

This Moment Returns to Me

Childhood Reverie and a Lenape Idea Of Recruitment by the Earth

Nancy A. Wisser¹

The Way It Started

You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough—even white people—the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them.

- Crow elder quoted by Gary Snyder²

It's hard to know where to start this story. Every time I think of a beginning, I think of something that came before it, but the section of the story that is relevant here began when I was painting a picture.

I was in therapy for clinical depression, and I told my therapist I would paint a picture depicting what I encountered when I went for my walks in the woods, the one refuge in my darkening life. The painting is large and I'm looking at it now, although it was never finished. It's a life-size depiction of a Pan-like being, a boy, maybe 15 or 16, with dreadlocks, horns, green, slitted eyes, and fur from the waist down. He has a bemused look on his face, and would be carrying a wooden flute if I had filled in the blank space where the flute was going to be.

I just meant it as a metaphor, a picture of something I could not put into words, the reason I was so attached to nature, to bird watching and hiking and anything that meant being out where things grew and lived on their own. I do not see it as coincidence, though, that the phone call that began a new and fascinating part of my life came while I was painting him.

The caller on the phone was a local magazine editor I had written for once or twice. She asked if I would be interested in writing an article about the indigenous people of our area, the Lenape people. Up until then I had done only nature writing, but since as far as I knew there were no Lenape anymore, I thought the Lenape article would require little more than reading a few books and contacting a few historical societies. I said yes, never suspecting I had just received what would become *The Assignment That Ate My Life*.

Trying to be thorough in my research, I went online and sent out a few queries about matters connected to the Lenape and their connection to the supposed pre-Columbian stone work in Pennsylvania, rumors of which reached the newspapers from time to time. I thought it would make an interesting sideline to what otherwise looked to be a dry historical account of a robbed people.

Then one night, as if I had walked into a novel, I received a call from a man named Fred Werkheiser, inviting me to come to dinner with him and a friend of his, their treat, to discuss matters concerning the Lenape and the stone work. Several people who had received my email inquiries had passed them on to him, and he wanted to learn what kind of person was inquiring into what apparently was a more delicate matter than I knew. Curious but a little nervous, I agreed to meet with them.

A few nights later, I was seated at a restaurant with two men I did not know, being interviewed to determine whether I was worthy to be given some knowledge whose nature I could not divine. They were good company, of wry humor and penetrating intelligence, so the evening would not be wasted even if I failed their test. At the end of the meal they conferred and decided I would be let in to at least part of their secret. They could show me some of the stone work, and they would introduce me to some of the local Lenape people.

Only a little of the adventure I entered into that night is relevant here. I was, of course, skeptical about the people who called themselves Lenape. Most of the people I met didn't "look Indian", and anyway, there weren't supposed to be any Lenape anymore, except on a reservation in Oklahoma. Only after having talked with them for a while did I become certain that, whatever their story was, these people had been brought up thinking differently than anyone I knew.

The first lead-in to our topic here was a comment by one of them, a young man named Jim Beer. We were talking about non-Indian people who worked to protect the earth and living things—environmentalists and the like—and he made the comment that people who work to protect the earth, no matter what race they are, were selected or recruited in some way by the earth itself, that the spirits had spoken to them.

It was an odd thing to say, and it struck me as one of those dreamy things that romantically-minded people like to believe. How could it be true? I mean, how would that work? I had put together a nature newsletter for a year, and distributed it for free. I couldn't remember any kind of recruitment. Everything else he was saying to me seemed thoughtful and insightful, so I allowed Jim this little quirk.

Looking back, I can remember discussing Mesingwe with him, too. Mesingwe is the name of a spirit important to the Lenape. I was interested because after reading about him in my early research I had dreamed about him. Even though he was facing away from me in the dream, the moment of seeing him was memorable.

The second thing that led me into this pursuit was a later conversation I had with the man who was then chief, Bob Red Hawk Ruth. Fred Werkheiser's inspiration for his work concerning the stone work and the Lenape was a friend of his, Mark, who had died before I met Fred. Mark was an archaeologist who over time became convinced that some stone structures in the northeast had astronomical alignments and had been built before Columbus "discovered" America, not by earlier sailors from Europe, but by the indigenous people. He also believed that some sites were still being used surreptitiously for rituals by descendants of the builders.

