

 **Christian Arnsperger**
 **Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet**
University of Lausanne

“The Paradise of How It Has to Be”: Writing About the Future of the Earth in a Time of Decline *A Conversation with William deBuys*

Christian Arnsperger & Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet: Your book *The Walk* ends with you standing at the edge of the meadow near your New Mexico homestead and observing a band of horses bicker and fight. For an instant, you find yourself wishing for the calm and the quiet to return—and then you tell yourself (but also your riveted reader): “. . . and I think, no, not the tranquil beauty of mere moments ago. Instead this, the perfection of disorder and desire. The paradise of how it has to be. This is it” (*The Walk* 151). It appears to be a very meditative stance, a kind of attitude of letting go and letting be. Would you say that it also reflects your view of how we need to react nowadays to ecological degradation and civilizational decline—as a “perfection of disorder and desire”? Are you an advocate of stepping into the future with a stoic’s mind, with a bodhisattva’s heart?

William deBuys: *The Walk* begins with a parallel meditation: that looking at the grain of wood in a desktop can lead to reflection on the biome that produced the wood, that the view out a window can lead to consideration of the stars, that the annoyance of a fly can be a portal into exploring the depths of one’s own psychology. These are not random journeys; they possess a logic. In the same way, the cranky antics of horses pestering each other—the perfection of disorder and desire—leads back to intrinsic tensions in the phenomenon of life. In slow ways or fast, living things test their environment and each other; they adapt; they select. Through their actions they express their being. That’s what the horses were doing, which is central to the final epiphany: that without tension and turmoil, life is sterile—it is not really life—and real beauty is impossible. The epiphany,

which I try to show rather than discuss, is that in order to have the things we love the most, we must also live with things that are much harder to love or even to accept. Life is a wholeness, and as humans we want to pick and choose among its aspects. The scene that concludes *The Walk* says that a true embrace of life includes all of its aspects. And in any case, picking and choosing is futile.

A friend who is a Protestant minister said that *The Walk* expressed a view more Jewish than Christian. I don't know if that is correct, but what she was trying to say is that Christianity promises perfection in an afterlife (although only for adherents who pass the tests of faith and good behavior). To varying degrees, Judaism and other religions and philosophies emphasize the here and now, classical stoicism among them. I find much value in stoicism's precepts and have been impressed to learn that its ethics are highly congruent with those of Buddhism. A bodhisattva being a seeker of the right and good, your formulation of “stepping into the future with a stoic's mind, with a bodhisattva's heart” captures that convergence and crystallizes a worthy goal for all of us.

CA & ASM: Your body of writing is very impressive in its scope and, while you are clearly deeply rooted in the American West and in New Mexico in particular, the spectrum of themes on which you have chosen to work looks, to the superficial gaze, somewhat eclectic at first: from the path you walk on almost daily at El Valle (*The Walk*) to the monumental ecological and hydrological disaster of the Salton Sea in southern California (*Salt Dreams*), from the life of a northern New Mexico villager (*River of Traps*) to the quest for the last surviving *saola* in Borneo (*The Last Unicorn*), from the excavation of the writings of the first chroniclers of the Southwest (*First Impressions*) to the history of how a private ranch in northern New Mexico became a public nature preserve (*Valles Caldera*), from the writings of the eminent geologist, explorer and conservationist John Wesley Powell (*Seeing Things Whole*) to the cataclysms caused in the Southwest by climate change (*A Great Aridness*), from the meditative chronicle of a Himalayan trek to bring medical care to remote mountain villages (*The Trail to Kanjiroba*) to the meticulous rendering of the natural and human history of the vast Sangre de Cristo mountain range (*Enchantment and Exploitation*). Add to that a number of forewords and prefaces to books about such diverse beings and places as the Colorado River, the Rio Grande or Las Vegas—and there emerges an almost baroque cathedral of extremely well-informed environmental thinking intertwined with sparse but always deep and moving existential insights. Yet, when seen as a whole, your work consistently balances involvement and detachment, loving attention and blunt factuality, sensitivity to beauty and awareness of decline, piercing

grief and inner peace. And so there is no eclecticism after all; in fact, a profound coherence seems to have patterned your entire writing life. Would you agree that its axial theme is that of genuinely experiencing both loss and joy within the passage of time—the fleeting time of a fragile human life but also the “deep time” (as Earth scientists now call it) of tectonic and glacially slow planetary transformations?

