beginning with agricultural processing and going on to the manufacture of tools and other equipment of use to peasants and workers in their daily lives. Dispersed among the villages and fields, small industries will provide a source of work and income, in a mode of production that is intimately related to the emerging agropolitan structure of society in which the contradictions of industrial capitalism—between city and countryside, production and consumption, work and leisure—are progressively resolved.

Now all that may sound slightly utopian, slightly wide-eyed. But these are experts, men concerned for many years with regions and how they can and should work. Besides, they stand firmly in the company of G. A. Borgese, a visionary credited with these wonderful words: “It is necessary; therefore it is possible.”

\[ \text{SEVEN} \]

Polity

One of the few notable world religions to understand the primacy of the natural world in human spirituality—perhaps the only one at all widespread—is the Taoism of the Chinese sage and political philosopher Lao Tzu:

The valley spirit never dies;
It is the woman—Primal Mother;
Her Gateway is the root of Heaven and Earth;
Like a veil it is barely seen,
But use it—it will never fail.

It is not surprising then, that this religion is one of the few to advocate the decentralization of political power, the values of village and communal life, and the goal of egalitarian rather than hierarchical status in familial and kinship relations. The famous admonition “Let things alone” was not merely a caution for humans to show a proper respect for the workings of nature but, in the context of the Tao-te Ching, primarily advice for Chinese princes and warlords of the 6th century BC: the best government is not merely the least government, Lao Tzu seems to say, but no government at all.

We may assume that Lao Tzu came to his political wisdom
by way of his ecological insights, for his Taoism is infused with
those substantial laws of Gaia that express themselves time
and again in the natural world. A political vision based on
those laws, on the evident workings of the biotic world, would
not celebrate centralized coordination, hierarchical efficiency,
and monolithic strength—the apparent virtues of the modern
nation-state—but rather, in starkest contraposition, decen-
tralization, interdependence, and diversity. The ways of na-
ture, in any park, on any shore, in any woods, are essentially
without coercion, without organized force, without recog-
nized authority. They are, to pick the closest word in our
inadequate vocabulary, libertarian.

It is perhaps inevitable that a civilization based on the denial
of Gaean principles should evolve its forms of government so
at odds with natural laws. But the experiment has been tried
now for perhaps two hundred years (the duration of parlia-
mentary and representative “democracies”) or, in its modern
version, for perhaps a hundred (the duration of the welfare
state), and it is no longer startling to suggest that it may sim-
ply have failed. Certainly modern governments, capitalist or
socialist, have not addressed themselves in any serious way to
the relationship between the crisis of ecological peril and the
political systems that have caused it. (Tame and meliorative
air-pollution laws, for only one example, have nothing to do
with true ecological wisdom or a thoroughgoing ecological
policy.) They have not solved the problems of world overpop-
ulation, or recurrent and growing epidemics of starvation, or
accelerating economic inequality, or mounting social disloca-
tion (crime, suicide, alcoholism, stress diseases, etc.). Maybe
it is simply impossible for institutions insufficiently based in
natural principles to understand and confront the profound
complexities of a Gaean world; perhaps they stand no better
chance of surviving within that world than the Mycenaeans.

Whatever dangers and uncertainties a bioregional polity
may hold, then—however strange and impractical and other-
worldly it may strike those for whom, say, the American
government seems a rational and serviceable institution—it
must be granted at least the virtue of ecological compatibility.
If it should ever be given the chance to evolve into being, no
matter what its other drawbacks, it would at a minimum have
a chance to stop and reverse the ecocidal policies of the present,
to realign priorities away from human primacy and toward
human interdependence, and to offer a reasonable possibility
that the globe will continue to have complex life upon it after
the 21st century. And if it should fail in that, however im-
probable it seems, it will not have done worse than the indus-
trial polities it replaced.

The ecological law with which bioregional politics would log-
ically begin is decentralism, centrifugal force, the spreading
of power to small and widely dispersed units.

