

The Spiritual Ecology Emerging From the Experience of Wildlife Rehabilitation

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The story was circulating on social media, so I plugged details into the search bar for confirmation and found an old essay in *The Atlantic Monthly* about Grey Owl, a trapper turned wildlife defender thanks to a couple of beaver kittens (Brower, 1990). Grey Owl, born Archibald Belaney, was a nature writer, lecturer, and conservationist in the early 1900s whose international fame was built on embracing his indigenous ancestry when, in fact, he was an Englishman living in Canada. The incident with the beavers is true, in any case. Short on money, Grey Owl killed a mother beaver he had trapped despite hearing the cries of her kittens. Unable to live with what he had done, Grey Owl went back the next day, found the beaver kittens, and raised them. Grey Owl's relationship with the young beavers ended his time as a trapper (Braz, 2015, p. 48).

Grey Owl went on to start a beaver colony and to advocate for beaver conservation. His work helped to save beavers from extinction. While Grey Owl felt a particular kinship with beavers, he wrote and spoke of a wilderness in which all beings, human and nonhuman, were citizens (Braz, 2015, p. 49). Grey Owl was fascinated by the similarities between human and animal languages, noting of the vocalizations of the beavers that “the resemblance to the human voice is almost uncanny to those not accustomed to hearing it” (Smith & Mitchell, 2012, p. 54). Despite Grey Owl's deception around his ancestry, the former trapper turned conservationist changed minds by capturing imaginations with a story that began with an encounter with two buck-toothed youngsters.

Grey Owl's story caught my attention because I, too, have had the life-changing experience of raising babies of another species. I am a wildlife rehabilitator, a volunteer licensed by New York's Department of Environmental Conservation to care for injured and orphaned wildlife. My specialty is treating turtles injured by vehicles while crossing roads, but my very

first charges were three orphaned juvenile grey squirrels. The first time one fell asleep against my chest I became a staunch defender of squirrels. Like Grey Owl, during my time with those squirrels and the others who followed, I began to understand their chirps, growls, and whines. The more I learned, the more I came to appreciate their squirrel-ness. My gardening philosophy changed to one of habitat creation, for squirrels and all the wild beings.

Wildlife rehabilitators collect stories of encounters with the other-than-human world, our own and those told by rescuers. Some stories illustrate the change in perspective that happens when we humans stop holding ourselves apart from nonhuman beings and help those in need. We talk of a hunter who carried an injured coyote on his shoulders for miles to reach his truck so he could get the creature veterinary care. We mourn a fellow wildlife rehabilitator who was struck and killed by a car while she was retrieving baby raccoons left motherless by another careless driver. We celebrate the firefighters who climbed their ladder into a tree to repair an owl's nest and return her fallen owlets. We listen as rescuers and other wildlife rehabilitators share their stories, even if we have heard them before, because we understand the profound impact of those encounters on a human's relationship with the natural world.

An encounter does not have to have a happy ending to make an impact. Aldo Leopold, a champion of wildlife conservation, tells a sad tale of shooting a mother wolf and her pups. Leopold and his companions took aim from a mountainside as the family crossed a river. The mother wolf lay dying when Leopold got down to her. He describes her death as the green fire dying in her eyes (Lorbiecki, 2016, p. 42). His experience with the wolf changed Leopold's attitude towards wolves and, instead of hunting them, he fought to protect wolves as symbols of healthy wilderness ecosystems (Lorbiecki, 2016, p. 149).

Leopold had shot many wolves before that day, so why did this one make a difference? I believe that, like Grey Owl's experience with the beaver kittens and my own with baby squirrels, there was something compelling in Leopold's close contact with vulnerability and suffering. In *Becoming Animal*, David Abram (2010) describes the human organism's "instinctive empathy with the living land" (2010, p. 7). Abram suggested that in insulating ourselves from the vulnerabilities of existence

[w]e cut our lives off from the necessary nourishment of contact and interchange with other shapes of life, from antlered and loop-tailed and amber-eyed beings whose resplendent weirdness loosens our imaginations... (p. 7)

Experiences of direct contact with otherness such as Abram describes, especially when offering care to those rendered defenseless, may trigger feelings of awe and wonder. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram (1996) discusses "perceptual reciprocity" (p. 69). When we touch another being we also feel ourselves being touched by that being.

On a winter morning not long ago, a red-breasted nuthatch flew impatiently around my head while I cleared snow off the feeders. Without much thought, I poured some seed into my hand and held it up for the hungry bird. He landed on the edge of my palm for barely a second, just long enough to choose a seed and fly off. I was awed by that moment of feeling his feet on my hand and in recognizing that he had come to me in need of sustenance, and I had instinctually responded to meet his need. Not only had I picked up on what the nuthatch was communicating, but that tiny bird had trusted me with his safety. I felt deeply humbled.

