

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 8: Doodles from Wonderland

Sept 27, 2010



Foreground: restoring slopes at GBS, horizon Van Ishwarakota, 2000m

Dear friends,

Hello!

It's been a while! More than a month since Dispatch 7 went out. Where has the time gone?

I hardly know where to begin today! How about with a huge Thank You: the biggest so far! Dispatch 7 brought so many responses that I felt myself wanting to write to people individually. I was reminded that friends are individual persons, each one special, each to be loved and hugged back and that circular community letters can wait for the moment. It was really nice to do this with leisure and quiet, to touch base with many of you. I'm sure I've missed some friends, my apologies for this.

As the weeks passed I started to hear from folks wondering if I'd dropped them from the mailing list, or if I'd stopped writing. This of course is really encouraging to hear! But I'd like to reiterate what I've said earlier, which is that writing the dispatches, as well as reading them, are spontaneous movements. I'd like them to spring out of daily life here. I tend to find writing difficult anyhow, so I really appreciate it when inspiration arrives, and nudges me to say something. It flows nicely then. No effort, just a sharing! In the same spirit, none of you is obliged to read this, or to respond, and I love it when you do. Either way all our respective muses can lead the dance and we can relax and follow!

I had in fact started writing Dispatch 8 about a month ago, and it started becoming more like an essay, and less a lighthearted offering from the day. While the topics are of great interest and concern, I was getting into quite a loop of study and thought and slightly removed perceptions. I suddenly realized I would have to do much more work to do justice to any of these issues. I think there is a place for this, but perhaps not here. The dispatches are really born from the immediacy of living at the Sanctuary, from the plants and animals and the light and the monsoon, and all my human friends, the walks with the dogs, and musings from just this time.

Speaking of which.....

I've just been daydreaming on the hill.

I've been out for two hours or so, on Sandy's lovely granite bench that is set into the slope surrounded by baby forest, looking out on old forest in the distance and Van Ishwarakota, the mountain (more commonly known as Banasuramala), and a brilliant sky bereft of monsoon clouds. I had Tasha (dog) for company. I also had my guitar, and a mug of home grown jungle coffee. I was out doing what I always do in the early morning light when it's not raining. I was out with one or more dogfriends, easing from dreamtime into daytime, warming up my vocal cords quietly to the E string on the guitar, listening to the birds.

Let me share with you the vision that opened my sleep-hugged eyes. Bright golden light turning silvery-white, a vast blue sky, nary a thunderhead, no breeze, no movement in the grass. Hundreds of dragonflies in the still cool air, the papery rustle of their wings adding pizzazz to the quiet. A Malabar Grey Hornbill swooping in the valley, caw-cackling as he landed, a pair of Scimitar Babblers calling, and some Red Whiskered Bulbuls in the small pioneer trees just at my side. The mountain was present and clothed (there are weeks during the monsoon when she is hidden totally), today she had on a mantle of dark grey clouds, glinting with the golden light from the rising sun.

The forest canopy in the distance was so clear I could see arrangements of leafs corrugating the individual crowns. The mountain base so close I could touch her. As I watched, the clouds slowly lifted and there she lay, Van Ishwara in her full glory.

I remember reading recently, in *A Language Older than Words*, that, sometimes it happens that a person can recollect the exact moment when his or her life changed irrevocably.

Sitting on the bench, I remembered that moment when it happened to me. It was when I climbed Van Ishwarakota with my friends when we visited the Sanctuary in the winter of 1992-93. I was back from my year at The Land Institute in Kansas and traveling with Gary, Christina, Lorenzo, Gopal, Michael and others from Brockwood Park (also my old haunt), in search of land and nature related efforts in India. It was a reunion of sorts, many of us were close friends. We were at the Sanctuary for 10 days, picking pepper, learning about tropical plants and tropical nature. I was fully intent on returning to the U.S., I had a gearless bike left in The Land's garage, some camping gear, a dream to bike the West Coast Trail and a return ticket by Lufthansa.

Wolfgang took us up the mountain on a three day excursion. Christoph, master carpenter, was also there. As were George and Thomman, from the neighbourhood. It was a big group. We piled into a single jeep (14 adults with back packs, karrimats and cooking pots), and drove the

old Kunjom way to the base of the mountain and started climbing.

Two memories from that trip stand out for me even today. The walk itself with its many wonders. And the decisive moment that turned my life by 180 degrees.

