

Yaquina Bay

Rick Bartow



Bear

CASCADIAN zen

bioregional
writings
on cascadia
here and now

volume one

Paul E. Nelson
Jason M. Wirth
Adelia MacWilliam
with Theresa Whitehill
editors



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Foreword

Before going to college and starting a study of Sanskrit I had read some of India's literature, mostly in handy little Penguin translations. The Upanishads, with their mix of Big Mind metaphysics and anticlerical folk humor caught my attention. I read Bhagavad Gita too, which puzzled me. What was clearly poetry of a high visionary order seemed to justify sending soldiers obediently into battle. Slightly older friends were getting drafted—this was late 1960s, early 1970s—and shipped to Vietnam for reasons that seemed both cruel and illogical. Then I found a few Buddhist texts, and these felt closer. The *Dhammapada* introduced *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit term that means not hurting—you could gloss it as non-violence—and applied the principal of non-injury to all beings.

At some point a friend pointed me to the *Vimalakirti Sūtra*, which announces with radical humor that everyone is a potential buddha. High insight is not just for monks. Creatures from other universes—who the sūtra does not describe—are capable of immense generosity. Other universes? Some of us took that to mean (as Dōgen Zenji says) that salmon and orca live in a universe of water, ravens a universe of air, potatoes in one of soil, and quartz crystals in a rock universe. I eventually put this together with Aryasura's *Jatakamala*, a Sanskrit court poem that describes the former births of Shakyamuni Buddha, several of which were animal

lives. This advanced the notion that all creatures, not just humans, are on a journey to enlightenment.

Those of us who thought about such things in the second half of the 20th century found studies that helped us modernize. Ecology, conservation biology, cybernetics, rewilding; these sciences brought refinement to the longstanding Buddhist question: whether such a thing as a separate living creature even exists, apart from an ecosystem of energy exchange, geomorphic forces, weather, and food chains. Ecology fit well with Buddhist descriptions of Indra's net, bringing science to what the sūtras talk about.

These sciences fit well with a rising awareness of bioregion as a way to think about one's place. People live and work not just in a human domain, but in rhythm with geologic and biologic orders. Your community includes the rock you live on, the air you breathe. Like old time Daoists saw, looking closely at the natural world helps us order our lives.

If I am not mistaken, *Cascadian Zen* is the first literary collection that takes a single distinct bioregion from which to draw poetry. This is quite different from, though it may overlap, collections that draw on nations or states. A state is a political designation—real estate—typically unconcerned with true-world boundaries such as mountain ranges, rivers, plateaus, or badlands.

Old-timer Buddhists spoke of “three jewels,” the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The words carry a good deal of history, and nobody would suggest replacing them. But I think a collection like *Cascadian Zen* provides a modern twist. Buddha is not a historical figure only, but a state of mind—the Sanskrit word means wakened—a potential waking on which Zen practice is founded. Sangha, or the community of practitioners, we can regard in our own day as the bioregion, with its intimate, inseparable mix of creatures. Tibetans have alerted us to the truth that everyone needs to be free, down to the last blade of grass. Dharma in this view does not need to mean fancy scripture, or inalterable truth held by a few illuminati. It means talking or writing that “wakes you up.” Poetry, the highly compressed form of language, may do it best. I like

Philip Whalen’s title, “The Lotus Sūtra, Naturalized.” Maybe that poem’s a glimpse of the first truly Cascadian Zen poetry.

Before going further, let’s give a *Gasshō* or deep bow to Cascadia, the land of falling waters. It is a land I have visited—not enough to claim real intimacy—and yet, the editors of *Cascadian Zen* have kindly asked me to write a few opening words.

The Southern Rockies where I live is in some ways Cascadia’s contrary, not spilling with water but high and dry. The air, soil, and waterways of Cascadia are defined by water. The vegetation’s rich, fragrant. I joke that it’s decadent, entirely too lush. Your Cascadian rain is omnipresent. Rivers and creeks fall or run in all directions. Luckily drainage keeps the soil from getting too boggy, and lots of water drains into the sea. Islands, fjords, inlets, bays; bridges, ferries, fishing lore, sea life. It is the sense of water where Cascadia and the Rockies so differ.

What then can I, an outsider, say to this bioregion? One thought I have is to highlight Cascadia by introducing my own bioregion—the way people meet and swap details about themselves. The Southern Rocky Mountain EcoRegion—that’s what the map in my study calls it—I’ve long thought of as *kinnikinnik* territory. Kinnikinnik is a leathery-leaf low shrub that covers sandy soil and loam, from the foothills to the subalpine zone. It’s an Algonquian word, “something you mix in.” Native people shredded the leaf with tobacco for smoking. One folk-name is bear tobacco; more common is bearberry, for the pebble-size dry-red fruit; my field guide calls the berry mealy and tasteless. Botanists call it *Arctostaphylos uva ursi*, a funny repetition of Greek and Latin.

