

# Lessons of the Wild: Nature and Psyche in the Escalante Canyons

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## Abstract

We explored Gary Snyder's notion of "the lessons of the wild" by intentionally cultivating our receptivity to the interaction between nature and psyche during a one-week backcountry exploration of the Escalante canyons, Utah. By paying attention to, and recording, specific lessons that emerged within our individual psyches, and discussing these with our group, we clarified what we each learned while immersed in this place. In so doing, "wildness" became less abstract, and our learning more powerful. Key Words: Wildness—Natural history—Experiential learning—Escalante canyons—Gary Snyder.

The importance of *wildness* is pervasive, recognized as vitally important in ecopsychology (Kahn & Hasbach, 2013), environmental ethics (Grumbine, 1994), environmental philosophy (Evernden, 1992), conservation biology (Fleischner, 2003), and beyond. Yet defining wildness is more challenging than recognizing its importance. Snyder (1999, p. 389) describes wildness as "the process that surrounds us all, self-organizing nature...all ultimately resilient beyond our wildest imagination." Sanders (1998, p. 40) poetically describes wildness as "the patterning power...[that] coils the molecules of DNA [and] spirals the chambered nautilus and nebulae." To Grumbine (1994, p. 232), wildness in humans represents "the self-regulating aspects of 'body' interacting with the unconscious depths of

the 'mind,' with each of these in constant contact with 'environment.'" Evernden (1992, p. 121) concludes that wildness cannot ultimately be defined—it is a quality, beyond empirical objects.

As the culminating phase of an intensive month-long course (Nature and Psyche) at Prescott College, we spent a week immersed in the wildness of the spectacular red-rock Escalante canyons (Fleischner, 1999) of southern Utah, practicing mindful attentiveness to both interior and exterior landscapes (Lopez, 1988). At the center of this mindfulness was the intensive practice of *natural history*—"a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy" (Fleischner, 2011, p. 5). In part, our efforts were guided by an inquiry into the nature of our perception. As Sewall (2012) has articulated, human vision (in the biological sense) has evolved with the remarkable adaptation of "neural plasticity" (Buonomano & Merzenich, 1998)—the capacity for the brain to change degrees of connectivity between neurons, literally changing our vision. What we pay attention to literally changes what we are able to see—or how we will categorize and interpret visual information in subsequent sensory moments. Thus, among the most critical decisions we make is what we pay attention to (Sewall, 2012). For we *are* what we pay attention to (Fleischner, 1999).

During our week of immersion (literally) in the Escalante, our efforts aligned with the notion of Alan Watts (1966, p. 8) that "we do not come *into* this world, we come out of it, as leaves from a tree." Among other academic and experiential exercises, we committed to two daily practices—one prompted by Loren Eiseley (1969) and one by Gary Snyder (1990). Eiseley described inadvertently gaining insight into human consciousness because he stopped to closely observe an individual spider. He referred thereafter to the spider as his "hidden teacher." After reading this essay, our assignment was to select (or be selected by) a particular presence in the canyons—a particular plant, animal, rock type, and so on. Among the specific

“teachers” selected by our group were cottonwood, the stars, the river, a particular sandstone formation, and ravens.

Gary Snyder (1990), in a pivotal essay “The Etiquette of Freedom”—“the best essay ever written about wildness,” according to Turner (2013)—referred to “the lessons of the wild.” After reading this essay, we brainstormed about what these lessons *were*—not in the abstract, but as specific teachings. We determined to pay close attention throughout our backcountry time to what, specifically, we were learning from the wild. We checked in on this exercise occasionally, to make sure we were on track, and then compiled our lessons on the final day. In slightly edited form, they follow below.

These inquiries took place in a very specific ecological, biogeographic, and geological context: in a particular section of the Escalante canyons—moving in and out of the Wingate, Kayenta, and Navajo sandstone formations—and at a particular time—just before fall equinox and just after a major regional storm had caused widespread canyon flooding. Streamside vegetation—horsetails (*Equisetum* spp.), coyote willow (*Salix exigua*), and small cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii*)—was flattened from the floodwaters, and river terraces were littered with newly deposited debris. Stream water was murkier than usual, with much suspended sediment, but gradually cleared over the six days of our stay.

### Results: The Lessons Learned

Each bulleted point below summarizes an individual person’s lessons learned.

- Be receptive to the unexpected experience in nature. There is more to learn than we can know at first glance. Get rid of the attitude that we are more significant than other beings.
- Learn to relax, and then make your own stories in nature. Create an original experience for yourself.
- I’m convinced that silence is the only way to listen. It usually takes a day or two of hearing my mental jabber ricochet off Wingate sandstone walls before I remember that I hear best when I’m not talking.
- When we walk in urban areas, most surfaces are graded for our convenience. Walking in nature, the terrain is so varied we must constantly stare at our feet. Yet we must remind ourselves to keep our eyes up, and that it’s worth the occasional stumble to witness the miraculous ecological interactions around you.
- Teachers are everywhere, and we must seek them out. Connecting to the physical realities of nature gives us access to the intangible depths of our psyche. Sharing what we find with others is a practice of feeling connected to earth, to each other, and to ourselves.

- We are always seeking answers. It’s human nature. Perhaps the value of wildness is the more we understand it through various lenses, the more its awesomeness stumps us.
- Sensual, mindful experiences of place allow one to notice the story of the landscape. The wild and extreme forces, which have constructed the natural landscape, are the same which have created us.
- Let your armor fall off, and let yourself be profoundly moved by the natural world.
- Let your attention follow what captures you, enlivens you, and awakens you at the core.
- Find your own way of connecting to the divine, seek to remove the separation between self and other, and you shall find a new conception of yourself.
- If it gets too hot, sit in the shade. Keep your eyes open and learn by watching. Have fun, even if it looks unorthodox.
- Invest in developing ecological knowledge. It illuminates important elements of psyche that may otherwise remain undiscovered.
- Engage in each moment. Be tenacious in love. Be willing to change. Go with the flow (literally). Believe in the possibility of rejuvenation/resurrection. Take nothing for granted.

### Discussion

All but two authors were in our twenties at the time of this inquiry. All authors but one are American (one is Israeli but has lived in the United States for several years). This paper represents the first direct reporting on specific teachings of the wild, by primarily young ecopsychologists, entering wild terrain with the intention of learning about the relationship between nature and psyche. We encourage more individuals and groups to engage in similar exercises of learning directly and explicitly from the wild. Increasing the sample size of wild learners will help clarify how subjective the lessons of the wild are. How much do the lessons vary depending on age, background, and experience of the humans involved? Are there certain truths that are revealed repeatedly? How much do the lessons vary with geological and ecological setting? The more we explore such questions, the more abstract concepts such as “wildness” and “lessons of the wild” become grounded.

One of the striking aspects of reading over these lessons (a few weeks after walking out of the canyons) is how much the Wild of the canyons engendered humility in many of us. Also, we notice how much our experiences in the canyons expanded our senses of identity—into what Thomashow (1996) called “ecological identity.” This prompting toward humility and a larger (ecological) sense of self, if multiplied more broadly throughout society, has the potential

to contribute to solving some of our most fundamental social dysfunctions (Fleischner, 2011).

One other aspect of this experience bears comment: the lessons were learned during solitary inquiry and contemplation, but the learning was magnified by doing so together in a small group, with focused intention on such learning. Human psyche is both individual and highly social. Exercises such as those described here can help dislodge ourselves from our contemporary comfort zones and nudge us toward a collective sense of “a psyche the size of the Earth” (Hillman, 1994).

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