Abram proposed

It may be the new "environmental ethic" toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire – an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of

our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature – will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us. (1996, p. 69)

I agree, and Grey Owl and Aldo Leopold's stories affirm, that intimate encounters which allow for sensate experiences such as reciprocation of touch and eye contact may be the key to an emerging ecological spirituality which will make environmental standards and laws unnecessary. It is my hope that such a spirituality does come to be.

A root of a new ecological spirituality might anchor in the monistic philosophy of Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), a German zoologist and biologist who notably coined the word "ecology." Haeckel posited that there was one set of natural laws which governed all matter and energy (Lustig, 2002). Haeckel promoted his contemporary, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution with the monistic pantheism of Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a combination Haeckel intended to be a science-based, ethical system which would be a new religion to replace Christianity. While Haeckel's scientific approach differs from David Abram's sensual method of understanding nature, Spinoza's belief that every being and object was a manifestation of God and therefore has intrinsic value bridges the two (Taylor, 2010, p. 8). The concept of universal oneness underscores the ability to have a shared experience with another form of life and the divinity of both parties ensures it is spiritual.

As the science of ecology advanced, so did its philosophy. Arne Naess (1912-2009), considered the father of deep ecology, encouraged each person to develop their own ecological wisdom, or ecosophy, through observation and experience of nature (Lauer, 2002). While Naess

created a brilliant foundation for an ecological spirituality, ecosophy seems to be a more intellectual pursuit than a wisdom cultivated through Abram's path of sensation and does not fully explain the psychological impact of touching one who is other-than-human.

In his interpretation of Arne Naess's work, Stephan Harding comes closer to explaining the spiritual shift I experienced while holding a baby squirrel to my chest. Ecological wisdom is developed through deep experience, deep questioning, and deep commitment (Harding, 2009, p. 57). Most experiences I would consider to be deep have occurred in my work as a wildlife rehabilitator. Babies always spark the wonder and magic I associate with a deep experience, and those feelings are amplified whenever one is injured or ill. Like Aldo Leopold's encounter with the wolf, I have been present at the moment of death for many turtles so badly injured all I can offer is hospice care. I nursed a mother opossum who had been hit by a car while she nursed the babies in her pouch, only to have her die in my arms the day after her children went out on their own. I was so affected by those experiences that I could no longer be part of harming another animal and committed to veganism.

Due to Grey Owl's deep experience of raising beaver kittens, he questioned both the ethics and sustainability of trapping beavers. Grey Owl's personal ecosophy grew from that questioning and not only did Grey Owl stop trapping, he made a commitment to try to restore the beaver population and advocate for their protection. Leopold's cycle from experience to commitment was similar.

These kinds of interspecies encounters invoke the concept of animism. A recent definition of animism is "the understanding that the world is a community of persons, most of whom are not human, but all of whom are related, and all of whom deserve respect" (Harvey,

2019). To recognize the personhood of all beings requires a transformation in how one sees others. David Abrams explains that

[t]he difficult magic of animistic perception, the utter weirdness and dark wonder that lives in a deeply place-based relation to the earth, is the felt sense of being in contact with wakeful forms of sentience that are richly different from own's own – the experience of interaction with intelligences that are radically other from one's own human style of intelligence. (2018)

Once we accomplish the difficult magic and recognize our relatedness, which is the deep experience Harding describes, then we can look at the deep question of what constitutes respect. I believe this is where one's personal ecosophy comes to be. Those who exist in a human world that they believe is separated from nature, those who will walk past a baby squirrel that has fallen from her nest believing nature should take its course, those who would turn away rather than watch the green fire fade from a wolf's eyes, will never answer that for themselves. They will rely on external instruction for how to behave around nature, such as those dictated by legislation or religion, and will fail to notice they are adhering only to the bare minimum of respect perpetuated by the myth of separateness. Opportunities for direct contact with other-than-humans, particularly when the experience is one of vulnerability and trust, can dispel the myth.

Like Grey Owl and Aldo Leopold, wildlife rehabilitators and rescuers are partaking in intimate and transformative experiences with nonhuman animals regularly. We are engaging in perceptual reciprocity and cultivating personal ecosophies. We are done with the “look but do not touch” rule often employed by environmentalists to protect humans and nature from each other. We understand that respect does not come from words on a page but grows from our relationships with other beings. My own deep commitment, born from my work as a wildlife

rehabilitator, includes creating opportunities for my fellow humans to have intimate contacts.

Perhaps my work will move my hoped for spiritual ecology closer to being.

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