

Eco Dharma Talk 6/28/22

By Shelly Hughes

I went to college up in Humboldt County. Living there surrounded by redwood trees, I fell in love with them and my classes took me there to learn the plants, birds, insects and mushrooms which were all new to me having grown up in the oak woodlands of Sonoma County. But hanging over all of this awe and love for this new place that I would be calling home for the next 6 years of my life was a cloud of anger and fear.

It was during a time of intense change for that area. 95% of the coastal redwood forests had been logged and the Eel River fisheries were collapsing. As a student I became immersed in what was going on. My best friend that I was living with at the time was one of a few young women in the Environmental Engineering program, I was studying Biology Botany and Environmental Ethics, another friend was studying with a professor that was brand new to the college and he was doing this really cutting-edge work climbing hundreds of feet up into the old growth redwood trees and studying all of the creatures up there. There are entire communities of invertebrates that live in the canopy, and there is an amphibian called the Wandering Salamander, that live their entire lives in the crowns of the old growth redwoods, having evolved a behavior well-adapted to the dangers of falling from high places: the ability to parachute, glide and maneuver in mid-air. This new professor to HSU also oversaw a lot of the research that was done about the nesting of Marbled Murrelets, a bird that was put on the endangered species list only 15 years after ornithologists discovered where they nested. Marbled Murrelets are actually seabirds and their close relatives all nest on rock cliffs but this bird saw the huge trees just off the coast and thought I'll try nesting there. During their breeding season, they molt their feathers and actually begin to grow some orange ones making them blend right into the dappled sunlight in the redwood trees, and the one solitary egg that they lay is green, like moss.

Tension was building on the campus between the Forestry students and Environmental Studies students. We went to every protest and there was one every few weeks, from very small ones at the courthouse in Eureka to large ones in remote areas of the county.

Pacific Lumber company, the largest land owner in the area had been bought out by a corporation whose CEO lived far away in Texas, and he had increased the rate of logging and targeted old growth trees. He was dubbed one of the most notorious eco-villains of all time along with the Exxon Valdez guy.

And the local community was understandably in a frenzy to protect these forests. For years, there was a grass roots organization called Earth First! working to equip the community with ways to delay the destruction of the forest... they trained people for direct action, and they would block logging roads and handcuff themselves to bulldozers and other equipment, can you imagine the bravery? Each demonstration became more intense and finally one time the County Sheriff's crew forcibly opened their eyes and swabbed them with pepper spray. Earth Firsters! began using the tactic of tree sitting. Someone would volunteer to go up in a tree for a few days and stay up there so that they would not be able to remove that tree. This tactic increased national attention of the issue. And people began questioning, why would someone risk

their life for a tree? And why is it legal to cut down a tree that has been there for a thousand years but it is illegal to take the life of a person?

In 1996, I went to a protest at the northern edge of the Headwaters Forest area. The situation had gotten national attention and gained the political support of the president at that time Bill Clinton and a draft resolution was passed to create a protected area at the headwaters of the Elk River and Salmon Creek but it failed to gain enough votes. 6,000 people showed up to that protest and over 1,000 were arrested at the Gate: it was the largest civil disobedience action in the history of the forest preservation movement.

I remember just seeing cars parked on the sides of the road for miles, there were just so many people. As we were walking to the demonstration area, a big flat bed logging truck roared by and there was a man standing on the bed of the truck with his chainsaw going and he was screaming at us. There were cars driving by us yelling insults and throwing stuff at us, my friend ended up with gum in her hair.

We walked miles to where the actual demonstration was happening and watched people taken away in handcuffs. There was a big bus parked there. People would climb over the gate, get handcuffed and put on the bus. I watched Bonnie Rait get arrested... I remember seeing her red hair flying around and she didn't go so easily. My voice was almost gone by the end of that day, we had yelled and chanted for so long. When we got back to my bus (yes I had a Volkswagen bus and I was very much a hippie actually a "Humboldt honey" if we need to use labels ;)

There was a note on my windshield and it said "sorry, you can use my phone if you need to" (it was before cell phones) and I thought that's weird, and then my friend noticed that my back tire was completely flat (there was a large gash in it) so I went to the nearest house and I knocked on the door and the woman that answered was apologetic saying that her father in law had been very upset by all these people and lashed out and slashed my tire. He was there in the living room and he was trying to talk to me but he was so drunk he could barely stand. I called triple A and she reimbursed me for my tire just like she said they would. That experience deepened my compassion for the people who work in those forests, after being in his home and considering his livelihood, as those circumstances had offered me.

