Toward an Ecological Conversation

Stephen L. Talbott

The chickadee was oblivious to its surroundings and seemed almost machine-like, if enfeebled, in its single-minded concentration: take a seed, deliver a few futile pecks, then drop it; take a seed, peck-peck-peck, drop it; take a seed .... The little bird, with its unsightly, disheveled feathers, almost never managed to break open the shell before losing its talons' clumsy grip on the seed. I walked up to its feeder perch from behind and gently tweaked its tail feathers. It didn't notice.

My gesture was, I suppose, an insult, although I felt only pity for this creature—pity for the hopeless obsession driving it in its weakened state. There were several sick chickadees at my feeder that winter a few years ago, and I began to learn why some people view feeding stations themselves as an insult to nature. A feeder draws a dense, "unnatural" population of birds to a small area. This not only encourages the spread of disease, but also evokes behavioral patterns one might never see in a less artificial habitat.

And if feeders are problematic, what was I to think of my own habit of sitting outside for long periods and feeding birds from my hands? Especially during the coldest winter weather and heavy snowfalls, I sometimes found myself mobbed by a contentious crowd, which at different times included not only chickadees but also titmice, red- and white-breasted nuthatches, hairy woodpeckers, goldfinches, juncos, blue jays, cardinals, various sparrows, and a red-bellied woodpecker. To my great delight, several of the less wary species would perch on shoulders, shoes, knees, and hat, as well as hands.

But by what right do I encourage tameness in creatures of the wild? The classic issue here has to do with how we should assess our impacts upon nature. Two views, if we drive them to schematic extremes for purposes of argument, conveniently frame the debate:

On one side, with an eye to the devastation of ecosystems worldwide, we can simply try to rid nature of all human influence. The sole ideal is pristine, untouched wilderness. The human being, viewed as a kind of disease organism within the biosphere, should be quarantined as far as possible. Call this "radical preservationism."

On the other side, impressed by our society's growing technical sophistication, we can urge the virtues of scientific management to counter the various ongoing threats to nature. Higher-yielding, genetically engineered vegetables, fruits, grains, livestock, fish, and trees—intensively monocropped and cultivated with industrial precision—can, we're told, supply human needs on reduced acreages, with less environmental impact. Cloning technologies may save endangered species or even bring back extinct ones. Clever chemical experimentation upon the atmosphere could change the dynamic of global warming or ozone depletion.

Managerial strategies more appealing to many environmentalists include re-introduction of locally extinct species, collaring of wild animals for tracking and study,

controlled predation by humans, and widespread use of bird nesting boxes—practices that have aided in the recovery of some threatened species, even if their lives now must follow altered patterns.

The problem with scientific management, founded as it is on the hope of successful prediction and control, is that complex natural systems have proven notoriously unpredictable and uncontrollable. Ecologists, writes Jack Turner in *The Abstract Wild*, keep "hanging on to the hope of better computer models and more information." But their hope is forlorn:

> The "preservation as management" tradition that began with [Aldo] Leopold is finished because there is little reason to trust the experts to make intelligent long-range decisions about nature .... If an ecosystem can't be known or controlled with scientific data, then why don't we simply can all the talk of ecosystem health and integrity and admit, honestly, that it's just public policy, not science?

"The limits of our knowledge," he adds, "should define the limits of our practice." We should refuse to mess with wilderness for the same reason we should refuse, beyond certain limits, to mess with the atom or the structure of DNA. "*We are not that wise, nor can we be*" (Turner 1996, pp. 122-24).

Turner's critique of the ideal of scientific management is not unlike my own. But, as is usually the case with pitched battles between opposing camps, the real solution to the dispute between radical preservationists and scientific managers requires us to escape the assumptions common to both. Why, after all, does Turner agree with his opponents that acceptable "messing" with ecosystems would have to be grounded in successful prediction and control?

Once we make this assumption, of course, we are likely either to embrace such calculated control as a natural extension of our technical reach, or else reject it as impossible. And yet, when I sit with the chickadees, messing with their habitat, it does not feel like an exercise in prediction and control. My aim is to get to know the birds, and to understand them. Maybe this makes a difference.

