THE GREAT CONVERSATION

NATURE AND THE CARE OF THE SOUL

BELDEN C. LANE

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PREFACE

"The teachers are everywhere. What is wanted is a learner."

—Wendell Berry[1]

I confess that I've always been more of a meddler than a scholar. Meddling in spheres that, strictly speaking, are none of my business. Crossing disciplinary boundaries with abandon, strolling library aisles as if they were forest paths, mixing genres in juxtaposing personal essays and scholarly articles.

If anything, it's getting worse the longer I write. In this book, I wade into the field of natural history with none of the deftness of David Quamman or Barry Lopez. I wander into explorations of cross-species communication without the depth of Celia Deane-Drummond or Peter Wohlleben. I run the risk of oversimplifying the teachings of the saints, lacking the expertise of theologians like Bernard McGinn or Elizabeth Johnson. My forays into thinking ecologically have none of the sophistication of Joanna Macy or Ilia Delio.

I have to bank on the little I know: my experience with a single tree. Yet that's no small thing. Grandfather has been a teacher and friend to me for many years. He's taught me more than I can express in these pages. Reminding me that being a meddler doesn't mean you're merely dabbling in this and that. It means you're thinking across fixed lines that others have drawn. Thinking like a mountain—like a tree. Practicing what E. O. Wilson called the consilience, the "jumping together," of knowledge.[2]

At any rate, I'm in this for the long haul. Engaged with (and dependent on) a much larger community of mentors, filtering my experience through their wisdom. Thomas Berry, Bill Plotkin, and Richard Rohr among them.

I'm grateful for each of the human and other-than-human teachers who've supported me in this work. These include two spiritual directors I've had over the past two decades: a sister in the Dominican Order of Preachers (and my friend), Joan Delaplane, and a cottonwood tree I affectionately know as Grandfather. I can't imagine living an authentic life without either of them.

I'm indebted also to a dog named Desert, a cat named Rusty, and numerous wilderness places that feed my soul. People to whom I owe much include my writing partner, Terry Minchow-Proffitt, a poet after my own heart; my extraordinary editor, Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press; and my encouraging friends—Mike Bennett, Douglas Christie, Jay Kridel, Glenn Siegel, Laura Weber, and Sherryl White, of the Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph. In the work of Illuman.org, I'm thankful for men on four continents—including Jim Taylor and Stephen Gambill. I'm grateful to Jan Stocking, of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, and Diza Velasco of the Rockhaven Ecozoic Center for embodying Thomas Berry's vision. To John DePuy for his artistic vision and stories of Ed Abbey.

I owe much to my tree-climbing teacher, Guy Mott of AdventureTree; Sally Longley and Beth Roberton of the Australian Network of Spiritual Directors; Anna Killigrew of the Koora Retreat Centre in Boorabbin, Western Australia; Ben Verheul of Ring Lake Ranch, Dubois, Wyoming; Ken Grush of the Missouri Karst and Cave Conservancy; Sandy Cooper of the C. G. Jung Society of St. Louis; the staff of the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary in Gibbon, Nebraska; the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry in University City, Missouri; the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Collinsville, Illinois; and the Endangered Wolf Center in Eureka, Missouri.

Kate, I'll never forget watching polar bears with you on the subarctic tundra. Or hiking with you, Jon, among the red-rock wonders of Ghost Ranch. You both make me so grateful to be a father. And then there's Patricia, a landscape of endless amazement for me, the greatest joy of my life. Thank you all.

THE GREAT CONVERSATION

INTRODUCTION

WILDERNESS AND SOUL WORK

> "Books and talks and articles about Nature are little more than . . . dinner bells. Nothing can take the place of absolute contact, of seeing and feeding at God's table for oneself."
>
> —John Muir[1]

> "I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines."
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*[2]

I've taken the dirt road toward the monastery, turning off before the Big Eddy takeout. Having left the car under juniper trees overlooking the Chama River, I'm hiking the bluff downstream toward Lake Abiquiu. This is Ghost Ranch land. Georgia O'Keeffe country.

The high desert landscape of northern New Mexico is a sparse terrain, bearing the trace of stories long forgotten. It's a good place to study the parlance of wind and flowing water, to ponder ravens on the wing and the play of shadows among the rocks. The land here cuts through you like a knife, enticing you to relinquish one trusted language for another—or for none at all.

I'd like that to happen, intrigued as I am by what shamans and mystics call "the secret language of nature." I've no illusion of being either a shaman or a mystic, but I've longed all my life to be able to listen as wild things speak. For years I've been a modest wilderness backpacker. Nothing very ambitious, a few days out now and then. But something happens when I'm alone on a wilderness trail. Language falls away, and I lose control. Hearing the voices of birds, insects, and trees, I'm like a child missing out on what's

being said—surrounded by whispering adults, spelling out words they don't want me to understand. I'm set on edge, bewildered.

Hasidic Jews tell the story of a rebbe's son who began leaving the synagogue during morning prayers to wander in the woods. The boy loved being alone in the forest. His father was concerned—not simply because the boy neglected his prayers, but because the woods were wild and dangerous in the Carpathian Mountains where they lived. One day he asked his son, "Why do you go out there alone in the forest? I notice you've been doing it a lot lately."

