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Environmental Writing

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10/22/2019

The Connection and The Call

The snow crunches under my boots as I stop to breathe in some of the purest air in the world. My eyes are filled with a view that looks like it belongs in a *National Geographic* magazine. Soaring, jagged peaks that look as if giant wolf clawed them out of the earth rise against the azure blue sky; the snow accentuating their cliffs and crags. A movement catches my mesmerized stare and I glance up to see a Golden Eagle gliding and rising on thermal currents in the wind. *Wild.*

I begin to walk again and catch up with the rest of my family. My family is a group of eleven students from all across the country. We flew to the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness to do a Semester in the Wild. The *Wild*. That is why we came out here is it not? To experience and live in the wilderness? To hike for days and not see a single soul? To reconnect with nature?

We each came out here for a different reason but I believe there is a common desire within all of us. That we might feel the call. Whether it is an unspoken whisper through the pines, a mournful howl of times long forgotten, the flaking of dried blood painted upon cave walls, the echo of bone against bone from clashing Bighorn Sheep rams, or the soft lick from a Mule Deer. We have each been spoken to in a different way but they are all the same call. The call of the *wild*.

In our everyday lives, we live in the Anthropocene epic. A time that geologically started when humans began to have an impact on the earth. Humans have always centered on connection. Because connection is so important to us, it is the lifeblood of our rapidly advancing technology. We are able to talk to people on the other side of the world face to face over the device of your choice. Doctors are now able to save people through state of the art surgical means. We are able to place people on life support to keep our connection. You have probably heard the phrase “the world has never been so connected”. Ironically, that could not be further from the truth. We have never been so disconnected. With ourselves and with the living world around us.

In the front country, families will go camping for the weekend. However, when they sit down at the campfire, the only conversation that will be heard is the crackling of flames. They are not looking at each other but at their phones. They are connected though. Connected to Snapchat where they are snapping with their friends about the fish they caught that day, connected to Instagram to inform everyone on a new image of them standing on a fallen log, connected to Facebook to update their status about how you love getting outside. Connected in the most disconnected way.

However, deep within each of us, there is a calling. Actually, more like a pleading. The *wild* still echoes within, beseeching us to listen and come back.

My fellow students and I felt this calling which is why we are here now. Ed Krumpe, our Wilderness & Protected Areas professor, told us that we are home. The *wild* is our home. We would be walking by the salt-lick and he would stop us and ask us in his Pennsylvania drawl, “Do you smell anything in the air?” One of us pipes up and says, “Sagebrush!” His weathered face softens to a smile and he replies, “Then you know you are home. You can smell it in the air.

You can feel it in the mountains. Why do you think people love wilderness? Because it is our home.”

We are being reconnected to our home. Pete Gag, our ‘dad’ and Ecology professor, has taken us out multiple times into the *wild* to study and learn. I have learned that the wilderness ecosystem is especially vital not only to this unique area but to humans as well. We need it just as much as the earth. Wilderness is our connection to a time long ago when we were one with the world around us. When we had a bond.

Ed Galindo, our professor on Native American history, spoke to us about how the Frank has been the home to natives for as long as the mountains remember. Their memories linger upon the cavities in the earth and cave walls which bear their mark. He taught us to walk in beauty with the earth around us. From the glittering bodies of the Milky Way to the pert grasshopper that rests on my leg. To feel the emotions of the sky and soil. The mountains and rushing river. The lofty trees and soft grasses. Everything has a spirit and a name. A life.

There have been different connections to the *wild* all through history which has been taught to us by our Environmental History professor Adam Sowards. Our connections with each other through religion has shaped and molded our view of the *wild* and what it signifies. How stories have been woven from epics and sagas. How our connections have risen and fallen through time like the ocean tide.

Living in the *wild* you grow. You change as a person. None of us are the same people that hopped off the plane over two moons ago. Instead of staring at the mountains with the ignorant idolization we had at the beginning, we now regard them with a steady appreciation. We each recall our own memories where the *wild* broke us and then built us stronger than before. Meg

Gag, our ‘mom’ and professor of Leadership, helped us in this rebuilding process through our leadership classes. Respect, responsibility, and having large doses of common sense have proven their worth time and time again.

Throughout all of these classes, we have grown with the *wild* and with each other. The *wild* was our fire that forged a bond through experiences and hardships that can never be broken.

We need the *wild*. We need wilderness. Without it we are homeless beings stringing along our half of hearts, endlessly wandering to find the home with the other half. That home is the wilderness. Where we feel the whisper beyond us; an awakening of a language. I cannot explain it in words as it is in a language beyond terminology. It is the firefly that glows in the night, the howl of the wolf echoing through the pines, the fierceness in the eyes of a wild stallion, the shadows that race across the grasses and lose themselves into the sunset. It is an untamed and ancient language that courses through our blood, ready to be sparked awake by the call of the *wild*.