

Also by Paul Gruchow

Journal of a Prairie Year
The Necessity of Empty Places
Minnesota: Images of Home
Travels in Canoe Country

Grass Roots:

The Universe of Home

Paul Gruchow



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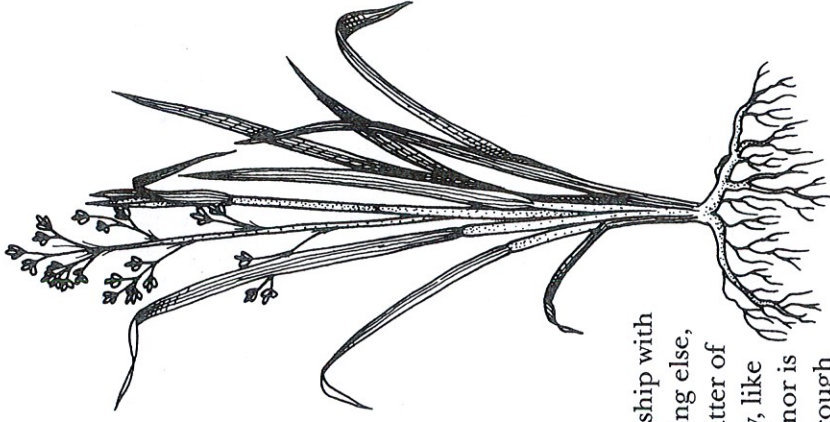
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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For Bob Artley, who has lived what I believe.

Naming What We Love



ESTABLISHING a relationship with nature — or with anything else, for that matter — is not a matter of networking. It is not a hobby, like collecting a life list of birds, nor is it something one catches through casual contact, by camping out on vacations, for example. A healthy relationship is ongoing, persistent, and resilient despite boredom, disappointments, adversities, infidelities. It is defined by its dailiness, a dailiness expressed in two dimensions — as a labor and as a need.

As a labor: not so much the labor of sweat and tears, although that too, but more the labor of attentiveness, of being present, of receptivity, of abiding, as Wendell Berry has said, "like water, which fills the place it comes to/ until a way is found."

As a need: The Old English antecedent of *need* suggests an imperative that is emotionally felt as well as practical, unlike the Latin *necessity*, which is formal, objective, impersonal. Water is a necessity; love is a need.

One way to understand our relationship with nature is to undertake the basic work of naming its constituents. The last great age of naming began in the Enlightenment and ended with the close of the Victorian era. The time was the heyday of natural history, when eccentric gentlemen of means, Charles Darwin among them, and destitute but resourceful swashbucklers, as often as not scientifically untrained, roamed the world in search of adventure and exotica. What they discovered laid the foundations for revolutions in both biology and geology, and these revolutions, in turn, profoundly altered our present perceptions of life and nature.

Natural history, once the domain of the namers, is these days a musty calling for those who keep alive its literary, not its scientific, tradition. Writers of natural history as diverse in their temperaments and methods as Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey, while grounding their works in close readings of modern science and of nature, have insisted that they are not natural historians and should not be read as such. Natural history now seems amateurish, dilettantish, not quite grown-up, decidedly old-fashioned.

Science, for its part, has become a priesthood. Its meticulously trained practitioners are suitably cloistered

in academics or corporate research laboratories. They speak a language, for the most part, that even well-educated persons outside their specialties cannot understand, communicating through journals and the proceedings of societies impenetrable to the general public. The problems they address are often technical and specialized.

Natural historians have become outmoded and scientists isolated at precisely that moment in our history when we fear that our very lives may depend upon how well we understand nature and our own responsibilities and limits within it. Bill McKibben, in *The End of Nature*, proclaimed nature itself dead, or at death's door. I do not take this pronouncement literally. While I believe that it has never been more within the realm of possibility that we might doom the life of our own species, I cannot yet believe—perhaps this is a baseless optimism—that we are clever enough or powerful enough to defeat life itself. Nevertheless, there is a way in which, for all practical purposes, we render nature meaningless to humanity, at our own peril: we have faltered in the naming process.

We are justly proud of all that we have learned in the past five thousand years or so of literate life. We have peered into the mysterious universe of the atom, learned to unravel and read the genetic code, manufactured new forms of life. We have counted the stars in the Milky Way and the galaxies in the universe. But we do not yet know, even to the nearest order of magnitude, the number of kinds of life on earth. The only thing, in fact, that we do know with any confidence is that the majority of the earth's species remain to be discovered, much less named. There are some whole living systems on earth—the soil ecosystems, for example, upon which we are utterly dependent for our sustenance—that remain almost

as hidden to us as the galaxies beyond our own. Perhaps ninety-five percent of the organisms living in soils have yet to be identified.

It is true that we have named more of the earth's living things now than ever before, which would seem to be making headway. At the same time, under our influence the earth is experiencing its greatest rate of species extinction in at least tens of millions of years, and the rate has the potential to reach unprecedented proportions. Our net effect, then, is one of destroying, and thereby rendering forever nameless, more information about life on earth than we are gaining.

And we have sufficiently altered the earth's atmosphere and irreversibly set into motion a warming of the world's climate. This warming is likely to outpace the rate at which adapted plants can move across the landscape. What consequences this will bear for the diversity and distribution of life on earth we cannot predict.