So it is in the natural world, where nothing is more striking
than the absence of any centralized control, any interspecie
domination, where there are none of the patterns of ruler-
and-ruled that are taken as inevitable in human governance.
“King of the jungle” is our description of the lion’s status, and
quite anthropomorphously perverse; the lion (or, better, li-
iness) is profoundly unaware of this role, and the elephant
and rhinoceros (not to mention the tsetse fly) would hardly
accede to it. In a biotic community the various sets of animals
and plants, no matter how they may run their own families
and clusters, behave smoothly and regularly with each other
without the need of any overall system of authority or domi-
nance, any biotic Washington or Wall Street, in fact without
any governing organization or superstructure of any kind
soever. No one species rules over all—or any—others, not one even makes the attempt, not one even has either instinct or intention in that direction. (Even the kudzu and the red-tide bacteria, for all that they sometimes look as if they have in mind to conquer the world, are merely blindly moving into comfortable new environments and have no thought of rule or enslavement.)

What's more, when several subgroups of a single species occupy the same region, there is no attempt to consolidate power in one of them: you never see one colony of crows try to conquer another, one pride of lions try to establish control over all the other lions around. Territoriality, yes: often a subgroup of a species attempts to carve out a part of the eco-niche for itself and goes to considerable lengths to keep other members of that species (and competing species) away. But that is not governance, not the creation of any central authority, it is merely a familial or communal statement about the carrying capacity of that niche for that species—and, I guess, of who was there first to measure it. And defense, too: there can be quite intense and deadly conflict when one subgroup defends its home—hive or hill, roost or lair—from another, and mammalian families and individuals will often go to great lengths, including aggression at times, to protect females and their young during birth and nesting periods. But these are not battles of conquest, they are not followed by domination or colonization (though some ants will take other ants as prisoners), and they are never caused by one subgroup desiring to establish its rule, its command, over another.

Now there is of course one continuous exercise of power between species in the ecosphere: many animals perch on ingesting other animals and a wide range of plants. There is in fact a regular practice we call predation by which certain species live in a quasi-symbiotic relationship of hunter and hunted, eater and eaten, and it is common among all biotic communities and among many species of animals as well as a few plants. But this is not governance, it is not rule or dominance, it is not even aggression of an organized political or military kind. Mosquitoes, whatever they may be said to think, do not believe that they are ruled over by the purple martin that plucks the unlucky ones out of the air; and zebras, however wary they may always be at the watering hole, do not regard themselves as being in an inferior position to the lion or under the regular administration of some larger species. The predatory relationship is certainly one of violence and death (and sustenance and life), certainly one of imbalance and nonreciprocation, but it is never undertaken for anything but food—not for governance, or control, or the establishment of power or sovereignty. An exercise of power it is, but it is still diffused power, almost accidental power. (Moreover, there is always some kind of mutuality at work in predation, even though it is of an unconscious kind and may go quite unappreciated by the predator; one could not really expect the caribou to welcome the attack by the gray wolf pack, though in fact it is a necessary means of controlling the herd's population, and by weaning out the weakest and sickest helps to strengthen the herd's genetic heritage.)

A similar kind of decentralism, a recurrent urge toward separatism, independence, and local autonomy rather than agglomeration and concentration, exists in human patterns as well. Throughout all human history, even in the past several hundred years, people have tended to live in separate and independent small groups, a "fragmentation of human society" that Harold Isaacs, the venerated professor of international affairs at MIT, has described as something akin to "a pervasive
force in human affairs and always has been." Even when nations and empires have arisen, he notes, they have no staying power against the innate human drive toward decentralism:

The record shows that there could be all kinds of lags, that declines could take a long time and fall run long overdue, but that these conditions could never be indefinitely maintained. Under external or internal pressures—usually both—authority was eroded, legitimacy challenged, and in wars, collapse, and revolution, the system of power redrawn.

