A Philosopher Looks at the Natural World

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Twenty-One Acres of Common Ground

By

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This book is dedicated to Barbara, my good partner
for almost three decades on our twenty-one acres.

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PROLOGUE

Having settled ourselves into our new home, wreck that it is, we exit through the front door and make our way across the concrete parking lot. It extends, twenty-feet wide, across the southern front of the house and turns into a parking lot on the west side. On our left, we pass the driveway—a gravel road with parallel strips of concrete textured with grooves for traction, sweeping straight down like a ski slope to the street 350 feet below. On this driveway, a previous owner of the house once put his newly purchased tractor into neutral, causing it to roll towards the street. Unable to put it into gear, he hit the driveway, picking up speed as he found his brakes too weak to stop him. Still unable to stop when he hit the street, he crashed into the trees and rolled down a ravine on the other side, losing one of his legs as a result. I am reminded of this accident as we head up the steep road cut into the hill that takes us roughly 190 yards to the plateau on the top of our property, machetes and tent in hand. Once we reach this spot, we pass through a seven-acre field, now growing alfalfa, and reach the eleven acres of woodlands.

A wide-mowed path encircles and divides the woods. On one side, it divides the largest part of the woods from land that borders a series of ravines, some of which have springs. Over time, we will notice a difference between the rich loamy soil in the ravines and the flatter portion of the woods and the field. We will learn that some twenty-five years ago, a previous owner illegally stripped off and sold the topsoil of every part of our property except the ravines, flattening the hill in preparation for a housing development he was unable to get approved. Ravines aside, all the other soil is hard clay, which the shedding leaves from the surviving trees have been unable to coat with a significant layer of leaf-mold.

As we approach the woods circled by the path, we see mounds of lush, emerald green, the luxuriant result of countless honeysuckle and bittersweet vines. Yet these are not the lovely, noninvasive native honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) and bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*), but the invasive Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) and Asian bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*). This is our first careful examination of this part of our land. Looking upward, we see the honeysuckle has encircled the tops of even our tallest trees—tulip trees, oaks, locust trees, and maples—with a

web that impedes their growth and cracks their crowns with ever-tightening nooses. We see tree trunks that have been squeezed into corkscrews in the clutches of Asian bittersweet vines that wind around them and swell with new growth each season.

Our first self-appointed task is to free the trees, cutting away the vines from the trunks to stop the damage above. We each pick a point of entry into this tangled mass. Swinging our machetes, we cut our way through the vines and discover an understory filled with another invasive plant—honeysuckle shrubs (*Lonicera maackii*). This, along with many other invasive shrubs of the same family, was introduced from Asia into North America as an ornamental plant in 1752. It turns out that Southwestern Ohio, where our township of Spring Valley is located, is one of the areas most infested with this shrub.

All of these plants, and other introduced invasive species we will find here, such as tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) - also called garbage tree, garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) that will spring up after we've cleared much of the honeysuckle, autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellate*), and multiflora roses (*Rosa multiflora*) all have allelopathic properties. This means they alter the chemistry of the soil to inhibit germination by seeds of native plants. Our soil is polluted with these chemicals. This, and their rampant growth, are taking over natural areas and systematically endangering the native shrubs, wildflowers, and trees of our region. Variants of this problem are found across the United States.

Having made separate entry points, Barb and I lose track of each other. I call out her name and hear a faint answer. I have no idea from where it is coming. I trace the path I've beaten back, find where she started, and follow her tracks to where she is located. We behold each other, covered with sweat and bloody scratches, breathing hard from our exertions. We begin to realize the enormity of the task we have set ourselves in thinking we could ecologically restore our property and refashion our house into something livable.

The house was originally an underground structure built in the 1970s, with walls and ceilings fashioned from twelve-inch-thick concrete, two glass doors, and a southern-facing window. Another owner dug away the soil that embedded the house in the hill and added a second floor with two narrow glass doors but no windows that would enable us to see the valley below where the Little Miami, a state and national scenic river, winds

through along with the scenic and historic town of Spring Valley. Nor can we see the hills that surround the valley which turn pink in the spring as the redbud trees bloom.

The floor of the upper level is the tar-covered concrete that was originally the roof of the underground house. It is one room with a ceiling fourteen feet tall at the center, large enough to allow us to play some version of basketball if we wished to, along with a bathroom. There is also something wrong with the electrical system. Upstairs, the polarities of the outlets are reversed. Downstairs, flipping a switch often elicits an electrical shock. There is no central heating. The back concrete walls of the downstairs are covered with drops of moisture and patches of mildew. One bathroom is so moldy that we close the door, not to open it again until we are finally able to remodel the downstairs. There are two small bedrooms and a bathroom along the back side of the downstairs, as well as a pantry covered in red wallpaper that our niece says looks like it came from a tattoo parlor.

