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HEALING THE URBAN WILD

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> We are all indigenous to this planet, this mosaic of wild gardens we are being called by nature and history to reinhabit in good spirit. Part of that responsibility is to choose a place. To restore the land one must live and work in a place. To work in a place is to work with others. People who work together in a place become a community, and a community, in time, grows a culture. To work on behalf of the wild is to restore culture. —Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space* (1995, 250)

An Urban Wild

There is the nature we discover and the nature we recover. There is wildness and there is wildness. And sometimes, our own wholeness depends on the nature we attempt to make whole.

I need to explain. There is wildness where I'm sitting at the moment, a glade in Eggers Woods on Chicago's Far Southeast Side, surrounded by a mix of American elm, shagbark hickory, bur oak, and sugar maple trees, whose leaves flicker in the sunlight. It's the kind of place that offers a glimpse of Chicago before there was a Chicago, one of the many parcels that compose the nearly seventy thousand acres of the Forest Preserves of Cook

County. The preserves, along with parks, gardens, backyards, golf courses, cemeteries, and railroad rights-of-way, form the green threads that stitch wildness into the city's fabric, that make the city a living place.

Eggers Woods is also a cultivated place. Chicago is rightly known as an epicenter for ecological restoration and for its volunteer ecological restoration movement in particular. Beginning in earnest in the 1970s, small bands of concerned citizens adopted certain neglected forest preserve parcels as experimental worksites for bringing back rare and threatened native plant species. There was a lot of work to do, and these restoration groups suffered some lumps, but their overall success—which has grown with time—has been called a "miracle under the oaks" (Stevens 1995) and has become a model for other regions of the country.

Most of the sustained volunteer-led work, however, has occurred in Chicago's suburbs and in more affluent neighborhoods in the city. A city known for its "sides"—Far North Side, Northwest Side, North Side, West Side, Central, South Side, Southwest Side, Southeast Side—Chicago has a history that includes structural racism, economic redlining, and white flight. Like any city, Chicago bears its history into a visible present, and many African American neighborhoods, primarily on the West and South Sides, show signs of such disadvantages. For people in neighborhoods where priorities are keeping schools open and businesses functional, the opportunity to connect to the natural world, much less restore ecosystems, is not the first order of concern.

I'm thinking about such things because across the picnic bench from me is Henri Jordan. Henri is an advanced crew supervisor for Greencorps Chicago, and therein lies the exception to the rule. I have spent the last several months getting to know the people and work of Greencorps Chicago, a program of the City of Chicago that specializes in contractual landscaping and ecological restoration work.

Henri has been working for Greencorps for more than four years, and it's easy to discern why he is a supervisor. In a word, he has presence—the kind of presence that is communicated by the way he weighs my questions, sifts them through, then measures out his words from experience. Among his crew, he's known as "the chainsaw guy," the one who knows trees by their Latin binomials and can discern the healthy ones from the unhealthy. He has four apps on his phone for tree identification, tries to learn a new tree every day, and reads continuously. As he puts it, "Everywhere I go, if it's green, I'm observing it."

Another thing about Henri: he is an ex-felon. He has lived his entire life

in Chicago. By his own account, he "grew up in the ghetto and was exposed to the vicious cycle of the streets." Like many who have been through the Greencorps program, for Henri, the job wasn't just a job. Greencorps was a catalyst to a better life. "Everything in your life is a process of becoming," he tells me. "The question is whether you become, and as humans we have a large say in what we become."

In practical terms, Greencorps provides technical training, environmental education, and professional certifications to its crew members, positioning them for job placement in a range of environmental occupations. But there's more to Greencorps than prescription burn certification and properly administering herbicides. Greencorps is an organization whose work is transforming parts of Chicago by increasing the resiliency of urban lands. Sometimes this involves removing what's moved in—notoriously fast-spreading and invasive plants and shrubs such as buckthorn, phragmites, and purple loosestrife. Sometimes this means selective cutting of abundant trees so that light can once again reach patient seeds, which in the absence of regenerative fires have been stranded in time on the forest floor. Sometimes this means replanting species long gone, with the hopes that those animals that need them, from insect pollinators to endangered birds, will return as well.

