Priscilla Stuckey

Kissed by a Fox

And Other Stories of Friendship in Nature

PROLOGUE

Bald Eagle

Did the wind use to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things say very little to very few.

—Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Midnight blue water rested at the horizon under a brightening sky, framing shafts of pine and fir at shore's edge. Here on the southern tip of Lopez Island, off the coast of Seattle, the dawn air was cool and still, the only sound a few songbirds calling far away. I headed across the needle-packed yard toward a clump of pines. The bald eagle nest was right over there, Anya had said; she'd seen the chicks fledging just days ago, and they couldn't be far away now.

I turned my binoculars toward the pines, eager to spot that huge platform of sticks three to five feet across. Eagles use the same structure year after year, weaving in more and more sticks for support until the whole can weigh a ton or more. Surely a nest the size of a mattress should be easy to

find! I scanned the trees in one direction. Nothing. Puzzled, I looked the other way. No nest anywhere in sight.

Soon my neck stiffened from the upward gaze. I lowered the glasses and headed across the thick carpet of pine needles. The eagles would have to show up soon. Anya had said they were here, so I might as well wait.

It was 1995, and I'd met Anya just a few days earlier on a women's camping trip to Mount Rainier, a vacation from my too-quiet life in Oakland, California, where I lived alone writing a doctoral dissertation and editing books. A few years earlier, at thirty-five, I'd undergone three severe losses—deaths of both parents, plus divorce after thirteen years of marriage—followed too quickly by the end of a new relationship, and now I spent most days treading the waters of depression, withdrawn and silent. On the camping trip Anya had been almost as quiet. Each morning she would unroll her yoga mat a few feet away from the group and stretch silently through her poses. We'd hardly said a word to each other. Yet on the last day, when the group gathered on soft emerald grass next to a tiny ripple of creek to share what we'd gained from the trip, and I said I'd loved every minute of it but still—in this prime bald eagle country—hadn't seen an eagle, Anya had urged me to follow her home. Her guest room was really a workout room, but I was welcome to unroll my sleeping bag there for a couple of nights and search for eagles by day.

Climbing now over rocks near the water's edge, I gazed toward the deep blue of the sea. No eagles. I wondered how to find them. The thought occurred: *Why don't you call them?* While meditating recently, I'd seen trees and birds in my mind's eye, like watchful presences, but that was meditation, not "real" life. Birds don't just come when you call. True, my skeptical biologist friend Meredith, who had taught me birding, had told me how, during a bewildering time, she'd gone to the beach and asked for an osprey to appear. Although it was not the season for osprey, and they were fairly rare at that beach, within minutes an osprey had soared

high overhead. Nice coincidence, I'd thought, but no rational evidence suggested that birds could hear or respond.

Still, I was going to be here only until tomorrow, so there was no time to waste.

I sat down on a soft bed of pine needles, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. Inside, thoughts ran wild: *This is silly . . . They'll never show up . . . Might work for other people, not you.* I took another deep breath and settled into my body again, feeling alive in my arms, in my legs and feet. Noticing sensations was feeling, not thinking—a good way to turn off mental chatter.

I brought to mind a picture of a bald eagle: that white head, fierce yellow eyes, and hooked beak; the dark body, white tail, and powerful talons that could make off with a fish nearly half the bird's size. *Please,* I spoke mentally to the image, *I'd really like to see you. Is it possible for you to hear me?*

In the background I could hear another voice: *Yeah, sure, right—now you're praying to birds? Talking to someone you can't see, who may not even be there?*

I breathed again. *I'm only going to be here today and part of tomorrow. I've seen lots of birds but never bald eagles. Please let me catch a glimpse of you.* I remained quiet for a few moments, eyes closed.

There was no more to do. I opened my eyes. The sun was far above the horizon now. I sat in its midmorning warmth, gazing quietly at pines. How long do you wait for an eagle to come when you call?

If you're impatient like me, not very long. A minute ticked by, then two, then five. Nothing happened.

Trying not to notice a corner of disappointment, I stood up and headed toward the bike shop across the way. My chances of seeing eagles would increase—wouldn't they?—if I covered the island. I picked out a bicycle and at the café next door stocked up on a sandwich, water, and an apple.

Map in hand, new Lopez Island visor peeking out from under my bike helmet, I headed out.

The road I chose took me inland, and soon I was engulfed by peaceful summer-gold fields stretching to the horizon, the sea no longer visible beyond their gentle undulations. Cars passed at a leisurely rate, each driver in turn lifting an index finger—not four fingers, not a palm, just an index finger—to greet me. Shyly I waved back, unaccustomed after a decade of urban life to waving at strangers. I might have been back in the rural Ohio of my childhood.

