

# THINKING LIKE A MOUNTAIN

By Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — May 21, 2006

## R E A D I N G

Adapted from "Thinking Like a Mountain," an essay in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, by Aldo Leopold, 1949, p. 129-133

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A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world.

Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the (rancher) a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.

Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country, and distinguishes that country from all other land. It tingles in the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day. Even without sight or sound of wolf, it is implicit in a hundred small events: the midnight whinny of a pack horse, the rattle of rolling rocks, the bound of a fleeing deer, the way shadows lie under the spruces. Only the (novice) can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them.

My own conviction on this score dates from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Since then I have lived to see state after state (eliminate) its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anemic (decline), and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the Junipers.

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades.

So also with cows. The (ranchers) who cleans (their) range(s) of wolves (do) not realize that (they are) taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. (They have) not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea.

We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with supple legs, the (rancher) with trap and poison, the (politician) with pen, the most of us with machines, votes, and dollars, but it all comes to the same thing: peace in our time. A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps is a requisite to objective thinking, but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among (people).

John Muir, lover and chronicler of Yosemite and other wilderness areas, believed that "mountains are fountains" for humanity. "The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able people whose thought and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains..."

Mountains are important places for many of us, I daresay. Whether or not we ever emerge as great poets or philosophers, we frequently get sustenance from even the mere countenance of mountains, let alone from our touch of their inspirational ecosystem.

I grew up here in the Mid-Atlantic region, but heard an early call to the west, where mountains reign. Before a single month of living in California had lapsed, I climbed Half Dome Peak in Yosemite Park. I also spent most of the 1970s headquartered out of Denver and played in the Rockies regularly. A later decade in Seattle taught me to love the big mountains that surround that city.

During my first winter in the Pacific Northwest, a new friend took me up to Hurricane Ridge in the Olympic range. It was a gorgeous day and we spent our time hiking, talking, watching snow-tubers, dodging skiers and just drinking in the majestic Olympics.

At one point we quietly looked out across a deceptively distant valley at the immediate vision of these very impressive mountains. I imagined rock-roots going down deep to where the Earth is very hot. I pictured a wide, wide base, very solid. I knew storms had come and gone over these hills many times, and would many times more. I imagined that the earth would occasionally send a shiver of global vitality through this ancient terrain. I figured that a vast variety of smaller beings found shelter and food among the tress, crevices and rivers that had together witnessed countless seasons of change and challenge. It was a panorama of pure, earthy strength.

My friend was also engulfed in a powerful silence. He didn't say it to me, but he could have: "There you go again, thinking like a mountain." Yes, I was ever so

briefly imagining what the world looks like from the perspective of the Olympic Mountains.

I was trying to “think like a mountain,” which is a phrase from naturalist Aldo Leopold's exquisite little book, *A Sand County Almanac*, written in the first half of this century. Leopold helped pioneer the curious notion that human beings can consciously identify with other earth life forms. We would do this in order to build our empathy for them as valuable non-human participants of this interdependent planetary experiment.

In a small corner of his book, published shortly after he died while fighting a range fire in 1948, Aldo Leopold encouraged us to “think like a mountain.”

My relationship with this book is also curious. Many years ago I pulled *A Sand County Almanac*, out of my parents' bookcase on one of my visits home not too long after high school, and I carried it around with me from then on, never giving it all that much thought, really. But Leopold was from Madison, Wisconsin, my unremembered birthplace, so I sensed some geographical connection, I guess.

Later, while reading a fascinating newer book, entitled, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*, by Joanna Macy and others, I discovered that the author of that title phrase was Aldo Leopold in his evocative series of essays. So in a blinding flash of memory I turned to the shelf and, sure enough, there awaiting me patiently was *A Sand County Almanac*.

But the best part is that an old faded Business Reply postcard was stuck in the book, precisely in the short chapter you just heard, “Thinking Like a Mountain.” True story. The card offered a subscription to Natural History Magazine at the ancient price of \$8 a year, so it was indeed an economic eon ago that Leopold's mountainous idea was bookmarked for me.

This synchronistic experience reminded me of these endlessly useful lines of T.S. Eliot:

*We shall not cease from exploration;  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

To consciously arrive at the notion of intentionally identifying with non-human life is at once disquieting and reassuring: disquieting in its unfamiliarity—it is an activity well out of the mainstream; and reassuring in its common resting place—the vaunted unity of all life.

Expanding our powers of identification is exploration, to be sure, an adventure which I now believe may well lead us to an awareness of where we all started: as one.

The process of identification with non-human life—the expanding of human awareness to a much wider field of existence, “thinking like a mountain,” say—is the cornerstone of what is known as “deep ecology,” a name coined in 1972 by a founder of the movement, Norwegian eco-philosopher Arne Naess.

