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WATER SPEAR: LANGUAGE AS ESTUARY

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When Jim (Norris) and Dave (Shreffler) asked me to give a talk at this conference I requested abstracts of presentations offered in the next two days. Reading them left me fairly intimidated, what did I, a sculptor-poet with an amateur's love of Northwest ecology but little scientific training, have to say to professionals who were winnowing the fine details of Estuarine dynamics and their implications? A poet reports the world in private mortal witness, suspending disbelief to court the muse and her surprises. Science on the other hand cultivates doubt to hone and calibrate its insights. At first glance these two disciplines seem worlds apart, one a subjective burred blossom of surprise and connection, the other an objective quest, a focused pursuit of understanding free of human shadow. True enough on the surface but on further reflection or was it refraction it occurred to me that what we share is story telling. Your stories explain how the world works within reason. A poet's stories articulate human being in a fateful working world. "Explain" by the way comes from a Latin word that means to lay out flat, to map. 'Articulate' comes from another Latin word that means joint or connection. Science explains; art connects; two story telling impulses superficially inimical but secretly complimentary. Science seeks to rationalize and understand the amazing complexity of the cosmos, to construct a dependable shared compass of wonder. The poet celebrates the piercing awareness that blooms in the mortal wake of events, the wild variety of weddings, wounds and awakenings that are our lives. As storytellers we share a fundamental curiosity, a passion for meaning without which poetry is mere expression, solipsism with a cherry on top and science is a product for sale. Our stories offer two ways to the truth, like two moths above a smoky flame, maybe someday we'll learn to dance together around the mystery. That's what this talk in its awkward way is exploring.

Meaning requires language to convey its fertile gift. The discipline of science requires its adepts to learn a variety of "languages"; chemistry, physics, mathematics, statistics etc, ways of apprehending phenomena as disparate as "Phenolic and volatile compounds as indicators of plant stress in *Zostera Marina* and *Posidonia Oceanica*" and "Modeling an oil spill in Puget Sound". Poetry's discipline aims to apprehend personal experience and varies from the classical to the revolutionary, from the traditional cadenced surprise of Haiku to the freewheeling rhymes of rap. A teacher once told me poetry is condensed speech; every word must do some work. Consequently my discipline as poet involves an abiding curiosity about the origins and evolution of words. Poetry and science share the necessity of language; they can't tell their stories without it. For both disciplines spoken and written language, English in our case, is the essential soil,

the fertile grit of our reason, intuition and witness; the place where our ideas root, blossom and meet the day.

Being modern, or is it post modern people we forget in our haste and recently digitized hyper focus that every word in our shared speech is alive. My studies have taught me to imagine words as invisible plants rooted in the ancient soil of our common language, slowly evolving in the changing weather of history and culture. Words ride our breath and our children's breath into the future; changing slowly or dramatically to tell our stories. If you could time travel 300 years into the future to visit London, Toronto or Baton Rouge you would be amazed how much English had changed. You probably wouldn't have clue what they were talking about.

As scientists and poets we share a passion for meaning. Today I would like to take some time to explore the intricate many leveled vitalities hidden in the language we share. I would like to begin by looking into a few simple words associated with estuaries. I want to open these words up and look into their hearts, the root meanings that inform them. Knowing the root sense of a word makes the word more resonant, perhaps more mysterious and at the same time strangely accurate. Best of all knowing the roots of words confirms the vitality of language and whispers a little humility into our world because language will survive us to name the faults that absorbed our vanities and find words to recall our honesty.

English is part of the Indo-European family of languages that began evolving 20,000 years ago and has expanded in geographic range and linguistic diversity that includes Celtic, Italic, Hellenic, Germanic, Slavic and Indo-Iranian among others. English is a hybrid of French, a Latin-Italic language and Old English, a Germanic language. English as you already know is amazingly adaptive, supple and efficient. Much of its scientific vocabulary is borrowed from the Latin and Greek a gift of renaissance proto-scientists schooled in the classics. Our vocabulary comes from around the world and reflects the history of English speakers everywhere. So let's look into a few words.

Estuary: Estuary is from Latin aestuarium - estuary, tidal channel. Curiously aestuarium is from another Latin word aestus - heat, swell, surge and tide. Originally aestus meant burning heat and is related to the Latin word aether - brilliant sky. The Indo-European root is adh - to burn. So an estuary boils like heated water; its metaphoric heart while not literally accurate is descriptively cogent. Language at heart is metaphoric, faced with a new phenomenon it compares it to a known event and shapes the old word to fit the new experience. What the root of estuary is saying is the water in this kind of place seems to boil.

