

Stepping into our Second Nature

Michael Battenberg
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Reading

A compilation of passages woven together from Barbara Kingsolver's novel Flight Behaviour. In the Novel, a population of Monarch Butterflies amass in the Tennessee woods instead of their normal overwintering grounds.

The three characters in our excerpts are Dellarobia, the main character, her husband Cub, and Dr. Ovid Byron, an entomologist and specialist in Monarch butterflies.

“Do you know what they’re saying about the butterflies being here, Dr Byron and them?” asks Dellarobia. “They say it means something’s really gone wrong”

“Wrong with what?” Cub asked.

“The whole Earth, if you want to know. You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff they said, Cub. Its like the End of Days. They need some time to figure out what it all means. Don’t you think that’s kind of important?”

“Well, if the butterflies fly off somewhere, the doctor and them can go park their camper behind someone else’s barn”

“What if there’s no place else for them to fly away to? She asked.

“There’s always someplace else to go,” Cub said. “ Worries like that are not for people like us. We have enough of our own”

He wasn’t wrong.

“But what if there isn’t? she persisted quietly.

The cloudburst was winding down. Ovid Byron stood up from his log and smacked the tarp with the flat of his hand.

Dellarobia wondered out loud about what would happen when the winter was over and the spring dispersal began. “Where will the Monarchs go from here?”

After a pause, Ovid replied “Into a whole new Earth. Different from the one that always supported them. In the manner to which we have all grown accustomed. This is not a good thing Dellarobia, he added. “A Whole new earth.

My adventure began the way all 21st century adventures begin... with a selfie. This was, after all, a departure from my normal weekend routine and I felt the urge to leave my mark on Facebook for all posterity, and bask in the love of the thousands of “likes” that would surely come my way.

You see, on that fateful day I wasn't simply crawling in the dirt looking for bugs. I was a newly christened *citizen scientist*, one of hundreds... well, dozens... of naturalists participating in the second ever Scanlon Creek Bioblitz.

For those who don't know, or have managed to avoid being cornered by me while I go off on a rant, a Bioblitz is an intensive inventory of life in a specified location. It brings together experts, amateurs and curious members of the general public to explore the natural world. Blitzes can be as big as the flagship Ontario Bioblitz, which involves over 300 naturalists and just as many members of the public, or as small as the local Scanlon Creek Blitz. I had just finished leading a nature tour of insects at the Ontario Bioblitz a couple of weeks earlier, but this was my first time actually working in the field.

I was bestowed with a butterfly net, a pair of fancy binoculars and an official insect checklist (I graciously declined the accompanying spider checklist!). At the appointed time I ventured forth as an entomological apostle to do the work of counting, and hopefully saving my own portion of the earth's biodiversity. And who knows, maybe I would stumble upon something rare or even new to science. I even imagined having a new bumblebee named after me: *Bombus battenbergii*. Within minutes I made my first field observation: Chrysops: a deerfly!, and another deerfly... and... another. I was living the dream, someone please pinch me.

After several of hours dodging deer flies, turning over leaves and getting up close and personal with a variety of wildflowers and their attendant pollinators, I allowed myself a well deserved rest. A bench beside the trail provided a respite from the sun and a sweeping view of the creek.

Scanlon Creek is not exactly a magnificent watercourse. A thin black trickling thread, it weaves its way through a low, broad flood plane lined with wildflowers and shrubs. The Creek had been dammed in the 1970's in attempt to create a swimming pond, but that experiment proved to be ill conceived and the dam was decommissioned in favour of a restoration project.

The concrete spillway was all that remained of the dam. Dry and bleaching in the sun, it was a stark, monolithic reminder of the folly of the 60's and 70's with its creed that we can and must control nature whenever possible.

Now we were attempting to reclaim a previous ecosystem, and the land bore the scars: felled trees, stakes and warning signs. Human fingerprints were all over this small patch of land, one set witness to a misguided attempt to conform nature to our immediate ends, and another set a little wiser, and more in tune with the dynamics of the pre-existing ecosystem.

And here I was, sitting in the middle of this hybrid space, a convergence of human design and the evolutionary dynamics of erosion, sedimentation and succession. Evidence of human planning, both abandoned and fruitfully matured surrounded me, yet there was an undeniable wildness present here as well. I began to understand that in our contemporary world at least, the natural and the cultural were inseparable.

I recalled a phrase from my artist's statement: “Michael doesn't really know where nature ends and art begins, and often confuses the two”. More than a little tongue in cheek – Nature (like art) are words we use almost every day as though they were fixed, definable terms when in reality they are not. What we mean when we talk of “Nature” varies from person to person, from time to time and from context to context.

Needless to say I think about “Nature” a lot. Nature always wrapped in scare quotes, since its meaning for me is always flexible and fluid, very much like Heraclitus’ river. We can never step into the same Nature twice. Nature is not some place *out there*, some place to retreat to on a long weekend (and I thank you for that!). Its not always big and beautiful, exotic or exciting or remote.

In her recent **TED** talk, journalist and writer Emma Marris reminds us that nature is everywhere, not just in wild and exotic locales like the Amazon, Yosemite or Banff National Park.

She reminds us in fact that big parks like Banff are highly managed. “Wildlife”, she says, “is kept to a certain population size and structure. Fires are suppressed. Fires are started. Non-native species are removed. Native species are reintroduced... Banff National Park is doing all of the things I just listed: suppressing fire, having fire, radio-collaring wolves, reintroducing bison. It takes a lot of work to make these place look untouched”.

