

Heather Pistone

“Learning to Be Present in Nature”

I had the good fortune to spend my childhood in Oahu; I remember the greens and the blues of my home fondly and longingly, but I do not know if I will go back. I have heard that the last fifteen years have been disastrous on the face of the island. By the accounts of my family, Honolulu has encroached on the land. Oahu is becoming a booming metropolis. This is disappointing, but not surprising. I am part of a generation that has witnessed the spreading of cities and roads. We have built out into uninhabited areas and distanced ourselves further and further from the living world that supports us. We feel self-sufficient in our cities. We do not ache for reconnection with the natural world because we have not known it. “Nature” is a stranger to us; we think of it as a playground or a place of “natural resources.” We do not realize that part of being human is living on, and being educated by this earth. It does not surprise me to read about my generation’s rampant and careless destruction of the land, because I understand that we, for the most part, do not care about the land. We carry a tertiary affection for it, true, but we do not act desperately to protect it because we do not know it. Our direction, fortunately, can be changed. We have the opportunity to learn about the natural world around us, and to live lives informed by what we learn.

The voices of nature writers like John Muir, Cormac McCarthy, Norman Maclean, and Peter Matthiessen call us away from our cities and introduce us to two core principles about being in nature from the perspectives and experiences of a variety of characters, autobiographical and fictional. First, these writers teach us that we must “be there.” To experience and appreciate the natural world, we must first encounter it. Second, they teach us that we must allow ourselves to learn from nature. We must discipline or permit ourselves to be mentally present in the place where we are. For most of us this means stopping in a way, being quiet in our minds. Muir, McCarthy, Maclean, and Matthiessen choose, as central characters, those who encounter nature in very real, very personal ways, but they also present their readers with characters who do not enjoy being in nature, do not allow themselves to experience nature, and do not readily learn from nature. The authors’ central characters hope that their companions will begin to understand what it is to be in nature; they know, from their own experiences, how being present in the natural world can help, guide, and restore a person. Through the interactions and differences between the central characters and companion characters we, as readers, begin to understand that love and appreciation for nature is not entirely determined by how one is born; love and appreciation for nature are values that we are taught and that, even late, we can learn.

My First Summer in the Sierra opens with John Muir’s explanation of a bit of luck he had being asked by Mr. Delaney, a sheep-owner, to help herd his flock into the Yosemite Valley in the summer of 1869. He writes, “I was longing for the mountains about this time” (3). The self-proclaimed “wanderer” had an ardent desire to be in the place that he loved. His prose are charged with his excitement about the land around him, and he faces no struggle to feel mentally “present.” Rather, he is desperate to catch all of the details of the landscape and frustrated by distractions such as eating, sleeping, and caring for the sheep. A passage that captures Muir’s enthusiasm reads: “The whole landscape showed design, like man’s noblest sculptures. How wonderful the power of its beauty! Gazing awestricken, I might have left everything for it” (14). The resonant joy in Muir’s writing should not be taken for simplicity of experience. In the same ecstatic tone that he recounts the holy grandeur of the landscape, he recalls his own intentional brush with death: “I dreamed I was rushing through the air above a glorious avalanche of water

and rocks. One time, springing to my feet, I said “This time it is real – all must die, and where could mountaineer find a more glorious death!” (121). The degree of transcendence is almost chilling – in his deep contentment Muir has little regard for his own physical life.

It is in Muir’s story that we see the most distinct difference between the experience of the central character, (Muir himself) and the companion characters, Billy the shepherd, the “Chinaman,” and the “Digger Indian.” Muir is dumbfounded by the lack of interest Billy, in particular, shows in seeing the Yosemite Valley. Billy turns down Muir’s offer to watch the sheep in order that he might see the valley, arguing: ““What is Yosemite but a cañon – a lot of rocks – a hole in the ground – a place dangerous about falling into – a d–d good place to keep away from”” (147). Muir reasons to himself that Billy’s soul must be “asleep” or “smothered and befogged beneath mean pleasures and cares” (147). Billy’s apathy toward nature is incomprehensible to Muir, but Muir does little to introduce him to a new appreciation for the land. Instead, Muir hikes into the valley alone, avoiding contact with other people. At one point, after passing a group of Indians, he realizes the extent to which human company has become irksome to him. He writes: “Yet it seems sad to feel such desperate repulsion from one’s fellow beings, however degraded. To prefer the society of squirrels and woodchucks to that of our own species must surely be unnatural” (219). Muir is so captivated by the environment around him that he feels separated from the people around him, as a clairvoyant man would feel essentially separated from the blind. Muir recognizes the breach of understanding between himself and his companions, but is not sure how to build a bridge to greater understanding for a man like Billy. For all of Muir’s joy in the natural world around him, he finds it difficult to impart this love and appreciation to his companions.

