

WHITEWATER RIVER LETTER

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Big Blue-stem

A publication of The Paul Gruchow Foundation

FROM THE DIRECTOR

This first edition of *Whitewater River Letter* is modeled after Paul Gruchow’s own *Canon River Letter*, a small but influential mailer distributed in the mid 1990’s when Paul lived in Northfield, Minnesota. The original *Letter* contained essays, poems, commentary and short book reviews.



The decision to revive *Letter* in this form is part of a larger project that aims to preserve Paul Gruchow’s legacy, to make his published and unpublished writing available to a wider audience, and, through the foundation bearing his name, to foster awareness of the relationship between nature, creativity, community, and mental health.

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ON TRAUMA and HEALING

This issue of *Whitewater River Letter* explores the relationship between trauma, nature and healing. The lead essay, “The Sanity Of Wilderness,” is a previously unpublished lecture by Paul Gruchow that contains a personal acknowledgement of Paul’s struggle with mental illness, discusses what he has learned from that struggle, and identifies ten sources of healing he associates with wildness. Chuck Kernler’s reflective essay, “The Paul Gruchow

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THE PAUL GRUCHOW FOUNDATION WORKS TO FOSTER AWARENESS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE, CREATIVITY, COMMUNITY, AND MENTAL HEALTH.

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The Paul Gruchow Foundation is a tax exempt, non-profit organization established in 2007. A more detailed description of the objectives and activities of the foundation can be found on our web site: www.paulgruchow.org, or by calling The Paul Gruchow Foundation Center at (507) 263-0081. All contributions made to the Paul Gruchow Foundation are tax deductible.

We welcome your questions, comments, essays, poems, book reviews, and letters. Our mailing address is: The Paul Gruchow Foundation, 33246 Highway 56 Blvd., Dennison, MN 55018.

Louis Martinelli
Executive Director



The medicine wheel, or sacred hoop, symbolizes life's path, and the balance of all things. It also represents the four directions of the compass: east, south, west, and north. Two other directions - above and below - complete the all-encompassing circle of life. Wellness flows from maintaining balance and keeping the circle intact. Paul Gruchow sought meaning in all things; he looked in all directions. Similarly, the Paul Gruchow Foundation seeks to explore the relationship between four themes important to wellness and a good life. All the meaning and symbolism of the sacred hoop - its hope and promise - was the inspiration behind the logo of the Paul Gruchow Foundation.



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Memorial Prairie,” tells the remarkable story of how Chuck and his wife, Diane, transformed a highway department sand pit into a remnant of prairie. In “Fire and Song” Ted Gostomski probes the ambiguity of fire in the natural world. As a source of both trauma and healing, fire can teach us “that recovery after trauma is possible and may even be greater than we expected.” John Huber’s “Reflections On Whitewater River Floods” grows out of his professional work as a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Fish Hatchery Director, and from his personal experience of the devastating flood of August, 2007, in southeastern Minnesota.

John’s reflections remind me of sociologist Kai Erickson’s account of the destruction of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, in 1974 when a coal company dam broke, filling the hollow below with water, mud and debris. In a new edition of Erickson’s book, *Everything In Its Path*, he makes comparisons between the small, rural Buffalo Creek community and the New Orleans neighborhoods destroyed by Hurricane Katrina – a comparison that seems relevant to some of the small towns damaged in Minnesota in 2007.

Mary Doucette, a geriatric nurse practitioner and our Foundation Board Chairperson, told me a moving story about a child she met on one of her many volunteering trips to help with flood clean up in Rushford, Minnesota – a town of 2,350 people in the Root River Valley. Referred to by victims and observers as “Little Katrina,” much of the town remained underwater for days, and many of its residents lived in emergency shelters, motels, and FEMA trailers until they could rebuild or relocate. One of the displaced residents – an elementary student named Grace – gave her crayons to a boy who had forgotten his. While collective trauma is inevitably divisive, Grace’s generosity in the face of loss gives us hope.

Finally, I decided to include a poem in this issue of *Whitewater River Letter*: “Sleeping In The Wilderness” by Loren Gustafson. It is, I think, an eloquent, moving letter in which the poet imagines Paul Gruchow sleeping alone in the wilderness.

Louis Martinelli

The Sanity of Wilderness

By Paul Gruchow

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I have learned that I have an illness of the brain. For the past six or seven years I have lived in its shadow, which is the shadow of death. Many people with my illness attempt suicide and about a fifth of them eventually succeed. I may have been predisposed to mental illness by genetic factors; I hope to be helped by medications that modulate the levels of neurotransmitters in my brain.