I covered the length of the island, stopping for lunch along a sand spit stretching across a still lagoon, then heading inland again for more miles of quiet fields. Now and then I scanned the horizon for the telltale sign of black wings spread wider than a hawk's and flattened out horizontally from the body, not lifted in a V like a vulture's. I saw golden grain and craggy cliffs with pine trees silhouetted black against the blue sound, but I saw no eagles' wings.

By late afternoon my bottom was sore from the thick denim seam in my jeans—I hadn't packed biking shorts—and my leg muscles were yelping. Drinking the last of my water, I worried that I wouldn't get back to my sleeping bag before dropping from exhaustion.

Finally back at Anya's house, I finished the other half of my sandwich, soggy from the backpack. At dusk Anya returned, as quiet as she'd been on the camping trip. I told her no luck, I hadn't seen any eagles. She said, Maybe tomorrow.

I went to bed wondering what had gone wrong. *I guess beginners don't get what they ask for*, I thought. The next morning I would have time only to turn in my bike at the shop and head to the ferry landing for the return trip to Seattle and the flight home. The corner of disappointment had grown throughout the day and now threatened to take over.

Up early again the next morning, I thanked Anya for the impromptu visit and took one last hike around the outside of the house. Binoculars in hand, I searched again for the nest. If an eagle nest is so obvious, why couldn't I spot it?

I called again to the eagles. *And please*, I added, hoping I didn't sound too demanding, *it has to be soon, because I have to leave right now!*

At the bike shop a guy in a baseball hat pointed to the best corner for hitching a ride across the island, so I headed there and stuck out my thumb. Anya had assured me that Lopez Islanders often drove tourists to the ferry landing.

One car went by, then two. I tightened the straps on my pack and prepared for the three miles ahead. I was well out of sight of the hamlet, enjoying again the narrow road stretched between green and gold fields, before the next car approached. I turned and stuck out my thumb, and the small convertible pulled to a stop beside me. The woman driving waved me in cheerfully, and I hefted my pack over the side and settled gratefully down. Sun warmed the backs of our necks as we made our way north.

We were now in the very middle of the island. No other cars passed us on the road, there were no trees nearby, and we were sailing past tranquil fields, our vision open to the sky. I glanced to the right and saw, far away, across the fields, above the tree line at the eastern horizon, a tiny black spot in the sky. I ripped my binoculars from my pack and focused. Those spread-wide wings! Closer it drew. A nearly invisible tail! A light-colored head!

Over here! My silent call was more wish than thought. A head and tail of white materialized in the lenses. The bald eagle was headed straight toward us.

"Could you stop for a minute?" I asked the driver. She too had spotted the faraway shape to our right. "Sure," she said, smiling, as she braked to

a halt in the middle of the road. Still the eagle approached, on a course that would take it directly over our heads.

What happened next made my heart stop—and does so even now, more than fifteen years later. As we watched, the bald eagle, instead of flying over us and across the island, spotted the car below and, when it had arrived directly overhead, turned sharply to make a tight circle. I raised the binoculars again, eager for a closer look. There were the broad dark wings, spread white tail, pure white head. There were the sharp eyes trained on us as the eagle turned in orbit, shifting its regal head to stare directly down into the car. I watched, first with the glasses, then without. I had plenty of time to take in every detail, for the eagle, instead of making only one circle, was turning in many tight circles directly overhead. *Thank you!* I whispered. *Thank you, oh, thank you!* My heart was rising in my chest, as if elation could lift it to the eagle's height.

I watched until I couldn't hold my head up anymore. Only then did the eagle break orbit, beat its wings three or four times, and head back toward the spot on the horizon from which it had appeared.

Still in a daze, I boarded the Anacortes ferry and rode across the strait. I stared at the blue water, unable to think of anything but the miracle I had just witnessed. With my mind lost in wonder, my senses were freed to feel the sharp bite of sea breeze, to hear the piercing calls of gulls, to see in the deep water of midday the deep blue of nightfall.

On the two-hour bus ride to the airport, my mind dwelled still on the eagle making its tight circles above our stopped car. When I got home, there would still be a dissertation to write, friends would still be scarce and finances tight, but this one thing I knew: Someone had heard my call. Something new was possible. The despair I had been fitted with like a suit of family clothes had been torn by a visit from another species. Although

it would be years before the despair fell away completely, receiving a visit from the eagle nourished my growing sense of wonder. There was magic in the world, and it could be called up by sincere wishes sent out with respect. The eagle had answered—at a time when few others in my life were responding. Perhaps the world was a friendly place after all.