Looking back I see more of what led to this, but at the time I was so deeply impressed by the walk, and so in love with the view from the top, so enchanted by the connection of a garden to wild plants, to elephant spoor, to wild forest and a stunning mountain, that I (apparently) impulsively popped the question to Wolfgang as we huddled around a campfire on that cold January night, nearly 2000 metres high, near a small seep in a grove, redolent with the musty smell of elephant dung. Most of us had fleece jumpers, except for Lorenzo. George and Thomman were in their shirt sleeves and lungis. Wolfgang had no extra protection, and also no sleeping bag. He later told us he couldn't sleep for the cold. It must have been close to freezing.

This is what I asked him on that firelit mountain night, belly full with rice gruel and dry coconut chutney: "Is it possible for me to work at the Sanctuary?"

He replied: "Welcome."

End of job interview, application and acceptance. What consequence!

My friends were surprised, as was I. Wolfgang said later, he didn't believe I'd show up, until I actually did, in the first week of April, as we'd agreed. Return ticket binned, bike abandoned, a new dream of the Western Ghats replacing the one of the West(ern) Coast!

A key aspect in all this is actually the mountain, Van Ishwarakota. I've since come to attribute my decision to her. She cast a spell for sure. It was her, and no one else that worked on my body and my mind that time, she who engendered the epiphany. I think she worked on all of us. It was a special trip, one of a kind, a passing from one life to another for this group of friends, a passing from one terrain to another for me. All my rationalizations about ecology and rainforests and conservation are dross on the core. The mountain beckoned. I responded.

17 years have passed. In all this time not a day goes by when I fail to look out for her. And oddly

enough, in all these years I have never been up her again.

Maybe it's time!!

Some days I am more aware of the fact that each of us here at the Sanctuary, is on some kind of a journey, on a very specific trail. A trail which appears out of mystery, and disappears into mystery. Sometimes it seems the Sanctuary is like what I've understood of the meeting point of aboriginal songlines in the vast Australian desert. We are each: Mountain dreaming, Orchid dreaming, Fern dreaming....River dreaming.

I do not know if this is appropriate to do, to borrow from another culture, especially when I don't understand the cosmogony and ecology and community life of that culture. I only know of my struggle to represent things through the language I know, to find a way of speaking that fits all that goes on here, all that I see, all that we together and separately understand, and all that we together and separately, experience.

Simpler put, I have this sense of crisscrossing trails meeting braidlike in a forest, like the ones we find when we walk the real forest. Trails of Elephant, Boar, Gaur, Sambhar, Suma, Laly, Anna, Wolfgang, Tasha, Leela, Langur, Sandy, Hoomus, Sruti, Shailesh, Sora, Purvi, Janu, Giant Earthworm, Valsala, Rao, Gussie, Supi, Falaafel, Daffodil Orchid, Whisk Fern, Kallampuzha River, Vine Snake, Trogon...and infinitely many more.

It upsets me sometimes that every human being alive and dead has (had) a name but that every elephant alive has not. There are 6 billion named individuals of the species *Homo sapiens*, and of the approx. 20,000 Asian elephants, very few are named, or recognized individually. It used to be that human beings, commonly and everywhere, could recognize individual animals, individual trees, individual stones.

I could borrow from animists here, I could even borrow from the animist origins of Hinduism (a reminder to counter the abhorrent Ram worship that goes on): what were the ancients trying to do with their million names for god? Were they seeing species? Were they seeing persons, beings, ghosts, fantasies? What were they referring to?

I think it was an attempt honouring immense diversity through naming, but went further, there was it seems, an awareness of the awareness of non-human others. Of personhood. Of the peopling of the universe.

In fact, the theogony of this land was so vastly diverse, there were so many gods and goddesses, and yakshas, and devas, and spirits and asuras, and stories, referring to special places, to special forests, and mountains, and rivers and animals and plants and beings above ground, in the sky, and underground, under stones, in caves, in streams and lakes and oceans, that days were needed to narrate even a tiny fraction of it.

Isn't it interesting that recent scientific guesstimates of life diversity on earth is in the region of anything between 3 million and 100 million?! Every scientist friend of mine I ask about the latest consensus on species counts, shrugs his or her shoulders and says "it's hard to say, it could be 3-10 million, it could be 10-100 million, our estimates depend on the ocean deeps and rainforest canopy and the fungi and the bacteria, and on whether the taxonomists are splitters or lumpers. FAQ: what is splitting and lumping in the science of taxonomy? Want to know? Write in and I'll tell you!

Anyway, it seems in so many of our mythologies and cosmogonies, for peoples all over the world, the personhood of non-human others was honoured through story, often colourful and long, and fabulously intricate. For instance, the Kurchiya tribe in our area, take a whole night to sing the tiger hunt, they repeat it in full detail through song and dance. Imagine how many verses that would be! I remember driving four hours with Raman, a Kurchiya driver, and he sang this the whole way and he still hadn't come to the hunt itself. Dylan's longest song has some 50 verses I think!

