



I Am the Mountain Walking

Wombats in the Greenwood

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Mountains do not walk. Not in the sense that most people think of humans walking. But that is precisely the point. If you assume that only humans are truly alive, that only humans are active, that only humans think, feel, and have emotions and hopes, then the rest of the world looks lifeless. But what if not only dolphins, whales, and chimpanzees, but also trees, orchids, creeks, rocks, rivers, and even mountains were alive? What if they were “people” with purposes, activities, and “spirit,” just the same as humans?

Or to put it differently, what if I am not only human, but also part of the mountain, and the mountain is part of me? From that perspective, mountains do indeed walk. When I walk, the mountain also walks, because the mountain is part of me. I am the mountain walking.

I live in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. Hobart is a long, thin city wedged between a very big mountain (The Mountain) and a very big river mouth. Every house in Hobart is only a short drive from either The Mountain or The River. I grew up in a suburb on the foothills of The Mountain, and The Mountain was the main view out of my childhood bedroom window.

I am part of The Mountain, and he is part of me. This is true on a number of levels. The water that I drink every day, that becomes my very lifeblood, is sourced from streams that flow down The Mountain. The air that I breathe typically comes in cold winds blowing off The Mountain. Much of the food I ate as a child was grown in our backyard garden on the slopes of The Mountain. Physically and biologically, The Mountain is part of me.

The Mountain is also a central part of my worldview. When I want to know what the weather will be like in Hobart, I look at The Mountain. If it is raining on The Mountain, it will probably rain soon in the city. If blue sky can be seen over The Mountain, it will probably stay sunny. If I become disoriented in the city, then I simply look for The Mountain, and I know where I am. Whenever I travel away from Hobart I always look forward to seeing The Mountain again as I drive back into the city. I feel that I am "home" once I can see him.

The Mountain is my friend. I still remember the day of my eighteenth birthday. Many people celebrate that day by inviting friends to a big party. I didn't. I went walking on The Mountain. I could think of no other person I wanted to be with on that special day. When a

close work colleague committed suicide, I went to The Mountain to voice my hurt and anger. He listened. When I fell in love, I talked to The Mountain about my joy and pleasure. He understood. When I am depressed, he encourages me. When I am foolish or think that I am more important than I really am, The Mountain rebukes and reminds me of my place. He is a true friend.

The Mountain is my god. What does that mean? For me, gods and goddesses are not beings in another world, but part of this world. The Mountain provides me with a set of experiences and a way of thinking about my life that gives it meaning. The Mountain is bigger than me, but I am also part of The Mountain. The Mountain is a spiritual being that plays a central role in my spiritual life.

These three points are all closely related. First, I am part of The Mountain. My physical, social, and spiritual life develops through an intimate relationship with him. Second, The Mountain is a person. He has his own purposes and activities that I try to understand and respect. Third, in the same way a husband may consult his wife before making an important choice, I take into account the concerns and needs of The Mountain in choosing how to live my life.

The spirituality that I am describing here is often called "animism." Animism is the belief that not only animals, but plants and rocks, rivers and trees, have spirits—they are "animate," or alive. It is often assumed that animism is a "primitive" belief system, and you will still find references to this in some encyclopedias. It was thought that modern science and philosophy had shown animism to be wrong. However, increasing numbers of well-educated Westerners (like myself) are identifying as animists. Also, as modern Western science and business are causing huge ecological destruction, growing numbers of people are wondering whether the animist beliefs of indigenous cultures may be wiser and more insightful than was previously thought.

"Anthropocentrism" describes a way of living in the world in which humans are central. From an anthropocentric perspective, plants, rivers, and mountains are important only insofar as they serve the interests of humans. A forest does not have a right to exist of itself. Rather, if a forest is to be preserved it must have some value to humans—for example, as a place where new medicines may be found. In the Western world anthropocentrism dominates nearly all discussion about forests, rivers, oceans, and mountains.

In many ways, anthropocentrism is the opposite of animism. Animists take into account the lives of other-than-human beings such as wombats, hedgehogs, and wild orchids in their decisions about what to do. In contrast, people who are anthropocentrists are not very interested in these other-than-human beings. Christians are typically anthropocentric—the main thing that matters to Christians is that a person is saved and is going to heaven. What happens to orangutangs or the rare swift parrot or The Mountain, in this world, is not really that important. Business leaders and politicians are also typically anthropocentric. Their main motivation is to make money *for people*. They seek to improve the wealth and quality of life *of people*. Mountains can be turned into metals, trees into woodchips and paper, and profits.