The boy replied, "I go into the woods to find God." "Ah, that's wonderful," replied his dad. "I'm glad you're searching for God. But you know, you don't have to go anywhere special to find the Holy One, Blessed be his Name. God is the same everywhere!" "Yes," answered the boy, "but *I'm* not." God might be the same everywhere, but he knew there was something different about *him* out in the wilds. Stripped of things familiar, he was more vulnerable, more open and receptive.[3]

My own life as a theologian has been absorbed in language about God. But the appeal of wilderness has always made me question the effectiveness of words. Having taught with the Jesuits for thirty-five years, I've been inspired (and intimidated) by their facility with languages. Unable to match their expertise, I've gone in search of a different kind of communication. I'm a scholar-in-recovery now, spending more time on the trail, moving into a deliberate contemplative practice. This invites a gradual abandonment of words, an unnerving entry into what the desert saints called the "via negativa." What's most worth saying, they argued, can't be put into language. "*Neti, neti*" the Upanishads said of Brahman, the ultimate mystery. It's "not this, not that." You reach your heart's longing by discounting all the descriptors people use to contain it. You listen more carefully to what *isn't* being said, or only hinted at obliquely.

Things happen here in the northern New Mexican landscape for which I have no language. I was sitting by a cliff this afternoon fifty feet above the river, where a dry arroyo empties when it rains. Down below, the wind was playing havoc with a ribbon of thick green tamarisks growing along both banks of the stream. It moved with a fury, as if wild things were plunging through the underbrush, thrashing back and forth. Something more than wind was *alive* in there! The hair stood on the back of my neck as I felt its presence.

Later, just before dark, I pressed through the tall, thick branches to pump water for my Nalgene bottle and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. The rushing wind had left a memory of uncontrolled ferocity. God might be the same there as in the monastery chapel down the long dirt road behind me, but *I* sure wasn't.

We're easily deadened by familiarity. How many times have I watched wind racing through tall weeds? Emerson complained that people seldom marvel at a night sky filled with stars. If the stellar extravagance of a typical New England evening were to appear only once in a thousand years, people might really take notice, he said. The seers would "preserve for generations the remembrance of the city of God as shown to them." But when the same array of stars shows itself every night, these "envoys of beauty" are lost on us altogether.[4] The capacity for astonishment escapes us.

We have to be pushed to the edge in order to see and hear what's been talking to us all along. Some people seem inherently better than others at communicating with the natural world. Members of the Findhorn Community in northern Scotland speak of collaborating with the spirits (the devas) of the plants with whom they work. They've grown forty-pound cabbages and other vegetables that never thrive that far north. Listening to intuitions that come to them from the plants they tend, they take seriously what William Blake said about talking with angels. When Blake was nine years old, he saw "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." On telling his father of his vision, he was threatened with a thrashing if he told a lie like that again. Sadly, there are ways of perceiving that have been beaten out of us.[5]

Out here in the Piedra Lumbre wilderness, I'm tempted to dismiss as fanciful the intimations of mystery that burst into ordinary experience. It happened again last night. I woke up around 2 a.m. with an intuition that I ought to move outside of the tent, that, in a dream I'd just had, a wolf was waiting to speak to me.

The idea was absurd, but I did as I was told. Spreading out my mummy bag between sagebrush plants, I looked up into a sky suddenly alive with shooting stars and the wide band of the Milky Way. It was as wild as Blake's angel-filled tree. Who could imagine such a thing if they'd never seen it? Orion the Hunter lying on his side just above the horizon, arms outstretched, holding Betelgeuse in his right hand. How could I believe it myself? How could I accept my own

account over the next few hours of the Jeweled Face (that hexagonal cluster of stars) rising in the eastern sky? Taurus, the Pleiades, Auriga, Gemini, the bright "Dog Star" Sirius. I was blown away by their mind-stopping grandeur. Lupus (the wolf constellation) was lower on the horizon than I could see. But he was there, hiding between Scorpio and Centaurus, whispering, "I told you so."

We're surrounded by a world that talks, but we don't listen. We're part of a community engaged in a vast conversation, but we deny our role in it. We haven't the courage to acknowledge our desperate need for what we can't explain. The soul feeds on what takes us to the edge, but we don't go there willingly.

Conversely, the Earth needs *us* as well right now, given the immense threat of climate change, species loss, and environmental destruction. The planet longs for a body of wild souls who will love it intensely, acting boldly on its behalf. We're just beginning to value wild places—now that we're losing them. Yet we haven't understood how our increased attraction to wilderness is the wilderness's own intense desire for life. Our longing is an echo of its own. The Earth yearns to teach us languages we didn't even know existed. These are more than the arcane exchanges of quantum physicists and astronomers, more than the esoteric skills of medicine men and indigenous healers. They're the multilingual obligation of an extended family.

FINDING A TEACHER

The natural world is full of teachers ready to carry us into amazement. Experiencing them, however, means making ourselves vulnerable to nature's wild splendor. That's the paradox explored by this book. Only in risking ourselves to wind and fire, cave and tree, birdsong and wolf-cry can we grasp the language of glory whispered through it all. These are teachers whose lessons can't be studied from the safety of armchairs. They require "absolute contact," as Muir insisted. They demand our falling in love—crazy, self-abandoning love—in giving ourselves to wild things. Only as we're shocked by what we've not yet subdued do we have a chance of stammering a response to nature's hidden language.

Six themes summarize the intent of this book, each of them growing out of my experience with a single cottonwood tree over the past quarter of a century. He lives in a city park across the street from my house, but he's as untamed as any tree you'll find in the woods of an Ozark hollow. I call him Grandfather. Our conversations tend to be one-sided; he speaks with a profundity I find difficult to grasp. Yet these are the things he's taught me over our years together. I'll be developing them further in the chapters that follow.

