

THE REDISCOVERY OF TURTLE ISLAND

(For John Wesley Powell, watershed visionary, and for Wallace Stegner)

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I

We human beings of the "developed" societies have once more been expelled from a garden. We have been expelled from the formal garden of Euro-American humanism, and its assumptions of human superiority, priority, uniqueness, and dominance. We have been thrown back into that other garden with all the other animals and fungi and insects, where we can no longer be sure we are so privileged. The walls between "nature" and "culture" begin to crumble as we enter what might be called the Ecological Era, an era of the acknowledgement of interdependence and the acceptance of our literal kinship with all other life forms. There is no name yet for a humanistic scholarship that accounts for this change. For the time I will call it "post-human humanism."

Environmental activists ecological scientists. and post-human humanists are about mid-stream in a process of re-evaluating the practical relationship of human beings to nature. On the public policy level, significant changes have been taking place in the thinking of those who manage the vast expanses of wild or semi-wild land in the American public domain. We are at a moment of lively confluence of academic professionals, the self-taught ecosystem experts of local communities. and land management agency experts.

The phrase "nature and culture" refers to two highly interactive categories, that together make up most of human reality. Nonetheless there are still many humanists who think that knowledge of nature should be left to the sciences. Many historians and philosophers unreflectively take the natural world to be just a building-supply yard for human projects, with some pretty nursery plants available in one corner. In that regard they are little different from petroleum geologists and mining engineers.

These several intellectual and professional positions have been facing each other off with a broad range of differing assumptions. Starting a few years ago some writers suggested that a distinction should be made between two contemporary ways of seeing nature. They are saying that View A speaks of "pure wilderness" and argues for the idea of an original condition of nature. This view, it is said, holds that the "ideal" condition of an ecosystem is one of accomplished successional development, which is a stable and diverse condition that is technically called "climax." The View B, it is said, argues that nature is always changing, that there is no reason to value climax over disturbance or any other succession phase, and that human beings are part of nature. The subtext of this view is, perhaps, that human beings shouldn't hesitate to intervene in their own favor. View B is, I believe, taken to be a "reinvention of nature" in some circles.

The "A" view is ascribed to the Park Service, the Sierra Club, and various "radical environmentalists" with their desire to conserve and preserve wild lands. The "B" view has -whether it was intended or not- already become a favorite of would-be developers and those who are vexed by the problems that come with a serious concern

for biodiversity. I would argue that the dichotomy as proposed is largely unnecessary, and that both versions reflect the instrumentalist view of nature that has long been a mainstay of Occidental thought. On the "B" side, to see the natural world as shaped in part by history, subject to continual change, is not a new or original insight, and it seriously fails to address the question of "why preserve natural variety" to use Bryan Norton's term. And on the "A" side I have seen nothing in the writings of the older ecologists to indicate that they doubted the fundamental impermanence of the universe. It has always been obvious that any successional phase -including climax- will be followed by further events and changes. Stability is always a relative term. So I think that charging previous ecological theorists with being obsessed by the idea of climax is a bad rap.

Yet is certainly true that hominids have had some effect on the natural world going back to the earliest times. "Pristine" then should not be taken to mean "totally without human agency" but can refer to a situation where the human effect is almost invisible. Sometimes human influence seems to mimic natural process -as in Indian burning in California, which already was a highly fire- adapted grassland and forest. Pristine nature is not an original condition which once altered will never be redeemed, but (in the light of process) can be understood in terms of the image of the "spring of Artemis" -the pool hidden in the forest that Artemis, Goddess of wild things, visits to regain her virginity. The wild has a wind of hip, renewable virginity.

And to freeze some parts of nature into an icon of "pristine, uninhabited wilderness" would also be to treat it like a commodity. To value wild lands for "amenities" such as silence, beauty, or access to spirituality is to miss the point that the most basic concern should be for diversity of creatures, plenty of appropriate space for them and the integrity of ecosystem dynamics whether charming or useful to humans or not. Traditional preservationist ideals do serve to protect some aspects of biodiversity however, and are altruistic in intent. They deserve respect, even as we begin to refine them.

We need to go beyond both the neo-utilitarianism of the anti-climax cynics, and the naivete of the pristine preservationists. Then to "reinvent nature" could be a creative and constructive task in which we might understand *why* we would hope to recover some of the wild that has been lost or endangered. Then we could begin to lay the groundwork for a future "culture of nature."