I remember the first time I took a close friend walking in the wild places of Tasmania. He was studying geology at the time, and he took particular delight in annoying me by describing the various metals that might be mined from the rocks we were walking over. I tried to show him the beauty and depth of the life of the mountains and forests. It is an issue of perspective. What do you see when you look at a mountain or a forest? What do you think about? The geologist thinks about the minerals that may be in the earth. That is what she is trained to do. The manager of a woodchip company thinks about the possible profits from cutting down the forest. That is what he does to make money. But, an animist sees the complexity and beauty of the life in a forest. I

Some animists may be hunters. They kill animals for food. However, the approach is different. It is common to ask permission of an animal before it is killed, and to thank it for its life. Similarly, as an animist, I would not argue that all mining or all forestry is wrong. Rather, I would argue that the rights, values, and lives of forests and mountains need to be considered as part of the decision-making process.

Graham Harvey has described the "Greenwood" as a place where Pagans "experience and celebrate the Earth's life."¹ "Other-than-human persons" inhabit the Greenwood: "plants, insects, animals, birds, fish, and of course, the teeming bacteria in the soil." The Greenwoods are those places that remain where other-than-humans still have a life of their own. Greenwoods include places like old forests, perhaps a significant tree in a city park, and, for me, The Mountain.

Graham Harvey suggests that Greenwood Paganism is more like "sitting among trees" rather than a "spiritual path."² What he means is that Paganism does not look for a path to lead humans out of this world. For Greenwood Pagans, this world is already home, it is already good and holy, and there is no need to travel anywhere on a path. Rather, Greenwood Paganism is about being and celebrating life here and now.

These three things are all linked: anthropocentrism, the desire to find a spiritual path to escape this world, and the destruction of Greenwoods. Humans often look at trees, or mountains, or rivers, simply as resources, as things that can help humans obtain what they want. The need for more paper, more gold, more water for irrigation are all justifications for the transformation of Greenwoods with lives of their own into resources to serve human interests. If God, or "home," or "enlightenment" are in the next world, what does it matter if humans destroy the Greenwood? I don't think that trees, mountains, rivers, and wombats should be made to always serve the interests of humans. The wombat's experience is a good example of the problem confronted by anthropocentrism.

Unlike Australian possums, and squirrels in the Northern Hemisphere, who have adapted well to urban life, wombats do not like urban environments. One of my regular walking tracks on the outskirts of Hobart takes me past several wombat burrows that are now unoccupied. The encroaching houses have driven the wombats away, or they have been killed on the roads.

Wombats are Australian marsupials about the size of a medium dog with a solid build and short legs, a big head, and very powerful digging claws. They live in burrows that can be many metres long, coming out to feed on grasses during the night. They are not dangerous, unless you pick one up, which is hard to do as they can run very fast. Wombats have very distinctive cube-shaped droppings that makes it easy to tell if they are living in an area. Wombats live in a wide range of habitats, from the warm coastal scrublands to the snow-covered peaks of the alpine areas.

I have met numerous wombats. Wombats fascinate me. However, they don't seem that interested in me, or in humans in general. They have their own lives to get on with, eating, sleeping, burrowing, mating, and raising their young.³ When I meet a wombat in the forests of Tasmania they mostly ignore me, or run away. I sometimes see evidence of wombats on The Mountain, though it is too rocky and too close to suburban Hobart for them to be comfortable. I usually meet them in other Greenwoods, more distant from humans.

I was walking in one of these more distant Greenwoods recently, a forest in southern Tasmania. It was easy to see that wombats lived in the area; their distinctive droppings were not hard to find on the sides of the track. The area was under threat from a logging company. Logging in Tasmania is practised in a particularly destructive way. Not only do they take all the old-growth timber, mostly to be woodchipped, they also cut everything else down and leave it on the ground, and then burn the remains in a high-intensity fire by using a substance similar to napalm. The reason for this is to kill off

all the variety of native species so the area can be replanted with a eucalypt monoculture. Worse still, the foresters then lace the area with blue carrots poisoned with 1080. This is to kill off the native animals so that they don't eat the shoots of the plantation trees. So while the wombats may survive the fire by hiding in their burrows, they won't survive the poisoning. Their death is slow and painful.

