

The John Muir Centenary Year arrives in 2014. What will our legacy be in 2114?

Wendy Robertson Fyfe continues reflecting on some contributions of Dunbar's famous son, John Muir, Father of Conservation and some developments in the 21st century towards the John Muir Centenary Year in 2014.

Wendy's tent on the edge of the sweet mint meadow in the forest, Animas Valley, Colorado National Forest.

We have come already to the final article in this series of four reflections. The first exploring Muir's contribution to a wider conversation with nature and the importance of conservation of wild spaces including more recent work by Bill Plotkin regarding our human wildness and nature; the second more specifically relating Muir's childhood in Dunbar with Plotkin's work regarding cultivating both nature and human tasks, including facets and developmental stages; and the third article specifically about an aspect of Muir's influence in Scotland today with the 'Year of Natural Scotland 2013'.

In this article, I will offer a more personal reflection, including my time of exploring wild places in Scotland and in the wild west USA canyons and forests in National Parks, through the last year. I am aware that Yosemite National Park continues to burn as I write. Throughout this year I engaged 'as if everything depended on it', or as Plotkin states 'as if your place in the world really mattered.'¹¹ As far as possible, I took myself out of this dominant Western Culture and, by doing so, saw the extent to which I needed to live 'counter-culture', in order for a different 'daily air' to become visible. Do we take the everyday world for granted as 'the reality' I wonder: for example, the way our working/employment hours and salaries can tie us into rents and mortgages and benefit systems, bills, television, radio, particular news, lifestyles, relationships, computer systems with social networking and mobile phones: a whole matrix of 'reality'? It has taken everything including, paradoxically, a variety of grants from a Pollard and Dickson Trust Fund, St Baldred's Episcopalian Church in North Berwick, AL Development Fund at The Open University, extended annual leave from CrossReach PostNatal Depression Service in Edinburgh, support of family particularly through my father's illness this year and dear friends. My father's illness brings home to me the urgency of 'now', of living fully in the present. I have indeed been very blessed to have made this journey.

So, what have I found? I have found that 'to fall', as I ended my first article, to let go of, for example, identities, understandings, perceived social 'reality' in a particular supportive context to 'not knowing' and 'breaking open' to the world is indeed to enter another deeper place of meaning and possibility, romance even; an underground river ... As the poet Rilke, quoted by Plotkin and written during Muir's lifetime, states:

'How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of even the smallest thing
and pulls it toward the heart of the world.

Each thing –
each stone, blossom, child –
is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,
push out beyond what we each belong to
for some empty freedom.'¹²

I found myself falling ... 'toward the heart of the world', into a world both terrifying and stunningly beautiful; a world long gone in Scotland, of big wild animals keeping me on the edge of aliveness and vitality; where my initial fears transformed into deep love and respect for and with things such as Mountain Lion:

'Sure-footed,
sturdy
and thick-necked,
Every part of its lean, muscular body is fully in purpose.
There is no waste here.'

Wendy Robertson Fyfe (from *Midnight Mountain Lion* – unpublished).

Or Bear who began entering the richness of my dreamscape, that 'otherworld' of mystery which, like the wilderness, can bring our focus to another reality beyond our daily world and experiences which can inform our next steps, if heard and



In conversation: Bill Plotkin, Ursula from the year group and Capitol Reef Canyons, Utah (by kind permission).

allowed to work on us. Bear, who I heard roar in the dark night of the forest in Animas Valley, Colorado ...

I found myself falling quite literally, hurting my back and needing to take gentle self care and time. I found myself falling in love and longing anew with life and a vital, animate, expressive world around me conversing with me in a unique way, as I found it did with each one of us in the group and I find so in guiding 'The Walk' along coastal East Lothian too. I also fell into grief. What a loss there is for us not to be in such conversation with the world and all life, to participate! No wonder there is such deep sadness and bewilderment or need, quite literally, to be *bewildered*. A deep grief sits with me when I realise the extent of our loss; our disconnection from our source in Nature, humans as part of Nature, from Earth, the universe that John Muir gave so much attention to in ensuring space and conversation with our true belonging and inheritance.

One of this year's group, Jack Benter, a Ranger at Yosemite, sent a beautiful Muir quote yesterday:

"Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and; tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love." ⁽¹⁾

I wonder, did I *really* hear previously what Muir was really saying? Did I *really* take on what he was referring to and his impact? Mmmmm. I felt the grief of loss most acutely on the Isle of Iona and also feel this now as I think of Yosemite burning:

Meeting the Grief of the World on Iona

Walking on white sands of Iona,
soaking in the falling waters
of the world
whilst weeping for my losses,
the tears of the world
and my own
meet and merge.

A single drop appears on the end of each eyelash.
I'm seeing the world through a row of droplets
and even when the rain stops
I refuse to wipe them away,
acknowledging each and every one
as I walk on.....

Sunshine now falling,
I see the world through diamond rainbows
and leave the bay
holding a small, single,
green Iona marble
teardrop.