She contrasts this with a story of an abandoned elevated railway in Philadelphia. With no human planning – no deliberate human intervention – a floating meadow has emerged from airborne seeds. This, she says, is “completely autonomous, self-willed nature.”

Now, as it happens I can’t really afford to head out to the big, remote “natural” places. But really, for an experience of nature, I actually don’t have to. A clump of weeds bursting out of a broken concrete slab reveals a wild nature that, if seen up close enough, rivals anything, anywhere. It seems that how we approach the natural world can effect our ultimate experience. Our values can be either a bridge or a wall.

Emma ends her talk with a photo of a young, inner-city boy gleefully holding what appears to be a garden variety weed. She comments:

“I don’t want to be the one to tell him that the flower he’s holding is a non-native invasive weed that he should throw away as trash. I think I would much rather learn from this boy that no matter where this plant comes from, it is beautiful, and it deserves to be touched and appreciated.”

So, it appears nature is everywhere. In native forests. In reclaimed and restored conservation areas. In a field of invasive weeds. And now we’ve come to that part of my sermon where I produce a can of worms, open it and watch the sparks fly. Here’s where Michael the citizen scientist meets Michael the theorist in the ring of valour. And I’m not too sure which side I’m cheering for.

On the one hand I hear people saying “We are in the Anthropocene. We live in a world where humans are and have always been part of Nature, and where technology is real and vital so lets get over *old nature* and embrace the *new nature*, the second nature”. On the other hand are the scientists – the biologists, entomologists and ecologists – decrying this kind of theorizing as irresponsible and dangerous. “This way of thinking is a licence to pollute and justify the consequences.”

Both sides seem to have a valid concern. So its science to the left of me, theory to the right... and here I am, stuck in the pulpit with you.

Suddenly all this talk of Nature, of invasive species and ecosystems and even evolution itself is no longer simply a theoretical or academic exercise. The reality is that in an interdependent world we can’t *just leave* Nature alone. Since both my actions and my inactions make an impact on other beings, neutrality is not an option Yet I don’t believe we will ever have enough evidence to make a once-for-all right decision. I certainly know I won’t.

What can I do? What *should* I do?

The natural world is being degraded at an ever increasing pace, with a whole host of competing and even conflicting interests vying for my attention, time and money. In the face of these pressing concerns, what shall Michael the Unitarian Universalist do, guided by a series of principles that embrace both knowledge and faith, in spite of having far too little knowledge and far too little faith?

Just like the Monarchs in our reading from *Flight Behaviour*, a coming storm is going to push us into a whole new earth that we have yet to become accustomed to, into a whole new world that will require our committed action. Like it or not, we will be stepping into our second nature.

I recently read an essay by the French theorist Bruno Latour that offers a useful and even concrete perspective on this issue (which is quite unusual for a trendy french intellectual!):

We have taken the whole of Creation on our shoulders and have become coextensive with the Earth. From now on, we should take up explicitly and seriously what we have been doing all along at an ever-increasing scale, namely, intervening, acting, wanting, caring...all of Nature needs our constant care, our undivided attention, our costly instruments, our hundreds of thousands of scientists, our huge institutions, our careful funding.

And he ends with the wonderfully upside-down retelling of the biblical adage: *What good is it for a man to gain his soul yet forfeit the whole world?"*

Perhaps this is the face of our second nature, the face that has been there all along, trailing us like a shadow or embedded deep inside our dreams.

Perhaps our second nature is our precisely our imagination frozen on ancient cave walls, a towering Cathedral defying gravity to give our small voices a vast resonating presence, or a telescope orbiting the earth, offering up visions of the universe in its infancy.

The second nature is as big as Yosemite and as small as a grain of pollen. It is neither ugly nor beautiful, neither human nor un-human. It is all these and more.

Our second nature is the thoughts we think and the brain doing the thinking; the dreamer and the dream – it has never been any other way. This is what it means to live in an interdependent web of living, thinking, dreaming beings.

As Aldo Leopold reflected, we abuse [nature when] we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see [nature] as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

We betray our second nature when we act as though it is wholly outside of us. Or wholly inside us. We carry our second nature on our shoulders like a sleeping prophet carries a vision across the threshold of dreaming to waking, to deliver a timely message: *What good is it for a species to gain a soul, but forfeit the whole World?*

Joanna Macy reminds us in this morning's meditation that what's remarkable is that we as a species are beginning to wake up, as from a millennial-long sleep, to a whole new relationship with our world, with ourselves and with others.

Yesterday's dreams of emancipation from the relentless cruelties of Nature have become today's nightmares. Perhaps today's nightmares, bearing all the unexpected consequences of our remarkable achievements and technologies, will fuel the dreams of tomorrow. Ultimately only time will tell. But we must not abandon these nightmares any more than we would abandon our most precious dreams.

We must give them all our undivided attention, our costly instruments, our hundreds of thousands of scientists, our huge institutions, our careful funding. For these are as much a part of our nature as the flowers and the whales and the birds... as internal combustion engines and the solar panels... as monarchs and as the deer flies.

A small paragraph from the Next Nature website sums it up nicely:

We'll never be able to completely understand or analyse nature. We must remain humble in the presence of nature. We are just one species on a small blue dot in a vast cosmic theatre. Nature is bigger than us. It will always continue to surprise, amaze and challenge us. It will never stop, and that's a wonderful thing.

References

Emma Marris: Nature is Everywhere: [click here](#), or go to TED.com and search for Emma Marris

Bruno Latour: Love your Monsters: [click here](#), or go to Nextnature.net and search for Bruno Latour