

The Wild

PARABOLA

The Search for Meaning

“In Wildness is the
preservation of the World”

—Henry David Thoreau



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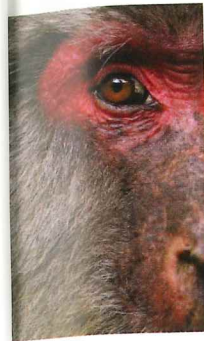
PARABOLA

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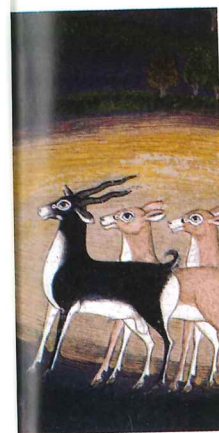
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INTERIOR OF PRIMEVAL FOREST ON THE AMAZONS.

Vol. I., page 72.

Interior of Primeval Forest on the Amazons. From *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* (1863), by Henry Walter Bates

Three Lessons From the Amazon Rainforest

Ocean Malandra

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER of his spiritual classic *SADHANA: THE REALIZATION OF LIFE*, Indian poet, philosopher, and Nobelist Rabindranath Tagore makes the point that much of the malaise affecting modern humanity is based on our disconnection from the primeval forests that once nurtured us thousands of years ago. He claims that the forest is the original monastery, the source of true spiritual wisdom, the best place to reconnect and restore any lost relationship between humanity and Natural Law:

To realize this great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world was the endeavour of the forest-dwelling sages of ancient India.¹

As a freelance writer who has spent much of the last decade in various parts of the Amazon Rainforest, the largest and most bio-diverse primeval tropical forest in the world, I want to testify to the wisdom that this marvel contains. Although the global South in general is often overlooked as a source of spiritual knowledge in favor of the East and West because it produces few books, organized traditions, or other artifacts we are used to examining, the Amazon itself is the living teacher here. It is the book, the tradition, and the artifact all in one, more dazzling than any representation could be.

Here are three lessons from the Amazon Rainforest that restore the “great harmony” that we have lost. I call them *marriages* because each one is a union, the root meaning of the word Yoga, which is the true subject of Tagore's book and the ultimate goal of humanity.

“The Amazon is the living teacher here. It is the book, the tradition, and the artifact all in one....”

Modern researchers [try] to figure out where civilization leaves off and wilderness begins. In the ancient Amazon, no such distinction existed.

THE MARRIAGE OF CIVILIZATION AND NATURE

Although the idea of an untouched wilderness still remains relatively synonymous with the Amazon Rainforest in the popular imagination, slews of studies released over the last couple of decades show that the area was once home to dense urban societies that were just as complex as European civilizations at the time. A 2008 paper published by the University of Florida states that these Amazonian urban areas were on the same scale as your average medieval town and Greek “polis,” or city state.² These walled urban settlements, each with roads leading out following the cardinal directions, were also connected to each other in a feat of regional planning that spread out over large areas of the Amazon in what the researchers describe as a “galactic” pattern.

Unlike Europeans, however, these ancient Amazonians did not destroy the forest systems around them. They did the opposite: they enhanced them. Study after study shows that much of what we like to consider “pristine” rainforest in the Amazon was actually planted and cultivated by humans. The reason superfood-loaded trees like acai, Brazil nut, and even cocoa are so common in the Amazon is because they were tended by these civilizations—so much so that when researchers now look for

evidence of human settlement they look for density of these trees.³ The Amazon Rainforest is not really a wilderness at all, it is a garden.

When the first European explorers arrived, they were so in awe of the “garden cities” of the Amazon that many thought they had found the Garden of Eden, and drew maps that placed the rainforest at the center of the world. I have seen these maps at the Ethnographic Museum in Leticia, Colombia⁴; a bustling small town on the banks of the serpentine Amazon River. Nude as Adam and Eve, the ancient Amazonians dwelt among a super-abundance of healthy fruits, nuts, and medicinal plants, much of it planted and maintained by generation after generation in a co-evolution that leaves modern researchers trying to figure out where civilization leaves off and wilderness begins. In the ancient Amazon, no such distinction existed.

