The Raven Knows My Name:
Contemplation and Practice on an Off-Grid Island

by

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Abstract

Students often confront grief, anxiety, and despair as they learn about ecological decline and their complicity in a deleterious system. Ecological grief afflicts students even as the world requires much of them by way of action and reform. However, the middle and upper-class in modern Western societies, accustomed to comfort and consumption, often find it hard to diminish their ecological impact. This dissertation explores the following question: How do we do what we are not inclined to do even as we suffer from ecological grief? Informed by Zen tradition and practice, the author explores contemplation as a way of dealing with ecological pain. Working through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, the suite of ruling dispositions shaped by practice, the author examines how inclinations are shaped by everyday activities. The research project involves a ten-and-a-half-month retreat on an off-grid island on the West Coast of British Columbia. Using a combination of contemplative practice, phenomenological inquiry and portraiture, the author documents the disruptions to his urban habitus, the practices related to living in a wild place, and how such practices are relevant to educators aiming to promote dispositions that cohere with a more ecologically sound way of life. Through stories and reflections from each season, the author relates experiences of living in the woods and interprets their significance to environmental education. Significant themes include: embodiment, awareness, water, askesis, time, and contemplation. The author also describes discontinuities and adjustments upon his return to the city and elaborates on their significance in relation to ecological grief and habitus. The last chapter explores the dimensions of ecological grief and suggests approaches to working with anxieties, ambivalences, and aspirations associated with the ecological decline. This study presents an analysis of the various dimensions of practice and suggests profiles of practice to help reshape existing dispositions.

Keywords: ecological crisis; grief; contemplation; habitus; Zen; practice

For Don Grayston,

here and everywhere

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Prelude

I stood on the metal deck of the ship, overlooking the roiling waters under sheets of white foam. The motor grumbled in steady beat as the vessel sailed west. The sky was slate gray, a hint of haze from distant wildfires that raged across British Columbia. Flies menaced the passengers as the ship pressed into open ocean. At the start of September, when teachers and students gathered in classrooms for the start of a new school year, I faced a different beginning. In the cargo space of my mother's Toyota, I had a trunkful of gear for my upcoming year on an off-grid island: sleeping bag, blankets, utensils, pots, tools, flashlights, a duffle bag of clothes, a bag of dog food, a crate. Miles, my five-year-old Australian Shepherd, slept in the backseat with a bandaged left-hind paw.

As the black waters churned in the wake of the ship, the pewter sky obscured all my resolve. Earlier that morning, I checked my Facebook status and was heartened by a message from my aunt: *You are a brave soul. You are embarking on an adventure that many of us dream of but never have the courage to pursue. Come back to us safely and share with us all that you learn.* I was moved by her words, but in that moment, I knew nothing of courage. No volition of mine compelled me forward except the hum of the motor, whisking me toward a place strange and unfathomable. No calibre of intelligence could discern what awaited. I had no cache of confidence to match the demands of circumstance. The gray sky painted my mood as I waved with the wind, unsteady and unmoored.

Ecological Grief

My time on an off-grid island came as a culmination of many intersecting forces that have each played a role in my life history: anguish over the state of the planet, frustration over my complicity in a modern industrial system, and a psycho-spiritual search for meaning amid the ecological crisis. The confluence of these forces would shape my intellectual life and ethical commitments throughout my adult years.

I was born in Taiwan and suffered from asthma as a child. When I was six years old, I was hospitalized for a severe case of pneumonia, complications stemming from my asthmatic condition. Doctors suggested that poor air quality had contributed to my

respiratory illness. Concerned about my faltering health, my parents decided to emigrate to Canada. I arrived in Vancouver a month after my tenth birthday, the first lungful of crisp clean air still vivid in my memory. The significance of our journey to Canada did not become clear until many years later, when I learned about rapid economic development in Taiwan in the 70s and 80s, fueled by coal-fired powerplants and the proliferation of motor vehicles. My entry into Canadian society was set against a backdrop of smog, and the discovery of a new life came after a struggle to escape environmental duress.

With crystalline mountains visible from the street and the charge of morning air cold and invigorating, I cleaved to—as many immigrants do—the promise of a splendid future in a land that hosts every possibility. Oblivious to colonial history and the significant changes already wrought on a landscape that I perceived pristine, I applied myself to studies in the hope of attaining a station among the upper classes, aspiring to a life marked by material wealth and a surplus of luxuries. I entered university with the intention of studying business and attaining a degree in accounting. However, in those formative years of study, new interests stole away the sureties of upbringing and the expectations of family culture. Literature and philosophy called to a latent longing for the humanities; reflections compelled by Shakespeare and Plato were more enticing than the calculations of microeconomics and financial accounting. Basking in the seminal ideas of previous ages, I glimpsed a life rich in thought and meaning and drifted from the view of a human life measured by wealth.

I first learned about global warming in the mid-90s. At the time, I could not apprehend the gravity of the crisis. In subsequent years, I grew more concerned about climate change, the stupendous disruption to planetary systems wrought by industrial development. On a backpacking trip through South-East Asia, I saw lakes choked with detritus—carpets of trash masking the water beneath. In Beijing, I braved the bleakness of a sandstorm. Ghostly figures drew coats over their faces and shuffled through an ashen cityscape. When I returned to my hotel room, I was shocked to see the sight of myself in the mirror, eyebrows and hair white with dust. Later I learned that sandstorms in northern China had grown more frequent and severe due to widespread deforestation. In India, I was devastated by the sight of children sleeping in mounds of refuse, next to feral pigs rummaging through trash. I was appalled to learn the effects of nuclear waste that remained dangerous into the distant future. I lamented rivers no longer teeming with fish, the streets devoid of songbirds, the oceans defiled by plastic. Summers grew hotter,

and wildfires more frequent and fierce. My entry into adulthood was accompanied by concern and alarm over a planet undergoing tumultuous change.

Marriage and a career afforded me a comfortable station within mainstream society, but the underlying grief over the state of ecological despoliation did not subside. As a secondary English teacher, I drew attention to environmental issues, led an environmental club, and lobbied for solar power for the school building. I knew that such efforts amounted to little within the sweep of a rapacious industrial project that brooks no limit and defies restraint. The enviable living standards of many Canadians, which I took to with alacrity upon my arrival, now appeared hollow in light of their impacts. The promise of a better life through social mobility within a capitalist-industrial system dissipated under the spectre of ecological collapse. At the same time, I could not shake my own membership in this pervasive project of development; complicity in the system became an acid that seeped through fissures in the armour of denial, corroding innocence and integrity both. With the news of another species declared extinct, another international agreement abandoned, I grew despondent and weary. There were days and weeks when I was silent with an anguish that had no name, pressed by a weight without intermission. Every conscientious act was rendered futile by the scale of the problem; each item recycled was made absurd by the mountains of detritus spilling into oceans, each stem of leafy green growing from a pot obscured by the masses of concrete poured into new buildings inhabited by nameless millions across continents the world over. Despite faltering attempts to live more consciously, my participation in a flawed system gave my conscience no rest.

Grief had thus attended my awareness of the ecological crisis. Having no claim to innocence, I found myself with little ground to stand on. My very participation in modernity had become a vexing problem. In its essence, the pain was a writhing tension between modes of consciousness. No longer at home in the society that I knew, I was nevertheless unable to effect the arrival of an alternate life, entrenched as I was in an anthropocentric society. Thus, I found myself astride two worlds: one bound to die, the

other powerless to be born.[1] At stake was not only a tenuous faith in human progress but also a foundational moral integrity that inhered an ethical life.

Caught between worlds, I recalled two episodes from my travels that illustrated the dilemma. In 2003, I visited Munich while backpacking through Europe. On a walking tour of the city, I came upon Viscardigasse, a small narrow street next to Odeonsplatz. The cobbled street featured a trail of gold stones. During World War II, the SS headquarters were based in a government building adjacent to Odeonsplatz. Beneath the insignia of two eagles perched on a swastika, two SS guards were posted at the gate. German citizens who passed the gate were obliged to salute the regime. A few conscientious citizens took a detour through Viscardigasse to avoid the salute. Today, the government honours these objectors by marking the path of their quiet protest.

On a second trip to Germany years later, I visited the Topology of Terror in Berlin, a museum that documents the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. Among the displays, a curious photo depicts unionized workers at a Nazi rally—a sea of bodies with arms raised in salute to Hitler, except one man who keeps his arms crossed in defiance. The museum curators marked this man with a red circle, making his refusal conspicuous amid a swarm of bodies.

These trivial acts did not stem the tide of Nazism; however, I find it remarkable that the German posterity should deem these gestures worthy of remembrance. What retrospective view of their national history, which saw the populace accede to Hitler's power, made these acts of resistance worthy of commemoration? Could it be that troubled by mass acquiescence to a terrible regime, present-day Germans view their past with consternation and applaud individuals with the courage to resist dominant power, however small their gestures of defiance? By honouring acts of resistance, these commemorative instalments reveal a sensitivity to the power of noncompliance in the face of monstrosity. Visitors to Munich may see in the gold stones along Viscardigasse the symbol of a conscience that refused to cooperate with institutionalized evil.

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[1] I borrow this phrase from Philip Kapleau, who describes in *The Three Pillars of Zen* a person's disillusionment with European civilization after World World II but is yet unable to usher in an alternative to the Western world order.

Like the German posterity that holds their past to scrutiny, future descendants may look upon modern societies with consternation. Appalled by the ecological devastation left in our wake, they will ask how the masses acquiesced to environmental degradation. It must matter to them that despite the giants of vested interest, there remained pockets of opposition, people who abided by the dictates of conscience.

Admittedly, there is something different about opposing a political regime compared to resisting a mode of civilization shared by many people across the globe, a form of organization that goes back to the beginning of the agricultural revolution.[2] Further, it might be argued that I have denigrated modernity with too broad a brush—the economic benefits of industrial development have lifted many out of abject poverty, brought health care and education to millions, and cured diseases that have ravaged countless lives.[3] The advancements afforded by industrial-consumer capitalism are a mixed bag that includes health and security alongside environmental degradation. I do not place myself among the ranks of those who opposed the Nazi regime, but I take their resistance seriously and aspire to their courage. I do not discount material and technological progress in their entirety but merely consider their true costs. While many advancements have been positive from a human perspective, they are less impressive when secured at the expense of biodiversity and the stability of fundamental ecosystems. If current modes of progress are unsustainable, then technological advancements are only provisional and their benefits overstated. Economic expansion that draws on limited resources to bolster a growing population spells ecologic cataclysm for the web of life on planet earth. The glitzy wonders that now bedazzle millions also portend an arid silence that soon follows.

The culture of the Modern West[4] offers little to those struggling with ecological anguish, and the inner wounds of disillusionment find no balm in the platitudes that pass

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[2] Paul Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

[3] Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meir, *The New Middle Classes: Globalizing Lifestyles, Consumerism, and Environmental Concern* (New York: Springer, 2009).

[4] See Heesoon Bai, "A Critical Reflection on Environmental Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 4 (2020): 916–26. For Bai, the culture of the Modern West refers not to a geographical substrate (countries and continents influenced by European colonization) but knowledge systems that see the world as disembodied, objectified, discrete and commodifiable. Such a system denies intersubjectivity and renders the world an instrument of human progress.

for wisdom in consumer society. Ecological grief is more than lamentation for a desecrated world, but a struggle to muster faith in flawed humanity, to reclaim a life worth living, and to wager a renewed commitment amid suffering. Even bright-eyed assurances from well-intentioned environmentalists who advocate for responsible choices, renewable energy, and green policies can elide the substantial inner work that must be done, the hidden architecture of ingrained culture that must be reformed in order to effect a greener society.[5] Lynn T. White has argued that “human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny,” and that “what people do about their ecology is deeply influenced by what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.”[6] Consideration of the ecological crisis and the scale of effort required in order to avert disaster challenge the limits of ordinary consciousness. The situation is too big to ponder, too overwhelming to grapple with. Knowledge of the ecological crisis can rout the mind long before the body is sickened by toxins or swept away by storms.

The ecological crisis precipitates a concomitant psycho-spiritual crisis. The prospect of biospheric decline poses an existential threat, an unrelenting source of trauma in which stress and emotional pain overwhelm one’s capacity to cope.[7] My own psycho-spiritual life began with my involvement in Evangelical Christianity in my adolescent years, followed by a period of doubt and spiritual exploration. The certainties of divine order, so vigorously proclaimed from the pulpit, gave way to disillusionment in subsequent years as I joined the strident, atheist chorus denouncing the dogma of institutional religion. However, despite estrangement from the church, my affinity to spirituality did not wane. I was drawn to contemplative traditions, the journey into deep reaches of interiority, the commitment to fashion a capacious awareness that holds both despair and hope. I found a home in Zen Buddhism, a tradition passed down through

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[5] Heesoon Bai, “Decentering the Ego-Self and Releasing of the Care-Consciousness,” 1999, http://summit.sfu.ca/item/13202; Heesoon Bai and Greg Scutt, “Touching the Earth with the Heart of Enlightened Mind: The Buddhist Practice of Mindfulness for Environmental Education,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education (CJEE)* 14, no. 1 (2009): 92–106; Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2000); Arne Naess, *The Ecology Of Wisdom: Writings By Arne Naess*, ed. Alan Drengson and Bill Devall (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008).

[6] Lynn T. White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1205.

[7] Zhiwa Woodbury, “Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma,” *Ecopsycology* 11, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

generations of contemplatives, monastic and eremitic, who undertook the arduous work of awakening.

This interest in contemplative practices coincided with a love for the natural world. The susurrus of poplars swaying in a breeze could arrest me in a moment of awe. I relished the breaking lights on the water's surface, the spattering of stars across a January sky. The forest a numinous sanctuary, I walk its trails as a pilgrim entering a cathedral, each step a prayer on sacred ground. As a teenager, I found reprieve in watching geese and mallards; as an adult, I still savour the cherry blossoms in bloom. My best memories were of time spent outdoors—swimming in lakes, fording streams and catching smelt with a net. This connection to the wild[8] is deeply intuitive, something primordial, yet fresh and alluring. Thus, wild places became for me a refuge from the frenetic activity of the city, a sanctum of stillness and contemplation.

The confluence of a nascent ecological worldview, a discontent with modernity, an interest in contemplative practice, and an affinity with wild places led me to consider how a contemplative retreat in a remote setting might play into the broader discourse within environmental education, and within the environmental movement at large. At first blush, a contemplative retreat promised to address a nexus of environmental issues by 1) establishing a basis of contemplative practice for inner work that addresses ecological grief, 2) promoting a life of material simplicity in contradistinction to modern consumerism, 3) facilitating a deeper connection with the more-than-human world in a wild place, and 4) aid in the development of ethical integrity through the alignment of values and practices. My doctoral studies further intensified my interest in ecological ethics and deepened my conviction in the merits of simplicity. I was fortunate to have received funding for my studies, which gave me time to conduct research and exploration. Thus, the longing of the psyche aligned with external circumstances. The forces of my life soon coalesced around the prospect of a wilderness retreat.

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[8] I use *wild* throughout the dissertation in reference to Gary Snyder's conception of that which is "self-creating, self-maintaining, self-propagating, self-reliant and self-actualizing." See Snyder, "Writers and the War Against Nature," *Lion's Roar*, 2007, http://www.lionsroar.com/writers-and-the-war-against-nature/. For more on *wild* and *wildness*, please see chapter one.

Family

The possibility of a retreat posed a significant disruption to my marriage. Over the years, my wife saw how ecological grief had wrung my spirit dry. She knew well my frustration over collective inaction on climate change and how I lamented my own complicity. She saw in me a troubled soul depleted of mirth. I confided in her about my discontent over urban life and my longing for an experience of the woods. Finding the words that gave voice to a deep longing but also terrified that my desire to depart would devastate her, I expressed my commitment to her while also admitting the disruption to our lives that such a project would impose. I thought it unpardonably selfish for a married man to leave his wife for the silence of the woods. Even if I found some peace and wholeness, such fruits would be paid for by her loneliness. Is this excursion justified? In her usual grace and magnanimity, she put both her hands on my cheeks, directed my gaze toward her eyes and said: *If this is what you need to do, then I support you completely.*

We both knew that the vibrancy of our partnership was inseparable from the vitality of each partner. Partnership thrives on authenticity; without it, the relationship withers. When she encouraged me to do what was needed, she had put aside her own needs in wishing good for the other. I did not expect this magnanimity, neither did I take it for granted. It was with her warm wishes that I ventured into the woods.

I was also given leave by my mother. Though she ached at the thought of my living an ascetic life in the woods, she knew the value of a contemplative retreat. As a Buddhist, she saw in the project a rare opportunity that few were fortunate enough to undertake. Like all loving mothers, she gave me her blessing even though my departure plagued her with worry.

The months leading up to my departure were difficult and stressful. Our dog Miles had his first seizure in March of 2017. We consulted a veterinary neurologist, who diagnosed him with Idiopathic Epilepsy. My wife and I were stricken with grief. He would be on anti-seizure medication for the rest of his life. We had been discussing an appropriate arrangement for Miles when I went away, but the onset of epilepsy further complicated matters. In June, while I searched for an appropriate location for a retreat,

Miles had more seizures. Consultation with a holistic vet led us to try CBD tinctures, but our hopes were dashed when seizures continued throughout the summer.

In late August, the Friday before my scheduled departure for the island, Miles had another seizure. We had returned from our evening walk when in the lobby of our building, his eyes went blank. He flung himself across the hall, crashed one of his paws into an electric baseboard. Collapsed on the floor, he writhed and paddled, eyes panic-stricken, tongue flapping, jaws snapping in laps of foam, his body possessed by something wicked. I waited for the horror to pass, whispering helpless words of comfort. After a few moments, he regained himself, looked about in a daze, stumbled on unsteady legs, and leaned into me in a sorry state, searching for consolation. I saw that a claw on his left hind paw had been split open, fresh blood seeping. Pam and I cleaned the claw, hoping the blood would clot over. However, when Miles seized again two days later, his thrashing re-opened the wound. The vet recommended severing the entire claw. Although the tissue would eventually regenerate, we would have to live with a bandaged dog with a cone around his head for the next two weeks.

With my wife working full-time, Miles would not have been safe at home with his epileptic condition. We decided that he would spend the year with me. But if a wilderness retreat was enough of a challenge, having an epileptic dog on medication complicated matters further. We did not have the slightest idea how he would do on the new medications, neither did we know how much medical attention he would need. A cloud of uncertainty descended on the project. Hearing these travails, my mother said to me: "All the ancient sages experienced setbacks before they began their journeys. These stresses indicate the beginning of something momentous. They are tests of your resolve. Will you buckle or will you rise?" Galvanized by her words, I pressed on. Thus, the project began on an uneven keel, all sureties suspended and emotions frayed.

Under the pall of Miles' ailment, I left the city with little by way of confidence. I embarked on that sailing across the water in that stinging state of unknowing. The path to growth, according to Buddhist teachings, lies in uncertainty and insecurity. There is nothing to hold onto, nothing of ultimate assurance. Pema Chodron writes: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest."[9]

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[9] Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 88.

Riding on the deck of the ship, I felt the tumultuous course of trepidation and determination, a confounding mixture of excitement and dread, and the upwelling of these valences challenged my hold on poise and control. While the inner wrangles remained unresolved, the ship's steady movement carried me to the opposite shore. Soon I disembarked at the harbour and drove onward to the next leg of the journey.

I arrived at another dock and met a barge operator who would ferry me to the island that would be my home for the next year. I loaded my belongings and sat Miles beside me on the floor of the barge. We watched placid waters slip soundlessly past the hull, and in the distance, silvery fish jumped from the water and vanished in the breaking lights on the surface. We reached the shore, and I loaded my gear once again onto a neighbour's van. They dropped me off at the bottom of my hill with all my supplies. Lugging his crate and multiple items of gear, Miles and I laboured up a steep hill and reached our cabin. It took me three trips up and down the hill to fetch my belongings. When I finally sat down panting, the sun was saffron in the west and the forest alight in beams that washed the bushes in tints of gold. Miles was investigating his new surroundings and sniffing every corner of the cabin. In that moment of rest, I felt the piling weight of homesickness and shrivelled at the thought of a year, a span which seemed an eternity.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Much of the ecological degradation across the world is the outcome of industrial consumerism in "developed" nations.[10] Since the average lifestyle of those living in countries like Canada contributes to the bulk of the world's ecological impact, the onus of reform lies with these responsible parties. David Orr has argued that much of the world's ecological damage can be traced to educated elites who enjoy the accoutrements of class status.[11] However, behaviour is difficult to change, and a complex web of factors impedes widespread transformation.[12] For those habituated to life in an over-developed society, a reduction in ecological impact will, at the very least, require having fewer children,[13] a decrease in reliance on fossil fuels,[14] a reduction in meat consumption,[15] and a shift toward local sources of food,[16] just to name a few. However, these behaviours are embedded in larger systems and institutions within the political economy, with established norms that govern life in modern, developed societies. Such structures are inseparable from cultures and histories that inscribe a

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[10] Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 1996).

[11] David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 2004).

[12] Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman, "Mind the Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are the Barriers to pro-Environmental Behavior?" *Environmental Education Research* 8, no. 3 (August 2002): 239–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620220145401.

[13] Seth Wynes and Kimberly A. Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions," *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 7 (July 2017): 074024, https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541.

[14] IPCC, "Fifth Assessment Report - Synthesis Report" (United Nations, 2014), https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/; Richard Heinberg, *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 2004).

[15] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2010).

[16] Alisa Smith and J. B. Mackinnon, *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007).

dominant relationship to land.[17] A more thoroughgoing effort to address the ecological crisis must therefore attempt to reform culture, politics, and consciousness.[18]

For those accustomed to a certain “standard of living,” a reduction in ecological impact can be perceived as privation and austerity. Many see forgoing the use of a car and opting for a long walk instead as an imposition.[19] Reluctance to adopt pro-environmental behaviours is tied to norms and patterns established by an accepted standard of living and the continuing influence of habit and acculturation. The reluctance to change in the face of ethical imperatives raises an important question for education: *How do we help people (including ourselves) do what is difficult*?

The question seems to place the burden of environmental reform on the shoulders of individuals, a tendency that overlooks the systemic forces that militate against responsible behaviours while positing the individual as the primary agent of change. This individualistic view of change can abet diffuse, uncoordinated actions that leave existing power structures unchallenged.[20] The shift toward a more ecological society requires collective effort, systemic reform, government legislation and policies that shift existing norms. Coordinated action of this kind is vital, and I support theories and practices that provide further impetus in this direction. At the same time, coordinated action can seem hollow without a personal commitment to a life that squares with one’s social and political commitments. Further, collective efforts to remake the establishment is an ongoing project; such coordinated actions take place in a world of glaring flaws; activism requires citizens to remain buoyant in a world that falls short of ideals. Individual and collective action are not mutually exclusive; they exist in an ongoing dialectic that

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[17] Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*; William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

[18] Sean Blenkinsop, “Four Slogans for Cultural Change: An Evolving Place-Based, Imaginative and Ecological Learning Experience,” *Journal of Moral Education* 41, no. 3 (1 September 2012): 353–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2012.691634; Heesoon Bai, “Peace with the Earth: Animism and Contemplative Ways,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 10, no. 1 (14 May 2013): 135–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-013-9501-z; Heesoon Bai, “Re-Animating the Universe: Environmental Education and Philosophical Animism,” in *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment, and Education*, ed. Marcia McKenzie et al. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009), 135–51, http://summit.sfu.ca/item/13207.

[19] I assume here the able-bodied persons who have no physical impairment that prevents them from walking.

[20] Michael F. Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” *Global Environmental Politics* 1, no. 3 (August 2001): 31–52, https://doi.org/10.1162/152638001316881395.

composes the life of ecological commitment. With full support for organized action that challenges structures of power, in this dissertation, I shall focus on the personal dimensions of ecological activism, how one rediscovers ethical integrity in a culture averse to ecological modes of living, and how to work toward an ecological life while negotiating the status quo.

The personal dimension of ecological activism is a vital area of study, as the damage posed by human expansion ruptures faith in collective progress. Most human endeavours presuppose planetary conditions favourable to the continuation of life, and societal efforts toward technological and economic advancement proceed on the basis of a hospitable biosphere. Recognition of the ecological crisis induces deep grief when the primary conditions of life are no longer guaranteed, and fundamental supports are rendered precarious. There is no return to the environmental conditions of the Holocene. Whereas trauma and grief caused by past events (such as war and famine) leave psychological wounds on traumatized subjects but open the possibility for healing in the present and into the future, the ecological crisis is now a condition of modern life, an ever-present stressor that continues to aggrieve.[21] The recognition of this dire condition induces a pain that can undermine the fabric of agency, corrode the faith in society and unsettle the foundations of personal and collective life. Because I participate in and benefit from the extractive global economy, I am implicated in the ecological crisis. In confronting complicity, I face denial, anger, guilt, hopelessness, despondency. Complicity can fray one's moral fibre and foment questions about one's membership within the larger establishment.

In the face of this grief, "solutions" in the form of "green" actions (such as changing lightbulbs, adoption of renewable energy) typify technological responses to a situation that, at its roots, has little to do with technology. John Livingston writes: "There is no engineering solution to a problem of human culture."[22] At present, scientific and technological innovation cannot revive species lost to extinction, reverse the decimation of splendid places, or heal the inner wounds that result from ecological grief. The upwelling of anguish threatens the foundational aims of education: rather than a force of

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[21] Woodbury, "Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma."

[22] John Livingston, *The John A. Livingston Reader: The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation and One Cosmic Instant: A Natural History of Human Arrogance* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007), xv.

empowerment, education can *disempower* students and relegate them to despair when information about the ecological crisis is delivered without the emotional supports that keep students upright and engaged.[23]

The complexity of the ecological crisis—the result of an agglomeration of forces each operating on many layers of influence and distributed across many nodes of power[24]—confounds current efforts within mainstream environmental education. Such "wicked problems" overwhelm ordinary conceptions of personal agency. One feels the weight of anguish, yet the resolution remains elusive, and one's ability to effect change is sunk by doubt. If an honest recognition of the ecological crisis must pass through the netherworld of grief and anguish, then educators have a responsibility to usher students through the difficult passage of mourning, holding them together with skillful and compassionate wisdom in order to preserve the possibility of a renewed commitment to the earth.[25]

This difficult inner work occurs alongside a recognition of the pernicious impacts of certain lifestyles and the need to dismantle tacit assumptions about what constitutes a good human life. The imagined trappings of material comfort—a teleological force that compels many endeavours—lose their appeal, but with nothing apparent to take its place. Much is upended while much is required at the same time. Grief arises in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems; paradoxically, these problems place great ethical demands on students at a time when they are most incapacitated by disillusionment and fear. For the most part, educators are unprepared to support students in these struggles. Public schools trade comfortably in knowledge, skills, and prescribed competencies, but less in the domain of social-emotional health related to the ecological crisis. The inability to help students negotiate these tensions can prevent them from undertaking changes in their own lives, not to mention the significant structural reforms necessary for an ecological society. Therefore, the question of *how we help people do what is difficult* must be joined to another question: *how do we help people struggling with ecological grief*? In synthesis, I formulate the following question as

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[23] David Chang, "Holding the Pieces: Pedagogy beyond Disruptive Environmental Education," *Philosophy of Education 2017*, 2017, 507–20.

[24] Valerie A. Brown, John A. Harris, and Jacqueline Y. Russell, *Tackling Wicked Problems through the Transdisciplinary Imagination* (London: Earthscan, 2010).

[25] Chang, "Holding the Pieces."

the basis of inquiry for this dissertation: *How do we help people do what is difficult, even as they struggle in the grip of ecological grief?*

In this chapter, I begin with a literature review on the salient forms of environmental education and discuss their respective merits and shortcomings in light of my research question. By considering notable theories in moral motivation and pointing out the gaps that remain, I consider an approach that attends to both the relational dimensions of ethical motivation and the emotional and spiritual of environmental work. I shall explain how these aspects of environmental education must be considered together, supported by a sociological theory that can supply insights to educational practice. In establishing the theoretical foundations of my research, I interpose Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice with contemplative inquiry to form a dialogue that, in my view, can provide important insights to educators working to address the ecological crisis while also supporting their students' well-being. I will conclude this chapter with some considerations on methodology, positionality, and audience.

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. Movements within Environmental Education

Environmental Education is a broad and varied educational movement comprised of many dockets. One prominent and widely adopted approach is experiential outdoor education, which promotes outdoor experiences as a way to instill an appreciation of natural settings along with the development of an environmental ethic. In outdoor education, nature supplies both curriculum and pedagogy, the subject and the method of inquiry. In Oregon, for example, sixth-graders spend up to a week in outdoor camps, exploring science concepts along with nature appreciation.[26] In Michigan, a statewide movement called "No Child Left Inside" has lobbied for government legislation that would require schools to provide opportunities for students to learn outside, exploring meadows, forests, and waters.[27] Advocates of outdoor education believe that learning

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[26] Rebbecca A. Martusewicz, Jeff Edmundson, and John Lupinacci, *Ecojustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[27] Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci, *Ecojustice Education*.

and play in outdoor settings not only benefit children's physical and mental health but also form the basis of more sustainable ways of living.[28]

However, the assumption that positive outdoor experiences in nature lead to pro-environmental behaviours has been challenged in recent years. In their research at an outdoor school in British Columbia, Sitka-Sage et al. document an episode of outdoor play where children organize themselves into a mini-society, constructing a village complete with a McDonalds, an armoury, a twine shop, a tattoo parlour, two police stations and a jail.[29] The children also elect a prime minister who touts a "tough on crime" agenda in response to the prevalence of theft in the village. The reproduction of an authoritarian regime, penal institutions and capitalist franchises prompt Sitka Sage et al. to challenge two assumptions that permeate outdoor education:

> First, that significant amount of outdoor time with self-directed play will lead to some kind of richer, radiantly happy and more compassionate and ecologically just relationship with the natural world. And second, that the "innocent" imaginations of the students are somehow unfettered by cultural norms and orientations such that their interactions with the natural world will allow them to spontaneously perform a more caring cooperative and interconnected way of being in the world.[30]

It seems that despite educators' noble intentions, outdoor education *per se* cannot effectively deliver sound ecological relationships. In order for students to develop an understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of the ecological, they need to cultivate a critical awareness of how history and social processes intervene in their relationship with wild, outdoor places.

With an affinity with outdoor education, place-based education can be described as "the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts."[31] Place-based education connects students to local communities, thus making learning more relevant and engaging. David Greenwood has been a leading

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[28] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2008).

[29] Michael Sitka-Sage et al., "Rewilding Education in Troubled Times: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Post-Nature," *Visions for Sustainability* 8 (2017): 20–37.

[30] Sitka-Sage et al., 30.

[31] David Sobel, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (Great Barrington: The Orion Society, n.d.), 7.

proponent of what he calls “a critical theory of place-conscious education,”[32] also known as “critical pedagogy of place.”[33] Greenwood is concerned about the glaring gaps left by education that encourages outdoor experiences but leaves out the examination of history, how social forces mark specific places, and how these forces intersect with environmental issues. Drawing on critical pedagogy, Greenwood argues that critical place-based education must convey the importance of *decolonization* and *re-inhabitation*, the inquiry into which proceeds from the following questions: *What happened here? What is happening here now? What direction is this place headed? What should happen here?*[34] Greenwood’s integration of critical pedagogy with place-based education offers a way to address the assumptions of outdoor education that Sitka-Sage et al. critiqued.

However, although Greenwood’s notions of *re-inhabitation* and *decolonization* indicate a way of life that protects and preserves local landscape and knowledge, more work needs to be done to underscore the importance of diminishing ecological impact at the local and global levels.[35] Under the current, Western economic system, a program of re-inhabitation must require the populace to reduce its demand on the land-base, both near and far.[36] Other theorists have pointed out that place-based education is not politically neutral, that its critical perspectives are products of miseducation at the hands of a settler colonial establishment and often fail to address colonization and Indigeneity.[37] Instead of place-based education, Delores Calderon argues that land-

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[32] David Greenwood, “A Critical Theory of Place-Conscious Education,” in *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education*, ed. Robert B. Stevenson et al. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 93–100.

[33] David Greenwood, “A Critical Pedagogy of Place: From Gridlock to Parallax,” *Environmental Education Research* 14, no. 3 (1 June 2008): 336–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620802190743.

[34] Greenwood, “A Critical Theory of Place-Conscious Education.”

[35] David Chang, “Diminishing Footprints: Exploring the Local and Global Challenges to Place-Based Environmental Education,” *Environmental Education Research* 22, no. 8 (26 October 2016): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2016.1249458.

[36] Chang.

[37] Dolores Calderon, “Speaking Back to Manifest Destinies: A Land Education-Based Approach to Critical Curriculum Inquiry,” *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2 January 2014): 24–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.865114; Eve Tuck, Marcia McKenzie, and Kate McCoy, “Land Education: Indigenous, Post-Colonial, and Decolonizing Perspectives on Place and Environmental Education Research,” *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2014): 1–23.

based education recentres Indigenous-Settler relations and more aptly challenges the politics prefigured in the act of naming.[38] Sandra Styres advocates for a land-based education that recognizes the epistemologies and stories inherent in the land, a pedagogy that draws from Indigenous epistemologies.[39]

These critiques identify the limitations posed by a critical pedagogy of place. I affirm the importance of Indigeneity. At the same time, to pose a form of education solely along the axis of Indigenous-settler relations seems to gloss over the diverse relationships that various people develop with places. The presumption of a white, European interlocutor inevitably obscures the many ways that people come to know land and place. As an Asian immigrant, although I have joined the colonial establishment, I do not enjoy the privileges of white society. Critiques against European colonialism are revealing and instructive, but it is not always clear where I can locate myself in the discourse. Critical pedagogy of place, in my view, offers a more inclusive framework for hosting many entries into land and facilitates many voices and efforts in the work of challenging settler colonialism.[40]

More specifically, I am interested in how the *theoretical* intricacies of place-based pedagogy transmute into the *practices* that underwrite behaviour and actions. Although Paulo Freire—whose work has informed Greenwood's theory—has advocated for the integration of theory and practice, the direction of his educational paradigm nevertheless starts with theory (learning to rename society, building discourses of empowerment), which informs practices that in turn reshape theory.[41] However, the preponderance of information about the ecological crisis and the consensus among scientists have not been adequate in marshalling significant changes in policy and behaviour.[42] On its own,

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[38] Calderon, "Speaking Back to Manifest Destinies."

[39] Sandra Styres, "Land as First Teacher: A Philosophical Journeying," *Reflective Practice* 12, no. 6 (2011): 717–31; Sandra Styres, "Literacies of Land: Decolonizing Narratives, Storying and Literature," in *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018); Sandra Styres, Celia Haig-Brown, and Melissa Blimkie, "Towards a Pedagogy of Land: The Urban Context," *Canadian Journal of Education* 36, no. 2 (2013): 34–67.

[40] David Addington Greenwood, "Place, Land, and the Decolonization of the Settler Soul," *The Journal of Environmental Education* 50, no. 4–6 (2 December 2019): 358–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2019.1687412.

[41] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 3rd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1993).

[42] Kollmuss and Agyeman, "Mind the Gap"; Stephen Sterling, "The Learning of Ecology, or the Ecology of Learning?" in *Key Issues in Sustainable Development and Learning*, ed. William Scott

theory in the form of information and discourse has thus far been inadequate in promoting required social change. For this reason, I am interested in models and pedagogies that posit practice as the axis of change.

1.2.2. Moral Motivation—The Individualist View

Given the limitations of outdoor and place-based forms of environmental education, I now turn to the existing literature on moral motivation to explore how teachers might help students tackle what is difficult. Philosophers in this field have debated the nature of moral motivation in an effort to clarify the forces that compel moral action. Michael Smith has argued that moral judgments *per se* carry motivational force, that the act of judging something wrong induces a desire to avoid such an act.[43] According to this view, a moral judgement is by definition normative and *ipso facto* moves the subject to act accordingly. Others, however, have questioned Smith's conception of the inherent connection between moral judgement, motivation, and action. Sigrun Svavarsdottir argues that not everyone who arrives at a moral judgement also enacts an appropriate moral action; thus, there must be a point where conation brings judgement into action, and this conative state is contingent on a variety of situations and constraints.[44] David Copp has pointed out that moral motivation is neither as common nor as reliable as often assumed. The supposed connection between moral judgement and moral motivation must also go hand in hand with certain qualities of moral character that make one apt to respond appropriately in moral situations.[45]

Although this specific debate among philosophers has produced a useful distinction between moral *judgement* and moral *motivation*, the discussion supposes a free individual agent and places rational judgement at the centre of moral life. The

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and Stephen Gough (London: Routledge Falmer, 2004); Stephen Sterling, "Transformative Learning and Sustainability: Sketching the Conceptual Ground," *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, no. 5 (2011): 17–33; Hiromi Yamashita, "The Problems with a 'Fact'-Focused Approach in Environmental Communication: The Case of Environmental Risk Information about Tidal Flat Developments in Japan," *Environmental Education Research* 21, no. 4 (19 May 2015): 586–611, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2014.940281.

[43] Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[44] Sigrun Svavarsdottir, "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation," *The Philosophical Review* 108, no. 2 (1999): 161–219, https://doi.org/10.2307/2998300.

[45] David Copp, "Belief, Reason, and Motivation: Michael Smith's 'The Moral Problem,'" *Ethics* 108, no. 1 (1997): 33–54.

recondite debate over whether moral judgement is intrinsically motivational or contingent on the force of will elides a host of external factors that not only impose constraints, as Svavarsdottir has argued, but also spell the terms of acceptable actions that cohere with social norms and expectations. Further, this debate does not take into account the weight of lived experience within the social sphere through which subjects inherit a particular moral compass that shapes much of their moral judgement, and which smuggles biases into their determination of right and wrong. Acculturation and socialization can shape tolerances, making one blind to injustices fixed within the existing social structure, such that moral failures become common and unrecognizable. Immersion in society engenders a sense of the world as a given. This naturalized sense of the world lends itself to prevailing automaticity, a habitual and noncritical way of living that does not question the ethical import of ordinary things. Thus, moral *perception* precedes judgement and motivation. Even if the relationship between judgement and action were mapped out with impeccable precision, there remains the practical question of *how* to operationalize the concept in real situations. After all, *knowing* that there is a connection between moral judgement, motivation, and action does not, in and of itself, guarantee that I will *act* justly when I come upon a situation of moral import. Therefore, despite their valiant efforts at sorting out the minutiae of motivation, Smith and Copp offer little to educators who want to motivate students to change their behaviours.

1.2.3. Moral Motivation—The Relational View

The debate over moral motivation in the form that Michael Smith, Copp, and Svavarsdottir have presented places the rational individual at the centre of moral agency. This form of individualistic ontology, common throughout much of Western philosophy, comes in for critique with theorists like Carol Gilligan, who argues against the construction of moral problems as the tension between moral principles, and the type of discourse that conceives of morality in the domain of rational deliberation. For Gilligan, moral problems arise in the context of relationships, and their tensions have more to do with relational responsibilities rather than abstract principles.[46] Following Gilligan, Nel Noddings also argues for *care* as a fundamental impulse behind moral

[46] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

action.[47] For Noddings, the cry of a child can invoke sympathy, attention, and receptivity, or what she calls *engrossment*. The act of soothing a child instantiates a form of *motivational displacement*, the "feeling with and for the other"[48] that engenders natural caring. For both Gilligan and Noddings, moral motivation is bound in the relatedness of moral agents. Whereas others posit reason as the seat of moral motivation, Gilligan and Noddings see relationship as an inherent component of moral life, a basis of connection that cannot be abstracted from moral reason.

This relational view of moral motivation leads to further questions about the many forms of relatedness that weave the web of moral life. Noddings uses the mother-child relationship as a paradigmatic case for her ethics of care; it is the circle of care and reciprocity that forms the basis of an ethical relationship. From the perspective of developmental psychology, the mother-child relationship is the primary form of secure and stable attachment,[49] the rudimentary elements of moral agency. However, in regard to the ecological crisis, Bill Plotkin and Theodore Roszak have argued that modern humans living in developed societies suffer from a disconnection from land and wilderness, a rupture that has dire consequences for both biosphere and human societies alike.[50] From the perspective of eco-psychology, humans form secure attachments to land and waters, the wider biosphere which provide the conditions for life. A relationship with land is a basic and indispensable form of connection that is vital to the development of an ecological ethic. In Plotkin's view, the developmental trajectory of a mature human cannot be complete without a time immersion in nature, in which one learns the enchantment of the natural world, and of the imaginative capacities furnished

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[47] Nel Noddings, *Caring, a Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984).

[48] Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 14.

[49] Allan Sroufe and Daniel Siegel, "The Verdict Is In; The Case for Attachment Theory," *Psychotherapy Networker*, 1 March 2011, http://global.factiva.com/redir/default.aspx?P=sa&an=PSYNET0020110309e73100009&cat=a&ep=ASE.

[50] Bill Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007); Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 2001); Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth/Healing the Mind* (San Francisco: Counterpoint, 1995); Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* (Novato: New World Library, 2010).

by contact with the more-than-human.[51] The suppression and diminishment of such experiences result in arrested development, widespread pathologies, and desecrated landscapes.

Consistent with the diagnosis offered by Plotkin and Roszak, Heesoon Bai has argued that environmental education needs to address fundamental forms of alienation, which severs a people's relationship to land and impairs the development of moral agency.[52] Bai writes: "we tend to live and act out of alienated consciousness, and in turn spread, unconsciously, more alienation."[53] This cycle of alienation "prevents us from fully taking responsibility as moral agents and deliberately and decisively enacting changes to heal the inner and outer landscapes."[54] Alienation becomes a persistent source of anxiety that cleaves to fleeting assurances that promise to dispel underlying insecurities but never finds a solution to deep vexation. According to Bai, the work of environmental education lies in the transformation of consciousness through healing from alienation, in realizing the interdependence of all things, and in loving the world intrinsically.[55] Drawing on Buddhist and Daoist traditions, Bai suggests that a ruptured consciousness (defined as "mind-body-heart-spirit")[56] can be reshaped through contemplative practices that repair the rent between the human and the more-than-human by dissolving the experience of separateness, and in the process cultivating a relatedness that restores the person to the network of ecological kinship.

We see in Gilligan and Noddings a recomposition of moral discourse that forwards relationality and mutuality as the basis of moral motivation. Eco-psychology has broadened the scope of relationality, which includes people's connection to nature and wild places. With this wider view of relationality, Bai articulates an educational vision that aims to address the effects of ruptured connection to the more-than-human world. In my view, this relational concept of morality holds greater promise to generate ethical action

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[51] Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*; Plotkin, *Soulcraft*.

[52] Heesoon Bai, "Reclaiming Our Moral Agency through Healing: A Call to Moral, Social, Environmental Activists," *Journal of Moral Education* 41, no. 3 (September 2012): 311–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2012.691628.

[53] Bai, "Reclaiming Our Moral Agency through Healing," 319.

[54] Bai, "Reclaiming Our Moral Agency through Healing," 319.

[55] Bai, "Re-Animating the Universe"; Bai, "Peace with the Earth"; Heesoon Bai, "Challenge for Education: Learning to Value the World Intrinsically," 2001, http://summit.sfu.ca/item/13203.

[56] Bai, "Reclaiming Our Moral Agency through Healing," 312.

because, whereas the rationalistic conception of motivation posits the deliberative individual at the centre of action (by many accounts, an incomplete picture of human agency), the relational view tends to the conditions and situations that make moral action possible and provides a more thorough and pragmatic picture of agency as a function of relationship and situations.

Bai's call for *healing* as a goal of environmental education recalls the psychic wounds inflicted by a separation from land and wild places. Joanna Macy has observed that the psychological wound of the ecological crisis is unique in human history:

> With isolated exceptions, every generation prior to ours lived with the assumption that other generations would follow. It has been an integral part of the human experience to take it for granted that the work of our hands and heads and hearts could live on through those who came after us, walking the same Earth, beneath the same sky. . . . Now we have lost the certainty that there will be a future for humans. I believe that this loss, felt at some level of consciousness by everyone, regardless of political orientation, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.[57]

This grief over the decimation of the biosphere, extends beyond personal loss. However, Macy also observes that:

> Many people, conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our immediate welfare, find it strange to think that we can suffer on behalf of the larger society—and on behalf of our planet—and that such suffering is real, valid, and healthy.[58]

Macy believes that these psychological wounds must be addressed through what she calls *despair work*, which involves "telling the truth about what we see and know and feel is happening to our world."[59] Grief is not something to evade but a process to be embraced: "Our sorrow is the other face of love, for we only mourn what we deeply care for."[60] In the honest recognition of grief, and the willingness to face the pain of ecological demise, one relinquishes old defences and discovers new power and possibility.

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[57] Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007), 18.

[58] Joanna Macy, "Working through Environmental Despair," 1995, 2, http://rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/macy.pdf.

[59] Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, 100.

[60] Macy, 100.

Similarly, in her treatise on the power of mourning in the aftermath of violence, Judith Butler writes:

> one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.[61]

For both Macy and Butler, the pain of loss is an entry point for further development. However, transformation requires a willingness to attend to grief and mourning; the urge to suppress and escape psychological pain forecloses the possibility of growth. The capacity of educators to help students attend to their psychological wounds becomes vital, not only for their well-being but also for the possibility of larger social transformation.

Bai draws on Eastern traditions in the work of healing the psychological wounds posed by alienation. Insofar as Western traditions of moral education have focussed on the *content* of moral teachings (concepts, rules, imperatives, reasoning, judgement, and the like), Buddhist contemplative practice focuses on "the ontological space around the discursive content of consciousness: that is, the 'container' itself."[62] In contemplative practice, the capacity to hold the contents of subjective experience, discursive and emotional, without judgement, is vital in the ongoing effort to transform one's interior landscape. This capacity to remain with suffering, to hold pain in the spaciousness of compassionate attention, intimates a greater resilience along with greater sensitivity and concern for the well-being of self and world. In the Buddhist view, pain is not to be expelled, but is rather an inexorable feature of life, something which harbours a transformative potential to reshape the ethical subject, allowing one to be more skillful and buoyant in the face of adversity. I interpret Bai's notion of *healing* not as the elimination of pain, but a radical reorientation of one's relationship to emotional anguish, such that grief does not lapse into despondency. By attending to ecological grief with compassionate attention and opening an internal space for grief to extend its transformative power, the contemplative allows for the reassessment of tacit views and the rearrangement of fundamental values. Although grief over ecological decline shall

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[61] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 21.

[62] Bai, "Reclaiming Our Moral Agency through Healing," 322.

remain as long as seas rise and species disappear, this grief need not debilitate but rather provide further impetus for insight and action. There may not be a *cure*, but there is *healing* nevertheless.

In this review of salient theories related to moral and environmental education, we see that while educators have tried to promote pro-environmental behaviours and cultures, much of this work is based on questionable assumptions and has produced limited results.[63] Likewise, philosophical debates over the intricacies of moral motivation show little educational promise. A relational view of motivation offers more insight into questions of moral motivation. The grief induced by the realization of ecological decline and other forms of alienation suggests the need for healing, for ways of attending to inner pain while developing resilience and resolve in the face of the ecological crisis. The work of healing consists of a motion that includes both inner work and engagement with the external world—and never one without the other. What Joanna Macy has called *the great turning*—the relinquishment of outmoded values and norms, coinciding with the adoption of life-sustaining cultures and views—requires the ongoing dialectic between inner transformation and outer reform.

In the next section, I point to predominant cultures and modes of living typified by the *city* and the *wild*. These archetypal places are often counterpoised as distinct ontological symbols, each with its own order and function. By juxtaposing the city with the wild, I review some relevant theories in environmental philosophy and explore the topographic dimensions of ecological ethics, the movement from the city to the forest as a gesture of resistance and transformation.

1.2.4. The City

Herman Daly has argued that capitalist, industrial-growth societies are predicated on technological progress afforded by an ever-expanding economy based on self-interest, free-markets, and the pursuit of riches that bring about rising standards of

[63] Blenkinsop, "Four Slogans for Cultural Change."

living.[64] Consumer culture measures the quality of human life by material abundance,[65] a social order predicated on profit-making, where economic imperatives often supplant ethical values.[66] Class mobility occasions the accumulation of income and the attainment of status. Production and consumption become self-perpetuating processes; disposable products built for obsolescence fail to meet human needs but stoke the fires of production as a parade of goods entice insatiate desire. Moreover, the industrial-growth economy institutes a culture of conformity and acquiescence—human livelihoods are beholden to a vast complex of labour, distribution and consumption, the institutional structures that circumscribe the social order. The rules and rhythms of the modern economy delimit a narrow range of possibilities for individual action and constrain prospects for systemic reform.

Giorgio Agamben uses the *anthropological machine*[67] as an underlying metaphor for a modern, developed society. The machine is a system that works according to the function of constituent parts. A machine is rote—the movement of each component is predetermined and assigned. A cog in the machine possesses little agency—its rotation aids in the function of the whole. Further, the operational logic of the apparatus obliges each component to remain oblivious to the functions of other components. Industrial-growth society is *like* a machine that operates on inputs and outputs: energy and raw materials are extracted and processed into goods and services. Since every labourer is also a consumer, the industrial system runs on a circular logic that rationalizes its existence by generating demand for its work.

As a further elaboration on the anthropological machine as an arching metaphor of the industrial system, the city becomes a topographical symbol that represents the capitalist-industrial system. The city is a place of aggregate human activity, a hive of production and consumption. With its rhythms and patterns meted out by clocks and

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[64] Herman E. Daly, "Introduction to Essays toward a Steady-State Economy," in *Valuing the Earth: Economics, Ecology, Ethics*, ed. Herman E. Daly and Kenneth Townsend (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 11–54.

[65] John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor H., *Affluenza: The All Consuming Epidemic* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

[66] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Vintage Canada, 2015); Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Reprint edition (Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2017); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Reprint edition (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008).

[67] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

schedules, the city sees inputs and outputs in the form of fuel, food, sewage, and trash. City dwellers constitute a social order and are, in turn, programmed by the order. Work and consumption comprise a single economic event. The ecological origins of a product and the labour that produces it are obscured by monetary exchanges that keep the industrial apparatus humming. City dwellers do not need to know how everything is produced—their prosperity within the machine only requires them to keep to their stations. What they know of agency is only constructed within the norms prescribed by the economics of the city.

If indeed the roots of the ecological crisis are systemic and embedded in a culture and consciousness formed by the industrial-growth economy, calls to green consumerism—the switch to electric vehicles and the transition to renewable energy, or what Patrick Curry calls "light green ethics"[68]—remain glaringly inadequate because they leave intact the core assumptions of capitalist-industrial culture.[69] So long as economic growth remains the *raison d'être* of modernity, over-developed nations will struggle to envisage a different form of human well-being.[70]

A keen diagnosis of the current malaise must therefore trace beyond symptoms and identify a more fundamental cause. The alienated, extractive culture of the capitalist apparatus is one of the main drivers of the ecological crisis. In this way, the city becomes a nexus of aggregated meanings and associations. Beyond its gleaming edifice and glimmering lights, the city cuts its shape in the collective mindscape, a topography of incessant striving, the relentless pursuit of anthropocentric progress at the expense of biodiversity. The city is both material and ideational; its significance reaches beyond the sum of all urban activities. As a symbol, the city stands for a totality of meanings and a mode of life with a distinct suite of values and practices. In contrast to the wild, the city stands for a human-made world, an anthropocentric artifice built on the premise of dominion.

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[68] Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011).

[69] Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006).

[70] Donella H. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and Dennis L. Meadows, *The Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* (London: Chelsea Green, 2004); Erazim Kohák, *The Green Halo: A Bird's-Eye View of Ecological Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2011).

1.2.5. The Wild

In contrast to the city, Gary Snyder calls attention to *the wild*, that which is "self-creating, self-maintaining, self-propagating, self-reliant, and self-actualizing, and it has no 'self'."[71] In other words, the wild is an emergent phenomenon. Order and integration occur without a fixed, primary entity (self) to which a generative and organizing process can be attributed. *Wildness* is an auto-poietic system composed of many species, thrives without design and administration, and functions according to emergent qualities of a dynamic whole. Going further, Snyder writes that *wilderness* "is a place where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order."[72] According to Snyder, *wilderness* "need not be a place that was never touched by humans, but simply a place where wild process has ruled for some decades."[73] An old-growth forest and the arctic tundra are wild not because of the absence of human inhabitants, but because their ongoing vitalities are not subject to orchestration by a single species. *Wildness* proves a useful concept that clarifies the distinction between the city and the forest while circumventing the dichotomy posed by the *natural* and the *unnatural*. Snyder writes:

> So we can say the New York city and Tokyo are "natural" but not "wild." They do not deviate from the laws of nature, but they are habitat so exclusive in the matter of who and what they give shelter to, and so intolerant of other creatures, as to be truly odd.[74]

The city almost exclusively serves human utility. Aside from domesticated animals, and a handful of species that thrive on refuse (crows, rodents, roaches), the city is a centre for human agendas. In contradistinction to the city's symbolic import, the wild represents diversity, interdependence, the unconditioned, open and free.

I submit that navigating, negotiating, and resolving the tension between these two symbols as sites of aggregated meaning shall prove one of the main tasks of meaningful change, a necessary task if one is to heal the fracture between modern

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[71] Gary Snyder, "Writers and the War against Nature," *Lion's Roar*, 2007, http://www.lionsroar.com/writers-and-the-war-against-nature/.

[72] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: With a New Preface by the Author* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 12.

[73] Snyder, "Writers and the War against Nature."

[74] Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 12.

societies and the wildness that has characterized life on planet earth. The dialectic between the city and the wild, therefore, speaks to a renewal in processes of meaning-making, a reinterpretation of totalities from which we derive significance and direction. Thus, in the collection of literature that I have examined here, environmental education consists of inner work that tends to ecological grief while reinterpreting the references from which meaning derives. This reinterpretation lies in the rediscovery of wildness, creating spaces for the actualization of wild potential.

The shift toward wildness calls for an ecological ethic that does not place the human at the centre of existence as the preeminent species who lords over land and water. Further, for one who sees the exploitation that makes modernity possible, the movement away from the city can be interpreted as a protest against the establishment, a form of resistance against the anthropological machine. Departure from the city entails several changes: the immersion in solitude in the absence of multitude, the turn toward inner life in the absence of external obligations. To this end, I conduct a brief review of salient figures who have articulated a case for wilderness retreats. For Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Merton, a retreat is not simply an escape from the artifice of society, but rather a sustained attempt to recover authenticity and ethical integrity.

1.2.6. Solitude

Solitary wilderness retreats have endured in the popular imagination; there is a wealth of stories related to pioneers who braved the elements in order to venture into a rarified experience. A number of stories have gained purchase in popular culture. Cheryl Strayed's book *Wild* narrates the story of a young woman who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in search of rebirth after a string of tragic events and choices. We can also add Jon Krakauer's account of Christopher McCandless, who eschewed society and repaired to the forests of Alaska, only to perish from ingesting a poisonous plant.[75] More recently, Michael Finkel uncovered the story of Christopher McKnight, a recluse who lived for twenty-seven years in the woods of Maine, subsisting on food stolen from surrounding cabins and resorts.[76] In McKnight, we read a man whose idiosyncrasies found no home

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[75] Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Anchor, 1997).

[76] Michael Finkel, *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit* (New York: Vintage, 2017).

in society's offerings. These stories inscribe the fantasy of escape; through personal failings or disdain for society, the characters retreat to the wild without the proper respect or regard for wilderness and its demands.

Robert Kull's *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes* depicts a man's year-long tenure on a remote island off the coast of Chile.[77] Kull relates the logistical feat and material provisions required for a solitary venture and the psychological challenges faced by one who ventures deep into isolation. Rather than a repudiation of society, Kull's excursion instantiates a man's search into his psyche within a period of unbroken aloneness and explores the extremities of human experience.

Another notable example of solitude is the story of Tenzin Palmo, an English-born Tibetan nun who spent twelve years meditating in a cave in the remote Himalayan mountains of India.[78] Palmo slept barely two hours each day in the same wooden box where she practised meditation. One winter, a severe blizzard left her cave completely buried in snow, and she dug herself out with bare hands. Palmo's experience is rare in the austerity of her meditative practice, a form of discipline that very few can follow. Her solitary retreat is a unique case in the annals of human experience, an illustration of a single-minded determination in the pursuit of spiritual illumination, a life that defies conventional notions of what a person needs in order to thrive.

