The Tonic of Wildness

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Growing up in northeast New Jersey, I felt the grimness of the city like a weight against my soul. I remember wanting to scrub away the bleakness until a new landscape appeared. Indeed, in my young imagination, I painted alternative terrain: decrepit gray buildings became soaring redwoods; crumbling potholes turned into woodland ponds; the concrete schoolyard strewn with broken glass transformed into shadowy fields alight with glow worms. Whenever possible, I sought refuge in hidden pockets of nature: the wild grape vines that entangled our back-alley clubhouse; the "stink trees" growing rampant in the burned-out lot across the street; the lone and massive mulberry tree standing stalwart behind our apartment building—the tree I climbed to sit and read and in June to eat the berries that stained my feet black. In spring and summer I loved helping my mom with her garden. In this eight-by-ten-foot oasis, fenced off from pedestrian traffic and the dusty kickball games of kids in the complex, my mom cultivated peppers, tomatoes, zucchini, mint—enough for our table and to share among friends.

I think my mom experienced a yearning similar to my own. She had grown up in Minnesota, surrounded by farms and prairies and where every home had a garden. Now, in the city, she found ways to recapture that proximity to nature. In our two-bedroom apartment, she kept 120 plants—I counted them. Lush ferns, avocado trees stretching floor to ceiling; philodendrons that encircled our living room. She sang while she watered them. Sometimes on weekends we piled into our rickety station wagon and drove to more rural areas of the state: hiking the trails of South Mountain; observing the wildlife along the boardwalks of the Great Swamp, where we spied snapping

Emile Claus, *The River Lys at Astene*, c. 1885.

image info

turtles, spring peepers, even otters. Although exhilarating for me, these sojourns felt brief, and by nightfall we returned to our city blocks, which held their own kind of beauty but felt limiting all the same.

One of my favorite books was *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George. It tells the story of young Sam Gribley, who runs away from his family's crowded Manhattan apartment to live alone in the Catskills, in the wilds of his grandfather's long-vanished farm. With only a flint and steel and the clothing on his back, Sam learns to survive in and forge a deep connection to the natural world. He builds a home inside an ancient hemlock tree and learns to trap rabbits, catch fish and turtles, smoke mussels, collect edible plants. He raises a peregrine falcon who becomes his constant companion. Like any good naturalist, Sam keeps a notebook. In it, he maps the landscape and records wildlife, pausing at times to express joy in the sheer beauty of his surroundings. Although he relishes his solitude, he enjoys occasional human visitors, including Bando, the wilderness-loving English professor who stays with him for a spell.

Sam's narrative parallels the writings of another nature lover who lived a century earlier in Concord, Massachusetts. Indeed, Bando calls Sam, Thoreau, in honor of the literary legend. In 1845, when Henry David Thoreau retreated into the woods, he went there, in part, to write. He was working on his first book, dedicated to his brother John, who, only three years prior, had died suddenly, painfully, from tetanus, as Thoreau held him in his arms. That book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, recounts a trip the two had taken. Outfitting their boat with melons and potatoes, they used the mast to hold up the canvas they slept under each night in differing spots along the shore. In darkness amid the pines and on board in the mottled sunlight, passing fields and villages, woods and battlegrounds, navigating the many dips and widenings of the rivers, Thoreau took note, with his seer's eye, of his earthly and watery surroundings. He documents trumpet weed and soap wart, tortoises and cardinals, the many species of fish, including the indefatigable shad. Not just the sights, but the sounds of nature stirred his soul. Lying under the stars next to his brother, he was moved by the calls of foxes and owls, the baying of the hounds.

Nature, for Thoreau, held an illuminating power that was deeper, truer, farther reaching than the hypocritical doctrine of the churches with which he was familiar. Although humans destroy nature, nature preserves itself. And it can sustain us, even teach us, he believed, if we engage in simple, deliberate living. Six years after his boat trip, this vision still pulsated in Thoreau. It is what he would write about and what he would spend his days living out—in the woods near Walden Pond.

Like Sam Gribley, Thoreau, in his bold experiment, first secures the essentials of living. With borrowed tools he hews white pines to frame his tiny cabin. He digs a root cellar and plants a garden. In anticipation of winter, Thoreau chops wood and builds a chimney, reflecting, as he does so, on the beauty and utility of trees, their provision of fire unifying humans across centuries.

In these labors as in his woodland wanderings, Thoreau feels graced by transcendence. He experiences it while fishing on the pond in moonlight and in the boom and echo of spring ice thawing. Thoreau praises, too, what humans cannot see but of which nature offers glimpses: autumn loons plumbing the depths of Walden Pond; a lone hawk encircling the sky. "We need the tonic

Claude Monet, *The Rose Bushes in the Garden at Montgeron*, 1876.

image info

of wildness," Thoreau propounds, and also its mystery.

When my eleventh-grade English teacher first read aloud from *Walden*, a shiver ran down my spine. As I had with Sam years earlier, I immediately recognized Thoreau as kin. After class, I shyly approached Mr. Miller and asked where I might read more. The next day, I found a book on my desk with a note: "Take it home. It's yours."