Picture Herodotus and Lucretius botanizing together. “Bear grapes?” “Yep, grapes for bear.”

I have driven from the Rockies to Cascadia. The route crosses several large territories, each with a vivid personality; I’ll call them bioregions. First the Rocky Mountains, high, jagged, arid, drained by forceful rivers. Bear, mountain lion, coyote, elk, bighorn sheep, rattlesnake, and a few surviving beaver. The mountains rise out of the Great Plains and lift to 14,000 feet. The high country locks up snow in a storehouse that remains deep until June or July. There is a great deal of water up there, so by some

metrics it resembles Cascadia. But Cascadia has water coming out of the sky all the time. In Colorado most of the water drops at high elevation, then drains out through rivers.

The rivers run with history, folklore, and little linguistic tricks. Indigenous names include the Arkansas, the Pecos, the Yampa, and the Apishapa, which some Anglos call the Fishpaw. The French named Cache la Poudre and the St. Vrain. The Spanish put names on Rio Grande, el Rio de las Animas Perdidas en Purgatorio (Purgatory to English speakers, sometimes Picketwire), the Dolores, San Juan, and San Miguel. English speakers gave names to the Dirty Devil and Muddy Creek. My own drainage is French, the Platte (flat) River, “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Its Omaha name is *ne braska*, flat water.

Everyone around here, Indian or settler, has learned one thing. You can’t settle for long, or work the land, unless you irrigate. This means acequias, ditches, trenches, dams, canals. Beaver did the first hydraulics. When the Spanish showed up, they found pueblos channeling the water. Without reservoirs and pipelines the cities of Denver, Fort Collins, and Albuquerque wouldn’t exist.

Leaving the mountains, head west towards Cascadia. You cross a high upland, the Colorado Plateau. This is truly arid land. Its upper reaches have pinyon and juniper forest, pine, and fir on the remote slopes, but most of the land is carved and cut into colorful deep canyons by rivers draining the Rockies. The rivers get terribly wild when rainstorms and snowmelt come in the spring. Watching the flashfloods you see how canyons, arches, labyrinths, hoodoos, scalloped rim-rock—ivory, scarlet, crimson, chocolate color—took shape.

Crossing the Plateau, you drop into the endorheic Great Basin where groundwater flows only in. The Basin has no effluents. Rich in minerals and salts gathered from up-country, water leaves these behind by evaporating. A truly interesting water cycle. Here sit the ghost-lakes of the Pleistocene. Lake Bonneville—its remnant today the Great Salt Lake. And ancient Lake Lahontan, the ancestor of Pyramid Lake in Nevada. The color of the Great Basin is gray-green. Sagebrush far as the eye can see. A shrub as happy in hot desert as cedars in the wet Olympics.

Cascadia seems a perfect contrast to the Rockies. Yet in a different way, Cascadia's other contrary is the Great Basin. Wherever you stand in Cascadia, water flows out to sea; in the Basin water flows in, and pools into salty inland lakes. William Blake once wrote, "Without contraries is no progression" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Blake might agree that wildly distinct bioregions advance together and give birth to the ten thousand things. In Cascadia you stand in a universe of moisture, humidity, and old growth forest, with thumb-size berries that would take a blue medal at any state fair in the Rockies. I can show you Rocky Mountain blueberries the size of a pinhead, or tiny brine shrimp from the Great Salt Lake. Each bioregion has its flavors.

It seems no accident that so much early thinking about bioregion took shape in Cascadia. The name refers to the omnipresent tumbling waters. But Cascadia has a unique culture heritage too. It sits at the meeting ground of three geo-cultural domains, each with its totems. There is the North American landmass of bison, wolf, coyote, and beaver. This meets the Pacific Rim curving along East Asia and down to Chile, with seal, otter, salmon, shellfish. Finally, the Pacific Ocean with dogfish, swordfish, and whale that migrate the subaqueous roads. Totems from these three realms meet in local Native art. Cascadia is a crossroad for people too: Continental, Arctic, and Asian-Pacific.

Maybe this mix spurred an early historical interest in bioregion. I think specifically of a handful of writers around Port Townsend who in the 1970s—watching work done in the Shasta bioregion to their south—identified the character of their landscape and founded a poetry scene with the 1976 journal *Dalmo'ma*, and a press they gave the Zen-inflected name Empty Bowl. Most of these poets show up in *Cascadian Zen*. A more famous press, arriving a bit later, Copper Canyon, is more cosmopolitan; it still carries the Cascadia wild salmon flavor, smoked with a gentler hint of Zen.

The other term, then, is Zen. What a range of meanings that word has taken! Track it back to Chinese *chan*, itself derived from Sanskrit *dhyāna*, meditation; Bodhidharma called it wall gazing. In the late 1950s

bioregion-elder Gary Snyder made a poetry ideogram, offering the Sanskrit word—naturalizing it—to Cascadia. He did it with a funny little nod to Ovid.

Actaeon saw Dhyana in the Spring.

it was nothing special,
misty rain on Mt. Baker,
Neah Bay at low tide.

