

Looking for Solace in the Natural World

Reflections from Fall 2011 Writer's Residency

HJ Andrews Long Term Ecological Reflections

By Carla Wise

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair grows in me
 and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
 in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
 I go and lie down where the wood drake
 rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
 I come into the peace of wild things
 who do not tax their lives with forethought
 of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars
 waiting for their light. For a time
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

-- Wendell Berry

It is mid-October, and the Andrews Forest is glowing in fall sunlight. I've come to seek solace in nature, to search for ways to live with more comfort in a world we are altering in ways I sometimes feel will break my heart. I was here once before, for a nature writers' gathering, and one of the first things we did was to enter the forest at night and in the darkness to speak the name of anyone who had inspired us. I remember that I said nothing back then; so many writers had influenced me, and yet I couldn't find one to call out. I felt self-conscious and unsure. This trip is different. I know exactly who's inspired me to be here this week, and the exact poem he wrote celebrating the solace to be found spending time in nature. Plus, I am alone.

I've come explicitly to seek out the peace of wild things Wendell Berry speaks about. I am also here at the Andrews to write. The topic at first feels way too big, my own talents way too small. How can I write about something Wendell Berry has captured so beautifully in a poem? Monsters of self-doubt invade my brain, and I feel lost and adrift. I struggle my first morning here to settle, to begin.

But it is not long before being here starts to captivate me and help me forget my insecurities. The Andrews is not a wilderness or a nature preserve, but an experimental forest. I see lots of signs of this:

the research plots, the treatment markers, the flagging tape and field crews. Still, it is the exuberance of nature here that gets to me right from the start, not the elaborate experiments or the curiosity of the researchers. The science being done here is impressive, the questions being asked important. However, it is the many immediate beauties of living creatures everywhere that fills the place with promise. The owl calling at the decomposition site, the give of the moist spongy ground under my feet in the filtered forest light, the American dipper diving under the icy clear water searching for bugs in Lookout Creek and coming up dry, the huge dead trees lying across the gravel haphazardly like giant dropped matchsticks. It's all lovely to me. Being in this place brings me such pleasure that by my second day, I'm questioning my very premise—that despair is a reasonable and perhaps an unavoidable stage of facing the reality of climate change. Over the course of the week, as I hike and write and spend time in the forest, I learn things.

About the Church of Nature

I've never gone to church, unless it was for a wedding, a memorial service, or to see the inside of a spectacularly beautiful and inspiring building. And I am pretty sure I never will. I have always been a little uncomfortable with the idea that nature is my church, but here I decide it is probably pretty close to the truth. I find comfort and peace in places belonging mostly to other creatures, places dominated by nonhuman forces, places like this forest. I am recovered here, made whole. Being here gives me a sense of grounding, a feeling that the world is as it should be. I do not know what it is like to actually believe the teachings of an organized religion. But when I get out here or to anyplace that has the unmitigated power that the Andrews does, I feel one with the world. This is my spiritual practice. Saying this explicitly feels strange: I think of myself as a scientist as well as a writer, and I have little identification with spirituality.

Being here, though, I can feel the vitality, resilience, and aliveness of nature. I don't care right now about eloquent arguments about "the death of Nature" or the data showing that we have added so much greenhouse gas to the atmosphere that every living thing will be affected and many unique life forms will likely face extinction. Life in the forest is beautiful, and it is thriving. As much as the future is uncertain, being here feels beyond these worries.

At first, the pleasure and solace I feel here makes me wonder about the people who work here. A whole cadre of researchers, field assistants, and staff work and sometimes live at the HJ Andrews. But then I remember what I knew when I worked as a biologist and did fieldwork: the daily grind of research, even in a beautiful place, gets in the way of loving the land unguardedly. Perhaps some of the scientists here find satisfaction in their connection with the natural world. But my experience suggests many of them don't experience this connection any more often than I do. The key, at least for me, is to come back outside often, to places not dominated by humans. What I realize is that every visit to a place like this, every hike into wilderness or camping trip to a special place is nourishment for living well in our times. It's so easy to forget this in the trenches of daily life.