WdB: The temporal tension between human time and Earth time commands our attention. These two vastly different scales of perception enable us to generate a binocular view of our place within the cosmos. I will quickly confess, however, that if I had concerned myself with such lofty ideas when I started out as a writer, I might have found the trail ahead too steep. Instead I asked very basic questions: Where am I? Who is he? What’s been going on here? Those three questions respectively underlie my first three books. That simplicity, I think or maybe I just hope, continues through the rest of my work, even to my last book which asks, How shall I carry the grief I feel about the world?

The “axial theme” you identify is perhaps more an end point than a starting place. It is where the discoveries prompted by those basic questions have led. I hasten to add that my journeys are not particularly analytical and certainly not intentionally so. Irrespective of where I wind up, I tend to get there by finding and following stories, not by reasoning alone. If the stories are good, they engage the heart as well as the head, and the journey becomes infinitely more satisfying. If the trails that the stories follow tend to arrive in a place where the theme you mention—the tension between the scales of human time and Earth time—becomes palpable, well then, that raises another question: either there is an objective and durable significance to that tension, or the convergence simply reflects the “wiring” of my own small, subjective consciousness. I hope the former is true, but I am happy to leave it to others to render judgment.

CA & ASM: At the present time, we are living an epoch where the fleetingness of our short human lives is colliding with an unheard-of acceleration in our planet’s transformation. Tectonic and glacially slow changes are still taking place, of course, but they’re being eclipsed by the galloping speed of climate change—or “global weirdness,” as you prefer to name it—and all its accompanying apocalyptic horsemen. In several of your books, writing as a conservationist, you discuss extinction and the fact that it is already too late to “preserve the world we were born into” (as the environmentalist Bill McKibben says). Could you expand on why, in your eyes, “too late” does not mean simply “there is no hope”?

WdB: Part of the answer, for me, is in episode 35 of *The Trail to Kanjiroba*:

Earth’s beauty is inexhaustible. Even where the world is most diminished, beauty remains. The forces that erode the life of the planet can reduce but not eliminate that beauty, for beauty is intrinsic to the planet. Or if not to the planet, then to the way we Sapiens have evolved to see it. And the beauty belongs to us, inheres in us, and needs to be conserved in us too, for we are a part of the planet. . . . If beauty is infinite, then the need—no, the obligation—to defend such beauty is also infinite. It will last as long as beauty lasts, and so the obligation will have no end. . . . defending the beauty of the world [is] a calling that [will] never go silent. And . . . to serve such a calling . . . produce[s] something that all of us seek, which is *meaning*, durable and real.

A longer, fuller answer is much more complicated. Change is inherent to life. Crystals can replicate themselves but they are not alive—their replication remains changeless and sterile. Living things change and *adapt*, and along the way they experience loss and death. As you say, climate change is greatly accelerating the rate of change living things must try to endure. Many will not adapt fast enough. Human appropriation of Earth’s energy and habitats, and the careless destruction of the wild world resulting from that appropriation, also accelerates the rate of change. But beauty will persist, even as it is destroyed. We mustn’t forget that.

