

## The Wolf Highway

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# The Wolf Highway

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*Maximilian Werner*

When my father Max was a young man his hair was long and dark. He could have been a body double for Kris Kristofferson, though as he has aged he looks more like a white-haired, blue-eyed Smokey Robinson. He emigrated to the U.S. from Germany when he was a boy. Since then he's lived much of his life in New England and even now summers in Bangor, Maine. Although he has long considered himself a dyed-in-the-wool Easterner and has on more than one occasion half-seriously asked me when I'm going to round up my wife and kids and leave what he calls the "cultural wasteland and hellhole that is the West" (to which I've always responded "As soon as you find me a comparable writing professor job in New England!"), my father lived in Mountain Home, Idaho for fourteen years, which suggests he has at least some basis for his opinion. Despite his past criticisms of the West, however, deep down my father has an abiding fondness of western landscapes, which may be why he did not speak one unkind word when he first learned of my research in Montana. In fact, he had expressed more interest in my work with predators than he had in anything else I had done over the course of my entire working life. I didn't blame him: I find it more interesting than anything else I've done, too. This wasn't the first time I had taken a biocultural approach to the work I was doing in the humanities, but it was definitely the most reinvigorating, exciting, and risky. My father didn't follow wildlife issues when he lived in Idaho (he was a mountaineer and rock climber then), but one can't live in a rural town like Mountain Home and not get a feeling for people's attitudes toward predators, which then, as now, he found repugnant. Regardless of how much or how little he knew about the plight of predators in the West, though, as an outdoorsman and life-long benefactor of wilderness (one of my favorite childhood memories is of summiting Mt. Katahdin with him and my brother), my father has always advocated for wilderness and wildlife. Granted, advocacy means different things to different people at different stages in their lives and includes everything from "I would not kill a fly" armchair advocacy to nonprofit work, monkey wrenching BLM oil/gas lease auctions, chaining oneself to a tree, lying down in front of bulldozers, and everything in between.

Having spent much of his life outside, and notwithstanding his love affair with carbohydrates (he says it's because he's a runner), my father is in excellent condition. But as a 78-year-old who now divides his time between Maine and Florida with occasional summer trips out West to visit me and his grandchildren, my father's current mode of advocacy consists of letters to the editor and supporting my work any way he can. Usually that means listening to me recount my latest discovery or idea or outrage or conversation with my contact in Montana, Bill West. But

in 2016 he timed his annual visit so he could join me on my third trip to Montana. I knew he was eager to make the trip when he showed up with a backpack full of mountaineering gear that hadn't been used for the last 30 years. This archaic assemblage consisted of an internal frame pack into which he had stuffed a -20 degree sleeping bag that had, in his words, "saved his bacon on more than one cold night," a sleeping mat that was so thin I wondered why the manufacturer had even bothered, and one of those two-person tents that, when pitched, resembles a sarcophagus. My timing probably wasn't the best, but as my father struggled to cram his pack behind my front seat the day I picked him up from the airport, I expressed some reservations about the reliability of his gear. Since then I've learned not to question the old timers about their equally old equipment. People are fiercely loyal to their equipment, especially when it performs well. But I think my father's loyalty may have more to do with the gear's symbolic importance, harkening back, as it does, to the halcyon days and places of his past.

Not surprisingly then, my father, whose own fond memories of time spent outdoors surely flashed before his eyes, read me the riot act. As evidence of the gear's enduring quality he said that back in the '80s the tent cost \$200 (on sale) and the sleeping bag cost \$400. When I told him he might get \$125 for both if he sold them today, he looked annoyed, as if I had asked him 100 different questions all at once. "Sell them?" he blurted. "Are you out of your mind?"

When my father can't quite believe that someone sees the world differently than he does, he talks in a tone that would be abrasive if it weren't tempered by humor and surprise, as if halfway through whatever he's saying he realizes he's on the brink of being offensive and needs to dial it down a few notches. I know because I do the same damn thing sometimes and every time I do, I think of him. Not an ideal approach to communication, in part because of how it resigns the listener to a reactionary limbo where things could go either way. It's the old question of which wolf is one going to feed (though if we're talking about actual wolves I'd say "Don't feed any of them: A fed wolf is a dead wolf"). The difference between me and almost everyone else is that I've known my father my whole life and have learned to appreciate his unorthodox style of communication.

"Am I out of my mind?" I retorted.

"That's what I am wondering," my father said.

I could already hear the softening in his voice. We had gone from DEFCON 3 to DEFCON 4 in the span of about three seconds, but I knew I still had to choose my words with care. I

considered saying something like “Takes one to know one” or “You’re nuttier than squirrel shit,” but I instead opted for a more passive approach.

“Not according to my last test results,” I said. My father just shook his head as if I had run him through the wringer.

“\$125,” he said, incredulous, as if we were now talking about the value of life itself. “I will *never* sell this stuff. Weisst du warum?” Here he put his hand on my shoulder and that, together with his decision to ask me why in his mother tongue, suggested he knew I might have a point and that the moment was not without humor.

“Because it’s not worth it?” I asked. My German is alright, but I couldn’t remember the word for *worth*, so I stuck with English.

“Nein!” he growled. “Because I’m giving it all to you!”

