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This Glorious Darkness: Reflections from the John Muir Trail

Betsy Perluss

A mix of memoir, depth psychology, and environmental philosophy, this article includes reflections garnered from the author's recent trek along the John Muir Trail, a 220-mile route in the California Sierra Nevada that begins in Yosemite Valley and finishes at Whitney Portal. Through long dark nights, encounters with death, melting glaciers, and fierce lightning storms, the author describes the inseparability of psyche and nature, of wholeness and wilderness, and the mystery of the union of earth and spirit that is discovered along the way.

YOSEMITE VALLEY

True, there are innumerable places where the careless step will be the last step; and a rock falling from the cliffs may crush without warning like lightning from the sky; but what then! Accidents in the mountains are less common than in the lowlands, and these mountain mansions are decent, delightful, even divine, places to die in.

—John Muir (1916, p. 91)

The asphalt-covered path ascends the steep banks of the Merced River before it turns into a dirt trail—a welcome sign that the busy campground below, the RVs and radios, have finally been left behind. Earlier this morning, as the sun barely touched the tips of the tallest trees, my husband



James Griffith, *Corpus Collosus-Helix* (detail), tar on canvas, 2013.

Joe and I quietly rode the shuttle from the North Pines Campground to the Happy Isle Trailhead, located on the eastern edge of Yosemite Valley. Ironically, the shuttle took us maybe a quarter of a mile, not much distance considering the 220 walking miles that lay ahead. Joe would accompany me for the first 30 of these miles, up and over the valley wall and back down into Tuolumne Meadows, where we would then go our separate ways: he, back to work, and me, onto the John Muir Trail, a California Sierra route that extends from Yosemite Valley to the 14,505-foot peak of Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the lower forty-eight.

I have known for some years that when I turned 50, I would hike the John Muir Trail. I would make the trip alone, without the distraction of company, and with plenty of time to walk at a pilgrim's pace. Now, almost a year has passed since my 50th birthday and the time has come. Over the last few months, and within small pockets of time, I have been busying myself with trips to REI, staying up late ordering supplies online, putting together hundreds of individualized zip-lock baggies of lightweight (and hopefully, satisfying) meals, and finally packing and addressing boxes to send to my four resupply locations: Tuolumne Meadows, Reds Meadows, John Muir Trail Ranch, and Onion Valley. In preparation, I have also been paying attention to my dreams, fantasies, and expectations, anticipating that they might serve as a map, offering waypoints to help navigate through this uncertain period of my life.

From a physical standpoint, the hike itself is not risky. Summers in the Sierra are mild and the trail is clearly marked. Nevertheless, beneath my excitement there is a trace of apprehension. I know that amidst the solitude and beauty there will be moments of loneliness, especially on the sharp, cold nights when there is nothing but darkness between the infinite sky and me. "In a dark time, the eyes begin to see," writes Roethke (1966, p. 239), and it is in the night, without the comfort of civilization's steady buzz, that the eyes adjust to the darkness, within and without. Frightful images creep into my thoughts like a mountain lion prowling in the shadows. The truth is, I *could* die out here, as everyone has reminded me. A slip and fall, an unexpected storm, a bizarre infection could take me out. But what I fear most, really, is the return; that once

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this trip is over, I'll still be without answers, and the questions will linger like smoke darkening the sky.

Did I make the right decision to leave my job at the university? Was it wise to move from my home in Southern California, and all that is familiar, to relocate to the north? I made these decisions precisely so that I could more fully engage in my work as a wilderness guide and ecopsychologist; no longer content to live two separate lives, one as a professor in a traditional MFT program at an urban university, and the other as a depth psychologist with an insatiable love for the wilderness. And I moved to the densely oak and pine forested foothills of the Sierra Nevada to live on the land, to immerse myself in the seasons, and to be near the mountains that continually beckon my attention. It seemed like a perfect plan. But what I didn't realize at first was that my desire to live closer to nature runs a parallel line with my yearning for wholeness, and wholeness doesn't exist outside the scope of nature's cycles, including her long dark nights of the soul. "Nature kills every autumn whatever she has created during the year," writes Jung (1976, p. 405). How could I have forgotten?

