

## ***The Wild Within***

*The body is a divine vessel, channeling the very essence of the universe*

### **John Tallmadge**

I never wanted to live in Cincinnati. What wilderness lover would ever dream of settling deep in the Rust Belt astride polluted rivers? One might long for places like Bozeman or Spokane, hard by Yellowstone or the Bitterroots, but certainly not Cincinnati, a town known less for forests or lakes than for jet engines, floating soap, and indigestible chili. When Pam and I left Minnesota, it felt as if we were hurtling into exile. Married less than two years, we had a baby on the way and no friends or family anywhere in Ohio. My teaching career lay in a smoking ruin. My new job would be associate dean of a graduate school with no campus, no courses, no resident students, and downtown offices, 10 stories up in the air.

For 15 years I had designed and taught courses that combined literature with wilderness travel. I had lived for adventure, craving beauty, remoteness, and freedom. My heroes were Henry Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Gary Snyder, who had practiced the wild in places like Maine, Wisconsin, and California. They wrote of endless mountains and rivers. But their books offered scant wisdom for living in places like Cincinnati.

Cities were decomposers, releasers of energy and greenhouse gases, consumers of land, soil, and fossil fuel, destroyers of habitat, and degraders of ecosystems. They were not interested in relating to nature on any terms but their own. I had grown to fear the cumulative effects of city life, with its obsessive focus on work, career, and the good things that money can buy. Without wilderness, how could you avoid lapsing into a fatal narcissism? And how could you practice the wild in a place so dominated and bruised by human culture? How could you ever say "Thou" or learn from the Other? How could you ever reach down and touch the earth?

Pam and I were married on the summer solstice, six months after the college had given me notice. I had spent the spring grinding through doomed appeals as our wedding plans germinated and blossomed. The night of our marriage was full of portents: a planetary conjunction, green tornado skies, a room full of friends feasting and dancing. We honeymooned in Glacier Bay. And eight months later, in the dead of winter we stopped using birth control.

This, I admit, was not exactly a rational move. Many couples we knew had chosen not to have children for reasons they were quite willing to share. Start with the environmental crisis, whose ultimate cause was overpopulation. Why create one more mouth to gnaw at the stricken earth? Why add another American, when we already consume far more than our share of energy, food, water, timber, and minerals? How can a capitalist culture fueled by greed and envy sustain itself, much less the living Earth?

Nor did we get much encouragement from nature. Minnesota was locked in an arctic February. At 20 below, the snow squeaked underfoot and the sky was so dry and clear that at night you could make out the colors of stars. They dazzled but gave no warmth; it was hard to believe they were lit by nuclear fires. Meanwhile, the human world was locked in the final nightmares of the Cold War, when scientists had begun to warn of the "nuclear winter" that would result from an all-out attack. Thinkers like Kurt Vonnegut and Gregory Bateson had likened the arms race to addiction, a self-destructive spiral driven by pride. And in his powerful book *The Fate of the Earth*, philosopher Jonathan Schell had proclaimed that a policy of mutually assured destruction was tantamount to embracing extinction. It was a spiritual disease. The only cure would be for all of us to embrace the future, even though we could not control or even imagine it. He likened this to the choice people make to become parents.

Now, years later, it is clear to me that Pam and I had chosen Schell's path of faith in the dead of winter that year. But we were not thinking philosophically or politically. We just wanted to have a child. It seemed to be the next step on the road of intimacy and commitment that we had chosen. Somehow the craziness of the world itself, hanging by a thread above the nuclear abyss, and the craziness of a professional life reduced to dust, made it okay to do something crazy ourselves. We stopped using birth control, and the very first night, I knew that we had conceived.

I can feel the smile forming on your lips: "He writes as a man. How can he know?" Indeed, it was only six weeks later after a mixed period and a few good fights, that medical tests confirmed we had conceived. But that night I sensed an energy flowing through us that I had never felt before. It was not sex but something far more powerful, affirming yet oddly impersonal, like a current of molten light. Who can explain such things? I thought of Dante, who saw a river of light in Paradise and a rose full of souls who were drinking light. But this was something felt, not just imagined. I knew for certain that we had conceived. We had opened ourselves and received something holy and alive, borne into us on some sort of hot current originating God knows where.

