

LEARNING TO DIE

Learning to Die

WISDOM IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CRISIS

Robert Bringham & Jan Zwicky



University of Regina Press

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· PART ONE ·

The Mind of the Wild

I

ONE OF MARK TWAIN'S amusements in the latter part of his life was writing an almanac called *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*. Twain never completed the project and probably never meant to complete it, but he did recycle parts of it into a wacky Shakespearean comedy that is faintly disguised as a novel. Among the surviving bits is an entry for October 12th. This commemorates the day in 1492 when Christopher Columbus made landfall in the Bahamas, still apparently believing he had brought his ship to India. Pudd'nhead Wilson's nugget of wisdom for this day is,

“It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it.”

Twain would scoff at the suggestion that we take seriously anything he ever wrote. This is fair enough, but I feel no obligation to take his scoffing very seriously either. Meditating on how good it might have been for European sailors *not* to discover America is one way of stepping a little outside ourselves and starting to learn to see things with precolonial eyes, and with nonhuman eyes – or as David Abram would say, with more-than-human eyes. It’s a way of trying to learn to think like an ecosystem instead of like a disconnected visitor – a predatory tourist, say, or a lost sailor hoping to get rich quick and find his way back home.

The people who lived in North America before the arrival of Europeans were not wild humans, but they knew a great deal about the wild because they lived in intimate contact with it all their lives. We have mountains of hard evidence that they studied it and respected it, and that it served as the foundation for their educational practices. Their stories, which survive in over a hundred Native North American languages, tell us over and over again that they didn’t aspire to run the world or tame it. Their stories tell us they understood that the land has a mind of its own, that the wild is in control of

itself and has room within it for humans but does not need and cannot tolerate human domination.

Most of the traders, explorers, and colonists who came to the Americas in the sixteenth century and later carried a book with them that says, in the first chapter,

וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצִלְמוֹ,
 בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ:
 זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.
 וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם, אֱלֹהִים,
 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים,
 פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ,
 וּכְבִּשְׁתֶּהּ;
 וַיְרֹדוּ בְּדִגַּת הַיָּם, וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם,
 וּבְכָל-חַיָּה, הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

Vayibhrâ ʿelohîm ʿet-haʿadam bhetzalmô,
 bhetzelem ʿelohîm bharâ ʿotô:
 zakar unqebhah, bharâ ʿotam.
 Vaybhârekh ʿotam, ʿelohîm,
 vayomer lahem ʿelohîm,
 pherû urbhû umil'û ʿat-haʿaretz,
 vekhibheshuha;
 urdû bhidagat hayam, ubhi'oph hashamaym,
 ubhekhhol-hayâh haromeset ʿal haʿaretz.

*God created man in his own image,
 in the image of God created he him;
 male and female created he them.
 And God blessed them,
 and God said unto them,
 Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,
 and subdue it:
 and have dominion over the fish of the sea,
 and over the fowl of the air,
 and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.*

The Hebrew text of the Book of Genesis has suffered a lot of editorial meddling – like many important Native American texts – but the character of the underlying material is clear. The stories are full of foreboding. The narrators know they are dealing with hubris, not with beatitude. And in spite of, or because of, that foreboding, the Hebrew text is laughing to itself, weaving a cat's cradle of puns, reversals, and half-rhymes that ring like soft alarm bells. Not everyone who reads the text in Hebrew hears that laughter or that irony – hubris is a widespread disease, and piety and hubris are a toxic combination – but in translation, no one hears the laughter. As soon as the text is translated, the laughter disappears. Few of the people who carried that book in their hands

or in their baggage as they sailed to the New World were reading it in Hebrew, and few had any training, either as storytellers themselves, or as literary critics. They took the humourless translations at face value, as if that other god, in another place and time, in another language, had been talking directly, and without a trace of irony, to them. As if the story didn't unfold. As if they hadn't read the book.

There are differences, to be sure, between pastoral and agricultural mythologies on the one hand and hunter-gatherer mythologies on the other, but the general emphasis in either case can fall, and usually does fall, on gratitude and respect toward the natural world. Every storytelling tradition knows the unwisdom of unlimited demands.

Gods belong to places. So do kings, queens and prime ministers. So do stories, without which there would be no kings or queens, and no prime ministers either. Books belong to places too. These things are difficult to carry across the ocean, but many immigrants try. If the European colonists and traders had come here by meandering over a land bridge, or by paddling, over several generations, along a chain of islands, then their stories, dreams, and songs would have shifted step by step and had ample time to change. Instead, they came in fast

little ships: carracks, caravels, and galleons. Like people who fly in airplanes today, they travelled too fast ever to get where they were going. So they stepped ashore and walked right by the wild. When they noticed it at all, they routinely misconstrued it as a barrier and a challenge.