Each of these accounts captivates popular imagination because they showcase individuals who left the auspices of civilization, and in so doing, defied common beliefs about togetherness as a basic condition of human life. However, extreme accounts of wilderness ventures, further sensationalized by television programs such as *Man vs. Wild* and *Alone*, play on ingrained stories that pit human against nature and magnify the heroism of an iron-willed protagonist. A fascination with extremes can turn the wilderness into morbid spectacles; they stoke the audience's desire for amusement but do not compel critical reflection. Happy to remain on the hither side of entertainment, audiences are content to witness a character's plight from a distance; they need not examine their own relationship to wild places, nor are they challenged to consider their parameters of comfort which make such stories compelling. Worse, the glorification of

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[77] Robert Kull, *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes: A Year Alone in the Patagonia Wilderness* (Novato: New World Library, 2009).

[78] Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow* (London: Bloomsbury USA, 2008).

wilderness survival casts nature in opposition to humans and further inscribes a view of nature as a savage other, a realm inimical to civil society, a place to be mastered and subdued. Instead of the wilderness spectacle, a greater potential for reflection lies in stories that feature practical choices and dilemmas faced by people in unfamiliar—but not extreme—situations, where modern/urban sensibilities are challenged by the constraints posed by wild circumstances. Such examples can push the imagination and challenge modern assumptions without lapsing into morbid fantasy.

A more moderate account of solitary life can be seen in Annie Dillard's "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,"[79] which narrates a young woman's experience at a remote cabin in Virginia. Dillard spent her time in quiet observation of the wildlife in her area. Her solitude was populated by companions of many kinds, from insects to frogs to muskrats. Although the perplexities of nature became the subjects of observation, the theme of Dillard's musings veers toward the spiritual. Pondering the lavishness of nature's procreative powers and the wanton destruction that appears to overtake fecundity, Dillard ponders the inseparable union of life and death, the continuity of life beyond the demise of individuals. By observing and pondering the paradoxes and mysteries of the wild, Dillard reviews and reorients her view of God, the ultimate paradox and mystery. Her solitude is not so much an ascetic excursion as an immersion in perceptiveness and reflection—the silence and spaciousness of solitude created the conditions for a deeper appreciation of nature and the numinous presence that permeates nature's course.

In the West, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* has become an archetypical narrative of a man's search for sanity in a society mired in madness. Thoreau's tenure at Walden Pond was not merely a refuge from the busyness of Concord, but a conscious objection to a society that has forgotten the essence of human life. With scorn aimed at the pious gestures of charity that belie a deeper compliance, Thoreau writes:

> There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root, and it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve.[80]

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[79] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013).
[80] Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Random House, 2000), 72.

Thoreau believed that ostensible acts of altruism are often bred from the same system of injustice which gives rise to disparity, and that one's station in society can perpetuate an order predicated on exploitation. His repudiation of common mores includes a critique of capricious fashions, the trivialities of amusement, dullness of comfort, the excesses of enterprise.[81] The retreat to the woods is not a vacation from the busyness of the town but rather a social-political declaration, a commitment to a wholeness not possible in the throng of bustling streets. His wilderness passage was a movement toward full awareness in the conduct of life, in defiance of the stultifying forces of a complacent society: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if could not learn what it had to teach."[82] This resolve to front only the *essential* would see him adhere to thrift and simplicity: "Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul."[83] The enduring legacy of Thoreau's retreat lies in his stalwart conviction against the prevailing norms of his society, the mastery of a perspective that burnishes character in the wildness of the forest.

Thoreau's retreat has influenced many generations of contemplatives who led lives of solitude and simplicity in wild settings. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, writer, and social activist, has articulated a comprehensive vision of contemplative solitude as a personal responsibility that counters the malaise of modern society.[84] For Merton, solitude is not an escape into a private paradise but a commitment to integrity in a society wracked by confusion. Even the most ardent activist is prone to the myths and guises that hold sway over a culture. Mass society thrives on passive assent, whereby the populace yields to the ideologies of the day and acquiesces to oppressive norms. Anxious under the threat of nuclear annihilation, plagued by racism, the America that Merton witnessed was (and remains) a society rocked by turmoil. However, Merton believed that efficacious action is impossible without personal development. Healing the worst social ills requires "the renewal of an authenticity which is twisted out of shape by

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[81] Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*.

[82] Thoreau, 86.

[83] Thoreau, 308.

[84] Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960); Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, rev. ed. (Garden City: Image, 1968); Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action: Second Edition, Restored and Corrected* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

the pretentious routines of a disordered togetherness."[85] Suspicious of the popular values that preclude personal freedom and induce subscription to a dubious way of life, Merton advises:

> You must not allow yourself to be represented as someone in whom a few of the favourite daydreams of the public have come true. You must be willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he [*sic*] upsets the general dream.[86]

Stated otherwise, one must be on guard against the visions that hold sway, ready to relinquish the artificial benefits of membership in order to recover a deeper authenticity.

Merton's injunction seems to turn the individual against the dictates of society, as if authenticity demands renunciation of the social body. A deliberate retreat seems to be a repudiation of a deranged order with its innumerable demands on the individual. On this account, solitude may seem an escape to a private paradise, a rejection of all that infringes on self-determination. However, Merton's vision of solitude arises out of a concern for the integrity of the community. He believes that a solitude that gratifies one's disdain for society is a spurious one indeed:

> But if you try to escape from this world merely by leaving the city and hiding yourself in solitude, you will only take the city with you into solitude . . . for the flight from the world is nothing else but the flight from self-concern. And the man [*sic*] who locks himself up in private with his own selfishness has put himself into a position where the evil within him will either possess him like a devil or drive him out of his head. This is why it is dangerous to go into solitude merely because you like to be alone.[87]

Merton believed that solitary contemplatives must not indulge in unadulterated privacy as a matter of personal preference. Solitude is not the resort of the unsociable but rather a gift of society, and its fruits must be returned to the world at large. Contemplation enjoins a double openness: the contemplative sees their own life rejuvenated by contact with the world; at the same time, others share in the benefits of solitude via the contemplative's astute perspective on the collective condition. Without this mutuality, a selfish escape from the city degrades into "simple aloofness, withdrawal, and refusal of

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[85] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 267–68.

[86] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* 97.

[87] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 78–79.

concern [which] would make the contemplative a scandal to his brother [*sic*] in the world."[88]

Contemplative solitude attempts to reform and reevaluate internalized forms of socialization. This work of inner reformation is the hallmark of personal development within many contemplative traditions, among them the desert fathers of early Christianity who established the roots of Christian monasticism.[89] In Buddhist traditions, Bodhidharma, Cold Mountain, Matsuo Basho, and Ryokan are a notable few among those who spent extended periods of meditative practice in solitude.[90] The stories, reflections, and poetry that resulted from contemplative solitude form rich traditions that continue to offer insights to contemporary practitioners who aspire to tread in the path of their predecessors.

Although their experiences speak to the perennial theme of individuation and awakening, the wisdom of past contemplatives needs to be reinterpreted and rearticulated within the current milieu in order to speak anew in a modern context. The contemplative life, with its emphasis on simplicity and vows of poverty, implies a set of values consistent with ecological principles. A notable complement to the contemplative life can be seen in Arne Naess' list of "lifestyle trends within the deep ecology movement."[91] Some notable trends include: simple means, choosing activities that have intrinsic value, practising anti-consumerism and solidarity of lifestyles (maintaining a life that is not too much higher than that of the needy), seeking depth and richness of experience rather than intensity, satisfying vital needs rather than desires, appreciating all life forms, and practising nonviolence.[92]

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[88] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 137.

[89] Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*; Peter France, *Hermits* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

[90] Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, 50th Anniversary ed. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2010); Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Sky Above, Great Wind: The Life and Poetry of Zen Master Ryokan* (Boston: Shambhala, 2012); Matsuo Basho, *Narrow Road to the Interior and Other Writings*, trans. Sam Hamill (Boston: Shambhala, 2000); A. V. Grimstone, ed., *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and the Blue Cliff Records*, trans. Katsuki Sekida (Boston: Shambhala, 2005).

[91] Naess, *The Ecology Of Wisdom*, 140–41.

[92] Naess, *The Ecology Of Wisdom*, 140–41.

Although each of these principles appears consistent with contemplative worldviews, we need a contemporary analysis of the complexities that arise when ecological and contemplative aspirations meet practical requirements of living in the wild. How, for example, does the internet figure in a life of solitary contemplation? How far can one take a life of voluntary simplicity in a world engrossed in fossil fuels? Conversely, widespread adoption of contemplative techniques in educational settings (such as various forms of mindfulness practice) has largely been associated with neuroscience, social-emotional learning, and self-regulation;[93] much less has been written about the ecological significance of contemplative practices and views in educational settings.

In carving this path through the existing literature, I have considered: 1) how certain prominent frameworks of environmental education have struggled to promote effective social-cultural change; 2) how, by positing the rational individual at the centre of moral action, theoretical discourse on moral motivation offers little to educators aiming to shift widespread behaviour; 3) how relational conceptions of ethical conduct offer a more complete and nuanced understanding of how people act; 4) how modern, Western modes of living can be typified within the symbol of the city, a system thrown into relief by Gary Snyder's notion of wildness; and 5) how contemplative solitude instantiates one response to a flawed establishment. Much work has been done in each of these domains of research. However, less analysis has been applied to the intersections between them. Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and the challenges facing educators, the confluence of motivation, relationality, contemplation, and ecological ethics, considered as a dialogical attempt to weave many perspectives, may provide fresh insights to the work of environmental education.

In building a research project around my research question, "how do we help people do what is difficult as they struggle with ecological grief," I shall attend to the

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[93] Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain* (New York: WW Norton, 2007); Hawn Foundation, *The MindUP Curriculum: Grades 6-8: Brain-Focused Strategies for Learning-and Living* (New York: Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2011); Zindel V. Segal, J. Mark G. Williams, and John D. Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002); Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl and Molly Stewart Lawlor, "The Effects of a Mindfulness-Based Education Program on Pre- and Early Adolescents' Well-Being and Social and Emotional Competence," *Mindfulness* 1, no. 3 (27 May 2010): 137–51, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-010-0011-8; Richard J. Davidson and Bruce S. McEwen, "Social Influences on Neuroplasticity: Stress and Interventions to Promote Well-Being," *Nature Neuroscience* 15, no. 5 (2012): 689–95, https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3093.

intersection between motivation, contemplation, and relational and ecological ethics. In doing so, I aim to fill the gaps that remain in environmental education and moral education, which tends to assume a causal connection between experience and action, between rationality and ethics. We need a theory of action that accounts for sub-conscious acculturation, an analysis that attends to the formative effect of pervasive practices in the development of social agents. In the following section, I point to the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu as the theoretical foundation of my research.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

There is a large body of literature that attempts to explain the barriers to environmental behaviour.[94] In contrast to linear models of behaviour that assume rational deliberation as a primary mode of agency, sociological and psychological perspectives consider the pre-reflective tendencies that influence action, the sub-conscious factors that figure in behaviour. In his theory of social reproduction, Pierre Bourdieu postulates *habitus* as the operating mechanism for social continuity. Habitus is "a system of durable dispositions" that function as "principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' . . . without in any way being the product of obedience to rules . . . without a conscious aiming at ends."[95] Bourdieu describes habitus as a set of "structuring structures"[96] that underwrite the improvisational engagement within a social field, a *feel for the game* rather than rigid adherence to *the rules of the game*. According to Bourdieu, social agents are not unbounded in their freedom. Internalized tendencies and repertoires, the products of cultural experience, are always circumscribed by the unwritten rules of society. The propensity toward a course of action in a given situation demonstrates not the unfettered deliberation of a free agent, but rather the patterned behaviours shaped by the social sphere.

As a sociologist, Bourdieu was primarily interested in the arena of human interaction. The theory of habitus, therefore, can be interpreted as a thesis on the *how*

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[94] Kollmuss and Agyeman, "Mind the Gap."

[95] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

[96] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

and *why* of human behaviour within parameters of practice, including what Bourdieu calls *fields.*[97] Although *field* has been understood as an arena of interaction between human subjects,[98] Bourdieu was not exclusively interested in interhuman interactions. He also considered the network of relations in which habitus operates, both social and environmental.[99] The interchanges involving economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital consist not only in interactions between the social agents, but also the contexts that produce and are produced by the social sphere.[100] Habitus arises in interaction with an environment and the practices made possible by a given setting. "Practice" is hereby defined as "real activity as such,"[101] or what Richard Jenkins calls "the business of everyday life."[102] Practice is temporal (structured in time and set in tempo), spatial (occurring within spatial parameters) and objective (observable). A Kabyle peasant who sets up her loom is engaged in a practice that iterates a cultural order.[103] For the weaver, the loom itself becomes the stuff of symbolic meaning as thread coalesces into tapestry under the coordination of hands and feet, thus intimating the creative force of human will in interaction with malleable material. Further, Bourdieu's analysis of the Kabyle house as a geometric symbol of a larger cosmic order indicates a sociological concern with practices that correspond with environs and the material artifacts of culture.[104]

Beyond its role in producing action, habitus is written into the body, and its tendencies (hexis) are transmuted into unconscious, embodied experience, such that inclinations are somatic, prereflexive, and not easily accessible through conscious scrutiny: "what is 'learned by the body' is not something that one has, like knowledge

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[97] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

[98] Patricia Thomson, "Field," in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham: Acumen, 2012), 65–80.

[99] By "environmental," I refer to the built surroundings that comprise human habitation. Bourdieu was interested in the material environs that play into the formation of habitus, not the wild and more-than-human world that forms the biosphere.

[100] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*; Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Key Sociologists (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[101] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 96.

[102] Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 69.

[103] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 115.

[104] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

that can be brandished, but something that one is."[105] Physical comportment, gestures and movements mark a specific habitus; the proximal spaces between comfort and strain, tension and relaxation are largely the product of a society of practice that acculturates and domesticates the body. Gesticulations and physical habits can become the signatures of a person's social identity: expressive hand movements that accompany speech and the facial expressions that typify a cultural lineage both instantiate "the use of the body in the production and reproduction of cultural artefacts."[106]

Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* strikes at the convergence of body and practice, and there is much evidence to suggest that cultures of practice alter physiology itself. In developed nations, sedentary lifestyles and calorie-rich diets are contributing factors in a host of adverse health effects.[107] Excluding cases of physical disability, a lifestyle of relative physical ease transmutes into bodies less adept at negotiating the material world. This erosion of physical fitness in turn generates dispositions which favour mechanical aids. Dependency on mechanical assistance can make the population less inclined to opt out of the services that furnish a life of physical aid. As Bourdieu has argued, the body itself becomes the site of collective inertia. In this way, the habitus is the entanglement of social norms and technologies within the matrix of the body.

The theory of habitus helps to elucidate the inertia of social norms, but more importantly, how practices and dispositions generate views that become entrenched in social life. The prevalence of practices and the dispositions they engender form what Bourdieu calls *doxa,* beliefs about the world that do not recognize belief as arbitrary, but rather as self-evident and indisputable. Doxa is a "set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma."[108] Cecile Deer offers the following definition: "pre-reflexive, shared, but unquestioned opinions and perceptions conveyed within and by relatively autonomous social entities . . . which

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[105] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 73.

[106] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 73.

[107] Mark Stephen Tremblay et al., "Physiological and Health Implications of a Sedentary Lifestyle," *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism* 35, no. 6 (23 November 2010): 725–40, https://doi.org/10.1139/H10-079; Wioletta Żukiewicz-Sobczak et al., "Obesity and Poverty Paradox in Developed Countries," *Annals of Agricultural and Environmental Medicine* 21, no. 875194 (1 September 2014): 590–94.

[108] Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 15.

determine ‘natural’ practice and attitudes via the internalized ‘sense of limits’ and habitus of agents in those fields.”[109] This self-evident common-sense “goes without saying because it comes without saying.”[110] Pervasive practices engender normative views suggested by the implicate order. For example, a doxic belief in material and technological progress sees economic growth as an unalloyed good, the ultimate social and political end. Economic metrics of social conditions, such as employment rate and quarterly growth, become cardinal indicators of progress. Doxic belief in the growth paradigm cannot readily accommodate an ecological view that enjoins nonmaterial forms of human flourishing and steady-state and small-scale economies.[111] Because doxa entails “the misrecognition of arbitrariness,”[112] a challenge to the maxim of economic growth will likely be deemed ludicrous or outrageous. To dispute doxa is not to contest opinion but to upend reality itself. If habitus marks the practical dispositions that produce action, then doxa is the view that accompanies and sustains action, the incumbent beliefs that aid or forestall cultural reform.

Bourdieu’s corpus explicates the confluence of forces that inhere social reproduction, from practice to dispositions, from *field* to *doxa.* In my view, his primary contribution lies in positing practice as a fundament of social life. *Practice,* conceived in the broadest terms, subtends many forms of action. In effect, *we are what we do*. Most of what we practice, Bourdieu argues, is sanctioned by a social-cultural establishment. These practices are coterminous with a doxic view of the world. From an ecological perspective, a society of profligate consumption normalizes excess, the habituation to which disinclines the populace to more ecological modes of living premised upon simplicity and reverence for life. With this diagnosis in mind, the task of cultural transformation lies in the reform of *habitus* and *doxa* via practice. Bourdieu’s theory offers to environmental educators a possible opening for the transformation of culture. To change how life is lived, one must attend to the practices that shape habitus.

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[109] Cecile Deer, “Doxa,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham: Acumen, 2012), 115.

[110] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 167.

[111] Daly, “Introduction to Essays toward a Steady-State Economy”; E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989).

[112] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 168.

The reform of habitus is difficult because dispositions are lodged in processes beyond the reach of conscious awareness. At the same time, while habitus does not usually operate in the realm of conscious awareness, it does not exclusively operate outside the purview of the conscious mind. If habitus is entirely unconscious, there should be no hope of reforming dispositions, no possibility of arresting the processes that animate the actor. The project of transforming one's dispositions entails an examination of habits and tendencies that previously escape notice. The act of taking notice, of pausing to examine the arising of impulse, is integral to the work of transformation. Awareness, in this sense, is a deliberate practice in the conative act of bringing attention to the mundane activities of everyday life, but also the refinement of a consciousness that aims to illuminate more of its own operation.

However, because a multitude of dispositions are naturalized into modes of behaviour and practice, how is one to examine what is invisible, the dispositions that operate within the structure that created it? The theory of practice leaves open the possibility of reforming incumbent disposition. When social actors find themselves in a novel field, where a prevailing habitus does not correspond to objective conditions, the inadequacy of ingrained dispositions is revealed. In an effort to correct the deterministic tendency of the theory of habitus, Andrew Sayer argues that the susceptibilities and powers of habitus "are always mediated in some way (facilitated, blocked, overridden or refracted and modified) by the context, and indeed actors may be able to consciously override them."[113] If in moments of disjuncture, agents are able to catch themselves compelled by inclinations that suddenly find no footing, then habitus can serve as a useful concept for self-reflective inquiry.[114] Although Bourdieu has been criticized for a determinist rendition of social processes, he insisted on the possibility of revelation and transformation in moments when "habitus is divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities."[115]

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[113] R. Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 25.

[114] Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class*.

[115] Pierre Bourdieu and Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 511.

I take Bourdieu's placement of habitus in the under-determined space between conscious and unconscious as a point of strength in his theory of practice. Social agents do not employ rational deliberation in every exchange, neither are they rote automatons operating within a predesigned program. The disjuncture between habitus and environment might be a way to reveal the *opus operandum* through the very motions of the *modus operandi*. But this work of examining points of disjuncture requires a skill that should not be taken as a given. The capacity to pause and note the discontinuities of experience without rushing into habits of action is itself an outcome of consistent practice. Thus, I submit that an intentional practice of awareness in the form of meditation constitutes a method of examining the operations of habitus. In essence, meditation entails a quality of mental awareness that attends closely to the nuances of present experience. Through repeated practice, the meditator cultivates an ability to examine all inner valences, including the physical sensations that accompany mental and emotional events, and hones an acuity of focus that is apt to discern the subtle forces that animate the body and the psyche.

The interpolation of practice within the realm of disposition is a productive move in opening avenues of exploration, furnishing subjects with a focus for inquiry. I take the most concrete parts of Bourdieu's notion of structure as my point of departure: the *practices* that correspond with the *body*. Practice is the socially sanctioned activities that map onto the body, from postural comportment to physical endurance. Because the mind and body are not separate entities but one united whole, discontinuities registered on the body hexis also disturb the mental plane. Surprises, frustrations, discomfort, and struggle, both physical and mental, mark the disruption of the incumbent habitus and the point at which new possibilities emerge. This dissertation tracks and analyzes these disruptions as they emerged throughout the year.

1.3.1. Habitus and Environmentalism

The theory of practice can offer a critique of mainstream environmental movements, the enthusiasm for which has drifted into many forms of environmental education. Bourdieu's concern lies not with *ergon,* the object, but rather with *energeia*, the principle of production.[116] Bringing habitus into environmental theory, we might say

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[116] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

that the ecological crisis is a consequence of practices sanctioned through socialization, which establishes norms and beliefs that compel a range of behaviours that lead to harm. The optimism with which certain environmental "solutions" are presented, and the response of the general populace, reveal the recursive nature of dispositions, the inertia of latent preferences that maintain a prevailing habitus. Efforts to address ecological problems are therefore severely constrained because the range of possibilities is already set, the acceptable and unacceptable already determined.

The urban habitus implicated in a capitalist-industrial order also calls for a consideration of C. A. Bowers' work on root metaphors,[117] the "the meta-cognitive schemas that underlie the largely taken for granted patterns of thinking."[118] Bowers argues that linguistic metaphors encode historical and cultural traditions—their recursive tendencies force us to think old ideas under the guise of the new. Having no alternate schema from which to construct an alternative way of thinking, we try to glean new possibilities from a script that can only reiterate itself. Bowers believes that the root metaphors that characterize "high-status" knowledge in the industrial age include: 1) a mechanistic understanding of life processes, 2) a view of change as linear and progressive, 3) a view of the individual as the basis of the social unit, 4) an anthropocentric understanding of human relationships to nature, and 5) a view of science as the most powerful and legitimate source of knowledge.[119] Linguistic conceptions delimit how we envisage an ecological way of life, since the cognitive schemas at our disposal determine the shape of thought.[120]

Bowers' work on root metaphors reveals the pervasive patterns of thinking that circumscribe the range of possibilities for ways of living. At the same time, the manner of a human life is not solely bound by *thinking*, but also by practice. Habitus, therefore, can serve as the *behavioural* and *embodied* counterpart to the root metaphor's *thinking.* Just as one inherits a guiding mentality through language, one's practices also shape

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[117] C. A. Bowers, *The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[118] C. A. Bowers, "Gregory Bateson's Contribution to Understanding the Linguistic Roots of the Ecological Crisis," *Trumpeter* 28, no. 1 (14 May 2012), 19.

[119] Bowers, *The Culture of Denial*.

[120] Bowers, "Gregory Bateson's Contribution to Understanding the Linguistic Roots of the Ecological Crisis."

behaviour. If the root metaphors that undergird thinking result in a way of life, practices that constitute culture also impose the terms of *what* we think (and what is unthinkable). Metaphor and habitus are enmeshed schemas that underwrite a prevailing *doxa.* Studied together, they shed insight into the recalcitrance of human behaviour and our seeming inability to address the ecological crisis.

In moving to an off-grid island, I search out an environment that might pose a challenge to my urban habitus, and in so doing, provide insights into techniques of practice that shape dispositions. This investigation can offer educators a frame through which to approach cultural change and provide suggestions for a pedagogical design that can reform underlying dispositions.

However, given the possibilities available to me and the practices that normalize the capitalist-industrial establishment, it might be asked whether a flight to the wilderness might be a product of, rather than a disruption to, my urban and consumer habitus. Clearly, I am already inclined toward the wild. If the habitus is a *feel for the game*, the generative principles that enable an improvisational engagement in a social field, then the act of retreat might be part of an existing repertoire sponsored by habitus. What accounts for this affinity to natural settings if not the product of my socialization?

Habitus engenders inclinations but not necessarily determinations. A social agent might not produce acts of unpredictable novelty, but she can nevertheless behave in ways that surprise conventional expectation. Although a wilderness retreat might not appeal to most urbanites, it is not an inconceivable alternative to urban life. Stories of hermit sages and solitary naturalists continue to endure in the popular imagination. These stories are maintained by certain cultural traditions and serve as both a supplement to the prevailing doxa and its potential disruptor. The desire to live in the woods, and the practices that arise from such a life, might not be the product of habitus *per se*—as in the inclinations operating in the moment of engagement in a field of social agents—but rather an outcome fomented by a cultural inheritance that furnishes a wide range of human possibilities.

I do not presume that my attitudes and dispositions represent those of my society, such that changes to my habitus are of direct import to the habitus of others. At the same time, I do not believe as an urbanite that my inclinations are so exceptional

that they stand outside the collective habitus. With little wilderness experience and no survival skillset, there is little that sets me apart from millions of city-dwellers. I proceed on the premise that my dispositions are fashioned at the hands of a dominant culture, and that these dispositions operate within fields (construed here as environment/location/situation). My experience of discontinuity instantiates a specific case of how habitus intersects with environment, how inclinations negotiate disjuncture. While this experience cannot be generalized to a broader urban habitus, insights gleaned from the project nevertheless offer something relevant to discussions of preferences and inclinations for both the personal and the more general public.

These points of investigation require methods that draw upon phenomenological theory. In the next section, I will make a case for phenomenological and contemplative inquiry as suitable methods of research. More specifically, I explore how contemplative practice, as a formal technique of phenomenological inquiry, aids in the exploration of habitus. I will also discuss portraiture as a research paradigm that can aptly capture the insights and perspectives offered by a contemplative research project.

1.4. Methodology

Given my use of Bourdieu's theory of practice as a basis for heuristic inquiry, the examination of *habitus* implies a methodology that peers into and articulates the essence of experience. The study of experience falls within the purview of *phenomenological inquiry*, which aims:

> to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience.[121]

Phenomenological research communicates both the *nature* of experience and the *essences* of experience. For my project, a phenomenological orientation has the potential to communicate the aspects of living off-grid, when ingrained habitus faces challenge in jarring moments of discontinuity. Considering that my project attends to the

[121] Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), 36.

body, close attention to sensorial experience and somatic adjustment can offer fresh perspectives on what it means to live closer to land.

However, the emphasis on the essence of experience so central to Max van Manen's research methodology seems to take for granted an abiding ability to attend to subjectivity in the thick of experience. Phenomenological inquiry is difficult precisely because awareness itself is not easily summoned; the acuity and duration of awareness vary with the extent of practice and cultivation. The ability to attend and assess one's experience is more difficult in experiences of disjuncture, as in moments of conflict, when ingrained patterns play out with force. Phenomenological investigation, as a conative act that marshals the resources of attention, is itself subject to the propensities and habits of the mind. Phenomenology presupposes a calibre of awareness that, despite Husserl's meticulous exegesis on the *epoché* (the suspension of judgement and beliefs in the act of examining experience), remains a variable in matters of heuristic inquiry, for both judgements and beliefs are often parcel to habits of mentation. Thus, phenomenology itself requires a technique of refinement, a method of accessing and harnessing attention so that the *epoché* becomes a more stable feature of cognition, thus making the manner of investigation consistent with an attentional comportment that engages experience with capaciousness and clarity.

If phenomenological inquiry assumes a calibre of awareness that is not afforded to all, contemplative practice offers a way to addresses the glaring gap. In his treatise on meditation as contemplative inquiry, Arthur Zajonc writes that "meditation is a schooling for experiencing life from the inside."[122] As a technique of attending to experience, Buddhist meditation provides some formal methods of phenomenological inquiry that attend to both the content and the container of experience. Many forms of meditation are taught within Buddhist traditions. Davidson and Lutz have offered two categories that typify most meditative techniques: Focused attention (FA) and open monitoring (OM).[123] FA techniques enjoin fixed attention on a chosen object in an effort to sustain and deepen the quality of concentration as awareness becomes more stable and less prone

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[122] Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2008), 46.

[123] R. J. Davidson and A. Lutz, "Buddha's Brain: Neuroplasticity and Meditation," *Signal Processing Magazine, IEEE* 25, no. 1 (2008): 176–74, https://doi.org/10.1109/MSP.2008.4431873.

to perturbations of discursive mental content. When attention drifts in pursuit of discursive mental events, the practitioner restores concentration to the object while relinquishing discursive thought. On the other hand, open monitoring involves "non-reactively monitoring the contents of experience from moment to moment, primarily as a means to recognize the nature of emotional and cognitive patterns."[124] Open monitoring cultivates a relaxed and capacious awareness that attends to all forms of experience, inner thoughts and external stimulus alike. These two categories of meditative technique are not mutually exclusive, and many Buddhist traditions teach forms of meditation that utilize a combination of these techniques.

In Zen Buddhism, the tradition in which I locate my practice, meditation (*zazen*) is the primary technique of spiritual development. A specific form of zazen known as *shikantaza* (只管打坐), literally translated as *nothing but sitting*, consists of an objectless awareness that abides with the natural essence and movement of the mind. The meditator simply sits in open awareness, attends to present experience in the clarity and spaciousness of keen observation. In the space of awareness, the meditator observes the multiplicity of inner motion, from the ramblings of discursive thoughts to the luminous tranquillity of a transparent awareness; the practitioner observes all experience with nonjudgemental curiosity. As a technique, *shikantaza* does not require extensive instructions, yet the practice is rigorous because the emanations of thought and the fluctuations of emotion are protean; attending to their full activity requires persistence and patience. Given the rigour of the practice, Eihei Dogen has instructed: "Single-minded exertion is itself pursuit of the way."[125] I submit that the cultivation of awareness via *zazen* constitutes the basis of mental acuity required to conduct phenomenological inquiry.

Contrary to common misconception, meditation does not aim to drain the mind of thoughts, thus ushering in a vacuous state of placidity. Rather, meditation is a way to contact the "qualities of luminosity and stillness [that] are innate to the substrate

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[124] Davidson and Lutz, "Buddha's Brain," 176.

[125] Eihei Dogen, "Fukanzazengi (Principles of Seated Meditation)," trans. Carl Bielefeld, n.d., 3, https://web.stanford.edu/~funn/zazen_instructions/Fukanzazengi.pdf.

consciousness."[126] In other words, the clarity of awareness cultivated in meditation is not an escape from the stresses of life but rather a healthy way to attend to the oscillations of experience. With relevance to ongoing ecological grief, meditation can be seen as a practice that holds emotional pain within a warm space of nonjudgemental awareness. Zazen, therefore, instills a form of intra-personal attunement that is conducive to healing and well-being.

While phenological inquiry and contemplative inquiry attempt to glean insight from salient moments of experience, I also draw on another research paradigm that can track experience across a longer timeline, mapping adjustments and discontinuities in the form of a narrative. Portraiture, a term coined by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot,[127] describes a method of research that combines elements of ethnography and narrative inquiry. Portraiture is ethnographic in its use of immersive and descriptive fieldwork, which is then used for thematic analysis; portraiture can be likened to narrative inquiry in its emphasis on aesthetic, story-based representations of study subjects, and as such supplies a basis for analyzing the broader arch of experience that exceeds moments of phenomenological qualia. Jessica Hoffmann Davis (2003) states that a portraitist works to tie context, thematic structure, relationship, and voice into an aesthetic text, highlighting salient features of the portrait that then offers rich possibilities for interpretation. In contrast to positivist methodologies that attempt to uncover patterns that can be generalized within a larger population while maintaining moral neutrality in their research, portraiture forefronts an ethical position and aims to learn from the goodness of its subjects. With its roots reaching deep into the sociological and the literary, portraiture seems a promising vehicle through which to examine and convey my experiences on the island.

Writing is communication; communication is *re*-presentation. Articulation and text are but impressions of the landscape. The considerations of portraiture serve as a discipline through which I compose sketches of experience. Further, just as the established narrative structure can be challenged and revised, there is a space for creativity and experimentation. One of the prerogatives of the portraitist is defining (or

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[126] B. Alan Wallace, *Contemplative Science Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 59.

[127] Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman-Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

redefining) the concept of the portrait itself, just as a storyteller may exercise her license to redesign the scope and purpose of a story, pushing for the inherent good of the subject, the source of insight within the focus of inquiry. The license of the portraitist allows her to respond to the occasions that are parcel to the life of the land, with its own intelligence that has been ignored and marginalized in Western academic research. If the land itself holds a wisdom that I am not yet privy to, my primary responsibility is to listen and to attend with dexterity the subtle emanations of the island's manifold murmurings.

1.5. Positionality

The flight to a remote island in protest of an exploitative society is made possible by a series of privileges not afforded to all. First, as a cis-gendered, heterosexual man in a historically patriarchal society, I tend to take for granted the freedom to move and travel without fear of harm to my personal safety. That the world is a relatively safe place that offers itself to exploration is part of a privileged male experience. In a cultural context that constructs the male as intrepid and bold, I can pursue an island excursion without fear of harm from others.

Further, raised as a middle-class urbanite, I am liable to see *lifestyle* as the sum of my *choices*, as if each choice is the result of informed deliberation, unaffected by the pressing hand of necessity. Those who struggle to pay the bills may find it difficult to deliberate over *lifestyle* as a series of choices. I am liable to view the flight to the island as an act of ethical conviction in the face of an incorrigible establishment, but this is an option available to me, not to all. To conceive of resistance is to operate from an ingrained sense of the *right to resist*. This sense of a right is an analogue of distinction, a basic competency conferred by status, or what Bourdieu calls *status competency*,[128] which is a feature of class and a privilege that generates a high-minded concern for matters of ethical import in the absence of the pressures of privation. I have the luxury of *thinking* and *writing about* the dire repercussions of runaway development without having to live the gritty reality of poverty; my foray into an off-grid island is a temporary experiment sponsored by academic institutions and my family, who ensure that I do not

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[128] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 51.

fall destitute in the course of my studies. My class status is not at stake. To conceive of an island retreat as a viable alternative to life in the city is to operate a basic level of personal agency that assumes access to land. Others may not have the luxury of such access. For them, life is not a panoply of options but an ineluctable reality with a suite of responsibilities that cannot be easily abandoned. The retreat to an off-grid island, therefore, can potentially become another middle-class fantasy that distracts from the struggles of countless others in the working classes.

To go further, the practical challenges of living off-grid require a level of physical health that is mostly enjoyed by the young and able-bodied. I recognize the presumption of physical vitality that inheres to my project, a certain fitness that enables me to undertake the arduous labour of living in the woods. The recommendations I offer do not take for granted the physical abilities of those I address. Neither do I present them as universally applicable; I only aim to explore how physical challenges posed by wildness reveal forgotten connections to the body among able-bodied urbanites.

I also realize that the move to an off-grid island may reinforce a settler impulse, whereby a disaffected inhabitant of a place moves to another in search of a more idyllic existence. I am socialized to see land as property, and my access to land is facilitated by monetary exchange; in this economic order, the rent I pay warrants my tenure. By contrast, for the Coast Salish peoples—whose traditional territories include my island abode—the land is a sacred gift to be treasured and wisely managed, not traded and sold as a commodity. The disjuncture between these colonial and Indigenous views of land resulted in dramatic changes in the North American landscape since the arrival of European settlers.[129] Critics may charge that by moving to the island, I inadvertently reproduce a system of property ownership that unfurls from colonialism. Others may say that the excursion to an off-grid island reiterates a settler fantasy while reinstating the settler's claim to innocence.[130]

The project appears problematic if a settler's every movement within settler society is seen as a reinscription of colonial systems of power. For Tuck and Yang,

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[129] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2003).

[130] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (8 September 2012), http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/download/18630.

decolonization is not an epithet for marginal gestures of reconciliation but a radical project that aims for the repatriation of land and the reinstatement of Indigenous sovereignty.[131] Other scholars, such as Robin Wall Kimmerer and Sandra Styres, have called on settlers to become indigenous to land, which entails a deeper connection with local places, the fostering of respect and reciprocity in relation to land,[132] and a willingness to acknowledge the primacy of land in all matters of human life.[133] Attentive to the complex and interwoven histories of Indigenous and settler peoples, Dwayne Donald advocates for a kind of research that interposes perspectives and experiences, a form of inquiry that does not lapse into binary judgements that oppose the settler experience with Indigeneity.[134] These Indigenous theorists bring Indigenous traditions into dialogue with modern Western notions of progress by unsettling tacit values of settler modernity, but without foreclosing the possibility of a shared future stemming from an intertwined past.

I am also mindful of the exploitative tendencies that have typified colonial projects. The extraction of material resources finds an analogue in scholarly exploits that export knowledge from local communities to earn distinction in a distant academy. I am aware of my status as a guest under the auspices of the island residents. I conduct my research under the conviction that scholarship should benefit not only the investigator, who earns academic credentials from the course of study, but also the community itself in the form of shared knowledge and reciprocity. This benefit to the community should come not in deferred promises but rather tangible contributions to the island community, both human and more-than-human. Throughout the dissertation, I will describe the ways that I have contributed to the vibrancy of the land and the island community in an effort to uphold the responsibilities that accompany place-based research.

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[131] Tuck and Yang; La Paperson, "A Ghetto Land Pedagogy: An Antidote for Settler Environmentalism," *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2 January 2014): 115–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.865115.

[132] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2015).

[133] Styres, "Land as First Teacher"; Styres, Haig-Brown, and Blimkie, "Towards a Pedagogy of Land"; Styres, "Literacies of Land."

[134] Dwayne Donald, "Indigenous Métissage: A Decolonizing Research Sensibility," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 5 (1 August 2012): 533–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.554449.

Second, I arrive on the island with an attitude of open curiosity.[135] Although I have a tentative plan for research, I do not seek to impose a rigid agenda onto the land, but rather to open myself to the questions and insights that emerge in the act of living. This attitude calls for an inquisitive spirit that pursues the wisdom inherent in experience, the willingness to follow a path of inquiry that at first appears irrelevant to my research focus. In the following chapters, I shall describe how an open research paradigm afforded an array of insights otherwise foreclosed by a stiff methodology.

1.6. Audience

Much of the current ecological degradation and carbon emissions are the outcomes of industrial consumerism in over-developed nations.[136] In 2018, the average Canadian produced 22 tones of greenhouses per year, the highest among G20 nations.[137] However, calculations of ecological impact per capita obscure the differences within a population, including patterns of consumption among different social-economic classes. Among the G20 nations, the middle class is responsible for the bulk of aggregate economic activity, both in production and consumption.[138] Furthermore, a new burgeoning middle class in developing nations[139] poses additional ecological challenges as millions adopt a lifestyle characterized by consumption and spending.[140] Since the

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[135] Curiosity is itself a privilege afforded by my academic position. For me, this curiosity comes with a responsibility to respect and honour the experiences and perspectives of the community (the land and its inhabitants), and includes a duty to protect the island from unwanted notoriety and attention.

[136] Wackernagel and Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint*; Brad Ewing et al., *Ecological Footprint Atlas 2010* (Oakland: Global Footprint Network, 2010); IPCC, "Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees" (United Nations, 2018), https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_High_Res.pdf; IPCC, "Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere, September 2019" (United Nations, 2019), https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/; IPCC, "Special Report on Climate Change and Land, August 2019" (United Nations, 2019), https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/.

[137] "Brown to Green: Country Profile Canada" (Climate Transparency, 2018), https://www.climate-transparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/BROWN-TO-GREEN_2018_Canada_FINAL.pdf.

[138] Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meir, *The New Middle Classes: Globalizing Lifestyles, Consumerism, and Environmental Concern* (New York: Springer, 2009).

[139] Mario Pezzini, "An Emerging Middle Class," accessed 10 September 2020, https://oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3681/An_emerging_middle_class.html.

[140] Jennifer Wheary, "The Global Middle Class Is Here: Now What?" *World Policy Journal* 26, no. 4 (2010): 75–83; Lange and Meir, *The New Middle Classes*.

middle class is clearly implicated in the ecological crisis, the onus for change also falls on their shoulders.

The *middle class*, however, is an amorphous term used in a variety of contexts. Beyond its environmental impacts, the ramifications of middle-class life can be further examined in three ways: economic, social-political, and cultural. First, class refers to economic status measured by income and spending. According to the OECD, a person who earns between 75% and 200% of the median household income after tax is considered a member of the middle class. In Canada, this includes anyone who earns between $45,000 and $120,000 CAD.[141] A narrower definition, put forward by James Sullivan, suggests that a typical middle-class household spends between $38,200 and $49,900 USD each year.[142] These economic definitions capture large portions of the population and include individuals in a wide range of financial situations, not all of which, depending on where a person lives, are marked by financial ease. Nevertheless, on a macro-level of analysis, we need a term to denote that segment of the population who, as a function of their lifestyle and aggregate numbers, constitute the bulk of a nation's ecological impact. In the context of this dissertation, I shall use the OECD's definition in reference to the middle class. The analysis and recommendations presented in this dissertation are addressed to the middle class in developed countries like Canada. Examples and analogies are drawn from middle class experiences and will be familiar to those who have secure access to shelter, food, clothing, and at least some disposable income for discretionary spending.[143]

Second, in addition to its economic significance, the rise of the middle class has also coincided with significant social and political developments. In many parts of Europe and North America, public health care and education are in large part funded by the middle class through decades of relatively stable economic growth. These social-political advancements have led to improvements in health and quality of life for vast segments

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141 "The Squeezed Middle Class in OECD and Emerging Countries: Myth and Reality"; Hogan, "Who Is Canada's Middle Class?"

142 Tami Luhby and Tiffany Baker, "What Is Middle Class, Anyway?" CNN Money, n.d., https://money.cnn.com/infographic/economy/what-is-middle-class-anyway/index.html.

143 What about the lavish spending of the upper class? By forwarding a sociological critique of the middle-class in its cultural manifestations, I also implicate the upper-class (those with incomes above $120K) whose standard of living is also harmful to the health of ecosystems at large.

of the population. In North America, rising living standards became a basis for social empowerment, giving rise to democratic movements, including civil and women's rights, the creation of social welfare systems, and just employment standards and practices.[144] The social and political contributions of the middle class, therefore, are not to be dismissed outright. For these social reasons, evidence of a shrinking middle class in developed nations[145] is worrisome, as the uncoupling of productivity and income threatens to erode a constituency that underwrites much of the current social order.

However, the tendencies associated with middle-class life come in for critique in cultures that conflate material abundance with personal worth and income with well-being. Capitalist-consumer societies sponsor an aspiration of wealth, expectations of a steady rise in living standards afforded by an ever-expanding economy. Thus, the *ideal* of the middle class encapsulates a teleological arch, a vision with its own motivational force that sees adherents clambering for economic status within a political economy where purchasing power equals personal power. However, with a human population of over seven billion, the dream of the good life—furnished by the trappings of modernity—poses a dire threat to the stability of life on earth. Seen in this light, the middle class is a cultural myth that sets the direction of human endeavour, a sociological phenomenon in which status engenders a suite of preferences and inclinations that inhere actions and practices. According to Bourdieu, class structures not only form the hierarchical divisions within society but also generate the ongoing dispositions which reproduce class distinctions.[146] In this dissertation, I do not argue for the dismantling of class altogether but rather aim to unpack and unsettle the dispositions engendered by the middle-class lifestyle.

1.7. Outline

In the following chapters, I present an experience of seasons in the woods. Analysis and attention will point toward the discontinuities and disruptions experienced

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[144] Lange and Meir, *The New Middle Classes*.

[145] OECD, "Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class" (OECD, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1787/689afed1-en.

[146] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 1990).

during my off-grid venture, how these experiences revealed something about my urban habitus, the effects of living in the wild, and the insights gleaned from contemplative practice. In Chapter 2, I describe my first weeks on the island and the novel challenges experienced in the fall of 2017. In Chapter 3, I explore a shift in the land's mood and tenor in the quiet of winter. In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss changes in my activities as the days lengthened throughout spring and into summer. I describe the adjustments and difficulties associated with a return to the city, how I negotiated the transition, and what I discovered about habitus. Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the implications for educators dealing with students' ecological grief and offer principles of practice that can form dispositions vital to the greening of consciousness.

Life in the woods engenders a change in the conduct of scholarship. Perceptions sharpen, perspectives shift. Consistent with the demands of phenomenological inquiry, which aims to keep pace with the vagaries of experience, many observations and reflections take the form of narratives and poems. I present these reflections in their idiosyncratic formats in the hope of conveying the liveliness of the land, the vitality of the forest, and the instructive moments that marked my time on the island.

Chapter 2. Autumn

2.1. The Land

Seated in the waters of the Strait of Georgia, the island is a perch of basaltic rock arrayed in a thick forest of Douglas fir. Its origins reach into the geologic past. As Pangea fractured 200 million years ago, the North American plate drifted west, and floating terranes coalesced to form the Pacific Coast.[147] Movement between the North American and Juan de Fuca plates created the Cascadia Subduction Zone—from Northern Vancouver Island to the coast of Oregon—where the crust of the Pacific Plate slides under the North American continental plate at a rate of 40 millimetres a year.[148] Volcanic activity over the course of 200 million years supplied the igneous rock that now forms the island's rugged terrain,[149] along with islets of similar composition along the coast. Glacial depression kept most coastal rock formations below sea level during the Pleistocene; then, around 20,000 BCE, glaciers melted along the coastal shelf, resulting in isostatic rebound (uplift of continental crust). The island emerged from the depths as the ice retreated and ocean waters engulfed its jagged shores.[150]

According to anthropologists, the North American continent saw its first humans in the late Pleistocene, when small bands of migrants appeared from Siberia and Northeast Asia, tribal hunter-gatherers who travelled along the coast of the Bering Strait.[151] Thriving on a bounty of kelp, fish, sea mammals and birds, the first Paleo-Americans entered the Alaskan panhandle and continued south through successive waves of migration over the course of the late Pleistocene and into the Holocene.[152] Moving down the west coast from Alaska, the early migrants found a wet and mild

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[147] Catherine Townsend and John Figge, "Northwest Origins" (The Burke Museum, 2002).

[148] USGS, "Why Study Cascade Volcanoes?" n.d., https://volcanoes.usgs.gov/observatories/cvo/cascade_volcanoes.html.

[149] William Dickinson, "Evolution of the North American Cordillera," *Annual Review of Earth and Planetary Sciences* 32 (2004): 13–45.

[150] Duncan McLaren et al., "A Post-Glacial Sea Level Hinge on the Central Pacific Coast of Canada," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 97 (2014): 148–69.

[151] Alice B. Kehoe, *North America before the European Invasions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[152] R. G. Matson and Gary Coupland, *The Prehistory of the Northwest Coast* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009).

climate, lush forests, and a marine environment teeming with life. Settlements were established along the coast of British Columbia.[153] For many millennia, these First Peoples thrived on the coastal lands and waters, developed sophisticated cultures and languages, detailed knowledge of terrestrial environs, and strong connections to their territories. The island was home to at least a few hundred Coast Salish peoples and served as an active fishing post for other seafaring communities along the Salish seas. Among the cultural groups that frequented the waters: the Kwakiutl and the Tsimshian on the main coast extending north to the Skeena and Nass rivers, the Haida peoples of Haida Gwaii, and the Nootkans (also known as Nuu-chah-nulth) on the west coast of Vancouver Island. South of the Strait of Georgia, the Chinook peoples lived along the lower Columbia River in present-day Washington state.[154]

The First Peoples of the coastal Northwest developed sophisticated practices of terrestrial and marine management, including the engineering of intertidal terraces, or clam gardens, to stabilize the movement of sediment at a specific tidal height.[155] Intertidal mariculture increased shellfish productivity and served to bolster food security for the coastal First Nations.[156] Today, the evidence of ancient clam gardens can still be seen on the island. At low tide, flat sea-beds intimate the handiwork of many generations of Indigenous communities. Forest management practices, characterized by respect and reverence for the land, provided the Indigenous peoples with the materials for baskets, houses, canoes and totems while preserving vast swaths of cedar forest along the Salish Coast.[157]

Although the island was once home to Indigenous communities, little evidence of Indigenous presence remained when the first European settlers arrived in the 1870s.

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[153] Matson and Coupland, *The Prehistory of the Northwest Coast*.

[154] Matson and Coupland, *The Prehistory of the Northwest Coast*.

[155] Amy S. Groesbeck et al., "Ancient Clam Gardens Increased Shellfish Production: Adaptive Strategies from the Past Can Inform Food Security Today," *PLoS One* 9, no. 3 (2014): e91235.

[156] Megan E. Caldwell et al., "A Bird's Eye View of Northern Coast Salish Intertidal Management Features, Southern British Columbia, Canada," *The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* 7, no. 2 (2012): 219–33; Groesbeck et al., "Ancient Clam Gardens Increased Shellfish Production: Adaptive Strategies from the Past Can Inform Food Security Today."

[157] Nancy J. Turner, Dana Lepofsky, and Douglas Deur, "Plant Management Systems of British Columbia's First Peoples," *BC Studies* 179 (2013): 107–33; Nancy Turner and Darcy Mathews, "Serving Nature: Completing the Ecosystems Services Circle," in *A Book of Ecological Virtues: Living Well in the Anthropocene* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), 3–29.

Much of the Coast Salish population were decimated by the smallpox epidemic during the 1700s.[158] Starting from the 1870s, waves of European settlement spread along the coast of British Columbia. The island saw a growing population of settlers throughout the early 1900s, most of them hearty homesteaders and farmers who lived off the fruits of their toil. The postwar boom saw a rise in the price of lumber; forestry became the dominant economic engine for the island residents. At its apex, the forestry industry had fourteen lumber operations on the island and boasted a sizeable fleet of trucks, dozers, and yarders. However, by the late 1950s, the island's old forests had been thoroughly exploited. An exodus soon followed, leaving many farms abandoned and homesteads deserted.[159] In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a wave of newcomers established themselves on the island. Disillusioned by the political and social establishment, buoyed by the back-to-the-land movement, these young idealists came to the island to build their paradise.[160] Today, the islands' cultural ethos is still imbued by the creativity and optimism of these inhabitants from the 1960s and 1970s.

2.2. The Cabin

Seventeen kilometres south of the dock, a grassy landing gives way to a dirt path that leads through firs and cedars into a clearing backed by a bike shed. The trail cuts a steep ascent through Douglas firs and moss. The path gains elevation over banks of loose dirt and gravel before entering a stony pass that veers south. Juncos and warblers loiter in the bushes, scattering the hillside with song. A black-tailed deer grazes behind a hedge, still and alert, her body frozen except her jaw in circles of mastication. Swaths of salal subside as the trail enters a plateau in a copse of young Douglas fir. The cabin, nestled in the silence of the forest, sits atop a rocky slope. Down the steep side of the slope, there is an empty stable and a pen; at the gentle side of the slope, a shed for firewood and tools. In the vicinity of the cabin, there is an old outhouse and a wooden hut that houses batteries, a generator, and a propane tank. A silhouette in the afternoon

[158] Douglas L. Hamilton and Darlene Olesko, *Accidental Eden* (Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2014).

[159] Hamilton and Olesko, *Accidental Eden*.

[160] Hamilton and Olesko, *Accidental Eden*.

sun, the cabin perches alongside lines of light cut by the trunks of Douglas fir, their mottled shadows move furtively on the needle-strewn floor.

The cabin measures 14 by 22 feet. Inside, 230 feet of living space: a kitchen, a study area encased by windows, a small loft, a wood frame bed, a wood stove for heat in winter. The kitchen is equipped with a propane stove, a sink with water fed by cisterns atop the next hill. The mineral content gives the water a brown tinge. I would use this water only for washing and cooking and drew drinking water from a spring located a kilometre away.

The cabin has a few electrical outlets. Two photo-voltaic panels provide power to two 12-volt batteries. The bay windows overlook a declivity thick with arbutus, fir, and cedar. Beyond the trees lies the Strait of Georgia in a silvery band of light. On the other side of the water, the jagged shape of Vancouver Island, Mount Everglade rising high above the waterline. The waters evince a mood every day—the brooding storms that churn the ocean in chops of white, the placid evenings when the sea was a mirror drawn from the sky.

The fading light of the September evening caressed the woods in shades of gold, and the cabin rested into a cradle between sky and water. Standing on a crop of grass, Miles circling the rocky steps and surveying the woods, I was glad to have found a home in the shade of the forest. Yet the path to this island abode, several months in the searching, was itself a meandering trail full of turns and snaking passes.

Figure 2.1. View of the Salish Sea from the cabin window.
Photo by David Chang 2017.

2.3. Finding an Island Home

Canada is home to vast stretches of wilderness and many remote islands, most of which are off the electricity grid. By virtue of its geographical isolation from the mainland, each island comprises a unique habitat that hosts a distinct environment for its inhabitants. In his study of finches on the Galapagos Islands, Charles Darwin observed that islands presented a variety of selective pressures that would shape the evolution of their respective inhabitants.[161] Relative isolation creates unique environments for species. Komodo dragons on the islands of Indonesia and marsupial mammals of ocean-bound Australia exist nowhere else on the planet; they instantiate how isolated environments shape and preserve unique flora and fauna.

[161] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 150th Anniversary ed. (Signet, 2003).

Jared Diamond has argued that islands are *natural experiments* that illustrate how minute variations in terrain and climate can affect the fate of cultures.[162] Unique physical properties of islands not only affect flora and fauna; they also shape the culture of its human inhabitants, as myth and lore often derive from local features. The worship of Pele, the goddess of volcanoes, on the Hawaiian Islands indicates a religious consciousness fostered by a unique topography. Closer to home, the southern gulf islands off the Salish seas each feature a distinct cultural ethos. Visitors and residents alike notice the idiosyncratic tenor of each island. With distinctive features, each island poses a singular trajectory of evolutionary potential, both cultural and biological. An island's remote location removed from a mainland establishment is a primary factor in the development of culture, an incubator of an alternative ethos that throws mainland culture into relief.

An island, therefore, can be conceived as an ecological and cultural niche. My own view of islands as niches came as a result of reading Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry's *The Universe Story*, wherein the authors posit:

> A species always creates its own niche . . . we say conventionally that the environment is fixed . . . but it is also true to say that species itself "fixes" the environment by choosing one out of a potentially infinite number of niches to inhabit. We say conventionally that the fixed environment selects the species, but it is also true to say that it is the species that selects the environment. And in so doing, the species chooses its own evolutionary pathway.[163]

By what power does a creature shape its evolutionary pathway? Swimme and Berry suggest chance, choice, and necessity.[164] Darwin noted that the water ousel's "choice" to forage underwater, like the first amphibious fish that ventured onto dry land, marked a significant moment in the species' evolution. "Choice" does not refer to rational deliberation but rather a confluence of inclinations that propel an animal toward one avenue among many. This idea postulated by Swimme and Berry counters conventional evolutionary theory, which sees each island niche as a source of selective pressures that determine physical forms in species that descend from a common ancestor.

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[162] Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

[163] Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994), 135.

[164] Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, 136.

Swimme and Berry suggest some agency on the part of the species themselves; their *choice* of islands would ultimately determine their evolutionary destiny.

If animals play some part in shaping their evolutionary path, I was cognizant of the ramifications of my choice of an island abode, which in turn should affect the changes in my understanding of land and waters. I was looking for a landscape characterized by wildness, a place without the elaborate infrastructure that displaces wild potential and intensifies human activity. On the cultural front, I was looking for an ethos that harbours diverse life philosophies, independence of spirit, and an experimental attitude conducive to insight and innovation. In early 2017, I begin to look for an appropriate island residence for my retreat. In deciding on an island, and informed by my reading of Pierre Bourdieu and deep ecology (seven platform principles),[165] I determined that the retreat needed to:

- facilitate a simpler way of life that required fewer material goods;
- be rustic enough to pose a disruption to my urban habits and dependencies;
- be remote enough so that I could live in relative solitude; and
- be close enough to city centres so I could access services in case of emergency.

These last two conditions seemed to oppose one another, but this balance between them would be vital, as I was new to woods and may have required assistance of many kinds. My wife and I agreed that I would need to maintain some access to health services, both for my sake and for Miles' epileptic condition. The solitude I sought was to be tempered by proximity to others who could provide a helping hand. These choices provided some assurance of personal safety but also circumscribed my experience of isolation, and thus my experience of solitude.

To the question of shelter, I had considered finding an unoccupied space on which to build a simple hut, perhaps a yurt. However, I did not want to acquire materials for a project, only to abandon the shelter after a year. This waste of materials would run

[165] Alan R. Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, eds., *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995).

against the ecological aim of my project. On the balance of consideration, I decided to look for an existing cabin that I could move into.

There are thousands of islands strewn along the coast of British Columbia, most of which are not connected to the electricity or sewage grid. I looked online and called prospective landlords. I inquired with friends and acquaintances. I connected with distant acquaintances who owned off-grid properties along the Sunshine Coast. None of these efforts yielded fruit. I continued my search on Gabriola Island, where a friend had seen an ad for a cabin. Although Gabriola was on the grid, this cabin was located in a section of the island that did not have electricity. However, with its daily ferry service, Gabriola sees regular vehicle traffic from Nanaimo. Its paved roads, stores, restaurants, and markets provide many of the conveniences of city life and therefore offered little potential to challenge my urban habits.

