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Respect: the Nature of Sanity & the Sanity of Nature

Over the course of my adolescent and adult years, I have observed a pattern that has both intrigued me and given rise to concerns. This pattern is characterized by a correlation between respect, a person's and/or culture's appreciation of Nature, and sanity. Persons and cultures generally characterized by an *ethos* of respect for self, others and Nature experience less mental illness and more social cohesion and happiness, and those persons and cultures generally characterized by disrespect experience more mental illness, unhappiness, social fragmentation, and environmental degradation. Now, this pattern seems like common sense, and one would think that we would normally choose to practice respect rather than disrespect, but, sadly, an ethos of respect is uncommon in practice, which is one of the seminal reasons for why environmental degradation and mental health issues plague us. Before I turn to statistics to back up my point, I'd like to share some reflections based in my own life experiences to illustrate the point.

Nature has always been a fundamental presence in my life. In fact, I can not envision any version of a life worth living without it because environments devoid of Nature are neither vital enough nor complex enough to provide archetypes of wholeness and health by which to pattern healthy bodies and minds. In other words, environments devoid of nature are boring and lack an inherent capacity to heal.

I grew up in a broken home, and had lost much by my fifth year—the loss of my beloved birth land, Hawai'i, due to my parents' decision to move to Alexandria, Virginia; the loss of my family structure when my parents divorced; and the loss of my father when he was dispatched to fight in the Vietnam War. These losses were traumatic, and they catalyzed the beginning of a seven-years-long period of nightmares that occurred every night. Consequentially, I intimately felt the brokenness of the world, growing up with the stories of obscenities that humans have inflicted upon other humans and the natural world, such as slavery, genocidal policies towards indigenous societies, the onerous butchery of wild bison to the brink of extinction, the world wars, the Holocaust inflicted upon the Jewish people, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and so much more suffering and waste. I hated all of it, and felt the need for something beautiful, healthy and whole. So, early in my youth, I found much solace in the wholesomeness of Nature, communing with the wild animals and wild places in the various neighborhoods in which my family and I resided over the course of my childhood and adolescence.

Shortly after moving into an apartment in Alexandria, I became aware of a little woodlot down the street from where we lived. It was an early summer day, the wind was blowing and the woods were resplendent with green foliage. I could hear the rustling sound of the trees that reminded me of the sound of the surf in Hawai'i, and I felt called to commune with the source of that sound—trees. To this day, I still remember the first time I saw the shafts of light descending down through the canopy into the shadows of the woodlot's interior. I was spellbound with awe and ecstasy, and fell in love. Soon, I was in the habit of running out of the yard and into the woods whenever mom wasn't looking.

This experience touched me so profoundly that I wrote a poem about it years later. The title of the poem is "Green Bones," which was written on April 16, 1994. It is a short poem that is presented here in full:

Trees quiver and shake,
Whispering in my bones . . .
To the woods, to the woods.

"Stay in the yard!"
Mother's words become
Fetters around my feet.

Yet, a language unspoken speaks,
Green bones hear what ears cannot . . .
To the woods, to the woods.

Magically, the fetters break, releasing
Winged feet that run
Like wind into the woods.

Leaves dance across my eyes,
Shafts of light split the shadows,
Stirring the sap in my bones.

Awakening in awe and ecstasy!
Oak and Dogwood, soil and sky,
Reveal fiery souls.

I embrace the Maple, Pine and Sycamore.
Rolling upon the musty sod,
I know home again.

Unfortunately, another decision was made to move again, and I lost my little haven. My mother, my two brothers and I moved into an apartment building in Oxen Hill, Maryland. I did not find a woodland there, but there were trees around the apartment complex that I climbed, and I remember chasing bats in the early summer evenings. Eventually, my mother met and married a man, and we moved into another apartment with little or no access to wooded areas. A year later, our apartment unit burned, and we eventually made our way to Clinton, Maryland, where we resided in our first house surrounded by a yard with trees and shrubs. The house was situated one block away from a large woodland area with a creek that discharged from a large storm drainage pipe, which was wonderful! My new friends and I spent many hours there, exploring the drainage pipe system and cleaning the creek of litter and debris. Then, I discovered Tinker's Creek in a large woodland area behind the grade school I attended. This creek was fairly large, and my friends and I would float down the creek on our backs or on anything we could find that kept us afloat. We loved hanging out there, and eventually built a tree house from the ground up into the branches of a beautiful oak. Another year passed, and we moved again into a very nice house, which was located in an adjoining neighborhood that was further from Tinker's Creek by a couple of miles. This house was the home of my adolescent years, and it was there that I discovered a little neighborhood wetland.