Almost immediately we began to live in two worlds, as if life were governed by a sort of parallel time. Outside, the winter world seemed dark and full of doubt: our careers in eclipse, the state gripped by farm failures, the nation still grasping at wealth and power as it slipped down the slope of mutually assured destruction. But inside the warm folds of Pam's body, a new life was patiently growing, indifferent to anything but its own agenda. At first, we felt its presence indirectly. After the bright intuitions of conception, Pam's body began to rebel: She suffered nausea, was repelled by common smells and tastes. (Thank God for rice cakes, which have the texture of balsa wood with half the flavor.)

Experiences like these quickly dispelled any romantic notions of pregnancy. This was more like a seizure, except that a seizure runs its course, while this went on and on. We knew, rationally, that it was all perfectly natural, a process perfected by millions of years of mammalian evolution. The power now in control had been turned to a fine ferocity on the lathe of natural selection. It was ruthless, remorseless, and, as the world population showed, highly successful. It was big, very big, much bigger than the two of us, and yet at the same time, it was no big deal. Thousands of women went through it every day.

As we moved through the first three months into the relative calm of Pam's second trimester, the consistent, inexorable process of pregnancy brought an odd sense of order to our lives. Outside, our carefully nurtured world of work and community had begun to fray as the end of my teaching contract approached. We began cutting ties, settling debts, and packing up to move. We arrived in Cincinnati, found a doctor and started childbirth classes. While Pam coped with isolation and fatigue, I coped with the gray, alien world of downtown's urban space, an artificial desert of plane surfaces, right angles, and manufactured stone.

Ten stories up, in a small quadrangular cell, I spent the day reviewing documents and taking calls. I dealt with texts and voices, regulations, paper and messages distilled from electromagnetic signals. The day went by in a stream of brief but intense encounters that demanded shrewd judgment and quick decisions. You never knew what was going to land on your desk or leap out of the phone and grab you by the throat. I dealt with people – for what was administration but "people problems"? – I met very few of these problems in person.

This absence gave rise to an odd sense of disembodied action, of relationships without scent that sprang up and blew away in the twinkling of an eye. It was the antithesis of the ecological complexity that I had come to appreciate while living on the prairies of Minnesota with their old plant communities and deeply composted

soils. These momentary and evanescent relations had little connection to the fertile, anti-entropic cycles of biological time. This was urban time, a time of no story. So the days passed in a blur as indistinct as the scenery I drove past each morning. I kept my head down, learned the job, and pushed as much paper as possible, for I had a wife and incipient child to support.

Meanwhile, the pregnancy progressed with sublime assurance, as if following a drum- or heartbeat of its own. By November, Pam's belly was as round and hard as a basketball. Her skin glowed; her face looked soft and radiant. I thought her incredibly beautiful, even as she waddled around the house. We could feel the baby moving inside her. I would often lay my hands on her belly, feeling for the child and fancying, perhaps, an answering kick; or I would hum a tune or even talk a bit, so my voice might not seem strange to the newborn. Perhaps I was just trying to stay involved. Pam's body had no more use for me than yesterday's news; I had played my biological part eight months before. If anything, it was her mind that I nurtured as it tossed like a cork on the churning hormonal rapids that carried us closer and closer to term, that convergence of inner and outer time when our new life as parents would begin.

Birth night caught us by surprise. Two weeks short of term, Pam complained of pains early in the evening. We did some breathing, which helped, though they did not subside. We called the doctor at home. Over the fizz of dinner party talk he assured us they were Braxton Hicks contractions, nothing to worry about, take a warm bath and call again if they persist. We ran a tub, and Pam eased in while I packed our "labor bag" of sandwiches, books, and tapes, just in case. We went to bed; we breathed together, she says I drifted off. The next thing I knew sharp nails were digging into my shoulder. Pam was gasping, trying to breathe. I glanced at the clock; it was after midnight. The pains were coming every two or three minutes, clenching her body like a fist. Whatever 'this was, it was not letting go. Between attacks she huddled, panting and shaking. "We have to go now," she gasped. "Call the doctor. Take me in!"