That night after dinner I used Google Earth to give my father a virtual tour of my study site in Centennial Valley before zeroing in on where we’d camp and roughly where along the wolf highway I wanted to set the camera trap I had recently purchased, along with a can of bear spray for him. Google Earth is a nifty way to familiarize oneself with the overall layout of a place, but I do not rely on it for topography. Compared to the actual terrain and gain in elevation of where we were going, the Google Earth images made the area look bucolic. Not like an English countryside, but not like mountains either. I used the cursor to show my father the route we would take to the wolf highway, but I would stop whenever I came to a significant location, such as the place where I found my first wolf tracks and scat, and where I had found a shard of obsidian that had likely been forgotten or dropped there by a Shoshone person. Perhaps forgetting that it had been over 30 years since he had done any serious hiking, he said it didn’t look too strenuous. And maybe it wouldn’t be for the guy who climbed Mt. Rainier three times and summited it once. I guessed we’d see. Not that it mattered. I was just grateful to have along someone I know, love, and trust, and who has a vested—or should I say *genetic*?—interest in my well-being.

When we left Salt Lake the next morning the sun was out and the sky was clear all the way to Camas, Idaho, but from that point on the clouds started to build and darken. By the time we reached Dubois to gas up it was snowing. I’m one of those people who checks the weather several days or weeks before departing on a trip and who keeps checking until the day of departure. Even better are the traffic cameras set up all along I-15. With two clicks I could see an image of the location, as well as the weather, temperature, and road conditions from Salt

Lake all the way to the Monida, MT exit. I knew there were flurries in the forecast, so I wasn't totally surprised or especially concerned when we pulled into Maverick and I got out, filled up, and studied the sky for sign of the storm's breakage. An eighteen gallon gas tank takes a few minutes to fill, though, and in that time not only did I not see any evidence that the storm would pass or abate, it actually started snowing harder. My father is something of a fried chicken connoisseur so I sent him inside to get himself a bag because a) he is never happier than when he is eating and b) it would give me some time to figure out a plan without him hounding me for answers I did not yet possess. The problem, however, was that while the change in the storm's intensity was gradual for me, because it was snowing lightly when he went in and heavy when he came out, for him the change was dramatic.

"Jesus Christ!" he said, shielding his eyes from the driving snow with his hand, adding ". . . is our Lord and savior" when he saw a little boy watching him from the open window of a truck parked next to us. The truck was pulling a horse trailer and I could see a single black, thick-lashed eye of the horse inside it.

"Nice save," I said as we both climbed into the truck.

"One should not take the Lord's name in vain," my father admonished.

"You're full of it, you know that?" I asked.

"In this particular instance, yes, but that's beside the point. Do you think he bought it?" My father dug a piece of chicken out of the plastic bag.

"Hard to say," I said, looking at the boy who watched us with bemused suspicion.

"Well, I did my best," he said. "Now what's the plan, Shackleton?"

The way I saw it we had two options. We could drive on and hope that the storm weakened or ended altogether once we hit Centennial Valley. Or we could try to find a hotel in Dubois and drive into the valley the following morning. In a town of 600 people, though, we had only two choices of where to stay and neither was especially appealing, mostly because staying meant wasting the next several hours watching TV and eating gas station food rather than getting out in it and doing what we came to do. My father has never been one to sit around, so it didn't take much to convince him that we'd be better off taking our chances and continuing on our way. A couple minutes later we were back on the interstate. In an effort to keep our minds off the storm and the fact that the situation appeared unchanged to the north, I pointed out

landmarks on the way, including the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station headquarters just outside of Spencer, ID, and the old abandoned school building in the town of Humphrey. At the time of our trip, the only thing I really knew about the sheep station is that it employs many people living in Dubois and runs sheep in prime grizzly bear habitat in the high alpine meadows of the Centennial Mountains. This controversial practice has led to dead sheep and predators, as well as calls by the environmental community to not only cease operations in the Centennials, but to defund the entire station as well. There have been some close calls, but so far it hasn't happened. As I did my best to tell a coherent story about the station, my father listened carefully and ate his chicken. I was just happy he did not ask me questions whose answers I did not yet know.

What I did know is that the Bitterroot Mountains to the west seemed to have had a dampening effect on the storm's intensity as we neared Monida and Exit 0 (or ground zero, as I like to think of it), a designation that seems fitting since the Centennial Valley truly does represent a starting point so far as wildlife coexistence is concerned. Without the benefit of having lived in the area and watched seasons change and storms come and go over the years, my interpretation of the weather was guesswork at best. Once we reached the valley floor it was snowing lightly and I could see the grass bending in a north northeast direction. That was the only evidence I needed to convince myself that we had made the right call. I watched for a couple more minutes and then told my father that I thought we had seen the worst of the storm. "That's good," he said, perhaps secretly grateful that he would not have to put his cold weather bag and tent to the test after all. Along the way we passed several abandoned homesteads with their broken corrals, caved roofs, and fallen chimneys. Some were right off the road and some were far from it. All were lonely. The roads leading out to them had long ago been reclaimed by time and nature, so it appeared as though the structures had been dropped there or had grown from the ground. People often describe ruins such as these as symbols of an earlier time, but many of the hand-planned timbers from which the ruins are made date back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus they are not just symbols of an earlier time, they are, like mummified humans, the persisting embodiments of earlier time itself.

