[*JSRNC* 9.4 (2015) 506-508]
doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v9i4.18558
JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Book Review

Priscilla Stuckey, *Kissed by a Fox and Other Stories of Friendship in Nature* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 373 pp., $16.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-58243-812-2.

The late Thomas Berry invited human beings to view other animals—indeed, all of nature—as a 'communion of subjects, not a collection of objects'. Priscilla Stuckey's exquisitely written and riveting book, *Kissed by a Fox and Other Stories of Friendship with Nature*, responds enthusiastically to Berry's invitation.

Stuckey, like many passionate voices in the conversation about human degradation of the environment, starkly presents many facets of ecological devastation. As she notes, 'In a world linked by ozone depletion and climate change and seas that are sick, nothing could be more urgent than healing that tired old split between individual and community' (p. 318). Many environmental scholars and nature writers have carefully and thoughtfully identified human assaults on air, water, soil, and plant and animal life. But Stuckey is not content with recording numerous illustrations of the havoc we have wreaked on nature. Nor does she stop with offering suggestions toward solution, though she does encourage a robust view of community between human and nonhuman. In this not easily classified book—the diverse categories of Biography and Autobiography, Memoir, Nature, Nonfiction, and Religion/Spirituality are suggested by the publisher—Stuckey takes us on a journey.

With raw honesty Stuckey narrates her own wrenching struggles with physical illness, emotional fragility, an upbringing of authoritarian religious rigidity, and multiple heavy losses. But she does not include these elements in a self-pitying or self-absorbed way, nor does she leave us in that despair. Instead, the story of her own healing serves the deeper objective of her book: to recall us to cultivate respect for, attentiveness to, and intimacy with the more-than-human world around us. (Stuckey, along with David Abram and no small number of others, uses the term 'more than human' to indicate the natural world that supports and accompanies all human activity.) She weaves her own narrative together with insights into how to heal our culture and its diseased relationship with nature, drawn from her experiences of communion with neighbors such as rocks and creeks, bougainvilleas and birches, eagles and foxes, and dogs and cats.

The book is well grounded in thorough and wide-ranging research. For guides in the journey toward healing, the author brings together cultural historians, philosophers, geneticists, physicists, biologists, and economists.

Further, in her quest to nourish intimate connection and communication with nature, Stuckey utilizes meditation and Jungian dream analysis. She learns the wisdom of openness to the universe from elders within indigenous traditions such as the Yarralin Aboriginal Australian community, the North American Maidu, and the Andean Quechua culture.

Most powerfully, she articulates what she has learned from her nonhuman teachers. Stuckey's accounts of 'friendship in nature' are many, each tale breathtaking. She

insistently begs an imagined bald eagle to show himself to her and gasps in delight when a *real* eagle actually appears overhead and flies circles around for long moments. She learns from Peralta Creek in Oakland, California, about the patience and persistence it needed to entice humans to help repair its polluted watershed. And yes, as she volunteers in a wild animal rehabilitation center in California, resident red fox Rudy honors her by 'greeting [her] as a fox greets a trusted member of the family', inserting his tongue into her mouth to see what she's bringing for dinner. In each of these stories, as in many others, Stuckey consistently portrays our embeddedness in community as broad as the planet and all its inhabitants (and even beyond, to the stars!).

The most awe-inspiring chronicles for me involve companion dogs Shvana and Sapphire and companion cat Brio. The accounts of openness and two-way communication Stuckey shares with them via mental images, gentle touch, and silent listening describe impressively believable encounters in which Shvana, Sapphire, and Brio convey clear messages to Stuckey. One charming example is: 'I meditated with [Sapphire], asking her to show me what she [smelled] in the park… As soon as I asked the question, my face flooded with a prickly sensation like *wasabi* up my nose but enticing, not painful' (p. 166).

Stuckey's approach highlights connections, many formerly hidden, which emerge with clarity. She notes the link between our culture's rejection of the possibility of interspecies communication and our loneliness on earth; she relates the popularity of dog-training techniques that require human dominance with our cultural fixation on the model of competition. In her exploration of the root cause behind our death-dealing neglect and abuse of the more-than-human members of our global community, she lists culprits identified by other thinkers, such as the rise of agriculture, the move toward congregating in urban centers, and the growth in literacy. Then Stuckey advances her own theory: 'We forget our cousins the creatures when we forget each other' (p. 311). While I am not sure I agree with her that human neglect of human community has caused the abuse of our more-than-human community, I certainly share her conviction that the two are intimately related.

The text is not interrupted by footnotes, a format that allows the book to read as compellingly as a novel. Stuckey outlines her scholarly sources for each chapter in a section at the end.

I had to look hard to find any area of disagreement. In her impressive rehearsal of the Western philosophical and theological tradition of obsession with causality and control, she examines John Calvin's theology and refers to his modern-day heirs: 'Presbyterian, Congregational (later United Church of Christ), Baptist, and all stripes of American fundamentalism' (p. 285). As someone raised in the non-Calvinist wing of U.S. fundamentalism, I would argue that some fundamentalist Christians owe their devotion to the Bible to John Wesley's legacy and not John Calvin's.

Stuckey goes on to claim a similarity in these churches' 'emphasis on understanding scripture texts correctly [and] even, as among fundamentalists, on taking scripture as a legal document, a written rule' (p. 285). As one who now finds nourishment, community, and inspiration as a member of the progressive United Church of Christ, I would point out that a dizzying array of views of Scripture are held by the diverse members of that communion, very few of which are fundamentalist/legalistic.

My overwhelming response to this collection of delightfully written essays, each one chock-full of careful observation of and reverence for the more-than-human world around us, is enthusiastic celebration. How profound and beautiful her vision is of community, of intimacy, of paying attention to and cherishing our neighbors of all species and sorts—and how powerful and persuasive!

Barbara K. Darling
Department of Religion
Wheaton College (Massachusetts)
darling-smith_barbara@wheatoncollege.edu