

Nature As Mirror

By Bill Plotkin, Ph.D.

On a soul craft journey in the redrock canyons of the Utah desert, our group included a Mexican-American man, Miguel Grunstein, who had studied the Peruvian flute - the *quena* - with an Incan master in Peru. Early each morning, while still in my sleeping bag, I would hear Miguel somewhere near camp, on a ridge or in a hollow, playing the most serene and delicious song to greet the dawn. For several days, it was more or less the same haunting tune. But later in the week, after we had moved camp, the tune changed.

Over breakfast, I asked Miguel about the source of his melodies, suspecting they were traditional Incan songs. But he said he was playing *the songs of the canyon*. Each place has its own song, he said. He followed the canyon walls with his eyes and heart and played what he saw and felt there, as his Peruvian teacher had shown him. When in the high country, Miguel played the songs of the mountain ridges, letting his flute sing the notes flowing up and down the horizon like a musical score, inviting nature to offer itself to his imagination.

Each song that emerges from Miguel's flute reflects a unique facet of his soul that comes alive in the particular wild place he visits. It is an interaction, a conversation between Miguel and the wild. An award-winning documentary filmmaker who captures the eloquent gestures of the human heart and soul, Miguel is himself such a gesture. His elegant *quena* songs are a mirror of nature, both within and without; they are a communion, an exchange of essences.

Our relationship to the wild unfolds through several developmental stages. In a healthy childhood, nature holds great fascination and wonder, the wide arena in which we discover and explore the world of our inheritance. By imitating the animals, birds, and trees, we acquire a vocabulary of gestures that we assemble into our own way of being human.

Then, in adolescence, our relationship with nature changes. The natural world becomes a mirror of our developing adolescent personality, a screen upon which we project our fears and hopes for belonging. But we don't yet know we are projecting. We experience our emotions as if they are qualities of nature rather than our own. We enter the wilderness as a place of danger, self-testing, and self-discovery.

The next stage occurs in the second cocoon as we become conscious of our projections. But now it is not only the personality but also the soul, we discover, that we are projecting. Like the poets, we begin to observe in the patterns of nature the essence of courage, love, sacrifice, desire, faith, belonging - all the possibilities of our own humanness in their primary and most vital forms. In time, we encounter reflections of our deepest individual natures and perhaps hear our true names spoken for the first time. We come to understand that what is reflected by nature is not just who we are now but also who we could become. And so we begin entering nature as pilgrims in search of our true home, wanderers with an intimation of communion, solitaires with a suspicion of salvation.

The mirror of nature is not always pleasant or comforting. On a vision quest in the redrock canyons, a psychotherapist named June, whose mother died when she was ten, arrived with a curious history of being tormented by bats. One evening under a full moon, accompanied by

drums and rattles, we danced on the compacted sands of a dry creek bed. Several times a bat landed on June, on her shawl or dress, her arm, or in her hair. It never flew into anyone else though there were fifteen of us and we were dancing wildly and weaving among each other in a small forest clearing. On three occasions, the bat became entangled in June's hair or shawl, and another person carefully freed it while June squirmed and the bat squealed. The bat, apparently an abandoned juvenile, was at least as traumatized as June.

During her subsequent days alone and fasting, bats visited her again. June knew the bats had something to communicate, something about *her* but also about *them* and her relationship to them. Finally, she accepted the inevitability of conversing with Bat. At sunset, while two bats flew circles overhead, June introduced herself out loud and spoke openly of her fear of them. She asked what they wanted to tell her. Suddenly she became painfully aware of how she had felt, ever since childhood, like a victim of other people and circumstances. This awareness was her catalyst to dive into her sacred wound, and dive she did. Alone in the wilds, June relived heartbreaking and sometimes harrowing memories, especially her mother's death. She came to understand that the young bat at the dance was mirroring her own sense of being abandoned, orphaned, and yet emotionally entangled in another (her dead mother). She reached the central core of her lifelong experience of being a victim and vowed to disentangle herself from the ghosts of her past.

June's encounters with nocturnal fliers did more than facilitate her healing, however. The bats, she discovered, were also mirroring her unclaimed soul power of navigating in the dark, her exceptional capacities of intuition and imagination. On her fast, she was able for the first time to experience these powers as awesome - not merely terrifying. By entering her sacred wound, June beheld nature reflecting her soul's gift as well as her childhood traumas. Her encounter with Bat held the potential for profound changes in both her social life and her work as a psychotherapist. Yet only time would tell how adept she might become at navigating in the dark.

Earth so effectively mirrors our soul powers simply because our souls are elements of earth's soul.

Archetypal forms and patterns exist not only in the human psyche but also in the outer world of nature. Wind, water, fire, mountain, rain, rainbow, bird, bat, butterfly, fish, snake, bear: earth archetypes. In the shamanic traditions, the apprentice learns his craft by using the refined powers of his imagination to become the various animals and qualities of nature, by merging with the earth archetypes and "re-membering" as he remembers he has always *been* nature. Moving from one archetypal nature identity to another: this is the genius of the shape-shifter within each of us. By becoming earth, through her forms and forces, we regain our souls.

