

Following on the heels of my last post about "time," I thought this would be a good followup. Though it doesn't discuss "time," it indirectly causes me to reflect on it. My daughter was 11 when I came to prison, she was 12 when I sent her this and she is now 13 as I share it with you. Every time I write her I must confront this passing of time.

Dear L,

I was laying in my bunk recalling memories of when you and I went for walks in the forest and we would talk about the animals and plants we came across. I would tell you the plants and animals could talk and communicate with us and each other. Now that you have grown up a lot, you might think I was just being silly with you when you were younger, but I wasn't. I will try to explain some of the things I've told you then, so you can better understand them now that you are older.

I don't think it needs much explaining that animals could talk. I'm sure you remember clearly the first time you got really close to a deer. It's one of my favorite moments with you. The deer looked right at you for a bit and then when it felt scared it opened its mouth and yelled at you and I. So that was obvious: the deer had something to "say" about the situation of all three of us encountering each other at the edge of the forest that day. The average person might not understand this, but you're not the average person, so I won't explain it any further.

For plants, it might not be as easy to believe they talk too, so I will explain it some more. First, let's look at what talking actually is. It's the movement of air to produce a sound. You can't talk without moving air through your body. Give it a try...try to say a word without moving air through your lungs and mouth. It's impossible! So if talking is air moving to produce sound, we can hear trees do this.

Do you remember when we would be in the forest and we would hear the tall trees creaking and making noises as the wind blew them, causing them to move and bend? I would say to you, "Listen...the trees are talking." The same goes for when you stand in the forest and the wind blows through the tree tops, causing the leaves to shake and vibrate and make all kinds of sounds.

This is air moving to tell story through sound. It's a story about what's happening in the forest in that moment. We might not know the exact words these plants (and animals) are using, but if we listen carefully we can understand most of the story they are telling. It's just like us people, they move air around to tell stories about themselves and others in the forest.

Many people will never allow themselves to open up to this language of the wild. There is an entire “more than human” world out there that most people ignore. And sadly, they think this “more than human” world can’t hear them as well. They talk only as if other humans can hear them. But the plants and animals (and all of the more than human world) can hear us.

I’m not saying they can understand our words. But they can understand the story, the same way we could understand theirs if we just listen to them.

An example of this is when scientists took plants and played loud, aggressive, heavy metal music around them regularly. This stunted their growth and damaged their health. But when scientists played gentler, classical music around them, the plants had an increase in their growth and overall health. I’m not saying they understood the words, but they definitely can comprehend the tone of our words, as the experiment showed.

So when you speak, remember that the natural world is listening to your tone and feeling the vibration of your words. This is a fact. You are actually in conversation with the living world when you speak. So try to speak kindly of it. If you do, it will respond accordingly, like the plants that grow more with the gentle classical music.

Lastly I will talk about reading the natural world. Wildness writes its stories everywhere, we just often choose not to read it. Writing is marks on a paper, and when you look at these marks (or scratches) that I wrote down, you hear a voice in your head that tells you what they mean. So if you look at marks written in the natural world, you can do the same.

I’m not just speaking of deer tracks that you’ve seen. These do tell a story, but there’s more than that. You can look at the rock with its curves and roughness as the sun creates a shadow across it. You can focus on the marks of that rock (just like you’re now focusing on the marks I wrote here), and listen for the voice in your head to tell you what is written on the rock.

Writing is just marks that tell a story and these marks are everywhere in the natural world. Like the collection of acorn shells that have scratches and marks all over them that we would always find in the same spot in the forest. They can be read, and we can hear the voice in our head that told us: “This is where the chipmunk comes to eat every day.”

So I hope you understand that I was not just joking or being silly when I told you that plants, animals and the wild world in general could talk, hear us and share their stories through their own writings. I know this to be true the older I get. I move through the wild world and

A letter to my daughter

know I can listen to it, and it can listen to me. I hope you can do the same. I hope you still believe me when I say the natural world is still talking and listening to us.

Love,

Pa

My older daughter called me Pa as a joke one day and it stuck. I've come to embrace it ever since.