The snow had dwindled to a dusting by the time we reached the camp site. After a tense drive in from Dubois, it felt good to get out of the truck, walk around, and feel the ground beneath my feet. My father decided to sit tight and polish off the chicken while I unloaded the truck, starting with his time capsule. "Go easy with that," he said as I struggled to dislodge his pack from the back seat. "Don't you fret, father. I am the master unpacker." After one final tug, I freed the bag and hauled it around to the side of the truck, where I hung it on my roof rack, first, to keep it from absorbing a thin layer of slushy snow that covered the ground and, second, to prevent my father's rebukes that would surely follow. By the time I had pulled everything

from the bed of my truck and had almost finished setting up camp, my father had finished eating and he was now removing the contents from his pack. Initially things sounded like they were going well, as if with each extracted object my father was whisked away to an earlier time and place. But then his sounds of pleasure and approval turned to sounds of confusion and profanity. I could hear him clearly, and though I will not repeat some of what he said, he was not a happy camper.

“What’s the problem over here?” I asked.

“Look at this goddamn mess!” My father held up a log of fabric that I guessed was his tent. Turns out that leaving a tent packed up for 30 years does not qualify as proper storage.

“Is that black shit mold?”

“Of course it’s mold,” my father said, disgusted and annoyed by this turn of events. “Grab that corner and help me spread it out.”

“What corner?” I asked. “I don’t see any corners!” Whatever chemical reaction had taken place, it had caused the fabric to congeal into a single mass that, when separated, was like peeling apart thin layers of onion skin. The fabric was so fine I was sure it was going to tear.

“Give it here,” he said, taking the log into his hands and, using the napkins that came with his chicken, brushing away the mold. After a couple of minutes of that he managed to find two corners and slowly peel apart the tent, enough to where I could now grab hold and help him. As we slowly unrolled the tent, however, a powerful odor of sweaty feet and cheese that had for decades been locked away in layers of fabric was now released into the air and I winced when it hit me.

“You should have told me I was going to need a goddamn hazmat suit to help set up your tent.” The bed of my truck could fit the two of us if need be, but I was not thrilled by the idea. My dog Rufus needs about an eighth of the space my father would require and I can’t sleep with him, so there was little chance I was going to sleep with my father lying next to me. Sleeping was already challenging; if I could avoid making it more so, I would. But then, as I stood in the tent’s cloud of noxious odor, I wondered if the smell would attract bears. It certainly was rank enough. I reminded myself that we were near the road and that I hadn’t heard of any grizzly bear sightings in the southwest valley for as long as I had been coming here. My father must have read my mind because no sooner had I dismissed the idea when he brought it up again. I wasn’t going to lie to him. “Bears could be anywhere,” I said. “They could be there,” I said,

pointing to the bushes above our camp. "Or there." I pointed to the ridgeline. "Or even there." I pointed to a boulder. "They *could* be a lot of places, but as you can see, they are not *here*. And besides," I said, looking through the miscellany of my father's things, "I'll be right inside the truck. If you need anything, just holler and I'll come running with guns blazing." I didn't have a gun, of course, but he got the idea. Then I imagined my father calling for me at the darkest hour of the night and the time it would take to pull on my clothes and boots, grab my bear spray and flashlight, open the camper top and tailgate, and then climb out into that darkness to confront whatever assailed him and awaited me. Maybe I should have said "Just holler and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"That's quite comforting," my father replied. "I feel much better now." Spread out and staked down, his tent was actually starting to look like a tent, but the smell remained. When we lived in Maine and my father was big into running, he wore his shoes without socks and the result was unkind indeed. My mother made him leave them outside on the porch because they smelled like a sewer rat had crawled inside them and died. The tent didn't smell quite that bad, but it was close and I thought sleeping in it would be like sleeping in one of my dad's old running shoes. Bears or no bears, my father was determined to pitch his tent, so I told him just to keep the bear spray within easy reach and yell if a bear came. I just hoped that his sleeping bag hadn't devolved into a putrid sock. I watched anxiously as he removed the bag from its duffle and shook it out. Luckily it was in good shape. We could have made do without it (for extra padding I brought a couple of old Coleman sleeping bags that my wife Kim and I used to zip together when we'd camp in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona), but we were both glad it didn't come to that, he for his reasons and I for mine.

That evening we warmed up some soup and split a sandwich for dinner. I had hoped to make a nice fire, but everything was wet, so we pulled up our camp chairs and held our hands to the flame of the stove burner instead. A seam of reddish grey sky hung above the Bitterroot Mountains to the west and the wind tore at the flame until finally it blew out. The stove had provided little heat and even less light, but without it the reality of the coming night hit hard. The feeling is hard to describe. I'm not even sure it *is* a feeling. Looking out at the darkening sky, and listening to the vegetable, animal, and geologic worlds go quiet, and smelling the cold and the thickening night, and knowing what I do about living and dying and the terrible luck of both, I would need a whole sky of words to account for the loneliness and longing I felt, the abject resignation and contentment. Down comes the night. I would need all the hours in a year to describe this dispossession, this absence and presence, this emptiness and fullness; a word neither congruent nor contradictory, neither near nor remote. I would need a word as dark and bright as the moon to say everything I need to say. When I can't tell if the clouds are outside my eyes or in, it's hard to know where I stand, to know if this mournful feeling is inside



me or out there. I don't know if my father thought the wind would stop blowing because I didn't ask. We sat there until we could not see each other's face anymore. We were two voices, almost whispering there in the dark. I had hoped we'd hear wolves gearing up for their nightly patrol so we'd know they were there and could add one more story to our book of stories that is much shorter than we'd like it to be. But all we heard was our own breathing and the mother of all howlers, the mountain wind.