A second part of the long answer is that when we talk about hope, we have to be clear about what we ask the term to mean. If our notion of hope depends on returning things to how they used to be before our present worries existed, then indeed there is no hope. We cannot get back to an idealized *status quo ante*. But true hope, as I try to explain in episode 45 of *Kanjiroba*, is not the same as optimism and it is not simply a yearning for the elimination of anxiety. True hope requires us to place faith in the uncertainty and unknowability of the future. Sooner or later, something unforeseen will occur. It may be positive, negative, or both. Whatever its valence, we must prepare ourselves to wring the greatest possible good from it. During the long years of Soviet domination of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel prepared himself for an eventual deliverance; Nelson Mandela did likewise during more than three decades of imprisonment. Neither man knew whether the Soviet Union or apartheid would collapse in his lifetime, but each was able to make the most of the opportunity that came to him because he never gave up hope.

A third element of the long answer is that there is no bottom to how bad climate change and the suffering it engenders can get. Despair and inaction only guarantee more loss. We must engage. We must assent to what we know. We must strive to conserve the best and avoid the worst,

even as the definitions of both continue to change. There is no defensible and moral path that does not include taking action, and action, because it seeks to change the odds for outcome, is inherently hopeful.

CA & ASM: Your latest book, *The Trail to Kanjiroba*, is an account of your care-delivering journey with Roshi Joan Halifax and a team of doctors and other medical practitioners to a remote area of the Himalayas. It is also a wonderful literary account of the development of the field of geology, Darwin's travels as they led up to his formulation of the theory of evolution and other aspects of Earth science. What ties these disparate subject matters together?

WdB: The book concerns itself with environmental grief—my struggle, and everyone's struggle, to come to terms with both the human destruction of the wild world and the grave losses, already arriving, that attend climate change. But the book is equally a celebration of the beauty of Earth.

The book grows from a paradox: that we people of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are the first people in the timeless history of our species to be able to tell ourselves the story of our origins, the origins of the life around us, and even of our planet—without resorting to magic or fantasy. Think of it: we needn't invent a mythology to explain our place in the universe. We possess an explanation that is real, measurable and wholly defensible. And yet, even as we possess this near omniscience, we are well advanced in destroying much of the creation of which we are a part. Many would say we are destroying the most beautiful portion of that creation.

The two great theories of Earth science, one from the nineteenth century, one from the twentieth, make possible this deep knowledge of our origins and of our planet. The first, of course, is Darwin's theory of natural selection and the second, less well known, is the theory of plate tectonics, which cohered and began to win acceptance in the 1960s, when those of us now old were children.

Without digressing into a discussion of aesthetics, I would argue that complexity and awe are linked elements of what we call beauty, and that the more we partake of the complex insights these theories provide into the workings of the world, the greater our awe and the greater our appreciation of the beauty of creation can grow. And so, even as *The Trail to Kanjiroba* takes the measure of our planetary woes and seeks the psychological and spiritual resources not to lose heart in the face of them, it also seeks a deepened awareness of the beauty of the world—and of the moral resources such an awareness can offer. In my view, these two strains are complementary, and without the second, success in the first becomes much harder to attain.

CA & ASM: You joined the medical mission to Nepal partly to see if the ethics of the doctors and other practitioners might offer ideas or values that could be applied to care of the Earth. You were particularly curious about the expedition’s prioritization of “care over cure,” which also lies at the center of hospice ethics. Could you explain what it means to think about the Earth and about ecology in terms of hospice care, and why it doesn’t simply mean “giving up”? When you speak of “hospice” as an attitude to adopt in the face of the ecological crisis, is the dying patient the biosphere or the human race? As you acknowledge in your book, the term could be easily misinterpreted in a number of ways. Could you explain exactly what you mean and why “hospice” seems like a valuable framework to adopt at this point in time, and if you believe it is also still worth “fighting for” radical societal change in order to move towards living within our planetary means?

WdB: It is important to recognize that the concept of hospice, as applied to Earth care, is an imperfect metaphor. Earth is not dying, and neither is the human species. In the context of deep time, life will continue on this planet, as it has for billions of years, expressed, as Darwin put it, in “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful.” And at the shorter timescale of centuries and millennia, there is little probability that the human species—now almost 8 billion strong—will disappear. (Although in the context of deep time, pretty much all species are guaranteed to go extinct or metamorphose into radically different forms, as birds evolved from dinosaurs.)