While staying with friends on Gabriola, I connected with Luke,[166] a man who lived on neighbouring Ruxton Island. He kindly agreed to meet me at Degnen Bay on Gabriola. On an overcast Saturday morning, we set off for Ruxton Island. Luke was congenial and generous with his knowledge and experience. He had purchased a beautiful property on Ruxton, where he maintains his career in IT. He lives in a large house with a TV, satellite internet, computers, fridge, stove, and composting toilet. A large bank of solar arrays and batteries power the systems. A cluster of vacation homes dot the hills surrounding the bay. In the summer there are lively parties and plenty of company. In the afternoon, we walked through the island and admired the sandstone caves carved by tidewater on the south side of the island. When we returned to Luke's home, a seal pursued a school of fish in the shallow of the bay. We were mesmerized by the black shape parting clouds of fish under the water's shimmering. We shook ourselves from amazement, got back on the boat and returned to Gabriola. I thanked Luke for his generosity and hospitality, and we parted ways at Degnen Wharf.

Although a beautiful spot, Ruxton was not suitable for my project. Without an existing transport service, such as a water taxi or a ferry, I would need a boat of my own to access Gabriola or Nanaimo. The acquisition of a boat ran counter to the central aim of my project: to rely on fewer materials and machines. Kayaking was out of the

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[166] Every person mentioned in this dissertation has been assigned a fictitious name.

question; the locals warned me of powerful rip currents that tore through the straits. Motorboats have been caught in these currents and were unable to reach the shore. Further, the tight clusters of cabins made Ruxton a wonderful vacation spot for the socially inclined, but not for one seeking solitude. Although there was one cabin available for rent on Ruxton, the cabin featured amenities that city dwellers have come to expect—hot water, electricity, and refrigeration. These comforts would not challenge the habits of my city life. Although an island may be off the electricity grid, its cultural ethos emerges with its inhabitants' choices. A remote island could be a private resort or a rustic place of contemplation. The difference is marked by intention and the conscious choices that give shape to local culture.

In 2016, I volunteered on an organic farm on another island off the BC coast. On that occasion, under the auspices of my gracious hosts, I met many wonderful island residents, one of whom was a woman who lived in the south end of the island. Later that year, I ran into her again at a Zen centre in Vancouver where I practised meditation. She told me about her island cabin that sat empty. In the spring of 2017, I contacted her to inquire about the cabin. Happily, it was still available, and so I promptly made plans to visit. The island itself had a water transport service—I would not need my own boat to access the mainland.

I hitchhiked my way to the south end of the island and hiked up the steep hill to the cabin. In the brightness of the afternoon, the cabin glowed with a distinct charm. The brightness of the afternoon light was instantly inviting. Many contemplatives speak of the power of intuition, a guiding hand that steers without overt direction. Upon entering the cabin, I came to a subtle assurance. It felt *right*. This steady hand of assurance was the apogee of many months of handwringing, of calling strangers and finding no response, of an adherence to principles without any assurance that opportunities might materialize. Without connections to social circles familiar with cabin culture, I felt locked out of a circuit. The search felt blind and frantic, and my efforts hapless and ill-conceived. Thus, it was with an appreciation for serendipity and providence that I found a cabin that would shelter me for the next year.

Despite misgivings against religious belief, I nevertheless witnessed something about the role of faith in the path of development: the commitment to values and principles, moving forward without certainty or assurance, trusting that circumstances

would unfurl in ways that are appropriate to growth and learning. This was perhaps my first encounter with habitus: the movement toward new planes of possibility was a leap into empty space without the usual assurances of safety and success. Each design was accosted by doubt, each effort buffeted by anxiety. A life accustomed to ease is inclined toward the proven and familiar. Yet, I had to relinquish the assurances of my urban life and lunge into the unknown. I noticed that the consistent effort is nurtured by an innocent, perhaps naïve, desire to persist, to keep groping in the dark for a passage forward. This persistence gestured toward trust in one's inner resources, the moxie to equal each moment, and the wherewithal to make good of every situation. At last, finding the cabin gave rest to my initial anxieties and furnished an initial glimpse into the role of faith in a life of contemplation and learning. The paucity of assurance is no cause for the abjuration of effort. Since the entire off-grid venture would be an excursion into the unknown, I would come to fathom faith's many depths throughout my tenure on the island.

2.4. Neighbours

An old arbutus tree with a sinewy arm blackened by disease lives on the south side of the cabin. Its contorted shape was visible from my kitchen window. The curve of its branch served as a perch for a pair of ravens, with whom I shared the forest. In the first weeks of my arrival, the ravens circled the cabin and called with clear intention. Their voices were precise and deliberate: two scrapes and a click. Having noticed the new occupant, they declared his presence by repeating the phrase to each other. When I ambled outside the cabin, they filled the woods with dire pronouncement. One morning, a raven landed on the blackened branch and peered into the cabin with its eyes of onyx. Our gazes met for a brief moment; the raven called and ruffled his wings before alighting the branch. In an instant, a mutual recognition.

The cabin is graced by a grove of young Douglas fir and arbutus. Each morning I was greeted by another arbutus outside the front door—its trunk smooth like the thews of an uplifted extremity. The red, papery bark peeled, revealing the skin beneath. The firs spread a thick canopy above and filled the soundscape with waves of susurrus. Their rigid trunks threw long striated shadows on the forest floor. I admired the audacity of their bark, green with lichen and moss, rough to the touch, but stately and complex in the gloaming. In the dark of night, the treetops framed the studded sky, and I peered past

the branches to trace the crinkled shape of Cassiopeia. On moonlit evenings, I watched the firs in a dim and silvery array, stoic and resolute in a foreign world unvisited by wit or imagination.

I was always happy to encounter a deer around the cabin. Sometimes the wanderer was a solitary doe, sometimes a mother with her fawn. They watched me with great intensity, searching for the essence of my character. In their delicate movement, I recognized a graceful beneficence. Once, a deer too keen to taste the tender grasses growing inside the pen became frantic when she could not escape the confines. Miles was transfixed and dashed to the fence. This enthusiasm spooked the deer, and she circled the pen in a frantic clip. I had to leash Miles in order to liberate the deer. Upon entering the pen, the deer bolted. I tried to herd her to the gate, but she found a weak spot in the fence, pushed through the wires, and disappeared over the hill. Miles was disappointed to see his subject vanish.

In the immediate vicinity of the cabin, I was surrounded entirely by forest. In front of the cabin, a junction in the dirt path broke in two directions: one south, the other east. If I walked ten minutes southward, I came to Thomas and Jane’s place, a beautiful home surrounded by lush gardens. An infinity pool in the back garden bleeds into an expansive view of ocean and sky. Thomas is an experienced carpenter who builds houses around the island. He built this home over the course of a decade. Every nook manifests an attention to design and detail. Jane is a teacher and an avid gardener who grows delectable vegetables and vibrant ornamentals. We spent some wonderful evenings together in laughter and revelry. I think of them with fondness and gratitude; theirs is a little paradise nestled in a space that the mad world has forgotten.

At the junction, if I walked up the hill another ten minutes toward the east, I came to the home of a lovely couple who divide their time between the island and California. Walter is a retired engineer who spends his days in woodwork. Lilian is an artist who bakes delicious bread. Sharing a love of music, we sat in their living room singing and strumming songs that Lilian had written. The gift of their friendship made for great memories.

Down at the bottom of the hill lives a lovely family: Ryan, Amy, their two children Taylor and Bradley, Muji, a black lab, and Reese, a fluffy black cat. Ryan is a tree

planter who spends part of the year managing planting projects on Vancouver Island. Amy works as a secretary at an elementary school. Taylor and Bradley were 11 and 9 respectively when I met them. Ryan was often working in the yard when I strolled past. His smile and congenial greeting eased my apprehension when I first arrived on the island. Amy is a skilled baker who makes delectable treats that strike the taste buds with unparalleled delight: almond caramel crisps, chocolate pecan cookies, and buttery raspberry scones. Taylor and Bradley are vivacious children I was privileged to befriend. We bounced on the trampoline, raced our bikes to the bay, and sat watching the clouds on summer afternoons. I am indebted to this family for their warmth and generosity. A part of me remains in that house brimming with laughter. In moments of doubt and discouragement, the memory of their kindness comes as a salve that comforts the soul.

Up and down the main road, I enjoyed many friendships. There was a Liz, a lovely lady who ran a farm down the road. She lived there with Tommy, her Golden Retriever, and two horses. Liz was always kind and generous. She drove me to the dock when I needed rides and even lent me her van when my parents came to visit. She taught me how to brush a horse and invited me to a musical gathering around Christmas time. A dozen of us sat in her living room, played guitars and banjos, and sang old Beatles tunes. The gathering remains one of my cherished memories of the island.

Through Liz, I met a lovely couple, Donna and Ray, who led the island's nature conservancy. A teacher, sailor, and committed environmentalist, Donna spent her life in activism and loving devotion to the natural world. She started an environmental magazine, co-edited a book about the Salish seas, led conservation efforts on Salt Spring Island, and sailed the west coast of North America. Ray is a well-read thinker (he dubs himself a "bush sage") who spent his life conserving the wilderness of Washington state. Thanks to his work, much of the forests and wildlands of Whatcom County are now preserved and protected. Our shared love of nature and our concern for the planet held us together. In their company, I found kindred spirits and loving friends. Together, we hiked to the peak of a nearby mountain, swam in the bay on sweltering summer days, and played music well into the night in June, as daylight lingered long into evening. The gift of their friendship enlivened my tenure, and I am grateful to them for their constant support.

Simon and Carol, a couple who run a barge service, live on the opposite hill. Their house is situated by a lake that rounds a bulging slope. Simon is a hardy homesteader who settled on the island in the seventies. When he first arrived, he had little more than a kerosene lamp for light. Now, they are comfortably furnished with solar panels and generators. A well-stocked garden and orchard supply them with provisions throughout the year. Their generosity was most appreciated when they invited me to Christmas dinner. I sat at their table, enjoyed a sumptuous feast, and became acquainted with their grown children, who had all gathered for the celebration. I am grateful for their conviviality. In a perfect world, everyone would give and receive such open-hearted kindness.

Phil lives further down the road. A polymath of impressive erudition, Phil spent much of his life rewilding the land on which he lives. He dug a creek and several ponds in order to restore the salmon population that the island once hosted; he created a marsh as part of the salmon's habitat and planted a patch of forest to help moderate the micro-climate of the valley. Each conversation with Phil was a brisk tour through a section of an obscure encyclopedia. He expounded on the rate of biomass reduction in the Georgia Strait and reviewed the adventures of Wilhelm Stellar on his voyages through the Salish seas. In his loquacious manner, he conveyed his love of the land, his irrepressible passion for knowledge. His indomitable spirit remains a source of inspiration.

Further down the road by the bay, William lives in a beautiful house with lively sculptures of mythical creatures. An artist to the bone, William turned driftwood into comical chimeras: crocodiles with the faces of Labrador Retrievers, lizards that stand on their hind legs, and mythical dragons coiled around pillars and beams. William also built his own sailboat over the course of several years, using nothing more than his wit and the skill of his hands. His life is marked by ingenuity, creativity, and fierce independence.

Off the main path that leads to William's property, a trail winds through a thick forest of cedar and balsam. Here, the swampy grounds flank the hardened path, and ashen trunks felled by storms crosshatch the terrain. Pileated Woodpeckers drummed a steady beat, and Flickers flashed in flights of panic. A turkey vulture swooped overhead as I passed, its dark wings gleaming in the sun. The path leads to a steep declivity that opens onto a rocky beach. A congestion of driftwood filled the shoreline, each log a

unique colour and texture that reveals years of weathering. I hiked the boulders to reach a narrow point in the peninsula. At low tide, the beach uncovered a blanket of white oyster shells.

Ambling past the grove of alders on the main road, I came to another opening. Here, the roaming deer would dash, startled by my approach. Adjacent to the trail entrance is an idyllic meadow. Beyond the swale, the path leads to a narrow bay. I sauntered past the bay and entered the conjoining forest, rising with the slope to a mesa over an aggregation of boulders. Here, I took in the sweeping vista of the bay and the southern waters. In the distance was the shape of Vancouver Island, extending far into the horizon. To my left, I saw the bare cliffs of Cutter Island. On this rocky mesa, the southerlies comb crops of pine and juniper, bending their branches, sculpting the landscape into a tableau of perpetual motion. The vegetation is permanently stretched under the wind's direction, each ligament reaching in a dancer's pose. This windy rock was my favourite perch. I came here on snowy days when the ocean and the sky dissolved into sheets of gray. I watched with rapt attention in the middle of a winter storm as the waters battered the rocks and curtains of white spray careened from the walls. These were moments of deep reckoning when I witnessed the raw power of wilderness in an awesome display, what A. J. M Smith described as "the beauty of strength broken by strength and still strong."[167]

The gulls surfed the wind. They quartered the gust, wings steady in the bluster. Then, with a subtle tip, they cut across the space of the bay, dropped altitude in a hurry, and recovered in one swoop. These deft maneuvers evince nothing if not the sheer joy of flight; their acrobatic antics served no purpose outside the enjoyment of exquisite skill. On another occasion, the sunlit mesa was dotted by the moving shadow of a juvenile Bald Eagle. She glided soundlessly toward me, a mere twenty feet above. The raptor trained its gaze, her head tilted slightly in bafflement. Then, as if to dismiss my presence, she parried over the precipice and disappeared over a line of juniper.

Walking further south, I came to the main bay, which is also designated a provincial park. Here, the waves lapped against sharp crops of rock. Swathes of yellow grass spread over the landing near the water. The approach to the bay is populated by

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[167] A. J. M Smith, "The Lonely Land," *Poetry in Voice*, accessed 24 June 2019, https://www.poetryinvoice.com/poems/lonely-land.

notable individuals: a venerable arbutus with a wide trunk and thick outstretched arms, a Douglas fir that defies his genus, growing sideways in every direction rather than skyward. Hooded Mergansers and lines of Surf Scoters paddled the waters as dusk wore into evening. Bald Eagles nested atop the surrounding conifers. On stormy days, the ocean churned and pushed with mystical force. During my first week on the island, when I was assailed by doubt and homesickness, I came to the bay and was moved by the sight of rolling waves. The raw energy pierced me completely, and I was overcome with emotion. Something about the raw beauty of that place spoke of an irrepressible presence and an ageless power. I could not know what stirring force had broken my brittle defences, whether I had lapsed into grief or joy. When the rain came, it filled the land with both contentment and longing. The wind's howl was both a maniacal scream and a call of jubilation. Through sheets of precipitation, I was held captive by the indomitable majesty of a world that shall always be cloaked in great mystery.

Such was the composition of those woods where I lived. In contrast to the raging world torn by strife and madness, this little corner remains for me a bastion of sanity. From Wrens to Vultures, from giggling children to venerable elders, I was part of a community, a network of life that renewed in me a faith in the world and an appreciation for life. Against this backdrop of boundless beauty, I negotiated the setbacks, struggles and surprises. In the throes of challenge, land and community proved a constant source of strength and support.

2.5. Cycling

In the warmth of the September afternoon, I was buoyed by a pleasant mood. As I walked with Miles down to the bay, the spells of homesickness and self-doubt that had plagued me for the past week were now replaced by an upspring of confidence and euphoria. This inexplicable shift could not be attributed to any external events. In that burst of vibrancy—the poplars and cedars announced themselves with a flourish, the Flickers fluttered a delightful spectacle—I felt at once grateful and happy to be alive, walking down that dirt road.

Earlier in the day, I rode my bicycle up the island—a seventeen-kilometre journey through hilly terrain. It was my second ride up the island. During my first ride, I was thwarted by the gravelly hills one after another. I entered each incline with what

momentum I could muster, but gravity soon took hold. Midway up the ascent, I pedalled hard on a light gear, puffing and pushing with difficulty. On that first ride, I dismounted twice and walked the bike to the crest. On this second ride, determined not to dismount, I forced my way up each acclivity and endured the burning muscles as the bike inched over the hill. The entire ride took just under an hour, but the exertion felt more taxing than an hour's strain. I was drenched in sweat after the ride but proud to have endured the island's rugged topography. The ride back to the cabin was equally demanding, but in the mysterious motions of the psyche, the return journey seemed shorter. After a period of rest, I ventured out again with Miles on an afternoon walk, swept by a tide of bliss.

Some would chalk up this euphoria to a brain saturated with endorphins, since the effect of physical exercise on mood is well documented.[168] The blossom of dazzling thoughts and observations during my walk might be a result of increased blood flow to the brain, the cardio-vascular system ramped up through physical activity. These physiological factors are part of a larger phenomenon in which my physical response was folded into the larger landscape of corporeality that made both soil and soma one continuous field of experience. Neuroscientists who detail the operations of neurons have disclosed the workings of a marvellous organ, but it would be a mistake to conclude that neurotransmitters and hormones are the ultimate cause of experience. In order for endorphins to flood the synapses, there must be a world in which material bodies push and lean against each other—boulders that call to the climber, waters that challenge a swimmer's stride. The rugged terrain announces its presence, the struggle against which coils the human form. The euphoria of exertion comes precisely because the body lives amidst a world of bodies, in contact with manifold materiality.

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[168] Carl W. Cotman, Nicole C. Berchtold, and Lori-Ann Christie, "Exercise Builds Brain Health: Key Roles of Growth Factor Cascades and Inflammation," *Trends in Neurosciences* 30, no. 9 (1 September 2007): 464–72, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2007.06.011; M. Sharifi, M. R. Hamedinia, and S. A. Hosseini-Kakhak, "The Effect of an Exhaustive Aerobic, Anaerobic and Resistance Exercise on Serotonin, Beta-Endorphin and BDNF in Students," *Physical Education of Students* 22, no. 5 (1 September 2018): 272–77, https://doi.org/10.15561/20755279.2018.0507; G. H. Sharifi et al., "The Effect of One Exhausted Exercise Session on Serum Serotonin and Prolactin Level of Men Runners," *Occupational Medicine Quarterly Journal* 4, no. 1 (10 October 2012): 53–58.

David Abram, a perspicuous observer of matters corporeal, has noted the reciprocity inherent in physical contact with the material world.[169] He writes:

> Wander over to that oak, or to a maple, or a sycamore; reach out your hand to feel the surface of a single, many-pointed leaf between your thumb and fingers. Note the coolness of that leaf against your skin. . . . But notice, too, another slightly different sensation: that you are also being touched *by* the tree. That the leaf itself is gently exploring your fingers, its pores sampling the chemistry of your skin, feeling the smooth and bulging texture of your thumb even as the thumb moves upon it.[170]

Contact consists in the interchange between material bodies—the subject is also an object and vice versa. A cyclist who labours up a hill is not simply feeling the burn in his legs—the exertion actuates the shape of the terrain. To meet the land in the bareness of my own physical power is to contact the topography in unmediated engagement. The terrain transpires in the stretch and strain of muscles; tendons bend and lock under the weight of exertion—such is the body's way of importing the shape of land, of knitting geography into the body's sinuous fibres. In the moment of toil, the mountain felt its own weight and contour in the flex of my body. Yet, the stress of physical strain was also an ecstasy. In the rush of exertion, I was enfolded into the curve and cut of the hill. The terrain was present in my blood as embodied experience was subsumed by the lie of the land.

Physical contact with land also discloses the inherent rhythm of topography. The labour of riding uphill was followed by relief at the apex and a delightful descent down the other side. The glutes and thighs relaxed as the bike gathered speed. The beads of sweat on my face felt cool in the wind as I darted downhill. Bramble and bracken pulled to a blur. I let go of the handles and rode with my body upright, soaking up the wind. The joy of a downhill glide was also part of the hill's profile, for the descent completed the shape of its spine. Every uphill struggle was punctuated with an invigorating descent; thus, the experience of the hill was made whole in the traversal between ascent and descent.

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[169] David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 2010); David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

[170] Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 58.

The euphoria I felt in the afternoon came on the heels of this physical intimacy. The sense of the land imported into the body, and my pulse synchronized with the rhythm of its topography. This shift in affect was not the whimsical oscillation of mood but rather the elation of the land transmuted in and through the body. This physical connection suggests that mental and physical wellness are not the property of the individual, but a shared correspondence with the land itself, an interchange that sees the hill sensing its own shape through muscles and nerves. The wind discerned itself as gust in the roar that filled my ears or a breeze that caressed my face. If I was happy this afternoon, it was because of a deeper acquaintance with the land and a deeper union with a flourishing imminent within its geography. This was a euphoria not entirely my own, but rather the land's ebullience shining through the embodied creature.

In light of the somatic intimacy engendered by physical contact with land, it came as an odd juxtaposition a few days later when I rode in my neighbour's car and drove up the island. The old Toyota hummed up and down a series of slopes that had previously winded me on my bike. The steadiness of the ride, punctuated by the whirl of the engine, hardly delivered any sense of strain. I was comfortably seated and felt nothing of the hills' unique character. The ease with which the car traversed the hill imparted a sense of estrangement, as if the body had missed a point of vital contact. Here was an acquaintance squandered, a potential neglected. The power of an engine replaced the toil of the muscles, and I lost the satisfaction of surmounting a hill and the affective high that was parcel to the land's rugged features. There was no struggle, but also no relief after the exertion. The mediation of experience by machines delimits sensation and physicality, thus importing a numbness that blunts the senses by precluding a range of sensual contacts. The machine, in its power and efficiency, reduces the corporeal union with land, bypassing the unity of perception and perspiration in the moment of strain. The price I pay for reliance on machines is a diminishment in the life of the body; the ease and efficiency provided by motors deprive the body of its utility and forecloses opportunities for a somatic apprehension of place and geography. Neglect of this physical connection abets an ignorance of the factors that support a flourishing life. As I watched the trees fly past the car window, the world moved faster but appeared less remarkable.

Regarding conservation, Aldo Leopold once wrote: “In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial.”[171] In a modern world of appliances and gadgets, I would like to say that in making *life* easy, we have made it trivial. The return to physical effort recovered a vital connection between mindscape and landscape, between cogitation and motion. If the ecological crisis stems in part from the predominance of an abstract rationality estranged from the material world, as Val Plumwood has argued,[172] then an ensuing response should be a rediscovery of a physical life, of logos apprehended *in* and *through* the life of a body that shares in the corporeal matter of the world itself.

2.6. Firewood

Sunday afternoon, the sky was bright with blazing blue. I had spent the last few days chopping wood. There was half a cord of sectioned logs that I stored in the shed and the stable. Some pieces were chunks of Douglas fir that measured three feet in diameter. I used a long-handled axe with a wedge-shaped head to split the logs. I worked on a section of even ground by the stable. The axe itself was heavy; some effort was required just to lift the implement over my head. The downward strike required technique—I had discovered the importance of keeping my eyes on the exact spot where I wanted the bit to land, as the axe tended to strike where the eyes are ranged. There was a temptation to apply too much force, which skews the axe’s descent and pushes the bit far from the target. Better to push the axe just a little and let gravity pull it down in a swift arc. Once the axe landed on a section of the log, it was lodged tight in the fibres. Some effort was required to pull the axe loose before commencing the next stroke.

Most of the logs I had were local Douglas fir. The dry climate and frequent winter storms on the island meant that trees grew slowly, and the wood was denser than those grown in other climates. The local fir had a pink hue, and I have developed a deep

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[171] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 246.

[172] Val Plumwood, “Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason,” n.d.; Plumwood, “Nature as Agency and the Prospects for a Progressive Naturalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 12, no. 4 (2001): 3–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/104557501101245225; Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1 March 1991): 3–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00206.x.

respect for this timber. Whereas a hefty piece of balsam would split with one or two strikes, a block of Douglas fir was harder to crack. I surveyed the log, following the cracks in the fibres. I deployed the axe with zeal, striking across the grain. However, the bit merely cut a notch on the log. Another strike, another notch. In the same repetitive motion, I continued to strike the log, only slowly chopping through the fibres. I lifted the axe and sent it down. The thump of bit meeting wood rocked my hands and arms. To dislodge the axe head from the wood, I placed one boot on the log and pulled with my arms, my back leaning away from the handle. Often, I found the axe so tightly caught in the wood that I could not pull it out. I pounded on the handle with my fist or kicked the head to knock the axe loose. With great effort, I managed to pry the axe away from the log, took a few breaths and returned to the task. With one difficult piece, I counted 128 strikes before I heard the resounding crack that signalled the partition of fibres.

With every activity came some curious tendencies. I have noticed that those who work in physical labour tended to use coarse language, and on the occasion of chopping tough wood, I found myself cursing profusely. *Bastard!* Coarse language was not a feature of my everyday speech, but I discovered that swearing suited grunt work. I was not angry so much as worked up by the log; the stubbornness of the fibres insinuated into my speech, and I gave it voice by muttering expletives. *Motherfucker!* The forcefulness of physical exertion found verbal expression in vulgarity; each obscenity was strangely satisfying and befitting of the arduous endeavour. *Fucking Hell!*

This sudden change in diction evinced a disruption in habitus wherein a practice was accompanied by an associate language; physicality provided its own vocal complement to force and strain. Consistent with research indicating that swearing increases pain tolerance,[173] my foul mouth seemed to make the arduous task more bearable. But was this uncouthness befitting of a practising contemplative? What of my Buddhist vow to practise right speech? In the moment of utterance, the words attended action, and I felt entirely on side with the coarse language—yet self-examination followed in the wake of a disruption to habit. The hard work of splitting logs had my words running afoul, and I now had to reconcile myself as *the kind of person* whose diction surprised his self-image. Cursing instantiated an intersectional moment when a

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[173] Richard Stephens and Olly Robertson, "Swearing as a Response to Pain: Assessing Hypoalgesic Effects of Novel 'Swear' Words," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (30 April 2020), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00723.

novel impulse interrupted the construction of myself as a Buddhist practitioner, a construction that I had assumed and grown into by way of deportment. In the absence of partners who upheld social norms, the expletives came all too easily. This recognition came in the form of amusement—not so much self-reproach, but a curious inquiry into the breach of politeness in speech. As a teacher, I had often disapproved of profanity uttered by students. As an academic, I prized skillfulness in articulation. In the Buddhist tradition, speech was a central virtue, a vital element of ethical conduct. Yet, who was this person swearing like a sailor?

The toil of splitting wood suggested another intersection between material bodies. The energy I exerted in splitting the wood opposed the energy that bound the fibres together. The density of the log's tight grains was its own force field, a binding energy drawn from sun, water, and soil. These energies converged in grain, an orbit that held layers of material in a clenching grip. In swinging the axe, I sent my own energy crashing against this orbit. Physical exertion must match and overcome the energy that held the fibres together. In this toil of strength against rigidity, the density of the timber reached the tension in my muscles. The energy that held the log in its shape was felt in the soreness of my arms, the stress in my back, and later the heat from the burning fire. The strength of the wood was none other than the burn I felt in my body. This was another intimacy that furnished the life of the body in a world of embodied matter, a force uttered through course language. Within the complex dimensions of a multi-faceted noesis, I understood the wood more completely through a physical immersion soaked with perspiration; the density of fibres was actualized, not in the factual register of Aristotelian *episteme*,[174] the repository of declarative knowledge, but in the immediacy of the Husserl's *lebenswelt*,[175] the world of lived experience, where timber occurred in the flex of my arms and the rush of labouring breath.

2.7. Carrying Water

Two cisterns atop the next hill fed water to the cabin. This water was pumped from a lake at the bottom of the hill. Its mineral content gave the water a rusty colour.

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[174] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).

[175] Joseph J Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, Purdue University Press Series in the History of Philosophy (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994).

Though the cistern water was safe for washing and cooking, my neighbours advised me to gather my drinking water from elsewhere. Ryan showed me the location of the spring, approximately one kilometre away from the cabin. A few days later, I carried two empty jugs (11.5 litres each) to my bike, secured the containers to the trailer with bungee cords, and rode one kilometre to the spring. Miles ran alongside me as I cycled toward the spring, his eyes sharpened in the search for deer.

The spring was located in a swamp owned by an elderly couple who welcomed residents to draw the water. Walking through a grove of alders and maples, I came to a wire fence and gate that kept ungulates at bay. On the other side of the gate, the land shifted into a blaze of bracken and damp soil. The terrain exuded an air of enchantment as the footpath carved through banks of undergrowth, arriving at a small mouth in the forest floor shaded by maples. This cozy corner of the forest beamed with a whimsical charm, a paradise for fairies and sprites. Reflecting on his venture swimming in the rivers and lakes across the UK, Roger Deakin writes:

> Our relationship to water is a great deal more mystical than most of us admit. How much of the ancient folk-belief in the healing powers of water still existed? There are holy wells over the country, but since the advent of mains water supplies in the 1920s and 30s, many of them have been forgotten.[176]

The numinosity of the spring was apparent to me the first time I entered. Each trip to the spring became a pilgrimage to a mystical corner of the forest. The trip itself comprised mentation—I was entering into a unique space with its own distinct presence. My status as a guest required an attitude of respect and humility; each footfall would be planted with reverence and appreciation.

Seeking provision from this sacred space, I felt compelled to offer a gesture of gratitude. Palms together at heart centre, I closed my eyes and bowed with reverence to the bounty of the spring—a familiar Buddhist greeting. I did not know to whom I was bowing, nor was I conscious of any discernable presence. The gesture was simply an acknowledgement of the land's abundance, a sign of appreciation.

Balanced on my knees, using a metal scooper left by the side of the spring, I broke the water's surface and filled each jug. The skaters slid under ledges as I drew

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[176] Roger Deakin, *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey through Britain* (London: Vintage, 2000), 156.

each scoop, careful not to disturb the silt at the bottom. The water was cold and crisp, invigorating to the touch. I moved my arms mindfully, careful not to spill when pouring water into the jugs. The motions were meditative in their ritualistic reverence. The jugs full, I returned the scooper, stood with my hands together and bowed again in gratitude. Each trip to the spring was a spiritual exercise that wove me closer to land.

The bike ride back to the cabin was more taxing. With twenty-three litres of water in tow, I was sluggish up the slopes. When I reached the base of my mountain, I carried the jugs by hand. On my first attempt, I tried to haul both jugs at once but was quickly exhausted. Loose gravel and dirt gave way, and I slipped and struggled on the hill. I placed the jugs in the hitched trailer and pushed my bike up the hill, but the bike toppled, the trailer tipped over. There was no other option but to carry the water up the hill, one jug at a time. Each jug was heavy and unwieldy, so I alternated between hoisting the container on my shoulder and holding it close to my chest. Legs and back coiled and tense, I paused to catch my breath midway up the hill. The steepest part of the climb was after the midpoint, so I braced for another push. By the time I reached the cabin, my heart was pounding, and I was bent with exhaustion. However, the other jug awaited, so I headed downhill again to carry the next jug. Each trip down and up the hill took about fifteen minutes.

Physical exertion was a passage of contemplative life. Chopping wood and carrying water are recurring motifs in Zen literature. Chiyono, an assiduous nun who practised for many years without attaining the fruits of meditation, was carrying water on a moonlit night. The bottom of her pail broke, and water spilled onto the ground. In that moment, Chiyono was set free.[177] In a poem of commemoration, she wrote: "No more water in the pail! No more moon in the water!"[178] Each exclamation limns the delight of realization. Did Chiyono pant and grunt under the weight of water? Did the physical weight also compress the mind, thus releasing both body and spirit in the moment that the bottom fell out? In my own experience of carrying water, physical strain coincides with a mental constriction, a return to the body in the vivid present. The exertion marks its own mental presence, a full inhabitation of the embodied present. The mind is fully

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[177] Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, eds., *Zen Flesh Zen Bones* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1985).
[178] Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh Zen Bones*, 49.

pressed to the action of the body. *Breathe. Just a few more steps. Push!* And in the immediacy of exertion, the present moment was all.

I was reminded of another Zen saying: *Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.*[179] Prior to the industrial revolution, these were the mundane chores of daily life. However, the practices that a modern urbanite considers primitive were gateways for contemplative insight, for they challenged faculties both mental and physical. Movement over land, contact with wood and water was a daily concourse in the ecology of the land. The regularity of the tasks made for recurring opportunities for inquiry, for the practise of mindful attention to present activity. Chopping wood and carrying water are menial chores, but in the motions of such work, one peers into the unassuming miracle of each moment, a subtle beauty that need not announce itself. There was a quiet dignity in carrying my own water, splitting my own firewood. Each labour was a gesture of contentment with all that a day offers, an honest satisfaction that did not seek further elaboration. Enlightenment or not, there was only the task at hand. The work itself was enough.

After lugging the second jug up the hill, I paused to catch my breath. Sweat gathered around my chin. Perspiration was water's passage from spring to jug, from blood to pore. With each day's activities, I soaked my T-shirts in perspiration. Yet, I relished this release of moisture and felt my body opening as a vessel for water's course. The body was now a more porous station in water's manifold movements. All the sweating felt healthy, and it happened without the deliberate act of "exercise," for every movement on the land was a kinesthetic operation. I was readily breaking into sweats and thus felt myself cool down quickly as my body became more efficient in regulating its internal temperature.

Between laboured breaths, the lush silence of the forest became audible. The tranquil stillness of the land leapt into vivid presence, and I experienced the striking juxtaposition between exertion and repose, as if my labours were caressed by a more fundamental tranquillity. By pressing deeper into the body's labours, I also felt more deeply the restorative touch of the forest. With the mind soothed by the forest, the body soon found recovery. Within an hour, there was the completion of a course from tension

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[179] Kyle Kowalski, "On Enlightenment: 3 Meanings of the 'Chop Wood, Carry Water' Zen Quote," *Sloww* (blog), n.d., https://www.sloww.co/enlightenment-chop-wood-carry-water/.

to relaxation, from exhaustion to convalescence, and I found this cycle both salubrious and edifying.

I brought the jugs inside the cabin and poured myself a glass of icy water and savoured its subtle sweetness in the heat of the September sun.

2.8. Excretion

The latrine was an old outhouse—dubbed “butt hut” by the owners—located some thirty feet from the cabin. Having perdured the elements for the better part of two decades, the planks had started to rot, the particleboard panels softened by weather. There was no door save for a ragged curtain. A bucket placed beneath a hole in the bench contained the excreta. After each deposit, I threw a mixture of cedar shavings and ash to cover the stool. Walter, ever the prodigious carpenter, kept a pile of shavings and welcomed me to the pile. The shavings ameliorated odour, and the ash minimized flies.

Every morning, I visited the outhouse and looked out at the expanse of the forest. Against conventions of civility, timid under the weight of embarrassment, I should like to say that the outhouse became a daily sacrament. There, sitting on the crapper, with nowhere else to be, I took in the greenery and fronted the resplendence of the forest. The presence of everything was a marvel, and I basked in the goodness of the land. I counted myself blessed to be living amid the trees, watching the light break through the banks of leaves, the songs of birds soft on the ears. I gave thanks and settled deeper into belonging.

Yet, these numinous moments did not seem to cohere with my present activity, defecating into a bucket. For urbanites, defecation is not a matter of discussion and is rarely associated with sacredness. Bodily functions are the most private of private matters. When brought up in the company of friends, the subject is often couched in comedy, as if humour might disguise the shame and embarrassment associated with the most basic of bodily functions. To speak of excretion is to breach the rules of good taste. Urban society, with its flush toilets and stringent standards of sanitation, has distanced people from basic matters of the body and pushed physical realities into the realm of taboo. In so doing, we have separated ourselves from our most immediate material connection to the land and dispensed with the daily reminder that our bodies *make soil*

and will one day *become soil*. I was party to this culture of aversion, and in discovering the sacramental side of *poo*, I struggled to sort the admixture of embarrassment and appreciation—for even in the act of defecation, I was nevertheless in communion with the land.

The bucket was full after ten to fourteen days. I took the bucket out to an opening by the pen, surrounded by alders and maples. I dug a pit about two feet deep and emptied the contents of the bucket into the hole. This smelly chore was perhaps one of the more unpleasant tasks of living off-grid. Unpleasant, but not unbearable. In the squeeze of an ineluctable task, the senses relinquished their grip on volition. I could suffer the unpleasant odour, and thus the senses did not militate my ability to function. The growing tolerance of the unpleasant instantiated another adjustment to sensory parameters, allowing me to work despite the perception of something dreadful. In learning to brook the foul, I widened my ability to operate under a broader range of sensory conditions.

Further, I discovered a certain honesty in minding my own shit, leaving the chore to no one else. It was personal responsibility brought to its most basic and earthly duty, a direct charge that fronted the materiality of my own life. After days in the bucket, I saw that cedar, ash, and feces had become a thick paste of organic matter. The stench was harsh, but the umber paste blended into the loam where I interred the material and covered the spot with fallen leaves. In time, this material would also become soil. The interment of shit was therefore a gesture of my own bond with the land.

Though unpleasant, the task provided the first-hand experience with principles of ecology, that no material matter goes to waste in an ecosystem. I struggle to find the temerity to say that shit is a gift to the earth. Such a statement upends common sense in a culture where *shit* equals filth and defilement. Yet, humans are nevertheless locked in a material bond, a mutuality that cycles through blood and bone. Handling shit, the precursor to rich compost,[180] signals a return to both *humus* and humility, the lowly but generative material of life. At the same time, the putrid task seems to countervail the

[180] Joseph Jenkins, *The Humanure Handbook*, 4th ed. (Grove City, PA: Jenkins Publishing, 2019).

thought of future fecundity; the contrast between smell and knowledge made for another contradiction that I pondered while living in the woods.

In his argument against human overpopulation, Patrick Curry offered the following thought experiment:

> After your next bowel movement, pause and consider it before flushing it away. Now multiply what you're looking at another time or two a day for the duration of an average life in years; then multiply that 6.9 billion times (and rising). . . . Rich or poor, professor or peasant, high carbon-emitter or low—that stuff has all got to go somewhere.[181]

Curry's thought experiment makes a point about the massive impact that is bound to result from mass population growth. However, without first-hand experience in handling one's own waste, without feeling the mass and weight of a few days' deposits, I doubt an urbanite has even a basic idea about the materiality of stool and is likely unable to imagine the aggregated fecal matter of billions of people. The potency of Curry's thought experiment presumes that the thinking subject possesses the rudimentary experiences from which to form a sound estimate. The lack of such experience makes it hard to imagine the total impact of the masses.

As in matters of defecation, so in matters of urination. I designated a spot close to a Douglas fir, on the edge of a rocky slope that dropped into the pen. In the morning, shortly after waking, I came to this spot to water the rocks and the soil. Completing motions that included drawing, carrying, and perspiring water, I was also *making water*. In those moments of urination, I watched the quality of light that permeated the forest and listened to the speech of the leaves and branches. The senses wove into the morning presence, and I was once again present to the bounty around me. In watching the liquid fall to the forest floor, the life of water came to completion, from the spring to the rocky soil.

As with stool, urine did not disappear in a swirl inside a porcelain bowl but seeped into the land and became the soil. The act was tinged with shame, since my urban upbringing taught me that urination anywhere outside the toilet was uncouth. At the same time, I knew in my mind that this *making of water* was also a form of intimacy with land, a reminder of my own involvement in the water cycle. I was also worried about

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[181] Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, 256.

the dense carpet of moss on the forest floor, now drenched in urine. How would they take to this soaking? I decided then, as a matter of experiment, that I would watch how a patch of moss fared under regular urination. The small patch of ground would not, I surmised, be of great significance to the other swaths of moss that lined the forest floor around the cabin. The absence of sewage systems brought matters of excretion, along with its many ambivalences, into the forefront of my daily observations.

2.9. Bathing and Laundry

In the first weeks of my tenure on the island, the lingering heat of summer still strong, I hung a shower bag filled with cold water from a hose connected to the pipes from the cistern. In the blaze of the afternoon sun, I lathered and scrubbed over a patch of moss, delighting in the vastness of the forest. In the city, bathing was a private affair conducted in confined quarters. The sudden shift to bathing in the open, not a curtain or a door in sight, was a delightful liberation from cloistered bathrooms. The grandeur of the forest loomed large in my field of view, and yet I was not worried about the invasion of privacy, since there were very few people around. Whereas in the city, privacy was secured by the retreat to confined spaces, in the woods I enjoyed a privacy under the vast sky; the experience of spaciousness was utterly invigorating.

As the weeks wore into October, the temperature dropped. The mornings and evenings were much cooler, and I could no longer get by with cold showers. I did not have hot water in the cabin, so I resorted to boiling water on the stove. Two kettles of hot water into a pail half full of cold water produced just the right temperature for a bath. I lugged the pail to the back of the cabin, used an old cooking pot to douse myself with water, and scrubbed over a patch of moss. On some afternoons, I watched the sun set over the distant mountains and savoured the remains of the autumn day.

Because each bath was a production that took approximately an hour, I began to take fewer showers. Whereas I showered with cold water from the shower bag every other day, I decided to experiment with less frequent baths. With fewer interactions with others in closed indoor spaces, I did not adhere to an urban standard of hygiene. Although my own scent would become more pronounced over several days, the odour did not seem unpleasant to me (though I dared not ask others for their opinion). If we remove the company of others, it becomes a question of whether perspiration and bodily

odours indeed constitute a stench. If they do not bother the subject, do these odours still matter? The habit of washing has become a norm in societies where people must interact with one another in close proximity; the curtailment of one's odour shows respect for others by preventing an imposition on their senses. The development of culture has reached beyond the curtailment of scent to its elimination in some cases, whereby one must not smell of anything at all. Some people aim to elimiate scent while others apply artificial fragrances, which have the effect of constructing olfactory experience while concealing natural odours at the same time. All this management of scent generates tastes and preferences, shaping a predilection for certain fragrances while averting others. In the absence of these norms, I was no longer bound by the regimes of scent implicit in the rules of civility.

Perhaps I would have been too ripe for my own nose in another day or two. It was rather the epidermis that begged for a good scrubbing. My skin felt sticky, my scalp afflicted by itch. The niggling sensations were pronounced enough that I noticed them in my daily activities: clothes sticking to my back, fingers frequently scratching the scalp. On the afternoon of the fifth day, I prepared a bath and felt instant relief as the water washed away several days' worth of exuviae. Those days without washing magnified the pleasure of the bath, and the water was glorious. I was reminded of the ancient Romans and the Japanese who deem bathing an exquisite pleasure. I dried myself and put on a new change of clothes; it was a rebirth, like slipping into new skin. I decided then that I would try to bathe every three days, infrequent enough to conserve energy and water, but frequent enough to keep my skin refreshed and happy.

Laundry was my least favourite chore. On my first attempt, I worked outdoors, filled two plastic tubs with water and added soap to one. I scrubbed each garment in the soapy tub and rinsed in the second. With each article, the second tub grew soapy and cloudy, so I replaced the tub with fresh water. I could not be sure if each item was completely clear of soap, nor did I know if each item was clean. “Clean” was an arbitrary notion, the discernment of which I had little previous experience. Clothes laundered by the washing machine were clean—no further questions required. Now, each garment sopping and heavy in my hands, I could not determine when to stop scrubbing or if the rinsing managed to strip away the soap. Without confidence, I wrung the garments, hung them on a line tied between two trees, each article fastened with clips. The morning seemed calm, hardly a breeze in the forest. However, by early afternoon I returned to

the line and was dismayed by the clothes that littered the forest floor, the articles tossed by winds that I had underestimated.

A few months later, in a casual conversation about the toil of laundry, an islander said: “You’ll never know if your clothes are totally clean; there’s only *dirty clean*.” The oxymoron tickled me, and I relaxed into a new laxity in expectations of cleanliness.

Laundry became even more of a challenge as the weather grew colder. On cold days in October, when the water was frigid, I worked by the kitchen sink, filled the plastic tubs full of water and scrubbed the garments with fervour. Even with plastic gloves on, my hands turned red in the icy waters, and my fingers grew stiff and palsied. When I could no longer tolerate the frigid water, I boiled a pot of water to mix into the bins, but I had to replace the water often, as each garment quickly clouded the waters with grime. The frequent refilling of the tubs made for a big production, the counters and floors wet with stray splashes. It was the pain of the icy water that influenced my decision to bring my clothes to a laundromat on my next trip into town. Although I was content to deal with my own shit, I would pay someone else to clean my clothes. This apparent inconsistency was due in part to the physical demands of each task. While I could brook the stench of excrement, I was less able to endure the icy water. The tactile sensation of cold was more painful and harsher on the psyche than the offending smell of the bucket. I was also less willing to put up with the laboursome and messy task of boiling and replacing water. The whole production seemed more hassle than it was worth. Thus, I opted to save the laundry for my occasional trips to the main island. The resort to commercial service was an example of capitulation to an incumbent habitus.

2.10. Catching Mice

When I arrived at the cabin in September, I swept and mopped the floors, wiped the ledges, cleared webs from corners. On the countertops and floors, I found mice droppings, black pellets like grains of rice. The cabin had not been inhabited for several years, and rodents had frequented the cabin. I took the evidence of their presence in stride and hoped that I would not encounter them during my tenure on the island.

A week into my stay, I heard the click-clack of tiny paws on wood panels. The motion came in fits and starts—a rush of tapping followed by a pause. I searched the

cabin, peered into every crevasse and corner, but did not find a culprit. The sounds were more pronounced at night—scurrying feet accompanied by the gnawing of wood. Miles heard the mice too. He circled the cabin, trying to sniff out the rodent intruders. The sound seemed to come from the outside, just by the window beside my bed. Rather than wait for the rodents to appear, I would need to take some measures to fend off the mice. However, the thought of trapping mice posed some ethical conundrums. What was the ethical way to deal with mice? Is there a way to peacefully co-exist? I was wary of mice due to the hantavirus, which is transmitted via contact with mouse excrement. I did not relish the thought of mice crawling into the cupboards where I stored food and grains. Even if they behaved with impeccable manners, the thought of rodents running free in the cabin sent me shivering. The combination of health precaution and an aversion to rodents convinced me to do something about the visitors.

I consulted Thomas on the matter. “There’s only one way to deal with them: mouse traps,” Thomas said. He explained that mice travel in predictable routes. Once they venture onto new locations, they will use the same path and return to their hunting grounds. Other mice will pick up on the scent and traverse the same route. Once a mouse established a path, others were sure to follow.

Six months prior to my departure, I had taken my Zen Buddhist vows as part of my *jukai* (lay ordination) ceremony. Among the precepts: *a disciple of Buddha does not kill but practises non-harming.* If I were to follow the precepts, I would have to fend off the mice without harming them. This seemed a humane option of first resort. I decided to acquire a live trap that would capture the mice without killing them. However, a live trap raised other questions—where would I take the mice once they were captured? Would this task not put me in closer contact with the mice? I decided to proceed with this experiment, curious to learn something about mice in the process.

On a trip to the main island, I purchased a live trap, a metal box with a glass window encased in the top lid. Two entrances on the sides led into a corridor that tapered into the walls. The mice would squeeze through the narrow opening at the end of the corridor and find themselves imprisoned inside the enclosure. I placed the live trap outside my window, on the roof of an old shower box that was crumbling after many years in the elements. Remembering Thomas’s explanation of rodent behaviour, I surmised that if the mice tended to gather outside the window by my bed, a trap there

would undoubtedly capture the regulars. I set out the trap on a Saturday afternoon. By 8pm, I heard the click clack of frantic paws outside the window. I pointed a flashlight at the trap and registered the movement of a furry ball, the tiny paws poking through holes in the metal enclosure. I decide to wait until morning before electing a course of action.

The next morning, I checked the trap and was surprised to see two mice scurrying frantically in the enclosure. Through the glass window, I saw that the interior was littered with droppings. To minimize the likelihood of mice excrement falling out of the ventilation holes, I wrapped the enclosure in a plastic bag, and with bungee cords, I tied the metal box to the rack on my bike. I rode down to the bay, removed the metal box from the bike, and set the enclosure down in the grass. My squeamishness was rather primal, and I did not know where I acquired this aversion to rodents. I unfastened the lid and flicked it open, jumping out of the way in anticipation of fleeing mice. To my surprise, the mice did not flinch but seemed frozen in the contraption. I tapped the contraption with my shoe to compel the captives, and in a fit, the rodents dashed out of the box. One mouse zipped between my feet and disappeared into the grass; the other bolted for the rocks by the beach. Creeped out by the whole affair, I packed the metal box and returned to the cabin, where I washed out the trap and scrubbed it clean of the droppings. Dismayed by the task, fearing exposure to disease, I decided that live trappings would not work. I did not want to keep relocating mice, nor did I want to deal with enclosures littered with feces. Alas, I would need to use spring-loaded traps that killed the mice.

I went back to see Thomas. Though he never said the words, his smile conveyed the *I-told-you-so* that I deserved. Thomas lent me some mouse traps and showed me a trick for their effective use. The spring-loaded traps were meant to break a mouse's neck; however, the hammer swung in only one direction. If a mouse tried to lick the bait from the side or entered the platform in the same direction as the hammer, the snap may miss the mouse or perhaps catch only a leg or a tail. To make sure that a mouse always approached a trap headfirst, Thomas used a yogurt container with an opening cut into the side. He would place the trap inside the yogurt container with the hammer aimed at the opening. A curious mouse had no entrance other than the designated opening; once it poked its head inside the container, the mortal blow was waiting.

I followed Thomas' instructions, sprang two traps inside the cabin,[182] set them under the yogurt containers and waited. The next evening, I heard a snap in the dark hours while I was asleep. In the morning, I removed the yogurt container and recoiled at the sight of the hammer lodged across the head of the mouse, its face maimed, eyes bulging, blood staining the wooden platform of the trap. With rubber gloves on, I removed the mouse from the trap, took the carcass by the tail and set the body on a patch of moss outside the cabin. I felt pangs of remorse, studying the body of the dead mouse. If I had not lived in the cabin, this mouse might have lived. Yet, something about a deep-seated aversion, coupled with the wariness of disease, precluded the prospect of our sharing a space.

Anthropocentrism—the assumption of human primacy over and above other species—is often deemed a primary condition that causes the ecological crisis. In regard to anthropocentrism, John Muir wrote:

> No dogma taught by the present civilization seems to form so insuperable an obstacle in the way of a right understanding of the relations which culture sustains to wildness as that which regards the world as made especially for the uses of man [*sic*].[183]

That humans deem it necessary and right to extinguish other species for their own use and convenience is one of the more egregious manifestations of human dominion. Might the same justification for killing mice (concern over disease, preservation of larder) also justify the killing of insects (through the use of pesticides) or larger predators (like wolves) if they posed the same problems? I am opposed to the idea of killing larger mammals, but what are the distinguishing features that make mice expendable and wolves sacrosanct? At first blush, a larger animal *appears* to have a greater hold on life; its physical size in relation to human proportions seems to embody *more life*, and therefore *more value*. People may have few qualms about killing mosquitos, but they might feel greater inhibition taking a knife to a sow. However, differences in size and kind cannot serve as a sufficient justification for the killing of one animal over another. A mouse has just as much vitality coursing through its veins as a wolf and just as much

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[182] I realized that there would be no end to the mice I could catch if I sprang the trap outside, even if they seemed to be crawling right outside my window. It would only be the ones who ventured inside the cabin that would be caught.

[183] John Muir, as cited in Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, 55.

interest in staying alive as any member of a pack. One might further argue that a mouse inhabits a rung further down the food chain, and the extirpation of a few mice does not alter the ecosystem in the same way as the removal of apex predators like wolves. Although this ecological view appeared more convincing, I remained suspicious, for the logic seemed a convenient rationalization for killing mice.

On the other hand, we might consider the episode from the perspective of the land. The cabin was located in a relatively wild place shared by many creatures. In time, the forest would reclaim the cabin. Its pillars and panels will soften and crumble. Birds, rodents, and insects will make their nests here; lichen and fungi will reappropriate the materials. The encroaching mice were simply the land's way of reclaiming the cabin within the folds of wildness. My defence of the cabin against rodents was simply a temporary assertion of boundaries, as if to say, "*no, not while I'm here.*" But even this perspective did not resolve my misgivings, since those who kill wolves to protect livestock may lay claim to the same justification.

These ethical ruminations did not find final settlement, especially for an urbanite who has not had to deal in death. In modern societies, the slaughter of animals is left to anonymous workers. One can eat meat without contemplating screaming animals and the labourers with hands drenched in blood. The privilege of ignorance can breed a high-minded view of ethics, scrubbed clean of the messy business of ecology, where everything is food for something else.[184] For the urbanite who has delegated bloody acts to others, killing is odious, next to meanness and evil. However, farmers and homesteaders deal more closely with death. For them, the act of killing enjoins a more honest attitude regarding the interchange between life and death. Although killing may never shake off ethical entanglements, there is a transparency to the act that looks at death squarely in the face, and therefore reconciles with frailties and vulnerabilities of life. Greenwood and McKee have argued that alienation from matters of death spells one of the cultural ailments of modern, Western societies. The development of death-literacy is a "necessary ecological virtue in a culture that is at once both obsessed with youth and hell-bent on ecological destruction."[185]

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[184] Snyder, "Writers and the War Against Nature."

[185] David Greenwood and Margaret McKee, "Thanaptosis: Death Literacy for the Living," in *Eco-Virtues: Living Well in the Anthropocene* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), 71–89.

Ethical considerations did not displace the remorse and compunction I felt with the dead mouse dangling in my hand. This was the emotional price of my claim to the cabin. Remorse and compunction were also the necessary components of a deeper appreciation of my involvement with the land. From remorse, one apprehends a central paradox of wildness that many land-based cultures understand well: one can *take a life* while also upholding a *deep reverence for life*. A Buddhist vow to not do harm is a worthy aspiration but cannot function as a rigid stricture in the wild, where life flows from one creature to another via the doorway of death. In this concourse of living and dying, remorse attends the motions of communion and gives death's passage its proper due. This remorse is formalized through rituals that shape cultural norms and attitudes. If I had no good choice but to kill the mice, I needed to offer rituals and gestures that would recognize their value and guard against indifference within my own conscience.

I placed the mouse with its mangled face on a concrete block by the cabin, under the arbutus where the ravens often perched. Hands together, I whispered a few words of apology: *Friend, I'm sorry I had to kill you. May you journey well in the afterlife.* Afterlife? I did not believe in such things, but in the spur of the moment, the words had weight. I bowed to the mouse and left it on the concrete altar as an offering to the ravens. At the very least, its body would go to nourish other beings. In this sense, the mouse would find an afterlife and catch flight on the wings of the raven. In the afternoon, I checked the alter and the mouse was gone.

In remembrance to the mouse, and the others that I trapped throughout the year, a poem:

The Mouse Trap

This morning a furry carcass
In the death grip of metal jaws
The mangle face of the critter
Wrinkled around bulging eyes
Its neck lacerated and bloody
A life extinguished in an instant
Did it taste its own blood?
Was it appalled in its last moment
Clinging to wakefulness?
I wash the trap, "Victor" branded on the wooden platform
Conquest is assured.
But I feel no victory
For the trap has caught critter and conscience both

All our devices of destruction
Ingenuity in service of death
I leave the mouse an offering to the ravens
But tonight, I will spring the trap again
I will ready the contraption
And face compunction tomorrow
And when the day breaks the winnowing night
I cleave to a hope
That no mouse comes tonight.

2.11. Moonlight

During my first month on the island, I lived completely without electricity. The solar-powered electrical system was off-line. The lead-acid batteries used by previous residents had long died from disuse. My landlord suggested that I try to live in the cabin for a month before replacing the batteries, just to make sure I wanted to commit to a year in the woods. The weeks wore on, the nights grew longer, and I spent most of each night in meditation. Before taking my seat on the cushion, under the light of a battery-powered lamp, I boiled water and drew an Epsom salt bath for Miles' injured claw. Speaking softly to him, I put one hand on his mane and massaged the injured claw. *It's okay, buddy, you'll get better soon.* Always easy-going by nature, he was a good companion and was adjusting well to the new surroundings.

One night, sitting on the zafu, I basked in the light of a bright moon, not quite full but still radiant. The windows threw bars of blue on the floor and walls, the whole cabin outlined in shades indigo. I was sitting many hours each day; at least two hours in the morning and two hours each evening. On this night, I sank into stillness, in the company of the moonlight. I dissolved into the silence, watched the moonlight sweep across the floor and walls through the course of hours, time itself collapsing to a point. The radiance proved splendid company, illuminating a patch of the wooden floor where I rested my gaze. Miles curled himself into a ball and slept beside me, his coat silver in the effulgence.

Without streetlights bleeding into the heavens, I gazed upward and took in the starwash. I watched the forest lined in silvery blue, the deep shadows etched into the cut and curve of the land. This lunar affinity recalled a recurring motif in Zen literature, and the contemplatives who gazed from their huts and marvelled at the nocturnal light. They

saw the moon and found an ageless companion. Ryokan, a hermit beggar of eighteenth-century Japan, wrote the following:

> Water does not go,
> Moon does not come.
> And yet,
> how pure its reflection
> on the waves! [186]

Water and moon have no coming or going. The cosmos appears in the wholeness of the present, every perfection in a crystalline suchness. The mind, in the clarity of the present, sees the manifest perfection of all things. Though rich in imagery, Zen verses appear to convey no profundity beyond the apparent. However, the verses are expressions of mentation, phenomenological statements of experience within the immediacy of the present. To exclaim the reflection on the waves is to declare a mind that apprehends itself in the waves, a mind that is none other than the wave itself. Percept, perceiver, and perception unite in a single exclamatory point. In this sense, nature supplies the terms of mind's manifold motions; awareness and attention coalesce in the piercing presence of moon and wave.

