WILDERNESS CALL FOR OPENNESS

David Strong

Or we can open to ourselves to the meaning of a life in the wilderness and be patient of being overcome in our wandering by that which can make us at home in this condition. Henry Bugbee, By that which can make us at home in this condition.

Introduction

Openness to discovery, to what is other, is an esteemed virtue in the Western tradition. Even The Odyssey tolerates but actually nurtures a Socrates. We scorn Galileo's and Eastern philosophy in our colleges and universities.

Moreover, in the culture at large we think a person is closed-hearted, that openness to otherness is at risk in our present circumstances. Hence, mountains give me the measure of the shape of my body. I am disgusted with myself when I am soft, weak, and breathing heavily. I resolve to stay fit over the next winter. Hence, mountains call for getting into and staying in shape: not only to one or a few aspects and close us off from the world of the thing. The world of the thing is taken over by the machinery of the device. The central heating system is his paradigm here.

A key point to realize here is that devices impoverish experience. This makes it imperative that we have things that correlate to our experience. In order to have rich and profound experiences, we need to encounter something other than devices, we need to encounter things. What is the significance of this point?

Traditionally, whether we are open or not is thought to depend fundamentally on our attitude. We need a change of heart, to be open to the meaning of a life in the wilderness and be patient of being overtaken in our wandering by that which can make us at home in this condition. That is, openness requires the conditions, the potential for misery in the landscape and avoid it or risk it only for good reason. From habit one is attuned to the environment—seeing the sunny alpine country with the possibility of a storm in mind. Experienced hikers can enjoy a tremendous storm in a dry place, or, knowing one will be dry, one can risk getting drenched. Learning to be open to wilderness teaches us to be selective about technology, to appropriate devices. Avoiding misery does not mean we are to be lucratively counter the environment. Such avoidance insulates one from things. Moreover, having to shoulder a pack puts ‘what is really needed’ in mind. Experienced hikers are better than beginners at avoiding misery. They have a frame of mind which takes into account the potential for misery in the landscape and avoid it or risk it only for good reason. From habit one is attuned to the environment—seeing the sunny alpine country with the possibility of a storm in mind. Experienced hikers can enjoy a tremendous storm in a dry place, or, knowing one will be dry, one can risk getting drenched.

Beckoned To Open

But preparation is never just “body building” as on a Nautilus. There are always times in wilderness in which one cannot avoid hardship and destitution. Odysseus, Job, and the pioneers have all shown us this possibility, that no one goes to the wilderness to have a miserable time of it, if it can be avoided. A backpack trip can be miserable for those completely out of shape. No one wants to spend the entire time focusing on one’s shaking bladders. Blisters, too-heavy a pack, a drenching cold rain all are to be avoided. Such narrow and bodily focuses can suddenly expand and open one up to the richness of things and the world things bear. Citizens of a technology yet, there remain openings, things, to be open to. Wilderness is one of these things. Unlike devices, literal wilderness is a place we can be open to and will not repel openness.

Unlike reading a book while peddling an exercise cycle, wilderness does not divide mind and body, even in moments of consumption. Rather it unifies our mind and body. So wilderness offers us some thing to be open to. What is there? Moreover, it instructs in the way of openness by exacting openness. How so? How does wilderness call for openness on our part?

Preparing To Be Open

Unlike fast food, wilderness requires that one turn toward it in preparation. Obviously, one must decide to go for a backpack trip and that itself usually calls for a wish-list of imagined places and decisions about how much time one has and where to go. A long trip calls for much preparation; a short trip may call for an hour's preparation, given that one has an established practice of backpacking out of one's back door to retrieve equipment and knows what to bring for food, etc.

Backpacking teaches one to be mindful about the body in advance. Mountains give me the measure of the shape of my body. I am disgusted with myself when I am soft, weak, and breathing heavily. I resolve to stay fit over the next winter. Hence, mountains call for getting into and staying in shape: not only to one or a few aspects and close us off from the world of the thing. The world of the thing is taken over by the machinery of the device. The central heating system is his paradigm here.

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Introduction

Openness to discovery, to what is other, is an esteemed virtue in our experience of these original things. Setting the automatic technology makes available to us. Whether or not we personally use and Eastern philosophy in our colleges and universities. The region of China, or yield insights into Taoism. More to the point, dinner does not involve us deeply in the culture, take us to a thermostat in one's house and putting it out of mind does not. From light switches to microwave ovens, from stereo systems to yogurt cups, from freeways to airports, our present setting are immersed in technological devices.