The earth archetypes illuminate the edges of our understanding. We see the rainbow, and if we allow our imaginations to be generous, we discover the possibility of realizing our fondest dreams, the longing for treasure, the enchantment of the world, the thinness of the shimmering veil that separates us from the sacred, or the bridge to this world for the gods.

We experience earth archetypes as significant, evocative, emotionally captivating, enchanting. Why are we drawn to particular elements of nature? Why *those*? Possibly these

are the earth archetypes to which our (unconscious) psyches already attribute meaning, the ones that resonate with the deepest possibilities within us.

In its attempt to be made manifest, the soul takes every opportunity to resonate with any element of nature that stirs it. As we offer our attention to the world, we discover the beings to which we are most drawn. Our fascination with a particular facet of nature is how our souls say "Yes!" to an earth archetype that we, as individuals, especially tune to. As we open ourselves to that element of wildness, we discover a quality of our own souls that longs to be embodied in the world, sung to the world, danced, cried, celebrated.

The earth provides us not only the means to be physically born into this world but also the spiritual means to recognize our deeper identities. Why would she provide one without the other?

Jerry, an accomplished fifty-year old songwriter and recording artist, took a walk high in the summer mountains of Colorado and came upon a small spruce at the edge of the tree line. He noticed part of its top had been sheared off, probably by a massive spring snowslide. He sat down beside the tree and spoke to it out loud, something he had never done before. He said of the experience:

The connection between us was extraordinary. I felt such compassion and strength from that tree - about how you must hang in there through the storms of life, about standing firm in your spot. Our connection was so amazing I just sat and wept with love. Yes, I saw myself in the mirror of that tree - a bit ragged at fifty, but still strong and open and willing to bring all of me to the world.

Jerry does indeed bring all of himself to the world, courageously sharing his radiant heart through his soulful music. A year later, Jerry visited the tree a second time. It was still thriving at the edge of the avalanche path. Even from his home on the edge of the avalanche path called Los Angeles, Jerry says he can feel his bond with that tree.

During the most life-changing soul encounters, nature holds up a mirror and shows us the face we have longed to see but had been terrified to behold, at once bestowing the greatest of blessings and burdening us with a seemingly impossible charge. In the lightning-strike moment, the soul confronts us with our true name, the one we were not brave enough to say or embrace.

In the midst of a storm in the Mojave Desert, Annie Bloom saw her soul image mirrored by nature, and her life was transformed, profoundly and irreversibly. She says:

I sat in my circle of stones upon a knoll. I was in the middle of a dry wash in the upper reaches of Death Valley. It was the fourth day of my fast. The day began dark and filled with brooding clouds. I watched big black thunderheads roll over the mountain range in the west and march down the valley toward me. The wind began to howl and gusts raced past me pell-mell like specters for some unknown destination. The intensity of the sky and wind and my feeling of being completely exposed roused me to dance and drum within my circle. I raged with the approaching storm, shouting all the things of which I was sick and tired. I implored God, "What shall I do with my life?!" Finally, utterly spent, I fell exhausted to the ground.

Astonishingly, the thunderheads soon passed and the wind died to a whisper. All that intensity and yet no rain - and no thunder or lightning.

This drama of storm and then nothing repeated itself several times through the day. As dusk drew near, I watched yet another thunderhead roll over the mountain range and begin its descent toward me. This was the biggest, darkest one yet, and I thought "Okay, this is it, I'm really going to get slammed now!" I bundled up and sat in my circle hugging my knees. I considered retreating to my tarp, but I felt pinned to that spot. The cloud approached and the tempest roared. The sound of it was deafening. I trembled from head to toe, terrified I was about to die.

The cloud stopped, suspended directly above me, and I looked up into its vast blackness. I saw the image of two hands opened wide within its velvet darkness. I reached out my own hand as if to touch it and heard myself cry out, "Why hands? Why hands?!" a lament torn from a primal place inside. I had been seeing hands in the clouds from the moment I entered my circle on the first day. The hands were always benevolent, always forming gestures of caring. And now a voice came booming from the cloud, saying, "You are Hands to the World. We are honoring the work you do through your hands. This tempest is fierce, but gentle; this is your nature as well."

Seconds later, the thundercloud passed, the wind died down, and I was left shaken and alone atop my little knoll. Tears of gratitude and fear streamed down my face. In agitation, I ran up and down the knoll, repeating to myself over and over, "Hands to the World. Hands to the World." Then the doubts began: Did I really hear that? What had just happened? For an hour, I fluctuated between wild ecstasy and agonizing self-doubt.

Gradually, the evening unfolded, serene, clear, and crystalline. The stars came out in their abundant radiance. Deep in the night, a lady appeared to me in the stars, with lights shining from the palms of her hands. She sang words of encouragement and I was left with the terrible and awesome task of carrying the gifts of my soul into the world.

Despite her awe and terror, Annie has lived as Hands to the World ever since that day. She uses her spiritual and physical hands in her daily work as a soul-oriented massage therapist, a "hands-on body-soul worker," as she says. She listens to her clients' body-souls through her hands, which she experiences as extensions of her heart, and responds with healing touch.

Annie also extends Hands to the World through her work as a wilderness, ceremonial, and soulcraft guide. She has committed her spiritual hands to breaking open people's wild hearts and tending the raw, shimmering vulnerability that arises in that breaking