



"Space between Two Walls," Les Baux de Provence, France

Being an Environmentalist: Decisive Uncertainty and the Future of American Environmentalism

Take your well-disciplined strengths
and stretch them between two opposing poles.
Because inside human beings
is where God learns.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, "Just as the Winged Energy of Delight"

For decades, American environmentalists have seen the natural world under attack and taken up the charge of defending it from the exploits of humanity. Efforts to combat climate change, ozone depletion, loss of biological diversity, fresh water scarcity, and the like all reflect this sensibility. They express a commitment not to sit by and let humanity undermine the life-support system of the planet or otherwise degrade the natural world but rather to stand with nature and defend it from ecologically damaging assaults.

As this book has documented, American environmentalism's long-standing attraction to nature is coming undone. Nature is no longer an independent realm separate from human beings but instead part and parcel with the human world. Empirically, humans have erased the boundary between the human and nonhuman spheres; conceptually, we have come to see through nature's independent status. As a result, environmentalists are now living in and need to adjust their mission to a new world. We must find fresh ways of working on behalf of environmental protection in the absence of a stable, well-understood

notion of nature, and within a political landscape in which debate must go beyond the merits of nature versus humans. Such a challenge requires not only altering agendas, building new alliances, and engaging in the political process in different and more creative ways. It also involves, more fundamentally, being a new kind of environmentalist. Without nature around to orient one's work and life, American environmentalists must develop new understandings of their own and humanity's place on earth, and translate that understanding into political practice. Such is the environmentalist task in a postnature world.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have suggested that a new mode of environmentalism can emerge through what I have been calling a middle path. A middle path is a route into the postnature world that leaves behind the compelling attraction of either the dream of naturalism or mastery, and embraces a politics of ambiguity. In this final chapter, I describe the outlines of this middle path, and explain its promise for American environmentalism.

Political Ambiguity

Few see ambiguity as a virtue. In the midst of complexity, most of us want to find something secure to trust in, something around which to base our understandings and on which to rest our sights. This is also the case when it comes to environmentalism and explains why so many environmentalists, especially in the United States, have counseled staying away from questions about the nature of nature. Many fear that reflecting on changing understandings of nature will drag the movement into a kind of never-ending navel-gazing that will only undermine confidence and passion. The last thing the movement needs right now, they would argue, is doubt and indecision. In the face of today's ecological degradation and especially the gathering storm of dangers associated with climate change, the movement is looking for decisive action, and ambiguity seems anathema to clear thinking and determination.

As I have been trying to demonstrate throughout this book, ambiguity need not muck things up by dimming environmentalists' sights but can actually provide insight and the kind of perspicuity longed for in these difficult times. It can, in fact, supply confidence and direction. It can do so to the degree that it stretches environmentalists across the tensions that inflect environmental decisions in ways that demand integrity.

All of us live contradictions. Few of us walk the talk. The problem is that we are forced to hide our contradictions for fear that they will undermine our advocacy or compromise our public persona. A postnature age requires us to acknowledge this, and seek to move beyond it by enlarging ourselves to include the cross-cutting pressures on our environmental lives and forge direction as a result. In the preceding chapters, I suggested that a way to do this is to situate oneself at the interface between the broken dreams of naturalism and mastery, and approach environmental challenges stretched uncomfortably across the divide.

As the chapters on wilderness protection and climate change indicate, environmentalists may be attracted to the idea of harmonizing with nature, and be deeply devoted to preserving the organic quality of the nonhuman world and desisting interventions into so-called natural processes. But this does not mean that we reject all intervention or rebuff tendencies toward mastering nature. As shown in chapter 6, protecting wildlands and wildlife, while resonant with the dream of naturalism, takes a tremendous amount of human energy, including using some of the most sophisticated technologies and management techniques. Leaving nature alone as a wilderness protection strategy—reservation ecology—is simply not an option in our humanized world. Likewise, as discussed in chapter 7, leaving the carbon cycle alone so that it can do its "thing" is not a viable strategy for combating climate change. We have crossed too many thresholds to get out of the greenhouse gas business. We are now influencing global climate, and we better

recognize this and direct our actions accordingly. In both cases, we must concede how the imperatives of the day force us to span the naturalism-mastery divide and arrive at a middle way that carefully yet confidently operates in a postnature age.

