

Attention Must Be Paid

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

September 18, 2016

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When a new edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* was published in 2008, a number of sharp-eyed readers noticed something striking had happened: an extraordinary culling away of words concerning ‘nature’ had taken place. Under public pressure, Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries its editors no longer felt to be relevant to kids growing up today. Some of the deleted words?: *acorn, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow*. Words introduced into the new edition included: *attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, cut-and-paste, MP3player and voice mail*. “When the head of the children’s dictionaries at the Press was asked why the decision had been taken to delete those ‘nature words,’ she explained that the dictionary needed to reflect the consensus experience of modern-day childhood.” (from Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 2015, pp.3-4)

Now I’m not suggesting for a moment that words arising from the virtual reality world of our growing technoscape don’t belong in a children’s dictionary; far from it. And this is not going to be an anti-tech, get-off-the-grid sermon. But I am troubled by what seems an alarming acceptance of the idea that our natural landscape—a world of particular trees and critters, flowers and birds, fields and nectar—is receding from experience and relevance in the lives of children and adults. What happened a few years ago to the *OJD* is a symptom of a wider cultural disengagement with nature, the effects of living in a post-pastoral terrain, and of a simulated life that we, increasingly, are being ushered into.

I read this story about the culling away of nature from a dictionary in New York City where I joined up with my spouse who’s been caring for a grandson and baby granddaughter.

There's a connection here, if you'll bear with me. Not the obvious one of nature being not-quite-so-close-to-hand in the gritty, mind bendingly diverse Queens neighbourhood where we were staying. The connection I want to make is something else.

A number of you have asked how my summer was, and I've replied that there was a lot of grampa time, *and* that I had forgotten how much work it is for adults to watch over and care for two very little people. I'd certainly gotten out of practice, and I'd end the day pretty much wiped out—I didn't have Diana's stamina. But that's beside the point; what I really want to say is this: watching my partner attend to and care for a three and a half year boy and an infant girl was a revelation to me. There is something astonishing and very moving about watching an adult truly paying close attention to a small child. Everything else in the world just fades away, above all—the ego of the adult takes a hike. (You don't need a monastery!) There's only this child—the physical needs that must be addressed moment-to-moment, the constant play of emotion and burgeoning life enlivening the body and the face, and there's the murmuring, gesturing, gurgling articulation of sound, the eye contact, the smiling, cooing, holding and comforting.

I'd forgotten how extraordinary this is, and how we take this kind of attentive, life-making, language-bestowing, care-giving *so, so* for granted. No wonder an adolescent character in the film *Super 8*, who'd lost his mom and grieving, wondered out loud: “She looked at me in *this way* [of hers]; and I knew, *I just knew* that I existed.”

There is a kind of attentiveness expressed in sight, word and touch, a paying of attention that is, I believe, a deeply moral endeavor; it bestows and calls forth into real existence the particularity of a child—their unique form, emotions and thought, their growing conviction that

to have been seen and touched in just this way over time, and with love, assuredly anchors them in this world and our house of being.

And of course, I'm not just speaking of children and the name-giving, life-making intensity of the attention we extend and bestow upon them. After all, I started out these remarks with the troubling disappearance, in a respected children's dictionary, of names for very real things in nature: *acorn, buttercup, catkin, kingfisher, nectar, willow...* What happens when these names for real things, and myriad others, wither away from disuse and inertia?

There is a story of how, on the very cusp of Enlightenment, the Buddha was tempted by all the snares that Mara and his demon army could devise; to no avail. Siddhartha would not be deterred. Finally, Mara asked: who would testify that Siddhartha was worthy of attaining Ultimate wisdom. And then the Buddha reached down and touched the ground and said: "the Earth is my witness."

So let me ask you, think with me! If by lack of attention, if by journeying so far down the path into a simulated, virtual world, or if distracted by the surface swirling glamour of a throw away world—if by our inattentiveness the very names of things in nature and the real objects to which they refer fade away one-by-one into oblivion...will there be an Earth and its myriad forms to stand as a witness for us, what we value and what we love? What will be left to testify if we have no words, no stories? How will we be able to call them to our side, or for us to stand in solidarity with them?