We staggered into the cold November night, starless with city haze. At 2:00 a.m. the deserted freeway glowed beneath rows of mercury lamps like a dream sequence out of a Bergman film. As we sped along, Pam clutched my arm, gasping with each contraction. I murmured comfort, chanted the breathing mantra as the city rushed by. We turned west toward the hospital, through the industrial zone where huge factories rose in a forest of pipes and metal, stacks billowing smokes of many colors. To my dazed eyes, they looked weirdly exotic, beautiful as parasitic orchids. This was the world into which our child would be born; these were the realities with

which he or she would have to deal. And yet not with these alone, but with all of North America in its vastness and woundedness, its beautiful wild places under siege, its sweeping farmlands, its soiled, energetic rivers, its cities and forest where wildness was always seeking to grow back in the green shadows cast by urban space and time.

Beside me, Pam moaned and panted in her throes. I had no time to think about such things. She needed me, and I needed to focus on the road. Life was narrowing to a sharp, metallic point, piercing through every routine thought and action. I spun off the freeway and up the ramp to the hospital, ran into the emergency room, and dashed off forms while the nurses fetched Pam in a wheelchair. In the birthing room, homey with flowered wallpaper, the nurse told me to go park the car while she fitted Pam with a gown and an IV. "Take your time," she said. "We're not going anywhere."

So I went out, parked, and came back, my shoes squeaking on the waxed vinyl floors. The pastel halls were empty except for an occasional nurse wafting by in sea-green scrubs. I felt smudged and dirty in my rumpled clothes; I half expected to be seized and hosed down. The whole place glowed with sterility, a temple dedicated to the control of nature.

But in the birth room, nature was bursting forth. Orderlies wheeled in equipment, yanked open drawers, shouted into the intercom. Pam lay moaning, knees drawn up, her face knotted in concentration. A nurse tossed a wad of scrubs toward the restroom. "Change in there!" she ordered.

I changed and rushed to the bed. Pam looked up imploringly, clutching my arm, then gritted into another spasm. I looked across at the nurse. "She's dilated three centimeters since you arrived," she said. "This baby's coming."

"Where's the doctor?"

"Who knows? We've called an intern."

Now the pains came one on top of another like breaking waves. Pam's body was seized and flung about; all the poor nurse and I could do was hold her down and speak words of encouragement, praising her bravery, helping her breathe. The doctor rushed in, a young, kind-faced man dressed all in green. He pulled on latex gloves, did a quick measurement, then began massaging her perineum in the ancient

manner of midwives to stretch the tissue so the baby could come. He spoke soothingly: "You're fully dilated. When the next contraction comes, you can push."

Then Pam let out a yell that raised the hair on my neck. It was no scream but a full-throated karate yell. Again and again she yelled and pushed, and suddenly there was the baby's head bobbing between her legs, round as a softball and topped by a swirl of dark, wet hair. I was astonished, somehow, to see a real person emerge, a tiny face wrinkled and squished as a prune, yet at the same time perfectly formed. Pam yelled and pushed some more, but the baby seemed stuck in the birth canal. Finally, the doctor took one snip with the scissors, and the baby squirted out into his hands, slippery and round as a sausage, bawling for life. It was a little girl. Later we named her Rosalind, after Shakespeare's resourceful heroine whose name means "pretty rose."

The doctor handed her to the nurse, who laid her on Pam's chest. Pam held her gingerly, stroking her wet forehead, murmuring, "Hi, baby." We all relaxed. A stillness fell on the room. Pam looked utterly spent, yet a glow lay about her bright as a halo in a Renaissance painting.

