

Good, Wild, Sacred by Gary Snyder

Weeding Out the Wild

My family and I have been living for twenty years now on land in the Sierra Nevada range of northern California. These ridges and slopes are somewhat “wild” and not particularly “good.” The original people here, the Nisenan (or Southern Maidu) were almost entirely displaced or



destroyed during the first few decades of the gold rush. It seems there is no one left to teach us which places in this landscape were once felt to be “sacred”—though with time and attention, I think we will be able to feel and find them again.

Wild land, good land, sacred land. At home working on our mountain farmstead, in town at political meetings, and farther afield studying the problems of indigenous peoples, I hear such terms emerging. By examining these three categories perhaps we can get some insights into the problems of rural habitation, subsistence living, wilderness preservation, and Third and Fourth World resistance to the appetites of industrial civilization.

Our idea of Good Land comes from agriculture. Here “good” (as in good soil) is narrowed to mean land productive of a small range of favored cultivars, and thus it favors the opposite of “wild”: the cultivated. To raise a crop you fight the bugs, shoo the birds, and pull the weeds. The wild that keeps flying, creeping, burrowing in—is sheer frustration. Yet wild nature cannot be called unproductive, and no plant in the almost endless mosaics of micro and macro communities is ever out of place. For hunting and

gathering peoples for whom that whole spread of richness, the wild natural system, is also their economy, a cultivated patch of land might seem bizarre and definitely not good, at least at first. Gathering people draw on the whole field, ranging widely daily. Agricultural people live by a map constructed of highly productive nodes (cleared fields) connected by lines (trails through the scary forest)—a beginning of “linear.”

For preagricultural people the sites considered sacred and given special care were of course wild. In early agrarian civilizations, ritually cultivated land or special temple fields were sometimes considered sacred. The fertility religions of those times were not necessarily rejoicing in the fertility of fall nature, but were focusing on their own harvest. The idea of cultivation was conceptually extended to describe a kind of training in social forms that guarantees membership in an elite class. By the metaphor of “spiritual cultivation” a holy man has weeded out the wild from his nature. This is agrarian theology. But weeding out the wild from the natures of members of the *Bos* and *Sus* clans—cattle and pigs—gradually changed animals which are intelligent and alert in the wild into sluggish meat-making machines.

Certain groves from the original forest lingered on into classical times as “shrines.” They were viewed with much ambivalence by the rulers from the metropole. They survived because the people who worked the land still half-heard the call of the old ways, and lore that predated agriculture was still whispered around. The kings of Israel began to cut down the sacred groves, and the Christians finished the job. The idea that “wild” might also be “sacred” returned to the Occident only with the Romantic movement. This nineteenth-century rediscovery of wild nature is a complex European phenomenon—a reaction against formalistic rationalism and enlightened despotism that invoked feeling, instinct, new nationalisms, and a sentimentalized folk culture. It is only from very old place-centered cultures! That we hear of sacred groves, sacred land, in a context of genuine belief and practice; Part of that context is the tradition of the commons: “good” land becomes private property; the wild and the sacred are shared.



A SACRED SITE IN AUSTRALIA

Throughout the world the original inhabitants of desert, jungle, and forest are facing relentless waves of incursions into their remotest territories. These lands, whether by treaty or by default, were left in their use because the dominant society thought the arctic tundra or and desert or jungle forest “no good.”

Native people everywhere are now conducting an underprivileged and underfunded fight against unimaginably wealthy corporations to resist logging or oil exploration or uranium mining on their own land. They persist in these struggles not just because it has always been their home, but also because some places in it are sacred to them. This last aspect makes them struggle desperately to resist the powerful temptation to sell out—to take the cash and accept relocation. And sometimes the temptations and confusion are too great, and they do surrender and leave.

Thus some very cogent and current political questions surround the traditional religious use of certain spots. I was at the University of Montana in the spring of 1982 on a program with Russell Means, the American Indian Movement founder and activist, who was trying to get support for the Yellow Thunder Camp of Lakota and other Indian people of the Black Hills. Thunder Camp was on traditional tribal land that was under Forest Service jurisdiction at the time. These people wanted to block further expansion of mining into the Black Hills. Their argument was that the particular place they were reoccupying is not only ancestral but sacred.

