

Woodlands, Farmlands, and Homesteads:

The Landscapes of Childhood and Discovery of Soul

By Kathie Collins

The shape of a landscape is an ancient and silent form of consciousness. Mountains are huge contemplatives. Rivers and streams offer voice; they are the tears of the earth's joy and despair. The earth is full of soul.

- John O'Donohue

The first landscape witnessed through human eyes is that of a mother's body.

When a child is born, Mother (or mother substitute) is her entire universe. Mother's body feeds her, cares for her, and protects her. Her eyes, fresh from the watery realm of the womb, take in little more than light and shadow, focus only on the mountains of Mother's breasts and the silvery lakes of Mother's eyes, other landscapes distant and fuzzy. But gradually she begins to distinguish the rocky cliff of Mother's nose and the gaping crevasse of her mouth, and to see reflected in those lakes other lakes and cliffs. One day, in a moment of contentment, belly full and diaper dry, she bats her arms into the sunlight cascading through the window above her cradle and catches her first glimpse of tree-like fingers growing straight and tall from the field of her own body. Months later, as she begins to sit and pull herself up to standing in her crib, she'll take note of those same figures framed on the other side of the window pane. And in another year, she'll begin to learn their names, to understand them as "not Mother." As she grows, her fingers, those delicious objects of discovery and mimicry, will become steeples and people. They'll

have names like “Tall Man” and “Thumpkin.” And Father, that tree of a man, will scoop her up at the end of the day, placing her carefully in his branch-like arms, and carry her to the boughs outside her window where she can pick a green leaf, shaped and veined like the palm of her own hand.

The world inside – with mother and father and the bedtime stories they tell – and the world outside – with creeks and winds and the gurgling and whispering stories they tell – are a single reality for her. She feels instinctively what Simon Schama conveys in *Landscape and Memory* – that the land existed many eons before human beings grew from its clay (7). She experiences herself as a part of this clay, no more or less important than the butterfly that lights for an instant upon her arm. Just as the body of her mother was home during the weeks of her gestation and infancy, the body of the earth will be home her entire life. Nature will continue to be, whether she recognizes it or not, the reference point for all her experiences, both personal and cultural, for culture also draws its life from natural forms. Indeed she must grow to recognize consciously, and further, to embrace the natural world she now experiences unconsciously. To fail at this task is to risk alienation from both the earth and her self. To succeed at this task she must develop what James Hillman calls in *Re-visioning Psychology* an “imaginal” view of life, an ability to see soul within the inanimate world – an ability that may be cultivated through the spontaneous interweaving of backyard play and the cultural myths and stories of childhood.

This interweaving begins as soon as her legs become strong enough for climbing hills and trees and her use of her language becomes advanced enough to tell herself stories about the very ground beneath her feet. Once she no longer requires the constant

care and attention provided in the lap of her personal mother, what Delores LaChapelle calls in her book *Earth Wisdom* the primary matrix, she is ready to be launched into the secondary matrix of Mother Earth (61). From the age of seven, a child's work is her play in the natural world. Having found her place within the family, she must now create a place for herself in nature. She must find out who she is away from Mother and Father. She must find a home away from home – creeks to cross, woods to wander, and lakes which reflect more than the tiny face into which Mother so loves to gaze. The earth becomes this home in as much as she is able to personify the trees (and the squirrels that scamper through their branches) and also imagine herself into the cultural stories and myths that have their settings in nature.

Ancient Greek culture claims that in these years of latency – the years from seven to twelve referred to in American culture as the “wonder years” – the child belongs to Artemis, goddess of the wilderness and the hunt. Classic children's literature abounds with Artemisian heroes and heroines from Robinson Crusoe to Pocahontas, and the child who wanders the countryside, or even the backyard, while pretending to be one of these characters develops a relationship with the natural world that cannot be acquired by watching the best nature videos or reading scientifically based material about the environment. The child must feel the textures of the world, grass between the toes and gentle mist upon the face, in order to experience herself as part of it. Story characters like Heidi, who have crossed the threshold out of the house and into the hills before her, provide not only a model, but also lend her the eyes and body through which she might also see and touch the world. Such Artemisian characters are archetypal ideas which allow her to see deeper into the surrounding landscape. These ideas are essential

because, as Hillman writes, “the more ideas we have, the more we see, and the deeper the ideas we have, the deeper we see” (121).

Seeing deeper into any realm allows for the possibility of true understanding and sincere relationship. Seeing deeper into nature brings greater meaning to human life which extends from it. To see into nature is to see into human nature. Yet while the natural world may well surround and even interpenetrate the human realm, its depths are best discovered within the wilderness, the place in which Artemis makes her home. The wilderness is a liminal place – an environment existing outside cultivated society. The pre-adolescent child, freed from Mother’s apron strings but not yet bound by the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, lives psychologically in this same liminal realm. Her “wonder years” then provide the child a golden opportunity, indeed the mandate, for exploring the untamed regions of both her outer and inner worlds. Only by entering into the forest (or at least the modern equivalent of the backyard woods) does she accept the initiation essential to this stage of life. Only through her encounters with the creatures she meets on her journeys in the woods does she encounter herself. And while the encyclopedia may offer her practical information about animal habitats and the Latin names for the local flora and fauna, fairy tales provide the necessary compass and map for the inward portion of her journey.