While Fred was an amateur, Mark had academic credentials and had to bear the derision of his colleagues, who embraced the orthodox assumption that the natives here did not build in stone, despite the fact that indigenous peoples everywhere else in the Americas did. Rather than back off, however, Mark remained fervent in his conviction until the end of his short life, even though no native people came out in his support. He said that one native man told him privately that the stone work remained hidden by white man's inability to see, and the fact that Mark could see them meant something special about him.

Fred owned a copy of an unpublished novel by Mark, and he loaned it to me to read. In the novel, Mark brought up in several places something he called "language in

memory”, an experience he’d had as a child which he felt was connected with the stone work and the landscape in some way. I recognized in his description an experience I’d had as a child, too, a golden timeless moment while alone in the tall weeds at the back of my parents’ property, an experience I had never discussed with anyone.

In Mark’s book, it was clear that this experience had shaped his relationship with the land and his own life. Having glimpsed what he glimpsed then, he could never see the land without knowing there was a living mystery contained in it. Thinking about it, I realized that the same was true for me. You could say that that moment had shaped much of my life and even who I was. It was as if, in those moments, the earth really had recruited us.

I asked Bob Red Hawk whether, according to his way of understanding things, he would say that Mark had been contacted by spirits, whether he would see that as the source of Mark’s vision and courage. Bob said yes. And suddenly I got it. This had nothing to do with the article I was working on at the time, but when I got off the phone I was elated. Maybe, I thought, I’d never before had any idea what “spirits” were. Maybe when these people used the word, they meant something different from what I thought it meant. Maybe they meant something that was real in my world, too. I lay back on the bed and kicked my feet in the air. I knew something, but right then I couldn’t have told you exactly what it was.

But What?

In that childhood moment, I now realized, the sensation had been much like being with and communicating with someone, except that there was no tangible someone. It was as if there were something or some things out in the landscape with psychologically active properties but no detectable physical properties—spirits.

If this was what some people meant by spirits, they were nothing like what I had imagined spirits to be. The best way I can put it is that there was no outward localised presence, just the effect—a sense of inward presence and communication—which one can’t examine at the time, caught up in a sort of mystical ecstasy, but which is evident afterward, as Mark had put it, in memory.

Inward effect with no physical presence—that description captures the essence of the experience and shows why it is so hard to talk about it, especially because that sense of an inwardly communicating presence is often apparent only in retrospect. Since we have little context for something from the outside touching the self without words, other than that provided by religion, someone knowing only the Western world view is likely to conceive of these golden moments as internal events of the self or perhaps even as the presence of God.³ This experience happens to the religious and non-religious alike, however, generating the same life-long effects.

Words fail when we try to recreate it, and it is impossible to convey to someone who has not had it what the experience itself is like. Even when I have been writing about it, if, in the course of other activities, I experience some of it, my first thought when it is over is that it is not like what I am imagining during the writing. It is closer, more immediate, more private and personal than I can convey in any way I can think of. Good poetry comes closest, and I have to think that many poets have had at least one of these experiences in their pasts.

It did occur to me that people in our culture who had the experience would be forced to make up metaphors. The passage containing Pan in *The Wind in the Willows* and Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* seemed now like attempts to depict this intangible reality that had qualities of man and of nature, just as I had attempted it in my painting without knowing why.

I began to search for words for what I conceived it to be. I started with “entity”, “being”, “consciousness”, “psyche”, and the thesaurus soon had me off to “wight”, “fairy”, “angel”, “deva”, “genius loci”. There was no word with the meaning I was looking for, exactly. Why would there be if our culture did not have the concept?

I ran across the word “manitou”, a related Algonquin word, and that got me thinking about the Lenape, who speak one of many Algonquin languages, again. Mesingwe, whom I mentioned earlier, is an important figure in their spiritual world. They depict him as a human/animal mix, a hairy man like a Sasquatch. In an important story told about him he takes pity on and appears to two boys who were abused or neglected by their parents. He helps them and teaches them, eventually enabling them to return and help the whole village in a time of crisis.

I learned that sometimes before a Lenape child went out for vision quest, the parents and people of the village would pretend to abuse and neglect him, so that spirits like Mesingwe might take pity on him and choose to become his helper or guide.

