

Divergent Biography: Reflections on Ecological Relationship and Development

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Author Note

This paper contains reflections on a prompt quoted from our online course platform:

Your ecobiography is an ecology-based writing that reflects upon life events and experiences as influenced by a connection with elements of the natural world. This relationship may be within a wilderness, rural, or even urban setting and is the chronicle of your development and upbringing that includes descriptions of the natural world, place, and formative memories of the intersection of life events and nature.

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The swamp lands behind Langley Air Force Base family housing are present in my very earliest memories of spending time in natural spaces. Lightning bugs under the huge willow tree between red brick buildings beckoned us away from sticky and glistening trails left behind the snails' slow tours around the sun-baked earthen building materials. They hinted at the mystery lurking between walls of trees, or just below the ankle-deep sludge that quickly fell away to swimmable depths that might swallow an entire cherished pet dog whole. Virginia, some said, could be dangerous like that.

I didn't know any of this at a glance, the way it is told here; years of exploration, seeking, playing, and learning allowed my four year old understanding to expand just enough to hold onto this magical place as the family packed up a trusty old station wagon to move west. By that time I was five, and I could ride a bike without training wheels, and I too had become an older sibling. My memories of Muffin puking acrid smelling crayon parts all over the back end of our vehicle, and a recent brush with the terror of losing my family's canine companion to the brackish depths I dared not wade into, were so fresh as to evoke visceral reactions in a cacophony of displeasure at the notion of leaving our loving yellow lab behind (on purpose!). I was utterly inconsolable after dropping her off at a strange location before we turned toward Colorado. It seemed like I had only just ensured her safe return from the swamp! And what was my baby sister even crying about?! *She* didn't convince the family that our beloved pet's name was Muffin. *They* never went on adventures together....

We settled at the foot of *Tava*, or Sun, as named by the *Tabeguache*, the People of Sun Mountain, a band of Ute who say they were created there (Wroth, 2000). None of us knew these

details at the time, nor did anyone in our family question the name of Pike's Peak while appreciating its coveted view from our house. We didn't know the Arapaho called it *Heey-otoyoo*', meaning Long Mountain (Arapaho, 2012), or that people had been racing automobiles to the top since 1916. Our family knew it as a 12 mile hike from the west side of town to the summit, backpacking destinations just below treeline, a picturesque backdrop to a wedding feast, and dad even ran along with the annual foot race to the top a few times.

Exposure to undeveloped country came with some regularity during those years. A family membership in a mountain retreat provided lessons in trout fishing and cross-country skiing, depending on the season. Time to sit among sub-alpine trees while listening for birds and watching for deer was plentiful. Closer to home, cycling also allowed for exploration of grasslands surrounding our new unincorporated subdivision, and time to gaze at grazing pronghorn, sword-leafed yucca, or thirsty cottonwood trees along the paved routes we dared to ride in times before dedicated bike lanes.

Along with a license to drive came license to explore more of Colorado's high country. High school friends would rendezvous at the base of a favorite waterfall hike to enjoy star-gazing from above the twinkling skyline, or set out with a small bag full of water and snacks on any number of dusty day hikes. We especially favored hikes which afforded a view of the city, the space to look down on the paths we so often traveled. We each went in search of meaning and perspective; some joining our science teachers in Outdoor Club hikes and overnights. I took it so far as to write a winning essay and accept a fully paid Outward Bound scholarship to attend alpine leadership mountaineering training, foregoing any use of plumbing for 28 consecutive days before my senior year. In the Gore Range I practiced tending to the needs of two groups of

complete strangers met on day one. We engaged in lessons on technical gear placement, wilderness medicine, camp organization, meal planning, map reading, and then reorganized into smaller patrols responsible for meeting their guides at the end of each day via back country orienteering and compass navigation.

The transcendence of forming and watching the entire progress from a snow ball into an evaporating wet spot on a sunny rock during my first fasting solo encampment revealed my own inner strength and resolve to dive deeper. I saw myself reflected in the slowly melting sub-alpine ice. I found that I could trust in my patience, my integrity, my focus, and my direction. I could trust in unconditional embrace of my embodied oddities, I knew myself to be held without judgment in a natural world surrounding and permeating so much artifice, distraction, and exclusion. I knew without question that witnessing one single scene as representing multiple disparate truths would carry me through difficulties as yet unimagined.

These studious years, extending through my undergraduate program, solidified my faith, though not in ways my family of origin knew about or approved. I had moved beyond mere fantasy and imagination, beyond simple literality of interpretation. I allowed for acceptance of unexamined truths, and found that conventional ways were not suitable for the calling I heard from beyond reason and logic. I had taken individual responsibility for the values and beliefs I was exploring. I recognized unspoken juxtapositions and reveled in the various intersections and perspectives that opened before me, in sometimes bewildering and entirely unsettling ways. I was, even by my own estimation at the time, progressing through an enduring quest for spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002). I still vividly recall the nearly hidden anguish on my mother's face during brunch as I nonchalantly revealed that I would no longer adhere to our Lutheran

upbringing, instead favoring exploration into the heathen ways of our forebears. I sought out ways to honor their struggle against ethnocide, their nearly erased wisdom, to sing the songs of my ancestral home place.

Most of the next twenty years held much the same pursuit of knowledge, lacking peer or mentorship support, and a feeling of ill-fit within my surroundings. Any time I was not in some space widely considered to be wilderness, I soaked in pools of distress and rejection. People found ease in declaring me a lone wolf, though it was not an identity that I ever felt described the real me, it wasn't natural. Thus, solo expeditions became self-care; I repeatedly set out on week long adventures without receiving any acceptance of invitations to share these spaces. I toured with a backpack, pulling a trailer behind a bike, and by sea kayak, and very little of it was done in human community. The costs for my access to natural space continued to rise, and I kept finding myself without anyone to share expenses in financial, participation, or planning matters.

Now, I've spent the better part of a decade focusing on optimizing my own access to more primitive ways of being. I've obtained a wide variety of necessary equipment for safely pursuing outdoor adventures, and I've realized digging deeper into home place as the most sustainable path forward from my social location. I've learned enough, and lived enough, to know better than to accept an ill-fit simply to allow for another's comfort or ease. Selecting native plant species for a completely redefined and rebuilt concept of urban home and garden space, weathering years of birth, growth, death, and regeneration cycles, has put me within range of a scalable balance of wild, natural, invented, and architected ways of embodying human experience. I have within reach a set of practices that support drop-in community visitation, solitary isolation, subsistence farming, and experiential learning options for all present. Once

I've secured access to a place allowing me to re-enact these lessons over the long term, I'll have a realistic opportunity to authentically contribute to the "wellbeing of the whole—the whole person, the whole human family, the whole planet, and the whole web of life" (Vaughan, 2002).

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