

Conversations with Trees: Toward an Ecologically Engaged Spirituality

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For almost as long as I can remember, trees have been a significant presence in my life. I studied them as a naturalist, slept out under their arching boughs, made tea from their needles, and preached about them from the pulpits. I first began writing with trees as a theological experiment. I was enrolled in a tutorial on spiritual development at Starr King School (the Unitarian-Universalist seminary in Berkeley, California), and wanted to understand how the biblical gospel of love applied to nonhuman beings. Inspired by Martin Buber's thought on I-Thou relationships, I pursued the serious questions of engaged spirituality and the nonhuman world.

Over the past three years I have given myself to the practice of writing with trees, based in a naturalistic method. Central to this was spending time in silence, close to specific trees. I wanted to engage directly in conversations with trees, unmediated by books, photos, memories, fantasies, or other distancing means of relating. I tried simply to be present with the tree as Other. To maximize the depth of contact, I observed my thoughts, moods, and projections and how they moved in the conversation. I did not go to the trees with an agenda or story in mind, but chose rather to see what would unfold in the specific place and moment.

I see this work as an ecological form of socially engaged spirituality. My premise and experience is that ecological relationships are a critical aspect of social reality. By this I do not mean the many ways in which human life is supported by "ecological services" such as oxygen production by plants, groundwater recharge, and soil fertility. I refer instead to a view of "social" which reflects an expanded sense of an ecological self. Macy (1990) describes this ecological self as relational and interdependent, responding constantly to information flow in interaction with other beings. This stands in contrast to the traditional Western notion of an autonomous and separate self that agrees to compromise its actions for the sake of social contracts (including resource exploitation of trees, etc.). The ecological self is experienced as one node in a web of relationships where one's actions reverberate throughout the causal web. The relational self in Macy's model responds not only to human actions but also to the actions of plants, animals, stones, rivers, and mountains. These nonhuman members of the ecological web are themselves relational and influential. To the extent that one engages in developing relationships with spiders, snakes, and fir trees, for example, one is socially engaged with the nonhuman world. This understanding of social reality is common to many Native American spiritual traditions (Gill 1983; McGaa 1990).

In this view, to be engaged is to be in active exchange with nonhumans, as well as humans. The first step in relating to nonhumans, as in human relationships, is acknowledging the existence of the Other. For most people, this requires some learning about local birds and wildflowers, watersheds, growing seasons. Fuller engagement comes from paying attention to the specificity of cycles and patterns, of plant and animal habitats, of individual nonhuman voices (Andruss et al. 1990). With experience over time, one begins to participate actively in relationships with local life forms—the fence lizard on the deck, the towhees by the compost, the alders along the creek.

Social action arising out of this form of engaged spirituality is action that reflects one's experience of the ecological self in relationship. This may be manifest in a number of different ways, each offering a liberation praxis. I will mention here several I am most familiar with in my work. One arena of activity is speaking out on behalf of those whose voices are not included in human decisionmaking—laboratory animals, trees being clearcut, river corridors threatened by development, migratory birds suffering wetlands losses. At the close of the twentieth century, as species and ecosystems disappear at an alarming rate, this is urgent and agonizing work. My tree writing is activated by this kind of concern.

A second arena is the revolutionizing of language and culture to include the presence of nonhumans more fully. Aldo Leopold, for example, redefines community to include "soils, waters,

plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (Leopold 1949, 239). Creek and watershed restoration projects lift creeks out of culverts into parks, celebrating with flags and banners the life of local waterways (House 1990). In my work, I address the trees directly, using language to initiate conversation, despite the obvious differences in "speech."

A third arena of ecologically engaged social action lies in the spiritual practice of cultivating moment-to-moment awareness, or mindfulness. Observing one's thoughts, emotions, and sense perceptions is a means to reduce activity and develop the capacity for restraint. This ability to stop habitual patterns and consider them in depth is fundamental to an ethical appraisal of human activities in the environment. If this mindfulness practice is extended to ecological relationships, one gains greater awareness of the myriad links of interdependence. One practices the discipline of acknowledging the suffering of many lives given (or rather taken) for food, shelter, paper, clothing; the water and air polluted for manufacturing; the costs of energy extraction and automobile use. In an extremely wasteful society such as the United States, this practice of acknowledging the cost of meeting human demands can be painful. Through education, reflection, and experience, one gains practice in the relational perspective and liberation from false views of a separate, autonomous self.