At the local level there is a growing illiteracy about the natural world, paradoxical as that might seem, given the nearly universal anxiety we feel about the state of our environment. I first began to think about this problem when, in a review of a book I had much admired, a critic said, "This writer knows the names of more plants than anyone else I know." This comment excited my attention because I had failed to notice that quality in the book. So I went back to the text and counted. I found, in all, the names of thirteen plants of the commonest household varieties: petunias, roses, lilacs, and the like. Can the reviewer be serious? I wondered, and then I thought, sadly, that he probably was.

Recently, at the instigation of a neighbor, I have had a visit from my town's weed inspector. The condition of my yard, in which grow some plants with no close

relationship to Kentucky bluegrass, has been a terrible aggravation to this neighbor. His first protest was polite enough—a gift of promotional literature from the local ChemLawn franchise. Then he telephoned to ask that I cut down a number of shrubs and a tree that is dead. I removed the shrubs but balked at cutting the tree, explaining that I welcome the birds it attracts. He escalated the attack by removing the branches of the trees on his side of our common property line and dumping them in my yard. When this provoked no response, he complained about the condition of my yard to the weed inspector.

The weed inspector sent me a registered letter. I was the subject, it informed me, of a citizen complaint and had five days to remove the offending vegetation (unspecified) or the city would move in and mow, spray, bulldoze, or take whatever other action was necessary—bombing not explicitly excluded—to do so, with expenses borne by me.

I telephoned the weed inspector. "Can you tell me," I asked, "what in particular you object to about my yard?" Well, no, he couldn't, he said. He had never seen it. I invited him over for an inspection and asked him to identify the problem plants for me. He came and wandered aimlessly about, finally halting in front of a catnip plant. He kicked at it with his boot. "Well, what about this?" he said. "This doesn't look like the sort of thing that ought to be growing here."

"Can you tell me what it is?" I asked.

"I'd have to look it up," he said. "And what about that?" he said, poking at a wild phlox. "That looks like the sort of thing I see in places that haven't been kept up."

"What is it?"

"Well what about *this*?" he said, stabbing at a meadow rue.

The scene repeated itself several times.

"I don't have time to run around looking every little thing up in the books!" he finally huffed.

Then, after getting hold of himself, his tone turned friendly and confidential. "If I were you, I'd just cut them all down. You'll make a lot of trouble, you know, if you don't."

He paused. "Do *you* know what they are?"

"Yes," I said, "and I don't mind making a little trouble, if it comes to that."

He stared at me hard, shrugged his shoulders, and went away muttering under his breath. I felt relieved but also distressed at having, in my modest attempt to make room for nature in my own yard, aroused so much anguish in my neighbor, whom I enjoyed and would have liked to please. We lived so near and yet in such distant worlds.

More recently I took two groups of the brightest seniors in our high school—sixty of them in all—on a walk along the lake that most of them have frequented since they were infants. When we had walked a bit, I stopped and asked them to name as many of the plants as they could. A few of the students could name a handful; they were mostly farm kids who knew the weeds. But the majority of the students could name no more than two or three. The dandelion was the only plant they all knew. They didn't recognize cattails. Most of them couldn't tell the difference between a willow tree and a cottonwood tree. They have wandered and played along that lakeshore for a lifetime, utterly blind to it.

We are fond of saying that we are living in an information explosion, but in some critical respects this statement is an absolute delusion. No group of Santee youths, standing on the shore of Lake Okabena two

hundred years ago, would have been ignorant of its natural life or devoid of language to describe its landscape. No Santee child would have been unaware of the connections between the health of the earth and the health of human life. I think no farm child living seventy-five years ago, or fifty years ago, would have been quite so innocent of these matters either. I am not convinced that we are experiencing an explosion of understanding. On the contrary, just as every species extinction deprives us of certain volumes of information, obtainable, even if unread, so the general decline of intimate relationships with the natural world, and therefore of our knowledge of nature, has left us bereft of information that no marvel of biotechnological engineering, however sophisticated or clever, can possibly restore or replace.

Something of the same confusion now reigns even within the biological sciences. Twenty-five years ago, we were able to say with some confidence that we understood, at least in general terms, what an ecosystem was and how it moved, through a series of successions, toward a complex but stable climax. But the recent work of mathematicians inclined specialists, particularly the population biologists, calls into debate if not outright question even this basic perception of nature. Similarly, chaos mathematicians have recently taught us to see that the behavior of the physical world is vastly more complex and difficult to predict than we once thought and that even very tiny disturbances in the world can have enormous and quite unexpected effects. This new understanding is popularly epitomized in meteorologist Edward Lorenz's famous "Butterfly Effect," the proposition that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Beijing can ultimately influence the storm patterns over New York or Minneapolis.

We are less certain now than at any time in this century that we can accurately perceive any prevailing sense of order in the natural world. Some of us are inclined to think that there is no order, that change and disturbance rule the world. Others — myself among them — are inclined to believe that we have simply reached a plateau in our learning; that, as at many other junctures in history, we have seen enough to invalidate our prevailing picture of the world but not yet enough to make a satisfying new picture.

A very old but not outmoded idea is that we will find our salvation in what we love. We have learned in recent times to fear for the earth, for its suddenly apparent fragility, and for all that we obviously do not know about it. But fear is no basis for an intelligent relationship; ignorance and indulgence preempt the love that is required of us. We will love the earth more competently, more effectively, by being able to name and know something about the life it sustains.

Can you, I asked those students, imagine a satisfactory love relationship with someone whose name you do not know? I can't. It is perhaps the quintessentially human characteristic that we cannot know or love what we have not named. Names are passwords to our hearts, and it is there, in the end, that we will find the room for a whole world.