

## Walk on the Wild Side

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I work in a sanctuary for vanishing plants at the edge of a tropical mountain wilderness, a wilderness that is itself about to vanish. We seek to put health back into plant populations and wild habitats, *into an ecosystem* threatened by the combined effect of industrial agriculture, urbanization, invasive species, unsustainable harvesting for the global medicinal industry and the great new craze, eco-tourism. We work with people locally and regionally through our “School in the Forest”: a nature based pedagogy that we have developed over two decades. We also grow our own “forest farm” to feed ourselves and have a small community that looks after land, animals and plants.

My role in these 20 minutes is to call our collective attention to the lives of wild things, the vast majority of plants, animals and fungi that form the biosphere with which more and more people have little or no contact in a direct, conscious and meaningful way. I believe this distancing to have profound implications: I believe that humanity is being re-shaped dramatically. For a good percentage of people alive today, our worldviews as well as our feelings and thoughts in our daily lives, as well as our bodies and senses and our very cells and biology have little connection with those who we share this planet with, even though our species has evolved *in conviviality* with the other beings of the wild over a million years. Clearly some of us (like the assembled group at Planet Diversity) are concerned about this and seek a re-embeddedness in the wild matrix.

**As** we debate over the next few days about the technologies that we have engineered that *now threaten to engineer us*,  
**as** we celebrate the magnificent diversity of farms and farmers,  
**as** we share our concerns about the sacrifices that are being made and enforced on virtually everything of beauty, intelligence and excellent common sense that we have discovered over these past ten thousand years,  
*sacrificed in favour of* an economic system that is failing us all *and* unleashing cataclysmic changes upon our planet,  
**as** we discuss all of this....

**let us** remember the strength of life, the power of creation, the unified action of millions of species. If anybody, it is *they* who can avert disaster, if we let them.

Our *real allies* in the difficult times ahead are the diverse and prolific spectrum of the biota.

For this we have to look them in the eyes, honour their existence and their daily work, processes that give us air, water, food, medicine, perfume, timber, honey *and* health, joy and....beauty. We have to remember how vast this greater majority is, how long they have been around, and take this as our strength as we plan our own strategies.

But what's it like to be one of the greater majority? What's it like to live in communion amongst the biota? What's it like to ally with them? How many of us here actively invite the presence of other organisms into our spheres? How many of us allow **them** to work on us? Where is the exchange? What does all this mean?

To explore this a new language might be required, because language is related to the world we inhabit, to the things around us, to the objects we relate with and therefore remember. The things we think about and communicate about reflect our concern, our inhabiting of *certain* spheres and not *others*. Language is embedded in the world and is therefore part of the matrix of life. Furthermore language, thought, worldview, concept: inform our actions.

### **I'll start the ball rolling by sharing my experience of the wild.**

Let us take a step out of here, out of this time and this space. And enter a realm that is estimated by science to be around 100 million years old, the tropical rainforest.

I hope you will excuse me if my examples and metaphors are drawn from this store. My metaphor for a good life (one that is varied, healthy, balanced and connected) comes mostly from the forest. This is where I learn many lessons, many possibilities. You see, the forest, like a city, is also a hub of sorts, also a bustling center of action, also dazzling and colorful. But it functions on entirely different principles. Let me explain.....

You see, the forest *is just there*. And you *are just there*, a mere strand in it, intertwined with a zillion others. The forest neither threatens nor promises. No one *wishes* to hurt you, so you can relax. Your defenses are activated briefly and

appropriately, when necessary. Snakes are good teachers, as are elephants and leeches. Most of the time the forest has a mild soothing effect on your system and it does things usually beyond your sway: the work of leaves, the swell of a cloud, things growing old and dying.

There is a sort of etiquette amongst all these creatures, one that you learn when you've been around them awhile. The first is the principle of awareness, which is really quite simple. Everything is aware, and everything functions as if every other thing is aware. Nobody is stupid in these parts, not even the tiniest slug. There is an acceptance that all things are equal, even if all things are not the same. You may kill, but you do not hate and you will not wantonly destroy. There are no expectations in the woods, no personal demands. You may die any moment anyway. You learn to be direct. Beating around the bush might cost you your life. You learn alertness, whence before you had an armour of fears and attitudes. You become grateful. You start to nod at grass stalks on the hill, at snails gliding upon a rock. You start to feel for things, for others, for yourself, without being sentimental.

So you start to align yourself with awareness, not with this project or that, this possession or that, this person or that, this belief or that. Life is not about projects, missions or plans. It is about relationships, awarenesses and multitudinous beings inhabiting countless worlds. The funny thing about awareness is that it brings the necessary partnerships anyway. You might find yourself in partnership with trees for instance, or with frogs and beetles. You may count upon plants as your best allies. You may tread upon dirt in full knowledge of its capacity. You may take counsel with air, or water or stone, and you may grow a garden, a forest, or better still a wilderness all together.

