

WALTZING TOWARD THE EQUINOX
(NEWS FROM THE COMMUNITY GARDEN)
AUGUSTA BENEDICT

Editor's Note: This month Augusta is in the Florida Everglades with Dario Charnay of radio station KMLN-FM, Astoria. The two are assessing hurricane damage and habitat restoration for the rare Shaus Swallowtail butterfly. In Augusta's absence this month we took her advice and perused a copy of Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild*. The following is an excerpt from the chapter "The Etiquette of Freedom". Although taken out of context from the broader essays it's a fine foundation on which to begin any dialogue concerning wilderness. We hope these words will tantalize you into reading Snyder's entire book.

The Words *Nature*, *Wild*, and *Wilderness*

Take *nature* first. The word *nature* is from Latin *natura* "birth, constitution, character, course of things" - ultimately from *nasci*, to be born. So we have *nation*, *natal*, *nature*, *pregnant*. The probable Indo-European root (via Greek *gna-* hence cognate, agnate) is *gen* (Sanskrit *jan*), which provides *generate* and *genus* as well as *ken* and *kind*.

The word gets two slightly different meanings. One is "the outdoors" - the physical world, including all living things. Nature by this definition is a norm of the world that is apart from the features or products of civilization and human will. The machine, the artifact, the devised, or the extraordinary (like a two-headed calf) is spoken of as "unnatural". The other meaning, which is broader, is "the material world or its collective objects and phenomena", including the products of human actions and intention. As an agency nature is defined as "the creative and regulative physical power which is conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena." Science and some sorts of mysticism rightly propose that *everything* is natural. By these lights there is nothing unnatural about New York City, or toxic wastes, or atomic energy, and nothing - by definition - that we do or experience in life is "unnatural."

(The "supernatural"? One way to deal with it is to say that "the supernatural" is a name for phenomena which are reported by so few people as to leave their reality in doubt. Nonetheless these events - ghosts, gods, magical transformations, and such - are described often enough to make them continue to be intriguing and, for some, credible.)

The physical universe and all its properties - I would prefer to use the word *nature* in this sense. But it will come up meaning "the outdoors" or "other-than-human" sometimes even here.

The word *wild* is like a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight. Up close, first glance, it is "wild" - then further into the woods next glance it's "wild" and it recedes via Old Norse *villr* and Old Teutonic *wilthiazaz* into a faint pre-Teutonic *ghweldizos* which means, still, wild and maybe wooded (*wald*) and lurks back there with possible connections to *wilk*, to Latin *silva* (forest, sawage), and to the Indo-European root *ghwer*, base of Latin *ferus* (feral, fierce), which swings us around to Thoreau's "awful ferity" shared by virtuous peoples and lovers. The Oxford English Dictionary has it this way:

- Of animals - not tame, undomesticated, unruly.
- Of plants - not cultivated.
- Of land - uninhabited, uncultivated.
- Of foodcrops - produced or yielded without cultivation.
- Of societies - uncivilized, rude, resisting constituted government.
- Of individuals - unrestrained,

- insubordinate, licentious, disolute, loose.
- "Wild and wanton widows" - 1614
- Of behavior - violent, destructive, cruel, unruly.
- Of behavior - artless, free, spontaneous.
- "Warble his native wood - notes wild" - John Milton.

Wild is largely defined in our dictionaries by what - from a human standpoint - it is not. It cannot be seen by this approach for what it is. Turn it the other way:

- Of animals - free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.
- Of plants - self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.
- Of land - a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine.

Of foodcrops - food supplies made available and sustainable by the natural excess and exuberance of wild plants in their growth and in the production of quantities of fruit or seeds.

Of societies - societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local eco-system.

Of individuals - following local custom, style, and etiquette without concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. "Proud and free."

Of behavior - fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, "bad", admirable.

Of behavior - artless, free, spontaneous, unconditioned. Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic.

Most of the senses in this second set of definitions come very close to being how the Chinese define the term *Dao* the way of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. Both empty and real at the same time. In some cases we might call it sacred. It is not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma* with its original senses of forming and firming.

The word *wilderness*, earlier *wilderness*, Old English *wildernes*, possibly from "wild deer-ness" (*deer*, deer and other forest animals) but more likely "wilderness," has the meanings:

A large area of wild land, with original vegetation and wildlife, ranging from dense jungle or rainforest to arctic or alpine "white wilderness."

A wasteland, as an area unused or useless for agriculture or pasture.

A space of sea or air, as in Shakespeare, "I stand as one upon a Rock, environ'd with a Wilderness of Sea" (*Titus Andronicus*). The oceans.

A place of danger and difficulty: where you take your own chances, depend on your own skills, and do not count on rescue.

This world as contrasted with heaven. "I walked through the wilderness of this world" (*Pilgrim's Progress*).

A place of abundance, as in John Milton, "a wilderness of sweets."

Milton's usage of wilderness catches the very real condition of energy and richness that is so often found in wild systems. "A wilderness of sweets" is like the billions of herring or mackerel babies in the ocean, the cubic miles of krill, wild prairie grass seed

WILDLIFE ON THE EDGE
INTERACTIONS WITH US



The mother raccoons & their young who visit John and Lisa are becoming too pesky and demanding. Raccoons are too smart to be turned out they will take advantage of a good situation if they recognize one. Billy believes that people who are really lucky might come back as Raccoons.



Black Bears have great livers. In the Orient this organ is considered an aphrodisiac and their claws look great hanging on a hairy chest. For these attributes, black bears are being illegally poached in the publicly-owned forests in our area. In the privately-owned forests they are being murdered for eating the tasty shoots of baby Douglas-firs. No comment.

(leading to the bread of this day, made from the germs of grasses) - all the incredible fecundity of small animals and plants, feeding the web. But from another side, wilderness has implied chaos, eros, the unknown, realms of taboo, the habitat of both the ecstatic and the demonic. In both senses it is a place of archetypal power, teaching and challenge.

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