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Write from the Earth - Power of Words Conference 2015

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Write from the Earth * Power of Words Conference 2015

with Ken Lassman & Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

INVOCATION

In Response to a Question

The earth says have a place, be what that place
requires; hear the sound the birds imply
and see as deep as ridges go behind
each other. (Some people call their scenery flat,
their only picture framed by what they know:
I think around them rise a riches and a loss
too equal for their chart – * absolutely tall.)

The earth says every summer have a ranch
that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape
that proclaims a universe – sermon
of the hills, hallelujah mountain,
highway guided by the way the world is tilted,
reduplication of mirage, flat evening:
a kind of ritual for the wavering.

The earth says where you live wear the kind
of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)
and by listening with the same bowed head that sings
draw all into one song, joining
the sparrow on the lawn, and row that easy
way, the rage without met by the wings
within that guide you anywhere the wind blows.

Listening, I think that's what the earth says.
~ William Stafford

WELCOME HOME: A STATEMENT FROM THE BIOREGIONAL MOVEMENT

Across the planet, people recognize that we must become guardians of our life-places. Human beings have long understood that security is found in acting responsibly at home – in our neighborhoods and watersheds, our bioregions.

Bioregions are living systems where every being is connected to, and interdependent with every other; bioregions are not by property lines, states, or nations, but by rock, soil, weather, water, terrain, plants, animals, human cultures and human settlements.

Bioregionalism calls for active citizenship in the whole of life, yet its key understanding is cultural: attention to place, to local history, natural history, and to how a community's hopes, wounds, and dreams can inform enduring ways of life that will heal the planet's bioregions and their inhabitants.

Bioregionalism cultivates learning the natural history of all our relations in order to craft diverse human societies respectful of place and planet.

Bioregionalism means working to satisfy basic needs locally, relying on renewable energy and sustainable agriculture, developing local enterprises based on local skills and strengths.

Bioregionalism challenges and is an alternative to nationalism, corporate rule, and top-down globalization of our lives.

Bioregionalism embraces the struggle around the world to preserve, restore and enhance the life of the distinct places that constitute the planet.

Since 1984 bioregionalists have been gathering semi-annually at camps throughout continental North America. You, too, may be a bioregionalist, in fact probably are, if you've received this invitation. Continental bioregional gatherings are meetings of peers and kindred spirits, open to all ecology-minded persons that offer unparalleled opportunities to envision and develop a realistic, restorative way of life in your bioregion. We set their own agendas, operate by consensus and build a common commitment. Grand times and good friendships are only the first fruits. At bioregional congresses, we live in community, concern ourselves with the things that matter, and return home informed and inspired. We also spend time talking in depth, sharing technical knowledge and processes, in areas related to community and ecological restoration: water, forestry, health, education, prairie management, the arts, energy, etc. We earnestly invite the participation of all, especially those involved in the work necessary for the human species to reinhabit the bioregions of the Americas and of the whole Earth.

The survival of humanity and of the planet's bioregions depends on our advocacy of ecological design in all branches of human endeavors: economics and auditing, technology, agriculture and forestry; planning and industry; education, culture and art; philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics; law and justice; healthy and environmental defense; politics and land tenure. Any and all activists and practitioners in these fields are strongly urged to attend, to share their passions, lore, successes and learning experiences; to find new friends, mentors, or fellow travelers while participating in plenary discussions and spontaneous conversations.

If we are to avoid ecological and social collapse or global monoculture, we need to begin to listen to the planet, to learn our places. Home is the ground for honest hope. Only in our life-places can begin anew, in the timeless way of Earth's ecologies.

*~Stephanie Mills in concert with a group of bioregional writers from throughout the continent:
Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Gene Marshall, Joyce Marshall, David Haenke, Chris Lowry and David Levine*

WRITING FOR REINHABITATION, RESTORATION, AND RECIPROCITY

Reinhabitation:

If the life-destructive path of technological society is to be diverted into life-sustaining directions, the land must be reinhabited. *Reinhabitation* means learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation. It involves becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it. It means understanding activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems, and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it. Simply stated it involved becoming

fully alive in and with a place. ~ Peter Berg, *Reinhabiting a Separate Country*

Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner – what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.
~ Rainer-Maria Rilke

Restoration:

In the land we may find solace for our wounds, privacy for a developing intimacy with a natural surround, an occasion for acting out healing processes that effect inner healing as well; or we may remain unconscious of and oblivious to the living community of the land. Numbed and paralyzed by the degree of damage that has been inflicted on the land, we may be domineering and exploitive toward it, or even blindly destructive. Our behavior toward the land is an eloquent and detailed expression of our character, and the land is not incapable of reflecting these statements back. We are perfectly bespoken by our surroundings....Imagine a world where the life of the Earth and of the human spirit could go on, evolving, diversifying, adapting, changing, and surprising, fearlessly: if it can be imagined, it can come to be. If it can be recalled, it may be restored. ~ Stephanie Mills, *In Service of the Wild*

An unsung land is a dead land. ~ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*

Reciprocity:

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with *other* eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn those other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.