During his term in office California Governor Jerry Brown created the Native American Heritage Commission specifically for California Indians, and a number of elders were charged with the task of locating and protecting sacred sites and native graves in California. This was done partly to head off confrontations between native people versus landowners

or public land managers who start developments on what is now considered their property. The trouble often involves traditional grave sites. It was a sensitive move, and though barely comprehensible to the white voters, it sent a ripple of appreciation through all the native communities. Although the white Christian founders of the United States were probably not considering American Indian beliefs when they guaranteed freedom of religion, some court decisions over the years have given support to certain Native American churches. The connection of religion to *land*, however, has been resisted by the dominant culture and the courts. This ancient aspect of religious worship remains virtually incomprehensible to Euro-Americans. Indeed it might: if even some small bits of land are considered sacred, then they are forever *not for sale and not for taxing*. This is a deep threat to the assumptions of an endlessly expansive materialist economy.

Waterholes

In the hunting and gathering way of life, the whole territory of a given group is fairly equally experienced by everyone. Those wild and sacred spots have many uses. There are places where women go for seclusion, places where the bodies of the dead are taken, and spots where young men and women are called for special instruction. Such places are numinous, loaded with meaning and power. The memories of such spots are very long. Nanao Sakaki, John Stokes, and I were in Australia in the fall of 1981 at the invitation of the Aboriginal Arts Board doing some teaching, poetry readings, and workshops with both aboriginal leaders and children. Much of the time we were in the central Australian desert south and west of Alice Springs, first into Pitjantjara tribal territory and then three hundred miles northwest into Pintubi lands. The aboriginal people in the central desert all still speak their languages. Their religion is fairly intact, and most young men are still initiated at fourteen, even the ones who go to high school at Alice Springs. They leave the high school for a year and are taken into the bush to learn bush ways on foot, to master the lore of landscapes and plants and animals, and finally to undergo initiation.

We were traveling by truck over dirt track west from Alice Springs in the company of a Pintubi elder named Jimmy Tjungurrayi. As we rolled along the dusty road, sitting back in the bed of a pickup, he began to speak very rapidly to me. He was talking about a mountain over there, telling me a story about some wallabies that came to that mountain in the dreamtime and got into some kind of mischief with some lizard girls. He had hardly finished that and he started in on another story about another hill over here and another story over there, I couldn't keep up. I realized after about half an hour of this that these were tales to be told while *walking*, and that I was experiencing a speeded-up version of what might be leisurely told over several days of foot travel. Mr. Tjungurrayi felt graciously compelled to share a body of lore with me by virtue of the simple fact that I was there.

So remember a time when you journeyed on foot over hundreds of miles, walking fast and often traveling at night, traveling nightlong and napping in the acacia shade during the day, and these stories were told to you as you went. In your travels with an older person you were given a map you could memorize, full of lore and song, and also practical information. Off by yourself you could sing those songs to bring yourself back. And you could maybe travel to a place that you'd never been, steering only by songs you had learned.

We made camp at a waterhole called Ilpili and rendezvoused with a number of Pintubi people from the surrounding desert country. The Ilpili waterhole is about a yard across, six inches deep, in a little swale of bush full of finch. People camp a quarter mile away. It's the only waterhole that stays full through drought years in tens of thousands of square miles. A place kept by custom open to all. Until late at night Jimmy and the other old men sat around a small thornbrush fire and sang a cycle of journey songs, walking through a space of desert in imagination and music. They kept a steady rhythmic beat to the song by clapping two boomerangs together. They stopped between songs and would hum a phrase or two and then argue a bit about the words and then start again. One would defer to another and let him start. Jimmy explained to me that they have so many cycles of journey songs they can't quite remember them all, and they have to be constantly rehearsing.

Each night they'd start the evening saying, "What will we sing?" and get a reply like "Let's sing the walk up to Darwin." They'd start out and argue and sing and clap their way along through it. It was during the full moon period: a few clouds would sail and trail in the cool light and mild desert wind. I had learned that the elders liked black tea, and several times a night I'd make a pot right at the fire, with lots of white sugar, the way they wanted it. The singers would stop when they felt like it. I'd ask Jimmy, "How far did you get tonight?" He'd say, "Well, we got two-thirds of the way to Darwin." This can be seen as one example of the many ways landscape, myth, and information were braided together in preliterate societies.

