cut down the trees in order to pay off huge junk-bond debts. They accelerated cutting in the Headwaters Forest, engaging in unsafe and often illegal clear-cutting (they were fined hundreds of times for violations and once had their license suspended), creating the kind of conditions that led to the disastrous mud slide at Stafford. They have continued this accelerated cutting almost without pause for the last several years. For Maxxam Corporation and Pacific Lumber, the trees in Headwaters Forest have been imagined as so much "timber" or so many "board feet." Or to put it even more crudely, as "capital." Every tree cut in this forest can be translated into a simple and widely recognizable symbol: the dollar sign. It is an immensely potent symbol. Superimposed onto the trees in the Headwaters Forest, it threatens to overwhelm any other possible meanings the trees might have. It effectively destroys them. It reduces trees to capital, part of a corporate bottom line. It considers them a kind of wealth, though a shrunken and poor idea of wealth.

There are of course other ways to imagine trees, other symbols we might use to help us in the necessary work of reclaiming the mythic power of trees.<sup>16</sup> I am thinking here of the sacred oak in Jewish tradition, which Theodore Hiebert has demonstrated was inextricably bound up with Yahweh's revelatory presence.<sup>17</sup> Or the remarkable fusion of the imagery of the cross and the tree of life in the Christian iconographic tradition, which Simon Schama has so brilliantly elucidated.<sup>18</sup> Or the numinous power of the chestnut tree in the Japanese poet Basho's *Narrow Road to the Interior*—inseparable from the redemptive path of the Boddhisatva.<sup>19</sup> The symbolic rich-

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 108-112.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 214-226.

<sup>19</sup> Matsuo Basho, *The Essential Basho*, trans. Sam Hamill (Boston: Shambala, 1999), 10.



ness of this language and these religious traditions can help us in our effort to see and cherish the trees all around us.

But I want to consider what might happen if we were to prescind for a time from our symbolizing habits altogether, if we simply placed ourselves in the presence of trees and looked and listened and imagined. As Mary Oliver asks,

Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches  
of other lives—  
tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey,  
hanging  
from the branches of the young locust trees, in early summer,  
feel like?<sup>20</sup>

The prospect of engaging in such an exercise of the imagination may leave us feeling absurd or uncomfortable. Or, and it is this that seems to lie deep within Oliver's question, the very act of imagination may elicit from us an unexpected reservoir of curiosity and desire. It may be enough to draw us close to the locust trees, into the presence of those "other lives." And then, who can say what might happen?

One catches a vivid glimpse of what *can* happen by listening to John Muir's description of trees he encountered during his first summer in the Sierra Nevada mountains. He notes carefully the distinctive qualities of particular specimens of goldcup oak, Douglas spruce, yellow pine, silver fir, and sequoia. But it is the sugar pine that seems to have caught and held his attention most deeply. He called it "an inexhaustible study and source of pleasure."

I never weary of gazing at its grand tasseled cones, its perfectly round bole one hundred feet or more without a limb, the fine purplish color of its bark, and its magnificent outswEEPing, down-curling feathery arms forming a crown always bold and striking and exhilarating. . . . at the age of fifty to one hundred years it begins to acquire individuality, so that no two are alike in their prime or old age. Every tree calls for special admiration. I have been making many sketches, and regret that I cannot draw every needle.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Oliver, *West Wind* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 61.

<sup>21</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 51.

Muir is well known for his rich rhetoric, for his ecstatic exclamations at the beauty of all that he beheld, for his tendency to see traces of the sacred everywhere around him in the wild world. Here we see something else: a simple, stripped down attention to the particularity of an individual being. He does not try to “make anything” of the tree. He simply attends as carefully as he can to the intricate character of this particular tree. He notices its “individuality.”

A little more than a half-century later, while considering a different tree, the governor of the state of California (who would later become president) offered this pointed observation: “If you’ve seen one redwood, you’ve seen them all.” An argument for trees as homogenous and uninteresting, as far from Muir’s careful attention to the particular as one can imagine and still, regrettably, too much with us. “Every tree calls for special admiration,” Muir said, sitting before the old sugar pine, making sketch after sketch, full of regret that he could not draw every needle.

Such a sensibility was rare then and it is rare now. Still, I wonder whether it is possible to even begin imagining our way out of our current impasse unless we take more seriously than we have done Muir’s challenge—echoed by so many contemporary writers, poets, artists, scientists, and religious thinkers—to notice and cherish the individual lives of wild beings. To do so will require that we open ourselves to these wild beings, these Others. It will mean learning to take seriously their emotional, moral, and spiritual claim upon us. It will mean learning to imagine them differently.

As I consider the tumultuous improvised ritual that unfolded in the Headwaters Forest that day, Julia Butterfly Hill’s long vigil high atop that tree, and the witness of those Cistercian nuns sitting in silence in the heart of an ancient redwood grove, I begin to think this might actually be possible. I begin to think that we might be on the verge of learning again how to see and imagine the wild world as alive and sacred and whole. An agreement of sorts has been worked out to save parts of the Headwaters Forest. Julia Hill has come down from Luna, and continues her struggle on the ground. And the community at Redwoods Monastery, together with all those who sojourn with them in that place, persist in their silent contemplative witness. Certain parts of the forest remain whole, alive, vital biological communities. Sanctuary Forests, as one group calls them.

But trouble remains. The logging trucks rumble by on the road just beyond the monastery grounds. The Headwaters agreement frays

at the edges as illegal logging continues. And now Luna, the tree that has stood as a beacon of hope throughout this struggle, has suffered deep and perhaps irreparable harm: someone stole into the forest and sent a chainsaw ripping more than halfway through her massive trunk. Her prognosis remains uncertain.

“There are,” suggests Wendell Berry, “no unsacred places; / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places.”<sup>22</sup> I think about this as I return from the Headwaters gathering to the monastery, as I enter again into the silence. It is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross—the sacred, redemptive tree. I sit for a long time in that silence looking up at the giant redwood tree. As the light slowly bleeds from the evening sky, the tree fades into the shadows. Finally it disappears from view completely, a hidden presence, a holy remnant.

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<sup>22</sup> Wendell Berry, “How to Be a Poet (to remind myself),” *Poetry* 177:3 (January 2001), 269-270.



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