Writing, like human language, is engendered not only within the human community but between the human community and the animate landscape, born of the interplay and contact between the human and more-than-human world. The earthly terrain in which we find ourselves, and upon which we depend for all our nourishment, is shot through with suggestive scrawls and traces, from the sinuous calligraphy of rivers and winding across the land, inscribing arroyos and canyons into the parched earth of the desert, to the black slash burned by lightning into the trunk of an old elm.

A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. *To make sense* is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one's felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are. ~ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

Tired of all who come with words, word but no language
I went to the snow-covered island.
The wild does not have words.
The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all directions!

I come across the marks of roe-deer's hooves in the snow.
Language, but no words.
~ *Tomas Transtomer*

WRITING PROMPTS

1. Write to you body, beginning with the phrase, "My body, you are an animal..." and see what you have to say to and for yourself. Or write about your body as a gate, listing all that passing through the gate brings you.

I Talk to My Body

My body, you are an animal
whose appropriate behavior
is concentration and discipline.
An effort
of an athlete, of a saint and of a yogi.

Well trained
you may become for me
a gate
through which I will leave myself
and a gate
through which I will enter myself.
A plumb line to the center of the earth
and a cosmic ship to Jupiter.

My body, you are an animal
for whom ambition
is right.
Splendid possibilities
are open to us.
~ Anna Swir translated from the Polish by Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan

2. Taking Oliver's questions (the ones in italics), write you own responses for something you see or experience that you feel gratitude for as you wander these wetlands.

Gratitude

What did you notice?

The dew-snail;
the low-flying sparrow;
the bat, on the wind, in the dark;
big-chested geese, in the V of sleekest performance;

the soft toad, patient in the hot sand;
the sweet-hungry ants;
the uproar of mice in the empty house;
the tin music of the cricket's body;
the blouse of the goldenrod.

What did you hear?

The thrush greeting the morning;
the little bluebirds in their hot box;
the salty talk of the wren,
then the deep cup of the hour of silence.

What did you admire?

The oaks, letting down their dark and hairy fruit;
the carrot, rising in its elongated waist;
the onion, sheet after sheet, curved inward to the
pale green wand;
at the end of summer the brassy dust, the almost liquid
beauty of the flowers;
then the ferns, scrawned black by the frost.

What astonished you?

The swallows making their dip and turn over the water.

What would you like to see again?

My dog: her energy and exuberance, her willingness
her language beyond all nimbleness of tongue, her
recklessness, her loyalty, her sweetness, her
strong legs, her curled black lip, her snap.

What was most tender?

Queen Anne's lace, with its parsnip root;
the everlasting in its bonnets of wool;
the kinks and turns of the tupelo's body;
the tall, blank banks of sand;
the clam, clamped down.

What was most wonderful?

The sea, and its wide shoulders;
the sea and its triangles;
the sea lying back on its long athlete's spine.

What did you think was happening?

The green breast of the hummingbird;
the eye of the pond;
the wet face of the lily;
the bright, puckered knee of the broken oak;
the red tulip of the fox's mouth;
the up-swing, the down-pour, the frayed sleeve
of the first snow –

so the gods shake us from our sleep.
~ Mary Oliver

3. Make a list of dappled things that you see in the wetlands, and then join them together in your writing.

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.
~ Gerald Manley Hopkins

4. Beginning with the word, “remember,” write what comes as you look around, focusing on what means most to you and on the vivid details that bring this meaning alive.

Remember

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is. I met her
in a bar once in Iowa City.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the
strongest point of time. Remember sundown
and the giving away to night.
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of
her life, and her mother's, and hers.
Remember your father. He is your life, also.
Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.

Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.

Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the origin of this universe. I heard her singing Kiowa war dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central once are you.

Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember that language comes from this.

Remember the dance that language is, that life is.

Remember.

~ Joy Harjo

5. What is this place to you? Begin by asking questions about what it is, could be, encompasses.

Place

Is it the eagles returning to Lecompton, Old Eagle Town, that stretch of lookout cottonwoods on the Kaw River,

or is it those rivers we measure towns by, where we wait for flood and drought tides?