Billy does present quite a quandary. He is traveling through one of America’s most astounding natural environments unmoved. This poses a few questions for those who are working to engage with nature and help others to do the same: Why are some of us untouched by encounters with nature? What is interfering with our ability to experience the natural world around us? Are we too busy working to pay attention? Are we too numb? Are we afraid to confront ourselves in the natural world? Billy’s reasons for avoiding the valley follow two strains: he is fearful of the falls, and he does not see the point of going out of his way to see them. From Muir’s perspective, we do not get the whole of Billy’s story. We do not know if Billy is being touched in small, subtle ways, or if his experiences in Yosemite will trigger a love of the land later in his life. Billy’s quick glances at Cathedral Peak may express more than Muir, himself given to spirited hyperbole, realizes (146).

All the Pretty Horses, by Cormac McCarthy is a story about three young men and their journey into Mexico. The story’s central character, John Grady Cole, like John Muir, feels drawn into the natural world, but his journey is one in which he must confront his own aloneness and lay claim to his own identity. John Grady has lost his home at the cattle ranch, and is watching his parents finalize the terms of their divorce. In his journey to Mexico he is figuring out what he will do with his life. John Grady experiences nature quietly. His observation of the land and the sky happens internally. In the novel, he is the character who is most diligent about seeking direction and guidance from the land. He, Rawlins, and Blevins cross the border without much of a plan. John Grady is recognized as the leader, but he is followed more because of who he is than where he is going.

John Grady has a great deal of influence on his friends. By quietly encountering and responding to nature he impacts the spirit of the boys’ journey. He has learned to be silent and content in nature. McCarthy describes one of John Grady’s first nights in Mexico: “He lay a

long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within” (60). John Grady is finding a home in the natural world, and gradually learning about who he is. Rawlins, in comparison to John Grady, seems anxious in nature. Through the course of the novel he is nearly always the first to break a spell of silence with a thought, a question, or a concern. When Rawlins sits silently with John Grady, he begins to think through questions he has about God and his own mortality. In the moments of silence he is beginning to face life’s hardest questions, but he cannot wait for the answers the natural world might provide him. Instead he turns to his friend to ask what he thinks.

Rawlins looks to John Grady for answers to the questions he is coming upon in nature because he respects him and knows that there is a strong bond between them. Rawlins is not influenced by John Grady because of anything profound that he says; rather he is instructed by his ability to peacefully and contentedly be in the land. John Grady’s silence allows Rawlins to work through his questions. As the two grow in understanding of the world around them, they become better friends to one another. By the end of the novel, Rawlins knows what to say to John Grady. He understands that his friend hasn’t yet found a place where he is home, but asks, “Where is your country?” (299). When John Grady answers “I dont know...I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country,” Rawlins is able to be silent (299). He understands his friend and can let him leave.

The theme of learning how to be present in nature is central to Norman Maclean’s story, A River Runs Through It. In this story Norman (the author) and Paul (his brother) are taught how to fly fish by their father. The boys’ dad plants a reverence for nature in them; he sees the artistry and grace in a man with a fishing rod and teaches his sons that: “only by picking up God’s rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty” (2). As adults, Norman and Paul still understand the discipline of fishing patiently, and listening to the water. Through fishing the river year after year, they have come to know it and understand the life in it. The boys were shown how to listen to the river, and they were diligent enough to wait for understanding. Throughout the story, the reader is reminded that nature speaks to us and may be able of heal and restore us, but that we must humble ourselves to the status of pupils to receive its help. In the beginning of the story Norman tells of his frustration as a child waiting to actually fish:

My brother and I would have preferred to start learning how to fish by going out and catching a few, omitting entirely anything difficult or technical in the way of preparation that would take away from the fun. But it wasn’t by way of fun that we were introduced to our father’s art. If our father had had his say, nobody who did not know how to fish would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching him. (3)

Norman’s explanation about training for fly fishing seems to speak to our expectations about experiencing nature. We believe that nature will help us, guide us, teach us, or at least make us calmer people, but we hope that this experience will be a painless one. We do not expect to have to labor in nature for answers, and we do not want to look closely at our fears and our insufficiencies; we are, as people who look at nature as a playground, unfamiliar with the discipline of silence, and we are often too busy to fidgeting to hear anything.