A fourth arena of activity—choosing to simplify one's lifestyle—may follow from practicing awareness of the use of resources. In many spiritual traditions, seekers or prophets carry little with them on their quests into the unknown. Moderation, restraint, simplicity, and some degree of renunciation are virtues of social action, based on reduction of wants to the most basic needs. A simple lifestyle of reduced consumption allows more time for interaction with living, dynamic beings, more opportunity for meeting the Other fully and unencumbered. It is also a quiet but powerful political statement that rejects the manipulative nature of advertising or manufactured need.

My particular work with trees is based on the teaching of the *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*, a Buddhist text by Zen master Eihei Dogen of thirteenth-century Japan (Tanahashi 1985). The truth of this sutra, like most Zen works, is best realized through direct experience rather than cognitive explanation. The sutra begins by acknowledging the simple recognition of things as they are—mountains

are mountains, rivers are rivers, and by extension, trees are trees. But in the course of studying mountains and rivers in depth, one sees them explode into all the phenomena that support their existence—clouds, stones, people walking, animals crawling, the earth shaking. Then mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers, in the original sense. Proceeding with this investigation, one finally pierces through to the truth of the entirety of existence, including the mind of the perceiver. Then mountains are once again mountains and rivers are once again rivers, but now the depth of understanding penetrates, informs, and transforms the perceiver into a participant in the mountains' existence.

This work of being with trees is investigative rather than prescriptive. I have found that much more information about systemic relationships can be uncovered through an investigative approach, at both the individual and the social levels. In contrast, prescriptive moral recipes for human-tree relationships tend to be oversimplified, cutting short the depth of transformation possible from thorough investigation. The experience of the truth of interrelationship arises independently for each person, exactly in the specific context of each unique life. The investigative process reveals the nature of reality in a way in which it can be most clearly seen by each person, with power to illuminate the individual's choice of actions. The practice is to rigorously and thoroughly examine the patterns that condition one's thoughts and actions regarding the environment. Then one can make ethical choices to act appropriately, in harmonious synchrony with other beings and with the dynamics of life and death.

To undertake this work I cultivated an attitude of attention and willingness. I wanted to learn new ways of being open to trees. I worked with "not knowing" to allow for the unexpected, to allow the trees to reveal themselves. My personal choice to work with trees grew out of concern for the disappearing rainforests and loss of California oaks. As I taught children, adults, and undergraduates in different settings about the serious state of affairs for trees, I became deeply disturbed about human-tree relationships. I traveled in Costa Rica and Thailand and saw firsthand some of the damaged forests. I followed with dismay the politics and economics of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, watching the clearcuts take over more and more mountaintops.

In each situation I saw the same conflicts

over short- versus long-term gains, economic benefits versus ecological impacts of human activity. The greater the damage and loss, the more I questioned the justification for so much death. I could not make moral sense of the enormous waste and misuse of trees for consumer products. The scientific conclusions of conservation biology fueled my ethical and spiritual concerns. Standard forest management practices did not seem to me to go to the heart of the problem. I began to realize that the social ethics of industrialized culture did not include any thoughtful basis for mutually respectful or spiritual relations with trees. I felt the inadequacies of Western economic philosophy, which identifies trees primarily as objects for human use—building homes, making paper, or producing toothpicks. This philosophy did not address my own personal experience with trees nor my growing sense of moral and spiritual obligation to forests.

In this time of environmental crisis, many people are responding with depth and moral concern to what they see happening. Upset by the impacts of a wasteful, materialistic Western society, many activists, teachers, and ordinary people are looking for more ethical and sustainable ways to live. For me and many others, the heart of this seeking is a journey of spirit, an urgent call to make meaningful sense of our lives.