Without a fire or stove burner to talk around, my father and I decided to call it a night. I held the light for him as he crawled into his tent and got situated. Once he had quieted down and had slipped inside his sleeping bag, I asked him if he needed anything before I turned in. "I'm all set," he said. "Bring it on!" Then I told him to be careful what he asked for and that I'd see him in the morning. As I walked to my truck I looked to the west and saw pitch black where I would have expected a lingering haze of dim light. I could smell snow on the wind and knew we were in for a colder night than I had predicted. I walked around camp and made sure everything was either secured or put away. Even before I had found my way to the bear country of Montana, where a dirty camp is an invitation to disaster, I had kept a clean and orderly camp. Many times have I seen camps along rivers and in the mountains and deserts of Utah and Arizona where gear, food, clothes, and garbage were strewn about, including goddamn dirty diapers, and many times have I been offended and saddened by the sight. I have not studied why some humans exhibit this unfortunate tendency to trash their habitat, but it can be summed up this way: As one behaves in civilization, so too shall one behave in wilderness. Perhaps there is a small percentage of people who, on entering wild places, become the opposite of who they are anywhere else. But I doubt it. What seems more likely is that people give free reign to their impulses—no matter how kind or cruel, beautiful or base—in the wilderness. No wonder we seek to destroy and preserve it as vehemently as we do. Wilderness shows us who we are.

Around midnight a sleet storm settled over the valley. Unlike snow, which falls so silently it could fall all night without my knowing, sleet is loud and I could hear it pelting the valley minutes before it reached our camp. The wind came first, though, and as it swirled and gusted and rifled through our things, I worried until I saw the scene in my mind and knew there was nothing it could take. I considered calling out to my father to see if he were awake and to ask if he were ready to ride out the storm, but I decided against it for fear of waking him in the unlikely event he had actually managed to fall asleep. Out here there are three kinds of sleepers: Those who can sleep because they don't know any better, those who can sleep because they do, and those who can't sleep because they're somewhere in between. Although this was my father's first trip to the valley, and as much as I wanted to believe that he was having the sleep of his life, he knew we were in bear country. And that does something to the

mind. Odds were he was lying there, fully awake and anxious, in his cheese sarcophagus. But as long as there was a chance he was able to put aside the knowledge of his predicament and drift off, I held my tongue. And besides, I could keep an ear on things. I had tried to keep an eye out, too, but when I shined my light out the window and into the night, all I could see was a beaded curtain of pea-sized sleet falling 25 miles per hour. My father and I have similar comfort levels in the wilderness, but I had more experience with and knowledge of the valley, so it was up to me to keep us safe. By then I had endured many fitful nights in the valley; I had laid awake for more hours than I had slept. I might complain if these night studies hadn't taught me to distinguish significant from insignificant sounds. But what wilderness giveth, wilderness taketh away. For in the throes of the storm, the only sound was the sound of pounding sleet. Ten bears could be in our camp having the time of their lives and I wouldn't know it.

Grizzlies were at least six weeks away from hibernation, so it wasn't that they weren't out and about. Not only were they out, they were driven by hunger. A bear would have to find us first, but their sense of smell is excellent. I know that much. But what effect if any did the falling sleet have? Might it make odors, as well as sounds, less apparent? As is true with most physiological processes, I had no idea how smell works in humans and other animals, so at the time all I could really do was speculate. I would later learn, however, that our (and presumably other animals') sense of smell is indeed affected by the weather. In colder temperatures, the molecules in the air slow down and many smells become less pungent. But intense smells, like the smell of a gut pile or carcass, for instance, or the noisome odor of a cheese sarcophagus, become more intense because the air is not diluted by other smells with which the intense smell must compete. I still don't know to what extent the falling sleet might affect this olfactory dynamic, but the brain in my gut tells me it probably has little effect on the bear's ability to detect a malodorous tent and the stress-and-chicken breath of the man inside it. However deep my musings may have been, I was still hyperaware of the world outside my head. I could feel myself straining to hear the smallest deviation from the monotonous white noise of the plummeting sleet and it was exhausting. The strain was worth it, though, when I thought I heard my father call out. I popped up like a jack-in-the-box and fumbled for my flashlight. Two or three anxious seconds later I found the flashlight and shined it on my father's tent.

Humans have a well-documented habit of imagining the worst possible outcome of potentially negative or threatening events. In fact, it's so well-documented that psychologists have coined a word for it: *awfulizing*, which describes our tendency to imagine something being as bad as it can possibly be. That's basically what I did as I stared out from the back of my truck, fully expecting to see a grizzly bear assailing my father's tent. The flip side of *awfulizing*, however, is

that, in today's world at least, there is usually no basis or reason for it. And yet most of us do it anyway, and in earnest. It's an odd business considering how unpleasant it is to imagine such negative outcomes for ourselves and for our loved ones, but it becomes much less so if we consider the primal context within which the tendency was selected. At the time modern humans emerged, the world was a much more dangerous place and *awfulizing* would have given us the edge we needed to prepare for and survive those dangers. Saber tooth cats, cave bears, and other prehistoric predators that preyed on our early ancestors don't prowl Centennial Valley as they did the savannah of Pleistocene Africa. But there *are* grizzly and black bears, wolves, and mountain lions out searching for food there. Chances are low that a grizzly will visit our camp and find my father (and his tent) toothsome, but as long as it's possible to be predated, the cost of *awfulizing* will have been both appropriate and worth it, especially for my father, who, as I watched the sleet bombard his tent, seemed none the wiser.

