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# Robert Michael Pyle Interviewed by Jason M. Wirth

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Robert Michael Pyle, Bob to those who know him, has produced one of the most philosophically distinctive and provocative bodies of literature in the Pacific Northwest. He lives in his adopted home, Swede Park, by the town of Gray's River (Bob insists, contrary to current bureaucratic practice, that the apostrophe be retained). It lies in the verdant (120 inches of rain per annum) yet injured forestlands of the Willapa Hills in southwestern Washington, near the lower Columbia River. An internationally renowned lepidopterist, Bob has also emerged as a student and bard of these 'ravaged' and 'forgotten' lands, attentive to their details, 'living for keeps,' and imagining what it might mean to one day co-evolve with them.

I call these writings philosophical not because they explicitly position themselves in any philosophical lineage. One of the many striking features of Bob's exquisite writing is its impressive poly-disciplinarity, at home in science, poetry, literature, history, nature writing, and ecological reflection. I call them philosophical because they have much to teach philosophers about the power of thinking and writing, attentiveness to place, and 'living for keeps.'

When the Pacific Association for the Continental Tradition was founded almost fifteen years ago, we wondered what thinking about European philosophical traditions while living on the western coast would mean. We have come to learn that it means that the most important word is the Pacific, and that is so because we discovered that we are increasingly attentive to place, including the contemporary challenges and opportunities for these places. It has come to mean the poetics of this place, as well as its roots in indigenous culture, science, poetics, natural history, and the looming ecological crisis. This brings us to Bob Pyle, who embodies and performs this complexity.

Jason M. Wirth

**JMW:** Bob, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us and for your inspiring work. And I have been doing a deep dive into it in the last few weeks, and I am absolutely jazzed about your writing.

**RMP:** Thank you so much, Jason.

**JMW:** I would like to begin by asking you about the ambiguous affective resonance of your work. It evokes a deep fidelity to the Willapa Hills (as well as other places), even a love for them. They are beautifully attentive to all its citizens, human, animal, insect, but also trees, plants, fungi, stones, soils, hills, mountains, waters. They are also mournful. Precisely because it avoids grandstanding, your critique of the “sack of the woods” is unforgettable. A land can be “both pleasant and ravaged.” Can you tell us about this complicated love and how it can teach us to become more present to place?

**RMP:** Jason, I was born and brought up in Denver, Colorado, and in Aurora, which at that time in the fifties was a very small suburb of Denver, just a village really, now bigger than Denver itself in size. As a result, I was exposed to a wide array of childhood habitats. I was attentive to and enraptured by what people would generally call nature, although I use the term to be a synonym of being, of all things besides the merely human—nature in terms of all plants and animals and their rocks and soils as well as people. Yes, I was enraptured by nature from a very early age, but it was not pristine. I lived in the north edge of Denver and then in a brand-new subdivision freshly bulldozed out of old marshes and farms. However, in both locations, there were nearby rural landscapes that had been more or less as they were for quite a long while.

I was able to follow a dusty road into farmland on the edge of North Denver, and later along the High Line Canal in Aurora, which wound seemingly forever to the east. These rural pathways took me places that stood in as wilderness for a small boy, even though it was far from that. There was a wildness to it in the cottonwood leaves and crayfish claws and so many other kinds of plants and animals. I learned my butterflies, which would become crucial to my life, there on the High Line Canal. Where water from the Rockies met the arid Great Plains, life forms followed and concentrated—what a lesson! When my father took us up into the mountains on fishing trips, I was exposed to actual wildlands for the first time. I fell even more deeply enraptured with wilderness than I’d been with rural brooks and fields. But I grew up on the wrong side of Denver to be a Rocky Mountain kid, and I’ve always maintained a love for the In-Between lands, the backlands, what I call the “hand-me-down habitats” or the “secondhand lands.”

As a kid of the farmed-out, beat-up, dried-out edge of the Great Plains, I took my wildness where I could get it. That meant that my love was distributed among some surprising candidates like weedy fields and muddy ditches. It was not just the pristine range of the high Rocky Mountain tundra, which I love very deeply, too. This bilateral love of wildly contrasting landscapes came to me naturally and very early on. When I came to the Northwest in 1965 to enter the University of Washington and became a student conservationist, I devoted myself to the protection of both a campus swamp-become-landfill and new national parks. I was an environmental activist all through college, both for our student group and in city organizations such as the Sierra Club and Seattle Audubon Society, and it was here that I got to know the old growth forests.

Post- graduate study in two successive forestry schools taught me the tenets of forest management. I was not naive about the fact that most of our national forests were devoted to timber production, and yet I was also pretty sophisticated at a young age in the politics, practice, and philosophy of wilderness protection à la John Muir, Bob Marshall, Margaret and Olaus Murie, Polly Dyar, and others who developed this discipline within conservation. I idealized living near the Big Wild as a writer, naturalist, and scientist. But when I finally came here to Gray's River in the Willapa Hills, I found I had moved to what is fashionably called a 'working' forest landscape. I do not like that term, because it implies that protected forests, not currently being logged, are somehow not working . . .

**JMW:** I guess they are lazy.

**RMP:** Yeah. But that idea may be going by the wayside now that we know the forests are very busy storing carbon. In any case, when I came out here to an actively logged area, it was a bit of a blow because I had been working so hard for wildland protection. Even though I came out of a forestry school that was at least half or more logging-oriented students, it was still somewhat polarized between the wilderness and wildlife activists and the pulp and paper people. I bore some of the biases of my fellow urban conservation cadres. I arrived here and saw the degree of logging, which was greater than one typically sees in the Cascades and Olympics, because there is no national forestland in the Willapa Hills. The early arrival of disease at the mouth of the Columbia River, leaving the indigenes almost extirpated, and the absence of railroads on this side of the river, led to much of the government land falling directly into private hands, skipping the federal reserves that arose elsewhere. Weyerhaeuser, Crown Zellerbach, and a few other companies concentrated many of these holdings, free of even the government's light restraints. Scattered among them are some state-owned Trustland acres dedicated to producing income for their trusts, including schools, universities, and counties.