It is certainly true, in one sense or another, that "the limits of our knowledge should define the limits of our practice." But we need to define the sense carefully. By what practice can we extend our knowledge, if we may never act without already possessing perfect knowledge?

Our inescapable ignorance mandates great caution—a fact our society has been reluctant to accept. Yet we cannot make any principle of caution absolute. The physician who construes the precept, "First, do no harm," as an unambiguous and definitive rule can no longer act at all, because only perfect prediction and control could guarantee the absence of harm. Those of us who urge precaution must not bow before the technological idols we are trying to smash. We can never perfectly know the consequences of our actions because we are *not* dealing with machines. We are called to live between knowledge and ignorance, and it is as dangerous to make ignorance the excuse for radical inaction as it is to found action upon the boast of perfect knowledge.

There is an alternative to the ideal of prediction and control. It helps, in approaching it, to recognize the common ground beneath scientific managers and those who see all human "intrusion" as pernicious. Both camps regard nature as a world in which the

human being cannot meaningfully participate. To the advocate of pristine wilderness untouched by human hands, nature presents itself as an inviolable and largely unknowable Other; to the would-be manager, nature is a collection of objects so disensouled and unrelated to us that we can take them as a mere challenge for our technological inventiveness. Both stances deprive us of any profound *engagement* with the world that nurtured us.

My own hope for the future lies in a third way. Perhaps we have missed this hope because it is too close to us. Each of us participates in at least one domain where we grant the autonomy and infinite worth of the Other while also acting boldly to affect and sometimes even rearrange the welfare of the Other. I mean the domain of human relations.

We do not view the sovereign individuality and inscrutability of our fellows as a reason to do nothing that affects them. But neither do we view them as mere objects for a technology of control.

How *do* we deal with them? We engage them in conversation.

We Converse to Become Ourselves

I would like to think that what all of us, preservationists and managers alike, are really trying to understand is how to conduct an ecological conversation. We cannot predict or control the exact course of a conversation, nor do we feel any such need—not, at least, if we are looking for a *good* conversation. Revelations and surprises lend our exchanges much of their savor. We don't want predictability; we want respect, meaning, and coherence. A satisfying conversation is neither rigidly programmed nor chaotic; somewhere between perfect order and total surprise we look for a creative tension, a progressive and mutual deepening of insight, a sense that we are getting somewhere worthwhile.

The movement is essential. This is why we find no conclusive resting place in Aldo Leopold's famous dictum. “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (1970, p. 262).

Integrity and beauty, yes. But in what sense stability? Nature, like us, exists—preserves its integrity—only through continual self-transformation. Mere preservation would freeze all existence in an unnatural stasis, denying the creative destruction, the urge toward self-transcendence, at the world's heart. Scientific management, on the other hand, reduces evolutionary change to arbitrariness by failing to respect the independent character of the Other, through which all integral change arises.

Turner, applying Leopold's rule to the past, is driven to suggest that “the last ten thousand years of history is simply evil” (1996, p. 35). He is, in context, defending the importance of moral judgment and passion. By all means, let us have moral indignation where it is due—and, heaven knows, plenty of it *is* due. But a ten thousand-year history was *simply* evil? This is what happens when you make absolute a principle of stability and leave conversation and change out of the picture.

The antidote to Turner's stance here (a stance he himself continually rises above) is to consider what it might mean to engage nature in respectful conversation. One can venture a few reasonably straightforward observations.

In any conversation it is, in the first place, perfectly natural to remedy one's ignorance by putting *cautious* questions to the Other. Every experimental gardening technique, every new industrial process, every different kind of bird feeder is a question put to nature. And, precisely because of the ignorance we are trying to remedy, there is always the possibility that the question itself will prove indelicate or otherwise an occasion for trouble. (My bird feeder was the wrong kind, conducive to the spread of disease. And you can quite reasonably argue that I should have investigated the issues and risks more thoroughly before installing my first feeder.)

In a respectful conversation such lapses are continually being committed and assimilated, becoming the foundation for a deeper, because more knowledgeable, respect. The very fact that we recognize ourselves as putting questions to nature rather than asserting brash control encourages us to anticipate the possible responses of the Other before we act, and to be considerate of the actual response, adjusting ourselves to it, when it comes.