On one occasion, Ryokan returned to his hut and caught a thief attempting to steal what few possessions he had. Feeling compassion for the thief who had to return empty handed, Ryokan gave him some clothes as a gift. The bewildered thief took the clothes and slunk away. Ryokan sat by his window and mused: "Poor fellow, I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."[187]

Ryokan was poor in material possessions but wealthy in his appreciation of the cosmos. Yet this wealth, unlike currency and property, could not be earned or traded. One does not "possess" the moon through transaction, but through cultivating attention in the spaciousness of a burnished awareness. The lunar glow is bestowed to all but enjoyed only by those who, in the clarity of awareness, bask in its radiant splendour. Content to have the moon, Ryokan had little need for worldly goods. My time in the woods entailed a reacquaintance with such riches, recalibrating the senses and adjusting internal rhythms so as to meet the beneficent moon.

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[186] Tanahashi, *Sky Above, Great Wind*, 94.

[187] Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh Zen Bones*, 27.

The next evening, under a sky in a silvery glow, I ventured outside without a flashlight, determined to navigate the woods by naked sight. The trails were lit in bars of blue, broken by strips of shadow. Diffident in my steps, I was slow in finding sure footing and held out my hands to guard against falling. Colours bleached away, the forest was a monochromatic scene, its depth and texture stark in the moonbeam. Each outline was framed by shade, no variation in between. I was caught in a peculiar landscape, at once familiar and entirely new at the same time. My body moved, but without poise and certainty. I was traversing the edge between terror and wonder, entirely uncomfortable but thrilled by the disjuncture. Although the island harboured neither hungry predators nor poisonous snakes, a mind unaccustomed to this novel venture conjured these dangers to furnish the darkness. The thought of invisible threats chilled my resolve, but I was also awed by this shadowy world, so fresh and splendid. I pressed on and came to a clearing generously lit under the incandescent sky. There in full brilliance, I beheld a magnificent moon. The walk through the woods transformed into a rapturous experience: I was another creature in this unworldly landscape, sporting another pair of eyes and moving furtively through a new body. For a moment, the repertoires and habits of an old self slipped away. Only the moon and the woods remained.

The acquaintance with moon also signified the movement away from a life of artificial illumination, a growing affinity with darkness and its associated comportment, both mental and physical. Moving tentatively in the forest or sitting in the cabin, I settled into another perceptual field that offered its own acuities. Under the glare of city lights, the mind chased tasks regardless of the setting sun. The prevalence of light effectively prolonged the day and extended the hours of mental and physical activity. While in the city, I had developed the habit of working at night, eyes fixed to the screen for many hours before bed. This incessant activity was detrimental to both body and mind and proved a strain on basic wellness. In the darkness of the cabin, however, I slowed down and allowed myself to rest in the abyss. The moonlight illuminated what it touched, and I learned to let the world appear without the prying glare of lamps and screens. I was content to disappear in the enfolding darkness and relaxed my hold on productivity. It was a gentle way to attend the remains of a day, a kinder deportment in the silence of the night. Thus, the darkness marked the rhythms of contemplative life—when the day grew dark, I followed the cue to soften and basked in the assurances of silence, where I found rest and restoration.

2.12. Curtain

As the weather cooled, I began to keep a fire burning in the evenings. The living quarters were attached to an open doorway next to a mudroom. Much of the heat from the woodstove dissipated into the mudroom. I needed to retain the heat in the living quarters or at least slow the rate of heat loss. There were no hinges, brackets, or rods around the doorframe. I had to devise a barrier between the living room and the mudroom, something easy to construct but did not hinder movement into and out of the living area. This practical problem became the first of many practical challenges that I faced while living in the woods.

I took the problem of heat loss in the cabin to my neighbour Walter, a retired engineer and skilled carpenter. Walter owned a collection of woodworking tools and brought an engineer's precision to every project. He considered my problem and suggested a curtain. He advised that I make a pair of wooden blocks with circular divots routed into the centre of each block where a curtain rod would rest. His design was elegant and symmetrical, consistent with a modernist aesthetic. However, the construction of these brackets required power saws and routers that I did not have. I remembered that William was also a skilled carpenter who took a different approach to his woodwork. An artist at heart, William suggested: "take a cedar slat and shave off the corners to make a rod. Then, look for where branches divide on an arbutus tree. That's where you'll find a natural Y-shape in the branches. Cut those branches and use the Y shape for your bracket."

From their suggestions, I saw that Walter and William brought contrasting approaches to practical problems. Walter had an eye for precision and symmetry. His sense of form and function was closely tied to his precise craftsmanship and the capabilities of his tools. He reshaped natural materials with a meticulous process. Whereas Walter altered form to serve function, William saw the function inherent in natural forms. He surveyed an existing shape and imagined a function to which the material is already disposed; thus, design follows form. These two perspectives juxtapose one another in their approach to construction. They also pose two distinct aesthetic signatures: Walter's house was crafted with precise angles, geometric proportions, uniform dimensions, and polished surfaces; William's house was a sprawl of spontaneous curves accented by sculptures carved from driftwood, salvaged cedar

pillars carved into the shape of animals. At first, I leaned toward the refined appearance of Walter's aesthetic sensibility. This preference for machine-pressed regularity indicated my own acculturation, tastes and preferences calibrated by an industrial establishment with its visual culture of linearity and uniformity, an aesthetic milieu that shaped my urban habitus.[188] On the other hand, there was something undeniably appealing about William's handiwork. His creations retained a quality of wildness and intimated a creativity that joined spontaneity with a playful imagination. William worked *with* the curves and shapes in nature and applied his own flair in creating objects with unique and inimitable character.

I decided to follow William's suggestion not only because his idea seemed novel but also because it did not require power tools. He had a cedar slat lying around, which he happily gave to me. The next day, I sat outside my cabin with my trusty swiss army knife and set about whittling the corners, carving the square piece into a rounded rod. The knife was sharp and shaved off long strips of wood. In one movement, I cut too deep and sliced off one end of the cedar rod. Luckily, the shortened rod was still long enough to span the width of the door sill. After an hour of work, I had a curtain rod (see Figure 2.2). After completing the cedar rod, I manage to find a few branches on nearby Arbutus trees with the desired Y junction. Offering a prayer of appreciation to the trees, I used an old saw that I found in the shed to cut the ends of branches, leaving the Y shape for the brackets (see Figure 2.3).

[188] Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

Figure 2.2. Shaving off corners of cedar slat.
Photo by David Chang 2017.

Figure 2.3. Y-shaped brackets from arbutus branches
Photo by David Chang 2017.

The next day, I rode my bike and trailer to the community store in search of something that would serve as a curtain. The community store was where islanders dropped off unwanted items. Volunteers sorted the materials and offered them to residents free of charge. I sifted through shelves of fabric and came across a queen-sized duvet cover that would work nicely. Back at the cabin, I made a sleeve in the cover by folding two inches along one edge and sewing the ends into the duvet. Far from a skilled tailor, and I was clumsy with needle and thread. I did not know a stitch pattern most appropriate to the project, so I used the *Namu Kie Butsu*[189] stitch, which did the job nicely. It took me a quiet, meditative hour to sew the sleeve. I settled into a chair, patient in the work of hands and fingers. The silence of the forest was thick and rich. Following the movement of fingers over fabric, care and attention applied to each stitch, I was happy to pass the hour in the work, sinking into contentment with the movement of my hands. There was something nourishing about the work, an unassuming activity imbued with gentleness and quiet integrity, making something with my own craft and skill. I was grateful for the fortuitousness of it all, that this stitching technique served a practical utility along with its contemplative purpose.

I slipped the cedar rod through the sleeve. Voila, I had a curtain! However, when I hung the curtain on the Y-shaped Arbutus brackets, I realized that there was a five-inch gap between the curtain and the floor. The gap was sure to leak precious heat. I improvised a remedy by cutting off strips of fabric from an old blanket, attaching them as loops to two corners of a floor mat. I screwed hooks into the doorframe, just where the curtain hung above the floor. One side of the floor mat would hook onto the doorframe, covering the gap left by the curtain. It was a crude solution but worked well enough; the cabin stayed warm, and I felt the temperature differential between the mudroom and the living area.

Having made a door curtain with some advice from neighbours, I now glimpsed my creative potential. The experience of addressing a practical problem in my living situation suggested a nascent agency. I knew intuitively that life in the woods required

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[189] Six months prior to my departure, I officially took up lay precepts in the Soto Zen tradition. Part of this ordination process involved sewing a *rakusu*, a bib-like article that represents the Buddha's robes. The sewing technique employed a form of back-stitching, and practitioners would recite the mantra *Namu Kie Butzu* (I take refuge in Buddha) with every stitch. The sewing process required meticulous labour and mindful awareness, as with each stitch, the sewer meditated on the mantra while finessing needle and fabric.

self-sufficiency and a suite of skills that a pampered urbanite does not possess. I was not entirely confident in my resourcefulness and rarely had occasion to improvise solutions to practical problems. Yet, fashioning the curtain without spending a penny imparted some confidence in my resourcefulness. The availability of services and products often foreclose the birth of vision and the occasions that test our skills, thus atrophying our creative powers. Without the convenience of paying for services and products, I had the fortune of enlisting the work of my own hands. The intricate handwork of stitching became a complement to the quiet of the autumn afternoon, when the ambition of one human heart settled into the silence of the land, content to dwell in the quiet of an ordinary task; mind, hand, and land come together in the motion of needle and thread. The completion of the curtain furnished me with some confidence in practical work, and I decided to look for other opportunities to develop practical skills.

2.13. Media and Technology

I made some deliberate choices about my access to media and use of technology. Access to digital news and information formed a significant part of my habitus and occupied much of my attention. Thus, I resolved to minimize my use of the internet and computers. However, there were some matters related to the life of a graduate student (such as course enrolment) that would require access to the internet. And whereas in previous decades, basic information related to transportation was printed on paper, I now needed a computer to obtain ferry schedules and weather forecasts, information that would be vital if I needed to access medical help for Miles. The cabin itself did not have wifi or a satellite internet connection, but I could access cellular coverage. I decided to bring my laptop and smartphone but limit their use.

Use of the phone came as a result of further consultation with my wife, who wanted to remain in touch and keep up to date about how Miles and I were doing. For my mother, the phone provided assurance that I was safe and well. Prior to my departure, I thought it a worthy experiment to try to live without phone communications for a time. However, I knew that going without a phone would impose some stress on my marriage. Pam wanted to stay in touch, and I was not willing to cause her grief. We agreed to maintain communication and gauge the situation throughout the year. On the day of my departure, Pam asked that I call her that evening when I had settled into the cabin. By the time I dialled her at 7 p.m., I was feeling the weight of homesickness, and

we were both glad to hear each other's voices. We agreed to check in with each other every day during that first week. By the end of the first week, we both appreciated the daily conversation and felt that it was vital to our relationship going forward—so it became a routine that we spoke on the phone and maintained an interest in each other's lives. These daily conversations were helpful to my emotional well-being throughout the year.

At the same time, I felt the faint stirrings of disappointment, as if by speaking to my wife every day, I had failed to meet a bar and compromised both solitude and wilderness by maintaining a connection to the city. I was not immune to the expectations of a more "pure" and "real" wilderness experience, derived perhaps from stories of other audacious adventurers in remote places. I equated these austere excursions with rectitude and wondered if my project was diminished by these daily phone calls. Nevertheless, both of us needed these conversations, the absence of which felt detrimental to our relationship. If a "purer" solitude revealed a steely resolve, my connection to Pam would stand for responsiveness and relationality. If I had refused to speak, I might have upheld a faceless ideal but caused harm to the relationship. In full recognition of our bond and in following the heart's belonging, I nevertheless cherished each evening's conversation.

I managed to go for many weeks without logging onto the internet or tuning in to the radio. I was free of the bombardment of information and stimulation that came with a media-saturated life. The absence of media came as a relief. When I lived in the city, I developed the habit of reading the news at breakfast. I browsed news websites and scanned current events. After breakfast, I sifted through my inbox and attended to the business of a graduate student. I spent much of the day in study. As a break between studies, I read more news articles or watched videos on YouTube. The screen permeated my consciousness. If an inquisitive doctor peered into my brain, she might have found pixels and wires in place of neurons and synapses.

Media and digital technology posed a formidable imposition on my consciousness; they formed habits and dependencies that shaped the landscape of mental life, providing both the content of thought and the emotional backdrop of ongoing rumination. Media cycles, aside from their ability to inform or edify, are a form of stimulation. I could subject myself to hours of dross because a mind habituated to media

craves stimulation of every sort. There is mounting evidence that the immersion in screens can become another form of addiction,[190] which in the long run frays concentration and erodes attention span.[191]

Further, I fear that the fulminations of the media are parcel to the angst of modernity, a discontent that festers at the heart of social life. The media is the voice of an anxious togetherness that exacerbates the contradictions of a frenetic collective. An interminable parade of messages dictates impossible ideals of what we ought to be: wealthy, beautiful, youthful, and poised. These ideals find broadcast in popular and social media, which has become what David Loy calls the "collective nervous system"[192] of modern society.

I abstained from the internet in order to discover the possibilities that lie outside the media spectacles that supposedly plot the course of history. During the first two months in the woods, I was beset by a frequent impulse to reach for my phone and check the latest news, fearing that some world-changing event had occurred while I remained in ignorance. Subconsciously, I associated being uninformed with being irrelevant, as if ignorance was a demerit to one's membership in society. However, I managed to maintain my practice. When I ate my breakfast, I savoured each morsel and listened to the silence of the cabin and that of the surrounding forest. I heard the sound of oatmeal loping around my tongue; I watched the tree branches rustle ever so slightly in the wind. A quiet contentment settled into daily life. I was not rocked by convulsions of politics or the volatility of markets. There was a steadiness around me; I felt more attuned to the emotional tenor of my own life. The stirrings of sentiment, the evocation of memory, and the oscillations of mood were tied to the weather and the shifting subtleties

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[190] Margaret D. Weiss et al., "The Screens Culture: Impact on ADHD," *ADHD Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders* 3, no. 4 (1 December 2011): 327–34, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12402-011-0065-z; Laura Widyanto and Mark Griffiths, "'Internet Addiction': A Critical Review," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 4, no. 1 (1 January 2006): 31–51, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-006-9009-9; T. Ryan et al., "The Uses and Abuses of Facebook: A Review of Facebook Addiction," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 3, no. 3 (2014): 133–48, https://doi.org/10.1556/JBA.3.2014.016; Igor Pantic, "Online Social Networking and Mental Health," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 17, no. 10 (5 September 2014): 652–57, https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0070.

[191] Philipp Lorenz-Spreen et al., "Accelerating Dynamics of Collective Attention," *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1 (15 April 2019): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-09311-w.

[192] David R. Loy, *Money, Sex, War, Karm: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* (Boston: Wisdom Publishing, 2008), 32.

of the land rather than the hysteria of media. In discovering this mental and inner poise, I saw more clearly how compulsive consumption of media affected my inner life, how I yielded to its encroachment in my casual attitude to the screen.

In the daily consumption of news, I had given passive assent to the parade of troubles that would dominate my attention. In the space of present awareness, I had forfeited the friendliness of my immediate surroundings in exchange for a collection of tragedies from distant places. Eyes glued to the screen at breakfast, I chewed on toast, but I was digesting the world's malaise. Though the contents of each news item varied, there was a consistent subtext that conveyed an underlying message: the world is intractably flawed, and human existence is a vexing problem. The conventions of modern journalism play no small part in the perception of a world in crisis. News networks assemble a daily bouquet of misery for the readers' eager eyes. Their rapt attention is caught by the headlines and captivated by media spotlight. The *newsworthy* becomes the *thoughtworthy*. If a media network trades in the scandalous and the sordid, attention and discussion are warped accordingly. However, frustration over the state of the world is compounded by my inability to alleviate the troubles that afflict the masses. Powerlessness in the face of crisis tends to strangle hope. The price of staying informed is a psychological incongruity in which my knowledge of tragedy must co-exist with powerlessness or indifference. The pervasiveness of this message infiltrates the mind and shapes the manner of a mental life characterized by quiet despondency. Thus, the ubiquity of electronic media can induce acquiescence; the ethos of the age is disseminated through unending cycles of texts and images. Under the incessant murmuration of media and the chatter of marketing, one can miss the whispers of an inner voice, which finds stability in the tangible present, confidence in the matters at hand, and assurance in the faces of real people in moments of ordinary encounter.

On 2 October 2017, I travelled to Vancouver Island to purchase a set of batteries for the solar electrical system. In the car, I listened to CBC Radio and learned of the horrific mass shooting in Las Vegas. A gunman had opened fire on an audience attending an outdoor concert. The news was appalling and heartbreaking—but my grief was also accompanied by the sinking feeling of having returned to an ailing world. I lamented this act of gratuitous violence but also sank at the realization of having returned to this circuit of bad news. *Back to this again,* I thought. Later, I told my wife about this feeling of being sucked back into swirling madness. She suggested that I was

living in a happy bubble, oblivious to the tumult of the world. However, the metaphor did not quite fit. I preferred to imagine that I was afloat in outer orbit, closer to the stars and weightless in the celestial sphere—attuned to a context that was invisible to others. I was closer to the goods that made life worthwhile, the quiet contentment that had been forgotten in the madness of society. The former metaphor suggested an artificial bliss afforded by deliberate ignorance; the latter implied contact with the saner perspectives that nourished the spirit. I submit that contentment and joy are not the luxuries of those who live in a secluded paradise but the abundant comforts available to earthly creatures who breathe air and frolic under the sky. It is the spell of digital media that bewitches us, keeping our minds tangled in chaos. Living in solitude gave me perspective on how my emotional life was hitched to the media, how I had succumbed to the digital machine and relinquished a basic agency in shaping my inner life.

Spaciousness in inner experience need not preclude exposure to media content. It's not that we should be prohibited from consuming media but that we see clearly the ramifications of a permissive attitude toward stimulus, the ways that the digital world can infiltrate one's inner landscape and overtake the tenor of mental life. I need spaces in which to feel and consider life on my own terms, away from the dissonant voices and pompous authorities who choke the airwaves. If I turned to the shed in front of me, I saw work that needed to be done—manageable work, the completion of which was a tangible statement of my agency. Witnessing the work of my hands, I grew more confident in my ability to make a life and surer of my inner resources. If the media painted an intractable world, the woods proved a striking counterpoint. Every day was manageable, and the weeks came and went without turmoil. Thus, I saw more clearly the incongruity of my mental orientation, which was divided between the perception of a world in crisis and the tranquillity of each passing day. This glaring disjuncture facilitated an investigation of that which remained under my remit, how I was to cultivate my inner life, and the degree to which I yielded to the media's messages.

2.14. Deer and Dog

Miles and I spent our days together, roaming the woods and working around the cabin. I was watchful of his claw, still healing from an injury from his last seizure. Three weeks after my arrival on the island, we were walking up the hill when Muji, Ryan and Amy's dog, came bounding along. She teased Miles into a bout of play. Miles was not

interested, but Muji persisted. Still a pup, but bigger than Miles, she bounced alongside him and nibbled his mane. He was visibly annoyed. They tussled along the gravel path and chased one another. The play grew rough, and soon they were wrestling in the shoulders of the trail. Finally, he had enough and barked his displeasure. Muji got the message and trotted away.

Minutes after Muji left, I noticed Miles limping. He had split open another claw—this time on his right hind paw. That night, his leg trembled even as he rested on the floor. His other claw had hardly healed, and here was another injury. It was hard to watch him trembling with pain. I had to take him to the vet. However, each trip off the Island was a major production. I asked my neighbours if anyone was headed into town. It happened that Liz was going over the next day. I gratefully arranged a ride with her, took the boat ride into town the next day. Fortunately, the injury was not serious, and the veterinarian was not concerned—he bandaged the injured claw and prescribed the same course of Epsom salt bath. I had arranged to meet Liz at the dock in the afternoon, and she had agreed to take me back to my cabin from the dock. However, as the boat prepared to depart, Liz was nowhere in sight. Perhaps her plans had changed, and she would return on a different sailing. I did not want to wait another three hours, so I boarded the boat.

With an injured dog and seventeen kilometres of gravel road between the dock and the cabin, I didn't know how I would return. As a new resident, I did not know anyone on the ferry who could give me a ride. A braver soul would have asked every stranger on the ferry for a ride. On that sailing, the compounding stresses of the preceding weeks came to a head: the dog's worsening seizures, the multiple visits to the vet, the claw injuries, my gnawing homesickness, the loss of independence without my own car, the feeling of being at the mercy of strangers, and an obstinate pride that barred me from asking for help. I hid my face in my arms and cried. I had not the slightest idea how I was going to return to the cabin, much less endure the year.

However, a man I had just met surveyed the passengers on my behalf and found a mother and her daughter who were happy to drive me home. After arriving at the dock, we disembarked, loaded gear into the van. Miles and I found space among the cargo. The young woman at the wheel asked me about my studies and Miles' broken claw. For them, the drive was not a great imposition, and they were happy to help. However, for

me, this generosity was all the kindness in the world. Their casual assistance saved me at the nadir of my emotional journey. I thanked them profusely when they dropped me off at the base of my hill. A week later, I painted a postcard and wrote a letter of gratitude, thanking them for their kindness.

I was disheartened for a moment because my dog was sick, and I didn't have my own car. Is this what passed for adversity? Many others have braved harsher circumstances. Yet, in my moment of helplessness, I felt the provision of ordinary kindness. Indeed, how wonderful that we need each other! The trappings of middle-class life afford much convenience. With my own vehicle and apartment, I enjoyed independence and privacy but had lost touch with the neighbourly kindness that animates communal living. That poignant moment on the boat occurred because of acute need. In a moment of vulnerability, I experienced the grace of strangers, which in turn reinforced a will to service and reciprocity. The kindness of the islanders claimed me, and I was woven into the fabric of their community, witness to hospitality that would have remained obscure if I had every device and resource at my command. Urban life places a premium on independence and privacy but sequesters individuals in their sectioned spaces. In the pursuit of independence, we have forfeited the open exchange of care between neighbours, the considerate acts that forge the bonds of friendship. To experience a need that only others can meet—not through transactions but benevolence alone—is to settle deeper into the web of belonging and behold the riches of a different economy where we only have what we give. This memory of kindness and countless other gestures exchanged and laughter shared strengthened the cord that bound me to this community, and I felt more determined in the conviction that my presence must reciprocate the grace and generosity of the people, that my tenure ought to be of service to the island itself.

That evening, I removed the bandage and soaked the mangled claw as the veterinarian had instructed. I looked into Miles' hazel eyes and shared an understanding of the many stresses we went through together. Despite the travails, his soulful gaze melted every tension, and I placed my face next to his, whispering words of assurance as I cleaned his paws.

Several days after he injured his second paw, I hiked up the hill with Miles as we returned from the bay. The hike was steep, and I struggled to find sure footing as Miles

pulled and lurched upward. I decided to let him run off-leash during the final stretch of the hike. A fawn appeared on the bluff. Miles froze and then darted off in chase. I called to him, but he was gone. I returned to the cabin expecting him to follow. However, when he did not return after several minutes, I set off again in search. I called to him as I traversed the vale. In response to my voice, I heard anxious whining. *He must be hurt,* I thought. When I reached the bottom of the hill, Miles was waiting by a pond under a maple tree, his legs soaked with mud and water. The pond was circumscribed by a collapsed wire fence. In the corner of the pond, the carcass of a deer, the body wrapped in wire. It occurred to me that Miles may have killed the deer. However, upon closer examination, it seemed the carcass had been there for a while. The eyes were clouded over and the limbs taut with rigor mortis. Perhaps in chasing the fawn, he stumbled upon the carcass, waded into the water out of fascination and remained there, gripped by the presence of something alien.

I noticed that his recent claw injury had started to bleed again. In the excitement of the chase, he had broken the clot. I was furious. I clipped him to the leash and pulled him away. In his usual way of appeasing me, he flicked his tongue and regarded me with a pleading look. But I had depleted my store of patience. The compounding stresses of the epilepsy, claw injuries, and his irrepressible urge to chase, had shattered my composure. I pulled him hard alongside me as we rushed home. Inside the cabin, I fumed as I prepared a salt bath for his claw. I lost my temper and shouted with a viciousness that surprised me. I am not proud of this outburst, and the image of him cowling in a corner sours me with regret. As he gazed into my eyes with a look of guileless innocence, I felt that bewildering mix of emotions that was the purview of love: pity, shame, regret, and adoration. We were in this together, and in that moment, being together was hard.

Perhaps there was something wild in him that would not submit to domestication. A descendent of wolves, he was stirred by the fleet movement of hoofs, lured by the scent of game. In that instant, he was not a sheltered pet but a surge of primal instincts. The predacious urge to follow the movement of ungulates, a trait prized in herding dogs, is derivative of lupine ancestors who pursued caribou in the snowy wilderness. The chase was his own liberation from the regimented life of the city. Who could blame him for this animal impulse? And yet, this wild instinct collided with my predilection for control. Keeping a dog in the city required adherence to tacit rules. Canine behaviour

was subject to expectations of civility; respect for others' spaces meant that a dog was mostly kept on leash, and its unruly behaviour met with correction. Miles was raised in a human world, his movement circumscribed under my control. He could not roam six feet without reaching the end of a leash. However, the forest was an expansive, wild place that called to his instinct for the chase. Although I had given myself the freedom to roam the forest, I maintained my urban restrictions over the dog. Conscientious about rules against chasing deer, I kept strict watch on him; his forays into the backcountry jilted my nerves and I rushed to restrain him. Thus, Miles' wild urge to run the forest came up against my adherence to communal expectations. The domineering hand of the human manager, uptight and anxious, was challenged by this ancient dance between the lupine and the cervine.

I had expected discontinuities within my urban habitus but had not anticipated that prevailing dispositions might be ruptured through a domesticated companion whose impulses would complicate my adjustment to the wild. I could not excuse myself from the implicit terms of our relationship—after all, I was responsible for him and felt obliged to limit his excursions. This domestic relationship was firmly established, and yet the vastness of the forest made conspicuous the oddity of the human-canine bond. Miles lived between two worlds and must have felt the tug from opposing directions: the drive of his canine blood and the consternation of his human companion. He was both an ambassador to the more-than-human world and held hostage by a race that presumes dominion over other species.

In that episode of distress, I saw the rigidity of a disposition to control and restrain under the guise of *responsibility*. The same responsibility that would see me nurse his injury also required me to restrain his impulses. Responsibility for a domesticated animal was made manifest in the urge to control, a form of dominance that would curtail a dog's inclinations. These are the impositions that dogs must brook in order to live with humans. A week earlier, in a fit of ecstasy, Miles had rolled in the desiccated remains of a gull. I pulled him away in a hurry, dismayed by the bits of carrion that clung to his coat. Pried away from his desideratum, he must have felt pangs of discontent—but I held the leash, the operative instrument of power. Such was the trade-off for dog and human alike; their bond would be marked by love but also mutual forbearance.

Later I learned that island residents had a more relaxed attitude about dogs. True, dogs were not to stock deer with impunity, but the residents were not nearly as uptight about dogs running through the forest. They gave their companions freer reign. When the dogs strayed, they coaxed them back to their side but did not work themselves into an anxious ball. Something about my urban norms demanded that my dog be by my side at all times, even when roaming off-leash. In contrast, I had a tumultuous time adjusting to a new version of Miles in the wild environs. He was riveted by the strange scents and creatures of the forests, and the vigour of his instincts intensified my urge to control. In this exasperating negotiation of instinct and restraint, Miles and I played out a vexed episode where both man and dog struggled through a jarring discontinuity.

2.15. Return to the City

In mid-October, after more than six weeks without incident, Miles had a seizure. I was writing at my desk when he fell over, eyes gaping, jaws snapping. Foam poured from his mouth, and urine soaked his fur. I spoke soothing words to him as he emerged from the convulsion and paced anxiously in a daze. I cleaned the floors and wiped his mane damp with saliva. Two hours later, he seized again. It was clear that he entered a cluster, and I did not know when it would end. Later that evening he had his third seizure and another at 4 a.m. I decided to take him back to Vancouver to see the neurologist. In a frenzy of preparations in the dark hours of the morning, I packed a bag of belongings and gathered his medicine. My neighbours agreed to drive me to the dock to catch the ferry. We left on a cold, rainy morning, rolled through waves as sheets of rain fell from a black sky. Throughout the ferry ride, I feared that he would have another episode. Fortunately, the crossing was uneventful, and he slept through the entire sailing. After a full day's travel, we arrived safely in Vancouver, but Miles would have two more seizures that evening before he cleared the cluster. We made an appointment with the neurologist, which would not be for another two weeks.

My sudden return to the city was accompanied by great ambivalence. I knew that Miles' epileptic condition had cast its shadow on my project, that my foray into the woods would be tempered by a responsibility to keep him in stable condition. I had anticipated that he might need medical attention but could not predict that his seizures would necessitate a sudden return to the city. I struggled with the implications for my research, the integrity of which seemed in tatters. Was I all too ready to compromise, or was I

merely meeting my responsibility to a companion? Perhaps a more determined person would have rejected every demand for attention and remained steadfast in his commitment. However, where did these ideas of an uninterrupted residency come from? What abstract standard was I trying to meet by insisting on remaining in the woods at the cost of the dog's health? The drive to persist seemed to serve no one other than my misplaced yearning for an arbitrary perfection, an insistence that would be detrimental to Miles and hurtful to Pam.

During his year-long solitary residency on a remote island in Chile, Robert Kull also had an animal companion, a cat who also suffered from epilepsy.[193] Kull had picked up the kitten just prior to his departure and had to watch helplessly as the cat suffered seizures throughout the year. Isolated on the remote island, there was little that he could do. Kull had brought along the cat to help determine the toxicity of shellfish—if the cat got sick or died after eating mussels, Kull would have ample warning. Thus, the cat had served a more utilitarian function for Kull (though their bond deepened throughout the year). In contrast, Miles was already close to my heart as a friend; we were together for five years before he developed epilepsy. Whereas Kull had no recourse and therefore no choice but to watch an animal suffer, I had factored in the need for veterinary care. Although having the option to return to the city would be an interruption from my project, I was glad to seek adequate care for him. My research was interrupted, but I was content that the project did not come at the expense of his health.

Soon after I returned, a good friend and mentor passed away from a degenerative lung disease. He had asked me to serve as a pallbearer at his funeral, and I had agreed. The family invited me to prepare his body, and I was honoured to participate in this sacred gesture of respect. The funeral was scheduled for the third week of November. My wife was also scheduled to attend a conference in San Diego at the end the October. Between the vet appointments, the conference, and the funeral, I would need to remain in the city for close to a month, far longer than I had anticipated. Although I had upheld my responsibilities to my wife and Miles, I nevertheless felt a niggling frustration over the hiatus. It seemed that a chain of events had conspired to

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[193] Kull, *Solitude*.

keep me away from the woods. Despite knowing that I met my responsibilities by returning to the city, the project felt irremediably compromised.

I was not ready to give up but was also disappointed by the way it had unfolded. In the tug and shove of responsibilities, I was unsatisfied with this turn of events. Concerned by the way I wore this lingering disappointment, Pam took my cheeks in her hands, directed my eyes to hers, as she had previously done when she wanted to pierce the cloud that obscured my vision: “I know you feel that the work is compromised by your return to the city, but this is not the end of your project. After we get through the next few weeks, you can go back to the island and continue what you started.” She was right, of course. I had cleaved to a vision of an uninterrupted residency and fancied the tenacity and toughness that such a residency was supposed to reveal, as if obstinacy was equal to resolution. However, these dreams of a “pure” wilderness experience risked the projection of ungrounded fantasies, and at worst, fed designs for the aggrandizement of ego. As with so many other occasions in my life, I needed to relinquish what I thought *should have happened* in order to skillfully meet what *did happen*. I had to surrender my designs and act with responsiveness and fluidity. Pam’s encouragement gave shape to an intuition that was already astir but had not yet found expression.

I came to see that a temporary return to the city was not a compromise but rather a responsiveness to present exigencies. On the matter of responsive fluidity to changing circumstances, Lao Tzu wrote: “Men (*sic*) are born soft and supple; dead, they are stiff and hard . . . whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and yields is a disciple of life.”[194] Although the return felt detrimental to my project and a diminishing of the ecological ideals I set out to explore, I nevertheless adhered to another set of relational ideals.[195] One’s ethical life rarely coalesces around only one presiding set of guiding values; rather, the terrain of ethical integrity consists of clusters of commitments, each with its own imperatives and injunctions. Depending on the exigencies of a situation, these clusters can exist both in harmony and in tension with others; the art of ethical conduct lies in the skillful conversation between one commitment and another. Whereas *compromise* suggests a zero-sum game, whereby

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[194] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Chang*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 76.

[195] Noddings, *Caring, a Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*; Noddings, *Educating Moral People*; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, Reissue edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

one side's gain is another side's loss, *conversation* does not set one side against another.[196] The ethical challenge of attending to Miles' health while also maintaining the island project was not a balancing act between two competing commitments but an effort toward the integration of particular values within a larger movement toward loving and considerate conduct. Thus, I determined to take care of matters at hand while finding a way to continue my project. I reminded myself to soften the urge to control and adjusted my course without relinquishing the destination.

2.16. Goodbye

The neurologist prescribed another course of medications for Miles. He was now taking two pills to control the seizures. My wife and I discussed the implications of his condition. With little access to veterinary care, the island was not a suitable place for him. My wife working full-time, we did not feel at ease leaving him alone in the apartment for most of the day. We mulled over our options and mourned the implications of his worsening seizures. We came to a difficult decision to send Miles to another family. Luckily, the family from whom we adopted him was willing to take him in. Thus, Miles would be away from us for the duration of my project.

On a rainy November Sunday, we drove out to the Fraser Valley with Miles in the back seat. For him, it was another Sunday outing. We arrived at the house where he was to stay for much of the coming year. The family welcomed us. Miles charged into the house with curiosity and enthusiasm, sniffing the corners and exploring every room. We sat down to coffee and thanked the family for their generosity. When it was time to leave, we stood and walked toward the door. Having caught our movement, Miles sat by the door, anticipating the ride home. I sank at the sight of his eagerness, his obliviousness to our pending departure, our betrayal and abandonment. The host beckoned Miles with treats, and he followed; in those intervening seconds, we slipped out the door, leaving our boy in the house. Pam and I were sullen as we drove home in the silence of his absence.

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[196] David Whyte, *The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self, and Relationships* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).

On 17 November, having attended my friend's funeral and settled Miles with another family, I set off again for the island. I had been away for almost a month. A determination to complete the year meant that I was departing again, leaving Pam behind. We said our goodbyes once more and felt the weight of all that had transpired in the preceding weeks. We agreed to speak on the phone daily and continue to navigate together the following weeks and months.

I arrived on the island late in the afternoon. The days were noticeably shorter, and daylight was fading into the darkness of the forest. I caught a ride with Ryan back to the cabin, glad to rejoin the company of my new friends. I hiked up the trail in the darkness of the autumn evening, Miles' absence carving a hole in my heart. *God, I miss him*, I thought. The sourness of longing bore a striking affinity with the chill of the autumn evening, the land and sky falling into pensive night. Despite disappointment over the course of events, there was also relief and gladness, the pride of steadfast fidelity to my project. I arrived at the cabin, paused to breathe in the forest lovely and deep. Majestic silence all around.

Chapter 3. Winter

3.1. Following Water

In the darker days of November, I saw that the land had changed. Several days of rain had soaked the forest and soil. The trails were edged by runnels gushing from the forest. Arteries of rainwater, tickling and trickling down through strewn branches and leaf litter, gathered into channels that hemmed the gravel road. The thick grasses that had choked the roadside in summer were now brushstrokes of green under the water's course. I followed the channel and studied the resolute movement of water. The flow gathered force further down the gravel road—trickles strengthened to a spate at the road's junction, where a pipe directed the water further inland and opened into a larger stream, where the water poured into sheets of foam.

The maples had mostly relinquished their coat of yellow, leaving a carpet of gold on the forest floor. Heavy with the weight of rain, the leaves packed into the soil, compressing organic matter deeper into the earth. In their summer foliage, the maples did not stand out against a grove of fir and cedar. In the crispness of an autumn day, the maples were exclamations of brilliance in the darkened land. Each maple shed leaves within twenty metres of its crown, a circular patch of colour on the sodden soil. The leaves flickered in the wind and found niches in the fallen trunks and branches strewn across the forest floor. Some leaves fell into the water and were carried downstream, aircraft taxiing down a runway. Soon the leaves entered the mouth of the bay and found themselves seaborne. Thus, the maple's flesh ventured far and wide—the nutrients gathered on the terrain would settle into the soil and sail far into the ocean's currents.

Curious about the stream's winding course, I followed the water through the land's alternating terrain. A Pacific Wren shot up from a soggy bole. Its circular form and inconspicuous umber plumage slipped into the earthen textures of the undergrowth, and I struggled to spot its movement along the rotting logs. Lingering in a moment of stillness, I held my breath just long enough to see its white eyeliner, the points of its obsidian eyes. This little bird was not without flair. It seemed as curious about me as I was about it. In a fraction of a moment, the wren paused and fixed me in its stare. But instinct trumped novelty—having cast a few glances, the wren hopped to another twig, ducked under the log, and disappeared into the forest.

Along the grassy path, I noticed fallen branches and clusters of twigs. This woody debris had been shaken down by the insistent winds of the previous day's storm. Turbulent weather was nature's way of exfoliating the forest, pulling organic matter from the trees and returning them to the earth, where innumerable species shared in spoils otherwise untouchable. I peeled back the leaves and observed worms and beetles in the underlayer, teeming creatures glistening in the moist darkness.

I continued along the stream, winding past rocky hills and into the thick of the forest. The waterway snaked across knolls and crops of rock. I climbed over trunks and crawled under thick logs. It was not a simple matter trying to find sure footing; my boots sank into soft mud or slipped on leaf litter. Fallen branches sectioned off parts of the stream. These accidental dams slowed the flow of water and divided the passage into variegated pools. The woody obstructions harboured sections of foam as the water pulled through. A pulsating mound of white lather gathered by the water's exit at the end of each pool. There were spaces where the water moved slowly, protected by submerged branches in the torrent. These calmer pools proved sanctuaries for skaters who were otherwise swept downstream by vigorous waters.

I came to a rope-wire fence and could follow the water no more. Still intent on hiking the waterway, I searched for an opening in the fence along the undergrowth and found a collapsed section close to a jut of rocks. After crossing the fence, I trod through thick mats of fallen leaves. The terrain sloped upwards until I came to the bare slabs of basalt congregating to a point above the waterway, now gushing toward a canyon amid the rock walls, vertiginous and sheer. Careful against the glazed rock surface, I climbed to the summit and peered over the edge to watch the white waters flush into the bay, the turbid green torrents churning into froth and spray. Rain had started to fall again. I sat on that precipice and basked in the great wetness of it all, water's passage through land, and marvelled at the transformation of the landscape from brilliant greenery at the height of summer to this glazed, watery world in the darkness of November. In following the water's course, I was also caught in rapture, drawn to the gestures of the land's seasonal motions: the maple's parting gift, the wren's exploits, the branches that divide the stream. The entire morning, spent in aimless wondering, was an education in the moods and modalities of the land in its ceaseless turning. Each bend revealed something new about the land and the ever-renewing cycles of regeneration.

In her reflections on her time spent walking along the beloved rivers of her youth, Kathleen Dean Moore affirmed a method of learning in what she called "poking around."[197] This "poking around" was:

> a matter of going into the land to pay close attention, to pry at things with the tow of a boot, to turn over rocks at the edge of stream and lift boards to look for snakes or the nests of silky deer mice, to kneel close to search out the tiny bones mixed with fir in an animal's scat, to poke a cattail down a gopher hole.[198]

This rudimentary form of environmental education is "more capricious than studying, but more intense than strolling."[199] Unstructured (but not dissipated) wondering was the basis of more grounded understanding of land and place, for in this playful act of poking around, I was calibrating the senses and bending the direction of inquiry toward the features of land. Curiosity took on a shade of terrene, as the senses pressed close to soil and water:

> Poking around is guaranteed way to learn. Ideas, after all, start with sense impressions; and all learning comes from making connections among observations and ideas. Insight is born of analogy. Everything interesting is complicated. Since truth is in the details, seekers of truth should look for it there.[200]

Affinity to land need not come from explicit and formal instruction but in days of aimless wondering, following the whims of curiosity. In the care-free wonder of poking around, one is inducted into the mystery of the land and lays hold of a deeper belonging. The rain becomes an usher, the austere boulders a stately officiant. In the span of an afternoon, the water and land revealed themselves and made a mark in the crevasses of the soul.

However, this "poking around" might be deemed a luxury enjoyed by the privileged few, for those pressed by economic necessity can hardly spare a moment to entertain fleeting curiosities. However, instead of sapping the value of "poking around," this recognition serves as an indictment against an economic regime that precludes

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[197] Kathleen Dean Moore, *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).

[198] Moore, *Riverwalking*, 31.

[199] Moore, *Riverwalking*, 32.

[200] Moore, *Riverwalking*, 36.

communion with land, that fills the day with busyness at the cost of the soul's vitality. In the mad effort to alleviate one form of poverty, we are all too ready to accept another. When it comes to the malaise imparted by modernity, a withered spirit is refreshed by the healing hand of wild spaces. Simply breathing the scent of a rainy day and following the path of water was enough to fill the soul. The marvels of the stream are an earthly inheritance available to all, and an economic structure that deprives certain segments of this basic goodness is an odious one indeed.

3.2. Just Sitting

In the cold of winter, the life of the meditator enters another stage. The silence is thick, and the land exudes an arresting stillness. Terrene moods shift toward the quiet and the contemplative. My daily practice of *shikantaza* grew in steadiness and depth. There were hours when the mind ventured far, rehashing old movies, visitations with friends, sexual escapades, harrowing encounters with environmental catastrophe, and dreadful scenes of personal failure. In the hours of sitting, the mind revelled in fantasies and fears *ad infinitum*. Meditation is a practice of remaining with self in all its fulminations, including all the devices of self-repression and control. Although the technique entailed nonjudgemental observation, equanimous awareness is the mind's last resort. Its first inclination is to control the flights of discursive thought; failing the arrestation of thought, the mind attempts to question, to inquire into the significance of a given rumination, thus providing commentary on mental content. All these movements are mentation multiplying upon mentation. The job of the meditator is not to condemn these endless circles of thinking, but to simply learn to say with a smile, without condemnation or disappointment: how busy I am indeed! Thus, one befriends oneself, moment to moment, throughout a lifetime of practice.

However, although the meditative hours were filled with the ramblings of a monkey mind, there were also moments of great stillness, those deep lakes of clarity and vivid presence, not a ripple on the surface. I felt that the forest itself was sitting alongside me in practice. The furtive movement of the branches in the breeze intimated a loving message: *breathe*, *love*, *awaken*. It comes as no surprise that the language of Zen has, through the centuries, borrowed heavily from naturalistic images. Dogen Zenji had taught that when someone grasps the essence of *shikantaza,* they are "like a

dragon gaining the water, like a tiger taking to the mountains."[201] In Zen, awakening occurs in the metaphor of wildness; the wind and moon are the very substance and expressions of realization.

Early in my tenure on the island, I read David George Haskell's "The Forest Unseen." [202] A scientist and nature lover, Haskell designated one square metre in a forest floor as a place of observation, a space that he calls a "mandala"—which according to one Sanskrit translation means "community." For Haskell, the mandala was a metaphor for "the universal within the infinitesimally small," [203] a window through which an entire cosmos is revealed. During the course of a year, he visited the mandala often and studied the space with quiet observation. At the end of his year, Haskell wrote:

> This year I have tried to put down scientific tools and to listen: to come to nature without a hypothesis, without a scheme for data extraction, without a lesson plan to convey answers to students, without machines and probes. . . . It is unfortunate that the practice of listening generally has no place in the formal training of scientists. In this absence science needlessly fails. We are poorer for this and possibly more hurtful.[204]

Through his observations, Haskell offers insights about nature and the capabilities of science as a tool of human understanding. He believes that the relinquishment of expectations, the meditative practice of staying present is a powerful method of inquiry: "The interior quality of our minds is itself a great teacher of natural history. It is here that we learn that 'nature' is not a separate place."[205]

Having found in the forest an arboreal sangha of contemplatives and following Haskell's example, I took up the practice of spending an hour each day sitting on a mossy knoll surrounded by Douglas fir and arbutus. However, unlike Haskell, who examined the forest floor with a scientist's keen eyes, I came to my spot as a contemplative who listened to a wisdom without words or language. I would learn

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[201] Eihei Dogen, 'Fukanzazengi' (Mountain Rain Zen Community, n.d.), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/537a8950e4b0e00f9812dec6/t/53a4b1bbe4b054baed4c197e/1403302331983/mrzc-chant-book-complete.pdf.

[202] David George Haskell, *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

[203] Haskell, *The Forest Unseen*, xii.

[204] Haskell, *The Forest Unseen*, 238.

[205] Haskell, *The Forest Unseen*, 244.

something about the passage of clouds and the community of beings who hosted my tenure. The surrounding boulders appeared soft with their downy skin of lichen. The Strait of Georgia loomed large in view, its blue band punctured by cliffs. I brought a fold-out chair and spent an hour in quiet observation, taking in the presence of the forest. I listened to the tree frogs and felt the brush of cold wind. Sometimes drenched in rain, I braced against the sweeping mist that shrouded the island. I participated in the community of life and entered deeper into its silent fold. Each rooted tree had long committed itself to its place, staking its existence in the soil. This view of the bay is their wide existence amid sweltering heat and piercing cold. In the stillness of this company, I resolved to glean something about their presence by joining their ranks and experiencing the seasons through their vantage.

What exactly did I learn from this regular sitting? Nothing by way of declarative or propositional insights. Rather, in my practice, I opened myself to the forest's presence and was imbued by its inherent wisdom. The forest was majestic in its silence but communicative in its quietude. Tree frogs punctuated the space. Crows dotted the air with caws and clucks. The wind stirred the branches and leaves. The forest remained in unshakable repose. Even in a storm, racked by wind and rain, the trees retain their irrepressible poise. This unperturbable steadiness impressed me deeply. Life did not flourish in a chorus of ecstasy but in an unassuming confidence girded by a silent surety. The forest was always true in its witness of the clouds, in touching the breeze, in saluting the sun. Steady in presence and continuity, the forest had been here long before I arrived and would remain here long after I have left. This constancy was a stark counterpoint to all the dramas and struggles that riveted the human world. For the duration of each hour, I joined the forest in its silence, privy to its equanimity and assuredness. To witness the stillness of its repose was to peer into a timelessness that outlived the vexations that plagued human endeavours.

In the space of unhurried hours, I gave myself over to the forest. The mind had availed itself of the reach of the surrounding greenery. One morning, while sitting in my usual spot on a mossy knoll, I was visited by my raven neighbours. They circled above me, voicing their syncopated caws. Two clicks and a ping. I knew this vocalization from previous weeks of observation, when the ravens would click a distinct tune whenever I ventured outside my cabin. They sang this song only when I appeared in their sightline.

Thus, I became familiar with their “word” for me, a strange interloper in their midst. That afternoon, I wrote the following:

> There, in swirling spires of morning wind
> The Raven sounds her charge
> Euphonic dots and clucks, finished with a sonar’s ring
> Fast she banks the forest’s edge,
> Cuts the space above me,
> Drawing out a punctuated utterance.
> The Raven catches my gaze,
> Calls to me,
> With a name that I have not heard,
> But have longed to discover.
> Sweet its whimsical crack, bouncing against wind and surf
> Swift its rigid wings, limning the line to the shore
> Soft its secret word . . .
> The Raven knows my name.

The recognition of the Raven’s call was an initiation into the fraternity of the forest. It was the beginning of many relationships: the wrens who visited the cabin in winter, and later the swallows who made a nest in a crevasse under the roof in summer. Would I have recognized the Raven’s call if I was entertaining a friend or preoccupied with a phone conversation? Human companionship enjoins a set of moods and a distinct suite of sensibilities. Conversation and levity foment human bonds, but intimacy with the more-than-human world requires sensitivities afforded by steady attention. They beckon to us in a voice barely audible, discerned more with the heart than with the ears. The clouds invite us to linger, and the scent of pine calls for pause. A loud and hurried mind is apt to miss the friendliness that surrounds us. Alone in the forest, I had availed myself to be called by name. In that moment of recognition, the Raven did not mistake me, and I was not confused by her invocation.

3.3. Darkness

December nights were long. The skies begrudged the arrival of light. I woke up at 5:30 a.m., stirred under the covers and braced myself for the chilly cabin. I got up, brushed my teeth, splashed icy water on my face, and felt the stinging cold on my hands. Slipping on my coat and headlamp, I ventured outside into the abyss, crawled into the wooden hut to check on the batteries’ charge. I crossed to the Douglas fir by the outhouse, made water over the rocks that led down into the pen, nothing visible but the

apparition of breath in the headlamp's beam. The horizon shrouded in sable, the world disappeared and confounded the senses, pushing perception to a nervous edge.

There was something vital about the immediate excursion outdoors, leaving the safety of shelter within ten minutes of waking. The exposure to the elements, the darkness, the rain and the cold drew me back to the great forest, and I faced the immediacy of the land once again. Each dark morning was a reckoning with the heaving life of the forest, the splendour of its own winter passage. I breathed the brisk air, discerned the scent of bark and rain, the sodden soil under layers of moss. The forest announced itself in the immediacy of the present. *Here. Now!* And in the cold darkness, I was connected once again to the grand context of life and reminded of my belonging in a wider universe.

I made my way back to the cabin, chastened by the cold. I huddled by the woodstove, placed tinder and kindling into a pile, and started the day's fire. I sat in the deep darkness and watched the room turn blue-black with the encroaching light. I sank into the blackness, longed for the warmth of the bed but persisted in the fogginess of a mind weighed down by torpor. I waited for heat to fill the cabin, waited for daybreak to freshen the woods. Waiting was not the anxious anticipation of light but the assured expectation of its arrival, and the softening into the darkness of morning. Immersion in the darkness revealed a corresponding comportment, a gentler mien in the space of inner life. I had to give in to the darkness and let the abyss hold me in its embrace, like a cosmic womb in which all possibilities were present. I resisted the habitual urge to turn on the lamp that furnished the eye with the certainty of visible shapes. In each passing moment, I reminded myself to refrain from the familiarity of form and soften into formlessness. Absent acute concentration, I made do with what awareness I could muster and laughed at my hapless efforts:

Sloppy Zen

Morning alarm
dawdling in bed,
dazed and indolent
I rise with resentment
Stagger from sink to stove
Plop myself on the cushion
Eyelids stiff and stubborn
Listing sideways

Dreaming away the hour
Not a moment's concentration.

In the great swirling dark, those long nights that wore late into morning, I rested in the deep black of winter. In those endless hours, I glimpsed the restorative power of the season, how winter caresses and enfolds with majestic silence. The hours spent in the darkness of the cabin, with nothing other than the faint glow of the fire, gave way to another state, a restful suspension in the expansiveness of the spacious present. I was neither asleep nor active but simply pliable and steadfast in the quiet of the hour. This was a time to sink deeper into the land, to let the silence of the woods seep into the pores and refresh the soul. Winter was thus a passage of inner life when the natural cycles of the land called to respite and reprieve. In her meditative exploration of winter, Katherine May employs winter as a verb and posits the act of *wintering* as a necessary stage in the cycles of life. Winter, May writes, is "a time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment, for putting your house in order. Doing these deeply unfashionable things—slowing down, letting your spare time expand, getting enough sleep, resting—is a radical act now, but it's essential."[206] Winter's fallow season differed from the ceaseless strivings of the city, where activity knew no rest; wintering was radical because a mind that cleaved to busyness as a sign of its importance must now surrender its devices and cede ground to silent repose. In the great darkness and cold, winter was a momentous period of inner transformation when I let slip the compulsions of enterprise.

It was not easy to soften and let go of my agenda. My contemplative leanings held designs for an off-grid retreat, and I applied a certain monastic rigour to the apportionment of the day. In Zen monasteries, monks rise at 4:30 and are seated on their cushions by 5 a.m. I did not rise at 4:30, but I was keen to seize the early morning and aimed to sit at least two hours before breakfast. This regimented schedule was also a vestige of an existing habitus that parsed the hours and demanded discipline in matters of sleep and wakefulness. Throughout the fall, I had little trouble waking early. However, the arrival of winter saw me struggling to leave the bed. The alarm was grating, the chill of the cabin unwelcoming. The darkness of the early morning conspired with the allure of slumber; the warmth of the covers proved almost irresistible. Yet, I

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[206] Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020), 14.

would rise and grope in the dark for a sweater, don the garment inside out and lumber to the sink. Some days I gave in and hit the snooze button, happy to curl into the coziness of the bed. However, I also felt pangs of guilt, having shrugged my own rule for discipline in contemplative practice. In my mind, excess sleep was slothfulness, and an extra hour in bed was an hour wasted. However, something about the circadian rhythms of the body called for sleep and rest. In the great long hours of darkness, my body sided with sleep. The forest itself was at rest, the maples and alders had long shed their leaves and retired from the work of making sugar. The silence of the land was a gentle invitation to let go of expectations. Yet, the nagging critic inside would have none of it: *You are squandering this precious opportunity. Get up at once and seize every minute!*

However, in my afternoon visits to the mossy mesa, I watched the great arbutus trees, the Douglas firs in their repose. Perfectly still under the mottled clouds, or leaning in the bluster of a storm, the forest did not fight winter. No struggle. No strife. In the hours of soaking in their silence, I saw the forest's wisdom, the epitome of non-striving.[207] Katherine May writes:

> Plants and animals don't fight the winter; they don't pretend it's not happening and attempt to carry on living the same lives they lived in the summer. They prepare. They adapt. They perform extraordinary acts of metamorphosis to get the through . . . winter is not the death of the life cycle, but its crucible."[208]

Thus, with the land at rest and in retreat, I decided to bring a more relaxed attitude to the structure of each day.

However, since habits can form quickly—one day's slack can inhibit the next day's structure—I was watchful of the drift of creaturely comforts, how an inch can give way to many yards. This adherence to structure was another vestige of an urban habitus accustomed to regimentation, but I nevertheless moderated my attitude and opted instead to give myself a period in which to rise. Rather than wake up at 5:30 on the dot, I would give myself a fifteen-minute period in which to rise. If I overslept my fifteen-minute period, I gave in to sleep and reminded myself not to be harsh with self-reprimand. Most days, I was up by 5:45. Others may have more fully heeded winter's call and allowed

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[207] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Chang*.

[208] May, *Wintering*, 14.

themselves more rest; somebody else might have maintained monastic discipline without variance. As for me, I moderated expectations in response to the winter, decided on a kinder course according to my own judgement. I rose promptly or slept in but always reminded myself that it was all alright.

In the darkness of evening meditation, a darkness indistinguishable from morning, I was learning to let go of designs and outcomes. The nights enveloped me in the warmth of the cabin, the fire crackling in the wood stove. The world dissolved into a little glowing light reflected in the wooden floor, and the hours passed without a sound. Great spacious dark that held me in its nest, and I learned slowly to rest, to let go, to be content in the bold silence of the surrounding landscape.

Figure 3.1. Winter landscape for contemplation and rest.
Photo by David Chang 2017.

3.4. Storms

I was alone in the dark, watching a thunderstorm. Rain spatter crashing in waves on the windows. Then a bolt of light and the forest was aglow—the firs against the electric sky, the sea bright in the distance. The wind gathered, breaking the silence of the woods; the cabin heaved with gusts that buffeted the hillside. Then another streak of light skewered sky and ocean, its reflection a fit of white through coal. A moment later, the rumble of thunder like the abrasion of cosmic forces mounted into rain and darkness. I watched the storm for the entire evening as the world dissolved into black rain.

The next evening, sitting in zazen, I listened to sheets of rain wash over the cabin. The storm brewed over the land, filling the woods with precipitation. Meditative silence threw into relief the force of the storm. I did not know what kind of work was being done here, sitting in the storm, but I sensed the stirring of energy within and without. The swirling wind was both a maniacal scream and a lyrical symphony, and in the stillness of zazen, the storm brought into motion the animus of the world. Even in the cabin, the inert wooden floor was veiled in black except a dim reflection of the burning fire, brimming with vitality. I settled deeper into the thick and sumptuous silence, broken by wind and rain. The hours bled into the boundless present, spacious and dynamic in the dance of the storm. In the clarity of awareness, the present slipped every grip; there was no handle to hold, nothing to grasp; all strivings subsided in the ageless clarity of now, a spaciousness at once boundless and full.