So I do think we need to keep on re-thinking our relation nature here on the cusp of the fiftieth human millennium. We might start by being a bit dubious about, a tad critical of, the Judaeo-Christian-Cartesian view of nature which still dominates the mind-set of most scientists and scholars, and by which all developed nations excuse themselves for their drastically destructive treatment of living beings. We might then try to resume, to re-create, that view that holds the whole phenomenal world to be our own matrix -a locus of its own kind of consciousness- centered at every point in the web- always "alive" in its own manner, a spring of intrinsic value, and completely self-organizing. I am describing, rather poorly, what I think of as a third way, one which is not caught up in the dualisms of body / mind, spirit / matter, or culture / nature.

There have been Euro-American scouting parties tracking this path that crosses over the Occidental (and Postmodern) divide for several centuries. I am going to lay out the case history of one of these probes into the new space. It amounts to a new story for the American identity. It has already been in the making for more than thirty years. I call it "Rediscovering Turtle Island."

II

In January of 1969 I attended a gathering of Native American activists in Southern California. Hundreds of people had come from all over the west. After sundown we went out to a gravelly wash that came down from the desert mountains. Drums were set up, a fire started, and for most of the night we sang the pan-tribal songs called "49s". The night conversations circled around the idea of a native-inspired cultural and ecological renaissance for all of North America. I first heard this continent called "Turtle Island" there by a man who said his work was to be a messenger. He had *his dark brown long hair tied in a Navajo men's knot, and he wore dusty khakis*. He said that Turtle Island was the term that the people were coming to, a new name to help us build the future of North America. I asked him who or where it came from. He said "There are many creation myths with Turtle, east coast and west coast. But also it was heard."

I had recently returned to the west coast from a ten-year stay in Japan. It was instantly illuminating to hear this continent called "Turtle Island." The re-alignments it suggests are rich and complex: we see that the indigenous people here had a long history of subtle and effective ways of working with their home grounds. They had an extraordinary variety of cultures and economies with certain distinctive social forms (such as communal households) that were found throughout the hemisphere. They sometimes fought with each other, but without losing a deep sense of mutual respect. Below their various forms of religious practice lay a powerful spiritual teaching of human / natural interdependence and self-realization that came with learning to see through non-human eyes. The landscape was intimately known, and the very idea of community and kinship embraced and included the huge populations of wild beings. Much of the truth of Native American life has been obscured by the Eurocentric narrowness, the anthropocentrism, and the self-serving histories that were written on behalf of the present dominant society.

I had more or less already known some of this, from my youthful interest in environmental and Native Peoples' issues. Seeing these points made fresh renewed my hope for a Native American cultural renaissance, and put the emerging environmental movement into perspective. This took place about one year before the first Earth Day.

As I reentered American life that year, the spring of 1969, I saw the use of the term "Turtle Island" spread in the fugitive Native American newsletters and communications. I became aware that there was a notable groundswell of white people too who were seeing their life in the western hemisphere in a new way. The name was moving into the non-native world. I met white people who figured that the best they could do on behalf of Turtle Island was to work for the environment, reinhabit the

urban or rural margins, learn the landscape, and give support to Native Americans when asked. By late 1970 I had moved with my family to the Sierra Nevada and was developing a forest homestead north of the South Yuba River. Many others entered the mountains and hills of the Pacific Slope with virtually identical intentions, from the San Diego back-country well into British Columbia. They had begun the reinhabitory move. Through the early seventies I worked with my local forest community, made regular trips to the Bay Area, and was out on long swings around the land reading poems or reading workshops. Our new sense of the western hemisphere permeated everything we did. So I called the book of poems I wrote from that period *Turtle Island*.

The introduction says,

Turtle Island -the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millennia and reapplied by some of them to "North America" in recent years. Also, an idea found world-wide, of the earth, or cosmos even, sustained by a treat turtle or serpent-of-eternity.

A name: that we may see ourselves more accurately on this continent of watersheds and life-communities plant zones, physiographic provinces, culture areas: following natural boundaries. The "USA" and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here.

The poems speak of place, and the energy-pathways that sustain life. Each living being is a swirl in the flow, a formal turbulence, a "song". The land, the planet itself, is also a living being- at another pace. Anglos, Black people, Chicanos and others beached up on these shores all share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions- African, Asian, or European. Hark again to those roots, to see our ancient solidarity, and then to the work of being together on Turtle Island.

Following on the publication of these poems I began to hear back from a lot of people -many in Canada- who were re-visioning North American life. Many other writers got into this sort of work each on their own, a brilliant, and cranky bunch that gave us: Jerry Rothenberg's translation of Native American song and story into powerful little poem-events, Peter Blue Cloud's evocation of Coyote in a contemporary context, Dennis Tedlock's representation of oral narrative, Ed Abbey's call for a passionate commitment to the wild, Leslie Silko's hair-straightening novel *Ceremony* -and much more.