Back to names: Jane Goodall named the great apes she came to feel close to in her studies.

Raghu Chundawat and Joanna van Gruisen named the tigers they followed in Panna. I remember

Alan Morley who helped reveal the birds of the Sanctuary to children, always talking about “her” and “him”, (“look! there she glides!”), never “it”.

Btw, is there an appropriate pronoun for hermaphrodites yet? I’d rather not refer to monoecious plants as “it” or to sporophyte ferns, mosses and liverworts as “it”. And “he” and “she” would not fit either, nor does “s/he” really work. I guess until English comes up with the perfect neuter personal pronoun for hermaphrodites, and one for asexual beings, “it” may have to suffice, but only provisionally and in great awareness!

Chambers has the following on “it”.

It, *it*, *pron*: the neut. of he, him (formerly his), applied to a thing without life, a lower animal, a young child, rarely (except as an antecedent or in contempt) to a man or a woman, used as an impersonal, indefinite, or anticipatory, or provisional subject or object.....

I have great trouble with... it.... for all the above definitions of it!!!

As I wrote the above paragraph I spied Wolfgang walking by. I called out to him: Do plants have gender in German? He called back: "feminine!"

Do tigers have names for each other? Probably not the same as we have, certainly not Hindu names, or Christian names or Indian names, or English names or Kurchiya names, and especially not scientific names. (There are no scientific names for individuals, the Linnaean system goes as far as species, subspecies and race/variety, ecotype, and I’m not sure if it goes as far as genotype these days).

But there is no doubt tigers know each other individually. And I bet that they recognize humans individually, whether or not we recognize them individually.

Rom Whitaker wrote me a note saying that pigeons can recognize 400 human faces, a study has been done showing this. Imagine that! Now how would one study this? I’m curious to know, I must ask him.

Can you or I recognize 400 pigeon faces? Or elephant faces, or tiger faces, or frog faces? Can you or I recognize 400 human faces?!! Other than those of movie stars and politicians?

Would you laugh if I told you that the plants can tell the difference between Laly and me? Or would you want a study proving it?

I remember Sandy talking about frogs as individuals, I remember he had named one Freddy. I remember Wolfgang seeking permission of rare plants whose flowers he needed. I know Laly and Suma recognize individual plants in the hundreds of species they nurture.

There is a large glossy *Nephelia* spider weaving the most wondrous web outside my room. I've named her Shakti and her tiny orange husband, Shiva. Oops another spider-man has arrived as I write! Now what shall I do? I can't really tell them apart! Should I spot one with non-toxic yellow paint, the way an entomologist once showed me? Shall I name him Shivum to acknowledge his similarity to Shiva?

Maybe I'll just accept my limitations, apologize to the three of them, and let them know that it's no worse than my difficulty with the Tibetans or the Japanese or the Ladakhis. I get mixed up real quick! I know some white people have trouble with Indians, we all seem to look alike to them.

I think it's all a matter of interest, affection, interaction, relationship, discovery, listening. Names can then follow. Or not.

One of the little activities we did with children from CFL when they came here last winter was to name individual plants. It was all part of a week-long study project on plants. We did a lot of drawing and story telling. We covered wide ground from adaptive strategies, to behaviour (duh, is there such a thing as plant behaviour!), diversity, ecology, politics of biodiversity, illegal trade, biopiracy.

I remember thinking I was attempting something that could result in fantasy. But, to me, fantasy was less the issue than detail. I was interested to see if detail and observation and contact and affection could be the “drivers” of the class, rather than whether someone was cooking up a story about a plant being sad, or whether it was silly to name a specific Begonia, or a specific Costus (some incredible naming happened!).

But youngsters are just so much more perceptive and fun loving, that it took little to develop a feeling/sensing discourse, rich in narrative and detail, full of questions, full of beautiful drawings, and essays and really interesting facts. The intricate biochemical world of plants revealed itself with little or no trouble.

E.g. one question that came up in one session, a sharing on amazing facts about plants:

"Plants eat light".

“What? Plants eat light?!”

“Of course! Photosynthesis, silly! What else?!”

I know I’m digressing. This is a long winded labyrinthine topic. I have lots I’m wondering about. Right now the issue is not the name actually, neither is the proper noun or even the common noun, or even pronoun, these are part of various human systems of reference. The issue is : the recognition of the life of that individual, to relate to each of these animals and plants individually, as you would to a being, a person. A person with his or her own experience of things. One that you can never know through the so-called “objective study” of their behaviour alone. (What is a person?! Who is a person?!)

