

Bewildering and the Benefits of being Bewildered

Eden is a home from which we have been evicted. My story is about our living with Wildlife in the new world we are creating. We live in a time of changing orthodoxies. We have wrapped ourselves in a worldview almost completely derived from Science and Religion, largely divorced from Nature and with a technological bent that, placing prime value on what is humanly created, regards Nature as separate from us and little more than a source of raw materials.

This mode of separation from the visible and invisible worlds of Nature is almost unique to our civilization. Most cultures in human history have experienced that all life forms are imbued with a spirit or essence, and that spirit may exist without form, and even precedes and is responsible for the creation of form. These were reflections of their experience, not their faith or beliefs, an experience that has been the reality of countless, perhaps even the majority of, human beings through the ages.

Nearly everyone in our present society professes spiritual feelings when being in wild Nature. Most people explain these feelings in terms of the religion they were taught as children. However, those feelings are older and more basic than any traditional religion. They are a natural part of our existence as natural material beings. They are recognition of our participation and belonging as members of Nature and the Universe. I believe every child is born a naturalist. Their senses open naturally to the world around them, their mother, their family, the warmth of the sun and the cool of the night, the sound of the rain, the glory of the stars above, the touch and embrace of others, the beauty of flowers, and the mysteries of life. These experiences need no translation.

One result of our increasing disconnection from nature is our increasingly polluted and disrupted ecology with all its attendant dangers and threats to the continuance of the rich and diverse patterns of life on our planet. We are governed by a materialistic worldview that ignores any possibility of a spiritual presence or presences in the forms that surround us, and treats Nature as something separate from our selves that we must dominate, rather than as an organism of which we are a part and with which we must commune and cooperate.

However, many people are waking up and seeing through the beliefs and thrall of the twin steamrollers of globalization and disconnected capitalism in their endeavor to turn the world into a single market, a single culture, and a single ecosystem—a new, improved, impoverished Pangaea. And their stories are being heard around the world and heeded in increasing numbers.

Whilst visiting Findhorn on a recent trip to Scotland, I met Paul ‘The Feraliser’ from nearby Anam Cara. Paul spoke passionately about the need for ‘feralising’ people and the countryside. ‘Feralising’, he said, came from *feu* Gaelic for ‘grass’, and *fer*, a Roman term for ‘the watchers’, the people outside their campfires watching just out of reach, who fought *ferociously*. If you were unorthodox and questioned the norm, you were *feral*. He told of the ‘*silli*’ the people of the woods who had no church. If you did not conform to the teachings of the church, you were as a ‘*silli*’ person, which became a silly person. He spoke of the *heathens*, the people who lived in the heather/heath away from the influence of the church; the *villains* who lived in

villages without a church; the *pagans*, people who lived in the country, a term later used by early Christians as a clever strategy to lump all non-Christians together making them easier to target and remove; and, the *wiseacres* or soothsayers changed by the church to be a person with an affectation of knowledge or wisdom, to be regarded with scorn or irritation by others, a know-it-all.

Paul spoke of the ‘rewilding’ revolution taking hold in Scotland. He said the Scots were reclaiming their natural environment despoiled by the greed and depredations of the Barons and the Monarchy, and beginning a great revegetation program to rewild the countryside to something like its former glory and bring back as much wildlife as possible, hopefully even wolves and bears. But will ‘rewilding’ work for us in Australia? In part yes, and it is being done with Tasmanian Devils and Quolls, but I believe we need more than this.

We are living in a great metropolitan boom. According to the United Nations, two-thirds of the Earth’s people are projected to live in cities by 2030. And Australia is one of the most urbanized countries of all. This urban development, combined with population growth, will have a transformative impact. Over the next three and a half decades, the world’s cities are predicted to swell by 2.5 billion people. And the apparent disconnect from Nature for most of these will be complete.