The front side of the house is one long room. On one end is the living area partly filled with a huge brick fireplace that is unusable because it is not connected to a chimney. On the other end is an open kitchen with a few cabinets and a stove that, by the time we remodel this area, will be down to one working burner. The roofers wait some time to install the shingles after laying down the tar paper. A violent storm will tear off large sheets of it and water will infiltrate the downstairs where we are living. After this, we will move under the moisture-stained wallboard and loosened strips of joint tape. We will live in this dungeon for about six years.

Addressing the problems of the house and trying to clear the woods of invasive species, planting native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers to create a biodiverse landscape will occupy us for close to thirty years. But on that first day of clearing vines, we have not yet grasped the enormity of our project. We are in our mid-thirties, full of vigor and dreams of life among wild things.

That night, we put up our tent in a part of the woods less infested with invasive plants. We start a fire, cook our dinner, talk for a bit, and then lie down wearily on our sleeping bags. An early riser, I awake to the sounds of birds and leave the tent with my binoculars. Entranced by the unspeakable beauty of these songs, which are like nothing I've ever heard, I try to track down the birds to view them. Their ethereal song has a flute-like quality,

and they seem to have ventriloquial abilities since parts of the melody seems to emit from more than one location. Later I will learn that I am hearing wood thrushes and that the unearthly quality of their songs is partly attributable to the males' ability to sing duets with themselves by singing harmonizing pairs of notes simultaneously, one in each branch of its y-shaped syrinx, or voice box. Many have tried to describe the song, but none can do it justice. It is one of the most beautiful sounds in the world. Of it, Thoreau wrote, "Whenever a man hears it, he is young, and Nature is in her spring. Wherever he hears it, it is a new world and a free country, and the gates of heaven are not shut against him."[1] Though their songs fill the woods, I am not able to locate a single one.

Even so, this is magic. This earthly magic that we discover among the ordinary life of this place, however damaged it is, will help to carry us through the next twenty-eight years of labor—a labor still unfinished. As we steadily increase the habitat of our property, the magic will increase as more wild things move in. But as we have grown older, we sometimes wonder whether the labor will wear us down and how long we will be able to keep it up. Looking at our neighbors' properties that are in the same condition as ours was on that first day, we wonder whether our inevitable surrender of the land because of old age or death will allow the seeds from those invasive plants to take root on our property and make all our efforts vain.

In what follows, I will describe what led up to that first day in the woods and what has followed until the present time. Since I am a professional philosopher who has concentrated on environmental philosophy in the later part of my career, I will provide both a narrative of our journey and an attempt to describe the philosophical lessons I've drawn from it—lessons about what we are, the nature of this amazing planet, and where we fit in its rare and precious system of life. Much of what I say will, I'm afraid, be tinged with sadness about what we have done, how we have fashioned ourselves, and what we are losing. However sad these things make me, I write this book in the hope that we can find a way to change, understand our place in the natural order, and discover a more constructive and wiser path forward

CHAPTER 1

THE WOODS

> A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship. But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fiber thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself.
>
> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 81.

For many years, I have taught courses in environmental philosophy and sustainability. I have also taught these subjects as part of *Introduction to Philosophy*, a course that all students are required to take at the Catholic university where I work. In each class, I have asked my students whether there was some special place during their childhood where they found a deep connection to the natural world. The places they mention range from tree-shaded creeks, the wild shores of a lake, wooded lots, or even a mere tree or cluster of trees or shrubs in their neighborhood where they found a kind of magic, mystery, or solace. Too often, their stories end with how that place was taken from them by development or sometimes even their own parents who cut down their trees or replaced a wooded area with a grass lawn—a green desert devoid of the most interesting living things. My students often express both resentment and grief when describing these things. Those feelings and memories seem to have been suppressed until I ask my question, as though they felt it was expected of them to simply accept that this is how the world is: People are entitled to do as they please with their property, we should expect to be robbed of precious things, and nature is dispensable. This is what we call progress and growing up requires accepting it. They are convinced that their belief that those lost places could have been preserved, like their childish belief in Santa Claus, must be abandoned as the price of "growing up." But the longing for those places is not lost, only buried, until we excavate them together in the classroom by

asking whether the destruction of beautiful things and intimacy with the natural world can really be called progress.

