

# Entering Old Growth

*Meditations from the Ancient Rain Forest of the Pacific Northwest*

**When first entering the old growth – alone - in the gloomy wetness and bone chilling cold of late November, when the big storms begin to roll in off the Pacific and the trailhead parking lots empty of cars and campers, I am wide-eyed with expectation, eager to be among the big trees. The *really big* trees.**

**On this rainy morning, after 20 miles of rutted and rock-filled logging roads, I finish my coffee (cold by now), go quickly over my checklist: a sandwich and a bar, some water, an ace bandage, raingear, hiking sticks, cameras and lenses in plastic against the weather, lock the car (why?) and hurry into the forest even before first light so I can be fully engulfed before the magical pre-dawn light emerges out of the fog and mist.**

**Within minutes on the trail however, I feel an eerie sense of disorientation. As I penetrate deeper into the ominous silence, the trailing threads of connection to things familiar begin to dissolve in the visual chaos surrounding me. Soon I feel lonely, confused, and a little frightened.**

**In the city everything is ordered within a containing grid: the streets, the rectilinear buildings, the rooms in our homes, the lines on a page, the logic of our minds, even the objects of our desires and attachments. Our lives become like vast multi-**

**dimensional spreadsheets of interdisciplinary data generated by the stories we tell ourselves, by the lessons learned, our losses, successes, and our failures. All this, carefully digested for us, interpreted, correlated, and contextualized by our teachers, our musicians, philosophers, and spiritual leaders.**

**None of that makes any sense at all in the rain forest. The grid is abruptly, even brutally, gone. The trees here have grown so large, for so long, they force one to reconsider the very dimensions of imagination. Their compelling authority, along with the brooding dark beauty of the hanging mosses and lichens commands me ever deeper under their spell. Agog and hyper alert, I am drawn into a primeval landscape that has evolved intact for so long without human agency that its complexity, diversity, and mystery lead me directly from the sensation of mere vastness into meditation on the infinite, into Spirit.**

**Fear, it appears, is necessary to wake me up, as if from a deep sleep, to usher me into the raw, primal places lying in wait within. Once so shaken, fear soon gives way though to awe. And from this deep artesian well of awe springs a river of passion and aliveness, flows a numinous sense of connection to all living things. Flows devotion, and a desire to communicate the teachings, beauty, and mystery of wilderness. Thus I am ushered into the realm of Spirit.**

**In this exhibit I am attempting to bear witness to the fact that spirit lives. Though under siege, spirit is not only alive and well in this wild place, she is accessible to us. She is powerful, she is radiantly beautiful, and she stands fully prepared to illuminate our way forward in this dark age in which we now find ourselves.**

**A few brisk miles in, my blood circulating a cozy warmth against the damp chill, I throw my pack off and sit against a log on the bank of the Bogachiel River to surrender and give myself over to spirit. The names of these great rivers that radiate down like spokes from the Mt. Olympus glaciers evoke the spirit of ancient peoples: Sol Duc, Calawah, Quilleute, Hoh, Queets, Quinalt. Each river once supported its own tribe who dwelt at its mouth where it empties into the Pacific, who fished its waters, hunted its valleys, and adventured its length to the high peaks where dwelt the gods. Provided for by the abundance of the sea in front of them and the forest behind them, they are the only known Neolithic peoples anywhere to live in permanent dwellings with no need for or practice of agriculture.**

**In first light, the rain has given way to mist; the forms of high mountain walls across the river gradually emerge from the low clouds, becoming visible against a brilliant cobalt sky. The color of the water is revealed to be a milky green aqua from the glaciers high above. Upstream I watch in the dim light as a**

**herd of elk carefully pick their way single file across the river, occasionally stopping to drink as they cross.**

**The river swells from the addition of last night's rain flowing down a thousand streams from the mountainsides. It churns westward over, under, and through immense logjams. Its gravel bed whispers to me of moving stones. The lightening sky is churning too with heavy dense clouds returning easterly from the Pacific to the high places where they will dump their contents as snow – dozens and dozens of feet of it. Wispy strands of trailing cloud and mist hang between the vertiginous mountain walls, like clues to last night's dreams.**

**Water is the constant, is everywhere. It cycles here as solid, liquid, and gas to produce a most dramatic microclimate. An enclosed system, a timeless uninterrupted sacred wheel of transformation, creating and nourishing in its turning the most fecund ecosystem on the planet. In terms of annual biomass produced per acre, there is no place on earth its equal. If water is life; abundant water is abundant life.**