1. *The teachers are many, but we begin with one.* In this book I'll be looking at twelve particular teachers in the natural world. For thousands of years, spiritual traditions close to the earth have studied them—from Inuit shamans in Greenland to indigenous healers in Brazil. Even the prophet Job declared: "Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you. Speak to the earth, and it will instruct you, let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know what the hand of the Lord has done?" (12:7–9). The teachers are many, but our access to them comes most often through a single one we've chosen—or, more likely, has chosen *us*. One tree has introduced me to a world that's alive with wonder.

Scientists tell us that "reality is composed of neither wholes nor parts but of whole/parts, or holons." In relating to a single cottonwood tree, therefore, I'm simultaneously connected to every other piece within nature's integral system. The one offers entry into the many. As Richard Rohr says, "How you love one thing is how you love everything."[6]

2. *We communicate to the extent that we learn to love.* To enter the Great Conversation is to bring to consciousness the relationship that already exists between the parts and the whole. To "be" is to be related. Hence, the more I give myself with attentiveness to any other being, the deeper the relationship grows. To most of the people in my neighborhood, Grandfather looks like any other tree. But to one who spends time with him every night, nurturing (over the years) an increasing curiosity about his life, the ordinary becomes wrapped in mystery, even love.

He's driven me to read all I can about trees—from canopy and tree-root research to arboriculture and tree-climbing techniques. Along the way, I've found myself falling in love with what I can't understand. Love is the language by which Grandfather and I communicate best. The principle is an ancient one in the history of spirituality. "Love itself is a kind of knowing," said Gregory the Great in the sixth century. *Amor ipse notitia est.*[7] Deep exposure

over time to the inner beauty and mystery of "another" generates an undeniable knowledge of the heart.

3. *Suffering is the door, joining us by a mutual woundedness.* Something deeper than shared time and space is necessary in fostering an intimate relationship of this sort. It was a common loss that opened Grandfather and me to each other years ago—his blowdown from a storm, my death of a parent. The door connecting us was suffering. A grief we knew in our bodies brought us together.

It's important for us as humans to recognize the common anguish that we share with the other-than-human world. The teachers in this book are facing an overwhelming threat—due to climate change, habitat destruction, the use of pesticides and herbicides. We hear increasingly of "historic" and "record-breaking" forest fires, floods, hurricanes, and loss of species diversity. These are the voices of a planet in travail. They call us to a celebration of all that still lives—and to a language of lament that gives birth to action.

4. *The conversation has to engage us with all its participants.* We can't pick and choose, reckoning only with daisies and loveable black labs, nature at its nicest. The entirety of a wild and wondrous world confronts us out there. Both predator and prey, things that attract and things that strike us as outrageous. The Great Conversation will have to be pursued with long sleeves and thick gloves, with beekeeper's head-net in place and snakebite kit within reach. It involves risk, a stretching of mind and body.

The dialogue demands our relating to the world with a greater evolutionary/systemic depth, as well as a deeper ethical awareness. Attending to where the Earth hurts most and where the poor hurt most with it. Those we find easy to fear and ignore: refugees fleeing drought and famine, people living near toxic waste dumps, others displaced by forest removal. Each part (human and other-than-human) is integral to the whole.

5. *The journey is lifelong, moving through cycles common to the Earth itself.* Learning from the others in the natural world is a process that persists throughout our lives. It subtly changes as we move through various stages of psychospiritual development. As *children*, we're drawn upward—to fly with the birds, soar with the wind, and climb into trees. As *adolescents*, we're drawn outward—to flame with the passion of fire, the brilliance of stars, the burning ache of the desert. As *adults*, we move inward—learning how to flow with the river, deepen with the canyon, or retreat to the island. As *elders*,

we're taken downward—grounded in the mountain's stability, taken into the cave, recovering the wolf's wild freedom.

Through it all, we're invited to move with the cosmos toward integrating the first and second halves of life; the four elements of air, fire, water, and earth; and teachers from the twelve compass points of an integrated life.[8]

6. The connecting web is a mystery embedded in the ordinary. My falling in love with a tree has, finally, been a profound experience of the sacred. Not in spite of, but *because* of the mundane nature of the exchange. I increasingly encounter God's presence in the rough touch of bark and the sound of rustling leaves. In the ordinary.

The God I encountered growing up in the evangelical fervor of the American South was, by contrast, an *interventionist* in the natural order, seen mainly in the miraculous. There wasn't much to celebrate in a world where God appeared only in the rare interruptions of nature. The spirituality I remember was a pretty thin gruel—not much to feed the soul. The God I marvel at now has outgrown the child I was then.

Ironically, I've rediscovered the shaggy-haired Jesus of my youth by bonding with a tall, leafy cottonwood tree. I'm joined with a larger presence permeating the cosmos. Call it what you will—Teilhard's Cosmic Christ, Rumi's Beloved, our Buddha Nature, Spider Woman's web-weaving magic—it leads me to amazement and praise. I yearn (like an entire world absorbed in evolutionary change) to be drawn into an ever-deepening bond of connection, novelty, and complexity.

The mystics explain this attachment in numerous ways. "We are like lutes once held by God," said Hafiz. "Being away from his warm body fully explains this constant yearning." John Ruysbroeck spoke of a wild and divine Spirit looming beyond the borders of our knowing. "He enters the very marrow of our bones . . . He swoops upon us like a bird of prey to consume our whole life, that he may change it into His." We live in a universe that longs for ever-deepening connection, argued Teilhard. A world bending toward self-transcending fulfillment. "Come," the Beloved pleads with Rumi. "Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come."[9] It's an old voice I hear anew in the tree I've learned to love.