But mental illness is not merely chemical or physiological. It is also a response to environmental conditions: the circumstances in which one was born and raised, individual quirks of character and temperament, the set of expectations one carries for oneself and the culture in which one lives, and also, as Minnesota author and wilderness advocate Sigurd Olson might have put it, the clarity and imagination with which one remains aware of the unfinished business of our racial past. By the word “racial” Olson meant to include the whole of humanity. He often talked and wrote of us as a species under development, recently arrived upon the earth, and so much more recently departed from our ways as hunters and gatherers that we could not possibly have shaken the deep memory of those times. We need, he argued, to return to wilderness, or at least to have it still at hand, because it remains our true home and the fount of the human spirit. In one of his most succinct statements, Olson put it this way:

The preservation of wilderness is a humanitarian effort based on the knowledge that man has lived in a natural environment for some two million years and that his physiological and psychic needs come from it. No matter how urbanized or divorced from nature man may be, within him is a powerful need for the background from which he evolved. So closely has man been identified with wilderness and so deep are his roots in the ancient rhythms, silences, and mysteries of the unknown that he cannot forget, and he must return often to recapture his sense of oneness with his environment. Without this opportunity to

experience wilderness in his own way and wherever he may be in large wilderness regions or in minute sanctuaries he will know frustration, boredom, and unhappiness.

I believe this to be true, but it is important to acknowledge that many, perhaps even a majority, of our citizens do not agree, and that there are many places in the world, even in this country, where the raves of the increasingly rich upon the increasingly poor make it impossible to practice these ideals.

One of the privileges of my illness is that I have been obliged to walk for a time, in Duluth, Minnesota, among the hundreds of human beings there for whom no work is available that pays a living wage, no bed except a mattress of cardboard and a blanket of newspapers under some highway bridge, no food except that dispensed by soup kitchens or salvaged from dumpsters, no cigarettes, which are the balm of the poor, except the salvageable butts discarded by those who can afford to buy them. I have learned that the public will pay thousands of dollars per month per dreary shared room with a bathroom down the hall to entrepreneurs to house the mentally ill, and thousands more to medical professionals to provide often unwanted treatments and medicines, and thousands more to phalanxes of social workers to superintend their lives (my own life is managed these days by a committee of six), but only \$71 a month per person (in Minnesota, which is more generous than some states) to the ill themselves to provide for all their needs and wants except basic food and shelter. These are not people who are going to rediscover their spiritual roots on uplifting canoe voyages into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. True wilderness these days is largely a class privilege.

I want to offer one other fact for consideration: I have been mentally ill for most of my adult life, but never once in the thousands of days I have spent in wild places have I manifested any of its symptoms. This was true even before effective medicines for the treatment of illness became available. "When are you going to learn, Paul," an impatient therapist friend of mine once said, "that a hike is a lot cheaper than a psychiatric consultation?" The same might even be true for people with purely physiological illnesses. I will never forget the face of a man I met in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming. He had what appeared to be an advanced case of cerebral palsy, he was on crutches, struggling his way up a steep slope at least seven miles from the nearest trailhead, he was alone,

he was carrying a full backpack, he was bathed in sweat, and he might have melted glaciers with the intensity of his triumphant grin.

I believe that wildness has healing powers, assuming that one approaches it in the old way, under one's own power and with the understanding that you yourself are one element of the wildness at hand. Among these healing powers I count:

First: Silence

I was at a concert of the Minnesota Orchestra one night. A big romantic symphony was on the bill, I forget now which one. The orchestra had arrived at the penultimate crashing chord of the piece. For exactly one beat it rested, and exactly on that beat, a woman in the second tier balcony sneezed loudly. The audience tittered. The gracious conductor turned on the podium and gestured with his baton toward the balcony. The sneezer gallantly rose and took a bow. We all laughed and applauded. Then the conductor turned back to the orchestra, took one more beat of silence, and brought the symphony to its triumphant close. That was the night when it came home to me that music depends as much upon silence as it does upon sound.

Sigurd Olson called the wild country of the north "the singing wilderness." Wilderness sings because it contains so much silence, in sharp contrast to the noisiness of our daily lives: the muzak, the whine of tires on pavement, the sirens, the ringing telephones, the babble of the television set. Music, whether it is of the composed or of the wild kind, is a universal language. It speaks to what novelist Frederick Manfred used to call *The Old Lizard*, the core of our brains that we share with primitive creatures, that part of our brains that responds to the fundamental emotions: joy, sorrow, fear, anger, surprise, disgust, shame, and interest. In this sense, the singing wilderness is the beginning of wisdom, because it is the first music and because what we have not felt, we have not known.

