

All My Relations: Reflections on Home

Three writers, steeped in communion with natural places, share readings to inspire us to see deeper, to listen more carefully to the earth calling us home. Walking, loving, harvesting, noticing... deepening our connection with land, ourselves, each other, and the generations.

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View/Listen to a recording of the event at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUKYaM7Wj7Q>

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Note: The essay read by paulo da costa at the event is not included here because of contractual limitations. The excerpts by Nowick Gray are from [*My Country: Essays and Stories from the Edge of Wilderness*](#) (Cougar WebWorks, 2014).

HEIDI:

What could possibly be an adequate response to the global crisis upon us? What mind or heart even, could fathom an answer to the dilemma of human and animal extinction of our age? The conversation is upon us, and has been. Spiritual masters of all ages have pondered this question, the quandary of humans living in balance with the natural world...

When I think of a larger response to something global, I personalize it, and liken it to a crisis in my own life. And when things in my life seem overwhelming or out of hand, I turn in. I return back to home.

I think this is what many of us are coming to realize in this global predicament. This is why we are turning to indigenous cultures—because they live and always have stayed *close to home*, to their place of origin. This is not an option for many of us, of mixed races and cultures, whose parents are refugees from various countries. But home can become the place where you settle. Where you decide, "This is the place I will grow myself and my family. I will stay here and I will call this place my home." Humans, from our mammalian origins, have a natural propensity to safeguard our home, especially if we have a family we're caring for.

NOWICK:

It is the path of finding a hard yet possible future by making the hardest choices now.

It is a hard and bitter path because we have been so utterly convinced that it is the wrong one, the one to leave behind, the one to eradicate and transform and evolve from; and we have grown so utterly dependent on our short-lived alternative, so beguiling with its comfort and ease and excess, so intoxicating with its riches transferred to us from the other side: the invisible earth, the silent victims, the dispossessed. Of course we don't want to slide back to the Stone Age. We will go kicking and screaming backwards, or kicking and screaming forwards—sacrificing our comfort, or others' lives and livelihoods, in the process—but go we will, to the unpromised land, the land finally free of unsustainable promises. Today or tomorrow, one way or another, by our action or inaction, we will go out of our false and manufactured Eden, into the wilderness; we will find our way home.

HEIDI:

I awaken to the steady bass note of the water falling below my home.

Rains have engorged these rivers to overflow and in their pregnant beds, they run resplendently to the sea.

I am a witness to their course, as are the many birds that alight on the branches outside my window, coloring the sky with their song.

The vastness of the Pacific lays herself before me and receives the rushing waters of her daughters with ease.

This is the Way of Things. Ho`olawa Valley, one of many *ahupua`a*, on this Hawaiian island of Maui.

Beautiful things don't ask for attention...

and

"If you stay in a place long enough, she will reveal herself to you."

NOWICK:

Through the canopy of green, into the dark interior of forest... I walk this path to send my spirit on its journey home.

HEIDI:

I have traversed this glorious island today

From the valleys of the North Shore, where the water runs fervently to sea

To a peak on the West Side, Kukui Puka

the sacred *heiau*, light portal, where souls enter and leave this world

And now South side, nestled in a private cove,

Soft waters caressing the shore facing the islands of Kahoolawa and Molokini

Infinitely opulent and generous with her gifts, Hawaii once nourished hundreds of thousands who had found balance with her rhythms.

She reminds me that we are everything. Life giving and taking, wild and calm, passionate, peaceful, stormy and sweet. The diversity of her climates mirror my own arid deserts, surging seas, snow capping jagged peaks, cloudy days, unexpected showers and sun swept rainbows.

She too, emerged from fetal waters, conceived in passion's fire, deep in the womb of the earth and birthed by breaking water. She took form within the vastness of blue Pacific, a respite for ocean voyagers, migrating birds and mating whales.

But these are not the reasons for my devotion.

Love has no reason

NOWICK:

The easiest path is chosen, quickly, without thought. The true footing gains itself. Watchfully the sky waves on. I dream some, forgetting yester-pebbles, aware of not-the-stream, the stream aware of not-me. Awaiting sun of tomorrow is too long, for now, so we-I-you say okay, let's keep on...

HEIDI:

This is not a large response. Not a global response.

This is one simple woman's response to *why*...

Why do *I* care? Why should *anyone* care? And what is there to care about?

