Meeting Nature-as-Presence
Aldo Leopold and the Deeper Nature of Nature

Craig Holdrege

Summary

Nature can be encountered as a forceful presence, as being-at-work within sense experience. This kind of encounter is not a given, but is both a foundation and a goal of Goethean science. I will describe 20th Century scientist and environmentalist Aldo Leopold's journey to discover, articulate and become an advocate for the deeper nature of nature. This will help us to see some of the conditions that are necessary to develop a connection with beingness in nature. Key is the movement from "thinking about" to active thinking-perceiving, a movement that allows us to participate in other beings and other beings to find expression through us.

Zusammenfassung

Die Natur kann als echte Präsenz, als Wesenshaftes in der Sinneserfahrung erlebt werden. Diese Art des Erlebens ist meistens nicht einfach gegeben, ist jedoch sowohl Grundlage wie auch Ziel der Goetheanistischen Naturwissenschaft. Ich werde den Weg beschreiben, den der im 20. Jahrhundert tätige Wissenschaftler und Umweltschützer Aldo Leopold gegangen ist, um die tiefere Natur der Natur zu entdecken, auszudrücken und zu schützen. Dies wird uns helfen, einige Bedingungen zu sehen, die notwendig sind, um die Beziehung zum Wesenhaften in der Natur zu entwickeln. Wesentlich ist die Bewegung von einem Denken «darüber» zu einem tätig denkenden Anschauen. Dadurch wird eine Teilnahme an anderen Wesen möglich und andere Wesen können durch uns zum Ausdruck kommen.

> *"We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming mêlée of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.*
> *In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.... I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise."*
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> (*Leopold* 1949/1987, p. 129-30)

With these words, the 56-year-old Aldo Leopold reflected back on an experience he had at the age of 22. It was 1909 and Leopold was leading a crew for the newly formed United States Forest Service that was carrying out an inventory of the locations, quantity, and quality of timber in Arizona and New Mexico.

After shooting the wolves, Leopold and his crew climbed down to the banks of the river and found the old wolf. She was still alive but unable to move. Leopold put his rifle between himself and the wolf, she grabbed the rifle in her jaws and then died.

> *"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain."*
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> (*Leopold* 1949/1987, p. 130)

In the very moment of her extinguishing, Leopold met the wolf for the first time. For a split second he glimpsed the wolf as a being in its own right. The impression stayed with him. In a sense the wolf became part of Aldo Leopold on that day.

And yet it took many years for the wolf to become a force in his thinking. He could still write in 1920, eleven years after the encounter: *"It is going to take patience and money to catch the last wolf or [mountain] lion in New Mexico. But the last one must be caught before the job can be called fully successful"* (quoted in *Meine* 1988, p. 181). Leopold was trained as a forester and was an avid hunter. Working for the Forest Service his goal was to manage forests for the maximum quality and quantity of timber. He held to the principle of "maximum use", which for him included managing forests and other wild lands in such a way that they provide food for livestock, game (such as deer) for hunters, and recreation for people. Predators that killed livestock and game simply did not fit into world view of the young forester and game manager. His thinking about nature was centered on human interests.

For most of 15 years following the encounter with the wolf, Leopold worked in the southwest (New Mexico and Arizona) for the U.S. Forest Service. He rode thousands of miles on horseback and observed first-hand the ecology, wildlife, and human use of the land in this arid part of North America. He also studied scientific literature and philosophy. These were years of expanding experience and thought. Leopold's biography and writings reveal tensions, contrasting perspectives, and shifting alliances as his view of the world transformed to become more centered in nature's concerns.