Wild: What Is Sustainable

Contributed by Richard Adrian Reese
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If you only have time for one sentence, hear this: Jay Griffiths' book, Wild — An Elemental Journey, is one of the most powerful books I've ever read. Wild is a celebration of wildness and freedom. It celebrates societies that work, societies that have complete respect for their ecosystems, societies that have survived for thousands of years without suffering destructive whirlwinds of mass hysteria.

Griffiths is a brilliant heretic and a proud one. Her book shows us what happens when madness collides with wildness. It helps us understand the dark injuries that destroyed our own freedom, and put us on the path to what we have become. It is 350 pages of full-throttle outside-the-box thinking, written with passion and eloquence. For outside-the-box thinkers, it's just awesome. For light sleepers, it might provide a life-changing wakeup call.

Griffiths was born in deepest, darkest England, a devastated island that was once a magnificent rainforest. She was blessed with the precious curse and gift of having an active mind. She excelled at asking penetrating questions that were not proper for young ladies (or lads) to ask. The wardens were not amused.

During her teen years, she hung out with fundamentalist Christians, but what they were teaching could not survive rational scrutiny, and her mind was highly allergic to blind faith. Painful clashes inspired her to run away. She abandoned the normal life for which she had been trained. "I lost a walled city but found a wildness and freedom. I never regretted it."

She wandered around the world, but life was not always easy. "Following a passionate freedom can mean loneliness, penury, humiliation, for we live in a world where the caged hate the free." By and by, she floated away into a healthy dance with depression. Depression is one of life's valuable idiot lights, warning us that it's time to pay attention and change paths.

One day, the phone rang, and a friend invited her to Peru, where she could hang out with shamans, use powerful medicine, and recover her lost soul. So she did, and it worked. The heavy black clouds soon dispersed. She spent the next seven years working on her book, travelling from the Amazon to New Guinea, Australia, and Arctic Canada.

We routinely teach our children that wild people are primitive, and that their way of life is inferior and undesirable. In so doing, we erect a brick wall that prohibits fresh wild notions from flushing the crud out of our wheezing, slobbering imaginations. Instead, we teach our children to live like there's no tomorrow, to shop till you drop, to leave nothing behind for future generations.

Griffiths understands that the brick wall must be smashed, for the sake of all life. Her mind is a sledgehammer. She takes us on visits to wild ecosystems that stood in the path of the all-devouring global economy. She listened to the wild people, in a caring and respectful manner, hearing their pain, rage, and despair. They had a healthy way of life before the invasion. They needed nothing from us. They simply wanted to be left alone.

She took long treks through the jungle with wild people who possessed immense knowledge of the plants and animals. They perceived that all flora and fauna have spirits (except for domesticated plants). They saw that all wild beings were animated by the same life force, but different species appeared in different forms. We were all equal. When humans lived like equals, rather than masters, they didn't gang rape their ecosystem, because that would have been inconceivable.

After days of hiking through a perfectly healthy land, a treasure of abundant life, they stumbled upon the town of Maldonado, the cash economy, the modern world — electric lights, pop music, abundant booze and drugs, discarded syringes, splatters of puke, and overflowing outhouses. Everyone seemed to be mad. “To me, the forest had been wildly beautiful and the town was a hideous wasteland.”

One chapter was devoted to the vast wildness of the sea, the place where all life began. The surface of Mars is better known to us than the floor of our oceans. The underwater world is a realm of immense beauty, and diversity. Cetaceans, like whales and dolphins, are incredibly intelligent, and they live in an incredibly intelligent manner, exactly as evolution prepared them to live, wild and free, without technology (a brilliant strategy for long-term success).

The ocean is a place where primates have little business, beyond the shoreline. Civilized primates have become abusive, ravaging the sea life, and filling the waters with toxins, sewage, garbage, and noise. Climate change is making the oceans so acidic that catastrophic harm now seems very likely. Wild people didn’t do this — even when they lived too hard, the harm they caused was far, far less than the harm caused by our way of life.

Missionaries were high on the list of people that Griffiths most resented, because their mission was to destroy wild cultures, and convert wild people into literate, employed, Christian consumers. In Peru, four different missionary groups, using helicopters and speed boats, competed to find uncontacted tribes. They knew that they would import deadly diseases, but they didn’t care. In some places, half of the people died within two years of their arrival. The priests blamed female shamans for the illness, and the angry people killed the shamans.

Common gifts for the converts included axes, tobacco, clothing, and mirrors. Mirrors enabled people to see their own faces, and become more aware of their individuality. Jesus saved individuals, not communities. God lived in heaven, and the Earth was a realm of wickedness, so it didn’t matter, it was worthless. Missionaries built roads into the jungle, which were soon used by miners, loggers, and other destroyers. Separated from the family of life, the modern heart gets hard.

Missionaries forced the natives to surrender their sacred objects, which they burned. Within two generations, traditional knowledge becomes extinct, because it is no longer being passed down to the young, who spend their days in classrooms. Cultural genocide is emotionally shattering. In one Brazilian tribe, over 300 natives committed suicide.

In Australia, the invasion of civilization has been devastating for the Aborigines and their home, but the elders maintain a sense of patience, for the noxious cities are nothing more than ugly scabs. Whites have never possessed the spirit of the land, which remains alive beneath the parking lots and shopping centers. With time, the disease will pass; the land will heal and thrive once again, to the best of its ability.

Humans are not domesticated, we are genetically wild animals, but so many have been tamed. “Tamed creatures are dolt-minded and dumb, insipid and bland,” Griffiths tells us. “The tame are trained only to hear the voice of their tamer, having ears only for command.” Our wild genes scream in despair, as we go berserk with cage rage. “Sensible habits and good road safety skills will keep you alive till eighty. So what? If you didn’t know freedom, you never lived.”

The myth of human superiority has constructed an enormous ecocidal monstrosity, and its ongoing self-destruction will result in unimaginable harm. If we cannot find a way to return to our humble place in the family of life, we will have no future. That’s the message here.

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References:

Griffiths, Jay, Wild — An Elemental Journey, Jeremy P. Tarcher, New York, 2006.

About the author Richard Adrian Reese

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