Nevertheless, there are different viewpoints about the best means by which openness to otherness is at risk in our present circumstan­ces. From light switches to microwave ovens, from stereo systems to yogurt cups, from freeways to airports, our present setting are immersed in technological devices. Albert Bormann has shown that these modern devices detach us from what he calls "things". Devices close down and narrow our experience of these original things. Setting the automatic thermostat in one's house and putting it out of mind does not bring one into contact with the sights, smells, sounds, seasons, family, friends and skills that define the open hearth or even a wood burning stove does. Eating a Chinese-style frozen dinner does not involve us deeply in the culture, take us to a region of China, or yield insights into Taoism. More to the point, peddling an exercise cycle does not bring us into contact with a trail, the character of the day, or the natural world. A well-made nature film may image for us sights we are likely to see in Alaska, but, as I will show later, wilderness is really something more and other than what the film brings us into contact with. The film's light and sky are really no replacements for the light and sky of a Sunday afternoon. Nor does a cross-country skiing exercise machine bring us into contact with the world of Yellowstone. We remain cut off from it.

The general pattern Bormann sees here is a change from things to devices. A thing, in this sense, is this-and-those-due-to the earth and bears a world, interweaves means and ends, and engages us on many levels, including bodily, mental and social levels. Things range from hearths to guitars. Devices, on the other hand, procure one aspect of the original thing, the warmth of the wood burning stove, and disburden us of the rest, the world of the thing. Thus, devices narrow our experience of the original thing to only one or a few aspects and close us off from the world of the thing. The world of the thing is taken over by the machinery of the device. The central heating system is his paradigm here.

A key point to realize here is that devices impoverish ex­perience. It makes imperative that we have things that correlate to our experience. In order to have rich and profound experiences, we need to encounter something other than devices, we need to encounter things. What is the significance of this point?

Traditionally, whether we are open or not is thought to depend fundamentally on our attitude. We need a change of heart, to become open, to suspend judgement about our beliefs, etc. But this need for a change of heart is thought and articulated in circumstances which have become problematic in our time as I have shown above. In these earlier circumstances there were things to be open to and openness was exacted by them. Thus, the responsibility to be open to things and circumstances was located with the self.

Against this, technology amplifies the claims things make on us to open to them because of what in fact devices do. In construction and structure they make it impossible to experience the richness of things and the world things bear. Citizens of a society dominated by technology are finally claimed by disbur­dened consumption and little else. Work has become degraded, cuts and broken bones, blistered, sexed, clean.

The practice of backpacking teaches one to mind equipment ahead of time, so that it will let one be on the trail. The boots I buy require a long break-in period, if they are not to prove miserable. Mindful of this, one would rather not wear them on salt beaches. Backpacking teaches that time has a definite character and is not a continuous mass in preparation. It would be grasped then or not at all. One cannot run to the store or throw it in the microwave. To forget the matches is to not have them.

Beckoned To Open

But preparation is never just "body building" as on a Nautilus machine; it is preparation for some thing. The mindful body finds itself anticipating hiking with the subtle changes in light and warmth in late February. Images of past and future hikes fill the mind. One's presence in the present is tinged by what is to come. These are good technologies which respond to harsh, threaten­ing conditions. In the light of what they bring about, we open ourselves to it and become excited with the lengthening of day.

All these February changes, however, probably would not stir the mindful body in this way had not one already been open to mountains as a beckoning direction in the landscape of one's life. What makes what will speak to us and take hold? Mountains beckon us that we do not know who we are; rather, we find out who we are by living out our lives with things. That is, openness requires response to what it is that speaks to us in order to grasp what there is and who we are. A refusal self is indeed alone, homeless, in the universe, with some idea of its failure and how things should have been. Mountains teach us of true wonder and lasting mystery, of pause and humility. They make us skeptical of decisions too rationally decided in advance, as if all that counted were more and the latest-and-all too standardized living.

Unlike reading a book while peddling an exercise cycle, wilderness does not divide mind and body, even in moments of contempla­tion. Rather it unifies our mind and body. So wilderness offers us some thing to be open to. What is there to be open to? More to the point, it instructs in the way of openness by exacting openness. How so? How does wilderness call for openness on our part?

Preparing To Be Open

Unlike fast food, wilderness requires that one turn toward it in preparation. Otherwise, one is caught in circumstances which have led one to go for a backpack trip and that itself usually calls for a wish-list of imagined places and decisions about how much time one has to spend there. A long trip calls for much preparation; a short trip may call for an hour's preparation, given that one has an established practice of backpacking out of well-known areas to retrieve equipment and knows what to bring for food, etc.

Backpacking teaches one to be mindful about the body in advance. Mountains give me the measure of the shape of my body. I am disgusted with myself when I am soft, weak, and breathing heavily. I resolve to stay fit over the next winter. Hence, mountains call for getting into and staying in the shape: not only climbing but climbing muscles, and not just muscle tone but toughened feet. Backpacking makes me think of my body over a lifetime, worrying about my back and caring for my bones and knees. Alpine mountains make emphysema and cigarettes abhor­rent to me.