My memories of my own childhood are fragmented. I marvel when I read memoirs in which the authors recount conversations and events from their early days in great detail. What I recall instead are mere images, feelings, or fleeting memories of scenes that flash before my mind's eye. They are not more vivid than some recurring dreams I have had, or a series of dreams set in a common place that seem like a real place where I have lived. My inner life seems shaped nearly as much by dreams as by memories.

In one recurring dream from my childhood, I live in a medieval town on a waterfront with a long dock extending high above the ocean. The village is plagued by the predations of a dragon and a meeting is called to decide upon some course of action. It is decided that someone has to be armed, to take a defensive position on the dock since that is where the incursions occur and fend off the dragon to protect the village. To my surprise, this burden falls to me. As I ask why it has to be me, all but one of the villagers vanishes. He hands me what appears to be a sword in its scabbard before he himself disappears. I stand alone examining the weapon in my hand, only to discover that the scabbard holds not a sword, but a lollipop.

Wondering what I am to do, I wander to the edge of the dock, searching for signs of the dragon. I lose my balance and tumble toward the ocean far below. As I reach its surface, all is transformed. I plummet not into the water but through clouds, drifting into a green meadow surrounded by mountains, my landing eased at the last minute by a parachute. This recurring dream seems to prefigure the futility I often feel as I battle against the forces that rob the world of beauty, but there are no such comforting endings as in my dreams.

I have often dreamed, as I suppose many have, that I can fly. But my dreams of flight always include the hazard of a sky so strewn with power lines that flight is dangerous. In them, I must resign myself to a terrestrial existence knowing that if we had made our cities differently, I could have soared up high and moved freely over the landscape.

In adulthood, I have dreamed so often of some places that I sometimes find it hard to believe that they don't really exist and that the events that occur within them are not a real part of my history. There is a place with a

tall house, like the one we are remodeling—a place to which we have moved because of the spectacular scenes of nature that surround it—streams of pure water flowing through a wooded valley, a vista of wooded hills and mountains, and prairies filled with flowers and grasses populated by a rich variety of birds and other wild things. In my dreams, there are always two disasters: The view is eroded by the encroachment of mining that gradually eats away at the trees, streams, and prairies, replacing them with a ravaged landscape; or the house begins to collapse in on itself due to flooding and defective construction.

In my childhood, I lived in four different houses. I have no memory of the first, where we lived until I was four years old. However, I vividly remember our house on Gramercy Street in Toledo, Ohio. In my memories, it sits on the corner of a field and woods that seem immense to me, dense with things to explore and wonder about: a field where we are always surrounded by bees, wasps, butterflies, dragonflies, and other insects, and woods with trees to climb and build platforms upon. We cut the ends of grapevines free so that we can use them to swing from tree to neighboring tree. There is a moist area with a dense colony of canes from which we weave our forts. I lie on a tree fallen over the creek and study life in the water, entranced by the aquatic insects and their mysterious forms of locomotion. I wonder to what hidden homes or lairs they disappear. One year, I collect salamander eggs and place them in a fishbowl. With fascination, I follow their development from black droplets at the center of firm but gelatinous eggs, to slender comma-shaped forms with feather-like gills around their necks. Once they emerge, not knowing how to care for them, I return them to the creek.

I spend almost all my free time exploring those woods and studying the things within. My parents purchase a microscope for me, and I discover the hidden structure of insects, feathers, and other small ornaments of the natural world. I wander alone through the field and the woods, follow the creek, and climb trees to watch what goes on in the canopy. These moments hold me entirely in their grasp and freeze time; the scenes before me becoming a portal to some other dimension of this world. I am especially enchanted with the birds and talk to them, half expecting them to talk back. I feel myself part of the community of living things and that we are all, in some way, kin. My attempts to understand these feelings will preoccupy me throughout much of my adult life.

One year, a pair of robins builds a nest on the awning over our picture window. The nest incorporates the window itself as part of one side, and by standing on a stool, we can see the improbably blue eggs, and later the hatchlings, naked and ugly at first, each day visibly developing into something new. Pin feathers emerge from waxy coated sheaths supplied with proteins and pigments by their blood, gradually forming into recognizable feathers. As the nestlings grow, the nest becomes so crowded that it seems inevitable that at least one will be nudged over the side to its death. We watch with anxiety as they fledge, wondering whether they will fall prey to cats, careless and curious children, or other predators. The whole process that unfolds before us seems a miracle, one more example of the mystery and magic that surrounds me.

