

Whole Terrain

REFLECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE



Legacy and Posterity
1999/2000

"Our skills and works are but tiny reflections of the wild world that is innately and loosely orderly. There is nothing like stepping away from the road and heading into a new part of the watershed. Not for the sake of newness, but for the sense of coming home to our whole terrain."

— GARY SNYDER

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Whole Terrain

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REFLECTIVE
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PRACTICE

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Volume 8

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Hay-stacks and Hay-bales, Pumpkins and Seeds: Transmitting the Treasures of Childhood

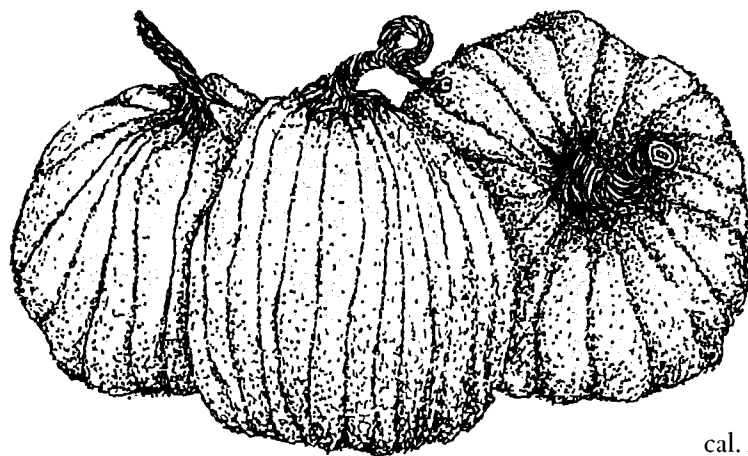
by Rabbi Everett Gendler

WONDER PRECEDES WORDS. Can we doubt this simple assertion? Not if we observe an infant or a very young child sitting for minutes at a time, perhaps staring fixedly at something out of reach, perhaps engrossed in touching-feeling-manipulating something within reach.

The intent look, the brightness of the eyes, the puckered lips: all testify eloquently to the child's wonder, long before she/he has any words with which to communicate verbally that felt response to the surrounding world.

Wonder precedes words. Might the transmission of childhood wonders from the environment, then, be aided by actions as well as words? Perhaps the doing rather than the saying, or at least the doing along with the saying, would help us share some of our fondly remembered childhood wonders with those yet to come. Or maybe, to the contrary, might the doing, in practice, impede the transmission of the fondly remembered childhood treasures?

These thoughts and questions come to mind as I sit remembering some precious experiences of earlier years, when our two daughters, Naomi and Tamar, were quite young — 5 and 8 — and Sean, the little lad across the street, was only 4. Although I was hardly conscious of it at the time, I realize now that a variety of activities involving hay-stacks, hay-bales, pumpkins, and seeds were my attempts to share with posterity a legacy that I had cherished since childhood, a sharing that I thought might be assisted by doing as well as hearing or imagining.



Hay-stacks

As I was growing up in a small Iowa town, five architectural forms punctuated the surrounding landscape: houses, barns, silos, water towers, and hay-stacks. While all of them interested me, it was the hay-stacks — long before I had ever known of Monet — that most attracted me. How various they were: some squat, some tall, some round, some elliptical. And how mysterious. Take lawn clippings

and try piling them high: a couple of feet up, and down they come. Yet all through the rolling Iowa fields stood these great pillars of grass, and they *didn't* come tumbling down! Seven, eight, nine, even ten feet high, and there they stood, resistant to downpours, blizzards, and severe winds. What protected them from the weather? Why didn't they rot over the winter? Why didn't they collapse or blow away? This mystery of childhood remained unsolved, and was soon forgotten when we moved to the city.

Decades later, married and with two daughters, I moved to a then-rural part of Andover, Massachusetts. The 5-acre site was mostly rough and wooded, with a two-acre hay-field in the back. And not surprisingly, that hay-field released in me a flood of memories long dammed up behind the dike of adult amnesia.

Along with the memories came the mysteries as well. How *did* those hay-stacks stand? Why didn't they collapse into unsightly heaps? Happily for me, a repository of such traditional knowledge, Scott Nearing, was still alive and vigorous in his 80's, and having been close to him and Helen for many years, off our family went for a hands-and-feet-on practical tutorial in proper hay-stack making. Given Scott's predilections and procedures, our daughters were too young at the time to do more than observe our crash course in the vanishing skill of hay-stack construction. We headed back to Andover invigorated and inspired to apply the newly acquired knowledge.

