

An Undefined Courtship

By: Ernest Morris III¹

“The question we must deal with is not whether the domestic and wild are separate or can be separated; it is how, in the human economy, their indissoluble and necessary connection can be properly maintained.”

Wendell Berry

Some have heard of Gabi Mann², the eight-year-old Seattle native who developed a relationship with her neighborhood Corvids, a family of birds containing those seen daily in most yards. It was actually the American Crow whose intelligence mesmerized Gabi and inspired others to take a closer look at this bird’s relationship to humans. Over two years, Gabi apparently won the hearts of a whole flock of crows, who in return for food offerings brought her tokens of appreciation. This seemingly rare story is a wonderful example of the sacred relationship between humans and nature.

The beauty of nature and how it relates to the human body are realities sometimes downplayed in our fast-paced, modern world. The fact that most medicines used throughout the world to heal the human body originate from plants that can in many cases be found along city sidewalks, along country roads, within forests large and small, is lost on most people as they race from place to place. In fact, most consumer products--not just medicines--have become so store-based that we forget about how herbal life, a provision that birds play no small part in perpetuating, is a source of earth’s natural medicine. As unconscious as many of us have become of earth’s role in human wellness, Ernest Caldwell’s famous character Lov was wrong when he lamented the loss of human care for the earth, stating that it would, in turn, forget about us humans.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of species found in the plant kingdom--in the forms of barks, roots, and leaves and stems--are still plentiful both in natural and human-altered landscapes. If we add to this list fungi, then we can easily see how environments around us, placed in the right

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² <https://www.audubon.org/news/seattle-girl-befriends-neighborhood-crows-making-bird-lovers-everywhere-jealous>

hands, constitute a virtual pharmacopeia. The fruit of the Sweetgum tree for example, dark-reddish spikey spheres with eyes, contains seeds that, when prepared properly, can aid the disappearance of symptoms of a cold or flu. Such knowledge, well-known and practiced by our ancestors, is today hidden in plain view. And, because so, we have come to fear the plant world and, in turn, to under-appreciate the land that provides its nourishment.

However, despite our failure often to take notice of earth's provision, Mother Nature has her own way of taking our breath away. We can all give an account of how her fruitful giving has enhanced our lives. In America, we recall our native ancestors who utilized the land, rather than possessing it, to sustain their communities. Psychotherapist and author Thomas Moore writes that many types of entities can provide the nurturing of a mother. Most certainly the land can serve this basic human need. Mother Nature seems to understand her role as provider, and we are the receivers though it is a gift that comes with responsibilities.

When I consider this ongoing role of the earth, I am taken back to just a few years ago, one summer, when an unwieldy vine started to grow alongside an old shed in the backyard of my grandfather's land in Fayette County, Tennessee. Granddad discovered the vine while hunting for what he took to be weeds, invasives that had taken over an eight-foot wooden fence, clinging happily to it. This "mysterious" vine, its branches thin, feeble, and crooked, Granddad soon realized was actually a peach after he spotted the fuzzy fruit, nearly ripe, growing on the vine. He plucked a few to show my grandmother. "It's a white peach," he informed her and offered her a piece, sliced with his pocket knife. She marveled at its rich taste, not having seen or eaten a white peach before. After she finished sampling it, I too took a bite, and my jaws tightened immediately from the fruit's sweetness. My eyes watered and shed a small tear. It was hard for me to believe then but is somewhat easier for me to believe now that without direct human intervention, intentional cultivation of land on which the peach tree might find a suitable place to grow, the earth, undoubtedly with the help of our bird friends, could give birth to such a beautiful and nourishing thing.

In the years in which my grandfather had owned his small four acres, this land that became home to a naturally-planted white peach had not seen much cultivation, save for a patch of turnip greens or a small bed prepared by Grandma for an occasional gift of a rose. To the contrary, much land in southwest Tennessee and northwest Mississippi has been cultivated, on a growing scale, for nearly 200 years. This high level of land use requires a period of rest, a fact not lost on the stewards of Strawberry Plains Audubon Center (SPAC). Connected to the upper Coldwater River, the land is enriched and made into a garden refuge for both winged and footed

visitors. Vigorous, yet conscious steps have been taken by caretakers of SPAC to return land, once given to thousands of acres of cotton, to an auspicious state.

As I reflect on my early experiences on my grandparents' land and recent experiences at Strawberry, I'm encouraged to think about how we can grow more stewards of the earth, more people who delight in nature's bounty not just because it is food for the body but because of the fact that earth's ability to produce in this way indicates its health and, in turn, our own likely health. Wendell Berry provides an answer. In his article, "For the Love of the Land, a Farmer and Conservationist Is Tired of Being on Two Losing Sides," Berry attempts to unite the conservationist with the farmer.³ Both, he believes, need to concern themselves with long-term effects of massive land-using economies, with corporate interests that have little awareness of relationships between the "domestic" and the "wild" or their own *natural* relationship to place.

Take for example much of the development that occurs on the edges of small towns, usually near interstates or state highways. The bulldozing of small forested areas to make way for supercenters and parking lots is arguably bad for the future of historic diversity of local business, but the appearance of new shopping centers, always owned by outside interests, conglomerates in most cases, anticipates the arrival of a mono-culture both in terms of foods available, food practices, and lifestyles. If conservationists buy into this type of "human economy," Berry writes, they are buying also into food production far away from home, the effects of such large-scale production on rivers and aquifers, loss of biological and genetic diversity not to mention pollution, toxicity, and over-medication.⁴ This is to say nothing of effects of food transport on the larger environment.

This latter concern raises an issue not just of the type of economy conservationists and farmers alike might want to envision but, more specifically, of scale. Berry tweaks my interest with an idea, for instance, of a "forest economy." What does this system look like? Who are its stewards and its benefactors? It seems likely that those people who belong to the land around remaining forests would most directly benefit from their potential flourishing, and nature's bounty, as often wild as cultivated, would be intimately linked to local culture. I came recently by a case in point.

A well-known herbalist visiting a small town in southwest Tennessee not long ago happened upon a seasoned man selling Poke Salad greens from American Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*⁵. The herbalist was very familiar with the plant, which still grows plentifully

³ Wendell, Berry, Sierra, May/June, 2002.

⁴ Berry, 52.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phytolacca_americana

throughout the country and which can be used for any number of human ailments including hunger, as it is still eaten by older residents who know the somewhat complicated process of preparing it. The herbalist himself regularly uses the plant in his practice, but the day he came across the man selling it, he was more interested in securing the sign the man had made to advertise the greens than in the plant itself. Normally a collector of herbs, the practitioner wanted on that day to collect and preserve the hand-made sign as evidence both of a long practice, using the wild as food, and of a local, wild economy. The story is instructive when it comes to imagining a related forest economy. At the moment, these seemingly radical alternatives parallel a system of development, finance, institutions, jobs, and dietary habits that take people away from local food sources, yet there is reason to believe that local economies might see a resurgence. Even as it would appear that a generation or two have settled into off-site production of food, several movements, including Farm-to-Table and Slow Food, indicate the existence and growth of niche economies that are not limited to food but to dissemination of information. In the very moment in which masses of people seem satisfied with alienation from the origin or source of products they consume, others seem to have a new thirst to know not just the journey that a chicken or a tomato has taken on its way to the dinner table, but the kinds of tomatoes that no longer are available to us, as well as the cultures of the near past that are disappearing. People are coalescing around such questions. The land has courted humans for thousands of years as have the animals around us; perhaps the human, land, and animal relationship is in this sense undefiled.