One day driving near Ilpili we stopped the truck and Jimmy and the three other elderly gentlemen got out and he said, "We'll take you to see a sacred place here. I guess you're old enough." They turned to the boys and told them to stay behind. As we climbed the bedrock hill these ordinarily cheery and loud-talking aboriginal men began to drop their voices. As we got higher up they were speaking whispers and their whole manner changed. One said almost inaudibly, "Now we are coming close." Then they got on their hands and knees and crawled. We crawled up the last two hundred feet, then over a little rise into a small basin of broken and oddly shaped rocks. They whispered to us with respect and awe of what was there. Then we all backed away. We got back down the hill and at a certain point stood and walked. At another point voices rose. Back at the truck, everybody was talking loud again and no more mention was made of the sacred place.

Very powerful. Very much in mind. We learned later that it was indeed a place where young men were taken for ceremony.

I traveled by pickup truck along hundreds of miles of rough dirt tracks and hiked into the mountainous and rocky country where the roads stopped. I was being led to special places. There were large unique boulders, each face and facet a surprise. There was the sudden opening out of a hidden steep defile where two cliffs meet with just a little sandbed between, and some

green bushes, some parrots calling. We dropped down cliffs off a mesa into a waterhole you wouldn't guess was there, where a thirty-foot blade of rock stands on end, balancing. Each of these spots was out of the ordinary, fantastic even, and sometimes rich with life. Often there were pictographs in the vicinity. They were described as teaching spots and some were "dreaming spots" for certain totem ancestors, well established in song and story over tens of thousands of square miles.

"Dreaming" or "dreamtime" refers to a time of fluidity, shape-shifting, interspecies conversation and intersexuality, radically creative moves, whole landscapes being altered. It is often taken to be a "mythical past," but it is not really *any* time. We might as well say it is *right now*. It is the mode of the eternal moment of creating, of being, as contrasted with the mode of cause and effect in time. Time is the realm where people mainly live and within which history, evolution, and progress are imagined to take place. Dogen gave a difficult and playful talk on the resolution of these two modes early in the winter of 1240. It is called "Time/Being."

In Australian lore the totem dreaming place is first of all special to the people of that totem, who sometimes make pilgrimages there. Second, it is sacred (say) to the honey-ants which actually live there—there are hundreds of thousands of them. Third, it's like a little Platonic cave of ideal honey-antness, maybe the creation spot for all honey-ants. It mysteriously connects the essence of honey-antness with the archetypes of the human psyche and makes bridges between humanity, the ants, and the desert. The honey-ant place is in stories, dances, songs, and it is a real place which also happens to be optimum habitat for a world of ants. Or take a green parrot dreaming place: the stories will tell of the cracks of the ancestors going across the landscape and stopping at that dreaming place, and it is truly a perfect place for parrots. All this is a radically different way of expressing what science says, as well as another set of metaphors for the teachings of the Hua-yen or the Avatamsaka Sutra.

This sacredness implies a sense of optimal habitat for certain kinfolk that we have out there—the wallabies, red kangaroo, bush turkeys, lizards. Geoffrey Blainey (1976, 202) says, "The land itself was their chapel and their shrines were hills and creeks and their religious relics were animals,

plants, and birds. Thus the migrations of aboriginals, though spurred by economic need, were also always pilgrimages. “Good (productive of much life), wild (naturally), and sacred were one.

