

Enchanted Despair

Some choose not to see.

Several years ago I was staying at a motel in Tucson while attending Society of Ecological Restoration meetings. My walk from the motel to the conference center was an uninspiring mile of stores, urban neighborhoods and hotels.

One of the conference keynote speakers was E.O. Wilson, famous for his research on ants and animal behavior, and for his defense of biodiversity. Wilson was elated: That morning, while poking around in the soil surrounding his downtown hotel's manicured shrubs, he had spotted a native fire ant he hadn't seen in decades.



That Wilson saw something thrilling in a landscape I found unremarkable is a lesson I seem to need to relearn on a regular basis.

It's harder to dismantle the world if your eyes are open and connected to your heart and mind.

A week ago I sent an e-mail to my 32-year old son Josh. I listed some items for which I needed details from him. In mockery of my own list, I added, "Eye Color" and "Favorite Memory About Butterflies." Josh's responses were an E.O. Wilson-like reminder to see:

Eye Color: I think it's hazel-brown, but there are a lot of colors in there. If you look close at many people's eyes, they're quite beautiful and unlike anything else in our bodies, aren't they? Like jewels set in there.

Favorite Memory about Butterflies: Once when I was on top of Mount Joseph [in the Willowa Mountains of northeast Oregon], I spent maybe an hour in a tiny high-alpine meadow, formed where a dimple in the side of the mountain had funneled groundwater near the surface. There were many tiny cinquefoil bushes, low to the ground, and in many of them were snagged little pinches of wool from bighorn sheep (I guessed) that had been hanging out there earlier. I started walking around, from bushlet to bushlet, gathering wool. All the while, there were two or three parnassian butterflies, white and fuzzy black, that were patrolling the same meadow. In their case, they were after late summer nectar; but it was fun, all three or four of us using the same space, they keeping a cautious distance with their random-looking fluttering.

For a number of years, a hunter friend, Scott Stouder, and I occasionally took walks together in the Corvallis area and the Coast Range. On these walks he would see animal signs that were escaping me: several of an elk's white rump hairs lying among tall grass; a sapling slightly debarked from being rubbed by an itchy-antlered deer; a track indicating an animal's haste. Scott's practice of watching the world had led him in 1990 to halt his 25 years of old-growth logging in the Coast Range. Now he lives in Idaho and works for Trout Unlimited, urging his fellow Idahoan hunters and anglers to protect their last roadless areas from logging and off-road vehicle routes.

It's harder to dismantle the world if your eyes are open and connected to your heart and mind. Several years ago, Sen. Stevens (R-Alaska) held up a blank piece of cardboard on the Senate floor, explaining to his colleagues that this is what the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge is like. (If Stevens had been candid about what he personally "saw" in the Refuge, he would have smeared the underside of the cardboard with oil.) Our nation's current Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton reports, with equally sharp vision, that the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge is a "flat, white nothingness."

As a species, we're fatally capable of not seeing. Stevens and Norton can happily advocate for dozens of drilling stations in the ANWR because they see only flat white nothingness and oil. Eugeneans who have never watched a meadowlark sing in the West Eugene Wetlands can happily advocate for a four-lane highway being constructed through its length so they can save five minutes driving cars and trucks that use oil from the ANWR, or maybe Iraq.

To see is a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because those who see encounter infinitely meaningful, intricate, astonishing, and beautiful things. A curse, because seeing also means witnessing the world being squandered, trampled and drained of life. Everyone I have ever met who looks closely at the natural world is both enchanted and in despair.

But seeing, I believe, is akin to love, and so it seems that the old saying holds: Better to have seen and lost than not to have seen at all.