**And abundant life is abundant Spirit. She not only thrives in these wild places, she dances, she sings aloud, and she rages. My how she rages! Nowhere I have been is the spirit of life on earth so dynamic, so prolific, so powerful, and so *available*. With a prayer I invite her in. She infuses my being, quickens my pulse, teasing me with fleeting displays of her radiance, challenging me to photograph the ineffable, luring me ever**

**deeper into the wilderness. I'm a goner, off chasing the divine again.**

**By the end of the day, I am wet, cold, tired, hungry, and very happy. I will eat roasted salmon tonight in La Push.**

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**I don't know what took me so long. I've had a 'thing' about big trees – really big trees – since I was a young child. I must have seen a Life magazine picture of some redwoods, (the one with the rising sun piercing the early morning mist and some dwarfed tourists with cameras craning their necks skyward) and have always had a deep yearning to go to the big trees and immerse myself in their... in their what? I never really knew.**

**Instead I busied myself with a life like many others, a life filled with melodrama, marriages, children, businesses, some adventures, an occasional stab at making art, then the inevitable retreat back into the safety of making a living. But it was a life lived largely within the fragmented, artificial parameters of a grid - an abstraction - overlaid upon a shaky foundation of unreality, as if I and everyone else were play-acting, projecting and protecting a complex game of fragile egos. The pillars of my culture seemed insufficient to support authentic life, or at least my life. I even had a word for it: in moments of extreme disconnection, I would say I was experiencing a 'reality glitch.'**

**But through it all I never stopped imagining the big trees. Like a clear night sky in winter, in Old Growth I fancied I would encounter a new world, fresh, inarguably true, and uncontaminated by my species. Here I would experience, or so I fantasized, a clarity of mind and inner peace so deep and coherent that meaning, identity, and connection would emerge, and I would be made whole.**

**So when fate and fortune landed my partner Lu and me in the Pacific Northwest we lost no time in finding our way to the Hoh Trail in the Olympic National Park on the Olympic Peninsula. Like everyone, we gawked at the grandeur and tapped at our cell phone screens. But I felt let down. It wasn't at all as I had imagined. Beautiful, yes, but I didn't see God. It was a sunny August afternoon with a clear blue sky and the trail was six feet wide with a steady parade of families with children, backpackers of all ages, and frail older folks out for a walk from their RVs. "Howdy, howdy," with cheerfulness and good will to all. A nice stroll in the Park; hardly a *wilderness*! But I *did* catch a glimpse that day, a mere glimmer out of the corner of my inner eye, of something. Of something that reminded me of that for which I had been searching. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was strong enough to send me pouring over my maps that fall. I read "Twilight on the Thunderbird" by a Quilleute Indian by the name of Howard Hanson in which he says: "When they cut down our trees, they**

cut down the spirit of my people.” That resonated deeply in me, and I wanted to know more. So I made plans to stay for a few nights in his native village of La Push and headed out. This time alone.

Over the next two years, I averaged about a week per month during the fall, winter, and spring months exploring the trails of the western slopes of the Olympic Mountains of the Olympic National Park. As fall gives way to winter on the Olympic Peninsula, the storms strengthen and the temperatures drop into the thirties and forties. When it’s not storming, a persistent mistiness saturates the air, alternating with hard rain. Average annual rainfall here is *twelve to fourteen feet*, most of it falling between November and March. But I feel cozy in layers of wool and the best of raingear, and I feel like I have the whole Park – all million acres of it - to myself. Or almost.

Only once in that first winter did I encounter anyone on the trail, an ancient crone hunched in a black poncho and gumboots shuffling through the mist towards me. “See?” she said as she approached, looking up at me with a crazy bug-eyed grin. She opened a plastic shopping bag for me to see the mushrooms and fungi she had collected, before quickly disappearing up the trail in a cloud of dripping vapor.

And I come to feel, finally, at home.

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**The Olympic National Park is a small donut-shaped island of 12,000 year old primordial climax forest surrounded by a vast sea of clearcut. In order to reach it, one must traverse a titanic expanse of human ecocide, a post-apocalyptic landscape abandoned after the looting and burning - an entire biota left to expire without apology, without apparent regret, shame, or second thought. The ratio of clearcut to intact ancient forest on the Peninsula is five to one.**

**Some clearcuts have been seeded into tree farms of various ages, to be harvested in no more than fifty years. Many simply lay like battlefields with no survivors, defiled not so much by our human need for newsprint and toilet paper - for lumber to build homes and hospitals - but (in my opinion) by corporate and political greed for unconscionable wealth and illegitimate power. At the logging industry's peak, during the 1960's, 70's, and 80's, *five hundred* truckloads of logs *per day* were taken to the surrounding saw mills, then shipped mostly to emerging highest dollar markets across the Pacific.**