This particular time is rich for ecological spiritual inquiry. In North America, the strong tradition and history of public lands protection, especially in the western United States, have fully matured by the end of the twentieth century. Millions of people camp, hike, travel, and seek contact with the natural world in national parks and forests. Beautiful trees and inspiring places are known by more people than ever before. Widespread knowledge of and concern for the health of the land have spawned hundreds of fiercely dedicated environmental groups, motivated by a sense of moral obligation to the extremely rich biological and cultural heritage of North America.

At the same time, an increasing percentage of Americans know almost nothing firsthand about the natural world. As more and more of the population becomes urbanized in physical location and cultural perspective, most people are psychologically and spiritually distanced from intimate interaction with the environment. I believe that television and nature movies contribute to this distancing by offering delusional substitutes for rich, sensory contact with the actual rhythms and textures

of the natural world (Mander 1978). Commercialization of trees, animals, and landscapes to manipulate consumers only adds to the distance and distortion of the human-environmental relationship.

I see a strong thread of moral indignation and spiritual inquiry weaving through the American tendency to idealize nature, often based on experiences of despair and grief over environmental loss. As more facts accumulate about toxic groundwater, nuclear waste, loss of ozone, and rates of forest cutting, one becomes, most naturally, overwhelmed by the extent of the damage. This can induce a state of denial, leaving one paralyzed to act (Macy 1983). But for some, the opposite happens when contemplating the painful realities of environmental destruction. I have seen many people experience profound moments of awakening to global interdependence. These moments of awakening are causing the American public to be increasingly dissatisfied with business and governmental decisions that result in severe environmental abuse.

The environmental movement is, as much as anything, a struggle to reclaim relationship with animals, plants, and the land. Those with the greatest motivation for this struggle often feel a powerful emotional and often spiritual identification with the environment. Political analysis falls short in explaining the force behind the evangelical dedication of people who have awakened to the interconnected reality of person, planet, and all beings. In the confusion surrounding moral questions in the 1990s, the natural world is a locus of truth, a source for ethical reflection and insight.

In my work, I have taken trees as a place to investigate this naturally occurring truth. It is my sense that the root of ethical response springs from revelatory experience, the sort of encounter that penetrates to the core, illuminating one's perspective on everything. The power of this experience elicits awe, sometimes dread, sometimes unifying love. It is not something to be taken lightly.

My primary orientation in this work is not to tree as symbol, but to tree as Other, as one party in an I-Thou relationship. Trees have historically and mythologically represented many things—the Tree of Life, the axis of the Earth, tribal ancestors, homes of spirits (see accounts in *Parabola* 1989). I am more interested in one-to-one dynamic relationships with trees than in cultural constructions concerning trees or in anthropomorphic projections. My primary motivation is the desire for

genuine contact at a core level, sensing that this is the source for constructive, respectful interaction. I want to know: What does it actually mean to be in a relationship with a tree?

Acknowledgment of and participation in relationships with trees, coyotes, mountains, and rivers is central to the philosophy of deep ecology (Devall and Sessions 1985). In this philosophy, nonhuman beings hold intrinsic value because of their very existence, independent of human-centered needs or uses. My tree work is one person's expression of this philosophy. My desire is to find ways to speak "with" or "to" trees, rather than "about" trees. I use personal narrative to communicate directly the details of my experience (Warren 1990). I do not claim to speak for any others except myself; someone else meeting these trees in other circumstances would certainly find different encounters. By sharing this process with others, I want to encourage and support people in engaging in their own serious conversations with trees.

The practice of ecologically engaged spirituality, as I have found it, follows a progression through five stages of relationship. First is the simple desire to meet trees and make contact. I have followed various avenues of greeting—tracing the shape of the land, using my hands to touch trees, observing with books and field guides, responding sensually. I have taken these trees as I found them, recognizing my own uncertainty and clumsiness in conversation.

The next stage is the process of looking past first impressions, taking time to uncover more complete histories of individual trees. I have found, for example, that trees tell stories of fire, agriculture, and commercial cultivation. As I looked more deeply into my own needs for relationship with trees, I saw how these needs influence my perceptions of community, change, and death. I encountered a greater complexity in reviewing the role of trees as both shapers and victims of human activities. Many aspects of what I saw have been unsettling, pointing to the shortcomings of human capacities for deep and engaged relationships with trees.

