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# Quality of Life, Virtue, & Applied Ethics

## The Nature of Truth

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# Introduction

If the lad or lass is among us who knows where the secret heart of this Growth-Monster is hidden, let them please tell us where to shoot the arrow that will slow it down. And if the secret heart stays secret and our work is made no easier, I for one will keep working for wildness day by day.  
(Snyder, 1990, p5)

No matter how many insights I might have in my life, I know they are useful only if I take action upon them. Part of my work is to keep myself inspired at least enough to take action. I do this mainly through photographing wild nature and documenting the human experiences of it - whether it be my own experience or that of others.

From spending more than twenty years exploring many wild places around the planet I have gained many wonderful insights into my life and the world I inhabit. For a large part of this time I have been conscious of my own development of awareness and ways of thinking. In this essay I would like to explore my understanding of 'truth', particularly as an adult. This exploration is important to me because my work is influenced by the need to pursue the truth. The camera, and to a lesser extent the pen (via the computer), are the tools I use to document this pursuit.

## Manifestations <sup>1</sup>

In early 1993, I found myself on the side of a grass-covered mountain surrounded by Australia's largest contiguous rainforest. Huddled in my sleeping bag in my tent, I waited for a persistent storm to pass. I had already been waiting three days; watching the heavy squalls come and go, watching the river rise and rise further still. I was in the seventh week of an eight-week journey through the 350,000-hectare Tarkine region in the remote North West of Tasmania. I had been commissioned to document its vast and unprotected old growth forests, button grass moorlands, coastal sand dunes with giant Aboriginal middens, and granite mountain ranges. In today's world it is rare to find a diversity of ecosystems in one place. The Tarkine is one such place, and because of this is worthy of recognition.

On the side of that mountain, grounded in all of the Tarkine's wildness, I wrote this insight:

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that the word 'manifestations' in French means 'action'.

When you go to the forest and hear the screech of a wedge-tailed eagle look around for you shall meet her.

When you walk in the forest, when you climb-up-over and duck-on-under the green growth that bars your way, walk softly through the maze of trees. Look up. For you shall touch the light that forms the gentle jade which rests upon your face. Remember its warmth.

When you stand within the forest, breath deeply. Suck in the aromas of the Leatherwood and Sassafras, the dank earthiness of rotting logs. Breath deeper if it pleases you, for you have met the wind.

If you desire to know more about the wind, move up to the mountains. For that is where I am.

However if you stay, to stand within the forest, dig your toes in deep. Soon, lie down amongst the leaves and feel the earth beneath. Grasp it with your hands. Feel it against your shoulders, spine and buttocks. Concentrate on each individual leaf that touches your skin. Feel the dampness of the earth - the cool sensations that delight.

Roll over. Press your hands chest and pelvis to the floor. Dig your fingers beneath the humus. Press your ear to it. Listen. Listen beyond your own heartbeat. Listen, for you will hear me.

When you cup the sweet water to your lips drink thoughtfully. Not thirstily. For you will miss the singing. All at once the creek sings. Each note perfect, each octave struck, like the eternal filling of a liqueur glass. Though a hundred times more sensual. Drink thoughtfully. Listen hard. For you can hear me.

When you can hear, then you shall see. If you are so close and still can't see then the jaded light will strike you, slap you across the face to wake you. Here is where I linger most. This is where you'll find me.

More than two years later, in November 1995 I found myself on a commando style mission heading back into the heart of the Tarkine's rainforests with the 'Tarkine Tigers', a group of young environmental activists dedicated to protecting the region. The Tasmanian government built a 50-kilometre long road straight through the Tarkine under the banner of Ecotourism, but deceptively creating infrastructure for future mining and logging. Throughout the year the Tigers had kept constant vigil on the progress of construction and stalling it where they could by 'locking on' to machinery with chains and pipes that they would secure their wrists to.

Intent on winning the fight with the environmentalists, the government pushed so hard to finish the construction of the road that the surrounding environment was given scant regard.