The nurses wrapped Rosalind in a plastic sheet and took her away for Apgar tests, eye drops, and other medical rites of the newborn. When I objected to the plastic, the nurses patiently explained that it kept the baby warm by preventing evaporation, much like a diver's wet suit. Meanwhile, our regular obstetrician breezed in, quipping, "Looks like I missed the birthday party!" How many times had he used that line? The intern slid off his stool and handed the surgical tools to our doctor who began to sew up Pam's incision. As the intern backed toward the door our eyes met; his looked large and moist above the surgical mask. For him, too, this had been an initiation.

Pam lay inert and oblivious while the doctor sewed and the head nurse cleaned up the bedclothes and afterbirth, which lay in a steel basin like a piece of raw liver. I looked at it with fascination, feeling a strange rush of sympathy. For nine months the placenta had been our baby's lifeline, millions of cells working in matchless, intricate harmony to serve her developing life, yet now they were cast off like old clothes with never a thought. They had been sacrificed. Was it right? Was it cruel? Do cells have a soul? Life had left them and was rushing on. And what about us, whose lives would henceforth be devoted to nurturing this child? We, too, were being sacrificed. It was too much to deal with in this room that still throbbed with the energy of childbirth.

The nurse asked me to step aside so that she could take the basin. "This must all be routine for you," I said sheepishly.

She looked me in the eye. "Never" she said.

The doctor finished and, murmuring congratulations, swept out of the room. The nurses brought Rosalind back wrapped in a soft flannel blanket and laid her on Pam's chest. Then they too softly departed, leaving us alone with our child. I marveled at her exquisite features: tiny fingers curled like shrimp, real eyelashes, 10 perfect little toes, skin smooth and rosy and silky soft. Pam held her close; as she latched on to nurse, an air of unutterable peace settled over them. I stood outside, as if on the edge of a campfire. Such perfect calm after such extraordinary violence! There was no doubt about it: Moments before, something ancient and powerful had leapt into the room through the door of Pam's wracked body. A cosmic force had revealed itself, then quickly slipped back into hiding. It waited now deep in the body of our child, biding its time until, decades later she too might conceive.

I had never imagined such wildness so close to home, so intimately linked with everyday life and with the body itself, this poor beast that bears us and that we take so much for granted. It was something older and deeper than the mind, an evolutionary wisdom that had unfolded in harmony with the planet's own history. We have all learned how gestating embryos recapitulate their phylogeny in the womb, beginning as proteric cells and progressing through more and more complex forms – coelenterates, fish, amphibians – to the point where they can survive in the world outside. It is as if each new baby carries the imagery of its species' past along with it, embedded as a prelude to its own story

But the matter goes deeper than this. Even the chemical reactions in our cells have histories. Loren Eiseley remarks that our bones and teeth are formed by the same biochemical processes that mollusks use to construct their shells. Sometime in the Paleozoic, life discovered how to precipitate calcium carbonate from seawater, and it has never forgotten that art. Imagine the chlorophyll that made photosynthesis possible and thereby changed Earth's atmosphere over millions of years. Imagine the hemoglobin that converts oxygen from a poison to a metabolic fuel. They share a basic chemical structure called a porphyrin ring that differs by a single atom at the center, iron for hemoglobin and magnesium for chlorophyll.

Even the elements in our chemistry have their stories. Except for hydrogen, they were all created by stellar explosions, supernovae prepared by billions of years of

thermonuclear combustion. Iron, boron, carbon, and nitrogen all carry stardust memories into the core of each living cell. There are parts of us that go way, way back, and at the moment of birth, the cutting edge of time, they all come together to hurl new life into the world. The Zen masters tell us that no flower can bloom without the whole spring behind it. Just so, it takes the life of a star to make the life of a child.

Meanwhile, Rosalind had fallen asleep. The nurses returned and carried her off to the nursery while I helped move Pam to her recovery room. Outside, a pale November dawn had spread over Cincinnati. Far below, I could hear traffic beginning to stir. I tucked Pam in and drove home to catch a few hours' sleep. The city looked abstract and unfamiliar as if the buildings were cut out of paper. The sky was a wash of milk and water. The house felt as soulless as a motel. I drank a glass of orange juice and fell into bed like a hewn tree.