Was what happened to Mark and me similar to a vision quest? What would a vision quest be like if it happened by accident to someone who was completely unprepared for it? I knew that Mark had resorted to the outdoors as a refuge from some pretty serious abuse. While I had not been abused, I spent time outdoors to escape a rough older brother and the strong emotions of my parents’ failing marriage. Maybe the spirits took pity on us.

Then there was the issue of helper or guardian spirit. I knew nothing about them at first, but they were what vision quests were often about, and the qualities they added to a person who gained one were just the qualities that made someone like Mark stand out. Not just Mark, but people through history who had contributed to our culture showed many of the qualities attributed to people who had guardian or helper spirits.

The word *genius* as we commonly use it originally meant the helper spirit the outstanding person was thought to have. *Inspiration* means the arrival of a spirit. To be *dispirited* means to have lost your spirit. Language is like an archaeological site that is always at hand, and vestiges of many old ways of thinking remain buried in it.

I had never read about shamanism, for years dismissing it as just another way for some new age crackpots to draw attention and money to themselves. But now I discovered that shamanism was all about spirits. Most of it seemed pretty far out, even though I was more prepared than I used to be to entertain new notions. Then I ran across something in one of the books that helped popularize shamanism in the West, *The Way of the Shaman* by Michael Harner. It said:

To a shaman it is readily apparent that many Westerners have guardian spirits, as evidenced by their energy, good health, and other outward manifestations of their power. It is tragic, from the point of view of such a shaman, that even these power-full people are nonetheless ignorant of the source of their power and thus do not know how to utilize it fully. A related tragedy, from the same point of view, is that lethargic, ill, and dispirited Western adults have obviously lost the guardian spirits that protected them through childhood. Worse, they do not even know that there is a method to regain them.²

Tears came to my eyes when I read that. I was pretty sure I knew how at least some of those Westerners had acquired their guardian spirits. Records of those experiences had to be buried throughout Western literature. Time to take a look around.

Tracks of the Spirits

First, what is the nature of the experience we are talking about? How will we know it if someone describes it? For someone who has experienced it, it is easy to

recognize, but here are some aspects that are common in descriptions of the experience. Most descriptions will include some of these characteristics. Few will have all.

First, the moment is memorable. Decades later, the person can usually tell you exactly where he or she was, and often can describe details: flowers that were blooming, the sound of bees or the colors of butterflies, even the quality or angle of the light.

Second, the realizations that came with the moment have the sense of being absolutely true. One is seized with certainty and may believe he or she has had a vision of the inner workings of the world, the true essence of being. Most people come away from it with a strong feeling of awe and of having encountered a, or perhaps *the*, great mystery.

Third, subjects may experience a sense of timelessness, as if the experience somehow took place outside of regular time, in an eternal moment of what some call blessing. While it is happening there is no chance that another person will come along and interrupt, as if you have stepped into an adjacent version of the world where others are invisible to you and you to them, or as if the power that is reaching you also has the power to divert anyone from that spot.

Fourth, the world or the place seems indescribably beautiful, perfect in every detail, even in the characteristics that have always seemed like faults or wrongs. Beyond a shadow of a doubt and despite anything else that may be going on, everything is good and right.

Fifth, this world that is good and right may have characteristics of a being or person, as if the place where you are, or the planet or world itself is *someone* rather than something.

Sixth, subjects may feel personally blessed by this perfect beautiful world, or befriended by this great being. The experience seems to be happening, not randomly because you happen to be there, but particularly and especially to you—who you are in the deepest and most personal sense. It knows you.

Seventh, subjects may have the feeling or realization that they are one with this perfect beautiful world, that all apparent separation is an illusion.

Eighth, subjects may be seized with the feeling or realization that the world, and therefore they who are one with it, are eternal, incapable of being destroyed.

Ninth, subjects may perceive everything around them as having a profound meaning, or feel they are receiving something like speech without words, language or communication of an esoteric nature, which tells them deep and absolute truths. Sometimes this may seem to be communicated through the behavior of some creature or through the wind, or by the sun moving on the leaves, in other words, through some natural agent that has taken on, for that time, a supernatural significance.

Tenth, subjects frequently are taken up in a feeling of joy, elation or ecstasy.

These are the primary characteristics, but having listed them I have not described the experience. Those who have had it know that the experience is whole, immediate, intensely personal and ineffable. One is in the moment and in the world in a different way from normal, and the difference is inexpressible. These characteristics can only be separated and described with much thought later.

