

As I drive up the canyon of the Rio Grande on these Sunday mornings, there comes a time when I rise up out of the depths, turn a corner, and the whole of the Taos plateau stretches out before me, split by the Rio Grande gorge as a bolt of lightning splits the sky.

It's an amazing sight, and no matter how many times I see it, it never fails to take my breath away. And it's never the same twice.

The light is different – sometimes hazy with dust, sometimes bright and clear, the angle of the sun changing with the time of year. The sky can be blue, or filled with puffy white clouds, or storm-laden and dark with a thousand shades of grey. The land can be browner, or greener, or dusted with white. The far peaks are dusky purple, dark jade, or capped with snow.

This palette of color and light and texture is painted upon the canvas of the land – the plateau, the gorge, the mountains, the sagebrush, the junipers and pinons, the elms, the cottonwoods.

And there's something else that happens as I turn the corner, something odd. The view seems to both expand outward into the distance, and simultaneously compress around me. As if I've passed through some invisible prism that bends not the light, but my being, as I pass through it. Once on the other side, my normal perspective returns, yet I cannot shake the sense that I've arrived in another world.

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For most of our existence as a species, human beings have been inextricably tied to the landscape. Most of us lived and died within a few dozen miles of where we were born. Our identity was grounded in our home place and we knew it intimately - it's geography, it's plants and animals, it's weather and climate. And it knew us.

All these being things had names, and we had names.

And they all spoke to us, and we spoke back.

This conversation was more like song or lyric poetry, rich and descriptive and complex. Sometimes fast like a hummingbirds wings. Sometimes slow like mountains breathing. Sometimes it whispered, sometimes it thundered.

Each place had its own poetry, its own language, its own chorus of voices, that expressed the power of that place.

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In its fullest sense, the term "place" includes not only the geographical location and natural environment, but the history of human presence and before. "Place" includes the people living there now, and, as in all poetry, the voice of the speaker of the poem.

As Leslie Marmon Silko says, "Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on." The speaker may be passing through, or better yet, a longtime resident of a place whose utterance might be instantly recognizable to other residents, while simultaneously offering insight to strangers resident elsewhere.

When we arrive at a place, the first thing we do is learn the many names of things.

Here are a few local names in English, Spanish, Tiwa and Tewa. I ask your forgiveness in advance for my poor pronunciation of some of these.

Taos Pueblo is so named for the Taos people, who called it "Tuah-Tah". They spoke Tiwa, and they also called it 'ialaphai, "red willow trees". The Tewa called it Thawi'i "the gap where they live".

Pueblo Peak is called Maqwaluna by the Taos people, and is sacred to them.

Arroyo Hondo (deep wash in Spanish) is known to the Tewa as Ko-bu-ts'i'i "barranco dell canyon", while the Taos call it P'a-tsiyu-haeluna "water cicada arroyo".

Tres Piedras (Three Stones in Spanish) is called 'mountain-sheep rocks' in both Taos and Tewa: in Taos "Kuwahiuna" and in Tewa "Kuwak'u".

Some names stay the same. The names for the Rio Grande also mean "big river" in many of the indigenous tongues.

So many names. The names carry the history and complexity. We all answer to many names. How many names do you have? How many do you answer to? Which is your true name?

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The second thing we do is listen. By listening we hope to understand the languages being spoken around us.

We try to become local.

Localization is the counter-balance to globalization.

As Wendell Berry points out in *The Unsettling of America*, our culture and our literature glamorize moving on, lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest, as opposed to staying in one place and knowing it so well we become a part of it.

A "Glamour" in the old language was a spell cast on someone to hide reality from them. Glamour is not beauty, not reality. Glamour is an exciting and illusory romantic attractiveness.

Pick up a copy of Cosmo or Arizona Highways, and you'll know what I mean. Everything is airbrushed and Photo-shopped into unreal perfection, a false ideal, a false idol.

This spell makes us ignore or diminish that which does not fit the glamour. This spell makes us ignore or diminish the places that do not fit the glamour. This spell keeps us from seeing past the illusion into the beauty of the real.

"In this hemisphere," writes Scott Russell Sanders in *Staying Put*, "many of the worst abuses—of land, forests, animals, and communities—have been carried out by 'people who root themselves in ideas rather than places.'"

The deep ecologist Paul Shepard thought that the lack or denial of our connection to the plants and animals in a given place makes us crazy. Rootless, detached people are dangerous. On the other hand, sanity happens when people understand that where they are is who they are.