Vintage equipment was offered by neighbor Mr. Boutwell, now in his 80's but looking youthful compared with the ancient sickle-bar mower, the tether, the hay-rake, the cart, and the tractor in his barn. Nevertheless, the tools did their jobs despite highly audible wheezing, sputtering, and squeaking. The temperature on our hay-making day approached the 90's, and the relative humidity followed in hot pursuit. The family, looking like figures from a Breughel painting, bravely took to the field, I pitching the hay, Mary arranging it, Tamar and Naomi stomping it down. Ever so slowly the stack grew taller; meanwhile, the workers grew sweatier and sneezier as the pollen,

the chaff, the seeds and the dirt stuck to their skins, filled their nostrils, and covered their eyes. Sunglasses, kerchiefs, bandannas — all were futile as protective agents against the all-pervasive dust. At last the height of the stack exceeded my pitching capacity, and so it was declared completed. The day's ordeal — the unseen precondition of those romantic hay-stacks of my childhood — did not endear the hay-stack to its current builders, nor did the prospect of building one more the following day. "Maybe we can do it earlier tomorrow, Daddy, before it gets so hot?" "Alas, dear daughters, the dew dries late, I'm afraid we have no choice."

The temperature and humidity the next day climbed into the mid-90's. Despite such deterrence, the doughty crew reluctantly returned, and a second hay-stack joined the first in companionable proximity. When friends came over to play, our daughters did take them up to the field, pointed with pride to their towering achievements, and clambered up with cheerful determination. When finally on top of the hay-stacks, they stretched out their hands in triumphal gestures, and regally surveyed the close-cropped fields whence came the hay for their fancy foot work.

The following year, alas, reluctance rose to resistance at the prospect of a repeat of the previous year's ordeal; memories had obviously not captivated the captive work crew. Rather like Frank Morgan as the Wizard of Oz — haggard and hassled as he emerged from behind the controls responsible for the lovely effects on the other side of the curtain — these re-constructors of my childhood icons had experienced more weariness than wonder building them. It was only the generous nature and physical stamina of a sturdy neighbor down the road which made possible the construction of that year's stacks. The temperature and humidity, I need hardly report, surpassed the highs of the previous year by several degrees and percentage points, and the defectors felt fully vindicated, perhaps even divinely liberated.

The next year was terminal for hay-stacks reconstructed. My faithful neighbor, Ted, in real life a skilled technician for New England Power, found

that during periods of electrical overloads and brownouts, he was on 24-hour emergency call. These periods — caused by the heavy use of indoor air conditioners — coincided, of course, with prime time for outdoor haying, and so my last ally was conscripted for service on a different front. There was now no alternative to enlisting the help of the hay-baler.

Hay-bales

The prospect of the hay-baler put me in a grumpy mood. I did, however, retain some perspective. Even while I complained audibly about the unending clanking noises of the baler, it did occur to me that such sounds were, perhaps, less inhumane than the sighs, the sneezes, and the sniffles of the long-suffering human serfs of that earlier summer. I was also realist enough to recognize that Mr. Boutwell's advancing years and physical decline were not only matched but exceeded by the plummeting physical condition of his haying equipment. That machinery, after all, had been neither smooth nor silent during its functioning those previous years. So, then, let the hay-baler enter the garden.

The operator of the new machinery was experienced, and his equipment was up-to-the-minute. A rotary cutter, a revolving tether, rake and baler combined: never had this hay-field known such treatment. Still put off by the mechanical efficiency of it all, I was piling the bales when Sean, the 4-year-old from across the street, came up our hill and approached the scene of the action. How would he react, I wondered, to these mechanically-gathered, string-tied bundles of recently cut, thoroughly dried grass? Could these uniform, identical hay-bricks substitute for the unpredictable loose hay that in earlier years had been pitched and tromped into distinctive, individual shapes? His answer to my unasked question was not long in coming.

"Mr. Gendler," he exclaimed excitedly, "it's a mountain!" His face all aglow, he could hardly wait for the stacking to be finished so that he could scale the newly erected heights.

A mountain? Of course. How could I not

have seen it? And a veritable ziggurat besides, I mused to myself. Having piled it with ascending, step-like bales on each side, I could imagine the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon atop this West Andover replica of classical Mesopotamian forms.