Key to doing this is realizing that our orientations are not compromises due to contemporary exigencies but rather inevitable paradoxes that give expression to deeper impulses within each of us. While environmentalists tend implicitly to subscribe to the dream of naturalism and skeptics tend to subscribe to the dream of mastery, in truth there is a little bit of both impulses in each of us. Personally, I love the woods *and* the city; I enjoy hiking *and* reading the newspaper. When I am sick, I count on my body to heal itself *and* take synthetic medicines to outsmart and override my body's dynamics. Politically, environmentalists engage in the same kind of jujitsu. For instance, while we worry about climate change, and advocate reducing our use of cars, electronics, and other technologies to address it, we also depend on and employ extensive technologies to understand the character of climate change and forge paths toward responding to it. (Many of us also fly around on planes so we can lecture others about how to reduce their carbon footprint.) Likewise, we often counsel letting rivers run free in the sense of dismantling dams, reducing water pollution, and restoring river watershed features. Nonetheless, we utilize sophisticated water-sampling techniques, ladders to assist salmon crossing barriers, and bulldozers to affect this. Our actions reveal that we are quite accustomed to both lording over *and* harmonizing ourselves with the nonhuman world. The problem is that we are not confident in doing so. We can gain confidence by seeing what we used to assume was a conflict as simply the experience of living in a complex world in which the old standards of value and political engagement still murmur in the background, but no longer provide the secure insight they once did. A postnature age welcomes us into this world rather than pretending otherwise.

The Middle Path

To say that ambiguity provides a route toward confidence and integrity in a postnature world may seem to be just another paradox. How can ambiguity supply any sense of assurance and support conviction? Isn't ambiguity the opposite of confidence? It all depends, of course, on what one means by confidence, and how deeply one can experience it.

The dual dreams of naturalism and mastery have long offered their respective camps philosophical places of confidence. They have provided coherent worldviews and prescriptions for practice. Armed with such dreams, environmentalists and their critics enter debates not at square one—as if coming to environmental affairs each time anew—but with developed tools of analysis and plans of action. This enables them to categorize data, filter information, position themselves quickly within debates, and formulate decisive action. It also, however, blinds them to facts, contexts, and forms of interpretation that fall outside their purview, and creates an undue sense of smugness about one's understanding of the world. The dual dreams suggest that we already understand the world: we know what is most important to know, and need only figure out how our categories of understanding can be applied in given instances. This provides a type of confidence that can make one feel secure and assured, but to the degree that it does so by shutting out the unfamiliar, it gives one a shallow or even false sense of confidence. It offers conviction at the price of narrowness. With their deep commitments, the dreams lock out novelty and surprise. They bar their adherents from what those who value wildness have long considered paramount: the novel, spontaneous, and unbidden. And without this—without an openness to the different, strange, and untried—deep down it is hard to feel self-assured. In a paradoxical sense, confidence comes not from knowing everything and being able to control our experience but rather from knowing that we do not know everything,

and nonetheless finding ways to live meaningfully and work on behalf of life.

Ambiguity finds its spirit in wildness. We are most indefinite when we are not in control and when the world appears to us uncontrollable. At such moments we know, with certainty, that we do not and cannot know everything. This becomes a virtue to the degree that we embrace our unknowing. That is, we gain confidence by understanding the limits of our understanding. *This* is the key to preserving wildness in a postnature age. To appropriate Thoreau, one could say that being torn and unsure about the way of things *is* the "preservation of the world."

But what does *this* really mean? What is a middle-path environmentalism rooted in ambiguity?