For Jung, nature is the bedrock of all existence, including its infinite assembly of phenomenological expressions.¹ Nature is minerals, animals, and plants but also the images, ideas, and actions clothed in these physical forms. Attribute it to instinct or spirit, the material world pulses with life. It groans, shifts, blooms, erupts, gives birth, kills, and creates. Even the archetypes of the collective unconscious, Jung claims, reach into this earthly realm and are "the chthonic portion of the psyche . . . that portion through which the psyche is attached to nature" (1964, p. 31). Thus, it is impossible to know nature apart from psyche; at their roots they are the same. And the roots go deep—much deeper than consciousness could ever fathom—and so mostly, when turning toward nature, we turn toward the unconscious psyche, and toward that which is dark. Nature, herself, is dark. It is, perhaps, only in those gifted moments when we notice ourselves observing a songbird in a tree, or a dust mote floating through golden space, or an image within a dream that a hint of light touches the darkness. And a moment later, it flees. "Nature loves to hide," wrote Heraclitus.

Speaking of the perplexities of nature's darkness, Jung writes, "Everything that the darkness thinks, grasps, and comprehends by itself is dark; therefore it is illuminated only by what, to it, is unexpected, unwanted, and incomprehensible" (1963, p. 255). It takes tremendous effort to illuminate

¹Jung often capitalized the word *Nature* to express its all-encompassing character. I use the word *nature* in the lowercase for the sake of consistency and to avoid conveying a duality between nature, as all things, and the more common usage of nature as that which is "outdoors."

nature without falling into the familiar trap of mistaking the illumination for the light of ego's deceptions. We see what we want to see. The deception is not unlike using a flashlight on a moonless night, which may help in negotiating a narrow path or spotting a foraging raccoon in the garbage bin; but the unnatural illumination, while helpful for a moment, can further blind one to the greater surroundings. One must turn off the flashlight to see in the dark. One must turn off the loud light of self-consciousness to see anything at all. And for me, this can be terrifying. For what I see is that nature is not concerned with me. Nature offers no answers to my questions, nor soothes me with solutions. This realization is so disturbing, I can barely stand it. And yet, the impulse to see remains.

In his poem, "Carmel Point," the poet Robinson Jeffers proclaims that "We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; we must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident as the rock and ocean that we were made from" (2002, p. 114). The poem suggests that, despite a sense of separation and self-importance, we humans are no different than nature. Yes, we have a different consciousness, but we are all made from the same stuff. And furthermore, we might as well get over our humanistic hubris because within the larger scheme of things, our lives are no more than "a tide that swells and a tide that ebbs." But for Jeffers, it is not impoverishment to accept our place within nature's swells and ebbs, but a source of *confidence*. And, it is this I seek: a shift in my consciousness, if even so slightly, from an *ego*-centric to an *eco*-centric one, so that I may share in this confidence. In other words, I want to know my place among the larger world of things, trusting that this knowledge will provide some meaning in an otherwise darkly profane world.

Three and a half miles and a grueling 2,000-foot climb later, I am standing on a lookout above Nevada Falls, the most glorious waterfall in Yosemite. I am elated. The cool mist of the water rises to my face and a rainbow gently bounces in the spray below. I walk up to a sign posted on the railing: a common missing person report. This time, it is asking for any signs of a young man who was swept away by the river's current a few weeks ago, his body last seen going over the 500-foot falls. He was 19 years old. Beauty and terror. Rise and fall. The tension is unbearable at times. "For the darkness has its own particular intellect and its own logic, which should be taken very seriously," adds Jung (1963, p. 255). It is a logic I don't quite understand.

If to bring light to this darkness is my goal, I know right now I will fail. My consciousness will muddy the rivers and pollute the skies. My ego-centrism will stay locked into place. I will remain the centerpiece of this story. Nevertheless, I begin by crossing a symbolic threshold, a line in the sand that marks my intention. I'll treat this trip like a dream and everything that enters,

including my thoughts and ruminations, are part of the dream as much as the flowers and the high mountain peaks. The secret of seeing cannot be sought outside of oneself. Nor can it be found inside. It can only be found in both, and even then, it is temporary.