All this makes it fascinating to search for and read accounts of these experiences in literature. Since there is no consensus name for them and the writers are attempting to describe the indescribable, they resort to creativity to express what they have experienced. I found some of the following descriptions myself, and others had already been collected by authors who were exploring the topic for other reasons.

Here is a good one to start with. I quote it from Tobin Hart's *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. The girl who had it is simply known as Debbie:

At age eleven, Debbie was by herself, lying back on her swing set. As she described, "I was looking at the sky, just watching. I don't know how it happened but it all opened up to me. I don't know how to say it, but I felt everything was perfect and connected. I can't say I was thinking about anything—it's like there was no room even to think. It felt like my chest could just burst open and fly into a million pieces. It felt like I could explode and be the sun and the clouds."³

Here is a passage from Thom Hartmann's *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*:

I remember a summer when I was five years old. My parents had recently purchased a hammock and put it in our back yard, and I was lying on it on a bright sunny afternoon. The sky was a deep blue, with thin wispy clouds, and I could smell the fresh-mown grass crushed by the green-painted yellow frame of the hammock. I could feel the ropes of the hammock against my back, through my T-shirt and pressing against my bare legs below my shorts, and hear the melodic sounds of birds singing in the trees that surrounded the yard. One of the birds was repeating over and over a three note call, while others chirped randomly.

I stared at the sky, noticing little specks in my field of vision and how they'd jump when I moved my eyes and then slowly settle when I held my sight on a particular bit of cloud. There was a gentle wind blowing, and I could hear it rustling the leaves of the huge old maple tree about thirty feet from me; the hammock rocked very slightly, a soothing motion that made the sky seem to tilt slightly from side to side.

Turning my head to the left, I noticed that I was ten feet from a stand of pink, white, and yellow hollyhocks, covered with blossoms and standing five feet tall. The thick white stamens erupted from the waxy, colored petals, and honeybees and bumblebees moved lazily from flower to flower gathering pollen. I could hear them buzzing, as if they were humming their pleasure in finding the pollen.

As I looked at the way colors flowed from pink to white on the flower petals, I noticed how the sounds of birds had changed with the movement of my head, felt the sun now full-warm on the right side of my face, I was washed over with a sense of total Now. I saw that the flowers were alive, the bees were alive, the tree and the birds were alive, and I was alive. The air was crystal clear, and I noticed the empty space between me and the flowers, the distance between me and the grass, the next house over, and the tree. Even the empty spaces vibrated with life.

"Wow," I said softly, then heard the sound of my own voice, and that was another miracle, amazing me all over again. It was a perfectly ordinary moment, but filled with Spirit.⁴

The Irish poet and mystic A. E. Russell describes an encounter he had while taking walks in the countryside during his adolescence:

The tinted air glowed before me with intelligible significance like a face, a voice. The visible world became like a tapestry blown and stirred by winds behind it. If it would raise for just an instant I knew I would be in paradise. Every form on that tapestry appeared to be the work of gods. Every flower was a word, a thought. The grass was speech; the trees were speech; the waters were speech; the winds were speech. They were the Army of the Voice . . . I listened with my whole being, and then these apparitions would fade away and I would be the mean and miserable boy once more.⁵

Albert Hoffman's description of his experience is particularly beautiful and apt:

One enchantment of that kind, which I experienced in childhood, has remained remarkably vivid in my memory ever since. It happened on a May morning—I have forgotten the year—but I can still point to the exact spot where it occurred, on a forest path on Martinsberg above Baden, Switzerland. As I strolled through the freshly greened woods filled with bird song and lit up by the morning sun, all at once everything appeared in an uncommonly clear light.

Was this something I had simply failed to notice before? Was I suddenly discovering the spring forest as it actually looked? It shone with the most beautiful radiance, speaking to the heart, as though it wanted to encompass me in its majesty. I was filled with an indescribable sensation of joy, oneness, and blissful security.

I have no idea how long I stood there spellbound. But I recall the anxious concern I felt as the radiance slowly dissolved and I hiked on: how could a vision that was so real and convincing, so directly and deeply felt--how could it end so soon? And how could I tell anyone about it, as my overflowing joy compelled me to do, since I knew there were no words to describe what I had seen? It seemed strange that I, as a child, had seen something so marvelous, something that adults obviously did not perceive--for I had never heard them mention it.