I've asked myself these questions, and now I ask you...

Where is your place?

What is your *relationship* to place?

Where do you call *home*? And why?

PAULO: ...

NOWICK:

It's been a long, cold winter and a long, cold, rainy spring. Now, near the end of May, the warm sunny weather has finally arrived. There's much catching up to do: in the garden, the orchard... and the heart. While my days now will be filled with managing my little corner of nature, there is more yet to be done under the sun: but this in the shelter of wild trees. I am struck this morning, as I walk in the sun-salved forest, with a sense of homecoming.

I was raised in such a forest. Oh, not me, personally; and not exactly this type of forest. But over the long term of millions of years of evolution, humans developed in such an environment—warm, shady, filled with other living things, and a sense of presence: them in me and me in them, all part of a living fabric. The whole brain and body there (here) is awake, aware, alert to the presence of all life. Today we call this unity an ecosystem.

All seems possible now, as I walk gently, quietly here under shade as tranquil as a cathedral. It even seems plausible, when it's warm and dry and comfortable as this, to “make a living” in a harmonious manner here, with those other living things. This is a northern mixed forest, predominantly fir and pine, cedar and hemlock, vine maple and birch. There are, on this outing, no deer to be seen. Maybe, finally, they have taken their climatic cue to move up to the high country. Small animals are few: the odd squirrel; the sound of birds. Inevitably some ants; no mosquitoes, yet. The plant cover on the forest floor is behind schedule, with the bracken and thimbleberries not really opened up yet to spread thickly everywhere, as they will after a spell of hot weather. There is not, in other words, a lot to eat in this forest. Still, I have a positive feeling about the prospect of spending the time here to seek out food, or to prepare shelter, if needed. I'm not going to freeze to death at night. With a little more practice in snares and tracking, cordage and firekeeping, I think it could be done.

A light breeze ruffles the treetops.

I reflect further that, to really do the job right—the job of primary production and survival—would take a full-time commitment, and cooperation with others at the same task, over the course of the good growing weather. The native tribes of the BC interior possessed the necessary skills, and worked like mad in the summer to put away forest

foods for the long winter. And it worked: they were successful in making a living from their natural homeland.

I don't plan to stay, of course, to do all that, but will continue down the trail toward my house and computer to write about it instead. Am I just another intellectual copout in a human world, doing head work, abstract work for a living? How can I claim to be truly at home here? From the perspective of the forest, or its indigenous inhabitants, no doubt I'm just a tourist, passing through. Or worse, a colonizer here only to extract value on my terms.

That's a fair enough critique. Given such limitations, I still find a valid sense of rootedness here: a connection that is deeper than culture or level of technology. I come home by noticing, by appreciating, by paying homage to that thrill in the heart that comes from being here—under the canopy of branches, standing on living soil, amid the stirrings of fellow life—in the ancient homeland. Even if just for a period of years, or months, or one day, or during one morning walk down a forest trail, I can share in a more universal human homecoming: the warmth of recognizing the ancestral house and family; of joyfully stretching limbs and lungs in that soothing, familiar element.

The high drone of a plane enters without knocking.

My reverie is broken and I lope down the trail toward home, leaving the forest behind. I have words that must be written there; and seeds to plant in the garden, and an orchard to water.

PAULO: ...

HEIDI:

What is the significance of place?

This is the question living passionately within me at the moment. Throughout my many years of traveling and studying, being with people from different places, what has struck me most is how indigenous people from everywhere speak of their connection to place. When they introduce themselves, their names are connected to their home, the name of *their* place, the mountain, and the river from which they and their family have come. All of their oral traditions are passed down with reverence, knowledge that speaks of where to find clean water, where to grow certain kinds of foods, where to gather, when to

harvest and what to hunt, where, and at what time of year. Their history, as their survival, is etched in the windswept lines of the landscape of their place of origin. Their tribal land is an ancestor.

The bones become stones and our ancestors, the ground beneath our feet...

They are, we are, related to the land and to move them or herd them away is the equivalent of ripping a suckling child away from its mother.

Land holds memories...

And land holds these wounds.

The wounds of separation, the wounds of slavery, war wounds and colonial missionary wounding. And today, the wounding of pesticides and corporate greed digs into the earth and is literally bleeding her, as are the gulf spills and tar sands seeping wounds.

Yet the land also holds medicine.

The medicine is in the wound...