The logging was consequently intense. People spoke of it as they did Chicago voting: log early, log often. Much of the Willapas have been logged over through several cycles, probably the most intensely logged part of Washington state. Coming into a land of logging as a diversity-educated naturalist and conservationist rudely rubbed my nose in reality: living in a verdant and lovely valley among the logged-off hills of southwest Washington was not going to be a mindless immersion in wildness. This was going to continue to be a frequently logged area. If I was going to remain an activist, I was going to have to choose my battles, what to try to protect, what to edit out, and how to live here without becoming a pariah. I was already suspect as an urban environmentalist. Neighbors looked at me askance, knowing that I was much involved in conservation and was coming from the city—a place with very different values.

So, I did a lot more listening than talking for the first few years. And I came to realize that the urban protectionist stance, which I shared when I came here, is not entirely realistic from the standpoint of social realities, or even biological ones, because rural people live or fall by the resources that the land provides: the timber, the fish, the grass for the dairy. There is no in-between. In a way that few urbanites fully comprehend, these communities directly depend upon the lands and waters. They always have. If one decries that and barges in to try to change it wholesale, one will definitely be received as an interloper and will not be accepted. On the other hand, some positive change can be made by listening, learning, and offering better ideas with humility.

My book *Wintergreen*, which grew out of the first several years of living and listening here, is highly critical, as you note, in the chapter called "The Sack of the Woods." Locals

assumed it must be an anti-logging book. But as it was read, some discovered that it is not critical of the people who are deriving a livelihood from the land, or of logging *per se*. I am, after all, a forester. I know where the chair I am sitting on comes from, and what my books are published on. I also know that logging can be done well or badly. And a lot of it was being done badly for purposes of short-term profit taking. So, what I criticize in *Wintergreen* are logging practices that hurt the people of the woods as well as the woods themselves. Enough folks got this and even appreciated it that I have been able to live here amicably for 43 years, with many logger friends, while getting some conservation done.

Things exacerbated during the decade after *Wintergreen* when many mills closed, Crown Zellerbach and Weyerhaeuser both sold a lot of their lands to junk bond managers and big insurance companies, and so on. There was no longer local management. Even the kind of restraints that Weyerhaeuser practiced, which it did at some level, were now reverting to a kind of logging that one saw in the 1890s: get the cut out fast! Lately, this dialogue more and more involves what are being called legacy forests, much in the news right now. These forests are not old growth, but they are taking on ancient forest attributes because they were never plantations ("natural reprod," as foresters refer to them). After the first logging, they were not sprayed or replanted in rows with limited species. Those that remain should absolutely be treated just as well as the old growth. No more of it should be logged so that we can begin to rebuild the texture of some of the older forests. But the Washington State Department of Natural Resources is embattled over this right now. Although the commissioner [Hilary Franz] is an avowed conservationist, she is up against the many local jurisdictions who depend upon state timber trust revenues for their schools and counties.

Because we are bound to the trust-land system in Washington state, it is hard to get those remaining legacy forests protected, and they are rapidly depleting. When I came here, Jason, the Willapa Hills had many thousands of acres of legacy forests because a lot of it had been logged very early on and had not yet been revisited. Weyerhaeuser went fairly slow with them. But from the nineties on, under absentee landlords looking after their shareholders, some 90% of those legacy forests were liquidated within ten or fifteen years. Just wiped out. I had not fully appreciated them when I came here because we were trying to save the last bits of actual old growth, which we did: less than 1% of the Willapa forest. There were many more legacy forests, but I took them for granted. Within a mile of my house, I could walk to rich, older forests. Now those are all gone. That meant not only the opportunity cost of the lost ability to revivify future forests; but also, probably fifty years of local jobs lost (on a lighter, more amortized cut) in order to maximize immediate profits.

Since I arrived, except in one watershed, there is barely a stick of legacy forest left in the Willapa Hills. And that remnant is scheduled to go soon. This is hard to live with, and it really gets to the heart of your question. I realized soon after I came here that as a naturalist, I could not avoid the clear cuts. They are all around. So, I went into them, and I discovered that there is beauty and wonder and gentleness and vibrancy and vivacity and evolution going on in the beat-up, cut-over, burned-over forestlands too, because nature does not rest. It will not necessarily come back with all its former diversity and grandiosity, but it will come back in some form. Watching that process is invigorating. I came to find out that, ah, yes, this is like my old ditch in the plains! I enjoy these lands, too, something I discovered by default. But if those legacy woods still stood, the clear cuts would stand a much better chance of someday resembling real forests once more.

**JMW:** Listening to you, I thought of that distinction that E. F. Schumacher made in *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973): we are burning down natural capital as if it were income!

**RMP:** That's exactly right.

**JMW:** The Willapa Hills are, you wrote in *Wintergreen* (1986), a "metaphor for wasted lands everywhere." Can you describe how this metaphor works throughout the healing attentiveness you pay to the lands and populations victimized by industrial mania?

**RMP:** Yes, I think I can. It once again takes me back to the High Line Canal in Colorado. After *Wintergreen* I wrote *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (1993), which is about the Canal and what such ditches on the plains meant to me and other kids. It was a memoir of the place more than a memoir of myself, and a paean to children's special places everywhere. I came to realize that *The Thunder Tree* and *Wintergreen* are both *love songs to damaged lands*. Yes, I have written about actual wilderness quite a bit and I am in love with many forms of that. But I am in love with damaged lands, too. That is because you cannot throw the land away. It is still there. And it does not need us at all. Do not get me wrong. We are extraneous to the land in many ways. It would be better off without us tomorrow. Yet we need to care not only for the pristine lands but also for those damaged lands because we cannot throw them away. We cannot even throw away Hanford, for the gods' sakes! We now have a phenomenal national monument on the best bits of Hanford.[1] And yet Hanford still maintains some of the most polluted landscapes in the country. They may never be cleaned up. It is a terrible atomic legacy and yet a great biological preserve. This is also a place where the love of damaged lands had to go alongside the love of that which we aspire toward, having an unspoiled landscape. And that for me is a lot.