...what they had done to the river and the surrounding environment was bad road making. And it was vindictive, it was not just a road going through, it was angry, vindictive, unnecessary violence... It wasn't a case of, 'your ideology believes you need a road and my ideology (doesn't)'. This was beyond that. And I broke down. And the police arresting me, said to me, 'you're talking to the wrong person. I'm sorry, I'm converted. This shouldn't be going on. You don't need to tell me anything. This is wrong'. (Konkes, as quoted in Caganoff, 1996)

To try and cover their tracks, the Tasmanian government placed a 'media ban' on the construction of the Donaldson River Bridge, the last piece of road that would join the southern construction zone with the northern. The Tasmanian media has traditionally

shown bias against environmentalists. This was no different. The media played out the ban. It was this that drove me to take action. I flew to Tasmania where the Tigers guided me into the heart of the Tarkine where the damage had been done. My camera secretly captured images of 'bad road making' which immediately made national news, embarrassed the Tasmanian government and helped bring the plight of the unprotected Tarkine to Australia's attention.

A week later the government organised a four-wheel drive tour along the road for the media. During that week we had watched the construction workers manicure the surrounding environment to look like it was never damaged. They even made the piles of dirt green, to try and hide the scarring. That evening the television media showed only what the government had shown them.

Back in Sydney, watching my video rushes, I became even more aware of the contrast between the Tarkine's wild environment and the intrusion of the road. The contrast symbolised the difference between truth and lie: the truth that the Tigers were trying to express, which was constantly being whitewashed beneath the lies the government invented in order to get their way. Reflecting on all my experiences in the Tarkine, and in wilderness in general, I wrote that:

Truth is a manifestation of wilderness. Wilderness knows only truth.  
Lies manifest with the human need to hide the truth.  
(Caganoff, 1996)

In the video rushes I found a Tiger talking to camera. As he and his friends walked away from the road works after being told by police and security to leave, he exclaims disappointingly, 'the truth leaves and the lie stays'. All who were there could plainly see this contrast between truth and lie.

At the end of 1995 the Tarkine had seen over a thousand protestors, forming 47 protests, and amassing 100 arrests. In March '96 the road was opened to the public. In the first twelve months of use there had been 15 to 20 car accidents, mostly rollovers. The police came out saying the road was dangerous, the Tourist Council of Tasmania admitted they were against it, and most car hire companies wouldn't let their cars on it. After all this the Tasmanian government still declared the road safe! And year after year they arrogantly spend taxpayers' money to repair it. The biggest irony is that the construction company won an industry 'earth award' for their work.

# Truth

Modern Society seems to be a celebration of all things that lead away from the truth, make truth hard to live for, and discourage people from even believing that it exists. (Rinpoche, 1992, p20)

The Tarkine story shows us how revengeful, 'vindictive violence' manifests from people caught in the 'develop at all costs' dogma. 'Develop' not just at the expense of the environment but also at the expense of moral values. But it is not necessary to try and prove who was right and who was wrong. What I want to explore here is truth, because what you do and don't believe influences your moral point of view, and when moral values are compromised then the truth becomes untrue.

'Morality is action' (Murdoch, 1992, p461), and the Tarkine saga forced the Tasmanian government and the protestors to put their moral values on the line. But the media ignored that and focused instead on the political propaganda and the 'ferals' dreads, drugs, and desperation to stop the dozers. By focusing on the 'sensational' the media failed to outline the underlying philosophical issues. The media fell once more into making a categorical mistake, where an issue of ethical value is incorrectly categorised as an aesthetic value (Hauerwas, 1983, as in Book of Readings, 2000, p52). It is the ethical action the Tigers took which should have been the focus of the discussion. Doing so would have created the space to publicly question the dominant social value system, and the place to collectively steer it towards a new direction – if it was agreed that that's what needed to be done. (How many times over the centuries has this opportunity been missed?)

This is a classic case of systemic collusion, where a host of people who share the same ideology consciously or unconsciously collude to contrive an outcome that benefits only themselves. There is no denying that environmental and social justice activists around the world collude, both together and with sympathetic media, but it is Corporatism that is the dominant ideology of our times (Saul, 1997, p2). Corporatism has such a hold on our society that great measures are taken to ensure that it dominates; measures that see corporations collude with the media in controlling information.