Fjord: Most fjords are estuaries; Puget Sound is an estuary/fjord or a complex or estuarine fjords. Richard Strickland's "The Fertile Fjord" explains the dynamics of the estuary/fjord system documenting the fateful irony that the same dynamic

that makes them so fertile also functions to concentrate the pollutants that threaten that dynamic.

The original Indo-European homeland did not include a marine environment. Our ancestors were an inland people who began to wander and how they named fjords was simply a witness to their wandering ways. Fjord originally meant a place for crossing over because typically a fjord widened at the fresh water tidal interface and was easier to “ford” there. Ford and fjord share the same root. After time passed our ancestors discovered what fertile places fjords were; witness all the settlement place names in English, Scots and Scandinavian that include ford, fjord or firth. The Indo-European root is per - to cross over or carry over. It’s likely that metaphor - “to carry meaning across” shares this root.

Inverness: Inverness is the name of a famous estuary in Scotland. Its name has two parts, Inver - old Gaelic for estuary; it comes from the root word bher - to bear in. The estuary in the Scots perception is a place of carrying in. Ness is the river name so Inverness is the estuary of the river Ness.

The same root bher sprouts more words than we can name here, birth and bear are two. Bore as in tidal bore is another. A tidal bore is a full wave, a standing wave that rises on the surge of flood tide in a narrowing estuary.

An archaic word for tidal bore that is still used in some dialects of English is eagre or eygre. It has an interesting and as yet unsettled etymology. Eagre has two potential roots. The first has it being a compound word made up of ea - the universal root word for water common to all the languages on the planet so primal and ancient is our connection to water. The second part of eagre may be gar an old English word for spear. So an eagre may be seen as a water spear. I like that derivation’s poetry, it makes one wonder who is holding the spear. The second claim on eagre’s heart is equally poetic. The same dictionary offers aegir - norse for water god as eagre’s informing image. An eagre might be a water god made manifest. Quite a different reality swimming in the simple words that hold our world ... gods and spears ... paleolithic hunters fording the ice melt stream ... the pregnant wave the sea bears in ...

I’d like now to turn to a few more general terms, everyday word’s that everyone knows, sort of ... My experience is that a heightened awareness of words deeper vitality let them tell a truer story. Let’s start with the word term. By practice, instinct and education we know terms are often more subtly definite than words. A word at root is something said, nothing startling there. Term is more graphic in its metaphoric means. Term comes from the Latin root terminus, a boundary. The Indo-European root - ter-men meant that which one gets over. So a term at one level is limit but there is an implicit older invitation to go beyond. Terms are the living edge of our understanding, the skin of mystery. Terms are where we come to terms, meet our limits, change our minds, reorient our hearts. Science and art share this sense of edge. A true term, a useful term, is able to touch the edge of

our knowing and let the world ring in meaning. The world is a bell and our “tongues” let it sing. I think about the work of scientists who have made my world more resonant; Jerry Franklin, Jeff Cedarholm and Jim Lichatowich to name a few.

But remember languages are very different. Each language has its own subtle landscape of meanings and some languages precipitate startlingly different experiences of our world. This is not surprising as language has traditionally belonged to and in places. The metaphoric nature of language insures that places and environments affect the way we describe hence see reality. The landscape provides the metaphors and experiences for our descriptions. An unsettling example is a conversation I had more than twenty years ago with a ten year old boy who had just returned from a long sojourn with his parents on the island of Woleiai in the Pacific. His parents were government workers and learned a pigeon Woleiain but Ben in the way of youth and the immersion of playing every day with native speakers soon became fluent. In the course of our conversation I happened to ask Ben if he believed in ghosts. He answered matter of factly, “Not when I speak English I don’t.” He went on to explain that when he was on Woleiai speaking Woleiain he could see them. What we say is what we see and what we see informs how we say it. Language and human perception seem to be a Mobius strip of inside and outside awareness. I think language naturally and instinctively wants to settle in places, to nuance its awareness in the subtlety and variety places provide. I might be wrong but as human cultures and their attendant languages have become globally and economically located our sense of belonging is increasingly abstract. Our diminished vocabularies reflect this lack of connection to local places and their endlessly discrete vitalities. What we say is what we see; our speech is increasingly haunted by business metaphors as if the bottom line was more real than chlorophyll, where the real work of the world is grounded, capitalized if you insist on post modern terminology. Our ancestors knew that health, healing, holiness and wholeness were all aspects of the same experience. Modern science is confirming an intuition that has persisted in the roots of our speech for 20,000 years. The Indo-European root for whole - health - holy etc. is kailo - whole, uninjured, of good omen. It sprouts in Greek as koilu - the beautiful and various Germanic words such as hale, health, holy, whole and heal among them.