Henri wipes a hand over his brow and removes his white hard hat, the kind you might see on a construction crew chief's head. As he does so, it occurs to me that a new kind of construction is occurring here in Eggers Woods and throughout the city's forest preserves—a *construction* of relationships between people and land, an opportunity for the emergence of wildness. There are nuts-and-bolts aspects to working with Greencorps—skill building and the disciplines of showing up on time and doing good work. But there's also something deeper that Henri articulates: "You're interacting with something that has life in it. Even if it's not another human, it has life in it, [which] touches something on the inside that doesn't often get touched."

My conversation with Henri underscores that the longer one does this kind of work, the greater the appreciation for how a living world works, for the wild systems that define a place. When I ask him if his ability to identify different plants makes him feel more at home in the preserves, he answers unequivocally: "Absolutely. I feel connected. Words give things life."

And what about the word *wild*? "I come from the West Side of Chicago—that's wild. Chaotic. . . . A lot of people don't get *out* of those neighborhoods," Henri responds. Gesturing around us toward the trees, he provides a

contrast: "I don't call it wild [in the forest preserves]. I call it nature. It's what the blocks in the hood should be like—peaceful."

Is the ecological restoration work of Henri and other Greencorps crew members a restoration of wildness in the city? It's complicated.

A Complicated Wild

In conservation circles, *wild* is a kind of shorthand for *healthy*. Vast mountain ranges. Foaming rivers sluicing through canyons. Page through an Ansel Adams wall calendar from the Sierra Club: you won't find Chicago or any other urban area; you won't even find people. The health of the land and water and clear blue skies, we are led to believe, doesn't have much to do with human actions. In fact, the fewer of us, the better for the wild, or so goes one version of the environmental narrative.

There are other associations with the word *wild* that don't figure much in conservation circles. When I asked people from Greencorps Chicago what the word *wild* calls to mind, as I did with Henri, they talked of lawless *humans*, ranging from the historical Wild West to current conditions in the West Side of Chicago. Guns and drugs, the demand for heightened awareness, checking over your shoulder, knowing what street corner you are on: These associations don't have much to do with healthy land, and many times they indicate the opposite. *Wild* means out-of-control or unruly territory, broken glass, abandoned storefronts, razor wire–topped fences, and learning to avoid such places for the sake of bodily safety.

To my eyes, there was wildness where Henri and I were sitting. There was also wildness—different in kind—a few blocks away.

The South and West Sides of Chicago can be high-risk places to grow up. The majority of Greencorps crew members call these parts of the city home. Of the persons who come through the Greencorps program, looking for career training and a fresh start, 90 percent have been incarcerated at some point. The forest preserves don't figure prominently in their mental maps of Chicago neighborhoods, even when these preserves are nearby. Zach Taylor, the former project manager for Greencorps, told me he's probably heard "over a hundred times" the exclamation, "Oh, I grew up my whole life right here. I had no idea this [natural area] was here."

Curtis Moore, a young man I spoke to who is in his first year of Greencorps training, provides a case in point. He grew up "ripping and running" with gangs in Englewood in South Chicago. "I just couldn't leave the streets

alone, as far as hustling . . . not thinking right," he says, and the forest preserves were "never on my map." Later in our conversation, when I ask him about wildness, he responds, "Wow. I can associate wild with a lot of things, like what's going on in communities all across Chicago. Just *uncontrollable*." He pauses to gather his thoughts. Knowing the rough contours of the project I am working on, he continues: "I might have a different definition than you. What I see in the neighborhood, as far as all the violence, [that's] the first thing that would come to my mind, it wouldn't be as far as something with the forest. That's why I can't use *wild* with that. I'm so at peace there, so it's not wild there."

Tyrone Ellis is another Greencorps crew member I met in his first year of the program. We spoke in the Greencorps crew's truck cab as his colleagues were felling ash trees and pulling up phragmites on a chilly day. He grew up on Chicago's Southeast Side and describes his former disposition as comparable to a confused Tasmanian devil, "just wild, just wild." As for Chicago, "just living in Chicago, period, is dangerous," Tyrone remarks. Pointing north, he continues the thought: "People who don't think so live *that way*."