DONOHUE PASS (11,056 FEET)

Western man has no need of more superiority over nature, whether outside or inside. He has both in almost devilish perfection. What he lacks is conscious recognition of his inferiority to the nature around and within him. He must learn that he may not do exactly as he wills. If he does not learn this, his own nature will destroy him.

—Jung (1958, p. 535)

On the top of windy Donohue Pass, on the edge of the Ansel Adams Wilderness, a man sits with his young daughter. With a serious and sad expression, he gazes up at the mountain while she eats M&Ms from a ziplock bag. A few silent, uneasy minutes after my arrival, he turns to me and speaks. He tells me he is a biologist and that he came to this place to show his daughter the remains of Lyell Glacier, Yosemite's largest. The glacier is now "stagnant," he informs me, meaning that it has melted to such an extent—60% since 1990—that it no longer has the mass weight to move itself downhill. In other words, by definition, Lyell Glacier is no longer a glacier. Still, it is beautiful and magnificent with its blue hue of distance and time. John Muir was the first to discover the glacial theory behind the iconic landforms of the Southern Sierra. The downward movement of these masses of ice carved out the volcanic remains beneath them, leaving behind U-shaped canyons, rounded domes, and jagged peaks. The Sierra is a 100-million-year-old recipe of rock, fire, and ice.

Not long ago, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shocked the environmental community with its report that global warming has reached a point of irreversibility. This news only confirmed what some scientists have been saying for years: that we've entered a new geological epoch, one that reflects the extent of human influence on the ever-changing face of the earth. They call this new epoch the Anthropocene, "the age of man." Ice ages come and go, relatively speaking, but the Anthropocene is the first to be viewed as a period of glacial decline brought about solely by humans. Although no one can say for sure how long humans have been significantly altering the planet—estimates range from 7,000 to

50,000 years—there is no doubt that industrialization and the burning of fossil fuels have accelerated global warming, along with its accompanying extinctions. Environmental activist Bill McKibben made note of this reality back in 1989 with the publication of his seminal book, *The End of Nature*, wherein he unveiled the evidence that human-generated greenhouse gases have initiated losses that took evolution millions, if not billions, of years to achieve. Today, there is nothing on this planet, not even a drop of rain, that isn't touched by human hands. As much as humankind has sought power over nature, it is harrowing to imagine we may have actually achieved it.

Dominance implies isolation; isolation brings about loneliness. “We are gods and might as well get good at it,” proclaims Stewart Brand (2009, p. 20), a noted “ecopragmatist” and past publisher of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. With icy optimism, Brand is suggesting that since humans have dominion over the earth—have already altered the climate, killed nearly half of all wild species, and poisoned the forests and oceans—we'd better hurry up and accept our god-like duty to manage the planet

more efficiently. According to Brand and his proponents, we need to better tend the earth—to garden it—not because of any intrinsic value of other life forms, but because human survival depends on it. But if this is true—if we *are* gods—then I say, we are like the gods of Greek antiquity, cold and unfeeling, unconcerned with the fate of earthly beings unless it suits our needs. And, if we are like the immortal gods, we have forsaken our soul, having forgotten that soul “derives from its special relation with death” (Hillman, 1989, p. 21). Paradoxically, it is the impending darkness of death that grants us soul, and it is the grief over our mortality that grants us empathy toward life in the first place. It is no wonder Jung writes that, in such a god-like state, “Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos” (1954, p. 255).

Environmental philosophers have long noted the relationship between religious monotheism and the human quest for dominance over nature, most notably traced to the Book of Genesis, 1:28, wherein God implores humans to “replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the

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sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Revised Standard Version). Whether the author of the Biblical text intended to promote human dominance is questionable, but the myth of dominance is obviously what Westerners have inherited. And today, in more subtle tones than found in the Bible, we discover that monotheism has shape-shifted into the ascendancy of modern rationalism, which with dogmatic fervor adheres to the belief that all things can be known—and thus controlled or improved upon—through scientific thinking and technology. Even Steward Brand’s seemingly polytheistic claim “We are gods” reveals a blindness to “its own entanglements with a monotheistic conception of a God” (Crist, 2014, p. 232), based on the idea that the capacity for rational thinking sets us above other life forms that don’t share our same type of consciousness. This “monotheism of consciousness,” as Jung calls it (1968, p. 36), shuts the door on ourselves; the world becomes small, enclosed, and excruciatingly tight.

