

# The Daily Fabric of Our Lives

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I was in Manhattan being interviewed by a feminist historian who was writing an article on the women's movement. In the course of our conversation, I mentioned that my husband and I were uncertain of our summer plans as we might be facing a short stretch in jail for blockading at Clayoquot Sound up in British Columbia, where we had been protesting the logging of old growth forests.

My interviewer peered forward and said something high on my list of Least Favorite Responses to Political Action: "Are people still doing that sort of thing?"

When I assured her they were, she leaned back thoughtfully and said, "You know, I think to most New Yorkers the environment is sort of unreal." When I looked at her in a mild state of shock, she went on, "I mean, we support it, save the whales and all that, but we don't really believe in it."

This conversation made a lasting impact on me. At first, I laughed and felt superior, but as I began to consider her words I realized she had articulated a

problem that went far beyond New Yorkers — that was, in fact, a condition shared by lawmakers, corporate executives, decisionmakers of all kinds. The environment seems less real than the balance sheet or the latest results of voter polls. No wonder we're in the mess we're in!

But as I thought longer about the situation, my smugness began to erode. For if I were honest, I would have to admit that to most city dwellers, even most environmentalists, even most Pagans who claim to worship nature, in reality the environment is sort of unreal, something we visit from time to time, or appreciate aesthetically, without deeply grasping that our lives depend upon it.

My family and I had been arrested for trying to protect old-growth forest, but the truth is that until our friends took us hiking, we wouldn't necessarily have known old-growth when we saw it. How could we? There isn't enough of it left anywhere reasonably accessible for us to have become familiar with it. Like many Pagans, I garden — but the vegetables and fruit I grow are a wonderful addition to the food I buy, not my major source of subsistence. I may worry about the weather, but it rarely

determines my income or my daily caloric intake.

We all live in a culture that has more and more made the environment unreal, something exotic we watch on PBS, not the daily fabric of our existence. I began to feel that perhaps the most important work we could do, spiritually and politically, was to begin developing a real relationship with nature.

## UNDERLYING ATTITUDES

To do that, we need to be aware of the underlying attitudes that separate us from the natural world. There are, of course, the overriding philosophies which see human beings as above nature and therefore entitled to exploit the natural world for human ends. These philosophies arise both from religious sources and secular worship of profit, and the damage they cause is massive and visible.

But there is another more subtly damaging view of the human relationship to nature, and the damage it causes is perhaps more insidious because this view is often held by activists and environmentalists themselves. That is the attitude that human beings are somehow worse than nature, a blight on the planet, doomed to despoil whatever we touch, and that nature would be better off without us. Now, I admit that a case can be made for this view.

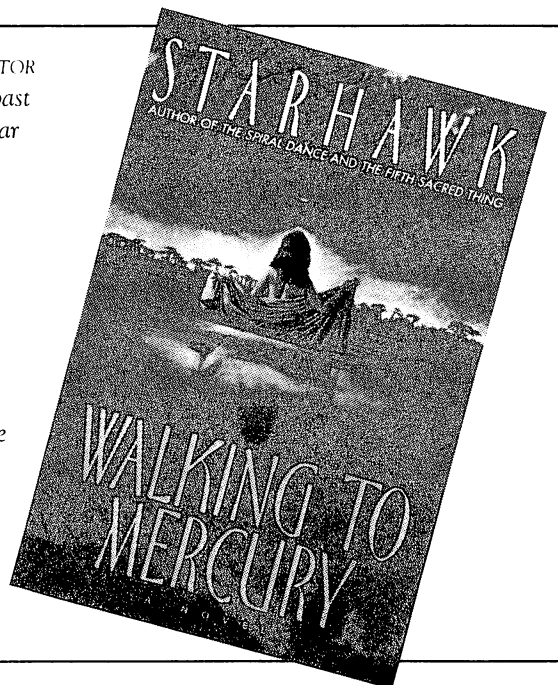
Nevertheless, I think that in its own way it is just as damaging as the worldview of the active despoilers. For if we believe that we are in essence bad for nature, we are profoundly separated from the natural world. We are also subtly relieved of responsibility for developing a healthy relationship with nature, for learning to observe and interact and play an active role in nature's healing.

The humans-as-blight vision also is self-defeating in organizing around environmental issues. It's hard to get people enthused about a movement that even unconsciously envisions their extinction as a good. As long as we see humans as separate from nature, whether

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Her latest novel, *Walking to Mercury*, was reviewed in our last issue. Copies will be available at the *Spiral Dance* (see page 31 of this issue) and at many bookstores.

