

Small Wonders Podcast - Season 1 - Episode #1



*Dark Sky Thinking*

By Laurel Moffatt

*[Grand Central Station - stars on the ceiling intro then Grand Central Sounds]*

I went somewhere recently where you *can* see the stars, the real ones. Joshua Tree in the Mojave desert. I went for the day, but also the night.

*[walking in Joshua Tree with a little wind sounds]*

If you've ever been to this place then you'll know how wonderfully stark and strange it is. There's the twisting, furry Chollo cactus patches that look like trees that only Dr Seuss could have imagined. There are towering granite monoliths; boulders as big as buildings. And stretches of what seems like nothing, desert wilderness all the way to distant mountains.

People go to wilderness places like Joshua Tree for different reasons, to explore, to work, to holiday, to express themselves, to escape themselves or the strictures of their lives. To get away from the busy-ness of places like, well, Grand Central Station, both literal and figurative ones.

While I was there I met other people who had come for the day. There was an older couple who were travelling through the park on their motorcycle, trailing their music behind them.

*[motorcycle driving - one of those big motorbikes - layered with a song]*



The woman had long grey hair, pulled back in a single braid that fell down her back. The man had wavy white hair and a beard. He looked like St Nicholas, if St Nicolas happened to be a rough rider in full biking gear.

They stopped to eat a packed lunch at the picnic table next to ours. They lived in Montana, I think, but it sounded like mostly they rode their bike through stretches of wilderness.

There was a man and woman with matching bandanas knotted at their necks and pristine leather boots on their feet, shepherded through the park by a bossy tour guide, who told them what was worth seeing and what wasn't. He took their picture next to a towering rock that looked like a skull and then packed them back into a touring van and sped off.

There were two newlyweds who'd come to the desert in the afternoon to take wedding photos among the trees the park is named for. The groom wore a fur coat and a fedora, the bride a white lace bodysuit. They carried a bottle of champagne and a camera. They looked bizarre and beautiful and completely at home.

All of us were passing through the desert for the day, in a way in keeping with the purpose of the park as protected by the US Wilderness Act of 1964, a place of wilderness set aside "for the permanent good of the whole people". A permanent good...of the whole people. Wilderness is good for you.

If you had asked me when I was 20 if there was anything about a desert worth preserving I probably would have said 'no'. At the time I couldn't really see what the point of such wilderness was. All I could see was the absence of all comfort. (I wasn't really what you'd call an outdoorsy person.)



Back then, I could only feel how hot and dry the desert was, and, to my eyes then, how completely featureless it was. I probably would have said (in fact I'm pretty sure I did say it when I drove across America with a friend when I was 21) what this place needs is some water and some lights.

Of course the moment you start piping water and power into the desert, it's only a matter of time before you add some gaming tables, maybe a couple of slot machines, some cheap lodging. Do that for a bit and hey presto, you've made Las Vegas with lights so bright it's impossible to see anything else.

Maybe it's worth preserving a wilderness, if only to save us from all the wasteland we're so good at making for ourselves. To protect what is there, even if we can't see it for what it is at first.

One of the many benefits to places of natural wilderness is the reminder it offers us of who we are, as humans. Far from the comforts of home, the extremes of the wilderness remind us that we are limited in our own resources. We are creatures who are not self-sufficient in ourselves, no matter how tempting it is to think otherwise.

In the cold we must blanket and jacket ourselves. In the heat we look for water and shade. All through the day we need food and water and shelter, and places of wilderness remind us, in the scarcity of such comforts, how much we are dependent on things outside of ourselves for survival. This is both a humbling and necessary thing to know. We would die without it.



For all the marvels of my day in the desert, mineral, vegetable and animal, it was the night that ended up surprising me most of all. For if a wilderness is vast enough, another gift it offers is the sky at night.