The belief that being in nature can help a person or, more specifically, that fishing can help a person is frequently reiterated in A River Runs Through It. When Norman picks up Paul and Mo-nah-se-tah from the drunk tank, the policemen advises, ““Why don’t you all go

fishing?'" (27). Later Paul explains to his exasperated brother that they are supposed to be helping Neal (Norman's brother-in-law) by fishing with him:

I asked "Do you think you should help him?"
"Yes," he said, "I thought we were going to."
"How?" I asked.
"By taking him fishing with us." (47)

The characters in the book feel a responsibility to help one another and expect that time spent fishing will do this somehow. Norman and his father hope that fly fishing will keep Paul from drinking and fighting, and Neal's mother and sisters believe that fishing will help Neal to mature as a man. Ironically, being in nature ultimately saves neither Paul nor Neal, but listening to the water restores Norman, the character who is worried throughout most of the story about giving help.

Norman is often disappointed in himself. He thinks that he never says the right thing, and feels like he is failing his brother when he can't communicate with him. He longs to help Paul, but doesn't understand him. Thinking of himself and other brothers in his position, he writes, "We are probably those referred to as "our brothers' keepers," possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go" (28-29). What Norman does not realize is that he is loving his brother even in his failed attempts at talking with him. A turning point in the story occurs when Norman hits a peak of frustration dealing with Neal (who has, at this point, fouled up the banks of the river the Maclean men love in a moment of drunken, sexual abandon and, to boot, stolen their after-fishing beer). Paul decides to take care of Norman (take him fishing). Norman realizes that Paul is taking care of him and humors his efforts by receiving the help. Norman does not think that he needs help, but the more that he enjoys his day out with his brother and his dad, the more clear it becomes: Norman needed to be supported and taken care of by his brother too. He was so used to carrying the responsibility of being the older, more responsible brother that he did not realize that he needed Paul. Toward the end of the fishing trip Norman and his dad watch Paul swim in to shore. Norman remembers, "We laughed at each other because we knew he was getting damn good and wet, and we lived in him, and were swept over the rocks with him and held his rod high in one of our hands" (100). The day out fishing has reconnected Norman to his brother and dad and helped him to understand that they are all three part of each other. Norman has peace as he sits listening to the words of the river with his father and brother and feels that he belongs: "We sat on the bank and the river went by. As always, it was making sounds to itself, and now it made sounds to us. It would be hard to find three men sitting side by side who knew better what a river was saying" (101).

Maclean's story captures an element of encountering nature that is particularly important. Even though there is an enormous gap between the respect Norman and Paul have for the river, and the disregard Neal has for it, a strict division is not made between those who appreciate nature and those who do not. Instead, the childishness of a person like Neal is regarded as a call for help. There is an underlying belief in the story that people can be helped, and that they can learn to come into restorative contact with nature. This idea has great implications for those who are involved in the work of protecting and preserving nature. It is not necessary to draw a line between those who value nature and those who do not. It is feasible that even the most Neal-like people can be taught and changed by nature. Maclean highlights the possibility that we are all

capable of encountering and respecting nature. In his story the best fly fisherman, Paul, is still learning about life from the river and from his brother and father, and the character who knows the river best, Norman and Paul's father, still grapples with what it is saying. Toward the end, hope that Neal will learn has still not been abandoned. When Norman and Paul bring Neal home from their day of fly fishing and his day of debauched fornicating on the river, Norman's wife Jessie asks, "'if my brother comes back next summer, will you try to help me help him?'" He writes, "It took a long time to say it, but I said it. I said, 'I will try'" (77).