While still a child, I experienced several more of these deeply euphoric moments on my rambles through forest and meadow. It was these experiences that shaped the main outlines of my worldview and convinced me of the existence of a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality that was hidden from everyday sight.⁶

Notice that he mentions the long-term effects of the experience on his life. Thomas Berry, too, found his epiphany to be life-changing, as he wrote in *The Great Work*:

My own understanding of the Great Work began when I was quite young. At the time I was some eleven years old. My family was moving from a more settled part of a small southern town out to the edge of town where the new house was being built. The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do.

Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.⁷

Thomas Berry devoted his life to serving the earth, and that experience could be said to be his recruitment. Virginia Woolf describes the importance of her childhood experience:

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills -- then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.⁸

These examples demonstrate that some very talented and influential people attribute significant aspects of their lives to moments like these. There are many more. With research I learned that I was not the first to observe this. Edith Cobb's *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* is an exploration of the phenomenon. Tobin Hart, in *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, writes:

Childhood moments of wonder are not merely passing reveries. They shape the way a child sees and understands the world, and they often form a core of his or her spiritual identity, morality, and mission in life.⁹

Rupert Sheldrake, in *The Rebirth of Nature*, writes: "Many children have in certain moments a mystical sense of their connection with the world. Some forget it. Others remember it in a way that serves as a continuing source of inspiration."¹⁰ Albert Camus's well-known quotation about art seems to be saying the same thing: "A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened."¹¹

Sometimes a person's entire life becomes a long attempt to rediscover and understand that childhood epiphany. After speaking to Red Hawk that day I began to realize that I was doing just that, that most of my favorite literature and music contained references to similar experiences. Van Morrison sang "No guru, no method, no teacher, just you and I and nature . . ." Thoreau, in all his writings, expressed the timelessness and ineffable friendship he experienced out in nature. Tolkien's Bombadill—what was he but that experience personified? These authors seemed to be doing as I had done, when as part of therapy I had painted that woodland figure.

Personification was almost irresistible. The sense that I was being spoken to, that I was befriended by a great beneficent being, was so strong. Anyone who reached inside and tried to categorize it might come up with something that had some characteristics of natural things and the psychology of people. I wondered if man/plant and man/animal figures in cultures around the world had arisen when people tried to understand and describe this thing that happened to them out in the landscape.

How many people have this experience and never acknowledge it? How many have had it and felt alienated from society because of the disconnect between how important the feeling felt to them and how trivial it seemed to be in the culture? How many had not mentioned it for fear of being seen as ridiculous or just crazy when they said they had some kind of personal mystical experience? How many put it out of their conscious minds and yet had been guided by it in their likes and dislikes, in their interests and choices of vocation—in their heart of hearts?

My hunch was the numbers were large. One thing I have learned in aging is that my experiences and thoughts, no matter how individual and personal they seem, are almost always shared by large numbers of people. On more than one occasion when I have confessed some terrible thought or described some regrettable mistake from my past, I have been surprised to have my confidant, instead of looking horrified as I anticipated, nod or even laugh in recognition. Our insides are not as unique as we imagine.

How could I recognize those people? I looked at Van Morrison, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Henry Thoreau, three people I was pretty sure had been spoken to. What did they have in common, besides being creative and articulate, which were the characteristics that allowed me to be aware of them? They had in common poetry, a love of nature, taking walks, and strong spirituality, although of various types.

At this time, I was so excited by what I was realizing that I spoke about it at some length with my teenage son. When he caught on quickly and began to say things like "I was talking to this teacher at school today, and I think he's One," meaning one of the

people we'd been talking about, it increased my conviction that I was looking at something real.

In one memorable incident, we arrived early for a poetry reading and were talking with the young man who had initiated the readings and hosted them at the location. He talked to us lovingly about a beautiful natural place where he had once lived. This fellow never hesitated to speak of his spirituality, and of course, poetry was very important to him. My son and I looked at one another and I asked the question already knowing the answer: "Did you spend a lot of time alone outdoors as a child?" He said yes, and we laughed. He was One.

I soon learned that that was the question to ask. Many people when asked about a spiritual or mystical experience in childhood backed off, whether because it was too personal or because to begin to own it would dredge up a lot of stuff they didn't want to deal with, I don't know. In many cases they probably never thought of it in those terms.