This wetland was quite narrow and perhaps as long as two football fields, end-to-end, serving as a buffer between one of the main avenues that led into my home town, Clinton, and my neighborhood. There was a little stream that trickled amongst the trees and shrubs, forming pools here and there. For decades, the little woodland and its hidden wetlands were left untouched, and the local wildlife found within it a haven amongst the hubbub of suburbia. It was too small for anybody to hunt within its confines, and the stream and associated pond was too small to attract interest from fishing enthusiasts. In short, most people did not give it much thought—even amorous teens and *potheads* found its prickly thickets and mud a nuisance.

I, however, found within its shrouded interior a wonderful world of wild creatures, living in beautiful harmony. It was home to spring peepers, bullfrogs, toads, box turtles, alligator snapper turtles, gray squirrels, opossums, raccoons, red foxes, red tail hawks, nightjars, a myriad of song birds and much more. I spent many hours throughout varying seasons of the year observing the playful, monotonous, busy, predacious, or curious behaviors of the creatures as they negotiated life together. Each creature had many roles to play, and they fulfilled each role perfectly. Whether as predator or prey, as forager of seed and nuts or eater of insects, as digger of dirt or builder of nests, each and every creature engaged its tasks with superb skill honed through thousands of repetitions over countless generations. Those who survived year after year grew in wisdom and became masters of their respective crafts, modeling for the young how to thrive incognito in suburbia, not just survive.

The science of ecology calls this interdependent network of plants, animals and elements an *ecosystem*, but this word does little to convey the soulfulness of this network. *Community* is a much better word because it lends a sense of neighbors depending upon one another to survive and thrive. Of course, wild communities are not like Mr. Roger's Neighborhood—bloodless and polite. No. The wild community is full of blood, passion, hunger, playfulness, audacity, beauty, mystery, wonder and so much more. As in any functional community, there are unwritten laws about how to live together. In the wild, and unlike most post-agricultural human communities, there is an inherent sense of enough as well as a system of checks and balances, which keeps the community from losing balance and becoming unhealthy. The little wetland held lessons about the web and balance of life that have stayed with me to this day, and perhaps the most enduring lesson and impression was the observation that all of the diverse species of plants and animals fit together in a way to promote a healthy, vibrant community of life that was more functional than the comparative simplicity of the human world with its myriad dysfunctions and pain. In other words, human societies in the various post-agricultural expressions do not fit into any pattern of Nature and therefore do not contribute to the whole, but rather post-agrarian societies fragment and deplete the wholesomeness of Nature.

I came to love the neighborhood wetland and its protective woods and briars, and had come to adopt it as one of many special nature retreats from the problems of my home life and my growing concerns about the direction our world was moving, especially the sociopathic Cold War preoccupation with accruing more and more nuclear weapons. The marriage between my mother and stepfather failed for various reasons when I was sixteen. My brothers had been slipping into drug use over the years, which became worse after the divorce. I, on the other hand, slipped further into the woods with a few nature loving friends, retreating from both family and worldly concerns, which was a saving grace.

Sadly, one spring day, I noticed orange ribbons tied around various trees and shrubs surrounding the wetland. I knew what they portended: a plan to “develop” the wetland. (This concept of “development”—paving over richly diverse communities of life to build monolithic structures that contribute nothing beneficial to the rich web of life—is one of many oxymoronic notions that have characterized the industrial age.) Walking around the perimeter of the wooded area, I noticed a posted sign, informing the locals that the property was slated to be filled in and covered by a parking lot for a small strip mall. I became quite angry and determined to oppose this development. I removed every orange ribbon, and kept removing the ribbons when they were replaced. Unfortunately, I was one kid, acting by myself to watch over the wetland, and I had to attend school. Eventually, the tractors showed up, so I increased my efforts, buying several bags of sugar from the local grocery store and dumping the contents into the gas intake of each tractor the night before they were going to start bulldozing the wetland. Apparently, the tactic delayed the