I called it metaphor, and it is, but it is also more than a metaphor. It is an outright, concrete reality of its own. These places are hurt. Almost everywhere is hurt more and more. And if we try to sweep them under the carpet and ignore them and just go for the best of the best, we will not succeed. Somebody needs to go for the cream of what's left, yes. But as a movement, as a people, as a thoughtful human response to the land and the water, we need to attend to what is wrecked as well. And we do. One of the most exciting areas of conservation today is the rewilding movement that really got started under Dave Foreman [who took inspiration from Edward Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* and founded Earth First!]. He recently passed away [19 September 2022] and is remembered in our hearts. Rewilding is going gangbusters in a lot of places, in cities, at Hanford, as well as on the High Line Canal.

I tried to get the High Line Canal protected—the best parts, of which there were quite a few back in the sixties when I was still in high school. I got a few things going. I tried to start something called the Canal Conservancy in 1967. Well, a lot of wreckage still went on. As Denver grew and grew and metastasized, Aurora also metastasized. But today there is a big movement with thousands of members. We sometimes give away hardback copies of *Thunder*

[1]The Hanford Reach National Monument was declared in 2000 by President Bill Clinton shortly before leaving office. It preserves over 196,000 acres of land in Eastern Washington, including some of the last remaining free-flowing, non-tidal stretches of the Columbia River. It is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a wildlife refuge. It is also part of the former Hanford Site, which produced nuclear materials for over forty years and is now a Superfund Site.

*Tree* as membership rewards. It is now called the High Line Canal Conservancy. Nobody remembers my old embryo in 1967, but they do not need to. It is not important. The work is getting done now, if a half-century too late. They lost a lot of opportunities. But it is never really too late because there are still some good bits, and there are also parts that will come back with proper care. So yes, I do believe that both the Willapa Hills of Washington and an old canal in Colorado are as good examples as anywhere to exemplify responsibility, love, and care of damaged lands.

**JMW:** That is such a powerful and beautiful answer. I think of the Duwamish People here in Seattle. Of course, the Duwamish River is a Superfund site, and yet it was their sacred river. It was the place that made them who they were. Nonetheless, they still built their longhouse on the river. They have not given up on it.

**RMP:** Very impressive. And of course, there is also the great rewilding event of the removal of the Elwha dam and the river's restoration. The great salmon are coming back faster than anyone expected. It is harder for the Duwamish River, of course. But the same principle is there. It will be wild again someday, with or without us.

**JMW:** This brings us to the next question. On the elegiac side of the ledger of this ambiguous resonance that is detectable in many of your writings, you remind us that the "woods of the Willapa were . . . one of the greatest forests on earth." That thought alone, having visited the Willapa Hills, makes you want to cry. The loss of the great trees is grievous, but even greater is the loss of the underlying ecosystems, "the complexity of the primeval forest," "the living, dying, regenerating forest." Adding salt to the wound is the corporate industrial logging industry's sense that such living systems are simply "overmature" and that trees are crops. After all these years, how do you live with this grief and what counsel might you have for others struggling with such grief? What have we lost?

**RMP:** Your questions are so well formed, getting right to the nubbins. This is such rich territory. Well, the trees *are* crops at a certain level. Let's face it. Here in much of the Willapa, we are on the third or fourth generation of forest. The cycle between cuts is now as little as thirty years, or even less. It was eighty years for the Longview Fibre Company and Weyerhaeuser when I came. And they were also all-union. There was actually some attention paid to the community and to the people. The owners were not all cynical. Some of those Weyerhaeuser ground managers really did have something of an ethic of sustainability. It was their big bosses in Federal Way [Weyerhaeuser corporate headquarters] that did not let them practice it much. But with an eighty-year cycle and a union workforce, there was something to be said for it all. Unfortunately, that involved liquidating almost all the old growth. In the eighties, the unions were broken, and the land went back to absentee landowners far away, making decisions in the boardrooms. There was no more restraint. Well, there is restraint as required by law regarding buffer zones and so on, but that is minimal.

There is ignorance and cynicism involved because when they say that the older forests are simply "overmature" they can no longer get away with it as they did in the fifties and sixties. Nobody believes that anymore. Jerry Franklin[2] and others demonstrated long ago that the growth

[2] Jerry Franklin, a pioneer of the "new forestry," is Professor Emeritus, School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, University of Washington.

and complexity continue to evolve in the older forests. Yes, there is a great rush of growth in the new forests. Managers commit aerial spraying of herbicides to eliminate competing growth, to allow the monoculture to maximize its rapid growth. This looks impressive industrially, but it gets rid of the complexity, resilience, and biological integrity of the forest. For example, mushroom diversity in the industrial forestlands of Willapa is less than ten percent of that in a conserved Olympic forest.

Most of the foresters know now that the over-maturity argument is bankrupt, old, and moldy. With the legacy forests movement, that is even more obvious than it was. And now, with carbon: evidence shows more and more that regenerating forests, even though growing fast, do not sequester more carbon than an old growth forest. Both kinds of forests do their share, though, so it is very important to keep it all in forestry. Even the crop-land forests as they function now are better for carbon, better for the watersheds, than if they were developed.

But I want to get back just a little bit to the earlier part of that question. How does one put up with the losses? How does one deal with them? How does one live in a land of logging as an environmentalist? As a "druid" with a small "d," or a Tree-hugger with a capital "T," a biologist and a poet, how does one live with that constant loss?