But at that shorter timescale of human time much indeed is dying, and these losses include myriad species of plants and animals, as well as human languages and cultures. These will be joined by the loss of many places—geographies that as a result of rising seas, melting glaciers or other impacts of climate change will be fundamentally transformed and their biomes largely erased.

Such losses promise to challenge us in profound and intensifying ways, and the ethics of our medical expedition, which are similar to those of hospice care, offer a moral framework for moving forward without capitulating to despair. While on the trail our expedition had no access to x-rays, scans, blood labs or other sophisticated technologies. We were obliged to prioritize care over cure and to focus on optimizing the present. We were challenged to maintain a “strong back” and a “soft front”—facing every new crisis with both resolve and compassion. We strove to reduce the suffering of the present moment while increasing its joy, clarity and relatedness. We tried not to worry about outcomes we could not control. As applied to Earth care, this approach might mean that we sometimes

spare ourselves the vain hope of “fixing” things and instead settle into the more realistic mode of making conditions as good as they can be for as long as possible, meanwhile being prepared to bear witness to death and other endings—and to honor them. These ideas require a longer and deeper discussion, which fundamentally is why I wrote the book.

Interestingly, however, the most valuable lessons I learned about handling grief arose from a different source. They were embedded in the discipline and practice of living on the trail, which is to say they arose from the necessity of continuously “learning how to walk.” These lessons are encapsulated in the last sixteen words of *The Trail to Kanjiroba*:

Every day a yatra

Every situation a clinic

Absorb the beauty

Build an ark

Be alive

To unpack those words, however, you have to take to the metaphorical trail and read the book—or so I think. (For starters, *yatra* means pilgrimage.) What I learned was that acquiring a set of precepts or applying a particular methodology, although useful, was not as important as the task of organizing and focusing one’s mentality, one’s inner self. That’s where the greatest difference and the most useful preparation can be made. I am seventy-two years old and I am still learning to walk. That realization, in its strange way, is comforting. Somehow it makes the long metaphorical distances and steep climbs more tolerable, and it makes the topography of grief more navigable.

A word about “radical social change”: many agendas are crowded beneath that very elastic umbrella, and I am in favor of most of them. Must all be achieved in order to avert the worst of climate change and save the wildness that remains? Probably not. Can an excess of social turbulence delay or prevent attainment of planetary stability? Probably, yes. Can we know, in advance, the optimal combination of social and environmental reform? We cannot. Immanuel Kant wisely said, “From the crooked timber of humanity, nothing straight was ever made.” To contend with climate change the global community may need to produce something straighter than we have ever produced before. The struggle to do so will change us, even as the world around us changes.

CA & ASM: One of the deepest issues raised by modernity is that of teleological time, viewing temporality as linear and leading either inexorably to Progress or to Apocalypse (possibly followed by paradise, if you look

to the Bible as a source, or by a post-apocalyptic dystopia, if you look to popular culture). Do you have any thoughts on the question of time, and on how our cultural concepts about time influence our actions (or our failure to act)? Isn't there a risk that, being caught between the fleeting temporality of a human existence and the towering deep temporality of the biosphere's evolution, one might feel paralyzed and fatalistic? Aren't the twin beliefs in perpetual progress or in an impending apocalypse a defense mechanism against this paralysis? Do you see your role as a writer as trying to provide a middle ground between these two modern forms of inertia?

WdB: Teleological time is a burden of human myth-making that civilization might do well to put down. People want to believe that the future has an address, that events lead toward an intended destination, be it a Second Coming or a Mad Max dystopia or any of a thousand other imagined possibilities. These are distractions from living responsibly in the present. Worse than distractions, they are a kind of anesthesia dulling us to the existential moment. I frequently hear people say, everything happens for a purpose. That's nonsense. That is akin to a basketball player thanking God for guiding his three-point shot to the basket. (Don't we wish that God, if she exists, has better things to do?) One of the fundamental lessons of Darwin's theory of natural selection is that evolution is ruled by contingency: biological change arises randomly; some changes work out; most don't; organisms interact with other organisms and with their inorganic environment in countless ways, creating the ungoverned, churning complexity that is the miracle of life on Earth. As J. B. S. Haldane said, "The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, it is probably queerer than we *can* suppose." No teleology that our furiously busy human minds can imagine can capture that "queerness" which today we would call complexity.