(*Myths & Texts*)

The light touch of Zen makes landfall with, "it was nothing special." Entire Zen lineages have sprung from that laconic phrase. Asked once to describe bioregionalism, Snyder said, "a fancy term for staying put and learning what's going on." That is to say, figuring out the personality of the place you live, and living with it. Nothing special. Even if you meet up with a moon-face goddess (your own spontaneous mind) skinny-dipping in a pool. Snyder's words set forth a *kōan* that fits Cascadia's poetry. It's a tone of high-quality cool, misty as rainfall over the Olympics. You can hear the tone recur throughout this volume.

The editors of *Cascadian Zen* have distributed poems, *kōans*, and philosophy into "baskets," Sanskrit *piṭika*, to make sense of so much good work. These baskets refer to Buddhism's original *tripiṭaka* or three baskets. Let's recall how in Tang Dynasty China of the seventh century people had heard of India's three baskets but felt poorly outfitted when it came to books. The well-studied monk Xuanzang (602–664), surveying China's lack of texts, made a brave, technically illegal, twenty-year trip overland from China to India, to collect what he could.

Early brush drawings show Xuanzang with a hefty basket of woven rushes over his shoulder. This was the rucksack of his day. But it symbolizes those early Buddhist literatures as well, the baskets he went to

collect in India. Those literary baskets organized and made portable three distinct types of writing: sūtras, philosophies, and lifeways. The editors of this anthology have distributed *Cascadian Zen* into a different set of baskets, but the reasoning is the same. It makes the works portable; it arranges them for practical use. For what promises to be a good journey through the territories of Cascadia.

Cascadian Zen: a Short User's Guide

In one of the most effective origin myths of Zen, the Buddha held up a flower and winked, and his disciple Mahākāśyapa smiled. The Buddha responded, “I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana, the true form of the formless, the subtle Dharma gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the sūtras. This I entrust to Mahākāśyapa.” This narrative exemplifies what remains essential to the transmission of Zen practice. At stake is not to induce others toward a particular doctrinal direction. It is rather to transmit an awareness of mind itself. Bracketing or transcending words and letters is not rejecting them but rather deploying them skillfully to awaken the mind of which words and letters are the symptom and fruit. This helps explain the paradox of Zen: voluminous sūtras, commentaries, Dharma talks, and literary, calligraphic, painterly, and musical works from and about what in itself cannot be directly expressed or ensnared with words and letters. To have only the latter is to have the husk without the seed.

In the oldest extant literary treatise in the Chinese language, the sixth century masterpiece *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) by the Buddhist Liu Xie 劉勰 (d. 522), the author explores this mind in relationship to literary creation. *Wenxin* is literally the heart-mind (*xin*) of words, and it also alludes to the Chan (Chinese Zen) concern with not depending on *wenzi*, words and letters. *Wen* 文 means

Dəxʷwəqʷəd (Cedar River—Lake Washington) and Koksilah River

something like word but also pattern as well as literary production. Liu Xie boldly proclaims that “when mind (*xin* 心) arises, language abides; when language abides, literature (*wen* 文) enlightens.”¹ In other words, the clarification and awakening of mind allows language to presence beyond our expectations that it merely demarcate, define, and reference. When language presences, then the literary word expresses the depths of mind. It writes from mind to mind and communicates Buddha to Buddha. In this way, it expresses the awakening of its root and the power of its seed. To be beyond words and letters (*wenzi*) is to deploy words and letters from and toward their nameless source. Liu Xie called such words and literary production the “carving of dragons” rather than the dull and dogmatic effort to “carve insects.”

Such dragons do not occur in a vacuum but are rooted in our causes and conditions. These includes our languages, cultures, and histories, but these in turn also do not occur in a vacuum. They are sustained and shaped by their bioregional ecologies (including their human and non-human histories). Awakening to mind is awakening to the place where mind is occurring. These two volumes are a collective effort to carve some of the dragons of Cascadia, expressing an awakening to the mind of this place and its myriad interdependent life processes, sentient, and non-sentient. To navigate this collective effort, born of an awakening to the mind rooted in and shaped by our mutual place, we offer these short navigation tips.

I.

In drawing these works together, we are not implying that all the authors have a commitment to Zen practice, or Buddhist practice more broadly, or even to what remains vital in many of the world's other practice lineages. Although many of the authors have, for want of a better phrase, serious spiritual practices (Buddhist and non-Buddhist), what unites these otherwise varied voices is a practice commitment to awakening and cultivating the mind of this place, to the Cascadian heart-mind out of which language presences and gives rise to the dragons of this place. Some of these dragons are gentle, others whimsical, while still others speak of

grievous historical, cultural, and ecological wounds. The awakening and expression of the Cascadian heart-mind-world is not merely celebratory and grateful, but also careful, mindful, worried, vigilant.

2.