**Driving through seemingly endless clearcut sets a tragic emotional stage for the wilderness experience. It feels not unlike what some of us experience upon entering old age. After a lifetime witnessing hardship and suffering everywhere, limitless extraction practices, broken dreams and betrayal, I enter Old Growth saddened and sobered, scorched by the certain knowledge that I am entering a vestigial remnant of**

**what once was, but is no longer, and can never again be. Wanting not to be fooled into thinking that what is so good can also be real. Thinking life will be over soon.**

**The condition of our planet can, at these moments, appear apocalyptic. The tail end of a life today can also feel like that. So I am thrust, finally, into a search for meaning, for a way forward not so much for my own life, but for life itself. How can one go on when everything appears so dark? Will my grandchildren live to old age? Can we not achieve a little peace of mind, I ask, if not outright joy?**

**Some say we are in the midst of a cultural transition from the rapacious greed of the Piscean age characterized by boundless extraction practices (such as clear cutting) to an Aquarian age grounded in spiritual practice, and all that that entails (such as sustainability.) The jury is out on that, but it's clear that our wider culture hasn't got that one quite figured out yet.**

**Believing in a new-age transition from what once was to what can be seems at first to be naive. The wilderness has been clear cut from coast to coast across the continents. The waters and soils and skies of the planet, once the lifeblood, bones, and spirit of our bodies in which we were cleansed, fed, and inspired have become our toxic waste treatment systems, already, or soon to be overloaded to the tipping point. We have created wealth beyond comprehension, but accruing increasingly to fewer and fewer hands - terrified hands**

**clutching tightly around the levers of power, increasingly willing to stop at nothing to maintain their grasp on comfort, privilege, and dominion.**

**That is the legacy I have to pass on to my children, and to their children. In reaction to the cynicism and despair inherent in that picture I have felt compelled to explore another landscape, one that might offer a glimpse of a more productive way forward – the landscape of a creation story as evidenced in wilderness.**

**To truly share as a participant in this creation story, to experience Spirit herself rising within me, I need only set foot in the ancient rain forest and request an audience. She demurs shyly at first, hiding in the visual chaos, but can be enticed out by a prayer. Or a song. She readily infuses my being with a radiant presence, quickens up my spine like a shiver, and radiates outward on the cry of the rutting elk, on the wings of eagles fishing up the rivers. She propels my steps deeper into mystery, and in the company of trees older than Jesus releases my imaginings from their confining grid of arthritic habits and outgrown biases. A little clarity slowly emerges, refreshing as a cold shower. Over time and thousands of steps, things begin to make some sense. It's not as complicated as I once thought.**

**The unfamiliar and frightening, guided by Spirit, gives way in me ultimately to a sense of reassurance. To a sense that I can be released from my isolating fear, can let go of my craven need**

**for dominion; that I can submit to my rightful place among living things and be forgiven. Spirit is a self-initiating teacher, and once invoked, is more than willing (eager, in fact) to guide me out of alienation, into reconciliation. Her first lesson: getting right-sized and letting go of the arrogance of dominion. Spirit has made it irrefutably obvious, trite even, that the endgame of dominion is our own extinction.**

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**As I ramble the deep forest trails, I often find myself ruminating on my life and its curious trajectory. I come slowly to understand the ways I have colluded in privilege and dominion. I come to see how I have exiled living Spirit from within to an external archaic object of suspicion in order to justify the compromises I felt it necessary to make. In a word, I come to identify, understand, and accept my complicity in the clearcut.**

**Renunciation is one response. I could give up my morning hot shower, forsake the use of toilet paper, retreat from the grid and learn to survive on worms, but what good would that do? Instead I look to the big trees for a new story line.**

**When Spirit returns within (I hear them whisper) so does the urge and power to connect. With connection floods in everything else - flows compassion and energy and the power to love. Comes a sense of urgency, service, meaning, and**

**mission. The imperial self submits, finally, to a higher authority, begins to accept, then celebrate, its utter interdependence in a picture much, *much* larger than itself.**

**These big trees have held their ground for thousands of years, secure in their niche, cleaning the air for me (and everything else) to breath, busily converting and storing the sun's energy, providing homes and food from its crown to its roots for countless creatures of all descriptions (including me), and containing and manifesting Spirit without reservation or condition.**

**Isn't that what I should be doing too? I mean, I'm not a tree, but life is life. We're all manifestations of the One. Or, as a friend once put it: "we're all exactly the same, in just different ways." I can't fix nitrogen or perform photosynthesis, but I can write a poem in praise of those who can. I can make a photograph. Do I not share with the trees and every living thing a fundamental purpose: to devote my energy and life to the cultivation, nourishment, and manifestation of Spirit?**