This way of life, frail and battered as it is, still exists. Now it is threatened by Japanese and other uranium mining projects, large-scale copper mining, and petroleum exploration. The issue of sacredness has become very political—so much so that the Australian Bureau of Aboriginal Affairs has hired some bilingual anthropologists and bush people to work with elders of the different tribes to try and identify sacred sites and map them. There has been much hope that the Australian government would act in good faith and declare certain areas off-limits before any exploratory team even gets near them. This effort is spurred by the fact that there have already been some confrontations in the Kimberly region over oil exploration, as at Nincoomba. The local native people stood their ground, making human lines in front of bulldozers and drilling rigs, and the media coverage of this resistance won over some of the Australian public. Since in Australia a landowner’s mineral rights are always reserved to “The Crown,” even somebody’s ranch might be subject to mining. So to consider sacred land a special category, even in theory, is an advanced move. But it’s shaky. A “registered site” near Alice Springs was bulldozed supposedly on the instructions of a government land minister, and this was in the relatively benign federal jurisdiction!

Shrines

The original inhabitants of Japan, the Ainu, had a way of speaking of the sacredness and specialness of a whole ecosystem. Their term *iworu* means “field” with implications of watershed region, plant and animal communities, and spirit force—the powers behind the masks or armor, *hayakpe*, of the various beings. The *iworu* of the Great Brown Bear would be the mountain habitat—and connected lowland valley system—in which the bear is dominant, and it would mean the myth and spirit world of the bear as well. The *iworu* of salmon would be the lower watersheds with all their tributaries (and the associated plant communities), and on out to sea,

extending into oceanic realms only guessed at, where the salmon do their weaving. The bear field, the deer field, the salmon field, the Orca held.

In the Ainu world a few human houses are in a valley by a little river. The doorways all face east. In the center of each house is the firepit. The sunshine streams through the eastern door each morning to touch the fire, and they say the sun goddess is visiting her sister the fire goddess in the firepit. One should not walk through sunbeams that shine on the fire—that would be breaking their contact. Food is often foraged in the local area, but some of the creature's come down from the inner mountains and up from the deeps of the sea. The animal or fish (or plant) that allows itself to be killed or gathered, and then enters the house to be consumed, is called a "visitor," *marapto*.

The master of the sea is Orca, the Killer Whale; the master of the inner mountains is Bear. Bear sends his friends the deer down to visit humans. Orca sends his friends the salmon up the streams. When they arrive their "armor is broken"—they are killed—enabling them to shake off their fur or scale coats and step out as invisible spirit beings. They are then delighted by witnessing the human entertainments—sake and music. (They love music.) The people sing songs to them and eat their flesh. Having enjoyed their visit they return to the deep sea or to the inner mountains and report: "We had a wonderful time with the human beings." The others are then prompted themselves to go on visits. Thus if the humans do not neglect proper hospitality—music and manners—when entertaining their deer or salmon or wild plant *marapto*, the beings will be reborn and return over and over. This is a sort of spiritual game management.

Modern Japan is another sort of example: a successful industrialized country with remnants of sacred landscape consciousness still intact. There are Shinto shrines throughout the Japanese islands. Shinto is "the way of the spirits." *Kami* are a formless "power" present in everything to some degree but intensified in strength and presence in certain outstanding objects such as large curiously twisted boulders, very old trees, or thundering misty waterfalls. Anomalies and curiosities of the landscape are all signs of *kami*— spirit-power, presence, shape of mind, energy. The

greatest of *kami* centers is Mt. Fuji. The name Fuji is now thought to derive from that of the Ainu Fire Goddess, the only one who stands above and can scold and correct the *kimun kamui*, mountain deity. Bear. All of Mt. Fuji is a Shinto shrine, the largest in the nation, from well below timberline all the way to the summit. (Many place names left behind by the displaced Ainu are still current in Japan.)

Shinto got a bad name during the 1930s and World War II because the Japanese had created an artificial “State Shinto” in the service of militarism and nationalism. It and folk Shinto became confused in the minds of many Euro-Americans. Long before the rise of any state, the islands of Japan were studded with little shrines— *jinja* and *omiya*—that were part of neolithic village culture. Even in the midst of the onrushing industrial energy of the current system; shrine lands still remain untouchable. It would make your hair stand up to see how a Japanese developer will take bulldozers to a nice slope of old pines and level it for a new town. When the New Island was created in Kobe harbor to make Kobe the second busiest port in the world (after Rotterdam), it was raised from the bay bottom with dirt obtained by shaving down a whole range of hills ten miles south of the city. This was barged to the site for twelve years—a steady stream of barges carrying dirt off giant conveyor belts that totally removed soil two rows of hills back from the coast. The newly leveled area became a housing development. In industrial Japan it’s not that “nothing is sacred,” it’s that the *sacred* is sacred and that’s *all* that’s sacred.