While wildness carries these negative connotations for many Greencorps participants, the meaning of the forest preserves, augmented by hands-on experience, changes over time. The ecological puzzle pieces lock in place, and the crew members who become advanced crew members or supervisors soon read the landscape with new vision. Controlled burns, a common restoration practice, can be especially eye-opening. This is also a management tool that lends *wild* new connotations. I ask Tyrone if the word *wild* has changed at all for him, given his time in Greencorps. "Oh, yes, it has. Wildlife. Wildfires. And both of them is good. You need the wildlife, you need the wildfire." He then lists the many benefits of burning—nutrients released that enrich the soil, new plant growth, eliminating invasive weeds.

Another person with whom I spoke, Brenda Elmore, described her journey through Greencorps as one that was full of new experiences. Brenda is a Greencorps success story. She graduated from the program and got a job with a nonprofit conservation organization, Friends of the Forest Preserves, where she now works as an assistant supervisor. She's been with them for three years.

Such a career would have been inconceivable to her only a handful of years ago. "Growing up, I didn't know anything about nature," she tells me. On the South Side of Chicago, she recalls, "The only time we could go to

the woods was if we were picnicking, and we couldn't go anywhere near the treeline. . . . To my knowledge, the only thing you did in the forest preserves was sell drugs or something you had no business doing." It didn't help that she was afraid of wildlife. "I would run like crazy from deer. If a snake was anywhere near me, I would scream so loud you could hear me for six blocks away." In short, she was led to understand, "Black people didn't do nature, especially on the South Side of Chicago." Her work at Greencorps changed her perception of the forest preserves from places of menace to places of beauty. She has since become an advocate for these areas of the city, with a particular focus on connecting people of color to the forest preserves. As she put it, black people in Chicago need to be involved because "this is our earth. We deserve to be here. We deserve to help protect and restore it."

This kind of restoration between people and place may be wildness by another name. One face of the wild is represented by extremities—chaos, disorder, independence at the expense of others, a kind of self-will that in the long run is self-defeating. This is represented in Greencorps members' associations of wildness with the Chicago streets. When the Greencorps members I spoke to talked about the forest preserves, however, they most often used words like *peace*, *serenity*, *relief*, *fascination*, and *clarity of mind*. This indicates a different—an inclusive, collective—form of wildness. As the poet and essayist Gary Snyder put it, "When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all the members are present at the assembly. To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. Human beings came out of that wholeness, and to consider the possibility of reactivating membership in the Assembly of All Beings is in no way regressive" (1995, 173). Ecological restoration in the city is one attempt—perhaps always inconclusive and provisional—to ensure that all members of the assembly are present. Human beings "reactivate" their membership in the process of doing so. Might this be wildness—to feel like participants in something that exceeds our control, that transcends our daily stressors and assures us of our place in the Assembly of All Beings?

An Emergent Wild

By training and empowering skilled leaders who are from communities that consistently lack the opportunities available in more affluent communities, Greencorps Chicago serves as a foundational step toward a broader sense of connection to the natural world. A common theme that emerged from

my conversations with people in Greencorps was the idea of mutual healing. The land benefits, gaining a measurable amount of health, but the crew members experience positive changes as well—some subtle, some dramatic.

Tyrone, for example, the "Tasmanian devil," was a reluctant Greencorps recruit. He'd been in and out of the penitentiary four times, and his "mind was still in the streets." He chuckled as he recalled the day of his interview with Greencorps and how he deliberated over what he would say to a friend who recommended the program to him: "I was thinking of a lie to tell him so I didn't have to go." The idea of "picking weeds" dumbfounded him. "Oh, nah, with your hands?" he remembers asking.

