

Self-Meaning : Nature and Nurture

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Consider each of the four words in the above title separately for a moment and drift your edge of [un]consciousness toward the separation of each word and meaning. A natural image is sticks floating on a rolling river. My husband recently wrote an image that resembles the above thought exercise in a poem that may help you toward understanding how self, meaning, nature and nurture all come and go together.

“September 19: There”

/ A half-mile wide/ Twenty to thirty feet deep/ Glacial slit and rain mud/Yukon water moving frigid mass/ Whole body stretched from ridge to sea/Skin violet glazed chocolates/ There/ When I saw the river way/ Where an upward-welling boil/ Breaks radiant, fine grained/ Water clears a moving space/ At its edge waves rise and chop/ Lead a short, smooth/ Water dark drift stick/ Down foaming mocha through/ Around dark creaming fringe/ The stick turns once/ without flip or pause/ Finds the straight flow/ Floats on

Exploring both the relationship between the four title words and floating separate meanings may help us recall our own ways of floating on-like sticks journeying from mountaintop, forest, or bog—each of us having our own shape, color, size, weight, grain, rhythm etc. that point us toward our natural destinations.

Reading words and constructing meaning is an exercise with which we humans have nurtured and tortured our souls. We easily lose awareness of the resemblance of lines and curves of letters or characters to the prints of birds' feet in soft mud. However, a slough of letters, a river of characters, may be imagined as a whole bunch of sticks. Our mind's eye can lead us to a resemblance of meaning between languages, a place where two rivers of written language meet.

In Mathews' Chinese English Dictionary(1943) the characters 自(zi) means private; personal [and] natural. Combined with the character 我(wo) for I, 自我(zi wo), in the psychological sense, means self(p.459). Meaning for self converges with the natural. Self is natural. Flowing through where two wor[[]]ds

meet and sticks rub up against each other for a moment finds another Chinese compound built with the first character. The compound 自然(zi ran) translates as the noun nature. As an adjective we may create similar meaning as natural, unaffected. As an adverb we gather the meanings naturally, spontaneously, accordingly. Another way of understanding the converging meanings of self and nature is in the phrase in due course. Like the course of a river, like the way/Tao, like breath flowing in and out or chi coming and going, self-meaning naturally and nurturally flows. The second character 然 ran of 自然(ziran) means To burn; to light a fire. 自然的(zi ran de) means natural and is often translated as spontaneous. We are naturally made for spontaneity. The human self burns naturally. How do we nurture a natural way of meaning for ourselves? How do we nurture natural, spontaneous ways of being our self?

Nurturing our natural self-meaning may be further experienced when we consider our private and personal nature. Many of us have grown up with the idea of 'nature vs. nurture' as though we have no other choice but to take a side, an us against them mindset with either Nature(our genes) or Nurture(our environment) as if there is a game in which one side loses or wins, as if we have to chop our self or another in two. Taking sides leads to an endless disturbance that overshadows our awareness and attention of our limits. Self-empowerment calls forth our relating and relationships made between both nature and nurture. I mean to write readers out of the mind for competition and debate and into a space that creates new self-meaning in how we nurture this nature to burn naturally, to discover how to feed our own flames and to smolder in own ashes.

I called my husband the poet the other day at lunchtime and confessed to feeling boredom, a dry dullness in the middle of my winter day at the office. He related to a similar place in his own life back at the apartment and went on to talk about living in the cabin down on the Alaskan slough where the poem "There" took inspiration and wrote itself here in Taipei. He pined for spruce and birch trees in that phone call. He said something like "we don't control trees there and trees don't try to control us." We live and grow with nature there. There we were together through a telephone line in Taipei. I hung up and walked to lunch by myself. A block away, out the back of the University, on the black asphalt of an alley, something caught my attention. It was a seed with a white hairy parachute blown in the way of my next step. I reached down and gently took it between my fingers. The seed was warm amber brown and

the size of a tiny leaf. I carried it home after work with a smile on my face and glint in my eye. I laid it on the dinner table as a “gift of the magic seed” to my husband. Accordingly, in due course and quite naturally, I/we made self, meaning, nature and nurture together.

Reference:

Cornberg, D. (in process). *The Dailies: A Poem For Every Day of One Year*.

Mathews, R. H. (1943). *Mathews' Chinese English Dictionary*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.