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Coming Around the Bend: Thoughts on Cultivating the Unexpected

Sarah Rabkin

When I was in my teens, I came upon John Muir's description of his first glimpse across California's Central Valley, from the grassy crest of the Coast Range to the granite peaks of the Sierra Nevada. Standing at the summit of Pacheco Pass in April, Muir looked over a sea of wildflowers that stretched to the north and south farther than he could see. Nearly a hundred miles ahead to the east, the Sierra rose from a belt of pink and yellow foothills into purple mountains capped with a pearl-gray frosting of snow: "a wall of light ineffably fine," he wrote, "and as beautiful as a rainbow."

Reading Muir's passage, I thought about riding inland from Berkeley toward the mountains in my family's car.

We would wind gently up the coastal slopes until, coming around a bend in the highway, we reached a vantage point similar to Muir's. Peering eastward through yellow-gray smog, I beheld the great valley below, plowed and platted, the Sierra a dirty mirage in the distance. My spirits always sank at the sight. Only about a century had passed between Muir's viewing and mine, and the contrast attested to rapid and violent changes in the California landscape.

Years later, I taught a group of ten-year-old girls in an after-school workshop on nature notebooks. On the first day, as we sat introducing ourselves, I asked them to think out loud about nature. What exactly does the word mean? What is natural and what

The Sierra Nevada as seen from the Lick Observatory, Mount Hamilton, CA. © UC Regents; UCO Lick Observatory image.



... our ordinary surroundings, built and natural alike, have an immediate and a continuing effect on the way we feel and act, and on our health and intelligence.

—Tony His

is not? After the girls had talked for a while, I asked whether they considered humans a part of nature. “We used to be,” said one, “but we domesticated ourselves.”

We, wielders of combines and chain saws, bulldozers and backhoes, have indeed domesticated our selves and our surroundings — and now we are asking, with increasing urgency, what we have lost in the process. Among the spiritual satisfactions that we forfeit when we tame the landscape is that of coming around a bend, as John Muir did when he topped Pacheco Pass for the first time, and discovering something wide open and wild. Muir tried to keep his contemporaries from closing in on the last of the untrampled places. Today,

we in the West struggle to hold back development from a few remaining parks and wilderness areas, what Wallace Stegner called the geography of hope, in order to preserve not only the land but also the pioneer’s sense of limitless possibility within ourselves.

Towns and cities cannot substitute for wilderness, and yet they, too, can offer moments of private pioneering, of coming-around-the-bend. One morning I found myself in an unfamiliar Santa Cruz neighborhood within a mile of my home, on a side street where I had never walked before. I could hear the traffic a few blocks away at the grocery store where I shop every weekend, but I couldn’t picture my position in relation to other streets,

and suddenly I had no idea what lay around the corner ahead of me. In a small way, I was lost.

With the momentary disorientation came unanticipated pleasure. I had no mental map for this place — no internal photograph of what to expect as I gazed down the winding street. I became elated, charged with a sense of adventure. If I didn’t know what waited around the bend, it seemed, then anything might appear there, including a spectacular flower garden, a funky Victorian cottage, the season’s best blooming eucalyptus, or a stranger who would turn out to become a friend. I found myself savoring the moment and reluctant to return to familiar ground.



This brief encounter with the unpredictable reminded me of being on the trail and the road, and it illuminated one reason why I love to travel. Visiting a place for the first time, whether a mountain river or a roaring city, makes almost everything worth examining, because very little is dismissably familiar. Unable to slip the scene into a comfortable context of memory, the mind refuses to shut out any possibility, and the senses open up to every stimulus. The world is new.

As I wandered my small stretch of personal frontier in Santa Cruz that morning, I wondered what it would take to cultivate the traveler's openness as a perpetual state of mind, even amid the dailiness of home. Optimistic artists and dreamers do seem able to retain this ability to see their surroundings as if for the first time, while the more demoralized among us have lost faith in the idea that something unexpected, rejuvenating, and good could lie just around the corner. Most of us find our outlook swinging gently inside those extremes, but the environments where

we live and work — the shapes, smells, textures, and colors of the spaces we encounter every day — can affect the pendulum's tendency profoundly.

Although we have lost the literal frontier, we haven't shed our need for the inviting unknown place that lies ahead and beyond. Most of us live in cities, so preserving wilderness areas and establishing national parks, though essential, is not enough. We need to create inviting spaces close to home that offer a sense of mystery and promise, and that elevate rather than diminish our spirits. Public gardens, parks, and pathways, restored riverfronts, pedestrian malls, museums and cathedrals — all kinds of city places have that power. I remember touring a large Massachusetts Institute of Technology dormitory whose curving hallways produced a sense of intimacy in the alcoves outside rooms and an exhilarating curiosity about what and whom one would encounter around the next bend.

Perhaps the most magical urban spaces of all, at least to me, are book-

stores and libraries. If I were an architect or planner, I think I would pay close attention to the places where books are bought and borrowed. Buildings that house books unite two kinds of architecture, literal and literary, and I suspect they can teach us a lot about how to create environments full of hope and good will.

When it comes to design and furnishing, the best book places have their signature touches: the parquet floor, the vaulted ceiling, the loft hung with photographs of visiting writers from over the years, the rocking horse in the corner. But interwoven with the physical arrangement of space is a more complex design — one that changes with the inventory and varies with each visitor, composed of the invisible lines of ideas that interconnect books and browsers. In the best, one-of-a-kind bookshops, as in the most enticing outdoor landscapes, mystery and possibility are written into every nook and corner.

One of my favorite local bookstores sells a sweatshirt emblazoned with a



Photos courtesy
Sarah Rabkin.

line from Vincent Van Gogh: “I think that I still have it in my heart someday to paint a bookshop with the front yellow and pink in the evening ... like a light in the midst of darkness.” I don’t know whether Van Gogh ever painted his bookshop, but if he did, it would have been a Bookshop Santa Cruz or an Elliott Bay Book Company, not a franchised, sterilized, predictable space where the beep of the electronic cash register is louder than the thoughts of the browsers.

As a society, we can create the kind of surroundings that encourage joyful creativity in each of us — or the kind that drive us to depression. Someone who grows up in a bleak neighborhood accustomed to fearing danger around the corner has slim chances, I think, of learning to trust in the world’s miracles. Those who plan neighborhoods and commercial streets, who build fences, developments, and dams, who design buildings and parks, don’t determine everything about our surroundings, but they do have tremendous power to influence attitudes by shaping our physical world.

Domesticating ourselves doesn’t have to be a deadly process. We can plant splashes of unexpected color and scent in our cities and build hundred-mile trails around and out of them. We can restore urban waterways, fund art on the streets, make resting alcoves and mini-parks along crowded boulevards, create tree buffers to temper the noise and danger of traffic alongside pedestrian walkways, and push for bike paths and public transportation and cleaner air. And we can support independent booksellers and local libraries. Whether it is from Muir’s luminous wall of mountains or Van Gogh’s illuminated bookshop window, we need the light of hope, discovery, and possibility to shine on the places where we spend our lives.