Beyond questions about the economics of logging (it seems to benefit a few wealthy individuals rather than the community as a whole), and the ethics of poisoning native animals (death by 1080 poison is not humane), there is a broader issue about what really matters. For Greenwood Pagans, the lives of wombats and trees have value in and of themselves. When an economist looks at a forest, he typically thinks only in terms of the money that can be made. When a Christian hears of ecological destruction, it often does not concern them. Although there are some ecologically minded Christians,⁴ surveys have shown that conservative Christians are much less likely to be concerned about the environment than people who are not Christians.

For me, as a Greenwood Pagan, what really matters is to live in the world respecting my community—that includes other humans, animals, forests, rivers, and mountains. I do not long for heaven, nor do I anticipate that becoming fabulously wealthy will solve all my problems. Rather, I long to spend time in the Greenwood, to sit and listen, laugh and dance with my friends, human and other-than-human. I do not expect to control the other-than-human world. Although we at times work together on projects, I do not want other humans to be my slaves. Similarly, I do not want wombats, King Billy Pines, and The Mountain to serve only my interests, although I may use some harvested timber or metals mined from mountains in some of the things I do. I think that my life, human lives, will be richer, more pleasurable, deeper, and more satisfying if they are lived in

community with other-than-human peoples, rather than by oppressing them, silencing them, or making them extinct.

Economists try to dominate and control the world. Many businesspeople seem to think that new technology will solve any ecological problems that arise. This is a very anthropocentric view of the world. It assumes that the only people with good ideas or with important things to do are Western businessmen. For Greenwood Pangans, this is a strange idea. Our aim is not to dominate, but to live in a respectful relationship with other-than-human peoples.

Westerners often assume that indigenous cultures, such as the forest dwellers in northern India,⁵ should abandon their animistic beliefs and adopt Western beliefs and practices. Of course, it is assumed this will make them wealthier. However, in almost every case when a forest is cut down for woodchips, or a region is opened up for tourism, or a traditional fishing ground is fished commercially, the end result is that the indigenous peoples become poorer. They lose their traditional sustainable sources of livelihood in exchange, if they are lucky, for a one-off payment that never lasts very long. Sharma argues that this form of "development" is not worth the costs.

In the same way, I argue that Westerners have forgotten that the endangered Hairy-Nosed Wombat, or the Eastern Barred Bandicoot, or the King Billy Pine, or the Great White Shark, have values in and of themselves. When these other-than-human beings are made to serve the interests of humans, many of them find themselves on the edge of extinction. We humans have acted in the world in a very anthropocentric and selfish way.

When we cut down an old-growth forest to make woodchips we are making a decision that the wealth and pleasure of particular groups of humans are more important than the lives and pleasures of the other-than-human inhabitants of that forest. I would rather give up television, newspapers, and glossy magazines than give up my respect for wombats and my friendship with The Mountain. I am not arguing

that we should stop all forestry, or all mining, or all fishing. Rather, I am pointing out that most humans completely ignore the lives of other-than-human beings in their decisions about what forests to clear, mountains to mine, or fish to catch.

The modern mass media, and in particular television, encourage people to be selfish and to just think about their own pleasure. Big business and marketing companies do not want people to consume less, or to be satisfied with the clothes, car, computer, or hairstyle that they already have. They want people to buy more, so that they can make more money. Politicians are always offering tax cuts as an incentive to seduce people to vote for them. In our obsession with our own human pleasures we have typically ignored not only the quality of life, but often the complete extinction of our other-than-human friends with whom we share this world.

Joanna Macy describes a Buddhist concept of "dependent co-arising."⁶ Humans do not exist alone, or independently, but arise with, alongside, the other beings in the world. Humans are dependent on other beings. A person does not need to read very much zoology, botany, and ecology to understand that this is not simply a religious idea, but a very sound scientific approach to the place of humans in the world. Humans are part of the web of life. This understanding of our place in the world leads to a very different approach to the relationships of humans to other-than-human beings.

Is it fair to cut down the Amazon forest so that Americans can have cheap hamburgers? Is it right to destroy the old-growth forests of Tasmania so that we can have cheap woodchips for cheap paper? Is it right to allow the livelihoods of wombats to be destroyed to create monoculture plantations of eucalypt trees? For me, these are as much religious and ethical questions as they are economic and scientific ones. The Amazon forest, the old-growth forests of Tasmania, and wombats have a right to exist in and of themselves. They have lives of their own, and they should be allowed to live them.

