



Living Earth Community

Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing

EDITED BY

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13. Imaginal Ecology

Brooke Williams

Looking back over my adult life, most of it has been about wildness — wandering in wild places, or wondering how to save them.

Years ago, I came to the conclusion that we need to save wild places because they save us. According to Henry David Thoreau, ‘in Wildness is the Preservation of the world’;¹ I spend most of my time thinking about why this is true. Contemplating this has led me to Carl Jung and the collective unconscious. I read everything I could find on the subject, including a book called *The Earth Has a Soul: The Nature Writing of Carl Jung*, edited by Meredith Sabini, a psychologist working in Berkeley, California.² She was very kind to me and tried to answer my questions.

Through her, I came to better understand the collective unconscious as a container for the entire evolutionary history of our species, including all we’ve ever needed to save ourselves. Natural history is key to understanding how our exposure to the wild world provides access to the collective unconscious. Those who choose to study this are, therefore, ‘Imaginal Ecologists’.

One day, we were talking on the phone. She said, ‘my colleagues and I have been talking about you.’

‘Hmmm,’ I said. ‘Why?’

‘Our sense is that whenever our species has been in trouble, the collective unconscious rises to the surface to help us, in often surprising ways.’

1 Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walking’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 9.56 (1862), 657–74, available to read online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>

2 Carl Gustav Jung, *The Earth Has a Soul: The Nature Writing of Carl Jung*, ed. by Meredith Sabini (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2002).

'Yes?' I said.

'When someone as naïve as you starts asking so many questions, we must really be in trouble.'

I took that as a compliment.

Part of a book I'm currently working on is about dragonflies, based on fifteen years of the notes I've taken recording my encounters with dragonflies. These encounters began with a dream I had involving the image of a dragonfly.

My chief interest in dragonflies, beyond the fact that they're such amazing biological creatures, is that, since they are born in water where they may live as nymphs for years before emerging as adults, symbolically, they are seen as the messengers between worlds, bringing contents from our inner unconscious into consciousness. Water, to renowned psychologist, Carl Jung, 'is the commonest symbol for the unconscious'.³

I had planned to recount more dragonfly stories for this anthology, but changed my mind. Instead, I would like to invite you to participate in an exercise for invoking imaginal ecology that I often do with my students.

So. Please stand with your knees slightly bent. Breathe deeply a few times... three counts in, hold it for three counts. Then exhale slowly for four counts. Then hold for four more.

(Thirty seconds pass).

You are in a dark basement. This basement is so dark you cannot see your hand that is waving in front of your face. You stand motionlessly, not wanting to bump into anything. (A few seconds pass). Your eyes adjust to the darkness and you are able to differentiate shapes around you. And then, in the distance, across a large room, you see slivers of light entering through the cracks forming around what seems to be door. You walk toward the door.

You feel the surface of the door, hoping to find a knob, which you do, midway down near the right side.

Turning the knob frees the door and pulling it toward you floods the room with bright sunlight.

3 Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 18.

The sunlight is so bright that you shield your eyes from the brilliant and burning whiteness.

Your eyes adjust and you realize that you are standing at the bottom of a staircase. Describe that staircase. What is it made of? How many steps can you see?

Stepping up onto the first step, you look down and notice your foot? Is this actually 'your' foot? Is it covered? If so, by what?

You walk up the steps.

From the top step you see, spread out in front of you, a familiar landscape. Describe it.

Looking down, you see that you stand at the beginning of a path. Describe this path.

You step out and begin walking along this path.

In the distance you see someone or something moving toward you on the same path.

As you move closer to this other being, you see that it is an ancestor. Who or what is this ancestor?

You meet.

Your ancestor has a gift for you. What is this gift?

You thank your ancestor for the gift just given, turn, and walk back along the path the way you have come.

Where the path ends, you step onto the stairs and walk down. You enter the basement through the same door, shutting it behind you. Once again you find yourself in the dark room.

The light comes on.

The conference had a different feel from others I'd attended. The setting — with its beautiful art and gardens, the 'basket room' where our sessions were held — became for me the perfect container. The people, so open and ready, made me feel that I was part of some strange and wonderful family. I felt a nearly immediate bond with everyone, and had the strong sense that everyone there was looking out into the world wondering how, or if, their work contributed to a better understanding of how we might make it through this dangerous moment in earth's history, due mainly to the impact climate change is having on all life, and the US Government's refusal to acknowledge it.