There is another element contributing to being restored by the natural world. Other species have no grocery stores or central heating to fall back on. I realize here how many of my best moments occur when I'm doing without these protections. When I must work to meet my most basic needs—eating, staying warm, finding shelter—I feel most at one with the world. It reminds me of something Joseph Campbell said in an interview: "I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive." When I'm outside needing to fend for myself in some fundamental way, I am most likely to experience being alive in this way.

On Nonhuman Intelligence

We believe we alone in the world are burdened by “intelligence” as we define it: forethought, the power of reason, the ability to understand cause and effect, our very consciousness. We believe we alone are a species who worries, anticipates, plans, and regrets. We believe that we suffer and the wood drake doesn’t because we think but the bird just exists.

Maybe we are wrong. It strikes me here in the forest that we cannot *really* know how the wood drake experiences the world, how the Douglas fir feels. There is a bird I’ve been watching, a little soot-grey bird that flits along the creek, dives underwater to feed on bugs, and comes up completely dry. I am no birder, but when I take the short walk from headquarters to the gravel shoreline of Lookout Creek each day, I am fascinated by this amphibious bird. I go to the library and look it up: I’m not satisfied with its name, which seems somehow unimaginative: the American dipper. I wonder what we really know about the experience of an American dipper. I know there are animal behaviorists who study cognition and emotion in primates, dogs, and other species. But I am not sure what that work tells us about life in the forest.

It’s a pleasure to be among the organisms that don’t *seem* to know regret, guilt and worry. We are the ones who seem to suffer, but maybe other species do have consciousness every bit as complex as our own. Maybe what they know is that life is now; maybe it’s our concept of time that is the distinctly human problem. Although I believe there may be mysteries to animal and plant consciousness way beyond our ken, I also believe, as Wendell Berry does, that they do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. In that way, I want to be a forest creature.

On Not Knowing

Does the towering Douglas fir know of my admiration as I sit under it? Usually, I accept that there are mysteries we humans cannot now and may never be able to unravel. Mysteries, particularly, having to do with the secret of what makes life, the nature of consciousness, and forms of energy and information flow we cannot measure. This acceptance has given me both a love of and acceptance of the limits of science.

Here in the forest, I'm finding it harder to accept not knowing. Something about the beauty all around me woven from layers of living creatures and exquisite land gives me a longing to know what the other beings here know. I am especially curious about some of them. The Douglas fir, the spotted owl, the American dipper, the funny little pair of grouse I meet on my way up Carpenter Mountain. My first day here when I thought I heard a spotted owl calling, I found myself wondering if spotted owls have any idea that while we humans have destroyed most of their habitat to cut down forests to build stuff, we have spent millions of dollars and endless research effort studying how they live so we can supposedly help them survive. Do they wonder why we put mice out to bait them in, catch them, band them, weigh them, and let them go?

And the big trees: in the old growth patches here, the forest has stunning vertical heterogeneity. Very old, very tall Douglas fir giants stand sentry among all manner of smaller, younger multi-species vegetation. These old trees, so high above, draw my attention and curiosity. What do they know, and how do they know it? How is it even possible to imagine their experience, being in this one spot for centuries?

I imagine a visiting writer, 100 years from now, understanding something more about what a Douglas fir knows, and I long to know too. I remember reading about a study showing that trees do

communicate with each other. When I search for studies about tree communication, I find several. Scientists have found that walnut trees emit aspirin-like compounds when they are under stress. One interpretation of this is that they may be “warning” other trees of impending problems. Other research on how plants defend themselves against insects and disease suggests the possibility that chemicals released by plants may act as warnings, invitations, and possibly even requests for help. Can chemical defenses really be thought of as plants talking to each other or other species? Is this evidence of plant consciousness?

But soon, there may be little time for luxuries such as trying to unravel the mysteries of what trees know and how they communicate. We may have to concentrate on more immediate things, like how to survive. Or there may be no way for our species to bridge the gap of understanding with trees. But the longing for this interspecies understanding is something I feel here in a way I haven’t often felt before.