Yet understanding these six insights also requires a *practice*. Not only a hands-on exposure to specific teachers in the natural world, but a commitment to time for silence and contemplation. It means learning to be still before the

wisdom of those speaking an unfamiliar tongue. This can take many forms—from Aldo Leopold's "thinking like a mountain" to Douglas Christie's "contemplative ecology" (drawn from the early Desert Christians) to Joanna Macy's merging of Buddhist meditation with "the work that reconnects."[10] Whatever the discipline, the outward journey requires an equally challenging inward journey. Restoring the Great Conversation involves our learning to listen from the inside-out as well as from the outside-in.

NATURE ARCHETYPES AND THE LIFE JOURNEY

How, then, might one's life be shaped by a *lifelong* practice of learning from teachers in the natural world and the saints (or sages) who have pondered them? What if—throughout our lives—we were to embrace the risk and wonder of the wild, living in communion with a world that stretches us at every turn, submitting ourselves to a succession of powerful teachers? When we understand the spiritual life as a progression that echoes the Earth's natural patterns of seasonal change, we find instructors to whom we can apprentice ourselves along the way. We recall teachers who've already come to us at significant points in our lives.

What would happen if you were to *give yourself* to a particular mentor in the natural world, being transformed by a meticulous study of something you love? Perhaps becoming a student of the stars at a time in your life when your horizons need expanding? Studying a patch of sky every evening through a given year, learning the constellations, spending time at the local planetarium, marveling at images from the Hubble Space Telescope, adopting a discipline of meditating under the stars.

Can you imagine apprenticing yourself to the birds that gather at a feeder in your backyard? Studying their species, learning about their migration patterns, how they mate and raise families, the convoluted melodies of their songs. This could lead you to explore the hundreds of references to birds in the Bible, the Quran, or the sutras of the Buddha. Learning to fly, as it were, in your own spiritual life.

If you live in a city, you might spend time with a littered urban creek, perhaps when a flow of creative energy has slowed in your life. What might come

from pondering its flow, being aware of the wildlife it supports, identifying the pollutants that clog it, discovering how those living downstream are affected, thinking of clean water as a matter of justice?

I know people who have embraced a deliberate study of desert terrain while recovering from a season of loss in their lives. Entrusting themselves to a place like the Mojave Desert, making periodic trips to explore its dunes and salt flats, spending time with its Joshua trees and creosote bushes, wandering through Badwater Basin in the depths of Death Valley. They've allowed the desert to offer the strange healing of its emptiness.

Over the years, I've attached myself to teachers like these in my own commitment to wilderness backpacking as a spiritual practice. Submitting to these spiritual guides in a penetratingly physical way is a life-changing experience. In wilderness (wherever you find it), there's always risk, but the physical challenge is the least part of it. Out on the trail, I find myself longing for an unsettling beauty, for a power I cannot control, for a wonder beyond my grasp. I can't begin to name the mystery that sings in the corners of an Ozark night. But I *can* be crazy in love with it, scribbling, in turn, whatever I'm able to mumble about the experience.

In the process, the wilderness reaches back. Carl Jung spoke of archetypal images that come to us as readily in the natural world as in our dreams and mythic tales.[11] Nature archetypes include land forms like islands, mountains, or canyons; energy conveyors like fire, wind, and water; flora and fauna like trees, wolves, and birds; even heavenly bodies like the stars and planets.

They project back to us what's going on deep inside us at various times in our lives. Learning to listen to these teachers is powerfully integrating. It's how we participate in the Great Conversation, valuing the "others" as revered teachers in their own right, whether we find them on a wilderness path or the interior life of the psyche. They're alive and well in both.

Jung insisted that there's no hard-and-fast difference between inner and outer, physical and spiritual worlds. They meet in a collective unconscious that's *shared* by the human and more-than-human world. We see "inherited patterns of behavior" in a weaver bird building its perfectly round nest *and* in human beings instinctively drawn to doing things in a circle.[12] Jung discovered mandalas in the fossils he found in the Jura Mountains, in flower petals and the patterns of dried desert mud, in the convoluted dreams of his patients.

Everything points to a longing for integrated consciousness, for perceiving all of reality as an interrelated whole.

When I speak of these nature archetypes as teachers, I'm talking about a *sensuous* reality we experience in body and soul—preferably in a situation that takes us to the edge of what's comfortable. We don't learn about trees without climbing and sleeping in them. We can't understand caves without spending time in them alone in the dark. We won't appreciate the wildness of wolves without hearing them howl in the night a few hundred yards away in a Montana wilderness.

When you give yourself to a teacher in the natural world, you won't be the same any more. An archetype occasions a "bedazzlement of consciousness," says James Hillman.[13] It engages you at every level of your being—it recurs in your dreams, drives you to study its ecology and natural history, prompts scientific investigations of its details, and stirs forays into the writers and poets enthralled by its mystery. It drives you, at last, into the silence of contemplation, into wordless wonder.