The middle path of ambiguity involves cultivating a decentered environmental politics. For too long, nature and humanity have provided candidates for the center of our environmental concerns. They have served as fixed foci around which we organize our thinking and action. As political scientist Kerry Whiteside puts it, a center is a "unique thing endowed with certain properties allowing it to illuminate the value of other things. The goodness of those things becomes a function of their proximity to the 'center.'"¹ In other words, the dual centers of nature and humanity create ethical systems that assign value based on how close things orbit either the natural or human worlds. These centers do not disappear in a postnature age but rather become merely nodes or frames of reference that exert less gravitational pull on our thinking even if they murmur their ancient refrains. A decentered environmental politics means hearing and acknowledging their hum without being tied to it. It suggests that we can enter environmental debates with our eyes wide open—aware of our complex impulses and the theological poles to which we are used to being drawn.

What happens when we do so? The first thing is that we realize that environmental questions can no longer be a debate about the relative importance of nature *or* humans. They

can no longer be framed as trade-offs between what is best for humanity *versus* nature. Instead, they are about humans *and* nature, and the mutually constitutive dynamic between them. Because a strict boundary between the human and nonhuman worlds no longer exists, we need to recognize that life has only one fate. Yes, individuals and specific entities may have distinct destinies, but the humanization of the earth has set everything on an interdependent path in which human action and nonhuman realities share a common experiential and evolutionary trajectory.

Many American environmentalists worked hard in the 1970s and 1980s to protect endangered species and ecosystem hot spots in the developing world. They sent scientists to study the mating patterns, dietary requirements, and environmental conditions of various plants and animals, and policy experts to devise ways of cordoning off ecologically rich areas and threatened species from poachers, habitat destruction, and other dangers. In many cases, such environmentalists were successful in setting up nature preserves, sanctuaries, or other forms of legal protection. Despite such efforts, many environmentalists eventually realized that they were fighting a losing battle. Endangered animals were still disappearing, lands were still being encroached on, and ecosystems were still being destroyed. There are various explanations for environmentalist failures, but one factor is surely environmentalists' overconcern for the nonhuman world at the expense of the human one.

By circumscribing and patrolling preserves and sanctuaries, environmentalists often ignored the people who were living inside or close to such boundaries. As a result, environmentalists failed to address the incentives that people have to destroy habitat, poach, and so forth. Many environmentalists fortunately have learned their lesson. They recognize that you cannot protect wildlife or wildlands without paying attention to the well-being of people. Such understanding has spurred various efforts to include residents in decisions and practices associated with

nature preserves—for example, incorporating resident populations in local ecotourism, or making sure that revenue generated locally from preserving wildlife stays in the community rather than being exported to the capital or simply outside the area. To put it differently, it has led environmentalists to care about human needs along with the environment.

There is much good that has come out of such learning. One problem with it, though, is its strategic character. Environmentalists concerned with plants and animals in the developing world *have* to pay attention to human needs if they want to succeed in their wildlife protection efforts. They focus, in other words, on humans as a concession to achieve other goals. This is not to say that environmentalists do not care about humans but merely to note that the reason many of them have had to go into the human needs business is out of concern for the nonhuman world. Plants and animals are the focus; humans are the means.

We see a similar story in many environmentalist actions. In the parlance of environmental discourse, focusing on humans is a type of “brown” environmentalism. For too long, environmentalists have concerned themselves with “green” issues: the well-being of plants and animals, the preservation of certain landscapes, and the protection of ecologically rich or otherwise aesthetically pleasing areas. Over the years, they have been dragged into brown issues: urban health concerns, sustainable development, the siting of toxic waste dumps, incinerators, nuclear power plants, and the differential experience of environmental harm. In many ways they have come to these campaigns kicking and screaming insofar as such issues have taken environmentalists far from their conventional mission. The result is that in many environmentalist circles, brown issues are channels toward green concerns. They represent the necessary work that needs to be done to protect nature in an effective way.