As I have already mentioned, one can take vigor and succor from the resilience of even a rogue little hemlock shoot in the middle of a logging road. I used to be an urban naturalist and I took great pleasure in the plants in-between the sidewalk cracks. And a lot of what we see here is kind of like that dandelion in the city because life does push up. Life does push forward. Life comes back. Even so, one grieves constantly over the losses, one simply does. There's no getting away from it. In 1994, I was asked to contribute an essay to an issue of *Orion* magazine whose theme was "grief." I was to respond to a question much like yours: how can we cope with constant environmental loss? I wrote: "But going out, alert and open, causes some chamber of the heart that has temporarily drained to pump again. You remember that you can harbor loss, hold tight to sorrow, and honor grief, while still rejoicing in the rich gifts of the Earth." A later, related essay added this: "I have found full-body baptism in the plain and glorious particulars of life to be a powerful antidote to despair. The fact is that the details of our natural surrounds offer infallible fascination and a route out of morosity. In a world deeply flawed by the infantile excesses of our own kind, this is no small potatoes."

In *The Thunder Tree*, I had to write about my time with the butterflies of the High Line Canal, with which I spent a huge amount at my time. I came out with a great long, bloated manuscript that nobody would read except for me and a few butterfly friends. That was not going to work. So, when I narrowed down that book in the seven years and six drafts that I spent on it, I found the inherent stories in each of the chapters. I wrote that final draft as a poet writes, that is, not knowing where it was going. A good essay, like a good poem, must not know where it is going. Or it becomes some other kind of writing.

**JMW:** Maybe the writerly version of monoculture?

**RMP:** Yes. And that has its place, but it is not essay, it is not poetry. But where this one went truly surprised me. It became two essays, one about my mother, the other my father, their lives and particularly their deaths. The butterflies were still in there, much condensed, and organized around my parents' stories. I had no idea that was going happen. It gave me shivers. As I wrote, I came to realize the absence of any clear distinction between the extension of love and the reconciliation of loss. Whether for places or people, I believe that all the sadness in the world

belongs to us. The land does not grieve. But as long as we live on the land and among others, we shall know a state of permanent grief, for loss is continuous and always with us. After all, we are mortal. As Aldo Leopold reminded us, the penalty for knowing nature is to live in a world of wounds.

But there is also a balm, and it comes from the same source. F. Scott Fitzgerald named it in *Tender is the Night*, where he wrote that in receding from a grief, it seems necessary to retrace the same steps that brought us here. I found that in trying to reconcile and accept—well, not accept. I do not accept the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross stages of grief enough to go along with acceptance. It has never been acceptable to me that Thea died of ovarian cancer.[3] And it never will be. I am never going to accept it. And yet I know it is a stochastic thing that has nothing to do with me personally. Well, Fitzgerald's words also apply to the land. You have to go back into it in order to live with it. I tried to do this in my collection of poems, *Chinook and Chanterelle* (2016). I did not write a lot of grief poems, six or eight maybe, about Thea. They went back into the grief and came back out with some of her, while asking the grief to make room for me as well.

I could dwell all the time on what we have lost here in the land and in the waters. There would be no end to writing about it. But that is not good for me. And it does not necessarily help the land. What does help is to recognize that loss and then to dive back into it. Do what you can to maybe prevent something bad next time around or to improve or rewild this or that bit. Change logging practices, get this bit set aside. Do what you can in the hope that the grief might be less next time. But never forget it. Do not attempt to get rid of it.

And I find this somehow helps. I am often in good cheer. Wendell Berry says we should "be joyful though you have considered all the facts." I find that I often wake up with a grin, even though I am looking out my bedroom window at clearcuts. One of those patches, though, definitely made me grimace. Fresh out of Yale with a PhD in ecology and what do I do? I write to Crown Zellerbach and tell them that there is a forest in my valley that we really ought to try to protect. I had been working for the Nature Conservancy for several years, and I appreciated how hard this work is to do. And yet I move here, and what do I do? I write to the owners in my naïve way and say that this legacy forest should be protected, and I ask what I can do to work with them to find a means of doing so. There was no reply, but a few months later, I awoke to the shriek of chainsaws coming from that special stand. My friend, who is a logger, although he did not work on that site but knew what was happening, said, "Bob, you fingered that forest! They probably wouldn't have noticed it for years." I could have kicked myself all the way home for bringing it to their attention! My only succor, forty years later, after another whole cycle-plus, is that The Timbered Tor (as I called it) is now one of the older stands of timber on the whole mountain!

So, Jason, it is a matter of going back into the grief and not letting it get you down, but also not letting it get away. Not trying to forget it. It is that way with people, too. And at my age, we lose people more and more. What is going to keep us sane and keep us in good cheer is to remember the lost people and places and to live with the best of what is left, as well as with what we must do, and to cherish that.

**JMW:** Mourning is the perfect transition to the next question, which takes mourning to an even more global dimension. One can add to the ledger of the logging industrial complex's 'sacking of the woods' (and abandonment of their workers) another aspect of the industrializing mania of the

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[3] Bob's wife, the botanist and artist Thea Linnaea Peterson Hellyer, died in 2013.

Great Acceleration, namely, climate change. Even the verdure of western Cascadia, for example, is increasingly subject to huge fires. The forests we fought so hard to protect go up in flames. We are now learning that the beloved Western Red Cedar is fated to no longer flourish in our forests. How do you look at your decades in the Willapa Hills from this perspective?

**RMP:** Climate is so huge. I have been asked to write climate books and wisely declined. I finally was convinced to contribute to one of the most respected of the big climate books, Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael Nelson's *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* (Trinity University Press, 2011). It had everybody from Desmond Tutu and Barack Obama to the Dalai Lama and Al Gore. But it also included lesser-known scientists, writers, philosophers, and others. I told Kathy that I did not have anything new to add. My feelings on climate are much like a lot of my colleagues. I had not done any climate research except a little bit with butterflies, and that would not make a suitable chapter. She bugged me and bugged me until I asked, "Can I write exactly what I want to write, even though it might not be very nice?" She said I could, that people were being too polite in this book anyway. So, I wrote a none-too-cheerful little essay called "Evening Falls on the Maladaptive Ape." I concluded that "evolution will mock our tardy rage."