Since Zen speaks to the in itself unnameable *source* of what it is to be *now and here* in the membrane that is the Cascadian bioregion, we recognize that its expressions are multiple and varied, and that the diversity of its voices is a strength. Although it is impossible to propose anything that is fully representative without collapsing into the bureaucrat's enervating love of the encyclopedic, we made considerable effort to cast as broad a net as circumstances allowed. Careful attention was paid to gender balance, Indigenous voices (Cascadian Zen practitioners *avant la lettre*), as well as poets and philosophers of color. This itself was also symptomatic of our awareness of the complexity and variegation of the positionalities of Cascadian Zen as well as to the powers and singularities of creativity.

3.

Attention was given to including some of the most recognized and celebrated practitioners of Cascadia (and friends of this place) as well as to emerging and otherwise under-recognized voices. Again, there are many other voices that could and should have been included. *Cascadian Zen* is an effort to get the ball rolling, so to speak, hoping that additional voices and manners of speaking will be heard in the future.

4.

This book does not document the Cascadian heart-mind-world as if it were a *fait accompli*. It is designed to facilitate its awakening and deepening. It is closer to a spiritual practice manual or resource book than it is to literary and philosophical record keeping.

5.

Cascadia includes lands that are now separated by a national border (Canada and the United States to use their current colonial denominations).

Although border security will always remind us of the seriousness of this institution, we did our utmost to ignore this geopolitical scar, acting as if we were clouds, whose movement is shaped by the bioregional heart-mind-world rather than by the pernicious politics below. Cascadia invites us to think politics and economics from the history and reality of our place rather than colonially demarcate it based on reigning political and economic ideologies. We are unwilling to leave global capitalism unchallenged.

6.

This assemblage of poetry and prose is inspired by David McCloskey's new-old way of thinking about Cascadia. It concentrates on watersheds while remaining attentive to the Indigenous cultures that they supported "since time immemorial." We conclude each volume with reflections by McCloskey. The book's designer, Theresa Whitehill, took these maps to heart in her artistic vision.

7.

The book not only emerges from the worlds of orature and literature, but is also rooted visually in its art, including Indigenous work by luminaries like the late Wiyot artist Rick Bartow and the Coast Salish artist Susan Point, as well as other non-Indigenous works by artists shaped by the Cascadian heart-mind-world.

8.

In cases where the poet is no longer with us, we made no alterations, even in cases where there is reasonable suspicion of a typo or its orthography is no longer current.

9.

Finally, the two volumes are divided into seven baskets. (For more on the symbolism evoked by "baskets," see Andrew Schelling's foreword.)

The first volume has three baskets.

The Buddha Way collects poems that explicitly evoke Buddhist themes or are aligned with figures who do. It includes some of our most well-known and celebrated bioregional poets (Daphne Marlatt, Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, Cedar Sigo, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Albert Saijo, Peter Levitt, Andrew Schelling, Jane Hirshfield, and José Kozer) as well as many other wonderful poets and thinkers.

Empty Bowl is a legendary bioregional poetry and prose press founded in Western Washington in 1976 by Michael Daley and Bob Blair. Always run on a shoestring budget, it went through several iterations until coming into the hands of the poet Michael Daley in 2018. Its mission from the beginning was "literature & responsibility," and its fundamental theme remains centered on "the love and preservation of human communities in wild places." Many of the authors in this basket have published with this press while others have not. For our purposes *Empty Bowl* speaks more to the ethos (epitomized by this Press) of those who have written around the Salish Sea, celebrating and drawing nourishment from what Robert Sund called "Ish River Country."

Original Mind has many things in common with the first basket, including its dedication to clarifying and developing the primal mind as it expresses itself in the Cascadian heart-mind-world. By original or primal mind, we reject its denigration as somehow primitive and under-developed. This is neo-primitive mind, thinking and speaking from the retrieval of its Indigenous roots and the practice of their wisdom.

The second volume has the remaining four baskets.

Borders Without Binaries contains work that wiggles free of colonial mapping techniques and colonial sensibilities and contemplates boundaries that have no clear "A' starts here, while "B" starts over there." There is an unspoken awareness that political borders do not register in geological time, and will never divide flora and fauna, or alter the long reach of our coastline and the cascade of watersheds that flow into it. Borders in this respect are edges that bleed from and into other bioregions, marking an interdependence within and between them.

Freed of the burden generated by our imagined identities, Ed Dorn would simply be in his body, here on the land, experiencing the scent of the Sound, “felt on the wrists and neck, cold bands on the body...” Others would meld with the landscape. Deborah Poe finds “distance and intimacy underlined by the lake.” Deborah Woodard draws “down a flap of the gray sky.” Their poetry is an antidote to our extraction-based culture’s habit of living so divorced from the rhythms and nuances of the land that we have, in many cases, as poet Stephen Collis states, even extracted our “selves.”

Sadly, another thing the political border cannot divide is our shared history of genocide, compelling Indigenous poets such as Jordan Abel, severed from his Nisga’a heritage at an early age, to ask how do “those who have been dispossessed / and severed from the land / begin to think through what land means to them?” Severance is a knife with a ragged edge. Again, here, there is no place where “A” ends and “B” begins, only an examination of the ragged wound left in its wake.