This is, of course, changing. Today, the environmental movement has a strong wing focused on environmental jus-

tice, sustainable cities, green technologies, and other elements of sustainability understood in the broadest sense. Recognizing that we live in a postnature age further emboldens these efforts by inviting us to rethink the relationship between means and ends. Without nature around to serve as a good toward which to orient our campaigns or a goal in which human-needs work is merely an instrument, we must see humans and nature as fundamentally linked. As theologian and environmental thinker Thomas Berry observes, “We now in large measure determine the earth process that once determined us. In a more integral way we could say that the earth that controlled itself directly in the former period now to an extensive degree controls itself through us.”² This means that what we think, imagine, construct, and organize, we do for ourselves and all creatures. Conversely, it also means that our thoughts, fantasies, and constructions are not self-originating but instead develop in relationship to the more-than-human world of which they participate. The nonhuman world works through us to the degree that we are the main agents of planetary change, but there is also something beyond us. Just because the world has become humanized—with a human signature everywhere—does not mean that there is nothing except humans. A bio-engineered tree may express human design, yet it still is not a human being, and as mentioned, a genetically modified mouse may be programmed to develop cancer, but it is still a mouse and not a person. In a similar vein, while human beings today may have animal organs and even possibly altered DNA, this does not make them nonhuman. Political theorist Francis Fukuyama and others may refer to such people as “posthuman,” but this does not get rid of the fact that these beings are not orchids, frogs, or sandstone.³ They are not, to be sure, the kind of human beings that we have long conceptualized—with an essential and stable set of bodily and cognitive features (expressing a given human nature). But this doesn’t subtract from their identity as humans nevertheless. The most souped-up human—

equipped with artificial limbs, a monkey's heart, and changed DNA—is still human. And yet it is not simply that. All living and nonliving entities on earth are a *mélange*. We are so intermixed and mutually constituting that although we are different entities, one cannot disaggregate the human and the nonhuman, nor imagine their fates as separate.

This goes not simply for day-to-day experience but also for our evolutionary track. In a postnature age, we are on a coevolutionary adventure in which humans and the more-than-human world forge a common trajectory. One sees this with climate change. Humanity's evolutionary trajectory, which includes industrialization and the widespread use of fossil fuels, is altering nature's evolution in the form of climate change. The earth's systems are changing in response to human activities. The dynamic continues, however, insofar as climate change is now altering human consciousness and promises, if we are lucky, to set humans on a different industrial course. Of course I am using the notion of evolution here in a liberal manner, but it should be clear that the coevolutionary dynamic is at work in even the strict sense of evolutionary change. Whatever humans and nonhumans look like in the distant future will be a result of the interactions between them or, put differently, their bonded identities. *Human/nature* is what everything is about these days—a hybrid world in which there is no such thing as either humans or nature per se but rather an amalgamation or fusion of the two. Put differently, humans may be in the earth's evolutionary driver seat, but our actions are not self-originating. They emerge out of hybridity.

To realize that we are on a coevolutionary journey calls on environmentalists not to see human needs and nature's needs as separate goals but instead one and the same. Concentrating on human well-being is not a concession made in the enterprise of environmental protection; it is part and parcel of a broader environmentalist project.

The Middle Way of Bright Green Politics

Another consequence of a postnature age for environmentalists has to do with our appreciation of human ingenuity, technological prowess, and other dimensions of the mastery narrative that we have long resisted. American environmentalism has long sought to erect boundaries between humans and nature to protect the latter from the former. This has involved policing nature preserves and preaching restraint when it comes to using natural resources. A postnature age questions this orientation, and invites us to welcome and give greater significance to a different approach espoused by an emerging wing within the movement.

After years of urging people to sacrifice their material desires in the service of environmental protection, a new crop of environmentalists is claiming that humans need not hold back, restrict, reduce, or otherwise diminish our ecological presence but rather embrace that part of the human spirit that seeks innovation and enjoys extending our imprint across the earth. We see this type of environmentalism being expressed in efforts to design our way out of ecological woes, technologically surmount issues like climate change and peak oil, and leave the whole idea of nature behind as an anachronistic category of environmental analysis.⁴ This type of environmentalism is most focused on building sustainable cities, improving industrial metabolism, investing in mass transit, outfitting the world with solar panels, and a whole host of technically demanding challenges. This breed of environmentalist tends to be upbeat about our prospects and tempers a quiet dream of naturalism with a strong attraction to technical prowess. To distinguish this orientation from earlier movement expressions, some have come to describe it as "bright" green politics.