After thousands of years, living in the grip of modern civilization, is it even possible to forgo our sense of human dominance to exist in kinship with other beings? Can we *really* disentangle ourselves from the monotheism of our consciousness, along with its superior sense of self? Looking up at the melting Lyell Glacier, I do not feel dominant. I feel depressed. If I could give up my god-like status, I would. I would leave this lonely mountain peak and melt right along with that glacier and return to the soft waters of the big blue sea. But I am here, breathing, cursed by consciousness. “It is ironic that the one thing that separates us from our creator—our very self-consciousness—is also the one thing that divides us from our fellow creatures. It was a bitter birthday present from evolution, cutting us off at both ends,” laments Annie Dillard (1974, p. 79). Was it also a bitter birthday present from evolution to have created the very thing that may destroy it? It is impossible to know. The only thing I know right now is that the depression, as awful as it is, leads me back to soul, back to the heartbeat of mortality. The image of melting ironically brings relief.

Recently, I experienced a wave of suicidal fantasies. I would be driving or doing laundry when all of a sudden I would see myself committing some horrible suicidal act. I never had any intention of actually killing myself, but in spite of attempts to suppress the images, they kept appearing. They had a will of their own. Eventually, out of desperation, I consciously turned toward the images, indulging them, which felt embarrassingly regressive until I realized that something *in me*, not me, wants to die. This realization gave me an unusual, though curious, sense of peace. I received exactly what I’ve been asking for all along: the unexpected and incomprehensible, the *unthinkable!* In other words, I received images. Extremely irrational images! To make room for a consciousness that includes a world bigger than requires death—an ego death—and the images of suicide, along with those

of melting glaciers and the boy slipping over the falls are, in fact, pure, wild, and uncontrollable nature.

“Where indeed have we ‘conquered’ nature?” asks Jung (1954, p. 261).

RAE LAKES

If you will contemplate your lack of fantasy, of inspiration and inner aliveness, which you feel as sheer stagnation and a barren wilderness, and impregnate it with the interest born of alarm at your inner death, then something can take shape in you, for your inner emptiness conceals just as great a fullness if only you will allow it to penetrate into you. If you prove receptive to this “call of the wild,” the longing for fulfillment will quicken the sterile wilderness of your soul as rain quickens the dry earth.

—Jung (1963, p. 160)

It’s near midnight and I am standing in two inches of water. When I began this trek 18 days ago, I wasn’t concerned about rain. Summer rainfall in the Sierra typically moves in from the south, offering fierce, but brief, afternoon downpours. But this storm is different, northerly, advancing now into its fourth day, and seemingly content to carry on into the late hours of the night. My gear is wet—pack, stove, shoes. And it is cold. When the rainwater started to pool around the perimeter of my tent, I knew it was time to get out and dig a trench. Reluctantly, I pulled myself out of my warm down sleeping bag, donned my soaking sneakers, and with plastic trowel in hand, bent over and began to dig.

With the moon locked behind clouds, it is dark. Black dark. But between bouts of blackness, flashes of light illuminate the landscape, transforming my campsite into brilliant white. The thunder, deep and resonant, bounces off the walls of the glaciated basin and rolls into my stomach. A little too close for comfort, I think, and so I crawl back inside the tent and proceed to get into “lightning position”: placing both feet close together on top of my sleeping pad and curling up into a human ball. A ridiculous pose, but, if lightning does hit, this position supposedly minimizes the force of impact. One can only hope.