That a wild animal had come to my call was a smack to my consciousness. Something was afoot in the world—something that the best descriptions of that world, thought up by the most brilliant minds of the most modern society in that world, could not explain and did not even have words for.

Once I was home again, to say I turned skeptical of what I had experienced is to put it mildly. After all, I was thirty-eight years old and a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Through a decade of graduate school I'd been trained as a meticulous observer and in my dissertation was exploring gender and nature in Western religions. My school valued both rationality and faith, and it promoted faiths of all kinds, from Christianity to Judaism to Buddhism. Yet nothing in my graduate studies talked about what I had just experienced. Not one of those great religions taught that humans could become intimate with other animals or plants. There was no language for my experience, and so for all practical purposes my experience didn't exist. Interspecies communication was not "spirituality"; it belonged instead to the back alleys of parapsychology and New Age woo-woos, which means—this is an understatement—that it was not taken seriously. Certainly I never mentioned the eagle to other students, much less my professors. After all, I hardly believed myself what had happened.

Yet by that point I'd also been a feminist for more than fifteen years, and if feminism had taught me anything, it was to pay attention to my own

experience—to trust it even when signals from others contradict it, to hold my own way of seeing as equal in value to the seeing of others. Feminism, in other words, had taught me courage. Little in Christianity, with its doctrine of original sin—that fatal flaw in humanity that means you can never fully trust yourself—supported or even recognized this form of courage; Christian feminists had been saying so for decades already. My favorite Zen axiom had become "If you meet the Buddha in the road, kill him," which is said to mean, Don't believe what even the most revered authorities tell you, but instead test everything—*everything!*—in your own experience.

So when my experience started diverging from mainstream rationalism, including the religious kinds, I could not completely discount it. I had to pay attention. The eagle had bestowed a tremendous blessing, and being faithful to my experience meant being faithful also to this being's gift. The eagle had flown across the island in response to my need, and fidelity to that appearing meant allowing the eagle to make a difference in my life; it meant, in effect, opening myself to a new kind of faith.

We don't usually think of our worldview as our faith; "having faith" more often means belonging to a religious group or believing in God or even feeling certain that something fantastic is about to happen; Red Sox fans in 2004 were paragons of faith.

But another meaning of *faith* is our basic stance in life—the worldview that orients us. It's like a travel guide written by our culture and handed to us at birth to help us make sense of our adventures along the way. Like any guidebook, it points us toward some paths and glosses over others; it says "stop here" but "don't bother over there." And in 1995, when I was a doctoral student, my guidebook said clearly that animals do not hear human thoughts. It also hinted that anyone who disagrees is probably just a teensy bit crazy. The authors of this guidebook, religious and scientific

minds alike, agreed that humans are different from the rest of the creatures; we alone possess mind—at least the kind of mind that can solve problems or make tools or feel emotions. And even if scientific research showed those criteria crumbling and falling away, at least we could take refuge in our human-only use of language. To put it simply, plants and animals, let alone rocks and earth, don't talk. And they surely don't pay attention to what humans are thinking and feeling. On this score my guidebook was clear.

That the rest of the creatures are mute is, I have come to see, an article of faith, not a conclusion about the world reached through examining the evidence. It's a relic of seventeenth-century Europe, where people became gripped with the idea that nature works like a machine, and it grew into the Western consensus that mind and matter are separate. But when I was thirty-eight and a graduate student, my faith in this consensus had begun to shift, and the bald eagle's appearance was but one of the hard-to-explain events—"fissures in ordinary logic," writer Carol Flinders calls them—that was compelling me to seek a different guidebook.

Philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn might have called it an anomaly—an event that cannot be fitted into the system of shared beliefs called a paradigm. Kuhn is famous for pointing out that paradigms are chosen, not proved. There is no irrefutable evidence to support one paradigm over another; it "can never be unequivocally settled by logic and experiment alone." This does not mean the choice is irrational, only that it depends on factors, and especially values, lying outside the bounds of science.

Some distance always remains between a paradigm and the "real world." Paradigms are not nature itself but rather humanly created models of nature. Travel guides, not the territory.