Try it out! Look at the plant in your roof garden, that squirrel running up and down your apartment block, that tree you walk by everyday, name them and talk to them, then see what happens to your world, how magically it becomes peopled most abundantly!

Please refrain from the question, can it be done for all living things in each of our spheres? Or that even if it can, what’s the use? Cast aside for the moment the imponderable nugget that individuation may appear differently in bees, grasses, lichens, fungi, bacteria, mountains, humans, cows, rivers, dewdrops, corals, stars, planets and galaxies. Or in adivasis, soldiers in the army, corporate workers and New Yorkers. Or in children and adults. Or in twins, triplets, single

children. Or babies in the womb and people before they die. Let's not, just now, ask: what (or is it actually who?) is an individual?!

Please just use this as a chance to check your assumptions about things. As I am doing now. To realize that often we don't realize how we speak and think! And how these are related to how we see, perceive, act upon and experience the world.

Just because the plant is not moving in the same time frame as animals, it doesn't mean that there is no movement. Just because plants appear to not react, does not mean that they do not. Just because they are silent does not mean that they do not communicate.

I mean, why do we need David Attenborough to show us all this?!

Or why do we need proven findings from research in the high tech labs of Novartis on plant-plant exchange or plant-insect exchange? Or the latest conclusions from years of work of field biologists, who talk about trees signalling each other, or the intelligence of fungi.

Gardeners can tell you many such wondrous things, and so can indigenous people, and so can children! And of course, so can the plants and insects themselves! Talk to them!

"Hello Shakti, I see you've got some breakfast. Keeping some for later? How are you today? I see your web is worn and dusty in this corner already. Hey Siva, how's it going? You've been there in that corner since yesterday afternoon. All well? She talking to you? Btw I encountered half a dozen of your kind, all spinning webs on the way to the river yesterday."

Or I could sit here and write *about* them, *over* there: A female *Nephelia* spider is seen constructing a web on Monday Sept 27, 2010. 3 hours later this female is observed to be wrapping a moth in silk. At 0900 hours the same female is seen to be touching palps with a newly arrived orange male. The sexual dimorphism in this species is extreme. The population density of *Nephelias* in Medium Elevation Wet Evergreen Forest is in the order of 200 per sq km, extrapolated from a single transect of 50 m.

There was a time when I thought sentences like this. I don't much anymore, unless I want to demonstrate (to kids, mostly!), that there are many ways to speak about things, that a poem is as acceptable to me as a song as a drawing as a field log entry, All these are valid communications on natural history.

In our work with children we remain open to anything that invites and reveals relationship, and mostly try to alert each other about ways of thinking and perceiving that come of assumptions that there isn't relationship, or that relating is not necessary. Mostly we try to encourage seeing, and opening our senses and learning from our feet upwards. Finding each our unique ways to grow intimate with these others.

Now all this is a Pandora's box of issues: philosophical, linguistic, metaphysical, neurobiological, proprioceptive, anthropological, psychological, Nepheliological. I am not an expert in any of these areas. I'll probably shoot myself in the foot if I say any more. I'll probably be canned as a loony talking to spiders.

I'm just sharing some things I'm wondering about today or find interesting about our lives here: the fact that we do things like name spiders, and relate tenderly to plants, and have intimate encounters with mountains, and attune, or attempt to attune to the soul of a place.

Speaking of which....

Strange formations are happening on the new shola hill, also called Ranjith's land, Ranjith being the guy who sold the place to us.

Using one kind of talk I'd say there is serious goddess worship going on there, laterite lingams galore rising out of the fecund meadow brimming with rare flowers.

Using another kind of talk I'd say: heterogeneity of habitat is a necessary aspect of landscape design for maximization of floristic diversity.

Talk 1: Wherever you go in these mountains, there is a soul to a place. It is the plane at which earth, sky, water and life meet. It is revealed by the presence of very specific plants. The old peoples recognized this and saw them as sacred. The gardener seeks to honour this by placing a few large stones on a hill. They bring coolness and character, shelter and possibility for different plants. They help us remember who is where.

Talk 2: Multiple parameters determine the richness and species gradient of a system. Random sampling across the Western Ghats shows that aspect, slope, exposed rock, soil type, ground water flow are correlated with the distribution of herbaceous flora.

Both talks mean the same thing (or do they?). Here at the Sanctuary we slide between both. Often we are too shy to use the first and end up resorting to a watered down version of the second.

