**Moments of Grace**

Anthony Weston

*– In memory of Jim Cheney –*

In 2004, Patsy Hallen, Australian teacher-activist-writer-dreamer, invited me to co-teach that year’s version of her Eco-Philosophy course out of Perth’s Murdoch University, which she organizes around two long backpack trips into the outback. Thus my fiftieth year found me quite literally all the way around the world from my Carolina home, traipsing overland with adult students – Master’s-level, mostly, in their 20s and 30s, from all over the world – through the red desert and along the shores of the tumultuous Southern Ocean, sleeping under the shimmering unfamiliar stars, and later car-camping with my family up and down the west coast and among the great monadnocks of the Red Centre and in the rainforests of the Northern Territory.

Something is going on out there. This group felt it especially strongly at the awakening of the Earth at dawn in the bush. The fast-shifting clouds, the countless purposeful insects, the lilting birds, the last full exhale of the soils’ pores before the coming heat of the day, the quizzical but poised rocks – there is something immense and powerful in that land, seemingly just out of reach, even a hint of numinous more-than-human fellow-travelers. Not for nothing do Australian Aboriginal peoples speak of Dreamtimes. With permission, we followed aboriginal paths through the land, winding our way between billabongs, meeting together for talk or sometimes more or less silent wonder under the wide-open skies, joined by sea eagles and kangaroos on occasion, our nights filigreed by vivid and unprecedented dreams, our days sustaining the ongoing multiple human dialogues that also wove through our walkabouts.

People who take long wilderness trips usually take many days to feel the beginnings of a real shift in their perceptions – to awaken into the larger world, to the winds and weather and the great rhythm of light and dark, to the creatures and the powers of the place. The din of machinery and the buzz of electronics have to subside first, and the senses reawaken. But they do. Even then, there are no guarantees – it takes some spiritual preparation, though I don’t necessarily put it to students that way, and it takes some pedagogical strategy, for example eliminating electronics (no phone, no cameras – which makes for useful discussions as well). Still, even three or four days in, the effect is marked.

Perhaps a certain receptivity is built into the rhythm of such experiences. Nature on the whole moves slowly: think evolution, or tectonic drift, which utterly transform everything, repeatedly, but over vast time spans. The power of such experiences then may derive partly from our own shift of tempo, shutting down the near-instantaneous and interruptive modality of the cellphone for the cosmic and the chthonic near-timelessness of the glittering stars at night or the contemplation of the backstory of grains of sand on a beach. That shift, at least, that openness, is the precondition from our side. The world, for its part, imperturbable and sublime as always, just welcomes us back. Mary Oliver: “I thought the earth remembered me / she took me back so tenderly… / I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed / nothing between me and the white fire of the stars…” (1993).

**Tricky rocks**

Teaching like this – or more accurately, fellow-traveling with students – out on the edge of hyper-anthropocen*trized* modernity (Weston 1991) is actually to come to the very *center* of the world if one looks at things from a larger-than-human perspective. Thus a 2006 and 2007 summer class out of Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia, part of a Masters-level curriculum in Environmental Education and Communication overseen by Professor Rick Kool, took Rick and me and twenty students, mostly in their 20s and 30s, mostly Canadian environmental organizers or teachers themselves, up Vancouver Island to Tofino in vans, then onto a small boat that services mostly logging operations up that roadless, precipitous, primeval coast and its islands to drop us at a site called Cougar Annie’s Garden – once the homestead of a legendary though problematic local figure (that’s “Annie”), now being restored as a residential study facility on temperate rainforests as well as a historical site, part of Hesquiaht First Nation traditional land. There we lived for a week in small cabins up the mountainsides, no electricity, no contact with the outside world, just the forest and the bay, grizzlies foraging by day and the dance of the nebulae at night.

We took turns doing meals and between sessions hiked for miles along logging roads and Hesquiaht trails, as well as the cedar plank-ways and occasional shrines or other structures being built on-site as a labor of love by the current owner and main resident, winding between 800-year-old trees and, incongruously, hothouse-type flowers from bulbs that the eponymous Annie used to grow for sale. Hobbitty little outhouses invited us to help fertilize semi-wild gardens right below us down the steep mountain slopes while we gazed through ornately crafted windows dozens of miles across the bay. We swam in a small and spectacularly frigid lake behind the site with a mysterious “Whale Rock” in the middle – in native lore, a site of great power – that showed itself, with exquisite delicacy, to only a few of us, just as the ancient stories, credited by none of us at first, told us it would.