Deep ecology is qualitatively different from the complementary and also valid environmental movement of “reform ecology,” which focuses on appropriate action for effective change. The two are coherent and ideally mutually supportive. Deep ecology is the philosophical heart that has often been neglected by the flailing arms of an activist concentration.

The time is well nigh to fortify the underpinnings, the guts of the environmental movement so that the action we take has true and powerful grounding, so to speak. As consistent as this endeavor is with modern Unitarian Universalism, I feel drawn toward the religious development of an ecological ethic.

And to me a large part of this elusive ethic seems to reside in our ability to identify with non-human life. Usually I think of my self as my body and all the mysterious energy that circulates within and among this particular collection of molecules. But Arne Naess proposed that one's “ecological self” can in fact identify with more than just one's body.

Animals, plants, portions of landscapes or water formations, mountains—any part of the earth is available for my consideration. I can be as large as my identifications. I think, then, of Whitman's evocative statement: “I am large. I contain multitudes.” For, in fact, is not the earth our “larger self”? I can think like a mountain, yes. I *am* mountain.

Join me in a simple exercise:

Close your eyes for a moment — breathe deeply...

and feel your heart opening, easily, authentically...

Now invite some non-human part of the earth to come into your awareness.

Don't think too hard about it, just see what steps up...

Let the first image stay. Trust that image, for whatever reason...

Hold on to that entity, whatever shape it takes...

Whatever its name, put that name after the following two words: "I am \_\_\_\_."

Say to yourself, silently: "I am \_\_\_\_\_."

Say it again...

Just sit for a moment with that identification...

This kind of exercise can go a lot further, as you might imagine. But if you were able to do even just this, then you have essentially expanded your identity—enlarged your self-image, ever so temporarily—to include another life form of our diverse planet. Perhaps you can take a little time in the days ahead to explore just what it might mean to *be* this "other" entity.

And if this was a hard exercise for you, that's very understandable. We humans have learned to set up many subconscious blocks to such heightened identification with non-human parts of our world. The assumption that "my total self equals my body and what it can do" is an accepted and encouraged worldview in our culture. There has been little incentive to think otherwise. In fact, the manipulative human structure of our world almost ensures that we will narrow our self-image to single units. "Divide and conquer" may be a relevant aphorism here.

Perhaps we are also prudent to put up such blocks because in this kind of work—moving beyond our own needs to a bigger picture—there is distinct potential for encountering some significant despair, for a number of reasons. For instance, many of the other life forms of our gloriously diverse planet are suffering under the strain of our rapidly expanding human presence. This fact is becoming harder and harder to avoid, and it is an unpleasant awareness.

I suspect that over the years, each of you has had varying moments of coming to grips with the implications of current global trends. Not a pretty sight. My growing

hope is that our entire species is now finally willing to address the issues. Even Time Magazine once declared Endangered Earth its cover story, as “The Planet of the Year,” not because of honorable achievement, but rather to highlight the ongoing undoing at human hands of a magnificent eco-system. Time notwithstanding, it seems as if we are being dragged in raging denial to face the truth of our ways.

I have discovered two helpful handles for understanding this quandary of collective avoidance and resistance. One is that it is no longer a matter of insufficient information that blocks our ability to intentionally change for the better. We can no longer plead ignorance about the reality or the consequences of our momentum toward destructive tendencies. We know all too well what is going on and we tend to not want to know any more, because it can be so disheartening.

Our largest obstacles to enacting change may now be the fear of encountering despair and the social taboos against expressing such feelings. We are very close to fearing fear itself. Lack of information is no longer an appropriate excuse for complicity with our culture's destructive orientation. This realization encourages me to better focus my own limited energy, to be about the work of solutions without delay.

I respect the work of gathering and spreading pertinent information, but to be effective it must be partnered with people who can sustain and support an ethical directive to change the dominant worldview. Some of us will be better at this work than at demonstrating or legislating; our time is now. We must assist as midwives.

Another less obvious handle that helps me understand our culture's unwillingness to confront the need for attitude adjustment is the resemblance such nearsightedness has to contemporary adolescent arrogance and materialism.

One of the more mythological purposes of rites of passage for adolescents is to integrate the knowledge of their mortality into their personality. This framing of the concept of death helps youth to assume the responsibilities of adulthood in an appropriately balanced context of self-esteem and humility. It is in adolescence that we first fully comprehend our own finitude, i.e., our eventual death. This has an essential centering effect on young lives, *as long as proper guides are nearby* to conduct their passage into this larger worldview.

My point is that a parallel development can be seen in human evolution. Collectively, we are just beginning to realize the potential for extinction of our species and the death of our planet. We are quite conceivably in an adolescent phase of humanity's global development. But we often find ourselves at a loss for the proper guidance that will assure our cultural survival, let alone maturation.