We all know we are on the cusp of environmental catastrophe. You folks are meeting this crisis head on in your research. We need to find language to translate science’s reaffirmation of nature as a living whole back into a popular imagination that is currently sidetracked in the superstitious fantasy of self interest. I don’t know how to accomplish that translation. If artists forgo their egos and science forgets its political timidity we might find a way. In the meantime I want to offer the etymologies of six simple words we use every day without a thought to their deeper meaning. I hope that knowing their root meanings, their heart meanings may invite reconnection to a whole and healthy world. These words are clues, not answers. Clue comes from an old Greek word which meant

a ball of yarn one used to find the way out of the labyrinth. Remember Ariadne and Theseus and the Minotaur, a suitable parable for post modern times?

Ecology and economy: These are two words we hear a lot these days. Ecology and economy are sister/brother terms; they share the same root, the Greek word oikos

- home or dwelling place. The Latin version of oikos is vicus and meant neighborhood or village, hence our word vicinity. The Indo-European root weik - the family in its home. So economy and ecology are about home, the house we live in. Ecology is oikos + logos. Logos is another Greek word that gives us logic, legend and dialog among many others. So ecology is the logic of the house, story of the house, talking about the house, the principles of the house. Economy is a “smaller” term; it comes from Greek oikonomos - household steward - the one who distributes household wealth. You would imagine a good steward wouldn't spend more than the house could afford but for the last 300 hundred years our so called stewards, our leaders, with our permission, have been burning the house to keep the “family” warm. We live in the corrosive flux and flow of money's mercurial stream, its fiery floods and droughts and don't belong anywhere. The salmon haunted house of Puget Sound is looking for a steward.

Resource: Resource is a Latin based word. It begins with the Latin verb resurgere - to surge back hence our word resurge. If you dig further you discover that surge is a contraction of the Latin word subregere - to rule from below. (Sub - below + regere - to rule). Our words regal, regulate and rex all come from regere. So a resource is ruled from below. A resource is something that surges back ruled by powers hidden from view. Sound familiar?

Community: Community is a term that's becoming sentimentalized in the absence of an authentic experience of it. It's not that we don't try or have lost our communal instincts; it's that the industrial economy needs a fluid labor force and resources. Places are irrelevant in consumer economies and without known places and their attendant traditions community is hard to sustain. We own property in places we aren't intimate with; our children leave. We have lost the sense of the vernacular. Our images arrive via mass media not local art and science. Vernacular by the way comes from an Etruscan word for house servant. Ever notice how the servants, those closer to the ground, have more colorful speech than the masters?

Back to community ... community comes from Latin co - together and munus - a gift or civic obligation. The Indo-European root is moinis - to exchange. So community at heart is mutual obligation and promise just like an ecosystem. We're all in it together; my self interest must include your self interest. The salmon feeds the tree which shades and feeds the stream. This sense of mutual obligation and promise also informs our words communication and the commons. The community of the commons means the air, water, soil and their attendant resources are ecologically and “economically” shared by all and all of us are

responsible for its health. Immunity is the opposite of community; it originally meant free from civic obligation. Who do you know who pretends immunity?

Culture: The process of culture is like the process of an estuary. It is a stirring, a turning, a moving around. Culture turns with the surge of seasons the way water follows the swell of the moon. Culture comes from Latin colere - to till the earth, to cultivate. I imagine culture as turning the ancestors into the light. Old stories brought to light turned and returned, spiraling through time; teaching child after child where in the world she is born. But if you heat up a culture with entropy rich energy imports it changes from a traditional evolution into an addictive institutional revolution. Institutionalized revolution, as Robespierre said, is terror and terror is the alchemy of alienation.

There are no easy answers to this quandary. Maybe reclaiming local culture is like stream restoration work where in a culturally erosive torrent of distraction you slow the flow one rock at a time. We can't invent or fabricate culture; we've got what we've got, a torrent of distraction and "infoamation". But maybe we can create eddies, backwaters for the soulful to rest in on their way home.

What if estuary scientists, poets and artists in a specific watershed hauled a large boulder down to a beach or ford on a local estuary and on this stone the scientists carved text describing in a straightforward way what this estuary is, how it happened, how it works and its worth to the community and the commons? The artists and poets would add celebratory images and imaginations and the stone would stand as an irrevocable witness to the wholeness that holds it.

Truth: We think of truth as a system of proved and provable percepts, dependable knowledge. Hunger for the truth seems to be a human need although when I reflect on salmon's navigational abilities or ant's communication skills I think curiosity may have more than just a human face. In post modern - industrial civilization truth belongs to science, its complexity increasingly beyond the individual. Our weakened sense of community and meaningful communication has left the scientist unable to gift the citizen with knowledge and the citizen unable to support science except through the much resented abstraction of taxes. To be honest artists and poets have marginalized themselves in the search for truth by avoiding community and attending local culture opting instead for the heroic expressive persona we have been masquerading in for the last 500 years. We've courted the rich instead of turning the richness.