Peter Matthiessen, the central character in The Snow Leopard, is learning to be present in nature. Like Rawlins, Matthiessen is working through difficult questions; he is struggling to accept the death of D, his wife and dearest friend, and is not sure who (or how) he will be without her. As Matthiessen travels to the Crystal Monastery with his friend, George Schaller (GS), he learns to live in each moment of his life. He sees the children who "celebrate this moment of their life" and realizes that "they are at rest in the present" (133). As he makes the long trek to the habitat of the Blue Sheep (he is helping GS on a scientific expedition) he allows himself to encounter the land around him and to be moved by it, in joy or in sorrow. The journey is arduous and for the most part freezing, but Matthiessen has peace in it. He finds himself learning to accept loss and disappointment, and he comes to be content with the realization that he is not yet ready for some things. In his dreams he cannot yet release control, and on his trip he is not ready to see the snow leopard. The story is a beautiful expression of one man who is learning to exist in the place and situation he finds himself in. Matthiessen takes comfort in the experience of existing and allows himself the space of not knowing who he will be down the road. He thinks:

A change is taking place, some painful growth, as in a snake during the shedding of its skin – dull, irritable, without appetite, dragging about the stale shreds of a former life, near-blinded by the old dead scale on the new eye. It is difficult to adjust because I do not know who is adjusting; I am no longer that old person and not yet the new. (300)

The Snow Leopard, of all four of the books I have discussed, places the most emphasis on being present in nature, seeing things as they are, and letting life be what it is. It also gives the clearest account of a person who is confronting his own self in nature. The differences between Matthiessen and GS's experiences in Nepal reveal a truth about being present in the natural world. "Being there" for GS, like Billy (Muir's fellow shepherd), is not enough. To encounter nature we must allow ourselves the mental space to take in and think through what we see. Billy did not have mental openness to Yosemite because he was fearful and uninterested, Rawlins was anxious, Neal was inebriated, and GS, through much of his journey, is busy working. GS is a paradoxical character because although his life's work brings him into nature, he is often too busy working to "be there." He becomes so busy charting and studying what he is observing in the natural world that he forgets to just see it. During the journey Matthiessen sees him begin to relax. He records a moment when GS accepted that they might not see the snow leopard. GS said, "'You know something? We've seen so much, maybe it's better if there are some things that we *don't* see.'" Matthiessen teases him, saying, "'That was the haiku-writer speaking,'" but appreciates the degree to which GS has opened up (244). He recognizes that GS is becoming comfortable and at peace with himself.

Matthiessen's final struggle, as he nears the end of his trek is to take what he has learned with him. As he descends from Crystal Mountain he becomes agitated and recognizes that he is losing his ability to exist wholly in the moment he is in. He becomes worried and begins to wonder if he left too soon, if he missed something that he was supposed to learn. He feels like he has failed, "The path I followed breathlessly has faded among stones; in spiritual ambition, I have neglected my children and done myself harm, and there is no way back. Nor has anything changed" (298). He recovers his insight in degrees and begins to "experience that *now* that is spoken of by the great teachers" (300). He is learning to be in happiness and sorrow and is allowing regret to pass through him without pulling him away from the moment he is in. "I begin to smile, infused with a sense of my own foolishness, with an acceptance of the failures of this journey as well as of its wonders, acceptance of all that I might meet upon my path" (301). Matthiessen's insight into the imperfection of his experiences is heartening. He lives moments of transcendent understanding of nature and moments when he feels like he has wasted his time, but he frees himself to accept his experiences for the brief moments of living that they are.

Muir, McCarthy, Maclean, and Matthiessen teach us about being present in nature and paint an encouraging picture for those of us who have neglected this vital part of our humanity. It is not too late for us to come and listen. Nature will amaze us, it will help us figure out who we are and where we belong, it will reconnect us to the life around us, and it will help us to work through grief. But we must come like patient pupils again and again. The more that we begin to understand, the deeper or longing will be to return. In the words of Norman's father, "'the words are underneath the water'" (95). It is up to us to go and listen, and to bring our own companions with us.

Works Cited

- Maclean, Norman. A River Runs Through It and Other Stories. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976.
- Matthiessen, Peter. The Snow Leopard. New York: Penguin, 1978.
- McCarthy, Cormac. All the Pretty Horses. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Muir, John. My First Summer in the Sierra. 1911. New York: Penguin, 1997.