The first stage is common to many environmental education techniques based on sensory awareness (Knapp and Goodman 1981, 20-36 and Cornell 1979). The second stage is possible where interpreters or naturalists have uncovered local stories of specific trees and made them available to others, or where students are engaged in discovery methods. But most environmental education stops here,

leaving one perhaps touched or curious, but not necessarily moved to take action.

In my work, I was pressed into a third stage, where I entered completely the tangle of human-tree relationships. Trees were no longer simply trees; they carried painful stories of killing, unconsciousness, and objectification. I sat with these faces of suffering, feeling the dilemmas of each situation. Answers, solutions, easy plans for fixing the damage were nowhere in sight. The trees exploded into unending waves of despair, greed, and helplessness. I allowed myself to taste the full measure of suffering tied to human-tree relationships. I often felt caught in dialogues of time and place that reflected a long history of habits that distance and kill the Other.

In the confusion and agony of this experience, I entered a fourth stage, seeking ways to respond that were heartfelt and genuine, that spoke from the depth of what I saw. I placed my effort in cultivating a stable and attentive mind. I investigated traditional spiritual practices to develop greater capacity in approaching the demanding situation of trees today. Pilgrimage, mindfulness, and spiritual inquiry offered powerful ways to be with trees without closing off the suffering.

In the last, fifth stage of the progression, I found I could no longer act from a simplistic view of trees. Now I was compelled to engage in social action from a context of mutual causality. As part of spiritual practice at Green Gulch Farm in northern California (associated with the San Francisco Zen Center), I joined others in planting trees in the local watershed. We explored the interconnected social and spiritual aspects of ecological restoration work. Questions about relationships with trees took on the vitality of specific place and religious teachings. I made pilgrimages to the grand oaks of the watershed of the White Mountains and renewed education efforts with students and friends. I found that the actions themselves relieved some of the tension of the spiritual dilemma, simply by moving the dialogue forward. The desire for conversation brought me closer to many difficult questions about reinhabiting place, living simply, and speaking from the truth of experience.

Social action springing from this context—fully embracing the whole story of fear, pain, suffering, grief as well as joy, inspiration, respect, and obligation—reflects a greater awareness of the complexity of the situation. It goes beyond the do-gooder response to "Save the Earth." This progression of experience, as I

have outlined it, explodes traditional notions of caretaking and stewardship, calling for depth of integrity, compassion, and courage to enter deeply into the web of relationship. I myself, have no grand conclusions about this method yet, but I sense one must be willing to accept the scale of death and destruction that is going on right now in order to move forward constructively. In retrospect, I should add that these stages do not necessarily occur in a tidy, linear progression. Rather, one is thrown back and forth from stage to stage, each illuminating the others as one moves even more deeply into relationship. They are described here in some order for the sake of clarity, but there is really no way to predict the nature of one's experience with trees.

Living simply, practicing ecological mindfulness, speaking out, including nonhuman beings—these forms of ecologically engaged spirituality can reflect the insight of experience. This power is ethical and spiritual power, which can be of great service to the world. A tremendous task lies in front of us right now: To simply see what we are doing. There are many ways to approach this; being with trees is one place to begin.

There are mountains hidden in treasures.
There are mountains hidden in swamps.
There are mountains hidden in the sky. There
are mountains hidden in hiddenness. This is
complete understanding.

An ancient buddha said, "Mountains are
mountains, waters are waters." These words
do not mean mountains are mountains; they
mean mountains are mountains. Therefore
investigate mountains thoroughly.

When you investigate mountains thor-
oughly, this is the work of the mountains.
Such mountains and waters of themselves
become wise persons and sages. (Eihei
Dogen, Tanahashi 1985, 107)

ENGAGING WITH TREES

The following two pieces are examples of this work with trees, edited and excerpted with permission from *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*, to be published by Ballantine Press, July 1993. These two pieces, "The Attentive Heart" and "Cutting Wood," are examples from the fourth stage of relationship, seeking ways to respond that reflect the depth of experience and suffering that I have witnessed. "The Attentive Heart" describes the practice of mindfulness at a forest retreat center in the heart of California logging country, where I work to stabilize the mind in the midst of the ethical and emotional tensions of logging. Walking, breathing, and sitting silently with others help to cultivate

presence and awareness and courage to face the issues of tree removal.

