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Reflections: A Self-Conversation on humanity as part of a living  
system

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Reflections: A Self-Conversation on humanity as part of a living system

From my perch atop a mountain, I look over my valley marveling at the beauty. Gazing across a clear-cut where I am sitting on fire watch under the shade of the forest canopy, I feel both a part of and separate from this extraordinary world.

The valley floor is a lattice of fields mostly for grazing of livestock. The home of our friend Ed stretches out across the other side of the valley; his 100 acres with what's left of a 7 year old crop of Christmas trees and an air strip clean and well used. His house in the making for 20 years is partly finished and his hangar built out of straw bales is complete and secure. I get a sense of how Ed must feel on his daily ventures into the sky to overlook our world.

Just up the valley from Ed's farm is Deer Creek Park, the location in the North Willamette Valley of the only standing prairie of the original tufted grass that covered the valley floor before "we" got here. This is where a McMinnville postman discovered the little butterfly which was named after him, "Fender's Blue". This little butterfly only feeds upon a rare variety of Lupine, the Kincade Lupine that is also found in this little park. I reflect on how easy it is for "us" to destroy our treasures and so hard to try to repair the damage. Without this little butterfly, the Kincade Lupine would struggle to survive

and without the Kincadee Lupine, the Fender's Blue would perish. A delicate balance almost lost because of us and now saved by us.

When we became separate from and not part of our ecosystem, we began the long and successful, at least so we think, road to the domination of our world. No other species even notices the impact we make on the earth; they simply adapt to the changes we make or die. Only we are aware of what we do and are aware that we are aware. We are conscious, but do we have a conscience? I wonder. How many species do we destroy permanently, in our quest to dominate the earth? And for what?

As for Deer Creek Park, there is a small group of dedicated volunteers working to preserve this little oasis of natural history at the mercy of prison park crews, cultivation, pesticides, and introduced weeds. The volunteers, led by our friend Dave, battle to preserve this park not for themselves, but for their children and others they will never know. When I consider what "we" do without consideration of the impact our actions will have on our ecosystem, I am amazed. The legacy is etched upon this pristine little park. Teasel, Scotch broom, Canadian thistle, and English hawthorn are only a few pest species of plants that we introduced from overseas, then sat back, and watched as they invaded and over ran our native plants. In the old, yet unplanted clear cuts that surround me, Canadian thistle is more common than any of the native plants.

I watch as vultures sail over the valley on the updrafts, oblivious of the total destruction that lay beneath them. Only I

observe the chaos created by the logging operation, the animals do not appear to notice. I look at the logged slope below me in both awe and horror. The amount of work required to make a wage in this industry is extraordinary; man, machine, nature, entwined in a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth. Each now dependent on the other for the health of a forest now lacking nature's own controls. This too is our doing. But did we have a choice? I am not sure.

As a strong advocate for our ecosystem, I have had a hard time coming to grips with the continual harvest of our forests. I see no excuse to cut our old growth forests, the last remnants of ecological systems "somewhat" unaffected by man. Somewhat because even in these systems, man has intervened and stopped the cycle of fire and natural rebirth of the forest. We must work together to preserve this dwindling legacy.

As I stroll through this small remnant of forest, no older than 50 years since the last harvest, I see a beautiful system that has emerged out of the chaos of destruction. The forest canopy, 150 feet above, is created by maples and firs racing to the sun; struggling for the nourishing light that brings life to this world. The forest floor still shows the undeniable signs of the last harvest, tractor ruts, stumps, and unnatural mounds of earth, even after 50 years. But more visible, is the preponderance of life. Sword and bracken ferns cover the forest floor. Trillium and a myriad of other plants add to the diversity of life that abounds with both plants and animals. The forest canopy is alive with birds of many types, evidenced by

the different songs floating down from above. In just 50 years, it is fantastic to see what nature is capable of doing. It reminds me of Mt. St. Helens, once a pristine landscape, utterly destroyed in one of nature's most impressive and destructive events, and now reborn and teeming with life. Not even the scientists imagined this level of the regenerative ability of nature.

The vultures are still circling above in perfect harmony with this space. I wonder what they are looking for, or if they are simply fulfilling the call of nature to soar. I begin to understand why Ed escapes to the sky. What a wonderful way to keep a perspective of our place in our world. In "Out of Africa", the character that Robert Redford plays also takes to the sky and gains an extraordinary vision of the beauty Africa holds.

We were not the first humans to inhabit this land. Like in so many places on earth, maybe all places, these people did not see themselves as placed on Earth to dominate nature. They saw themselves as part of the marvelous organic system we call Earth. They all understood the regenerative cycles in nature. They understood how wind, rain, earth, and fire were all necessary components to create and sustain life and they lived in harmony within and a part of the very system that we are hell bent on controlling and dominating. Colonialism is not dead; we have simply transformed our efforts to the domination of nature rather than people. Yet with the way most organizations and many communities treat people, I may have underestimated our

attraction to domination over others. Colonialism seems to be alive and well in all areas that we choose to dominate.

Our imprint has permanently changed our relationship with nature. And here in the United States, many of our actions are now not only unavoidable, but are viewed as "necessary" for the health of our ecosystem. This is a view I can say that I did not entertain until recently. If we can preserve wilderness areas that provide our children and us with a glimpse of life 1,000 years ago, we may be somewhat justified in treating other portions of our forest as a crop to be harvested every 50 years. Why would I come to this delicate understanding? I am sitting at the edge of chaos, looking at a destroyed forest, a forest in every sense of the word that is gone. Nothing but slash, piles of logs, and machinery. And at the same time I sit at the cusp of a beautiful forest reborn from the very destruction I see below. It is with a sense of reverence that I consider the ability of nature to create order out of chaos.