bulldozing a few days (or so I like to think), but the wetland was gone by the end of the week, covered over by dirt and gravel. Within two weeks, it was covered by tarmac and cement curbs, and by mid-Autumn, the buildings were up and open for business. A strip of trees was left to create a boundary, but that was the end of it. It was terrible to witness the decimation of this community of life. Gone were the spring peepers and bullfrogs; gone were the box turtles and alligator snapper turtles; gone were the opossums and raccoons; gone were the red tail hawks and nightjars. Gone, gone, gone. My retreat to sanity had been turned into a parking lot, and I felt like a steamroller had flattened me.

I was bereft and angry . . . very angry. I hated the nameless, faceless people who perpetrated this mini holocaust. The lack of regard for life and community was monstrous. I expected my neighbors to become incensed by the crime, but there was no outcry. Nothing. I wondered, "How could this be?" With much dismay and a growing fire in my belly, which also was fed by the dysfunctions and disappointments of my family life, my dwindling faith in society was significantly cracked. For several years, I did not know what to do with this fire, so I dampened the stove by focusing on usual pursuits: going to school, reading books, doing chores, writing papers, dating girls, hunting, fishing, playing baseball and football with my friends in the neighborhood, etc., but the fire did not abate. It burned through the remainder of my adolescent years and it grew as I matured into an adult. I became more and more aware of the destruction and degradation of the world's ecosystems, such as strip mining, mountain-top removal mining, clear-cut logging practices, destroying the Amazon for soy bean cultivation, the increasing rate of animal and plant species going extinct, terrible oil spills, etcetera. Also, I had become aware of various social and political injustices and abuses, as well. I could not ignore the fire in my belly anymore. It threatened to burn a hole through me if I did not find some way to address the injustice I had witnessed . . . and continued to witness in other regions of the country and world in my travels.

So, I became politicized by my 21st year, and chose to become an activist, addressing issues such as nuclear weapons proliferation, homelessness and poverty. In later years, I included unfair labor practices as well as peace and justice in Latin America among my concerns. Oddly enough, I did not make my way into the environmental movement until my latter twenties because the social and political movements were where I was invited to act as a young man.

Eventually, I did become an environmental activist, which gave me a venue for dealing with my anger in a constructive way by providing me a community and voice to my solitary habit of witnessing the destruction of Nature and acting on its behalf. Becoming an environmental activist was deeply satisfying because it enabled me to become congruent with my world in a way that sourced my deep love for Nature while serving my purpose to protect it. I became aware of the environmental justice movement, which gave me an even greater forum to combine and subsume my

earlier socio-political activism. Still, I needed a path that included psyche and spirit, as well as social and environmental justice. So, I was delighted when I discovered deep ecology and ecopsychology, both of which inform each other in important ways from two different disciplines that actually mirror each other in terms of rich, interdependent, dynamic systems of understanding. These disciplines gave voice to my instinctual knowing that the relationship between mind, society and Nature is sacred in the sense that it is fundamental to health for both human and nonhuman communities, and needs to be deeply regarded as such in all levels of human culture, which brings me back to my assertion that respect for self, other and Nature is essential for sanity.

So, is there a way to measure this assertion? One quick measure is arrived at by comparing the respective results of international assessments on happiness and “greenness”, using the annual World Happiness Report (WHR), which is issued by the United Nations (UN), as well as the Global Green Economy Index (GGEI) by Dual Citizenship, a US-based data consultancy. The 2015 WHR lists 158 countries that participated in the UN study. Of these participants, Switzerland ranks highest, closely followed by Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia in that order. Now, let’s consider the GGEI on the world’s greenest countries. The top ten among 60 nations that participated in the study are Sweden, Norway, Costa Rica, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Finland, Iceland and Spain. What strikes me about the top ten happiest countries is that most of them place a high intrinsic value on Nature, also. It is not a mere accident that Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries listed are among the top ten happiest and the top ten greenest countries among the world’s nations. These countries consistently legislate policies that place premium values on social and environmental supports. Also, honorable mentions go to Costa Rica and Austria, which made the “top ten” list of the greenest countries, while ranking 12th and 13th, respectively, amongst the world’s happiest countries, which is no small achievement. Like Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, Costa Rica and Austria have made political imperatives of social and environmental wellness.