The *Wilson’s Bowl* basket is named after a perfectly round bowl-shaped petroglyph scooped from granite in the inner recesses of Long Harbour on Salt Spring Island in what was a large Coast Salish village site 7,000 years ago. Perhaps the bowl was used for grinding. However, as Phyllis Webb writes, “Moon floats here / belly, mouth, open-one-eye.” The image of the petroglyph serves as the nexus of stories, poems and images related directly or indirectly to the work of anthropologist Wilson Duff who did groundbreaking work to introduce settler culture to the true nature of the Indigenous people whose land they had stolen.

Issei Zen is a work of love that comes out of Barbara Johns’ deep study of Issei culture in the bioregion and demonstrates that the experience of Japanese immigrants is an enormous Zen lesson. *Dekita koto wa, shikata ga nai*, indeed! How must we take the challenges of our time and make art from the deepest part of ourselves? The Issei generation endured more than their fair share as they navigated their wartime illegal incarceration, but the determination of the writers and artists collected in this basket can also help us pilot our brave new world of ecological and cultural chaos.

The work in the *Storm Clouds* basket documents the dark and the ominous elements looming in the bioregion, current and ongoing. Joanne Arnott notices that her ancestors have peopled her zoom during the pandemic. Sharon Thesen apologizes to a pillow that she is forced to leave behind as she flees her home to avoid the threat of a wildfire advancing on her Okanagan home. Barry McKinnon experiences “the sense of shitkick to the soul” as he walks through Prince George’s rough downtown core.

No book on Cascadia would be complete without the wisdom of David McCloskey, whose vision in conceiving of the notion of Cascadia is at once an inspiration and, we hope, something we are extending, or at least articulating clearly. He has given the dedicated bioregionalist marching orders for the next several lifetimes as we take the next century or two to restore and heal the biosphere, one bioregion at a time, and develop new rituals to honor what we have now and here and learn how to be more fully present as our Indigenous forebears of Cascadia did and have always urged us to do.

In conclusion, we’ve spoken of the ancient Chinese understanding that literature involves “carving dragons” as opposed to “carving insects.” This is the projective size Charles Olson was writing about in 1950 and illustrates our task at this critical time in human history, surely a time when nothing less than the *duende* is required. A time when we will either learn to live sustainably in our own bioregions, or “perish together as fools” squabbling about “insect” issues while the earth kicks us off the island. This book is created with the hope that our species has what it takes. May all sentient beings flourish!

In Cascadia

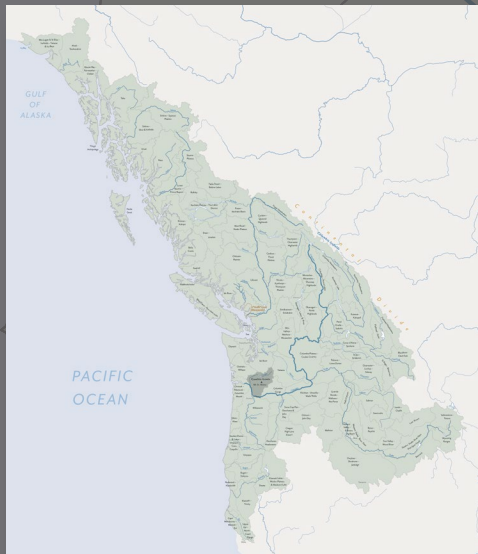
June 2022

1. We borrow both this translation and some of these ideas from Rafal K. Stepien’s marvelous article, “The Original Mind is the Literary Mind, the Original Body Carves Dragons,” *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*, ed. Rafal K. Stepien (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 231–260.

