

For the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership

- "A Tender Wildness" by Jay Griffiths

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To my delight, I learned recently that there is a variety of Norfolk pear proudly called 'Hacon's Incomparable'. Even the name tastes lovely on the tongue. The earliest recorded date for this incomparable pear is 1792, one large revolution in France, one small revolution in pear orchards.

Traditional Norfolk apple varieties include the 'Look East' apple and the 'Jordan's Weeping'. That specific apple, that precise pear is named with language poetic in its precision. This kind of naming celebrates 'thisness', the especialness of species in the especialness of locale.

The law of evolution encourages especialness in individuation, diversity is a signature of the vitality of nature, and these laws of life agree with the law of love in nurturing true individuality, for the human heart cherishes especialness - 'thisness', the essential specificity of the beloved person.

'If you ask me why I loved him,' said the Renaissance French humanist Michel de Montaigne of his friend Etienne de La Boétie, 'If you ask me why I loved him, I can only say: because he was he, and I was I.' Delineating an exquisite uniqueness, it is as if their fingertips still touch, after all these centuries.

Modernity seems too often to disregard the unique, the precise locale, the especial place. Modernity supports the Mono, mono-shops, Tesco's everywhere; mono-apples of Golden Delicious, destroying variety, from apple variety to biodiversity to cultural diversity. At the heart of biodiversity and nature conservation work is an implacable belief that this place matters, this site, no matter how small it might be.

The idea of the Songlines is a resonant one to me. The Songlines of Australia are famous, but I would argue that there are songlines all over the world. Every specific place has singers of the land. In local conservation, there is always that lovely heart-slipping moment when you suddenly realize that you are with a knower of the land,

who keeps like treasure their stanza of the song, their knowledge, perhaps of that exact part of the fens, their observation, perhaps of that animal. In Australia, it is regarded as treasure and birthright, and belonging. How can one ever belong to one's land? By knowing it, by learning its songs.

Researching for my book on the world's wildness, I went to the Amazon, where shamans sing the songs of the forest, called *icaros*, songs for healing. They say that the songs are taught to them by the plants of the forests. As they chant incantations, they make the forest night quite literally en-chanted. Their songs, the *icaros*, are the songlines of the Amazon. Ethereal, quiet almost to inaudibility, they are sometimes whistled, sometimes voiced, and sometimes they sound like panpipes from miles away, music half-heard from a source unknown, where melody is more like scent, a sweet resin in the air from an unseen tree. I felt as if I was hearing the essence of the forest. The shaman fell quiet for a while, and then began another song, from his own locale, the specific trees and groves of forest. This music was green and vivid and was so strongly suggestive of plants that I felt myself plantlike, rooted in brown leaf-mould and thirsty for the sun. In Australia, the songlines go horizontal, across the land. In the Amazon, they go vertical, upwards to the sun.

West Papua is one of the world's richest places in terms of biodiversity and cultural diversity. I stayed with freedom fighters there, who were trying to force out the Indonesian military who have been operating a genocide there for the last forty years, the Papuans sang the land, sang the mountains as we walked. To sing of one's land, to sing it up, to cherish it in poetry, is a human universal. I don't see humans as a blot on the landscape but rather one of the most exquisite realisations of wildness and of songlines and of life. Mostly.

Now I want to read you a line from a poem.

'Deep mud with lugworms dominant'. This is a poem of lugubrious slumber. A long snooze after red wine on an autumn Sunday afternoon. Okay, really it is one habitat type of a saline lagoon, and sites include 'Abraham's Bosom', in Wells. 'Deep mud with lugworms dominant'. Get that.

How we humans describe nature matters. It enhances our relationship with nature when we use terms which are empathetic. It is easier for humans to understand the behaviour of animals and indeed plants if we practise a form of gentle anthropomorphism. I would argue it is one of the ways the human mind works at its best, humbly ‘standing under’ another animal in order to ‘under stand’ it. It is a way of knowing which has been scorned in the west, but it is a way of knowing which increases closeness, which brings knowledge warm to the mind, not cold as a frozen statistic alone.

Anthropomorphism hints that nature is minded – this is why Western society has disparaged anthropomorphism, but we are very much alone in trying to portray nature as mindless. Indigenous people don’t. Quite the reverse, in fact. Overwhelmingly, to them, it is a minded world.

An Inuk woman told me how for the Inuit, all the surroundings have spirits, and are “aware”. Even ideas, such as “sleep” or “weather” are alive. Inuit elders stress that no animal should be killed unnecessarily, or made to suffer, or be mocked or made fun of. Everything – even vegetation – should be treated with care. Even bees or spiders have minds “and in their own kind they are adults,” says an Igloodik elder. “That is why you do not mistreat them. Because... they can think too.”

