Bewildered, be-wildered

with Emma Palmer
(previously known as Kamalamani)

"The word *wild* is like a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight. Up close, first glance, it is "wild" - then farther into the woods next glance it's "wyld" and it recedes old Norse *villr* and Old Teutonic *wilthijaz* into a faint pre-Teutonic *ghweltijos* which means, still, wild and maybe wooded (*wald*) and lurks back there with possible connections to *will*, to Latin *silva* (forest, sauvage), and to the Indo-European root *ghwer*, base of Latin *ferus* (feral, fierce), which swings us round to Thoreau's "awful ferity" shared by virtuous people and lovers. The Oxford English Dictionary has it this way:

Of animals – not tame,
undomesticated, unruly
Of plants – not cultivated
Of land – uninhabited, uncultivated
Of wild crops – produced or
yielded without cultivation"

(Snyder, Practice of Wild, 2010: 9.)

I wake with a dream image of wilderness. Green everywhere: undergrowth, trees, the furry vegetation of the river bank touching the water's edge. A deep cut river running from right to left – at least, that's the direction of the river's flow. The land ahead slopes gently upwards towards a plateau of sorts. In the mid foreground, raised, higher ground. A few other tummocks to the right. It's not a landscape I recognise. At least, I recognise the deep peace of wilderness, but I can't 'name' it in a more human-bound way: 'oh, it's Bodmin Moor' or 'the Rift Valley' or 'the Somerset Levels' or 'the Kenyan Highlands' - though it slightly resembles the Kenyan Highlands, now I think about it.

I realise, emerging more fully from sleep, that part of the reason I cannot name the wilderness is because it is shape-shifting. One minute it's tropical jungle – beloved memories of the humid heart of Ghana – next it's a thick carpet of oaks much closer to home. Green everywhere. You can tell that all of life is here; delving into that green I would find all sorts of beings. There is also shape-shifting in that I realise the wilderness is 'out there' in the dream image and it's also 'in here'; the wilderness of my heart. The wilder-ness of my heart. In the words of Snyder, the feral, fierce, untamed, deeply passionate yet quite quiet heart. Uncluttered, unfettered. Bored of the who-said-what-to-who-and-when of everyday, inevitable, human life. Faraway from the busyness of the lead up to Christmas when everyone suddenly seems to want to meet and socialise and I long to write, alone, in a candle-lit room. I feel the tension in myself, loving the camaraderie of the market place whilst longing for the hearth these short days.

As the dream image of the wilderness fades I re-read the words I had already written for this edition of *Somatic Psychotherapy Today* about addiction. Addiction and wilderness. Wilder-ness and addiction (the other thing that comes to mind as I awoke is the need to visit a house of prayer in Bristol, but that's a story for later). What I have found myself writing in long hand so far is about the growth of Bristol, my home city in this south-west corner of England, through the

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Fox retrieved from: http://www.factzoo.com/sites/all/img/mammals/canids/grey-fox-alert.jpg
River scene retrieved from:
https://friolodging.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/river_panorama_001.jpg

eyes of five favourite plane trees living down by the river, opposite the SS Great Britain. For years these five trees have felt like welcome friends. I welcome them quite a few times each week. Maybe they welcome being noticed – I don't know, I'm not them. This time of year, they stand proud, matching in height the white block of flats and towering over the older houses. Bare of leaves and sculpted. In the height of summer, they provide welcome shade. In spring they provide shelter for hundreds of delicate mauves and lemon-yellow crocuses – a welcome sight in the low spring light after a long, often grey British winter.

For years I have called them the 'dancing trees' for they look like they could be dancing – a little like the trees or stones in Somerset fairy tales who were once human. Humans who drank too much scrumpy (*note - a local cider drink), so were punished once the clock struck midnight. Mightn't be ***so*** bad being turned to a rock or a tree for the rest of time?

Anyway, a few weeks ago I made a pilgrimage to see them, these dancing trees, these dancing friends. Not a grand pilgrimage, but a pilgrimage all the same, given that I found the trip had 'spiritual significance' which is what a pilgrimage is, apparently, now I come to look. On that bright blue-sky day, the best of autumn here, I felt ashamed at first that I'd never actually visited these trees. Never gazed with awe at their height, their girths, their majesty. I forgave myself a bit, for they live on a traffic island which is quite hard to reach unless you're fairly swift in darting between fast-flowing waves of traffic.