Then a landslide occurred above the small town of Scotia, where the mill was located, and the mudslide destroyed 8 homes. There was a huge old growth tree near the edge of this clearcut that had taken place on a slope and caused the landslide, and to bring attention to the issue Earth First! wanted someone to occupy the tree for a week. So a young woman by the name of Julia Butterfly Hill (same age as me at the time 22) climbed 150 feet up into that tree and stayed there for over 2 years (738 days!) Throughout her ordeal, she weathered freezing rains and 40 mph winds (it just happened to be an El Nino year) helicopter harassment, a ten-day siege by company security guards, and intimidation by angry loggers. She wrote a great book about her experience called the Legacy of Luna. The tree was named Luna because the moon was rising when they hiked out there to get her set up in the tree. I read it to my son (after reading it myself) when he was about 7 and he was like "mom, I don't think I want to hear this story anymore, it's too much!"

During my last year of college I seriously considered dropping out and joining the Earth First movement, not as a front line person but someone who would support direct action at

Basecamp. I think our own Feather may have delivered something to Julia Butterfly during her tree sit! Anyway, I had student loans that needed to be paid off and it just wasn't in the cards for me for many reasons.

Instead, I vowed to defend what I loved with my academic achievements and my very first job after graduating that summer was with an environmental company doing plant surveys of timber harvest plans. So, I found myself in the most remote areas of the county... I was on logging roads miles in from the main roads, hours deep into the land, seeing clear-cut after clear-cut and then we'd see an area with larger trees flagged to be cut and these were the timber harvest areas that we were working in and my job was to find rare and endangered plants. At first I worked so hard looking for these plants but they just weren't there. Every once in awhile someone would find a few, and then we would flag them, mark their location on the map and that would not necessarily stop that timber harvest plan from being cut. The logging company could count them as a "take" and alter a timber harvest plan elsewhere. It was heartbreaking work. I encountered a few black bears but I only saw their back ends as they were running away from me, and my fear lessened as I noticed that they were in the areas that had been cut and were eating huckleberries growing there.

So I became very frustrated and saddened by that process but I knew I wanted to continue to work to protect and defend the land and so my next job was for Point Reyes National Seashore as a Biological Technician. There I went out to very remote areas of the park to remove Pampas Grass, which you all know, it's that giant grass that has feathery looking inflorescences, it also has razor sharp leaves. These grasses were marked on a map and my partner and I had to locate them and remove them by hacking and digging them up. We used a Pulaski which is actually a fire fighting tool, it has a hatchet blade on one end and a wide pick on the other. There was no way to actually remove the plants entirely because we were so remote and I often questioned the effectiveness of what we were doing but the park service had money to remove invasive species and this is how they were doing it. Just a few days in I was covered in cuts and poison oak but I made it through the 3 months that that job was contracted for.

Awhile after that, I began working for a non profit as an environmental educator. We worked with 4 high schools from Windsor, Healdsburg and Geyserville and with some at-risk youth. We would take students out once a week on field trips all throughout the watershed. Our program was called Russian River Watershed Science and we taught them about plants, wildlife, hydrology and ecology, all of it place based and hands on.. we collected native plants seed, grew the plants and planted them along degraded creeks, mostly on private vineyard lands.

I could really sense the difference I was making. When you have a 15 year old young man who in the beginning of the school year complains about the cold and rain and being outside, rolling his eyes at everything, and then at the end of the year... smiling away as he teaches a third grader how to plant a coast live oak along the creek and what it will do for the riparian corridor, it's just golden. It's not like that happened for all the students, but for good number it did.

There was one project that became very special for me. If you are local, in Sonoma county go check it out, it's in Sebastopol behind Palm Drive hospital up the hill from the Laguna, so it's called the Laguna Uplands Preserve. It's an 8 acre area that once was grazed by sheep (it

looked like a moonscape when I first saw it) and we planted hundreds of native trees and shrubs there with all facets of the community over several years and during the last year of that project is when I had my first baby, my daughter Kira. She is almost 16 now, and when we go there to the Laguna Uplands there is a thriving riparian oak woodland and I stand in the shade of those trees that we planted and marvel at how beautiful the plant community has become and witness all of the wildlife that now call that place home.

My mom recently gave me this book, called *Finding The Mother Tree*. It's written by Suzanne Simard, a woman who came from a family that worked with the land, harvesting trees. Early in life, she worked seasonally for a logging company and quickly learned that the practices of spraying and removing "non sellable timber" were accepted as routine with very little evidence of their effectiveness on the existing stand, and the book is about her journey to conduct research to prove that keeping the oldest trees in particular, the Mother Trees, is better in many ways.

[From inset: The forests are social, cooperative creatures connected through underground networks by which trees communicate their vitality and vulnerabilities with communal lives not that different for our own]

Ah, reading this book was like a balm for my 22 year old self and the battles that were fought over why those ancient trees were important.

So, I'm a gardener now. For the past few years, it has become an increasingly intimate adventure. I had my hands in the dirt one day, and this understanding just washed over me "here in the earth, are my ancestors, everything is here, so much returns to and grows from this place."

And the more I've returned to the earth every day to tend her, my perspective has really widened, that this... all of this is the garden.