Sean smiled as he ascended the mountain. Who knows what inner imaginings may have fueled his climb to the top? And who knows what associations may cross his mind now if he, grown up and living elsewhere, happens across stacks of hay-bales in old country farm yards?

Reflecting on these memories from long and longer ago, several thoughts occur to me. First of all, duplication of form does not necessarily yield duplication of effect. Reproducing the hay-stacks with the help of our daughters did not reproduce for them the effects that hay-stacks had for me in my childhood. How did this attempt fare, to transmit a natural legacy to posterity by doing it? As our fax machine sometimes succinctly says, "Transmission error." Monet's haunting paintings of hay-stacks, shimmering and mysterious in the varied light of various hours from dawn to dusk, requiring only viewing by the viewer, not doing by the doer, are surely more effective, more reliable transmitters of the inherent or associative wonder of hay-stacks.

Secondly, to my surprise — though it should not have been — the transmission of legacies is not unidirectional. Sean, for example, transmitted to me the latent wonder of the stack of hay-bales. This strikes me as significant for our consideration of the relations of legacy and posterity, especially in a world so rapidly changing. A generation now exposed to large, circular shapes dotting the hay-fields may find, in striking light or against the proper background, the figures themselves occasions for fresh wonder. Happily, it seems that wonder may emerge whenever the human imagination encounters a natural object. As William Blake expressed it:

"Great things are done when Men & Mountains meet;
This is not done by Jostling in the Street."

Thus wonder itself is wondrously unpredictable.

Pumpkins

The national and the natural sometimes stand in sharp opposition. What is thought to be good for America is not necessarily good for the environment, and vice versa. However, this tension is reassuringly resolved by the existence of the pumpkin. Can one imagine a more glowing natural embodiment of Autumn's bounty than this bright orange product of lengthy, leafy vines? And except, perhaps, for apple pie and the flag, can one think of a more widely recognized national embodiment of America than this denizen of Autumn, celebrated by patriotic poets from James Whitcomb Riley to Carl Sandburg?

Such musings were far from my consciousness when pumpkins first caught my attention as a child. Suddenly visible as the surrounding corn stalks were toppled during harvesting, "orange and tawny gold clusters" did, indeed, "spot the hills with yellow balls" and "light the prairie cornfields" (Sandburg's words). Even when isolated and few in number, they were striking to behold in the rolling Iowa fields that stretched for miles.

Quite unforgettable, however, and splendid beyond description, was their mass assemblage each Autumn at Pumpkin Center, Missouri. Not incorporated and too tiny to receive even a pinpoint on a map, Pumpkin Center was physically nondescript: a few large, tin-sided, tin-roofed sheds, a filling station, a sprinkling of houses, and some trampled, dusty fields in between. Set on a highway not far from a rail line, it was the receiving station for tens of thousands of pumpkins produced annually in northwestern Missouri's Nodaway County. At high season, out they poured from hay-wagons, pick-up trucks, cattle carriers and flat beds, awaiting shipment to their final destinations. Spread over the ground nearly as far as a child's eye could see, that vast carpet of yellow and orange shimmered even in clouds and rain; in full sunlight, the brilliance was almost more than tender eyes could tolerate. Although a good 100 miles from our home in Des Moines, my father and I made a pilgrimage there at least once each Autumn to see that wondrous sight, and it has



THE AUTHOR STACKING HAY-BALES WITH
4-YEAR OLD NEIGHBOR SEAN.

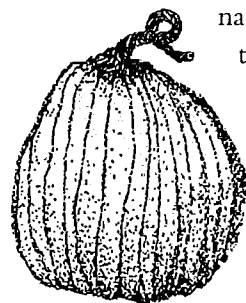
remained aglow in my memory through all the passing decades since.

How share that sight? How transmit that wonder? Although not formulated in words, it may have been my unconscious effort to answer such a question that set loose a rollicking stream of associations one bright Autumn day while I was at Temple. Jack o'Lantern... ..hrnmm, why not Jacob Lantern? And why should that golden glow be confined to door steps and house windows? Why not adorn the altar of the temple as well with the luminosity of a Jacob/Jack o'Lantern, truly an inspired conflate of light and vegetation? As for timing, late in the harvest season felt appropriate, with declining hours of daylight, and night arriving earlier and earlier. And if some of the mysterious aura of Halloween were also to hover, what harm could there be in that? The return of the ancestral spirits at the end of the harvest season is also attested in Jewish tradition by the ceremony of Ushpizin, our invitation to the spirits of Biblical figures to join us in the Sukkah, the harvest hut prescribed in Biblical tradition.