Wendy Robertson Fyfe

Falling 'toward the heart of the world', I found an animate Earth such as finding myself in conversation with a lizard sunning itself on my hat on my head in the desert; in conversation with the canyons singing in the night; with the night forest creatures singing their longing for the sun to return and falling silent again before the sun approaches and though still dark, I know the silence heralds the sun arriving and wait in awe for the majestic gravitas of the rising. I am not disappointed.

Falling ... falling ... the Rilke poem continues:

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.

Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So, like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what things can teach us:
to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly. ⁽²⁾

(continued next page)



John Muir was a man who did 'learn from the things' and placed them at the heart of his life speaking for/with all beings. It was a way of living that he embodied for life rather than a day and in doing so showed us another way. Quite a legacy for which I am truly grateful. And what will my or our legacy be for the future ones 100 years and more from today; human and 'more/other than human', the creatures, animals, flowers, trees, unseen ones? Can we see/embrace fully the conversation and impact John Muir had in his day? I, for one, surrender and am willing to do so again and again. How about you? The SouthWest American writer Terry Tempest Williams states 'The eyes of the future are looking at us and longing for us to see beyond our own time.' Dunbar's famous ancestor saw this and acted. Is this something worthwhile for us to see, hear and remember today 100 years on and a time when the way we live counters it?

As we inch towards the John Muir Centenary Year, I will leave you a further quote from John Muir himself to ponder:

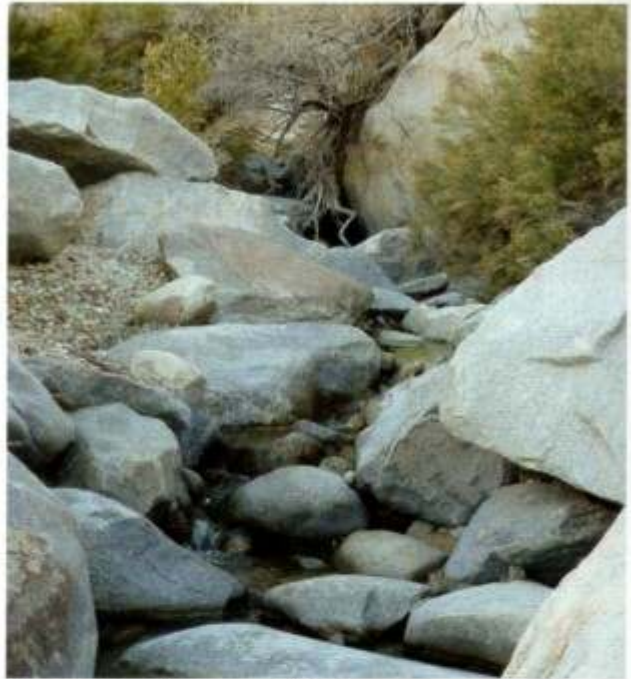
'As long as I live, I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing. I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm, and the avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.'¹⁴

Wendy invites you to share your own experiences, ideas and responses at info@wendyrobertsonfyfe.co.uk. Wendy developed and guides 'The Walk' along coastal East Lothian. She is a guide to soul, psychotherapist, poet, photographer and teaches at The Open University in Scotland.


1. Plotkin B (2003) *Soulcraft*, New World Library
2. Barrows A & Macy J (1996) Translation, *Rilke's Book of Hours, Love poems to God*, (1900), Riverhead Books, New York
3. Muir, J (1870's) *Mountain Thoughts* collected by Linnie Marsh Wolfe and

- published in *John of the Mountains* (1938) University of Wisconsin Press, Madison. Reprinted by arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Co.
4. Quoted from *Muir Journals* (undated fragment, c. 1871) by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (1945)

Article, unpublished poetry and photographs copyright Wendy Robertson Fyfe




Water in the desert, Anza Borrego, California.



DISCOVER Dunbar


with all its traditional shops,
businesses and attractions
set in and around our historic
high street.

We have all you need to make
your visit complete. A perfect
one-stop destination for
coffees, lunches and
inspirational shopping.



Discover Dunbar

The birthplace of John Muir



DUNBAR TRADE ASSOCIATION

www.dunbar.org.uk



VISIT JOHN MUIR'S BIRTHPLACE

Be inspired by the legacy of John Muir, conservation pioneer. Open through the winter 10am to 5pm Wednesday to Saturday, 1pm to 5pm Sunday. 126 High Street, Dunbar, EH42 1JJ.

For more info call 01368 865899 or visit www.jmbt.org

COMING IN 2014! A series of events and exhibitions in Dunbar and East Lothian celebrating the legacy of John Muir, 100 years after his death.

THE JOHN MUIR FESTIVAL from the 17th to the 26th April 2014 is one of the highlights of the Homecoming Scotland 2014 celebrations. Look out for more details soon at www.snh.gov.uk






Garleton Lodge

We cater for up to 30 people in spectacular surroundings, offering luxury accommodation and top quality menus using fresh produce sourced locally from award winning food producers.

Whether you want to party the night away making full use of the outdoor hot tub and Finnish BBQ hut, or just relax and enjoy the spectacular views, Garleton Lodge guarantees to impress.

West Garleton, Haddington, East Lothian
Visit our website or call Gavin and Jackie
on 0162 082 4936 or 0776 749 8012
www.garletonlodge.com info@garletonlodge.com