IF KUHN WAS right, then the door is open to reconsidering our paradigm of nature. The view of nature as a machine, lacking mind or spirit, can

be seen as a choice, the product not of logic and evidence but of values that lie outside science itself. In fact, this is what historians find when they look into the lives of the seventeenth-century thinkers who set this worldview in place, such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Descartes, for instance, instituted the laboratory practice of vivisection—dissecting an animal such as a dog while alive and conscious—not because he had evidence that animals feel no pain but because he *began* with the belief that animals lack soul or consciousness and *therefore* cannot feel pain. He carried his beliefs into the laboratory rather than deriving his beliefs from what he observed.

Moreover, our ruling paradigm of matter as devoid of mind or spirit may not at all describe "nature as it really is." While being tremendously useful for solving certain puzzles, it leaves others completely unexplained. In the laboratory, researchers find subatomic particles behaving as though they could have mental properties, or mice showing empathy for cagemates in pain—anomalies that stretch the contours of what we normally expect. And in everyday life, an eagle showing up in response to a telepathic call simply doesn't fit what we think we know about the world.

In the twenty-first century, we are beginning to see that relying on a four-hundred-year-old paradigm has led us also to the brink—perhaps beyond—of ecological disaster. If mind belongs to humans alone, then stones, trees, and streams become mere objects of human tinkering. We can plunder the Earth's resources with impunity, treating creeks and mountaintops in Kentucky or rivers in India or forests in northwest North America as if they existed only for economic development. Systems of land and river become inert chunks of lifeless mud or mechanical runs of H_2O rather than the living, breathing bodies upon which we and all other creatures depend for our very life.

Not to mention what "nature as machine" has done to our emotional and spiritual well-being. When we regard nature as churning its way

forward mindlessly through time, we turn our backs on mystery, shunning the complexity as well as delights of relationship. We isolate ourselves from the rest of the creatures with whom we share this world. We imagine ourselves the apex of creation—a lonely spot indeed. Human minds become the measure of creation and human thoughts the only ones that count. The result is a concept of mind shorn of its wild connections, in which feelings become irrelevant, daydreams are mere distractions, and nighttime dreams—if we attend to them at all—are but the cast-offs of yesterday's overactive brain. Mind is cut off from matter, untouched by exigencies of mud or leaf, as if the human mind were not, like trees, shaped by whispers or gales of wind, as if we were not, like rocks, made of soil.

And then we wonder at our sadness and depression, not realizing that our own view of reality has sunk us into an unbearable solipsism, an agony of separateness—from loved ones, from other creatures, from rich but unruly emotions, in short, from our ability to connect, through sense and feeling and imagination, with the world that is our home. We stand in self-decreed exile, having lopped off our awareness of the mind flowing through all creatures in this world, and so we are unable to know ourselves as kin with those creatures, participants in the same life permeating all.

Many societies, both past and present, choose a different worldview: they count plants, animals, or mountains as friends. It is a view that Western scholars call "animist." But *animist* is so abstract a word, so close to *animated*, conjuring up images of cartoon characters drawn by an animator who gives them whatever life they appear to have.

Animist is also a word freighted with colonial prejudice. The late-nineteenth-century English founder of anthropology, Edward Tylor, said that animists were "primitive"; they were people who believed in "spirits," or nonmaterial entities. To Tylor, the Anglicans of his time were as

animist—and as primitive—as Melanesians or Bantu because they too believed in a spirit (of God). Tylor, in other words, thought animists focused on the supernatural. Because he thought that only the material world is real, to him animists were like children, confused about what is and is not alive.

Our ideas about animism have not progressed much beyond those of Tylor. Animism remains a quaint, outmoded view, and animists are those misguided folk who stubbornly cling, despite all modern evidence, to their idea that inanimate objects are alive.

Some try a kinder, gentler approach to animism. They point out that the word *animism* comes from *anima,* Greek for "soul" or "psyche" or "mind." Literally, then, animists are people who view all of nature as "ensouled." But this word too falters on a Western idea of matter as divorced from mind or spirit. In its two simple syllables, *ensouled* implies that the soul has been put there from the outside, instilled after the fact. In the modern Western paradigm, matter is the "fact," while soul is something radically different—the absence of matter. Soul, or spirit, originates elsewhere—in the heavens, in some other dimension, or as some pop spirituality theories proclaim, in the Pleiades—but it always comes from above, never from below. To most Westerners, whether nihilists or New Agers, spirit does not and cannot arise from Earth.

But look closely at that word *anima*: in its original sense it meant "the life within." *Animism*, then, could mean a world that is *alive*, not merely "enlivened," a world where life emanates from matter, where all visible things participate in creating one another just because they "are." In this view, which is my own, nature is personal; it is a place where trees or birds might say hello and where the great community of spirit includes lizard, lion, and lichen as well as the rocks and land that shape and nourish us all.