An announcement in our Temple Emanuel bulletin invited members to bring appropriately carved pumpkins to grace the altar the last Friday night in October; at the service candles would be provided for the Jacob Lanterns, that their glow enhance and illuminate our own Sabbath worship. Among the distinguishing features of this service were appropriate selections of poetry, special music, and a period of meditative darkness during which the only illumination was the massed light of the Jacob Lanterns; the reactions of the worshippers, old as well as young, were immediately positive. Over the years attendance steadily increased, with more than 50 pumpkins annually present along with twice that number of worshippers! In a small congregation of fewer than 100 families, where the usual number attending Friday evenings was around 25, this response was quite extraordinary.

How might it be explained? There are probably many elements at work: the novelty, the re-awakening of the child in all of us, the invitation to creativity in carving and decorating the pumpkins, the simple enjoyment of these innocent delights, the awe-engendering darkness suffused by streams of golden light. Each of these contributes, I suspect, to the popularity of this annual service. But at the heart of it, I am convinced, is that dashing, decorative, natural image of growth, fruition, sunlight and ripening, the eye-engaging, mystery-evoking, nourishment-promising pumpkin. How we hunger spiritually for connection with the earth! And when such fare is offered, great is the response.

But is this “environmental education,” one might ask? The question is appropriate, the answer only tentative. It seems to me, however, that fasci-



nation with what comes from the earth and appreciation of its wonder do incline us to work for its preservation. If the presence of pumpkins can excite and delight us, we'll be all the readier to guard earth from harm.

Seeds

Personal success with sowing seeds was not part of my childhood experience; amazement and envy of those who succeeded was. In neither of my childhood homes was the garden area hospitable to gardening; planting the seeds and burying them were sadly indistinguishable operations. But how they sprouted, thrived, and towered in the nearby corn fields and sunnier-sited home gardens! What secrets did those planters possess that were denied me? Not only seeds but the conditions of their growth were impenetrable mysteries to my childhood.

Later, of course, I learned some practical answers; my earlier envy disappeared, but not my wonder at the mystery of seeds. Despite my increasing knowledge of successful cultivation, the sight of seeds germinating and bursting through the soil has never lost its excitement. A brief poem/reflection from a prayer book expresses it nicely:

Fueled

Fueled
by a million
man-made
wings of fire—
the rocket tore a tunnel
through the sky—
and everybody cheered.
Fueled
only by a thought from God—
the seedling
urged its way
through the thickness of black—
and as it pierced
the heavy ceiling of the soil—
up into outer space
no
one
even clapped.

—Marcie Hans

How share this legacy, how transmit some of this excitement? One autumn day during Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, the great harvest celebration dating from Biblical times and still observed in Jewish tradition, an idea came to me. The Biblical holidays at Autumn and Spring are agriculturally connected by autumnal planting and spring reaping. The major grape and produce har-

vest at Sukkot occurs just before the rainy season, and is immediately followed by the fall sowing of winter barley and wheat typical of the Mediterranean basin; the spring festivals, Passover and Pentecost, mark the beginning and the culmination of those grain harvests. During the Passover-to-Pentecost period of seven weeks the following Spring, freshly cut grain was raised high each day and waved about in a dance-like offering at the altar.

What, then, if at our temple we were to plant a small patch of winter barley or rye or wheat during the harvest celebration? The following spring we would have the wintered-over grain steadily developing, and starting with Passover, before each Friday evening service we could cut a handful to lift high and wave at that part in the service where the particular day is numbered.

And so the following year, just before Sukkot began, we dug up a small patch of the lawn that was directly in front of the south-facing wall of the temple building. On the intermediate Sunday of the holiday, class by class the children of our Religious School came out of doors to wave ceremonially the palm frond, willow, myrtle, and citron prescribed in Leviticus; they ate grapes and drank cider in the Sukkah (the autumnal harvest booth); then they walked in ritual procession to the small patch of prepared soil, and each one broadcast a handful of the wheat or rye or barley grains, thus sowing the future harvest. The kids loved it, and without weighty words a message was also delivered: no planting, no harvest; without some human tending, the earth will not provide the bounty upon which our lives depend.

