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Wildness and our original one-ness with creation

The wild places, by Robert Macfarlane, London, Granta Books, 2008, 352 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN-10: 1847080189; ISBN-13: 978-1847080189

Reviewed by Karin Jarman, Registered Art Therapist

What is wilderness? Our common perception is a place untouched by humans, nature left to its own devices, doing its own thing without our interference. This is where Robert Macfarlane started out: 'To reach a wild place was, for me, to step outside human history' (p. 7). By the end of this particular exploration, he has come to some very different perceptions. Once when he reached such a place, he was overcome with the feeling of being rejected, of having no place in it. He had reached a summit in the Highlands:

> The comfortless snow-shires, the frozen rocks: this place was not hostile to my presence, far from it. Just entirely, gradelessly indifferent. Up there, I felt no companionship with the land, no epiphany of relation like that I had experienced in the Black Wood. Here, there was no question of relation. This place refused any imputation of meaning. (p. 157)

In his further writing, Macfarlane returns to this experience a few times, contrasting it with places equally remote yet feeling included and wanted. He begins to differentiate many different qualities of wilderness in terms of intricate interrelationship with human presence.

One such striking example is his experience of history and the connection with the dead: 'So many of the wilder landscapes of Britain and Ireland are filled with graves, marked and unmarked. So many ancient burial places are located within sight of a river or on bluffs and promontories overlooking the sea' (p. 171). From there he takes another step of exploration, that of the wilderness within our own souls that we ignore at our peril:

> And so new maladies of the soul have emerged, unhappiness which are [*sic*?] complicated products of the distance we have set between ourselves and the world. We have come increasingly to forget that our minds are shaped by the *bodily experience of being in the world – its spaces, textures, sounds, smells and habits* – as well as by genetic traits we inherit and ideologies we absorb. (p. 203, my italics)

Herein lies the immense value of this truly beautiful, sumptuous and richly textured piece of writing. Macfarlane succeeds in finding the intrinsic one-ness of the human soul with the outer landscape through his ever-deepening experience in his encounter with wildness, as he calls it, where an entirely mutual relationship exists:

the one cannot be without the other. Although he does not as such formulate this, what I come away with is: nature, the earth, wilderness needs the conscious human encounter. Earth wants to be seen, be recognized and valued, just like we as humans need this from one another. And as far as our soul is concerned, this he says very clearly indeed, would wither and die within if we were to lose the intimacy in our encounter with the world around us. In the above quotation he points out that this intimacy is created by touch, smell, taste – all senses that cannot be replaced by screens and images, no matter how beautiful. As long as we are only onlookers, as we are ever-more conditioned to be with our clever technology that can bring the remotest places into our living room, we are not *intimate* with the Being of Nature. How could an online relationship ever replace the real thing?

In this book, Macfarlane takes us along, in as much as this is possible, through a book, which already has more going for it than the screen. We have to be present to reactivate the images that he conjures up before us, using such poetry in his prose that at times I can smell the wind, feel the sharp cracks of the rocks, the surface of the frozen tarn on which he places his bivouac for the night. Oh, how I feared the ice would crack and the tarn swallow him up, although no such thought seemed to have crossed his mind! He displays intricate knowledge of the workings and potential perils of outdoor existence, for which he is indebted to his wonderful upbringing by parents who instilled this urge and longing to be out there, to leave the city from time to time, even though family and work hold a strong bond as well. He HAS to go, even just to the beechwood a mile from his home, if no more is allowed: 'I have lived in Cambridge on and off for a decade, and I imagine I will continue to do so for years to come. And for as long as I stay here, I know I will also have to get to the wild places' (p. 7); and later on, 'I felt a sharp need … to reach somewhere remote, where starlight fell clearly, where the wind could blow upon me from its thirty-six directions … ' (p. 8).

The language in the book increasingly becomes the language of truest love-making, of climax of inner and outer merging as he moves from the woodland at the outskirts of his city into specific realms of wildernesses that form the chapters of this book: Beechwood, Island, Valley, Moor, and so on. Mostly he goes exploring by himself, but is also glad of human company with a friend who shares this love and need.

Notwithstanding the fact that Britain is one of the most densely populated places on earth, it is remarkable that such marvellous wilderness is to be found here, something that attracted me to these islands many years ago, coming from continental Germany.

Being a passionate long-distance walker, intent on covering distances to measure true time and space, this book found me at a truly auspicious time. A notorious foot injury is preventing me from walking more than three to four hours at a time, and my soul finds it very hard to adjust to this newly acquired restriction. Macfarlane is teaching me to linger, to just be and absorb with my whole being, through every pore, to rest and assimilate and to picture what is revealed. He has, in no small measure, brought comfort to my restlessness and my own sharp but frustrated need to escape the familiarity in search for depth and meaning. I learn now that I can be in touch with the wildness within in places where I have been often before and can now see with more potential to reach deeper still.

The chapter entitled 'Holloway' is in fact a tracing of wilderness within extensively farmed counties such as Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. These ancient pathways have been trotted down so deeply into the earth itself that they have become their own micro-wildernesses complete with unusual plant and animal life. He describes them almost as otherworldly in their appearance:

> A few hundred yards further along, in a gap in the hedge by a towering ash tree, we found a way back down into the holloway, and descended into its shadowy depth, abseiling down the sandstone sides using ivy as a rappel-rope. It felt as though we were dropping into a lost world, or a giant version of the gryke in the Burren. (p. 223)

Right at the end he invites us to discover wildness within the city, between the roads, the disused railway banks. This, too, I have found through my many connecting walks, when I have never shied away from the ugly stretches, as my aim had been to see what is truly between two places. There are still many green veins leading right into city centres, in the end merging into parkland, perhaps, or arriving along the waterway around which the place was founded back in history. These places are precious, even if they can never fulfil the urge to go into the remote outer reaches beyond civilization. 'We are fallen in mostly broken pieces, I thought, but the wild can return us to ourselves' (p. 320).

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is by no means a page turner. In fact, it has taken me a long time to read, as I felt I wanted to savour it and not have too much of a good thing all at once, like eating too much chocolate! It makes a hugely important contribution to our understanding of our profound human need to connect on a much deeper and more poetic level than safely packaged outdoor leisure activities could ever hope to reach. I think it is not too much to say that this is a deeply spiritual book based on no ideology, philosophy or religion other than the re-cognition of our original one-ness with creation.

Transgender emergence: therapeutic guidelines for working with gender variant people and their families, by Arlene Istar Lev, Binghampton, NY, Howarth Press, 2004 (published by Routledge, 2009), 500 pp., £32.90 (paperback), ISBN-10: 078902117X; ISBN-13: 978-0789021175; Kindle edition available

Reviewed by Jennifer Maidman, Songwriter, music maker, and former counsellor and co-editor of Self & Society

The author of this book is a US-based social worker, family therapist and counsellor who is a member of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. Drawing very much on her own 'hands-on' experience, she has written a book which, for me, very much sets out the 'state of the art' in terms of working with gender-variant people. As a trans person myself, and a trained counsellor, I can highly