After my presentation, many participants approached me to tell me what had happened to them during the exercise: mainly describing who their 'ancestor' was, and the gift they'd been given. While I hold those conversations in confidence, I'm comfortable describing my experience. I'll begin with the exact notes I made that day.

The stairway. How weird. It was paved, like an old highway with a double yellow line up the middle. Crumbling a bit at the edges. Abandoned, re-routed for efficiency, perhaps. A symbol of the two-lane roads I've always said were important in the desert to get between places of importance.

My foot/the shoe, a strange-colored Chuck Taylor autographed high top. At one time in my life, I wore them for everything — basketball, but also squash. I ran in them and wore them while hiking in the desert. I always waited for them to go on sale when I would buy three or four pairs.

The landscape, looking west on Highway 50–6 between Green River and Wellington, Utah, the two distant perfect buttes, I've only recently discovered.

The path, a recently graded dirt road through the very dry desert, wide enough for a large vehicle. Lined by low-lying, yellowing plants. Curving to the left.

The ancestor, an older, unknown bright-eyed woman — someone who looked like Julianne Warren might a few decades from now. She wore a flowing brightly colored dress or coat.

The gift. She leaned in and whispered into my right ear: '*My gift to you is perpetual spring*'. I sensed that she was not referring to the season but rather the feeling of moving from the dark and cold into the light and new life. The hope that this brings. She may as well have said 'perpetual hope'...

I am thinking back on this experience now, nearly four months later. Once again, I'm astounded by the degree to which every moment of life, if considered, if *attended to*, is filled with symbols such as these. Because of the temporal distance between me and this experience, I now find myself comfortable not trying to recreate what these symbols meant back in October. These symbols are 'active' in that they're alive; they will 'shift' the story to one I need now.

I like that idea of *attending* to life, of *paying attention* to it. Where does this concept of *paying* attention come from... as if buying something? No, as if giving up something to acquire something else? Is this what *paying* attention is?

So, I return first to the **stairway**. I wrote recently that nothing says post-apocalyptic like a crumbling highway. This is what comes to me today. That the stairway in my 'dream' was a crumbling highway suggests that it would soon disappear; it hadn't, because of some massive shift in priorities, been maintained. And where once it was a well-used 'way' from one place to the next, it had long ago been forgotten, and had thus fallen into disrepair. The 'way' between the lower dark world and the bright upper world, once obvious, well-known and constantly used, had been abandoned. The 'way' still exists. My job is to repair and maintain it and encourage people to begin using it once again.

The **shoe**. My memory suggests that the Chuck Taylor All Stars I wore in my 'dream' weren't so old as they were intended to look old. Fashionable, in the way things like distressed jeans are these days. Something 'old' and forgotten has come back to be popular. I noted that during the sessions in the library on the last day of, Mitch Thomashow, one of the conference participants, wore grey, modern, Chuck Taylors to make his presentation. Two things occur to me. First, that I was wearing shoes that were once popular and very useful and have recently become fashionable again, may coincide with the stairway — *my job is not only to repair and maintain the 'way' between worlds, but also to personally move quickly and precisely along it*; after all, Chuck Taylor's are still athletic shoes. Second: wearing someone's shoes could mean seeing that person as an example for my future. That these shoes were once mine and now Mitch's fascinates me. Mitch and I are about the same age. Mitch has been on an amazing path as an educator, writer, wanderer, and wonderer. That I wore these specific shoes in this 'dream' suggests that I might find out more about Mitch, that I might discover something in/about him that *resonates* for me as I move forward.

('Resonate', as I use it here, is a feeling that an idea or image 'fits' into place. I also like the term 'register', which is a printing term meaning 'the exact correspondence of position of color plates'. The best way I can describe it is a roulette wheel with all the holes representing possibilities. My inquiry is the silver ball that bounces among all possible answers



Fig. 7 Unnamed Buttes South of Wellington, Utah. Photo by Terry Tempest Williams (2019).

before falling into the perfect hole. The sound the ball makes as it drops into the hole — that is what I mean by ‘register’ or ‘resonate’).