By 4:30 a.m. the slow-moving storm had moved down the valley, the mountains on either side channeling the dark clouds east toward Henry's Lake. *It's somebody else's storm now*, I thought as I dug down into my sleeping bag for my socks and long johns. All night long I had gone back and forth, giving and rescinding permission to ignore the alarms of my lizard brain, alternately snatching ten minutes of slumber here and thirty minutes there before being thrust back into wakefulness by some unspecified fear. Once the storm was gone and I was again in familiar sonic territory, when the world all around is so quiet that I can hear even the smallest disruption, I slept for two unbroken hours and awoke just after dawn. In the wilderness, few sights are as comforting as the just-risen sun. Try as I did to preserve the quiet of the morning as well as my father's sleep, midway through lowering the tailgate, my lower back felt like it was going to snap so I dropped it and woke my father. "Good morning," he grumbled from inside his tent. "How'd you sleep?" I walked over, unzipped his tent, and peered inside. I told him that as usual I slept like royal shit and that, again as usual and despite a stiff back, I felt sufficiently rested and ready to go. "Good, then you can make the coffee," he said, disappearing into his sleeping bag. A couple minutes later I heard him snoring. Longevity scientists like to argue about how long the human body is designed to last. Some say around 90 years. Others say 115 years. Still others say even longer than that. I'd like to ask them if their estimates include the back and, while I'm at it, teeth, which don't seem cut out for more than 50 years let alone 115. I guess I'm also a little baffled by the importance of the question itself. Why speculate about how long humans can live? More importantly, what good can possibly come from living for 115 years or longer in the first place? How could that possibly be in the interests of the organismic and planetary good? Of course these questions aren't for science to answer. The best science is policy neutral. The possibility and desirability of living to 115 years of age are two separate things. I'd suggest that philosophers attempt to answer these

questions, but rumor has it all they do is argue about reality, decide that nothing is real, and then go to lunch.

While my father drank his coffee and eased into the morning, I walked around camp and looked for the tracks of visitors in the thin layer of sleet covering the ground. That it was only a couple of inches and not half a foot deep came as a surprise given how long and hard it had stormed. Half the storm had fallen as rain. The air was heavy with the sweet smell of it, and fog steeped with the smell of wet grass and frost had settled on the valley floor while high above us the Centennials were sashed with clouds. On the outskirts of camp I found the tracks of a small canid, probably a fox, which had come to investigate. I could see how it had walked a short distance and then stopped and sat down, perhaps in an effort to decide if coming any closer was worth the risk. Perhaps this. Perhaps that. Seems that for each thing I know there are a hundred things I don't. But not knowing is fine as long as I don't make decisions that affect the well-being of that which I do not know. I will never know why the fox did not wander farther into camp, but I take pleasure in wondering about all the possible reasons, including the smell of humans, the presence of a larger predator such as a coyote, a mating vocalization, or the guttural and forbidding sounds of my father's snores.

With our morning rituals behind us, my father and I went over our plan for the day. Then I gave him a more thorough tutorial in how to use the bear spray, though thinking about it now I suspect my teachings left much to be desired, particularly when it came to when and where to spray in order to achieve the maximum effect. My father is a quick study, though, and he had committed to memory my abbreviated lesson in no time and we soon found ourselves on the trail and heading up the mountain to the wolf highway. I must confess to complacency while in my father's presence, not because I thought he was going to protect me, necessarily, but because of what can only be described as his disarming penchant for silliness. Not until we came to a steep ascent up to the ridge and I chose to go straight up and my father opted for the diagonal and less strenuous route along the tree line did our paths separate and the complacency end. Before I discovered Montana, I spent most of my outdoor time fly fishing the streams and rivers of Utah. Sometimes I would take beginning fly fishers, which created a minor dilemma. Do I teach them what I know? Or do I instead let them learn through experience? Similar questions came to mind as I watched my father walk along the tree line, though there probably should have been no question that I needed to teach him everything I could for no other reason than fly fishing in Utah is not hiking in grizzly bear country in Montana. I wouldn't knowingly put my father in harm's way. I just didn't think I knew enough myself to be advising anyone on what they should or should not do. Were we to take that same hike today, however, I would have stayed with him and kept 50 feet of open space between us and the tree line. Although I was high and he was low, I kept an eye on him and I'm

sure he kept an eye on me. Whenever I lost sight of him I'd call out and each time my father seemed a little surprised, as if he weren't quite sure what all the fuss was about, nor why I might need to know where he was at every given moment. But I knew what the fuss was about, by god. Splitting up and dividing our mass and attention was a bad call no matter how I look at it. Reminds me of how my wife Kim and I used radios to stay in contact whenever we went fishing in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona where black bears are numerous, and what I fool I had been to ever let her out of my sight.

When I reached the place where I had found the obsidian shard and wolf tracks on my previous trip, I climbed on top of the eroded knob of basalt and guided my father there with my voice. The clouds I had seen from camp were still up there, too, and had my father not been wearing the blaze orange vest I had asked him to wear, I wouldn't be able to see him if he were 15 feet in front of me.

"What an interesting day," he said, using a kerchief to wipe the slurry from his nose.

"It's about to get more interesting," I said.

"And why is that?" My father looked up at me with a quizzical look on his face.

"Look there," I said, pointing to a single set of wolf tracks in the ash-colored earth. My father took a knee and, careful not to disturb the ridges that had formed between the thumb pad and toes, touched a track with his fingers.