Darwin was pilloried for suggesting that a biological relationship existed between apes and humans. The worry was not just that humans had hairy cousins with unattractive habits but that humanity's place on the throne of creation was insecure. The last sentence of *On the Origin of Species* speaks of "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful [that] have been, and are being, evolved." His use of the present imperfect tense—"are being"—tells us that Creation is not finished, the first week of Genesis is still the week in which we live. This repudiation of the Christian teleology of his time may have been his greatest heresy, and much of mankind finds it troubling to this day.

Looked at another way, however, a rejection of teleology is liberating. We are freed to become participants in the great on-going project of creation. We are here, now, on a glorious pinprick of life within the vast sea of the

universe, and we are free to act. What more do we want? We don't need to choose between deep time and human time. Both are real. And we needn't feel trapped between them either. We need to be able to think at both scales without blurring or confusing them. In the blurring lies the moral danger. If we say to ourselves, "Deep time teaches that new species will always evolve, so we don't need to worry about extinctions occurring now," that's an error of scale. People say that kind of thing to avoid feeling moral responsibility for what's going on around them. In a way, they invite the paralysis you mention. It is a cop-out. We need to embrace the two scales of time and make good use of the binocular vision they bestow upon us.

CA & ASM: In *The Trail to Kanjiroba*, when discussing your ethics of hospice care, you describe geoengineering as "perhaps . . . no more than a lavishly expensive ghost dance for industrial capitalism" (195). In comparing the hypermodern imaginary of geoengineering to this Native American spiritual movement, born at the time out of both deep despair and desperate hope, what points or parallels are you trying to draw out?

WdB: You have nailed our probable predicament with your phrase "deep despair and desperate hope." Given the failure of the global community to abate its pollution of the atmosphere—and given also the unlikelihood of a reversal of that failure anytime soon—"deep despair and desperate hope" will be very widely shared. Under such circumstances, humans show a talent for inventing fantastical salvation strategies and convincing each other that those strategies, no matter how far-fetched, are right, proper, and essential to support. The Ghost Dance was a heart-breaking example of this. Its charismatic apostle was the Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka who preached that the Ghost Dance, properly practiced, would halt the westward migration of whites and restore Native America to unity and prosperity. The dance spread quickly from tribe to tribe and was fervently adopted, but, obviously, it did not produce the hoped-for results.

The suffering and loss resulting from climate change can be expected to produce similarly wishful thinking, possibly leading to the adoption of risky, speculative and exorbitantly expensive technologies for carbon capture, planetary cooling or goodness knows what. Probably a few of the proposed technologies will have merit, but on the whole I suspect we will see the birth of a Golden Age for scam artists at all levels from individuals to mega-corporations and governments. The accelerated herd behavior and intellectual flaccidity of social media pretty much guarantee it. Humans do this kind of thing. It doesn't matter whether you are a Native American watching your world get crushed in 1890 or almost anyone in, say, 2050, witnessing mass migration, starvation and storms. If you are human, you will clutch at such straws as are offered, and in our hyper-commercialized

world, you will probably contribute resources toward them, directly or through taxes, even if they are worthless.

