Are humans a part of nature, or somehow separate and distinct? Our unique abilities: to reason, to develop tools and to manipulate our environment can lead us to believe that we stand apart from what is natural. All human societies erect barriers between the social and the merely natural, distinctions between that which is civilized and that which is wild. A disposition develops about the proper relationship between these two categories. This relationship can be healthy or it can be dreadfully confused. In our era of climate controlled living rooms, where the closest many get to wilderness may be a documentary streamed on Netflix while huddled under a blanket in our dorm, our complete separation from nature is all too easy to assume. In the essays that comprise *A Sand County Almanac*, ecologist and philosopher Aldo Leopold argues beautifully and thoughtfully that this tendency is both misguided and self-destructive; we must take great care to resist it. Humans are surely a part of nature, and it is only by recognizing our place the natural order that we may begin to solve our most wicked ecological problems: “When we come to see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (Leopold xix). Anything short of this is not merely a failure to understand our world accurately, a failure fraught with both physical and spiritual danger.

Ecosystems comprise a ceaseless exchange of energy and matter. To explain this perpetual cycle, Leopold employs the metaphor of the “Round River”: a tributary unto itself. “Wisconsin not only had a round river, Wisconsin is one” (189). So are all environments, everywhere, and comprising all things. Humans are distinct insofar as we have a special ability to modify our environments, but this does not make us supernatural. Our ability reshape the world around us
tempts us to a high opinion of ourselves. It does not separate us from what is natural; we can, as Leopold puts it “burl the Round River”, but we remain in the stream nonetheless.

We have confused our ability to modify with the ability to transcend; we are skillful mammals who have convinced ourselves of our godhood. We believe that we are distinct from nature, that our decisions about how we interact with our environment should be economic, a calculation about what is useful for human beings. When what is natural is economical, there is no problem. When the natural world is inconvenient, we act with vengeance. Leopold demonstrates this poetically when he describes an encounter he has early in his career as a wildlife management official. As he and his colleagues are taking their lunch on a ridge, they see a wolf crossing the river below them. The men conceive of predators like wolves as competition for game: if fewer wolves means more deer, eradicating their lupine competitors would result in a hunter’s paradise. The men unload their weapons on the creature, and Leopold approaches “just in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in its eyes” (138). This green fire chills the young man, and, in time, Leopold writes, he came to understand just what that fire represented: a true understanding of the inherent connection that all creatures share. It was the wisdom a sense of our interdependence with all that nature holds.

In Leopold’s essays, thinking of nature only in terms of instrumental value to human beings is held as unethical and unsustainable. Leopold insists that our failure to understand our intimate and indivisible connection with nature is a “spiritual danger” (Leopold 6). The limits of nature can be stretched; they cannot be transcended. Every human action sends a ripple effect through our environment. We have forgotten how to think this way. The green fire eludes us. Our actions are misguided, led as they are by a belief in our right to bend nature to our will. The results,
Leopold points out, are disheartening: “hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea.”

Modern barriers obscure the relationship between humanity and nature, but the constituent relationship of the former to the latter becomes clear upon study and reflection. Belief that food comes from a grocery or that heat comes from a furnace: these are the manifestations of our failure to see our position accurately. The more that we understand about nature and about ourselves, the more that we come to understand that we are but “fellow travelers on the journey of evolution” (Leopold 117). Leopold argues that this instinct in humans is fundamental: surely we feel an affinity for our natural kin, why else would we mourn extinction? Leopold writes of a monument erected in his state to the carrier pigeon, hunted to extinction in the early 20th century. They died to leave us better fed, better clothed: “perhaps we grieve because we are not sure, in our hearts, that we have gained much by the exchange” (Leopold 116). This specific failure reflects the more general one: our conception of ourselves as apart from and against nature.