Second: Solitude

By solitude, I do not mean aloneness. In the last analysis, it is quite impossible to be alone – one always has the company of oneself, of nature, and, if you so believe, of God or the gods. I mean remoteness

from the customary habitations of human society. As silence is the necessary ground of music, so solitude is a precondition for society. It offers a unique perspective for sorting what is background noise in society from what is real and meaningful.

What, for example, does one miss by being in solitude? Traffic jams? Morning commutes? Office intrigues? The evening news? Grading papers? Dental appointments? Money? Deadlines? If one misses anything at all, it is likely to be family, friends, favorite co-workers, good work: those human ties, that is, that bind us into communities. To go home from wilderness reminded that it is connections, not things, that sustain us in everyday life, is to return with new vitality for whatever lies ahead.

Third: Labor

We have devoted ourselves in modern society to saving labor. It is an article of faith with us that anything that saves particularly physical labor, whatever its other consequences, will be to the common good. We even extend this principle to our encounters with the wild. The speedboat substitutes for the canoe, the snowmobile for a pair of snowshoes, an ATV for a pair of legs and a sturdy walking stick. To what end? It is clear, certainly, that all of these devices save labor, but, because they are costly, they save no work.

I have always loved Thoreau's parable on this point. "My neighbor," he says in *Walden*, "chides me because I walk to the next town rather than taking the train. But consider: my neighbor has to work for a whole day in order to earn the price of a train ticket, and only then can he go. I, in the meantime, have walked there and back and have had not only the pleasure of the walk, but I have saved a whole day in the process. Which of us is better off?"

The modern substitute for labor is exercise: workouts at the gym, to which we have driven; jogging; cycling, for all of which we seem to need expensive outfits made from high-tech fabrics and cut to ever-changing fashions. The difference between labor and exercise is that labor is social while exercise is self-centered. Exercise is labor minus its community value.

One might argue that a trip under self-power into wilderness is

just another form of exercise, but I believe there is an important distinction. That is that we live in a culture which does not value what is not used. Such wilderness trips do no great harm to the wilderness even as they make use of it, thus laying claim to the value of wilderness until such time as our culture develops a more sophisticated sense of what is truly profitable. In this sense, to use wilderness is to save it.

Fourth: Hunger

“There is no sauce in the world like hunger,” Cervantes said. Hunger begotten of labor rather than from deprivation, reminds us that all of the deep physical pleasures in life arise out of toil or tribulation, abstinence or sacrifice. There is no such thing as a happy person who has not mourned, or a satisfied person who has not known want, or a peaceful person who has not known turmoil.

Fifth: Sleep

The poet John Berryman used to say that the most beautiful sentence in the Bible is, “Come unto me, all ye who labor, and I will give you rest.” There seems to me no rest sweeter than that which comes at the end of a long day of wilderness travel. I tried to describe that sensation in a book called *Travels in Canoe Country*:

When you have descended into dreams, your body functions according to its preconscious will, as it has operated through all the millennia of human kind, when you have abandoned yourself fearlessly, automatically, to whatever the night and the forest might bring: then you come as near to wildness, to a life in nature, as any human can.

“The civil wilderness of sleep,” Robert Herrick called it. You cannot know, when you enter it, whether you will ever return. It was like that for my father. One evening he slept, and after that the mornings, for him, ceased to rise, although many times since, high in the sky and in watery depths, I am quite sure that I have caught glimpses of him. He seems to be awake still, more awake, perhaps, than ever. “There is more day to dawn,” Thoreau said. “The sun is but a morning star.”

Somewhere a squirrel flies, and somewhere the moon glows, and somewhere a fisher hunts, and you sleep. Somewhere a night breeze stirs. Somewhere an owl rides upon it, and you sleep. Your face has fallen, and somewhere the stars have risen. Your face has fallen into innocence. For this little while, at least, you can do no harm. You look it; you look young and harmless, as if you might never again be streetwise and carelessly knowing. "Praise ignorance," Wendell Berry's Mad Farmer advises, "for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed."

Somewhere the vegetable mold is becoming humus. Somewhere your own heart is beating. Somewhere the sun is shining. Somewhere your mind is dreaming, and your body is inside your dream, and you sleep. Somewhere mists are rising and birds are stirring, and still you sleep.

Everywhere everything is changing. When the day dawns, it will be a new day. When the day dawns, there will be a new you. Your hair is lengthening, your brain is slaking cells, your body is being cleansed and refurbished. You sleep and you cease to be and you start becoming. You are only being. You are only becoming. You look becoming.

You awaken. It is light. Birds chirp in the forest undergrowth and in its canopy. You crawl from your tent and stand in the sharp, clean-smelling morning air. Fog shrouds the lake. The island across the way seems to be floating in it. You light your stove and boil a pot of coffee. A chipmunk warily advances to investigate the intrusion. You find a rock to lean against, drinking in the stillness with the coffee. You feel, suddenly, invisible.