**When a biota evolves, unmolested by chain saws, logging roads, farm clearings, villages, and all the other trappings of mankind - as the heart of the Olympic Peninsula has for twelve thousand years - every single organism, from the lowly digestive microorganisms at work in the detritus of the rotting forest floor to the wildlife that occupies the lofty crowns 300 feet above, has evolved together, in community as it were.**

**Every individual of every species in the ancient virgin forest has had sufficient time to evolve both into the fullness of its solitary uniqueness and at the same time becoming totally interdependent with every other individual of all the species in its own microclimate – the very definition of community.**

**The modern, managed forest of today – a clearcut replanted with nursery stock, aerially sprayed with insecticides and chemical fertilizers - resembles a cornfield much more than it does a forest. The complexity of species interdependence in the ancient forest is vast; in a cornfield, non-existent.**

**Modern biologists, botanists, and ecologists are still in the very early stages of exploring the complexity of interdependence and unraveling the minute detail and principles governing its rulebook.**

**But regardless of the details, life is life. Life and the planet is one, is Gaia, our atoms intermingling at will through decomposition, erosion, absorption, digestion, and the miracle of rebirth. I belong in that web. My guts are filled with digestive organisms that had enough time to evolve within the roots of these trees. Without them I cannot live. Somehow an animating spirit gets involved in the act and atoms of mineral and water and air become both me and the flying squirrels that soar from the forest canopy to the floor for their meal.**

**What remains of the Old Growth is left only because it was the most remote, the most difficult to reach and harvest. A small handful of dedicated scientists, activists, and the Northern Spotted Owl intervened in the nick of time to rescue this last island of antiquity from the approaching army of chain saws. Another few years, and it would all have been gone. The story is transfixing, a barnburner retold in numerous books on the subject that I read in the long winter evenings in the cabin.**

**The fight is not over. The growth layer of a thousand year old tree is much thinner than the layers it builds up during its first fifty years, producing a unique and highly valued fine grain. And in spite of its Park status, the same forces that have already slaughtered 80% of the Peninsula still circle these precious relics, poised to pounce, awaiting patiently their opportunity to punch in roads and take the last trees, each one worth a small fortune on the open market. Many of the trails are no longer maintained by the underfunded Park Service, and as they fall into disuse the areas they once penetrated lose their advocates and become vulnerable.**

**Since their beginnings, both the National Forest and Park Services in the Northwest have been the servile handmaidens of the logging industry, and since the Park Service functions in response to the ever-shifting winds of the political storm, it cannot be trusted to carry out its preservation mission. I learn all this with mounting outrage, my innocence betrayed yet**

**again. I become determined to spend as much time in the ancient forest as possible, to learn what I can of what it has to teach me before it is too late. Too late not only in terms of my own age, but before this forest segment too is leveled, lost forever. To learn, but also to communicate, to record, to photograph.**

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**Not much remains when we are gone. All the tricks and secrets of whatever trades, life skills, and professions we have learned and practiced have by now either been taught to others or they will be lost for all time, as has been most of the ancient spiritual technology that we have ignored and discarded - stamped out in fact - in our haste to conquer and gain dominion over our planet.**

**We mourn that loss now, as we yearn for authenticity, as we discover the need for community and the need to connect with the sources of our sustenance, both physical and spiritual. Self-declared shamans discover small, broken shards of these once grand and sophisticated technologies and we flock to them in search for the way home. We know so little, really, of this landscape of interdependence. And the need is so great.**

**At seventy-four, I am approaching the threshold of becoming an elder. I could wish for some wisdom to go with it. My sojourn in the rain forest has been the beginnings of an**

**exploration of what it's like when such a one opens (finally) to Spirit.**

**It seems somehow fitting that now my eyesight begins to blur with cataracts, that much of what I hear also blurs into background noise. I can't find some of the words that used to be so important to me when I want them.**

**I loosen my grasp on the details in the urge to look beyond for a picture big enough to encompass everything and into which everything fits, even the clearcut. Without the clearcut, I wonder to myself, would I even be able to see or experience the wilderness? To stand in awe of it? To be petrified into moments of aesthetic arrest in the face of its powerful and poignant beauty? In truth, I think the starkness of the contrast, like the fear, may be necessary. Just like light cannot be understood in the absence of darkness. And just like I most certainly wouldn't be able to appreciate the gift of life were it not for the fact of death.**

**I take comfort in that.**