Again we were living and learning – no real distinction – in the very midst of a vastly larger world: the whole numinous Pacific Northwest surround, its fjords and tumbling waters of the west coast of Vancouver Island, at the edge of a familiar world but at the very center of another. Not “remote” at all – quite the contrary. Once again the grand scenario was immersion, continuously unfolding encounter, in an uncompromisingly larger-than-human frame.

Classes and small study groups met constantly on the decks, in a small half-open chapel near the lake, or in the gardens. Students worked on a signposting project for one of Rick’s classes (how do you present such a site – diplomatically, informatively, provocatively, honestly?). For mine, the theme was storied modes of inhabitation or co-presence, as I called them – one mode of “environmental communication”, or what my late friend and wilderness companion Jim Cheney called “ethics as bioregional narrative” (Cheney 1989). Out loud as well as outside, we read the works of the Haida-Gwaii storyteller Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay (John Sky), a long Sapsucker narrative in particular, while at the same time we could savor the voice of this very land under its own open sky and surging waters, the mewling and drumming sapsuckers themselves all around us.

I invited the students to take the next step too. One of the main projects for my class that week was for each participant to find (or be found *by*) what I called a *Storied Token* of the place: some natural being or object or specific process, emblematic of the place, around which both their own human and the place’s more-than-human stories might crystallize. Of course, the Token had to show itself in the first place. Tokens and their stories may come to each of you in specific ways, I said: your first task is chiefly to be open to them. This is “environmental communication” too, but in a far more ancient and mysterious mode than we have learned to expect.

Students responded with immense heartfulness and variety. Days were spent preparing, feeling their ways back into the natural world, attending to the solicitations, as David Abram puts it (1996), of specific more-than-human Others right around us. We finally spoke of them together on our last long late-summer afternoon before heading back to “civilization”. Some Tokens were small pieces of wood, invoking the tree elders, scraps maybe from the boardwalks whose rough waviness brought out a certain quirky and fleeting magic in the place at the same time, counterpoint to the gravity and immensity of the trees. One Lebanese woman linked the massive ancient cedars of this faraway temperate rainforest to the legendary cedars of her homeland – now reduced by millennia of depredations to a few small plots, slowly regenerating in the hearts of the people as well as tenaciously on the eroded hillsides.

Another participant brought us a set of nested crab shells and spoke of molting – shell-shifting – as life-story, both literally and as metaphor. When she finished, her friends in the class, knowing her own life-story, spontaneously stood up and honored her as doing the same thing. She’s beaming and sobbing at the same time. Another brought a mini-version of the Whale Rock. She had not seen it in the lake herself, she tells us, but in the very midst of her irritation – it was going to hide from all the women, *really?* – she decided that the rock was actually manifesting itself to her in another way, as something she could carry with her and warm with her own body’s warmth. We contemplated this.

In a similar spirit I brought my own Storied Token, a little totem that came to me on a previous kayak trip in this region: an oyster shell that welded itself to a small rock, the ensemble, held at the right angle, irresistibly bringing to mind the wing of the Winged Victory, the famed though still mysterious Samothracean (fragment of a) monument now in the Louvre. A winged rock, then, quite literally: it flew home with me from my previous trip and flew back for this one. More allegorically, it is a symbol, to me, of how the whole spirit of the place, literally the fusion of life and rock, itself can “take flight” in our own imaginations and, yes, “environmental communication”. Ancient stories tell us that rocks themselves are alive – they just move at a different tempo, but they do indeed move: all over the surface (by water, by ice, by us…) and by plate (think tectonics), up and down, into crust and mantle; and even through space. This one…flies.

**All Our Relations**

Why care about nature? Really, why? Like most moderns, my Environmental Ethics students can produce a whole range of decent reasons. Because of its beauty. Because of its antiquity. Because of some special kind of intrinsic value that philosophers haven’t been able to persuasively articulate just yet, but will soon, we promise. Because God created it and actually did not sign it over to us to ravage as we please, despite what the first pages of Genesis seem to say. Because, if nothing else, human well-being and indeed sheer survival depends on it. We study all of these sorts of arguments – the usual themes of Environmental Ethics– and my course, like many others, seems to be moderately successful at enabling students to develop and claim voice to them.