You have vanished into the forest, taken a proper place in it. You stand there belonging, anointed with the heavenly, the homely, grace of the wild.

Sixth: Humility

By humility I do not mean self-abasement, nor do I mean humanity-bashing, a sport toward which environmentalists sometimes seem

to tend, but rather acceptance of the fact that there are forces greater than ourselves at work in the world, one of which is life itself, a mystery we are not much closer to divining than we were two million years ago. In wilderness, life teems all around us, in forms both too large and too small to be comprehended by the human eye, and none of it has arrived by our own agency. To know that is to have a heavy burden of responsibility lifted from our shoulders. To the extent that we know that we are not gods, Wendell Berry once reminded us, we are also saved from becoming fiends. And he wrote this, as fine an expression as I know of the humility that comes from being in nature:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the presence of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Seventh: Meditation

In my own life, I am just beginning to appreciate the difference between being busy and being productive. For a long time, I thought that if I could just keep moving, I would eventually get somewhere. Then came a day when I could not move at all, when I was literally paralyzed by all the fears and agonies I had been able to ignore while I was busy simply moving in one place, as it would seem from later perspective. I have slowly been learning, since that day, how to do nothing at all, how to find an inner center of peace and to listen to it, how to accept the mere fact of being as something worthy in itself. The state of mind in which this happens is called meditation.

In everyday life, meditation needs to be practiced. In wilderness, at least in my experience, it just happens. I am thinking of all the mornings and evenings I have spent in wild places, perhaps with a cup of coffee or tea, perched upon a boulder or resting against a tree, watching

the sun rise or set, and feeling perfectly at peace with myself and the world. If this happens in the presence of water, the great medium of life, the feeling is all the more powerful.

I have several times tried this experiment with my students: I have told them to meet me on the next class day at 4:30 in the morning. When they have asked why I should require such an outrageous thing, I have said that I cannot be more explicit, but that I believe I am going to show them something that will change their lives. Most of them do show up, groggy-eyed and grumpy. While it is still dark, I take them to a lake or marsh and distribute them along its shore so that they are out of contact with each other. "Your assignment for this morning," I say, "is simply to attend the dawn."

When the sun has risen, I go to collect them, and almost always I find my students in a state of rapture, and what has happened during that assignment comes up over and over again in class discussions and in written work for the rest of the semester. Their lives have indeed been changed. They have discovered the unique power of nature to bring us, by way of meditation, to peace.

Eighth: Self-reliance

I do not have in mind here what used to be called rugged individualism, the notion that if you are stubborn enough and resourceful enough, you can successfully tough out life all alone, and that there is even some special virtue in approaching life in this way. We all know that successful life resides in communities.

Instead, I have in mind the resilience that comes with accepting things as they are and learning to adapt your own actions accordingly. One benefit of being in wilderness is that one is relieved there of the delusion that there is any other choice. When the black flies are biting, you either don the protection you have wisely brought against them, or you resign yourself to being bitten. You know that by no stretch of the imagination can you make them disappear. When the winds are strong, you do not persist in trying to cross a lake straight ahead; you learn, instead, to tack. When the fish are not biting, you eat noodles for supper instead and enjoy the sunset with the wish that your luck will be better tomorrow.

Such resignation to reality has the paradoxical effect of giving us a sense of competence. If only we could carry this same resignation over into our daily lives!

Ninth: Radical acceptance

There is a kind of resignation beyond even that of responding with competence to life as it presents itself. That is to acknowledge that everything in life is a gift, is fleeting, is forever changing. The ancient philosopher Epictetus put it this way:

Nothing can be truly taken from us. There is nothing to lose. Inner peace begins when we stop saying of things, "I have lost it," and instead say, "It has been returned to where it came from." Have your children died? They are returned to where they came from. Has your mate died? Your mate is returned to where he or she came from. Have your possessions and property been taken from you? They too have been returned to where they came from.

The important thing is to take great care with what you have while the world lets you have it, just as a traveler takes care of a room at an inn.

This is radical acceptance, and there is no place in the world where its reasonableness is more evident than in a wilderness, where not one thing can rightfully be claimed as your own.

Tenth: Mastery

By mastery I do not mean domination, but rather having come to a sense of one's place in the order of things, of feeling content to be whoever you are wherever you happen to be in the present moment. Tom Hennen has written beautifully of this sense in his poem, "What the Plants Say":

Tree, give up your secret. How can you be so satisfied? Why don't you need to change location, look for a better job, find prettier scenery, or even want to get away from people?