While packing one's pack, wilderness teaches one to imagine the future body in actually possible worlds. Sweating climbs, wind and sun, storms, blizzards, gales, heat, evening temperature below zero, cold body, body in the dark, hungry, tired, sore, pleased, viewing, bearing endurance, fall danger, cut and broken bones, blistered, sexed, clean.

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Openness Through Avoiding Misery

Misery and destination can beget openness. Odysseysses, Job, Buddha and the pioneers have all shown us this possibility, but, no one goes to the wilderness to have a miserable time of it, if it can be avoided. A backpack trip can be miserable for those completely out of shape. No one wants to spend the entire time focusing on one's shaking muscles. Blistered, too-heavy a pack, a drenching cold rain all are to be avoided. Such narrow and bodily focuses can suddenly expand and open one up to the wilderness, as our tradition shows, but this experience was born of a time when misery could not be avoided; now, when it can be avoided in wilderness, seeking this beneficial side of the experience seems wrongheaded. Rather, feet, legs, and body, when avoiding genuine misery, are open, let be, to encounter the wilderness: bedrock feels solid underfoot, a steep trail yields a splendid view, evening settles quietly on a lake near one's campsite.

Experienced hikers are better than beginners at avoiding misery. They have a frame of mind which takes into account the potential for misery in the landscape and avoid it or risk it for good reason. From habit one is attuned to the environment—seeing the sunny alpine country with the possibility of a storm in mind. Experienced hikers can enjoy a tremendous storm in a day's hike. You or, knowing one will be dry, one can risk getting drenched. Through such avoidance, one is not only let be to encounter things, one is also open to equipment—a dry parka, a tent that withstands bad weather, a warm, down bag, a foam sleeping pad. These are good technologies which respond to harsh, threat­ening circumstances very different than those which have become normal. Moreover, having to shoulder a pack puts 'what is really needed' rent to me.

Learning to be open to wilderness teaches us to be selective about technology, to appropriate devices. Avoiding misery does not mean a sitting in a frivolous claim of misery that results in discomfort. Such avoidance insulates one from things. Moreover, having to should a pack puts what is really needed in fresh light.

There are always times in wilderness in which one cannot avoid harsh claims that one would have avoided. One can get sick, hurt, lost, or drenched. Sometimes one has to push too hard and be avoided in wilderness, seeking this beneficial side of the experience seems wrongheaded. Rather, feet, legs, and body, when avoiding genuine misery, are open, let be, to encounter the wilderness: bedrock feels solid underfoot, a steep trail yields a splendid view, evening settles quietly on a lake near one's campsite.

Utter Containment

Sometimes in order to become open to a place we need to appreciate our utter containment in the place here and now. One must become undecided of elsewhere and another time to come. Wilderness is a metaphor for when we open ourselves up to the usual purposes and attitudes are bracketed for a time. As with boating, one is always in a place or somewhere, and leave old ones behind us as we lift the great pack to our backs. A mile or so in the wilderness and the experience of separation from cars, highways, and towns is similar to a ship lockdown.
For a time, when one is adjusting to the coordinates of the mountain, what presents most perhaps is absence: absence of convenience, of noise, ability to turn the channel, signs directing one to the next section for day or night, a hot bath, a telephone. What is present, too, is what one has not yet let go. On a daily walk, I may be nudged by the flying of seagulls, or some things may happen so noisy and too cluttered with schedules to follow their pull and come completely clean. That falls away more in wilderness for what is presently absent fades and is an opening to be filled by the actual presence of wild things.

Unlike earlier times when simplicity and confinement were necessary, voluntary commitment in the wilderness. Being in wilderness is more than being confined to a homestead cabin in winter in the last century and accepting the containment in the necessary, backpackers undertake the noninsulated way of being in the world. Avoiding misery, a large mountain usually calls for planning, at least the sighting of a way being one may have forgotten outside of the wilderness.

Pressing and Impressive Claims of the Natural World

Occasionally one climbs a mountain because one just got started up it, but even on an extended backpack trip, when one is given more to whims, a mountain-to-be-climbed usually arranges the days. At the very least, one should remember the cool of the morning, and best to get to the top before afternoon thunderstorms make it dangerous.

Descent is much different than ascent. Sometimes it is not quite clear whether one has made it outside oneself on the ascent. One has stood at the top of the evening landscape knowing or possibly caring whether it had the look of being looked at or something more. The sense of harmony that overtakes one on the descent is a source of strength and a sense of the difference, the impression, the pressing claims of the landscape makes on our body. By sweating we cleanse ourselves of impurities and become more in touch with a life insusceptible to criticism.