What does it mean to say that nature is personal? In the broadest sense, it means choosing a different paradigm from the Western idea of nature as machine. It means seeing more continuity than discontinuity between

humans and other creatures. It means holding the possibility that all things on Earth, even rocks and mountains, have their own will and intention. For don't rocks too move from place to place, however slowly, shaping the world as they go? Where I now live, in Boulder, Colorado, megaliths of tilted sandstone define the western edge of town, forming both the geology and the personality of the place; if they look solid and still, they certainly are not so across geologic time. "Everything dreams," writes science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin. "Rocks have their dreams, and the earth changes."

And don't plants use humans to carry out their will, as Michael Pollan argued in *The Botany of Desire*, hitching rides from us to spread their genes or cajoling us with their beauty, as in tulips, or their chemistry, as in marijuana? Pollan may not say that Earth is alive, yet anyone who sets out to tell a story from "a plant's-eye view of the world," as his subtitle announces, has made a mental leap away from mechanism and toward perceiving nonhuman others as having their own will and intention and treating them as more like than unlike ourselves.

And here lies the crux of the matter: to say that nature is personal may mean not so much *seeing* the world differently as *acting* differently—or, to state it another way, it may mean interacting with more-than-human others in nature as if those others had a life of their own and then coming to see, through experience, that these others are living, interacting beings. When nature is personal, the world is peopled by rocks, trees, rivers, and mountains, all of whom are actors and agents, protagonists of their own stories rather than just props in a human story. When Earth is truly alive, the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human.

A. Irving Hallowell was an anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania who lived among the Northern Ojibwe of Canada during the

1940s and 1950s. Hallowell's writings are leading scholars of religion to challenge Tylor's old ideas about animism because Hallowell found that Ojibwe thinking simply doesn't fit Tylor's categories. While Western scholars viewed Ojibwe as believing in "spirits," the Ojibwe saw themselves as relating to "persons" of many kinds—tree persons, stone persons, cloud persons, dream persons. Trying to take seriously the Ojibwe cosmology, Hallowell coined the term *other-than-human persons*.

One day Hallowell asked an Ojibwe elder, "Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive?" The old man looked around, considered a long moment, then said, "No! But *some* are." The answer is important. Stones could be related to as "persons," not because all stones have a "soul" or "spirit" but rather because some stones *act* like persons: they relate to others. Naturally, some stones are more "personable" than others.

The concept is not hard for even skeptical Westerners to follow: Hiking through a forest, don't we notice our attention drifting to some trees more than to others? Most of us interpret that moment of noticing as the human mind choosing which trees to focus on. But what if the opposite is also taking place? What if trees, or at least some of them, have the ability to draw our attention toward them?

Notice the difference in the quality of the experience. The moment of noticing can be the act of an isolated human mind. Or it can be a moment of relationship, a meeting of two.

When did human societies, and especially my ancestors in the Western world, stop listening to the whispers of trees and water, moths and mud? David Abram is an environmental philosopher who suggests it took place before Christianity, before Socrates and Plato. In his view, becoming literate led our ancestors to forget their cousins the animals and to seek wisdom instead in the words of humans alone.

In nonliterate societies, he says, humans focus their attention on the animals and plants, weather and tides of the natural world. Plenty of reading takes place, but it is a type forgotten by literate people, the reading of signs and tracks. To people who hunt for their food, each paw print in damp soil tells a story—how the rabbit paused at this point, avoided the coyote at that point—and provides clues about where a rabbit can be found for dinner. Each leaf whispers news of wind and weather and of the creatures who brushed by it minutes or hours before. Reading the wisps and wiggles of cloud on the evening horizon helps to plan the next day's work.

The sense that the whole world is alive, says Abram, is lost once people transfer their attention to books. "It is only when a culture shifts its participation to these printed letters that the stones fall silent. Only as our senses transfer their animating magic to the written word do the trees become mute, the other animals dumb."

Abram could bemoan the advent of literacy and gaze with nostalgic eye on exotic, nonliterate societies, but he does something much more useful: he uses modern people's experience of literacy to demystify indigenous cultures. He makes a radical suggestion: that modern Westerners are animists too, at least in one important way.

This type of animism is taking place right now, in this moment. A reader gazes at words on a page, and little marks of black are transformed instantly into words spoken by a voice in the mind or images arising on an inner screen. Reading a novel, we might picture the characters, feel their feelings, identify with or loathe them, and at the story's end we may be reluctant to say good-bye. We feel as if we have experienced their lives.