The grain germinated from the residual summer warmth of the soil, but the onset of winter soon arrested any further growth. Then, as the sun climbed higher with the approach of spring, the grain resumed its growth, growth all the more rapid because the south-facing stone wall absorbed the heat of the sun. Adults as well as children regularly checked outside to see how the grain was growing, and the inherent drama of winter dormancy to spring revival was newly appreciated by all. Each week we cut some of this developing

grain for the Friday evening service, then waved it ceremonially as we proclaimed the number of that particular day. We kept the sheaves from the previous weeks, and so the new growth was easily seen. Some weeks, chilly and rainy, there would be little visible increase; on sunny weeks the stalks seemed to add height as if propelled by a rocket. And each week everyone could see the development of the grain as the spikelets filled out and grew plump. Thus harvest became seedtime, seedtime harvest, and the wonder of the seed was powerfully experienced.

This, in turn, presented new opportunities for environmental education and awareness. An obvious issue to discuss was the dangerous decline and disappearance of seed varieties, with the attendant threats to agriculture. An irresistible reaction to explore was the excitement at the discovery of the seed. In the Creation story of Genesis, Chapter 1, verses 11 - 12 speak of the earth putting forth “vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” What the English translation does not convey is that in those two short verses, the root form of “seed” occurs six times; “yielding seed” is literally to be rendered, “seeding seed” (maz-ri-a ze-ra). It is as if the discoverer of the power of the seed to reproduce cannot stop exclaiming in wonder, SEED... SEED... SEED!

Final Reflections

These were some of the childhood treasures that I wanted to bequeath to posterity. Obviously, this legacy is not subject to inheritance taxes; it does, however, require appropriate and effective transmission, and this can be rather taxing. The best ways to achieve the desired transmission are not obvious. How much doing, how much saying, how much showing, how much telling? Even when the right means present themselves or are happened upon, they are not necessarily easy. And each one, I am convinced, leads us to an occasion of wonder, an opportunity for amazement at the marvels surrounding us.

It is the quality of this encounter which ultimately validates our work in the world. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, late Professor of Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, expressed it in these words:

"As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation."

Or, as the West Coast poet of the 1950's, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, repeatedly cried out in his short poem, "I Am Waiting" (in *A Coney Island of the Mind*):

"and I am perpetually awaiting
a rebirth of wonder...
a rebirth of wonder...
and I am awaiting
perpetually and forever
a renaissance of wonder"

Is it not the burden and blessing, the challenge and calling, of environmental education to serve as midwife for this rebirth of wonder?



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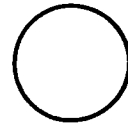
Cover Images of Whole Terrain

-Ty Minton-



Bison—strength,
prosperity, untamed
nature

Circle—totality,
perfection, unity,
eternity, a cyclic
process



Fish—harmony, wis-
dom, freedom,
wealth, regeneration

Spiral—life force
source of the cos-
mos

Lightning—wink
of Thunderbird,
light of truth



Rain—purity,
increase of spiritual
energy

Mountain—eternity,
transcendence, stability,
challenge, wisdom



MOMENTS OF YOUTH

LIZA JESWALD

Through mahogany veiled memories,
Blurred by layer on layer of elusive years,
and the softly settled dust of passing time,
I recall my childhood.

Sweet as that mid-summer's night
spent running dew dusted,
wild strawberry,
firefly and starlit fields,
The distant twilight past comes skipping back to me
to the tune of my ancient lullabies.

Can you read from my eyes where I've come from?

Can you tell from your stare I once, at six laughing years,
held a squirming red eft in my trembling palm?

Can you see in my gaze the heavy warm
damp aired summer evenings
I spent swinging till dusk,
my delicate eight year old eyelids shut tight?

Or are the years I spent
gallivanting in my sweet cherry
daisy crown innocence
fallen from your twisting grasp.

We forget that the past does not die with our memory of it.
For we are created by the fact that
at seven and a half bumbling years,
we caught a cricket in the dusty-aired barn
behind our grandfather's sagging-roofed house.

We dismiss our past with the excuse of irrelevance,
And blame our loss of memory on time's slow loss of pertinence.
And just as we let slip the tiny down feather
we found quivering in the grass when we were four,
We let slip the concept that these instants affect us.

We are born from those little velvet moments of youth,
When wide-eyed child encounters life.

(this poem was written when the author was fourteen years old)