In "Cutting Wood," I investigate my relationship with wood through wood stacking and cutting with a chainsaw. I give myself to the puzzle and power of spiritual questions or *koans* to observe the many facets of using wood for warmth. The questions are tools for unsettling the mind to open up new ways of seeing and therefore new ways of responding more fully. In these two pieces I deepen my capacity to engage in effective social action based on spiritual practice. It is this kind of deepening of relationship that makes possible truly effective social action described earlier in what I have called the fifth stage.

The Attentive Heart

Breathing in, breathing out. Slow deep in-
hale, slow deep exhale. Quieting the body,
quieting the mind. I woke up this morning
under the graceful, arching branches of bay
laurels and Douglas firs. All night the trees
have been conversing under the full moon,
weaving me into their stories, capturing my
dreams with their leaning limbs and generous
trunks. Breathing together as I slept, as they
rested, we danced quietly in the summer
night. Their great confidence framed a circle
for my waking; their sturdy presence offered
an invitation to be still.

I arrived last night to join others on retreat
in a small community in Anderson Valley
near Mendocino. On this flat, gentle river
bottom land, the trees have grown up in easy
conviviality, nurtured by floodplain water
and the protection of the valley. Below the
knoll the creek winds its way through a lazy
channel, limpid with the slow movement of
late summer. The central grassy area is open
and spacious, framed by the comfort and sta-
bility of trees. Tall, straight redwoods and firs
emerge above the rounded coast live oaks,
bays, and madrones, filling the sky with quiet
companions.

Inside this large ring of trees lies an island
of stillness, a protected area in a war zone.
These several hundred acres have been desig-
nated for slowing down, for listening to the
calls of the heart. Their purchase was an act
of intention on behalf of trees and people,
that they might find a more peaceful way to-
gether. Up and down the valley, stands of
redwoods are being turned into lumber and
cash at an alarming rate. The tension over
trees in this country is palpable. The high
price for rare, clear-grained heartwood is a
driving force behind more and more logging.

The economic machine justifies and perpetuates the killing in this war. For some, the price is too high because logging also causes fragmentation of wildlife habitat, severe soil erosion, and widespread loss of salmon runs (Norse 1990). The battle in the forest involves private property rights and defense of environmental integrity. Tree lovers prefer the trees alive; the timber companies want them dead. The two desires are completely incompatible.

The retreat, however, is not about trees; it is about the attentive heart, the heart that feels the presence of others and the call to respond, the heart that lives in relationship with other beings. The attentive heart is not a purchasable item; its value cannot be measured in economic terms. The capacity for compassion and response grows slowly from cultivation and practice. In this retreat we are practicing traditional methods of mindfulness and intention (Nhat Hanh 1987). Breathing in, breathing out, with awareness, over and over again, we are trying to pay attention to what we are actually doing moment to moment. The instructions are simple, but the practice is very difficult. The mind is so naturally slippery, so deftly agile, so quick and ready to dart off in any new direction. Like practicing scales on an instrument, watching the breath can be tedious, even boring; and in this lies the great challenge to keep coming back, to keep trying to settle the scattered mind.

Though there is no escaping the local tree war, I find it stabilizing to focus on one activity, one motion at the center. Breathing slowly, the monkey mind finds a place to rest, to empty out, to pry loose from the paralyzing traps of self-absorption. After an hour of sitting silently, we step outside for a period of walking meditation. Each time the mindfulness bell rings, we pause and breathe deeply three times, noticing the detail of where we are. One step, breathing in, one step, breathing out. Paying attention to the feet, paying attention to the breath, noticing the body moving through the landscape.