CA & ASM: You have made your home in New Mexico, which like many other parts of the United States is a place scarred by settler colonialism and the destruction of Native cultures. Some survive, and in the case of the Pueblo tribes (as suggested by two of your fellow New Mexicans from the University of New Mexico, Gregory Cajete in *A People's Ecology* and David E. Stuart in *Anasazi America*) the ways of life they still practice today are much better adapted to prolonged droughts and heatwaves than those of mainstream Anglo-Americans. In *A Great Aridness*, you explicitly state that the future that awaits the American Southwest because of runaway climate change is but a prefiguration of what billions of other humans will also need to face sooner rather than later. At the end of *Enchantment and Exploitation*, you write:

The traditional cultures of the region are not mere aesthetic ornaments. . . . Like a rare plant or a unique ecosystem they are irreplaceable. Society needs to conserve them both for the answers they give to the basic problems of existence and for the fresh new questions they pose about the proper relation of people to each other and to the land. (318–19)

Do Indigenous lifeways offer resources to face grief and loss in today's ecologically imperiled world, and to look into the future differently than modern, “progress”-drunken Westerners have tended to do?

WdB: Maybe the old lifeways offer specific tactics for surviving the turbulence of the future. Maybe not. Should we always keep a three-year supply of grain stored in a back room in case drought or war hobbles our harvests next year? I doubt it. But I am pretty sure the old ways offer a wealth of metaphor that can help us think about how to cope: what is the modern analog to those rat-proof bins filled with maize? Let's come up with an answer to that.

Maybe we don't need to dance to summon the rain clouds or to assure fertility in the biome to which we belong, but the self-restraint and respect for nature inherent in such a practice will never lose relevance. I don't believe there is any doubt that we have much to learn in terms of perspective and attitude from appreciating the long-time people of this world.

When the screws of drought tighten or a horrible politician attains high office, some of my Anglo friends muse about moving where it is wetter or where the political climate is more agreeable. The contrast with the Native

community could not be greater. In countless public meetings, I have grown used to hearing tribal representatives, first, begin their comments with a prayer, and second, preface their message with the statement, “We are not going anywhere.” In the hard days to come, I will not begrudge the exodus of people who want to leave. May they go in peace. But I will be more interested in the people who stay behind—the people “who aren’t going anywhere.” They will be a select group. Granted that personal economics will also have much to do with who stays and who goes, on balance, the character of the “stickers” will favor tenacity, grit and loyalty to place. I am all for that. In the last chapter of *A Great Aridness* I repeat something that a Zuni friend, Edward Wemytewa, told me: that the Zuni word for the long-ago inhabitants of the Zuni homeland translates to something like “fiber people.” They were people honed by hard work and short rations until they had no fat on them and no softness. They were physically tough, and their minds were the same. In their sinewy frames they had the fiber, physically and spiritually, to survive in an unforgiving world.

The hotter, drier future that arrives more fully every day may demand something similar from us and our descendants. The odds may be poor, but the future is unknowable, and out of the uncertainty of the years ahead, good things may emerge. The Native people of the Southwest embody the stamina, patience and resolve that the future will require of us.

CA & ASM: Your books all deal with natural places and the human experiences and entanglements they afford. How did you start writing, and is it the same impulse that keeps you writing now, thirty years later?

WdB: I call my writing studio “the Sentence Factory,” and I like to think I put in a pretty good shift on a regular basis. When I don’t—because of travel or calamity or distraction—I feel the lack. I think this may be because writing is the means by which I process the world. It is how I make sense of my experience. I suspect this is true of most writers. The origin of this proclivity may go back to childhood and to the earliest experiences of reading, which for me, as for millions of others, writers and non-writers alike, revealed itself as riveting and wonder-filled antidote to loneliness. (Immersion in nature was another.) In any event, I have come to think of writing as “the art of finding out what you know—and feel.” I don’t think I come to terms with things—I don’t see them in full—until I write about them. I am not saying my understanding becomes complete, but if I stick to the task of writing, it becomes as good as I can get it to be.