Each place contains its own history, hearkening back from the trajectory that began as the earth was forming billions of years ago. Ancestral stories of plant and animal evolution, human migration, and tribal settling.

Histories steeped in stories. And power steeped in place.

PAULO: ...

NOWICK:

Walking through the woods to the post office, intent as usual on my own purposes and bodily exercise, I happen to notice several old, moss-covered stumps.

I stop, feeling something of importance in these old stumps I pass so often but notice so seldom. What is it?

What can I say for them, or about them? What do I even care? They don't give a hoot for me. And yet, we live side by side. It strikes me that I haven't paid them enough attention. They are like neglected children, whom I've fathered and forgotten; or parents left behind to die, though they've sheltered me with love and money and wisdom...

Or maybe it's I who have been neglected by them.

But they cannot move, or reach out, or be active in any physical or conscious way, so it is unfair to expect of them what I can expect of myself: to take notice. I walk on to the mail, getting my exercise. And now, having noticed, having opened myself to that extent, I can't get rid of the things.

Old stumps, moss-covered: they stand soft yet firm in my consciousness, like breasts of a familiar lover. What do I do with them now?

—*Give them attention, and love, and care.*

Who said that?

Still I ask for more: that those trees forgive me (or my brother or neighbor or whoever cut them down—probably a man, by all the odds).

Can this be asked and given, forgiveness from the forest? Doesn't such a pathetic fallacy spoil the rational basis of argument?

What's the argument?

Somebody cut them down. Young ones grow up around the stumps, diffusing the pain, healing the vision until the old wounds are practically unnoticeable. This is good: instructive as to what works for humans, too.

Would it be better not to have cut them at all? It may as well be asked.

I probe the lessons of history, economics, ethics. Somebody likely made good use of that wood. I myself have turned the same trick on a number of specimens, leaving stumps, soon moss-covered, in the forest to be noticed or not as I or another two-footed one passes. I own my guilt in the matter: I have cut down trees to make my shelter. This just cause redeems the guilt, or calls it something else.

Having cut them, I owe homage to that fact by noticing, now, as I walk. And then reflecting: how many? The newer, big live ones, are they next, on someone's list? Undoubtedly; and the younger ones to come. The real question, allowing cutters-to-come the same privilege I took, is how many more, for how long?

Soon we won't be able to ignore them; we'll have to stop, noticing so many new stumps. In their growing numbers they will cry out to be noticed. We will have to wonder then (as I have to now, having once noticed) where this vision is headed. Because a present vision noticed is a past wound acknowledged is a future laid bare.

Do we want that future? Humans multiplying endlessly, endlessly cutting?

Somewhere there is an end to it. The end comes when we notice, when the old stump is our lover, when we give our one or two children attention and love and care, and say to all those who ask, No More.

PAULO: ...

HEIDI:

My home is nestled in a valley on the North Shore of Maui. I am incredibly fortunate to awaken to the sound of the river rushing and the birds singing in the trees. I look out and I see the ocean and beyond that, nothing. This Moku or district is called *Hamakualoa* which means “the long back of the island” (<http://ulukau.org/>).

The rivers that border this *Ahupu'a* are *Ho'olawa*, which means “complete” and *Haumana*, “student, pupil or apprentice”. They have been renamed things like Twin Falls, King, Queen and Princess Pools and Flatrock by the many people that have come after, indicating *their* stories. But the value in looking back, to the original name is to familiarize ourselves with the history of the place we inhabit. The names teach us what the gifts or medicine of a particular place holds. You may learn what kind of animals or plants live in a valley, what the rainfall or river flow is, or even what battles and bloodshed took place. Tidal indications along coastlines are found in place names, as can be the hereditary families of origin of a particular place. A place name is a place keeper. Each name means something. If you want to know a person or a place, the first step is to learn its name...

NOWICK:

Walking on the frozen flats at the head of the lake, I notice my tracks go straight; when I decide to change direction, the new direction is also straight; I walk a large zig-zag pattern. Coming into the sparse brush, I continue walking straight until I notice deer tracks, meandering with gentle curves through the brush. The undergrowth is sparse enough that a straight path would still be convenient. Yet, following the deer's tracks, there is a different consciousness at work. This meandering course of gentle curves, I discover, can only be made step by step, moment by moment, with decisions always

tentative, subject to influence by the next whiff of air, the next attractive bud, the next whim of inspiration or pure serendipity.

