

The Whirling Subalpine Fir:

An Encounter with Nature, Psyche and Myth

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Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.

- David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

Given a lifelong love of the mountains and David Abram’s vivid descriptions of a phenomenological approach toward experiencing the earthly landscape, I was quite naturally drawn toward quieting “chatter” and opening perception to nearby montane, subalpine and alpine ecological communities. During a series of visits to Banff and Jasper National Parks, I slowed my pace in order to witness the enveloping flux of life. In a “duet” with the landscape, a story emerged. Partitioned into four segments, the chronicle of this experience serves as an inspiration and thread to a theoretical discussion on the ways in which nature, psyche and myth are intimately intertwined.¹

A Tunnel Mountain Summit: Reciprocal Perception versus Anthropocentric Blinders

My encounter with the landscape and the emergent story begins as follows:

Just inside an eastern threshold to the North American continent’s Rocky Mountain spine, is a broad, glacially carved valley. Centered herein and contained by higher peaks is a modest, 5,500 foot mountain shaped like a sleeping buffalo. Initially called, in fact, “Sleeping Buffalo” by ancient First Nation inhabitants, the European-Canadian railroad contractors who carved their way through the mountainous backbone, subsequently renamed the hill “Tunnel Mountain”—since an executive needlessly planned to hollow out a cavity in it. Near the summit of the buffalo’s resting head is a slightly balded lookout point. The relatively smooth, moderately angled rock embedded in the earth makes an ideal perch for gazing at the valley below.

Gazing at the gazers is a majestic subalpine fir. Like a noble guardian she stands proudly—taller than any of the other fir trees that encircle the mildly graded open face near the mountain's apex. With their attention stolen by the clear view of the manmade structures and machines over a thousand feet below, the human visitors who frequent this popular locale typically look past the regal arboreal creature. In the course of an hour, a dozen people come and go—most stopping for just a few minutes to catch their breath and to take a couple photographs before returning to the trail that will bring them back to their automobiles. Whether or not the people notice her, however, our fir tree notices them all. She faces the summit and has the supreme vantage point for watching all of the activity on the topmost slope.

This first passage of the story touches on the nature of perception and challenges the notion that only humans can act as witnesses. For Abram, perception is *intersubjective* and *reciprocal*—inviting an ongoing, wordless interchange between whatever outer beings catch the attention of the senses and one's own body:

It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness, as when my hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it, or when my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments. (52-3)

Some might explain away Abram's observations as the experience of "muscle memory," but even this term suggests a sort of intelligence that exists outside the brain. If a muscle has "memory," then perhaps in that memory is a kind of story—a tale of both the individual muscle's lived past and the archetypal possibilities which belong to muscles everywhere. Perchance the experience of this "story" influences the way in which the muscle responds and attunes to the various archetypal objects and energetic fields that it encounters. And if muscles can operate from memory and story, why couldn't a tree do the same? We know, for instance, that a tree responds to the sun, water and soil. Is it not conceivable that, with its own particular variety of sentience, the tree also responds to

other beings, including the humans within its presence? The tree as sentient being is, in fact, the experience that emerges when, in a meditative state, I silence the verbal chatter and open to a more engaged sensory perception. In witnessing the tree, it feels as if the tree is also a witness... and an active subject affecting my body as the object. Abram writes, “In this ceaseless dance between the carnal subject and its world, at one moment the body leads, at another the things [of the world lead]” (54).

Returning once more to the story, another theme emerges. Many of the people, who stand in the same place, do not seem to notice the witnessing tree, but give their attention instead toward the village below—a place filled with objects that humanity has created. This aspect of the chronicle suggests the prevalence of *anthropocentric blinders*, or, in other words, the tendency, in industrialized nations, to unconsciously filter out much of sensory experience in order to focus on human invention. C. G. Jung believes that the development of humanity’s ability for abstract thought has led to a disconnection of conscious awareness from our habitat, resulting in perceived isolation:

Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him. [...] Neither do things speak to him nor can he speak to things, like stones, springs, plants and animals. (79-80)