The media, whose role it is to disseminate information and stimulate knowledge, are run by corporations. The Australian media is dominated by Rupert Murdoch, who owns almost 70% of the newspapers that the majority of the population read, and Kerry Packer, who owns Australia's largest commercial television station and most of the country's magazines (Pilger, 1998, p76). Our main source of news and information, of which our general knowledge is based upon, is polluted by corporatist dogma. Knowledge shapes opinions and opinions influence individual moral standing. The systemic collusion caused by economic ideology dilutes knowledge, creating an, 'unconscious civilization'. 'To know – that is to have knowledge – is to instinctively understand the relationship between what you know and what you do' (Saul, 1997, p5). The lack of real information available to the public is directly related to their lack of real action. Lack of knowledge of the world outside of the economic paradigm ensures that, 'our actions are only related to tiny, narrow bands of specialist information' (Saul, 1997, p5). With diluted knowledge comes a diluted understanding of what is right and what is wrong.

The politicians responsible for the degradation of the Tarkine seemed to sincerely believe that they were doing the right thing. It was their understanding that the project

would benefit the whole 'community'. However being unconscious of their own collusion, they can understand nobody else's opinion, and dogmatically believe that, 'whatever they are selling is the truth' (Saul, 1997, p3).

You wouldn't believe me no matter how right I was.  
(Tasmanian MP for Braddon, Bill Bonde, arguing with environmentalists over the road through the Tarkine, quoted in Caganoff, 1996)

The Tarkine Tigers consisted of a bunch of young people intelligent enough to see through the 'childlike certainty' (Saul, 1997, p5) of their elected leaders and brave enough to break free from the economic ideology they were raised in. In total contrast to the politicians' unconscious state of mind the Tigers consciously confronted their fears and took appropriate action based on the collective wisdom of their humanity.

We're not just trying to stop a bridge going ahead, we're not (just) trying to save the Tarkine; we're trying to change a paradigm. There is a mind-set that is allowing this kind of thing to go ahead and that's what we're trying to change. (Waterfall, as quoted in Caganoff, 1996)

At this moment in our cultural evolution we have compromised morality for rigid, narrow-minded ideology. The Tarkine saga alone reveals the weakening of personal moral integrity, demonstrating how a person, influenced by the powers of economic rationalism, is not living as ethically as they can. A weakness in moral integrity reveals a weakness in the understanding of truth. When we realise the role the media plays in helping create this unconscious civilisation it is clear to see that the foundation upon which to challenge public opinion has been taken away. If public opinions aren't challenged then how can we as a collective become sufficiently informed to make the best ethical and moral decisions for future generations and ourselves? The foundation I'm talking about is communication, especially communication on a 'two-way-street'.

## Communicating Truths

'...language, when it works, is the tool that makes it possible to invoke reality.'  
(Saul, 1997, p176)

Mass communication has primarily become a one-way process. The information gets fed to us through media outlets, government departments, organizations or corporations, but there is little opportunity for any two-way discussion. There are talkback radio shows, letters to the editor columns, etc., but a great proportion of information barrels its way down a one-way-street. The information itself is not language at all but 'dialects of individual corporations' - dialect; meaning, 'the specialized, inward looking verbal mechanisms of the tens of thousands of monopolies of fractured knowledge' (Saul, 1997, pp48, 49). This is the modern corporatist language that is, 'attached to power and action' (Saul, 1997, p48). In contrast, public language, which has evolved from eons of collective wisdom, has been numbed into a state of powerlessness. The corporatisation of communication has successfully muffled intelligent public discussion on all issues that go against the grain of the all-powerful Market economy.

If we are serious about creating a fair and just society then the corporate 'dialects', bloated with propaganda and rhetoric, must give way to a public language that embodies two-way communication. What will evolve will be a rich and varied source of opinions. The more opinions we have access to the more we are able to make informed decisions that have bearing on our ethical and moral points of view. Therefore we enrich our understanding of truth rather than dilute it.

We can achieve such freedom of language through the use of dialogue.