What about Spain that made the top-ten list for greenness, but placed 36th for happiness? This seems to be at odds with my assertion that respect for nature translates into respect for people. The inconsistent rankings for Spain can be largely accounted for by Spain’s emergence out of the long fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, which was a period characterized by little respect for social wellbeing. This period is regarded as “old” Spain. However, “new” Spain is correcting the social/political ills of the Franco era by adopting social and political values that insist upon more respect for social wellness and human rights, which is a trend that accords with my view about the relationship between social and environmental wellness and a cultural ethos of respect. In time, I fully expect Spain’s happiness ranking to reflect its greenness ranking.

Let's add a couple of extra measures—the rankings of national corruption and a wealth index—to round out our portrait of the import of respect with regard to sanity and environmental health. The top ten least corrupt nations according to the 2015 annual Corruption Perceptions Index put together by Transparency International, an organization that acts as a watchdog for political and corporate corruption, are Denmark, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Singapore, Switzerland, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Canada in that order. Again, Switzerland and several of the Scandinavian countries make a strong showing. Again, this is not accidental.

One would think that wealth is a significant component of happiness and environmental wellbeing, but it is not. Many of the world's richest countries rank low on happiness and greenness. According to a recent Forbes study of the wealthiest countries, Qatar, Luxembourg, Singapore, Norway, Brunei Darussalam, United Arab Emirates, United States (US), Hong Kong, Switzerland and Netherlands show in the top ten. Of these ten, Luxembourg ranks 17th in the WHR; the United Arab Emirates ranks 20th; Singapore ranks 24th, Qatar ranks 28th and Hong Kong ranks 72nd. Although the US ranks 7th amongst the world's richest nations, it didn't make the top ten list for either the happiest or greenest nations. (Brunei Darussalam does not rank among the 158 countries listed in the 2015 WHR nor the GGEI.) So, it seems there is some truth to the old adage that money can't buy you happiness . . . or environmental wellness . . . because monetary wealth does not translate into respect.

It is important to note that Switzerland and nearly all of the Scandinavian countries make it into the top twenty richest countries. I submit the argument that their economic success is the result of their fundamental respect for society and the environment, rather than the other way around. Respect is conducive to happiness, environmental health and robust economies. (So, take those who criticize the environmental movement, declaring that it is bad for business, with a healthy dose of skepticism. The facts simply don't support the "nay sayers.")

The inverse appears to be true, too: persons and cultures that generally disrespect Nature, taking for granted its beneficial services and largely unaware of its intricate systems, also tend to demonstrate general patterns of insensitivity and disrespect for benevolent personal, social and cultural norms. Such disrespect gives rise to increased distress, resulting in increased incidences of mental illnesses among individuals as well as other kinds of inter-personal and cultural dysfunctions, such as high rates of crime, corruption and social anomie. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, the ten most corrupt countries are Somalia, North Korea, Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Syria. None of these countries show up in the favorable rankings of happiest or greenest countries, which is no surprise.

Now, let's turn to conventional measures of the beneficial relationship between Nature and sanity, based in psychological studies of the relationship between

exposure to Nature and human development. Dr. John Davis list several studies that support the relationship between sanity and exposure to Nature in his 2004 report, "Psychological Benefits of Nature Experiences: an Outline of Research and Theory". According to this report, there are significant benefits for "cognitive, affective, and moral development" for children who are "impacted significantly and positively by direct contact with nature." By "direct" contact, he means contact with wild nature unmediated by significant human manipulation, in contrast to "indirect" contact (e.g., parks, zoos) or "vicarious contact" which is mediated by technology (e.g., television nature shows or books). (See Kahn & Kellert (2002), Chowla, Sobel, Nabhan & Trimble, and others.)

