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Ed Davis

Beyond Imagining: The Heart of the Wild

Wild. A trip to my *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* recently led me into an exploration of shades of the word's meaning. For instance, there's the neutral sounding "not living with or under the control of humans, not tame or domesticated . . . growing freely without human intervention." Then the definitions shade negative with "desolate, irregular, erratic, dissolute . . . fierce, savage, violent, cruel," only to take a turn toward the light with "pleasingly unconventional." Then things get really interesting with "going beyond the bounds of what is prudent or reasonable; rash; fantastically absurd or unreasonable . . . 'in or beyond one's wildest dreams.'" Finally: "*in or beyond one's most fantastic or unrestrained imagining or expectations*" (emphasis mine).

Whoa.

Too often we shrink from going beyond what is "prudent" in social, financial and political matters. However, we can be so damn reasonable all the time that we have to do those "fantastic" "unrestrained things," even if to others they'll seem "absurd," even risky or dangerous. Do the "wild" woods make some of us "rash, imprudent, unreasonable" and "fantastically absurd?" Absurd like . . . ingesting psilocybin? I only did it once, on my thirtieth birthday, when a friend and I wandered a snowy farm in West Virginia in December, entering Oz, where I witnessed a flaming No-Hunting sign, a crying tree and a tiny, intricate snow castle. My senses temporarily left the planet. The silver-blue sky pulsed radiance above us, and the chocolate-covered almonds my buddy handed me tasted as if they'd been plucked from the Milky Way. But these days I don't need 'shrooms. I enter that magical realm any time I want, upon reaching the bottom of stone stairs taking me straight to the heart of my wild, sacred sanctuary: Glen Helen, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

By the time I reach the bottom of the 126 stone stairs and take my first step into the Glen, her energy enters me and begins to change, first, my brain, then my mind; my spirit will follow. Not only can I not hate in this place, but even fear blurs into surrender, curiosity, compassion and I'm home on this day in late February—not a single day but a composite consisting of several from the past few years.

At the bridge across Yellow Springs Creek, I probe the water for gigantic carp that sometimes linger in the shallows there, then glance up to see if my heron friend might be standing, stoic and statuesque, upon his downed tree. (Not today, though his image flashes for a second.) I wave at his ghost. Maybe next time. After treading carefully through the mud beyond the bridge, I reach the first fork in the path.

The path left, which would lead me down the new cedar boardwalk winding up to the yellow spring, makes me waver. After all, that iron-rich water streaming down the beautiful man-made sculpture into a rusty-gold pool is the source of healing waters that even early Shawnees recognized as powerful—and mysterious—since no other local springs in Greene or adjoining counties are iron-bearing to any degree. Maybe the very presence of the mineral in the water accounts partly for the springs' magic, whose waters, "palatable, cold, clear and sparkling, containing . . . chrysaline particles" were, for many years, touted as cures for "chronic

constipation, scrofula, dyspepsia, rheumatism and many other diseases,” according to James Galloway’s *The History of Glen Helen*.

Elevating the curative water’s status from healthy to medicinal enhanced its commercial value, so that, during the 1860s, the creek was dammed right off present-day U.S. Rt. 68, a lake was formed and hotels and cottages were built. Soon enough it became a vacation spot as well a health resort to many Cincinnatians and Kentuckians; in its heyday, according to Clarence Leuba’s *Guide to Historical Spots in Glen Helen*, upwards of 5,000 people wandered the Glen. Folks came from as far away as Kentucky for the vaunted water cure and hung around for something else that these natural surroundings still evoke so powerfully in many, including myself. *And what is that?*

Some days I’m here simply for a cardiovascular workout, and I’ve got a route that gives me four steep hills, no mean feat for flat Ohio; other days, I need a spiritual fix. Today it’s the latter, so I veer right, striding quickly to the stepping stones across Birch Creek, their placement precarious since a furious storm two years ago rearranged them and carved deep gullies into the main path meandering beside the creek up to the Pine Forest.

But I do not choose that wide, much-traveled trail today. As has been my habit the last few years, I turn left, hang an immediate right, pass between the chain-sawed halves of a huge downed oak and ascend the stone staircase I call the Tolkien Rocks in honor of the revered author of my wife’s favorite novel. Now, gripping the branch bannister, I heave myself up onto the first flat stone, stretch to the next and the next, following Frodo in a race to the summit where, having evaded black riders, we’ll scan the forest floor and plot the rest of our journey from the Shire to Bree then Rivendell and finally the safety of elves.