Walking: this, too, is a primitive skill.

HEIDI:

I live on the top of a ridge above *Ho'olawa* River. "Ho'olawa means: to apportion sufficiently" (<http://wehewehe.org/>). The name tells me that I live in an abundant place. I live along a river that tells the story of the plentitude of this land. And even today, there are farms back to back on this road and the adjoining roads, enough rain and rivers to nourish and maintain a lot of food and people. The craw daddies still inhabit the rivers, as do other tiny fish. And the *pohole* fern still grow in the wetlands.

And yet, where are the Hawaiian families that used to live from this abundance? How was their land acquired and where have they been displaced? Uncle Jackie still holds the reigns, literally, in this valley. And he comes on his horse still, to meet the neighbors, share stories and seeds. And I know he's watching the building of homes, the plants growing, (and not) and how things are changing, (and not). We are a funny bunch that live out here. The roads are dirt and we like them that way. There are no electrical lines. Instead solar and wind provide us power, while rain catchment roofs and tanks our water. It is a choice. To live like this. Convenience is not a priority. Solitude, nature, the sounds of the natural world, growing food and simple living are the values that we share.

NOWICK:

Now we pause the programs and looping routines long enough to wonder, what next? Which path, of all those possible, may be more advantageous than the ones we've been on, individually and collectively, up to this point? We stand on a single point of time, with blankness all around. One path appears before us: steps by steps continuing, rhythmic echo of the past. These steps, too, lead into darkness, but the motion of our past movement impels us blindly forward. If we were to stop and look around, we might envision creating footsteps, by our own simple walking, in paths as yet unexplored. There is a frontier yet to be tasted: not on any continent but that of the human spirit. Here too we may suppose it's all been done: yet the next moment is unprecedented, the conditions changed. The dynamics of the whole have come into play as never before, and will continue to create novel contexts by which to judge each next move. This game develops

new and evolving rules, and twists of rules, all the time. Random factors are at work, giving us continual opportunities to change our expectations.

Part 2

PAULO: ...

HEIDI:

It is a strange thing, for a woman who was born and raised in one of the largest cities in the world, Los Angeles, to reflect upon my life as it stands now. I always longed for this, even as a child. I knew there was a natural order and intelligence, and I couldn't find it in the city or in the suburbs in which I grew up. I was 20 before I picked food growing on a tree. I intuitively knew the importance of that. And even though I don't call myself a farmer, I do grow food and most especially perennial crops that continue to produce even when I am not around to care for them. Food forests.

I was greatly inspired by a group out of the Bay Area of California called Guerrilla Gardeners. They dress in white, sneak out at night and plant gardens in vacant lots and along curbsides in the city. They leave a sign saying "Water me. I am a garden and I will give you food."

This is revolution in the way that we need. Seed bombs. To think of the future, and to do what it takes to ensure there's food for our children and grandchildren—healthy food, naturally biodiverse food, free from chemicals and not genetically engineered.

And so I began. I would collect seeds and saplings, starts and sprouts. I would gather friends with the same, and with our backpacks full of hundreds of different kinds of plants, natives and edibles, we would set out and plant food on state land, wild land on any land we could find that receives enough rain. This is not a new idea. Native peoples around the world have been cultivating food by encouraging and supporting wild edibles. And many of my local and Hawaiian friends have been doing the same guerilla type gardening with a plan to create GPS mapping of all of the renegade food planted on island.

Save seeds. Plant and share them. Growing food is an act of revolution. Re-love-ution.
Serving our future by planting with love today.

PAULO: ...

NOWICK:

26 September 2001

No TV. No Internet. No email, and even the phone was out for a day—which was better, in a way, than unplugging it, because this time I just had to let go.

Nature spoke. I didn't even hear the wind over the rain in the night, but in the morning, trees were down everywhere. Needles and branches littered the dirt road through the forest I call home. The power lines stayed down for three days.

It was no death scene of a distant city, like those I had witnessed two weeks before, with the painful luxury of a front-row seat three thousand miles and a way of life removed. The forest took its losses without complaint.

Another Gulf War, longer, and larger, rages in the rumors of front pages, elsewhere. But today, instead of world news, I take a walk to the river. I write outside with cold fingers on a small notepad, while the silver morning grows over the mountains to the south. A single raven calls, answered by various-rhythmed birds... then a humming silence.