"We", believing ourselves separate from nature, have stepped in and robbed nature of her only tool for the natural rebirth and sustainability for the forests, fire. Fire used to serve the same purpose that we now serve for the forests using clear cuts, the critical cycle of death and rebirth. Of course our new process is substantially different from that of nature and as usual, is not at all the process that nature would prefer. When we intervene in the natural rhythms of our world, we inevitably create more harm than good.

When fire was a natural partner to our forests, an

extraordinary diversity of forests in all stages of life abounded. Now with "our" influence, with the exclusion of our wilderness areas, there is the potential that all of our forests may end up being in stages of rebirth to harvest and death during only a 50 year time span. This may be the only visible future for our forests unless we are willing to add forests that are in different stages of life to our portfolio of wilderness areas in an attempt to preserve diversity of forests with varied life spans.

The homogenization of our forests into forests that are born and die in a much shorter life span than even we humans live, has a profound impact on the diversity and sustainability of our ecosystem. Those species of plants and animals whose survival requires forests that have life spans counted in blocks of 500 years are doomed to adapt or die. Unfortunately, they do not know. The only ones to know are at the same time, observers, creators, destroyers, and custodians for the very systems that so many species depend upon for survival.

Hawks have been screeching over head, adding their cry to the harmony created by birds, wind, trees, and other living things that inhabit this forest. This harmony is broken only by the occasional addition of human enterprise that is carried on the winds to my lofty perch. If I attempt to overlook our influence, this valley probably looks much as if it did 500 years ago. As one zooms out, the details of our intervention disappear and a sense of awe unfolds.

Who is to say that Ed's 100 acres of Christmas trees, with

a birth to death cycle of a mere 7 years, is any better than a forest with a life span of 50 years. Of course, I am not advocating for the latter. But with the intense amount of pesticides and fertilizers needed to bring a Christmas tree crop to harvest, all of which contributes extensively to ecological damage through out the world, a forest with only a fertilizer application every 10 to 20 years seems like it may be the better of the two. I certainly do not hear an outcry for the elimination of Christmas tree farming. Who is asking the question "How do we create sustainability and harmony between humans and our ecosystem?" I am for one.

There is utility in what we do, but how much of what we do is designed for mechanistic and materialistic consumption of our resources? When do we ask the question "How much is enough?" Where is the reverence for our world? I wonder!

Even though I see patches of trees and clear cuts creating a mosaic in front of me, given a chance, I believe that nature would reclaim its own and our legacy would disappear into oblivion. Maybe this is the foundation of man's obsession with the control of nature. Just maybe, "we" are trying to prove that we have an everlasting place in the history and evolution of our universe. Just maybe, if we can conquer and control nature, she will not reclaim "us" as she has with all that has preceded "us".

As I zoom out, the details of our intervention on this earth disappear and a sense of awe unfolds. I can clearly see that I am a part of the world, not separate from it. I am of the

past, present, and the future and am honored to have been included in this experience of life.

Do I have hope for our children, grandchildren and theirs to come? Or have we gone so far that what was and can be is all but destroyed?

As we now live, we shall not live perpetually. We are not sustainable in our present form. I can only hope future generations will reunite with our world and create a future for humans and the world as one living system. I want to be a part of the solution helping make this happen. It is for this reason that I have transformed my career to public service. Through conversation (people learning together through talking together), I hope to help communities and societies throughout the world to self-organize into ecocentric and sustainable frameworks. I believe we can make a difference. Can one voice change the world? I am counting on it.

#### Epilogue

As if I received a response from God, lightning struck this logging site at about 3:15 PM on Friday September 6, 2002, just 53 days after I wrote this reflection. 117 acres were burned; two trucks, a tower, and a loader were burned. Log piles were burned, standing timber was burned, and if it had not been for a heavy rain 2 days before, this fire might very well have engulfed this whole region as others have done all over Oregon this year.

Two bolts of lightning struck in the middle of hundreds of trees that had been felled and waiting for loggers to limb and

collect for transport. Our friend Ed was up on his hangar working and saw the lightning strikes. He was the first to call in the report. A fire watchman on the site called in next; this could have been me. The response was fast. Ed said the trees went up like kindling. That evening across the valley at Ed's, we sat with neighbors at the end of his runway watching the helicopter dump load after load of water on the hot spots. Earlier, a bomber equipped with fire retardant made three passes over the fire line dumping retardant helping contain the fire to the small acreage burned. We watched in amazement as the bomber circled over our home time and time again. Later that evening while sitting at Ed's, we had the opportunity to watch the bomber drop another load of fire retardant to block the advance of the fire towards the valley floor.

The probability of a lightning strike in our valley on the very site where I sat on fire watch must be incredibly low. This has been amazing to me. But even more amazing was the extraordinary self-organization that I watched as neighbors, firemen, Forestry personnel, the National Guard, and volunteers of all types converged on the site and effectively worked together to prevent a catastrophe in our valley. My neighbor behind me is a logger and had cut a fire trail through to the fire and had his equipment up on the site almost before anyone knew what was happening. Others responded and worked together to prepare for a battle against nature's force. Out of what looked like total chaos emerged a focused effort to work together for a common cause. We are the custodians of the future. I can only

hope that we can band together with the same passion to help create a sustainable world for our children.