I walk with bare feet, soaking up the sunlight in the grass, crinkling the green leaves with my toes. In the center of the soft lawn, I bump into the roots of an old Douglas fir stump. A tiny oak seedling has taken shelter in a crack of the stump, drawing on the tree's remaining nourishment. The tree roots protrude a few inches above the ground, marking the space of its former water territory. Worn and smooth, they are like firm hands touching my feet. My feet, the tree's feet—we meet each other in the deep breathing that connects

body to ground. I touch the tree's presence by walking the length of its roots. Next to the ephemeral exuberance of the grass, the roots provide depth and grounding, a testimony to the history of the tree.

Cultivating this practice of mindfulness is painstaking and demanding. In each moment of observing a leaf, a squawk, a firm touch, there is the temptation to make it something more than it is—an object of fascination, a delirium of nature bonding, a symphony of deliberate orchestration. There is also the danger of thinking it something less than it is, missing the context and history of the tiny event striking the senses. Either way, one falls off the impossibly thin razor's edge of bare attention. Fall and return, err and correct. Like riding a bicycle, the mind aims for balance, seeking to stabilize the wobble between the pulls toward falling.

Each step, listen, breathe. Each step, note what is actually happening. It is difficult to hold the tension of these instructions in my body. Slow people moving like molasses on the lawn—we are all so serious about this! Couldn't I go up and tickle someone? Wouldn't it be fun to break their attention with peals of laughter? I feel impatient and mischievous with the slowness of this practice. Breathe, relax, observe the mind of resistance. Slowing down again, I walk with grass, roots, sky, clouds, watching the emotional waves rise and fall, surge and pass away. Emptying out of self-referential ideas, emptying out of the tendency for distraction, I am trying to maximize the possibility of being completely here. But every second there is a tug in the web that pulls on my attention.

Loud, heavy, gear-grinding, gas-guzzling noises invade the island of stillness. My body tenses. I recognize the sound of a logging truck on the local transport route between forests and cities. I know more than I want to about the sound of this logging truck. The roaring engine sets off an internal alarm tied to fear, protectiveness, uncertainty, helplessness. *The forests! the forests!* the voice of concern calls out. Breathe, walk, listen, observe. The tension sinks into my stomach and tightening hands. I try to stay present to the whole causal net, to the desire to escape it, to the tension of the conflict. I know the trucks are carrying trees stripped naked into logs, their arms hacked off and left to rot or burn. I know that a logging operation can quickly turn a living forest community into an unofficial burial ground. I imagine the trucks as hearses in a long and very drawn-out funeral

procession. A wave of great grieving washes over me. I struggle with this slow walking, torn between acting and not acting. It seems like an indulgence to take the time to cultivate mindfulness when so much is being lost.

But this is the tension: to find a considered way of acting not based on reaction. Building a different kind of sanity requires a stable base for careful action. It means being willing to know all the dimensions of the reality of destruction, being willing to breathe with the tension of emotional response, being willing to cultivate tolerance for unresolved conflict. This nonverbal form of ethical deliberation depends on the careful work of paying attention to the whole thing. Meditating, walking slowly, calming the mind by centering on the breath—these painstaking, deliberate practices increase the odds for acting intelligently in the midst of crisis.

The bell sounds to close the period of walking meditation and begin the break; I am longing to shake off the tension of the logging dilemma. Between the orchard and the kitchen, a small path drops over the hill and winds through a sloping oak woodland. I follow it intuitively toward the low places, hoping to find water and the company of alders. My feet want to stand in cool water, my hands yearn to splash wetness on my face.

Stepping over the cowpies and fallen oak twigs, I leave the path and wander down to a shallow stream. Warm and almost stagnant, the water is barely moving. Near an overhanging alder the creek is a foot deep; I slip out of my meditation clothes and into my fish body. Wriggling, squirming, splashing, cleansing—for a few moments the existence of suffering is a distant thought. The tension of human confusion slides away; I bask in the apparent simplicity of animal life. I catnap on the warm rocks, resting like a lizard. Wavering on the edge of consciousness, my mind drifts with the sounds of the stream and the warmth of the sun. Thoughts skim across the surface, finding no anchoring place in the pond of my imagination. The tension of acting/not acting is swallowed up in a cat's yawn, as I turn on my back to face the full sun.