Mary O'Brien of Eugene has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She can be reached at mob@efn.org

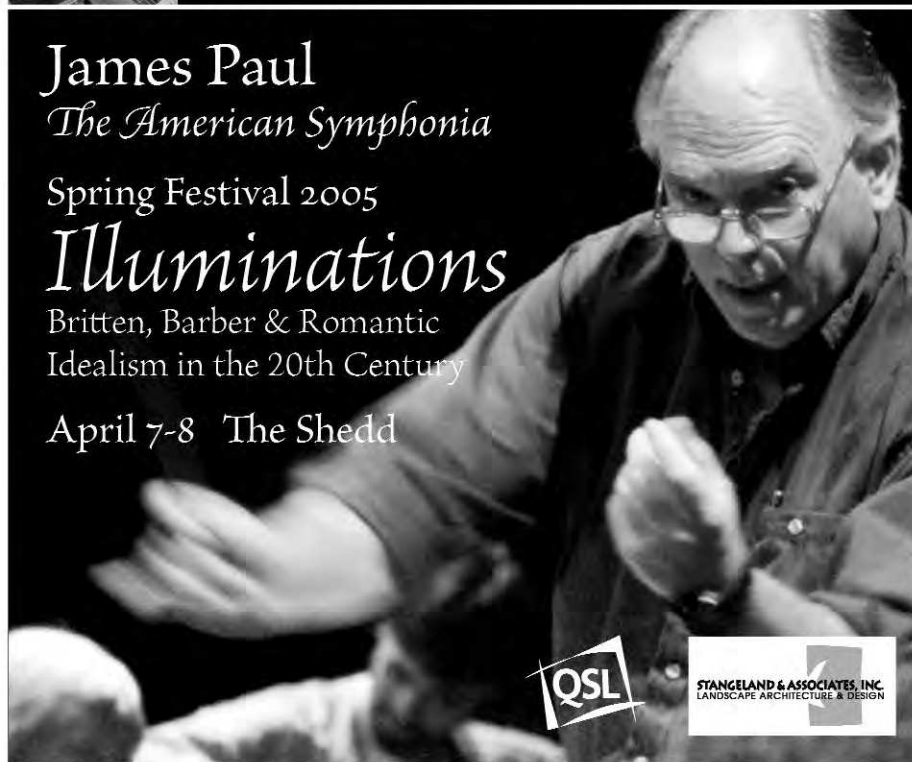
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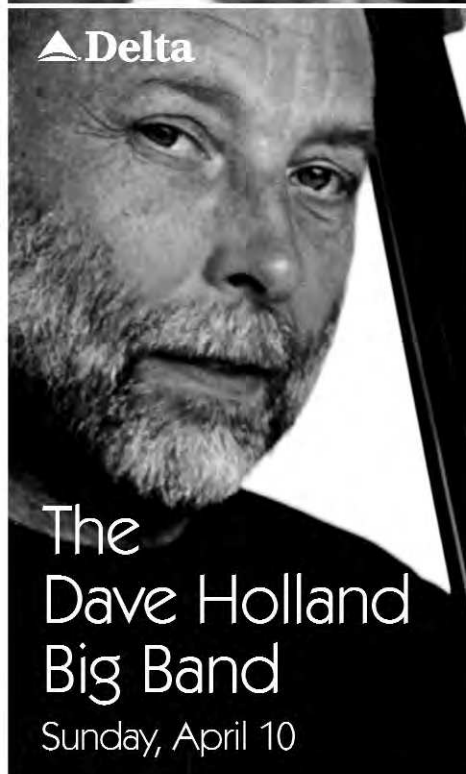
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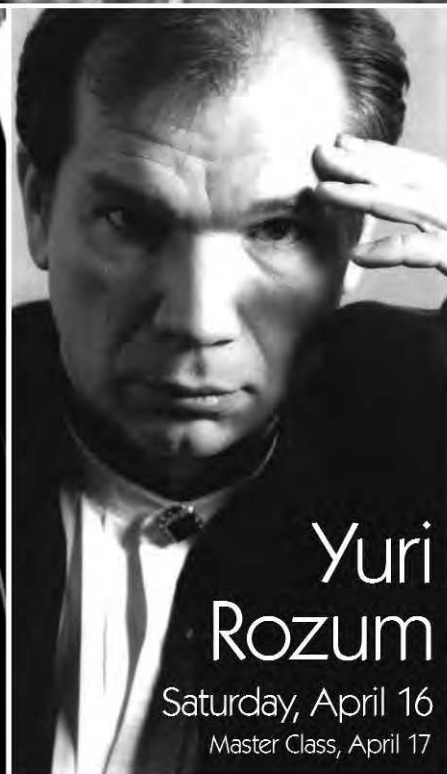
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