

Against the Laws: Incarceration as Reevaluation of the Natural World

by Chris Hoke

During the months Daniel was in Skagit County Jail, he dreamt of oceans and oceans. He would be swimming, he tells me, with whales and his family.

Daniel has never been to the ocean; the closest this recently released, 19-year-old local gang affiliate gets to the Pacific is when we stand on the dyke behind his parents' house in West Mount Vernon and he points out where he'd play on a large drainage pipe in the Skagit River at low tide when he was a kid.

In the last year here in the valley, much of my time has been split between working on a picturesque organic farm on Fir Island and five nights a week in the county jail as a young chaplain with hundreds of inmates. Praying, reading and discussing the Bible, doing advocacy and meeting with incarcerated, multiracial men on the underside of the social chain has caused me, a privileged and educated white man, to question the authority of many laws that have governed my imagination. Especially those of celebrated Mother Nature.

I sometimes share with the men at the jail that the original vision of the Garden of Eden was dreamt by captives. That is, most scholars believe that the creation accounts of the book of Genesis sprung from the Israelites' time of captivity in Babylonian exile. Like Eden, Daniel also dreamt of a surreal, lush, and boundary-less existence of delight with the environment, other creatures, and those he loves.

Both Daniel and the Israelites, as captives, have experienced the brunt of Natural Law: they have been conquered by more powerful, predatory forces in their habitats; they have learned the game of survival, its unforgiving fate for the less fit, and how their elimination is the unquestioned logic and law that keeps everything in the environment so beautiful and all in the order and balance we enjoy.

While many voices these days speak of the earth's "balance, harmony and cooperation," from which we humans can re-learn an existence of "peace and unity," the captive knows better, and so dreams beyond this Natural Law. Their dreams reject the necessary terrors and predatory forces of the dominant reality. Their dreams help us imagine open places of beauty and unfettered intimacy free of the laws of death.

Stand with an inmate, talk to a prisoner of war, imagine the Skagit Valley from the perspective of a laboring mouse dodging raptors in the corn fields. Soon Mother Nature seems less kind, less of a calendar pin-up. She seems more like our City Administrators and County Judges in her operation and indifference. The captive's perspective forces subtle but far-reaching questions. Is it really Nature we love, in its full and harsh reality? Or have we come to accept that darker side of things if we learn that it sustains what first captured our heart: the peace, the sense of awe, the rush of life and existential perspective that restores us during relatively brief immersions in our favorite, scenic, inspiring, and highly specific locations?

If the captive's experience exposes such a distinction between our thirst for what is truly life-giving and the more pervasive, dominant modes of survival, rivalry and violence, then we too may awkwardly realize that our deepest desires are often at odds with many of the natural world's assumed and respected laws.

Few people love decay, self-defense, territorial boundaries and how the strong prey on the weak. Rather, as earth's citizens we do not question these authorities of decomposition and defensiveness. We watch a child waste away with Leukemia and comfort ourselves with poetic images of fallen leaves turning to humus under trees, reconciling our revolting grief to Nature's reigning rhythms based on death.

However, we find that the captive's defiant dreams are shared with our children. Ask any child—as I did last night just to double-check—if they accept the death of the pet they loved deeply, if they can appreciate the circle of life natural to the coyote predator's life. “No,” 10-year-old Nicoleina of Burlington told me, immediately, looking me in the eye. “I wanted it to come back to life.”

I am challenged in the jail to allow myself to share this place of seeming idiocy and delinquent noncompliance by actually wanting to break some laws, to allow love and a desire for more life to set me against the respected powers of Nature and Death.

Two weeks ago another young inmate shared with me off-handedly during a visit that he's been in jail so long now that he no longer dreams of life outside the correctional facility's walls. “Now, even all my dreams at night are about, you know, things in here,” Joey told me, suddenly saddened at hearing his own words. His imagination is now completely captive, enclosed within the immediate and solid realities of his environment.

It is just as tragic, I am beginning to think, if our imaginations as poets, activists, scientists, lovers, parents—all adults—can no longer imagine or dream outside the apparent confines of our immediate environment: the natural world's order. Daniel was able to dream beyond the concrete walls since he was only in for less than a year, like the child who has not been in this system so long that her imagination and desires are conformed to the way things are. But Joey has been in so long—like us adults in the world that our hopes are trapped in the grim reality of Nature's paradigm and necessities.

So reading about Jesus alongside the incarcerated can begin to puncture open our imaginations. Recently four separate groups of about ten men read with me the 22nd chapter of Luke's gospel, narrating how Jesus spent his last hours before getting arrested and taken into custody by the law. We recognize at one point that the Eden fantasy is actualized, finally, as Jesus takes his disciples outside Jerusalem's walls to the garden of Gethsemane: God chooses to walk intimately with humans as friends, among olive trees and under the stars after eating together earlier, where he had washed their naked feet.

Together we wonder why we had never recognized this Eden dream actually lived out in such a familiar scripture. We realize we are not alone in our blindness when we keep reading that Judas, a man in competition for power with Jesus, shows up with a pack of armed officials. They arrive at the leafy scene, not to share in the ultimate human dream, but only to—more “realistically”—shackle and eliminate Jesus, having caught him like prey in a vulnerable position. What plays out in this scene seems pretty natural to the inmates I read with, socially and ecologically: the more powerful take Jesus' hands not in love but to drag him away, prompting Peter's mother-bear instincts to lash out and tear the ear off the predatory guard threatening to take away what is precious to Peter.

What strikes us as unnatural, even shocking to some inmates, is how Jesus throughout this episode doesn't defend himself. He seems reproductively unfit, not trying to survive, as most of these men have tried all their lives on the streets and in their cells, as most every species we can think of does. Not only does Jesus freely operate outside these laws as he offers himself vulnerably, he also stops to care for his immediate threat and captor. He picks up the severed ear and reverses the trajectory of violence and eventual decay by replacing it on the wound of the guard, where it is fully and instantly healed, according to the account, in a tender and entirely unnatural way.

Dozens of inmates, the head chaplain Bob Ekblad, and I have been similarly surprised throughout this last year when we all together pray for and lay hands on their chronic lower back spasms, collapsing livers and despairing hearts—only to see these natural consequences of hard labor, drug and alcohol abuse, and others’ selfishness actually reversed as the men are healed. Sometimes in a matter of hours, if not seconds.

This violation is not an uncaring disregard for the living world in all its ecosystems, like some religious justifications of “dominion” for trashing the planet. Rather, this is a love and insistence on life so rich that it exposes and transgresses the limiting codes of “Nature”’s pervasive, indifferent, and sometimes cruelly balanced regime.

But I don’t think we can regain an ability to imagine an alternative existence outside our confines on our own, any more than captives can free themselves from high security facilities. It is an experience of surprise, of being set free. It is a quiet and wide-eyed exhale and smile, how Joey told me two days ago, a week after we prayed over his incarcerated dream life: “I can dream again, man! All week, when I go to bed, I’ve been with my girl and our kids.”