Last night the boys did homework by candlelight, played acoustic guitars. The night before, Nintendo gave way to Kahlah. I relearned an old tune on the pennywhistle, beat on a drum.

Have I embraced this emptiness yet? These last few nights there was more time for sleep, dreaming, love. Now there is only time.

Shouldn't it be this way?

Nature spoke. I can no longer take "power" for granted.

HEIDI:

So what does Nature have to teach us?

If there's one rule of balance that Nature upholds it is this: "Wherever there is a plant they can do you harm, its antidote can be found within twenty yards."

So I ask, even as threats to plant and animal life escalate, as ecosystems are dying and water, air and earth are being polluted at a rate unparalleled in history, what is the antidote found within reach? Where are we as humans, the mammalian creatures we are, born and raised on planet earth, finding the *natural* balance? As the proverb says, "the pendulum swings both ways," and I see evidence every day that for every apparent atrocity befalling our planet and people, there is an equal and positive reaction, (also natural law) asserting its will to return to homeostasis. And while some may argue we are no match for the "powers that be," I say what we have is the entire natural world working in our favor, in service to balance and Life. Every animal, plant, mineral, ocean, stream, current, mountain and volcano is bound to a natural law that will bring this earth back to homeostasis once again. And yes, I believe that law is also found within us, if we are listening.

NOWICK:

Mysticism is a primitive skill. Human consciousness is our window on divine consciousness, which we see manifest everywhere in the natural world. Nature is the substance that connects the inner and outer worlds in one organic unity.

In an age when the frontiers are all breached, and ecosystems are suffering irreversible devastation, contamination, extinctions, it becomes more important than ever to expand our awareness of the nature intact within us. Nature is not confined to forest and field, nor even to an infinite field of stars. Its power and immensity drive every detail of our own biological machinery. And while its spirit offers us a mirror of our most transparent selves, its inexhaustible body of forms inspires us to create our lives and works with just such exuberance and beauty.

Outside my window, young hemlock trees drip with fresh March rain beading the ends of their branches. Beyond the vacant pasture stands the forest wall mute and uninviting, as the mist, mingled with smoke from my studio stovepipe, drifts between us. The insistent

rain escorts the last of the winter snow on its way into the brown earth. A slight wind stirs the branches. I let go of words and remember to breathe.

HEIDI:

These eyes of mine see the world through their own lens. They are attuned to beauty, drawn magnetically to light and can only focus on what is directly in front of them. The macrocosm is a reflection of the microcosm, so I suppose I have found my own balance.

I see the little things...

The way water droplets nest upon a blade of grass stirs something deeply within me ... that perfect little globule, like a tear drop that has been caught and made immortal by the tender care of a leaf or petal palm.

That is nature's tenderness and efficiency. Each precious morning, the drops are held and conserved consciously by the intelligence of the natural world. The plant will slowly absorb that water or an animal or quick lighting bird will have a morning drink. Nothing is wasted and light, water and life come together cyclically to form great beauty and balance.

Color too, is a splendor.

The brightness that speaks vibrant from the plant world has me lost within flower blossoms for hours.

Spring fever.

It speaks of our own unfurling. A celebration of something new being born, spring evokes in all life that release or exultation at emerging from the darkness of winter's slumber. We need all cycles, and the stoic phase of winter suits me well for short cycles, which is why I am drawn to the tropics where year-round storms invite me inward more often but for less time.

Our colors find expression in spring, as we emerge from our own internal workings, we may don the shades and textures of hopes, dreams, intentions and ultimately our true essence. Spring is a time to be seen, to allow oneself to be seen.

And this is where I close. For we have survived and continue to see the effects of a long and metaphoric winter. But there is a hope of spring in this moment. As the light and the heat, lost songs of birds and rising waters awaken us from our proverbial slumber, we

begin to see the new growth that is happening as people mobilize, communities form and we reach for one another and a world we know is possible.

Tribal peoples from around the world, that have never participated in international conversations, are pilgrimaging to global gatherings to stake a claim and speak as a voice of the earth. Children and youth are also stepping forward and claiming their right for a future. "We are the ones we have been waiting for." It is up to us, each in our own way with our unique gifts, to listen deeply. To listen to the call of nature that is in our bones and blood and to find how we may contribute to balance in our own way, in a small way, in our own communities and close to home.

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