From our home in Toledo, Ohio, my parents send me to a summer camp for two weeks each year—Camp Storer, established in 1918 as the summer camp facility for the YMCA of Greater Toledo. This camp, which still exists, includes a lake surrounded by approximately 1,250 acres in the Irish Hills region of southeast Michigan. I spend many happy days there fishing, sailing, swimming, and taking three-day trips by canoe or horseback, sleeping under the stars. I study the creatures among the reed beds of the lake. One summer, I collect a mussel and bring it home in a fishbowl, which we place on a table. After the evening darkens, I take my parents and sisters to examine my find more closely. We switch on the light and find it transmogrified. Its shells no longer tightly closed, they have opened to allow a smooth white appendage, its "foot," to probe and glide across the glass bottom.

When I turn ten, we move from the house on the edge of the woods to a neighborhood vacant of woods, fields, or creeks. Our house sits at the edge of a circular "park," barren of all but grass. During the two years we live there, all the enchantment of my previous life vanishes except the sound of a cardinal that calls outside my bedroom window early in the mornings and the nest that one pair builds in a pine tree next to our screened-in back porch. From one corner of the porch, we can just peek into the nest.

During my two years at this house, I am largely taken away from the natural world and my energy turns to games on the streets and driveways—kick-the-can, hockey on roller skates, basketball, and baseball. But an older cousin reveals to me elements of nature in the city. She likes to share with me what she is learning in her science classes. One spring we collect twigs with small hard buds. She points out details in the structure of the twigs and

buds that I have never noticed and explains to me their significance for the tree's future development. We study the anatomy of birds by reassembling the bones of a chicken, boiled clean and dried.

In sixth grade, with my mother's help, I conduct a science project on feathers and flight. My mother and I amass a large collection of feathers. A friend of the family who hunts ducks gives me their severed wings, which I mount and dry to display. I learn about the different kinds of feathers, their various structures, and what each contributes to maintaining the lives of birds and the modes of flight characteristic of each kind. Despite this, and in the absence of immersive experiences of nature, I am frequently and unexpectedly overwhelmed with the feeling that a chasm separates me from my earlier life as though I've lost a part of myself or that my past life was only a vivid dream.

In 1965, when I am thirteen, we move to Burlington, Iowa because of my father's promotion to a managerial position at Champion Spark Plug. Along the back of our yard is a ravine with a creek, and beyond that, woods and a pond. Again, I can wander and observe. The pond, though small, hosts a pair of kingfishers. I spend hours prostrate behind some shrubs watching those birds with their blue Mohawk crests and long, strong bills diving for tadpoles and fish. I listen to their odd, chattering calls. A neighbor with training in forestry takes walks with me and my mother to put names to the trees and shrubs.

My mother and I join the Burlington Bird Club. My mother brags to members about my science project and collection of feathers and wings, which now includes wings of other birds taken from road kills, including those of a great horned owl. They ask me to conduct a presentation on feathers and flight. Among the members of the Burlington Bird Club is Fredric Leopold who is in his nineties and has been concerned about the survival of wood ducks, studying their nesting habits and designing wooden duck houses. I learn he is the youngest brother of Aldo Leopold who had written an important book called *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949, the year of his death. Intrigued that Burlington had been the home of this famous man, my mother and I read the book. I find that it articulates, in poetic and philosophical reflections, what previously I had only felt—that I belong to the larger community of life—an interconnected system which includes not only vegetation, insects, and animals, but abiotic elements such as air, sun, water, and soil, the basis on which life depends. At age thirteen, my life is transformed. I will return to that book many times, later using one

of its essays in nearly all the classes I teach. What were at first vague impressions of my childhood will become increasingly rooted in my understanding as I probe what science tells us about what we, and the world around us, are.

At the same time, I am tutored in how to search out encounters with wild things, and learn that the ability to closely observe, identify, and study the details of their lives imparts rich particularity to that larger community. A much older boy who belongs to the Bird Club is seriously interested in birds and will go on to become an accomplished ornithologist. One winter, I am flattered when he invites me to accompany him on a field trip. I marvel at his ability to find and identify birds—a marsh hawk, sleek and long-tailed, with its wings slightly upraised as it glides low over a wetland, a brown creeper near a creek probing the bark of trees for insects with its slender, downward-curving bill. Looking closely at the trees around me, I can find no signs of anything that could be food for the brown creeper. Nor can I conceive how the hawk can find prey in the vast areas over which it soars. I begin to wonder how these marvelous creatures are able to navigate their environments so gracefully and effortlessly and make a living. I wonder how such delicate creatures as titmice, chickadees, and nuthatches can survive the frigid temperatures. I want to know more. I want to unlock some of these mysteries, and so I read.