"My first wolf track," he smiled. "This is fresh."

As far as I knew, the only thing my father had ever tracked was the stock market. I considered making that point, but the moment was too important, and the fact is he was right. The track was so fresh I could feel the hair raise on my neck.

"Do you need a minute alone?" I said. Initially I was joking, but I ended the question on a serious note when I remembered that seeing a wolf track for the first time is no joke.

"I'll be alright," my father said, taking a long final look at the track before standing up and brushing the dirt from his knee.

"Looks like he went through there and on up the ridge," I said, this time using my hiking staff to point to a bottleneck of pine trees, beyond which was an ascent like the one we had just put behind us.

"Is that where we're going?" My father took a swallow of water and then began eating a granola bar I had given him.

"Yes," I said. "See how it flattens out up there?"

My father had food in his mouth, so he nodded.

"That's the wolf highway."

"Very good," my father said, the food now swallowed and safely inside his stomach.

Given how anxious I had felt when my father and I were apart, I told myself that we would stay together from here on out. But the moment we started climbing again, I quickly pulled ahead, both because of my already faster pace and because the closer I got, the more excited I became. When I reached the top of the ridge, I looked toward the wolf highway, which lay 150 yards to the south. The clouds were heavy there and in a moment of wishful indulgence I imagined a wolf walking out of them, vanishing and reappearing with each stoke of its storm-yellow eyes. Although there is nothing mystical about my reverie (wolves have been walking in and out of clouds for as long as they've existed), no other animal makes it easier to believe in magic. I can see how someone with a well-developed sense of mysticism might believe that the wolf and the clouds are causally related. But the only obvious similarities between clouds and my imaginary wolf are that they are both gray and quiet, and can be found in higher elevations. And yet these essentially meaningless similarities may be all that is needed to have a mystical or religious experience. It occurred to me that reveries like these are emblematic of all religious experience. Why we would take perfectly explicable information and make it inexplicable (or make wolves out of clouds) is puzzling indeed, and yet our tendency to do so is real and ubiquitous.

I looked back at my father and could see he was going to be a while. Having just come from Florida, he was surely feeling the elevation and its effects. Playing lots of tennis doesn't exactly prepare one for the mountains, yet I knew he would get his second wind before long. He was fine, but I could think of a few times when I had been out on a hike or a camping trip, away from any help, and had fallen ill. I was just happy that my own body was in good working order. And it felt good to be there with him. One day I hoped to return with my own son and daughter and hike these mountains and listen to storms and huddle around wolf tracks. Unlike in many environments I inhabit, in the wilderness I can really *be* with people. But this moment of reflection was short-lived. Now that I was still I could feel sweat sliding down the chilled runnel of my spine. I unshouldered my pack, shed two of four layers, and stuffed my sweater

inside the pack. My coat wouldn't fit without a fight, so I strapped it to the top of my pack and returned the load to my shoulders. When I was in my 20s, my German aunt Ellen, after I had told her all the things I couldn't wait to do, told me that patient at 20 is dead at 20. I remember because it was the first time anyone had actually given me permission to be impatient. I wondered what she would say about my impatience now as I looked back and forth between the wolf highway and my father very slowly making his way up the mountain. Impatient at 48 is pitiable at 48? I don't know, but I doubt she would expect me to stand a mere 150 yards from my destination as my body stiffened with the cold. I took one last look at my father and the landscape around him, decided he would be alright, and then headed south along the ridge toward the wolf highway.

There, as elsewhere, icy snow covered the ground and I could see tracks on both sides of the trail and one large set walking down the middle of the trail itself. Had the snow been any deeper, the tracks would have been white and, without contrast, harder to spot from so far away. Like words written in white ink. But the wolves that made them were heavy enough that their paws displaced and melted the snow, leaving behind their dark imprints.

What happened next is hard to explain, and I'm reluctant to try precisely for that reason, but as I neared the place on the trail where the tracks were the heaviest, I had the unmistakable feeling that the wolves had been there just minutes or moments before, as if I had walked into a draft created by their passing. The feeling became even more powerful when I knelt down and touched the tracks in the center of the trail. They were almost identical to my own tracks in terms of distinctness and consistency, and this knowledge sent a rush of ecstatic fear through my body and my arms tingled down to my fingertips. A moment later the rush subsided and the world was subsumed by silence. I felt or thought or supposed that if I ran south up the trail and into the trees toward Idaho I might glimpse wolves, but I was torn by caution, the need to wait for my father, and the pleasure of the moment. When I looked back I could see his head floating above the ridgeline. I didn't run over to him, but I didn't walk, either. It was more of a weird jog, the result of trying to move quickly and quietly and at the same time keep a low profile.

"They were just here!" I whispered as loud as I could, but I was still too far away for my father to clearly hear me, as if I were having one of those dreams in which I've had something crucial to say, only to find that I could not speak.

"What?" he whispered back, the taut expression on his face full of worry.

"We just missed them," I said. My father and I were now standing a few feet apart, so there was no need to whisper.

"Who?" My father looked all around, apparently searching for whomever or whatever we had just missed.

"The wolves." I motioned to the track-filled area behind me.

"Did you see them?" My father asked.

"No," I said emphatically.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I don't either." And that was the truth. I didn't understand how I could be so sure the wolves were just here. But what were we going to do? Stand there whispering in the snow and clouds while wolves were on the move and I invented words to explain a prelinguistic state of knowing? This was neither the time nor place to explain. It was, rather, the time and place just to be.