Or finding my grandfather during a storm, clouds and lightning and his face by the window?

Is it the house I grew up in, the way sun slanted through the front window, warm bars of winter dust and light?

Is it a locus inside a muddy muscle, the heart squeezing rivulets of bloods again, again, again?

~ Denise Low

6. Write your own list of how to say wind, or rain, or sun, or other weather.

Ways to Say Wind

Moves in the woods without touching the ground.

Crosses the mountains like a scarf between peaks.

From a flat and then kicked-up ocean creams along the shore.

Pummels clouds.

Lets a leaf come down in style.

When the sun goes down brings
the first cold star.

Reminds the valley about snow.

When bushes move talks like
a rabbit.

Lost all night, calls for
friends-help-justice.

Remembers the dead.
~ William Stafford

7. Write your own manifesto from your wildest, more grounded self.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. You mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forst
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested

when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please power more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?
Go with your love to the field.
Lie easily in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is highest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.
~ Wendell Berry

8. How does the world tell your story? Look at the specifics around you, and write of them, aiming for what you know through your senses.

Inscription

How does the world tell our story?
A line of one cloud overlaps another.
An airplane gone but for its tail.
A first star barely inscribed on the book
of evening before the page turns dark.

What does the first reddening leaf sing down its veins
to loosen the grip of cork from branch?
How does the cricket know to comb its wings
into the rhythm of August ending?

In the middle of a life, what tells us to turn quickly
from the oncoming car or edge of a nightmare

before dropping down to safety again?

What speaks through us at the cusp of winter,
the heavy hands of the next day's humidity,
or the last magnolia bud not ruined by last night's frost
knocked off the tree by a speeding squirrel?

Look away from the words composing the mind
into the blank sky, not quite gray, not quite blue
that dissolves into the wind of the world.

~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

9. When you return home, write of the land (or sky), or a feature of either (an aspen grove, the migrating geese, a weather pattern) as a medium, mediating between you and the earth. Or start with a phrase such as, "There is a kind of _____ quality to....." and see where you land. When you run out of words, repeat, aiming another quality to show you where and who you are.

The Prairie as a Medium

There is a kind of raging quality to the Kansas prairie. Roots pull deep on the bedrock, swelling the soils thick. Grasses twist and reel in the persistent winds like thousands of mourners wailing to the heavens, and if you listen, particularly in the winter, you can hear them whispering in the language of blade against blade. Look straight down to the ground in front of you and see a tangled web of life that bursts with languages and abstractions beyond human patterns.

There is a healing quality to the Kansas prairie. The dew-laden hairs on the leaves of a prairie rose bathe the legs of a bumblebee intoxicated with the heavy scent of the blossom. The bright green shoots of young bluestem leaves unfurl from the blackened stump of last year's growth after a fire. The cedar is full of wintering birds while the sun shines brightly and the wind blows lightly on a winter afternoon.

There is a kind of eternal permanence to the Kansas prairie. Head west to the Flint Hills, or go to the Smoky Hills around Kanopolis Reservoir. Over the next hill you could imagine a camp of Pawnees singing as they cure, cook and process every bit of the culled bison. Maybe the rise hides swaggering mastodons, sabre-toothed tigers, and giant sloths. You watch the same sequence of flowers unfold as the ones they watched: prairie violet, followed by purple coneflower, followed by sunflower, followed by aster. The swells of the landscape remind you of the ocean, resonating back to when this place was an inland ocean.

There is an ephemeral quality to the Kansas prairie. The morning fog transforms a solitary tree into another kind of being. The late summer wind blows undulating images in the grasses that are just beyond the edge of recognition. Walking through the same patch over time harkens back to Herodotus' river: Dip into the same field again and again, and it is never the same.

A native prairie remnant right here in Douglas County can hold hundreds of species of plants, fungi, insects, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, spiders, and on and on. The result is a community in a seemingly eternal cycle of unfolding and self-renewal. It can reflect back the full range of your emotions like some amazing kind of living Rorschach ink blot. All you have to do is to get out of your cocoon of technology/culture and stay open enough to hear yourself in the ancient patterns of life

which are older than civilization itself.

~ Ken Lassman, *Wild Douglas County*

INTERESTING READS ABOUT THE EARTH AND LANGUAGE

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Please also see the website for the Kansas Area Watershed Council, www.KawCouncil.org, where you can also access an in-depth bioregional annotated bibliography.