The best teachers often arrive without warning. We unconsciously seek them out at various periods of our developmental growth. In this book I've chosen twelve such teachers or archetypes that suggest themselves in the changing seasons of our lives. They form a template patterned after nature's turning seasons, the phases of the moon, the movement of the stars. Bill Plotkin plots a series of life transitions in his "soulcentric developmental wheel," building on the work of Eric Erikson and Joseph Campbell. He sees each of these life passages as marked by a different way of relating to the physical world around us.[14]

Childhood is a time of innocence and wonder, when we're incurably drawn to the magic under every rock and bush. In *adolescence* we're pulled to mystery-probing adventure. We take risks, pushing the edges. *Adulthood* hopefully carries us into a period of creativity and visionary leadership. We look to nature to spark our imagination and to find renewal. In *elderhood*, we assume a more holistic role of tending to the larger Earth community.

In the diagram (Figure I.1), I've plotted these four life stages in relation to the four classical elements of air, fire, water, and earth. A "pattern of four" repeats itself throughout the cosmos. A circle divided into four quadrants—the "squaring of the circle"—is an ancient mandala pattern. It incorporates

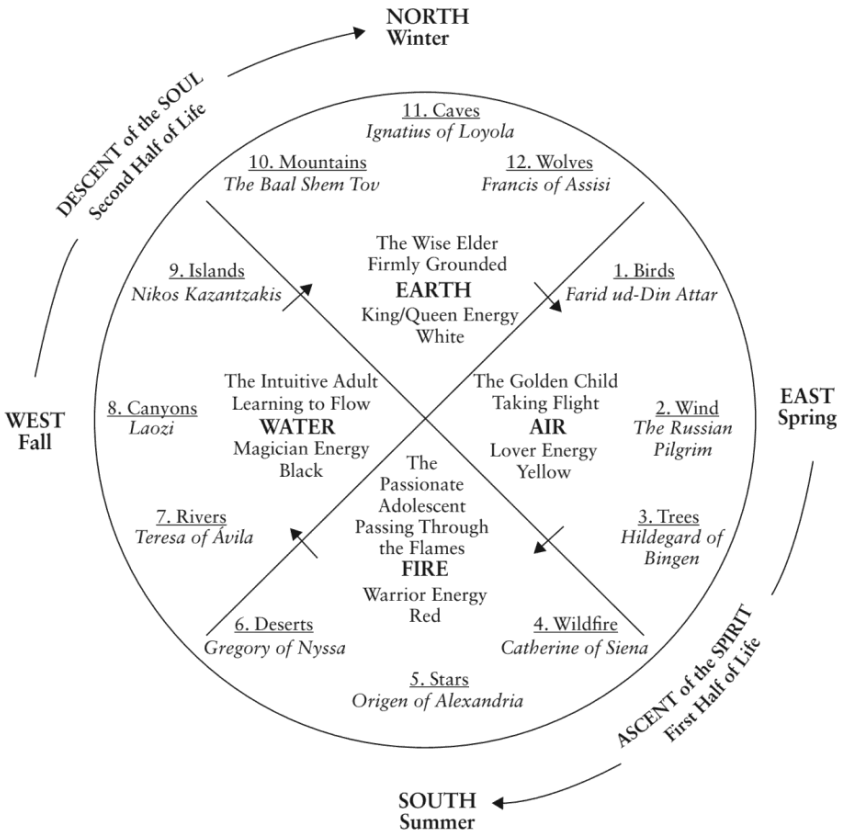

Figure I.1 The Path of Transformation: Nature Teachers and the Mystical Journey.

the insights of medieval alchemy, Jung's depth psychology, and Richard Rohr's spirituality for the two halves of life.

This developmental wheel—what I'm calling the path of transformation—plots the pattern of our spiritual lives as a two-part journey: the ascent of the *spirit* in life's first half and the descent of the *soul* in the second. The fiery, transcendent energy of youth leads to the salty reality of sweat and tears that comes with maturity. If the spirit blazes in the noonday sun, the ripened soul finds its home in the dark places, the night world, the realm of the moon.[15]

Life stages are more fluid than fixed. They vary widely from one person to another. We may find ourselves having to go back to earlier periods in our lives to finish uncompleted work. These stages are not mutually exclusive. Nor is movement from one stage to the next automatic. Individuals in our culture frequently seem to become fixated at an adolescent stage, never moving into the soulful work that maturity requires. People not uncommonly will give up on the full adventure.

My choice of these twelve particular teachers is fairly arbitrary. They are archetypes I've found meaningful, but there are many others one could use in working her way around the wheel. There are an infinite number of archetypes, says Jung.

The first two chapters of the book introduce the idea of the Great Conversation and my experience of it through Grandfather. Subsequent chapters connect each of the twelve teachers with a complementary saint or sage. These include a Sufi mystic, a Jewish rabbi, a Taoist philosopher, five Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, three Eastern Orthodox writers, and a Greek novelist who was declared a heretic. Each of them has served as a spiritual guide at one time or another in my life. They've accompanied me on backpacking trips into terrain similar to the living world that formed their own spiritual lives.

A conclusion reflects on some of the biological, philosophical, and ethical questions the book raises, asking how the notion of a communicative world (and a communicative *God*) can energize our speaking for and with the Earth. Once we begin listening to the great teachers in the natural world, we're empowered (and obliged) to act on their behalf.

RECLAIMING THE ELDERS

I write from the perspective of one moving into the last quadrant of the circle, asking what it means to be an elder at this point in his life. My primary teacher—an old Missouri cottonwood—is himself an elder. Through the years, he's survived flames racing up his trunk, wind shattering his limbs, and insects causing most of his leaves to fall. But he's stayed in one place—like Julian of Norwich confined to her anchor-hold—making the choice over and over again to thrive where he's planted. He models a passionate insistence on life.