Behind and alongside these reasons is another sort of reason, though, and a reason at once so simple, so central, and so overwhelming that it hardly seems like a “reason” at all. It even seems embarrassing to state it, especially baldly, and somehow sentimental to embrace or celebrate. This is simply that we are related to everything, and everything to us. Native people speak simply of awareness of “All Our Relations”. Australian philosopher Freya Mathews puts it in a more contemporary philosophical idiom when she writes that for aboriginal peoples, human subjectivity is not the primal frame within which everything else emerges, but rather is itself “emergent with a larger subjectivity, always already an emanation of land, of country, of world” (2005, p. 103). And for Mathews too this awareness is also vastly illuminating, heartening, grounding. It does not just “ground” a formal ethic but literally constitutes an entire way of life.

I do not propose here to even begin to argue for such a worldview – as if it even *is* a “view” for which one might argue in the first place, which already puts it into a distinctively modern/subjectivist/disconnected frame. These are very large issues. It does pose a major *pedagogical* challenge, though, which is more in line with the themes of the present collection. Even those teachers who may have little sympathy or less understanding of the “Old Way”, as the poet Gary Snyder and others call it, would likely agree that this encompassing feeling for the natural world at least needs to be taught as part of an Environmental Ethics class in the name of inclusiveness and “coverage”. Their aim, as mine, is in part to help our students become conversant with the broad range of existing approaches to environmental values and hence – especially the Environmental Studies majors – able to interact productively with a wide range of constituencies in the real environmental debates they will soon join.

Yet “All Our Relations” cannot be left a merely curious verbal formula when our students are going to be dealing with people for whom it is an orison to the encompassing animate depth of the world. Besides, who knows if it might not speak to our students’ souls (even… our own?) in ways that the usual forms and formulae of Environmental Ethics do not? In any case students need to have some sense of how it *feels*, how the world manifests when attended to in this way. But how can we teach such a thing? How do we offer students even the barest glimpse of what such a world is like, and of the profound ethical reorientation that arises out of it, when it is so far from anything that they (or we, mostly, either) are likely to have experienced or even considered before?

For multiple reasons, school *per se* is a profoundly unwelcoming or simply impossible setting for such a learning (Wren, et al. 1996, Weston 1996, 2003). Students are systematically separated from worlds of mystery and magic and indeed any larger world but for the classroom; few learn how to *listen*, certainly not with the heart; and the slow and patent nurturing of wisdom through actual experience in the widest world is certainly not on the agenda. Most of us know better than to bring up the Old Way in serious academic company, at least as anything other than an anthropological curiosity: we would be quickly and patronizingly dismissed as credulous, soft-headed, prone to talking to birds or the Thunder. In school more than almost anywhere, consensus reality rules, and reproduces itself.

Yet I have found that it is possible, after all, at least sometimes, in partial and ambiguous ways to be sure, to enable students to glimpse the natural world in another guise. Or rather, more precisely – for to be precise here is actually a demanding etiquette (Cheney & Weston 1999) – I have found that it is possible to create certain conditions for the emergence into experience, at least fleetingly, of that vastly encompassing animate and responsive world from which, in an aboriginal view according to Mathews, our own subjectivities and indeed our very beings themselves emanate. I hasten to add, in the spirit of the same etiquette, that I certainly do not claim credit for this, let alone any specific technique or method to somehow “produce” such experiences. They won’t be produced on cue, anyway: the spirits tend to be shy, as a shaman might explain, and often very particular. Thus, while I realize that the present volume is supposed to be more like a volume of success stories – celebrations of teaching – and while no one could be more appreciative of active teaching (Weston 2018), what I aim to share here is something quite different: very partial and barely replicable “successes” at best. Just moments, and a way of thinking that accommodates them. Just moments – but what moments!

**Thunder speaks after all**

In my Environmental Visions class and sometimes in others, I ask my students to consider the animals or places or forces of nature with which they identify and whose power or presence they feel they may share in some way. Many name specific animals: Cat or Dog, Dragonfly, Elephant, Stingray, Deer. A runner may be Cheetah. Some pick favorite places, places that speak to them, like Beach, or specific beaches. Some are waves, there is the occasional tree, sometimes Wind or Rain or Lightning or Sun. One African-American student at heavily white Elon declared herself Chameleon. A partly Native American student was a Buffalo: in his dreams he becomes a buffalo, runs with his fellows, and can ask them to take him other places or into other identities in turn. And unlike most students, he did not choose this Affinity Being: it was given from birth, his clan animal.