The wild is everything that grows and breeds and functions without supervision or imposed control. It is what lives in the long term without being managed. Oceans and rivers and forests and grasslands are naturally wild, while orchards, gardens, trout ponds, salmon farms, and berry farms are tame. The British Columbia government, when it reclassifies forests as tree farms, is turning its back on the wild, declaring that the timber should be under human management, though the forests have been here much longer than we have and know very well how to manage themselves. We can join in the life of the forest, and live within its means, but not by turning it into a farm. Joining in is not the same as seizing control. The wild is not a portfolio of resources for us or our species to buy and sell or manage or squander as we please. The wild is earth living its life to the full. The earth's life is much larger than our own lives, but our lives are part of it. If we take that life, we take our own.

The wild is here inside us too – and it is there, writ small, inside the orchard and the garden and the

berry farm, as every gardener knows. Our feelings and thoughts can be grafted and hybridized, like apple trees and roses, and they can be tamed, like horses and dogs, but if given the chance, they tend to grow more intricate, more localized, more deeply entwined with everything else in the watershed: more wild. The only people who have ever really discovered America are those who have seen how profoundly complete and self-sufficient, how intricate and beautiful it is – how little it can benefit and greatly it can suffer from human interference. Most of those discoverers – maybe all of them – have been born here. And the mark of their discovery is indeed a kind of sudden wealth: they've been struck dumb by what they've seen.

We never know the wild completely, because the wild is sufficient to itself – self-directed, self-sustaining, self-repairing, with no need for anything from us. Yet because we are a part of it – and cannot, even in death, be disconnected from it completely – we always know a little bit about it, however tame or urbanized we are. The little we know is not nearly enough to recreate it if it goes – but in a sense that does not matter. When it goes, we will not be here to try.

Plants and animals are wild unless they've been tamed – but taming works both ways. When a fungus

tames an alga to make a lichen, the fungus as well as the alga is tamed. And when humans tame horses and dogs, grasses and brassicas, or other human beings, humans make themselves more tame. That is to say, more distant from the wild, more dependent on contrivance, and more hidebound by the powers they've acquired.

Electronic and mechanical contraptions are not and have never been wild – nor will they, so far as we know, ever become so. Tame humans, with or without machines in their hands, can and sometimes do go crazy, and often we describe that craziness by saying they've gone wild, but the analogy is false. The wild is neither mechanical nor crazy; it is deeply and thoroughly sane.

One proof of this is that it works so well, and in so many different ways. Another is that it has worked so well so long, adapted so widely and often, and bounced back again and again from so many disasters. The wild is various and rich, yet 98% of documented species are extinct, and our documentation cannot be complete. The real figure has to be 99% or more. So the wild is not only rich and complex but at the same time economical and lean. If *Homo sapiens* followed this model, there would be fewer than a billion of us now, instead of seven billion and counting.

We've existed as a species for maybe 200,000 years:

hardly a breath in geological terms. For the first 95% of that time, it's likely that the human population never rose above a million, and unlikely that we did more damage than other species to the fabric of the world. Between 12,000 and 8,000 years ago, as agriculture increased along the Nile, the Tigris, the Euphrates, and throughout Southwestern Asia, the global population of humans probably rose to around ten million. By 2,000 years ago, agriculture was highly developed in Europe, the Americas, Africa, China, and India, and our global population may have been 200 million. It was maybe half a billion in 1492, a billion in 1800, two billion in 1925. It was probably still sustainable, with a relatively peaceful but advanced agricultural society, at two and a half billion, where it was in 1950, but by then its growth was rapid. It is rising now at the rate of a billion per decade.¹ For every living human we now also build at least a hundred machines – and soon discard them again, though they compost very poorly. And this feverish building and trashing is expensive. Roughly fifty years ago, we as a species started using the planet's accumulated resources faster than they are replenished. And we use more of them every day.

The wild routinely produces much more than it needs. It generates surplus. That is part of its beauty, its grace. If you apprentice yourself to the wild, learn to

think in its terms, and work with it, you can also increase its production. But does anybody honestly suppose that nature can be tricked into giving more and yet more every year, without end? Why does every nation on the earth base its economic plan on that preposterous assumption? By 2008, humans were using the earth's resources half again as fast as they accrue. Within a decade, at this rate, we'll be taking twice as much as the planet can spare.² The schemes for voluntary restraint have gone exactly nowhere. Individuals and kin groups often cooperate, but tribes, ethnicities, nations, corporations, and conglomerates also vie with one another for what there is. It is apparently their nature to take a partial view. Within limits, the wild tolerates such behaviour. But the wild itself is impartial. It does not have to be wiler than the tribes, more determined than the nations, or brainier than the corporations. It just has to take a larger view, and that is what it does, by being what it is. A billion more people per decade, each with machinery in tow, is more than the wild will bear.