Three journeys feed *The Trail to Kanjiroba*. In 2016 and 2018, I joined the Nomads Clinic for expeditions through Dolpo. Those two journeys totaled almost three hundred miles of walking and close to three months living on the trail. The third journey was no less an adventure. It

entailed more than four years of writing, trying to make sense of the lived experiences and seeing them anew in the light that was generated by words on a page. How this works is a mystery to me, but each sentence, as it takes its place on the page, seems to create new light, new possibilities, while shadowing or eliminating others. Following those possibilities or, through revision, going back and recapturing lost possibilities in order to follow them in a new direction, entails a continuous process of discovery. This is what gives life to a narrative, and I like to believe that in the best writing this between-the-lines excitement of discovery somehow communicates itself to the reader and raises his or her experience to the highest level.

There is a second side to the urge to write that doesn't specifically concern discovery or understanding. It is the drive to make something beautiful. From a lifetime of reading, we develop a sense in our mind's ear of how good writing sounds, how it feels when absorbed in the mind. We hear the music of language. The writers I most admire compose this music, which is not just music you listen to but music you can inhabit, a sort of alternate reality built from words alone. And so I think of writing, not just as the art of finding out what you know and feel, but as an art of composition, of beauty-making and world-creation. I suppose that when the work goes well, when the sense of discovery is present and something beautiful is emerging, the writer experiences a physiological “high,” like a runner's high, a feeling of well-being, if not a mild ecstasy. An intense session at the writing table can leave you completely exhausted but also deeply satisfied. As in the case of other addictions, this happy state is no doubt brewed from endorphins. In that respect, I suppose I am sometimes no different from a lab rat seeking food pellets at the end of its maze. As long as the reinforcement is attainable, as long as the journey to reach it feels good and necessary, I'll keep writing. I will have to.

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William deBuys (b. 1949) lives and writes in northern New Mexico at his homestead in El Valle, in the vicinity of Taos. Originally from the East Coast, he was educated in Baltimore, MD and Chapel Hill, NC before moving to the Southwest five decades ago where, as he puts it in his autobiographical notes,¹ he got “a new education” that “went farther and deeper.” This early and momentous, tectonic shift in his life

introduced me to a culture far from home and to ethics of community and place that were foreign to the privileged world in which I'd grown up. It also tutored me in the requirements of living with the land. My teachers were my Hispanic neighbors and the beautiful, rugged mountain country that enveloped our valley.

Not a fluent writer from the outset, he gradually grew into the role after he struck an almost animistic deal with the nature around him. By accident, he found the wreck of a crashed airplane in the Pecos Wilderness that stretches out between Santa Fe and Taos, while he was struggling to write about that rugged and beautiful landscape. Having received a reward for this fortuitous finding, he felt he had been given

a grant from the mountains themselves, and it caused me to believe that if I quit my [writing] project, which at times I desperately wanted to do,

¹ See <https://williamdebuys.com/about-william-debuys/>

I would be breaking the terms of the grant. No one would ask that the money be returned, but I feared the karmic consequences if I walked away. So I persevered. I kept making bad sentences hoping good ones would eventually come along. In time, they did, and the going got easier.

Many decades and prizes later, deBuys has an impressive *oeuvre* to show for this early pact with the local mountains. The local humans have followed suit in recognizing his talents, and he has since then received a number of awards, among them a New Mexico Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, as well as recognitions from Zuni Pueblo and Santa Clara Pueblo for service to their communities in his work as a conservationist.

He has established himself as one of America’s foremost writers on the many interfaces between wild nature and human nature, on the delicate interlacing of longing, joy, grief and hope in the face of ever dwindling wildness and ever more threatening anthropogenic alterations of the biosphere. Of his latest book, *The Trail to Kanjiroba*, which forms a kind of “accidental trilogy” with *A Great Aridness*—on climate change—and *The Last Unicorn*—on extinction and the loss of biodiversity—he writes: “Having written about climate change and species extinction, I [was] seeking consolation. I needed to find a constructive way of living with the discouraging implications of what I had learned about the problems plaguing Earth. Without giving in to numbness or futility, I needed both to acknowledge the dire state of things and still remain committed to changing them. I also felt a need to celebrate Earth’s beauty.”