I was new in school. Just months earlier, my family had uprooted and moved west to a town on the northern Mississippi. After fifteen years of city streets, I now had nature at my door. Wholeheartedly, I embraced it. I explored the surrounding bluffs and lakes and biked for miles along the rolling river. Still, I felt a disconnect. Having experienced nature's absence and now her presence, I felt the gap more keenly, knowing so many were without.

In his 2013 Ted Talk, "A Guerilla Gardener in South Central LA," Ron Finley tells how he started growing fruits and vegetables in front of his home on the narrow strip of

dirt between the sidewalk and the street. Eager to spruce up the barren city landscape and conscious that many in his community suffered from poor nutrition, Finley opened his garden to all. Neighbors could pick tomatoes, green beans, sunflowers, and squash and bring them home to their families. They also enjoyed the lush beauty of the plantings. It turns out, though, that curbside plantings violated code; the city issued Finley a citation. Refusing to pay an unjust fine, Finley petitioned to change the law, and with that became a "reluctant activist." Since then, he has opened a training center in Compton, where he mentors aspiring gardeners and speaks to audiences worldwide.

Finley has been featured in countless media platforms, including Delila Vallot's documentary *Can You Dig This?*, a sweet and inspiring film that traces how four small gardens in South Central helped transform the lives of local residents. Vallot introduces us to Spicey, who, with a history of drug dealing, robbing, and incarceration, initially joined a church-sponsored community garden with the hope of growing marijuana. But by working the soil, dreams take root, and Spicey's mindset changes as do his choices. We also meet Kenya, long suffering from addiction and abuse. After losing her father at a young age, she found solace in the streets, but gardening helps her find healing. She calls her plot *Blessing* for the repose it brings her soul. There's spunky eight-year-old Quimonie. To show how individuals can change their environs, her father starts a project-wide garden, which Quimonie embraces with ebullience and aplomb. Finally, there's seventy-year-old Hosea, newly released after three decades in jail, he starts a garden in the backyard of his halfway house. Remembering his youth in rural Arkansas, he views this little patch of green as a rebirth of freedom.

Interspersed among these stories is Finley, who appealingly, unapologetically, exhorts his viewers to make a change. When vacant city land is cultivated, he argues, the benefits are manifold. Urban gardening preserves natural resources. It provides affordable, healthy food for thousands lacking access. It also grants autonomy and freedom. Whereas, for decades many African Americans had disassociated themselves from the land (viewing soil as a bitter reminder of slavery), gardening reconnects them to essential elements of living. It also creates community, a "space for everyone to be as one." Ultimately, it is spiritual, teaching us that nothing ever dies. As gardeners, we become part of the divine creative process. "I planted my Eden," Finely reflects, "It turned out to be Paradise on the street."

I'm struck by how, in Vallot's film, the emotional and spiritual sustenance these gardens provide prove even more transformative than the physical sustenance. Indeed, peace, hope, freedom, purpose, joy, connection—these are the balms that make our lives beautiful, meaningful, even bearable. However, for the urban poor, the natural spaces that can provide this balm—woods, meadows, lakes, rivers, marshes, mountain, seas—are too often missing. This absence is not a superficial loss. When access to nature is restricted, it limits one's capacity for truly living. Today, Thoreau's woods seem open only to a few, those who, in the words of the great theologian Howard Thurman, have "their backs against the wall"; they are denied this tonic. They are exiled from Eden.

Thurman is perhaps best noted for *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), a beautiful book of interlocking lectures that profoundly influenced leaders of the US civil rights movement. Therein, Thurman distinguishes between the Christian church, which had sanctioned slavery and perpetuates racial prejudice and division, and the religion of Jesus, which embodies Jesus's dream of a human community grounded in fellowship and mutual understanding. He identifies Jesus as an underprivileged man himself—poor, Jewish, unprotected by the laws of Rome—and thus linked to all who suffer today from poverty and oppression. From a place of empathy, Jesus teaches his followers how to survive spiritually, emotionally, and culturally in the face of crushing external forces, counseling them not to give in to fear, deception, and hate but rather to push forward to unifying love.

Władysław Podkowiński, *In the Garden*, 1892.

image info

In "Fear," the longest and, to me, the most moving chapter, Thurman illuminates how the disinherited fall prey to fear but also may overcome it. Originating in isolation and helplessness in the face of overt or covert threats of violence by a controlling group, fear becomes ingrained and deadens the soul. The antidote, Thurman argues, comes from feeling deeply loved, deeply cared for, most specifically and potently, in seeing oneself as a child of God. When experienced, this assurance carries tremendous power. It helps break down false internal barriers and opens up a sense of possibility, instilling confidence, even fearlessness, to follow a path of one's own becoming.

Thurman references several New Testament passages that inspire such assurance.

The most prominent is the Sermon on the Mount, wherein Jesus promises his listeners that just as God cares for the sparrows and the lilies, God cares for us, even more profoundly so. We are loved; we belong; we are provided for in the garden. And when such awareness is accompanied by the faith and support of community mentors, the power is magnified. The question moves beyond "Who am I?" (a child of God!) to "What am I" (a person with open possibilities).