A lot of this followed on the heels of the back-to-the-land movement and the early seventies diaspora of hippies and dropout graduate students to rural places. There are hundreds if not thousands of communities still out there getting involved in all levels of politics being teachers, plumbers, chair and cabinet-makers, contractors and carpenters, poets-in-the-schools, auto mechanics, geographic information computer consultants, registered foresters, professional storytellers, forest service workers, architects or organic gardeners. These individuals have mastered an impressive body of

lore: there are herbalists, sweat-lodge doctors, ceremonial dancers, yoga and meditation teachers, jazz musicians, basket-weavers, expert local botanists, local history experts, readers of Yiddish, readers of Chinese, veterans of India and Nepal, in the rural communities of the far west. And of course of this can be found in the cities, too.

On the intellectual / cultural front the first wave of writers mentioned left some strong legacies -Jerry Rothenberg, Dell Hymes, and Dennis Tedlock gave us the field of Ethnopoetics (the basis for truly appreciating multicultural literature), Leslie Silko and Simon Ortiz opened the way for a distinguished and diverse body of new American Indian writing, Ed Abbey's eco-warrior spirit led toward the emergence of the radical environmental activist group Earth First! which (in splitting) generated the Wild Lands Project. Some of my own writings contributed to the inclusion of Buddhist practice and ethical precepts in the mix, and writers as different as Wendell Berry and Gary Nabhan opened the way for a serious discussion of place, nature in place, and community. This is but the tiniest sampling of what has been going on.

And "Turtle Island" continues to extend its sway. There is even a "Turtle Island String Quartet" based in San Francisco, and a Turtle Island Office, based in New York (with a newsletter) -a national information center for the many bioregional groups which every other year hold a "Turtle Island Congress." Participants join in from Canada and Mexico; the next gathering will be held in Kentucky in 1994. In the winter of '92 I practically convinced the director of the Centro de Estudios Norteamericanos at the Universidad de Alcalá in Madrid to change his department's name to "Estudios de la Isla de Tortuga." He much enjoyed the idea of the shift.

III

Turtle Island becomes the name for home. It is the word for our future identity. My stepdaughter Kyungjin (KJ for short) was adopted at eighteen months from Korea. Her adoptive mother is of Japanese descent, her stepfather is a *haole*, her language is English. Her uncles and aunties are mostly Japanese-American people of the second and third generation who are growers in the Great Central Valley. And now she lives in the Yuba river country, the mountain Nisenan territory. She sometimes has difficulty knowing how to see herself and will still announce "I am Korean" though she has little idea of what that might possibly mean. We play Korean music for her, she loves kimchee and gets a lot of it, and we promise to take her there for a visit someday. But then we tell her "Honey, you are a person of northern California, Shasta Nation. There are people from many different places here and lots of cultural styles and we respect them all. But we are all together *here*." And she walks a path to catch her ride to school through a forest where she stops and imitates the scolding of squirrels. She knows these critters are also neighbors in the hood.

She recently came home working at memorizing the Pledge of Allegiance. I taught her the poem that I had written for my (now grown) sons back in the mid-seventies, a pledge of allegiance that will be good on Turtle Island for centuries to come, regardless of changes in government:

For All

Ah to be alive
 on a mid-September morn
 fording a stream,
 barefoot, pants rolled up,
 holding boots, pack on,
 sunshine in the shallows,
 northern rockies.

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters
 stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes
 cold nose dripping
 singing inside
 creek music, heart music,
 smell of sun on gravel.

I pledge allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the soil
 of Turtle Island
 and to the beings who thereon dwell
 one ecosystem
 in diversity
 under the sun

With joyful interpenetration for all.

This re-visioning also connects with (and is informed by) the non-anthropocentric ethics of Deep Ecology. Make no mistake about it: any concern for human ethical obligation to the non-human world rattles the very foundations of Occidental thought. The "Turtle Island View" connects with the ideas of Buddhism, Daoism and the lively details of world-wide animism and paganism. It has been informed by ecosystem theory, environmental philosophy, and environmental history, but it goes on to become a personal practice. Deep Ecology underlies the work of engaged conservation biologists as with the Wild Lands project, which lays out a visionary re-mapping of North America and its possible future wildernesses. Both are given grounding in the Bioregional movement. Bioregionalism applies the Turtle Island concept place by place, calling for knowledge and reinhabitation in terms of biogeographical regions and watersheds. It calls us to see our country in terms of its landforms, plant life, weather patterns, and seasonal changes -its whole natural history- before casting the net of political jurisdictions over it. It would reverse what Ivan Illich calls "the five hundred year war against subsistence" that has characterized Occidental political history. The total undertaking is one of rethinking every level of identity in

space and time. Its local members become "reinhabitory". Reinhabitory refers to people who are learning to live and think "as if" they were indigenous. This doesn't mean some return to a primitive lifestyle or utopian provincialism, but implies a deep environmental ethic, a strong connection to place, a commitment to community, and a sophisticated mixed economic practice that might be horticultural, silvicultural, and service-based.

