

# Humanities and the Expressive Arts: In Wildness

I recently taught another section of "Humanities and the Expressive Arts," this time focusing on the theme "In Wildness." Here is my description of the course:

*In the 1850s Henry Thoreau made a bold claim in his lecture and essay "Walking": "In wildness is the preservation of the world." The focus of this course is to explore and investigate what this may mean for our own time and place. What is this wildness? And why might it necessary for the world's preservation? Or for ours? Scott Russell Sanders claims that "wildness [is] the very condition of our being," and in Refuge Terry Tempest Williams declares: "Dogma doesn't hold me. Wildness does." We will read and share stories of the wild-others' and our own-and explore how such stories may be necessary for survival. "What is the story we live by?" asks Linda Hogan. "Through stories," says Leslie Marmon Silko, "we hear who we are." And "sometimes," insists Barry Lopez, "we need stories more than bread, food to survive." Why is that? How do stories help us survive? In this class we will read a lot, write reflections on the readings, write our own stories, discuss everything, and engage in the visual arts and performance as vital ways to respond to the stories we encounter. Some of the major themes that weave their ways through the stories we will read are: the nature of war, violence, fear, survival, healing, wilderness, water, animal life, relationships, love, community, the legacy of history, the sacred, the sense of place, and the unknown. Some of the other arts-poetry, music, and film-will be included as well. I invite you to consider how wildness may feed your imagination, or how the wild itself may offer itself to you, like food to survive.*

Here is my description of the Group Performance Projects assignment:

*At the beginning of Week 3, we will divide ourselves up into performance groups. Each group will have 3-4 people. The task of this group is to write, create, and/or design a 30 minute performance based on Molly Gloss's novel Wild Life. The performances will take place during Week 9. Your performance may include any elements of the expressive arts, particularly theater, music, and dance. Think about the use of costumes, props, puppetry, songs, poetry, dialogue, acting, video, and so on. Be bold, imaginative, and creative in what you design. In-class time will be set aside each week for the groups to meet, create, plan, and practice, but your group should also plan as much out-of-class meeting time as necessary to create and produce the performance by Week 9. I will ask you for periodic updates and reports on your group's progress. After your performance, each of you should write an honest and detailed reflection on the experience (from the beginning of your group planning and creation through to the final performance). I am very excited to see what you create, and will do anything necessary to help your group's work and performance. Make sure you check into any special equipment you will need as soon as possible.*

We read and discussed Molly Gloss's *Wild Life* during the second week of the quarter. Students then discussed which of the expressive arts they were most interested in exploring in their Group Performance Projects. Whenever you break students up into small groups, you must always decide how to determine who is in which group. There were three methods for choosing the groups that made the most sense to me: (1) students determining who they wanted to work with, (2) groups based on the forms of expressive arts to be explored, or (3) groups based on the content or theme of each performance. After helping students form such groups several times, the second method seems to work best. Forming a group around the modes of expression brings a kind of cohesion the group needs at first. The other two methods come into play as well, for students still do choose to join groups that include people they want to work with, and discussion about themes inevitably spills into the discussions on the forms of expressive arts students are most interested in. For this course, six groups were formed, four groups of four students, one group of three, and one of five.

Wild Life, by Molly Gloss



Once the groups were formed, I gave them some class time (usually one hour out of the five we met per week) each week to do group work. We brainstormed ideas, did small performance exercises, and talked about where each group should be at each stage of the process. Some wonderful things happened in this messy, early stage of group work. Two groups decided they were

going to make documentary films and began to do this (such projects could never have happened within the short time-frame I had given to previous classes). One group focused on dance, even though no one in the group was very highly trained in it. Another group was trying to combine guitar playing, drums, spoken word, and photography. Another planned to do live performance on the nature of knowledge itself. The groups began to see that they did not need to stick to literal representations of the novel, but could explore its deeper themes of fear, the wild, women's lives, the sacred, transformation, and so on. There was enough time to try out ideas long enough to realize they wouldn't work, to abandon them, and to be re-inspired by something else. All this was the kind of collaborative and creative work artists and performers do. Students were all given the same assignment, but each group project was evolving in wonderfully diverse directions. There was a bit of a problem when one student could not find a suitable group and then her group disbanded and reformed with others. But this was worked out in the time frame the project allowed.

## The Performances

In the ninth week of the quarter, during two class periods, the six groups gave their 30-minute performances in Fairhaven College's auditorium. The first group had made a documentary film on expatriation, focusing on a passage in *Wild Life* when Charlotte and her companion find the bones of a person in a cave. Charlotte insists the bones be left there, out of respect. The students read this passage to us, and then their film taught us about the ways in which Native American communities have insisted that such bones be respected, returned for reburial, and left alone. It was a powerful message, and the students learned much about the nitty-gritty details of making a film. The second group included images on the large screen, music, poetry, masks, group art work, costumes, and setting a mood of reconciliation and healing in the midst of a violent and fearful world. The third group on that first day made our skin tingle. With images projected on the screen, an electric guitar and drums created a peaceful, heart-beating rhythm that lulled us into its hypnotic trance, then suddenly the guitar began to scream, the drums pound, and images of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, and other violent images of warfare filled the screen. As the piece evolved, eventually another student began to speak his spoken word poems over the music and images. When it was all done, we sat there in a kind of stunned awe.

On the second day of performances, the first group gave us 30 minutes of dance and music, no words spoken. The dance explored the tensions between human constrictions, expectations, and the freedom of wildness. One student added a series of juggling sequences as interludes and as ways to show the kind of games humans force each other to play. The movements were stimulating and the dancing beautiful, especially since these students were not trained in dance, nor was this a dance course. What they did was give themselves to the creative process of dance, and let it all out for us to enjoy. The second group showed the documentary film they made, which examined the nature of fear. The students visited an abandoned and possibly haunted building in Bellingham one dark, winter night, and recorded their collective and individual feelings and experience. The third group did live theater, bringing the audience into the performance as their students. They focused on the nature of knowledge, what it is, how we know it when we get it, and all the ways in which what we know is manipulated by teachers, television, game show, schooling. At the end of the performance the group led us on a walk outside to the Outback, to deposit the peels from the oranges they had given to us during the performance. It was a fitting way to end all six performances. As we stood there by the compost pile, in the light snow falling, we felt a kind of comradery I have rarely felt in any other class I have ever taught. The students in this course poured themselves into these Group Performance Projects, and offered their own creative gifts to me and their classmates quite abundantly.

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