"People *exploit* what they have merely concluded to be of [cash] value," writes Wendell Berry, "but they defend what they love....and to defend what we love we need [particular words], for we love what we particularly know." In other words, what we attend to truly, we care for indeed: just this infant, as well as that *beech tree, and heather, ivy, lark, newt, pasture....* words

that have disappeared from an esteemed, widely used children's dictionary. How can we care for and defend them if we end up no longer know their names? "Without a name made in our mouths," writes Tim Dee, a person, "an animal or a place struggles to find purchase in our minds or our hearts." And "those who wish to explain to a politician and others why landscape should be nurtured and made safe for all living things faces a daunting task where the necessary concepts and vocabulary are not [available]." (Finlay Macleod)

So, what follows is a real-life story; and I think it's worth it to go into some detail.

The Isle of Lewis rises low out the sea in the Outer Hebrides archipelago northwest of Scotland. A population of 18,000 people live on its 1700 sq kilometers. It's a place where Gaelic is still spoken, the Sabbath widely observed, and peat cut from the moors for fuel to cook food and to heat homes. Most the people of Lewis live in the town of Stornoway, with moorlands—vast tracts of uncultivated upland—stretching out over most of the island abounding in heather, sodden turf, bog, crag and wildlife. To a visitor, and with an untrained eye, the moor of Lewis resembles a nothing-place: peat, moor, and just more of it—"flat, repetitive in form, and its colours motley and subtle." The kind of place a Welsh farmer was heard to say, speaking fondly of his own home ground: this is MAMBA country: Miles and Miles of Bugger All.

(Macfarlane, 16)

In 2004, the London based, multinational engineering company AMEC, in conjunction with British Energy the UK's largest electricity generation company, proposed building a huge wind farm on the moorland of the Isle of Lewis—it would the biggest in Europe. It would consist of 234 wind turbines, 140 meters high with a blade span on each turbine the length of a Boeing 747. Each turbine would be sunk into the ground anchored by 700 cubic meters of concrete. The generated energy would be conducted away on overhead power lines held up by

210 massive pylons 26 meters high. To service all of this, 104 miles of roads and nine substations would be built, along with four concrete plants and five quarries.

In total, AMEC's engineers estimated that 5 million cubic meters of rock, and 2.5 million cubic meters of peat would be excavated and displaced. The authors of AMEC's application for this project admitted the "the effect on the landscape, resources, character and perception of Lewis would be major and long-term."

What ensued was a three and half year battle between the 80% of island's inhabitants opposed to the project and AMEC, British Energy and their local supporters for whom the wind farm meant jobs and money for the people of Lewis who'd long struggled with emigration off the island and low employment.

"The crux of the battle," writes Robert Macfarlane, "concerned the perceived nature and worth of the moor itself, and the language that was used—and available—to describe it." On the one hand, it was most definitely in the interests of AMEC and wind farm advocates to characterize the moor as a wasteland. The metaphors used by this side repeatedly implied barrenness. One pro-wind farm local councillor dismissed the entire island interior as a "wilderness"—a hostile, unproductive space empty of any kind of life worth preserving and caring for. Arguing in support of the project, the journalist Ian Jack described Lewis moorland as a "vast, dead place: dark brown moors and black lochs under a grey sky, all swept by a chill wet wind." The language depresses and oppresses the mind; it comes straight from 17th century Puritan accounts of New England as a "desert wilderness," and 19th century white settlers in Australia who called the interior outback a "hideous blank, a howling waste."

For residents opposed to the wind-farm and what they deeply felt would be its ruinous impact on the landscape, the flora and fauna and the culture of the island, *their* task was to create

an account of the moor as home-ground, or as one farmer put it: “the peatlands are the living heart of the island.” Beginning in early 2005, these islanders began to “salvage and create accounts—narrative, lexical, poetic, painterly, photographic, historical and cartographical—which, taken in sum, might restore the particularity, the names, stories *and* mystery to the moor,” and thus counter the claim that it was a vast, dead place.