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we place ourselves above or below, we will inevitably create false dichotomies and set up human/nature oppositions in which everyone loses.

### AN INDIGENOUS VIEW

There is another view, and that is to see humans as being ourselves as much nature as any old-growth redwood, mosquito, or wildflower. We are, in fact, animals. We are bodies evolved over billions of years to eat, shit, breathe, drink, reproduce, die and decay like other bodies. In nature, every giant whale and tiny micro-organism has a role to play in the balance of the whole. How arrogant to think that we don't!

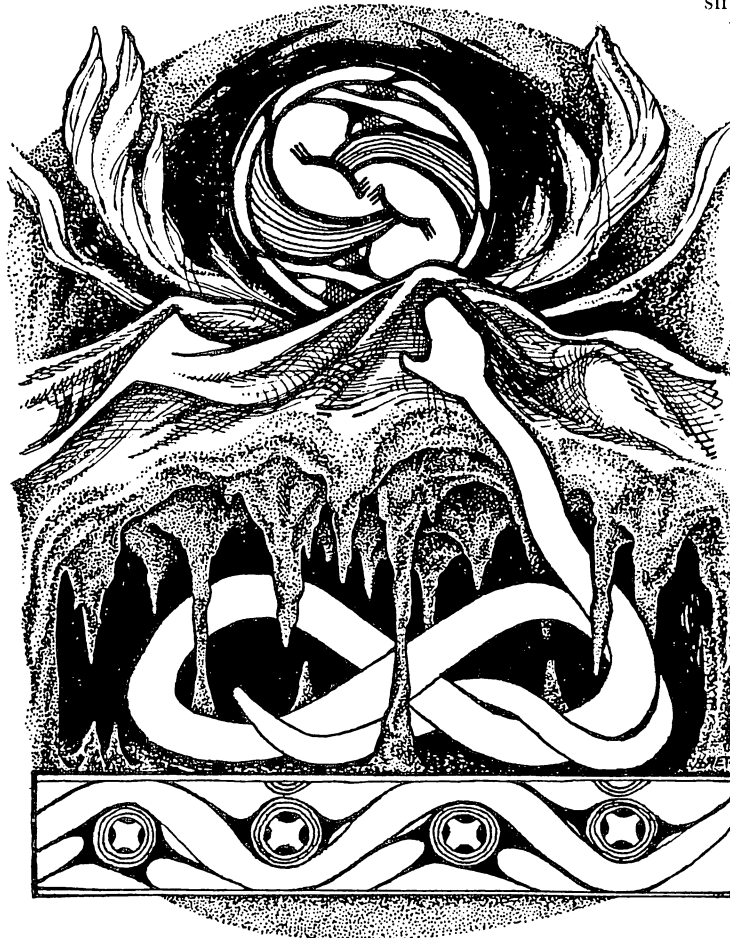
What might that role be? One hint might be in the words of Mabel McKay, Cache Creek Pomo elder and basketmaker. "When people don't use the plants, they get scarce. You must use them so they will come up again. All plants are like that. If they're not gathered from, or talked to and cared about, they'll die."

Could it be that we are supposed to be talking to the plants and animals, interacting with them, accepting the gifts they offer and using them in ways that further their growth? The Pomo basketmakers, by collecting sedge roots, pruned and thinned the stands of sedge and improved their habitat. The sedge, flourishing by the riversides and on the banks of creeks, helps hold the soil with its roots, preventing erosion. The First People of California pruned, coppiced, harvested, and burned the grasslands and forests in patterns that created optimum conditions for wildlife, for both open meadows and the growth of the great trees. Their interaction with the land was so elegantly attuned that European invaders missed it entirely, believing they had found a wilderness untouched by human intervention (and open for their exploitation), when what they had actually found was more in the nature of an exquisitely cared-for wild garden.

All over this continent, native peoples used fire, prayer, tools and ceremonies to influence their natural environment. The ecosystems we revere in forest and prairie co-evolved with

human cultures. Outside of the highest mountain peaks and the glaciers, no "untouched" wilderness existed here. European preconceptions and racist dismissal of other cultures created the fantasy of the "virgin" wilderness. The very "nature" we see ourselves as blighting was formed by millennia of cohabitation.