In fairy tales, the forest is dark and foreboding, symbolizing the unconscious – the source of psychological beginning. It captures the human imagination as a place of magic, birth, and initiation. Though cultures have sprung from all kinds of ground, desert and plain alike, the forest remains, in terms of psychological evolution, an archetypal nursery of sorts. As Schama writes, there is a “long, rich, and pagan tradition that

imagined forests as the primal birth-place of nations; the beginning of habitation” (6). Here on the dark, fecund floor of the forest, where new life is constantly born, Artemis serves not only as guardian, but also as the goddess of childbirth, midwife to both human and animal mothers in need. With opportunity for excursions into nature and an imagination developed through the hearing of these tales, children move naturally from the laps of their human mothers into a second birth within the woods. There Artemis delivers them into relationship with the great mother – a world teeming with life, mystery, and soul.

Hillman suggests that soul is “a perspective, rather than a substance, a viewpoint toward things rather than a thing itself” (xvi). This perspective and viewpoint is one that he calls imaginal, and it is typically the child’s natural approach toward the world in these “wonder years.” Indeed, imagination is the basis of much child’s play: bringing the trees, streams and hollows to life by personifying them or acting out ancestral myths enables the child to see through the landscape of the backyard to humanity’s more ancient roots. Yet what children seek, and perhaps what even awe-filled, playful adults seek, is not the empty quietness of a wilderness untouched by human hands, but rather an experience, an encounter with the natural world. Human beings crave relationship with the world. Even more, they seek a home within it, a place where their imaginations and deepest desires come into intimate contact with its non-human elements. Human beings seek, to use Hans Georg Gadamer’s term, a “fusion of horizons.” Imagination is essential to this fusion.

It is no wonder then that *Bambi*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Little House on the Prairie* remain perennial children’s favorites in Western culture. Despite

increasing urbanization, children still need, perhaps need even more, stories of life in the wilderness. They need these stories not for entertainment or as aids to literacy, but for the education of their souls. For in reading classics about life in the natural world, they learn to read nature. They learn to see themselves as part of that world, rather than apart from it. In developing their creatureliness, they develop their humanity. They cultivate this ability through the act Hillman calls dehumanizing, which he writes “aims to free psychology from personalistic confines and to revert its vision to poetic principles and polymorphic gods [...] a program of animism, of ensouling the nonhuman, a program that would relieve the human of its self-importance” (ix). Through the acting out of nature stories and myths, children learn to see through the ordinary oak a magical realm, a land infused with soul, a kingdom full of meaning. The tree seen through is not merely living. It is alive with soul. And it is only through a soul-filled aliveness of the world that human beings recognize themselves as also alive. Just as the infant deprived of the nurture of a loving mother will, clinically speaking, “fail to thrive,” the child who fails to imagine a home in the natural world is unlikely as an adult to find meaning in life.

Unfortunately, the loss of meaning is epidemic today. Human beings are increasingly anxious about the world, increasingly unable to see a way through the tears of despair. Depth psychology argues that this anxiety comes from the loss of images, the loss of the ability to imagine. Ginette Paris writes in *Wisdom of the Psyche* that “[i]nstead of getting rid of oppressive mythologies, we got rid of the imagination that created them. To get rid of fairies, we stopped imagining nature. To get rid of the devil, we stopped imagining evil. To get rid of God, we stopped imagining what is greater than ourselves” (204).

Perhaps then it is time for fairyland to be rediscovered, not in a literal sense, but an imaginal one. With few exceptions, even the most imaginative children understand that the fairy houses they spy in the hedgerow are not a literal fairy houses. Nevertheless, they might be real in the psychological sense and might offer real psychological value. Imagining fairies in the hedgerow is a form of personifying. It is a way of being in the world and a way, as Hillman says, “of experiencing the world as a psychological field [...] Personifying not only aids discrimination; it also offers another avenue of loving, of imagining things in personal form so that we can find access to them with our hearts” (13-14). The seeing of fairies in the hedgerow doesn’t propose to challenge the notion of the concrete structure of the plant world. Instead, it provides the framework for intimate experience of that place, of that particular landscape. Schama, quoting the great photographer of natural landscape, Ansel Adams, about his work in Yosemite National Park, writes: “In the last analysis, Half Dome is just a piece of rock...there is some deep personal distillation of spirit and concept which moulds these earthly facts into some transcendental emotional and spiritual experience” (9).