Not avoiding pressing and impressive claims of wild things does not mean one is closed to the easily overlooked gentle things. The way that wilderness presents itself seems to be one of an adversary that they somehow have to struggle with and conquer. Climbing a peak can be a moment of self-glorification—a crusade achievement over forces.

The Gentile Claims of Wild Things

Not avoiding pressing and impressive claims of wild things does not mean one is closed to the easily overlooked gentle claims of wild things. One does not go that one avoids pleasures, but rather, here, in wilderness, pleasures are let be in one's understanding of what it means to treat things as ends in themselves. The best dress for walking is nakedness. The fragrance hanging in the air at dusk for a tough day's hike. Facedown, drinking cold spring water and the cool of the morning, and best to get to the top before afternoon thundershowers make it dangerous. Some things may happen so noisy and too cluttered with schedules to follow their pull and come completely clean. That falls away more in wilderness for what is presently absent fades and is an opening to be filled by the actual presence of wild things.

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Not avoiding pressing and impressive claims of wild things does not mean one is closed to the easily overlooked gentle claims of wild things. Rather, we are overtaken and we are overtaken often enough.

The Beartooth mountains, geologically considered, are a young range which was uplifted as a mass to heights of over 12,000 feet, then glacialized, leaving a high and broad plateau region scattered with lakes in the pockets of rolling, green alpine hills which sometimes break off with thousand foot dropoffs. When winding one's way down through the switchbacks to the Boulder river canyon bottom some 3,000 feet below with its gray sandstone walls, waterfalls. Occasionally one climbs a mountain because one just got started up it, but even on an extended backpack trip, when one is given more to whims, a mountain-to-be-climbed usually arranges the days. At the very least, one should remember the cool of the morning, and best to get to the top before afternoon thunderstorms make it dangerous.

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Occasionally one climbs a mountain because one just got started up it, but even on an extended backpack trip, when one is given more to whims, a mountain-to-be-climbed usually arranges the days. One understands the overwhelming pull of a mountain; the cool of the morning, and best to get to the top before afternoon thunderstorms make it dangerous.

One usually climbs mountains at least the sight of a good way up, and always calls for effort. Sweating is important. Unlike walking on the level, sweating from a climb brings about the experience of air and becomes a source of reassurance, something to depend on.

When one has begun a climb, one is usually within the pull of the mountain and turning back is not an easy, arbitrary decision. It is not like tossing a stick to see which way to go: There is a definite up and down. The climb is a task and one knows its general outline. Getting a second wind, breaking into a sweat, and becoming determined are all moments of a climb which remind of a way of being one may have forgotten outside of the wilderness. Climbing teaches resoluteness and that resoluteness is only possible in the response on the strength of claims things make upon one.

Though mountaintops are usually farther than the imagination places them, it is always slightly amazing to me how quickly I get above the treetops, the immediate landscape, and the valley floor. More and more landscape loops out before the climber like a snakeskin unfurling in a high wind. Unless forced, I do not like to peer around to the other side until I reach the top. Especially in glacialized high plateau country, the grassy, flowered slope one climbs may have a clearing like a forest undergrowth, but this will be a thousand feet of definitive nothing. Always it leads one into the sense of the sudden whole.

Yet this imperceptible, sudden whole can mean nothing. This is the traditional problem of openness which Colin Fletcher calls the "expectancy barrier." We do not allow ourselves to be taken or overtaken. Here the landscape seems near at hand and yet remains far removed.

There remains a openness to the unexpected and still retained detached at a mountaintop. The air is thin; it is generally windy and cold. Trees, shrubs, grass and even earth were left below, leaving only bare, weatherbeaten rock surrounding the climber. There may be a distancing, blue haze hanging in the air and the noon light is usually harsh and absent of long shadows. Snowfields glare bare and old, covered with rocks and windblown dirt. Far below, the landscape falls out like a fancy ribbon of the road finally coming into view, one realizes, after a four or more days, that the best dress for walking is nakedness.

The Gentle Claims of Wild Things

Not avoiding pressing and impressive claims of wild things does not mean one is closed to the easily overlooked gentle claims. One may not go that one avoids pleasures, but rather, here, in wilderness, pleasures are let be in a respectful relation to them. Looked forward to, appreciated by, gently acquired, brought to the foot of things, even the gentle claims, as Whitaker notes, are the "gentlest of all the claims of wild things."

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Notes
4. This Promethean climbing is a traditional example of the will to dominate; technological domination is uniquely different. To technologically dominate a mountaintop would be to secure it with a device and make it technologically available, e.g. mountaintops secured with highways, trams, or helicopters.
5. Fletcher, p. 428.

About the author: David Strong is a professor of philosophy at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana. His work focuses on the relationship between environmental and technological issues. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the "Third Annual North American Wilderness Conference" at Weber State College in February of 1991.