The word 'dialogue', comes from the Greek root words 'dia' (through) and 'logos' (the word), suggesting that the 'meaning' of the words being exchanged are passing 'through' or flowing 'between' two or more people, creating a two-way process. ,  
'...an activity in which we all win if we're doing it right' (Bohm, 1991, pp 177, 178).

Using dialogue to achieve positive outcomes for all, rather than just for one, would provide a fundamental change in the way we communicate. The main requirement of dialogue is to learn to suspend opinions, or as Fran Peavey (2000) says, 'to put them in your pocket'.

An opinion is a judgment based on information and how that information is perceived. But information is never constant; it can be added upon, taken away, or shifted. Opinion then, is as liquid as the ocean, susceptible to constant change from a never-ending movement of information. In dialogue we must learn to suspend our opinions. We must also observe and assess them constantly as we live and grow. We can't do this if we rigidly hold onto our opinions, stowing them away in the dark recesses of our ego only to recall them in moments of defence. Holding onto opinions leads to a freezing of the mind where the ocean turns to ice.

The challenge for social change will be to encourage those with frozen oceans to open their minds to the warmth of the sun, then inspire the melt-water to flow down to the depths of their soul.

## Truth Re-Visited

There is a lot of free talk around on the decline of morality. Search the Web and you'll find many sites on the topic. Groups representing the Mormons, socialists and the American gun lobby all have their opinions there for the world to see. While surfing I found a study inquiring about the decline of morality.

America's teens believe the decline in social and moral values is the nation's number one problem... Many said that declining morality and drugs pose the greatest threat to their generation. (Council of the Great City Schools, 1997)

Most of the time, in our hustle bustle world, the fact is forgotten that we are part of nature, that we are inextricably linked to the creative forces of the universe. Our alienation of nature in our economic driven world has caused problems on a global scale; ozone depletion, deforestation, chronic air and water pollution, soil salination and erosion, over consumption, malnutrition; the list is endless. In short we have created a world that can no longer support the future well being of life on Earth. This external alienation of nature by society comes from an internal alienation of nature from the individual.

The rising alienation of nature seems to parallel our decline in ethical and moral action and the dilution of our understanding of truth. The rising alienation of nature and decline of ethics and moral action clearly defines a link between the two. Weakened ethics and morality harbours disrespect and a disregard not only for fellow human beings but also for the rest of nature.

Turning this around; to stimulate the raising of ethical and moral standards the 'nature' of truth needs to be understood. I experience truth and nature as one. If I seek to understand the nature of truth, then I am also seeking to understand the truth of nature. The exploration for this insight must be undertaken soulfully as well as intellectually.

The philosophical pursuit of understanding must also take into account spiritual and emotional experience.

Today, after many journeys through more wild country I find it easy to cut through the intellectual reasoning of my mind and experience the stillness of the earth, the quietness of the rocks, the steadiness of the trees and the motion of the waters spilling into the great ocean. My internal mind and soul connects to the great matrix of universal mind and soul and continues to understand that 'truth' is perhaps the most profound manifestation of nature.

Standing naked, the wild coastal shore stretches before me. The sand that I sink my feet deep into, feels like the first pit of sand I ever played in. Wild waves curl down - crashing upon the beach - spraying a fine salt mist, helped along by the breeze that dances through my hair.

The rivers are the poets who share life and make it run

The mountains are the keepers

And the places in between are where the creatures dwell

The ocean is the limit

It is also the beginning

Everything in the ecosystem has a common physical purpose: to grow and reproduce. There is no reason for nature to deceive us into thinking that there is any other purpose - none what so ever. Experiencing nature is to experience the vibrations of truth that are manifest in every molecule you experience, no matter whether those molecules make up earth, air, or water, they all express the universal truth that 'truth' is a manifestation of nature.

And 'whence' do I know this?

There is a very faint line between 'soulful' truth and intellectual truth. By soulful truth I mean what some people call 'Universal Truth', or 'God Truth', the truth that is constant. By intellectual truth I mean the conclusions that are arrived at after a thought process. A truth that is not constant but always shifting; like the ocean.