Indigenous people perceive the wild epistemology of jaguar, or parrot, their own ways of knowing. They understand that a tapir has its way of thinking and that some plants called “plant teachers” can teach humans. And, in perhaps the most extraordinary example of knowledge coming through nature, indigenous people all over the world have practised varieties of shape-shifting, that mysterious and entirely wild way of knowing. Intuitive, mimetic, self-forgetting.

The West, though, has long operated an intellectual apartheid, arrogantly certain that its own expertise is the only knowledge worth the name: it cannot manage to respect other human societies’ epistemologies, let alone accept that an animal can think. And as for a vegetable being a teacher, it is instructive to note that in the Amazon a healer who uses plants is called a “vegetalista”, suggesting knowledge and wisdom. In

English slang, to be a “vegetable” is the cruel term for someone in a coma, and “vegging out” means mindless laziness.

In the days of empire, that single way of knowing invaded the wild world and as it did so it claimed that it was an age of “discovery” and an expansion of the “known” world, the false claims of European history that knowledge increased in that era. It did not. The truth was the opposite. For, destroying human cultures and animals’ habitats, there was in fact a net reduction in the world’s knowledge. A reduction of diversity, from biodiversity to linguistic diversity, the beginning of the Age of Monoculture.

Biodiversity is not only ecologically important but politically important. Accepting that there are different ways of knowing, different ways of speaking, is the beginning of democracy and forests are a model of a wild, tattered democracy, of seed-pod, riverbank, wind and caiman. As if pollen mattered and the beetle had a vote, an ultimate parliament, a *parlement* (literally “speaking”) where all voices can be heard. For democracy is not only a matter of voting, but of talking and discussion, of knowing and listening. Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore identified democratic pluralism and an ecological culture as the distinctiveness of Indian civilization. “From the forests, we learnt democracy,” says Vandana Shiva: “that every species has its place.” This is biodiversity written in political language, not only democratic but ecocratic.

Forest lore and shamanic knowledge is an entire way of knowing, as beautiful and profound as any in the West. A curandero is a qualified doctor, a shaman is a professor, a grove a university library. The Amazon has its artists, its John Clares, and its Mozarts, its Platos, Debussys and Ovids. Everywhere a depth of art and curing, music, metaphor and mind. The Amazon is a forest of knowing. But, in deforesting the Amazon, it is also the human mind which is being deforested.

So kill pity. Crack down on kindness. Pour mercury over metaphor. Burn their books, hack down their languages and axe their philosophies. Tip Agent Orange into the eyes of a forest Picasso. Tie a Shakespeare’s hands behind his back – with razorwire. Break Nureyev’s ankles, stamp on Fonteyn’s feet. Crack Joyce’s head

against a wall until the words whimper and fail him. Daub graffiti over an El Greco. Bulldoze the sculptures of Rodin. Burn the entire Oxford English Dictionary. Slash every copy of Jane Eyre. Napalm the Berlin Philharmonic. That is what is destroyed when biodiversity is destroyed.

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There is a strand in the Western tradition which has portrayed nature as not only mindless but also as cruel. Indigenous people do not see it that way. Kindness is at the heart of it. When I was in the Amazon, I was told that everything in nature should be addressed “con cariño” with tenderness. All animals were “gente” – people like us, and should be treated, accordingly gently. Kindly. There is an idea in the West that wildness is somehow an opposite of kindness. That wilderness is savagely cruel, and unkind. To me, that is a lie.

To me, kindness is both wild and wise.

In its etymology, what is kind is natural: the word stems from *ge-cynd* in Anglo-Saxon, which means, amongst other things, “nature”. The adjective translates as “natural, innate, genial” suggesting that we are born innately kind.

Wild creatures hunt and kill, but they do not act unkindly to humiliate other creatures. What is wild needs cage nothing, mock nothing. The kill is swift, the motive simple hunger. Cases of cruelty in the animal world are rare and may be non-existent. The cruellest, most unkind creatures are those which are most unwild: the caged. If you want to make a wild animal learn cruelty, put it in a cage.

But for hundreds of years, the propaganda of the West has pumped out the lie that what is wild is unkind. It’s a lie of consequence for imputing unkindness to the wild world justifies a murderous attitude towards it (dehumanizing your enemy to justify a genocide). That strand of European philosophy, which sought to place mankind “higher” than animals and “outside” nature, manufactured the ferocious hatred of wildness, the annihilation of whole species and the vicious destruction of wild lands.