And, as he surveys the cataclysms of the 20th century, Isaacs shows that the fragmenting process has operated everywhere in our time, breaking down empires, throwing off new nations, distending and dividing old ones, "a great clustering into separateness":

What we are experiencing, then, is not the shaping of new coherences but the world breaking into its bits and pieces, bursting like big and little stars from exploding galaxies, each one spinning off in its own centrifugal whirl, each one straining to hold its own small separate pieces from spinning off in their turn.

The political lessons are clear enough, I think: a bioregional polity would seek the diffusion of power, the decentralization of institutions, with nothing done at a level higher than necessary, and all authority flowing upward incrementally from the smallest political unit to the largest.

The primary location of decision-making, therefore, and of political and economic control, should be the community, the more-or-less intimate grouping either at the close-knit village scale of 1,000 people or so, or probably more often at the extended community scale of 5,000 to 10,000, so often found as the fundamental political unit whether formal or informal. Here, where people know one another and the essentials of the environment they share, where at least the most basic information for problem-solving is known or readily available, here is where governance should begin. Decisions made at this level, as countless eons testify, stand at least a fair chance of being correct and a reasonable likelihood of being carried out competently; and even if the choice is misguided or the implementation faulty, the damage to either the society or the ecosphere is likely to be insignificant. This is the sort of government established by preliterate peoples all over the globe, evolving over the years toward a kind of bedrock efficiency in problem-solving simply because it is necessary for survival. In the tribal councils, the folkmotes, the ecclesia, the village assemblies, the town meetings, we find the human institution proven through time to have shown the scope and competence for the most basic kind of self-rule.

As different species live side by side in an ecosystem, so different communities could live side by side in a single city, and cities and towns side by side in a single bioregion, with no more thought of dominance and control than the sparrow gives to the rose, or the bobcat to the wasp. Sharing the same bioregion, they naturally share the same configurations of life, the same social and economic constraints, roughly the same environmental problems and opportunities, and so there is every reason to expect contact and cooperation among them. Even, for some specific tasks, maybe even confederation among them—but of a kind that need not mean diminished power or sovereignty for the community, but rather enlarged horizons of knowledge, of culture, of services, of security.

Of course communities with a bioregional consciousness would find countless occasions that called for regional cooperation—and decision-making—on all sorts of issues from water and waste management, transportation, and food production to upstream pollution seeping into downstream
drinking water and urban populations moving into rural farming country. Isolationism and self-sufficiency at a local scale is simply impossible, like fingers trying to be independent of hand and body. Communication and information networks of all kinds would be—would need to be—maintained among the communities of a bioregion, and possibly some kind of political deliberative and decision-making body would eventually seem to be necessary.

The forms for such confederate bodies are myriad and their experiences rich and well-documented, so presumably working out the various systems would not be intractably difficult. We start, after all, with a clear identity of interest among these communities, a clear understanding of how they are interwoven into the bioregional tapestry, a clear historical record of their mutual needs and responsibilities and what happens when those are ignored. A confederation within bioregional limits has the logic, the force, of coherence and commonality; a confederation beyond those limits does not. Any larger political form is not only superfluous, it stands every chance of being downright dangerous, particularly in that it is no longer organically grounded in an ecological identity or limited by the constraints of homogeneous communities.

If, as the scholars suggest, the goal of government as we have now come to understand it in the 20th century is to provide liberty, equality, efficiency, welfare, and security in some reasonable balance, a strong argument can be made that it is the areal division of power, divided and subdivided again as in bioregional governance, that provides them best. It promotes liberty by diminishing the chances of arbitrary government action and providing more points of access for the citizens, more points of pressure for affected minorities. It enhances equality by assuring more participation by individuals and less concentration of power in a few remote and unresponsive bodies and offices. It increases efficiency by allowing government to be more sensitive and flexible, recognizing and adjusting to new conditions, new demands from the populace it serves. It advances welfare because at the smaller scales it is able to measure people's needs best and to provide for them more quickly, more cheaply, and more accurately. And, because of all that, it actually improves security because, unlike the big and bumbling megastates vulnerable to instability and alienation, it fosters the sort of cohesiveness and allegiance that discourages crime and disruption within and discourages aggression and attack from without.