Having more urban dwellers may be a boon to some human development. Cities can offer better access to basic services and more job opportunities. They can spur efficiency and innovation. They are often hubs of intellectual and cultural richness. And denser living can be more environmentally sustainable as is the witness of Singapore.

Yet without deliberate attention, modern metropolises will not be synonymous with healthy communities, e.g. city dwellers are more obese than country people. And there is the oppressive weight of social isolation in modern cities—the lack of social connectedness, of face-to-face human relationships, of feeling a sense of belonging. I was struck by a survey that the Vancouver Foundation conducted in 2012 to better understand what community issues citizens of that city in Canada cared about most. To the Foundation’s surprise, the most significant issue was a “growing sense of isolation and disconnection”—that an increasingly individualistic way of life was undermining community caring and engagement. Surely our goal must be to build for *belonging*, with urban places, spaces and systems that enable the miraculous moments of interpersonal interaction.

Building for belonging can mean designing cities for the varied dimensions of people’s lives, with mixed-use environments that integrate opportunities to shop, work, learn and relax; where neighbourhoods are walkable and cyclable, where people of different ages, ethnicities and incomes are mixed together, and where natural prospects for connection exist, from pedestrian zones to public parks to farmer’s markets. It can also mean prioritizing housing and community quality alongside quantity.

Human beings are social creatures. From the moment we are born we crave the touch and attention of others. We need these things to survive. And when human connections are absent or lost, we suffer physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Social isolation correlates to afflictions from depression to heart disease, early death and crime.

There is much we can do to repair and renew the fabric of belonging, and to build resilience among individuals and across entire societies. It matters to all of us, because the bonds of belonging run in both directions. In extending a hand to someone else, it is we who are touched as well.

Another aspect of building for belonging is respecting local knowledge, and listening to local residents about what they value most. People want to feel a sense of place that connects them to their communities—to the landscape, street life and surroundings that make “where I live” feel special. This promotes the case for smaller councils rather than large conglomerates.

But there is more to it than this. What we see as the locus of power in the world is an illusion, born of the theory of change that our cultural capitalistic and religious beliefs dictate. We are going to need more than the smart people of the universities and the politicians to find the answers and create belonging. We are done with a world where the logic of money and power is more important than water, food and community, as seems to be the case in the current fracking and climate debates. When enough people live by that, the powerful will make different choices as well, acting in their proper role as barometers and channels of collective consciousness.

What exists between the warp and weft of religion, science and technology are the fine intangible threads of personality, identity, spirituality, passion, love, community, personal interaction and deep understanding. In the spaces between the fibres lies the poetry of being human. It is here, in the unfiltered chaos that a deeper connection to everything around us can take place, and it is here that we must look to transcend the barriers of technology and rediscover meaning in our work, home and life.

Surely it is time to redefine how we measure progress, to think of our evolution more holistically. Can we really say that we have progressed as a species if all we are building are high tech palaces in spiritual wasteland? Its time to slow down and reconnect with the world around us in all its raw and chaotic beauty. Its time to get the heavy hammers out and break down the walls that protect us from the direct experience of nature and being human.

And yet there is more. People-made environments/landscapes survive only at the sufferance of the wildness around them and in them. The flow of energy, water, nutrients and genetic information; the maintenance of temperature and the mix of atmospheric gases within narrow limits; the fertility of the soil; pollination—all these essential requirements and many others are achieved by wild nature in ways we do not fully understand. Since we do not know how the job is done, we cannot do it ourselves. Even if we could, we would end up spending most of our waking hours and budgets working for something that we used to get for free. We are not separate from Nature but a part of it.

What we need is engagement with community and recognition of our place in nature. We need a very deep human response to our relationship to our world,

especially our immediate environment that recognizes our place in it, our dependence upon it, and our responsibility to it. And we have that in *bewildering*.