As the storm increases in intensity, the veil between the world and myself becomes thinner and more permeable. Right now, I do not have dominion. The storm demands my full attention, and I have no choice but to oblige. Is this the type of consciousness that I seek? The situation concerns *me—my* safety, *my* comfort—but at the same time I am acutely aware of

the thunder, the water rising, the hail pounding the tent, and the light—the beautiful light—that illuminates every nuance carved in the towering rocks.

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It is possible to explain a lightning storm in scientific terms (as one could an earthquake, an eclipse, or even a psychotic break), but in the height of the moment, when the energy is at its peak, it is a psychic event, enlivened by a felt sense of the divine. As Erich Neumann writes, “What we encounter in science at the one end, so to speak, externally as an object, we encounter at the other end, inwardly in the psyche, as the numinous” (1994, p. 213). And this is

how the “chthonic archetypes” appear; they push themselves right through the door of our stilted awareness. They are living images wrapped up in the physical realm of our existence, unapologetically as real as the lightning that illuminates the earth. Archetypes *are* nature infused with energy, “a piece of life, an image connected with the living individual by the bridge of emotion” (Jung, 1954, p. 257).

Curled up inside my tent, something ancient and archetypal is evoked in me, like a multigenerational *déjà vu*. It feels as if I’ve been here before, and this feeling brings about an incredible state of wakefulness. How profound it is, all of a sudden, to be alive to witness this moment. John Muir is dead. C. G. Jung is dead. My father is dead. But here I am, watching this lightning storm. Given the incalculable possibilities, it is no less than miraculous that this could be so. And everything that has led up to this moment—to this small campsite perched on the rocky ledge overlooking Middle Rae Lake—is here right now, a miniscule point within the “eternity of nature” (Jung, 1954, p. 381). As I balance myself in a lightning pose, making myself small, it is hard not to imagine that this is how my ancestors first learned how to bow down and pray.

Unlike the eternity of the immortal gods, which is found in spirit and sky, the eternity of nature is made of water and dirt. It includes our biological beginnings when, perhaps, we were just shimmering slime on stone. It includes all the perfect conditions that allowed us to evolve, along with just the right amount of oxygen, water, and sun. It includes the mossy swamps

from which we emerged and the nutrient-rich plants on which we fed. It includes the birds that shadowed our ancestors with their enormous wings and the woolly mammoths whose bones they used for making art. In other words, nothing, not even us humans, exists outside evolution's astonishing matrix. Everything emerges from the same Tree of Life. Today scientists estimate about 8.7 million species on earth; a plethora of mosses, molds, flowers, trees, insects, crustaceans, amphibians, mammals, mollusks, and marsupials, just to name a few. We live in an ecosphere of infinite variation. Who in their right mind would want to spend eternity floating around in the white clouds of heaven when it is so obvious that the divine is right here on earth? There is enough religious meaning for 10 lifetimes to be found in one ant if one looks closely enough.

When Jung refers to the Self as the archetype of wholeness, I consider this wholeness to be inseparable from the world in which I have evolved. And yet, how easy it is to fall into abstractions when thinking about wholeness, as if wholeness were a transparent bubble drifting through space. How could I possibly be whole without the food I eat, the air I breathe, and the land upon which I walk? It is not just that these things sustain me, they *are* me. Now I understand what the ecopoet Gary Snyder means when he writes, "To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. Human beings came out of that wholeness" (1990, p. 12). For Snyder, wholeness is linked to our interrelationship with the planet and all its beings, including the images and ideas that visit us in our thoughts and dreams. Wholeness is an intact, integrated, yet wildly diverse, psyche–nature ecosystem. Therefore, to be whole, Snyder continues, is to reactivate our "membership in the Assembly of All Beings" (1990, p. 12), not as gods, but as divine human beings.

If nature includes all of existence, then *wilderness* is a particular aspect of nature that expresses our wholeness most fully. As Snyder points out, wilderness is where "the wild potential is fully expressed," where a "diversity

of living and nonliving beings flourish according to their own sorts of order" (1990, p. 12). Wilderness, as defined by the 1964 Wilderness Act, is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man." It is important to note that *untrammelled* does not mean untouched, but rather unhindered and uncontrolled. Humans have always been part of the wilderness, touching it in ways that harken back thousands of years. Petroglyphs, pottery, baskets, traces of grains, irrigation ditches, and an abundance of stories are indicators of this existence. Humans are wild beings, too.