Even if we haven't modern experience to ratify it entirely, the logic certainly suggests that because bioregional governance stands in a direct and vital relation to the natural environment and its resources, and because it can deal with a population of cultural and ecological homogeneity, it can do more effectively for the populace those things that governments are supposed to do. But let us extend that logical process one more step.

The ecological—and logical—corollary to the law of centrifugal force is the law of complementarity, or mutuality, under which the members of a single species within an econiche act

*Those who doubt that government is most effectively transmitted through smaller units might reflect on these figures: while there are 51 governments in the US ostensibly set up to solve the people's problems, the actual business of providing services in America (transportation, housing, fire protection, water power, etc.) is in the hands of more than 28,733 (in 1982) special-district governments at regional and local levels—more than 500 times more small governments than large. And even the national government, when it actually gets down to caring for its citizens' needs and desires, divides itself into some 1,460 general- and special-purpose organizations, and their number increases every year.
reciprocally and nonhierarchically to promote and defend their community. It is known among ecologists as “hetarchy,” standing in conspicuous distinction to hierarchy, and signifies the idea of distinction without rank, an acknowledgment that blue is clearly different from yellow but not superior. Just as it makes no sense to think of the hierarchy of the parts of a tree—the bark better than the roots, say, and they higher in some way than the leaves—so it makes no sense to try to find rulers and ruled or lords and serfs within the animal subgroups—families, bands, hives, troops, flocks, or whatever. What we see, rather, are complementary roles, no one superior to any other, all necessary for the survival of the group. In the hive, for example, some are foragers, others fighters, some are egg-layers, others builders, and no sense of dominance or primacy among them exists. The queen bee, after all, is only a prodigious reproductive organ temporarily servicing the hive, and “queen” only because we designate her so, a title the drones and workers might have quite different ideas about. And so it is with the other labels from our political vocabulary used to describe certain animals—“dominant” males, “king of the hill,” “ruling castes,” “slaves,” “workers,” and the like—which really say more about Western culture than about animal behavior.

In fact, stratification and hierarchy within specific subgroups in the animal world is extremely rare, and almost all “evidence” of it is anthropomorphic carelessness. It is quite true that there are examples of aggressiveness and coercion in some mammalian groups—baboons, for example, wolves, mountain sheep—by certain males the ethologists call “alpha” males, and there may be conflict, particularly during mating periods, in which one individual wins sexual or territorial privileges over others. But even then there is no regular, organized, institutionalized system deserving of the word “hi-
erarchy.” These are, rather, individual acts of assertiveness by selected animals seeking the best for themselves in groups where space happenstentially opens up for them, where they perceive themselves as having the chance to make their lives easier or fuller. There is never such a thing as a troop “election” or ritualized behavior that would signify anything so formal as hierarchy or stratification, fixed orders and ranks and echelons. As Murray Bookchin puts it in his important philosophical study, The Ecology of Freedom, “The seemingly hierarchical traits of many animals are more like variations in the links of a chain than organized stratifications of the kind we find in human societies and institutions.”

And so it is also in the traditional societies, the preliterate cultures, as near as we can reconstruct them. There are seldom any of those “organized stratifications” we have become accustomed to in the industrialized world and almost never anything that even hints of dictatorship or monocracy. Like trees and beehives, such societies do not have structures of hierarchy and domination, and indeed create customs and taboos and rituals to prevent just such arrangements from disrupting the group. There are different roles, different specializations, sometimes varied by sex, sometimes by strength, sometimes by simple skill; but the roles complement each other, and although the individuals may gain status and admiration for particular successes, they do not occupy higher or lower po-

*It is worth noting, too, that the groups with alpha males are quite exceptional in nature. Though they are certainly found among baboons, in the more human-like great apes—gibbons, orangutans, chimpanzees, gorillas—they are extremely rare, and such behavior would be distinctly idiosyncratic. Gibbons, for example, almost always live in troops with the utmost egalitarianism, where sharing food among the entire aggregate is normal, and the roles of food-gatherer and baby-sitter are traded routinely between male and female.
sitions among their colleagues. The man adept at hunting seals, the woman favored as the singer of lullabies, the elder given the knowledge of magic, the grandmother wise in the healing power of herbs, the youth capable of leadership in battle—these are all important people and highly regarded, but they do not generally accumulate power to themselves as a result of their prowess, are not given positions on a ladder of command and dominance.