Other studies cited in Dr. Davis' report include the following observations:

- Kellert & Derr (1998) reviewed programs by Outward Bound, National Outdoor Leadership School, and the Student Conservation Association (N=700+ adolescents), both retrospectively and longitudinally, with surveys, in-depth interviews, observations, and qualitative analysis. There were some differences related to program orientations, but major positive impacts were observed in all three programs. Furthermore, these impacts increased over time following participation. "A large majority" of participants reported the experience as one of the most important in their lives with positive benefits for personality and character development. Specific benefits included self-confidence, self-concept, self-esteem, autonomy, and capacity to cope. There was a clear carryover of effects from wilderness to urban settings. Results also indicate a strong increase in respect and appreciation for nature. Other, more qualitative, impacts included reports of increases in compassion, wisdom, guidance, and inner peace. See, also, reviews from Wilderness Research Center at University of Idaho (Hendee, Russell).
- The positive effects of nature are strongest in middle childhood (ages 6-12; in modern western cultures at least). While some research indicates that adolescents take a "time out" from nature, Kaplan & Kaplan (2002) argue that nature experiences for adolescents are significant and desirable as long as they also include the particular needs of adolescence, i.e., peer support, autonomy, and the opportunity to develop and demonstrate skill and strength. I would add that wilderness experiences offer opportunities to leave one's family, familiar community, and the roles that go with them, to try on new social roles, and to return with new self-images, behavior potential, and ways of relating. This is especially important during adolescence.
- Adults report that childhood nature experiences are important and positive. When asked to identify the most significant environment from their childhoods, 96.5 %

of a broad sample of adults identified an outdoors environment (Sebba, 1991). It stands to reason that adults who have more direct contact with such an environment would experience better mental health.

Clearly, the results of the research and observations support the notion that there is a beneficial relationship between exposure to nature and sound mental health, and the nature of the relationship is characterized by an increase in appreciation and respect of nature, self and others. Again, this is not surprising because respect is fundamental to the health of any system, be it biological, ecological, psychological, political, sociological, economic or otherwise. So, let's consider the role respect plays in fostering the sane psychological system as well as the healthy ecosystem.

Sanity is a bit tricky to define, because there are many qualities in play that characterize the sane person, such as resilience, vitality, genuineness, compatibility (fitness with context), capacity for trust, ability to commit, self-efficacy, self-respect, reasonable honesty, moral integrity, reliability, intuition, good humor, self-confidence, purposefulness, rationality, conscientiousness, emotional stability, sound judgment, coherence (the ability to see the whole rather than just the parts), adventurousness (a willingness to engage the unknown), sociability, vitality, flow (energetic immersion in activity wherein the ego dissolves into pure process), composure, cheerfulness, a healthy interest in sex, insight, empathy, creativity, and the ability to solve problems. Each of these qualities plays a role in stabilizing the self-world structure. For example, lacking a good sense of humor will promote an over-serious personality that is often experienced as off-putting to others and as isolating to oneself. Such isolating trends in personal experience can, and often do, lead to socially defensive and avoidant behaviors that can be painful. Many people living with social pain often turn to alcohol, drugs and sex as amelioratives, which then create other problems. For another example, consider the person who lacks a sense of adventure and is unwilling to take risks. Such persons tend to be governed by fear of the unknown, which can prevent social and vocational advancements in life that leave one feeling unfulfilled and resentful of others "good fortune."

In order to unpack this idea further, let us consider resilience, which is the ability to cope with and recover from stress and adversity. Resilience is absolutely necessary for any individual to function well in the world with its myriad sources of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and financial trials and tribulations. Lack of resilience in a person creates a brittle self-world structure that is too vulnerable and easily overwhelmed. Such a person compensates for his or her vulnerability by developing strategies to protect oneself from the real or imagined threats of the world at large. One might choose to become an overbearing bully or just the opposite, a highly dependent "clinging vine." One might seek control by hiding behind a façade of intellectualism to avoid feeling difficult emotions that threaten vulnerability.