Real people and real landscapes aren't perfect. Real people, like those of us in this room, and those we know and love, come in all shapes and sizes. Our skin isn't perfect. We aren't always smiling. We smell funny. We sag. We are scarred and bent. We don't fit into false ideals of beauty and idealized places. Real landscapes are the same way. They have power lines and roads running across them. Or they're tangled and uneven and drab. Or they're full of spiky things and rocks. Real beauty is not perfect and it's not glamorous.

The real landscape includes us, with all our imperfections. The real landscape includes our roads and quarries and canals and buildings. It includes the farthest mountain peaks and where we sit, and everything in between. It includes all creatures, great and small. It includes the history and the layers of the past. It is a community of being and time, and we are only a small part of the whole.

In the words of Wendell Berry: *I believe that the community - in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures - is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.*

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The representation of nonhuman realities may be the greatest challenge of all. The language of myth, especially in the shape-shifting Paleolithic imagination, may be the closest we have come to a verbal representation of animals and landscape. In the Paleolithic world, as described by

Calvin Martin, the human relation to nature is direct, intimate, physical, and spiritual in an animistic sense.

How do we listen without attributing human emotion or motives to nature, inanimate objects, or animals?

Yet how can we deny that our animal cousins feel hunger, grief, and terror? That they play in the waters and the skies, feel companionship with each other? I've seen the ravens in the trees, watching the sunset together.

How can we deny that kinship, that affection?

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Because we are kin, when the places and creatures we love are wounded, we hurt too. And because we don't like pain, our tendency is to turn away, to not be present with it. I think we consider some places to be ugly just because they are painful to look at. Painful to be with. So we turn our eyes away. We turn our hearts away. We abandon them. But there is beauty there.

Part of our obligation is the breaking of the spell of industrial civilization. To remove the glamour from our eyes so that we may see the real, and the beauty of the real with all its imperfections, and return to healthy relationship with it.

And perhaps fall in love with the world again.

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Let me share with you these words written in 1908 by Gerhart Hauptmann. Bear in mind that he's an old European dude, and he's got more than a few biases, but he's definitely onto something here:

Gods and demigods wedded with every white mountain-peak, every vale and valley, every tree and shrub, every river and spring, made everything holy. Holy was all that is above and on and in the earth. And round about her the sea was likewise holy. Why are we afraid and despise as trivial to sing of our landscapes, mountains, rivers, and valleys, yes, even to mention their names? Because all these things, which, as being Nature, having been regarded as works of the devil for a thousand years, have never truly been reconsecrated.

The people and the land used to be bound into circles of love. Then about fifteen hundred years ago, there was a very nasty divorce, and things got a little crazy. Bad things got said, things that could never be taken back, like this business of the world being an evil, fallen place. All the Earth's children suffered, and the human children in particular got pretty messed up by it.

Now, I know many of you may not think in these terms, and this may all seem a little woo. But sometimes woo matters. Symbolic acts matter, or most of us wouldn't have bothered with marriage ceremonies. Symbolic acts matter in the depths of our being, because healing the soul and the world starts there in the depths - where symbol and archetype and ritual do their invisible work.

And the language of the depths is poetry and metaphor and mythic imagination.

Who speaks the poetry of a place? In color and motion and form and texture and time – it is the land and air and water and beings of that place.

To speak it in words is our gift and our responsibility. To speak it eloquently, lyrically, is to invoke the power of that place in our hearts, to reconsecrate the lost connections, to wed ourselves to it, become healthy and sane again.

But wait you say... I am not a poet!

You are, we are. We are all of us poets. This is the human gift. We're just out of practice.

My invitation... no, the invitation of this place you live in, that we live in... is to learn to speak and write anew. To swim against the tide of unadorned language, to fight the tyranny of 140 characters and the short form, to resist the reduction of the rich and complex world around us to stark simplicity.

Listen to this place and its beings. Listen with your eyes and ears and skin and heart. Learn new words and old names. Start tossing beautiful adjectives and multisyllabic words into your daily language. Bring new beats and rhythms into your speaking. Be playful. Ignore those who look at you askance. The world has given you permission to be eloquent, and if some people find that weird, so be it.

You're a poet. Know it.

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I'll close with some guidance from 13th century Zen Master Dogen:

Although we say that mountains belong to the country, actually they belong to those who love them. When the mountains love their owners, the wise and virtuous inevitably enter the mountains. And when sages and wise ones live in the mountains, because the mountains belong to them, trees and rocks flourish and abound, and the birds and beasts take on a supernatural excellence.