We are grateful for these microscopic traces of salvaged land in Japan because the rule in shrines is that (away from the buildings and paths) you never cut anything, never maintain anything, never clear or thin any thing. No hunting, no fishing, no thinning, no burning, no stopping of burning: leaving us a very few stands of ancient forests right inside the cities. One can walk into a *jinja* and be in the presence of an 800-year-old *Cryptomeria* (*Sugi*) tree. Without the shrines we wouldn’t know so well what the original Japanese forest might have been. But such compartmentalization is not healthy: in this patriarchal model some land is saved, like a virgin priestess, some is overworked endlessly, like a wife, and some is brutally

publicly reshaped, like an exuberant girl declared promiscuous and punished. Good, wild, and sacred couldn't be farther apart.

Europe and the Middle East were once studded with similar shrines. They were even spoken of as "sacred groves." It may be that in the remote past the most sacred spot in all of Europe was under the Pyrenees, where the great cave paintings are. I suspect they were part of a religious center thirty thousand years ago, where animals were "conceived" underground. Perhaps a dreaming place. Maybe a thought that the animals' secret hearts were thereby hidden under the earth, a way of keeping them from becoming extinct. But many species did become extinct, some even before the era of cave paintings was over. Many more have become so during the last two thousand years, victims of civilization. Occidental expansion brought an acceleration of habitat degradation to the whole globe, but it is interesting to note that even before that expansion such political and economic processes were already well under way. The destruction of species, the impoverishment and enslavement of rural people, and the persecution of nature-worship traditions has long been part of Europe.

So the French and English explorers of North America, the early fur traders, had no teachings from the societies they left behind that would urge them to look on wild nature with reverence. They did find much that was awe-inspiring, and some expressed it well. Some even joined the Indians and became people of the New World. These few almost forgotten exceptions were overwhelmed by trading entrepreneurs and, later, settlers. Yet all through American history there were some who kept joining the Indians in (act or in style— and some, even in the eighteenth century, who realized that the world they saw would shrink away. In the Far East, or Europe, the notion of an ancient forest or original prairie and all the splendid creatures that might live there is now a tale told from the neolithic. In the western United States it was the world of our grandmothers. For many of us today this loss is a source of grief. For Native Americans this was a loss of land, traditional life, and the sources of their culture.

True Nature

Thoreau set out to “make the soil say beans” while living by his pond. To cause land to be productive according to our own notion is not evil. But we must also ask: what does mother nature do best when left to her own long strategies? This comes to asking what the full potential vegetation of a spot would be. For all land, however wasted and exploited, if left to nature (*ziran*, the self-so), will arrive at a point of balance between biological productivity and stability. A sophisticated postindustrial “future primitive” agriculture will be asking: is there any way we can go *with* rather than against nature’s tendency? Go toward, say, in New England, deciduous hardwoods—or, as where I live, a mix of pine and oak with kitkitdizze ground cover? Doing horticulture, agriculture, or forestry with the grain rather than against it would be in the human interest and not just for the long run.

Wes Jackson’s research suggests that a diverse and perennial-plant-based agriculture holds real promise for sustaining the locally appropriate communities of the future. This is acknowledging that the source of fertility ultimately is the “wild.” It has been said that “good soil is good because of the wildness in it.” How could *this* be granted by a victorious king dividing up his spoils? The fatuity of “Spanish land grants” and “Real Estate.” The power that gives us good land is none other than Gaia herself, the whole network. It might be that almost all civilized agriculture has been on the wrong path from the beginning, relying as it does on the monoculture of annuals. In *New Roots for Agriculture* Wes Jackson develops this argument. I concur with his view, knowing that it raises even larger questions about civilization itself, a critique I have worked at elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the sorts of economic and social organization we invoke when we say “civilization” can no longer be automatically accepted as useful models. To scrutinize civilization is not, however, to negate all the meanings of cultivation.