To work on behalf of
wilderness is to work on
behalf of the Self.

But, in a world that is becoming increasingly anthropocentric, where biodiversity is rapidly decreasing—nearly 200 species go extinct each day—we humans must recognize that there is something critical about defending wild places: actual large areas of undeveloped land with unimpeded migration paths, nesting grounds, and water holes—places without machinery, roads, wires, and fluorescent lights. It would do us good to acknowledge that the places that support bear, mountain lion, and coyote are the very same places that make us whole. And, dare I suggest, that if we take seriously Jung's notion that there is no separation between psyche and nature, along with Snyder's idea of wilderness as wholeness, we would discover that individuation—the capacity to flourish according to our own sort of order—is not only a personal ordeal, but involves living by a wilderness ethic that allows other beings to flourish as well. Our job is not to manage the earth, but to protect the conditions that allow the wild to express itself most freely. Or, as Jung puts it, "Where we can listen but not meddle" (1953, p. 46). To work on behalf of wilderness is to work on behalf of the Self.

Nevertheless, as with the unconscious psyche, the relationship between humans and wilderness has a history of ambivalence. Like a wild boar rustling in the bushes, the idea of wilderness emerged from the dark. The world *wild* grew up out of the unruly Teutonic and Norse languages, originally referring to uncontrollable "beast-savages" inhabiting "a dismal region of forests, crags, and cliffs" (Nash, 2014, p. 184). Wilderness often evokes the less pleasant side of nature, not the gentle greenery of gardens and parks, but of danger and death. The idea of wilderness populates the imagination with fanged beasts, vipers, spiders, and sharks. It is dirty, grimy, slimy, and full of the stench of rotting flesh. It is all this, too, along with its beauty, complexity, and splendor. Wilderness is a glorious darkness.

And for me, at this moment, wilderness is the water rising around my tent, violating it at the seams. Although the lightning has subsided, the rain is relentless. If my sleeping bag gets wet, I will be pressed to endure a very miserable night, or even worse, hypothermia. How could this be? I am an experienced backpacker with the best of gear. I have no choice but to hunker down and try to sleep through the night and hope that by morning it will be clear.

BACK HOME

Not till we are completely lost, or turned round—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world,

do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

—Henry David Thoreau (2014, p. 100)

It has now been a year since I completed the John Muir Trail. One year since I stood on top of Mt. Whitney, at 14,505 feet, feeling jubilant and crazed with life, set loose like the cold wind that tossed my hair that early morning. It has been one year since I walked through the Whitney Portal and put down my pack for good (or at least until next time). After hiking 17 miles on that final day, I was altered, in a daze, but when I saw Joe walking up the trail from the parking lot to greet me, I knew I had come home. And, yes, even in the midst of all the laughter and kisses there was, and continues to be, a thread of grief at having to leave the mountains behind. Truthfully, I could have turned around right there and gone out for another month . . . or two. The temptation of the never-return. “Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire,” the poet continues (Roethke, 1966, p. 239). But unbeknownst to me on that final and sunny day, the dark came with me, even as I stepped across the portal.

My intention for this trip was to make space to linger in the threshold of my uncertainty, a space big enough to hold my scattered pieces and resolve my questions and doubts. And, although I never expected to return with any conclusive answers, I was hoping that after 28 days I would have garnered some guidance for this next phase of my life. But now, a year later, I feel more lost than ever. How curious, after all those days alone on the trail, with the blisters, rain, lightning, and hail, that now, in the comfort of my warm home, the inner trail—the one I’ve been following much of my adult life—has disappeared completely. In truth, it was easier being on the trail than off it.