As always, I’m panting by the time I attain the heights, scramble over stone slabs that have slipped their positions, my glutes screaming in delicious agony. Once at the top, I see a grey coyote headed straight toward me through the forest understory. At the last second, he changes trajectory and disappears, leaving me to wonder if I’d really seen him. Another ghost like my great blue heron?

Ahead, the path tiptoes along the rim high above the lower trail, and I’m raked by windy claws, turtling inside my collar, glad I wore my knit hat. Skirting the cliff, I survey stacks of limestone, small stone islands broken off from the bluff where, one recent November election day in unseasonable seventy degrees, I saw a guy lying in a portable hammock, sipping (I fancied) a margarita, literally on the rocks. Admiring him for choosing sun over politics and not wanting to intrude on his solitude, I walked on.

I soon descend a short slope feeding into the connector path between upper and lower trails; I’m only on it a few seconds before taking a left, crossing the Traveler Spring and heading up a bank as steep as the Tolkien Rocks but without benefit of stairs, my nose not that far from the ground. But I’ve learned to look up before achieving the summit. Years ago, I arrived at the top, panting, head bowed, lifting my eyes to find a trio of deer reclined like cats, legs tucked beneath them, watching me with calm interest. I felt I’d arrived at the portal between civilized and wild. Extending the same respect as I’d given the hammocked human, I eased by, feeling their warm, dark eyes on my back. I tried not to make too much of our meeting; if I’m not careful, I analyze nature like a book, forcing signs and symbols from its every paragraph and punctuation mark. If meaning arises organically, great; if not, I’ve learned, I should probably leave it alone, so I walk on.

Between green walls of two main paths, I feel the first touch of true solitude, for this upper trail is traversed by few; it's where I leave behind casual Glen-tasters who linger within sight of the stone staircase back up to the parking lot. Fine with me, for this upper middle path is where, on most days, I begin to experience something more enduring and real. Another presence—Shawnee forebears, God, maybe even the spirit of these woods—walks with me while unseen birds urge me on. Occasionally I'm treated to the sight of some huge-winged raptor flap-landing on a high bough. Trees crowd close by this narrower path, observing me without eyes but not without interest, especially when, veering off-path to pee, I find myself looking up at sycamore, beech or shagbark hickory. The trees abide, assuring me it's okay to do what's natural here. The body's water is fine, but plastic—Styrofoam and candy wrappers I occasionally find—are a sad betrayal (stowed in my pack for carrying out).

Why is it, I wonder for the thousandth time, that I want trees to signify the divine? Silence, strength and soaring height are obvious answers. Their reverent hush is every bit as rich as that of a vast library with oak bookcases facing floor to ceiling windows. But unlike a room, I can neither see through nor above this winter-grey grove. Walking among them, I wonder, as I did with the deer family, how I must look to them: anxious, angry, care-stricken? I hope I am more pitiable than pitiful. I try to refrain from requiring these trees to mirror me the way I consciously or unconsciously do everything and everyone else I encounter, if I'm not careful. If I just relax and let them be, these beings reveal exactly what they are, and accept me for what I am—or could be—if I will just shut up. Many days I've been a better man among these trees than anywhere else. They've taught me it's best if I put on hold values inscribed onto my soul by the sharp pen of civilization and let others emerge.

Speaking of civilization, this Glen has a history of attracting society's discontents, obsessed with finding joy not only for themselves but also for others. Glen Helen has been home to some interesting cults. The first arrived in 1825, when British industrialist Robert Owen founded his utopian Owenite community, which hoped to “change [society] from an ignorant, selfish system to an enlightened social system . . . [uniting] all individuals into one and [removing] all causes for contest between individuals,” according to Leuba. Despite building a commodious building to house people and their common goods on their 750-farm consuming much of the present-day North Glen, the community disbanded after only two years. Later on there'd be other utopians to make Owen and his ilk seem tame.

In 1856, during Horace Mann's tenure as Antioch College's first president, Dr. Thomas L. Nichols and his wife Mary, from Cincinnati, opened, despite fervent protest from town and gown, the Memnonia Institute at the old Water Cure facility site, “a sort of school-of-life . . . a nucleus of a new society along communitarian lines.” It was rumored to also include “free love as a sort of spiritualism doctrine” and that's where trouble began.

