

Grappling With Our Place and Purpose:

What is our role within the natural world?

When we look at the characters that populate our world – the insects, flowers, trees, otters, birds, mountain lions – we tend to simplify their lives. We often boil their behavior down to basic needs, including sourcing their food and water, managing their temperature, warding off predators, and of course producing the next generation of their species. Through these lenses we come to understand these other beings as survivalist actors... two-dimensional characters with no more complicated purposes than to pump blood, digest food, and move muscle; to inevitably and inadvertently send their energy ascending up and cascading down the food chain. These lives are manifestations of necessity made real... expressions of endless and cyclical transactions between natural phenomena.

But unfortunately for us (and fortunately in some ways, I suppose), humans have removed themselves from these systems, and complicated our roles. For quite some time now, does our survival, our *being*, not fit neatly into our shared ecosystems in which we inhabit. Instead, we farm entire species in factories to be packaged and widely distributed year round. We construct roads, exhaust resources, intentionally or unintentionally transplant species, hunt to extinction, engage in countless – perhaps infinite – other practices that disrupt the equilibrium of those otherwise balanced, natural transactions. We are powerful, detached, and we are accountable.

A Beginning:

My stewardship project began as a much simpler quest than to gnaw on our existential purpose. I wanted to share with the youth my own personal sense of responsibility to the land we live on. I work for an outdoor education program in Alameda, and so it felt like a natural fit to implement a project that embodies a connection to and responsibility for the land we visit, learn about, and of course, play in on a daily basis. With groups of eight to ten local elementary students at a time, I wanted to help them engage in some trail restoration and coastal clean up of the Elsie Roemer Bird Sanctuary. This sanctuary provides for over a hundred unique bird species that visit from across California, and all of the accompanying plants and insects that support it. It is one of the last remaining salt marshes in the San Francisco Bay, and is tragically in decline. In my work, we visit this bird sanctuary very often. We learn about the crabs, birds, and plants that make it the biodiverse hub that it is. We play in its mud, admire discarded sea shells, and revel in all of its sensory stimuli that makes us feel *alive*. But as humble visitors, sometimes we don't always leave the land healthier than when we found it. Sometimes looking for

crabs turns into accidentally crushing one under a rock. Sometimes it means the games we play are a little too loud for neighboring birds on sand banks. I can't help but feel guilty when accidents like these occur. A common motif in all naturalist work is connecting people to the consequences of their actions. In an effort to deepen their connection with this land, I wanted the kids to feel some sense of responsibility for protecting it... a sort of give and take relationship that we have lost, culturally speaking.

To my dismay, but also well within my expectations, it only took a week for my groups of six, seven, eight year olds to grow weary of cleaning up after other peoples' messes. They can't even clean up after themselves sometimes. After some trash clean up days, and some more intentional placement of driftwood to keep people and dogs on the designated trails, my lesson in responsibility had run its course.

An Evolution:

While I was no longer insisting that my group of naturalists spend their time with me picking up litter, I continued to host conversations about our impact on the land. We talked about how Elsie Roemer's native marsh has declined significantly due to misplaced priorities surrounding development and consumption. The kids understood, with profound empathy, that the importance of these habitats go beyond our personal enjoyment of them... that with their loss comes the suffering of countless beings.

As I neared the end of this project, I asked them a question about our roles, as humans, on the land we share. First, I asked them to tell me what a bee or a butterfly might "take" from a flower. Yes, it is true they take nectar. "And what might they 'give' in return?" I asked. This follow up question warranted a pause in their answers, but they understood what I was looking for: pollination of course! I asked them the same questions about an immense oak tree they might see on a walk. How it "takes" water and nutrients from the soil, and "gives" oxygen, provides us with shade, and offers a place of refuge for squirrels, birds, and caterpillars. In these ways, we can see how each organism plays its role in nature. "But what about humans? What do we take?" They shouted all sorts of answers at me. From the mundane to the absurd, humans *take* lots of things. The kids were right. "And what do we give?" This one was harder for them to answer. Again, there was a wide range of responses. They said we can plant seeds, protect and take care of wildlife, and share with those in need. The conclusion that we came to was that humans have to consciously decide to give back. It is easy to take from nature without giving anything in return, which is the exact reason we find ourselves in the midst of ecological collapse today. This is about as far as my conversation with the children went, but my work continues.

A Purpose

We are not like the butterflies, trees, or birds at Elsie Roemer. To see ourselves as nothing more than energy moving through a food chain is incomplete, perhaps nihilistic. The intellect that has been used to destroy the planet is the same tool that can be repurposed to save it. Our daily needs are met with modernities that do not often make for a fair trade, but our ability to understand this abstract exchange empowers us to offer something in return, even absent of a direct and immediate pay off. We can choose to consume responsibly, and design brilliant practices that work in harmony with our natural systems, not at the expense of them. We have both the means and the capacity to care for what does not necessarily belong to us.

This kind of relationship to the natural world, born from an understanding of how other *non-human* organisms live in reciprocity to one another, might offer us a framework for seeing ourselves more clearly. Unlike the plants and animals at Elsie Roemer, we seem to torture ourselves at the thought of finding a “greater purpose” for our lives. Our boundless pursuit for quick and efficient consumption leaves people feeling empty, even after they have well surpassed their material needs. But the oak that exhales oxygen for our lungs and whose leaves chatter and cheer at the breath of fresh air from off the coast doesn’t seem to grow into anything other than itself. It simply is. A honey bee does not second-guess its role as it pollinates a sunflower, whose seeds go on to nourish birds and rodents. These lives unfold as part of a living rhythm, without hesitation or doubt. I wonder what life might feel like if we lived in that kind of rhyme with the world around us? Would people desperately crave purpose in the same way if we understood our survival to be bound to the health of one another and the systems that sustain us? Perhaps meaning is not something to be found, but instead something to be lived: tending to the well-being of our shared and only world, ensuring that life continues, in all of its forms, long after any one of us.