An elder does more than move beyond the previous stages of life, passing into a new role as solitary sage. She incorporates the earlier phases in a wider perspective. The crone enters with the wolf into the mountain cave, gathering the energies of trees, stars, and canyons. She's more compassionate (more grounded) than ever, weaving together the disconnected threads of a life that's more than her own.

John Muir was one such elder, smitten with love for an Earth that sings. "As long as I live," he declared, "I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing. I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm, and the avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can."[16]

He knew the yearning that a storm awakens in the limbs of wind-driven trees. "A few minutes ago," he wrote, after a summer squall had swept through his Yosemite campsite, "every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship . . . Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fiber thrilling like harp strings."[17]

The words "glory" and "glorious" echo through Muir's writings in a frantic effort to describe what he couldn't put into words. His editors urged him to refrain from all this religious language. But he couldn't help himself. Having soundly rejected his Presbyterian roots and his father's angry God, he remained overwhelmed by the wonder he found in the natural world. He didn't stop believing in God; he simply learned that God was far wilder than he'd been taught.[18]

I'm drawn to this old Scots mountaineer, as well as to a tree named Grandfather. They urge me to embrace my calling as an elder, assuming—like them—my place in the family of things. The oldest teachers among us are still in search of learners: a 150-year-old Galapagos tortoise, a 200-year-old bowhead whale, a 5,000-year-old bristlecone pine tree in northern California, 10,000-year-old glass sponges in the East China Sea, 500,000,000-year-old stromatolites in the depths of a Missouri cave. These are the true elders.

***

Stricken dumb by the unnerving beauty of the Chama River Canyon Wilderness, I've headed back upstream toward the car and the road to the monastery. The river gets its name from the Tewa word for "red," the color of

the water flowing through this reddish sandstone of northern New Mexico. Coursing down the backbone of North America, it parallels the Continental Divide Trail, which passes nearby. This entire Piedra Lumbre land grant area is magical. A history strewn with stories of cattle rustlers and witches (Ghost Ranch was originally *el Rancho de los brujos*), and the scene of an effort by Chicano activists to secede from the United States in the 1960s. It's a country full of surprises, murmuring the language of the trickster and wandering fool.

Before leaving, I stop at a place up the bluff from the water where an expanse of bright blue river stones lie scattered. Cornflower blue rhyolite, glistening in the morning sun. A product of one of God's blue periods, no doubt. Taking a drunken pleasure over hundreds of years in rolling rocks down the river bed to make them smooth, he's tossed them here in a spray of reckless artistry. I sit among them, listening to what chooses to speak.

Painted layers of Jurassic sandstone adorn the mesa on the other side of the river—red, white, yellow, beige. Water laps on the rocks below. A raven flies in a tight circle overhead, sun catching its black wings in a luminous silver flash. My attention wanders to a brown, speckled stick lying on one of the blue stones nearby. It almost looks like a lizard. No, it *is* a lizard! I just saw it move. A fly tried to land on its clever disguise, and the "stick" suddenly came to life. But their exchange attracts the attention of the raven overhead and yet another scenario begins to unfold, another meal taking shape.

In this shimmering landscape where water flows toward one distant ocean or another, I can't tell whether a stick is pretending to be a lizard or a lizard is pretending to be a stick. Reality here is fluid, indeterminate. The consciousness of the fly transforms into that of a reptile, the perception of the reptile into that of a raptor. In the end, as I watch the mystery unfold, I'm haunted by the roguish language of the wild, by an evolutionary God who delights in endless transformations, a God of restless love revealed in predator and prey alike. Saying that *everything* belongs.

I shoulder my pack and hit the trail, realizing I'm being called to a memory deeper than my own, to a language my body has known all along. The desert speaks—out of lifetimes of patience and pain—with a subtle but insistent voice. My role in the Great Conversation isn't finally to understand, only to listen and to love.

Figure 1.1 Grandfather Cottonwood and the Park.
Photo by Jim Taylor.

that we're increasingly falling in love. Communication, in the end, is nothing more than learning to love—"letting the soft animal of your body love what it loves," as Mary Oliver says.[4]

Grandfather and I met more than two decades ago at a time of mutual crisis. My mother was in a nursing home with Alzheimer's disease and dying of cancer. He was dealing with a lightning strike and fierce windstorm that had blown down one of the two great trunks growing from his roots. A twelve-foot high wound was left in his side. That's what first drew me to him. A common hurt opened the door between us.

Grandfather is old for his species. I counted eighty rings in the tree trunk that was cut up and hauled away at the time, twenty-five years ago. Eastern cottonwoods don't live much beyond a hundred years. But Grandfather's still very much alive. He stands more than ninety feet tall, with a fifty-five-foot canopy and a sixteen-foot circumference at his base. When I lean into his hollow at night, I'm a tiny figure, almost hidden from view.

The two of us, Grandfather and I, live on the edge of the city of St. Louis. Our neighborhood is generally safe, but like many city parks, this one has its share of rowdy beer-drinkers, furtive drug dealing, and even occasional gunshots. You learn to be careful. Three years ago, a raucous bunch of partyers set a fire in Grandfather's cavity. It was put out, but his bark is scorched black on that side, twenty feet up.

* * *

He's given me plenty to worry about through the years. In winter storms, I've watched a half-inch layer of ice weighing down his branches. I've stood inside him while sixty-mile-an-hour gusts of wind twisted his frame like tensile steel. One night, after a twelve-inch snowfall, the temperature dropped to almost twenty degrees below zero. Having heard of trees exploding as their sap freezes, I feared for him.