I learn that many of a bird's bones are hollow—filled with the very air through which they fly and given strength by struts that cross back and forth within them. I learn that their powers of vision far exceed our own. The small, dark, lidded beads that appear to view are only the smallest part of their eyes, the orbs of which fill much of their skulls. This all seems quite incredible to me. Although I am rather squeamish, I force myself to dissect dead birds I find on the road to see for myself what I have read about them.

After I move to Iowa City to attend college, I return home one day to find that the woods behind our house has been scraped free of mature trees and plants. A house, aspiring to be an estate, is in the process of construction. A long paved and winding road leads up to it through what is now a grass lawn with a few small exotic species of trees pathetically planted here and there. And I'm sure that in Toledo, Ohio, the woods of my childhood on Gramercy Street is now gone, fallen to development. Like my students, I have found that many of the places that I loved are gone.

Reflecting on my childhood experiences of nature, I find it difficult to articulate why they were, and remain, so important and meaningful to me. What did they do to and for me? The philosopher Arnold Berleant has tried to characterize aesthetic experiences of natural environments as experiences that engage the whole person and transfigure a place. Perception and concentration become so immediate and intense that the experience is endowed with a vividly singular quality, evoking the "sense that the occasion has a distinct and special significance that makes it unique."[2] A sense of the sublime arises from a perceptual encounter with something of "overwhelming magnitude or power." These experiences almost magically vivify the perceptual world and transform the self, binding it to a place.[3]

Berleant's grand language brings to mind experiences I had later in life, such as of the magnificence of redwoods, sequoia trees, and towering mountains that made me feel dwarfed and insignificant in their presence. But it applies as well to my childhood wanderings in the woods. Climbing a tree to what seemed a great height, surrounded by its canopy, I would marvel that this tree had begun many years before as a small nut or seed that sent forth the slender beginnings of its first small root. I would run my hands over its trunk and branches and feel their strength. I would wonder at the thousands of leaves around me that were produced anew each spring after the barrenness of its winter life. I felt enclosed by the tree and held, as it were, in its sheltering hand. Lying on a log over the creek, a world of insects, tadpoles, and turtles would unfold before my eyes. The more closely I looked, the more this world enlarged as I noticed creatures tinier and tinier, some as small as a particle of sand. I sometimes felt that if I had the eyes to see, I would discover that the creek contained unending worlds within worlds. In these moments, the larger world around me was lost as I was absorbed by the particular mysteries immediately before and around me.

When my students express grief at the loss of the special natural places of their childhood, it is important to consider just of how much they have been deprived. A vast literature documents the effects of natural environments on the development and wellbeing of children. I will discuss the positive effects of natural environments in Chapter 7. Lack of prolonged exposure to nature and green spaces has been shown to have serious longterm consequences for the physical and psychological health of children, including increased levels of depression, cognitive disabilities, obesity, and diabetes.[4] In addition, to be deprived of experiences of the natural world's beauty is to be deprived of the opportunity, and quite possibly the capacity, to discover what kind of beings we are and to perceive

the world as the gift it is—to experience grace.

As ecosystems are degraded, we also lose aesthetic and spiritual values that cannot be measured in standard currency. I have mentioned my love of birds. Who can measure the loss of beauty as the populations of songbirds steadily decline: Their graceful flight, their often-delightful colors, their forms and shapes so perfectly adapted to their environment, their songs, which have been shown to vary creatively among individuals of the same species and which many think not only declare their territory and attract mates, but express and communicate pure musical joy?[5]

In March 2009, Ken Salazar, the US Secretary of the Interior, released a comprehensive assessment of the state of bird populations in America, which reported that nearly a third of the nation's eight hundred bird species are endangered, threatened, or in serious decline because of conversion of habitat to development, loss of wetlands, and pollution. This raises the heart-rending prospect of a landscape emptied of the beauty, cheerful activity, and song of birds. A *New York Times* editorial published on April 1, 2009, observed,

> There is no glossing over these staggering losses, and there is no dismissing what they mean. There is nothing accidental or inevitable about the vanishing of these birds. However unintentional, it is the direct result of human activity — of development, of global warming, of air and water pollution and of our failure to set aside the habitat these birds need to flourish … Every threatened species reveals some aspect of our lives that could be adjusted.

We need to make a place for beauty in our world and our ways of measuring progress ought to take account of the loveliness of the world that we save.