This already touches on a second point: in a conversation we are always compensating for past inadequacies. As every student of language knows, a later word can modify the meaning of earlier words. The past can in this sense be altered and redeemed. We all know the bitter experience of words blurted out unwisely and irretrievably, but we also know the healing effects of confession and penance.

This in turn points us to a crucial third truth. At any given stage of a conversation, there is never a single right or wrong response. We can legitimately take a conversation in any number of healthy directions, each with different shades of meaning and significance.

Moreover, coming up with my response is not a matter of choosing among a range of alternatives already there, already defined by the current state of the exchange. My responsibility is creative; what alternatives exist depends in part on what new alternatives I can bring into being. Gandhi engendered possibilities for nonviolent resistance that were not widely known before his time, and the developers of solar panels gave us new ways to heat our homes. If we have any “fixed” obligation, it is the obligation not to remain fixed but freely to transcend ourselves.

All conversation, then, is inventive, continually escaping its previous bounds. Unfortunately, our modern consciousness wants to hypostatize nature—to grasp clearly and unambiguously what this “thing” is so that we can preserve it. But the notorious difficulties in defining what nature is—what we need to preserve—are no accident. There is no such thing as a nature wholly independent of our various acts to preserve (or destroy) it. You cannot define any ecological context over against one of its creatures—least of all over against the human being. If it is true that the creature becomes what it is only by virtue of the context, it is also true that the context becomes what it is only by virtue of the creature.

This can be a hard truth for environmental activists to accept, campaigning as we usually are to save “it,” whatever “it” may be. In conversational terms, the Other does not exist independently of the conversation. We cannot seek to preserve “it,” because there is

no "it" there; we can only seek to preserve the integrity and coherence of the conversation through which both it and we are continually transforming ourselves. Hypostatization is always an insult because it removes the Other from the conversation, making an object of it and denying the living, shape-changing, conversing power within it.

Finally, conversation is always particularizing. I cannot converse with an abstraction or stereotype—a "democrat" or "republican," an "industrialist" or an "activist," or, for that matter, a "preservationist" or a "scientific manager." I can converse only with a specific individual, who puts his own falsifying twist upon every label I apply. Likewise, I cannot converse with a "wetland" or "threatened species." I may indeed *think about* such abstractions, but this thinking is not a conversation, just as my discoursing upon children is not a conversation with my son.

Permission and Responsibility

How, then, shall we act? There will be many rules of thumb, useful in different circumstances. But I'm convinced that, under pressure of intense application, they will all converge upon the most frightful, because most exalted, principle of all. It's a principle voiced, albeit with more than a little trepidation, by my colleague at The Nature Institute, Craig Holdrege:

> You can do anything as long as you take responsibility for it. (2001)

Frightful? Yes. The first thing to strike most hearers will be that impossibly permissive *anything*. What environmentalist would dare speak these words at a convention of American industrialists?

But hold on a minute. How could this principle sound so irresponsibly permissive when its whole point is to frame permission in terms of responsibility? Apparently, the idea of responsibility doesn't carry that much gravity for us—and isn't this precisely because we are less accustomed to think of nature in the context of responsible conversation than of technological manipulation? Must we yield in this to the mindset of the managers?

If we do take our responsibility seriously, then we have to live with it. It means that a great deal depends on us—which also means that a great power of abuse rests on us. Holdrege's formulation gives us exactly what any sound principle must give us: the possibility of a catastrophic misreading in either of two opposite directions. We can accept the permission without the responsibility, or we can view the responsibility as denying us the permission. Both misreadings pronounce disaster. The only way to get at any balanced rule of behavior, any principle of organic wholeness, is to enter into conversation with it, preventing its diverse movements from running off in opposite directions, but allowing them to weave their dynamic and tensive unity through our own flexible thinking.

"You can do anything if you take responsibility for it." An ill-intentioned one-sidedness can certainly make of this a mere permission without responsibility. But, then, too, as we have seen, taking on the burden of responsibility without the permission

(”First, do no harm—never, under any circumstance; do not even risk it”) renders us catatonic.