II

An old Chinese term for nature or the wild is *zìrán* (自然), which means “just like itself” or “that’s the way

it is.” There is a passage in the *Dào Dé Jīng*, the classic of Lǎo Zǐ, that says, *rén fǎ dì, dì fǎ tiān, tiān fǎ dào, dào fǎ zìrán* (人法地、地法天、天法道、道法自然): “Humans align themselves with the earth; earth aligns itself with the sky; the sky aligns itself with the Tao, the Tao aligns itself with nature” – or “the Tao aligns itself with the wild,” or “the Tao aligns itself with being what it is.”

We have a newer word that is essentially the opposite of *zìrán*: a word that, in effect, means “no longer like itself.” That word is *Anthropocene*. It was coined in the late twentieth century and has now been in wide use for over a decade. It is meant, like Pleistocene and Holocene, to serve as the name of an epoch in the Cenozoic era of the geological calendar, and it implies that we have recently entered a phase – one that began with the Industrial Revolution – in which humans are the dominating force. The Anthropocene, according to those who use the word, is an episode of geologic time during which the wild is subverted by the tame. But this again is hubris. The concerted human attempt to take control of the biosphere isn’t the dawn of a human-dominated geological epoch; it’s a geological *event*: a momentary though possibly momentous blip in the earth’s biography.

There have been several such events in the life of the planet. One occurred at the boundary between the

Paleozoic and Mesozoic eras, about 250 million years ago. In that cataclysm, paleontologists say, more than 80% of all existing genera and species were extinguished. Another such event occurred at the boundary between the Mesozoic and Cenozoic eras, about 65 million years ago, wiping out perhaps three quarters of all existing plant and animal species, including all the dinosaurs.

Depending where you set the bar – at 50% or 30% extinction – there have been at least five, or at least nine, such planetary holocausts or global mass extinctions, in the last 600 million years. At least one of them – perhaps the earliest mass extinction in the geologic record – was caused by an earthly species, or a consortium of species, running amok. Photosynthesis – the conversion of light into storable chemical energy – has been going on for three and a half billion years, possibly more, but it used to be done in a way that required no water and yielded no oxygen. Around three billion years ago, some ingenious and highly adaptable little creatures called cyanobacteria developed a new form of photosynthesis that does require water and does yield oxygen as a byproduct. This trick was extremely successful – that's why it is still in use – but its success came at a price.

For perhaps two billion years, the earth and the oceans were able to absorb all the oxygen produced by

cyanobacteria and their descendants. A lot of the red and black Precambrian rocks in the earth's mantle are full of iron oxide from those days. The oxygen was swallowed by the rock. But when the oxygen sinks were full, the photosynthetic organisms kept right on breeding and diversifying and dumping waste oxygen into their surroundings. They kept right on changing the air that, in those days, nobody breathed. The oxygen level spiked about 540 million years ago, and earth since then has been a different place than it ever was before.

Most creatures living on earth in the early days were anaerobic. They didn't need oxygen, and most of them couldn't tolerate it. By altering the atmosphere, cyanobacteria killed the anaerobic creatures off – and inadvertently produced the kind of environment required by most creatures living on earth today. We and all our fellow mammals – and the fishes of the sea, birds of the air, amphibians of the margin, and lilies of the field – are the later beneficiaries of that catastrophe. Millions of anaerobic species died, and we evolved and took their place.

That's one clear precedent for what's happening here and now. Nevertheless, the mass extinction we have recently put in train, by overbreeding, overbuilding, overexploiting, overhunting, overfishing, and by relentlessly overconsuming fossil fuel, can claim to be unique. It will

not be the first entirely homemade mass extinction in the history of the earth, but it will almost certainly be the first one provoked by a single species.

If some fraction of the biosphere survives this impending event – as in all such previous calamities – it will again be the wild, not the tame, that is responsible for the healing. The wild will rescue life on earth, if anything does, because nothing else can. It won't be us who do the rescuing and healing, even if some of us are still here, eating rat meat and earwigs, and waking in our cold beds with fits and starts of joy merely to find ourselves alive.

What if? What if we as a species are extraordinarily lucky, and some of our descendants do survive? Would that be bad news for the planet? Are we a jinxed species, doomed to recreate another global ecological disaster if our lineage continues? Are we genetically toxic to the wild? I do not know. But I do know that the dominant human culture is increasingly toxic to the wild. And I know this has not always been the case. Cultures change. And ours will soon be changing big-time.

If there are any human survivors of the next mass extinction, their cultural slate will be wiped pretty clean. No one may have heard of Shakespeare or Bach, Picasso or Plato. No one may get the joke if a survivor digs up a fragment of a book and, as he rips it up for fuel, sees there

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