The story of Geronimo is wonderfully telling in this regard. He was a brave and able warrior, successful in several battles against the Mexicans and respected as a military leader; but he was not a “chief,” for there was no such thing among the Apaches, and he never was accorded political stature or indeed any role of command off the battlefield. And when after one successful skirmish he tried to set himself up as a permanent tribal leader, he was promptly rejected and in fact cast out of the tribe, so he wandered the Arizona hills with a small band of brigands and raiders for most of the next twenty years. “He attempted to turn the tribe into the instrument of his desire,” writes cultural anthropologist Pierre Clastres, who studied the Apaches, “whereas before, by virtue of his competence as a warrior, he was the tribe’s instrument.”

So why is he named in the history books as “a chief of the Apaches”? Because the white immigrants, in their cultural straitjackets, assumed that anyone who led a company of raiders against them must be a person of political power, the Indian equivalent of King Arthur or Richard I, and so applied to him their usual unthinking title for “savage” rulers: no more than that. The Apaches not only had no such position as chief, they had no form of governmental organization or even established political power. Clastres says of them, as of the numerous similar tribes he studied: “One is confronted, then, by a vast constellation of societies in which the holders of what elsewhere would be called power are actually without power; where the political is determined as a domain beyond coercion and violence, beyond hierarchical subordination; where, in a word, no relationship of command—obedience is in force.”

The lessons of the law of complementarity from the animal world and traditional societies seem obvious enough as applied to a bioregional polity. Hierarchy and political domination would have no place; systems of ruler-and-ruled, even of elected-president-and-electing-people, are nonecological. So at the community level most decisions affecting people’s daily lives would be made and carried out by those with competence and experience in this task or that service, guided by the voice of the body as a whole and the principles of ecology. No leader, no ruling committee, no oligarchy, only citizens performing necessary roles: perhaps community officers for the accepted political functions—a magistrate, a treasurer, a sheriff, a facilitator, a clerk—and perhaps even a rotating series of coordinators, or archons, or managers. But these are people not with special power, only special functions, acting in complement and directed by the policies established by the community at large, routinely responsible to that community. Power, if it is to be found and named at all, rests only with the totality of the citizenry, not with any office.

Such a community of complementarity asks of its citizens a good deal of responsibility, of course, because where there is no one decision-maker, decision-making must be shared and assumed by everyone. It would be incumbent upon each individual to be willing to act as a public person, to be inquisitive and informed about public matters, to care and decide about public policies. This does not mean that every citizen has to be an expert on every subject or that there is no place in the
polity for specialists. Indeed, in any complex community, we assume there would be some people who just know a lot more about cost accounting or waste management or soil restoration than others; that is precisely the undergirding assumption of complementarity in the first place. Shared responsibility means, rather, that the concerned citizen is involved enough and cares enough to decide which specialists to trust, with what, when, and how far.

Now I am under no illusions that such a condition is necessarily easy to establish, especially since it has been the fixed intention of the nation-state throughout its history to prevent the general exercise of that political responsibility. Even in those liberal countries such as the United States that pride themselves upon “democracy” and “universal suffrage,” basic political responsibility has always been held in only a few hands. It was the precise intention of America’s Founding Fathers, as of other aristocracies, not to let too many people of too many backgrounds mess around with the affairs of state, for these are best left to those who are competent to decide for others, to the educated and the expert, to the cool-headed and far-seeing. This intent, far from being washed away by the extension of the vote and other constitutional changes, has in fact been strengthened by the modern state, concerned with the theoretical efficiency of centralization and the theoretical strength of bureaucratic control. By now effective power has been almost totally drained from regions, states, cities, and towns, leaving them fewer and fewer decisions of meaning while more and more matters of substance (especially of taxation, finance, regulation, defense, and planning) are concentrated in the legislatures and bureaucracies of the capitals. A measure of the efficiency of this process is that even in such an open and free-wheeling nation as America, which makes a great deal of “citizenship” and “participation” and the like, the very simplest expression of political responsibility—voting—is undertaken by not much more than half the eligible voters, and in the case of local elections, since the purpose seems to them so trivial, by not much more than a fifth.