Growing up, Thurman was blessed with such assurance, encountering it in church, in his family, and in the surrounding natural world. Young Thurman experienced transcendence in the waters of the Halifax river where he presented himself for baptism at age eight. He felt it likewise in the sea, in the fierceness of ocean storms and the tranquility of the beach at night. He felt it in the woods and orchards, where he spent his summers wandering freely and alone, and in the giant oak in his backyard, which became a source of strength and comfort. He also felt it in the heavens. Thurman recalls his mother awakening him one night to witness Halley's Comet, the two of them standing together, riveted by the wonder, both moved beyond words, his mother's expression akin to prayer.

Throughout his adult life, Thurman continued to experience such grace. He felt it in the fog of San Francisco Bay as he journeyed west to cofound the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. So, too, off the coast of Africa, where in the moonlit waves he heard the voices of his enslaved ancestors, their loneliness and anguish. During his 1935 tour of India, the same trip during which he visited Gandhi, Thurman hiked up Tiger Hill to witness the sun rise over the Himalayas. Setting forth hours before dawn, he reached the top in total darkness, then watched transfixed as a divine sight appeared. Decades later, he remembers it as "a transcendent moment of sheer glory and beatitude, when time, space, and circumstance evaporated and when my naked spirit looked into the depths of what is forbidden for anyone to see. I would never, never be the same again."[1]

As we see from Thurman, to know the full power of nature is to know the full power of the divine. It is to know one is part of something immense—in beauty and in terror. It is to see the perils and glories of our past and our present and to move forward bravely with conviction. When we attune ourselves to the world around us, we gain the fortitude to make the journey. Sam achieved this. Thoreau did too. So did Thurman. And Finley. And when they did so, they carried others with them. Sam's family ultimately joins him in the woods. Thoreau influenced Tolstoy, Gandhi, and naturalists galore. Thurman emboldened a generation of civil rights leaders to act with courage, grace, and love. And Finley-inspired urban gardens are flourishing coast to coast.

For the most part, these are quiet, active souls. Their strength is their courage to follow their truths. Their gift is that they listen, feel, and see. And they often find vision, purpose, renewal, and communion in the natural world. Of course, not everyone is like this. And perhaps not everyone needs what they need in order to flourish. But for those who do, access to nature—admission to the garden—provides fertile ground for their spirits to grow.

In my late teens, I felt a special resonance in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron." In this short story, Sylvie, the shy, quiet heroine, had lived in a crowded city tenement until her widowed grandmother whisked her away to her woodland cottage. One day, while walking in the darkening woods, Sylvie meets a young hunter searching for a heron. To help him, she sneaks out at night in hopes of finding the nest. Sylvie climbs a towering pine, which protects her as she propels her way—thin, pale, barefoot—to the highest branches. At the top, she beholds a magnificent view: the distant sea in the rising sun and two hawks circling above. Suddenly, from the green marsh below, the heron appears and rests just feet away. Together, they witness the unfolding of a "vast and awesome world." Although the communion lasts just moments, she is forever changed. Valuing the heron's life and their shared connection, she is committed now to silence, and will not reveal its whereabouts. Jewett ends with an invocation: "Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!" Although Jewett addresses nature itself, her readers hear the plea. It is we who are charged with ensuring that young souls like Sylvie can use their gifts and receive such graces, that they can ascend bravely and safely to reach their highest potential, that they awaken to the wonders of the world and experience communion with the divine.

Like Sylvie, like Sam, I, too, was transported, at an early age, to a "vast and awesome world." Yet the joys I received were tempered by sadness. I knew I was lucky both in my surroundings and by having people around me who cared. Thanks to Mr. Miller, I studied literature and became a teacher. I crisscrossed the country and had children of my own. I explored new authors and new environs, but I always loved the woods and I never forgot Thoreau. Wherever I've lived, wherever I go, I've strived to find that small patch of green.

My mom, eighty-one, lives near me in an adjacent rowhouse where she keeps a breathtaking garden, though now it's more flowers than vegetables. They provide the beauty her spirit needs. Working the soil has helped her in this pandemic.

As for me, my daily remedy is to slip into the trees. There are unmarked trails in my city's wilds, secret entries that close behind me. Just yards from one entrance is the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. A canyon streambed winds alongside it. I can walk here in solitude, past mountain laurel, white oak, American beech, viburnum. I can walk until the sun sets, past twilight, after dusk. I know my way in the dark. One of my daughters walks here too. She is a naturalist and part of a biota club. They map these neglected acres and exchange notes about mayflies emerging or mushroom blooms. She includes me in the most compelling news.

This May, we saw the running of the shad. From the Chesapeake, to the Potomac, to the Anacostia, to Indian Creek, to this gully in our woods they journeyed. "Come quick," my daughter texted me. When I arrived, she was stooping in the streambed; a pale carcass lay before her in the mud. "American shad," she decreed. She stood to catch the full sweep of the gully where more fish struggled upstream. They will lay their eggs here, then in the fall the young will start the long journey home, heeding the eternal call of the sea. My daughter turned and faced the sun. Flashes of silver bounced off her hair.

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1. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (Mariner Books, 1981).