Actually, I say, no one should think that they are doing all the choosing. As with the Storied Tokens, there is a more of a dance here. It is at least as true that other beings/powers choose *you*. Are there animals, I ask, that regularly come to you, in dreams or awake? Perhaps you have even had specific encounters, numinous or electrifying, that stay with you?

Of course it is possible to pick an Affinity Being in a superficial way. Nonetheless, there turns out to be immense power in opening this door even a crack. I have found repeatedly that the beings with whom my students embrace affinities show up in unprecedented numbers and in striking ways – across our paths, on the Web, in our dreams. I had not seen rabbits for years on campus until one of my first-years declared herself Rabbit one Spring. Within days we were stumbling over them. Another in the same class was Shark, partly on account of a diving encounter, face to face. Long after the class was over I was still sending him links to shark films that would not stop turning up on my listservs. Yet another was Dragonfly, and what followed was the summer of, yes, dragonflies.

Of course it may be said that Dragonflies and Rabbits and Wind and all the rest are always around anyway, and we just notice them more when we or someone else identifies (with) them. And it is true: they are always there. But why is this itself not the magic? Maybe the greater task is to learn receptivity and welcome to more beings more of the time. But it is also arguable that this kind of welcome may in turn have consequences in the world. Why wouldn’t creatures and other spirits be more apt to come to those who long and look for them? Part of the lesson is that others beyond the human can be at least as unpredictable, surprising, provocative, and enigmatic as we ourselves. To expect otherwise is another way of missing the point.

Usually my classes invoke our other-than-human affinities outside, around a fire if possible – Fire being a presence too of course – or in some other ceremonial space. The effects are often uncanny. After the last Fire Circle, my co-teacher Frances Bottenberg wrote a striking note:

I actually had an eerie sense that [students’] faces and postures took on something of their animal (or plant or elemental) alter-egos when they began to speak about their connections to their totems…. Bear had a growl in his voice I hadn’t noticed before… Cat seemed calmly twitchy like cats are, ready to spring or lounge at the drop of a hat… The way Otter moved her hands as she talked reminded me of the way otters play with objects in the water, turning them over and over… Cloud was always glancing up, maybe taking all this lightly, as if from above… Shark’s teeth glinted, especially when she said she “always follows the blood”! Oh, and of course there was kindly but stern Owl, so owl-awkward trying to read his poem with one eye, and then the other… I could list more… (Bottenberg 2013).

One first-year class met for our Council at dusk around an off-campus fire pit. Storms were predicted –­ a major front was coming through – and the evening skies were grey, but we gathered outside anyway, stoked up the fire, began to speak. Each offered gifts as well as warnings to the others. Turtle offered his patience, deliberateness: precisely the ability to go slow. Shark, the reminder that the world’s most self-congratulatory animal (guess who) needs to seriously temper his arrogance in the waters. Sun offered eternal light.

Between the circle speakers, the crickets and the frogs spoke up. We gave them their turns too, waiting until they paused for Owl (that was me, in my owl-head mask and academic gown: my personal Affinity Being is Daddy Longlegs, but philosophy’s disciplinary totem is the Owl) to sound the drum for the next student speaker.

We made it all the way around. At the end, Owl made a toast to the class. It was our final meeting, and the last class of the year for most of the students, the very end of their first year of college. I offered them best wishes for the summer. As I raised my paper cup at the end, just after my last word, there was the first peal of Thunder. A startling grace note, perfectly timed. A Thunderous Amen.

The students drank their sparkling cider. Now it really was time to say goodbye. Shedding mask, I invited them to fill their cups in their imagination with whatever they wanted to leave behind from this first year of college, as well as whatever part of their Affinity Being they now wanted to give back to the world – and then to throw their “full cups” into the fire. In they went – more than a few students visibly holding back tears.

The flames leapt up one last time. But by now the lightning was close and leaping too. The winds were lifting and we could hear the rain not so far off. Rushed embraces. Have a great summer. Then they sprinted across the woods for their cars. Or jumped or galloped or crawled or flew, only half returned to human – another flash of lightning and I had the distinct apparition of an animal stampede. Thunder followed on top of it. Then, within half a minute, it was pouring, the start of a solid day of desperately needed hard rain.