At that time, President Mann required male and female students to hike in the Glen on alternate days. No one must've been surprised, then, when he threatened to resign lest he see this “superfoetation of diabolism upon polygamy” take up residence in his chaste Glen. But, according to the society, whose motto was “Freedom, Fraternity, Chastity,” they had been sorely misunderstood. As Galloway explains, “so far as ‘Memnonia’ being a seat of sexual license, it inaugurated in its actual life the asceticism and celibacy which afterwards carried its leading characters into the Church of Rome.” As indeed it did, says Leuba, for Mrs. Nichols “saw a spirit announcing her husband was a Jesuit; thus, she and her husband immediately rushed off to study the history of the Catholic order, bringing this curious cult to a sudden and ignominious

end.” Some days, I can sense the ghosts of idealistic deep thinkers and free lovers from the past lurking by these ancient healing waters. As well as more contemporary joy-seekers.

“Are you a ghost?” the young man asks as I approach him on the path to the Pine Forest, planted by the Ohio Division of Forestry in the 1920s. I am tempted to laugh, but I don’t. He’s dead serious and could be a ghost himself, looking a bit like a twenty-first century Shawnee with his colorful poncho, black braids, ear buds and walking stick. “Nope, I’m real,” I reply as we draw abreast, then pass. After a few paces, I peek behind me to make sure he is real. I’ve been foxed before by this forest and its myriad manifestations; I’m still not entirely sure I saw, years ago while jogging in a thunderstorm, a completely naked man (except for a floppy hat). The after-image of his large, hairy belly lingers—perhaps he was a hobbit.

I shake off spider webs of memory and continue down the path. Taking a deep breath, I enter the Glen’s evergreen church. At its cathedral peak when I moved to Yellow Springs in 1980, the Pine Forest’s main sanctuary into which I step today has been much diminished by storms. I was especially shocked and saddened at the wreckage left by Hurricane Ike’s brutal winds, which made it all the way to Ohio in 2008. Thus, I was only somewhat consoled by Glen caretaker George Bieri’s claim that these pines are not native here and storms help the forest resort to its more natural state, clearly observable as holes in the canopy admit the sunlight stoking prolific growth of foliage among the log pews from which I’ve heard many a powerful crow sermon (which years ago inspired a poem):

*They carp, cajole and croak,
more cacophonous cough than growl . . .
sounding out consonants in
oily voices without vowels . . .
as they caucus and stew . . .
sonorous omen-givers all.*

I’m recalling human as well as inhuman events I’ve experienced here over the years: an October wedding when my wife and I sang our friends Jeff and Jane into wedded bliss; a summer reverie where I watched a squirrel fall stunned from high among the high branches, after which it took minutes for him to get his head back together and scamper off. I also saw here the most elaborate lean-to I’ve ever seen, constructed from downed branches and boughs and featuring two low, comfy cave-like rooms. It’s also not unusual to find blackened remains of fires, along with cigarette stubs and beer cans documenting moonlit gatherings (perhaps practitioners of President Mann’s lamented licentiousness!).

One afternoon a couple of years ago, I entered, lost in thought, and almost stumbled into a worn yellow couch sitting as forlornly as a sunflower on an assembly line. Stoic as ever, the pines absorbed this human folly with aplomb. I shook my head at the joke. Arriving home, I left a message for Glen Director Nick Boutis and the couch was gone by the next day. It was fun to imagine the pranksters parking at the preserve’s back entrance close to the school Christmas tree forest, muscling the monster out of the truck and walking it the equivalent of a couple of city blocks to its resting place, maneuvering among trees. However, I don’t think I would’ve been amused if removing it had been my problem.

In a smaller chapel just off the pine sanctuary, I greet the young tulip poplar I befriended last spring. Stroking its smooth bole, I gaze up into the crown with its hand-like leaves. It doesn’t

obviously respond, yet I still feel something good when I lay hands on this youngster. *Solidity. Solace. Spirit. Space.* I often pray and write here and sometimes just sit and soak up silence. It's impossible for me to be here and remain stressed. When I need to retreat from the world, the trees provide asylum, silence, total nonjudgment. I know that I'm not the only human who suspects that, on some level, trees know, feel and witness. And for me, this mixed evergreen temple, beneath sky rather than cathedral dome, with real rain and snow rather than stained glass separation, is the best place to commune with the wild.