At the end of the two hours, I rose from the mat and donned my coat. I stepped through the door into the stinging cold and braced against the bluster. The trees were bent, undulating their shapes in the storm. I basked in the awesome forces that stirred the land, felt the rapture of earthly power. I cast my gaze toward the southern edge of the forest, at the tops of trembling trees. The branches shook and swayed, and the sight of their motion pierced right through me—there was movement, but *I* was gone. Percept and perceiver had both dissolved. Wind and rain were all. The storm raged and nothing else; every vestige of self at once translucent, immaterial. What was left, apart from the blast of wintery weather?

Yet, whatever that moment of transparency, it was utterly and completely *ordinary.* No exclamatory fireworks of illumination, no trumpet flourishes of celebration.

The world in its unadorned suchness was just such a mundane miracle, and every minute an unmitigated marvel. The myriad things announced themselves without fanfare. Meeting things as they were, the mind was free. The movement of the forest, the wind and rain—nothing more was required, nothing could be taken away. In this great meteorological dance of forces, the congress of strength and motion, the menacing anxieties and festering grief about a flawed humanity were blown open. I had forgotten myself in the bluster of the storm. The moment was its own statement of being and could hardly benefit from another word of exegesis.

In witnessing the forest in the storm, I chanced upon a state that confounded the ideational divide between mind and land. In his essay *Sokushinzebutzu*,[209] Dogen Zenji writes: “Mind is mountains, rivers, and the Earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars.”[210] In the clarity of acute awareness, the land was not an external world of materials; neither was the mind a private interior locked in the conceptual boundaries of a perceiving subject. They are properties of one another, a seamless and unbroken intelligence that inhered a united cosmos. The world manifests diversity in form, and yet everything hangs together. Everything is impermanent, and yet everything returns and persists. This colourless, shapeless, and intangible constancy finds expression in the evanescence, the here and now, the ordinary sacredness right under my nose.

So much of human affairs is engrossed in the struggle of competing interests and the clash of grand ambitions. Anxiety and grief are the children of such unremitting malaise. However, the contest of particulars is only a partial dynamic within the larger unity of the whole, where nothing is lost or gained, nothing created or destroyed. Seeing the larger context of human drama, bearing witness to the partiality of my parochial ego, I softened and settled into the cradle of the land. To realize this ontological context is not to dispense with ethical discernment, as if to give tacit consent to every act of exploitation. Rather, to have felt the storm, to have gazed at the trees, and in turn to have seen the trees gazing right through me, was to reach past the psychic wounds and touch the ground that could not be broken.

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[209] *Sokushinzebetzu*, “Mind here now is Buddha.”

[210] Eihei Dogen, *Shobogenzo: Book I*, trans. Gudo Nishijia and Chodo Cross (Woods Hole, MA: Windbell, 1994), 53.

If the foregoing discussion can seem overly abstruse, one can return to the trees, wind, and rain. The release one feels in the rush of the storm, softening to the mood of the land and sky, is itself a form of realization. Feel the wind, linger in the rain. Ideation, conceptualization, and ratiocination have little to do with the sensate, pulsing union with the swirling sky. This is not a release reserved for intellectuals but a gratuitous gift provided to every earthly creature. To encounter the world as it is, and to rest in its suchness, is a form of homecoming, a reminder of my own belonging in the larger cosmos.

3.5. Time

I was thirty-nine when I entered the woods, just on the cusp of a milestone when I could look behind me and see half of my life already complete. I had become anxious about the swift passage of time and grew more desperate in the race against the years. I looked to accomplishments as safeguards, reviewed my savings as trophies of days that would not return, counted the lines on my CV as evidence of years not wasted. And yet, the panic did not subside, and the hurried pace of modern life exacerbated my anxiety. The drive to accomplish more within a finite timeframe became a feature of the psyche. Each day was logged with chores to finish, emails to write, books to read, papers to submit. The pressing charge of time's frantic passage made for a blunted existence as the weeks pulled into a blur. Coffee was devoid of taste, flowers bleached of their colour. Despite the frantic search for a refuge that could withstand the slip of vanishing days, there were never enough hours to equal duty and ambition. The inability to conquer the day fed into an underlying disquietude—life was menaced by apprehension over the scarcity of time, a fear that followed the acceleration of climate change which outpaces collective efforts at reform.

It came as a reprieve that in the woods, I rose every morning with the delightful thought of having a day without responsibilities or obligations. No appointments to keep, no expectations to meet. I enjoyed the unhurried hours in reading and reflection, free to luxuriate in the day's offerings. The break with frantic time was accompanied by an openness to the present moment and a calm acceptance of each minute. The impulse *to get things done* became apparent as a feature of an urban habitus, a specific manner of living in a busy culture. In the city, busyness is associated with competence and effectiveness, themselves indicators of status. In the mad rush of productivity, one is

liable to mistake motion for action. Activity generates the illusion of one's own importance, lending gravity to multiple preoccupations. By making a rule of activity, busyness folds into habitus. Living in the silence of the forest, I relished the liberation from the regime of busyness. Curiously, I did not experience what Victor Frankl calls "Sunday Neurosis,"[211] the depression that afflicts those "who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves become manifest."[212] With fewer social engagements—and its concomitant requirement of time-management—I fell into an alternate experience of temporality, a spacious mode of living unencumbered by scheduled demands. With the relinquishment of common practices came the realization of the arbitrariness of time as a social construct.

Bourdieu was astute in articulating the temporal dimension inherent in the theory of practice. In his work on reflective sociology, he remarked on the schemas used in knowledge production, which renders a distorted view of social phenomena. For example, as a cognitive device, the calendar tends to institute a temporal order that does not exist in practice:

> A calendar substitutes a linear, homogenous, continuous time for practical time, which is made up of incommensurable islands of duration, each with its own rhythm, the time that flies by or drags, depending on what one is doing, i.e., on the functions conferred on it by the activity in progress.[213]

Bourdieu was never more a phenomenologist than when he distinguished between objectivist empiricism that metes out duration via determined schemas and the subjectivist immersion of the native participant steeped in temporality. The *incommensurable islands of duration* experienced in first-hand practice are the counterpoint to the standardized schemes of temporality. Viewed as part of the structure that inculcates a functioning habitus, the calendar is a prototypical schema that configures time in linear chronology, apportioning each hour with mathematical symmetry, thus delivering unvarying units that comprise a cosmic tempo. The days are divided in equal measure, as are the hours that pass irrespective of experience. To live in calendrical time is to conceive of an irretrievable past, an indeterminate future, and the

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[211] Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

[212] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 107.

[213] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 105

succession of moments that intervene between them. The linearity of time and the uniformity of its increments is an artifact of cultural schema. Practical time, on the other hand, seems to defy such conceptualizations.

What the calendar produces by way of linearity and uniformity coheres with common metaphors embedded in everyday language. Time as measurable units maps seamlessly onto the linguistic metaphors that structure the basic forms of understanding. Lakoff and Johnson[214] have expounded in detail the function of metaphors within systems of conception. The authors assert that metaphor is embedded in the very structure of thought, such that we think and understand one thing in terms of another. One such basic metaphor is TIME IS MONEY (*I spend my time wisely*, and *how much time do we have left?*). Here, time is conceived as a limited resource that can be squandered or saved, budgeted or invested. Lakoff and Johnson continue:

> TIME IS MONEY, TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE, and TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY are all metaphorical concepts. They are metaphorical since we are using our everyday experiences with money, limited resources, and valuable commodities to conceptualize time. This isn't a necessary way for human beings to conceptualize time; it is tied to our culture. There are cultures where time is none of these things.[215]

Here, the metaphor of time as a limited resource corresponds to Bourdieu's observation about the calendar as a construct imposed by the sociologist's epistemological training: they conceive of time in quantifiable units and are subject to an economy in which time is a commodity. The experience of TIME AS A RESOURCE, and therefore as something to be managed and manipulated, "emerge[s] naturally in our culture because of the way we view work, our passion for quantification, and our obsession with purposeful ends."[216] Experience does not precede language; rather, experience is conceived in language. How we speak shapes how we experience.

In addition to Lakoff and Johnson's discussion of TIME IS RESOURCE, I add another pervasive metaphor: TIME IS SPACE. Common utterances illustrate this concept:

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[214] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003).

[215] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 8–9.

[216] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 67.

I have an *opening* just before lunch
The doctor can *slot you in* between 2 and 3 p.m.
Her days are *filled* with activities
My week is *jam-packed* with engagements

Here, time is conceived as a finite space that can be occupied by activities, as in a shelf occupied by objects. TIME IS SPACE is consistent with TIME IS RESOURCE in that both conceive of time as quantifiable; time is distributed and parsed, managed and adjusted because it occurs in equal and predictable measures. TIME IS SPACE, therefore, is a version of what Lakoff and Johnson has identified as the grounding metaphor TIME IS SUBSTANCE, wherein time is understood as quantified, valuable, purposeful, and expendable.[217]

To this end, metaphor and habitus conspire to weave a coherent system of conceptualization and experience: language conceives what practice actuates. For example, suppose I *book* a dentist's appointment in the morning, *squeeze* in a meeting with a client at lunch, and *spend* the afternoon in a telephone conference with business partners. Suppose each engagement goes according to plan. What I have executed by allotting space (booking an appointment, squeezing in a client) and using a resource (spending the afternoon in conference) is reinforced by the succession of practical engagements, an antecedent followed by a subsequent. The experience of the day abides a conception via metaphor while simultaneously instantiating the practices that structure dispositions. In this sense, metaphor and habitus reinforce one another: we are both *what we do* and *how we speak*.

The confluence of these two metaphors (TIME IS RESOURCE AND SPACE) affects the doxic belief in time as an object of management and thus imparts the illusion of human control. If time is both resource and space, just as money and warehouses are resources and spaces, then manipulation on the material plane transmutes to the temporal domain. Time is rendered a subject of administration. Agency inserts itself into the varying rhythms of the day—the "incommensurable islands of duration" are evened out into uniform regularity. *Time management* becomes a requisite skill in a society where human activity is orchestrated and organized; chronological increments are allocated so that events coincide. This objective time, or *clock time*, carries the hallmarks of industrial society by virtue of their invariant order, their steady movement without

[217] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 66.

reference to human subjectivity. Each person, institution and organization synchronizes itself to the clock and operates under the tacit agreement of time as the seriatim of temporal units. Objective time that serves as an organizational principle to the functions of society also subsumes subjective experience. To others, we *give* time, and from others, we *demand* time. Temporality becomes a domain of design, adjustment, regulation, and exchange, the acts of control within a field of dominion. With expanding human activity and growth in complexity, effective and efficient time management becomes imperative. It comes as no surprise that time should be a source of anxiety and aggravation.

What I experienced in the woods stood in contrast to the hurried exchanges that comprised city life. In the absence of company, I had few appointments. Demanding little of others' time and proffering little of my own, I vacated the economy in which time trades as a commodity. Absent the temporal regiment, time became more fluid within subjective experience, identified more closely with what Henri Bergson called "continuity of inner life" in which every *thing* and every *state* is experienced as duration itself.[218] Time was not so much a structure imposed from without but an inexorable feature of subjective experience, indistinguishable from subjective activity or the object of engagement. Variation in pulse and rhythm attended the activities done throughout a day, and the modulation between tempos was heightened by the tranquillity of the forest. A bike ride up a challenging hill seemed to linger in the burn of straining muscles. The last fifteen minutes of an evening's meditation can seem interminable. Yet, the experience of subjective, flowing time engendered a clearer view of schematic, linear time as a construct to which I had yielded as a condition of my participation in society. I glimpsed the arbitrariness of a fundamental dimension of society that is otherwise invisible.

The alternative experience of time, even if only momentary, was akin to the loss of a former innocence, the wide-eyed recognition of a magic trick that dupes the senses. Yet the glimpse of nonlinear, nonquantifiable temporality confounds language and bewilders cognition. Time is stranger than we think, and in fact, stranger than we *can* think because we do not have the structural metaphors to construct its character. C. A.

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[218] Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity*, trans. Leon Jacobson, cited in Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 22.

Bowers has written extensively about the root metaphors that ensnare our intelligence and dispose us to a destructive mode of existence.[219] The root metaphor of change as progress within linear time, for example, foments a neurotic fascination with the new and a repudiation of the old. Progress as improvement, as a teleological march toward perfection, disposes us to forgetfulness, as old wisdom is replaced by the fatuous pursuit of novelty. An important task of environmental education, Bowers argues, lies in the recovery of different root metaphors that consist in the recovery and conservation of traditions linking past and future, in which elders provide access to venerated wisdom and consideration is given to generations that will follow. This temporal reorientation obviates the preoccupation with the short-term and ties the distant past and future together in the seamless present.

Ecological time stands in contrast to the linearity and uniformity of clock time by its responsiveness to *incommensurable islands of duration*. This is the initiation of tempos that attend to the whim of the moment, that inhabits present duration with playful acuity. The light of the setting sun glowing off the water invites pause; the sight of a hummingbird through a window demands a swift attention. This improvisational repertoire can pause or start, tarry or hurry in accordance with the idiosyncrasies of the moment.

I was hiking through the woods one day when I came upon a banana slug. Was I patient enough to slow down and watch the slug crawl across the road? Did I *have* enough time to do so? Immersed in the moment, I had as much or as little time as the slug itself. The slug did not *take* time, it *was* time. So long as the slug crawled, its slimy movement traced the contours of an undetermined hour. The slug embodied a kind of time by virtue of its being, and my encounter with the slug was a brush with temporality itself. To cease my own movement and sink into the slug's own pace was to enter another mode of temporality, the intertwining of slowness and spaciousness, thick silence, and ponderous slithering in the fathomless now. Everything was suddenly very still. Time disappeared. The slug was *presence* (the raw encounter with full being) and *present* (both as "gift" and "now"). The meeting with the more-than-human other is not

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[219] Bowers, *The Culture of Denial*; Bowers, "Gregory Bateson's Contribution to Understanding the Linguistic Roots of the Ecological Crisis"; C. A. Bowers, "Toward an Eco-Justice Pedagogy," *Environmental Education Research* 8, no. 1 (1 February 2002): 21–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620120109628.

simply the contact between creatures, but the confluence of temporalities that alters durational experience.

This modulation of tempo, from a brisk saunter to observant pause, was analogous to a musical acuity that moderates rhythm and tempo. The musician's deft treatment of timing, from *adagio* (slow) to *allegro* (moderately fast), furnishes a large part of music's many valences. She anticipates harmonies, lingers over a resolution, and inserts *fermio* (pause) with equal confidence. The piece ends, but the properties of duration that inhere music's rhythmic structure have neither beginning nor end. This musical attention to the exigencies of the present—improvisational and responsive—stands opposite the management of chronological time, which involves regulation and apportionment. Both exemplify forms of temporal agency, but the former responds to the temporal implications of encounter with the more-than-human world, while the latter insists on an impersonal, a-contextual time impervious to the requirements of encounter. Thus, music as a form of practice transmutes into the motions of habitus, supplying a fresh metaphor to more aptly conceptualize the incommensurable islands of duration within first-hand experience.

Looking to other areas of practice, namely the culinary arts, we might substitute another metaphor to conceive of subjective time. Just as a chef might use a roux to thicken a broth, there are activities that make time more viscous, ponderous, even interminable—for example, waiting in line at a government office, enduring a tedious lecture, longing for home while travelling afar. These might be called *time thickeners* for their ability to make time seem more imposing. Conversely, there are *time thinners*—those activities which make time seem swift and insubstantial—such as busyness, conviviality, and the thrill of adventure. Further, there are *time dissipaters*, which make time disappear within the realm of experience. Music, art, and meditation are activities that can expunge the experience of time altogether. Skillful work with temporality entails the deft use of these techniques to variegate the movement of the day. These metaphors lend weight to comportment and practice in the experience of time. Time is no longer a feature of reality extrinsic to subjective experience but rather a phenomenon inextricably linked to practice.

While musical and culinary sensibilities are complementary to a life of attention, there remains the search for an understanding of time that throws into relief the

pervasive habits of language that structure our concepts. In his treatise on *Uji* (Being-Time), Dogen Zenji posits time not as a distinct noun itself but as a conjunctive noun inextricably bound to being: "Because real existence is only this exact moment, all moments of Existent phenomena are Time."[220] In Dogen's view, time and matter are not separate dimensions with properties that can be teased apart but rather an unbroken wholeness that inheres to the movement of the cosmos. As such, "pine-trees are Time, and bamboos are Time."[221] The silvery flicker of maple leaves rustling in the breeze occurred in a brief moment, but the vividness of their movement intimated the presence of eternity.

In the long hours of meditation, I sat in the darkness with nothing more than the flickering fire glowing on the floor. In those hours of silence and darkness, when the universe subsided and the world was nothing more than the orange glow under my eyes, I inquired into the nature of time and was folded into the surrounding darkness. *What was time*? It was this glow on the floor, this warm darkness that held me. I felt the assurance of eternity, which is not an infinite store of time, but the dissolution of *Chronos* in the surety of *Kairos*. Being was both *full of time* and *emptied of time*. In the grip of *Kairos*, the world itself was time embodied. There was nothing to gain and nothing to impart. I was heir to an eternity that is and has always been a part of me.

This taste of timelessness was a welcomed relief to the hurried city where time was a merciless conspiracy leading to a life of breathless haste. Temporality returned to wholeness. Deeper engagement with the world entails the embrace of the temporality of things—that which cannot be hastened nor tarried. If I can remain in contact with the great silence of the stars and behold the eternity of their light, I can hurry as if I have all the time in the world, for the cosmos is time itself, without tension, without vexation.

To Remind Myself to Make Peace with Time

Today I rise with gladness at the break of day
And retire with gratitude in the stillness of night
I savour the gift of another morning
Every moment a jewel of gratuitous grace
I abide the movement of age
Each crease on my face is etched

[220] Dogen, *Shobogenzo*: *Book I*, 111.

[221] Dogen, *Shobogenzo*: *Book I*, 111.

By the light of changing seasons
Like the rings of a tree
I open my naked arms
To the passing wind and rain
That touch both soil and soul
I move to the heat and chill
Of the land's whim and motion
I do not begrudge the sun's passage
Nor do I tarry the moon's sails
With gentle attention
I attend to my task at hand
And at the day's end,
My work set aside,
I watch the light dwindle behind the mountain
With a heart broken open by the good world
I shall say:
That is all,
and all is well.

3.6. Solitude

I spent many days simply wandering in the forest, hiking through groves, and traversing the moss-covered rocks. Coming to a break in the woods, I glanced out at the waters and sat among the thick pads of lichen, the sky immense above and the waters rippling below. These moments of solitude provided much peace, and I settled into what was before me, at ease with the world. If there was wisdom in the land, as many Indigenous cultures believe,[222] I had to give myself to its instruction. In order to thrive under the tutelage of the sky and follow the wisdom of the land, I would need to be completely available to these teachers. The intimations of land called for silence and unparcelled attention, the very goods afforded by solitude. If I had a human companion, the encounter with the wild would be moderated along a social axis, and I was liable to miss something in the land's whispering. In solitude, I gave myself over to the wildness of the surroundings.

In his treatise on solitude, Philip Koch defined solitude as "an experiential world in which other people are absent,"[223] but which does not preclude other forms of relational contact. In this sense, solitude is not an escape from civilization but an

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[222] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), http://muse.jhu.edu/book/55843/.

[223] Koch, *Solitude*, 15.

entrance into a different kind of society. To find solace in the glistening pines and comfort in the bubbling brook was to revel in the bonds of nature, forged in patient engagement with the wilderness. Throughout my time in the woods, I came to appreciate a variety of relationships, all of which moved to the fore of my daily experience. I was aware of the seas, which were different every day depending on the wind and weather. The colour of the water, the depth of the waves spoke the varying moods of the ocean. I took notice of the sky, its various brightness and complexion. The forest loomed large. The chorus of birdsong in the morning, the grazing deer, the swaying branches—together they formed a fellowship, a grand communion of subjects whose ceremony called to quiet celebration. If people are defined by the company they keep, then I felt myself a different man in the company of the forest—more at ease, more assured, more attentive, and not plagued by anxiety. By its presence, the forest evoked in me qualities that I was not prone to muster otherwise: the ability to appreciate things small and ordinary, to live quietly, to appreciate the unmerited gift of life. Because I was conscious of the community around me, consciousness itself took on a different warp and weft.

One afternoon, I walked down the hill and saw a shadowy figure slip under banks of bush. Intrigued by the figure, I quickened my steps, lowered my profile, and snuck closer to the mysterious animal. I could barely determine its shape before the animal launched into a nearby waterway. However, its shiny black tail and stocky limbs were enough to indicate a river otter. I ran to the water but could not see any sign of the otter underneath the black waters. Nevertheless, the sighting was enough to liven my heart. The encounter filled my day, and I left the pond full of contentment, glad to have met the otter's acquaintance. The company of the forest proved another form of communion: our togetherness was one of mutual presence in the common act of flourishing; not an exchange of words, but a silent abiding in the cradle of the land.

Acculturation under the conditions of togetherness foments its own inclinations and propensities. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus rests on a fundamental axis: incumbent dispositions operate within *fields*, the spheres of affiliation in which agents

engage one another.[224] If habitus is indeed the *feel for the game,*[225] then every operating disposition presupposes a specified form of interaction within prescribed parameters (the game itself) and a gathering of *players*, the subjects who act within predesigned constraints. Sociologists are keen to discuss the habitus as the force that influences action within social fields. I have argued in chapter one, based on Bourdieu's work, that we should undertake a wider reading of habitus, which includes the dispositions conditioned by and operating within a physical environment. My foray into the off-grid island was primarily an investigation into this latter reading of Bourdieu's work, an examination of incumbent dispositions within a different environment. At the same time, a sociological reading remains relevant. If habitus is strictly social, what effects does solitude induce in a social agent who now has a diminished social field in which to enact ruling dispositions?

Although I was on my own most of the time, I had several neighbours I got to know well. Living in a small community involved a certain paradox: because there were fewer people, interactions were infrequent, but they tended to be caring and warm. Thus, periods of solitude were accompanied by conversation and conviviality. In winter, when many of the island residents were away, the south end of the island became quiet. It was easy to go three days without seeing or speaking to anyone. In December, I found myself counting the number of days in which I did not see or interact with anyone. After three days, I saw a truck coming up the road. I waved to the driver, and he waved in turn. It was a casual gesture, but, in that moment, I felt a twinge of regret, as if I had lost something precious. My three days of total solitude were broken by this casual greeting. However, in the same moment, I realized the absurdity of this mindset. Did this greeting nullify my previous three days of solitude? Was solitude so fragile that it can be profaned by the briefest contact? I saw clearly my tendency to construct solitude as an absolute state constituted by the *absence* of social exchange. The vestiges of habitus were thus found in the inclination to mark a departure from the social norm, a conditioned attitude that saw togetherness as a default of human existence and solitude the notable exception. I thought that each day without interaction counted toward a record. That I

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[224] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Michael Grenfell, ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Acumen, 2012); Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*; Richard K. Harker, "On Reproduction, Habitus and Education," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 5, no. 2 (1984): 117–27.

[225] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

posited solitude in opposition to multitude was a product of ingrained assumptions about togetherness. If the *abnormal* signposts the normal, I had unknowingly marked solitude as the antithesis to togetherness.

I needed to remove solitude from the realm of absolutes and relieve its position as the antithesis to togetherness. Solitude is not simply the absence of human companionship nor a deliberate refusal to associate. It is not a state of affairs that holds only when one is alone, for it is possible for one to enjoy solitude even in a concourse of people. Alice Koller defines solitude as the intention to live well on one's own.[226] If solitude is intentional, companionship is not a requirement in the pursuit of one's purpose. Solitude does not repudiate company but rather sets aside companionship as a determining factor in the shaping of one's life course. Henry David Thoreau once wrote to Harrison Blake: "It's not that we love to be alone, it's that we love to soar. And as we scale the heights, the company thins."[227] Thus, the solitary life is better characterized by a spirit of independence rather than antipathy toward companionship; it is a pledge to reflection and contemplation, which in themselves do not preclude an appreciation for community and friendship. The solitary person can enjoy company but is not compulsively driven to seek companionship; neither is companionship indispensable to their well-being.

However, this conception of solitude highlighted the peculiarity of my situation. I was married, living in relative solitude on an off-grid island. My tenure was made possible by the support of my wife, whose steadfast encouragement kept me emotionally buoyant throughout the year. I also had the blessing of my mother, who affirmed the merits of a contemplative retreat. My supervisors were also unwavering in their support of my project and provided encouragement throughout my time away. Solitude was a gift bestowed upon me by community, and I would not have embarked on this project without their blessing. Prisoners in solitary confinement against their will may have much time to themselves, but such aloneness does not equal the gift of solitude.

Does solitude contain an inherent contradiction if I needed the endorsement of others to live on my own? In my view, the support I received became the precondition for

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[226] Alice Koller, *The Stations of Solitude* (New York: Bantam, 1991).

[227] William Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974), 117.

a solitary undertaking. The permission of my family and friends was the outcome of relationships kept in good standing. Once I was in the woods, I was free to explore the implications of living on my own, in the presence of the more-than-human world. Philip Koch argues that solitude must have its “container,” a system of supports and agreements forged under shared goodwill, which underwrites and enriches one’s solitary experience.[228] Even in solitude, I remained embedded in a network of relationships, though these relationships were maintained by means other than direct contact. Admittedly, there are those who escape society despite the wishes of loved ones.[229] There may be compelling reasons for someone to assert independence at the cost of their relationships, and I am not qualified to judge their actions. Had I gone into the woods knowing that my departure would hurt my wife, my solitude would have suffered as a result. Solitude was made sweeter by the support of community—the insights and reflections afforded by solitude were more poignant, knowing that others have a hand in my discoveries. For this reason, I believe that the fruits of solitude, the insights and perspectives gleaned in isolation, belong not to me but rather the community at large.

The gift of solitude is rare and experienced by few because togetherness is inherent in the very notion of society. I often hear variations of the statement: “we are social animals.” The frequency of this utterance makes me suspect that current social arrangements fail to meet the longing for connection, a disappointment that lurks behind declarations of ourselves as social creatures. North American culture enforces an underlying doxa that is suspicious toward those who opt to be alone. Under this cultural orientation, togetherness is not so much a virtue but an inexorable fact of life and an unquestionable feature of human existence. Those who contravene this view violate not only a tacit rule but also transgress a cardinal feature of human life. The suspicion against aloneness seeps into common discourse through tropes such as “loner” and “recluse,” both of which connote maladjusted misanthropes who suffer from flaws in their character or gaps in their development. Subtle stigmas cast a pall on those who live alone. Singles can feel ostracised in a society where couples form the standard social unit. As aloneness is looked upon with suspicion and pity, and ideas of human well-

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[228] Koch, *Solitude*.

[229] For example, Christopher McKnight disappeared from society and spent twenty-seven years living in the woods of Maine, stealing provisions from nearby cabins. See *Michael Finkel, The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

being are inextricably tied to togetherness, thoughts about the future can be fraught with anxiety: *Who's going to take care of me when I'm old? Who will be with me when I die?* These nervous ruminations further reinforce aloneness as a misfortune that befalls those unable to keep good company. Thus, the orthodoxy of togetherness exerts a disciplinary effect on the populace, making solitude ever more untenable.

Here, I must make a distinction between loneliness, aloneness, and solitude. Loneliness is the feeling of disconnection and detachment, a state of deprivation characterized by forlornness and longing, the experience of being severed from the vital pulse of life that flows through community and human contact. Although loneliness is part of a complex and multi-faceted emotional life, chronic loneliness can wreak havoc on an individual. I use "aloneness" to denote the condition of being on one's own, regardless of one's emotional state. While I use "aloneness" in this neutral sense of the word, a society ruled by the orthodoxy of togetherness often perceives "aloneness" as something undesirable. Solitude suggests an intention to live well on one's own, a life that includes a host of emotions and valences associated with a kind of flourishing that does not make companionship a priority.

The stigmatization of aloneness would not be so odious if the promised benefits of togetherness were actually met by cultures that nurture healthy relationships. The proliferation of digital technologies has further complicated the quality of social connection. Loneliness is more pervasive in societies where social media usage is pervasive.[230] Meaningful social connections are on the wane,[231] and many suffer the adverse emotional and physical effects of social isolation.[232] The health effects associated with loneliness are often as serious as the risks posed by smoking, obesity,

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[230] Matthew Pittman and Brandon Reich, "Social Media and Loneliness: Why an Instagram Picture May Be Worth More than a Thousand Twitter Words," *Computers in Human Behavior* 62 (1 September 2016): 155–67, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.084.

[231] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[232] John T. Cacioppo and Louise C. Hawkley, "Perceived Social Isolation and Cognition," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13, no. 10 (October 2009): 447–54, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2009.06.005; John T. Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo, "Older Adults Reporting Social Isolation or Loneliness Show Poorer Cognitive Function 4 Years Later," *Evidence-Based Nursing* 17, no. 2 (April 2014): 59–60, https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2013-101379.

high blood pressure and cholesterol.[233] The preponderance of medical data on the adverse effects of loneliness can feed into the pervasive fear of being alone, a cultural fear generated by anxieties that circulate within a social sphere. I do not dispute the medical data on loneliness; however, I worry that such warnings exacerbate the pervasive antipathy toward being alone and further entrench a discourse that treats aloneness with suspicion and alarm. The orthodoxy of togetherness presents an insidious double-bind: it stipulates that people must be together—but within its modern-Western contexts, it is unable to provide the relational bonds for authentic fellowship. Under this tacit proscription against aloneness, one is afraid to be alone and yet cannot help but *feel* lonely, sometimes even in the company of others. The orthodoxy of togetherness plays on a stark opposition between solitude and multitude. By making solitude absolute, the rarified purview of odd individuals, society is able to marvel at monks and hermits while remaining in its social course. So long as the solitary remains an elusive and mysterious figure, the populace can conduct its business and take comfort in menial connections.

If companionship and community are the necessary conditions of well-being, and this fact looms large in my view of relations, then my relationships inadvertently bear the weight of undue expectation.[234] That a vibrant social life should make me happy is incidental to authentic engagement, which springs from an interest in others and a concern for others' well-being. A genuine interest in others is characteristic of an authenticity that brings to relationships a measure of wholeness and cheer. On the contrary, if I expect others to benefit my well-being by virtue of their company, I am likely to fracture a tenuous bond through unwarranted expectations.

The disruption of the orthodoxy of togetherness requires intentional practices in the very midst of togetherness and the reformation of expectations that typically strain common relationships. Partners and spouses can take extended trips apart from one another without consternation from family and friends. Educational institutions, which

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[233] Matthew Pantell et al., "Social Isolation: A Predictor of Mortality Comparable to Traditional Clinical Risk Factors," *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 11 (November 2013): 2056–62, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301261); Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al., "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 10, no. 2 (March 2015): 227–37, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352.

[234] Koch, *Solitude*.

include schools, religious organizations, and community groups, can sponsor solitary retreats for willing individuals. Classrooms can integrate pedagogies that alternate between solitary, individual pursuits and cooperative group work. If culture is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, as Clifford Geertz has indicated,[235] then we can include stories of solitaries, who, by virtue of their distance from civilization, offer insights into the confusion and hysteria that afflict society. We can establish deliberate practices that block out the competing voices that vie for attention while opening spaces that invite reflection and the intimations of the more-than-human other.

3.7. Relationship

In the quiet of the woods, Pam was never far from my thoughts. In the wind that churns white caps by the bay, I thought about her magnanimous spirit that sent me here with every good wish, a love and loyalty that endured the ache of separation in the interest of the other. A bystander could not be faulted for judging me selfish, but the principals in a relationship know better the intricacies of give and take. Pam saw that something was calling to me, and that the neglect of this call augured a greater injury than one posed by a temporary separation. For my part, I promised to be responsive to her needs. We talked on the phone regularly. In our own way, we supported and nurtured one another from a distance. However, in the end, I was the greater beneficiary of her largess.

If we discovered something throughout the year, it was the sweetness of appreciation imparted by distance. Kahlil Gibran wrote: “let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of heaven dance between you.”[236] The space in our togetherness revealed the myriad ways in which absence strengthened endearment: I painted her postcards in watercolour and wrote poems about the days spent in the woods; I rediscovered one of the sincerest modes of communication and sent her hand-written letters detailing my encounters, the shifting tides of my inner world. She wrote back in turn, including in her letters photographs of her work trip to Northern British Columbia. Very few pleasures compare with the elation of finding a letter in a mailbox, holding the missive in my hands, walking up the hill with anticipation, sitting down at the

[235] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

[236] Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (Ballingslöv: Wisehouse Classics, 2015), 13–14.

desk and cracking open the envelope. In reading those letters, I felt the warmth of hearts providing solace to one another, the tenderness of the silent woods that was a cradle for appreciation and cherishing.

In the space of solitude, I saw more clearly the irreplaceable spark at the centre of relationship. The strength and inimitable beauty of one's partner and the malt essence of love are distilled and clarified. This clarity is so easily obscured by the trivialities of modern life, overtaken by menial duties that clog the days. *Who will pick up groceries, and who will walk the dog*? Pressing matters are too often mistaken for important matters. Years into a partnership, the shared responsibilities of adulthood and the joint administration of life's demands have distracted me from the view of her splendid character, that vivacious girl I fell in love with so many years ago. In the quiet of the woods, I thought about her smile, the way she broke into a silly dance in moments of merriment, how she exclaimed her contentment when savouring a good meal. In those silent and dark nights when I sat in the cabin alone, I felt her presence with greater acuity and warmth. Solitude allowed for the return of perspective and the rediscovery of those forgotten fires that light the course of a relationship. In the recognition of these cherished bonds, I did not feel the distance of geographical space but came closer to her in my commitment.

There is something paradoxical about solitude. If solitude is not motivated by a disdain for others but rather by commitment to combing the depths of interiority, one soon uncovers a commitment to others in a way that a sanctioned togetherness does not provide. Meditation itself is a solitary practice, but one that nurtures devotion and love at the very roots of the soul. In my first years as a meditator, assiduous and fervent in my practice, I sat for at least an hour every night. One evening, I met a flood of memories—scenes of my mother preparing my school lunch and running after me when I had forgotten to pack the box in my bag; how she sat against a wall, held my head against her shoulder because, in the throes of an asthma attack, I could not sleep supine; how she met me at Narita airport that first year when I was living in Japan, and while waiting for the train bound for Tokyo, she reached into her pack and produced containers of sliced fruit—honey melon, pineapple, and strawberries—because she knew that fruit was expensive in Japan. I sobbed for most of that hour on the cushion, enveloped in the tender appreciation of my mother. And many years later, in the quiet of the woods that winter, I thought often of my mother, who supported my project but for whom my

absence caused great worry. In the hours of zazen, I felt her beneficent presence and wished that the merits of my practice—if there were any—would vibrate the particles of matter across the great waters and enfold her with warmth. In the darkness of the winter evenings, when the cold was heavy and imposing, the spaciousness of the impenetrable black was full of love and tenderness.

3.8. Askesis

Prior to embarking on my project, for reasons both practical and ethical, I resolved to keep a simple diet. First, I did not have refrigeration in the cabin, so I could not stock a supply of fresh foods. I would only keep a handful of grains and dried goods in my pantry. Second, I was concerned about a larger system and culture of consumption, the capitalist-industrial complex that generates demand for goods and services. The perpetual bombardment of advertising that stokes collective desire is integral to the operation of capitalist society, and participation in the modern economy entails the never-ending pursuit of novel goods and experiences. Therefore, my determination to keep a simple diet was an attempt to shape my desiderative impulses, for the habits related to food are the most immediate, embodied manifestations of desire, the proto-typical form of *consumption*. Eating is not always a rapacious or exploitative act; one needs nourishment to keep hale and engage with meaningful work. However, the same appetite that eats for health can also lapse into excess and degenerate into a relentless desire for pleasure and stimulation.

Michel Foucault has argued that the formation of the self as an ethical subject rests on modalities of practice which enjoin and enable moral conduct:

> the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. . . . There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without "modes of subjectivation" and an "ascetics" or "practices of the self" that supports them. [237]

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[237] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 28.

The “ascetics” in question does not refer to punishing self-deprivation, as occasioned by religious adherents who renounce shelter, clothing, bathing, and sustenance beyond the most basic fare. Neither does it denote self-mortification, a harsh austerity born of antipathy toward the flesh. In his study of the Greeks, Foucault points out that *askesis,* the etymological root of *asceticism* as used in the modern lexicon, refers to “an exercise of oneself,”[238] or a “practice of the self.”[239] *Askesis* refers to training, meditation, tests of thinking, examinations of conscience, and control of representation that constitute the modalities used in the formation of the ethical subject. These practices aim to develop what Aristotle deemed *continence*,[240] a self-mastery in which the ethical subject is not ruled by base impulses but is free to act morally because one has conquered oneself.

Foucault further argues that *Aphrodisia*, transliterated as the works of Aphrodite, denotes not only sexual pleasure but also pleasures that ramify into other fields of experience and types of normativity concerning ethical conduct. Examined in the larger context, *aphrodisia* are “acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a form of pleasure.”[241] In this sense, sexuality occasions one form of *aphrodisia*, which can connote many forms of pleasure in the realm of experience. In Foucault’s view, the Greeks did not deem *aphrodisia* immoral but respected its influence in shaping conduct and were thus concerned with regulating its functions within the personal sphere. The Greeks saw the regulation of pleasure as part of a larger concern with *epimeleia heatou*—the care of the self—in which one took pains to avoid excess while discerning the uses of pleasure. The regulation of sexual pleasure underwent a treatment similar to alimentary ethics, which oversaw the administration of dietary regimes to promote health and vitality, because the principles that underlie sexuality also apply to matters of diet: Both concupiscence and appetite grow or diminish in accordance with the indulgences given to each act. Therefore, each domain is subject to regulation under forms of *askesis*.

According to Foucault’s analysis, *askesis* consists of the practices that cultivate virtuous dispositions proper to a beautiful life. Abstention is not merely the denial of

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[238] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 9.
[239] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 30.
[240] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
[241] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 40.

pleasure but rather emancipation from the bondage of desire, the burnishing of agency, and the assumption of command over one's faculties in the pursuit of virtue. Foucault explains that the virtues of moderation forged under *askesis* can be further discerned into *enkrateia* (the struggle and mastery of self) and *syphrosyne* (moderation that disposes one to justice, righteousness, and courage). *Enkrateia* is the active form of self-mastery that resists cravings and temptations; its practise requires an agonistic relation to self in the work of transforming desires. *Syphrosyne*, on the other hand, is the quality of one who has tamed desire. Whereas *enkrateia* entails adherence to prohibition, *syphrosyne* entails the enjoyment of moderation itself. Foucault argues that, as a form of effort and control that engenders continence, *enkrateia* is the prerequisite of *syphrosyne*. It is in practising *syphrosyne* that a person[242] exemplifies excellence and virtue. The practices of restraint instantiate the stylization of one's faculties in pursuit of a beautiful and virtuous life.

While I cannot claim to enjoy the virtue of *syphrosyne*, I know that without active awareness and intentional practice, the impulse to indulge meets little resistance in a culture that prizes ease and convenience. Within the matrix of the psyche, the compulsion to eat can become be a distraction from boredom, a dependency on stimulation, an anesthetic for unresolved psychological pain. The blind pursuit of pleasure can be an unhealthy way of dealing with latent suffering. The momentary gratification of desire and temporary satiation of appetite becomes an archetype for other forms of coping—the acquisition of material goods, fashion, status, and power—all of which seem unable to provide the balm that the psyche needs.

On the other hand, this disciplined effort to regulate appetite can also stem from emotional pain and deep-seated fear. For me, it was the fear of a species run amok, a ravenous spree that clears the plate and denudes the forest both. The graphs and images associated with the ecological crisis look eerily similar: The hockey stick graph[243]

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[242] Those who struggle to find enough to eat have little use for high-minded discussions of moderation. However, since I direct my reflections toward the well-supplied and the well-off—for whom eating is more than the acquisition of sustenance but has become a habit of pleasure and, in some cases, a symbol of status—this exploration underscores the importance of responsibility on the part of those who have the luxury of choice.

[243] Michael E. Mann, Raymond S. Bradley, and Malcolm K. Hughes, "Northern Hemisphere Temperatures during the Past Millennium: Inferences, Uncertainties, and Limitations," *Geophysical Research Letters* 26 (1999): 759–62, https://doi.org/10.1029/1999GL900070.

and the Keeling curve,[244] which depict the sudden rise in global temperatures and atmospheric carbon, respectively, the precipitous rise in human population in the last century compared to the previous ten thousand years.[245] These charts depict a relatively stable line along the x-axis before taking a sharp turn upwards. What if, instead of graphing temperature and population, the charts reveal the outburst of human excess, the runaway extreme of a species that adheres to no limits? The thought of a rampant humanity that defies restraint is deeply unsettling, further troubled by the realization that I am part of this flaunting of ecological limits. Fearful of a humanity that does not know how to stop—and since my most immediate access to humanity is in myself—I felt compelled to beat down the voracious appetite, the control over which meant not only the attainment of moderation but also the witness of a human possibility now receding from sight. This urge to control and contain, therefore, was also an internalization of the critical situation I saw in the world, a gesture compelled by fear and disappointment. Thinking back to the teachings imparted by my evangelical upbringing, I remember Jesus' words in Matthew 7:3: "why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" My own experiment with *askesis*, therefore, was full of ambiguity. The dietary discipline I practised was a way of testing incumbent dispositions in relation to pleasure but also an exercise that follows the judgement I placed on myself and others.

I kept to plain fare throughout my time in the woods. I purchased a twelve-pound bag of green lentils. I also had brown rice, quinoa, and oats. These staples were stored in a tote box. A few jars of nuts, dried fruits and mushrooms provided sufficient supplement. In the morning, I had oatmeal with dried prunes and a cup of coffee. For lunch and dinner, I ate boiled lentils and brown rice, dressed with a bit of soy sauce and rice vinegar. Occasionally, I substituted brown rice with quinoa. However, the quinoa was never satisfying, as I often felt pangs of hunger shortly after a meal.

The unvarying menu took the pleasure away from eating. The meal itself was palatable; because I was usually hungry, each morsel of rice and lentils passed for satisfaction. Food was no longer a vehicle for pleasure but something more utilitarian.

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[244] Daniel C. Harris, "Charles David Keeling and the Story of Atmospheric CO2 Measurements," *Analytical Chemistry* 82, no. 19 (1 October 2010): 7865–70, https://doi.org/10.1021/ac1001492.

[245] "World Population since 10,000 BCE," Our World in Data, accessed 3 March 2021, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/world-population-since-10000-bce-ourworldindata-series.

The practice of mindful eating, however, brought another dimension to meals. The sensation of chewing slowly and quietly, feeling each morsel loping on the tongue, is exquisite not because the meal is particularly delectable but because flavours became vivid under the light of awareness. This acuity of taste did not redeem the blandness of the meal, but the lesson in awareness and appreciation was important nevertheless.

The simple diet presented a host of observations in regard to my relationship with food. At the end of every meal, I felt a strong desire for a second helping; the mind knew that one bowl was enough, but the mouth wanted to keep chewing, and the tongue craved the sensation of taste. This compulsion was always strong and often over-powering. The blandness of the meal intensified a craving for more food. Without mindful observation, I could easily capitulate and reach for some nuts. In the depth of winter, I found myself preoccupied with thoughts of food. Walking in the woods, I daydreamed about slurping a bowl of noodles, munching on bread and cheese, a sip of red wine. At night, I dreamt of juicy brisket, sizzling sausages, and mounds of ice cream. I made a mental list of all the delicacies to devour when I returned to the city, and the thought of those feasts filled me with happy anticipation. Though food played a smaller part in my daily routines, its power seeped into another arena and loomed large in my consciousness. The practice of simplicity in diet grew into a preoccupation with food. Although I was more disciplined about what I ate, food gathered more power within my psyche, and the preoccupation with eating, in both extremes of craving and gorging, required care and caution.

I had to discern the balance between *askesis* and indulgence, and I ran against the physical effects of this commitment every day. Rational reflection and mental cogitation did not seem to hold much currency in the life of the body. In the grip of craving, it was hard to produce rational intervention, as if the mind could dissuade the body from its impulses. A nutritionist friend told me once that the body has its own gauge—*your cravings are messages from the body regarding the nutrients it needs*, she said. Though I had been vegetarian for several years, I craved meat and cheese above all. I surmised that my body needed protein and fats. Another friend, a Buddhist hermit who has been living in solitude for over four decades, advised me to push through obstacles: *When you come across something difficult, you know you are on the verge of a break-through. Persist*. These words of steely determination reflected his own commitment to contemplative austerity, and they spurred me to push my own limits. Just

prior to my departure, one of my supervisors told me: *Be kind to yourself.* I remembered her words with gratitude and appreciation, and I often reminded myself of her caring advice. Each of these statements articulates a distinct wisdom; the art of *askesis* lies in discerning the balance between respective injunctions.

Once a month, I made a trip to Vancouver Island to run necessary errands. During these trips, I visited the grocery store for provisions. These were critical moments that evinced the line between restraint and indulgence. I usually bought bread and cheese. Breaking with my vegetarian diet, I also bought deli meat. I indulged with a few chocolate bars to satisfy the craving for sugar and some potato chips to boot. There were the few evenings when I dared to feast on bread, cheese, and salami. I basked in pleasure, buoyed by a swell of cheer. In those moments, the meal was not only satisfying but emotionally uplifting as well. After a period of subsisting on simple fare, the flavours took on a potency, a nourishment beyond the absorption of physical nutrients. It was a gust of wind that filled the emotional sails, both in the form of empowerment and relief. Food could be a form of love, the gift of sustenance from the earth. However, consumed without restraint, this comfort can degrade into dependency and can spoil one's health. After many weeks of dietary austerity, the bread and cheese were splendidly restorative.

However, my fastidious nature continued to probe this moment of laxity. Did I succumb to the desires of the body, or was I exercising a necessary kindness, allowing myself the nourishment that the body craved? I never arrived at a definitive answer to these questions. There was certainly a temptation to rationalize the indulgence: *I have been eating oats and lentils and rice for the last month. Why not cut myself some slack for this meal?* However, the act of *rationalization* might have been a trick of the mind that gave license to indulgence. In recognition of this, I felt an inkling of guilt and disappointment. At the same time, what accounted for the immediate satisfaction and wholeness I felt after eating a full meal? I was undoubtedly happy; my mood lifted with the delights of taste and flavour. The synapses were bathing in dopamine and serotonin, those neurotransmitters associated with euphoria.[246] But if this somatic pleasure was

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[246] Maria G. Veldhuizen, Kristin J. Rudenga, and Dana M. Small, "The Pleasure of Taste, Flavor, and Food," in *Pleasures of the Brain*, ed. Morten L. Kringelbach and Kent C. Berridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 146–68; Kyle S. Smith et al., "Hedonic Hotspots: Generating

undeniable, so too were the accompanying questions that sprang from an ethical commitment. *Did you cave? Could you have gone a bit longer without this indulgence?* In reviewing the experience, a good meal encompassed the gratification of appetite, a jubilant spirit and mood, and the interrogation of conscience. All these flavours were rolled into a morsel of bread and cheese.

In savouring these rare and delectable meals, I came to see that that *enkrateia*, the active struggle to regulate desire, does not end with capitulation to pleasure. *Enkrateia* does not halt at the moment of pleasure but persists within pleasure by interrogating experience under the light of awareness. The ethical conscience becomes a dialectical partner to the experience of pleasure, bringing to view a mixture of considerations and solidarities. If I was eating meat, I was swept by its alluring aroma, the fat and umami that saturated the palate; but I also thought of the hog and its life in the pen. I tasted the tartness of compunction as well as the sweetness of gratitude, coupled with a resolve to recommit myself to vegetarianism. Such was the profile in this flavourful morsel. Active practice of the self maintains a space for incommensurate sensations and emotions, the admixture of disparate solidarities that signify my involvement with a complex, multi-faceted and yet undivided cosmos. This embrace of countervailing valences is not a blind acceptance of my inconsistencies, but rather a commitment to facing contradictions in order to integrate their productive tensions into an honest, ethical life.

The bread and cheese lasted me about three days, and soon I was back to eating lentils and rice. Regardless of whether I was allowing myself a necessary kindness or giving in to cravings, I have learned that these breaks from my dietary regime mattered less than my willingness to return to discipline. The next meal was always another opportunity to live my commitment to simplicity. In this movement between simplicity and leniency, I was content to experiment with practices of moderation. In the process, I became more familiar with the texture of resolve and the elastic tension between discipline and relaxation.

Sensory Pleasure in the Brain," in *Pleasures of the Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27–49.

3.9. Koan

My practice of forest meditation brought forth a recognition of both deep communion and a sense of otherness. The forest loomed large in my sphere of attention as if to rise with imposing grandeur: *Everything is here!* The exclamation marks the awe of my encounter, a recognition of resplendent nature and the miracle of being. The given-ness of the world subsided—everything appeared as a marvel. At the same time, this proliferation of life was also puzzling: *How is it possible that everything exists?* What is the essence of the forest, and what are its secrets? The forest exudes an irreducible presence that is at once inviting and impregnable, utterly familiar and yet seemingly inscrutable.

Henry David Thoreau wrote: "at the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable."[247] The capacity to hold the paradox of knowledge and mystery lie at the heart of a complete *scientia.* If I knew something factual about a tree's root system, the transpiration of water through the trunk and leaves, there remained something of its presence that empiricism could not deduce. The rustling leaves that recall the tumbling ocean waves registered on the senses in a way that no declarative fact could convey. Empirical science serves to clarify segments of an unbroken whole, delineating facts that can be extrapolated and applied to great effect; at the same time, something of the tree's immanent quality eludes the captivity of science and retains an irreducible mystery.

As an urbanite new to the woods, I spent much time with my field guide, identifying bird species and naming the plants. This growing ability to discern the wild species conferred a sense of skillfulness and understanding. At the same time, I felt a compulsion to name and identify more, as if I was collecting flora and fauna for the menagerie of the mind. This urge to expand knowledge is a feature of inquisitiveness; its tireless search is what gives knowledge its ranging breadth. In this sense, to *command* knowledge is to amass the secrets of the world, assigning them a prechosen order within schemes of classification. At the same time, there is the danger of overconfident knowledge that extinguishes the mystery of the cosmos. The ability to identify bird

[247] Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, 298.

species at a glance, for example, risks becoming a competency, a form of mastery that renders the woods an inventory of catalogued species. However, if I recognized the markings of a Spotted Towhee and was able to distinguish a Varied Thrush from an American Robin, I still knew very little of the birds themselves apart from the name of their species. I knew nothing of their lives outside the moment when they appeared before my prying eyes. Going from one species to another, the amateur naturalist only met the most trivial requirement of knowledge—that of identification and classification. This impulse to *name* and *identify* may instantiate a disposition derived from a knowledge culture in which to understand is to *apprehend*—to grasp and possess within the hand—and therefore a sign of an incumbent habitus that issued the terms of engagement with the natural world.

Whereas knowledge tends to feed confidence and mastery, mystery tends to instill humility and circumspection. The forest requires not only a respect for mystery but also an indomitable curiosity that becomes an avenue for learning. I think of inquiries that search and consider but also resist definition and delineation. In this manner, the inquiring mind challenges the claims of objectivity by interpolating the subtleties of subjective investigation; the goal is not to abolish objective science but to broaden its scope so as to admit further possibilities.

Giorgio Agamben, following the work of Jakob von Uexküll, posed the problem of subjectivity in relation to objective knowledge. Ticks, for example, place themselves on a branch and "wait" for a warm-blooded host to come along. They are triggered by the scent of butyric acid, emitted from the sebaceous follicles of mammals, which causes the ticks to fall blindly onto a host. The baffling question, however, lies in the meaning of "wait" within the tick's subjective world. Jakob von Uexküll reported a tick who was kept alive without nourishment for eighteen years in a laboratory. The tick remained in a sleep-like state for the entire duration of almost two decades. However, Agamben asks: within the perceptive world (umwelt) of the tick, what becomes of the world in this state of suspension? And "what sense does it make to speak of "waiting" without time and without world?"[248]

[248] Agamben, *The Open*, 47.

“Waiting” and “time” are both human constructs that feature within the human umwelt. Humans have little phenomenological baseline from which to approximate the umwelts of other organisms. The human sensorium mediates vital contact but is nevertheless limited. What functions the senses serve in forming human subjectivity cannot provide reference to the subjectivities of other creatures. In this case, we say the tick is “waiting” for a whiff of blood purely in the sense of dwelling in a suspended state, but the period of that suspended state is conceived as “waiting,” the abiding of duration. Agamben confounds the construct by undermining the very possibility of time and thus renders incomprehensible the alternative subjectivity. Whereas “waiting” assumes time, the negation of time precludes the very idea of “waiting.”

Here I see a line of thinking that presents an option for inquiry if we are to wrench ourselves from an odious effect of anthropocentric knowledge. Objective science often begins with empiricism, the inductive construction of descriptive knowledge (e.g., observing and recording the behaviour of ticks). Then follows the conception of subjectivity via anthropomorphic imagination (the tick “waiting” for a host). Agamben steers the inquiry elsewhere, culminating in a question that confounds the preceding line of investigation, a question that bewilders logic and to which no ideational response can be adequately supplied. Agamben has presented what I call a *wild koan*. I borrow the Zen term *koan* to denote the nonsensical questions, the incoherent problems that Zen Buddhists, especially those of the Rinzai tradition, have employed to induce spiritual realization. A koan is not meant to be solved—there is no answer that can neutralize the problem. Rather, students steep themselves in the question and struggle in the befuddlement of their intelligence, working toward a clarity that is never possible. The koan can meet no solution that is produced by hermeneutic prowess or ratiocinative insight. The koan frustrates every thinking attempt at resolution until the student is entirely exhausted. Then, having spent the resources of her mind, the student relents and falls into the problem; having relinquished the habitual mode of conscious reflection, she relaxes into the koan and finds herself inside the mystery, with new perception and percipience.[249]

[249] Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1999); Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Awakening of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000); Grimstone, *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and the Blue Cliff Records*.

The *wild koan* arises from an encounter with the natural world as a wonderous mystery that defies ideation. Empiricism and anthropomorphic imagination, abetted by the idiosyncrasies of linguistic construct, have the effect of making familiar that which is strange. Familiarity and conceivability engender a confidence in “knowledge” of the other. However, it is precisely this confidence that we ought to hold cautiously, for the confidence conferred by knowledge all too easily spills into the illusion of mastery. The path to knowledge must return to innocence, as *science* returns to *nescience* in the dialectical dance between certainty and mystery.

Here, cogitation shifts into contemplation. A wild koan cannot be thought through—it can only be felt in the realm of ineffable experience. The koan is meant to stew the inquirer in the act of inquiring; the question is its own process and its own answer. By pondering the wild koan, the student is transformed by the question, not by any answer that might conjure the illusion of understanding. The koan thwarts the false sense of mastery that the knower lords over the known and opens the noetic space for greater recognition of the subjectivity and agency of wilderness itself.

The koan is not antithetical to science. To confound knowledge is not to refute knowledge or to render it obsolete—rather, it is the interpolation of another noetic process that integrates knowledge into a broader, multi-faceted noesis, through which the world becomes both comprehensible and mysterious, intelligible and inscrutable both. The koan instills humility in the face of unsearchable mystery of the cosmos in its suchness,[250] a sense of awe at the inviolable character and inexorable uniqueness of other creatures.

On the island, I sat in the forest and the koan was alive and gripping. It started as a question of subjectivity: *how does a tree experience time?* But the ensuing inquiry could not follow the movement of ideational thought, for every conjecture missed the mark. The only adequate “answer” was to sit by a tree, listen very quietly, touch the bark, and breathe the scent of its leaves. In that moment of sensual contact, *tree* and *time*

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[250] David Chang, “Encounters with Suchness: Contemplative Wonder in Environmental Education,” *Environmental Education Research* 26, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2020.1717448; Michael Bonnett, “Environmental Education and the Issue of Nature,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 39, no. 6 (2007): 707–21; Michael Bonnett, “Environmental Concern, Moral Education and Our Place in Nature,” *Journal of Moral Education* 41, no. 3 (2012): 285–300.

came together in the finger that traced bark. Herein lies the entry into a reverence attended by humility in the study of the more-than-human world, where knowledge and knower, subject and subject came together in a singularity that contained both *scientia* and mystery.