In the absence of a sensorial conversation with the enveloping natural world, our egocentric brand of awareness turns us instead to our own technologies. Jung outlines the dangers of such a focus: “[...F]or modern man, technology is an imbalance that begets dissatisfaction with work or with life. It estranges man from his natural versatility of action and thus allows many of his instincts to lie fallow. The result is an increased resistance to work in general” (152-3). Furthermore, Jung “predicted that America was at risk of being devoured by its machines” (Sabini 9). Perhaps, not only the United States,

but also much of the Western world has already been so devoured by technology that individual consciousness has become machine-like. Glen Slater, professor at Pacifica Graduate Institute, editor and author of several depth psychological publications, asserts that today's collective mindset is heavily influenced by a vision which likens human functioning to mechanical process: "We have already lost an awareness of ourselves as animals, as a species belonging to an eco-system, and we are fast developing psychologies that reduce our experience to robotic and computational processes, conceiving of ourselves as analogues to complex machines" (173). No wonder, then, that many of the people who visit the buffalo shaped mountain miss the witnessing tree and look instead towards the growing village with its cranes of progress and the deeply cut passageway that serves as a conduit for automobiles racing off into the future. If it is the machines that are projected to have creative power and promise in the world, and if humanity's mode of operation privileges mechanical information-gathering over sensory perception to a natural Other, then it is easy to understand how people fail to notice the sentience of an organic being. This does not preclude the tree from sensing and responding to the people, however.

A Family Affair: Communicating with and about Nature

The story thus continues...

The fir lady observes, for instance, the British clan with the redheaded father, brunette mother and four children. While the youngsters scamper about the crest, mom and dad rest for a moment and break out the canteen. Loudly squealing with delight, one offspring stumbles upon a boulder surrounded by a cluster of inuksuit while another discovers names carved into the rocks and the remaining two chase one another around the trees—trampling a creeping juniper shrub not yet ripe with berries. Our lady the fir tree hears the father respond to his youngest daughter's plea to have her name incised next to the others, "You know, Dalia, some people believe that it is a shame for so many individuals to change the natural environment by engraving their names in the stone and stepping on the plants." Then the

tree hears the young lass ask, "Why, Daddy? Do they own the land?" followed by the father's resigned sigh.

This scene raises further questions concerning the relationship humanity has with nature and brings to the forefront the kinds of conversations we have *with* and *about* our organic environment. There are at least two types of dialogues taking place in the story: one uses a language of dominance and ownership, while the other uses a language of reverence. The difference between the two is based on the type of affiliation between the person and the land.

Let us first examine the language of dominance as it appears in the story. Senselessly trampling over juniper shrubs and carving one's name in the rock suggests a relationship with the land in which the human being is a kind of conquering hero, while the land is a spiritless object to be possessed and exploited. If the terrain is merely a resource to be manipulated in service of humankind's needs, then what does it matter if someone occasionally trips over a plant and uproots it from its life source? The underlying attitude here is, "unless it is of use to me or my kin, it does not really make a difference whether the shrub lives or dies."

Carving one's name in the stone takes this mindset one step further. The individual who wants to leave his/her name inscribed in stone at the mountaintop feels a sense of importance and ownership; engraving one's name in the rock is a way of saying, "I was here and I left my mark on this territory." The impetus behind such conceit and possessiveness goes beyond the attitude of a few individuals. Abram traces the development of the modern-day ego and mass anthropocentrism back the invention of the *phonetic* alphabet, which, for him is the first form of language that "prioritized the human voice" (195). As per Abram, the other elements of written communication that preceded

the alphabet—the pictograph and even the early Semitic *aleph-beth*—“are still implicitly tied to the more-than-human field of phenomena” (101). In the above story, however, the names, which are incised in the stone using the letters of our contemporary alphabet, are not meant to relate in any way to the land, but are meant to be understood by other people—by an exclusive family consisting only of other members of the human race.