So much emotional intensity! And yet we are engaged only with small black marks printed on a leaf of paper. To a nonliterate person it could look like magic—gazing intently at a leaf and taking away stories! Reading makes leaves come alive. For Westerners, reading produces the experience

that Abram says is common to all animists, of our senses being engaged so fully with something "inert" that it speaks to us.

Some might argue that a book does not have inherent life: the marks of black ink on its pages do not speak, and only what the imagination of the reader brings to them causes them to communicate. This is the same logic by which we are able to consider rocks inanimate, as if the only life they have is what the human imagination ascribes to them. Yet in relation to a book we can see how specious this argument is: the words on the page are arranged in patterns of grammar and syntax, patterns that we learn to recognize only through the hard work of learning to read. In mastering sentences and paragraphs, we gain access to a different world, the world revealed in a book. We can see its skies and valleys, streets and buildings, hear the voices of its characters or the beat of its surf, smell the grime of its industry or the heady air of its mountains. And once we have experienced its world, we are unlikely to consider that book any longer as a simple object. Ask any bibliophile who has had to move her library across a town or a continent: life does not feel ordered until her books are unpacked and placed again within reach. The books are not objects but friends, each disclosing a piece of meaning, evoking particular feelings and thoughts. We do not doubt it: books speak.

In a similar way, argues Abram, the natural world speaks to those who take the time to listen or read—who parse the grammar of clouds and moisture, who follow animal tracks or leaf shapes in pursuit of a meal or a medicine. One need not postulate a Creator, as an author, in order to contact the aliveness of the sea. Those who have trekked in the desert, with its magnificent sweeps of earth and sky, do not doubt it: rocks speak.

For just as unseen worlds unfold to those who read a book, so worlds hidden to hurried sight unfold to those who choose to spend more than a few moments cultivating their relationship with nature. Paying attention is key: we interact with the other when we allow it to engage our attention,

when we "read" it with absorption, as we would a book. The ficus tree in the office cubicle or the oak planted in the urban sidewalk offers undreamed-of wonders to those who pay attention. Just because to literate people reading a book is unremarkable, available to anyone who can learn the alphabet, it is no less magical. Among my people, children are taught to read books; among some other peoples, children are taught to read trees.

If worldviews are human approximations of nature rather than nature itself, then to mistake one's worldview for reality is to repeat an error common to religion: the error of idolatry. We tend to think of idolaters as those who build statues, like casting a golden calf and bowing down before it, as related in the book of Exodus. But while the ancient Hebrews worshipped something physical, an act that was forbidden, the greater error might be one of perception: mistaking a human creation for reality itself. To confuse limited with unlimited is to try to squeeze ultimate reality into the confines of a human model.

One needn't be religious to repeat a religious error. The seventeenth-century model of nature-as-machine, or mind as separate from matter, won the worship of the Western world for four hundred years. So enchanted have we been with its gleaming hide that we have labeled as "superstitious" or "ignorant" anyone who chooses a different worldview.

To return to the Zen axiom for a moment: "If you meet the Buddha in the road, kill him" is a powerful caution, not only against trusting too much in human authorities, but also against mistaking an icon for reality itself. Our seventeenth-century view of nature, in which we have placed so much trust, may be a Buddha in need of slaying. What might we see if our eyes were no longer shadowed by his huge frame?

Anyone can choose a worldview based on relationship; it is open to people of any faith or none at all. One need not believe in spirits or convert to an indigenous religion to count trees as friends. No trance states are needed, no drumming, no psychoactive drugs. No rejecting of one's present faith is required, unless that faith is opposed to seeing the divine in the natural world—and I know of none that is (though fundamentalist forms of theism see larger barriers between God and the world than do the moderate forms of these faiths).

Likewise, no rejection of science is required, although one's worldview might shift, as certain branches of science have already shifted, away from the view of nature-as-machine that still dominates most of modern life. When the world is made of relationships, science's basic commitment to testing through experience can remain central and may even be strengthened as old Buddhas are slain by new discoveries. In my experience, meeting the bald eagle—as well as scores of other meetings with plants, animals, and rocks—did lead me to a new kind of faith, not in the sense of accepting a new dogma but rather in the sense of discovering a guidebook that made better sense of the territory.

And in this alternate guidebook, trees are worthy of attention and birds may become companions on the journey. The pilgrimage is toward nature and the practices simply ones of cultivating relationships with those who are nearby—the oak outside the window, the soil that grows new life, the grass in the crack of the urban sidewalk. These are everyday practices that can be engaged in by people of all religions, people of no religion, and all who count themselves "spiritual but not religious": practices of respect, careful attention, empathy, and kindness.