Maybe I can minimize your confusion at these words and bring some order to this talk. The intention was to speak about diversity within and without by taking you for a walk on the wild side, but I got sidetracked by a faint whiff of the wild outback regions of our individual and collective human Mind. For it is in this shadow zone between wildness and intellect, between heart and head, between personal and impersonal, between the marvelous human body with its own sensuousness and the surrounding world that some vestige of hope remains: for the rivers, for the forests, for ourselves.

I believe this to be our common inheritance, our common wisdom. Sages and shamans of the wild, the world over, have articulated this many times over. They urge you to enter the forests, the mountains, the deserts to learn the fundamental

connections that underpin our lives, *anew*. They urge you to walk into the wilderness. Now at the dawn of this millenium it may be even more necessary to take these steps, so we can witness at first hand a few simple things:

*Like how:* our minds have a profound connection with the wild, how they are, in a way, summoned out of the wild. Although now tenuous and disturbingly endangered, this Wild Mind, (which is unconfined and yet powerfully rooted) still walks the twilight zone of our awareness like the great cats of our forests.

Let me say it in a different way: as the trace of a tiger in a wild mountain upland connects me to a single, specific tiger and it's unique existence, as well as to all tigers that have ever lived and are still to live, my own life, so immediate and so close to hand rustles richly with the lives of other people, other stories, other minds, other understandings. Other beings, of the mountains and the woods. Other entities, like water and stone and wind and earth and sky and star.

This is a fundamental truth of the living world, of the biosphere: all things are connected and therefore all is one.

When I look at the crux of our concern and of our educational work at the plant sanctuary, I realize it is essentially about two things:

one: unfolding the beauty in creation and allowing that to act in the life of a person

two: recognizing that material security and ecological security go together, and that to seek the first without the second is a sure road to collective doom.

The thousands of people who walk in to our plant sanctuary to experience the diversity of forest life are themselves diverse. Adivasis (tribal people), urban children, college students from small towns, farmers, botanists and naturalists, womens' self-help groups, families on an outing: each group or individual enters the wild world differently, each person can be seen as a warm bundle of energies, each the fruit of *their* particular landscapes, each one a complex responsive creature, a sensing being. And one of the most profound learnings for me has been that this variety of minds, bodies, worldviews, skills, creativities, thoughts and questions, stands itself in danger of disappearing, of being flattened in the same way as our landscapes are being flattened.

But there are other more complex issues. We began with the intention to expose individuals and small groups to the forest in order to bring about a greater environmental awareness. We found ourselves instead observing the various ways and the various degrees to which alienation occurs and how this manifests in many many things ranging from ill-health, fear, environmental degradation, obsessive consumerism, to a complete disregard for other life forms, including other human beings and finally oneself. And whether, tribal, rural or urban: everyone is on the road of alienation: a global disease spreading like a forest fire, emerging in all kinds of ways in different communities. So on the one hand we are working on the conservation of highly endangered plant species and on the other we are completely concerned about human beings.

You can study alienation in different ways. One of the things I observe closely in kids who come is the things they talk about. Small talk is a great indicator of what you are concerned about and where you are from, the landscape you inhabit. I believe that our fields of awareness are reflected in our language. The things we urban folk talk to each other about and share are almost completely mass media driven (sports personalities, gadgets, games etc) but rarely about the oak tree or the squirrel that lives in it. Talking about natural history is the domain of specialist science or of “primitive people”. It is not everybody’s business, like it was once and not so long ago. The knowledge base for all members of our species was significantly composed of the lives and habits and places of other living things.

So what do we all chat about when we get together? And what does this signify?

It seems, our experiences as children, and the worlds we inhabit in our infancy and youth shape the ways our brains register and process things. These experiences strengthen or weaken our various intelligences (verbal, musical, body kinesthetic, spatial, social, emotional etc) in different ways. Experience is connected to learning and then to memory. This then shapes language, commonplace speech. This shapes worldviews in turn shaping communities in turn shaping action. The whole thing is a big loop because this shapes further experience. So education, the place of nature in our early development, the nature of our community itself, the people we come into contact with, the access to technology: all of these influence the things we attend to, value, cherish.

In the same way that we are what we eat: so we are what we take in- of the world and how we take it in. And reciprocally the world then becomes what we give to it and how we give to it.

We have to ask the dual question: How does nature shape you? How does technology shape you? What kind of thoughts arise, what kind of feelings, what imagination, what music, what culture? What possibility?

What does a Black Forest kid need physically and emotionally in order to get by in a day? What does a tropical rainforest kid need? What does an Eskimo kid need? What kind of fears do all these children have, what brings them joy?

In the great homogenization of human societies, through colonialization, neo-imperialism, mass education, massmedia, urbanization, globalization, the internet, ipods, mobile phones and now GMOs we have to ask the question..... what kind of a human being is being formed? What are we losing in this great thrust forward and what are we gaining? What's in the small print for every new contract we sign for a new technology? And how do we remedy the damage done?

I'd like to go back to the theme of awareness: because it is the nodal point of my talk on diversity. One of the things you learn when you work with living things is the degree to which awareness is not held by one or another *only*, it is as if there is a collective field of awareness and that organisms function in awareness of other forms. Human beings who have grown up in natural areas also have this high degree of alertness but they are also becoming a rare species.