With faith in technology and a "can do" sensibility, bright greens certainly flirt with, if not get in bed with, the dreamers of mastery. Ordinarily this would concern environmentalists, and

historically the more conventional wing of the movement has worked to mute Prometheism from within (witness the many criticisms of the bright greens by their more traditional brethren).⁵ A postnature age signals that earlier antagonisms might best be left to the past, and that we can now incorporate, to a degree, the Promethean voice within the movement much more comfortably. For without the “god” of humanity behind the dream of mastery, environmentalists can gesture toward such a dream without worrying about abandoning established and cherished principles. One does not leave nature behind when one embraces technology, ingenuity, or humanity’s ability to control nature. Rather, one acts with eyes open to the realities of hybridity; one embraces the human/nature *mélange* in which we live. This enables us to develop practices that privilege neither humans nor nature but instead respect the blend of the two. For example, it would support efforts at adaptive management, environmental design, sustainable urbanism, and precautionary politics.⁶

At the heart of adaptive management, environmental design, precautionary politics, and other postnature orientations is the type of decentered orientation mentioned above, and a kind of stewardship mentality that seeks to cultivate the human/nature world toward health and sustainability rather than working on only one side of what we have heretofore taken to be a divide. One of the problems with the dual dreams of naturalism and mastery is that they both assume particular stances toward wildness. The dream of naturalism assumes that the way to reveal wildness is to minimize human presence. The dream of mastery seeks to stamp out wildness or, more accurately, sees wildness simply as an unwitting victim of our efforts to control the world. Postnature approaches enable us to go beyond the either/or frame by seeing us as caretakers and cultivators of the wildness both within ourselves and the wider world of which we are a part.

In his perceptive book, *The Case against Perfection*, political theorist Michael Sandel asks what is wrong with bioengi-

neering our progeny.⁷ He wants to know what is it that strikes many of us as disturbing when we imagine the possibility of genetically altering our children. For instance, he examines questions of risk: What if things don’t work out the way we imagine? What if, instead of blue eyes, our kids have no eyes? There are certainly huge dangers in altering human DNA, and we should thus tread lightly. Additionally, Sandel looks at certain principles that we have long valued like human liberty and fairness, and worries about their fate as we contemplate genetically modifying our species. Will genetically altered people be genuinely autonomous or simply subject to the genetic instructions imparted by their genetic architects? Likewise, if genetic manipulation is available only to the wealthy—which, at least initially, would be the case—might it breed an aristocratic race in which only certain people will be able to afford heightened musical talent, concentration, athleticism, and conventional notions of beauty? Much of Sandel’s book reviews and ponders such concerns. Sandel concludes, however, that our deepest hesitation toward genetically engineered children goes beyond functional or social consequences. Rather, it has to do with our sensitivity toward what he calls the *giftedness* of life. Sandel explains that our hesitation comes from an appreciation for the unpremeditated or unbidden character of our children. Our children arrive, in other words, unscripted by us or anyone else. As such, they present us with sheer novelty and unpredictability. For Sandel, to genetically modify our progeny is to embrace the mastery ideal, and snuff out the surprise, wildness, or otherness that birth manifests. Our children bring new worlds into our lives and human experience in general, and this, Sandel argues, is priceless.

Sandel’s reflections provide a metaphor for thinking about a postnature middle way. In a postnature age, although there is no nature to nature or humanity, this doesn’t bleach out the giftedness of our experience. The tension between the dreams of naturalism and mastery ensures as much. We may genetically

manipulate human nature, but this does not mean that we completely control human experience. As well, we may dominate the nonhuman world with our power, yet this does not mean that we get rid of it altogether. The wildness of the world and our selves may be muted in an age when humans continually delve into and seek to manipulate human experience as well as the workings of the nonhuman world. But it is not extinguished. Rather, it is part of the *mélange* in which we now operate. It is folded into the broader human/nature reality. The challenge for environmentalism in a postnature age is to keep this alive and present.