Thus to posit a bioregional politics that depends on the responsibility of true citizenship—that is, interested individuals regularly and willingly participating in all aspects of the ongoing deliberations of the community—may seem to defy history and even to run contrary to human experience. But that is nonsense. Societies in all parts of the world in all periods of history have lived by the principles of political responsibility—that is in fact the way they survived. Their people had to concern themselves with the affairs of the polity, with settling disputes between families, allocating the hindquarters of the mastodon, deciding when to plant the corn. Citizenship was and had to be taken for granted, and communal decision-making was a necessity built into the life of the community.

By the time of the Athenian Greeks it had even risen to the state of an understood, an accepted, duty: moira meant the inevitable, natural performance of duties to the polis in return for all that the polis provided. Duties: this is not a question of discretion or choice, an individual deciding whether or not to vote; this is the customary, unquestioned, necessary way to behave, and the Greek tragedies are mostly about what consequences attend those who shirk. As Pericles said of his fellow Athenians: “We regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as a harmless, but a useless, character.” Participation was the citizen’s obligation, and those who refused it had no better status than aimless dogs pissing in the agora.

Where all individuals are citizens, involved in the civitas, the true powers of complementarity are revealed. The strong hues and delicate tints, the bold splashes and slender lines, the
full range of color and value, of shape and pattern, are evident in the canvas of a community’s civic life, all parts contributing to the smoothness, the strength, even the magnificence of the whole. There is no meaning, no value, to hierarchy here; it would only be stifling and enervating, scorned as the impediment to community that it is.

One last principle, simple and inevitable, must follow: the law of diversity. A healthy ecosystem usually tends toward diversity, and diversity usually means stability: a setback or calamity for one species in a fragile system of only ten is much more debilitating than in a system of several hundred—it could even lead to the system’s overall collapse—which is why a temperate forest is likely to be more stable and recover from calamity more quickly than a subarctic tundra. In an ecosystem without centralization and hierarchy, where the natural tendencies to centrifugality and diffusion have full play, diversity and complexity of both animal and plant species are the inevitable consequences.

There’s a nice story about the eminent British biologist J. B. S. Haldane that bears on this point. Once at a luncheon at an Oxford college he was asked, amid a group of distinguished theologians, what he thought was the principal characteristic of the Supreme Being of the universe, since after all he had spent a long lifetime examining the Almighty’s manifestations on earth. The old man thought for a moment, bent forward and said: “An inordinate fondness for beetles.”

The theologians were no doubt taken aback, but the answer, it turns out, is eminently reasonable; of the million or so animal species that have so far been identified, nearly half—some 400,000 of them—are beetles, far more than any other kind of animal. Such diversity in a single order is astonishing.

almost unimaginable, and whether or not the Supreme Being can be said to have such a passion in fact, there is no doubt that the setting of the natural world obviously favors multiplicity and multiformity of that kind.

But beetles aside, the human animal in its own way is also a good example of the success of diversity. Neither so fertile as some species, so hardy or long-lived as others, it has survived these millions of years because it became adaptable. As a species we learned to climb trees and swim rivers, to run across prairies and swing on vines, to hunt and forage and to plant and nurture, to work alone like a hawk and in bands like wolves, to communicate intimately like honeybees and signal over great distances like porpoises, to know the world by smell and by three-dimensional sight, an acute sense of hearing, and a delicate sense of touch. Specialization works for the simplest species, microbes and bacteria, but it is this elaborate complexity, this variety of skills and roles, this unending polymorphism, that marks the human individual.