In the 1996 Boyer Lectures Pierre Ryckmans (1996, quoted in Learning Themes, 1999) told a story about the great Chinese philosopher, Zhuang Zi, who lived two thousand three hundred years ago:

Zhuang Zi and his friend the logician Hui Zi were taking a stroll on the bridge of the River Hao. It was a beautiful day and they stopped for a moment to watch the little fish below. Zhuang Zi said, 'Look at the fish! How free and easy they swim - that is their happiness.' But Hui Zi immediately objected. 'You are not a fish; whence do you know that the fish are happy?' 'You are not me,' replied Zhuang Zi, 'how can you possibly know that I do not know if the fish are happy?' Hui Zi said, 'Well grant that I am not you, and therefore cannot know what you know. But you must grant that you are not a fish, and therefore cannot know whether the fish are happy or not.' Zhuang Zi replied, 'Let us return to the original question:

when you asked me “Whence do you know that the fish are happy?” your very question showed that you knew that I knew. Still, if you insist on asking *whence* I know, I will tell you: I know it from this bridge.’ (Ryckmans, 1996, quoted in Learning Themes, 1999.)

Hui Zi, being a good logician, seems only to be aware of truths through the processes of logical thinking. He doesn’t seem to be aware of the understanding of truth at the soulful level. Zhuang Zi, being a good philosopher, shows his understanding of both the soulful truth and the intellectual truth. Zhuang Zi not only out wits his friend, countering logic with logic, but ‘...breaks free from the fetters of empty intellectual games and enters the realm of reality....’ (Ryckmans, 1996, quoted in Learning Themes, 1999). By bringing to surface the reality of a deep soulful truth Zhuang Zi hits upon the point of what truth is all about: ‘reality itself’. In this story it is the logician who, ‘...attempts to erode (the philosopher’s) living grasp of reality’. (Ryckmans, 1996, quoted in Learning Themes, 1999).

This story obviously parallels the Tarkine story, where supposed ‘logical reasoning’ held, and still holds superficial power over the soulful understanding of nature.

What is the difference then between the thought processes of Zhuang Zi and Hui Zi? And what is the relation between thought and truth? Ryckmans (1996, quoted in Learning Themes, 1999) inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt, states that. ‘...Truth is not a conclusion, but a premise...’. Arendt takes us deeper,

The chief fallacy is to believe that truth is a result which comes at the end of the thought process. Truth on the contrary, is always the beginning of thought. Thinking starts after an experience of Truth has struck home, so to speak... Truth, in other words is not in thought, but it is the condition for the possibility of thinking. It is both the beginning and the *priori*. (Arendt as quoted by Ryckmans, 1996, in Learning Themes, 1999)

Through meditation: sitting or walking, running or climbing, I have experienced the truth that presents itself at the beginning of my thoughts. Awareness of the present moment reveals the empty space between conscious and subconscious; the space that is free of attachment. I feel that it is my soul, connected to the soul of the world that generates the truths found in this state of mind. I know that the soul of the landscape mirrors the landscape of my soul; so to experience the nature of truth is to also experience the truth of nature.

# Conclusion

In my youth it was my passion to journey through the greatest expanses of nature. I was inspired to explore her wildness all the way to the horizon. Now in my middle age, the vast tracts of wild nature inspire me to be still. It was the storms that raged across the mountains of South West Tasmania that first taught me to become still; holed up in a tent or a cave on the side of a mountain, waiting for the weather to abate. It is in moments of stillness, and when the mind is most quiet, that the truth of nature hits you hardest. It is in moments of stillness, and when the mind is most open, that the nature of truth slaps you across the face to wake you.

The other day on the side of Mt Donaldson I lay awake in the tent.  
The day was creeping on and I should have been up.  
A raven alighted nearby and called to me,

‘Stay in bed. The day is morbid, ominous and quite outstretched’.

So I stayed.

Nature speaks in metaphor. In a society ill at ease with wild nature, art is one of the major providers of metaphorical expression. Art challenges us to seek out the nature of truth. Art works from within the constraints of our social system, pushing at the boundaries of our being, helping us find the strength and courage to take action.

From soulful training in the arts may we merge with the subtle metaphors manifested by the creative forces of the universe. From our soulful training in nature may we become masters of artistic expression.

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