

Sunday, October 5, 2008

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

“The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild, and what I have been preparing to say is, that in wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind...”

– Henry David Thoreau

“The spirit wanders, comes now here, now there, and occupies whatever frame it pleases. From beasts it passes into human bodies, and from our bodies into beasts, and never perishes. – Joseph Campbell

Opening Words

Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures. Let the noon find thee by other lakes, and the night overtake thee everywhere at home. There are no larger fields than these, no worthier games than may here be played. Grow wild according to thy nature, Like these sedges and brakes... Enjoy the land, but own it not. (HD Thoreau, *Walden*)

Chalice Lighting:

Only a Little Planet, by Lawrence Collins

Every particle of everything
rock, water, flower, human
has been in the same place flaming
in the heart of our ancient sun
before the earth
came flying out of it.
The irises in your eyes
the tissue of roses
the slow giant rocks in mountain hearts
were born flaming
locked in the sun as it drifted
like a light on dark water.

Words to Begin Meditation

The Peace of Wild Things, by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

— Wendell Berry

Sermon “The Preservation of the World”

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Renee Askins was a 21-year-old college student, when, in 1980, she joined a team of researchers at Wolf Park in Indiana. She had planned to research the wolf pack’s alpha female. But instead, for a variety of complex reasons, Askins found herself bottle-feeding a mouse-sized newborn puppy named Natasha and then socializing Natasha with several other puppies.

So much for carefully laid plans!

As she fed the puppy from a tiny dropper every few hours, as she carried the puppy in a sling against her body, as she slept with the puppy at her side, Askins’ life changed. Her loyalties to the wild in general and to one species – wolves – in particular deepened. And her understanding of what it means for human beings to engage the wild, the wilderness, wildness altered.

In her book *Shadow Mountain*, Askins writes:

“Paradoxically, it was the privilege and opportunity afforded me by the wolves’ captivity at Wolf Park that led me to realize the degree to which their lives had been compromised by that captivity...Natasha’s sacrifice was absolute, as is the sacrifice of all wild things caged for the amusement or education of humans...Her whole being retained the resonance of the wild. In her pacing and her panting, in her own bittersweet way she taught me of another world, another existence, in which the animals spoke through their roaming and their roaring, their howling and their prowling. Through the sheer force of her being, her autonomy and will, through her otherness Natasha began to reveal a story. It was the story of the loss of wildness in our world...” (Askins, 16—17.)

After several months in Askins' care, Wolf Park sold Natasha to a research facility in another state. Askins' despair at that loss was absolute. Watching the car pull away from Wolf Park with Natasha's crate loaded inside, Askins vowed she would someday make it up to the puppy.

"All I had in the echoing emptiness of Natasha's departure was hope, and from that came a promise – a young girl's promise made innocently and idealistically out of a need to make sense of a loved one's suffering, and, perhaps, to alleviate my own. I promised that I would do something that would give back in some small way what we had so wantonly taken from her and her wild ancestors, that I would fight for wolves in the wild." (Askins, 20)

Fifteen years later, in 1995, 70 to 80 years after wolves had been fully exterminated in the American West, they were reintroduced to Yellowstone Park. Key among their champions was Renee Askins, who, in keeping her vow, founded the Wolf Project and lobbied unflaggingly for the wolf's return to Yellowstone. Wolf recovery in Yellowstone has been so successful in the past few years that the wolf's protected status is now threatened.

Today in the Christian calendar is the Feast of St. Francis, patron saint of animals. In some churches, especially Catholic churches, people bring their pets to church for a special blessing. Here, for the last several years, Sharon Brown has crafted meaningful animal blessings – though, to my knowledge – the animals so blessed have been here in spirit only.

Like many of you, I consider my life blessed by a parade of pets. To me there is something magical about the bonds formed across species. I am grateful for and humbled by that special connection. I also recognize not everyone has pets or loves animals. Yet, regardless of our individual attachments – or not – to animals, each of us is a part of the web of life that holds every creature in relationship. Sometimes, moving from house to car, to office, to car, and to house again, it's easy to miss it. It's easy to think human beings are different somehow – outside of nature, unconnected to the animal world.

Sometimes, it seems to me, human beings have lost track of our true place in the natural course of things; we've numbed our wildness. What might we learn if we reconnected to that wildness?

"The wolf exerts a powerful influence on the human imagination. It takes your stare and turns it back on you," writes Barry Holstun Lopez, author of *Of Wolves and Men*. (Lopez, 4.) Today, as I receive the wolf's stare in a metaphorical sense, and turn it back on myself, I gain a number of insights.

First I am reminded of the danger and tragedy of unexamined prejudice.

In the United States, as settlers mowed down buffalo and other wildlife in the prairies for sport, wolves, robbed of their food sources, began to turn increasingly to farms and ranches for sustenance – thus earning the fear and revulsion of the human beings in their midst. In the 19th and 20th centuries, people trapped, shot, poisoned, and tortured wolves. People have pursued wolves on foot, on skies, on ATVs, on snowmobiles and in helicopters. Government bounty programs added to the wolf's demise.

But it seems the pogrom – for that it what it has been, a pogrom – has been fueled by irrational hatred as much as the love of money or an urge to protect livestock. That hatred arises from deep within our culture's psyche.

I have never seen a wolf in the wild. But I've known about them for as long as I can remember. Stories like *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Three Little Pigs* taught me wolves were dangerous and menacing. I heard about the boy who cried wolf. I learned about wolves in sheep's clothing and the wolf at the door. The wolf has long captured human imaginations, standing in for everything fearsome, manipulative, and brutal.