The word *cultivation*, harking to etymologies of *till* and *wheel about*, generally implies a movement away from natural process. In agriculture it is a matter of “arresting succession, establishing monoculture.” Applied on

the spiritual plane this has meant austerities, obedience to religious authority, long bookish scholarship, or in some traditions a dualistic devotionism (sharply distinguishing “creature” and “creator”) and an overriding image of divinity being “centralized,” a distant and singular point of perfection to aim at. The efforts entailed in such a spiritual practice are sometimes a sort of war against nature—placing the human over the animal and the spiritual over the human. The most sophisticated modern variety of hierarchical spirituality is the work of Father Teilhard de Chardin, who claims a special evolutionary spiritual destiny for humanity under the name of higher consciousness. Some of the most extreme of these Spiritual Darwinists would willingly leave the rest of earth-bound animal and plant life behind to enter an off-the-planet realm transcending biology. The anthropocentrism of some new age thinkers is countered by the radical critique of the Deep Ecology movement.

On the social level cultivation has meant the absorption of language, lore, and manners that guarantee membership in the elite class and is to be contrasted with “vernacular manners.” The truth is, of course, that the etiquette of villagers or nomads (Charles Doughty having black coffee with his Bedouin hosts in Arabia Deserta) can be as elaborate, complex, and arbitrary as that of any city-dweller.

Yet there is such a thing as training. The world moves by complementaries of young and old, foolish and wise, ripe or green, raw or cooked. Animals too learn self-discipline and caution in the face of desire and availability. There is learning and training that goes *with* the grain of things as well as against it. In early Chinese Daoism, “training” did not mean to cultivate the wildness out of oneself, but to do away with arbitrary and delusive conditioning. Zhuang-zi seems to be saying that all social values are false and generate self-serving ego. Buddhism takes a middle path—allowing that greed, hatred, and ignorance are intrinsic to ego, but that ego itself is a reflex of ignorance and delusion that comes from not seeing who we “truly” are. Organized society can inflame, pander to, or exploit these weaknesses, or it can encourage generosity, kindness, trust. There is reason, therefore, to be engaged in a politics of virtue. Still it is a matter of individual character as to whether or not one makes a little

private vow to work for compassion and insight or overlooks this possibility. The day-to-day actualization of the vow calls for practice: for a training that helps us realize our own true nature, and nature.

Greed exposes the foolish person or the foolish chicken alike to the ever-watchful hawk of the food-web and to early impermanence. Preliterate hunting and gathering cultures were highly trained and lived well by virtue of keen observation and good manners; as noted earlier, stinginess was the worst of vices. We also know that early economies often were more manipulative of the environment than is commonly realized. The people of mesolithic Britain selectively cleared or burned in the valley of the Thames as a way to encourage the growth of hazel. An almost invisible system of nut and fruit tree growing was once practiced in the jungles of Guatemala. A certain kind of training and culture can be grounded in the wild.

We can all agree: there is a problem with the self-seeking human ego. Is it a mirror of the wild and of nature? I think not: for civilization itself is ego gone to seed and institutionalized in the form of the State, both Eastern and Western. It is not nature-as-chaos which threatens us, but the State's presumption that *it* has created order. Also there is an almost self-congratulatory *ignorance* of the natural world that is pervasive in Euro-American business, political, and religious circles. Nature is orderly. That which appears to be chaotic in nature is only a more complex kind of order.

Now we can rethink what sacred land might be. For a people of an old culture, *all* their mutually owned territory holds numinous life and spirit. Certain places are perceived to be of high spiritual density because of plant or animal habitat intensities, or associations with legend, or connections with human totemic ancestry, or because of geomorphological anomaly, or some combination of qualities. These places are gates through which one can—it would be said—more easily be touched by a larger-than-human, larger-than-personal, view.