Grass, you don't care where you turn up. You appear running wild in the oat field, out of a crack in a city street. You are

the first word in the vocabulary of the earth. How is it that you are able to grow so near the lake without falling in? How can you be so alert for the early frost, bend in the slightest breeze, and yet be so hard to break that you are still there, quiet, green, among the ruins of others?

Weed, it is you with your bad reputation that I love the most. Teach me not to care what anyone has to say about me. Help me to be in the world for no purpose at all except for the joy of sunlight and rain. Keep me close to the edge where every wild thing begins.

I count my own mental illness as a curse, of course, but also as a vital blessing, because it has, in an important sense, kept me close to the edge where every wild thing begins. There are two delusions no person with a brain disease can possibly entertain. One is that one knows the truth of what one perceives. Every day a mentally ill person is freshly reminded that between the self and the world there is the mind, which does not merely taste and smell, touch and hear, see; it also interprets, and every interpretation is in some respect false. The other delusion is that tomorrow, or even the next hour or minute, is knowable, predictable. Wildness, like the brain, is perpetually astonishing. This is the ultimate value of wildness; that in keeping us unsettlingly surprised, it keeps us sane.

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The Paul Gruchow Memorial Prairie

By Chuck Kernler

My wife, Diane, and I moved to Winona County from Minneapolis in 1974. Our house is located on a shelf of sand, one mile east of Elba, Minnesota. It was protected by elevation from the 1974 flood, the first of several “hundred-year floods” during the 1970s.

To the east of our house is an acre of land, which, prior to our moving in, was a Winona County Highway Department sand pit. It was visually isolated from the highway by a dense stand of jack pine that was planted as part of a landscaping plan when the highway was straightened in the 1970s. Though only thinly populated with brome and other pasture grasses, it was a wonderful place to get away from it all.

A few native species grew here. We recognized round-headed bush clover, button blazing star, spiderwort, butterfly weed and others. There weren't many native grasses before straight-line winds toppled the jack pines in 1998. The post-storm cleanup included selling five cords of pulpwood that was harvested with the help of friends and neighbors. We were irritated, to say the least, when the trucker hauling the wood away got stuck in the middle of the sand pit. Eventually, though, he worked his way out and he apologized, and we got over it. I don't remember when we realized what it blessing it was.

Although the entire prairie is about an acre, the portion we re-stored was much smaller. In early 1999, we prepared the seed bed with an ATV and an old bed spring. We purchased a seed mix from Prairie Moon Nursery and harvested some seed from road-side ditches before they were mowed in the fall. We seeded the plot, packed the “soil” with the ATV (it was refreshing for us to employ the ATV in this way), and, because the site was so dry, we watered it with garden sprinklers. We also had some timely rains that first year, so the seed germinated well.

When you visit the Paul Gruchow Memorial Prairie, you will notice the plants' texture any time of the year. The grasses are beautiful in their fall glory. Through winter snow, the clumps testify to their sturdiness. In spring, after a burn, the charred remnants of clump grass are

shocking, but growth quickly follows and multicolored forbs blossom all summer.

I never had the privilege of meeting Paul Gruchow in person, but I like to think that we meet on the prairie. In a subtle way, our enjoyment of the prairie mimics the joy Paul reveals in his first book, *Journal of a Prairie Year*. Influenced by Paul's work, we will see to it that our memorial prairie continues to grow.



Fire and Song

By Ted Gostomski

When I think about trauma as it relates to the natural world, one of the first things that come to mind is fire. We have all seen fire on the evening news as it ravages western forests and sometimes overtakes towns built up in those fire-prone areas. There are many examples of fire's negative effects. According to data compiled by the National Inter-agency Fire Center (NIFC), an average of 3.9 million acres burned in the U.S. each year between 1960 and 2006. For people in the west and in parts of the south, fire is a fact of life, but we see a few fires of our own here in the Midwest and in my line of work, I see even more fires that are set for a reason. They are prescribed fires, controlled burns, and in some places, they are one of the best tools for rejuvenating the land, fighting back the invasion of unwanted non-native plants, and encouraging the return of plants and animals that belong there.

Fire in nature is a natural disturbance, a way to clean up and start over, or to maintain a particular set of environmental conditions. On prairies and savannas (grasslands with a few scattered trees), fire keeps trees small and it replaces nutrients to the soil that have been soaked up by grasses and flowers. Those nutrients, once they are stored in the stalks and leaves of plants, become unavailable to the soil until a fire burns the physical container (the plant) to ash, thereby releasing the nutrients back to the soil and starting the growth process over again. This is important because if the nutrients do not continue to circulate from soil to plants and back again, it becomes more difficult for each year's new plants to grow and thrive. Dead plants lying on the ground certainly decompose and slowly release the nutrients they hold, but an overabundance of dead plant material can overwhelm the system of insects, microbes, and bacteria that break down that material, and a growing mat of dead vegetation results. When that happens, the native plants such as blue-stem grasses and butterfly milkweed that need a nutrient-rich environment in which to grow begin to struggle, creating an opportunity for more flexible plants (those able to thrive in marginal conditions) to get a root-hold and dominate the landscape. In some cases, this just means a transition from prairie to woodland, but in the worse-case, it means non-native plants such as spotted knapweed take over and the

prairie changes to a weed garden.

