

How I came to ecocentrism: A sense of wonder

“I opened my eyes to stare into deep black eyes a few metres away. Fascinated eyes. Eyes of otherness. There was no fear, none at all. We watched in mutual astonishment at the incredibility of our ‘being’. We existed at this moment and time, and the gulf between our histories and separate evolution was gone. Behind us soared steep banks of sand and vertical orange sandstone cliffs. It was just on dawn. There was no thought, nothing but the startling desire to hang on to a connection that we knew could not last – holding on to our harmony for yet another unlikely moment [...] Someone else in the group moved and turned over, and the Superb Lyrebird ran off up the sand slope to vanish into the bush. The connection across different animal realms was broken – though not quite gone. He was a distant relative of dinosaurs, the largest passerine bird in the world, and the greatest mimic of them all. I was a descendant of small furry mammals like shrews, that eventually stood up and walked as primates – yet for a moment we had been one.”

(Washington, 2002: 7)

I came to ecocentrism out of empathy, listening and a *sense of wonder* at nature. As a child I used to ramble through the valley of Scotts Creek near Willoughby in Sydney, Australia. My school (a Steiner school) was near my home, and students were then allowed to wander the bush – and wonder. I used to sit happily by a red-bellied black snake basking in the sun, sharing a bond. My brother and I took delight in the sculptured landforms, caves with

honey-combing and hidden grottos. Tawny frogmouth (related to nightjars) pretended to be dead sticks on trees, or sometimes looked at you with vast golden eyes. Some teachers called me ‘Nature Boy’, for I took delight in disappearing into the maze of tracks and seeing what each day presented. Small wonder that my favourite phrase became: “If you listen you will learn.” I used to lie in the sun or shade, close my eyes and *listen*, feel the land around me, sharing a sense of belonging. It was due to that close communion with nature that I went to university to study ecology.

Until age 13, I wanted to send rockets to the moon. Walking through my valley, however, I saw people (who presumably moved there to have a bush view) throw rubbish over their back fence into the bush. I changed my mind, seeking to save *this* world, rather than fly spaceships to others. In 1974 (at age 18) I signed up for a bushwalk through the huge (and largely unknown) Colo wilderness, north-west of Sydney. We walked for five days down a deep sandstone gorge, through the heart of the largest wilderness in New South Wales, and revelled in knee-deep quicksand, giant boulder piles, and tangled mazes of water-gum thickets. It was while camping bivouacked (rolled in a groundsheet), on a sandbank where the Colo River rises, that at first light I woke to find my lyrebird (see <https://is.gd/cJa8S8>) standing, staring expectantly. Like Annie Dillard (1992: 12), who came face to face with a weasel, for a moment we swapped identity. It made me realize that here was the greatest mimic, yet one without a *human* voice to speak for his home. Soon I became the Secretary of the Colo Committee, which led the five-year campaign to create the 502,000-hectare

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Wollemi National Park (Washington, 2004: 52–67). I wrote later (2002: 8):

At that moment and in the following idyllic sun-drenched days spent in that sandstone gorge, I fell in love with the land. Absolutely and indelibly. My sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the place stunned me. I kept smiling at the sheer wonder of its existence. [...] And it was that moment which started (or at least catalyzed) my future path. It was that sense of wonder that seared through to the innermost parts of my 'self', my heart and soul.

So I became an activist as well as a scientist, and more than 40 years later I still walk the path that this experience catalysed.

So, what is our sense of wonder at the natural world? Many of us can remember this wonder from childhood. A yearning for a 'sense of place' is a perennial human longing. All peoples need a sense of 'my country', of belonging to a sustaining landscape they respond to in care and love (Rolston, 2012: 15). This can also be called a 're-enchantment' of the land (Tacey, 2000). Part of this sense of wonder is a feeling of being 'one' with the land, of belonging, of finding an 'ecological identity' (Thomashow, 1996: 18). This issue fascinated me to the extent that I wrote the book *A Sense of Wonder* (Washington, 2002). So, is our sense of wonder something we are born with, or do we learn it? Is it something more common in certain races or different societies? Does the fact that only 20% or so of people (in my Australian experience) get interested in environmental issues mean that only that percentage can *feel* the sense of wonder? Alternatively, does the growing interest in the environment in young people mean that our sense of wonder is growing? These are important questions.

The sense of wonder I am talking about here is a connection with the land. As such it must be considered spiritual, even if one does not call it religious.

An Agnostic, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim... all of these can feel a *sense of wonder*, even if they call it by varying names (Washington, 2002: 10). This is not something that should be trivialized as a fairy tale. It is about the fundamental relationship of humanity with the land, which has nurtured us for millions of years, one of the deepest and abiding loves of them all: *the love of the land*. There are also 'high points' in our sense of wonder (my lyrebird was one). I have called them "transcendent moments" (Washington, 2002: 43), and, interestingly, Louv (2005: 74) speaks of "transcendent experiences", while others have called them a "hierophany" or epiphany (Oelschlaeger, 1991). Such moments can change one's life (mine did). The sense of wonder is also about empathy. One must let down one's guard, open oneself up and let all one's senses absorb the beauty of the natural world. Aboriginal Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (Tacey, 2000) explains that there is a word in the Ngangikurungkurr language, *Dadirri*, which is "something like what you (white people) call 'contemplation'." She notes this is a key gift that the Aboriginal culture can share with other cultures.