Indigenous cultures around the world, including those we draw from in



our present-day Pagan traditions, have seen themselves as part of nature. Not all have been successful in keeping the balance: indigenous cultures have hunted animals to extinction, have destroyed forests and desertified cropland. We must not romanticize other cultures, but neither should we close our eyes to what we can learn from them.

### THE FIRST LESSON

The first lesson is that we as human beings do have the capacity to meet both our needs and that of the nonhuman

beings around us, in ways that actually increase diversity, habitat, balance and beauty. If we fail to do so, it is because of a flaw in our attitudes, our observations, our goals or our actions, not our inherent being.

The second lesson we can learn is that nature wants to talk to us. Far from being better off without us, nature would be incomplete without human eyes

admiring her and human voices singing praise. human hands tending, pruning, and gathering, and human bellies filled with her bounty. The plants will die if they are not cared about. And especially right now, when so much of nature suffers from human-inflicted wounds, we need human creativity, ingenuity, and sweat to renew the balance our out-of-tune culture has damaged.

How do we do it?

I hope in the course of this column to explore many approaches to restoring the human/nature connection. To begin with, we can each commit ourselves to developing a personal relationship with the natural world, to

making that relationship the heart of our spiritual practice and the inspiration of our actions in the world.

Perhaps the best way to begin is simply to step outside and observe. Find some spot that is still at least partly wild. If you live in the city, that might mean a less-tended corner of a park, or a vacant lot filled with weeds, or an unkempt garden — not a monoculture lawn under a few clipped trees, or a manicured flowerbed, but anyplace that seems slightly out of control. Spend a few moments each day there, if you can, just

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## Blessed Blenders

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I wonder what would happen if we named it all sacred? The sacred hot water heater that lets me take hot showers. The sacred phone that allows me to talk to someone on the other side of the world. The sacred computer with which I communicate and connect and organize and plan. Maybe in loving it and honoring it we can really let it go. Maybe in accepting that we have helped to create this, and that we are fallible, lovable human beings who mess up, will help us make future choices that will sustain and celebrate life. At the very least we might heal the split between the sacred and how we actually live our lives.

It is imperative that while we work to sacralize the technology we do use, we also continue to search for and create sustainable, life-supporting technology. Perhaps in letting go of some of the shame around the use of our current technology, we will have renewed energy to seek out and make commitments to tools that are less destructive.

Reading the Carmina Gadelica gave me a good sense of what it could be like to really live as if my life and the life around me was magical and honored and loved. But modern city life demands, that we also shape our sense of the sacred and our magical practices to include its complexities. Thus maybe a revised version of the Carmina Gadelica would include prayers to phones, VCRs and showers. It would have blessings to say before going online, before getting in the car to drive at rush hour, or flying across country. This new Carmina Gadelica would address us as who we are in this time and place, living our lives as modern urban witches.

"I am blessing this screen, this keyboard  
that all my words may kindle  
thought, pleasure or discussion.  
May this grey box, the colour of fog that gathers here  
hold my thoughts, my work and all that is within. May it not  
crash  
may it not be afflicted. Let all that come near it find joy  
let all who helped make it have justice  
may it not cause destruction to any life.  
This day and every day  
by the blessings of Bride who creates  
and Mercury of the clear mind and quick thought.  
So might it be."

## Start Making Scents

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oil into a very clean and dry amber or dark glass bottle. To prolong the shelf life of the oil, add the oil of a few Vitamin E capsules. If the dying sun feels too weak to properly infuse the oil, you can place the flowers in a slow cooker or crockpot and heat the oil on the lowest setting for 24 hours. Keep the oil refrigerated and it will retain its healing powers longer.

So, may the sacred marigold soothe our souls at Samhain, and may all our skin glow by Solstice from its healing properties. Blessed Be, Oak

## Making It Real

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looking at the physical reality around you. Not, if you can help it, speculating on how the trees feel, or using them as a background for your own meditations or personal work, but actually looking at them, at what insects and birds and animals appear, at how they grow and change over time. Just look, feel, listen, smell, taste. If you get bored, either you've picked a place that's too sterile and controlled to have much going on, or you're not really looking. Notice how your mind gets in there, and what your internal dialogue says, but instead of focusing on yourself, focus on what's around you.

Over time, you'll be amazed at how much there is to see, once we open our eyes. And as we relearn our capacity to observe, we'll begin to understand that what we see is real.

Glenn A. Turner



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