Permission and responsibility must be allowed to play into each other. When we deny permission by being too assiduous in erecting barriers against irresponsibility, we are also erecting barriers against the exercise of responsibility. The first sin of the ecological thinker is to forget that there are no rigid opposites. There is no growth without decay, and no decay without growth. So, too, there is no opportunity for responsible behavior without the risk of irresponsible behavior.

“But doesn't all this leave us dangerously rudderless, drifting on relativistic seas? Surely we need more than a general appeal to responsibility! How can we responsibly direct ourselves without an understanding of the world and without the guidelines provided by such an understanding?”

Yes, understanding is the key. We need the guidelines it can bring. But these must never be allowed to freeze our conversation. This is evident enough in all human intercourse. However profound my understanding of the other person, I must remain open to the possibilities of his (and my) further development—possibilities that our very conversation may serve. This doesn't, in healthy experience, produce disorientation or vertigo, a fact that testifies to a principle of dynamic (not static) integrity, an organic unity, at the foundation of our lives.

Such a principle, above all else, is what we must seek as we try to understand the world around us. The Nature Institute where I work sits amid the pastures of a biodynamic farm. The cows in these pastures have not been de-horned—a point of principle among biodynamic farmers. Recently I asked Holdrege whether he thought one could responsibly de-horn cows, a nearly universal practice in American agriculture.

“How does de-horning look from the cow's perspective? That's the first thing you have to ask,” he replied. When you observe the ruminants, he went on, you see that they all lack upper incisors, and they all possess horns or antlers, a four-chambered stomach, and cloven hooves.

> If you look carefully at the animals, you begin to sense the significance of these linked elements even before you fully understand the relation between them. They seem to imply each other. Do you understand the nature of the implication? So here already an obligation presses upon you if you want to de-horn cattle: you must investigate how the horns relate to the entire organism.

Given his own observations of the cow (Holdrege 1997) and given his discussions with farmers who have noted the different behavior of cows with and without horns—and given also the lack of any compelling reason for de-horning when the cows are raised in a healthy manner—Holdrege's own conclusion is: “Unusual situations aside, I don't see how we can responsibly de-horn cows.”

Strange as this stance may seem outside a respectful, conversational context, it is a conclusion that remains natural to us at some half-submerged level of understanding. What artist would represent cattle without horns? (Picture the famous Wall Street bull, de-horned!) The horns, we dimly sense, “belong” to these animals.

What the ecological conversation requires of us is to raise this dim sense, as best we can, to clear understanding. The question of what *belongs* to an animal or a plant or a

habitat is precisely the question of wholeness and integrity. It is a question foreign and inaccessible to conventional thinking simply because we long ago quit asking it. We had to have quit asking it when we began feeding animal remains to herbivores such as cows, and when we began raising chickens, with their beaks cut off, in telephone book-sized spaces.

Most dramatically, we had to have quit asking it by the time genetic engineers, borrowing from the philosophy of the assembly line, began treating organisms as arbitrary collections of interchangeable mechanisms. There is no conversing with a random assemblage of parts. So it is hardly surprising, even if morally debilitating, that the engineer is not required to live alongside the organisms whose destiny he casually scrambles. He is engaged, not in a conversation, but a mad, free-associating soliloquy.

Approaching Mystery

Our refusal of the ecological conversation arises on two sides. We can, in the first place, abandon the conversation on the assumption that whatever speaks through the Other is wholly mysterious and beyond our ken. This all too easily becomes a positive embrace of ignorance.

I do not see how anyone can look with genuine openness at the surrounding world without a sense of mystery on every hand. Reverence toward this mystery is the prerequisite for all wise understanding. But "mysterious" does not mean "unapproachable." After thirty-two years of marriage my wife remains a mystery to me—in some ways a deepening mystery. Yet she and I can still converse meaningfully, and every year we get to know each other better.

There is no such thing as absolute mystery. Nearly everything is unknown to us, but nothing is unknowable *in principle*. Nothing we could want to know refuses our conversational approach. A radically unknowable mystery would be completely invisible to us—so we couldn't recognize it as unknowable.

Moreover, the world itself is shouting the necessity of conversation at us. Our responsibility to avoid destroying the earth cannot be disentangled from our responsibility to sustain the earth. We cannot heal a landscape without a positive vision for what the landscape might become—which can only be something it has never been before. There is no escaping the expressive consequences of our lives.