The **landscape**. I’ve driven that highway section fifty times but never noticed those perfect buttes until last October, driving north from our home in Castle Valley to fly out of Salt Lake City for the conference. I looked for the buttes the next two trips but didn’t see them. Finally, driving back home after the holidays, moving slowly, we saw them — the bright sunlight faded the background, setting them apart in contrast. Barely higher than their surroundings, they seemed vaguely like the twin buttes for which Bears Ears National Monument is named. My sense is that these ‘new’ buttes are in some capacity my own personal ‘Bears Ears’. While I’ve driven by the actual buttes referred to as ‘Bears Ears’ for years, until we began working on National Monument status for the area surrounding them, I had no idea of their role in stories from the deepest past. The Bears Ears buttes represent the ‘sacralizing’ of that place. Of all the land conservation issues I’ve been involved in over the past four decades, Bears Ears may be the most important, because of the emphasis on sacred lands. I believe that this issue is intended to

show (or, indeed, remind) us Anglos the importance of 'sacred lands'. According to the native peoples involved in this monument designation, 'It is time'. These new twin buttes demand my attention. I'm making plans to walk out to them during my next trip. My wife, Terry, took a photo (see Fig. 7).

The path. The dirt road in my 'dream' was much like many of those I documented during my time as a 'Field Advocate' for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, a decade ago. Thousands of miles of these roads crisscross western deserts, most made in early efforts to exploit the area's resources. My job was to 'ground truth' maps — to identify which of the 'roads' shown on the maps still exist on the ground. In my dream, the 'road' (my path) has been recently 'improved', as it is lined on each side by spill from the grader. The degraded condition of the plants indicates late summer drought. Symbolically, I use this road to access desert resources. What resources am I looking for? I realize that lately I've been wondering about *desert wisdom*, and about how early seeds for Islam, Judaism, and Catholicism were planted by the 'Desert Fathers'. I'm searching for an understanding of what *exactly* that 'wisdom' comprises. It, once defined, may be the most valuable desert resource yet.

My ancestor. My recently graded road/path allowed me access to my ancestor, a beautiful mature woman — how I imagine Julianne Warren in a few decades. And if the road had really been graded to enable the extraction of the 'desert wisdom' resource, then this ancestor must symbolize the embodiment of that resource. Recalling my vision from October, I sensed her creativity based on her confidence and colorful clothes. The positive energy emanating from her attracted me. Today, I see this woman as my muse and wonder why my muse appeared in my 'dream', and not an ancestor. But then I catch myself and recall what I've learned about our dead ancestors — that they may be out there all around us, knowing much that we don't know, and wanting to help us. A muse is a person, usually a woman, who is a source of artistic inspiration. A dead ancestor wanting to help could easily come in the form of a muse.

'My **gift** to you is *perpetual spring*'. My first thought is to wonder if, as I thought last October, my ancestor — my muse — referred to the season 'spring'. Or 'a spring', as in a continual font of pure water bubbling

up through the earth. Then, I realized, that she did not whisper ‘a perpetual spring’, but rather ‘perpetual spring’ — without the indefinite article — as in ‘springtime’. Once I sorted this out, I focused on the feeling I get during the first specific glimmers of spring — the way the light changes and the smell of that moment when I turn the first water onto the trees we’ve planted. And the different warmth coming from the sun. The sounds of the first meadowlarks singing from the tops of the sage. Today, writing this in Cambridge, Massachusetts, blanketed in last night’s fresh snow, these images of spring do not send me longing for the future, but imbue me with a strong and vivid sense of possibility and positivity. If, like the months, I keep moving forward into the future.

I use this exercise in the college courses that I teach. Often, different elements generated by it become significant elements in the stories the students write. I always tell them that I’m not sure where these images come from. I’m not sure if truly paying attention has any evolutionary value, but I’m also not sure that it doesn’t. ‘I know one thing’, I tell them, ‘ — that we don’t seem to have solutions for all the problems we’re creating. We need to learn how to dream new solutions.’ I don’t know that this exercise has anything to do with that. But I don’t know that it doesn’t.

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