Despite the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, of cars, buses, the odd ambulance and emergency vehicle (often my van being one amongst the whooshing . . .) this is a beautiful spot. The trees are on the edge of Bristol's 'floating harbour', fed by the River Avon. It is a meeting place of four busy roads. In the heart of the grove of trees green is suddenly everywhere. The softer, velvety, damper north sides of the trees. The drier, greyer south-east sides homing a holly tree and a nascent ash. The grass below, the rich, entwined canopy above - yellows and greens still glinting in the golden autumn sun. The trees house transitory humans, too; a discarded vodka bottle here, a take-away box there. And bird life – crow, blackbird, and more habitual sea gulls. And many more insects besides, I'm sure, and mycelium out of sight, but all important in the fabric of life below my feet. The memory of the tree pilgrimage has stayed with me.

In my notebook scribblings I wrote as if I were those dancing trees, witnessing the growth of Bristol, the growth of the docks and the port, all human life passing by. I wrote of the acquisitive wealth of this 'great' maritime city. The heydays: the maiden voyage of Brunel's SS Great Britain in 1843, now back in dock and beautifully restored, resting across the river from the dancing trees. The maiden voyage of the reconstructed Matthew ship, setting sail for St Johns in 1997, following the route of the original caravel that John Cabot sailed from Bristol to Newfoundland in 1497, marking the 500th anniversary.

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The great wealth and the great, diseased poverty. A city with wealthy foundations resting nervously on the bones of slaves from that horrific triangular trade. Resting nervously, for the aftermath of the horror is still bubbling away – an unfinished stew. Battles over whether the Colston Hall – named after an infamous slave trader and benefactor of the city - should be re-named. And what about Colston School? And Colston Road? And that's but one name of a slave trader here. It is a great city, full of vibrancy – music, art, enterprise, a creative, rebellious spirit - it is also a very segregated city in terms of race, wealth, the wellbeing of children. It's a city which has literally been carved up for the pursuit of trade and wealth; we have culverted and covered up many of the rivers here, including 'the new cut' diverting the River Avon. It sends shivers down my spine. It's a place I love, a place I call home, as have my paternal ancestors of the past eight generations and many of my maternal ones, for more than a few generations. I see the history of this place through their eyes. And yet, and yet.

Do we look after our people - all of them, I mean? - and our trees in this city? And this land? We don't. Well, not well enough in my humble opinion. It's heart-breaking, this ongoing mercantilism above all else at the heart of this city. Given that they lack attention, I'll stay on the subject of trees; although, there is so much that could be said about austerity and human life, as you can imagine. Earlier this year the city council announced due to austerity the city's trees will no longer be maintained, unless they "provide a risk to health and safety" (in which case, they will most likely be chopped). From 2019 Bristol's parks will not be maintained, either, in fact, parks will instead be "relying on revenue generated from parks events and other outside sources" (Petition: Protect Our Parks, 2017).

It kind of nails something, this sentence about parks relying on revenue generated from park events. Parks can no longer be places where trees live, where squirrels dart around (sometimes chased by excited dogs), where children play, and lovers linger. No, parks and their events must generate revenue. We can't put aside some money for parks gained elsewhere and let trees be trees. Trees, grass, they must cover their costs - or be felled – one can witness the brutal destruction 181 miles north of here in Sheffield city – see STAG (below) for more information.

This addiction to narratives of growth, of progress, of cost recovery, of austerity. This addiction to also making sure people are treated in the same way as trees, expected

STAG: website of Sheffield Tree Action Group. See: https://saveSheffieldtrees.org.uk/

to generate revenue to legitimise their existence. Even if they're ill, or sick, or have just given birth, or simply need some down time. We're boxing ourselves in, us humans, in the way that the dancing trees are now boxed in on an island constantly surrounded by human traffic. This I-can't-get-my-head-around- it-view that we're civilized, whilst we ask the terminally ill to fill in forms, so they can keep receiving government support. It's no wonder we're addicted to our drugs of choice to cope with this society, a society where we have become tamed, and in the taming increasingly isolated, boxed in, self-harmed, dissociated from our other-than-human and more –than-human neighbours, conquerors of wilderness inner and outer. We die without wilderness. Wilderness homes millions of species – breathing beings. We need wilderness because our survival relies on biodiversity. We need wilderness because it's here and living. We need wilderness to remind us to simply let the soft animal of our bodies love what it loves, in the words of the poet Mary Oliver in 'Wild Geese'.