By late afternoon we have been sitting and walking silently for several hours. I fight it less, willing now to just do the practice, just put in the time. My companions walking slowly across the lawn seem more like trees than people; they are less awkward, more comfortable, less ruffled around the edges. We are absorbed in the practice of remembering where we are, remembering our relations,

noting the suffering of ethical tension. It takes time to see the deeply encoded patterns of destruction and transgression against trees and other nonhuman beings. It takes time to cultivate a relational sensitivity that is compassionate and not pathological. It takes time to embrace wholeheartedly the complexity of living with trees.

I find some comfort in our communal clumsiness. We each stumble along the uncharted path. Practicing with others is a useful antidote to the isolation of insight. We walk together sharing the silence, giving each other support as we investigate our lives. We forget and remember, moment after moment, each of us making an effort to deepen our capacities for observation of self and other. By learning in community, we practice breathing in a circle of friends and companions. Against the backdrop of ecological uncertainty, this retreat seems like a very small contribution of attention. Thought I cannot know how it will affect the large-scale patterns of social relationships with trees, I make an effort anyway. The choice to practice awareness over and over in each moment, is the cultivation of intention, a quiet, fierce kind of passion that supports the capacity to act with restraint.

Cutting Wood

What is my relationship with wood? I carry this question like a burning coal to the jumbled pile of firewood that needs stacking. It is only a slight variation on the question I have been carrying for years: What is my relationship with trees? The questions serve as Zen *koans*—teaching puzzles not meant to be explained by the intellect but used instead to penetrate the nature of reality. *Koans* work on the questioner like a mantra or meditation, unsettling the mind to open up new ways of seeing (Aitken 1982). Each piece of wood presents this *koan* in material form; the jagged heap challenges me to pay attention to the question.

A mixed cord of red cedar, coast live oak, and almond has been delivered to my doorstep. I look at the vibrant green moss on the oak and wonder where the wood came from. After five months without rain, the moss should be pale and dry. It's hard to believe this oak has been sitting in a woodpile curing. I suspect it was imported from moist forests in northern California or perhaps from as far away as Oregon or Washington. This means that local firewood harvesters are going farther and farther away to cut wood for Bay Area stoves and fireplaces.

The cedar in the pile raises similar questions. Some of the chunks are 16 inches or more from core to bark. If that is the radius of the trunk, the source tree must have been almost a yard in diameter. I know of no trees that size in the San Francisco Bay area. Again, I'm concerned—is this wood coming from the Sierra Nevada, the North Coast forests, or even Oregon?

Both observations are disturbing. It means that the local supply of wood is probably being overharvested. Or that people are cutting wood farther away where wood is cheaper so they can make a greater profit. These thoughts bounce back at me, naming my ignorance, revealing my helplessness as a consumer. I only ordered the wood; I didn't collect it myself. I am just one small piece of the market equation that determines the fate of firewood trees. Whatever their origin, these pieces of forest are now building blocks for my woodpile. I ask them more questions as I frame the foundation row for the stack. The *koan* deepens; it works its way into the details of each shape and form. Chunk of oak, where have you come from? Soft red cedar, what hands cut you down? Twisted almond, who walked through your orchards? I talk with the wood, using the questions to begin a relationship that will serve me through the winter. The pieces have been cut with precision. The edges are clean, not ragged, and most of the chunks are the same size. This makes them very easy to stack. I offer gratitude to the cutter for paying attention as he worked.

Wood stacking is a labor of love. A woodpile is an art form. People who appreciate this recognize each other by the shapes of their woodpiles. A fine woodpile, like a good stone wall, reflects the eye of the stacker. Each piece is handled with a particular feeling for its placement. Where exactly does it fit in the developing sculpture? I consider each piece in my hands, looking over the stack for just the right spot. If it lies snug and stable, then it will be secure enough to support others on top. I touch and notice each piece for what it is, another form of tree. We have a silent communication as I place piece after piece on the pile.

In the silent rhythm of work I listen again to the *koan*: What is my relationship with wood? The questions fill my mind: What does it mean to consume wood? What is my responsibility to trees as a consumer of wood? What is the impact of firewood harvesting on California oak forests? My actions are part of a complex web that I can either ignore or pay attention to. Paying attention is far more dif-

ficult and demanding. The questions obligate me to engage at a deeper level. I want to work with this wood, not against it.