Another thing I won't try to explain is why, as we neared the densely tracked area, my father and I kept whispering. But in the euphoria of the moment, I went with it. We discussed continuing on up the mountain in search of the wolves, but decided not to press it. We had had a good day so far. Better to leave well enough alone. As I walked around, looking for a good place to set the camera, my father warned me to tread lightly for fear that the wolves would smell me and avoid the area. I told him not to worry about it as I unzipped and peed on a nearby tree. He muttered a couple of surprised expletives and I told him that if we were hunting or trapping wolves walking around urinating would clearly fall outside the scope of best practices. But, I continued, not only were we not hunting or trapping, I found the whole idea utterly barbaric and revolting and would not soon forgive him for prompting me to think about it.

"And besides, I *want* the wolves to know I am here," I whispered. "I have no interest in trying to deceive them. That's not what this is about."

"Even if it means you'll never see them?" he asked.



“Even if it means I’ll never see them.” By now I had my head down as I dug through my pack in search of the camera trap. When I looked up I saw my father urinating on sage brush on the opposite side of the trail.

“What in Sam Hell do you think you’re doing?”

My father looked back over his shoulder. The half of his face I could see looked amused.

“I am emptying my bladder and freeing this little bush from the ice’s grip. Is that a problem?”

“Only if you think an overabundance of human urine in a wild place is a problem,” I said.

“Now you’re being ridiculous,” he laughed.

Having spoken with Bill, I knew the key to placing the camera was to find a place that was concealed from would-be thieves and at the same time close enough to the trail so that if the wolves passed through here again they would trigger it. A multigenerational wall of shrubs and pines grew along the east side of the trail, so finding a place that would be close enough would not be an issue. I think my father sensed that play time was over because he sat quietly on a rock and watched as I walked back and forth along the trail and tried to gauge what other humans might see. As I looked into the trees, though, I realized that humans would likely look straight ahead unless they were compelled to do otherwise. Just to be safe, I chose a three or four year old pine that had grown a little farther east and behind the other trees. I had already tested the camera and captured a couple of ten second videos of *Felis catus* roaming through my back yard, so I knew the rough dimensions of its field of view and how close the animal would have to be to trigger it. After determining the height at which to set the camera, I used the accompanying strap to attach it to the tree. I was careful not to damage the branches and foliage that helped conceal the camera. One could spend hundreds of dollars on all manner of theft prevention devices, including permanent posts, locks, chains, decoys, and metal security cases, but rather than engage in what one manual describes as “a costly arms race with thieves and vandals,” I decided to roll the dice and rely on my own wiles to outsmart any thieving bastard that may come near the camera. Once the camera was in place, I again walked the trail to and fro, first on all fours and then as a human. Because of how the trees had grown, when I walked from the north I could not see the camera even when I looked for it. The view coming from the south was a little dicey, but even then it took time for me to see the camera, whose black case had vanished almost completely against the damp bark of the tree. I had done what I could to see the world through wolf and human eyes. And—though I don’t say this very often insofar as humans are concerned—I liked what I saw.

Tired and happy from our travels, my father and I rolled into Salt Lake around dinner time the next day. The weather had been good, the traffic light, and the road dry. Without these external stressors I was free to revisit the salient moments of our trip. I had to smile when I thought of my father's rank and sullied tent and how, on the trip down from the wolf highway, he was screwing around and accidentally discharged his bear spray. It wasn't much, but he managed to get a little in his nose and mouth, which was enough to cause irritation. And the look of surprised fear on his face, as if he had opened the door for something terrible and was just waiting for it to enter. It was a funny and important moment, because now we (but especially he) had a good idea of the spray's effectiveness. For if a few droplets could cause that much discomfort, what would an entire can do? I thought about other things, too. And my musings went well, with one exception: As hard as I tried, for the life of me I could not remember the exact moment when I turned on the camera. I must have gone over the process ten times, and each and every time I came to a corner around which I could not see. I wanted desperately to ask my father what he remembered and if he had noticed me flip the switch, but the thought of revealing that I—as the principal investigator, as the man with the plan—would have forgotten to do *the* most important thing was unbearable. Four hours is a long time to spend with any given thought, especially when the implications of that thought are crushing. So I did what I could to protect myself from the possibility of my misstep and made small talk with my father, sang along with the radio, and made a plan for my next trip to Montana, which could not come soon enough.

A couple days later my father and I stopped for breakfast on our way out to the airport. We talked about Montana, our lives, and our plans for next summer. "I will fly out and visit you next time," I told him. Looking at him across the table, I thought back to when I was a kid and we were living in Maine how he would often make us breakfast and then sit down and watch us eat it. I remember offering him some of whatever he had made us and he'd decline and say how watching us enjoy a meal he had made brought him more enjoyment than eating ever could. But the man sitting across from me now seemed to be enjoying his pancakes every bit as much as my company. Some things change and some things don't. I found it odd that even at 48 I was still my father's child and would be for as long as he lives. *Don't start getting all sentimental*, I told myself. But of course the moment one has to remind oneself not to get sentimental it's already too late. Next thing I knew I was thinking about all the other things it's too late for, and down the rabbit hole I went. "What's on your mind, Little Max?" my father asked. He could see that I was somewhere else and was trying to help bring me back, but calling me Little Max—a nickname I hadn't heard since I was a kid and people wanted to distinguish me from my father, Big Max—did not help. "Nothing important," I lied. Then I took a bite of egg and swallowed it down with the lump in my throat. I didn't want my father to feel

what I was feeling, so I looked down at my plate and tried to pull myself together. But all it took was that one moment of me not looking him in the eye for him to let down his guard. “At my age, everything is important, my boy,” he said, his eyes glassy. I hated to see him go, but that’s how it had always been in my family. Why should this time be any different? I know what my father would say: It’s different because it’s one of the last. But that’s just what living things do. They come and they go. I’ve known this my whole life and it has never made his departure any easier.