I would say this awareness, this mutual recognition of each other as living entities is part of the pact of life: an exquisite attunement of one organism to the life of another.

How many of us have eye to eye contact with another species? Our amazing eyes that have evolved in connection with the life and movement of other creatures are now regulated by the vibrations on a computer screen. Once used to scanning the far horizon we now look at the glaring lights on advertisement hoardings. Once swift and precise now blurred by words and videos. Once reflected in the eyes of monkeys, tigers, snakes and even plants we now are reflected only in each other's eyes. This part of human evolution is something we are proud of. It is our glory we believe.

So what about the true miracle of creation: the human body, the human mind, human sensibilities, the delightful diversity and unity of ourselves?

Not only are our wildernesses in danger but also our eyes, our ears, our noses, our sensitive skins, our expansive lungs, our wiry and supple strengths; our myriad earth knowledges; our exquisite handcrafts and skills - the profoundly embodied intelligence which gives rise to an awakesness and a beauty that is uniquely ours, our own vital living energy....this humanness that is closest to us, that *is us: is this* not in peril, like the rainforests, the coral reefs and the fresh mountain water?

Our species in my opinion has broken the pact with creation, not so much by conscious choice but rather by falling too much in love with itself, its own richness and beauty, its astonishing powers. With artifacts of its own making. With technology.

And this has become an obsession with itself to the degree that it shuts out the rest of creation, and then still further it divides and splinters within itself. And then by turning so sharply inwards, harm and havoc are inflicted upon the earth, upon all.

We have accepted, eagerly and uncritically, a life engineered almost entirely by human technologies and techniques that disorients us, makes us narrow in our minds, bodies and hearts. As our landscapes get brutalized, so do our own sensibilities and multiple intelligences. We lose perspective and become incapable of assessing the limitations and dangers of our inventions. Rich or poor, we become estranged from our own humanness, a quality grown not only in relationship with other people but also, in reciprocity with the rich and textured living earth.

Urban India is completely divorced from the enveloping countryside on which it is totally reliant. The city shuts out everything organic, including the healthy functioning of our bodies and senses, shuts out the awareness of our dependence on air and water. Middle-class and slum dwellers alike have little interaction with other life forms. I believe this estrangement from nature plays a role in the widely deteriorating conditions of emotional and physical health, which in turn relate to issues of selfhood, belonging, relationship, livelihood and community. The surge towards modern and urban lifestyles is not just evident in profoundly changed expectations and patterns of material welfare, but also in the transformation of ways in which individuals define well-being itself. Material prosperity cannot but be derived from exploitation of resources.

I must add that communities that live in more natural settings are not always caring of the environment. More and more, the lure of technology and the promised benefits of modernization override old ways. More and more the youth get pulled away by the promise of the city.

Of course, in most rural communities alienation is enforced, rendering individuals powerless to cope with the changes inflicted upon them. Once alienated, their world is broken. They cannot return, nor do they have the intellectual or psychological strength to deal with their new realities. Desensitization, at first a sheer survival necessity, a coping mechanism, becomes entrenched and leads to ugly new problems.

Different communities need different ways of deepening their relationship with the earth and with each other. Urban folks need to be brought to their senses literally, taken out of their virtual realities, into the oxygenating interior of the forests. Not through gross consumerist tourist ventures which violate wild spaces, but through an elegant and quiet re-engagement where the wild enters *you* as it were.

Rural people can grow a more conscious relationship with the land; different ways by which they value and cherish what they have before it is too late. An empowerment that comes from recognizing the immense richness of what one has: rather than to desire what one doesn't need.

We need to make the link with the wild more explicit, to grow a new alliance with our landscapes. We need to live in meaningful relationship with the other sentient beings of our world, in order to truly flourish. The health, balance and well-being of each person are inseparable from the health and well-being of the encompassing earthly terrain. It is still possible to enter the domain of the wild, not so much by entirely renouncing technology, but by opening consciously into the wild expanse and by allowing ourselves to participate intelligently in it. In this era of globalization, with our visions of a common and unitary world, we need to root ourselves in local relationships, or else we will be carried away by abstract ideals that will prove themselves to be horribly delusory with time.

To end with I'd like to spin us out of this room again.

While we have been sitting here, in this last hour, our planet has traveled over a hundred thousand kilometers through space. There are forces at work in the universe, in nature, in life that we are barely able to comprehend. Yet, what we can do is to trust that they work, if we let them...just as they worked for billions of years before we came along and assumed ownership of the planet. This doesn't mean doing nothing...it means understanding our place...not as lords and masters, but as guardians and members of Life's community. It may also be that it is too late. It may be that all the work done by all of us here is ultimately doomed to be swept away by the tide of human progress, by the consequence of hubris, by monsters of our own making. But even if we could see into the future and have proof of the hopelessness of it all every person in this room would still continue with her or his work.

*Why? Because it's the right thing to do.*