The same is true as well for the human group. From the start, the diverse and multi-skilled band was the more successful, and obviously the ones that learned fire-tending and tool-making and game-hunting and skin-wearing and food-storage were most adept at survival. And today, for the same reasons, the human organizations that perform best—businesses that survive longest, universities that prosper, cities that thrive decade after decade—are those that are differentiated and diversified, capable of adjusting to new circumstances and accomplishing many kinds of tasks. The ones that become unadaptable and rigid, overspecialized and uniform, are short-lived.

In this contemporary world, though the complexities of global societies sometimes seem dazzling, the unmistakable trend is toward uniformity and monolithic in cultural as
well as economic and political spheres. Trend is not destiny, as they say, but no one who has been to the Cairo Hilton or the airport at Kuala Lumpur, or who has had to deal with the bureaucrats in Nairobi or Bogota or Ottawa, or who has seen the jean-and-tee-clad youths of Warsaw or Ouagadougou or Waikiki, or who has eaten the food on an airline of any nation, can doubt the rapid and effective cocacolonization of much of the world in a mere quarter-century. Industrial culture, in the name of efficiency or modernity or economy, seeks uniformity, interchangeability, routinization, and conformity; it works toward one language, one currency, one bourse, one government, one measuring system, one kind of popular music, one style of medicine, one design of office block, one type of university. The tide seems well-nigh unstanchable and its signs are everywhere: whole nations given over to a single product, cities to a single industry, farms to a single crop, factories to a single article, people to a single job, jobs to a single motion.

That is the way not of stability but of precariousness, not of empowerment but of slavery, not of health but of sickness.

In a bioregional world, particularly one based on self-sufficiency and decentralization, the whole movement of the culture would naturally run in the opposite direction. Diversity would almost be a necessity for survival, within a community, within a city of communities, within a bioregion, within a continent, although clearly the types of diversity would need to change according to the scale. Different bioregions would inevitably move in different ways, develop different resources, find different forms of governance; and so, too, might different communities even within a bioregion, because they would have different settings, different connections to the land, different people upon it. The patchwork would be quite varied—

even, to an outsider, crazy—but the whole would add up to a cozy and coherent quilt.

... Diversity, let us pause briefly to reflect, though one of those easy lip-service concepts, is a complex and possibly problematic phenomenon in real life, and it leads to conclusions not always welcomed by those who embrace its obvious virtues.

Let us take a bioregion, say a watershed. A certain homogeneity would exist there simply because the ways of making a living, of building houses, of raising crops would be likely to be similar; the people would be likely to have developed over the years a particularized culture, a special way of talking, a regional cuisine, an idiosyncratic sense of humor, a distinctive style of art. Yet a certain divergence would be bound to exist there also—differences between urban and rural, say, or hill folk and valley folk, or ranchers and farmers, or those on the upstream currents and those on the harbor tides. For the most part the differences would probably be tolerable and slight, even beneficial as they are in an ecosystem, but this is the point: even when those differences rub raw and real animosities emerge, the diversity giving rise to them must be treasured and preserved. It would be the purpose of a bioregional polity in its various forms to find agreement between quarreling communities, of course, but agreement at the cost of squelching variety or imposing uniformity comes at too high a price: a certain tolerance is the inevitable concomitant of diversity. As the stable econiche permits—even, in a sense, encourages—a certain amount of disharmony and conflict, appreciating that the interests of all species cannot be in agreement at all times, that disputes over territory or scavenging
rights or access to sunlight can exist, so the stable bioregion must do likewise.

Bioregional diversity, it must be understood, means exactly that. It does not mean that every community in a bioregion, every subregion within an ecoregion, every ecoregion on a continent, would construct itself along the same lines, evolve the same political forms. Most particularly it does not mean that every bioregion would be likely to heed the values of democracy, equality, liberty, freedom, justice, and the like, the sort that the liberal American tradition proclaims. Truly autonomous bioregions would inevitably go in separate and not necessarily complementary ways, creating their own political systems according to their own environmental settings and their own ecological needs.