“To kindle” means to “bring forth young” – the same Old English root as kind: kind – kin – kindle. All the wild processes of life are generative, regenerative, genial, kind –

the Arctic ice kindling polar bear cubs in a den, Earth like a wild cat kindling kittens in her hot womb. Kindness kindles life. To be kind is to be part of the boisterous, generous, creative life, while to be unkind is anti-natural. Kindness is nothing less than a force of nature – meek and mild it is not. It springs from the loins, it brings forth young, it is a lust within all wild things, a lust to kindle, the will to make kind, not only as strong as the will to make love but actually, in the word's root, identical with it. To be kind is to be on the side of life. Lovely, kind, wild life.

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This kindness is at the heart of all local conservation work. It is sometimes an act of tending, always an approach of tenderness and an attitude of attending, gentle listening, gentle presence. In local nature conservation these human qualities come to the fore. Meticulous observation is itself an act of kindness. The fact that there is a County Recorder for ants, and someone who cares enough about the Tassel Stonewort to develop an action plan for it in Norfolk is itself an example of the best of human nature. Whoever it was who named a creature the 'Little-whirlpool ram's-horn snail' should be as famous as Wordsworth. And my heart goes out to the 'Depressed River Mussel'.

It brings the molluscs closer to us, rightly so, and incidentally it is an act of friendship not to call a mollusc by its Latin name. All these things are acts of tender friendship with the wild world.

I understand that brown hares are more numerous in Norfolk than in most other counties, although they have been in rapid decline over the last thirty years. The levity of a little leveret is something which is not only necessary in the hare world but in the world of humans. We need a little of hare nature, the flash and sniff and the listening ears. Because in order to be fully human we need nature. This is not just an argument from culture, though that matters. It isn't only to say that poetry and art need nature, although they do. Every child needs its near place to play and to get lost and, critically, to learn how to love, not in the restricted sense of romantic love between two people, but deeper and unhorizoned love outwards into the world.

I want to tell you a story about the spirit of a little 'hare'. I have a friend who had a carved wooden hare on wheels, when she was a child. She had very, very few toys, and this was special. The maker must have had an incredible eye, for it is a remarkable toy, an evocation of the gladness of a leveret, and my friend called it, simply 'Little Hare'. Its paws are outstretched in the angle of joy, running, open-hearted into life. Its eyes are shiny and its nose is quick, after all these years. The funny thing is, that it is the spitting image of the spirit of my friend. How much of her is in the toy? A tiny row of toothmarks here where her babyteeth bit once. The hare's nose has numerous bumps and dents and scrapes from a thousand hours of nudging at furniture and skirtingboards, a small child pulling a little hare behind her for years. How much of the hare is in my friend? She is also open-hearted, joyous, attentive. Half a century on, it's hard to say whether she loved that toy because she saw her own nature in it, or because she knew she was somehow nurtured by the spirit of hare which it embodied. Certainly it in part is responsible for her work now, as a geneticist campaigning against genetic modification in trees and agriculture.

Because deep down underneath all the superficial differences, between a small girl and a hare, between me and a mollusc, between the Shepherd's Needle and a Fen's wainscot moth, deep down underneath we are all animated by the same principle of wild life.

In wildness is our self-willed, self-governing freedom, and such wild freedom blossoms within us, bubbles over with an anarchic ivresse of feeling. And we glint when the wild light shines.

We are animal in our blood and in our skin. We were not born for pavements and escalators but for thunder and mud. More. We are animal not only in body, but in spirit. Our minds are the minds of wild animals, a hare sniffing a quick wild scent in the air.

What is wild cannot be bought or sold, borrowed or copied. It is. Unmistakable, unforgettable, unshameable, elemental. Don't waste your wildness: it is precious and necessary. In wildness, truth. Wildness is the universal songline, sung in green gold, which we recognize the moment we hear it. What is wild is what drives the

honeysuckle, what wills the dragonfly, shoves the wind and compels the poem. Wildness is insatiable for life; neither truly knows itself without the other. Wildness is the luminousness of a bluebell wood at twilight, massing clouds boiling up their rain, the weed which cracks the pavement and the river which floods its banks, the creeping jenny run riot. It simmers in the feral intoxication of jazz, it explodes exuberant in carnival, it honks with laughter, it smashes the clocks above the factory gates and sucks up the now, it blazes in your eyes and it glories in everyone who wilfully goes their own way.

We come from its wild song – in music was the creation of the universe – and we are most fully alive when we resonate to its wildest pitch with intense and necessary love, in jaguar forests or deserts or mountains or in the lands of essential ice, or the water which first coaxed the story. Humanity’s highest purpose is to be fluent in the streaming cadences of all our world’s languages, making our earth more vivid and realizing it in song. For that is how the spirit deep within all life leaves the unforgeable signature of its wild authenticity, in the songlines of this wild world.

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