Our first conversational task may be to acknowledge mystery, but when you have prodded and provoked that mystery into threatening the whole planet with calamity, you had better hope you can muster a few meaningful words in response, if only words of apology. And you had better seek at least enough understanding of what you have prodded and provoked to begin redirecting your steps in a more positive direction.

But claiming incomprehension of the speech of the Other is not the only way to stifle the ecological conversation. We can, from the side of conventional science, deny the existence of any speech to be understood. We can say, "There is no one there, no coherent unity in nature and its creatures of the sort one could speak with. Nature has no interior."

But this will not do either. To begin with, we ourselves belong to nature, and we certainly communicate with one another. So already we can hardly claim that nature lacks

a speaking interior. (How easy it is to ignore this most salient of all salient facts!) Then, too, we have always communicated in diverse ways with various higher animals. If we have construed this as a monologue rather than a conversation, it is not because these animals offer us no response, but only because we prefer to ignore it.

But beyond this, whenever we assume the organic unity of *anything*, we necessarily appeal to an immaterial "something" that informs its parts, which otherwise remain a mere disconnected aggregate. You may refer to this something as spirit, archetype, idea, essence, the nature of the thing, its being, the "cowness of the cow." (Some of these terms work much better than others.) But without an interior and generative aspect—without something that speaks through the organism as a whole, something of which all the parts are a qualitative expression—you have no organism and no governing unity to talk about, let alone to converse with.

Remember: the science that denies an interior to nature is the same science that was finally driven by its own logic (for example, in behaviorism) to deny the interior in man—a *reductio ad absurdum* if ever there was one. The same oversight accounts for both denials—namely, the neglect of qualities, which are the bearers of expression in both the world and the human being. Where there is genuine qualitative expression, something is expressing itself.

In his study of the sloth (1999), Holdrege remarks that "every detail of the animal speaks 'sloth'." Of course, you cannot force anyone to see the unity of the sloth—to see what speaks with a single voice (against standard evolutionary logic) through all the details—because you cannot force anyone to attend in a disciplined way to the qualitative substance of the world. But this much needs saying: a science that long ago decided to have nothing to do with qualities is not in a good position to tell those who do attend to qualities what they may or may not discover. (The stance of some churchmen toward Galileo's telescope comes to mind.)

What those who *are* receptive to the world's qualities consistently discover is a conversational partner.

Where Does the Wild Live?

To foreclose on the possibility of ecological conversation, whether due to reticence in the presence of the mystery of the Other or simple denial of both mystery and Other, is to give up on the problem of nature's integrity and our responsibility. It is to forget that we ourselves stand within nature, bringing, like every creature, our own contributions to the ecology of the whole. Most distinctively, we bring the potentials of conscious understanding and the burden of moral responsibility. Can it be merely incidental that nature has begun to realize these potentials and to place this burden here, now, upon us?

Raymond Dasmann sees wilderness areas as a refuge for "that last wild thing, the free human spirit" (quoted in Nash 2001, p. 262). The phrase is striking in its truth. But one needs to add that the human spirit is not merely one wild thing among others. It is, or can become, the spirit of every wild thing. It is where the animating spirit of every wild thing can be known, where it can rise to consciousness, where its interior speaking can re-sound under conditions of full self-awareness.

This is true only because, while we live *in* our environment, we are not wholly *of* it. We can detach ourselves from our surroundings and view them objectively. This is not a bad thing. What is disastrous is our failure to crown this achievement with the selfless, loving conversation that it makes possible. Only in encountering an Other separate from myself can I learn to love. The chickadee does not love its environment because it is—much more fully than we—an expression of its environment.

The willfulness and waywardness—the wildness—that has enabled us to stand apart and "conquer" nature is also what enables us to give nature a voice. The miracle of selflessness through which a human being today can begin learning to "speak for the environment"—a remarkable thing!—is the other face of our power to destroy the environment. So we now find ourselves actors in a grave and compelling drama rooted in the conflicting tendencies of our own nature, with the earth itself hanging in the balance. Given the undeniable facts of the situation, it would be rash to deny that this drama both expresses and places at risk the *telos* of the entire evolution of earth. But to accept the role we have been thrust into, and to sense our nearly hopeless inadequacy, is at the same time to open ourselves to the wisdom that would speak through us.