Now any region true to bioregional principles would necessarily respect the limitations of scale, the virtues of conservation and stability, the importance of self-sufficiency and cooperation, and the desirability of decentralization and diversity—and one can only imagine that these principles would impel its polity in the direction of libertarian, noncoercive, open, and more-or-less democratic governance. But of course they need not. Different cultures could be expected to have quite different views about what political forms could best accomplish their bioregional goals, and (especially as we imagine this system on a global scale) those forms could be at quite some variance from the Western Enlightenment-inspired ideal. And however much one might find the thought unpleasant, that divergence must be expected and—if diversity is desirable—respected. It is quite possible that an extraordinary variety of political systems would evolve within the bioregional constraints, and there is no reason to think that they would necessarily be compatible—or even, from someone else’s point of view, good.

Gandhi remarks somewhere that it is worthless to go on “dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.” But that is exactly what I think is necessary: to imagine systems that will work even if the people in them are not good. There’s not much point, it seems to me, in dreaming of systems where we expect everyone will be good. Not only would that be likely to produce a fairly vapid society, but the long history of human behavior suggests that such a system would not evolve on this planet no matter how long we have a go at it. What we must do is dream of systems that allow people to be people, in all their variousness—and that includes being wrong on occasion, and errant and even evil, to commit the crimes that as near as we know have always been committed—and still permit their communities, their societies to survive and prosper as close to climax stability as possible.

That means, first of all, systems where all civil and social structures work to minimize errant behavior—where, for example, an individual normally feels part of the web of nature and is accorded a particular role and value within it; where bonds of community are strong and social forms supportive and nurturing; where material needs and desires are for the most part fulfilled; where individual or even community actions transgressing bioregional standards are known to everyone and their unfortunate consequences visible to all; and where individual acts of violence or disharmony are perceived as contrary to both communal and ecological principles. That means, secondly, systems where such errant behavior can be channeled and compartmentalized, constricted by scale, so it cannot do irreparable damage beyond narrow physical limits; the evil-doer, whether an individual or a whole community, is thus held in check by the limits of bioregional decentralism and cannot send poisons coursing through the veins of entire continents and the world itself, as can happen in a global
monoculture. Bioregionalism, properly conceived, provides just such systems.
Bioregionalism, then, not merely tolerates but thrives on the diversity of human behavior, and the varieties of political and social arrangements they give rise to, the way a laboratory thrives on multiple experiments or a scholarly institute on multiple disciplines. This diversity is the way to foster creativity and innovation, the dynamics of synergy, out of which eventually come the enhancements and advancements of life. It is the way to guard against the disasters that monocultures are open to, as when an entire citrus-planted valley falls prey to the Mediterranean fruit fly or an entire country succumbs to the potato blight. Diversity has its own special values, its own nurturant complexities, and it is to be welcomed even though at times it may give rise to the unwanted novelty, the unpleasant mutant, and even though in human systems it may allow those practices that stem from the baser rather than the nobler motives.

In any case, in the real world, there is no other way to have it.

**EIGHT**

Society

A few years ago when asked by The New York Times to name his choices for the seven wonders of the natural world, biologist Lewis Thomas led off with what he called the "extraordinary phenomenon" of the oncideres beetle and the mimosa tree.

It seems that when she wishes to lay her eggs the female oncideres beetle unfailingly picks out the mimosa tree from all others in the forest, crawls out on one of its limbs, and cuts a long lengthwise slit, into which she drops her egg sacs. Then, because in the larval stage the offspring cannot survive in live wood, she backs down the branch a foot or so and cuts a neat circular slit through the bark all around the limb. This has the effect of killing the branch within a very short time and eventually the dead wood succumbs to some strong wind and falls to the ground, where it remains as the home for the next generation of oncideres beetles as they hatch. But, interestingly, removing the limb also has the effect of pruning the mimosa tree, a rather valuable ancillary result because, left alone, a mimosa has a lifespan of just twenty-five to thirty years, but pruned in this simple way, it can flourish for a century or more.