3.10. Suchness

In *The Sense of Wonder,*[251] Rachel Carson wrote: “A child’s world is fresh and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement.”[252] Carson wished that all children be gifted with “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”[253] Carson believed that wonder grows from the emotions and the impressions of the sensate body, furnishing “a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love.”[254]

This exhortation of wonder is familiar in Western literature, the annals of which are rich with inscriptions by naturalists who have extolled the marvels of wilderness. Henry David Thoreau once described the rain that pattered on his cabin roof as “a sweet and beneficent society,”[255] and intoned that “we can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigours, vast and titanic features.”[256] William Wordsworth wrote: “to her fair works did nature link/the human soul that through me ran” and the “powers which of themselves our minds impress.”[257] The sense of wonder hails from a stream within the Western tradition in which nature is held in glowing light, a place of excitement and enchantment, in which the topography of sensuousness coincides with uplifting adventures.

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[251] Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017).

[252] Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, 44.

[253] Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, 50.

[254] Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, 50.

[255] Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, 124.

[256] Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, 298.

[257] William Wordsworth, “Lines Written in Early Spring,” in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed., vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 133–34.

However, there is an orientation latent in discourses that invoke the sense of wonder. Every pedagogical orientation has discrete reference points that dispose adherents to certain perspectives, each with its biases and limitations. This predilection to view the outdoors as a place of delight imparts a certain bias in our approach to environmental education by reinforcing a partial notion of nature and neglects a great variety of experiences, many of them subtle and ambiguous, not easily apprehended through positive and negative poles of experience. *Wonder*—rendered in association with excitement and fascination in nature—constructs an idyllic vision of wilderness that can foreclose a range of possible insights into nature. That stormy evening when I left the cabin and watched the trees sway in the wind was utterly mundane, hardly worth a word of commentary. However, fidelity to that moment of ineffable clarity pushed me toward a contradiction: I must pull together words to capture experience while at the same time casting doubt on the words' facility. Better not to say anything at all, but since language is one primary vehicle of communication, some utterance is required, however faltering the attempt. The immediate rawness of experience is subject to transmutation in the process of articulation and often takes on the colours and valences of an implicit and sanctioned cultural message.

To this end, several theorists have begun to address the limitations in the current discourse around wonder. Martin Ashley[258] warns that *wonder* can be "infiltrated by anthropocentric consumerism" [259] and corrupted by sanitized images that reinforce children's inherent anthropocentricity.[260] He suggests a need for a "rehabilitation of awe and wonder" to include fear and reverence. Even laudable ecological principles that guide environmental programs "are often undermined by subtle but consistent anthropocentric messages conveyed in the language and by the conditions of the learning experience."[261] Carie Green issues a similar set of concerns, pointing out that the discourse around wonder can "overgeneralize nature as a place of pure happiness

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[258] Martin Ashley, "Finding the Right Kind of Awe and Wonder: The Metaphysical Potential of Religion to Ground an Environmental Ethic," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 11 (2006): 88–99.

[259] Ashley, "Finding the Right Kind of Awe and Wonder," 96.

[260] Ashley, "Finding the Right Kind of Awe and Wonder," 97.

[261] Sitka-Sage et al., "Rewilding Education in Troubled Times: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Post-Nature," 21.

and joy.” [262] Green argues that educators should “support children in negotiating emotional tensions, or the negative emotions they may experience in facing environmental features that are ‘scary.’”[263] She goes further:

> Negotiation of both positive and negative emotions can serve to strengthen children’s environmental identity by instilling an inner sense of comfort and trust in nature, spatial autonomy and self-awareness, self-confidence, and competency in negotiating environmental features; these attributes will enhance one’s personal connection, feelings, values, and beliefs towards nature which, in turn, plays a mediating role in determining one’s actions and behaviours towards the environment.[264]

In my reading of her work, I see Green tugging at the discourse around *wonder* to include the negative experiences that are charged with fear and anxiety.

Venturing beyond Green’s argument, I ponder the range of encounters in nature that do not fit easily in the positive-negative poles of emotional affect. Watch the ocean spray careen off rocks, the poplar leaves flickering in a welter of wind—these encounters register on the somatic, emotional, and intellectual planes; they are neither positive nor negative, nor are they neutral. Binary metrics of emotional affect do not aptly gauge the manifold ways that nature contacts our senses. To insist on a pole is to impose a crude distortion in the direction of anthropocentrism. If the existing discourse around *wonder* connotes positive associations with the outdoors, and Green’s affirmation of negative experiences provides a necessary counter-balance, I suggest that there are avenues of discussion for environmental education that lie outside the purview of positivity/negativity altogether. In considering possibilities outside this polarity, the question is not “what experiences should we have in nature,” but rather “what does nature have to say?” The latter, as a starting point of inquiry, opens learners to possibilities outside themselves and shifts the axis of learning from their own experience at the centre to that of the natural world itself. To this end, I forward *tathatā* (suchness), a concept that describes a recognition of the world as it is and its potential to usher a nuanced relationship with

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[262] Carie Green, “Monsters or Good Guys: The Mediating Role of Emotions in Transforming a Young Child’s Encounter with Nature,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, no. 21 (2016): 126.

[263] Green, “Monsters or Good Guys,” 141.

[264] Green, “Monsters or Good Guys,” 142.

nature beyond the acculturated relational templates that children bring to their outdoor experiences.

According to the *Chinese Dictionary of Buddhist Terms*, the Sanskrit word *Tathāthā* (pronounced: ta-ta-tā) translates into “so, thus, in such manner.”[265] Other translators employ “thusness” and “suchness”[266] as equivalent cognates. *Suchness* denotes the undifferentiated wholeness of reality in its present originality. According to Buddhist thought, *suchness* is the world as it is, with its own life, propensity, and impermanence. A burbling brook coursing through the dappled light of the forest floor; a bank of clouds reflected in the glassy skin of a skyscraper; each instance manifests a recognition of the world in the emanation of the present moment. *Suchness* points to a world entirely sufficient and vibrant in itself without reference to the emotional elaboration and aesthetic embellishment of a human subject. This “perfection” of the world is not fully apprehensible to human ideation because it is not derivative of ideation. In meditative training, a practitioner gradually recognizes the inviolable quality of phenomena in a supple and lucid awareness that perceives the world just as it appears.[267]

Suchness pursues no essence beyond appearance and does not ask a thing to be more than what is perceived. The surface is depth; appearance is essence. Suchness is the recognition of life’s unique fullness, imbued with originality and evanescence. The recognition of suchness renders the world alive and complete on its own, whole and indivisible. The recognition of the world as it enjoins an attitude for inquiry that decentres *human* experience as such vacates presupposed outcomes of learning and opens the learner to the world on its own terms. As such, suchness denotes a state of recognition, a coming-to-terms with things, and therefore a form of ontic encounter. Suchness is the apprehension of the noumenal and not a blank condonation of any human action as if ethics have no content. The plastic and Styrofoam that wash onto a beach is an ethical outrage, and responsible people will be

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[265] William Edward Sooth Hill and Hodous Lewis, eds., *Chinese Dictionary of Buddhist Terms* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1998).

[266] “Tathata” | Encyclopedia Article by *TheFreeDictionary*, accessed 14 August 2018, https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/tathata.

[267] Mario D’Amato, “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word,” in *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Mario D’Amato, Jay L. Garfield, and Tom J. F. Tillemans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41–55.

affected by the sight of this pollution. In this moment, suchness presents the situation with unflinching clarity: *This. This. This.* I must have ethical concerns that motivate me to address a glaring malaise; but I cannot effectively marshal the necessary efforts to work toward *what ought to be* if I cannot countenance *what is*, if in the depths of a panicked psyche I pine for any reality other than that which is in front of me. Suchness encompasses the state of things as they are, including my ethical objections and desire for action, and says: *And this too*.

So much of nature's subtleties escape our notice if we cleave to unexamined notions of *wonder* without questioning the calibre of attention that we bring to our experiences. The forest reveals its secrets according to the time we give to discovery: a passing glance yields but an impression; a year's watch reveals a year's insights. If educators acknowledge the inherent life and nuance of each square metre of wilderness, the *suchness* brimming at every turn, then our pedagogical praxis shifts from *instigating experiences of wonder in nature* to *preparing ourselves to receive the wonder already abundant in nature*. The latter approach calls upon attitudes, practices and capacities that elicit a slower pace of study, a more patient mode of engagement, a perceptiveness and openness that allows nature to reveal itself on its own terms.

The perceptive acuity in which suchness registers must be underwritten by cultivated patience and sensitivity. A frantic and distracted mind is not easily impressed by a dewdrop on a patch of moss. The refinement of attention and the elaboration of patience unfurl from the committed practice of listening ever so carefully, of returning awareness to the present, of noting the mind's incessant habits and softly steering its awareness to the phenomena at hand. As such, the practice of mindful attention squares with Payne and Wattchow's notion of *slow pedagogy*, which calls on meaning-makers to "pause or dwell in spaces for more than a fleeting moment," which helps them "attach and receive meaning from that place."[268] Slow pedagogy helps learners "experientially and reflectively access and address their corporeality, intercorporeality, sensations, and perceptions of time, space, and . . . place."[269] Elsewhere, Payne has expressed concern

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[268] Phillip G. Payne, "Critical Curriculum Theory and Slow Ecopedagogical Activism," *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 31, no. 2 (2015): 16.

[269] Phillip G. Payne and Brian Wattchow, "Phenomenological Deconstruction: Slow Pedagogy, and the Corporeal Turn in Wild Environmental/Outdoor Education," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 14, no. 1 (2009): 30.

over the accelerating speed of the *dromosphere*,[270] wherein digital cycles and mechanized rhythms of modernity force an increasingly frantic clip on human activity, education included. Every pedagogical encounter is temporally bound, and injunctions to *wonder* in the natural world must attend to the duration appropriate to encounter. As Smith[271] points out, the *agogic* accent, the length of sounds uttered in speech and the duration of notes played in music, is an inextricable part of ped-*agogy*. Education is never without the "rhythms, accents, beats and stresses"[272] that animate vital energies of living interaction. If the living world is indeed instructive, the call to slowness enjoins an attention to the rhythms and paces of natural places and initiates a reform of haste, the perfunctory attention paid to things that escape the notice of hurried minds. Suchness requires that I modulate my habitual tempo and relinquish my expectations about when and how quickly learning occurs.

In my observation of the forest, I found that attention directed at the ravens imparted a sense of duration, as the pauses between their rhythmic calls formed a temporal pattern presented by the ravens themselves. Counting my breaths between the guttural calls of the tree frogs was another way to inhabit time. Each wild thing exuded its own momentariness. Suchness was an invitation to step out of the confinement of habitual perception and relinquish myself to the momentariness of wild things, the realization of which shifted the tempo of quotidian paces, which fell in sync with the slow and silent spaciousness of the forest itself.

3.11. Eupooria

In early December, I took a day trip to Vancouver Island for a few errands. I withdrew some cash and kept it in my jean pocket. Throughout the month, three $50 notes remained in that pocket. The money languished without notice because life in the woods had little requirement for commerce. I did not frequent stores, shop for groceries, or pay for services in the way an urban economy requires of its participants. Money became less relevant to the act of living. To realize that I had not spent a penny in three

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[270] Payne, "Critical Curriculum Theory and Slow Ecopedagogical Activism."

[271] Stephen J. Smith, "A Pedagogy of Vital Contact," *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 6, no. 2 (1 December 2014): 233–46, https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp.6.2.233_1.

[272] Smith, "A Pedagogy of Vital Contact," 240

weeks was itself a revelation—so long had I been accustomed to a society that sees money as a requirement for basic existence. It came as a delight that I had shed the role of *homo economicus*, that the forest imparted an abundant life apart from the pecuniary concerns that had occupied urban life. Though I had a modest outlay by way of rent and food, the requirement for spending was no longer frequent or immediate. Money was not a great concern, not because I had great wealth but because the life I lived required so little of it. My daily occupations—nature study, outdoor work, meditation—afforded contentment of a different order.

The disparity between *rich* and *poor* seems endemic to modern cultures, a binary as stark as good and evil, light and dark. Wealth denotes a state of abundance, and with it, a well-spring of pleasure, comfort, status. Poorness, on the other hand, connotes a state of deprivation, the misery of unmet needs. Communities with a significant divide often suffer from many social ills. It seems that wealth is always to be preferred over poverty. However, the veneer of material comfort so ubiquitously exemplified by the upper and middle classes has been devastating to the planet as millions of aspiring and intrepid dreamers pursue a life of material comfort.

There is considerable trouble with the words "poverty" and "poor"—these concepts are by definition negative. Certainly, there is a poverty severe enough to cause abject suffering wrought by social, institutional, and systemic conditions, wherein a population struggles to obtain the basic goods necessary to a decent life. The scarcity of food and water, lack of access to shelter and health care, the absence of education and basic employment erode the basic dignity of human life. The prevalence of poverty calls to mind Murray Bookchin's[273] insistence on an "irreducible minimum"—any just society must provide its citizens with the necessities of life; failure to do so spells a grievous fault on the part of society itself. In communities where people are well-provided for but do not indulge in the excess that many North Americans take for granted, the Western way of life can seem puzzling, if not pernicious. Thus, what constitutes poverty can be skewed by our view of wealth.

In an industrial-consumer society, today's luxury becomes tomorrow's necessity. Distorted views of wealth can skew views of what is essential. Is there nothing good

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[273] Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1989); Murray Bookchin, *The Murray Bookchin Reader*, ed. Janet Biehl (New York: Black Rose Books, 1999).

about living with little? Thomas Merton has argued that the Catholic monk's deliberate adherence to poverty is not a masochistic fascination with suffering but rather a commitment to freedom unencumbered by the preoccupations of wealth.[274] In the Catholic tradition, poverty engenders an intimate experience of one's indigence and vulnerability.[275] In vulnerability, the contemplative cultivates a trust in providence, the charity of the community, and the beneficence of the cosmos. Poverty (in the Catholic sense) forms the condition under which one appreciates the riches always at hand and encourages adherence to limits while opening other avenues for joy, imagination, and creativity. Unencumbered by material concerns, contemplatives clarify their vision of life's essentials and avail themselves of the needs of the world.

I deem this freedom from economic servitude *eupooria*, the art of living well with little, the enjoyment of simplicity under constraint, making good of scarcity, and savouring the pleasures that lurk in plain sight. This play on "euphoria" risks a blind celebration of poverty, as if to make a virtue out of suffering. I am not oblivious to the plight of millions, neither do I condone stark inequalities that relegate many to misery. I only suggest that in the developed west, the unbridled pursuit of wealth has obscured the essentials of human flourishing, and there is a good and beautiful life that has little to do with money. The "poor" in *eupooria* underscores the vice of excess rather than the virtue of poverty. In forwarding *eupooria*, I address myself not to those who live on very little, but to the upper and middle class who possess every comfort but have forgotten the meaning of *enough*.

Thinking back to September, when Miles had injured a second paw and I had to find my way back to the cabin, I experienced a moment of great need. In this moment of need, I was saved by the kindness of strangers and felt embraced by the community and was thus further committed to the community's well-being. This experience of vulnerability and providence could not have happened had I possessed all the material means of my own travel. In my moment of need, I witnessed another form of richness that could not be bought or sold.

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[274] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*.

[275] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*.

Admittedly, I was supported by university and government funding. My wife had a steady career, and we owned our own home. I did not face financial jeopardy, and my middle-class status was never at risk. Others may argue that speaking from a position of privilege, I never experienced the pit of true poverty. However, one need not fall into poverty to recognize the illusions of wealth. My experience of earning and spending little challenged my ingrained preoccupation with financial security. The industrial-capitalist system conceives of individual agency within the terms of market exchange; purchasing power equals personal power. People's sense of meaning and worth are inextricably tied to their ability to hold their place in society and afford the trappings of their station. A life is not lived so much as earned and bought. The compulsion to meet a standard of living becomes an unquestioned norm; very few realize their servitude to the economic regime. Dwelling in the cool of the woods, far from the swelter of the marketplace, I saw that an unrelenting concern with pecuniary matters is a capitalist affliction, which makes a transaction of human exchange. I saw that a full and satisfying life could be lived with much less money than I supposed. This realization came as a rush of cool air as if I was finally able to breathe with both lungs. The hard imperatives of economic life—the concern with employment, salary, inflation, and debt—softened in the shadow of the forest.

Contemplative traditions of east and west have extolled the importance of poverty,[276] not because suffering is inherently noble, but because one must pass through vulnerability in order to discover a hidden agency.[277] One must experience powerlessness in order to manage power responsibly. The discovery of one's own resourcefulness is a windfall of another kind. In modern society, where every gadget and tool is available to make life easier, we can buy our way to a false independence that shields us from reliance on others and prevents the discovery of our own usefulness. An intention to live well with less opens possibilities for appreciating riches that have no price; laughter shared between friends, a hummingbird darting over the grasses, a splattering of altocumulus cloud over the forest. This ability to live well with less is not

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[276] "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." Matthew 5:3, New Living Translation.

[277] Zengetsu, a Zen master of the Tang Dynasty, wrote: "Poverty is your treasure. Never exchange it for an easy life." See Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh Zen Bones*, 88.

about self-punishing austerity, much less the naïve worship of scarcity; it is coming into possession of the riches that one already has.

3.12. Christmas

In the dark and cold days leading up to winter solstice, I softened into the hushed stillness of the land around me. I sat in the blue-black dark of morning, waiting for the arrival of light through the windows. I greeted the arbutus tree outside my door and watched the sun shimmer through the branches. I took long walks through the woods and listened to the waters lapping the bay. I studied the textures of driftwood on the beach. Everything was coming to stillness, and my interior landscape followed suit. This contemplative season occasioned reflection and rest; it was a time to let go of old preoccupations, of the year's struggles. The frosted soil and the misty hillsides whispered words of solace, carried in the occasional rustle of the branches. I listened and basked in the quiescent land.

There was something deeply restorative about winter's silence. The coldness was at once sombre and sacred. Winter orchestrated a movement into the darker passages of experience. In the enveloping darkness, I started to see the seasonality of my own unfolding, how I was to navigate the narrows that passed through grief, disappointment, longing, and joy. The anguish I felt about the world was given its own space underneath the cold sky, and I saw that it too abided by winter's rules; anxieties and stresses settled and found their place alongside the trees and sank into an earthly belonging. In watching the fading light of the day and easing myself into the evening, I was learning to let go of my own designs, my urge to shape my own fate, indeed the fate of the world. Grief found a salve, not in the rush of palliative activity—as if one must always *do* something, anything, about one's pain—but in the spaciousness of silence that honours grief's sacred presence. The landscape presided over this sombre ceremony of reflection and recuperation. Each morning was a ritual in gentleness, each evening a lesson in letting go. The land was a supreme teacher in this regard. The tone and timbre of its silences provided sage instruction to soften and rest.

In the days leading up to Christmas, I was happy to abide the long and dark nights. One day, however, Liz invited me to a musical gathering at her farm. I brought my guitar and played with a host of wonderful friends who sang and laughed by the fire.

On Christmas Eve, Simon and Carol invited me to dinner. I sat with their grown children who had gathered from various parts of the province. We enjoyed a delectable feast and they shared delightful stories of growing up on the island. I was moved by their generosity and inspired by that magnanimous spirit that welcomed a stranger to their table. Between the great hours of solitude and conviviality, my life was full and bursting with gratitude and energy.

Though I appreciated the company of my neighbours, Pam was on her own throughout the holidays. We decided that I would return to the city, bring Miles home for a week and spend some time together, the three of us. We had each been in our own place for six weeks, and I could sense this separation was hard on Pam. On December 27, I returned to Vancouver on an early morning sailing.

At the ferry terminal, I was surprised by the bustle of travellers. Standing in line for coffee, I was surrounded by a concourse of bodies weaving through a confined space. I felt tingles on my skin and heat rising up my neck with the surrounding activity. Soon after, the ferry set sail, and I searched for a seat on the passenger deck. The travellers were abuzz. Conversations everywhere. There was talk of basketball teams, a recent engagement, a workplace dispute, a child's new toy. Without an inch of space for a sprouting thought, I pushed open the deck doors and braved the bluster on the deck. But even here, a couple was conversing, shouting over the wind. Trapped inside a hall of noise, it seemed the world couldn't stop talking. After being steeped in the deep silence of the woods, the snowy sheaths that hushed the forest, this drone of human voices now seemed a mad clamour, and I found the crowds instantly overwhelming.

Upon my return to the city, I was struck by the intrusive lights that crowded out the dark. The streetlamps were intolerably bright, the storefronts garishly lit. The headlights from cars harassed the retina. In my own home, I was bothered by the glaring fixtures, each glowing bulb an affront to both visual and mental space. Even with all lights turned off, the walls glowed from lights bleeding from the street. The stars were no longer visible. The magnetism of the heavens had all but vanished. The darkness I found so nourishing in the depth of the forest seemed a world away.

The city also appeared polished and rigid in ways that I had not previously noticed. In contrast to the monotonous surfaces and manufactured materials of the city,

the forest hosted endless variance in texture and hue. The coarse bark of a Douglas fir defied uniformity; each inch of scaly fibre was unique and distinct. The rocks were daringly inventive—no boulder deigns to repeat the shape of its neighbour. The mosses and lichens varied in colour and vigour, always following the cropping slope of the hillside, the decomposing boles on the forest floor. Morning light filtered through a million needles and leaves, filling the variegated land in a bath of light. Paradoxically, this explosion of shapes and textures did not burden the senses, for there was constancy amid variety, coherence amid difference. In contrast, the urban landscape tended toward uniformity. The polished surface of the café window domesticated the sensate body by restricting texture to mechanical flatness and precise angularity. This manufactured refinement imposed a monotony that starved the senses and deprived the mind of play and spontaneity. Straight lines and geometric divisions disciplined the eye; sight was calibrated to symmetry and the even distribution of shapes. Every edifice was a study in geometric rigidity. In this world of tight shapes and sharp angles, vision itself became taut—the eyes dart and shoot fleeting glances rather than flow with the shifting scene. This frantic vision was itself gesture that underlies subtle dis-ease, whereby the eye flickers from one place to another, registering objects that command attention.

The jolting contrast between the city and forest revealed latent conditions that comprise the basis of learning. The silence and darkness of the forest, its variegated surfaces and shapes intimate an order that lives at the frontier of human imagination, gesturing to an existence beyond method and design. The forest generates and renews itself according to its own impulses, a self-organizing entity (without a *self*) that delivered me into the presence of something that transcended parochial selfhood. Its impenetrable darkness and silence were entry points into a larger cosmos beyond the craft of human hands. The city, on the other hand, multiplied the sense of self through the proliferation of human production. Every corner and surface was a specified intervention that would pave the soil and block the sky. If the silence of the wintery landscape was educative in leading toward rest and recuperation, the garish lights and whirling noises of the city pointed toward ceaseless activity and unremitting effort. The city, therefore, departs from the seasonality of the land's cycles; likewise, the urban mind is severed from the patterns inherent in the wholeness of life's varying passages. Because awareness, attention, and mentation are inextricably linked to the sensory registers, the jarring contrast between darkness and light, silence and noise, indicates a leap in mental

comportment from repose to motion, a course of exertion indifferent to the season's bidding.

My return to the city was therefore attended by both a psycho-sensory adjustment and the elation of reuniting with my family. I was already longing for the woods, even as I savoured the days spent with Pam and Miles. A backdrop of noise and lights added to a baseline of subconscious stress; I could sense the stirring of agitation that never came to boil but bubbled quietly, nevertheless. It was already harder for me to live in the city. On the other hand, I was glad to be home with my wife, with both of us chuckling when Miles flopped onto our laps and beckoned for affection. My time in the woods highlighted the overlapping and elastic tensions that attended the movement from the city to the island and back again. The excursion into a wild place fomented new bonds, and I was undoubtedly attached to that forest cradle; and yet strong bonds kept me nested in the city, where I felt both at home and somewhat frazzled. The task of reconciling the pull of disparate forces and integrating their effects would be a recurring challenge throughout the year.

Chapter 4. Spring

4.1. Ice

I returned to the island in early January 2018. The days were wet and cold, but I was glad to return to the cabin, back in the embrace of the arbutus trees.

The cold winter weather posed a challenge for bathing and hygiene. I had bathed outside throughout the fall; though some days were uncomfortably cold, I was nevertheless able to carry the bucket and wash without much difficulty. Now, with temperatures lingering just above zero on some days, the thought of an outdoor bath proved intimidating. I braved the cold one afternoon, the outside temperature at 4 degrees centigrade. As per usual, I boiled water, filled a bucket, and shivered to the back of the cabin with the water in tow. Teeth clattering, muscles tense with shivers, I drenched myself with hot water and quickly lathered with soap. Each pouring of hot water was invigorating, but the heat was broken by stinging cold between each scoop. In the grip of the frigid afternoon, the body felt vigorous and vulnerable at the same time. Having washed, I reached for the towel and dried myself off. I noticed that I was not simply shivering, but my muscles were succumbing to rigours that made it difficult for me to don clothes. I made it back into the cabin, sat by the warmth of the fire, and decided not to bathe outside when the temperature fell below 4 degrees. I would instead stay indoors and wipe myself with a warm, damp cloth.

During a cold spell in early February, the water pipes froze, blocking my supply of water from the cisterns up the hill. I turned to the water from a nearby pond. The pond held a store of clear and beautiful water under a layer of ice. I walked down to the edge with a bucket and an old pot, broke the sheet of ice on the surface, and filled the bucket with frigid water. In the thick of a blizzard, I watched the draft send columns of snow swirling up the vale, the cedars waving their whitened arms, the forest aflutter in the wintery gust. The animate forest served witness to the pond's provision, and I was treated to a splendid display. The water was part of this vast and unsearchable scene that bursts with vitality and life. Caught in the moment, I recognized myself as an interloper with the good fortune of watching this sylvan dance. Water had its own life and season; in its nestled home of the pond, the water lived in community with the snowy branches and the swirling wind. The entire scene was its own its own story, its own

irreducible vitality. I witnessed water's living context, its belonging within the land's nook and nestle. Venturing to this pond, I experienced water as a force that lives its own life in the woods, a life that had very little to do with me, even if I had intruded on its course for a time.

With the bucket filled, I lugged the water back to the cabin. It was a laborious task, hauling the bucket up a small hill. I took care not to spill even a few drops. One bucket was enough for a day's washing and cooking. Each dip into the bucket was a measure of use, and the watermark became an ostensible metre of my habits, an unmistakable indication of finitude. Unlike the water that came from the tap, the steady flow of which required little consideration of supply, the bucket was unforgiving, and I constantly gave thought to my next trip to the icy pond.

Conservation benefits when scarcity is made visible. Without tangible indications of use, I was liable to be careless with water. In those frozen days of winter, the daily ration of water was a great interrupter of my habits, and I became more stringent with the use of water. I filled a small tub for cleaning dishes and used no more; I was scrupulous in washing rice and cooking. Given the alarming waste of water around the world, and the rapid depletion of the water supply,[278] my experience living with daily rations of water provided new insights into my habits and instilled a new appreciation for this precious resource.

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[278] Marq De Villiers, *Water: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003).

Figure 4.1. Frozen land, frigid waters.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

4.2. Building

As a child growing up in Taiwan, I had spent my earliest years with my grandfather. He was a kind man who took me for rides on rowboats and told me old stories of Chinese emperors and their political intrigues. Having lived through years of Japanese occupation, he enlisted in the military as a young man, served as a mechanic in the air force and fought against Communist forces under the leadership of Chiang Kai-Shek. After the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan, my grandparents moved into a village built for military families, where they raised their five children. Times were tough, and the family made do with little. Having lived through war and scarcity, my grandfather had internalized values of frugality. He kept a minute-glass by the telephone to count the minutes spent in conversation; he was scrupulous about the use of water and electricity. His experience in the military provided him with mechanical expertise and skills of construction and repair that amazed me as a child. I gazed upon his shelves of

tools, boxes of screws of every size, and admired the gadgets that he had fashioned with his hands, revealing skills both mysterious and dazzling.

Like many Chinese parents, my grandfather valued education and harboured a hope that his descendants would rise above the hardships he endured throughout his life. School was the great emancipator, and he spurred his children and grandchildren toward the great prize of scholastic success. *The learned become emperors, the unlearned become slaves,* he would tell me in a rhyming couplet. *Before you enter the school in the morning, ask yourself: What do I intend to learn today? When you leave the school, ask yourself: What did I learn today?* Such were the teachings he imparted. In the way children feel the weight of a family's expectations, I sensed that my success in school would redeem the poverty and hardship that they had suffered. Through education, I would not be subject to the winds of circumstance, and my academic standing would be the boon that proved every sacrifice worthwhile.

My grandfather died in 1992, eight years before I graduated from university, the first among my extended family. It came as a bittersweet irony that, after years of progressing through academia, my doctoral research brought me to a place where I needed the practical skills that my grandfather possessed in abundance, and where my years of book learning seemed of little use. Schooling often privileges certain forms of learning over others; the "high-status" knowledge based on faculties of reason and intellection take precedence over "low-status" knowledge of practical skills and technical expertise.[279] My grandfather had invested in me the hope for a formal education; now, ensconced in the bastions of higher learning, I longed for his skill and craft, the practical prowess to make useful things with one's own hands.

Living in the woods, these practical skills seemed ever so indispensable. I often encountered practical challenges: *How do I swap out the propane tank without a wrench? How do I change the oil in the generator? What to do about a pin-hole leak in the water pipe?* Each challenge posed a unique demand on resourcefulness and creativity.

Practical problems can reveal the limitations of an intelligence shaped by the school institution. Ivan Illich has argued that despite evidence to the contrary, "school is

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[279] Bowers, *The Culture of Denial*.

an institution built on the axiom that learning is the result of teaching."[280] Illich believed that "pupils do most of their learning without, and often despite, their teachers."[281] The establishment of schools primarily creates an unlimited market for accredited teachers, sanctions certain forms of knowledge while discrediting others, and deprives pupils of the ability to learn apart from the services offered by certified professionals.[282] Although the world is endlessly informative, and people find multiples ways to master skills and knowledge, schools monopolize learning and assign credentials to fewer and fewer pupils as they progress through the school system. Later in his career, Illich questioned why a populace continued to seek education, even those proffered by non-compulsory, non-scholastic programs, such as in-service training, television programs and private seminars. He concluded that education has been conceived "under the assumption of scarcity . . . under the assumption that the means for acquiring something called knowledge are scarce."[283] Since the conditions under which knowledge is acquired are scarce, aspiring learners must subscribe to the services of qualified experts in order to access knowledge. Under the condition of scarcity, schools and teachers wield prestige as repositories and custodians of sanctioned knowledge.

In my own educational experience, Illich's critique landed in three ways: a) the endorsement of book-learning that came at the expense of more practical skillsets; b) the inculcation of procedures for the acquisition of knowledge and skill; c) the entrenched belief that the locus of knowledge lies outside myself, that learning is a journey outward in search of expertise. Regarding the former, my first inclination when confronted with a practical problem was to brainstorm a list of *who* and *what* to consult. By listing the experts of first resort, I reified a view of knowledge as something extrinsic, something accessed and assimilated in the act of learning.

In the fall, when I had consulted Walter and William about how to hang a curtain, I was seeking advice from knowledgeable experts. I was tracing a procedure in which learning entailed the search for qualified sources who could offer advice and direction. Thus, I handily cast myself in the role of a student in search of teachers, reenacting a

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[280] Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 1970), 28.

[281] Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 28.

[282] Illich, *Deschooling Society*.

[283] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord: House of Anansi, 1992), 71.

typical relationship instituted through my years of schooling. For my coming project, I was determined to try to learn on my own, to wager my own creativity and resourcefulness in an act of construction.

The owners of the cabin had built an outhouse ("butt hut") some thirty feet away from the cabin. The wood had started to rot from over fifteen years in the damp forest. The floor planks were cracked, the side-boards brittle with age. The old structure was ripe for a replacement. In April, I obtained permission from the owners to rebuild the outhouse. I studied the existing structure, took note of its layout, weight distribution, the placement of pillars and planks (Figure 4.2). Based on the photos, I sketched out a plan for the replacement. I elected to stay close to the original design but varied the aesthetic flourishes to reflect my own tastes.

Figure 4.2. Old outhouse.
Photo by David Chang 2017.

On a cloudy spring morning, I dismantled the outhouse in the span of an hour. The rot made the structure easy to pry apart. The scraps were piled aside. On a previous occasion, I met a man who owned a mill and sold lumber just up the road from where I lived. I borrowed my neighbour's old F-150 and purchased a batch of lumber milled from local balsam and Douglas fir. Ryan and Amy, my neighbours at the bottom of the hill, also gave me permission to take some lumber from their stockpile. I took three planks of balsam and carried each piece up the hill to my cabin.

One significant question at the outset: should I use power tools or hand tools? Though an innocuous question, the decision signified a relationship to machines that revealed an incumbent habitus. A hand-held circular saw required the use of a generator. Because the project required much woodwork, I assumed the use of power tools by default. But why assume power tools? Through my conversations with neighbours, I learned that most people on the island used power tools in their construction projects. The prevalence of power tools constituted a norm, a standard of practice that served as a common reference point. Further, I had never learned to use these tools, and the thought of acquiring a new skill was enticing. I was aware of my trepidation around power tools, and the thought of injury loomed large in my mind. The admixture of enticement and intimidation was a potent force. The prospect of overcoming an underlying fear further compelled me to try the tool. I found an old power saw in the shed, left there by the owner. I replaced the old, rusted blade. On a Sunday afternoon, I plugged the power saw into the generator and readied myself for practice.

Prior to my venture on the island, I considered taking a course in woodworking to learn to safely operate power tools. A formal class would have imparted safety procedures and necessary precautions. However, the inclination to look to someone else for instruction and guidance was precisely what I now questioned. Due to my remote location, emergency response teams could not arrive quickly in the event of injury. Because I was relatively secluded in the woods, there might not have been anyone around to hear my plea for help. Therefore, my trepidation served as a guide for precautions. I wore thick leather work gloves, a pair of goggles for eye protection, and a long-sleeve shirt to protect my skin from woodchips. I held the saw in my hand and practised the sawing motion to gauge its weight. I pulled the trigger and felt the kick of the motor. I placed my left hand on a wood plank, but not too close to the marked line. I initiated the first cut—the blade roared to start, and I pushed the blade through the plank. The blurry blade sliced through grain and exited the other side with ease. I made several subsequent cuts, varying the force in my right arm that pushed the saw through the cut. I practised making my lines straighter, more decisive. After several cuts, I shut off the generator and put away the saw.

In this practice session, I noticed a turn in my own confidence. An act previously thought dangerous was now pacified, as if I had walked through a thick, imposing wall to emerge into the clear, open space on the other side. I had not so much *overcome* the

challenge so much as gone *through* it. I saw clearly how the intimidation that held sway was a product of my own inexperience. This buoyed confidence strengthened my enthusiasm for the project and further instantiated a growing faith in my own abilities.

Trepidation on the hither side of a challenge can induce avoidance, or it can be an invitation for measured and deliberate action. The challenge need not be addressed all at once but only broken into manageable bits. The threat of injury became an impetus to brainstorm and implement safety precautions. By instituting steps to familiarize myself with the tool, I unconsciously designed a graduated series of steps to help me learn the tool and refine my skill: I held the tool unplugged and practised the necessary motion; I plugged in the tool and pulled the trigger to familiarize myself with how it behaved. New knowledge and skills often appear daunting; however, with steadiness and even-minded consideration, the threat can be met with precautions that mitigate the risks. Self-directed learning requires this ability to assess, evaluate, and plan out the exercises that build to a larger experiment.

4.3. One Continuous Mistake

The adage "don't reinvent the wheel" reminds us that there exist designs that have been tested. The *wheel* stands for something already perfected, a standard by which other variations are measured. In other words, there is supposedly a *proper* way to do something, a more efficient method of accomplishing a task. However, there can be a conflation of the *expedient* with the *optimal*, for quick and easy is not always best. Living in the woods, I often encountered practical tasks that challenged my skills and resourcefulness. In every instance, the thought occurred to me: *Don't reinvent the wheel . . . there must be a proper and easier way to do this . . . where can I get this information?* However, this line of thinking reinforced my reliance on experts. In order to build knowledge through experimentation, I had to trust my judgement. I would reinvent the wheel if I needed to, even if it meant doing something the hard way.

The project began on a sunny spring morning. I laid out the circular saw, generator, extension cord and two sawhorses. I started to plane and cut the first pieces of lumber. I squared the base of the outhouse with 2x6 boards, adding hefty 4x4s for structural rigidity (Figure 4.3). Then, I framed the side walls. I used a heavy piece of balsam to serve as the horizontal brace, the ends of which had to be cut at an angle to

follow the slope of the roof. I pencilled the lines and proceeded with the cut. Because the piece was big and unwieldy, I had to move around the block to pencil the lines. I cut the end pieces and brought the plank to the structure. To my dismay, I had drawn and cut the wrong angles—instead of a trapezoid, I ended up with a parallelogram. I attributed this gaffe to carelessness and tried again with another piece of lumber, careful to draw the correct lines with opposing angles. But alas, I made the same mistake! Something about moving to the other side of the sawhorses bewitched my sense of direction, and I end up marking the wrong lines. Two pieces of lumber gone to waste! I stood there, fuming at my stupidity.

In this moment of frustration, I saw an ingrained reaction to unintended outcomes. An error is by definition regrettable, but the harshness of my recoil was cause for reflection. Why associate errors with stupidity, as if each gaffe reflected some fundamental flaw? If mistakes were unintentional, was it not equally appropriate to meet them with curiosity and humour? Granted, the scarcity of materials could make mistakes expensive, but even then, I questioned if an error should be ascribed to a flaw in character and intelligence. This reflexive leap to judgement, which tied what I *do* to what I *am*, seemed to stem from conditioning, whereby performance equalled competence and worth coterminous with achievement. Somewhere in my upbringing, I had internalized a censorious attitude toward mistakes and failure.

My experience throughout years of schooling was punctuated by anxious moments before the release of test scores, the marked paper, the scholarship results. Scholastic evaluations engendered a sense of selfhood predicated on external measures, confidence and diffidence precariously balanced on a letter grade. Mistakes were not indicators of proficiencies yet to be developed but demerits in the measurement of personhood. In a system of grades and rankings, the distribution of which formed a hierarchy of esteem and recognition, I had internalized a fastidiousness that tolerated few errors and latched my self-worth to elusive notions of perfection. Now, far from the halls of the schoolhouse, I was reenacting the harshness of judgement that had marked my scholastic training.

In his criticism of schools, Ivan Illich observed: “In a schooled world, the road to happiness is paved with consumer’s index.”[284] According to Illich, those deemed “successful” in schools do not excel because they have developed their own powers of learning, but because they have adhered to the rules of an institutional game. They have learned to need schools and have warped their sense of self-worth to suit the sanctions of school authorities.[285] Assessment practices intimate the inquisitional nature of schooling, whereby a child’s learning is “put on trial” through quizzes and exams. The exam was not only a summative statement of one’s understanding; it schematized the procedures of learning while constructing knowledge as a state of cognition that could be ascertained, quantified, and ranked. This schema presses into the child’s psyche, becoming an internalized logic that ramifies into other forms of undertaking. With every attempt at a new endeavour, something is assumed to be at stake, which makes mistakes hard to tolerate.

Rather than a demerit, a mistake is merely evidence. A mistake reveals another point in the path of inquiry and suggests possibilities for exploration; mistakes are assets, not liabilities. In the practical arts, people who learn without the assistance of experts must derive guidance from their mistakes. In order to learn from these mistakes, they must first be magnanimous about mistakes, for they are the *stuff* of progress. In this sense, mistakes are the movements inherent in (and inextricable from) the act of learning. By contrast, the primary casualty of an educational program that penalizes mistakes is the dislocation of confidence, as the learner aims to appease external standards and derive status from institutional measures. The supposed meritocracy of the school system extorts from pupils their own authority over learning while depriving them of the opportunity to witness their own ingenuity.

Having internalized the logic of the school’s rewards and sanctions, the harshness of judgement toward my own mistakes suggested another psycho-spiritual habit. I had groomed and maintained an image of myself as someone competent and meticulous, someone who prized excellence and perfection. The ruined pieces of lumber had pierced those illusions. Something of my self-image was upended. In reviewing the blunder, I was glad nobody was around to see the gaffe. This conjuring of another’s

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[284] Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 40.

[285] Illich, *Deschooling Society*.

gaze was part of an image that was unconsciously projected, a sense of myself that I wanted to keep up for myself and others. A mistake, then, could be a precious moment of revelation, an invitation to relinquish the labour of maintaining a self-image. In his comments on the value of mistakes, Shunryu Suzuki commented on the significance of Shoshaku Jushaku (將錯就錯):

> Dogen-zenji said, “Shoshaku jushaku.” Shaku generally means “mistake” or “wrong.” Shoshaku jushaku means “to succeed wrong with wrong,” or one continuous mistake. . . . A Zen master’s life could be said to be so many years of *shoshaku jushaku*. This means so many years of one single-minded effort.[286]

According to this Zen commentary, mistakes are inseparable from effort. Effort is not the labour toward a distant perfection, but rather a constant recognition of the contingent nature of self. To fall short of an arbitrary vision of perfection is not necessarily to fail at one’s aspirations, but to see more clearly the contrivances that hold sway. Hence, *one continuous mistake* refers to the recurring process of seeing my own construction of self, recognizing the habitual patterns that uphold a cherished self-image. In this sense, mistakes are not the means to a teleological end, but an ongoing opportunity to peer into the artifice of self.

Having taken note of my habitual reaction to errors, I needed to adopt a softer comportment. By taking on a project for which I did not have the requisite skills, I was forced to summon a dormant resourcefulness, calibrating my measures and adjusting my actions. By learning to appreciate my mistakes, I was letting go of an uptight and anxious pattern, while also migrating from one learning paradigm to another. I had to re-establish a trust in my own faculties and rediscover within myself a locus of learning.

I took the last viable plank of lumber that could serve as a horizontal beam. This time, I did not move to the other side of the sawhorses to make the cuts. I placed bolts on each corner of the drawn lines and made certain that I had a trapezoid shape before I sawed off the ends. At last, I had a usable piece. Next, I framed the roof and installed the siding (Figure 4.4). Each piece added more stability to the structure. A departure from the previous structure, I left open a section of the sidewall and installed thin

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[286] Shunryu Suzuki, Richard Baker, and Huston Smith, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (New York: Weatherhill, 2000), 39.

horizontal slats for a stylistic motif (Figure 4.5). The slats also suggested a slightly urban aesthetic that contrasted nicely with the rustic surroundings. Further, the slats aided with ventilation while preserving privacy and made the structure more resilient against strong winds. With the slats complete, I constructed a bench for the toilet seat. I borrowed a jigsaw from my neighbour and managed to cut an oval shape into the bench. For access to the bucket, I constructed a door secured by a simple latch. Finally, I reused the corrugated metal roof from the previous outhouse, shaping its edges to fit the new roof. Barring some delays from rain, the whole project took me approximately two weeks to complete (Figure 4.6).

Many people have created far more impressive structures with greater skill and finesse. Next to them, my foray into construction was feeble by comparison. Still, looking at the finished structure, I could not help but feel a surge of pride. Each joint and corner was a tangible rejoinder to initial self-doubt. The project instilled some confidence in my ability to meet the demands of living. In the bustle of the modern economy, life consists of transactions—earning an income, spending money to pay for goods and services. People hold jobs, and through their wages, they transmute specific labour into unspecified potential, for the coin converts into any good and service offered on the market. Human life is thus subsumed under an overarching economic reality, and personhood stands against the rule of monetary pressures. Whereas urbanites purchase services and goods and therefore live the transactional lives of *homo economicus*, I was witnessing another form of agency, coming to the possession of an ability to service my living requirements without resort to hiring professionals as a default. Much of this new confidence was made possible by the largess of my neighbours, who lent me tools and their truck. With their generosity as a foundation, I was able to nurture an emerging trust in my ability to build the structures necessary to life in the woods. This confidence signalled a shift in the axis of autonomy; instead of leaning on my capacity to earn money, I was more directly able to shape the material structures of my surroundings. I saw that there was a life in which money does not militate matters of living, nor was I doomed to servitude under the modern economy, paying others to do what I could do for myself.

Figure 4.3. Base and side frame.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

Figure 4.4. Roof and wall frames complete.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

Figure 4.5. Slats for wall and gable.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

Figure 4.6. Completed outhouse.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

4.4. Piston to Muscle

Throughout the course of constructing the outhouse, my decision to use power tools meant a reliance on the generator. Hours of work passed under the hum of the

motor, which grated on the ears and violated the silence of the forest. On one spring day, I happened to meet Blair, an older gentleman who lived on the other end of the island. He was curious about my research project, and we talked at length about living in the woods, our life philosophies, and the traditions that informed our views. A man of impressive experience and erudition, Blair spoke beautifully about the events that led him to the island and the changes he had witnessed throughout the decades. We shared an admiration for Eastern traditions, from Zen to Yoga. He invited me to his house, and I was happy to oblige.

We entered through a wooden gate, passing through thick overstory and dark undergrowth, coming through an opening surrounded by several noble cedars. We arrived at Blair's house, a towering structure three and half stories in height. It was one of the tallest houses I had seen on the island. Blair told me the story of the house, how he began construction in the seventies, slowly adding new sections in the intervening years.

Blair: There weren't generators back then. Everything was cut by hand.

Me: You mean every piece of wood in this house was hand-sawn?

Blair: Every piece, including the sidings.

Me: Didn't that take a lot of time?

Blair: Sure, but what's the rush?

I took a moment to reflect on his words. The recognition of this meticulous manual labour made the house truly stunning, and my reliance on power tools regrettable.

Me: I just built an outhouse, but I used a generator and some power tools. I can't imagine building a house of this size with only hand tools.

Blair: Well, you are a meditator, aren't you?

Me: Yes.

Blair: Construction is a meditation. When you use a hand-held pull-saw, see if you can narrow your attention to the motion of your arms, the sound of the saw chewing through the wood.

> Calibrate the movement of your arms so it matches your heartbeat. Push the saw as you inhale, pull as you exhale.

Something about this suggestion stirred a wellspring of inspiration. The Zen tradition has long emphasized mindful attention to mundane activities, for the "ordinary mind"[287] is not different from the enlightened mind.[288] Meditative awareness on the cushion is no different from wakeful attention in everyday activities—pouring tea, carrying wood, cutting lumber. Blair's instruction reminded me of mindful awareness amidst the motions of daily life. Somehow, in my preoccupation with matters of construction, I had put aside thoughts of contemplation. While I meditated in the early mornings and evenings, I had not included physical work as part of a contemplative life. Buddhist monks saw physical work as a fundamental component of liberation, an opportunity to overcome ego-centredness.[289] Blair's suggestion recalled a long-held intention, and I was grateful for this reminder.

The inclination to use power tools extends from exemplars that instantiate a state of affairs. If every homesteader used power tools and generators, their actions became a reference point from which a novice built his practice. In response to Richard Jenkins, who critiqued Bourdieu for postulating the theory of habitus without demonstrating the mechanisms of its formation, I posit that one mechanism may consist in the standard reference of practice through prevalence and repetition. Social agents, through gestures of imitation—those rudimentary techniques of learning and skill acquisition—reproduce practice and in the process ingrain within themselves the dispositions and habits common to practice. Mimesis initiates the gestures that through repetition are inducted into the repertoire of practice. If the use of power tools is thought a matter of course, so are the dispositions that cohere with mechanization. As one becomes habituated to gasoline-powered convenience, manual labour becomes increasingly onerous, and the body atrophies through disuse. Few people opt to work harder with less efficiency—at least not according to "common" sense. The popularization of power tools transmutes into the logic of the power tool, which stipulates a norm and its concomitant expectations.

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[287] A. V. Grimstone, ed., *Two Zen Classics*, 73.

[288] See Case 19 of the *Mumonkan* (Gateless Gate): Joshu asks Nansen, "What is the Way?" "Ordinary mind is the Way," Nansen replies.

[289] Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*.

However, if the use of power tools derives from pervasive norms that serve as exemplars, so must the craftsman who works solely by hand. The patient toil of handcraft is all the more remarkable in the world of droning machines. My chance meeting with Blair threw into relief my reliance on power tools, and I resolved to take on my next project using only hand tools.

The cabin had a wooden shower attached on its north side. As with the previous outhouse, the shower was dilapidated, worn by many years in the elements. Since I still had a store of materials left over from the outhouse project, I set about rebuilding the shower. Using a Japanese-made pull-saw, I started by cutting pieces for the frame. It took me approximately three minutes to cut each piece. I moderated the movement of my arms to match my heartbeat, breathing mindfully with each stroke of the right arm. The work was slow but steady. Without the drone of the generator, my senses stayed attuned to the pulse of the forest. As the pull-saw came to rest, I heard the chatter of the nearby swallows and felt a breeze brushing against my face. The work took on a leisurely quality. There was a sanity and dignity in the manual labour. The exertion of muscles evinced the honesty of a body in contact with material. Sweat expressed the integrity of work, the body's exertion in connection with the strength of the land. Wendel Berry once wrote: "we must learn again to think of human energy, *our* energy, not as something to be saved, but as something to be used and to be enjoyed in use."[290] The power afforded by motorized tools could accomplish much, but not without a cost to our sensate faculties. With regard to energy-saving machines, Berry wrote: "There is no such thing as a reservoir of bodily energy. By saving it—as our ideals of labor–saving and luxury bid us to do—we simply waste it, and waste much else along with it."[291] Motorized tools left homesteaders estranged from the body. And with greater efficiency also came a greater expectation of productivity; thus, the labourer worked longer to maximize production, leading to E. F. Schumacher's observation of a curious paradox: "The amount of real leisure a society enjoys tends to be in inverse proportion to the amount of labour-saving machinery it employs."[292] As I worked without power tools, the

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[290] Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 224.

[291] Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 224.

[292] Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, 158.

work itself became relaxing. I spent the mornings cutting plywood, and the labour was immensely enjoyable. There was fullness of satisfaction in every movement.

Berry observed that a technology is not only constituted by the tool itself but also by the skill of the user, the craft and technique called forth in the user's interaction with the tool.[293] The circular saw not only cut lumber, but also shaped the self in its demand for strength and precision; it inured the user to the hum of the generator and the scream of the blade, thus imposing a blunted sensitivity to noise. On the other hand, the mindful attention adduced from a hand-held pull-saw was part and parcel of the saw's function; its serrated teeth sliced through both hardened timbre and habitual mentation. Thus, technology is not merely a means for the user; the user is subject to the demands of the tool, and in fact becomes a product of the tool. Produced objects are attended by a manner of attention and craft during their production process; beyond the specification of outcomes, educators must consider the calibre of awareness, the kind of care and attention called into service within a program of learning. Activities and gestures that enjoin attention to physical movement and connect the senses to the surrounding landscape contribute to a skillset that is more in harmony with land, more respectful of the forest community. A wooden shower is an ostensible outcome of labour, but it also constitutes a mental pattern and a suite of sensory experiences imparted by the tools and methods of construction.

I completed the shower over the course of ten days. Piece by piece, the structure came together (Figure 4.7). On a lovely afternoon in late May, I had my first shower in the new structure after months of bathing on a patch of moss. The weather now warmer, I doused myself with invigorating cold water. The smooth planks of the new shower were nothing short of luxury. Standing there in a work of my own hands, the forest splendid before my eyes, I experienced a radiant joy and satisfaction.

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[293] Berry, *The Unsettling of America*.

Figure 4.7. Completed shower.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

For my final project, I constructed two birdhouses as a tribute to the swallows that accompanied me as I worked in the woods. It was their song that refreshed my spirit as I laboured over each piece of wood. Ray, a fellow nature lover and avid birder, provided me with the dimensions for the entry hole and the optimum height of the bird houses. With the scraps I had left, I built small enclosures and installed them near the staple and the shed. I hoped these boxes would provide safe shelter for migrating families for many years into the future (Figure 4.8).

In his work on contemplation and ecological responsibility, Douglas Christie expounded on the virtue of craft.[294] If consumption is so odious, then its antithesis must be *making*, not in the sense of mass production, but craft,[295] for "we do not *consume* what we make—we savour and enjoy them."[296] The experience of making something stands in stark contrast to the purchase of manufactured goods. Whereas a purchase is

[294] Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[295] Douglas Christie, "The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Contemplative Practice and Ecological Responsibility" (Vancouver, Canada, 4 March 2016).

[296] Christie, "The Blue Sapphire of the Mind."

about exchange, *making* presents a demand on one's skill and knowledge—something about my faculties was transformed in the act of making something. In the process of building these structures, I confronted my inhibitions, learned to trust the spirit of experimentation, and befriended my mistakes. The result was a newfound faith in my faculties. The crux of this experience was the development of agency via new techniques of the self,[297] practices of craft and ingenuity that threw into relief the hegemony of a mechanized, industrial society.

Figure 4.8. Nesting boxes for swallows.
Photo by David Chang 2018.

4.5. A Visit

Mom hurled into the toilet as I listened outside the locked door. We were aboard the ferry to the island, bracing against the rough waters that sent the ship pitching over white chops. My parents had been fascinated by my project and had waited eagerly for an opportunity to visit. I met them at the ferry terminal, and now we were riding the ship that would carry us to my off-grid abode. The weather was not favourable. Strong winds made for a rough crossing. Dad kept his eyes firmly fixed on the horizon, his knuckles white in a tight grip on the metal bars overhead. Mom did not fare as well. Overtaken by

[297] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

seasickness, she locked herself in the onboard washroom, heaved loudly as the ship rolled over the miserable waters. Other passengers glanced my way with expressions of concern.

The ship finally docked at the island's terminal. Mom was glad to be on solid ground. My neighbours were kind to lend me the F-150, and I drove my parents southbound in the old truck. On the gravel road, Mom reached into her satchel and produced containers of cut fruit, just as she had done so many years ago at Narita airport. "I know you haven't been getting fresh fruit, so I brought your favourite." Inside the containers: strawberries, pineapples, honey melon. The gesture melted me, and I thanked her for this kindness.

We arrived at Liz's farm; she had agreed to rent us a suite at her barn. Dad was delighted to see the island, so distant and remote from anything he had known. He looked around the farm, marvelled at the horses, and basked in the magnificent silence of the surroundings. I unloaded their bags, boiled a pot of water, and made tea.

Mom: You look thin.

Me: I've lost weight, but I'm healthy and I feel fine, mom.

Mom: Why are you doing this to yourself?

Me: Don't worry about me. I'm happy here.

Mom: Is this absolutely necessary?

Me: For now, yes.

Although she supported this retreat, she thought of my life in the woods as a form of hardship. It was difficult to explain that although I didn't have the comforts of urban life, my spirit was alive and thriving, that I was indeed happy.

Dad said to me: "I've asked around. Some of my friends' kids have gone through graduate school and obtained their PhDs. None of them have had to do what you're doing. Why is your program so difficult?"

I explained that the off-grid project was not a requirement of the program, that I was here out of my own research interest. Dad listened and nodded. As a businessperson, academia was a foreign world to him, and he struggled to grasp the

workings of the university. He was baffled by his son, who would abjure the trappings of urban life and opt to live in relative austerity in the woods. Though I tried to explain myself, Dad shrugged and chuckled. “Sounds pretty tough to me,” he said. All my years of schooling seemed to have imparted some distance between my parents and me; theories and books had churned my thoughts and carved my views into something unrecognizable and obscure. Indeed, they were often puzzled by the ideas that informed my views.

My parents were thirty-nine when they immigrated to Canada, the same age I was when I went off-grid. Mom wanted us to emigrate because I suffered from asthma as a child, and she hoped to raise me in a place with clean air. Dad sold his successful auto parts business and left his extended family and friends. He cried on the plane, terrified of the uncertainty that awaited us, anxious about the new life ahead. At seven and ten, my younger brother and I were elated about starting life in Canada; but in my excitement, I was oblivious to the trepidation that my parents felt, starting over again in a strange land at thirty-nine, two kids in tow.

My mom got a job working at a cannery, gutting fish and stuffing filets into tin cans. She came home exhausted and reeking of fish. There were days when she could not lift her arms after the day’s labour. One day, she brought home two whole salmon from the factory, but the bag leaked in the trunk of the car. Fishy water seeped into the fabric, and the car was rank for the next month. I secretly resented her for working at the cannery, coming home every day with an odour that cleaved to the house. In my childish mind, I could not yet appreciate the greatness of that labour, the arduous toil for her children.