My childhood experiences shaped me in immeasurable ways. They have made me hunger for the companionship of living things. They have also made me grieve over the poverty of the world that is emerging around me—tamed and degraded landscapes, artificial environments, an increasingly sterile world. As I face each year's new class of first-year students, I can't help but wonder how much they have been harmed and stunted by the heritage we have passed on to them. I feel that we cannot content ourselves with only preserving the natural areas that remain. They are too distant from where we live our daily lives and where our children play. In many regions, they are little more than scattered patches. As I entered adulthood and moved from city to city, I often found it difficult to discover a way to live

that could reintroduce the magic I found in my childhood. To do that, and to create a world worthy of inheritance by new generations of children, I increasingly feel that we must not only preserve the few places that harbor a diversity of life, but that we must engage in a great restoration and healing of our surroundings. We must reimagine cities, suburbs, and built environments. We must reimagine prosperity and rethink what it means to flourish. Our flourishing cannot be divorced from the flourishing of our diverse and distant kin, our companions in the dramatic arc of the history of life.

CHAPTER 2

LEARNING TO SEE

> Thus, what Paul says about all human beings, namely that God 'has made of one blood all nations of men' [Acts 17:26], can be taken to apply to all creatures … And we can see why God did this. He made all 'nations' of human beings to be 'of one blood' so that they would love one another, would be united by the same sympathy, and would help one another. In implanting a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures, God made them all members of one body and all (so to speak) brothers who all have the same Father…
>
> Anne Conway, *The Principles of the most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1692) 6.4

> It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow- creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.
>
> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac,* 109.

There was a period of my life, extending from my last year in college in 1975 to 1983, that I have not shared with even my closest friends. One reason for this is that I simply do not know what to make of some of what happened to me. Yet, there were several experiences that profoundly affected me and shaped my life in formative ways. I will mention only three, but first I should provide some context. Up until the middle of high school, I was a regular churchgoer. The Vietnam War was raging, with nightly images of the violent conflict and of young men not much older than myself returning home in flag-draped coffins after losing their lives in combat. It was a time of extreme violence. The Civil Rights Movement was at its peak. The nightly news displayed incidents of police violence against Black people protesting nonviolently for recognition of their civil rights. On September 15, 1963, the year of the March on Washington and Martin

Luther King Jr.'s speech in which he so famously proclaimed "I have a dream," four young girls were killed, and many others were injured in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. In that same year, my mother and I watched the Democratic National Convention in horror and disbelief at police violence against protestors in the streets of Chicago.

During this same period, there were multiple environmental disasters. For example, over a ten-day period in 1969, an oil well off the coast of Santa Barbara spilled an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 barrels, contaminating a long stretch of coastline and killing dolphins, elephant seals, sea lions, and an estimated 3,500 sea birds. That same year, the Cuyahoga River caught on fire in Cleveland, Ohio because of toxic contamination. Although the river had actually caught on fire several times before, this one caught the attention of the news media and was widely publicized. In one class during my senior year of high school, we read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. I was startled into the realization that the living things I loved were under threat by the poisons unleashed upon them by our culture.

I was awakened, as from a dream, to a world of violence and threats to the natural environment all around me and became deeply troubled by what in philosophy and theology is called the problem of evil. How is it possible that an all-powerful, all-good, and all-wise God could have created a world that contains so much evil? Overwhelmed by the chaos, hatred, violence, and pollution so unrelentingly displayed on the news, I eventually concluded that there could be no God. I remained an atheist from my last two years in high school through my years in college.

In college, I found myself without the inner resources to cope with my despair over what humanity was bringing forth on the planet or to find meaning in life. I began to explore religions of various kinds and to experiment with meditative practices. One day while meditating in the tiny backyard of our trailer that overlooked a hill, I was focusing on the single tree growing there and a busy squirrel. In that inauspicious setting, I suddenly *saw* in a way that I cannot fully describe how everything was connected as parts of a whole. In some ways, this only increased my despair as human destructiveness in an interconnected world was bound to ripple through it all. I began to look for some transcendent source of hope—some reason to believe that despite daily evidence to the contrary, things would turn out well and that good would prevail.

As I was finishing my final year in college and working second shift as a custodian at the University of Iowa hospitals, I became friends with a fascinating and brilliant coworker, Ed Smith, who was a Christian. He was affiliated with an obscure denomination which was one of a number that had broken off from the Nazarene Church because of what they saw as its compromises to the early teachings and practices of Methodism. After dropping out of Harvard he had been a poet, a political radical, a translator in Vietnam, and eventually a Christian convert. He moved to Iowa City from California to start a church and conducted services for a very small congregation in his tiny apartment. We had many long conversations in which I shared with him my despair and longing for some deep source of hope. It was a long time before I could bring myself to join his little congregation, but I did begin to pray and open myself up to the possibility of some larger meaning than the unsettling reality of the visible world.