For Sandel, our attitude toward the giftedness of life should be analogous to our approach to parenting. On the one hand, we are responsible for enabling our children to flourish in the world. This involves teaching, materially supporting, and orienting them to be the kinds of people we think would be happy and contribute meaningfully to society. On the other hand, we must respect their givenness. We must appreciate them as gifts that we accept as they come. Our children, in other words, are not instruments of our ambition or products of our will. They have their own ways that we should cultivate and allow them to express. In short, we should behold our children as well as mold them.

Our dual orientation to parenting is instructive for environmentalism in a postnature age. Like children, the human/nature condition of our age is neither an object of our manipulation nor something that can simply will itself aside from our participation. We thus need to bring both our designing selves to the world of which we are a part, and a sense of humility about the real and preferred limits of our interventions. This means we take an active role in shaping our world, but also respect the wildness that harbors within that world, and let it express itself and shape us. We need, in essence, two types of approaches to our environmental challenges: a sense of acceptance for the given quality of things, and a transforming attitude that seeks the well-being of all things.

The Middle Path in Dark Times

For too long, environmentalism has been about doom and gloom. The modern environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s peddled in apocalyptic scenarios that aimed to scare people to action, and much of the movement still uses fear for motivation. There is, of course, much to fear these days. Today, one in four mammals face extinction; everything frozen on the earth is melting due to climate change; water scarcity is endangering millions of people and untold species; and forests are disappearing at alarming rates. If one isn't gloomy in this world, one might say that he or she simply hasn't been paying attention.

But as mentioned in the discussion about climate change, doom and gloom has its drawbacks. Fear may motivate some people yet it turns off many others. Moreover, it inspires people to advance specific warnings that end up discrediting the movement if they fail to materialize. Furthermore, fear pushes people toward desperate acts that can be inappropriate and dangerous in their own right (for example, the radical geoengineering schemes I discussed in the previous chapter). Fear has its limitations at the personal level as well. As Leopold tells us, it is hard to live in a "world of wounds."⁸ It is difficult to hold the sorrow that many of us feel in witnessing the desecration of our world, and the injustices and ugliness associated with this. Such sorrow breeds pessimism and despair, and this can often increase a sense of despondency and depression.

Environmentalism's doom and gloom has further ramifications. Let's face it: many of us as environmentalists are a pretty sorry lot to hang out with. We walk around angry at our fellow citizens for the ways they squander resources and fail to appreciate the preciousness of the earth, and voice a constant complaint about global and regional inequities when it comes to the distribution of the earth's bounty. We look around at our societies and find little to admire, and spend our days under

a dark cloud waiting, like Chicken Little, to be proved right. We appear as fearmongers or disgruntled folk unsatisfied with all that society has to offer, and hang our heads low and talk to ourselves and others about how things keep getting worse. Such a demeanor is not only a sorry way to feel; it is also an immense turnoff to those we wish to join our cause.

In addition to muttering complaints to ourselves and others, we also experience much guilt about our own lives. Ensnared in systems that offer few choices to live ecologically sustainable lives, we walk around feeling guilty all the time because so many of our actions fall short of our ecological ideals. Many of us feel remorseful when we travel in fossil fuel machines, eat foods that we know have been grown in ways that deplete the earth's fertile soil, or overuse water in places where it is scarce. We have created environmental thought police within our own heads that constantly monitor our lives and criticize us for our multiple transgressions.

Being an environmentalist becomes even harder as we realize that the battles we engage in transcend our lives. Environmental issues are not puzzles in search of solutions but rather perennial challenges that each generation must face anew. For all intents and purposes, climate change will be with us forever. As long as there are fossil fuels, anthropogenic climate change is possible. The same goes for threats to wilderness. As long as there are reasons to use natural resources and create waste, wilderness will be vulnerable. Environmentalism is a matter of eternal vigilance. It is a full-time job that requires of us a lifetime of concern and commitment to goals that transcend our own lifetimes, and those of our children and grandchildren. If environmentalism is all doom and gloom, this makes for a sad, guilt-ridden, and (often) angry vocation. Such an orientation has to be hard to sustain, if not fundamentally damaging to our own lives. Moreover, if environmentalism is all doom and gloom, it makes it extremely difficult to win converts. Few people get excited by the prospect of worrying about things

that resist easy solution and promise to be around well beyond one's individual life. It is so much easier simply to withdraw and go about our lives blind to the threats to environmental well-being. "Oh well!"