Dad partnered with a friend and opened a furniture store. To save the cost of delivery personnel, dad delivered the furniture himself. He and his partner lugged tables and sofas and assembled chairs in strangers’ living rooms. However, the venture floundered, and dad eventually shuttered its doors. He then went into business with another friend and took on a small factory that produced disposable chopsticks and tongue depressors. He came home every day with boxes of chopsticks and paper sleeves. The family sat around the dinner table, sliding chopsticks into paper sleeves, hundreds of pairs every evening. I hated the tedium of that work and looked for excuses to dodge the chore. There was homework to complete, or a playdate with a friend. Mom

and Dad would excuse me while they remained at the table late into the evening, often finishing the day's quota well after I had gone to bed. In my youth, I understood little of their dedication, nor of "love's austere and lonely offices."[298]

They made do with what they could scrounge together, kept us sheltered from the stress of finances, and urged my brother and me to excel in school, for our academic success would be the most direct recompense for their work. We were new immigrants, and learning English seemed the pinnacle of all challenges. Thirty years later, my parents believe their labours were worthwhile. I was a teacher and an academic, my brother a partner at an investment bank. My grandfather would have been proud, they told me. However, for my parents, my academic pursuit was also baffling. I was a graduate student mucking about in the backcountry, wearing a ragged shirt and jeans caked with mud, carrying water and splitting wood. A life in the bush was not the immigrant's dream that they had imagined for me, and they were puzzled by the esoteric theories that brought me to land and soil. My hapless attempts to explain the cultural roots of the ecological crisis, delivered through faltering Mandarin, could not bridge the gulf that separated us. For me, a life of physical work was liberation from the tyranny of the screen; for them, white-collar work in an air-conditioned office was emancipation from toil in the mid-day sun. I saw my dad's career and envied his entrepreneurial savvy; I saw my mom's dedication in raising her children and wondered if I could ever be so selfless. My education had given me much, but it had also taken me far away from the knowledge and wisdom that had been close to home, the practical skills that were left behind by my formal education. Through their sacrifice, I obtained the station they had hoped for me, but I also became estranged from my roots. School had turned me into a stranger, leaving my parents to peer into my life as outsiders. Extended schooling leaves a complex and ambiguous legacy; it opens doors while closing others. In the pages of books, I conversed with sages from centuries past, but I would struggle to communicate with my parents, who had given me everything.

In the late afternoon, I took my parents down to the bay. Mom found the scenery breathtaking, and Dad relished the ocean breeze. The land and waters were persuasive in their own way, and my parents saw the beauty of a life lived in communion with the

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[298] Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," *Poetry Foundation* (Poetry Foundation, 20 March 2021).

wild. I took them up to my cabin and gave them a tour of the surroundings. Mom could not believe that I showered outside, that I dug holes for my own excreta. She was squeamish about the whole arrangement, and we had a good laugh in the fading light that filtered through the forest.

The next morning, dad came to visit me in the cabin. He had hiked up the hill, despite his two hip replacements. “This air is sweet and pristine!” he remarked when I came to the door. The charms of the island had clearly made an impression. We returned to the barn and ate toast with coffee. I could tell that they were beginning to see the beauty of a slow and simple life. “A person would be lucky to live here,” Mom said, even though she would not be able to persist on the island. She had been terrified to visit the latrine the previous evening, put off by the pitch dark of the night, and frightened by the thought of what might’ve lurked in the bucket. Her reticence was striking to me. Having grown up in a rural part of Taiwan, mom was no stranger to rustic living. Why was she now finding it difficult? “That was a long time ago,” she said, “I’m too used to city life now.” Alas, the years can carve out a habitus; the amenities of the city have expunged the habits that attended her childhood and circumscribed the conditions that she now found tolerable.

We toured the island, saw some beaches, visited a café by the dock. I showed my parents the little spring where I drew water, demonstrated my gestures of thanksgiving before gathering the first scoop of water. In the evening, we cooked and shared a meal together. My parents were full of questions about life on the island, how people lived, how they managed to earn money. They were amazed by the fierce resilience and resourcefulness of the residents, how they exemplified an ideal so foreign to the dreams that many immigrants harboured. We conversed late into the night, and I told stories of my year thus far: Miles falling ill, catching mice, and drawing water from a pond during a cold spell. Having listened to my stories, Mom said: “This might not be a life for us, but very few people have experiences like this. I know that this year is a special one for you.” I nodded in silent appreciation.

It was a short visit. They had arrived on Friday and were scheduled to depart on Sunday morning. I drove them to the dock, loaded their bags, and helped them onto the ship. I watched my folks, slower and frailer than I remember, stand on the deck of the ship, waving to me. I wished for them to stay, for them to feel the same peace and

healing that the island had provided for me, to feel the shelter of the land enfold them the way they sheltered when I was a child. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. Life’s too short for that,” Dad said. “Eat whatever you want, don’t starve,” Mom said. I nodded. The engine started and the ship pulled away. “Come back soon!” Mom called from the deck. I agreed and waved.

Fortunately, the waters were calm, and Mom would not be subjected to another bout of seasickness. The ship set sail, and my folks smiled to me from the deck. The distance between us was bridged by a sweetness beyond words. Though I was drawn to the woods, I also felt a tug toward my parents, toward that sure bond which kept me whole and hale throughout my life. In time, my return to city would be a comfort to them, and I would be glad to put their worries to rest. For now, I needed to learn the lessons of the land. I watched from the dock until the ship disappeared behind an outcrop of rock and forest.

Some loves have no words

Some loves have no words
My mother has no use for them
Hers lands on the tongue
In the tartness of the pineapple
The tangy pinch of oranges.
My father never says it,
But after an argument
Long after I’d slammed the door
He’d call from the staircase:
come down for dinner,
And I knew all was forgiven.
So now I dispatch with letters
Watch the hollows of shimmering water
Bless the ship in winds of appreciation
The gravity of all that need not be said
Fills the gulf between us.

4.6. Trash

In early spring, I browsed the beach after a rainstorm and found a bicycle wheel lodged between pieces of driftwood. Reading the inscription on the metal, I discerned that the wheel was made in Taiwan. Tickled by the irony of a Taiwanese boy finding a Taiwanese-made wheel on the other side of the ocean, I carried the wheel back to the

cabin. During the ensuing weeks, the wheel sat in the shed while I contemplated its final resting place. I gathered the bike wheel along with some broken totes, rusty paint buckets, and old glass bottles left by previous cabin occupants, loaded them into my neighbour's truck and drove to the island's trash dump. The community had designated a site for refuse that cannot be recycled. The materials were separated into heaps, plastic and metal. The dump itself was a strange sight to behold—a clearing in the forest surrounded by lush trees, and three mounds of unsightly mess piled amid all the splendour. The stacks of miscellany were the effluence emitted from a maniacal machine that leaves chaos in its wake. Yet the wild forest remained ever so dignified and upright, majestic under a unified order. The jarring contrast was a stark illustration of a fundamental rupture in the natural order. The dump replaced greenery with ashen scraps. That most of our consumer goods cannot be integrated back into the land was a poignant illustration of human separation from the biological process that supports life. The disjuncture was not merely material but also aesthetic. Not only do plastics not biodegrade, but they are also an unsightly oddity within the landscape. Each item in its aesthetic discontinuity signified a repudiation of earthly form, a defiance against the shape and texture of terrestrial harmony.

Yet, these materials had to go somewhere. The admission of an inescapable reality, the need for a place in which to dump trash, illustrated the powerlessness of the consumer predicament. The system operates on the logic of externality, and production occludes meaningful options in the disposal of materials. In the absence of alternatives, people had *no choice* but to dump somewhere. This lack of good options is the invisible partner that accompanies the illusions fostered by industry, which prides itself on invention and innovation. On the other side of its productive might, industry finds its powers vanished, unable to return to providential nature. The incinerator and the landfill are tragic sites that signify an unfinished potency that appropriates without the ability to reintegrate.

The island community charged $25 for each deposit at the dump; the cost discourages unscrupulous dumping. Thus, most residents were careful in their management of trash. Still, the image of the bike wheel placed on a heap of scrap is etched into my memory. The image of the squalid landfill should serve as a conscience for those enticed by trendy stores, the shelves lined with glittering products. Reflection on disposal is not a cynical aspersion on consumerism but rather a basic responsibility

that accords materials their due consideration. The mess of the landfill calls for greater demands on government and industry to reform operations, to produce goods that can be readily reabsorbed into the biosphere, to eliminate “disposal” as a stage in a product’s lifecycle.

4.7. Familiarity and Novelty

In the brightness of a May morning, I perched on the seat in the outhouse and took in the radiant verdure. Flakes of light pranced through rifts in the forest cover, and the warrens of salal spilled over the hillside. The vivid scene relieved the memory of winter only a few months ago, when darkness was thick and absolute. Now, the woods came to a vibrant exclamation. The land itself was astir and bursting, the green canvas above dotted with birdsong. I sat from this perch and gave thanks for the opportunity to be here, to watch the forest awaken to the vernal day. To watch the woods turn in the shifting intensities of light is to touch the moving baseline of my own seasonality, the changes in mind and body that cohere with the turning of the cosmos. It is a comforting form of groundedness, wherein I witnessed the cyclicality of time, the recurring pattern of life’s passages. Taking cues from Douglas fir and arbutus, the rich rolling moss, I saw that every supposed end was the start of another go-around. In this coherence with the land’s cycles, I felt something of a reassurance within inevitable change; despite my reluctance to relinquish summer, autumn ushered in notes of sombreness; just as I learned to rest in winter’s secrets, spring arrived with a flourish. The earth has its own course—and in surrendering machinations, the challenges lie resting in the land’s motions.

This daily survey of the forest scene became a touchstone of consciousness. In watching the sky and the forest, breathing the scented air from season to season, the mind fell into sync with the land’s own rhythm and discovered a pulse that subsumed all endeavour. Attention and awareness are shaped in the recurrent moments that weave thought and rumination to the fabric of land and water. Beyond my daily watch of the forest, I frequented the bay and studied its moods in the brighter days of spring. The jagged rocks that shaped the shoreline were steady and stolid against the roiling waters of winter. Now the rain-worn boulders stood bold against the china sky, the junipers frozen in arc, the gulls banked and swirled overhead. The landscape was the picture of serenity and repose. On another evening, the sunset flushed the ocean, and the bay

glowed in amber and red. The shoreline in glowing aura. There was playful creativity in the bay's immovable constancy, but also in the minute variations within features of sameness. The surprises of each moment were never apart from a deeper cohesion that bounded the terrain. This steadiness provided an assurance of continuity, the nourishment of ontic stability. Even in the face of unremitting change and impermanence, every disappearance gestured toward renewal. In wildness, I am called to rediscover the familiar within each sprouting moment.

In mid-May, I made another trip back to Vancouver. Upon my return, I noticed drastic changes to the places I once knew. Whole city blocks had been razed. Sleek buildings now stood where old brick facades had graced street corners. I walked past construction sites clanging with excavators, drills, and saws. On the corner of Broadway and Kingsway, I arched my neck to take in a new tower and its surrounding commercial spaces. Despite having passed here a thousand times, I could not remember what this corner looked like before this building was constructed. A coffee shop that I used to frequent was now closed, along with an entire bank of stores that awaited demolition. The sight of so much transformation left me cleaving to memory, searching for images to serve as reference for a time already gone.

Philip Koch wrote that "places too can become reservoirs of personhood, exuding a kind of inaudible invisible presence."[299] The rapid development of a city, whereby old establishments were replaced by glossy edifices, was a systematic form of erasure. With the demolition of old haunting grounds, so went the link to history, personal and collective, and the storied attachments to place that composed identity and memory. Glen Albrecht has coined the term "Solastalgia" to denote the "chronic distress caused by negatively perceived changes to a home and its landscape,"[300] and "the homesickness you have when you are still at home."[301] Each new building manifested an alien presence that severed connection to the past and confounded the suite of meaning derived from one's connection to place. Thus, the economic forces that impelled

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[299] Koch, *Solitude*, 59.

[300] Glenn Albrecht, "The Age of Solastalgia," *The Conversation*, accessed 16 November 2017, http://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337.

[301] Albrecht, "The Age of Solastalgia."

development destroyed not only wild habitat and Indigenous settlements but also the urban habitat where people rooted themselves through emplacement. [302]

There was a curious pattern of destruction and reconstruction that characterized the productive life of the city. The arrival of the new was not so much a rebirth but more a usurpation against the old. The replacement was bigger, glossier than its predecessor. This cult of the new coincided with a more pervasive neophilia, wherein the recent equated with the superior.[303] Competition for consumer dollars puts pressure on businesses to deliver new products and experiences. The market runs on cycles of hype and manufactured demand. The fascination with the new becomes an irrepressible force that spares no land, built and wild. Whereas the woods inspire the rediscovery of the familiar, the city compels the pursuit of novelty. The former is characterized by a recurring curiosity within a space of contentment, whereas the latter feeds on restlessness and neophilia. The forest requires practices that attend to minute variations within existing surroundings. The acuity of perception to look at things *anew* stands in contrast with the compulsion to gaze upon *new things*. The refinement of attention, the careful calibration of awareness, unveils the freshness of every appearance and reveals the splendours offered by the ordinary, if only I can peel away the film of indifference that blunts my vision. Contemplative practice serves as a basic complement to a life in the woods. In settling into a baseline of mindful acuity, the marvels of the mundane become apparent. The contentment of the forest-dweller lies not in the transformation of the surroundings into objects of interest but in the transformation of perception so all things become continually interesting.

4.8. Reunion

We had been in contact with our friends who had kindly taken Miles into their care. He had been on another set of medications since November and was doing surprisingly well. Pam missed him dearly. She determined that with his epileptic

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[302] Glenn A. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[303] According to C. A. Bowers, the tendency to equate change with linear progress is one of the root metaphors of modern culture. See C. A. Bowers, *Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities Public Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

condition stabilized, she would be able to look after him on her own. Although she would be at work for most of the day, she could return home at lunch and keep him company. We decided that we would bring him home, and Pam would care for him while I completed the last stretch of my time on the island.

We said goodbye to him on Remembrance Day weekend, some six months earlier. On Victoria Day weekend, we went to see him again, this time to bring him home. In his exuberance, he wiggled in our arms, shimmied himself against our bodies and licked our faces furiously. When we thanked our friends and opened the door, Miles dashed into the yard and ran spirited laps around the house. His unbridled exuberance was delightful, and we were elated to be together again.

In the course of the next few days, Pam, Miles and I hiked the trails in the North Shore mountains. We watched Miles plunge into the rushing river and trundle through puddles of mud. Free from worry and self-pity, Miles was not weighed down by his epilepsy. This innocence was an invitation to the same. *Put aside your trepidations, stop ruminating on previous travails. Live in the present*. Last year's sorrows belong to another time. Alongside the beauty of solitude, the resplendence of the woods, the pleasures of family and relationship were also part of a wholeness woven into a life that embraced an unbroken cosmos.

Chapter 5. Summer

5.1. Oysters and Nettles

On a bright and clear afternoon in June, I rode my bike and trailer to the beach, towing an empty bucket tied down by bungee cords. I came to a grove of alders at the mouth of a trail. The path led through a thick forest of cedar and balsam. Here, the swampy ground flanked the hardened path, and ashen trunks felled by storms crosshatched the terrain. Pileated Woodpeckers drummed a steady beat, and Northern Flickers flashed in flights of panic. The path wound to a steep declivity that opened onto a rocky beach. A congestion of driftwood filled the shore, each log a unique colour and texture that revealed years of weathering. I hiked the boulders and reached a narrow point in the peninsula. At low tide, the beach revealed a blanket of white oyster shells. I scoured the rocky inlet, strewn with jagged shells. I picked out the specimens the size of my palm and dropped them into the bucket. On my first oyster expedition last fall, I brought along an empty jar, shucked the oysters on the beach and slipped the delicacies into the jar. I was an unskillful shucker and broke the tip of a blade in my swiss army knife. Ryan told me that he collected the oysters whole in their shells and cooked them on an open fire. The oysters boiled in their own juices and the shells opened on their own. Curious to try another method, I brought along my bucket, determined to cook the oysters whole.

I bowed to the beach in a gesture of thanksgiving and proceeded to lug the bucket over juts of rock. It was tough going, hauling a bucket of shellfish, as heavy as a pile of stones. I negotiated the steep and rocky terrain, loaded the oysters into the trailer, pushed the bike and cargo up the steep slope, rode the distance back to the bike shed and hauled the bucket up the hill. The physical strain was taxing, and I paused several times to catch my breath. The labour made me question the caloric value of this foraged meal. Ryan gathered the oysters whole, but he usually drove his truck to the beach. Without the truck, I paid for the oysters in grunt and sweat. The entire labour took over two hours.

I reached the cabin, panting in exhaustion. With the scraps of wood left from the construction projects, I made a fire and grilled the oysters inside their shells. It was a good while before the milky juices bubbled out of the seams, making the fire spit and

hiss. When I saw that the shells had relented, the cracks visible in the heat, I removed the shells and pried them open with a knife. Steaming and succulent, the oysters tasted of brine and sand, the flavours of umami thick on the tongue. I was famished from the afternoon's labour, and the oysters were delectable. However, the meal was somewhat anti-climactic; cooking time varied with each shell, and I waited sheepishly between one morsel and the next. The meal lasted just under an hour, during which time I burned most the wood scraps left from construction projects.

Though the oysters were delicious, I suspected that I expended more energy procuring the meal than I gained by consuming it. Foraging brought to mind a calculus that urbanites rarely considered: the labour required to produce food, both grown and foraged. Behind every morsel of lentil and rice was the work of many hands, the drone of many machines. These expansive webs of labour and energy churn out the items that line the shelves, every day the equivalent of anonymous millions hauling oysters up the hill. The modern food system shields the consumer from these investments of labour and energy. As a consequence, the *value* of food, denoted only in price, obscures the many investments that make a meal precious. This partial apprehension of food can feed into an indifference to its waste, a habitus of forgetfulness. Food bought with cash could be discarded without much thought, but food grown and gathered with one's own sweat warrants greater care. Imagine grocery prices denoted not in monetary figures that could be settled with a credit card, but in labour hours that a consumer must remit in exchange for goods. A dozen oranges might be priced in so many hours of pruning and watering; an avocado could be had with a week's labour, growing, pruning, and picking under the withering sun, hauling 270 litres of water to grow 1 pound of avocado.[304] Without the outlay of one's own energy, the toil of others is easily forgotten. The act of foraging was, therefore, an honest glimpse into a day's work in exchange for a day's sustenance.

Compared to oysters, nettles proved far easier to forage. Earlier in the spring, I came to a meadow at the entrance to the bay, where the nettles grew in dense clusters. With gloves and a pair of scissors, I snipped the new sprouts at the top of the plants. After ten minutes, I had harvested a portion of the nettles in the meadow and left the rest

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[304] Business Insider, "Why Avocados Are So Expensive," *So Expensive*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZwbhgS9fuc.

for other residents. I walked home with the greens sealed in a zip-lock bag. The leaves left me with red welts where my wrist grazed the stinging hairs. The stingers were so abrupt, I doubted whether the plants were at all edible. However, I followed my forager's guidebook and trusted my neighbours who had told me about their favourite ways to prepare nettles. I sautéed the greens with garlic and they wilted in the heat of the pan. The nettles were reminiscent of spinach, but smoother and creamier. These leafy greens were delectable treat and I collected them wherever I saw them sprouting in the understory.

Foraging was perhaps the most literal form of communion with land. In scouring the landscape, keeping eyes peeled for edible forms, I was immersed in a vast abundance, and venturing into a terrene providence. Robin Wall Kimmerer has suggested that "the land loves us with beans and tomatoes, with roasting ears and black berries and birdsongs . . . she provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That's what good mothers do."[305] In the act of foraging, I was not merely consuming a set of goods, but rather participating in a larger context of abundance, entering into the concourse of life that circulates throughout the land. Beyond the taste of oysters and nettles, I imbibed the log-strewn beach, the sun-bleached stones, and the verdant meadows. The memory of each scene, the terrestrial home of delicacies, accompanied every morsel. Just as the sight of the icy pond in the blizzard recurs with each scoop of water, the memory of the beach and meadow was the psychological condiment to the meal itself. Thus, a foraged meal was not merely consumption of nutrients but the integration of the land's largess into body and soul. Eating was a sacred union with the soil, wherein I was claimed by the love of the land.

The gifts of the land call for gratitude and reciprocity. In recognition of the surrounding bounty, I put my palms together and bowed. This simple gesture gave form to the upwelling of appreciation and drew into the body the shape of thanksgiving. The lowering of the head, the bending of the back indicate humility in honour of the land. Such gestures instantiate the most basic form of response to generosity and reinforce the bonds of belonging.

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[305] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 122.

Beyond symbolic gestures of thanksgiving, I felt compelled to give back to the land in some way that reciprocated its generosity. Phil, my neighbour down the road, had been rewilding the land around his house, and was preparing to plant some trees by a stream. Over the course of an afternoon, I helped him plant saplings by the water. The trees would provide shade for young salmon on their way to the ocean. I contributed to the island's land conservancy to help preserve a tract of land close to the bay, home to old growth Douglas firs, and a hill that rose into banks of lichen covered rocks which overlooks the waters of the Georgia Strait. None of these acts, tokenistic at best, were nearly enough to equal the magnanimity of the land that served as my benefactor. At the very least, I came away with an abiding conviction in the importance of reciprocity, in the importance of communion with the wild, and a continuing effort to promote the vitality of the land.

5.2. Sitting and Swimming

At the height of summer, my regular visits to my sit-spot were presided by an intense sun that beat down in heat and glare. The settled silences of winter and gentle stirrings of spring were now replaced by a collective exclamation, the land surging in brilliance and activity. The chorus of the tree frogs' song had subsided, now replaced by the buzzing of bees, wasps, and flies. The vultures had returned, their great wings now limned circles in the cobalt sky. I sat at the spot, my face seared by the hot sun. The arbutuses remained poised and still; through blizzard and rain, they remained ever composed. In the course of a year's watch and in the silences of passing hours at the sit-spot, I continued to learn the meaning of constancy, the texture of steadiness. The trees had committed to this nook in the hillside and had nestled under this patch of sky. Even in the violence of the storm, they swayed without turmoil. In death, they surrendered leaf and bole, but even their demise is marked by an insouciance that endures, as the fallen tree nourishes saplings in their journey toward the sky. To denude a forest is to erase a living embodiment of equanimity, a vital example of strength in suppleness.

Although I continued to sit in *Shikantaza*, the heat of summer introduced a different energy to meditation. In stark relief to the enfolding darkness of winter, I was sitting in the light of morning when I woke and sitting in the rays of the sun in the evenings. I heard my neighbour swallows dashing off in flight, registered the changing

colours of the fading sun, the soft evening caressing the land and waters. I was restive on my seat, thinking of the sunset over the bay, curious about the hues of red and orange as the day faded. In contrast to the contemplative silence of winter, summer was summoning me in a different voice. I was compelled to leave the seat, bike to the shore, and watch the sky strewn with pink clouds. Better yet, I felt the urge to plunge into the waters and float on my back, merge my gaze with the silky heavens. Like Roger Deakin, I was dreaming of water and longed to enter the depths of coolness in the thick of the summer heat.

I heeded the call and left my cushion one evening. I went down to the bay and waded into the black water. The previous autumn, I had followed the course of water through the rivulets and streams that eventually joined the ocean. Now, I was joining the ocean myself, plunging into the deep and tasting the brine on my lips. Reflecting on the primordial pleasures of a good swim, Roger Deakin writes:

> When you swim, you feel your body for what it most is—water—and it begins to move with the water around it. No wonder we feel such sympathy for beached whales; we are beached at birth ourselves. To swim is to experience how it was before you were born. Once in the water, you are immersed in an intensely private world as you were in the womb.[306]

Swimming in the sea was the culmination of a year's relationship with living water; carrying the jugs, filling the bucket from the icy pond, bathing on a patch of moss. Now, in the swirl and splash of the bay, I shifted onto my back and floated in the water, my gaze cast upwards toward feathery streaks of cirrus cloud. The space above me, deep and vast, melded into the waters that held me. In the meeting point of sky and sea, one could dissolve into the abyss above and below. The immersion was healing—a baptism of the soul. Afloat and supine, I was given to the vastness of the universe above and the sea around me. Ruminations of the discursive mind seemed paltry and insubstantial. Physical contact with land and water has the effect of drawing us out of ourselves, liberating the human from the affliction of human concerns.

After the swim, I walked back to my cabin. I hiked the steep trail as I had done so many times throughout the year, reaching the cabin with my pulse and breath quickened. A life of physical movement in the forest offers its own form of healing.

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[306] Deakin, *Waterlog*, 3.

Swimming in the waters of the bay, riding a bicycle over the rolling hills, my contact with the land proved a wondrous psychic convalescence. Unlike physical injuries, psychic wounds are not easily sutured. If one grieves the planet's plight, healing comes not from platitudinous words of consolation or facile assurances of hope. The motions required by land might not speak directly to anguish, but in an oblique and subtle fashion, the body delivers us to wholeness and supplies a vital complement to the stirrings of emotional life. An embodied existence, where exertion and rest are folded into the movement of everyday life, can be a tonic, a constant wellspring of restoration. One might never be *cured* of the grief that comes with being human—the dread of ecological calamity, the inevitability of loss, the certainty of the ego's defeat—but *healing* is freely offered in the curvature of the hills, the hollows of each passing wave. As many eco-centric cultures have taught, the land remains the primary healer if one could only trust the land to mend the broken and revive the lifeless.

5.3. Departure

Since returning home to live with Pam in May, Miles' seizures had returned. The effect of the new medication was wearing off. Pam came home one day to a puddle of urine on the floor, and Miles leaning into her with his eyes sorrowful, his mane crusty with saliva and urine. He suffered through an episode with no one around to look after him. A few days later, Pam came home for lunch and found Miles trembling in a corner. The smoke detector was beeping from a dying battery. Miles had always been petrified of the alarm, and the noise left him cowering. There was no way to know how long the device had been beeping. Balanced precariously on a chair, Pam was unable to silence the alarm and had to enlist the help of a neighbour. The entire affair left her shaken and doubtful about the wisdom of the current arrangement, leaving Miles to himself each day. We discussed the situation and considered the option of cutting short my remaining time on the island and return to the city sooner than later.

Had I ended my tenure in the middle of winter, the return would have felt like an escape from the demands of off-grid living. Had I left in April, I would have struggled with doubts about whether I had the fortitude to last a year. I wanted to prove to myself that I could stay the course and was reluctant to end the project any earlier. Now, in the heat of summer, I was certain of my ability to stay until September, and I no longer felt the need to insist on staying. A year's tenure would have met a calendrical notion of

completion, but in the face of my family's needs, insistence on a longer stay would only satisfy an arbitrary timeline. Since it was Pam's recognition of my longing for wildness that moved her to support my project, I was likewise compelled to acknowledge her needs and share her burden. The motions of reciprocity and relationship are not transactional, as if one act of kindness must be exchanged for another; rather, we tend to one another in circles of mutuality, in gestures of responsiveness that nurture one another in a web of care.

Although in October I was troubled by an unexpected return to the city, I did not now feel that an early departure constituted a betrayal of my ethical aspirations nor of the forest and the island itself. I had listened deeply to the land's wisdom, steeped myself in its instructive presence; I met great friends; I tried my hand at construction and acquired valuable skills. Having experienced four rewarding seasons, I came to a juncture where one path ended, and another began. Describing his departure from Walden, Henry David Thoreau wrote: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live and could not spare any more time for that one."[307] Like Thoreau, I saw that another life was beckoning. A refusal to follow portended an injury to my family as grievous as the one I may have suffered had they refused my wish to live in the woods. Thus, my time on the island would end in mid-July, approximately ten and a half months after my arrival.

The island was abuzz with activity in the weeks leading up to my departure. There were festivals, foraging expeditions, and many musical soirees. I spent much of this time with the community, with the friends who had welcomed me with such open arms. Whereas in winter, I was called into the deep silence of solitude, summer drew me into activity and conviviality. The blossoming of an active social life was appropriate to the profusion of greenery and vitality. I had learned by this time not to fight the intimations of the land and to heed the suggestions of the season. I borrowed a kayak and explored the craggy shoreline, gazed upon cliffs colossal and sheer; I hiked to the summit of the island's tallest mountain; I jumped on a trampoline with Taylor and Bradley, my neighbours down the hill. If winter was marked by an inward turn, summer was a bold foray into exploration and adventure. The forest itself was bursting with vitality, the canopy lush with greenery. I was beginning to see that the passages of one's

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[307] Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, 303.

own transformation find shape and direction from seasonal changes, that the land provides sage instruction about the conduct of one's body and soul.

The Sunday before my departure, Ryan and Amy invited me to their house to watch the final match of the 2018 World Cup between France and Croatia. Almost the entire neighbourhood had gathered: Walter, Lilian, Phil, Jane, and Thomas. Ryan was French Canadian, so naturally, we all cheered for France, who took the cup. After the game, we walked up to Simon and Carol's place for breakfast. They had cooked a sumptuous feast as a send-off for me and had invited the neighbours as a celebration. I was deeply moved by their gesture. Taylor, Bradley, and other kids from the neighbourhood took up nets and went about catching bullfrogs. The rest of us lounged on Simon's patio. Buoyed by shared laughter and conviviality, I felt the good fortune of their company, their generosity inseparable from the beneficence of the land.

I came to the woods expecting to probe the depths of solitude and settled into a great silence that nourished me. At the same time, I had the privilege of meeting a community of generous people whose warmth was matched by their resilience and creativity. Solitude is not opposed to friendship and community; the capacity to be a companion to oneself is the same capacity to hold others in warm regard. To see the light in others and to walk alongside them in the spirit of fellowship is vital to environmental activism. Concern over the ecological crisis can breed cynicism against humankind and foment resentment over the failings of society. The temptation to dismiss others—and by extension oneself—as errant and incorrigible can be toxic to the psyche and erode precious faith when faith is vital. The antidote to disappointment over the failings of an abstract and universal "human" lies in contact with real, individual people in the ordinary moments of everyday life.[308] The magnanimity of mundane gestures—an earnest smile, a door held open, a story shared, a ride given to a stranger—intimate an underlying goodness that summons a reinvestment of faith in one another; they remind me of the worthiness of the shared struggle. When assailed by disappointment over the

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[308] Not everyone has the good fortune of growing up in good company. Residential school survivors and refugees of war have seen the worst of what people inflict on one another. Trust and faith are often the earliest casualties among those oppressed by systemic racism. Yet, even in the depths of abject suffering, survivors speak of altruism in extremis that reveals enduring humanity that inspires hope. Elie Wiesel wrote of starving prisoners who gave their portions of bread to others; Victor Frankl passed on an opportunity to escape the camp in order to care for his patients. Not everyone can muster these acts of selflessness; however, these examples reveal that even in harsh adversity, there remain threads of humanity that one can aspire to.

fate of humankind, the thought of my island neighbours serves as an encouragement to wager on the side of trust, believe in the good of others, and refocus my efforts.

Prior to my departure, I wanted to leave the water jugs filled and stocked for my neighbours for when they might need water in a pinch. I returned to the spring one last time, treading softly on that grove of fern and moss. I bowed and drew the water mindfully, each scoop accompanied by appreciation. The jugs full, I closed my eyes and whispered a prayer: *I thank you for quenching my thirst and nourishing my body for the past year. In whatever way I can, I will work for the vitality of land and water, here and elsewhere.* I knew no gods nor fairies, only fronds of fern, the skaters on the surface, the alders that spread above. Prayer was a supplication to the ordinary, a sublimation of the mundane, and a gesture of proper reverence that rejoins gratuitous abundance. In that very moment, one of the scoopers that hung on the nearby branches toppled over. Instantly, I intuited that the spring had responded to my prayer of appreciation: the wayward scooper was a sign of affection, a comical rejoinder to my prayer. Something in me was assured, comforted by the unspoken munificence of that place. The rational mind deemed it a coincidence, the effect of a passing breeze. Yet, the workings of numinosity confound the cogitative mind. Assured by the spring's response, I placed the scooper back on the nearby branch, took the jugs in hand, and left the spring for the last time.

On 18 July 2018, I departed the island and returned to Vancouver. I loaded my belongings onto Simon's barge, and we left the bay early in the morning. It was a blistering day, the sun white against the azure sky, the water a slate of glass. Squinting against the horizon, I watched the island dark in the distance, its magnificent silence, the deep repose of its woods. This rugged crop of basalt had sheltered me for the past year, held me in its cradle and passed the seasons in steady poise. The previous September still vivid in my memory, I reviewed the joys and sorrows of the past year and gave thanks to the island for its hospitality, and for the events that shaped my tenure. The cresting lines of the island's hills, pastel and soft in the morning light, seemed surreal and insubstantial. The dramas of the preceding months subsided into the still waters. At the edge of land and sea, all was bathed in *sunyata*, a great emptiness, the fluid present, the insubstantiality of duration, the translucence of all striving. In the instant of everything slipping away, life was precious and worthwhile. I arrived on the island at the age of thirty-nine; perhaps subconsciously, I had designed a rite of passage to initiate me into

the next stage of life, just as my parents had embarked on a new journey on the eve of their fortieth year. Or perhaps none of this was of my design, and it was wildness that beckoned me as I entered my next phase. The land and waters speak in their own whispers—they call to an audience who will listen beyond the brashness of words. Those who watch the foaming tides sweep over rocks, who await the moon to ridge above the tree line, are privy to an ageless wisdom sung by a cosmic order. I heard the timbre of the land and felt the stirrings of a melody that transcends song. Thus, I bid farewell to the island and rode the waters to another horizon.

5.4. Discontinuities

The irate driver leaned on the horn as vehicles clogged the roadway. The cacophony of noise—traffic, sirens, alarms, diesel engines—conspired to fray the nerves and tax the psyche. Incessant activity wove a baseline of aggravation, and the senses were battered by machines. The resulting tension took no discernable shape but melted into the backdrop of psychological dis-ease. Having witnessed the even tenor of island life and the contentment of its residents, this urban negativity was more conspicuous and striking. The city was not only a topographical landscape but also a psycho-emotional one. In the throes of motorized madness, the mind trembled with the electrical charge of surrounding machinery, strained by the grating din that gave the soul no rest.

The city tends to overwhelm the sensorium. In the woods, I woke up to the susurrus of the branches and the lilting song of surrounding birds. At the outhouse, I looked out onto the forest and gave myself to the shimmering lights behind the verdure. The quiet of the morning was always restorative, and the presence of the trees was an invitation to communion. Now in the city, the rising cacophony of noise overwhelmed the morning silence. Perched on the toilet, I stared into a wall rather than greenery. Whereas in the woods, a visit to the outhouse was a form of fellowship with the forest, in the city, excretion was done in a state of suspension, a moment of sequestration from manifold splendours. The built environment seals off the senses and severs contact with the more-than-human, thus leaving one in a state of domesticated blankness. The inflections of sacredness—awareness and gratitude in the presence of the forest—were effectively locked out by walls of concrete and plaster.

Though a marvel of modern sanitation and convenience, the flush toilet is also a fixture that underwrites a fundamental habitus that extends beyond defecation. Regarding the sociological significance of the toilet, Karen Liftin writes:

> The toilet is, in many ways, a metaphor for modern society's relationship with nature . . . According to [Philip] Slater, "unwanted matter, unwanted difficulties, unwanted complexities, and obstacles will disappear if they are removed from our immediate field of vision." Out of sight, out of mind. It's not just our toilets; it's the vast unseen waste stream associated with our everyday actions . . . the result has been "to remove the underlying problems of our society farther and farther from daily experience and daily consciousness, and hence to decrease, in the mass of the population, the knowledge, skill, resources, and motivation necessary to deal with them."[309]

The flush toilet was thus a site of dissociation that separated the user from the living land, from the materiality of one's own excreta. In the outhouse, the contents of the bucket piled up with each visit and counted toward another dig with a shovel. There was no turning away from the excreta. Conversely, I witnessed the material returning to ground, the ordure subsiding into soil. There was a sense of responsibility and accountability coming to completion, the full witness of my own physical involvement with the land. The toilet, on the other hand, facilitated the shirking of responsibility, whereby my material impact was relegated to some obscure process outside my remit.

If a visit to the toilet was a banal business, so was contact with the water that gushed from the tap. I remembered the trips to the spring, that charming alcove in swaths of bracken. I recalled the icy pond in the blizzard, the columns of wind that swelled with snow. Water was a spirited presence with its own secret life, whose stirrings I was privy to during my brief tenure. In my apartment, the liquid that flowed at the flick of the lever seemed utterly unremarkable, hardly the sacred substance that held sway over my imagination. Comparing the water in the moat around his home and the water delivered through the faucet, Roger Deakin writes:

> The wild, biologically purified water of the moat is quite different from the abstract tap water, which is much more like electricity of gas; something you turn on or off, something you control, and a pay for . . . to have turned water into a commodity is unnatural, because water is a gift, like air and sunlight. It wasn't until the 1920s that mains water began to arrive in many places in Britain, and people began the adjustment from the familiar taste

[309] Karen Litfin, *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community* (Polity, 2013), 53.

> of their own living, local water to the lifeless ubiquity that comes from a tap. Water used to be an absolute; now there are two kinds, the living and the lifeless.[310]

Herein lies the irony of urban comfort: by making a vital substance readily accessible, we have also made it lifeless and negligible. Water may be a precious boon secured after a morning's labour, or something squandered without a thought; the difference marks a consciousness that thrives in contact with the sacramental animus of the living world, or a habitus that is oblivious to the vitality of the earth's provisions.

Conservation and ease of access tend to stand in obverse relationship to one another. When I hauled the bucket from the icy pond, the weight of water was the measure of its own dearness. If I could haul only one bucket a day, then I would use only one bucket per day. Water's inherent physical properties proved instructive in limiting use and consumption. The seemingly inexhaustible flow that pours from the showerhead, however, provides no reference to water's status and scarcity. Much of the water that urbanites consume is drilled, pumped, and transported by machines that obscure its preciousness. Regarding the relationship between labour and consumption, Karen Litfin writes: "If we had to carry our water, we couldn't possibly use the roughly 100 gallons required by the average American household every day."[311] Although convenient access to water has improved sanitation standards for millions, the lack of reference to inherent physical limits often distorts the value of a substance and feeds into a habit of waste.

As in the case of excretion and the use of water—activities done in suspension from the wider context of a vibrant landscape—physical movement was also domesticated under the measured uniformity of the built environment. When I lived atop a hill, the hike down and up the trail was folded into each day's motions. Physical exertion was not a discrete activity but simply a part of life in the woods. I relished the hike and hoped to retain some aspect of the hike when I returned to the city. I decided to experiment with climbing the stairs to my eleventh-floor apartment at least once a day. During the first few weeks of my return, I adhered to my plans. However, I found the ascent entirely dreary and monotonous. The staircase was a dungeon-like emergency

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[310] Deakin, *Waterlog*, 180.

[311] Litfin, *Ecovillages*, 51.

fire escape, painted in shades of gray, cold and lifeless under sterile fluorescent lights. I would ascend the eleven stories, but the experience was not the equivalent of a hike up the trail through a wooded pass. The staircase was *exercise,* a form of physical movement suspended from the living topography, extracted from the motions necessitated by the material landscape.

I had erroneously supposed a homology between climbing stairs and hiking a hill. In both cases, physical exertion is occasioned by a gain in altitude, but there the equivalence ends. Whereas the hill rolled and spread with irregularity, its textures broken by rock and gravel, the staircase meted out each step with predictable uniformity. Whereas the hill was dressed in lush overstory, stippled with light passing through leaves, the staircase was not nearly so lively. A hike was both a physical and aesthetic ascent. It was physical because the aerosols produced by surrounding trees find their way into the bloodstream,[312] such that the quickened breath draws the forest deeper into cell and molecule. It was aesthetic because the experience of exertion was not monotonous labour but a full immersion in the vivacity of the forest. The staircase, on the other hand, demanded something physical without the nourishment of the more-than-human. Where there were cedars and Douglas fir, I now saw cement. Where there was sunlight streaming through a thousand trunks, I was now awash in a bland florescent light. The staircase served a strict utility; the ascent itself was a labour devoid of joy and communion.

By replacing the hill with the staircase, I had mislocated physical movement as a site of practice. The staircase could not import the wild into urban life. Exercise is a much-reduced approximation of the physical demands of living in the wild. Physical exertion is merely one part of the broader network of materiality that constitutes practice. It matters whether the foot meets flat, uniform surfaces that convey an unvarying world shaped to fit the human form, or whether the foot meets angles and textures that change with every inch, variations which reveal a topography that has little to do with human ease and comfort. In meeting the unique curve of the land with each footfall, I intuited a reality beyond myself, a mystery with its own character. The built environment, on the other hand, imposes modes of suspension and segregation. The walls of my home

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[312] Diane Beresford-Kroeger, *The Global Forest: 40 Ways Trees Can Save Us* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010).

sheltered me from the elements, but they also sequestered me from the surprises of otherness. By partitioning the world, the building domesticated my movements, thus further distancing me from the idiosyncrasies of a landscape that is apt to instruct and confound.

If the staircase could not replace a steep trail, neither did my attempts to turn off my gadgets in an effort to replicate my off-grid life. Upon my return to the city, I entertained the possibility of living without power for one day a week. The idea seemed simple enough, but the practical implications were trickier than I imagined. In my home were a collection of gadgets continuously running on electricity: the computer, the fridge, the microwave oven. The apartment was constantly drawing on power. I considered going to the electrical panel and switching off the fuses. However, food in the fridge would spoil, and I would need to reprogram the thermometers and reset the clocks on all devices when the power was turned back on. Meanwhile, I would not have use of the electric stove for cooking. With these considerations in place, even a temporary off-grid experiment seemed impractical.

In an urban middle-class home, the collection of amenities is predicated upon access to electricity. Designed to always be "on," these fixtures form a baseline of mechanical features. The prevalence of running machines reconstitutes notions of normalcy. To risk spoiling food in the fridge for a night of off-grid nostalgia seemed ludicrous; to portion an hour to reprogramming the thermostats seemed an unnecessary chore. Attempts to move against the logic of technology becomes a form of deviance from common sense. It appears that something has gone awry in the promises of the technological life. Machines are built to serve their users. In the implicit promise to provide ease and convenience, machines appear to *add* quality to the user's life. However, users do not expect their machines to *subtract* from quality when users temporarily forgo the machines' services. In an ironic twist, once a machine becomes a fixture, its absence brings about complications that would not have arisen otherwise. The encroachment of machines generates a form of *service inflation*, which occasions the rising expectation of convenience, coupled by a fear of the difficulties posed by the machines' absence and the effort required in bringing them back online. In this way, technocratic urbanites live in servitude to their machines. Although the gadgets provide some ease and comfort, the users must ensure the flow of electrical juice to keep their machines humming. Accustomed to technical assistance and prosthesis, users can

forget the use of their bodies and relinquish their powers of adaptability in deference to the automated surroundings.

Instead of shutting down power to the apartment, Pam and I decided to experiment with spending one evening a week without screens. On Monday evenings, we would read aloud to one another and take long walks in lieu of the hours in front of the computer. These nights we would call “Screenless Mondays.” In the first few weeks, we took to the practice with enthusiasm and appreciated the moments spent away from screens. However, I noticed the banal incursions that tugged on our resolve. I had set an alarm on my phone to remind me to administer Miles’ medications. When the alarm sounded on a Monday evening, I wondered if the intrusion constituted a violation of my intention to live away from the screen. Unlike an internet webpage or a YouTube video, the alarm did not hold my attention captive, but it nevertheless instantiated a way in which the device is embedded into my life. I had devolved the responsibility of remembering the medications, and in the process made my device indispensable. On a different day, when I was cooking pasta, I reached for the phone and set a timer for seven minutes. I did this without any consideration of whether the use of the timer constituted a breach of Screenless Monday. Later, Pam and I mused about the weather, forecast and I reached for my phone to check the weather app. I caught myself with the phone in my hand, realizing how quickly I had resorted to the device. I noticed an attempt to justify the action: it was harmless, and my subsequent doubts were overly scrupulous. I found myself tied up by an odd debate: whether checking the weather app constituted a breach of intention to live apart from the screen. The question itself can seem obsessive, irrelevant to the larger context of ecological harmony that I was reaching for. Perhaps the point was less about refraining from screens and more about reclaiming my awareness amid the forces that fragment attention.

My devices have become ensconced in the functions of my urban life. I resented the ways in which the screen could monopolize my time and attention. However, unlike social media, the alarm and the timer were not vortices that swallowed attention whole but assistive tools that served a singular purpose. Responsible use called for discernment rather than a blanket prohibition. On the other hand, the impulse to access information, such as checking the weather forecast, revealed a predilection toward quick answers, a mind whose musings must be met with instant response. Whereas in the woods I had set aside computer and phone and was happy to live apart from the screen,

life in the city imposed its own digital inertia. For most days of the week, I was at my desk, reading articles, writing papers, and accessing information. Monday evenings were a stark contrast to a prevailing norm and showed me how the practices dispersed throughout the week could weigh against deliberate intention.

The screen had the power to confiscate attention and sweep away the hours. At the same time, deliberations over whether to make exceptions to Screenless Monday can seem finicky and obsessive. No alarms and timers? Were these actually important questions? I was on a slippery slope and making a fuss of the slipperiness. Instead of sectioning off a chunk of the week and jealously guarding a sanctified evening against digital encroachment, perhaps it was more vital to discern the habits of mentation throughout each day, identifying how digital devices were used either as tools to meet justified ends or as portals of distraction that monopolized attention and diminished my ability to abide in the fullness of the present.

From these two experiments, I saw that there were some practices from the wild that could not be easily transposed into the city. However, I continued to explore ways of maintaining physical movement and retaining awareness and attention. Certain elements of my time in the woods have continued to take root in my urban life in the city. I shall return to these practices in the final chapter, where I explore the principles of practice and cite examples to instantiate my analysis. For now, I shall remain with the limits imposed on practice, how the structures of urban life form contradictions and ambiguities that strain the psyche.

5.5. Violin

In the weeks after my return, I found the city abrasive and harsh. In the sweltering days of summer, raucous motorcycles and sirens rent the soundscape. I noticed a heightened level of agitation. I did not carry water, nor did I inter my own excreta. The faucet and showerhead seemed a prosaic replacement for the spring and the pond. I had lost an experiential connection to living water. The trappings of modern life no longer seemed innocent, for the comforts they offered were accompanied by a deprivation of the senses and of communion.

There is a certain ineluctability to life in the city. That there exist water mains, plumbing, and toilets is a matter in which I had little say. However, they are also things in which I am implicated through use. The ambivalence is stark: I enjoy the convenience of running water, but I also know the wasteful, mindless consumption it promotes. On the one hand, clean water is vital to the health and sanitation of millions. Many Indigenous communities are still without reliable access to clean water and continue to suffer adverse health effects. On the other hand, I cannot shake the realization that the fixtures betray the value of water. These conflicting observations reinscribe the basic tensions at the centre of the ecological crisis. That much of the modern world is predicated upon extraction is a matter not of my choosing; yet, I am complicit in the status quo and cannot extricate myself from the world as given. This irresolvable contradiction, or what Gregory Bateson has called the "Double Bind,"[313] is the primary driver of the ecological grief that many struggle with. The tools and gadgets that surround me are not innocent. To see the shadow lurking behind the accoutrements of modern life is to live in the grip of contradiction.

In describing the critical perspective that renders suspect much of the modern establishment, Michel Foucault once said:

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.[314]

If I transposed Foucault's explanation, the fixtures of urban life become dangerous for the habitus they promote. And yet, their prevalence cannot be easily remedied (for they have their uses) and it would be absurd to call for the abolition of water infrastructure. The psyche is ensnared in a predicament where I recognize the flaws of a situation but cannot feasibly change the current establishment. This contradiction registers deep in one's consciousness and reverberates through many facets of being.

The grief imparted by the double bind holds import for the psycho-spiritual dimensions of the ecological crisis and must be addressed as an affliction that wounds

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[313] Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology Psychiatry Evolution and Epistemology* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2000).

[314] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 343.

the spirit. Inner work and cultivation must address the galling contradictions and develop agency in the face of existing constraints. I was struggling with the city, the rhythms and imperatives that seemed so stark compared to the island. Did I go away only to come back to the same prison? Had I set out to discover another world, only to find myself even less at home in the city?

In the midst of this inner struggle, I came upon a poignant moment that spoke to me deeply, a phenomenological event that conveyed what ideational thought could not muster. I was walking out of a transit station into the bustle of the street. By the entrance of the station, a violinist played Bach's Cello Suite #1 in G Major. Each lilting line drew the cityscape into something sublime. The melody was noble and stately; every cadence and inflection alluded to a timeless perfection, as if the world coalesced into an unsullied and sonorous essence. Instantly, an upwelling of appreciation: *This too is worthwhile . . . how could it be otherwise*? The music spoke to me what words could not approximate: Despite its flaws, everything was still precious, exactly as it is. The entire cosmos harbours both the forest and the metropolis. The city has its own beauty. Despite the division between the city and the wild, my task would be to integrate both and attempt to embody an unbroken wholeness. I needed to embrace the city in its suchness.

This embrace is not a statement of concession, as if to condone the city's excesses and surrender to the failings of urban life. It is not a blank cheque that sanctions all manner of abuses, as if ethics have no content. It is rather bringing a fulsome presence to the tragedy, an even-minded awareness to the situation at hand. Registering the challenges facing humanity, Joanna Macy once counselled herself to "fall in love with what is."[315] This love exists in the clear recognition of the world's flaws, but it also understands that there is no other arena in which to wager a life of commitment. "Loving what is" does not endorse the apologist's view that humans are "natural" and therefore all their abuses beyond reproach. Rather, this love brings us to terms with the world in its present form, however objectionable, and fosters a willingness to face situation with even-minded poise. This upright poise intensifies the ethical injunction to work toward ecological change but also sooths an underlying vexation within the psyche which says, "I cannot live in a world like this one," an affliction that

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[315] Joanna Macy, "Check-in from Joanna Macy," *Deep Times: A Journal of the Work That Reconnects* (blog), n.d., https://journal.workthatreconnects.org/2019/08/05/check-in-from-joanna-macy/.

entrenches a mode of refusal, which impairs effective engagement and action. We should always fight for a more ideal world, but that cannot occur if we always struggle to countenance what *is*. Zen teachings point to the importance of working with every situation. In the challenges of any given moment, practitioners remind themselves of an adage: “and this too.” The adage does not mean “and this is good too” or “I must acquiesce.” Rather, the message affirms that the present predicament is also an inextricable challenge of living, of integrating the baffling dimensions of a universe that always exceeds apprehension, that pushes me toward the edge of my capacities.

The violin pointed me toward an embrace of all the difficulties posed by the city. I wrote a poem that sketches the ongoing challenge of integration, the unity of a world that hangs together despite my tendency to pry it apart. There is distinction but no division. The speaker floats amid the transfiguration of landscape as one terrain bleeds into another:

Departure and Return

This morning there is light on the fir bark
    cheeping thrushes sound the forest
I round the corner at the bottom of the hill
    and gaze at the glossy skin of scrapers awash in coral

Last night the lightning raged
    white rents splitting oceans,
In darkness I walk the glistening streets
    from windows, beams of light spilling

At the bay, white waves lap the shore
    foamy fingers trace cleft and crevice
On this look-out by the creek, sailboats moored and assured
    Widgeons paddle the marina’s passage

My neighbours are playing music on the knoll
    worn guitars and banjos plucked with gusto
I emerge from the station, mesmerized by Bach’s melody
    the bow drawn by skilled and knowing hands

In the hours of the morning, I look west
    and witness the grandeur of alpenglow
The hospital hums with mechanical breath
    and the roads bristle with motors afire

What shall I do now that I have made nests of both city and forest?
    society and solitude sit at my table
        but under this gray sky, in the silence of the gloaming

all is at rest
all that you love
still and safe
in its own
sacred way.

The poem attempts to reconcile the antinomy I felt toward the city and the limits imposed by built structures. Music and poetry addresses consciousness at the point where cogitation goes no further. If ethics are curtailed by situation, and practices are bound by circumstance, then we need a mode of development that reaches beyond the limits of philosophy to address matters of inner life, whose workings are often subtle and ineffable. The ability to work with what is marks a certain quality of consciousness that is apt to meet the pangs of ecological grief. In the next chapter, I explore the dimensions of anguish that accompany the ecological crisis and discuss educational principles and practices that can shape guiding dispositions as we navigate the turbulent times ahead.

Chapter 6. Implications

6.1. Grief and Contemplation

I undertook this project in an attempt to investigate the following: *How do we help people (including ourselves) do what is difficult, even as we struggle in the grip of ecological grief?* My time on the island was an attempt to shift my own habitus and disrupt the inertia of urban impulses. I do not presume that this account can be generalized to others, but I believe my observations offer insights to other middle-class urbanites who share similar practices while living in the city, whose dispositions are formed by pervasive structures and practices that escape notice.

The research question joins action with psychic pain, acknowledging the inner domain of grief that attends ostensible environmental activism. The ecological crisis stems not only from a malaise of culture, politics, economics, and education, but also from a crisis of the spirit.[316] To face the prospect of ecological collapse is to upend the dream of material progress and thus to upend one's faith in the modern, capitalist-industrial enterprise. One's investment in the establishment becomes suspect and one's place in the system becomes less tolerable. Facing the possibility of ecological cataclysm, one is deprived of a basic teleological arc based on the belief in a desirable future. Teachers must recognize and attend to the psychic-emotional facets of the ecological crisis, which can foment hopelessness, cynicism, and despair. Without attention to the inner dimensions of the ecological crisis, educators neglect not only the vulnerabilities that affect students' wellbeing but also the possibility for renewed agency.

To face the ecological crisis is to live with anguish. If we are moved by the great beauty of the living planet, we will invariably grieve the loss of its splendour. Ecological grief is therefore an unavoidable feature of living attentively in the Anthropocene. This grief, or what environmental psychologist Renee Lertzman calls "environmental melancholia," involves three notable valences: anxiety, ambivalence, and aspiration.[317] Concern for the future and the plight of all species induces anxiety, a nexus of emotions

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[316] Loy, *Money, Sex, War, Karma*.

[317] Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315851853.

related to fear and dread. Recognition of current economic and political realities, as well as one's own place in the establishment, foments a series of ambivalences about the complexity of the situation, the constraints in place, and the difficulties of moving to an alternative mode of life. Nevertheless, the weight of ambivalence does not expunge the desire to do better and to work toward a more ecological way of life. This admixture of valences can confound the coping abilities of those raised in cultures that do not offer psycho-spiritual tools for navigating contradiction and complexity.

Lertzman argues that feelings of anxiety, ambivalence, and aspiration "can be integrated for modes of engagement with a dynamic, uncertain world."[318] In addition to Lertzman's analysis, I point back to Heesoon Bai, who has argued that the challenge is not only to shift the matter of our endeavours but also to shape the "ontological space around the discursive content of consciousness: that is, the 'container' itself."[319] The Anthropocene challenges us to hold within the scope of our psyche a great deal of countervailing commitments and practical exigencies. Resilience and agency depend much on the extent to which we are able to work with the confluence of anxiety, ambivalence and aspiration. While action and advocacy are vital, there is also an equally important work of developing the inner container, of refining the capacity to navigate contradictions and the limitations that surround us.

Contemplative practice offers an option for those who recognize the inner implications of the ecological crisis. Many Buddhist traditions posit that actions are never without an inner context, that the cause and the effects of ecological decline trace back to human consciousness (body–mind–spirit), personal and collective. Contemplation addresses that sphere of interiority so often neglected in education and provides a way of attending to the intricacies of subjectivity. Contemplation is a way to return to emotional experience, of bringing awareness to inner life in the spirit of gentleness and curiosity. Difficult emotions, such as grief and anxiety, are in fact healthy and appropriate, given the magnitude of the damage we now witness. They arise out of our love of and involvement with the living world. Multiple forms of conditioning often compel us to turn away from these difficult emotions; without patience and practice, I am liable to turn to distraction and denial to avoid this difficult dimension of experience. With kind

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[318] Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia,* 4.

[319] Bai, "Reclaiming Our Moral Agency through Healing," 322.

and gentle attention, contemplative practice helps me stay with the anguish, which in turn transforms me in its presence.