Those who are forming such bonds to the landscapes are, regardless of their national or ethnic backgrounds, in the process of becoming something deeper than "American citizens" -they are becoming "natives" of Turtle Island.

IV

The Nisenan, who are the indigenous people of the east side of the central Sacramento valley and Sierra foothills of California tell a creation story involving Turtle that goes something like this:

Coyote and Earthmaker were whirling around, sailing around in the swirl of things. Coyote finally had enough of this aimlessness and said "Earthmaker, find us a world!" Earthmaker tried to get out of it, tried to excuse himself because he knew that a full-scale world can only mean trouble. But Coyote nagged him into trying. So leaning over the surface of the vast waters, Earthmaker called up Turtle. After a long time Turtle surfaced, and Earthmaker said "Turtle, can you get me a bit of mud? Coyote wants a world." "A world" said Turtle, "Why bother. Oh well." And down she dived. She went down and down and down, to the bottom of the sea. She took a great gob of mud, and started swimming toward the surface. As she spiralled and paddled upward the streaming water washed the mud from the sides of her mouth, from the back of her mouth -and by the time she reached the surface (the trip took six years) nothing was left but one grain of dirt between the tips of her bill. "That'll be enough!" said Earthmaker, taking it his hands and giving it a pat like a tortilla. Suddenly Coyote and Earthmaker were standing on a piece of ground as big as a tarp. Then Earthmaker stamped his feet, and they were standing on a flat wide plain of mud. The ocean was gone. They stood on the land.

And then Coyote began to want trees and plants, and scenery, and the story goes on with Coyote's imagining landscapes which then come forth, and he starts naming the animals and plants as they show themselves. "I'll call you skunk because you look like skunk." Those landscapes are there today. Since I live in the Nisenan territory, my children grew up with this as their first creation story. It also prepared them for the Book of Genesis and then for the tale of organic evolution. When they read the Bible story one said "That's a lot like Coyote and Earthmaker". The many tales of human animal characters simultaneously present animal character and human behavior. One

recognizes the wild badger in the story-character Badger, but Badger is not quite identical with the badger; myth, society, and biology resonate together. This would be but one tiny move in the gradual process of growing a nature / culture narrative that makes place for the non-human.

Mythopoetic play is part of long-range social change. We can comfort ourselves with hopes for "paradigm shifts." But what about the short-term? There are some immediate outcomes worth mentioning: A new era of community interaction with public lands, our American Commons, is beginning. In California, under Doug Wheeler for the state, Ron Stewart from the US Forest Service, and Ed Hastey and Deane Swickard from the Bureau of Land Management, a whole new set of ecosystem-based government / community developed management possibilities is in the works. The most vital environmental politics is being done by watershed-based or greater ecosystem groups such as the Headwaters Alliance, the Greater Yellowstone Alliance, the Greater North Cascades Ecosystem Alliance. The possibility of biodiversity protection by the local and private landowner emerges, The Wild Lands Project, *Wild Earth Journal*, and the core group that spearheads that -Dave Foreman, John Davis, Michael Soule and all- are getting the information and insights of Conservation Biology to the communities and the academies alike. There are post-human humanists at work in many universities around the country. The new degree-offering "Nature and Culture Program" at the University of California in Davis is but one example.

(A bit of local gossip: In my corner of the northern Sierra of California we are working on the idea of the human-inhabited wildlife corridor, an area designated as a biological connector, with certain agreed-on practices that enhance wildlife survival even as people continue to live there. Such a move would be one key to preserving wildlife diversity in most Third World Countries.)

Rediscovering Turtle Island is the beginning of a planetary *reconquista*. We are all indigenous to this planet, this garden we are being called on by nature and history to reinhabit in good spirit. The rediscovery of Turtle Island is the recovery of human (and interspecies) conviviality and community. To recover the land is to live and work in a place -to work in a place is to bond to a place- people who work together in a place become a community -a community grows a culture- to restore the wild and connect with nature, is to restore culture.