Lakota philosopher Vine Deloria writes about how Europeans consistently misunderstand Native peoples’ rain dances as means of manipulating or producing rain. Observers turned cynical when they realized that the shamans only begin rain dances when it appears that rain was in the offing anyway. But of course, replies Deloria. The function of the rain dance is not to produce rain but, as he puts it, to “participate in the emerging event” (1999, p. 50). Wedding dances don’t produce weddings, do they? That is why you only dance when the rain is practically upon you. So this, so to say, was our Thunder dance. This class certainly “participated” in a remarkably thunderous “emerging event” – as close to speaking, I suspect, as Thunder cares to get.

**The heron**

Sometimes the Visions course meets at the Lodge, a nearby former church camp with a lake, a few shelters, a building with fireplace for when it is too cold to meet outside, large grassy areas where we can sit in the sun on blankets in a circle. The fire circle is here too. Most of all it offers relative quiet, the chance to be outside without distraction, with alert senses for once, in good company: with the winds that are always active; the turkey vultures wafting about and checking us out, along with the occasional hawk and chittery kingfisher; sun and the falling leaves; and, at the start of one especially memorable Fall term, lots of rain and thunderstorms as a succession of hurricanes brushed by. We spent most of our first few weeks meeting in the shelters.

That Fall we declared our affinities around a smoky bonfire on a cool afternoon. Windy, too, with low clouds scudding by: the smoke blew everywhere, and there was a lot of it, so we all went to our next classes smelling like we’d been camping all week. That year it turned out I had Rain, Dolphin, Jaguar (a Mexican woman with Huichol roots, whose distant shamanic ancestors might well have been jaguars too), Salmon, Bear, and many others.

We also had Great Blue Heron. As it happened, we had seen a Great Blue here at the lake below the Lodge, once, early in the term. But she’d never been back, though one end of the lake seems like fine heron feeding-ground. Still, the heron’s appearance that day was part of the reason D chose it for her Affinity Being, I think. The other part was some kind of quiet grace, a body that could be ungainly but in fact had an unmatched elegance; and a quickness too. Long periods of utter stillness punctuated by the lighting strike of the beak. Imagine the inner life.

Then came the day that D who was also Great Blue Heron was to present her term project on animal-animal, cross-species communication. We’d spoken, often, of human-animal communication, but she wanted to go several steps farther, to look at a bigger picture. Usually she’d been very quiet and did not say much, though she was a perceptive and animated person when she got going. Now she had just begun to speak, maybe half a sentence, already with that same animation and self-possession. Everyone sat up a bit straighter, smiled.

D was sitting with her back to the lake. But now just as quickly our eyes were drawn up and behind her. Suddenly a shadow was floating by to her right and then spiraling down toward the water. Today of all days, this exact moment of all moments, Great Blue came back.

She floated down to the brilliantly sunlit end of the lake, in full view, the deeper part where feeding is (I’d think) not so good, landed in the most graceful way right in the brightest sun. There she stood for a minute, looking us over and showing herself just enough, and then just as elegantly took back off, skimmed the water down to the other end of the lake, landed and proceeded to hunt up the stream and out of sight.

We were stunned into silence. No missing the magic here. I seriously wanted to end class right there, despite just having begun. What could you say or do after that? It was D’s day, though, and she had a lot to say. So after a time we collected ourselves and began to speak again, haltingly and unwillingly as it was. For in a certain way everything had already been said, or (more accurately) done. We came back to that Visit in every reflection on the class for the rest of the term. No one who experienced that moment could have any doubts that animals “communicate,” indeed in a far deeper way than any one of us, even D herself, had yet named or even imagined. Great Blue’s Return was something primal, a brief upwelling of a communicative flow far more powerful than language itself, something for which our only available word may once again be “magic” but which hints at far deeper receptivities and harmonies possible in the larger world.

Like the Daddy Longlegs that keep turning up in my tents and on my shoulders, herons actually keep coming to my classes – always, strikingly, in the mode of punctuation or emphasis, opening or closing some process, though never again in so intense a way as on D’s day. Of course, as Deloria says, you have to be open to them in that way. And for starters, obviously, you have to be outside. Again, again, again: the natural world is not some kind of stage scenery or piece of clockwork – not if we “participate in the process”. Here there can be immense gifts out of pure generosity, hints of pervasive unseen flows. At moments like these, every teacherly self-consciousness gives way before awe.

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