The simplest practice is taking time just to be in nature. And I don't mean packing your bags and traveling hundreds of miles away to visit some pristine wilderness. Connecting with nature need not mean leaving home, at least not in the geographic sense. I met the bald eagle on

a journey, that's true, but not in some "untouched" wilderness. Perhaps the idea of traveling elsewhere to connect with nature springs from Euro-Americans' own heartbrokenness—usually repressed—at having cut down the forests and conquered and banished the people who lived here before, people whose relationships with nature were livelier than our own. For the most part, modern Americans can't find the wild within or around us, so we go elsewhere to find it.

In a worldview where "people" and "nature" are separate, nature can reside only apart from humans; cities are "spoiled," corrupted by technology. If it's in our backyard, we don't call it nature, we call it a garden. In my experience, places unpopulated by humans do sing with their freedom from human tread, and they can indeed evoke a different feeling in us than does nature that is weeded and mowed and trimmed—thus the need always for wilderness—but the nature in our own backyard has equally powerful insights to offer and will also lead to the mystery that we seek.

Perhaps most striking of its gifts is friendship. Just as we receive more sustained pleasure from keeping company with our dog than from a momentary glimpse of a wolf in the wild, so also the plants, birds, and rocks of the ground we inhabit offer a more sustained experience of friendship; they live in close proximity to humans, and so they are available on a daily basis to watch and wonder at, to learn to know as intimately as we would family members, and to develop a sense of kinship with over time.

And if we open ourselves to respecting as friends the trees or plants or rocks in our backyard, we may find that we become travelers anyway, but of a different sort: cultural pilgrims at home. We may become willing to venture outside the bounds of everyday belief in the solidity and separateness of things. We may practice suspending, if only for a few moments at a time, the idea that nature works like a machine, and we may hold instead, if only for a few moments at a time, the idea that other parts of nature have their own awareness, their own will and point of view. We might become

willing to experiment, to try things that we have been told are impossible, to risk looking silly in order to follow a feeling or a hunch. And if we do all that, eventually we have stories to tell—as any returned traveler does—about the ways in which the world opened to our explorations, responded to our questions, and offered hospitality and gifts beyond any we could imagine.

My own journey toward listening to nature began many years before meeting the eagle and continues to this day. Although for much of my life I experienced animals and plants as having a lot more to say than humans gave them credit for, not until recently did I see the much larger implications of what I had thought of as private spiritual encounters. These meetings nudged me toward a worldview that offers tools that we, with our habit of treating nature as dead matter, sorely need. It is a new worldview with old, old roots, and because it emphasizes relationship and respect, it might actually help us solve the enormous ecological puzzles we now face.

But when I think of the journey I have taken, it is the bald eagle I met more than fifteen years ago who most clearly rewrote my guidebook. For when the eagle made a beeline for our car, then flew in tight circles directly overhead, staring down with sharp eyes, I was forced to see something I had never seen before. I saw a friend—one who had heard my call and who had chosen, out of free will, to respond. And, like human friends who respond, the eagle changed me, not only lifting my spirits but in the long run shifting my worldview as well.

My conversion to this new faith was not completed overnight, but after that meeting on Lopez Island, it was well under way. Step by step I was leaving behind a world in which humans alone possess the ability to communicate. I was moving toward a world in which all things, by virtue of existing, are permeated by life, are actors and cocreators in shaping the

world, are bearers and bringers alike of intelligence, of the Great Mystery. After all, the other creatures preceded us by millions, even billions, of years, so in simple evolutionary terms it is more likely that we borrow of their intelligence, than the other way around. "Birds were fully evolved by the time we stood upright," says Judith Irving, who made the film *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, so it's "better to describe human behavior as avianomorphism."

After fifteen years, time has only heightened my appreciation for what the bald eagle accomplished. Then, I was amazed that the eagle heard my thoughts. Now, I accept that ability to hear and be heard as normal, as the very fabric of life, stitching together beings throughout the world. The miracle now seems to be that the eagle came in response, flying out of his or her way to greet me.

For when I look back, I see that my request was very nearly a command. The nerve I had, calling eagles away from their daily lives just so I could get a good look! No person, human or other, wants to be ordered around, made to conform to the wishes of another. A Buddhist teaching says, "To every being its own life is precious," which is usually taken to mean that all creatures get caught up in preserving their own lives. I like to think it means something else as well: that every being wishes to be free, not enslaved to another's purpose. I have never since called another creature to show up just for my convenience.