Prescribed fire is a great tool, but it is also a very unsettling one to people whose only experience or knowledge of fire comes from the TV news version of catastrophic wildfires that consume thousands of acres of forests and hundreds of homes and force people to flee for their own safety. For years we have learned that fires need to be put out, but biologists and land managers are showing that prescribed fire can be used safely and effectively. Slowly, very slowly, we are teaching the benefits of – the *need* for – fire on the land. We are not so brazen to think we can control nature, but we have found that by studying the conditions that cause and feed fire, or alternately starve and extinguish it, we can *direct* nature, let it do what it must to accomplish certain goals we have for a piece of land, but keep it “focused” where it is needed and not let it run wild. Besides cycling nutrients and killing off non-native plants, prescribed fires also reduce the fuel load in an area. This is the dead, dry logs and grasses on the ground that can feed an uncontrollable blaze and allow it to go wherever there is something to burn. By reducing the fuel load, we can keep wildfires to a minimum because there is nothing for them to burn. Achieving this ideal has brought about a favorite slogan among land managers: “More prescribed fire means less wildfire.” This is a benefit to everyone.

It is true that the land looks scarred and dead after a fire, but like many scars, these heal and disappear with time. Even the dramatic Yellowstone fires gave birth to a new landscape. In some places, new plants began sprouting up through the ashes the following spring, which in turn attracted wildlife that depend on succulent green browse to return to areas where they had not been in many years.

One of the most amazing experiences I have had is to be mopping up after a prescribed burn and to hear the songs of birds and the whistles of frogs start back up from the areas we just blackened to ash. They had been singing before we started the fire, they went silent as the flames moved past, and as soon as the flames were out and the cool air of an April evening began to float over the place, the music returned as if nothing had happened. This is a powerful antidote to the fear that fire often evokes, and it is a poignant reminder that recovery after trauma is possible and may even be greater than we expected.



Reflections on Whitewater River Floods

by John Huber

They come at night when you're sleeping.

You can't escape them.

You never know when they will come again, you just know they will.

Whenever it rains hard, you remember like it was yesterday...

The flood that swallowed southeastern Minnesota on August 19, 2007, was not gone in the morning. Survivors lived in the highlands as well as the lowlands. There is no place to hide from 17 inches of rain. Mudslides occurred where deep-rooted native prairie grasses grew. Wells and basements on the highest ridges were flooded and contaminated.

A priest walking the streets of Rushford and Elba said the destruction reminded him of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. A lifelong resident of one of the hardest hit towns said, "I lived through a 100-year flood in 1974 and again in 1978, and now, I'm told, a 500-year flood in 2007. Do I look like I'm 745 years old?" Perhaps not, although many of us feel sadder and older after months of cleaning up mud and debris.

When I drove through Elba after the water had receded and saw "For Sale" signs on the windows of empty houses, it reminded me of a slide show I have presented about the history of Whitewater Valley. In the 1940s, after repeated flooding, people boarded up their homes and moved west. Then, as now, the streets were covered with appliances and furniture. Where will the traumatized, displaced people go this time? I have recently learned that, like victims of the dustbowl era in the Black Kettle Grasslands, the government is willing to buy some of them out. For those who can't take it anymore, financially or emotionally, it is a chance to recover some of their losses and start over, on higher ground. Some of the survivors want to rebuild where they are, in the flood plain, in what I think of as a kind of Adam and Eve syndrome: This is Eden and we'll never leave it.

The worst of it, for me, were the gawkers – curiosity seekers that came from elsewhere to see local people’s misery. Ten days after the flood, this was the first trip out of our homes, and we were going to the grocery store for much needed supplies. We waited 20 minutes in the two-block-long town while gawkers created a traffic jam, stopping their automobiles in the middle of street to take pictures of people carrying their personal belongings out to the street to join piles of debris already there.

Several days before we could drive out of the valley (huge mudslides made the roads impassable), we walked up the road and found groundwater pouring out of every crack in the sieve-like karst geology, mini-waterfalls emerging from steep slopes, and aquamarine pools sparkling in the dry washes. Rocks were showing their ancient colors, scrubbed clean by the turbulent water. Water everywhere, I thought, while not all that far away there was drought.