This is how I feel about it. We are not just fouling our nest, which we have done profoundly. We are not just desiccating our nest, but we are also burning it up, and it will be too late to complain about what comes afterwards. I am not very hopeful about climate because preventive change is not happening fast enough. A several degree change seems inevitable. On the other hand, the more-than-human will adapt, and humans *might* adapt. And what comes next will be what comes next. It will not be nothing. It will be extinction for some species, maybe many species. It will be the advancement and the diversification of a lot of other species. I recently received an academic book that is quite positive about climate change. Author Michael Mehta Webster posits a principle called *The Rescue Effect* that causes species to recover themselves. He feels that there will be a lot of exciting evolutionary opportunities because of the changing climate. Well, maybe that is the case. But I also think that it will really suck for people in many respects, especially the global poor, especially the Global South, especially people of color and people who do not enjoy privilege. It will also cause a great transmigration of people as well as other species. This is all old hat. With other species, as with humans, there will be winners and losers. Melissa Arctic butterflies may be bounced off the tepid tops of the North Cascades, while Pygmy Blues surge in from the southlands, as they are already beginning to do.

As for my personal take, I am watching these butterflies carefully. I am writing a couple of papers about certain species that I have studied over the years to see if they can give me an actual sense of how they are responding. I have not finished the data analysis yet, but I think one of them will dramatically benefit, while the other one may manage to adapt and hang on. Still others will not survive in these latitudes. It will be a mosaic of effect overall. But I feel our collective opportunity to head off the crisis has gone by.

Going back to your question, I have written only two essays that I would say are explicitly and overtly philosophical. I know that there are philosophical elements in all my personal essays, but only two times have I really tried to lay it out philosophically. One of them was in *Wintergreen,* in the penultimate chapter called, "And the Coyotes Will Lift a Leg." It attempts to parse the very question that you asked me. After receding from grief, while bearing grief, then what? What do you do when you face the abyss? Do you double-down on cynicism and darkness and just say, "Screw it"? Or do you do something else?

I found that I have a three-part response to the future. I am optimistic by nature as a person. I think that may be something of an epigenetic inclination toward a kind of a stupid cheerfulness. Some people are naturally dour. Others have a dumb smile on their face. But I am also deeply skeptical about the success of the human project. How do you reconcile those two things? The way I do it invokes still a third part to the optimism/pessimism scale. I am optimistic in the short term, just by the way I get out of bed in the morning. Oh sure, I can be gloomy and have a glum day. And I have been ill for some time with a heart condition and Long COVID, and this can be disconcerting. But I adapt to it, and I get done what I can get done, which is more than I thought I could. And many people are worse off than me by far. A clear-eyed friend of mine told me, "Pyle, the problem with you is that your glass is always one-eighth full!" I thought that was pretty cute and took it as synonym for Pollyanna. I tell him that with the stuff I am confronting these days, my glass is one-32nd full, but that is better than empty. I believe that everybody is invited to Serendipity's picnic, but you will not get there unless you accept the invitation and act on it. I have been one to watch for opportunity, be alert for connections, be aware of the T-junctions. I try actively to choose the adaptive way. I have far from always been successful. But if one is aware, and attends, the possibility of positivity presents itself to us through sheer stochastics. Such an outlook has allowed me to remain a short-term optimist.

This is all independent of the world falling apart and burning up and freezing all around us. But take that into the midterm, which starts soon. I do not mean twenty years from now. I mean maybe a year or two from now or less, and I become deeply pessimistic. I am a realist on many levels, although an idealist on others. This is not an either/or, but like most things, a gradient. Although I maintain some ideals, I am scientifically trained, and I am devoted to Occam's Razor [the law of parsimony in which entities or causes should not be multiplied beyond what is necessary]. I think that one of the great guiding principles of everything we do as a species ought to be a sense of parsimony. But people in general are deeply superstitious, thinking that if something happens once, that is how it happens. If something happens the same way twice, that is the way it *always* happens. No sense of probability, no sense of chance. They think that there are no coincidences, which makes me cringe because to me it is all frogging coincidence! Many people think that what happens was meant to happen. Clearly, as no sort of fatalist, I do not buy any of that.

Still, one comes to the realization that we are in deep disarray and parlous times. Climate is the worst of it so far. Or at least I think it is the worst of it. There is also the permanent nuclear crisis, which might be the worst. It is hard to deny that a major nuclear accident or belligerence could happen anytime. Equally bad is pollution because of the way in which we have infested the world with huge quantities of plastics and synthetic chemicals, including the so-called forever chemicals [PFAS or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances]. They are not going away. That is the third horseman.

And the fourth one, which is really the first one, is just plain overpopulation. I grew up in the era of Paul R. Ehrlich [*The Population Bomb* (1968)]. He was a friend since I was twelve years old because Ehrlich was primarily a lepidopterist. Most of his research was on butterflies, but when he was on Johnny Carson thirty-nine times, it was not to talk about butterflies. It was to talk about overpopulation. These days you do not get anybody going on with Stephen Colbert to talk about overpopulation. It is almost like it is not an issue anymore. But it absolutely is! We are not remotely near a sustainable population, and the world cannot sustain a state of permanent growth. So, of these four banes, climate is just the most recent to come to the fore. Possibly it is

the most threatening, the most lethal. As a biologist, I realize that there will be winners and losers. We will likely be a big loser. So much for optimism! I am a mid-term pessimist.

I finally come to the third part of my optimism/pessimism trilogy. The pessimism is not really Cassandra, rather a scientist's realism. But then, this is not really a Pollyanna/Cassandra standoff after all. Those are the easy clichés. Is this a Pollyanna World or a Cassandra world? Well, it is not that kind of duality. It is really mixed up. Most presumed dualities are to be seriously questioned, in my experience. But then there is a third part, and that is my long-term. What do you think it is going to be, Jason, optimism or pessimism in the long-term?