At that time, Barb and I were living in a small loft apartment. One night, I was bathing in the large, old clawfoot tub when I suddenly felt that I was being examined by some all-seeing eye, and that all my failings and sins were exposed. Deeply unsettled and frightened, I became serious about renouncing all evil in myself and searching for God. I am entirely aware that this experience, along with the two others I will recount, could have been a psychological delusion, but I was deeply affected.

I began to read the Gospels with Ed. I was profoundly moved by the teachings of Jesus, which I still seek to follow to this day. I found the Sermon on the Mount and his parables to be astonishing. The words of Jesus struck me as something almost supernatural in themselves. Ed assured me that in contrast to what I had been taught by the more tepid religious denominations of my childhood and youth, one could find evidence of God's existence through direct experience—a direct encounter with divinity. If such a thing were possible, I felt it my duty to pursue it.

When we left Iowa City for Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Barb had been recruited to the graduate program in Russian, we attended the services of a small church with similar doctrines in the nearby town of Ypsilanti. While I could not help but be appalled by some of what I heard from the pulpit, one of the fundamental tenants of these denominations is that a total renunciation of the self will result in a work of grace that will radically transform one's orientation. I attempted night and day to abandon myself to God. One evening, after three weeks of fasting and prayer, I had one of the most transcendent and indescribable experiences of my life. I felt that I was

in the presence of holiness, I was filled with joy, and lost consciousness of everything around me. I do not know how long this episode lasted but its effects were enduring. I felt myself a different person—a new self.

Another evening, I spent all night praying and reading the Bible, which was open to Matthew 9 in the King James version. Suddenly, a burning light fell upon two lines of the text in Matthew 9:16-17: "No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved." For years I have puzzled over what to make of this. I took a meaning from it that does not exactly conform to what I have learned through my study of its historical context, and how I understand these words has changed over the years. I now think of them as calling for a complete transformation of the self and society—that neither can be fixed by merely mending this or that aspect of the status quo.

I felt myself called to a life of devotion, and after attending a seminary, entered the ministry. Eventually, we found ourselves in Urbana, Illinois near the campus of the university there where I tried to do as Ed had done by starting a home mission. Over several years of doing this, I found myself increasingly troubled by the doctrines and practices of the denomination with which I was affiliated. Some seemed obviously sexist and oppressive, and I could not reconcile them with the religious reality I thought myself to have experienced. I began to wonder what doctrinal content I could directly infer from those experiences. I withdrew from the church and pursued graduate study in philosophy, thinking that it might provide me tools to sort it out. Regretfully, it did not. Philosophical reflection on religious questions has only deepened my puzzlement.

As I have mentioned, I am acutely aware of the mind's power to deceive itself and to manufacture delusory experiences. I have even researched and published an article on the subject[6] So, I do not entirely trust the experiences I have described, yet I also feel that I cannot entirely renounce them. While I do not know what to make of them, they did form who I am and change my orientation towards the world. Most fundamentally, they made me aware of the holiness permeating the visible order of things, but I have found it increasingly difficult to locate that holiness in the being of a personal god, primarily because I cannot begin to conceive of any person-like being who created a universe as vast and complex as this one. I cannot

see that a guiding hand is moving this world in the direction of the good. And I have become profoundly disenchanted with organized religions in which those who call themselves Christians seem to have no interest in following the teachings of Jesus which have never lost their power for me, even though I find myself unable to believe the doctrines of the trinity and incarnation. But my memory of the holy reality that I thought myself to experience and my increasing immersion in the living world has left me convinced that life is something sacred and that among the worst sins of humanity are ingratitude and the defilement of this gift.

Having lived most of my life in tamed landscapes of Ohio, Iowa, and Illinois, it was while living in Urbana that I was first exposed to the grandeur of unspoiled wilderness. A fellow pastor invited me on a fishing trip to a place in northern Minnesota surrounded by the Chippewa National Forest. Since 1980, my wife and I have vacationed nearly every year in an isolated cabin on a lake there— at a resort near the tiny town of Marcell, which is about thirty miles north of Grand Rapids, Minnesota, the birthplace of Judy Garland. Our annual journeys there have extended over a longer period of time than either of us have lived in any particular place. Our experiences there have woven a dominant thread into the fabric of our lives. For the first twenty-two years, we stayed in the "honeymoon cabin," built in the 1940s. We treasured its isolation from the rest of the resort and signs of human habitation. Although we loved the old place, it was not because of the aesthetic qualities of the cabin itself, which, over the many years, had leaned so far to one side that the top and bottom of the front door had to be trimmed at angles to match its crooked frame. Most of the windows could not be opened because they were so tightly jammed by the twists of the building, and the cabin was home to mice with whom we became intimately acquainted. Eventually, the resort was purchased by a couple in the business of building custom log "cabins," which are actually gorgeously handcrafted mansions, and one now sits upon the site of the old honeymoon cabin. Both the cabin and the site are stunningly beautiful.