Some Facts About Flash Floods:

1. The weatherman doesn’t predict their crest two weeks ahead of time because he can’t predict them at all.
2. You can fall asleep in your car near a quiet brook after a day of trout fishing and wake up floating upside down in a raging river.
3. Flash floods are created by the intensity and duration of rainfall.
4. Adults don’t teach their children what to do in flash floods because they don’t know what to do themselves.
5. One-hundred-year floods don’t occur every hundred years; sometimes they occur two days apart.
6. Sandbars along creek bottoms are not good places to camp. Ever.
7. Don’t go for a ride during a flood.
8. Stream trout aren’t bothered by floods as much as human beings. The fish find a safe place to wait it out.
9. Water overcomes rocks and trees and houses.



Some people blame the streams for the flood, and demand retribution by bulldozer and dam. One local town passed a resolution that proclaimed “people are more important than fish” – blaming the flood damage on the network of trout streams maintained by the DNR. Some blame the federal government, which can be an easy out: Even King George isn’t responsible for this one. People seem to need to blame someone or something, but are reluctant to examine their own ecological values and choices. As Doug Peacock writes about grizzly bears; “If there is a grizzly mauling, then some bear somewhere, must die.” Who is to blame for Katrina, tsunamis, and Mt. St. Helens? In the end, maybe no one; maybe, in spite of all our attempts, we are not in control. Maybe nature is bigger than us.



Because I was caught up in the middle of the flood, I have been interviewed at least twenty times by reporters wanting to know what it was like. Was I scared? Was it worse than the flood of 1978? The question I am asked most often is “what’s needed to return the Whitewater River and it’s tributaries to quality trout fishing conditions?” I think the answer is very simple: water quality. Floods and the resulting changes in stream appearance don’t make or break the stream. If the watershed was in good shape before the flood then the streams will recover quickly. Although rocks and pools are moved around by floods, the fish will be back. In a sense, the flood was the stream’s way of merely throwing back at us the silt we have smothered them in. As a result of that purging, there are places where they now resemble mountain streams. How long will it take before the silt smothers them again? That is the real question here. With the changes and trends in cropping practices in the southeast, the future doesn’t look good. We have passed the peak of water quality and are now seeing what happens when a region changes from dairy farming and the associated rotation of oats, alfalfa, pasture and corn, to corn/soybean row cropping. The flood has little to do with the changes we are seeing, but it provides a good excuse for those that don’t want to acknowledge the slower, less dramatic destruction that is happening on the landscape every day.



SLEEPING IN THE WILDERNESS

For Paul Gruchow

The sound of rain on the asphalt roof
This morning, the last day of January,
Reminds me of when you said
You loved to hear the rain on your tent
Sleeping in the wilderness

And of how a man in the audience
Said you were wrong to love it
Because “that rain will still be there
In the morning”

I no longer remember your answer.

I remember that Sigurd Olson
Wrote in *The Singing Wilderness*
About the peace of lying down
In a strong tent, ax nearby,
Should anything snap in the storm
During the night.

I don't know why your tent broke
Or how to feel about the sound of the rain
Above me now.
I only know that you are
Past caring,
Sleeping in the wilderness, alone.

Loren Gustafson



BOOK NOTES: What I've Been Reading

By Louis Martinelli

I've just re-read two of the most important books written about trauma: Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* and Kai Erickson's *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. While Herman, a psychiatrist, explores the impact of such profoundly wounding experiences as war, political terror, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche, sociologist Erickson focuses on flood damage suffered by a rural West Virginia community when a coal company dam broke in 1974. Both of these classic works take on new importance in light of the "war on terror" (an oxymoron, I think, because war IS terror) and the increasingly destructive effects of climate change.

On the subject of healing individual and communal trauma, I picked up an out-of-print book with an interesting title: *The Absurd Healer: Perspectives of a Community Psychiatrist* by Matthew P. Dumot, MD. Although written in 1968, the author's reflections on mental illness and communal health are relevant in the age of sociobiology and neuro-engineering.

Living In the Shadows of the Ghosts of Grief (Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.) – I found this to be one of the better guides available for working through loss. Wolfelt's critique of the prevailing tendency in psychiatry and psychotherapy to treat the symptoms of grief as indicators of illness is worth the price of the book.

Lorraine Daston's essay about the glass flower collection at Harvard's Museum of Natural History is the most interesting chapter in *Things That Talk: Object Lessons From Art and Science*, edited by Ms. Daston. The glass flowers are a fascinating story, a collection of 847 life-size blown glass models of over 750 species and varieties of plants created by Leopold Blaschka and his son Rudolph. The project took fifty years, was intended to provide scientific models to be used for botanical instruction, and is visited annually by over one-hundred-thousand visitors. Daston's claim that the glass flowers represent "the triumph of art over nature" seems bogus to me: The flowers are, after all, copies of photographs. The argument that would make them art is flawed, because art does more than copy. As every natural disaster and the trauma

of even the most peaceful death remind us, we are part of nature and cannot “triumph” over her.