We do as much damage by denying our profound responsibilities toward nature as by directly abusing them. If you charge me with anthropocentrism, I accept the label, though on my own terms. If there is one creature that may not healthily scorn anthropocentrism, surely it is *anthropos*. How should we act, if not from our own center and from the deepest truth of our own being? But it is exactly this truth that opens us to the Other. We are the place within nature where willing openness to the Other becomes the necessary foundation of our own life.

The classicist, Bruno Snell, somewhere remarked that to experience a rock anthropomorphically is also to experience ourselves petromorphically—to discover what is rock-like within ourselves. It is the kind of discovery we have been making, aided by nature and the genius of language, for thousands of years. It is how we have come to know what we are—and what we are is (to use some old language) a microcosm of the macrocosm. Historically, we have drawn our consciousness of ourselves from the surrounding world, which is also to say that this world has awakened, or begun to awaken, within us (Barfield 1965; Barfield 1977).

In general, my observations of nature will prove valuable to the degree I can, for example, balance my tendency to experience the chickadee anthropomorphically with an ability to experience myself "chickamorphically." In the moment of true understanding, those two experiences become one, reflecting the fact that my own interior and the world's interior are, in the end, one interior.

The well-intentioned exhortation to replace anthropocentrism with biocentrism, if pushed very far, becomes a curious contradiction. It appeals to the uniquely human—the detachment from our environment that allows us to try to see things from the Other's point of view—in order to deny any special place for humans within nature. We are asked to make a philosophical and moral principle of the idea that we do not differ decisively from other orders of life—but this formulation of principle is itself surely one decisive thing we cannot ask of those other orders.

There is no disgrace in referring to the "uniquely human.." If we do not seek to understand every organism's unique way of being in the world, we exclude it from the

ecological conversation. To exclude ourselves in this way reduces our words to gibberish, because we do not speak from our own center.

But nothing here implies that humans possess greater "moral worth" (whatever that might mean) than other living things. What distinguishes us is not our moral worth, but the fact that we bear the burden of moral responsibility. That this burden has risen to consciousness at one particular locus within nature is surely significant for the destiny of nature! When Jack Turner suggested that the last ten thousand years of human history may have been "simply evil," he ignored the worthy historical gift enabling him to pronounce such a judgment. How can we downplay our special gift of knowledge and responsibility without fatal consequences for the world?

Toward Creative Responsibility

We create "by the law in which we're made" (Tolkien 1947). Our own creative speech is one, or potentially one, with the creative speech of nature that first uttered us. (How could it be otherwise?) This suggests that our relation to every wild thing is intimate indeed. We speak from the same source. We cannot know ourselves—cannot acquaint ourselves with the potentials of our own speaking—except by learning how those potentials have already found expression in the stunning diversity of nature.

Every created thing images some aspect of ourselves, an aspect we can discover and vivify only through understanding. The destruction of a habitat and its inhabitants truly is a loss of part of ourselves, a kind of amnesia. Wendell Berry is right to ask, "How much can a mind diminish its culture, its community and its geography—how much topsoil, how many species can it lose—and still be a mind?" (Berry 2001, p. 50). As Gary Snyder puts it, "The nature in the mind is being logged and burned off" (quoted in Nash 2001, p. 263).

When Thoreau told us, "In wildness is the preservation of the world" (1947), the wildness he referred to was at least in part *our* wildness. If humankind fails to embrace with its sympathies and understanding—which is to say, within our own being—every wild thing, then both we and the world will to that extent be diminished. This is true even if our refusal goes no further than the withdrawal from conversation.

Our failure to reckon adequately with the wild Other is as much a feature of human social relations as of our relations with nature, and as much a feature of our treatment of domesticated landscapes as of wilderness areas. In its Otherness, the factory-farmed hog is no less a challenge to our sympathies and understanding than the salmon, the commonplace chickadee no less than the grizzly bear. We do not excel in the art of conversation. If the grizzly is absent from the distant mountains, perhaps it is partly because we have lost sight of, or even denigrated, the wild spirit in the chickadee outside our doors.