I suggest that the frequently distressing materialism of our modern youth can be seen as a reflection of our societal *uncenteredness*. I am actually quite fond of youth; I do not blame them for their cultural conditioning. But most are certainly more likely to think like an iPod than a mountain, or take passage cues from the MTV Guide. They unwittingly and ferociously reflect our minimal investment in their worldview education.

Our youth *and* our society are all but without passage guides.

No wonder many young people are apathetic to the fate of the earth and we elders fear the despair we might feel by identifying with the abused parts of the planet. We see no guides to help us understand and work through this encounter with the truth of our ways. We fear it will be only a distressing experience.

We are unsure of our own center, so we shy away from the overwhelmingly big picture. We think small. We rationalize our preoccupations: the land is merely a resource for sale; the Indians were savages. We avoid animals, which appear to us as strange, foreign beings. We consider ourselves entirely separate from them.

And we do all this subconsciously; it is our unexamined worldview.

I do not mean to speak here for any of you; I know this picture because I have painted myself in it: I have been complicit and despairing. But I am struggling to breathe new life into my worldview, to move into the future of every tomorrow in more just and appropriate ways, whatever they may be.

I seek a more productive truth for all of us earth denizens. I want to consciously breathe the same air as humpbacks and wolves. They take long and very deep breaths; and that cherished air becomes their resonant song.

The hope I hold for this movement resides—at least currently—in the exciting field of ecological philosophy and ethics, three primary principles of which are:

1. all forms of life are *interdependent*;
2. the stability of an eco-system is woven into its diversity, meaning that a system with 100 species is more stable than one with only two species; and
3. all resources are finite and system growth is limited.

[Patrick Moore, Canadian ecologist]

This last one about limited resources and growth may be the pivotal action item, and the hardest notion to sell to a resistant economy. That is why the essential work of environmental ethics must be raised as a banner at least equally patriotic as capitalism.

I suspect that our 7th Unitarian Universalist principle, which affirms “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” may be the veritable nub of religious relevance. I encourage any of you so inclined to continue your own investigations of just what this principle of interdependence means to our maturing worldviews and our everyday lives. It seems so much like work worth doing, alone and together.

One step in that direction, with a nod of gratitude to deep ecology, is to hold *even just an intention* to identify with the non-human entities that share our planet with us. In all their diversity as well as in any one personal encounter, they can be guides to a more secure future for all of us.

I’m reminded of an image from a Zen teacher, who said, “When one thinks like a mountain, one thinks also like a black bear, so that honey dribbles down your fur as you catch the bus to work.”

I suggest that the center we seek is inclusive of other earth life, without anthropomorphizing them—giving them undue human characteristics. (Enough of that happens in our cartoons.) But I am convinced that any efforts at personal centering that leave out our co-habitants will feel consequently hollow, illusory, and ultimately *off-center*. We need them more than we ever realized.

The way down the path toward a “larger self” may include some despair and anger, but these will be passages toward a fuller, richer destination. At this point,

difficult as the process of a wider identification may seem to us hidebound humans, it is a large start simply to have the intention for this to happen, to be open to the possibilities, to want to expand your self to take in the perspective of other life forms. For myself, at least, I believe that this is the path toward true interdependence.

Joanna Macy puts these words to her guidance:

I am mountain. I am ancient and strong and solid, built to endure. But now I am being dynamited and mined, my forest skin is being torn off me, my top-soil washed away, my streams and rivers choked...

You cannot ignore me! I have been with you since your very beginnings and long before. For millennia your ancestors venerated my holy places, found wisdom in my heights. I gave you shelter and far vision.

Now, in return, you ravage me. You dig and gouge for the jewel in the stone, for the ore in my veins. Stripping my forests, you take away my capacity to hold water and to release it slowly. See the silted rivers? See the floods? Can't you see? In destroying me you destroy yourselves...

Humans, I [still] offer you my deep peace. Come to me at any time to rest, to dream. Without dreams you may lose your vision and your hope. Come, too, for my strength and steadfastness, whenever you need them.

*[Thinking Like a Mountain, pgs. 85, 87, 89]*

This summer, when I visit in the Pacific Northwest, I want to go back to the rugged Olympics. And I've also enjoyed my excursions into the softer Appalachians over on this side of the country. Mountains are dramatic, of course, but I love lots of other landscapes as well. As I age, I find growing fondness for most of the natural world around me. I dare say I am doing what the poet Robinson Jeffers described as "falling in love outwards."

As we explore more and more of this wider earth, we may well find ourselves at a very new and very old place, knowing it fully for the first time—and hopefully more ready to help preserve it. This is the compelling dream I bring to the mountain, to our "blue-green hills of earth," which we can sing about now in Hymn #163...