According to Paris, this is the essential task of depth psychology – “to find the images that reveal emotional truth” (212). So to continue with the current example of personifying, what might be the emotional truth of fairies and fairy houses? Might human beings need to imagine a reality other than the visible one, a world free from complications and despair? Might they need to imagine a tiny world from which to escape the gigantic problems of life, to dream sometimes of hiding or flying on gossamer wings away from impending drama or disaster? Might they wish to don an acorn cap or a skirt of rose petals to announce their symbiosis with plant life? And might they wish

sometimes to sing and dance with friends all night in a realm where no one ever gets old? These questions, appropriate enough for adults, might ring with even more emotional truth for wee ones looking for wee houses, those children first venturing to the edges of the garden, building their first forts hidden from the eyes of task-oriented adults.

Of course, not everyone sees the fairy world. Human beings respond to nature based upon that “fusion of horizons” between the natural landscape of their given homes and the myths that capture their individual and cultural imaginations. As Paris says, “[o]nly the imagination can come up with the artistic compromise between the fantasy world of inner life and the objective reality outside” (208). The imagination draws images from both realms and fuses them into the picture it paints of the world. Everyone’s painting is unique – my own no exception.

As a child I was certainly not immune to the fairy world (and still am not as an adult), but the particular landscape that captured my imagination was that of the rural North Carolina farm where I spent weekends and summers with my father during my own “wonder years.” And the major archetype through which I saw this landscape and my life was a variation on Artemis in the character of Laura Ingalls, the young American pioneer girl of the *Little House on the Prairie* series. I often pretended as I played that I lived her 19th century life on the plains. In doing so, I built a relationship with the earth that mimicked the symbiosis with nature that Laura and her family lived.

Most of my childhood was lived in the city, far from wagon tracks through tall grasses and the plaintive cries of coyotes in the night. And as avid reader, certainly I was influenced by other stories, tales about life in the natural world included. Even so, it was

the Ingalls' family trek from the "big woods" of Minnesota into the wide open plains of the Montana and Nebraska territories that lingers yet in my soul. The sun-drenched, wind-blown austerity of Laura's life in the grasslands with its expansive beauty, daily trials, and simple pleasures coincided with some inner quality, some inner vision which I then projected onto my family's borrowed farmland. I knew the smell of the prairie because I had walked behind the haying tractor and been captured by the golden scent of those twine-wrapped packages of dried grass. Having studied the newborn calves with their still wet umbilicus cords swinging between wobbling legs as they nursed, I understood the closeness Laura felt to her animals. I knew what it was to run down a pasture field so fast I thought the wind might catch me up into flight. I imagined that the red clay banks of the muddy Yadkin River that snaked a path through our property were the banks of Plum Creek into which the Ingalls family dug out their first home west of the Mississippi. And I imagined the uninspired square brick ranch that sheltered us was the Ingalls' log cabin in "Indian Country."

Like Laura I knew what it was to have a Pa who never settled any one place long, the perpetual packing and unpacking of the semi-nomad who believes that the next home will be the fenceless paradise that won't hem him in; a Pa who, nevertheless, was in synch with the rhythms of the moon and the seasons, who could build things, and make things grow; a Pa with three little girls who cared not a hoot that none of them were boys. If my own Pa gave me anything more than life, it was the wings of Diana (the name given by Romans to their image of Artemis), the virgin spirit of the young woman who is one unto herself. He trusted that I could not only take care of myself, but that I could serve as protector of my younger sisters too. He knew that my step was nimble, my

balance keen, and my aim true. But more than anything, he seemed to understand that I shared his passion for the hidden mysteries of the land: the eyes of the black king snake watching us swing on a tire tethered to the same limb around which her body was coiled; the red fox whose fairy-like fastness frustrated our monastic attempts at sitting motionless in order to catch him stealing persimmons from the back yard; the tracks of a wild boar along the river bank; and the aura of a stand of trees visible from the one “picture window” in our house, the witnessing of their light bodies itself a kind of “seeing through.”

The farmland and the myths and stories that guided my imagination as I played in its woods and ran through its pastures fostered within me a reverence for and relationship with the earth that continues to abide. It soothes my soul when I am fretful. It inspires my passion, asking me to imagine even more from life. If, as Hillman writes, “the soul has shrunk because its imagination has withered, and so we have little space for fantasizing, for holding things and mulling, for letting be,” (93) then this particular landscape provided the room for my soul to grow to healthy proportions. John O’Donohue writes in *Anam Cara* that “you need plenty of room for your soul [...] that space allows your otherness to find its own rhythm and contour” (29-30). That space need not be literal, but perhaps large spaces do indeed invite a spaciousness of heart and mind. They lure us with their secrets and their mysteries, compel our contemplation and our awe. The realm of nature experienced in my childhood remains for me a most secret and sacred space, as sacred as the realms of memory, imagination, and story which weave with it, however imperfectly, to create a broad inner landscape, an infinite dwelling place for soul.

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