



ARNE NAESS

The Heart of the Forest

BY ARNE NAESS

Many cultures express awe of the heart of the forest. To be in the heart of the forest has been, and still is, considered something very special, something quite different from merely walking along its outskirts or knowing or feeling the direction in which you should walk to reach the edge of the forest.

A forest that is not deep has no heart. To have a heart, it has to have depth, but that is not enough. Sometimes we may feel it is adequate to say we are deep in the forest, but we may lack the feeling or experience of being at its heart.

Development at or in the heart of a forest obviously changes everything. A *poster* saying “Now you are in the heart of the forest” is ridiculous at best. We who have been brought up in an industrial country may, of course, with some justice be said to be oversensitive when we react negatively even to a little poster or to the cottage of a ranger—well-hidden and built

with exquisite ecological care—but painful experiences again and again have made us sore.

It is encouraging that people who endorse “progress” and continued economic “progress” and continued economic growth often retain the heart metaphor along with the respect it entails. They react against utterances that seem to imply absence of any idea of the heart whatsoever and then compare it with the square kilometers of the whole forest: “You will understand that the road makes practically no difference. You say the road goes through the heart of the forest. You mean the center? We may let the road avoid the center if you are happier that way.” Even enthusiastic developers reject this kind of crude talk.

We who sense the heart clearly see that a forest with such a road really is divided into two forests: The “roadiness” area is broad: hundreds of times that of the road itself. The forest changes into two smaller ones.

To be in the heart of the forest *implies* distance

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from the road but does not *mean* just “to be at a distance.” To be there and be conscious about it is to spontaneously experience (and understand) a kind of quality or set of qualities that is unique. It transcends awareness of distance as such.

“How great a distance do we need?” In a practically impenetrable forest: a small distance. In an open, sub-arctic forest with small trees: a much greater distance. It would be a mere scholastic exercise to go into details because “distance” here has much to do with our imagination: you look one way, forest, forest, forest . . . ; you look another way, forest, forest, forest, FOREST. The forest *fills* your mind; you are not a subject and the forest is not an object. The dualism is overcome.

To meet a big, wild animal in its own territory may be frightening, but it gives us an opportunity to better understand who we are and our limits of control: the existence of greatness other than the human. The same applies to meeting the greatness of the forest. We are not in control. Our eminent eco-anarchist Kropotkin in his little *Mutual Aid* (1955) tells us that people working in the vast Siberian forests have a tradition of shouting loudly and repeatedly before starting to eat their lunch brought from home: there may be a fellow human being who has lost his way and would need the

food more urgently (an example of mammalian broad empathy or identification as an evolutionary force).

A spontaneous experience of terror of being alone in a great forest is an experience of something real, the terror-alone-in-a-great-forest. We don't cherish terror, however, so it is better to reduce acquaintance with that part of reality. We should prepare ourselves, become informed, as we do before going out on a glacier, for example. The point I am trying to make is that spontaneously experienced negative characteristics of nature refer to something real, just as positive ones do. It is a task of wilderness enthusiasts to express their positive experiences.

Do contemporary forests in Europe have no heart? It would be misleading to answer yes, but the rate of destruction has been heartbreaking and, even if it is slowing down, invasion and fragmentation of undeveloped areas continue.

When a new road made for big vehicles is constructed where a week ago one had a path for walking and skiing, a new path through the woods is often carefully prepared, but ridiculously near the gigantic monster of a road. The preparation of the alternative path presumes that there is no loss of deepness of the forest as long as developments are out of sight.

How old must we be to spontaneously experience



Arne Naess. PHOTO: PETTER MEJLÆNDER

being at the heart of a forest? Small children growing up in a forest, even in small patches around their homes, may sometimes wander off straight into the “wild.” They turn from time to time, looking back. Is Mommy still in sight? Is big brother there? When they trust enough to go farther into the woods, little boys or girls, I suppose, may feel the greatness and independence of the wild, independence even of the power of parents and big brother. Their body language tells a lot. They don’t have, but they don’t know they don’t have, any control over the big world all around them. Don’t underrate children!

The outlook for the near future is grim, but I feel it impossible to believe that destruction will continue until there is no forest with a heart.

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