One friend, for example, who I knew was One, a great lover and protector of nature, writer of poetry and who said he went to the woods as his church, when I asked him denied ever having any kind of childhood epiphany. It gave me pause and I started to rethink my understandings because I believed him. He was not a person to lie about deep things.

Then I saw him a year or so later and he asked what I was working on. I said it was this project, and I had found descriptions of these childhood experiences in the writings of some people we both admired. He smiled and said he knew he had told me he did not remember any of those experiences, but since he told me that, he had remembered a number of them. They had just taken a while to surface and be connected with the description I had offered. My great exception was resolved.

As I have continued to explore the idea, I've come to believe that these inadvertent vision quest experiences are related to other non-rational experiences people have out on the land, from those described so beautifully and thoughtfully by Freya Mathews in her "Invitation to Ontopoetics" to more famous stories like that of Carl Jung and the golden scarab, or Joseph Campbell and the praying mantis. They are part of an interplay between individual and land or place that affects many, many people but is often ignored or suppressed in memory.

The circumstance most likely to generate a memorable symbolic incident of communication from the land to an individual is the death of a loved one. Bring it up in any group of people and someone—often many someones—will have stories to tell about gestures received through some agent of nature, often but not always birds or butterflies.

The most beautiful example I can think of is a story told to me by my friend Estelle, herself a champion of conservation and ecological health, working for the state I live in to protect the integrity of our watersheds. Her older girls were grown up and out of the house by the time of the incident and her husband of many years had left her. She lived alone with her youngest daughter, Lydia, a beautiful little girl with Down's Syndrome.

The girl was my friend's deepest treasure, but Lydia's health was fading and Estelle took her to every doctor she could, trying to find a way to improve her health and keep her alive. One day while Estelle was outside briefly, Lydia somehow managed to climb up and let their parakeet out of its cage. When Estelle came in she asked, surprised, why Lydia had done it. "It wants to be free, Mommy," the girl said, "it needs to be free!" Less than a week later, Lydia died (free!).

A few days later at the part of the funeral service that was in the cemetery, as mourners were gathered and a priest was speaking, an enormous flock of snow geese flew over, filling the sky, the honking so loud that the priest could not be heard. For a

few moments he stopped and everyone just stood silent and watched hundreds of the white birds pass overhead. Estelle's voice was full of awe when she described the scene to me. She knew she had witnessed a gesture.

Millions of people experience these moments of grace—the timeless ecstatic moments of childhood, and the deft metaphors the land offers us when our hearts are open. What would it take for more people to understand those moments as part of a real back and forth between them and someone or something that knows them? How do you give people permission to believe the thing they long to believe but that society has convinced them to give up?

As for me, the clinical depression that was so deeply troubling at the beginning of this story eased as the process of discovery I have described here relieved the tension between received understandings of the world and the compelling secrets the world itself whispered to my heart so many years ago. If I wish anything it is that others wrapped in that painful struggle with themselves could reclaim, even come to treasure, those golden moments of their childhoods, and maybe find the same relief. Understanding and experiencing the earth's ability to generate meaning might even help our *dispirited* societies become *inspired* once more.

Notes

1. Nancy A. Wisser is an editor and nature journalist with a particular interest in relationships between people and land, and the raw natural experiences from which spiritual technologies like vision quest and shamanism developed.
2. G. Snyder (1990), *The Practice of the Wild: Essays*, North Point Press, San Francisco, p. 42.
3. Addressing the psychological concepts of 'inside' and 'outside' as they are understood in different cultures and how they correlate with reality is not the purpose of this paper, nor is the discussion of the various concepts behind the word 'God'.
2. M. Harner (1990), *The Way of the Shaman*, HarperOne, San Francisco, p. 65.
3. T. Hart (2003), *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Inner Ocean Publishing, Maui, p. 11.
4. T. Hartmann (2000), *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight: the Fate of the World and What We Can Do*. Three Rivers Press, New York, p. 254.
5. G.W. Russell (1918), *The Candle of Vision*, MacMillan, London, pp. 5-6.
6. A. Hoffman (1983), *LSD – My Problem Child*, McNaughton and Gunn, Saline, pp. 29-30.
7. T. Berry (1999), *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Bell Tower, New York, pp. 12-13.
8. V. Woolf (1985), *Moments of Being, A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, Harcourt Brace, San Diego, p. 64.
9. op. cit., Hart, p. 53
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