Musings on Scale, from the Top of Carpenter Mountain

Standing up here, the view is unbelievable. And it seems so obvious: finding the proper scale is one of the secrets of finding peace. The right spatial scale and the right temporal scale. Being in the forest, and in wild landscapes in general helps with finding this perspective, which is one reason being here among old growth trees helps me relax. Their scale is big, ours is small. It’s when I imagine that we are big, all-important, all-destroying, that’s when I feel hopeless.

Seen from a little distance, the losses we are causing feel less tragic. This doesn’t mean we haven’t gotten into deep trouble on our home planet. There are way too many of us using up too much, polluting too much, farming too much of the earth’s surface, emitting too much carbon. But in spite of our rapacious growth, our using up the land and water, our alteration of the landscape and the atmosphere, thinking differently about scale is freeing. The more I imagine the time scale of life on

earth, of human induced climate change, of a sixth mass extinction event, the more room I find for the place I'm cultivating, neither denying nor despairing, of understanding our times and our predicament.

This growing sense of the okayness of it all is based on thinking more in evolutionary and even geological time. Thinking more about the whole planet, not simply the places where catastrophes may now be unavoidable. Human caused degradation of the planet's climate and ecosystems are short-term problems. The big source of heartbreak for me is imagining future losses and tragedies. Those imaginings are tragic up close, but in the scale of evolutionary and geological space and time, they are part of the development of the planet; the earth will survive, and life will evolve. Humans will find a way to come into balance with our planet, or we won't.

Scale is fundamental in another way too: in the struggle over feeling helpless as an individual. Strangely, the trick here is the opposite of realizing that we are small and short-lived in a big world. Time and again, I've come up against feeling helpless in response to the climate crisis. Individual acts, lifestyle changes, voting, activism; our logic tells us these things can do nothing. But this is only true at one scale. Each time you reexamine that idea at shrinking scales, it holds less power and less truth. It may be true in the world, and the country. It may even be true in your state. But what about your town, your community, your street, school, workplace, among your friends or in your backyard? Here I am on top of this beautiful mountain, looking across a small piece of the Oregon Cascades. Individual actions can have ripples here. The people who work in this forest, who measure the populations of prey, who monitor the rain and snow and the date of first and last frost, who study and protect the owls here, but who leave the forest as untrammelled as possible, they certainly make a difference to this magical spot.

Each scale has its place. It's such a cliché: think globally act locally. But today, I finally understand the power in this cliché. I would amend it this way, though: think globally only when it provides you with sustenance and motivation. Otherwise, simply act locally. Perhaps a better way to think these days is geologically. I can see up here on this mountaintop that looking for the right scale can show me the way forward.

On Boundaries

The HJ Andrews has good boundaries. They are both clearly defined and well-chosen. The forest covers the entire 16,000-acre watershed of Lookout Creek. That's it. I realize that one of the real beauties of this forest is the boundaries it possesses. The impacts of things done and things left alone can be measured here. All I care about, you could say, is within those boundaries, all I will think about, all I want to learn and know is right here. There is great comfort and containment in that. And yet the forest is a microcosm of the mountainous, wet, westside forests of Oregon's Cascades. Lessons learned here can be applied elsewhere, though not everywhere. One thing I learned in the forest this week is that I am working on building good boundaries too.

The boundaries of the forest allow the scientists working and learning here to do their work unhindered by what's outside, and on a manageable scale. My boundaries, if I can build them well, will allow me to do the same: putting aside the constant awareness of all I cannot hope to influence, and all that might happen in the future. I need to maintain boundaries around me, around my family and friends, around my community, the nearby lands I love, and around my present day, week, month, and year.

There is no doubt in my mind that we are in for a wild ride. For many months, I have struggled in the shadow of my growing knowledge about what we are doing to our atmosphere, and what is to come. By my second day in the forest, I feel that sense of dread falling away. One day I take a long hike in

the old growth, another day I get to the top of the watershed, and clear skies let me see central Oregon peaks laid out before me. By the end of the week, I feel changed. I need to do more of what I love. For me, that means spending more time out with “the peace of wild things,” because here, I can rest in the grace of the world, and I too am free.