Contemplation is not merely a form of navel-gazing, a private paradise of the introvert, but rather leads to a clarified view of our involvement in the world, the interdependence of all-in-all. This seemingly grandiloquent claim is brought back to earth in the practices of mindful attention that deliver us back to the immediate present. By attending to textures of experience, one inhabits awareness and a return to presence of plants, birds, animals, the clouds and waters. Awareness is not the possession of the individual but one aspect of a distributed and dynamic earthly intelligence that courses through the wind and ripples over waters. In contact with the living anima of the more-than-human, we can say with Dogen that "mind is mountains, rivers, and the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars."[320]

In living the vital communion with more-than-human world, one becomes more engrossed in the sorrow of loss while finding comfort in the company of other beings. Grief and solace are never far apart. Pain itself is borne of alienation, the pangs that stem from separation from land. In this sense, grief cries out for reunion. By refining our calibre of awareness, we are better primed for the wisdom and instruction of the land, with its teachings that hold import for our pain. In my year of living in the woods, I watched how the land itself cycled through seasons of excitation and retreat, how apices and nadirs moved with seasonal rhythm. In autumn, the forest showed me how to relinquish the summer's motions; in winter, the woods taught me how to settle into the cradle of darkness; in spring, I learned how to stir again in the warmth of the sun. The psyche needs the template of seasonality in order to meet its own wholeness within the patterns of inner life. Contemplation facilitates the reception of seasonality and thus fosters the cyclical passage from vigour to rest. Watching the land, I witnessed the exemplar of how to advance and retreat, how to live and let go. There is healing and restoration in living close to wildness, in which the oscillations of land and water correspond with the moods and colours of inner experience. Finding a space under the sky for every sorrow, it was as though I had come home and discovered a resting place. This is not the elixir that dispatches grief once and for all—for as long as there is

[320] Dogen, *Shobogenzo: Book I*, 53.

ecological decline, there shall be the sting of anguish—but by drawing inspiration from land, one regains poise in the midst of grief, strength in the midst of mourning.

We need contemplative practices in order to claim our pain and make sacred the anguish of living in the Anthropocene. We do this by refining our attention, making ourselves available and receptive to the land. In order to hear the teachings of the land, we need to sharpen our perception, for its subtle instructions do not register with minds hurried and coarse. In my year of sitting practice, watching the forest in blizzard and storm, I sensed a note of stillness in the midst of wind and sleet. The forest might be riled in the weather, but something remains free and undisturbed. It was this steadiness and constancy that impressed me and continues to shape my aspirations. The ecological crisis requires much of humans and challenges our faculties, but we should meet each exigency with the freeness of the forest, which moves and sways in the wind but remains constant and unbroken in the melee. This constancy can form the timbre that resonates in action and activism, a steadiness that stays undiminished in the fullness of effort. In giving ourselves over to wildness, we come closer to the qualities so direly needed amid the upheaval that surrounds us.

I point to these subtle calibres of steadiness and stillness as the underlying qualities that must inhere educators' work. The substance of our efforts is never separate from the spirit in which we undertake them. If we neglect the *manner* in which we oppose the odious, we risk perpetuating the vexations that necessitate our efforts in the first place. There is every risk of constructing foes and reifying enemies—tendencies which reinforce patterns of opposition and resistance that stoke animosity and fear. Further, we can lapse into disappointment and despair, hurt by the apparent apathy of others. Disheartened by election results and governments' broken promises, we may be seized by resignation, convinced that society deserves its fate. Each of these patterns stem from inner pain, absent the recognition of which we are bound to inflict the same cycle of suffering on ourselves and transmit it to others. Contemplation provides one way of attending to the inner landscape from which our actions spring and aims to reconstitute the fibres of personhood from which a life unfurls.

Contemplative practice cannot save the world, and therein lies its strength. It does not promise grand designs and thus reinscribe dangerous ambitions, which have wreaked so much havoc. Its techniques are minute and understated, but they work to

reconstitute the fundamental patterns of mentation by reclaiming awareness, reforming the manner in which we attend and act. With contemplation as the underlying guide, we can intentionally shape the practices that craft dispositions within an attitude of gentle persistence.

Contemplative practice can be seen as the steady accompaniment to the active work of reshaping self through practice. In the next section, I turn to an analysis of practice, which I believe could prove vital to the cultivation of dispositions that press us toward that which we find difficult.

6.2. Inflections of Practice

Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term "practice" is troubled by ambiguity, and its polysemous references can make for messy analysis. The task of teasing out the relationship between disposition and practice requires a more precise definition of "practice" in its various forms, and a careful analysis of its effects in different domains of action. Hence, I propose three meanings of "practice" and posit a way to link conscious action to the transformation of habitus.

As a sociologist, Bourdieu uses "practice" in its broadest definition. Practice is "real activity as such,"[321] the "practical activity oriented toward practical functions" which never appear as a spectacle. In the other words, practice is "the business of everyday life."[322] Under this definition, "practice"—which I shall call *Practice 1*—is a wide net that captures most behaviours in the domain of human activity. Kabyle peasants maintain customs of gift-exchange; Japanese students and teachers wear slippers inside the school; many Canadian students sing the national anthem at the beginning of each school week. Each action is not only an example of custom, but also the active and participatory forms of culture that reside in practical action. Under this definition of practice, the gestures and actions that accord with social norms all generate the dispositions which reproduce the existing social structure.

Social agents, by fact of their situatedness in a given culture, are incorporated into the norms of practice, for children are raised in cultures already replete with

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[321] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 96.

[322] Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 69.

customs. Therefore, *Practice 1* is not consciously adopted so much as passively accepted, not taught but absorbed. The conventions of social life (such as forming a queue at the store) reinforce themselves by virtue of their pervasiveness, and agents assimilate themselves into the social body by yielding to the commonplace. Regarding this domain of tacit norms, Practice 1 denotes actions constituted by existing structures, the generative forces that engender dispositions. Once established, *Practice 1* is naturalized into a repertoire which is taken as a matter of course.

To venture further, I note areas of practice which are not established through adherence to norms but rather as a result of deliberate adoption. This I shall call *Practice 2*, wherein a subject, either through explicit inducement or instruction, establishes a practice via conscious intension. For example, parents and caregivers teach and remind children to brush their teeth. If through steady reminders, a child develops a habit of brushing, and in turn, finds herself taking to oral hygiene, her preference for cleanliness comes about not through unconscious adherence to a norm but through intentional adoption of a given practice. Similarly, if through a review of medical science, people develop a habit of washing their hands frequently, they will have established a disposition as an outcome of willful intention rather than deference to norms. Once established as habit, Practice 2 becomes ingrained much in the same way as Practice 1, and the generated dispositions are ensconced in the schemas of action that propel agents toward certain acts and not others. Practice 2 is therefore an intentional effort to establish habit, which in turn fosters habitual states and operating dispositions.

In behaviour and speech, explicit and consistent guidance from caregivers and teachers can shape habits and their attendant dispositions. Suppose a child is explicitly taught by adults to share toys with others. Through redirection, the child learns to involve others in the act of play. Cooperation and inclusivity can become a dispositional trait, an orientation that can marks a child’s interactions. Likewise, a conscientious person resolves to avoid disposable products. In due course, they find the sight of paper cups and plastic straws ever so slightly grating. In both cases, disposition looms large behind discrete forms of practice, and reformed action transmutes into reformed sensibilities. Inclinations follow conscious effort. Although these habits themselves might be a feature of class and distinct social groupings, my point is simply that the requirement of deliberate effort makes these practices distinct from Practice 1.

As practices that require explicit instruction, guidance and direction, Practice 2 is the purview of parents, caregivers, and teachers. The requirement of explicit instruction and deliberate effort makes Practice 2 an extension of the conative and intentional mind, the faculties of consideration that compel one to *do* what one *knows* to be wholesome, good, and right. Seen in this light, Practice 2 hearkens Aristotelian *praxis*, the actions that cultivate worthy qualities of character. In this case, I refer to Aristotle to postulate the relationship between agency and disposition, action, and aspiration. For Aristotle, people "develop qualities corresponding to the activities that they pursue."[323] Disposition and action implicate each other in a dialectical relationship. Aristotle argued that "our dispositions are not voluntary in the same sense that our actions are. Our actions are under our control from the beginning to end."[324] The choice of activity is the "deliberate appetition of things that lie in our power."[325] For Aristotle, virtue[326] is shaped by practice, for "we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing braves ones."[327] From the perspective of Aristotelian ethics, the abstract and dispersive domain of dispositions finds concrete access in the form of tangible practices that in turn shape our guiding dispositions.

If we interpose Aristotelian praxis with Practice 2, we come into the sphere of educational activity, those intentional acts that aim at ethical ends. There are areas of reform that demand changes to taste and appetite, those inveterate propensities which are difficult to disrupt. A case in point: for middle class urbanites, who have access to many sources of protein, and for whom meat is not a hard necessity, the reduction in meat consumption is not only about making rational choices about meals, but rather acting against the preferences of taste, the norms of culture, and the weight of tradition

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[323] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 123.

[324] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 126.

[325] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 120.

[326] How do we determine what is virtuous? For upper and middle-class urbanites raised in a Western society, *arête* (excellence) is often derived from class norms and expectations. Likewise, the doctrine of the mean, seen in the virtue of moderation, can be anchored to consumptive trends specific to a person's social-economic status and thus severed from situations of scarcity and degradation in other parts of the planet. In this sense, Aristotelian virtue ethics can retrace the underlying habitus of the upper and middle-class establishment. Later in this chapter, I shall return to the practices that curtail the consumptive habits of the upper and middle classes. For now, I refer to Aristotelian ethics so as to locate agency within volitional practices as a way to shift dominant dispositions.

[327] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 92.

in service of a greater good.[328] The movement away from meat consumption is difficult, since meat is often associated with pleasure[329] and facilitated by physiological and neurological features[330] involved in the formation of *hedonic experience.*[331] In the matter of diet, Practice 2 must work against the inertia of taste and pleasure in order to address larger concerns. As the ecological situation worsens, the world population may face other impositions that strike against existing dispositions. A shortage of food, the rationing of water, the prevalence of inclement weather can bring about restrictions many will find difficult to abide. Under conditions of severe strain, people may be required to live in ways that serve the collective good. However, presiding dispositions can hamper these necessary efforts.

A deteriorating biosphere requires changes to collective behaviour, both to prevent further damage and to adapt to new situations. If underlying dispositions impede the shift in behaviour, and we do not yet know what dispositions will be called into question, then praxis must attempt to address dispositions *as such* in their various operations within the scope of everyday practice. If by some happy accident, duty calls for that which I am already inclined, then I shall take to the task with alacrity. There is little need to summon educational efforts if people are already inclined to do what is required. The concern lies with situations when ethical action calls for that which I am disinclined, and I am prone to fail my responsibility in the face of a great challenge. Moreover, vast uncertainties facing the global community in a time of crisis render unclear the kinds of dispositions that will be required of citizens. While Practice 2 aims to develop worthy habits and dispositions, there is every possibility, given the uncertainties of the future, that tumultuous circumstances may require adaptations that upend even the dispositions currently deemed noble and prudent. Praxis, therefore, must go beyond

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[328] Tim O'Riordan and Susanne Stoll-Kleeman, "The Challenges of Changing Dietary Behavior toward More Sustainable Consumption," *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 57, no. 5 (2015): 4–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2015.1069093.

[329] Jennie I. Macdiarmid, Flora Douglas, and Jonina Campbell, "Eating like There's No Tomorrow: Public Awareness of the Environmental Impact of Food and Reluctance to Eat Less Meat as Part of a Sustainable Diet," *Appetite* 96 (1 January 2016): 487–93, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.10.011.

[330] Veldhuizen, Rudenga, and Small, "The Pleasure of Taste, Flavor, and Food."

[331] *Hedonic,* as used by Veldhuizen et al., refers to the experience of pleasure. As neuroscientists, Veldhuizen et al. map the function of the "reward circuitry,," the neural activities that correlate with pleasure. *Hedonic,* in this neuroscientific sense of the word, is not to be equated with *hedonism*, the pursuit of pleasure as the highest form of good.

the development of specified habits and their attendant dispositions, reaching past the *opus operandum* to intervene in the *modus operandi*, the generative template from which habitus springs.

With the limits of Practice 2 in mind, I suggest a third interpretation of practice to denote the activities that address dispositions in their multifarious manifestations. For the moment, I shall use *Practice 3* to refer to activities that mitigate and direct incumbent dispositions, both proclivity and antipathy. Unlike Practice 2, which is unidirectional in its encouragement of habits, Practice 3 regards dispositions in their manifold forms, ever watchful of the forces that shape behaviour. The inclination toward one action can bring about aversion to others; therefore, I am concerned not with the merits of certain dispositions attached to specific activities, but with the ambiguous consequences of dispositions *per se*, the tendency for an inclination to compel responsible action in one instance but induce negligence in another. Likewise, taste carries with it a concomitant distaste. If I am living according to my dispositions, there is a likelihood that the world calls on me to do what I don't want to do. Practice 3 aims to counter recalcitrance and to interject the possibility of an alternate course.

With Practice 3 in mind, praxis insists on the possibility of transformation via resistance to the rule of disposition. Praxis does not aim to eradicate disposition, but rather enjoins the capacity to run against presiding inclination. This kind of praxis attempts to dislodge actors from the ruts of habit and disrupts arching patterns that delimit action, for ethical conduct often requires the subject to do what is difficult, not what is easy. My year on the island recalled moments when I pressed against the forces of inclination. Traversing the dark passage of winter, I was enjoined by the land to slow down, rest, and relinquish my designs. This easing of momentum and the softening of comportment was appropriate to the season but was not easy within the scope of my existing predilection for productivity. Conversely, though it was easier to use a power saw to cut lumber, I nevertheless took up a hand-held saw and favoured muscle power over the generator. The former case involved easing into the lay of the land, the latter saw the election of manual labour over the convenience of machines. Both cases involved doing that which I was not previously inclined to do. Each situation placed different demands on me, and their contrasting requirements made it a challenge to do what was appropriate. The theory of practice must address both on equal footing, not by

issuing *ad hoc* practices that respond to their respective situations, but by guiding actions that make their respective dispositions more malleable.

Even good habits can foment inclinations that one day prove unhelpful to the cause of ethical responsibility. Practice 3, therefore, is the type of activity that puts me in the fluid space between reluctance and alacrity. This practice requires a commitment to explore patterns of behaviour by venturing into the realm of the unfamiliar, where I examine the textures of hesitation. As activity undertaken voluntarily, Practice 3 requires conative direction, a willingness to do what is difficult. The effort to overcome one's own dispositions entails an agonistic relation to self. Foucault argues that *syphrosyne* supposes *enkrateia* (mastery), which refers to the effort to regulate desiderative impulses. Enkrateia is "located on the axis of struggle, resistance and combat; it is self-control, tension, 'continence.'"[332] According to Foucault, "enkrateia can be regarded as the prerequisite of sophrosyne, as the form of effort and control that the individual must apply to himself in order to become moderate."[333]

If *enkrateia* entails tension in relation to self, there arises a question of how to inhabit tension without inducing harm to oneself. The practices that alter disposition are always marked by reluctance, that tensile space between what I *ought* to do and what I am *inclined* to do. While living on the island, I was hungry for protein and fat and had to make a choice between sticking to simple fare or allowing an occasional meal that consisted of meat, cheese, and bread. After an allowance, I had to recover my initial commitment and return to a simple diet of lentils and rice. I had to do this while letting go of the tendency to judge myself without reinforcing the patterns of guilt that were part of my conditioning. Practice 3 enjoins a lighter way to inhabit the tension between inclination and disinclination.

The struggle to control oneself is also an act that plays to a mode of engagement—tension is unavoidable, but the manner in which tension is lived rests with the subject. By way of analogy, a musical score inscribes the notes and rhythms of a composition, but the musician must execute the score in performance. Although the notes are prescribed, the performer brings inflections that render interpretation unique.

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[332] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 65.
[333] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 65.

Through subtleties of treatment and the nuances of touch, the musician conveys an original voice within the confines of the score. In the same way, the struggle with self and the transformation of disposition entails internal tension—however, that tension can be animated by a skillfulness akin to the musician's interpretation of a score. As with a musical composition, tension can be *played* with seriousness or with ease. I submit that the agonistic relation to self enjoined by Practice 3 also permits creativity and playfulness within the effort to bend ruling dispositions.

With the musical example in mind, I forward *Morphesaria* as the term to replace what I have up to now called "Practice 3." *Morphesaria* is a conjunction between the Greek word *morphe* ("form, shape, figure," that which is fine and beautiful) and *aria* ("melody for a single voice"), a term in music derived from the Italian word for "air." *Morphesaria* unites the two contrasting elements within praxis—that of transforming incumbent dispositions and of an effort carried out with a gentle lightness. Within the work of reforming the self, *Morphesaria* means doing serious work without taking oneself too seriously, exemplifying an unshakable commitment that does not lapse into unyielding rigidity. This practice presses me toward something difficult, but the practice itself is not a miserable toil. Rather, I practise in the way a melody weaves through patches of harmony, with a breeziness that makes light work of unpleasant labour. In other words, *Morphesaria* is practice undertaken with right attitude, mastering the self without excessive drama, reforming character with insouciance and playfulness. Here, I am enlisting a musical sensibility to the domain of ethics and call for a musician's hand to intervene in the philosopher's work. The musician brings flexibility and agility to the task of self-mastery and sees the utilization of contrast over contradiction, apposition over opposition. Skillfulness is the ability to return to practice despite falter, a steady commitment that never degrades into austere deportment.

While I lived in the woods, each day entailed some challenge against incumbent dispositions. In the winter, I was loath to rise in the dark, brace against the cold and check the batteries every morning. Yet, I considered it a practice that shaped inclination and continued without exception. I grew to appreciate the darkness and the cold and found its instructions vital to my conduct throughout winter. Likewise, I detested the chore of interring excreta. Yet with more holes dug and filled, I was less repulsed by the task and more tolerant of the odour; thus, something about my ability to work despite my inclinations underwent a shift. I made mistakes cutting lumber for the outhouse and was

ensnared by a conditioned pattern of self-judgement; however, I learned the folly of self-criticism and decided to shrug off the mistakes. *Morphesaria* was active in these instances, pressing me toward what was required of me, but applying effort without the dolefulness that makes the work oppressive. *Morphesaria* reconstitutes habit and disposition precisely when there is resistance from an incumbent disposition; it entails working close to one's limits but doing so without injury to one's spirit.

Having explored three inflections of practice, we need to specify some guiding principles to direct our activities. In the course of identifying these principles, the implications for educators shall become clearer.

6.3. Principles of Practice

In the following section, I present some principles of practice I have adopted, which are aimed at promoting dispositions that align with a more ecological life. Each of these principles is informed by my time in the woods. I do not intend to prescribe specific practices for others to undertake but invite readers to shape their own practices based on the principles below. These practices are possible (and in many ways sensible) in my circumstances as a middle-class urbanite; others may not find these practices feasible. Nevertheless, readers can consider the correspondence between practice and disposition in their respective situations and experiment with practices that aim toward the reclamation of attention, the reduction of consumption and ecological impact, the rediscovery of bodily movement, and connection with the more-than-human. If one finds a practice difficult, then the practice qualifies as *morphesaria,* or Practice 3, which entails the willingness to go against one's existing inclinations. I shall return possibilities and limitations of these principles of practice at the end of this chapter.

Contemplation—Devote time for refining attention and the return to awareness. Contemplation is aided by formal practice, such as sitting meditation, but should not be restricted to meditation *per se.* Contemplative life does not end the moment I leave my seat but is marked by vital contact with deep and open awareness, wherever I find myself. Commitment to contemplative practice helps me maintain a healthier attitude and perspective in response to the ecological crisis, allowing me to sustain a more compassionate and even tenor to my actions.

By conditioning the soil of awareness, attention itself becomes a subject of care. There are many tentacles that pilfer attention. Without discernment, one can yield passively to the dominion of the screen and surrender one's inner landscape. *Doom scrolling*, the compulsive consumption of bad news, can erode one's outlook and deflate one's mental buoyancy. We should keep abreast of current events, but we should also be vigilant about how the mind can become dependent on information as a form of stimulation, and how we require a steady flow of malaise to maintain a state of agitation, which reinforces a belief that the world is an intractable problem. Mindfulness practice, in this sense, is one of the basic gestures of sanity.

Practices related to contemplation—Just as I did in the woods, I rise at 5:30 and begin the day with meditation. Regular periods of meditation build structure into the day and set up the mind for the day's eventualities. Beyond the cushion, I look for opportunities for awareness and observation of immediate experience. Moments of waiting provide good opportunities for awareness. Waiting for a bus, I pause and do nothing else but breathe and listen to the sounds around me. I watch the path of clouds and open myself to the expansive cloud-time in the ever-present now. These pauses recall the moment I spent with the banana slug when the cessation of activity arrested me in a space brimming with *kairos*. Awareness in the bustle of the city is also at ease with suchness within the very shape and texture of the present.

Devote one meal a day to mindful practice. Prepare the meal in the silence of mindful attention, handling each ingredient as if it were the body of a loved one. Cook the food with loving attention. Eat the meal in the fullness of awareness, without screens, papers, books, or radio programs. Bring awareness to the texture and taste of each morsel. Notice the flavours and their colours. After the meal, sit in silence and notice the feeling of satiation, or of the desire for more. Sit with these feelings and be curious about their colours.

Solitude—Make time for aloneness. Solitude breathes life and nourishment to interiority. The demands of modern life have their own force and impetus, often sweeping us along in a host of demands and responsibilities. A frantic togetherness imparts norms and desires that, without careful reflection, can become a collective blindness. The pursuits of the multitude need to be examined in the stillness of solitude. Time spent away from the crowd can clarify one's perspective and regain one's commitments. More

importantly, solitude affords a different kind of fellowship—that of the more-than-human. By spending time alone in a relatively green space, tuning in to the surrounding species, we rediscover a primordial affinity with all living beings and thus contact the ever-renewing spirit of life.

Practices related to solitude—On Sunday mornings, I walk twenty minutes to a park in a nearby neighbourhood. There, I have befriended a magnificent maple tree that stands bold by a field of grass. I greet the tree with my palms on the bark. I arch my back and watch the trunk extend upward, the branches sky-bound. I sit on a bench under the tree and watch the hour pass, with no agenda except to bask in the presence of the tree and dwell in the mystery of its being. In the spaciousness of the hour, the tree becomes its own *koan*, a secret that I feel close to but cannot wholly apprehend. I visited the spot in winter, when I shivered on the bench and buried my hands deep in my pockets. I sat under the tree in the warmth of spring, the leaves brilliant under the morning sun. This time of solitude and fellowship is always wholesome and restorative and provides a much-needed realignment with silence and sacredness.

Wildness—The measured comforts and regularity of the built environment can leave urbanites estranged from the rhythms of the land, the course of the stars that limn the cosmos. Severed from these terrestrial and celestial spheres, the psyche magnifies human preoccupations and loses sight of the larger context in which the human is but a small part. To mitigate against self-centredness and human-centredness, we need to return to that which is more-than-human, that which has its own life and being, and which has little to do with human affairs. By anchoring our attention to wildness and the cycles of the seasons, we access a template for the conduct of our own lives. The changing seasons, with their manifold variations of light and scent, intimate a way for us to negotiate our own passages, from labour to leisure, from movement to stillness.

Practices related to wildness—While living in the woods, I woke up each morning, brushed my teeth and went outside to check on the batteries and made water beside the Douglas fir above a rocky slope. In the city, within ten minutes of waking, I head out onto my patio and spend a moment under the sky. The contrast between the warmth of shelter and the openness of the sky serves to refresh the mind and return me to perspective. There, I perform a series of prayerful gestures known as Thomas Moore's prayer (see Appendix). In the rainy darkness of December and the powdery sunrise of

April, I watch the mood of the sky and survey the distant mountains. The sensory contact with the air conveys the teachings of the cosmos, and I intuit a comportment appropriate to the season. This daily contact frames the mind within the larger context of the land, and I am reminded to conduct the day according to *animus mundi*.

I make it a priority to spend time in relatively wild spaces. Frequent visits to a local estuary have acquainted me with a variety of bird species. Every hour spent in observation is a balm for the spirit, for the silence of the grove joins with the stillness of the heart. I enter the woods quietly, attentive to its own life and open to its terms. Each visit brings delightful surprises. The other day, I spotted a Wilson's Warbler and a Pacific-Slope Flycatcher. The sight of these creatures liberates me from the prison of self-concern and calls me to a world beyond the human, to a love that reaches across species. We need wildness to deepen our fellowship with earthlings both animal and vegetal, and in that bond reclaim a communion that is our terrestrial inheritance, a communion that dispels alienation and despair.

Movement—The city often features motorized travel and contraptions which replace the need for physical exertion. The escalator, the car and the train replace the movement of legs and feet; they are mechanized prosthesis that provide travel without physical effort. These features are of great assistance for the elderly and persons with physical disabilities. However, for the able-bodied, machines can generate a disinclination for movement, not to mention an erosion of physical fitness as the body weakens through disuse. Just as the built environment can alienate inhabitants from the land, motorized prothesis can alienate us from our own bodies as corporeal creatures. Further, the body's contact with the land constitutes a rudimentary form of intimacy as topography registers in sinews, blood, and cells. One requirement of wholeness must see urbanites reclaim forms of movement as part of the motions of daily life.

Practices related to movement—Here, I am not referring to forms of physical exercise as a deliberate activity, which are an epiphenomenon of built spaces that occlude physical movement. Rather, I refer to the movements of everyday life: walking, cycling, hauling groceries, digging in the garden, climbing the stairs. These movements help us return to our lives as embodied creatures and reaffirm the usefulness of the body, the range of valences engendered by a corporeal life. In reclaiming the usefulness of the body, we discover a wellspring of experience that has little to do with consumption. The strain of

exertion gives way to the pleasure of rest; thus, the life of the body is a site of wholeness. Although I no longer walk the eleven stories up to my apartment (a form of exercise that cannot replace a hike through the woods), in public spaces I still opt for the staircase instead of the escalator. These marginal choices reaffirm the importance of the body and maintain within me the possibility of a life without motorized aids.

Adhering to Limits—Consumer culture and the modern economies are predicated on growth and acquisition. There are few facets of modern Western culture that respects limits and constraints. Cultural change in the direction of ecological harmony must entail a renewed appreciation of thrift, a willingness to curb desire. The practice of adhering to limits need not be a form of caustic self-deprivation. Rather, the regulation of desiderative impulses, from shopping to eating, constitute a technique of the self, part of the larger work of shaping one's life in alignment with ethical commitments. There are things we care about more than momentary pleasures. In adhering to limits, we also discover nascent possibilities, for constraints do not merely deny us our wants but also compel creativity and resourcefulness within given parameters.

In presenting "voluntary" limits, there is a risk that the limits we impose on ourselves will fail to challenge a habitus of acquisition and consumption, and that disparate "standards of living" make for varying parameters of restraint, some of which remain glaringly indulgent compared to others. One person's moderation is another's excess. To this point, I argue that the runaway disparity in income and consumption is itself a symptom of a culture that no longer discerns between necessity and excess. Where extravagance is pervasive and celebrated, and thrift rare and deviant, values related to frugality remain at the margins. The crux of my proposal lies not in the significance of one reduction measured against another, but rather a shift in the factors of social reproduction which form the basis of doxic belief. The practice of adhering to limits, on this level of foundational culture, chastens tacit expectations of growth (both income and consumption) without ceiling. The adherence to limits, in this cultural sense, aims to furnish the backdrop from which discernment arises, part of the conditions that underwrite dispositions of moderation.

Although the injunction to practice moderation may see a variety of interpretations, in order to reform incumbent dispositions, we must begin with dispositions as they are, however distorted by class differences. In economies that

operate on growth, one intervention comes in the setting a limit on one's income and spending. Here, I do not presume to overhaul political and financial structures while instituting a steady-state economy. Instead, for the middle and upper classes who enjoy a comfortable income, I propose that we live *as if* our wages will not grow with each passing year, and thus learn to shape our consumptive habits under the constraint of a fixed income. Those who already enjoy relatively comfortable standards of living can peg their spending to a more stringent income limit and reduce consumption to a level that will challenge their habits and inclinations by keeping monthly spending below a ceiling. The limit on spending cannot be determined as a percentage of income, which may grow each year, but should be a number that stays consistent from month to month, year to year.

Practices related to limits—I live on a weekly cash allowance and must curtail my spending within these limits. If, at the end of one week, I spend less than the weekly allotment, I put aside the surplus. If, on certain weeks, I spend more than my allowance, the surpluses from previous weeks are applied to the deficit. Unlike credit cards, cash that I hold in my hands conveys the finitude of my resources and teaches me to consider my purchases.

Remembering the many days in the woods when I did not spend a penny, I designate every Tuesday a "Buy-Nothing-Day,"[334] during which I resolve not to spend any money. This practice is not always easy since commerce is ubiquitous and there is no shortage of temptations. In these moments when principle collides with impulse, I watch the force of my habits, how they work as the invisible drivers of behaviour. I pause and examine their operations, the colours of their presence within the field of immediate experience. Every Tuesday occasions a curious inquiry into the workings of habituation, the inclinations that operate within *homo economicus*. Coupled with a fixed weekly allowance, my overall spending has not increased, and I am able to live within my means.

In regard to the use of water, although the tap disposes me toward indiscriminate waste, I find it useful to initiate a count whenever I turn on the tap or step into the

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[334] I got this idea from the Ad Busters Foundation, which launched the *Buy Nothing Day* campaign to counter to the annual shopping frenzy during the Black Friday weekend in the United States.

shower. A silent count, at whatever pace, helps me return to the present moment, and I become more aware of my water consumption. As a result, I tend to use less water with each visit to the faucet.

I continue to practice forms of *askesis* by limiting my intake of certain foods and drinks. Although these limits are not as stringent as when I lived off-grid, when I subsisted on oats, rice, and lentils, the impetus remains the same. Dietary practices instantiate one way in which I adhere to limits in the minutiae of daily life, a way of working with desiderative impulses.

These principles provide a basis for experimentation and reflection. They do not prescribe practice, but rather give direction to the shaping of practice. In the following section, I shall consider the limitations of my proposal and address some possible criticisms.

6.4. Possibilities and Limitations of Practice

The practices described above can seem feeble in light of the scale and urgency of the ecological crisis. Principles of practice, in this sense, do not appear to provide adequate reforms so desperately needed. However, as I have indicated in chapter one, moral motivation that is solely concerned with "action" *per se* tends to conceive of behaviour without antecedent forces. Bourdieu's theory of practice is a concerted attempt to address the factors that sponsor ostensible actions.[335] According to Bourdieu, dispositions are more fundamental to behaviours aimed at specific outcomes. Whether an event precipitates a sudden and pervasive change or meets with widespread resistance depends in part on the dispositions harboured by a populace. Habitus, in this regard, is not so much a means to a predetermined outcome but the prior conditions that make *certain kinds* of change more likely than others. Dispositions are the internal orientation which affect the course of behaviour. Internalized conditions do not act in our place, but neither do we act without them; they are presupposed in our actions and form the horizon within which actions are sustained.[336] Practices *per se* are not synonymous with pro-environmental action; they are the gestures and motions prefigured in the acts

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[335] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Bourdieu, *In Other Words*; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

[336] See Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.

we undertake. In proposing principles of practice, I am not prescribing methods and programs that purport to reach a predetermined outcome. Rather, I present a framework for shaping the constitutional forces that compel people to pursue certain modes of life over others.

The injunction to reclaim attention, to return to embodiment, to join awareness to the more-than-human, can seem pedestrian and ineffectual in the larger effort to avert ecological catastrophe. However, the roots of the ecological crisis also stem from prevalent practices that do not seem to hold ecological import. Estrangement from land is the result of practices both common and mundane. The faucet, toilet, and shower offer great convenience, but they can also facilitate an ignorance of water's scarcity and preciousness. Use of the faucet *per se* does not constitute an ecological offence; but over time, ease of access can dispose us to mindless consumption and waste. Addiction to the screen does not appear to be an obvious cause of ecological decline. However, this addiction is not innocuous in holding our attention captive, thus eroding our capacity to notice the marvels of the more-than-human world, fomenting a neglect of the status of land and wilderness. The practices of everyday life seem unremarkable. Over time they sculpt the psyche by forming inclination and habit both. Since my diagnosis of the ecological crisis lies in *habitus* and the practices that engender dispositions, my recommendations are therefore placed on the same level of everyday practice.

Beyond a precondition that facilitates certain kinds of practices over others, habitus continues to shape action even while external conditions change. In this way, habitus is not simply the antecedent to change but also a persistent factor in the midst of adjustment, a subtending force that plays into the negotiation of upheaval. The aforementioned principles of practice aim to instill a respect for limits and a capacity for conservation. The ability to thrive within constraints becomes more vital as the climate emergency accelerates, leading to increased scarcity in resources. In 2018, droughts in Cape Town led authorities to impose water rations to fifty litres per person per day.[337] In a matter of weeks, citizens changed their behaviour in order to stave off "Day Zero," the day when water would finally run out. This abrupt shift in behaviour was precipitated by dire conditions. If citizens want to avert such drastic disruptions, conservation must

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[337] "How Cape Town Was Saved from Running out of Water," *Guardian*, 4 May 2018, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/04/back-from-the-brink-how-cape-town-cracked-its-water-crisis.

become a feature of everyday life. In 2021, drought in Taiwan has compelled the state water company to cut supplies to major cities two days a week.[338] Citizens have had to adjust their water usage to meet the decrease in the water supply. A habitus of water conservation, therefore, not only helps to prevent acute shortages but also helps populations adjust to chronic shortages.

Critics may further charge that my emphasis on fundamental practices amounts to incremental change rather than a rapid one. They may say that given the state of ecological decline, we do not have time for the former. David Boyd has argued that the introduction of laws and regulations has been remarkably effective in curbing pollution and preventing species extinction in a relatively short time,[339] and that effective change requires changes in legislation and policy. Indeed, we need legislation and policies to prevent and mitigate environmental decline. At the same time, I submit that the reformation of dispositions has less to do with the *rate* of change than with the *completeness* of change. The question is not whether change is incremental or rapid but whether it is thorough or piecemeal. Legislation can curb egregious environmental practices (e.g., regulating the emission of toxic pollutants) and disincentivize the consumption of certain goods (for example, fossil fuels), but it cannot effectively curb the culture of exploitation and consumption that underwrites capitalist-industrial societies. To address more fundamental matters of culture and consciousness, we must turn to the common practices associated with beliefs about norms and givens, that which "goes without saying because [they] come without saying."[340] The reformation of habitus, in other words, attempts to shift consumptive inertia toward a respect for limits and a preference for conservation. The intentional shaping of dispositions aims to reorient the sensibilities prefigured in our actions and decisions beyond the discrete domains regulated by law and policy.

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[338] "Taiwan Faces Its Most Severe Water Shortage in 56 Years: Sea Goddess, Air Force C-130s Called Upon," *WION*, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.wionews.com/world/taiwan-faces-its-most-severe-water-shortage-in-56-years-sea-goddess-air-force-c-130s-called-upon-371597; "Taiwan Imposes Water Rationing as Drought Worsens," accessed 18 April 2021, https://phys.org/news/2021-04-taiwan-imposes-rationing-drought-worsens.html.

[339] David R. Boyd, *The Optimistic Environmentalist: Progressing toward a Greener Future* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2015).

[340] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 167.

Others might object that my analysis of disposition and my proposal for its reform place too much emphasis on the individual and neglect the collective and systemic changes needed to usher in effective change. In response, I point to Bourdieu's theory of practice. According to Bourdieu, habitus is not the property of the individual, nor a determinative program imposed by social structures. Habitus exists in the interchange between agents and their fields, between individuals and the surrounding environments. By locating the confluence of practice and disposition (such as the link between fetching water and water conservation), habitus points beyond the individual as the site of operation and implicates a host of factors in the shaping of dispositions. The analysis of habitus leads me to two implications for educators: first, the development of critical examination of structures that afford certain practices and the dispositions they engender, leading to greater circumspection with regards to the accoutrements of urban life; second, the impetus to create and shape practices that dispose us to an ecological mode of life. The former enjoins a cautious attitude toward built environments and their effects, the latter calls for negotiation and creativity amidst the constraints and imposed by pervasive norms. The proposal to reform the practices that lie within our power is not a blind endorsement of individual action that excludes collective and coordinated forms of action, but rather an encouragement to create spaces for possibility within the limitations posed by the status quo. Systemic change is vital, and we need to work toward policies that will shift the industrial-capitalist-consumerist inertia. However, even as we work for collective change, the present predicament continues to impact our interiority, nor do we stop discerning the alignment of our personal lives with our political commitments. Attention to the inner dimensions of activism and the ongoing reformation of our practices complement rather than oppose our political and social activism.

This leads me to acknowledge a possible limitation in my proposal. Couched in negotiation with my surroundings, my attempts to reform practice seem isolated and singular, powerless to affect other fields and associations that compose the larger culture. My recommendations can seem ineffectual given the entrenchment of urban infrastructure. Watermains and sewers, power grids and cellular networks, asphalt and concrete comprise much of the urban landscape and circumscribe the practices of those who use them. One person's attempt to negotiate practices associated with their use does not portend larger transformational change.

This limitation points to the importance of associations and coordinated action in the effort to effect cultural change. In chapter one, I mentioned the importance of both collective and individual action, that the two exist in an ongoing dialogue within the conduct of an ethical life. Although in this dissertation I have focused primarily on the latter, the acknowledgement of the limitations of my proposal circles me back to the importance of collective action. Many have encouraged participation in environmental organizations and advocacy groups (forms of activism that I support and have participated in) which attempt to change government policy and promote changes in collective behaviour. Instead of reiterating the importance of coordinated action that lobbies for systemic change or joining organizations that encourage alternative practices (such Zero Waste campaigns and local food movements), I shall point to another form of association that not only lends strength to personal practice but also bolsters collective resolve: a *practice tradition*.

A tradition is community across time. The strength and longevity of our practices are supported by generations of predecessors who have marked their own lives with assiduous practice. Stories and lessons of their experiences can inform our own endeavours. They inspire, comfort, guide and encourage. My own venture in the forest was supported by the Zen tradition, consisting of contemplatives who have lived their own wilderness retreats with grace, humour, and wisdom. I was heartened by the story of Chiyono, who came to realization in the act of carrying water, and was edified by Dogen's characterization of Zen practice as mistake after mistake. Though I was living on my own in the forest, I was not alone. Practices handed down through tradition may seem simple at first blush, but one discovers their profundity by investing time in their cultivation. With consistency and patience, a practice continues to inform and instruct; one begins to witness its liveliness within the space of commitment. In these dynamic emanations of practical experience, the wisdom of predecessors serves as an interlocutor in the ongoing conversation of practice.

A tradition is also a storehouse of possibility, a repository of exemplars that serve as reference for the conduct of life.[341] Prior to meeting Blair, I had not encountered first-

[341] As a community that spans across time, a tradition is often maintained through religious institutions. However, I do not equate traditions with religious institutions, neither am I recommending membership in a religion. Instead, I am inviting readers to draw from the

hand someone who constructed a house purely from hand tools. It was through his example that I saw a hand-made structure as a feasible option. Although he was not associated with a religious organization, Blair's reminder about sawing wood as a form of contemplative practice tapped into the teachings of Buddhist luminaries across centuries. In that moment, he was among the many purveyors of contemplative wisdom reaching into antiquity. Because practice is often transmitted through mimesis, we need exemplars to preserve stories and teachings from elders and sages, because they enliven our aspirations and steer our direction. As a member of the Zen tradition, I see my conduct in light of examples set by predecessors, and how I might serve as a reference for those who follow. This is not an act of presumption, as if to deem myself an example to others; it is rather the understanding of how habitus is transmitted, how my practice becomes a vessel for the preservation of possibilities within an ancient lineage.

Certain practices require the support of others. Dietary practices, for example, often assume that our friends, families, and associates will accommodate our choices. We may also find it easier to adhere to limits if we undertake the challenge with peers who walk with us in solidarity. For example, one might draw support and strength in cultural and religious traditions that encourage certain restrictions at certain times of the year.[342] In navigating the throes of ecological grief, we find solace and resolve in support groups alongside others who are also sorting through the implications of the ecological decline. In 2020, I joined an online Buddhist community that explores the many dimensions of the ecological crisis, including feelings of grief and despair. I completed one iteration of an online training course and now serve as a facilitator for a subsequent iteration. The sessions have provided opportunities for people to share their struggles with the ecological crisis and to coordinate their responses in the form of collective action, including demonstrations and sit-ins to stop pipeline construction.

Beyond effects of the individual, collective efforts within traditions of practice provide one form of engagement with culture, which generates the conditions in which

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wellspring of wisdom that traditions offer, and to consider how practices can be inspired by the ancient past.

[342] In the Catholic and Islamic traditions, Lent and Ramadan are two periods in which members undertake restrictions to their consumptive habits. In both instances, these restrictions remind adherents of a devotion that supersedes immediate gratification. Those who live in the secular west may not feel an affinity to these religious traditions; nevertheless, their examples illustrate the importance of communal forms of restraint, attempted alongside others who undertake the same practices.

dispositions take shape. Tradition, in this sense, can be seen as a touchstone in the cultural fabric of social life. The revival of cultural traditions that enable us to live well with less is vital in the Anthropocene, when human demands collide with ecological limits. We need to rediscover stories, teachings, and wisdom from traditions that have extoled the values of thrift and restraint and warn against greed and excess. We also need practices and training in communities that retain practices of conservation.[343] Under the auspices of these practice traditions, personal effort is not merely individual but joins with the larger collectivity that sustains vital facets of human possibilities through time. As such, practice traditions facilitate spaces of creativity and responsiveness under the guidance of ancient wisdom. The rediscovery and revival of cultural traditions, in essence, is one channel through which personal effort joins with collective resolve within the larger movement toward social change.

6.5. Considerations for Educators

The ecological crisis induces a crisis of the psyche and vice versa. An environmental education that does not address matters of interiority remains partial and incomplete. Educators should understand the profound psychological and emotional traumas associated with ecological decline, from children in elementary schools to adults in post-secondary institutions. Recognition of the ecological crisis can often induce anger, disillusionment, denial, anxiety, and paralysis. Each of these reactions is a response to trauma, stressors that overwhelm students' ability to cope.[344] Awareness of the effects of industrial growth can alienate students from their surroundings, making them feel less at home in the current establishment. These psychological difficulties have little to do with content or competencies; they strike at the core of students' trust in a world that is hospitable to life. In order to help students navigate this inner anguish, educators must also attend to their own inner pain and the ways in which they work through the impacts of the ecological crisis. Regarding the pain we feel about the state

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[343] For example, in Soto Zen monasteries, monks carry a set of eating utensils (*Oryoki*) , consisting of three bowls, chopsticks, a spoon, a spatula and napkins. At the end of each meal, a small amount of hot water is poured into the first bowl to rinse off residual bits of food. The water is then poured into the next bowl for the same procedure, and then the last bowl after that. After the same water has rinsed three bowls, the practitioner drinks the wash water. Not one drop is wasted.

[344] Woodbury, "Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma."

of the world, Richard Rohr writes: “if we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.”[345] Unable to reckon with their own anguish, educators are ill-prepared to help students address their grief. In a rush to comfort students with facile hope and technological solutions, educators inadvertently convey that there is no space for sadness and mourning, which are themselves indications of our love for the living planet.[346]

To work with grief is to avail oneself of development. Grief is the raw pain of loss; however, if we can stay find ways to stay with grief, we can make a move toward mourning. Writer and theologian Serene Jones has said that “to move from grief to mourning is to move from a place of sheer loss to a place of acknowledging the loss.”[347] In mourning, Jones suggests, we “make sacred the pain.”[348] Similarly, Judith Butler argues that “mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation.”[349] This inner work has the potential to awaken students to vulnerabilities previously invisible, and to realign commitments. By learning to hold with compassion the difficult emotions that attend the ecological crisis, educators can generate a more resilient capacity to live and act in a world of bewildering challenge. Contemplative practices offer much guidance and wisdom to those who traverse the inner passage through grief and mourning.

Coextensive with the inner work of attending to anguish lies the challenge of confronting the constraints posed by the external world. Since our inner pain comes from the stark recognition of glaring flaws in modern Western societies, further frustration can arise from the recalcitrance of the establishment. As such, educators must support students in their vulnerability as they negotiate the limitations posed by their surroundings, the situations in which their choices and actions are already circumscribed. Moreover, students will likely confront ambivalences that confound their

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[345] Richard Rohr, “Transformative Suffering,” Blog, 16 April 2020, https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Transforming-Our-Pain.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=xc3Pv4aZlsM.

[346] See also, Sharon Todd, “Creating Aesthetic Encounters of the World, or Teaching in the Presence of Climate Sorrow,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 4 (2020): 1110–25.

[347] Krista Tippett, “Serene Jones: Grace in a Fractured World,” mp3, *On Being*, n.d., https://onbeing.org/programs/serene-jones-grace-in-a-fractured-world/.

[348] Tippett, “Serene Jones: Grace in a Fractured World.”

[349] Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 56.

own ethical values, as one set of values clashes with another. In these situations, educators who themselves have learned to hold space for complexity and contradiction can better assist students in navigating the challenges of modern life.

In dealing with the tension between ethical aspirations and practical constraints, we invariably run up against inclinations and reluctances, the habitual states that mark the life of habitus. As such, educators can pay greater attention to the minute and often invisible practices folded into educational interventions. Here, I refer not to instructional activities *per se*—those programs of conscious design aimed at specified outcomes—but the rhythms, gestures and motions imparted by educational activities. If attention is calibrated to a rapid flow of information and the frantic management of multiple tasks, the mind will be steeped in a pattern of frenzy, too hurried to note the finer marvels that are invisible to busy minds and eyes. Teachers can therefore examine the ongoing, and perhaps unintended, effects of their instruction, the habits and tendencies generated in a program. These propensities and habits may have little to do with explicit learning outcomes or specific competencies than with perceptions, attitudes, reactions, aversions and antipathies inculcated in the process of learning.

The mind is a significant site for habitus. Teachers have mostly been concerned with developing the *content* of mentation; however, the *tenor* of mentation should also figure into educational design. There is work to be done in expanding and deepening the *container* itself. In so doing, students become familiar with their subjectivity—they develop a skillfulness in navigating matters of interiority and cultivate a capacity for numinous experience in wild spaces. Begin each day with sensory contact with land; tune into scents and textures, survey the qualities of light in the sky. Awareness of the more-than-human within the contemplative mindset primes us for sacredness. Just as I spent many hours at my sit-spot, studying how the forest wore the seasons, teachers and students can dedicate time for quiet observation in a green space: watch a cloud change shape, sketch the face of a flower, watch a slug crawl across the dirt. Remembering the night when I ventured into the darkness of the evening with nothing but the moonlight to guide my path, teachers can encourage students to do something that challenges their sensory modalities: spend an hour in the forest barefoot, touch soil and bark with the back of the hand. Make time every day to notice the extraordinary in the ordinary.

In order to skillfully negotiate the workings of habitus, educators need to encourage reflective faculties that scrutinize moments of discomfort and discontinuity in order to glean insight into ruling inclinations. These are opportunities to identify the direction of inertia, to pause and entertain alternative possibilities. This ability to pause amid the force of habit and move against the grain of inclination is itself forged through practice. By encouraging students to catch a moment of difficulty, to understand the mechanisms that trigger resistance, and consider possibilities for alternative responses, teachers can promote within students the skills in handling disinclination and aversion. Then, by identifying the forces of disinclination, students can return to the practice in question, all the while getting to know the textures and colours of their own propensity. This ability to do what one doesn't want to do, and thus to make one's dispositions more pliable, is precisely the purview of *Morphesaria*.

Because practices are pervasive beyond the norms and routines of schooling, the critical examination of practice needs to reach beyond the classroom and into the business of everyday life. However, reflective capacity also offers a chance to generate alternative practices that promote healthier dispositions. Educators can also be cautious about the motions of the body and the comportment of attention in the process of learning, no matter how worthy the outcomes. If in honing a skill the body is rendered inert, or if in acquiring knowledge attention is surrendered to the screen, then students will have met an outcome while also generating questionable dispositions. By folding physical movement into the routines of the school day within the activities of classroom learning, educators reaffirm the use of the body (and the usefulness of the body). By setting aside time for open observation in green spaces, teachers can promote a disposition toward awareness, a capacity for slowness of comportment, and an affinity with plants, animals, the cosmos itself. Like the many practices of everyday life that are repeated without critical examination, intentional practices aimed at promoting desirable habits and dispositions (Practice 2) must be undertaken regularly and sustained over time in order to gather sufficient strength. The challenge for educators lies in the establishment of practices that are integrated into the routines of the classroom without lapsing into discrete "activities" that have little power to shape incumbent dispositions.

How do we help people (including ourselves) do what they don't want to do, even as they struggle in the grip of ecological grief? In following this question, I began by addressing and treating the inner wounds attached to the ecological crisis. In the

process, I have proposed a way to walk in solidarity with those who suffer. In the spirit of compassion, I examined the forces that shape agency by identifying the factors that engender ruling dispositions. These are mundane practices which do not appear formative but generate habitual states nevertheless. With conscious intention, I continue to engage in practices that restore and deepen awareness, strengthen affinity with the more-than-human, reinvigorate my sense of embodiment, and refine my ability to live within limits. In applying myself to practice, awkwardness and difficulty can be informative, for they signal the force of dispositions and steer me toward other vital directions. In so doing, I submit that everyday practice is one entry point into a more ecological life. The endeavour is not a dour affair, and less a glorification of austerity; it is a rather a call to wholeness that enjoys life as the "value of all values,"[350] a call to love and responsibility as our primary response. Practice can be a boundless space of exploration and possibility, a site of honest engagement, moment after moment.

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[350] Thomas Riedelsheimer, *November Rose: The Tides of Loss, Life and Love*, mp4, n.d., https://www.november-rose.com/the-film.html.

Postlude

My friend the maple tree is audacious and eager. It lives in a row with two other maples and a linden tree but is the first to send out buds after the first few warm days of spring. Something about its boldness calls to me; there's something I need to learn here. I have taken to coming here on Sunday mornings. The streets are usually empty and the neighbourhood quiet. Today, I greet the tree with my hands on the ridged bark then take my seat at the bench. In the course of the hour, I listen to Flickers and Blackbirds frolic in the dapples of light along sinewy branches. A woman walks up to the bench six feet away.

Woman: Do you mind if I have a smoke here?

Me: Not at all.

Woman: I don't want to interrupt your peaceful morning.

Me: I don't mind.

She had moved back to BC after many years in Montreal. Life has been difficult; a relationship ended, then she lost her job. Living in her sister's basement, she is starting again, rebuilding from the ruins of a previous life. I recognize the brokenness in her voice. Perhaps she recognizes mine. She asks about my life, and I tell her about my work, how I spent close to a year on an off-grid island.

Woman: And what did you learn?

Me: That nature heals.

Woman: It really does.

I would like to say that all is well, that I have made my peace with my life in the city. Still the garish lights are taxing, the roaring engines grating. I am not suggesting a final telos, nor do I present a master narrative about the arc of personal ontogeny from an infantile consumerism to a "mature" wilderness ethic. There are no perfect origins and ends, and I offer no fine finish to conclude this story. Each day brings with it fresh attempts to practise the simplicity that I learned in the woods. Many days I falter. When I falter, I resolve to try again. Every waking moment is an opportunity to seize what lies in

my power. My work is about the mundane, the marginal, the ordinary gestures that shape a person, an endeavour to compose consciousness in the common hours of a day. Those searching for spectacular revolutions will find more enticing fare elsewhere. Attending the minute motions of daily life, I know the depth and promise of all that is ordinary.

A year after my return, Miles had a cluster of severe seizures. We administered another drug to suppress the cluster, but he experienced serious side effects and was admitted to the veterinary hospital. Once again, we felt close to losing him. I watched his vacant gaze as he slipped into sleep under the anesthetic. Fortunately, he came through that cluster, and we brought him home from the hospital. A new set of medications have kept the seizures largely at bay, and Miles is back to his happy, silly self.

I remember our time on the island, his persistent attempts to chase deer, his repeated paw injuries, and his seizures. Those were difficult times, and the thought of them send me into bittersweet reverie. I am once again struck by that marvellous otherness, an intelligent being who draws me deeper into vulnerability. We belong to each other, even though there is a part of him that I shall never understand. And this itself is a mystery, how we can be utterly involved yet remain elusive to one another. Perhaps it is also the case with wild spaces, in which we commune with many kinds of otherness. In union, mystery remains. In mystery, there is reverence for all that eludes, all that confounds, all that transcends. Enfolded in the unknowable, the world itself becomes a *koan*, an all-encompassing question that surpasses apprehension.

I maintain an affinity with the natural world, to the ineffable and imponderable wisdom of trees, oceans, and the arching sky. Despite the farrago of news that dims the spirit, I remember what I learned in those hours of quiet sitting in the forest. Whether our prospects are bright or grim is mostly a human preoccupation. Better to gather insight from wildness and learn how to live and die with dignity and meaning. On days when I am assailed by doubt, I think back to what the trees revealed to me during those quiet hours: constancy and steadiness without end. Under the steadiness of this maple tree, I recall the other sylvan companions with whom I traversed the course of a year. With their wisdom in mind, I shall conclude with this poem, an invocation to the multiple mysteries of the wild that we have yet to contemplate or have long forgotten.

In Supplication to Arbutus

Teach me how to live
Red Arbutus
Peel back this bark
Reveal the undiscovered spaces
Of invisible words
Show me stillness
How to remain free
In the sweep of a winter storm
Teach me the patience of a thousand days
Held in one steady breath
Draw me close to soil
Where moss and lichen meet
Where dew gathers in starry clusters
Walk me to twilight's edge
Where rage finds rest
Where fretting turns to leaping
Show me the goodness of death,
Slow and free
Under a sky beaming
Teach me how to live
How to return from forgetfulness
To the rooted innocence
Of this
Prayerful
Silence.

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Appendix.

Thomas Moore's Prayer

The following is drawn from Donald Grayston's book, *Conversations with a Painting: A Memoir*. In the book, Don describes a series of gestures attributed to psychologist and author Thomas Moore. Don, an Anglican priest, interpreted the gestures within the context of his Christian faith. I bring my own interpretations to the gestures. The italicized text comes from Don's book. I have added my own interpretation following each passage.

First gesture: hands together in prayer position, I bow to the earth, from which I come as do all other creatures. The gesture is a recognition of the ecological context from which all life arises, a sign of gratitude for the conditions that give rise to the gift of life.

Second gesture: I raise my arms to their full extent (eleven and one on the clock). With arms outstretched, I open myself to the cosmos, the wide universe above. Donald Grayston thought of this gesture as opening oneself to God; I think of this gesture as opening oneself to all that transcends the parochial self.

Third gesture: I make a circle in front of myself with my arms, touching the tips of my middle fingers to each other. This is the gesture of embrace. With this gesture I embrace everything that exists in the world and remind myself to reject and exclude nothing that is in the world, all joy and suffering, all triumph and struggle.

Fourth gesture: I cross my arms on my chest. This personalizes God's embrace and tells me that God embraces me as well as everyone else and everything else. With every other part of creation, I am the beloved of God, and God is in principle well pleased with me (cf. Mark 1:11). This is a gesture of self-acceptance and love. I cannot give to the world what I do not know myself; therefore, I affirm who I am, with all my faults and limitations, so that I can use my gifts to serve others.

Fifth gesture: I place my uplifted hands close to my shoulders, in the surrender position. Sooner or later, this is what it's all about. My real moment of surrender came at the time of the end of my marriage, which also involved the relinquishment of my respectable

self-image. If your moment of surrender has come already, I rejoice with you. If not, I invite you to open your heart to the possibility. We can't do it all, and never will; nor are we in charge of the universe, although at times we may have lived as if we were. It is a freeing, liberating, realistic gesture: I surrender. By making it daily, with all the other gestures, I acknowledge that although the deep reality of surrender may have come to us in a particular moment, it is something that needs daily reaffirmation and renewal. This gesture is beautiful and moving. By raising my hands, I take a quick inventory of all that I am holding onto, all the tensions that have me in their grip. I soften into the moment. Surrender is not capitulation, but calibration; by acknowledging the forces beyond me, I am better able to respond with fresh vitality.

Sixth gesture: leaving my arms in the same position, and turning my shoulders from side to side, I sweep what is in front of me, from left to right and back again, with my glance. If we do the prayer in a group, we look directly at the other people in the circle and smile at them, an acknowledgement that we are bound up with them in the bundle of life, that we share with them the destiny of the entire human race as well as our own personal destiny. This gesture centres a responsibility toward ecological and social justice. There can be no true personal flourishing if others live under torment and oppression.

Seventh gesture: I clap, to wake myself up, and to wake up anyone else who may hear or encounter me as someone wanting to be an awakened or wakeful person. This day is another opportunity to awaken, to see into my true nature, the nature of the cosmos. I have another day to come to a greater understanding of all that I encounter. Let me not squander these precious hours.

Eighth gesture: once again a bow, a little deeper than the opening bow. . . this closing bow is also in honour of the earth, but in a different sense; it honours the earth to which we go. It is a daily memento mori, and acknowledgement of our mortality: in the midst of life, we are in death. Bowing to the earth, I remember my earthliness. With thoughts returning to soil, I recover my purpose—to work for the good of all creatures, and to remind myself of my pending return to the earth, the final homecoming.