Concern for the environment and the fate of the earth is spreading over the world. In Asia environmentalism is perceived foremost as a movement concerned with health—and seeing the condition of their air and water, this

is to be expected. In the Western Hemisphere we have similar problems. But here we are blessed with a bit of remaining wilderness, a heritage to be preserved for all the people of the world. In the Western Hemisphere we have only the tiniest number of buildings that can be called temples or shrines. The temples of our hemisphere will be some of the planet's remaining wilderness areas. When we enter them on foot we can sense that the *kami* or (Maidu) *kukini* are still in force here. They have become the refuge of the Mountain Lions, Mountain Sheep, and Grizzlies— three North American animals which were found throughout the lower hills and plains in prewhite times. The rocky icy grandeur of the high country—and the rich shadowy bird and fish-streaked southern swamps—remind us of the overarching wild systems that nourish us all and underwrite the industrial economy. In the sterile beauty of mountain snowfields and glaciers begin the little streams that water the agribusiness fields of the great Central Valley of California. The wilderness pilgrim's step-by-step breath-by-breath walk up a trail, into those snowfields, carrying all on the back, is so ancient a set of gestures as to bring a profound sense of body-mind joy.

Not just backpackers, of course. The same happens to those who sail in the ocean, kayak fjords or rivers, tend a garden, peel garlic, even sit on a meditation cushion. The point is to make intimate contact with the real world, real self. *Sacred* refers to that which helps take us (not only human beings) out of our little selves into the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe. Inspiration, exaltation, and insight do not end when one steps outside the doors of the church. The wilderness as a temple is only a beginning. One should not dwell in the specialness of the extraordinary experience nor hope to leave the political quagmire behind to enter a perpetual state of heightened insight. The best purpose of such studies and hikes is to be able to come back to the lowlands and see all the land about us, agricultural, suburban, urban, as part of the same territory—never totally ruined, never completely unnatural. It can be restored, and humans could live in considerable numbers on much of it. Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon swimming upstream with us, as we stroll a city street.

To return to my own situation: the land my family and I live on in the Sierra Nevada of California is “barely good” from an economic standpoint. With soil amendments, much labor, and the development of ponds for holding water through the dry season, it is producing a few vegetables and some good apples. It is better as forest: through the millennia it has excelled at growing oak and pine. I guess I should admit that it’s better left wild. Most of it is being “managed for wild” right now—the pines are getting large and some of the oaks were growing here before a Euro-American set foot anywhere in California. The deer and all the other animals move through with the exception of Grizzly Bear and wolf; they are temporarily not in residence in California. We will someday bring them back.

These foothill ridges are not striking in any special way, no postcard scenery, but the deer are so at home here I think it might be a “deer field.” And the fact that my neighbors and I and all of our children have learned so much by taking our place in these Sierra foot-hills—logged-over land now come back, burned-over land recovering, considered worthless for decades—begins to make this land a teacher to us. It is the place on earth we work with, struggle with, and where we stick out the summers and winters. It has shown us a little of its beauty.

And sacred? One could indulge in a bit of woo-woo and say, yes, there are newly discovered sacred places in our reinhabited landscape. I know my children (like kids everywhere) have some secret spots in the woods. There is a local hill where many people walk for the view, the broad night sky, moon-viewing, and to blow a conch at dawn on Bodhi Day. There are miles of mined-over gravels where we have held ceremonies to apologize for the stripping of trees and soil and to help speed the plant-succession recovery. There are some deep groves where people got married.

Even this much connection with the place is enough to inspire the local community to hold on: renewed gold mining and stepped-up logging press in on us. People volunteer to be on committees to study the mining proposals, critique the environmental impact reports, challenge the sloppy assumptions of the corporations, and stand up to certain county officials

who would sell out the inhabitants and hand over the whole area to any glamorous project. It is hard, unpaid, frustrating work for people who already have to work full time to support their families. The same work goes on with forestry issues—exposing the scandalous favoritism shown the timber industry by our nearby national forest, as its managers try to pacify the public with sweet words and frivolous statistics. Any lightly populated area with “resources” is exploited like a Third World country, even within the United States. We are defending our own space, and we are trying to protect the commons. More than the logic of self interest inspires this: a true and selfless love of the land is the source of the undaunted spirit of my neighbors.

There’s no rush about calling things sacred. I think we should be patient, and give the land a lot of time to tell us or the people of the future. The cry of a Flicker, the funny urgent chatter of a Gray Squirrel, the acorn whack on a barn roof—are signs enough.

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