There was a time when humanity, by and large, did speak with the land; and, in some small pockets of the world, such cultures can still be found. Abram emphasizes that a notion of kinship can extend beyond the human sphere and that language can serve as a means of communication with a much broader landscape:

“[...A]mong oral peoples language functions not simply to dialogue with other humans but also to converse with the more-than-human cosmos, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of the earth and sky, to invoke kinship even with those entities which, to the [so-called] civilized mind, are utterly insentient and inert. (70-1)

Looking closely at the story, one will discover evidence that points to the possibility of conversing with the “more-than-human cosmos”—the presence of the *inuksuit*. According to the authors of the *Canadian Museum of Civilization* website, inuksuit are “stone structures of varied shape and size” that, for up to four thousand years, have been erected from “unworked stone” by the Inuit people of the Arctic. Each inuksuk is “as unique as a fingerprint” and can serve a number of different functions: as a message center for the community, as a personal note, as an expression of sentiment, or as a tribute to a sacred place of power (“Online Exhibition”). The underlying philosophy behind the use of the inuksuk is one that gives reverence to the particular personality of the terrain. In place of manmade letters, the building blocks of communication are the pieces of *unworked* stone that are *native* to the locale. The dialogue that is created with these markers is one that, at the very least, includes the local landscape in the conversation. It

gives reverence and power to the archetypal field of influence created by the interwoven features of the region—the types of trees, rocks, aromas, animals, humans, weather patterns (and so forth) that, in their reciprocal influence of one another, shape a particular character of place:

Each place has its own dynamism, its own patterns of movement, and these patterns engage the senses and relate them in particular ways, instilling particular moods and modes of awareness, so the unlettered, oral people will rightly say that each place has its own mind, its own personality, its own intelligence. (Abram 182)

Thus, the original purpose behind the inuksuk was to communicate with a much larger community beyond the family of humankind. Today, one can find inuksuit clustered around a large boulder at the summit of Tunnel Mountain. If these stone figures were not created with the conscious intent of speaking with the landscape, they at least point to the potential of such a conversation...

Sensing the Place-Time Matrix

Returning to the story, a dialogue between the landscape and humanity begins to unfold:

Many people stand near the grand summit guardian without perceiving her attributes. Every now and then, however, she manages to catch a human being's attention. Those who take just a moment to expand their sensory receptors will immediately regard her grandeur—her compelling and commanding silhouette against a taller mountain that forms a distant backdrop. Engaged in such perception, they will also glean that her stance is not quite as static as first imagined. Her pose somehow suggests movement...as if she is revealing but one "frame" of her full-length motion picture, or as if her dance would become readily discernable if only one could alter the perception of time.

In this passage, which emerged in my attempt to open sensory awareness to the unique *essence* of the fir tree, something interesting happened with regard to the notion of time. Abram points out that focusing on the deep-seated nature of something seems to go hand in hand with relaxing or even halting one's pace (201-2). One cannot assess a

particular tree's uniqueness while constantly distracted with thoughts of what a friend said yesterday or with a mental rehearsal of things to do tomorrow. To understand a tree's essence, one must become tree-like—rooted in the ground and receptive. Present and alert to communication from the subalpine fir, the primary impression I received was that there was a layer of animation underneath its superficially static appearance. It was as if the evergreen was both rooted *and* bursting with the prospect of movement. This impression seems to be compatible with the understanding that oral story-telling cultures have about place: “Unlike the abstraction of an infinite and homogeneous ‘space,’ place is from the first a qualitative matrix, a pulsing or potentized field of experience, able to move us even in its stillness” (Abram 190). In other words, not only does a place have its own personality and intelligence, but there is also a “[...] temporal and psychological latency of the enveloping landscape” (Abram 193). Perhaps it is the latent potential within the tree that gives the impression of movement or perhaps it is the potential within that particular place-matrix on Tunnel Mountain that is pregnant with possibility and pulses with a rhythm that is outside linear time.

A time outside of linear time might be called circular time, Dreamtime, Distant Time or even mythic time and for the oral storytelling cultures it is “[...] the earthly sleep, or dream, out of which the visible landscape continually comes to presence” (193). Place-time offers that which lies dormant in the unconscious; and if, momentarily, a human being can relinquish the tendency toward abstract thought, can forget her/his obsession with manmade invention, can set aside the typical primacy given to the human voice, and can let go of ego rigidity... then s/he can perceive the messages coming from the place-time matrix and engage its promise. “The vitality of each place [...] is

rejuvenated by the human enactment, and *en-chant-ment*, of the storied events that crouch within it” (Abram 193).