Playing off the Taoist concept of “The Way” as the road to enlightenment, Gary Snyder (1990) writes, “There are paths that can be followed, and there is a path that cannot—it is not a path, it is the wilderness” (p. 151). Whereas one must learn the path in order to know where one is, eventually one must leave the path to forage among the greater sources of life. In other words, one must step off the trampled route of the ego and enter into the wilderness—the unmapped terrain of the unconscious psyche, a *terra incognita*. This feels like the territory I’ve entered, and although it is “unexpected, unwanted, and incomprehensible” (Jung, 1963, p. 255), it is deeply desired. In retrospect, I can see that this is the boon of the journey. If it was a decentering of the ego that I sought, then by the grace of wild nature, this is exactly what I received. This has not been easy, and I often find myself on the verge of panic. But recalling the Zen master’s wisdom, it is only when we lose ourselves that we become one with the Ten Thousand Things. Jung knew this in his final and dissolving days when he wrote, “The

more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things" (1961, p. 359). What a terrifying and wonderful gift: to be so uncertain and yet to feel kinship with all things! If I could just taste a morsel of this before I die.

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And yet, while floundering about in my lost condition, I have noticed a slight shift in my psyche; a shift so subtle it could easily go unnoticed. No lightning bolts, just a fluttering of leaves on a breezy afternoon. For years, I've been carrying around an assumption—unconsciously, of course—that nature is cruel in her indifference, that she cares about me as much as she did for that boy taken by the waterfall. Isn't this what we were taught in

school? That only the strongest, smartest, and most beautiful survive? But in this subtle shifting, a loosening has happened, and the question emerges like a small bird freed from its cage. What about love?

In a society where human dominance and control are the norm, where anthropocentricity has surmounted ecocentricity, it is easy to see how nature's indifference could be perceived as a cruel impulse for survival. However, indifference does not necessarily imply cruelty. Rather, in Buddhist teaching, indifference means to be without judgment or discrimination. In this sense, indifference is the opposite of an emerging yet narrow consciousness that seeks to separate. But when consciousness breaks loose from its egocentric bind, when it grows wide enough to become kin with all things, then indifference becomes *equanimity*. Such equitable disregard of hierarchy may feel cruel to an ego that demands a position of superiority, but to all other beings—animals and plants alike—it is the gift of loving-kindness. Indifference *is* wilderness where *all* beings can "flourish according to their own sorts of order" (Snyder, 1990, p. 12). Modern science may have taught us that nature is heartless, but looked at from the other side of the coin, nature is an expression of love.

Love brings light to nature's darkness. After my night of lightning and rain, I woke to a bright morning. It was an important day as I was scheduled to meet Joe that afternoon, along with our friend Wayne, at Kearsarge

Lake where they would bring my final resupply. It was a long shot. After not having communication for nearly three weeks, it seemed unlikely that our timing would match up. Furthermore, the clouds were already building, offering a small window of time for them to get over the 11,760-foot Kearsarge Pass. But, by midafternoon, as if by a miracle—and it really felt like a miracle—we met at the designated crossroads within 20 minutes of each other! My heart cracked open when I saw those two bearded characters carrying heavy packs, gingerly walking down the steep slope of the pass. And when they finally appeared in full form, exhausted but smiling, they pulled out gifts—a sandwich, an apple, and a bottle of red wine! We had a feast. A love feast. In the evening twilight, after the storm had passed, Kearsarge Mountain turned golden in the alpine glow.

What else could this be but the *lumen naturae*, the light of nature? Such ordinary things give out tremendous light when combined with love. The ancient alchemists knew this. They knew that in their continual striving for the precious stone—a stone full of life-giving potential, but an ordinary stone, nonetheless—that they eventually had to surrender to love, to that ultimate state of uncertainty, for the transformation from separateness to wholeness to occur. And thus, along with his final words, Jung writes:

Love “bears all things” and “endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). These words say all there is to be said; nothing can be added to them. For we are in the deepest sense the victims and the instruments of cosmogonic “love.” I put the word in quotation marks to indicate that I do not use it in its connotations of desiring, preferring, favoring, wishing, and similar feelings, but as something superior to the individual, a unified and undivided whole. (1961, pp. 353–354)

The marriage of earth and spirit, this undivided wholeness, is not something that can be devised or rationally explained. It cannot be learned in a book or found in a formula. It cannot even be promoted as a good idea. It has to be felt. It can only be mediated by love.

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