Most days I'm content to hang out in the Pine Forest as long as I need to, then wind my way back down beside the creek and home, but not this day. Instead, I find my boots pulling me toward the last of Glen Helen's sacred places, high above the village.

Leaving the Glen for a moment, I cross Bryan Park Road and enter the field, mowed once or twice a summer, leading to the bronze statue of the innovative educator and Antioch College's first president (1853-1859). Horace Mann's statue, donated by Hugh Taylor Birch in 1936, depicts a flowing-robed, smiling man with hand outstretched. While I used to wonder what the monument's doing so far from campus, I know now that this field was part of Mann's farm. Nearby is a more prosaic monument to Hugh Taylor Birch, Antioch alumnus and father of Helen, after whom he named the crown eco-jewel of southwestern Ohio when he gifted Antioch with the preserve, comprised of many smaller contiguous land parcels he purchased and consolidated into this extraordinary gift. If Helen is the mother, then Hugh is the Glen's grandfather. God bless those who birthed such a lovely child!

Today I realize that the field itself retains some of the magic of Mann, who famously challenged students to "be ashamed to die until [they'd] won some victory for humanity," a hard creed still for students today on the campus of the school resurrected by alumni in 2011 after a three-year closure. My friend Dan, who introduced me to the Glen in 1977, once claimed he was sitting beneath Horace when he got the call to go to China and teach English (which he did after learning Chinese). Ever since hearing that, I've tried to snag a few phrases from the President and, while I can't point to anything as life changing as the directive Dan received, I do feel a powerful presence here. I wonder if it's not the unruly field, huge blue sky and solitariness as much as the image of Horace with his spiffy red-painted shoes (more pranksters). Leuba's Guide reminds me this area would be very different had not activists prevailed to block a plan to redirect State Route 68 through this part of the Glen. (God bless activists. Glen Helen as we know it today would not exist without the generosity of many kind visionaries.)

The empty field makes me think of the empty mind and wounded heart I took to college in 1970. It surely was the first step on the path leading me here, for which I'm amazed, grateful and graced. I ponder the unfurrowed field, with tall trees standing at its margins. For years plowed and planted, it's been only comparatively recently allowed to return to its natural state. I've certainly been plowed, planted and harvested, too, retired after 35 years of teaching college writing. Now I'm returning to a state something like this fallow ground. Am I free? Maybe not like a hawk or heron is free to ride sunshine and storm, but, yes, pretty free to be, here inside myself, inside being.

Hark: voices. From behind the statue, three joggers emerge, paying me no attention, either because they don't see me or they don't want to disturb the writer, a gift often bestowed on me in the forest. Passing me, they cross the field and I'm just returning to concentration, when the smell of cigarette smoke intrudes. Voices again, distinctly male, and I hear dogs panting, choke chains jangling. A bit canine phobic from being occasionally menaced here by loose dogs,

I fight down emotion that rises automatically, knowing they can scent fear that makes them bare fangs and bark furiously. Now they're on me, two husky yellow Labs, trailing leashes, before I can react. Today, I calmly accept my fate and apparently emit no negative pheromones, surrendering like the mouse without a hidey-hole to the swooping hawk.

They lick my fingers and are gone, called by their owners, whom I never see. Still, it's time for me to go. People and dogs can be the hardest part of "wild" to accept here. I wonder what part of the dictionary definition fits them: fierce, savage, violent, cruel? Today I don't accept that. Today wild means beyond my imagining or expectation. My fellow man (and man's best friend) have treated me kindly, hence are not wild at all, epitomizing civilization, today at its best (but tomorrow . . . who knows?). I'll try to remember the Labs' gentle tongues the next time I see Bull or Killer roaring toward me on the path, owners trailing obliviously behind.

Sometimes Glen Helen fills me, but just as often she empties me—of anger, regret, hurt and fear—and I emerge worlds lighter. I can only speculate on the power that brought me far from West Virginia's mountains to this Ohio woods sanctuary, one from which, like Thoreau, I can view the larger world from the comfort of my small, though still wild, corner here on the rim of civilization. I suppose that, for me, the larger world is Glen Helen (and places like it in spirit); on the one hand, I search here for the meaning of life (or at least my life); on the other, I try to let the life I observe in this forest preserve simply be, knowing it's meaningless to ask (or expect) trees to signify the divine. They simply are.

Back home, I remove boots and smell the mud that reminds me of each step I took that triggered the sacred: earth in me and I in earth, enough wild to last a lifetime.

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