**JMW:** I know full well that you will not give pessimism the final word.

**RMP:** If my outlook were entirely anthropogenic or anthropocentric, midterm pessimism becomes long-term pessimism. But from the standpoint of the whole living fabric, things appear different. It is optimistic because, good gosh, even after the Yucatan meteor, when extinction was almost complete for many groups of plants and animals, look at what we have come to! This glorious panorama of life! We had to wait awhile, but it came around again. And until the sun cools or becomes a cinder or the earth stops rotating or becomes otherwise uninhabitable, it is going to keep coming back. But it will not be within a human perspective by that time. And is it for me to take pleasure in a future without my kind? Well, it is a leap. It may be a deeply undeserved pretension or presumption or both, and certainly, cold comfort for most. But I cannot help it. It makes me happy to know that when we have done the worst of our mischief and it is all over, life will go on.

I am not going to live all that many more years anyway. So, it will all go on without me. Does that make me unhappy? Only for myself, that I will miss it. But that does not hurt the world any. Only those who love me will have a hard time getting over my death. Whether it is without me or without all of us, the world does not care. But because other species will come back, and because there will be new species, I am able to maintain a positive outlook overall.

Although I am not the activist I once was—I no longer have the energy for it and now put more time into writing—I do remain an activist. I recently wrote a personal letter to Governor Jay Inslee and to Hilary Franz, the Washington State Commissioner of Public Lands, because both have told me face-to-face that *Wintergreen* had a powerful impact on them and on why they care about conservation. In Hilary's case, it is why she sought her job. However, by letting the legacy forests go, they are countermanding everything I had to say in *Wintergreen*. So, I wrote to them both, saying essentially, "Hey, you two, remember why you like *Wintergreen*? Get with it with these legacy forests!" They have not replied, but I understand that my letter did make an impact in the legacy forest movement. So, I do maintain some activism. If you simply say it is all going to pot, it is all awful, then it becomes easy to get burned out and not engage in activism anymore.

Which brings us to the phrase and piece of writing that I am probably best known for among the conservation community, namely, the concept of "the extinction of experience." The initial essay appears in *The Thunder Tree*, and I revisit it in my recent book, *Nature Matrix* (2020). It first came to me when I was giving a talk to the American Association for the Advancement of Science as a graduate student way back in '75 when I was substituting for my professor, Yale biologist Charles Remington. I realized that the very first local extinctions that I had ever witnessed were along my ditch in Colorado. There were butterfly colonies that I had discovered, loved, and revisited time and time again. I then watched as they were destroyed by

the advancing tide of development, including my own junior high school. I threw the discus on the field that was built on top of the Olympia marblewing butterfly habitat. It was these very losses that led to my founding of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation in 1971.

When I was starting my PhD and recollecting my conservation days, it came to me that what we are losing when we lose local diversity, whether it is plants and animals or human culture, languages, sounds, or whatever else makes our human and more-than-human community rich, *is a loss of experience*. It depletes our setting. As we become more homogenous in our setting, we become less attentive to what is around us. There is less to spark the imagination. We consequently become more alienated from our home ground. What follows is apathy, which will cause further loss. It is a particularly vicious cycle.[4] This became the basis of my lecture, the essay, and much of my work.

Although the short-term can be lovely, we are still deep in the midterm. The long-term will be fine without us. What do you do with that? What do you do about it right now in your life? Is it worth conserving anything if it will all go down in ashes? Yes, it is! We are responding to the extinction of experience. The next fifty years might be a real rough sled in many ways, even worse than what many people are experiencing in Bangladesh or Ukraine right now. But we still have the onus of maintaining a world that is worth living in so long as we and our offspring can live. So that is one reason to keep doing conservation.

Another reason is rewilding and restoration. We are really making some things better collectively. Maybe they will surprise me, given some good technology and some damn good breaks. Maybe we will pull this thing out. After all, what do I know? I cannot simply proclaim that it will all go south. Maybe I am mistaken. But here is the part that really motivates me to carry on with conservation: every bit of diversity that we protect through land conservation or rewilding or anything like that means a richer basis, a deeper genetic pool, and a broader foundation for the next evolutionary iteration. The conservation of all things human and otherwise is still worth it because it will provide a better basis for the next time around.

**JMW:** What a powerful answer! And powerfully philosophical! Thank you. In a world where trees and crops and land are assets, you sometimes say yourself that you are "always the animist" and even allude to pantheism and paganism. Today you spoke of yourself as a small "d" druid. What do these metaphors say for you and for us about the land and its inhabitants? Perhaps another way to think the sacredness of things just as they are?

**RMP:** As a rationalist I can appreciate the positive side of reductionism. I am a devotee of E. O. Wilson's book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (Knopf, 1998). I remember when Ed Wilson and I were together at a small conference in Rhode Island for ecological architects and designers. It also addressed children and nature, which I have written a lot about. Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2005) is one of the most important recent books in my opinion, and Rich was there too. The whole big issue now is about making environments better for health, children, and society through not just building green, but rather through an actual green setting. That is what this conference was about. But there was a certain amount of woo-woo going on.

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[4] "In the long run, this mass estrangement from things natural bodes ill for the care of the earth. If we are to forge new links to the land, we must resist the extinction of experience. We must save not only the wilderness but the vacant lots, the ditches as well as the canyonlands, and the woodlots along with the old growth. We must become believers in the world" (*The Thunder Tree,* 152).