But Grandfather's a survivor. He's withstood the threats of wind, fire, lightning, insects, and ice that bring terror to creatures of the wood. In Tolkien's universe, the treelike Ents, having survived all kinds of dangers, are an extremely patient and cautious race. Time moves slowly for them. They've learned to wait for what they need. Grandfather is like that.

For most people passing through the park, this is an old tree past its prime—scarred by fire, rotting from the inside out, soon to be marked with a large red "X" by the parks and recreation forestry crew. For me, he's a presence in my life that's hard to describe. Martin Buber, in *I and Thou*, spoke of two different ways of relating to a tree. On the one hand, he said, "I can assign it to a species and observe it as an . . . object. But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I'm drawn into a relationship, and the tree ceases to be an It." Buber and his tree were able to enter into a mystery of reciprocity.[5]

Grandfather and I do the same, communicating in a nonverbal, sensuous way. When I pass my hand over the deep furrows of his bark, he doesn't move—not in the way that a horse's flank will shiver under your touch. Trees do nothing in a hurry. Yet they "move their bodies as freely, easily, and gracefully as the most skilled animal or human," said the Austro-Hungarian biologist Raoul Francé. "The only reason we don't appreciate the fact is that plants do so at a much slower pace than humans."[6]

So I touch—and imagine being touched by Grandfather in return. The play of imagination and reverie, operating through the senses, is how we connect. I delight in his smell, pressing my nose each night into the shallow cave of his wounded place. It's the musty smell of old furniture, cinnamon bark, and wood smoke. It reminds me of my dad putting me to bed at night, remembering his smell of stale cigarette smoke (menthol Kools) and Old Spice aftershave.

I'm reliving that memory in these days as I take our grandchild, Elizabeth, over to spend time with Grandfather (see figure in frontispiece). She's two years old,

Too often spiritual guides seem to think it's their job to make people "feel good," hoping that people *like* them, become dependent on them. The indifference of trees is refreshing. They don't try to be nice. They aren't invested in whether we like them or not. They care nothing for most of the things that make us anxious. Trees are disinterested teachers drawing us out of ourselves, reminding us that we aren't in control, taking us to our knees in awe.

Carl Jung regrets that we've lost our "emotional participation" in nature's mystery. We don't talk to trees anymore. We hear thunder, and it's no longer the voice of the spirit coming on the wind. We notice raindrops glistening on a spider's web without being astonished. "[Our] immediate communication with nature is gone . . . and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious."[9] That's a great loss, one that signals our spiritual poverty while allowing us to destroy a world we once held in reverence.

We haven't a language anymore for what once energized our myths and fired our imagination. We've stopped listening to trees. "The tree which moves some to tears of joy, is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way," said William Blake.[10] We suspect that people who are brought to tears by trees have been reading too much Tolkien. They still believe in fairy tales, reverting back to what French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl called the participation mystique of a so-called "primitive" mindset.[11]

Our problem is that we've bought into a dualistic worldview that strictly distinguishes human rationality from the rest of an embodied creation. This dual way of thinking cuts against the conviction of indigenous peoples—and the biblical tradition as well—that creation is a seamless whole. All of it is sacred. You can't pull out a single part as superior to all the others without damaging the whole. Trees are crucial, not simply because they provide timber, a carbon sink, and oxygen in support of human life. They witness to something holy in their own majestic beauty.[12]

Carl Jung described the forest as a "place of magical happening."[13] It's more than an imaginative symbol of the unconscious. It participates in the very mystery to which it points. The forest is a place where we touch the sacred, where we're most in touch with ourselves. Jung looked to the great oaks of Europe for a charmed wisdom. In Japan, the practice of *shinrin-yoku* ("forest bathing") draws on the energy of ancient cedars and cypress trees.[14] I myself find more than enough wonder in a single cottonwood tree.

leaning into his hollow, moving into a practice of contemplative stillness. I let go of thoughts and words. Sinking into the tree's heartwood, releasing what's been rummaging around inside me through the day.

Once in a while, something comes up. Is it from inside me or from inside him? I never know for sure. It may be a feeling of being unaccountably loved in that moment, feeling utterly at home in the hollow of that tree. Or it may be a thought that arises: "Just stand there," it might say. "All you really need will come to you." I hear this spoken with authority, because it's something only a tree can say with conviction. Grandfather can't go anywhere for what he needs. He has to wait for everything to come to him. When a tree says this, I listen.

Even when nothing passes between us, being together is an end in itself. That's how it is with anyone you love. I call him Grandfather not in an effort to claim him as *my* tree so much as to put myself in a posture of being *his* person. Someone who simply enjoys sitting at his feet, admiring how big he is, imagining what it's like to be a tree. Isn't that what grandchildren do?

I delight in wandering over to the park with my granddaughter Elizabeth. Imagining the tree's pleasure in our coming. The three of us fit together, as she and I stand in his hollow. That's a mysterious thing in itself.

Finding a "fit" in nature has long intrigued ecological psychologist James Gibson. His theory of affordances focuses on the way a bird or animal discovers a particular niche in the environment that offers an occasion for connection. A tree branch affords a perch for an owl. An abandoned woodpecker hole provides a nest for squirrels. The coming together of the creature's need and the niche's affordance is a dynamic process, says Gibson. The two encounter each other in a mutual exchange as both subject and object.[16]

You might think of a child as similarly drawn (with her grandfather) to the niche of a hollow tree that affords a hiding place where she (and he) can safely see without being seen. In a transaction of this sort, the human and other-than-human parties are joined in the affordance and acceptance of a mutual fit.