Yet my audacity was honored, and perhaps this too is a quality of friends. For if someone dear to us makes an urgent request, won't we do what we can to respond? At that moment in my life I was in sore need of friends, and this eagle heard my request and chose to respond.

When I got home from Lopez Island, though, I wasn't yet thinking in these terms. I knew only that I was grateful to the eagle and that feeling grateful was a welcome change from the despair that had shrouded me. I was content, for the time being, just to notice and wonder at the

experience. What the eagle had brought to pass was a miracle, however I might slice it.

All that would flow from that encounter I couldn't quite imagine: greater appreciation for the mystery of life pervading all. More delight and less loneliness. A deeper listening to the body, to the physical world, and thus a greater hearing of spirit. The inner peace that can arise when we lay down arms against the self, and the ecological peace that grows from laying down arms against nature. More harmonious ways of understanding the self and community. Most of all, a spirituality of this world, in which prayer becomes simple greeting and ethics is encompassed in relationship.

All I knew that day was that in responding to my call, the eagle opened up new avenues for knowing; it revealed connections available every day to those who care to notice the birds, trees, rocks, or plants beside their house or along their street. For me a new way of being would grow from that encounter, a way of being in the world that had the potential to heal our perceived split between humans and the rest of the creatures on Earth and so head us ecologically in better directions than our old worldview had prepared us to do. It was a solution as simple—and as challenging—as relationship: the solution of widening our circle of friends.

NOTES

PROLOGUE: BALD EAGLE

The chapter epigraph comes from Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 88.

Carol Lee Flinders's lovely phrase "fissures in ordinary logic" appears in *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 14, a book I had the pleasure of copyediting.

Thomas S. Kuhn's influential book is *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); quote is found on 94.

For empathy in mice, see Dale J. Langford, Sara E. Crager, Zarrar Shehzad, Shad B. Smith, Susana G. Sotocinal, Jeremy S. Levenstadt, Mona Lisa Chanda, Daniel J. Levitin, and Jeffrey S. Mogil, "Social Modulation of Pain as Evidence for Empathy in Mice," *Science* 312, no. 5782 (2006): 1967–70.

Ursula K. Le Guin's lovely quote about the dreaming of rocks comes from *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971; New York: Scribner, 1999), 167.

Michael Pollan outlines the stories of the tulip, potato, apple, and marijuana in *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2002).

Anthropologists of religion have been leading the way in redefining animism from religion that focuses on "spirits" to religion that focuses on "persons," who may have either material or more subtle bodies. The Northern Ojibwe man's comment about stones is found in A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behaviour, and World View," in *Culture in History*, ed. Stanley Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). Nurit Bird-David, an Israeli anthropologist, uses Hallowell to redefine *animists* as people who use relationships to understand their environment; see "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40 (1999): 67–79. Both of these essays and others on similar themes are reprinted in Graham Harvey, *Readings in Indigenous*

Religions (New York: Continuum, 2002). Harvey drew these ideas together in his book *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). The phrase about relating to people, "only some of whom are human," comes from Harvey. David Abram's influential and popular book is *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996); quote is from 131. Abram's more recent book is *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Random House, 2010).

The scholar who has done most to articulate and question American notions of the wilderness is William Cronon, best known for his book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). His 1995 *New York Times* essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," is available at www.williamcronon.net/writing/Trouble_with_Wilderness_Main.html.

The term *avianomorphism* comes from Judith Irving, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, Independent Lens, www.pbs.org/independentlens/wildparrots/qa.html.

1: CUT-LEAF WEEPING BIRCH

Snippets of Dorothy Maclean's conversations with plants are found in the book I edited, *To Honor the Earth: Reflections on Living in Harmony with Nature*, with photographs by Kathleen Thormod Carr (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). For more on Maclean's experiences at Findhorn Gardens in northern Scotland, see her memoir, *To Hear the Angels Sing: An Odyssey of Co-creation with the Devic Kingdom* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1990).

The words of Audre Lorde on flesh and reason are from her poem "On a Night of the Full Moon," in *Chosen Poems Old and New* (New York: Norton, 1982). Her experiences with cancer and racism are found in her journals, published as Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988).

Eknath Easwaran's translation of the Upanishads is warm and accessible and includes some helpful introductions to the texts by Michael N. Nagler; see Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Upanishads*, 2nd ed. (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007). The lines beginning "As the same air" are from Katha Upanishad 2.2.9, and "Eternal peace is theirs" is from Katha Upanishad 2.2.13, both on 88.

The writings of anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro are tough going but well worth the effort; the ideas I discuss here are found in "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* n.s., 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–88.