Because we lack a vital place based culture we don't share a common image of the truth, hence a shared experience of it. We have sacrificed relationship with a larger reality for the dubious comfort of the "relative". But it's not all relative it's all related; there are many moons but there's only one moon. There is a shared image of the truth and as you might have guessed by now it's in the root sense of

the word. The root word for truth is the Indo-European word deru or dru - a tree. The truth is like a tree. Etymologists are cautious and say that the metaphor of tree was extended to include our notion of truth because of the tree's firmness and straightness. Their notion is well grounded as far as it goes but our Paleolithic ancestors knew a tree represented more than firmness and straightness. A tree's roots grow deep in the earth holding it firm in the storm's destruction. It greened, blossomed, fruited and faded in season. It bent and twisted toward the light. Its sap was sticky with life but its heartwood still and dry as death to make it strong. A host of creatures found shelter in its shade. The tree was our first source of fire, that slippery bit of sun we're still wrestling with. The tree that informs truth also haunts our words trust, betrothal and truce. If we add what science knows about trees the notion of truth as tree becomes even more resonant. We now know that green plants are photosynthetic. Imagine Willy Mays with a green glove stretching to catch a line drive photon from the sun and whirling around to reveal carbon and oxygen, elements fundamental for life on earth. There's more ... a tree's leaves compose the soil, new trees, other fruit, new fire. Trees shade the streams their scent invites the salmon home. The truth is like a tree; it catches the light and brings it down to earth.

Story: The Hag at the Well

I remember a high school physics class where the teacher, a slight animated man named Mr. Wright devised a clever demonstration of wave motion. He covered a pane of glass with about a quarter inch of water over which he suspended two little fingers of wood which dabbled the water and sent out waves. The device could vary or synchronize the tapping - wave making in time. Beneath the pane he placed a strong but diffuse light source so each wave being thicker than its trough would focus the water at a higher intensity. Some places where waves met a standing wave would arise, a radiant "eagre" if you will. That's how I imagine stories, radiant standing waves, the estuarine rich awareness of cultured conscience meeting the rhythmic mystery of creation. Stories are the resourceful boil of language meeting the world.

Imagine this story as an old tree fallen into a stream. It creates currents, backwaters, places to rest and reconsider our way. This story, called the Hag at the Well, is an old Irish story. I don't know if it's told much any more since television replaced the hearth fire as the center of the house.

Long ago there were three brothers who heard tell of a magic well far away to the south where the salmon of wisdom swam beneath the tree of truth. All one had to do was find the well and kill the salmon and eat its meat and one would become the wisest and hence they thought the most powerful man in the land. After a long journey and many adventures they came to the place the tale predicted, a wooded glen surrounded by a scatter of upright man sized stones. They built a fire for the night and planned how to approach the well. They decided it was best to try it one by one, the oldest first and if he failed then the next. In the morning the oldest brother entered

the glen. It wasn't long until he found the well. There was the craggy tree of truth, its top lightning blasted but green with summer and full of bird sweet chatter. Its blood red fruit dropped into the well and the water boiled eerily silent as the salmon of wisdom rose to take its food. "This will be easy" the eldest brother thought as he hefted his spear to aim when he heard a human voice that sounded like branches cracking, sounded like a ghost's footsteps in a fire dry forest. "Wait!" it said and he looked up and there stepping out from behind a tree was an old hag stooped and drooped, dressed in leaves and rags. She went right to the point. "You cannot try the fish until you have kissed me", whispered the hag at the well. The older brother laughed scornfully and raised his spear to strike as the old woman raised her arm and hissed "So be it". The elder brother was turned to stone. The next day the middle brother went to meet his fate. When the hag appeared he did not laugh in scorn but froze in fear and doubt and so too was turned to stone.

The youngest brother awoke cold in a drizzly rain; had his brothers betrayed him? Was there a terrible monster guarding the well? There was nothing for it but to swallow his fear and pride and walk into the fated wood. When he saw the salmon rise to take the tree's red fruit he was mesmerized and when the hag appeared he was surprised but not frightened. He remembered how his grandmother had taught him to look past appearances and into the other's eyes when meeting a stranger. Beneath the rags, leaves and twisted string of her cloak the young man caught her gaze and saw it was full of a deep longing. So when the hag whispered her fateful demand the young man answered from his heart saying "Why, grandmother, you must be very lonely here" and walked around the well and embraced the crone. With the kiss the hag was transformed into a beautiful woman, she and the youth made love by the well which boiled in sympathy and streams and rivers flowed from its depths and the salmon of wisdom escaped to tempt other less humble folk.