I can think of one particular bright boy who might shorten the whole thing and say: Hey! The hill is sprouting fangs!

It's also been a month of deep questions. By this I mean, I hear questions all around being asked by more than one of us, to all of us, to the world, and I'm sure each to himself/herself.

Let me tell you about a chat I had with Shailesh in the kitchen one day, a Sunday afternoon chat. I asked him, "Shailesh, what creates a viable community? A viable group? A viable relationship? A viable world?"

He said, swiftly, simply: "It has to be mutual. And there has to be a leap of faith. And there can be no force."

I immediately had a lot of "buts".

But what when someone does something that someone else does not like, when is this to be countered? Is it to be countered?

But what if someone is lazy, uncooperative?

But what if someone “misbehaves”?

But what if there is disagreement on what should happen?

But what if there is abject neglect?

But what if s/he is a stubborn cow, or a stubborn dog or a stubborn person?

But what if s/he is manipulative?

He said: “No game, no game. You can't play games.”

“But what if it is a game?”

“Get out of it.”

He said: “No force, there can be no force.”

24 hours later.

There was no electricity yesterday, so I couldn't finish this as soon as I was hoping to.

I'll end this Dispatch in bullet points with the happening **News** since yesterday.

→ Three of the plant team got lost on a steep mountain in southern Wayanad, and had to find their way down in difficult and dangerous terrain in the dark. They came back dripping blood (from leechbites), with scratches, bumps on foreheads, and hungry and exhausted. This morning the raincoats were found full of steamed and dead leech corpses. Laly showed me the slimy swollen pile looking like cooked fettucine.

→ Abhishek and Vasanth are here to discuss the removal of Australian wattle (exotic invasive species) in the Nilgiris. There is discussion of launching the “Green Phoenix”, a restoration movement to do with removing exotics, and bringing back natural vegetation in fragile areas in collaboration with other groups. [An aside from Abhishek. He was in an open jeep in Nagarahole recently and the jeep got stuck in mud and there was a herd of she-elephants with

young. One female charged the jeep, came running right up and bumped the spare tire at the back. The jeep flew out of the mud.....! They drove away, she did not follow!]

→ Canine frenzy is ebbing, it's been three weeks of sleepless nights and howling cavorting sex-crazed dogs. Polenta and Tasha have been in heat.

→ Esthappen spotted a sambhar deer in the new garden areas. I saw his hoof marks this morning.

And then if I go back a few weeks: **News from Aug/Sept**

→ Jan Woolf, a Dutch epiphyte ecologist, from the University of Amsterdam, visited us with his family. You may wonder what an epiphyte ecologist is. Someone who studies plants that grow on trees, plants and also lichens, that form communities up in the canopy of the rainforest. We had a lot of fun exchanging epiphyte trivia.

→ Devcharan of Wildlife Conservation Society spent two days here. He is doing his Ph. D on the Nilgiri Marten, a small carnivore that is endangered, and seen in our forest. Dev also plays the guitar, and I had a lesson from him. And believe it or not, just as I come to the end of this Dispatch, Vasanth walked by to say he saw a Nilgiri Marten in the Manisseri valley, yellow throat and all!

→ A new community member was adopted. Rao: an albino Great Dane, full grown, deaf, and blind in one eye. He is sweet, and right now a handful! We lost Helmut, sadly, who suffered for 18 months, but he went when he wanted to go. The dog pack stays at nine.

→ Charles (old time buddy of Wolfgang's) and Brenda, both now friends of all us, came by for the second visit this monsoon. One a gifted artist, the other a gifted musician, it was an honour and great privilege to have this time together with them. More on their gifts to this community by and by.

→ Thanks to my old friend George Mathew who is now a conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, I was introduced to Chris Lydon of Radio Open Source for an interview. Here is the link. Every now and then it happens that either a newspaper or a journal or (twice) television

and now internet radio, does a piece on the Sanctuary or interviews either Wolfgang or me personally. The caveat in all this is: it tends to then appear as if the Sanctuary is a personal venture of his or mine. Please remember it is not!!! I am thrilled to have met Chris, and to reconnect with George. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn to give interviews, and Chris's questions were great. Please take a moment and listen to his India series.

→ And last but by no means the least, I've saved this for the very end: the big BIG news is, and we are delighted to tell the whole wide world, that..... Sruti..... is..... expecting a baby! (And Sandy is too!). And all the rest of us connected to this beloved wonderful pair. Like Sandhya (Sruti's mother) said, this is a community baby! Let's celebrate!

Be well, all!

Warm wishes

Suprabha