Two days later, Pam and Rosalind came home. I took the week off to be with them, and in that brief interval discovered a new dimension of wildness in the heart of time. We had no schedule. All our attention focused on the baby, whose diurnal rhythms were not yet established. She was still living on womb time, responding to her body's inner promptings for food, warmth, touch, or sleep. And we lived with her, forgetting clocks, oblivious sometimes even to day and night.

Pam was healing, needing rest. We spent most of our time in bed. I got up to run errands or fix a meal but soon returned. It was a time of wonder comfort, and "cocooning," a yuppie term that bore, as I now saw, strong hints of metamorphosis. People had told us that childbirth would change our life, but I had imagined only mundane things like midnight colic or dirty diapers. Something far more profound and mysterious had happened. I had felt it first on the night of conception, and then during the earthquake shocks of labor. But now, here at home, we were in the midst of it, submerged in a warm irresistible flow.

Exhausted, marveling, we had no will to resist. Besides, we now had a baby to care for. We were a family

As for Rosalind, she slept, woke, and fed, casting her eyes about and flexing her tiny hands as if to get a feel for her body. She looked so small and fragile – she fit tidily in my two spread hands, no bigger than a loaf of bread – and yet she radiated a sense of tremendous power. What was it, I wondered. She absolutely compelled attention; we hung on her every movement, danced to her mood. Though she could not speak,

she communicated with piercing clarity, not only her needs but also her delight in being fed and touched. I wondered how we must appear to her newborn eyes, huge beings with faces that filled her view, like smiling moons, a warm, salty, musky aroma, and always there, big as angels and instantly responsive. Of course we gave to her, but she gave back. Indeed, it seemed that all she could do was give and receive love. But she did it with her whole being, her face lighting up to a touch, or nursing with blissful intensity. That was her power. She called forth our own capacity to love.

Pam's body began to flow with milk, which I tasted and found unutterably delicious. Creamy and sweet as honey, it thrilled me to the marrow. Truly, this was the milk of paradise! And I was flowing too, not with milk but with warmth and affection. I was adrift in time, living totally in the present with all my senses focused and engaged. Only in moments of I-Thou encounter in the wilderness, when weeks of hiking had scraped my mind to a poised alertness and some animal or tree had stood forth in radiant personhood, had I ever felt the present as something so solid, so real. But those moments had passed; this went on and on. It felt like being awash in grace. I thought, again, of Dante's souls in the celestial rose, drinking the nectar of angels that was also light. For them, truth, perception, and delight were one, and yet they never ceased caring for the world.

Childbirth showed me the essence of wildness at the very heart of the organism. Here was the growing tip of history, not just the story of two parents and their child, but also of our species and of the planet from which we arose, and the universe story itself. With every birth the world begins anew, returns to a state of grace so that its possibilities may begin once more to unfold. For every child is born without guile, in radical innocence.

As for me, my life seemed to have changed irrevocably. It felt as if I had come to a fork in the trail on a high plateau. The paths diverged gradually, and for a few miles I could still see the one not taken. It looked so close, yet in between a narrow canyon had opened; there was no way across without going all the way back. I had heard of men walking out on their wives during pregnancy or just after childbirth. Imagine them leaping across the chasm, spurred by incredible fear! Perhaps they preferred a life of desperate adventure to one of husbandry.

It seemed to me then that adulthood offered two basic choices: either to help life in its wildness and unfolding, or to resist life by choosing security and routine. To live for relationship or to live for autonomy, the path of labor or the path of addiction: Choose one. And since so much of the outer world seemed bent on the latter,

paralyzed by the arms race and the glitter of urban time, the way toward wildness seemed to open most promisingly within: within the organism, within the home, even within the city where I had never expected to find "nature" at all.

There was more to this matter of 'wildness than I had ever imagined, and more to its practice than travel into remote and savage places. Before, I had always gone out in search of it. Now, it seemed, I would have to start going in.

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