I have given many talks about wonder and realized quickly that most scientists felt *distinctly uncomfortable* talking about it. Yet many did indeed feel it, and some would come up afterwards, and literally check that nobody could overhear us, and then say "Well, actually, when I was x years old I had this amazing experience in nature, and that was why I became a scientist." And yet they felt embarrassed, almost ashamed, as if it was somehow unscientific to feel wonder. What an indictment of both academia and society that our wonder at life has come to be seen as unacademic! Hence why academics *need to speak out* about the wonder they feel and their enchantment with the natural world. And – as the other essays in this supplement show – some are.

I believe that all children feel a sense of wonder, but it can get buried at puberty.

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So how can we rejuvenate our sense of wonder? Some steps are:

- Be there with nature! *Belong* in the land.
- Take your children and friends to wild places so they can see the natural world as it really is, and bond with it.
- Take time to ponder... whether this is called meditation or empathy or prayer or contemplation or *Dadirri* or just sitting somewhere 'at one with the world'.
- Keep your imagination, creativity and artistic expression alive (poetry is my choice). In these you find the wellspring of your 'being', which renews your sense of wonder.
- Cherish the imagination of your children and youth in general, especially so they can survive the turmoil of puberty. Young people *need* our spiritual help while they undertake their own spiritual journeys (Washington, 2002: 97–9).

Encourage your empathy on a sunny day. Find a beautiful spot, let your defences down and empathize with the natural world. Meditate or just watch and ponder. Perhaps you too will find, as Henry David Thoreau (1854: 68) did, that:

Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and something kindred to me... ■

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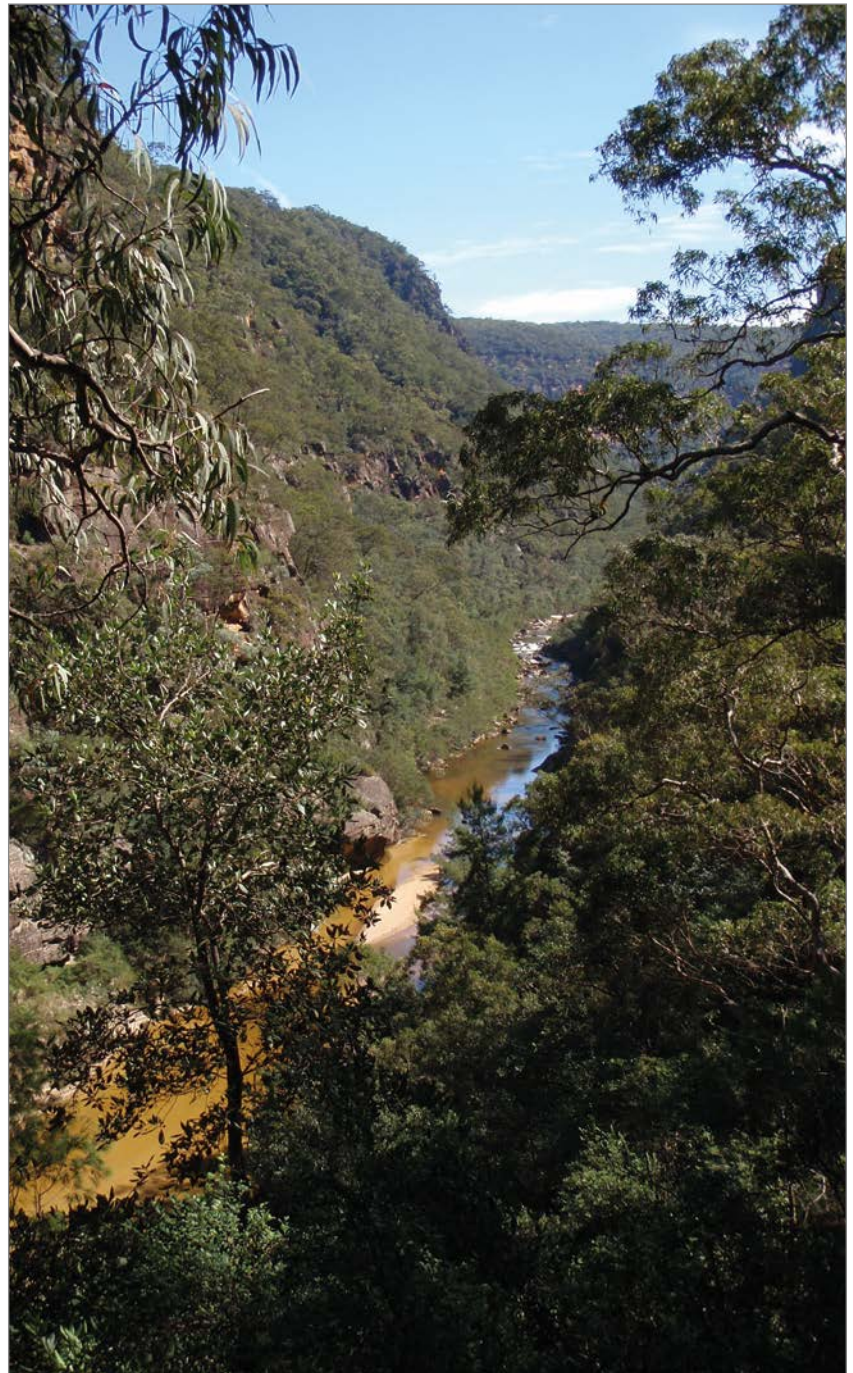
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