For the protection of all beings in the bioregion of Cascadia

basket one

the buddha way



Chehalis – Willapa

Yakama

Palouse – Loess Dunes

Clearwater – Lochsa – Selway

Cowlitz–Lewis

Mt. St. Helens

Chinook – Tillamook – Columbia Mouth

Columbia Gorge

Klickitat – Umatilla – Walla Walla

Grande Ronde – Wallowa – Nez Perce

Salmon

Salmon

Portland

Willamette

Snow Cap Plateau – Deschutes & John Day

Ochoco – John Day

Hells Canyon

Siletz – Alsea

Santiam

Oregon High Lava Desert

Malheur

Treasure Valley – 6 Rivers

Ag Basin

Boise – Payette

Siuslaw Dunes

Willamette

Deschutes Headwaters

Western Snake River Plain

Owyhee – Shoshone – Jarbidge

Humboldt

Klamath

Klamath Lakes – Modoc Plateau & Medicine Lake



Lopez Island

Reflections on Poetic Composition, Ecological Awareness, and Buddhist Thought

As I've been writing poetry since the 1960s, with gradually increasing awareness of environmental damage, and practicing Vajrayana Buddhism since the early 1990s, you would think I've come to some conclusion by now about how the spheres of writing poetry, ecological thought, and Buddhist teaching interact, but this still feels difficult for me to verbalize. There seems to be a tension between them that is generative, and in that word "tension" there's not only stretch but electromotive energy, a sort of current I can feel at work when I'm writing. This current manifests in words, which is quite different from the space that sometimes opens up in the act of meditating. Yet both are kinds of awareness. It seems to me that language-awareness shares a quality with eco-awareness that might best be summed up as "relational thinking," a term Miriam Nichols uses in a recent interview Paul Nelson has done with her, posted on the website of the Cascadia Poetics Lab (paulnelson.com, January 13, 2020). In that remarkable interview, Miriam talks about the poet Robin Blaser's sense of what poetry is or does as "a particular kind of knowing" which she identifies as "relational thinking."

Relational thinking is a mode of thought we badly need at this point in Western culture as we face the incredible damage human exploitation has done to earth's resources, to all living species, and to us—in short the biosphere we are not apart from but part of. On B.C.'s West Coast (I say

“B.C.’s” rather than “Canada’s” because, like many British Columbians, I don’t feel the rest of Canada is concerned about the continuing eco-degradation of our coast), we recognize that we are on the brink of losing our southern orca pod to extinction as well as the Fraser River salmon run. Salmon has been the traditional mainstay of the coast’s Indigenous economy and it still supports the biospheric relations of bears, eagles, indeed all that lives on the forested banks of still-wild salmon rivers. This disruption of a vast eco-cycle is due not only to industrial salmon farming, to pollution of all kinds including plastic detritus, but also to noise disturbance from heavy shipping like oil tankers. Led by the Tseil-waututh and Squamish nations on the north shore of Burrard Inlet, many of us have been opposing our federal government’s new bitumen pipeline through to Vancouver for this reason as well as the risk of tanker oil spills and what that would do to this part of the coast we share with marine life.

A new crisis point in northern B.C. is the RCMP forcible dismantling of blockades on unceded Wet’suwet’en territory, arresting people who are trying to protect their land from the construction of another pipeline carrying fracked gas to a port near Kitimat for export. And this despite a recent geological survey (CBC News, Nov. 14, 2019) determining that much of the underground rock that fracking blasts water through is already “severely stressed” with “ceiling faults” making these rocks earthquake-prone—in fact, there has already been a 4.5 magnitude earthquake in the fracked area (2018). All of this pipeline push is evidence of very short-term profit-oriented thinking that so far has over-ruled the relational thinking we need in order to understand the extent of environmental damage we’re now facing.

That word “facing” suggests something outside and apart from us but actually we are deeply inside it and may need to go even deeper. The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh, in his new translation of a very significant sūtra, the Heart Sūtra, offers the term “interbeing” as a way to circumvent our habitual dualistic thinking in concepts like outside as distinct from inside, self as distinct from other, being as distinct from non-being. For instance, we tend to think of the ground we human beings walk on, build on, excavate and drill into, as inert. Here’s a poem called:

on solid ground

she’s been pre
dicted, fore
told, building
code limits in
place

help brigades
field flats of plastic
wrapped water bottles, wonder
when she’ll come

big plates grind
slow, so slow
buildup one up
on another

west she rocks
that large island im
perceptible centi
meters back, back

and forth our
million feet don’t feel her
shrug the skin we keep
drilling into, hydraulic
pressure pins in
“rock hard” holds
—ha!

she’s on the move
like us, restless, dreaming
climax

/release some

time some
here

And then there are whole webs of life under our feet, the feet we set on boats, bridges, wharves, wind-surf boards, to mention some of the extensions we've built on the surface of waters.

Here is a poem that dates from 2012 when I went to Campbell River on Vancouver Island for a writers' festival called "Words on Water." It's a sort of verbal meditation on the form of interbeing through eating that happens underwater between marine creatures, and on land, in cities, in our own eating, or at least grocery shopping. I don't know if you have the label "Ocean Wise" here but in B.C. it's applied to species of fish or seafood that are sustainable and have been caught by conservation-aware methods.

full spectrum eye appeal

lost in depths that absorb
sun's red or orange wavelength
miniatures hunt

striped nudibranch's toothy rasp
at luminous sea pen, painted
anemone's tactile wave
stung crab to mouth

sea cuke's moptop licking its
tentacle chops we forget

underwater gastronomy
its delicate clarity of interception, inter-
connection lost

to the dry suit beings we are

solo surfing the next new wave
through passages of print black
on white

while vermilion and purple stars
climb walls on slow tube feet
tanker traffic will rock

not to any lullaby, the super
duper poster image of
profits, the gracious do si do
we do in grocery aisles
our eyes on "Ocean Wise"

our still so surface eyes

So much of what we form opinions about is "surface," even in this poem—"surface" in the sense that we observe externals, often on visual appeal only, and then make judgments about how what we observe might benefit or harm our individual selves. More than 30 years ago, in *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), Thomas Berry called for recognition of our intimacy with and "deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe."¹ "Sacred presence." That phrase suggests the need for reverence, a quiet standing back of self so as to open up to a phenomenally non-self reality. This is something many people, especially we First