I consider the internal structure of the pile. How can I stack this wood with an eye toward harmonious relationship? I see that with these pieces of forest I am building another ecosystem. Already crickets and lizards are seeking out cracks in the pile. Pillbugs and slender salamanders will crawl under the bottom logs and hide there over winter. Perhaps a mouse or two will settle on a wide shelf between pieces. Leaving cracks and holes for animals, I lay the wood down, thinking of those who will inhabit this woodpile.

A woodpile is a system on a very small scale. This makes it more than just a sculpture: it is a living art form. In fact, this is what all ecosystems are—living art forms. As living forms of art, these systems are more complex and multidimensional than a human mind can imagine. That is the beauty of it—the system of comings and goings that make up this architectural event in time. By stacking the wood with some eye to system, I touch a little of the bigger story.

Still the *koan* is not fully answered. I carry it to another cord of wood a week later, where I am plunged more deeply into the question. Now I am the one cutting the wood; it is my hands on the chain saw. It is my fingers on the trigger making the whirring and biting sound. Can I stay conscious and aware of what I am doing? What conversations do I have with these trees as they fragment into firewood in quick, efficient slices? The questions penetrate my body with the raw force of the saw.

I cut the limbs with a requesting heart. It is a cold day and I need the warmth from these trees. I am asking them to serve my life. I am asking them to enter my bones and blood and fuel my cells with fire, to make it possible for me to stay warm through the winter. They say that firewood warms you twice—once while you are chopping it and again while you are burning it. But I think the real warmth comes from the heart's genuine request. It is a request for relationship—for direct, intimate, interpenetrating relationship. In this case, it is the relationship of one organism consuming another, one life sustaining another. As the chain saw vibrates, the resistance of the bay branch enters my right arm. It shakes and bumps as the tree and I make contact. Again I wrestle with the questions of relationship: Tree or wood, will you kindly serve me? Will you accept my gratitude for your life given on

behalf of mine? May I know you through the exchange of energy and warmth? The questions are a bridge of connection even in the process of fragmentation. As the wood falls off the sawhorse, I see flames consuming the chunks. Each piece burns fiercely, purifying the questions, stripping bare the questioner.

The hungry chain saw sputters. I stop to refill the tank with a mix of gas and oil. Gas and oil from where? The Persian Gulf, Alaska, or the coast of southern California? Through what war zones or ice floes has this gas traveled before entering the chain saw? How much has it already cost in transportation and energy to produce this liquid gold? The questions multiply as I sink into the core of relationship. The *koan* digs into conditioned thinking, unconscious patterns, habitual ways of seeing. It works me like a teacher, opening up the possibility for insight.

Each cut requires diamond mind—sharp focus and attention on the wood and saw. This is dangerous activity; one false move could land the saw in my leg or forehead. Mindfulness is not something to dabble in here; it is sheer necessity. I ask each piece: How will you respond to this saw? Where are your knots and hard places? How can I be most attentive to your shape and form? This is the artist's question: How does one work with the materials to honor them? How do I become the material that is being worked?

The subject shifts. I am no longer just listening to the wood. I am engaged completely in this relationship; I am meeting the tree with total presence. The chain saw brings us to the point of intimacy, the hinge point around which all aspects of the story turn—fire, woodpile, oil, mind, danger, connection—each interpenetrating in the meeting place of our bodies.

The brilliance is tiring, the physical meeting of tree and person is so magnified by the chain saw. It requires such tension to grip the saw and manage its behavior. My hand is shaky, my arm aglow with electrical energy.

In an instant of falling away, my mind slips off in a thought, and I can see the possibility of accident. Away from the riveting meeting ground of intimacy, the whole thing falls apart. And it happens in a single, drifting thought. Now I have become part of the woodpile. The tree is in my body; we have met through the passionate medium of the chain saw. The art form of wood stacking rests on this knowledge of woodcutting. The *koan* pierces through all the elements, burning a flame of naked insight in the core of our meeting.

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