

CARY CLIFFORD



# The Moral Equivalent Of Wildness

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I drifted in my kayak, listening for small sloshes and hushed voices behind me: the sounds of my college students launching their boats in the dark. The night was intensely quiet and dark, like a campsite after the fire goes cold, but the moon was preparing to rise over the mountains in the east, and the lake showed a slick of silver.

I began to see the boats on the lake, scattered shadows floating: two kayaks, a canoe, a raft, a dory. One after another they turned east, stirring silver rings in dark water, until each boat pointed to the cleft in the mountains where the moon would emerge. In time, the top of the moon bulged between the black peaks, swelling upward. Then the whole creamy white orb lifted away from the mountains and floated free. When I looked behind me, the lake was dotted with uplifted, moonlit faces.

They were still for a very long time, the young people in their little drifting boats. Finally I heard oars splash, and the dory moved slowly up the bright pathway toward the moon and disappeared into the mountains' shadow. Then they rowed back again into the moonlight. They rested a moment in the glow of the moon; then back they went into shadow. At first I didn't understand what they were doing. Eventually it dawned on me: Each time they went into the darkness, the moon appeared for them to drop back behind the mountains. And when they returned to the light, the moon rose — setting and rising, setting and rising, this great enlightenment, over and over again.

As the moon sailed higher in the sky and the night grew colder, the boats came in one by one, oars thumping damply, voices whispering good night. Allen would spend the night in a canoe, floating on that skim of moonlight. Jenna would spread a sleeping bag in the meadow. Walking back to my tent, I passed Alicia wrapped in a blanket, ankle-deep in shallow water, looking at the stars. *My God, that water must be cold*, I thought. By morning there would be frost.

It was a long time before the dory came to shore. I lay in my tent and listened to voices murmuring on the lake. "So

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what *is* nature?" one voice asked. "And *where* is it?" the other replied. I smiled.

This was Philosophy 438, Philosophy of Nature. Every year in September, before the semester begins at Oregon State University, I bring this class to the mountains for a week. The students come from all majors: marine biology, political science, geography, forestry, a very few from philosophy. We camp on a little lake in a forest of subalpine fir and white pine, just under the broken talus slopes of a jagged mountain.

The morning after our excursion on the lake, we all sat in sunlight that made us squint, reading Henry David Thoreau. In the meadow where we had convened, frost glittered on each seed head and blade of grass, and mist rose in ribbons from the lake.

A person "needs wildness the way a garden needs its load of muck," Thoreau wrote, and none of us disagreed, there in the meadow with dragonflies clattering past and a great cloud of mayflies rising into the sunlight for one ecstatic day of flight. We tried to imagine what Thoreau's metaphor meant exactly. What is muck? How and when is it best applied to a garden? If plants need muck in heaps at their roots, where they live and grow, what is the significance of this for those of us who live in cities, far from wildness?

Thoreau went on: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." But, the students noticed, he didn't waste much time defining *wildness*. He talked instead about what the muck of wildness nourishes in people: energy, strength, courage, independence, alertness, a way of seeing that penetrates ordinary expectations, joyous gratitude that goes beyond mere gratefulness. If the natural world is to be preserved, he implied, it will be because of how wildness transforms us.

My students thought they knew pretty much what Thoreau meant, because for five days they had been gorging on wildness, swallowing it in great gulps, as if they were starved. Each of them had been transformed that week into the sort of person who canoes on a wilderness lake late at night, in the silence, in the presence of the moon. They knew that expansive feeling inside. They knew that gratitude. They knew that connection to the moonlit night, the joy that can't be distinguished from love.

So here is what scared me: The next day, the students would come down from the mountain to the first day of classes on a state-university campus going through fraternity and sorority rush. The cars they'd left in empty parking lots would now be shoulder to shoulder with other vehicles, and the bookstore clerks would be harried and cross. Voice mails would spill invitations, and parties would thump long into the night. And when they called home to say they were safely out of the woods — yes, it was awesome, yes, yes — what would they be able to tell their parents about the experience, as the cellphone signal went in and out and somebody's car alarm beeped and the line for registration pushed out the door?

The question I now asked my students was: Could we bring the values of wild places with us when we drove back down the mountain? Could we hold on to them in our neighborhoods? This was not an idle question. What if it's true that we need

wildness the way a garden needs muck, that the preservation of the natural world depends on wildness? Most people don't, *can't* live in the wild anymore. What, then, will nourish and preserve us?

William James noted that war, for all its hideous effects, sometimes brings out characteristics that we value: it can make people brave and selfless and gather them together to serve a common purpose. He searched for something that would bring out these characteristics without the necessity of bloodshed: the "moral equivalent of war," he called it. Wildness, too, changes us in ways we value. We return from the wild "restored," by which we mean filled with new stores that will nourish us, new sources of strength and peace, or maybe with new stories of who we are in relation to each other and to the moon. What we need in the cities is the "moral equivalent" of wildness. But what would that be?

When the discussion ended, the students wandered off in small groups to try to answer my question. Carrying notebooks and steaming cups of tea, they hiked down the trail past green moss heaped in a black-bottomed spring. I watched them talk among themselves, their heads bent together. Between their leaning bodies, light glittered on the lake.

No sooner had the students left than I started to wonder whether I'd given them the right question to ponder. I'd been presupposing that wildness is something we find in the mountains and not in the valley, something we might transport from wilderness to town. But maybe I was wrong. Isn't there night in the city? Doesn't the moon rise over the sororities as surely as it does over the howling hills? Doesn't mist lift from the broad lawns and catch on the eaves of the library, and doesn't that damp air smell of the river and the sea? And when the students are sleeping in various combinations in pizza-box-strewn apartments, isn't the moon still there, in the dark outside the window?

Maybe wildness isn't something we need to bring down from the mountain. It's true that legally designated "wilderness areas" are distant from our daily lives. Cartographers can draw lines around this wilderness. But there are no real boundaries to wildness. In the warm afternoon, carbon dioxide from the cities creeps up the valleys and lifts into the clouds. In the cool night, the air drifts down again, the smell of pines lingering between the Chevron and the 7-Eleven, whispering through the valves of our hearts. We are wildness: soil, water, oxygen, sunlight. Wildness is all there is.

Maybe I should have asked not how we can *bring* wildness into our lives, but how we can *remember to notice* the wildness in every sweating pore, every stewed carrot, every solid step; in the morning air noisy with rain; in the reeling stars. Or maybe this is the question: How can we live always as we do in the wilderness, with that same respect and care for what is beautiful and beyond us?

*(end of excerpt)*