Lopez writes: "*The hatred has religious roots: the wolf was the Devil in disguise. And it has secular roots: wolves killed stock and made men poor. At a more general level it had to do, historically, with feelings about wilderness. What men said about the one, they generally meant about the other. To celebrate wilderness was to celebrate the wolf; to want an end to wilderness and all it stood for was to want the wolf's head.*" (Lopez, 140.)

European settlers arriving on these shores found a wilderness of scary proportions – full of unfamiliar hazards ranging from poison ivy to rattlesnakes. And of course wolves. Settlers brought their hatred of wolves from Europe, where wolves had been systematically killed for as long as human beings had been engaged in animal husbandry.

The settlers met puzzling people here – people at home in the forest and on the plains, First Nations people who regarded themselves as part of the animal world – not separate from it. Lopez writes: "*They thought of themselves as The People ...and of animals as The Wolves, The Bears, The Mice, and so forth.*" (Lopez, p. 98)

Native people studied wolves to learn how to hunt efficiently. Native legends depicted the wolf as magical, healing – medicine man, even. Native rituals sometimes summonsed Wolf spirit. So I suppose it should come as no surprise that the settlers linked wolves and native peoples in sinister ways. Settlers wanted to share the land with neither. Settlers viewed both as savages.

Of wolves and First Nation peoples, Lopez writes: "*Since the two seemed so alike, [settlers] fell to dealing with them in similar ways. [Settlers] set out poisoned meat for the wolf and gave the Indian blankets infected with smallpox. [They] raided the wolf den to dig out and destroy the pups, and stole the Indian's children and set them to missionary schools to be rehabilitated. When [they were] accused of butchery for killing wolves and Indians, [settlers] spun tales of Mohawk cruelty and of wolves who ate fawns while they were still alive... By the late 19th century the argot of the Indian wars was the*

argot of the wolf wars. General Sheridan said, 'The only good Indians I ever saw were dead,' and the wolfer said, 'The only good wolf is a dead one.'" (Lopez, 171.)

Human history is replete with tragedies wrought by ignorance and prejudice. When the wolf turns my stare back upon myself, I am reminded of that painful human failing. I am called to look deeper into my soul to discover what prejudices I might be harboring there. And then, I am called to choose differently.

Second, as the wolf returns my gaze, I remember to take my right place in things – my right relationship with other beings. This is a lesson in humility.

As the settlers headed west, they were driven by a belief that the land and all it contained, from sea to sea, belonged to them, to their new nation – the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. That belief survives today. Hunters protest that a surge in the wolf population will reduce the numbers of big game animals like elk and caribou. Whether their claim is accurate or not, the protest is driven by an underlying belief that elk and caribou are the hunters' possessions, rather than creatures in a vast and shared web of nature.

Similarly, the belief in Manifest Destiny propels the U.S. into wars. We say we are exporting freedom and democracy – and maybe sometimes we are. But often, I fear, we are protecting our own interests abroad – assuring the oil flows from the Middle East to America, just for one example.

Humility requires an understanding that the land does not belong to us. The world does not belong to us. Rather, the land and world are loaned by future generations of all human beings – *and of all species*.

Humility guides me to see that wildness is not simply out there – it's in here, in me – I am part of it. Not above it, but part of it. Not dominant over it, but connected to it.

And finally, as the wolf gazes back at me, I am reminded of the human folly of attempting to control outcomes that cannot be controlled. Remember, Renee Askins arrived at Wolf Park planning to study the alpha female. She wound up caring for the smallest, weakest, and most vulnerable member of the pack.

In my reading for this sermon, I was struck by how deeply Renee Askins wrestles with the concept of wildlife management. She seems to make an uneasy truce between her understanding of the need for protection – particularly for a reviled species like the wolf – and her worries that human intervention – even protection – robs animals of their inherent wildness.

When the wolves were finally released from their holding pens and into the wilderness of Yellowstone Park, she wrote: *"Little could have darkened my jubilant mood that day, but one small detail penetrated my consciousness... Each wolf wore a [telemetry] collar... I feared the presence of the collars revealed something darker than the altruism we all*

professed. Under the surface of our intention was a far more dangerous impulse – the need to control what we had pretended to set free.” (Askins, 237.)

Human beings control so very little... and that seems so hard to grasp or admit sometimes.

We certainly do not control nature. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers attempts to control the path and flow of the Atchafalaya and Mississippi Rivers led to disaster in New Orleans, as we learned much to our sorrow with Hurricane Katrina.¹ Out in the western states, our devotion to preventing forest fires of any kind or size has resulted in devastating forest fires of epic proportions.

And those wolves? Well, many of the Yellowstone wolves chewed each other’s collars off. Or batteries died, severing the connection between the wolves who would be wild and the humans who would control things.

Human beings control almost nothing.

So we can let go of attachments to outcomes and expectations. Life will unfold as it will.

And so the wolf, in her wildness, gazes back.

Renee Askins says returning the wolves to Yellowstone was “*an act of giving back something that we had taken, not just from the land ... but from our souls.*” (Askins, 279.)

Her story – the wolves’ story – offers me an invitation to return to my own wildness, to take my right place among all of earth’s creatures, free of prejudice, free of the mistaken notion of controlling destiny. Free. Unfettered, collarless, and free.

Sources:

Askins, Renee, 2004. *Shadow Mountain*. Anchor Books.

Lopez, Barry Holstun. 1978. *Of Wolves and Men*. (New York: Charles Schribner’s Sons.)

¹ John McPhee’s book, *The Control of Nature*, describes the then-impending disaster with prescient accuracy.