Wilderness Alchemy

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“After our sweat lodge ceremony I asked Michael, ‘Do you feel like challenging nature tonight?’… I told him about the grizzly bear warning issued to fire lookouts;… the bears are roaming down from higher elevations… I suggested that we go into the forest and meet the bear.” Horvath, working as a fire lookout, invites a friend to partake in one of the ultimate experiences of the wilderness: a direct confrontation with the forces of nature, in this case a bear.

Wilderness Alchemy poses a similar invitation to readers: an invitation to “meet the bear,” to experience the rich, solitary, sometimes physically and psychologically dangerous life of those who perform the task of watching for fires.

Horvath shows that an equally real task of lookouts is to use their isolation to “meet the bear” within themselves, to explore the inner wilderness that is the mind and soul.

The book offers insights posed as possibilities for readers to meditate upon: “We may project our dirty psychic toxins onto another person: wife, husband, friend, or the boss. In the same manner we may also project our shadow onto the environment, darkness reflected onto the natural world, a projection contributing to violation or abuse.”

The idea that a parallel may be drawn between our inner turmoil and relationships with one another, and humanity’s soul-relationship with the earth is a theme to which Horvath returns in various forms throughout Wilderness Alchemy, until the fertile concept begins to bear the fruit of recognition.

To portray the exalted vantage points of lookouts, Horvath uses elevated, poetic, almost spiritual descriptions: “A lookout sits next to the gods, privileged to see eagles flying not only above, but also looking down at them. A lookout watches from a central axis, an alignment with heaven and earth…”

At the same time, paragraphs such as this keep readers’ feet planted firmly in practical realities: “Yesterday, a storm passed through my area and dozens of lightning strikes hit the trees. Fire from the sky invades. No smoke visible but you never know, sleepers may be hiding; fire may be smoldering for a day or two before unexpectedly erupting”

Wilderness Alchemy is a suggestively thoughtful book that rewards careful consideration for those unafraid to “meet the bear” within.

GENE-MICHAEL HIGNEY (July / August 2000)

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