As humans during this time, we have the notion that there is plenty of protected land (in parks, reserves, etc) but our little pockets of earth we call home account for far more land (83% of the land is privately owned) so what we do is important and effective. If we provide food and water and refrain from using chemicals, then we've got a life affirming intention going on.

This book has inspired me, called *Nature's Best Hope* by Doug Tallamy (he's a professor in the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware).

And he has this concept of "the Homegrown National Park" and it involves using native plants to support the ecological relationships and functions that have been disrupted.

It is very common that a green looking space is actually a food desert. A lawn is an obvious example. But here is another: an Oak can support 557 different species of caterpillars. A non-native tree like a Ginkgo offers virtually none. (gingko is commonly grown in urban areas, in the east more so than here I think). Ok so what's the big deal about caterpillars? 96% of terrestrial birds rear their young on insects. One pair of chickadee parents needs to bring enough food – on average 500 caterpillars to their nest *per day* or the nest will fail.

The kinds of plants we have in our gardens is crucial.

So this has got me excited and hopeful because I know native plants, way better than I'll ever know ornamental plants, and I love doing the work of restoring the land, and so I'm on this journey to weave my past into my future.

I've had the pleasure of working alongside Ellen in her garden for 3 winters now pruning back perennials and spreading around compost and I remember her saying something to me about her plants like "If it doesn't have bees on it, I get rid of it" and after hearing herself say it she said "is that fascist?" And I could totally relate! As a gardener I come up against this kind of question all the time "who am I to say who stays and who goes?" The fact is, how I answer that question has real consequences for all beings. We all know how delicate ecological balance is becoming. And with the drought. I work part time at the Marin Art & Garden Center and the garden manager there planted a bunch of Australian and New Zealand plants because they are drought tolerant. I don't see much happening around those plants. And I hear Ellen's voice in my head "if it doesn't have bees..."

The wild is there but it needs to be cultivated. And what a complete joy it is to do that. Because it's relational right?

As Buddhists it's our practice to understand that we are not separate. Our gardening ways can actually save the lives of our sisters and brothers, our earth family. It feels wonderful to enter into that relationship, so much treasure and magic, just waiting to be remembered and invited. I wrote a poem about this that I share below.

But the last thing I'd like to share is a prayer. I mentioned the intimacy that I've been feeling when gardening, you know I'm out there weeding, pulling up plants all over the place and deciding who stays and who goes, you know, I'm killing a lot of plants and insects, it's unavoidable sometimes, I try to work slowly and move bugs out of the way. But I began to feel that I needed to take the time to kneel first and center and I want to share with you the words that I say before I begin...

Here, At the womb of Mother Earth

Weave me gently into the cycle of birth and death
Honoring the mysteries of time and relationship
May I stay present, compassionate and careful
My heart full of respect and gratitude
Kneeling amongst countless beings, may I remain prayerful and lovingly tend the earth
working towards balance, radiance and resilience

Ellen and I met and she asked me, what can we do? We like to talk in abstract and relative terms, with ideology
But what do we actually physically do?
We use our heart and our hands
Gardening is a way of activism
Every time you kneel in the earth with gratitude
Every time you consider the life of other beings that live in community with the very same elements you do
Every time you don't spray chemicals
When your actions literally support life

It's not hard to miss if you pay attention
And there is all kinds of ways to use our unique energy
If you can't sit up in a tree like Julia Butterfly there are millions of other ways
to show your love and support
We all feel it, we just need to help each other continue to remember
And every connection is a remembering
Sometimes when I work with plants, especially ones that are particularly potent
medicines, I am in awe of the relationship that has evolved into that moment of me
receiving that healing.
All of the medicines and fruits and vegetables and grains that we enjoy today are the
result of our ancestors loving those plants and tending them generation after
generation.

That's what the author of the Mother Tree did out in those forests. Her love, her
remembering of something she couldn't articulate but knew was important fueled her
passion and hard work that resulted in scientific proof that everything in the forest is
connected.

POEM

Your Garden is Life

by Shelly Hughes

Birds flock over and take turns taking a dip in the water you set out for them
A baby skunk waddles through and finds a snack
Butterflies arrive to deep pools of nectar and lay eggs, with caterpillars having plenty
to munch on
A fox lightly skips into the scene sniffing around and gets a much needed drink of
water
Sometimes with a gurgling growl Raccoon comes lumbering through, curious and
searching while he shuffles stones around and scratches at stuff
Noticing crab spider, she can change her color to blend into the flower she is hiding
on
Spotted Towhee doing his little leaf scatter dance, unearthing seeds and wandering
bugs
And the boisterous laughter of quail and woodpecker
Lizard chillin under a cozy clay pot in the rain
Golden green bees flying in the sun
And flowers galore
which is how Mother Nature
Smiles

Though the earth is crying
She's rejoicing too
And healing
When we feel her boundless love
And return it