Understanding the postnature world relieves environmentalism, at least a bit, of all the worry. It helps us see that environmental protection is not a battle in defense of nature against a growing and increasingly powerful humanity. Rather, it involves safeguarding the world of humans and nature, or more accurately, the hybridity of which we are a part. Recognizing this should help insofar as we need not see every ecologically insensitive human act as another trouncing of nature and thus a lost battle but instead as another turn in a world that continues to evolve. We may not like the change of direction, but with a postnature mind-set, we need not understand it simply as another nail in nature's coffin. Thresholds will be crossed certainly, but new realities will present themselves, and we need to maintain a quality of mind and a movement spirit that can find the courage as well as resources to act in these new realities in ways that will cultivate health, justice, and ecosystem well-being. Our ability to maintain such an orientation rests on appreciating our unknowing. It consists in recognizing that no matter how much the world may appear overlaid by humanity, deep mysteries abide both inside and outside ourselves whose wildness is crucial to maintaining our own sense of well-being along with that of the world.

The unknowing I am talking about is not, of course, ignorance. Rather, it involves understanding what can actually be cognitively grasped, and what is beyond the reach of conceptualization, systematization, and general comprehension. In a postnature world, it should be clear not only that we *cannot* know everything but in important ways we *need* not understand everything. The urge to comprehend everything shares much with the dream of mastery. The urge to know everything is related to the impulse to control our world. If we understand

the inner workings of things, we can then manipulate all that is around us. Free from the dream of mastery, we can begin to focus not on knowing everything but rather on understanding what is important. A postnature environmentalism is about creating a livable world for all. These days we need to focus on what makes that possible, and how we and other living creatures can flourish in doing so. Traditional environmentalists may insist that creating a livable world involves reestablishing the boundary between humans and nature, and staffing the barricades. But this, as should be apparent, is not an option. What is an option is recognizing the collective fate of humanity/nature and then righting ourselves to the mysteries inherent in that *mélange*.

Environmentalism, especially its American variety, has traditionally been about protecting nature from humanity's onslaught. If we dig deep enough, however, we recognize that the idea of nature in this formulation has referred not strictly to empirical reality but has been used as a conceptual stand-in for the notion of *otherness*. American environmentalists have traditionally understood nature as that which is not human. It represents the self-willed world independent of conscious human influence. In this way it is the epitome of otherness. In a postnature age, much of this representation—in the form of wilderness areas, expansive landscapes, and species diversity and abundance—has been altered, often beyond recognition. But underneath the alteration, otherness still exists. To be sure, it is harder to see, access, and experience, yet getting in touch with it and trying to keep it not just alive but also present in our experience is central to a postnature environmentalism. Keeping otherness alive feeds our sense of excitement at coming to the edge of our knowledge and control, and serves as a strategy for making that edge the center of our politics. The more we honor otherness, the more we will seek its cultivation in ourselves and our world.

Our postnature condition calls on us to redefine environmentalism. As the divide between humans and nature disappears, we must realize that environmentalism as a *nature* movement is anachronistic. In its stead, we must develop a genuinely *environmental* movement. This means focusing attention on the world around and within us—as it is given and as it can be transformed. The given, in this case, is not merely the biophysical other-than-human sphere but the human one as well. We meet the given as a historical moment. Environmental politics is about bringing public power to bear on how we respond to that moment. We need to respond in ways that enhance rather than diminish life, and in ways sensitive to the long-standing values of justice, economic well-being, peace, and ecological sanity. Key to all of these is respect for and a desire to care about the other. Environmentalism has long used the concept of wildness to capture the other. The good news is that even in a postnature age, wildness is alive and able to be shared. Sensitizing ourselves to wildness is the future of American environmentalism.

Living Through the End of Nature

Kendy,
May our combined
efforts enrich the world
to greater justice,
environmental well-being, +
deeper humanity.

As a pleasure
to begin our friendship.

Paul