If we really believed in the saving grace of wildness, we would not automatically discount habitats bearing the marks of human engagement. We would not look down upon the farmer whose love is the Other he meets in the soil and whose struggle is to draw out, in wisdom, the richness and productive potential of his farm habitat. Nor, thrilling to the discovery of a cougar track in the high Rockies, would we disparage the

cultivated European landscape which, at its best, serves a far greater diversity of wild things than the primeval northern forest.

The point is not to pronounce any landscape good or bad, but to ask after the integrity of the conversation it represents. None of us would want to see the entire world reduced to someone's notion of a garden, but neither would we want to see a world where no humans tended reverently to their surroundings (Suchantke 2001). We should not set the creativity of the true gardener against the creativity at work in our oversight of the Denali wilderness. They are two very different conversations, and both ought to be—can be—worthy expressions of the wild spirit.

A Word Unasked For

In late winter or early spring the chickadee flock frequenting my feeder begins to break up as the birds pair off for mating. Only two (with their offspring) will occupy a given territory, and during summer those few may rarely visit a feeder; there are too many superior delicacies around.

A few summers ago I decided not to maintain a feeder and, because of other preoccupations, scarcely noticed any chickadees on the property. They were the furthest thing from my mind when, on a warm August day at a time of extraordinary personal distress, I happened to be standing outside in a small clearing. There was no brush or other bird cover immediately at hand. Suddenly a chickadee came out of nowhere and alighted on the fence railing four or five paces in front of me.

Standing still, I watched for several seconds as it regarded me with an apparently intense interest. Then, instead of veering away as I expected, it flew with its soft, stutter-step flight straight toward me, dipping characteristically a few inches in front of my nose before rising as if to land on my bald pate. But, with a slight hesitation, it seemed to have second thoughts (there's not much of a perch up there), and passed on behind me. This unlooked-for gesture from a "long-lost friend"—a moment of mutual recognition recalling an earlier conversation—touched me deeply. In the flush of affection I felt for the creature granting me this unexpected interview, I found an easing of my pain. Its life was so free, so far removed from my own problems, yet it was so precious....

"That's very nice, but do you really glorify this encounter as part of a meaningful conversation? And do you believe the chickadee was responding to your inner condition at the time?"

Well, hardly. I am serious—and I include myself in the rearmost rank—when I say we have scarcely learned to converse with nature (or, for that matter, with each other). But, nevertheless, one can at least glimpse the beginnings of conversation here.

The very first—and perhaps the most important—conversational step we can take may be to acknowledge how we have so far *failed* to assume a respectful conversational stance. For example, how much of my activity in feeding the birds by hand is driven by my self-centered pleasure in their attentions, rather than by selfless interest in who they are and what they need? To ask such a question is already to have shifted from manipulator to listener.

But, no, I would not claim that the chickadee on the fence railing was sympathizing with my troubles. Of course, because of my ignorance, and because the chickadee is a

speaking presence, I cannot say absolutely that it was not, at some level of its being, responding to my inner condition, or that it was not the agent of some sort of Jungian "synchronicity." But I am skeptical, and such things are in any case wholly beyond my knowledge. So I leave them alone.

What I do know is that the chickadee was, in an obvious and unproblematic sense, *responding to me* in its, expressive, chickadee-like manner. And this manner was partly familiar to me because I have paid attention to the chickadees in my neighborhood. The behavior, even if unexpected, was not altogether strange to me. I could say, "Yes, if a chickadee were to gesture in my direction, that is how it might do it; it was just like a chickadee"—and in saying this I could bring to mind much about the chickadee's way of speaking itself into the world. This in turn gives me something to respond to, something to respect, something to make a proper place for both in the world and in myself.

And, yes, maybe even something to invite in certain directions through attentive, reverential conversation. I do still occasionally feed the birds from my hands. This is a behavior they would never engage in if there were no humans in the world, but I have yet to see that it in any way diminishes them. I am more inclined to think the opposite. Chickadees are known to have a great curiosity about other creatures, along with a particular affinity for humans, and giving a few of them a little room to explore this affinity does not seem such a bad thing.

There are, of course, appropriate limits. Personally, I draw the line when the chickadees try to use my mustache as nesting material.

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