Wilson and I were there as the two biologists, and we were listening respectfully and putting in what we could. At one point the dialogue had detoured into *chi* energy and its future application in architecture. As he walked past me, I quietly asked, "Ed, is what we've just heard going to happen?" And he said, "Bob, I hope not to live long enough to find out!" [laughter] We were trying to be hyper-rationalists without forcing it on anyone else. I do not believe in proselytizing. I believe in listening and trying to be respectful. I don't like Bill Maher's raunchy and bullying anti-religiosity. It is too easy to make fun. Richard Dawkins is a superb evolutionary biologist and Darwin-interpreter, but his vociferous, superior bellicosity toward creationists puts me off. One of my closest colleagues in butterfly studies happens to be a young female creationist. I personally deplore her views and believe that she is missing much of what butterflies can teach us by not embracing evolution, as butterfly wings are the very canvases of evolution. But I will not spoil our relationship or rain on her faith by trying to convince her otherwise, because it does not matter.

I have had great conversations with young Mormons on patrol in the neighborhoods. I once taught at Utah State University for a semester as a visiting professor of English (not biology!), and all my undergraduates were Mormon. I lived in a predominantly LDS neighborhood. It was deeply interesting to be a minority resident in that culture, just as I had once been in New Guinea. It behooves us to be minorities at some point. I love talking with young Mormons, not trying to engage them in the facts or debate their faith, but simply sharing my credo and hearing their reactions.

The problem with animism and pantheism, as I see it, is that they carry too much baggage. Paganism's modern practitioners have too much woo-woo going on for me. I do not have a lot of woo-woo room. I have never found nature to be wanting in any essential respect to require a supernature; ditto for physics and a metaphysic. But I think the basic idea of seeing, to use your word, a sacredness, or something like that, in elements of the "creation" is certainly right. I went through many investigations of different religions, sects, and denominations in high school, just to see what my friends were doing with their Saturdays and Sundays. I started to adopt elements of different creeds as making some sense to me. This Hindu idea, that Jewish precept, this Christian teaching. Do not think that I was studying deeply—I was not. Then one Sunday I read a newspaper pastor inveighing against what he called the greatest danger to Christianity, which he called *syncretism*, and all of a sudden, I had a framework for belief: I went to my little brother and told him that I had finally figured out my religion. "Oh yeah, asked Bud, "What's that?" "I am a *naturo-pantheistic syncretist*," I said.

I didn't try to convince anybody else or to preach my new faith, but I carried it with me for a while almost as a joke with myself. It made me feel as if I had something of my own that all my friends seemed to get from their churchgoing, minus all the hours away from butterflies, girls, and sports that church demanded. I could practice my observances every time I wandered out the High Line Canal and did. Years later my brother injured his head in a bad car crash, but he retained his wit, his vocabulary, and surprising parts of his memory. He came to me one time, probably in the nineties, and asked me out of nowhere, "Bob, are you still a *naturo-pantheistic syncretist*?" He remembered that for all those years! I had not thought about it for decades, but I told him I guessed yes, I still was.

But the phrase is a little unwieldy. So, in my most recent book of essays, *Nature Matrix* (2020), I wrote my second overtly philosophical essay, and I realized that my cosmology is still very much the same, if a little harder edged on the materialist side. But *naturo-pantheistic syncretism* is too much of a mouthful, and not very communicative. I thought it was time to

simplify things, although the meaning, the guts of it, is still what I have long inclined toward. The essence of it is still the same: that, to me, sacredness is possible. But if there *is* a sacredness or a divinity, it belongs to everything. I mean *everything*. Either everything is sacred—and here is the Bob part—or nothing is. And, Jason, I do not really care which it is. I have come to call it by the much simpler name, *Alltheism*—just a silly pun on pantheism, but it works for me.

I do not believe in ascribing the sacredness of any given person, place, or object to a particular divine cause. Rather, I have faith in the "good enoughness" of everything. This is so simple minded that it sounds almost idiotic.

**JMW:** The "good enoughness" of everything is kind of Buddhist.

**RMP:** I've been told by others that my thinking has a tinge of Buddhism to it, and I will not deny it. I have not explored Eastern philosophy as much as many of my friends and peers and fellow writers have done. I have read some of their writing, Sam Hamill, Gary Snyder, Red Pine, James Lenfestey, Saul Weisberg, the "Poets on the Peaks," Robert Sund, and others. But I have not read a great deal of Asian poetry or philosophy. I certainly have not tried translating it as several of these friends have done. I've read this, that, and the other, but I have never made an attachment to Zen, although I have tried to gain a sense of it through the written word. In my deep ignorance I am not qualified to call myself a Buddhist, though I easily recognize many points of connection.

**JMW:** Can you say more?

**RMP:** I have been collecting the various ways in which many writers, Eastern and Western, have described the continuity, the connection, the infinite binding of all things. Almost all thinkers who consider wholeness come up with their own ways of putting it, whether Muir, Leopold, Carson, or whomever . . . One of my favorites is to be found in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) by John Steinbeck and the marine biologist Ed Ricketts (Doc in *Cannery Row*). Near the end of their epic outing, they get all philosophical and make their great statement: "The brown Indians and the gardens of the sea, and the beer and the work, they were all one thing and we were that one thing too" [chapter 29]. This is one of the most beautiful, happiest, most fun ways of putting it I know. But the simplest expression to me, and one of the purest, came from Kurt Cobain and Nirvana in the refrain, "All in all is all we are," from "All Apologies" (*In Utero*, 1993). That's it, and I'm happy to live by that. Hence, ALLTHEISM.

**JMW:** As Zen master Dōgen (1200-1253) says, "things just as they are, no extra mist." Do not add extra things. Beings are already enough just as they are. They are not missing something. Do not add a secret dimension. The parsimony of things, things as they simply are, is the religious thought.

**RMP:** Right on! And to me, the "supernatural" is that extraneous dimension. I have been to Peter Matthiessen's Zendo [The Ocean Zendo] and to Gary Snyder's Zendo [The Ring of Bone] at Kitkitdizze, and what struck me more than any resident sense of spirituality was their sheer, beautiful physicality. I put my faith in the actual physical details of the Earth.