Whence comes this failure to understand our relationship with nature? Leopold traces it to a desire, biological or psychological, for security: “we all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness… peace in our time” (141). This last phrase is, of course, an unsettling historical allusion, one which would have been quite evident to Leopold’s contemporaries. Here was the promise made by the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to the people of Britain after the Munich Conference: Peace in Our Time. The Western powers, war weary after the Great War, were willing to accommodate Adolf Hitler’s demand for territory in the Sudetenland. They were willing to acquiesce, to avoid war, to safeguard this same “comfort, long life, and dullness”. Leopold is being deliberately evocative. Is an ever higher standard of living, ever more material
prosperity and security, worth the cost, always? We set humanity apart from nature, and battle against it. We think ourselves adversaries, conquerors. Perhaps we will find, as Plutarch writes Pyrrhus did when he overcame the Romans at Asculum, that our victory is also our undoing: “If we are victorious in one more battle… we shall be utterly ruined” (Thayer).

Leopold certainly seems to think so. Unchecked material progress will lead to our ruin, precisely because we have failed to consider how much we are a part of nature. We must come to understand how vital what is natural is to us: it is a part of us, and we it. Our “spiritual danger”, our failures, are an existential threat. Leopold suggests that our salvation lies in correct reasoning, in recognizing the truth of the matter: humans belong to a community. This community comprises all the denizens of the natural world. As such, humans have both rights and responsibilities that we must not neglect. Like the grief we felt for the carrier pigeon, we must expand our moral concern for all of our partners in the community of nature.

This is a solution to our conceptual failure, what he deems the Land Ethic (237-264). It is radical in its challenges to modern doctrine. Ethics must be expanded not only to include how my decisions might affect other people in our immediate group, but actions must be considered for their impact on the community of nature. It takes intellectual work to make this conceptual correction, to expand the scope of our moral reasoning. Leopold gently exhorts the reader to consider their place in the natural world in a way that most people have not.

Leopold presents the evocative cases, like that of the carrier pigeon, because they make us feel strongly. It is important to note that we do not always seek to abuse nature, but we are often ambivalent towards it. We are not outraged at egregious overreaches in the name of prosperity because we are largely ignorant that they have even taken place. This is precisely why clarity about our place in the natural world is so elusive: we have placed many barriers between modern
comfort and the natural world. As a tonic to the alienating effects of modern society, Leopold suggests his reader spend a little time in the wilderness (119-124, 264-279). It is in the wilderness, where every decision and interaction with the earth has immediate and urgent consequences, that we can fix our conceptions of ourselves. When one chops wood for a fire they have no illusions that heat comes from a furnace. In wilderness, we can begin to understand our essential synchronicity with the environment, and thus the respect due to all of nature’s constituent parts.

*A Sand County Almanac* was published in 1949. How much progress has been made toward repairing our self-conception? We still seem rather tempted to believe that safety and security are well worth their cost in things natural. We are still believers in our ability to fix the stream of the round river to our liking. Perhaps the hope is that we will develop such great technology as to escape its flow altogether. While there is a sense of guilt, the trouble has yet to subside. Others have joined the cutleaf Silphium, the passenger pigeon, and the wolf in whose eyes Leopold watched the green fire die as collateral damage in the long hard drive for prosperity.

If our relationship with nature is adversarial, we will see it as an obstacle to overcome, and never feel for it the affinity is its due. If our relationship is administrative or ambivalent, we will seek only options that are ostensibly beneficial for humans. When we see ourselves as having obligations to nature as part of a community then will we begin to see the issue clearly. Only then will we understand that “peace in our time” may not be all that it is promised. Sometimes sacrifices must be made; we must be worthy of our challenges. This time, however, the enemy is not the storm trooper, threatening our way of life. Now the challenge is our own judgement, our own conceptual failure. Happily, our reason, unlike nature, is something that we can control, our
selfishness something that we can transcend. Let us, then, strike out into the wilderness. There, in
by the light of the green fire, we may begin to see clearly once again.

Works Cited


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