I believe Galway Kinnell’s recent collection of poems, *Strong Is Your Hold*, to be his best work in some time, especially “When the Towers Fell,” a long poem about the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11, and “It All Comes Back,” a shattering poem about childhood humiliation.

The best poetry in translation I’ve found in years is Coleman Bark’s versions of Rumi, his most recent collection of these entitled *Rumi: Bridge to the Soul*. Bark’s introduction to this book reads like a fine travel essay, beginning with a meditation on the Khajou Bridge in Isphahan, and ending with an account of a visit to Iran with Minnesota Poet Laureate, Robert Bly, in May of 2006.

On the subject of natural history/climate change, I can’t imagine a broader, more compelling treatment than Michael Novacek’s *Terra: Our 100-Million-Year Old Ecosystem and the Threats That Now Put It at Risk*. The title is description enough, the book hard reading but well worth it.

I had meant for some time to read the young Indian writer and activist, Arundhati Roy’s first novel, *The God of Small Things*. Like much extravagantly praised contemporary fiction, I found Roy’s novel to be disappointing. A well-traveled friend told me Indian fiction can be difficult for readers not culturally attuned to its rhythms and subtleties. This stunning achievement won the Booker Prize, England’s most prestigious award for fiction. John Updike declared it a “Tiger Woodsian debut.” I promise to read it again someday.

Middle Class, Union Made by economist Richard Levins might be the most readable book we have for understanding the decline of the middle class in America. In ten concise chapters, Levins, Professor Emeritus of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota, analyzes the impact globalization and other non-sustainable policies have had on working people. The last chapter lists some practical solutions we might consider, but as Levins warns in his conclusion, “Time is not on our side.”

Samantha Power’s acclaimed *A Problem from Hell: America*

and the Age of Genocide has been matched for journalistic excellence by her recent biography of Sergio Vieira de Melo, the United Nations diplomat who died in the first Iraqi suicide bombing in 2002. de Melo was a leading candidate for the Secretary General position at the UN, his accomplishments as a peace keeper unequalled. The book is called *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Viera de Melo and the Fight to Save the World*, a title that sounds a bit melodramatic until you read Power's thorough and convincing account of de Melo's leadership and untimely death.

I've never been a Germaine Greer fan, but she won me over with *Shakespeare's Wife*, a scholarly, well-documented study of Anne Shakespeare's disappearance from history (HIS story) at the hands of what Greer calls "bardolators." She argues convincingly that the marginalization (at best) and vilification (at worst) of the wives of Western literature's male icons has been the norm and is a shameful injustice.

On the subjects of emotional and sexual exploitation of clients by professionals – yet another of the world's under-reported problems from hell – I highly recommend the TELL (Therapy Exploitation Link Line) website: www.therapyabuse.org. I found it to be the best resource available for helping victims of this kind of insidious, widespread abuse – a subject Paul Gruchow became concerned about during the last several years of his life. Jan Wohlberg, one of the founders of TELL, is an author who has written about organizational cultures that foster abuse, and she has researched what works best in helping victims. Her essays on the website are informative, eloquent guides for anyone wishing to navigate this difficult terrain.

Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace by Kimberly K. Smith is one of the few studies of Berry's work that go beyond the rhetoric of "sustainable agriculture" and "environmental advocacy" to place him within a historical tradition and a democratic context. Smith's concern is with the roots of Berry's moral vision, which she explores in a scholarly but not tedious way.

I had the pleasure of reading again, as I do every year, Albert Schweitzer's *Reverence for Life*, an elaboration of the golden rule by someone who lived it. I am struck by how it resonates with and compli-

ments the conservationist Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic, set forth in *A Sand County Almanac*, and how Schweitzer and Leopold's insistence that we do no harm echoes the Hippocratic Oath.

Milkweed Editions, Paul Gruchow's Minneapolis-based publisher, continues to make available important works by new and established authors. Their 2008 "New Books" catalogue includes fiction writer David Rhodes (*Rock Island Line* and *Driftless*), an anthology of new fiction by Minnesota writers edited by Daniel Slager (*Fiction On a Stick*), Matthew Eck's ground-breaking novel of postmodern warfare (*The Farther Shore*), Bill Holm's searching meditation on his Icelandic roots (*The Windows of Brimnes*), and a wonderful collection of new and selected poems from John Caddy (*With Mouths Open Wide*). The complete catalogue and other information about Milkweed can be found on their website, www.milkweed.org.





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