Kim and the kids were gone when I got home, so I made a mug of tea and called Bill and told him everything that had happened on my trip to Montana. Bill has no illusions about the extent to which tradition and human emotions affect attitudes toward wildlife and wildlife policy, but facts and science lie at the heart of his worldview. As much as I try to remember that when I talk to him, there have been times when my emotions overwhelmed me and irrational thoughts snuck in. If Bill is 85% rational and scientific and 15% emotional, I’m probably 60% emotional and 40% rational, which I attribute mostly to my training as a humanist. One has got to be taught to look at the world objectively. I was there to learn from Bill, so I’ve always been happy with our arrangement, which usually means I ask questions and then listen intently to their answers. I was therefore taking a risk when I told him about my self-described, prelinguistic experience with the wolves and how I knew they had just been there on the basis of little more than a sensation or feeling. I expected him to either politely suggest that I was being a bit too mystical for his blood or to ignore the comment altogether and change the subject.

“I know it sounds hokey,” I said, “but I don’t know how else to explain it.” If I was right in thinking that Bill would find my account unconvincing, I wanted to give him a way out and at the same time lessen the blow of his exit from the conversation.

“I’ve had the same experience hunting elk,” he said.

“How do you explain that?” I asked, trying to contain the feeling of relief welling up inside me.

Whenever I’m talking to people on the phone or otherwise, I employ a communication style best described as *rapid fire*. I talk as if each and every word I speak brings me one step closer to the finish line, even if it means that sometimes I’ve got to backtrack and start again. I’m a say-now-pay-later, speak-before-I-think kind of communicator. But not Bill. His style is just the opposite. He never says a thing without first chewing on it for a while, so much so that there have been times when I thought the call had been dropped and asked if he was still there. At first these long pauses unsettled me, which had nothing to do with my patience (remember, I have none), but with my sense of anticipation. *What is Bill going to say next?* I wondered. *How*

*is he going to break it to me that I am wrong?* I have to admit, making people wait just a while longer to hear what one has to say is a good way to command their full attention, and Bill had the technique down to a science. Not only did I hang on every word he spoke, I hung on to every silence as well.

“Well,” he said after a pause, “sometimes you have to act before you know why you’re acting, and that feeling is evolution’s way of preparing you for whatever’s next.” Bill went on to say how early humans would not have lasted the night if they had to know the exact nature of what was happening before they could prepare themselves to deal with it. I was reminded of how, when I’m walking in the woods, or anywhere, really, and I’ve heard a loud noise right behind me—a branch snap, for instance, or a pinecone fall—my tendency is to jump away and put some distance between myself and the sound before I finally turn around and determine what made it. That impulse to flee is instinctual and prerational. The feeling I got up on the wolf highway comes from the same wild place. Like most people, I know truth when I hear it (what we do with truth is another matter). I knew Bill understood the explanatory power of evolution as early as 2014 after I had shared some writings with him in which I applied the theory to wolf and other animal behavior. But I would not have thought he would so readily offer it as an explanation for something for which there was no apparent empirical evidence. Then I thought of Carl Sagan’s quotation, “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Sometimes it takes time for science to catch up or to work back to the cause, and that may have been the case here.

At this stage in my life, and without meaning to, I don’t find many opportunities to engage people whose perspectives are different than my own. I don’t think this is unique to me as an academic, but being an academic may exacerbate my isolation. There is often so little difference between an academic’s specialization, his life, and the people that inhabit it. That is, almost everything I am—my interests, values, relationships, and way of looking at the world—is wrapped up in my profession. Sometimes it’s hard to determine where the one ends and the other begins. But I also have a lot of time to seek out unprecedented opportunities and experiences whenever I think to do so. I worry, though, about the people who do not have the time or desire or wherewithal needed to seek out unusual experiences or to initiate constructive contact with people who do not think like them. In addition to these practical considerations, there is at least one psychological obstacle as well, and that is the fear of not knowing or, worse, of being wrong.

Most people tend to avoid those who remind them that they don’t know every damn thing. But I suspect academics, precisely for the reasons I described above, are especially vulnerable to this insecurity. My insecurity when talking to Bill is still there, but over time it has lessened,

in part because I've grown more comfortable with not knowing, and because I value what he has tried to teach me. While my personal growth is cause for optimism, however, not everyone involved with wildlife management issues and coexistence efforts are as simpatico as Bill and me. In fact, compared to us, many people in the wildlife management, agricultural, and environmental communities could not be more different and, in some cases, outright hostile toward each other. I've spoken with many of these people, and it's always struck me as odd how people who share the same language can have such a hard time communicating. But I want to believe we are learning to resolve our different ways of thinking about wolves and other predators; and that we are finding solutions to problems that have plagued us for millennia, and not just inside the courtrooms, but in the wild, where everything we are fighting for and stand to lose is found.