World people, no longer know how to do because, as David R. Loy points out in his *EcoDharma*, our view of the earth and its resources is merely utilitarian, merely what can be exploited for human projects. Our culture has also become highly visual so that we tend to orient ourselves through vision and not through inner sensing. This makes it difficult for us to experience the sheer phenomenality of being linked with, and dependent upon, the being of so many other living creatures—trees, fish, bacteria, people unknown to us—even the extraordinarily *live* quality of this planet with its rivers, oceans, minerals, earthquakes and hurricanes. To feel our interbeing with all this requires letting go of our individual separateness. It calls for an openness to what is other than us and yet not other—kinship is one way of referring to this, a kinship announced in the Indigenous phrase known across native North America, “all my relations.”

This is something I was trying to articulate in an earlier poem, “generation, generations at the mouth.”² First, some background.

In the early 1970s I was working on an oral history project that introduced me to the pre-war life of a Japanese-Canadian fishing community on the Fraser River. This experience gradually morphed into a further collaboration with then-photographer Robert Minden and for me, a long sequence of poems about that community, Steveston. Steveston is at the mouth of the wide southern arm of what used to be a major salmon river, the Fraser. My experience of that river and of what was happening to the salmon was formative not only to my sense of ecology, but also to my later engagement with Buddhist teaching.

That poetic sequence with the title *Steveston* was first published with Robert Minden’s photographs in 1974 by Talonbooks. Twenty-six years later, Ron Hatch of Ronsdale Press asked me to write another poem for what would become the third edition of *Steveston* published in 2001. By then I knew I had to address the dwindling salmon runs on that river. I thought of the poem as a coda, an addition to the original series that perpetuated but also transformed its theme.

As I was writing this coda, I remembered something I’d learned from the 1970s, from Susan Reid, who was then an anthropology graduate student at UBC writing her dissertation under the mentorship of the

remarkable cultural anthropologist Wilson Duff who had worked intensively with the art and myth of Coastal Indigenous peoples, especially the Haida. As Susan was writing her dissertation, we talked about what she had learned of the cosmology of the Kwakwaka’wakw (then known as the Kwakiutl), a Nation further up this coast, particularly their sense of ancestral kinship with salmon, bears, and other inhabitants with whom they share their territory. What she told me about the significance of non-human ancestors, of recognizing this kinship, and the importance of returning salmon bones to the sea so that the salmon people would return to offer themselves as food, this stayed with me.

Another source of this poem comes from Buddhist teachings. By the time I wrote it, I’d become a practicing Vajrayana Buddhist and knew of the bardo, that transition space a mind-stream enters before becoming any sort of body. It is formless and yet has the potential of becoming a form, like the potential in the meeting of sperm and egg.

I also knew about the Tibetan practice of giving human corpses back to the earth through the hunger of vultures. In short, I was learning something about our sacred kinship with other beings and about the ongoing and transformational stream of life that is “something like a river,” to quote poet Fred Wah.³

generation, generations at the mouth

clans of salmon, chinook, coho, gathering just offshore, backbones no longer intact, steam-pressured in millions of cans, picked clean barbecue leavings in a thousand garbage bags ripped open by cats, rats, they can’t find their way back

what is the body’s blueprint?

return what is solid to water, the First Peoples said—
returned, every bone intact
generates the giving back of race, kind, kin

choked in urban outfalls, fished as they aim for rivers sediment-thick with runoff, *tamahnous* of the wild they hover, sonar streaks, impossible vision-glitches, outside pens where farmed lookalikes grow pale & drugged

kin, wild skin, wild & electric at the mouth where rivers disappear in the that that is not that, the chinook can't find their way back

come out of the blue: this flow, these energy rivers & wheels, radiant giving unlocked. & not this frozen, this canned product eagles once stripped, eagles, bears going, gone, hungry & wild outside shut doors where light pools & we pore over stock market news, refuse, refuse our interrelation, refuse to pour back

what *is* the body's blueprint? impermanent, shifting energy blocks in its own becoming, a stream & streaming out to the void where rivers lose themselves

in the bardo as many beings as waves gather at any opening, those in-between and not-yet ones that race a river of sperm to be here now, light-pour, each cell in its dying turn returns

what is the mouth of the river now? a toxic o of emptiness? teeming hole of ever-becoming we create? re-entry. re-turn. verbing the noun out of its stuck edges and into occurrence, currents, *curre*-... we've lost the verb in our currency, a frozen exchange streaming emptiness...