The human/nature dichotomy appears to be real in a country like the U.S. in part because our national parks, the best examples of “pure nature” that we have, were forcibly cleared of their native inhabitants by early “environmentalists” to create “pristine” areas of “untouched wilderness.”⁵ Our activity is separate from that of nature, and worse, detrimental to it. Even today, prominent ecological voices like biologist E.O Wilson call for setting aside half of the earth for nature, apart



From *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon* (1853), by William Lewis Herndon, et al.

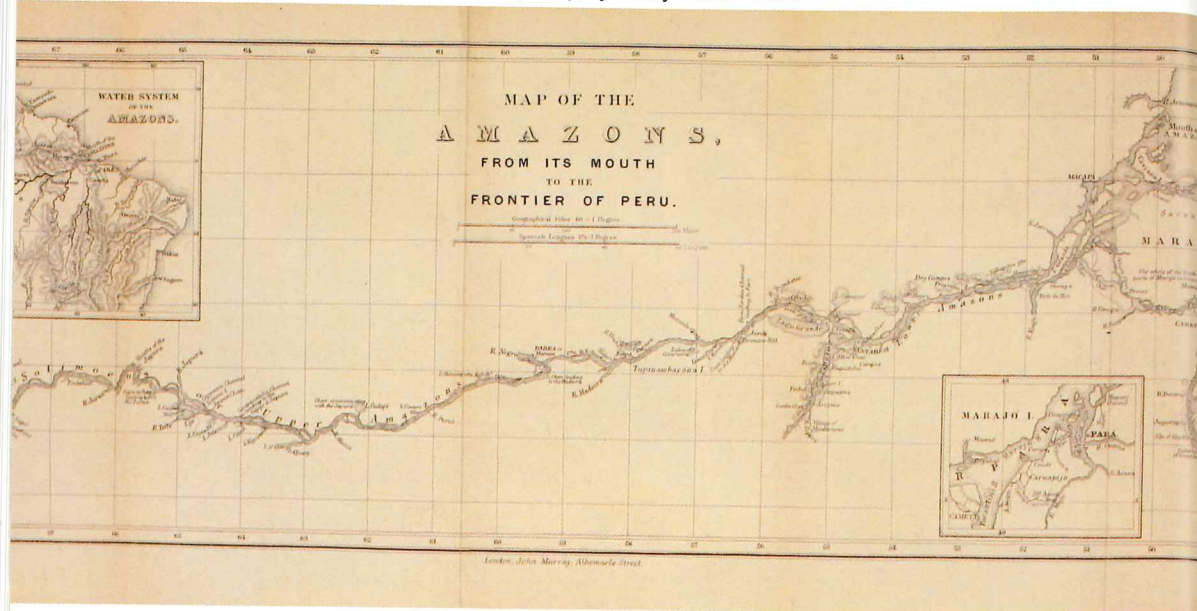
from humans in order to save it.⁶ But the Amazon Rainforest shows that civilization and nature are not really at odds, and illuminates a potential for a returned state of paradise on earth if we can harmonize the two.

THE MARRIAGE OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Some of the techniques developed by the ancient Amazonians are now recognized as potential game-changers for the global challenges facing humanity. Agroforestry, for example, in which food-bearing trees are used to provide long-term crops in place of the annual mono-culture crops that industrial agriculture relies on, can produce high-quality food

items and reforest the world at the same time, reversing global warming, regenerating damaged ecosystems, and turning around species decline in the process.⁷ Amazon civilizations of yore also developed a kind of super-fertile permaculture soil called *terra preta*, or black earth⁸, created from their burned earthenware goods in an airtight circle of recycling and renewal that produced no waste or pollution and transformed the nutrient-less white sands of the jungle into a microbe-rich living medium to grow their food forest on.