Flicking through the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (OUP, 1982: 1231), a little distressed, I read the definition for 'run wild': 'grow or stay unchecked or undisciplined or untrained'. I imagine Bristol used to be a bit of a wild place – well it still is, in some quarters, in some hearts. A place full of sailors, engineers and explorers, seeking adventure and the finding of new lands – running wild. Which reminds me, the bit of my dream I failed to mention earlier is that to the right of the gentle-slopes leading to the plateau there was one solitary, well-built brick house. I was to live in it. When I realized I could live there I felt great relief – return to the wilderness. I also felt a sense of dis-ease. One house would, ultimately lead to another, and another, and a road, and a bigger road, and a little settlement, and a gathering, and a village, a town, before you know it, a city. It's how wilderness is consumed, it's how the conquering of the wild often – not always - happens. Incremental growth, is that what it's called? I studied it once.

It strikes me that we need to 'run wild' now, running wild with new stories, as well as 're-wilding' - the better known contemporary phase. An antidote to stories of runaway growth, the view that 'greed is good' in the words of the character Gordon Gekko in the film 'Wall Street' (1987) Running wild in finding stories which neither end with Armageddon-inspired doom and gloom nor a happy green technology solved future. Closer to home, maybe we can 'undiscipline' or 'untrain' ourselves from aspects of body psychotherapy practice that seem to be driven by agendas of norming and prescription, and pay more care-ful attention to the client in front of us. Stories in which we can find individual and collective ways to 'undiscipline' and 'untrain' ourselves from being such good pilgrims of a late-stage capitalist system. Capitalism isn't working out to be so good for our wellbeing, for our hearts, our minds – for life on earth. Even the super-rich politicians, CEOs, rock stars, and bankers living safely in their

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gated mansions will need air to be breathe, clean water to drink, and plastic free fish to eat.

My nephew and nieces come to mind. This happens a lot of late. When I write, our legacy and the future generations are close to heart. I recall my youngest niece's comment the other day, "trees are boring," she said. My heart sank. Yesterday, wearing my black jumper with embroidered stars - getting into Yuletide spirit - she pointed at the red and silver one. "Look, Cocoa-cola colours!" My heart sank again. She doesn't even come from a family of Cocoa-cola drinkers, and yet she associates red and white with one of the world's most successful corporations. They really were successful with their 1930s campaign to adopt the colours of Christmas as their branded colours; it worked, and continues four generations on. Her older sister, by contrast, can't walk past a tree without climbing it, hanging like a lazy leopard from its thick branches for long stretches of time, herself remembering feral. She's a natural re-wilder. Their middle sister bursts into tears when she thinks about what's happening to the polar bears and tries to be vegetarian but struggles to give up chicken drumsticks. Their elder brother argues vehemently with his Dad, an ardent meat-eater, about the importance of being vegetarian. These messages we're giving these growing children. They're bewildering – the messages – and bewildered – the children. My heart sinks. ("Bewilder *v.t.* lead astray; perplex; confuse; hence ~ MENT *n*." (The Concise OED, 1982: 86))

My thoughts return to the dancing trees. The dancing trees aren't a wilderness. But I love how they tower over scurrying humans, only the masts of the tall ships matching their height – the masts, themselves, tree cousins. The dancing trees are a precious grove in the heart of this fast -beating, 'progressive' city. The morning I made the pilgrimage to see them I went up to Bristol Cathedral afterwards, just up the road, for a cup of tea (I visit houses of prayer more than I realise. It's one of my favourite haunts, the garden and the chapter house – imagining the harmonising and bickering abbots…) On this occasion I sat in the secret walled garden, wrapped up warm, and drank Earl Grey. Leaving the church, I thanked two cathedral guides.

"Wait," one of them said to me. "Was that you photographing the trees on the roundabout at Hotwells?"

"It was, they're lovely trees – I'm often admiring them, but I had never visited them, so I thought I would today."

"Good for you," she replied. "I love them too especially in the spring, when the crocuses are out."

We smile. It's a precious moment. We are related. Mary Oliver's work comes to mind again:

Moss

Maybe the idea of the world as flat isn't a tribal memory or an archetypal memory, but something far older – a fox memory, a worm memory, a moss memory.

Memory of leaping or crawling or shrugging rootlet by rootlet forward, across the flatness of everything.

To perceive of the earth as round needed something else – standing up! – that hadn't yet happened.

What a wild family! Fox and giraffe and wart hog, of course. But these also: bodies like tiny spring, bodies like blades and blossoms! Cord grass, Christmas fern, soldier moss!

And here comes grasshopper, all toes and knees and eyes, over the little mountains of the dust.

When I see the black cricket in the woodpile, in autumn, I don't frighten her. And when I see the moss grazing upon the rock, I touch her tenderly,

Sweet cousin.

(Mary Oliver, 1999: 31).

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Moss on rock retrieved from: https://i.pinimg.com/564x/f6/b5/29/f6b529b8dde5e6b59359944829a201b7--rock-yard-diy-garden.jpg