(they're fishing in London now)

at the mouth of the river, clans of the possible are gathering, the chinook, the coho rivering just offshore are us

—January 2000

Let me return now to the notion of some sort of current at work in writing a poem. It's not about naming so much as verb-ing or wording what seems at first wordless. When I start a poem, I have no idea where it's going to end. Words like trees embody time and change, they thicken with meaning through generations of speakers. We know some of their roots—for instance, *improvise* comes from Latin *improvisus*, unforeseen, what you can't prepare for. So much of the act of writing seems like this. Words moving moment to moment in thought's stream, called up by sound resemblance, or meaning connection, even the on-running rhythm of a sentence moving towards its so-called conclusion that then merges in larger depths of meaning often unforeseen. If this sounds like a river, it feels like one. Our thoughts, perceptions, sensations move in an endless stream, gathering flotsam as much as insight, moving us imperceptibly towards our end which of course isn't always our "end" in the sense of goal or aim.

It's very easy in this time of what is now called the Anthropocene Extinction to see only our fear for ourselves, our human survival, and refuse to see our agency behind the burning bushfires of Australia or the rapid ice-melt of Greenland. What can a poem do in the face of looming crisis?

What writing has taught me is the value of inter-relations in the arena of words. Simply put, how we think determines what we think. So behind the challenge of how to change our way of living on this earth is the issue of how to think, relationally (there's Nichols' relational thinking again) instead of thinking in fixed terms that merely entrench what we already know. Relational thinking recognizes connection in multiple directions, feels fluid.

To move into writing a poem I have to let go of what I think I already know. This process feels fluid to me. To compose means literally to put together but I don't often feel it's "me" composing. Everything by so many other writers I've read is in play in the wording of perceptions that a by-line proclaims as mine. Yet these words called "mine" arise in an echo of so many other usages by other speakers, writers—in that sense, a poem seems to arise on common ground. And often less in reference to things than vibrating in the web of sounds and images they create. What a poem

ends up “saying” is what these fluid verbal webs call up in a poet’s mind open to them and so eventually in a listener’s or reader’s open mind. That word “open” seems to be crucial here.

This is where Dharma so usefully teaches the necessity of junking what separates us from what *is*, principally learning to let go of our dualistic thinking that accomplishes the constant separation of *this* from *that*, *then* from *now*, object out there from me seeing it. As Thích Nhất Hạnh writes in a Dharma passage that feels ecological: “The insight of interbeing is that nothing can exist by itself alone, that each thing exists only in relation to everything else.”⁴ We can already see that when the intricate web of life that nourishes all beings is broken apart then we are broken too. And even before now, and beyond now, what forms us are the same minerals, water, air that have formed and will form the cells of all biological phenomena on this earth including us. This is in part what Dharma teachings refer to as inter-dependence.

In relation to this, here’s a very short lyric, an ecological love poem dedicated to my partner. It’s called “mes semblables,” literally my similars, in common usage my people, my kinfolk, those like me. It begins with trees, in this case fir trees taking in carbon dioxide and giving off the oxygen we breathe in.

mes semblables

for Bridget

the breathing out of firs
infinite complex circle
our blood intermeshed
light in synthesis

the gift you said, aware

en masse this mess
of human undoing

intricate interweft
divers’ blueblack wing shake
your water glitter eyes⁵

Hua-yen Buddhism offers a much more cosmic and complex image of interbeing. It’s the image of Indra’s net which strikes me as a guide for us now. Here’s a brief description:

In the realm of the Vedic god Indra, hangs a very intricate and infinite net. In each “eye” or hole of this net a shimmering jewel hangs, and because this net stretches in all dimensions and to infinite extent, there are an infinite number of such luminous jewels, each one reflecting all the others.⁶

I’ll close with a very brief poem that refers to this net. It’s called “Interbeing” and is little more than a reminder of what that might mean in everyday life. It ends with a quote from a much earlier poem by the seventeenth century Chan nun known as Yikui who, for some years of her life, lived in a cloister her brother built for her that had a wonderful name, the “Cloister of Investigating Commonality.”

interbeing

each a jewel plural
in Indra's net

ones not one reflect

or as Yikui writes
*If within there is no self
then each and every thing
is intimate.*⁷

This, it seems to me, is an extraordinarily apt image for, and statement of, what relational thinking involves, whether we're talking about eco-awareness or Dharma in action. And it also speaks to the relational qualities of language on the move in writing a poem.

1. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, Berkeley, 2006), 46. (This was first published in 1988 by Sierra Books in San Francisco.)
2. Daphne Marlatt and Robert Minden, *Steveston* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2001), 61–62.
3. Fred Wah, *Scree: The Collected Earlier Poems, 1962–1991*, ed. Jeff Derksen (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2015), 451.
4. Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Other Shore* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2017), 45.
5. Daphne Marlatt, *Intertidal: The Collected Earlier Poems, 1968–2008* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2017), 552.
6. This is based on a description by Frances H. Cook in his *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 40.
7. This quote is excerpted and re-lined from Chan nun Yikui's poem, "Inscribed on a Mirror" in *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns*, ed. Beata Grant (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 85.



The Celestial

Joan Giannecchini

Maggie Creek