The Evolution of Myth from a Relationship with Nature as Other

Now immersed in the place-time matrix, let us see what storied events unfold:

Meditating on her with focused attention, one can see in her posture the grace of a dancer. A strong yet supple spine leans ever so slightly into the mountain, while her head faintly cocks downhill. One branch, on her southern, uphill side appears to bend back at an angle, giving the impression of an arm bent at the elbow. It is as if this arm is flirtatiously holding up her hair behind her tilted crown. Another “arm,” on her northern side, is held in what ballerinas call “high fifth position”; the limb is extended upward and softly curved toward the crown. Indeed, when peering closely, one can see that she caresses a triangular shaped headdress with jewel-shaped clusters of fir needles. She holds her other arms out at various angles: those topmost on the southern side stretch away from her frame at about forty-five degrees with the wrists pointed skyward, as if she is hailing the midday sun, while many of the topmost northerly arms are angled at thirty degrees with straight-pointed fingers, indicating, perhaps, the direction of the North Star. There is a flourish of different branches beneath her mid-section—evocative of twirling hips. Her floor length skirt is round and full as its a-line cut widens outward toward the earth.

To be sure, when one’s receptors are open, it is easy to notice that this magnificent tree stands in half-twirl and that she is a whirling goddess with many arms, an intricately designed diadem, and a flowing gown. Her eyes of light peer intently at me, whether I regard her or not. She emits a confident, compelling laugh as she tilts her head coquettishly. Her presence is commanding, strong, full of queenly might—as if she could destroy me in the blink of an eye... and, yet, at the same time, she is playful, elegant, alluring and comforting in her exquisite poise. The aroma that she and her sisters emit invites contentment and her calm composure evokes harmony. Birds momentarily alight on her hands or limbs and she smiles upon them. Her budding pine cones reveal her bounty. She allows, watches and graces the countless humans who visit this lookout...and whether or not these individuals are fully conscious of it, she infuses wonder in each and every one of them.

The above story registered in awareness after attempting to first sense and then describe the essential nature of a singular tree. After a while, I could not help but notice the numerous ways in which the tree resembled Kali, the many-armed Hindu Goddess of eternal energy, time and change, who is both giver of bountiful life and the one who

annihilates in death. This recognition, in turn, made me wonder whether the original vision and stories of Kali had been imagined when a group of people had a similar encounter in nature. Could the myth have emerged from a human conversation with the natural landscape? With this question came the realization that I had primarily conceived of myth as an intricate pattern of archetypal images that emerged in storied form from the imagination of the *human* psyche. But what if psyche does not merely reside within the human sphere?

Abram explains that for the Navajos, “[...] psyche is not an immaterial power that resides inside us, but is rather the invisible yet thoroughly palpable medium in which we (along with the trees, the squirrels, and the clouds) are immersed [...]” (237).

Furthermore, that which most Westerners would dub the *imagination* or the *unconscious*, is understood by the Australian Aboriginals, as “the invisible medium *between* such entities [as rocks, persons, leaves]...” (227). For Abram, psyche exists in the *air*—that invisible yet tangible element that caresses, permeates and gives life to every being on the planet (227, 260). Looking at it another way, one could say that psyche exists in the *conversation between* the various beings of the phenomenal world—in the perceptual dance that all of creation shares.

This idea that psyche exists outside of humanity shatters the foundations of anthropocentrism. How can we continue to view nature as an insentient set of objects to be manipulated for our own devices...if psyche exists in our relationship with it? How can we continue to privilege our own voice and our own technology if it is the sensual interaction with the organic world that nurtures and sustains both spirit and body? We need to alter our focus and recognize that nature and humanity are irrevocably interwoven.

Such an altered focus, however, does not mean a nostalgic regression into a historic past where the alphabet, technology and abstract thought do not exist. The movement now would be to connect the stories that come from a sensuous participation in our earthly landscape with our modern inventions:

It is surely not a matter of, “going back,” but rather of coming full circle, uniting our capacity for cool reason with those more sensorial and mimetic ways of knowing, letting the vision of a common world root itself in our direct, participatory engagement with the local and the particular. (Abram 270)

To begin to make such a shift means that one must attempt to attune one’s pace to the rhythm of nature and regularly try to silence the chatter of verbal thought. One must imagine with one’s eyes, ears, nose, and nerve endings and discover what surfaces in awareness. One must commune with the essence of the objects within the immediate surroundings for, as Jung explains, “Sometimes a tree tells you more than can be read in books” (6). A conversation with a tree, for instance, can tell you about the ways in which nature, myth and psyche are intimately intertwined.

Endnote

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