Thanks to the *Orion* connection, I have been lucky to spend time among a lot of wonderful Buddhists. One such occasion was a laugh on me. It was a cocktail party at the Wild

Arts Writing Workshop at Squaw Valley. The climax of the week was to be Gary Snyder and Jack Shoemaker recounting the forty-year journey of the making of *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1997). I had not gotten to know Gary as well as I later would. He was talking with poet Jane Hirshfield, whom I knew a little better. I drifted in and they drew me into their conversation. After we talked about this, that, and the other, I had the temerity to ask Gary a blunt, purely left-brain question. "Gary, how do you make up your mind about which demands on you to accept?" He and Jane are both Zen masters and for me to barge in and ask this absolutely un-Zen question was kind of funny. They chuckled and played me a little bit, with this riddle and that kōan, but not unkindly. I got it and laughed along. So, I said, "Oh, okay. I know I am not going get anywhere with this."

That went on for my next two or three visits with Gary, as I tried to inch him toward that territory. I really wanted to know how Gary, who is in greater demand than maybe any other poet, dealt with it. Even though I was in far less demand, the importunities were still more than I could easily handle and still write. I really wondered whether he had any secrets or clues. And finally, when we spent a little time together in Okinawa and even wrote a pair of haiku together, I brought it up again. He said, "Oh, Robert"—he called me Robert—you really want me to answer that, don't you?" "Yeah, Gary, I really would like you to, if that is okay." He said, "All right: When I am asked to do something, I simply say, 'That's good work, yet it is not my work.'" And I thought, "Wow! The scales are falling from my eyes!" It is a perfectly Zen-worthy answer, but on the Confucian, practical side. Ever since I have said something like, "I cannot do it but carry on. Your work is out there, and it is important." It respects the others and their work without putting them down as if one were to simply say, "Oh, I don't have time," or "I am not interested." Thank you, Gary!

**JMW:** When I read your musings on Sasquatch or Bigfoot, I have the sense that, bracketing the question of its existence, it at least operates as a metaphor for the conscience of the land, its push back against its industrial onslaught. Can you speak to this aspect of your thinking and work?

**RMP:** Probably the strangest fact was my receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship to study Sasquatch! Yes, I have spent a lot of time with Bigfoot as a biologist and a writer, and its metaphorical value has been important. But I will tell you this, Jason: It is no longer just a metaphor! Oh sure, Bigfoot is unavoidably a metaphor for wildness and resistance, for something out beyond the campfire that we all seem to need. But spring before last, I had a possible sighting of the animal. This follows from the two dramatic footprint experiences I have had in the same area over twenty years. I cannot say that "I believe" outright, but as a biologist I do not have a better hypothesis now than that the animal actually walks and represents a great deal more to us than just a metaphor. As I put it in *Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide* (p. 11, 2017 edition): "If we manage to hang on to a sizeable hunk of Bigfoot habitat, we will at least have a fragment of the greatest green treasure the world has ever known. If we do not, Bigfoot, real or imagined, will vanish; and with its shadow will flee the others who dwell in that world. Looking at that tangled land, one can just about accept that Sasquatch could coexist with towns and loggers and hunters and hikers, all in proportion. But when the topography is finally tamed outright, no one will anymore imagine that giants are abroad on the land."

**JMW:** In addition to your mellifluous prose, you are also a wonderful poet. What is the power of poetic thought in your work? What is the relationship in your practice between science and poetry?

**RMP:** In every way I tie them together. My book, *Walking the High Ridge: Life as Field Trip* (2000), takes its title from Nabokov's question: "Does there not exist a high ridge where the mountainside of 'scientific' knowledge joins the opposite slope of 'artistic' imagination?" It is a place where "'the Precision of Poetry and the Excitement of Science' can meet" (48). Nabokov is talking about skating across the *corpus callosum*, though he probably did not know that term. To slip and slide between the left and right brains. We are complex enough people that we should have more than one arrow in our quiver. I believe in living on both sides and bringing them together and have sought to occupy that high ridge all my life. Fortunately, I am a person who has easy access to both sides, as a biologist and a poet. While I continue to do some science with butterflies and publish peer-reviewed papers, I go directly from that into poetry. I am currently reading a collection of both Kim Stafford's poems, but also Virgil's *Eclogues* . . .

**JMW:** The David Ferry translation?

**RMP**: I know that good one, but this is actually the 1949 Penguin by E. V. Rieu. And what I am loving is reading the Pastoral Poems alongside scientific journals and natural history prose, because they complement one another so well. Writing my own poems after reading science, as the master Colorado poet Pattiann Rogers does so well, can be wonderfully fecund. As Nabokov told an interviewer for *Saturday Review*, he was "certainly not afraid to bore readers with nature notes worked into a memoir or story. I am afraid to trim my science to size or—what is much the same—not to take full advantage of my art in speaking of scientific details" (*Nabokov's Butterflies*, p. 71). I love the blend too. I love trying to walk my life on the high ridge and realizing that we are complex people who can dwell and play on both sides. Are we not lucky to have minds that can encompass both? We should not have to choose between the two.

**JMW:** What final words would you have for we philosophers?

**RMP:** I would take them directly from Gary Snyder. We all need to be better naturalists all the time. In his poem "For the Children," Gary writes,

> To climb these coming crests
> one word to you, to
> you and your children
>
> *stay together*
> *learn the flowers*
> *go light*[5]

And I would like to particularly emphasize the line, "*learn the flowers*." Come to know our non-human, more-than-human neighbors in the world. It is only through our intimacy with all our neighbors in the world, human and otherwise, that we stand a chance.

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[5] From *Turtle Island* (New Directions, 1974).

**JMW:** That's extraordinary. It has been such an exquisite feast of thought and spirit and observation and humanity and extra-humanity. Things just as they are. That was all we ever needed, if we had eyes to see . . .

**RMP:** All we ever needed, if we had eyes to see. Thank you, Jason. I'm going to feel better than I have in a long time.

**Selected Works Referenced Directly or Indirectly in the Interview**

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