Over the years, we have seen many wonderful things in that spot in the Northwoods. It is filled with forests of flowering shrubs, red pines, white birches, oaks, balsam, and aspens, among other trees, an astonishing variety of ferns, fungi, and wildflowers, and bogs vegetated with tamaracks, bog rosemary, sphagnum moss, orchids, cotton grass, and pitcher plants with their strange red blooms and tubular leaves, flared slightly at the top, for luring and trapping insects.

Our cabin is on a lake so clear that we can see the boulders on its bottom through forty feet of water. We are told that one evening in the past, some fishermen took their boat to a bay of the lake, searching for water shallow enough to fish in waders. As they pulled into the cove and slowed their boat, one leaped out and disappeared into deep water before bobbing back to the surface. The others reached out desperately, and with a great struggle, pulled him into the boat and took him to shore where they helped him empty his waders of water. When asked why he had jumped overboard, his explanation was that in his home state of Indiana, if you can see the bottom of the lake, you know that you are in shallow water.

★

The sun is setting. The lake calms to a stretch of blue glass. Between us and the lake, a line of pines is transformed into complexly shaped silhouettes pierced here and there with the pale last light of day held by the western sky. When the sun finally sets, a full moon makes the birch trees and boulders scattered about the shores luminous. Finally, the swarms of mosquitos force us to shelter in the cabin. We talk through the night into the early hours of morning. Between stretches of silence, we hear for the first time, the excited, eerie, and lunatic calls of the common loon filling the night. Around 2:00 a.m., we step onto the deck and look up. Stars smear the black sky like clotting milk. The universe above and the surrounding night never seemed so vast.

★

One afternoon, fishing from our kayak, we see an eagle swoop out of nowhere to a high perch on a pine not far from us. We paddle quietly to just below it. The wind rustles the white feathers of its neck and head. We do not seem to exist in its world—we are insignificant, and it deigns not to look our way until we catch a fish and draw it splashing into the net. After a while it departs, first upwards, the strokes of its wings slow but mighty, then stretched motionless as it glides lower and lower over the water, finally disappearing from our view into the distance. Moments later, we see it climbing back up into the sky with a large and wiggling northern pike grasped in its talons, one in front of the other, orienting the fish to the direction of its flight. It circles widely until the fish is motionless. We hear a scream and see another eagle head towards the first. They fly together beyond our vision's reach.

★

We travel to a small remote lake for a day of fishing and a night of camping. Immediately beyond where we launch our kayak is an island bog anchored to the bottom at the center with floating vegetation forming its edge. On it, we see wild orchids called grass pinks, along with ferns, sundews, bog rosemary, cranberries, and a rich variety of other plants. We paddle beyond the bog, circling the lake to a promontory where we pitch our tent beneath a stand of tall and fragrant red pines, then we are back on the lake in search of fish for dinner. We return to our camp site and fix a supper of bass, potatoes, and vegetables grilled over an open fire. After dinner, we sit in enjoyment of the evening's peace, listening to the loons, and watching the birds flying among the surrounding trees and bushes, and finally enter our tent for the night. Around midnight, Barb jostles me awake to hear the sounds of coyotes calling back and forth around us, then a pack of wolves join in. It is a spine-tingling performance. While not believing we are in danger, it is strangely thrilling to know that distant animals, exactly how distant we do not know, are powerful enough to kill us. Then comes silence and sleep until we are awakened again, this time by the hooting of a great horned owl in the pines above our tent.

We arise at 4:00 a.m. and paddle out to discover what transpires between darkness and first light. Coming around a bend of the lake, we see three large heads breaking the water—beavers whose powerful swim home from their nightly chores leaves ripples behind them. One spots us, making a loud warning slap on the water before diving. The slaps of the others follow, and they are gone from our sight.

★

This year as we arrive, the owners of the resort greet us, followed by some orphans they have adopted—a male fawn and two young otters. Through the course of the week, the youthful buck is usually friendly, but at other times he tests his skills for future battles with brief charges towards us, his head lowered to wield emerging antlers.

Whenever we approach the dock, the otters follow with lopes that seem strangely off kilter. They talk back and forth in rapid little grunts and squeaks. As we enter our boat and row away from the dock, they follow behind for some distance and then abandon us in search of something more interesting. Next year we will learn that as they matured, they learned how