'*Bewilder*' is an ancient term meaning 'to be as the wilderness, fully connected to life, the source, the Spirit, God, Nature. It was gained through being wholeheartedly in Nature' and essentially 'charmed by Nature'. If people became bewildered, especially if it happened unexpectedly and they were untrained in these matters, they might initially become confused for their world would be different in that state and they might not know how to be themselves in it. They have become 'bewildered'. For those in the know, such as Druids in the old times, this would be a highly desirable state to be in and one that was sought after as it created free-thinking, independent, healthy people. It was only later that the confusion aspect was emphasized over the health and connection with Nature aspects and it became used as a derogatory term to discourage people from becoming connected to life, Nature, the source, the Spirit or God in this way.

We can now expand the term 'to bewilder' to include 'making wildness' and thus 'making provision for wildlife to live and belong with us enhancing the opportunity for us to become bewildered, increase our health and wellbeing and open our hearts, and embrace our rightful place in the world as a part of Nature fully connected to it, dependent upon it and responsible to it.

How can we enhance wildness? *Bewildering* is making provision for people's and wildlife's wellbeing and belonging. We can do this by planting appropriate vegetation, removing rubbish, obstacles and weeds, and creating and enhancing habitat wherever we can thus facilitating the process of allowing other species to live with us in our backyards, suburbs, cities, industrial areas and rural areas and creating healthy surrounds for people and wildlife. We create a living environment of belonging that fosters and enhances the wellbeing of people *and* wild things.

Of all the world's creatures, perhaps those in greatest need of bewildering are our children. The collapse of children's engagement with nature has been even faster than the collapse of the natural world.

Royal National Park was a big part of my childhood and its wildness is a voice that never stops whispering to my soul. Wildness enters your pores by osmosis, and once it's under your skin, good luck forgetting it. The wild haunts the imagination, calling you back to places of vast sky and ever changing light, where solitude hunts for you and the edges of the world get ragged. These empty spaces are mirrors; they reflect back everything of yourself. They are teachers too, of a thousand lessons beyond anything our hands have made. Out there, time stops walking and takes on different hues—one becomes bewildered.

Royal National Park is recognized by the IUCN as a great treasure, one of the world's great urban national parks entirely within and part of the great cities of Sydney and Wollongong. How fortunate we are.

Nasho filled my being with the joy and mystery of living; it gave me reverence for all life and helped me to create a kinship with it where there is a place for all things in the scheme of existence with equal importance to all. It was a great place to

touch the Earth and feel the Sun and Moon. Nasho was a great library and its books were the flowers, the trees, the rocks and streams that spoke in quiet voices whenever I had the presence to listen. I truly learned to do what only the student of Nature learns and that is to wonder. No need to rail at the storms, wind, rain, heat, cold, ticks and leeches. It was all one.

But this is still not enough. It is all very well for Nature to be in national parks but we live mainly in farms, towns and cities and are increasingly taking over the space for wildlife to live and thrive almost everywhere. So we need to make provision for wildlife to be able to live with us not only in national parks and forests but also in our backyards, towns and cities, in our urban and industrial areas, and on our farms. This is a provision made by bewildering.

I learnt that a person's heart, away from wildlife, becomes hard. Lack of respect for living things soon leads to lack of respect for people, too. So I keep my children close to wildlife. And I try to make provision in their life and the lives of all the people of my community for direct experience of Nature by bewildering where I live in Sutherland—thinking globally and acting locally.

Through bewildering we can make provision for wildlife to live with us, we can create a world for people and wildlife to belong together. This would be at least a first step for many people to establish a true kinship with all life and become true bewildered human beings.

Bob Crombie, June 2015

Bob was a park ranger/ranger naturalist for many years in Kosciuszko, Royal and Glen Innes. He then went on to teach environmental management at TAFE. As a founding member to the group *First National Park* Bob is campaigning for the World Heritage Listing of the Royal Reserves—Royal and Heathcote National Parks and Garawarra State Conservation Area. He is an active conservationist and bewilderer and spends much of his time bewildering Sutherland, the suburb in which he lives in Sydney.