But being out in the field changed this perspective. Tree identification has become a passion, refined with time and experience. His perception of the forest preserves has been transformed from an "abandoned place where people dump" to "a place that we need." This need has become personal: "I love it. When you get out here you feel a peace of mind. I go through a lot of things at home, but when I come out here it all goes away." He'd recently read research about hospital patients with views of the landscape who experienced quicker recovery rates following surgery. This mutual healing made complete sense to him. Compared to when he was incarcerated, he said, "My mind is like on a whole other level."

I asked Zach about whether he thought the healing impacts of doing ecological restoration went both ways—for the land and also for the people doing the work. He almost cut my question off with his response of "absolutely." To him, the discovery that you are part of cycles that both transcend and include you is especially important to people who have been emotionally or psychologically wounded. A person may experience hardships, but "the flowers are going to come out in the spring. You can point to all these different things that remind you why it's good to be alive. If you're helping create that space to remind others, that's a real positive thing." Sometimes it's a simple reminder. Zach thought about Owen, a Greencorps crew member who was "away" for sixteen years, and how it was a healing experience for him to crush mountain mint from a worksite and take it home to use as potpourri.

Not only are the people directly associated with Greencorps crews impacted. A ripple effect occurs as well. People I spoke with frequently noted the pride they'd gained in making their communities better places in which to live and recreate. Friends, family, and strangers noticed: a honk from a car horn with a friendly thumbs up, people recognizing the Greencorps

logo on their trucks and work vests, the curiosity of young people who see photographs from the worksites on Facebook and Instagram.

There is also the impact on crew members' immediate families. "I lost my marriage, my family due to the streets," Curtis tells me. "I've done so much destruction to the neighborhoods, and now I'm able to come give back and make the neighborhood look good." Seeing friends of his locked up, not returning, made him worry about his own three kids having to grow up without a father. His kids now recognize the motivational changes in him and that his stress levels are down because he's "a part of something that's bigger than just [himself]."

Henri notes that all three of his kids recycle now, that he has friends who ask him to identify the trees they see in their neighborhoods, and that his daughter has her own garden on their home's back porch, which includes plants grown from seeds he brings home from work. Brenda continues to draw from her own experience to "change the myth of the forest preserves" as dangerous places. This is now part of her full-time job, but it began with her children, who were immediate witnesses to her personal growth. All her children have now volunteered for various conservation projects in the city; one of her daughters became a crew leader for the Student Conservation Alliance (SCA); and her son was recently hired by the SCA, even traveling to Washington, DC, to meet with US senators about conservation. "I took the fear that ran through our family and changed that fear," she observes.

Renewing these mutual connections might be all the more important in a city, where urbanites' dependencies on the natural world may be less apparent. "Connecting to nature will give you a better respect for life in general," Henri notes. "Without these trees out here, we wouldn't exist," he tells his crew members, "so take that in while you are walking and doing your work." Curtis echoes this, saying, "If there wasn't no plants, there would be no us. That's it right there." In regards to other animals, Curtis continues, "In the urban area, just to see all the life that's lived off the maintenance we're doing, that's good to me. . . . The animals that I didn't really pay attention to or didn't think anything about, I have a respect for everything that's out there now. . . . Before when I was younger it was like 'whatever,' but now I just focus on peace for everything."

Cultivating the wild can shift one's perspective about place—by understanding the city as embedded in a larger bioregion—but it can also alter one's perspective of time. As Henri puts it, "This was here before we were here. The land was here before the people were here, so why not get to know

the land you live on, that you inhabit?" When he takes his youngest daughter to explore the local woods, "it's like an addiction." As they look for different kinds of trees and animals and follow the ways that water flows through these areas, Henri notes, "I want to know more. I want to see more."

The ripple effect I heard about from the people with whom I spoke—healing the land, being healed by one's interaction with the land, advocating to others in one's immediate family and beyond to one's community—has brought me to a more nuanced understanding of wildness. After the infliction of so many wounds, the healing takes time, for the land and for people. When I ask Tyrone if Chicago is a different place to him now that he knows the forest preserves more intimately, he tells me, "It's a gettin' better Chicago."