One group of islanders fanned out and gathered poems and folk songs concerning the moors of Lewis. Anne Campbell, whose family had worked the moors for generations cutting peat, farming and herding sheep, created a booklet called “A Known Wilderness.” Here, Campbell and her collaborator Jon MacLeod, demonstrated the long-term interconnection of the moor and human culture by intensively walking the land, noting its features and myriad living things, writing down the names and mapping out the criss-crossing paths and tracks of humans and animals some of which stretched back centuries—and what they achieved was the creation of a repertoire of storylines, “songlines” both ancient and new.

And finally, Anne Campbell joined up with Finlay Macleod and others in the creation of a *Peat Glossary*—a naming of the moorland: its physical features, effects of weather, and work, its critters, insects, birds and plants. It is a word list of attentive, rigorous exactitude—hundreds of words, but here, just two examples: ***rudhan***: “a set of four peat blocks leaned up against one another such that the wind and sun hasten their drying.” ***leig-chruthaich***: is a “quivering bog with water trapped beneath it, and an intact surface.” The existence of the *Peat Glossary* of the Isle of Lewis is a testimony of the long relationship between the Hebrideans and their land: its *use-language* attests to a relationship of labour, the need to name what is done working the land; its *aesthetic language* admits poetry and metaphor—the outcome of looking, touching and

appreciation—the human need to love where one is, what one does, and who one is and wants to be in and on the moors of Lewis.

So, not a “vast, dead place” after all—the moor of Lewis came alive in all its particular splendour, complexity and history due to the attention and care of those who knew it, loved it, and who were prepared to defend it with what turned out to be the most effective array of armaments they could ever have possibly devised.

After three and a half years, the Scottish Executive ruled on AMEC’s proposal. Taking into consideration the protective designation that portions of the moor possessed, the 10,924 letters of objection it had received and the cumulative work of Lewisians to recover and restore the names and stories of the moorland, the Executive decided to reject the wind-farm application. And thus, the moor was saved.

A couple of observations: first, saving the moor was hard work and it took years. Crofters allied with linguists, folklorists joined up with politicians and protesters, “Dr Finlay of the village of Shawbost” worked in mutual appreciation with peat-cutters whose generations of labour on Lewis stretch back beyond medieval times. As different as they were, and with at times, competing ideas and agendas, and energy levels that waned and waxed—they knew there was something more important, more dear than ego and the seemingly lucrative allure of an energy extractive economy. And *that* thing more important, needing to be known, attended to, named and cherished was the moor and its life—the living heart of the island.

As well, through their attentive efforts, this one place on our wide earth was brought back from the edge of slipping into abstract, nameless and, hence, loveless space. What we do not know and love, we cannot defend. AMEC and British Energy would have had islanders and others believe the moor a nothing place, an unproductive and thus worthless blank stretch of

ground on which to claw and scrawl a disenchanted, distracted signature. Fortunately, it was not to be. One name at a time, one moorland poem, one letter of protest, one sheep trail and “scarlet damselfly” noted down and recorded re-enchanted, and thus saved the moor of Lewis.

One hundred years ago, the German philosopher and sociologist Max Weber named “disenchantment” as the chief process and injury at work in the modern world. Weber defined disenchantment as the “knowledge or belief that...there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come to play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” The rationalizing process of disenchantment demands the end of dissenting kinds of knowledge—all must all give way to a master truth and law. As this process spreads out upon the modern physical and psychic landscape, Weber noted that it was always accompanied by a widespread reduction of wonder. “In modernity, mastery usurps mystery.”

In closing, over the years I’ve heard a lot of talk about spiritual practices and about the desire for more spirituality in our lives and in this congregation. Here’s my challenge this year to me—to us—I think that a compelling, wonder-working spirituality begins and goes from thence deep and wide, by paying attention—rapt attentiveness—to that which is close at hand. It begins with the knowing and naming of things so that they do not fade into oblivion. A spirituality worth the name could begin with something as simple as remembering, or re-learning the name of a tree, of rescuing from the scissors of the editors of a children’s dictionary words like: *acorn, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow* and teaching them to our children and our children’s children. Saving those words—that’s a kind of spiritual practice within our power to engage, a kind of spirituality that might yet open up to us gates of wonder. Who knows, it might even lead to saving something, someone we love. (For the story of the moor of Lewis and for so much of the content and idea for this sermon, see the remarkable book: *Landmarks*, by Robert Macfarlane, 2015.)