Having experienced such a relationship with Grandfather over a period of years, my perception of everything else in nature has changed. I've learned to expect the rest of the world to be alive as well. (As any perceptive two-year-old might do.) Thomas Berry cautions that we have to stop perceiving the world as a collection of objects. It's a communion of subjects.[17] We need

CONCLUSION

TAKING THE GREAT CONVERSATION SERIOUSLY

> "What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone,
> in the forest, at night, cherished by this
> wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech,
> the most comforting speech in the world."
>
> —Thomas Merton, listening to the rain
> outside his hermitage[1]

> "Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! the *actual* world!"
>
> —Henry David Thoreau on the slopes of
> Mount Katahdin[2]

I'm standing on the deck of a tundra buggy in the subarctic of northern Manitoba, overlooking the ice on Hudson Bay. The wind-chill factor this morning is minus 32 °F. Most of the scraggly spruce trees along the coast here have no branches on their north side, worn down by ice and wind sweeping down from the Arctic. I'm watching a polar bear grazing on kelp nearby. Weighing more than one thousand pounds, he leaves a twelve-inch footprint in the snow. These huggable-looking animals have been waiting for months for the ice to freeze so they can devour equally cuddly ringed seal pups. They're hungry enough to eat anything. Mother polar bears have to protect their young from being eaten by male polar bears. Life isn't easy in a place like this, nor is it kind.

It's easy for us to project moral judgments onto fierce landscapes. We make everything personal, as if nature were malevolent, out to *get* its creatures, including us. Exchanges of life and death within nature's Great Hoop aren't somehow vicious. (Animals need to eat.) But neither are they amicable. In a

wild and unruly place like Churchill, Manitoba, the Great Conversation may sound more like a barroom brawl than a mannerly drawing-room dialogue.

Each species reaches for a handhold in such an environment. Wetland grasses and sedges produce antifreeze to keep their cells alive in winter. Snow geese feed on their foliage as they nest over the summer. Arctic foxes and polar bears feed in turn on the eggs that the geese lay. Cree and Dene hunters take an occasional great white bear, the world's largest land predator, and turn the skins of foxes into clothing used for hunting. Everything eats and is eaten.

That's an important note on which to end this book, a reminder that the Great Conversation raises some hard questions. We might find some of the participants in the dialogue unsavory: bacterial decomposers, "disgusting" maggots, "heartless" predators, cancer cells. Yet they contribute, in ways we may not always like, to the balance of any ecosystem.

Theologians may find such things difficult to account for in a God-shaped universe. Some resort to simplistic theodicies that turn ferocious things into pleasantries in disguise. It's hard to rationalize a wild and rowdy world. Attempts to paint a boisterous world as "nice" are no better than efforts to tame a God who rides on the wind and laughs in the crashing thunder. In the end, we stand with the prophet Job on the edge of a harsh wilderness, knowing that a God too small could never command our praise.

The Great Conversation—like any deep exchange—involves tears, anger, and hands thrown up in despair, right alongside laughter and shouts of joy. It can't be carried on with kittens and sunflowers alone. We either embrace the entirety of an inexplicable world or we fabricate a Disney-like domain of our own making. The Great Conversation stretches us at every turn, yet it leaves us with the knowledge that we're in this together. We're part of a shared community with a growing respect for the whole. The conversation has to be as wide as the universe and as deep as the mystery of God.[3]

There are four pressing questions—scientific, philosophical, theological, and ethical—to be addressed in closing this book.

1. First, let's be honest. Can we really talk about a Great Conversation with the rest of the natural world? In speaking of my relationship with a tree, am I imagining something that doesn't exist? Or is there indeed a conversation going on out there that we all need to be a part of?

2. How do we widen our skills in listening and responding to the others? If words may be our least important means of communicating, how do we cross the borderlands of language and consciousness?
3. How do we conceive of God's role in this conversation? Where do we find God in the sometimes violent but always wild exchanges of nature, raging, exulting, dancing, weeping?
4. Once we affirm the dignity and sentience of the others, what new ways of relating to the world are demanded of us? In a time of ecological crisis, how do we stand together in a shared consciousness of the earth as a whole?

A FANCIFUL NOTION OR A TRUTH WHOSE TIME HAS COME?

The first question is how seriously we can take this idea of the Great Conversation? Is it a childish fantasy or a reality made possible by the new science and the deepening of human consciousness?

Since the Enlightenment, people in the Western world have been taught to dismiss the idea of "talking to trees" as nonsense, unless we're speaking of ancient mythology, Tolkien's Middle-earth, or children under the age of seven. We may have read about the whispering oak of Zeus at the Dodona oracle in ancient Greece, dispensing prophecy in its rustling leaves. Or Alexander the Great discovering a talking tree at the end of the earth—speaking with a male voice by day and a female voice by night. Or Muhammad's habit of preaching beside a date palm tree that wept for joy as he spoke. But we don't take these seriously.

Since the rise of anthropology as a social science in the late nineteenth century, we've learned to be suspicious of any subjective human interaction with the natural world. Early anthropologists of religion like E. B. Tylor at Oxford and James Frazer at Cambridge marveled at the childishness of "primitive" people who readily spoke to trees and attributed human traits to senseless entities in the world around them. They traced the "progress" of religious thought from lower to higher ("civilized") forms, leaving behind the naïveté of backward peoples.

Frazer was fascinated by archaic tree stories, however, gathering them in his classic study of myth and religion, *The Golden Bough*. "To the savage

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