As Henri and I discuss the kind of Chicago he wants his daughter to grow up in, he talks about the need to involve more people in caring for their local environments. When that happens, urban nature isn't an abstraction. "Now it's part of you." One of the reasons that ecological restoration is important within urban areas is that it provides a hands-on and close-to-home appreciation for the wild beings with whom we coexist. This can lead to an understanding of urban areas as lifeworlds full of other-than-human ways of being, as places that we are responsible for shaping with the needs of other species in mind. Perhaps wildness, in this sense, is not something discovered so much as something that emerges—from relationships that become "part of you."

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On a June day when it finally felt right to say "summer" in Chicago, Zach and I drove to the Far Southeast Side of Chicago, a place where the city brushes up against the border of Indiana. Chicago's muscular past is evident everywhere in this landscape: in the steel ribcages that puncture the ground, the chemical brews awaiting remediation, and the channelized and polluted waterways—all altered to suit the needs of industry. After passing semitrucks and weaving past the Ford assembly plant, we detour down a two-lane street, pulling to the shoulder of Hegewisch Marsh.

Zach has come full circle in a way. He grew up in the Southwest suburbs, but because of his affinity for wildlands, he moved away from Chicago: "I didn't feel there was a nature experience I could have." Working in places like Hegewisch Marsh—a biodiverse 130 acres of wet savannah, prairie, forested wetland, and hemi-marsh that was once a degraded industrial dumpsite—helped him rediscover Chicago.

Zach got to know Hegewisch by leading Greencorps restoration crews there for four years. The area was a mess when restoration began. For decades, the marsh served as an official dumping site for toxic by-products and slag from steel production and as an unofficial throwaway area for cast-off car parts and unsavory materials. The hydrology was compromised, invasive plant species were rampant, and deep grooves from four-wheel-drive joyriders crisscrossed the property. The amount of work to be done, Zach tells me, elicited more than a few groans from crew members when they first laid eyes on the site. Curtis offered me a Hegewisch summary: "Woo, rough."

Hegewisch is still a place of frayed edges. Funds have shifted elsewhere, and Greencorps is no longer on the job there. Signs of neglect are apparent. As I walk beside Zach, he notes the invasives—phragmites, reed canary grass, thistle—that are reclaiming the trails his crew built and the marsh edges that they spent many days seeding with native plants.

He shrugs his shoulders when I probe about whether he's disappointed to see Greencorps' work undone, redirecting my question to the experiences of the crew members who did the work. That couldn't be uprooted. They'll take those experiences with them. New skills, yes. New knowledge, yes. But also new relationships to Chicago and the nature within Chicago. An understanding that they are part of the larger lifeworld of the city. He tells me about the bald eagles he once saw here, the great horned owls that made use of a red-tailed hawk nest, and he points out one of his favorite plants, *Angelica sylvestris*, which looks like a creation straight from the mind of Dr. Seuss.

I tell Zach that one conception of wildness is simply an acknowledgment that the land has a will of its own. Wildness can be in the city, a self-expression of the landscape amid, alongside, and with human enterprise. Wildness, in this sense, indicates the *unique expression* of a landscape like Hegewisch. Rather than a declarative statement, wildness is a question that begins a dialogue with the land: What does this landscape *want* to be, *if given the opportunity*? Zach perks up at this, noting that there is a correlation with this idea and the experiences of the people in the Greencorps program. What do these men and women want to be, if given the opportunity?

I've walked the trails in Hegewisch a few times. A decade ago, the soles of my shoes would have melted had I strayed into the wrong chemical soup. Today, tree swallows flash their white underbellies toward us while skimming for mosquitos that hover above the shallow water. Daisy fleabane thrusts yellow sunbursts toward the sky. A dragonfly—a big-eyed, caramel-

colored meadowhawk—comes to rest on my finger. Not perfect, not pure, not pristine. But relatively wild. A cultivated wild that needs continued attention, demands human involvement, and can change us as we change the city.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Zach Taylor, Henri Jordan, Curtis Moore, Tyrone Ellis, Brenda Elmore, and Andy Johnson for spending time in conversation with me and for all the good work they do.

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