Perhaps they will share that life with us. Perhaps they will give up their lives for us at times. But it seems strange, even evil, to think that all that matters in this world is the wealth and pleasure of humans. Surely we humans should be prepared to reciprocate and give up a few of our own pleasures so that the other beings with whom we share this world can have a reasonable quality of life.

What does this mean for how we, as humans, live our lives? From an animist perspective there is nowhere we need to "go" in order to be happier, not to heaven, not to a shopping mall, not to the time when we are finally wealthy. The pleasure and joy of life is to live it in the here and now. We do, however, have ideals.⁷ We work toward concrete goals that involve less destruction, less greed, less extinctions, less poisoning, less selfishness.

The choices here are not just individual choices about watching less television, or eating more vegetarian food, or using recycled paper. Rather, the most important choices are made by politicians and big business. We could encourage trains rather than cars as the chief mode of transport. We could ban the harvesting of old-growth forests and poisoning with 1080. We could restrict the harvesting of certain fish species. We could subsidise farmers who grow their crops organically. Some of these actions are already in place. Such choices may make some delicacies more expensive, may require some people to change their occupation, or may hurt the vested interests of some big businesses. But these costs, which are often relatively small, are worth it because the benefit is an improved quality of life for not only humans, but all beings that live on this earth.

I do not expect everyone to become a Greenwood Pagan. In fact, I hope they do not. Each religious tradition has its own beauty and vitality. But I do hope that in the decisions about how we live our lives in this world that the voices of the other-than-human beings will be listened to more than they are at present. This is one reason that Greenwood Paganism is important. Union leaders speak for the

interests of the workers. Feminists speak for the interests of women. The leaders of big business work to ensure their profits. Certainly, environmentalists speak for the environment. But, Greenwood Paganism takes this to another level, alerting us to the basic rights of wombats, mountains, and trees. These beings not only have rights, but in a very profound sense they are part of us. As such, in harming them we are harming ourselves.

Descartes was wrong when he argued "*Cogito ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am). We do not come into being as isolated individuals through our own thoughts. This is wrong biologically, sociologically, and spiritually. Biologically we depend on the physical world around us, on a network of plants, animals, rivers, mountains, and clouds to sustain both our lives and the lives of our mothers and fathers. Sociologically we learn to think, to speak, and to be a human through relationships with family, friends, and work associates. Children cruelly locked in cupboards from a very young age do not learn to speak, think, or act as humans. Spiritually, we develop through our relationships, our encounters with other spiritual beings. As Buber argues, "In the beginning is the relationship."⁸

What do I do? I speak kindly to my friends, such as The Mountain and wombats. When they welcome me I visit them regularly. What should you do? A good start, I suggest, is to find a Greenwood and walk or sit in it regularly. Then, listen. Listen to what the other-than-human people there have to say. For me, Paganism is about living a good life in this world. Defending the rights of other beings in this world is part of what I do. But perhaps more importantly, I share my life with those I love.

I am the mountain walking.

Notes

1. Graham Harvey, "Gods and Hedgehogs in the Greenwood: Contemporary Pagan Cosmologies," in *Mapping Invisible Worlds*, ed. Gavin Flood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 90.
2. *Ibid.*, 91.
3. James Woodford, *The Secret Life of Wombats* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001).
4. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
5. B. Sharma, "On Sustainability," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. R. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996).
6. Joanna Macy, *World As Lover, World As Self* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).
7. Starhawk, *Webbs of Power* (New York: New Society Publishing, 2002).
8. M. Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. Smith (New York: Collier Books, 1958), 12.



Wild Spirit, Active Love

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We've been hiking in the mountains for four glorious days. Today is our last day. It is also my fiftieth birthday. The hike is a gift from my friends Ed and Sue, who know the land intimately. Both have been actively involved in local environmental campaigns for the past thirty years and are passionate about this place. As we walk up the steep slope towards the top of Mt. Bogong, the highest peak in Victoria, two eagles fly above us, leading the way.

From here the Alps stretch out as far as you can see; but dotted amongst the seemingly endless blue-green hills are patches of bare earth where swathes of the hillside have been cut away and left desolate by logging operations. We eat lunch by the rock marker and