Whatever the compensatory strategy may be, it sets a domino effect in motion that undermines one's ability to trust others and one's life experience as well as the ability to respect oneself and to respect others, which in turn leads to a host of other defenses that promote neurosis or psychosis and prevent genuineness, empathy, good humor, and the other necessary qualities for sanity. The whole personality structure is set askew because of the weakness of one or more traits due to the fact that all the traits are intertwined, so strengthening or weakening any one quality leads to global changes in psychological functioning that promote healthier or unhealthier self-world experience.

To be clear, I'm not saying that a mind or personality structure has to be perfect to be sane. No. The norm of sanity is broad, allowing for a diverse spectrum of more or less sane personality types and behaviors, most of which are flawed in some way that create uniquely *functional* persons. Insanity is a spectrum of personalities and behaviors, as well, but it is distinguished by personality structures and behaviors that are more or less *dysfunctional*.

The list above does not exhaust the possible qualities of sanity, and the essential qualities would change depending upon your perspective. For example, artists might insist that creative sensitivity, diligence and commitment to one's muse are essential traits of sanity, and athletes might argue that vitality, flow, diligence and commitment to one's sport are essential. So, with all the potential qualifiers, is it possible to distill sanity to one seminal qualifier? I believe so.

In the final measure, it seems that sanity has to do with congruence or fitness—the notion that one's behavior is functionally congruent with—or fits—one's activities, social circle and worldview. Such fitness is only possible if one is paying attention to one's life experience as it unfolds with respect to the values and necessities at play in one's activities, social circle and worldview. What governs the functional interaction of all these qualities of psyche is a respectful appreciation of each and the coherence of the whole. Respect is the virtue that cultivates the sensitivity necessary for attending to the balance of the whole. Without it, we become insensitive to the balance, which causes stress and anxiety, which are the primary causes for both mental and physical illnesses.

Similarly, healthy ecological systems of Nature are defined by many different qualities, such as differentiation of niches, resilience, vigor, community structure and hierarchy (inter-species and intra-species cooperation and competition), systemic coherence (compatibility or fitness of individual species within the ecosystem as a whole), symbiosis, species diversity, populations and communities complexity, etc. The strengthening or weakening of any one of these qualities impacts the entire system. For example, a loss of species diversity in a given ecosystem can cause the ecosystem to lose resilience, which opens the way to disease. What governs the functional interaction of all these qualities is a respectful appreciation of each member of a species for the dynamics of the whole system within which it finds itself.

This instinctual and learned respect enables the individual plant or animal to cohere with the whole. Again, what emerges as seminal is the quality of functional congruence or fitness. In other words, non-human organisms evolve in a matrix of relationships of competition, commensalism, mutualism or parasitism that help keep ecosystems and their constituent dynamics and species in check, balanced, and functional. Thereby Nature has a built-in dynamic of respect that keeps the system sensitive to perturbations with the capacity to bounce back—in a word, fit.

As we can see, both Psyche and Nature are characterized by overall patterns of dynamic balance, or homeostasis, comprised of checks and balances, roles/niches, conservation of energy, a creative abundance of species/ideas, competition and mutuality, etc., that attempt to maintain functional viability of persons, communities, societies, cultures, and a world, as well as species, niches, ecosystems, biomes, and the biosphere. The coherence of the respective patterns found in both Psyche and Nature can be generally construed as *respect*, which is to say that every part in either Psyche or Nature is sensibly appreciating every other part, leading to a healthy dynamic balance.

This respectful balance—or fitness—is sanity, and given the similar qualities found in Psyche and Nature, it does not require a great leap of insight to recognize that Psyche arises from Nature, and so the two are intimately related. Indeed, the nature of sanity is found in the pattern of Nature herself. For this reason, it is imperative that our understanding of sanity be rooted in an appreciation of and an immersion in Nature.

The operative virtue is *respect*—deep respect. The kind of respect one demonstrates when approaching the sacred because, in fact, we are approaching the sacred every time we engage ourselves, others and Nature. The closer people and cultures come to making such respect a norm of behavior, the happier and greener they become. The more one is removed from Nature, the more one's soul becomes deficient of primary sources of truth, beauty and goodness, all of which are necessary for basic sanity. So, let us pay respect to all our relations, appreciating each encounter with our selves, with others, and with all living beings as if our happiness depends upon it because, in fact, it does.