Modern civilization is destroying the natural world even though our technology is so advanced that we have sent men to the moon and connected the entire globe through the Internet and media. Something is fundamentally wrong, and that something is simple and



obvious. It is that our science is driven by economic systems, like capitalism or communism, not by spiritual understanding. What's so obviously absent in the material expression of the modern world, as Martin Luther King, Jr., pointed out in his 1964 Nobel Prize Lecture, is spirituality:

*Yet, in spite of these spectacular strides in science and technology, and still unlimited ones to come, something basic is missing. There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance.*¹⁰

Indigenous Amazonian societies see things from a “shamanic” perspective. While shamanism is often described as the belief in various “spirits” and other abstractions, a more concise and truthful definition is that it is the marriage of science and spirituality. When shamanistic societies talk about spirits, they are referring to the unconditioned metaphysical potential behind physical forms. Holding sacred the spirit of water, for example, ensures that all actions taken will never harm any of the

physical living manifestations of that spirit, whether they are streams, rivers, or oceans. The same goes for the spirits of plants, animals, air, etc. Shamanism harmonizes humanity with the greater world, the goal of Tagore’s forest-dwelling sages of ancient India.

Although we don’t know exactly what the ancient Amazonians believed, as Jesus pointed out, we can judge a tree by the fruit that it bears.¹¹ The Amazon Rainforest is possibly the greatest work of human design the world has ever seen. Only a high level of consciousness could have produced it. The reason why we in the West haven’t yet created anything that resembles the food- and medicine-rich “galactic” garden cities of the ancient Amazon where human behavior enriches both the natural world and society is that our scientific expression is not yet driven by spirituality.

Fortunately, the Amazon has also produced an advanced technology, born of the shamanistic marriage of science and spirituality, that addresses that challenge.

THE MARRIAGE OF HUMANITY AND THE COSMOS

By now everyone has heard of ayahuasca, the potent hallucinogenic brew that is widely consumed by many, but not all, indigenous Amazon societies and has made serious inroads into modern global culture. Brazil has spawned a handful of churches that use ayahuasca as a sacrament, several of these now operating in dozens of different countries around the world. Peru has seen an explosion in ayahuasca tourism, from mountain-high Cusco to the landlocked Amazonian island city of Iquitos. Ayahuasca centers have opened in places like Hawaii, Costa Rica, and most recently and amid televised dramatics, even in Kentucky.¹² The “medicine” is now a principal player in psychedelic research.

Much of this research focuses in on ayahuasca’s ability to help people struggling with modern health epidemics like addiction, PTSD, and depression, the latter now the most common form of disability on earth according to the World Health Organization.¹³ Psychedelic substances are able to relieve the symptoms of, and often turn around, maladies like these because they dissolve the sense of “self” or “I” distinct from the rest of the world, according to a paper published in the journal *NEUROSCIENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS* in 2017 by researchers at the University of Adelaide in Australia.¹⁴ Unlike purely chemical psychedelics, however, ayahuasca does not produce just visions but also strong gut reactions, instigating physical nausea as it probes the psyche, getting stuck

in any places where hatred, anger, fear, or other negative emotions reside. This marriage of the mind and body is the essential foundation for fully realizing the third and highest aspect of our selves, the spirit.

Only a cosmic consciousness can produce a civilization, where the laws of heaven are manifest on physical earth. While ayahuasca does not give this consciousness outright, it does show that it already exists within us and indicates what must change in order to dwell in that ecstatic state. It is a teacher plant, a gift from the ancient Amazonians that can be used in tandem with other spiritual practices, hopefully leading to blurring of the line between civilization and nature, to paradise on earth. ♦

¹ *SADHANA: THE REALIZATION OF LIFE* by Rabin-dranath Tagore. 1914. Chapter 1.

² <http://news.ufl.edu/archive/2008/08/pristine-amazonian-region-hosted-large-urban-civilization-study-finds.php>.

³ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170302143939.htm>.

⁴ <http://www.banrep.gov.co/es/museo-etnografico-leticia>.

⁵ <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1070&context=socssp>.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/01/science/e-o-wilson-half-earth-biodiversity.html>.

⁷ http://www.eurafagroforestry.eu/news/Agroforestry_can_save_the_world.

⁸ <https://permaculturenews.org/2017/08/08/terra-preta-amazon/>.

⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-aesthetics/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>.

¹¹ Matthew 10:33.

¹² https://www.viceland.com/en_us/show/kentucky-ayahuasca.

¹³ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>.

¹⁴ <https://academic.oup.com/nc/article/2017/1/nix016/391673>.