Joshua Tree is a dark sky park, a place where the darkness of night is preserved, which is another kind of wilderness, I suppose. The places that have the darkest skies are called 'sanctuaries'. Sanctuary, from the Latin word *sanctum*, a holy place, a place that is set apart.

While it sounds like the thing that is being preserved is the dark, what you end up meeting in such a place is the light, that is, all the light that is there that we usually can't see while ever we are too busy making light for ourselves.

*[sounds of insect life in the night desert at Joshua Tree and then transitioning into the first little bit of Rued Langgaard: Music of the Spheres, BVN 128: II. Like the Twinkling of Stars in the Blue Sky at Sunset]*

I waited for the dark. I was not disappointed. Vega. Capella. Jupiter. The setting of Venus. And then more stars, clusters of them. More than I think I've ever seen. There were the familiar constellations - Little Dipper, Orion's belt, Andromeda, were there, but swimming amidst so many more. The bright bloom of the Milky Way took shape as we watched. With no greater light that I could make for myself, the fine sliver of the fingernail moon shone in the night like a beacon.

The number of the stars visible to an unaided eye willing to sit for a bit in the dark is astounding. Confounding. I lay on a picnic table in the park and watched the stars move above me. It felt like I was swimming through them.



Because of the amount of artificial light we use each night, more than a third of people can no longer see the Milky Way. This includes 60% of Europeans and around 80% of North Americans.

This means we cannot see the light that is already, always there. Nor can we, as long as we insist on lighting our own way in the dark.

Emily Dickonson captures some of the wonder of looking at the dark night sky. Wonder, but also strangeness:

*I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –  
I felt the Columns close –  
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres –  
I touched the Universe –*

*And back it slid – and I alone –  
A Speck upon a Ball –  
Went out upon Circumference –  
Beyond the Dip of Bell –*

[*I saw no way – The Heavens were stitched* - Jonathan Dove, Convivium Singers or St Catherine's Girls Choir]

What you are hearing is Dickinson's poem set to composed for a choir by Jonathan Dove and sung by [name of choir]. It is part of the work, *The Passing of the Year*, which Dove composed to honour his late mother. It sounds a bit like I felt, looking up at the sky that night.

There are benefits of the dark, for humans, for animals, including the fact that when you sit in the dark, you are gifted with a surprising amount of light. And the brightness of the light in deep darkness can show us how faint, how small, how very weak and narrow our own attempts at lighting our own way are.



I was speaking to my friend, Tilky, recently about how she had come to believe in God, *why* she believed in him. We were standing on a subway platform, waiting for my train. It would come at any moment.

She told me that she had gone through a hard time in life. The particulars were harsh and difficult. It was, in many ways, a wilderness of sorts. An existential one. And it was in that wilderness, *because* of that wilderness, that she said she came to the end of herself. Past her own circumference. It was only when she came to the end of herself, she said, that she found the love of God.

My train came. I gave her a hug and said goodbye, and the train carried me into the night, under a starless sky.

[*New York N train sounds*]

I turned her words over in my mind. The end of herself. There's a double meaning in it. The end, as in limits of, but also the end, as in, *the reason for*. What my friend found at the end of herself, at the limits of herself, was the reason for herself: the presence and love of God. She found in the wilderness, the permanent good.

My train rattled on. It began to snow. And even though I couldn't see them, I knew that above the snowflakes falling through the air, above the clouds, far above the light the city burned for itself, the stars shone and the night sky glowed with all the light that is already, always there.

[*train fade out into 'I Saw no Way' then into Grand Central sounds file*]

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### Links:

Bogard, Paul. *The End of Night: Searching for Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light*.

<https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9780007428212/the-end-of-night/>

“I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –” Emily Dickinson, Fr633 (1863) J378

Fabio Falchi, et al. “The new world atlas of artificial night sky brightness”, *Science*

*Advances*, 10 Jun 2016, Vol 2, Issue 6 [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.1600377](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1600377) ,

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.1600377>