

Preserving the Wild Places

The necessity of breaking the rules

by Marjorie Kelly

*'Improvement makes
strait roads;
but the crooked
roads without
improvement are
roads of Genius.'*

William Blake
"The Marriage of
Heaven and Hell"

I came to it as to a memory, this room that I had dreamed of before, the forgotten third apartment in the back, through the mud, up the stairs. It had always been mine, this dimly remembered place, but whole years would pass between my visits, as though I had lost the path—while it was only steps away, through the mud, up the stairs.

It was there that they lived, the two young men in my dream—there that they lived wildly, and free. Literally free, because the landlady (me) had forgotten to collect rent. They had been expecting me for some time, and now as I approached I found myself thinking, What would I charge them; they had lived on my property for years, at no cost, and if I charged them a small amount (yes, something fair and generous on my part), even this small income would purchase some things I had been wanting a long time.

As I entered the rattletrap place—from the outside seemingly abandoned—I saw that they had made it their own: had nailed up new steps, rigged up a makeshift shower downstairs, painted enormous murals on the walls. There was dirt on the floor, and the heat rarely worked, but the rooms were spacious. They were filled with light. And while I barely knew the young men, in some secret way I loved them, loved the wildness of their existence.

I awoke still thinking of rent (in real life I am a landlady, renting out the bottom floor of my two-flat), and then it occurred to me, this delicious and radical thought: I could charge them nothing. I could let them live totally free—not by my neglect, but by my deliberate choice. I could allow them to break the rules, could in fact support them while they did so, and quietly look the other way.

The dream set me thinking about wild places, about the necessity of preserving them. Wild places in this tidy and

efficient world. Wild places in myself. When I use the word wildness, I mean something like "mistake" or "error"—I mean that gap where something genuine comes rushing through.

Lewis Hyde has written an extended meditation on this, a poem, entitled "This Error is the Sign of Love," which offers a litany of the errors by which we survive: "The crack in the ice where the otters breathe . . . the teacher's failings in which the students grow wise . . . seeds that need six months of ice . . . the spitball in the classroom. . . ."

I am reminded, too, of the hurrah for errors voiced by Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself," which makes me laugh when I think of it.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?

I also say it is good to fall, battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won. . .

Vivas to those who have fail'd!

And to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea!

And to those themselves who sank in the sea!

Vivas to failure, yes. I only wish I could feel a bit more that way, a bit more tolerant of myself when I'm less than perfect. I think that if I could, I would also be a bit more tolerant of the world. The first and most important level of ethics is how we treat ourselves—for if the taskmaster in our head is unforgiving and brutish, we shall be the same. When we punish ourselves, we punish those around us, especially those under us: subordinates, children, secretaries, clerks, waitresses. (This equation works in reverse, too, and is an excellent trick in understanding people. Watch how someone treats the world—who he yells at, how often he gets impatient—and you'll have a good idea of how he treats himself, in his own internal world.)

The most important ethics is the ethics of how we treat ourselves, for if the taskmaster in our head is unforgiving and brutish, we shall be the same.

It's the gaps, the errors, that remind us we're alive, that tell us life will not be contained and will not, by god, be perfect.

And of course, the opposite of being punishing is being forgiving. And that means letting people break the rules. We have this Puritan notion that ethics is a matter of following the rules, but sometimes it's a matter of breaking them. Or looking the other way while somebody else does. Like when my mother let me stay home from school, without making me pretend I was dying of pneumonia. Like letting myself take a Monday off, to play, without feigning a sore throat to the receptionist on the phone.

There's something friendly and cozy about a world with wildness and errors—and something frightening about a world without them. I think, for example, of our archetype of the efficient corporation, where no one comes in late or slips out early, no employees take home supplies, and no one, ever, misses a deadline. Or I think of my own archetype of the efficient professional: the one who isn't a pound overweight, dresses gracefully, finishes her to-do list every day, and is always happy.

I can't live in such a world; I feel squeezed and panicky. Like the otters, I need the crack in the ice where I can breathe.

It's the gaps, the errors, the wild places that remind us we're alive, that tell us life will not be contained, will not follow the rules and will not, by God, be perfect.

It has something to do with accepting our own failings, and not calling them failings. It has something to do with accepting others with all their oddities and failings, and embracing them as part of the human fabric. For just as we need all the animal and plant species, as we cherish the diversity of life on earth, so also do we need all our human species: the bag lady and the retarded child as much as the artist and the monk. As a business person I am a member of one species,



One panel of *Wild Ass* by Mike Glier, 1986, charcoal and crayon on paper, 2 panels, each 45×62 inches. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

with certain habitat, certain behaviors, but let me never suppose that mine is the only legitimate skin to inhabit.

Those of us in the mainstream need the fringe. And we need the fringe of our own lives as well. We need places where the child in us can run free.

And we need these places for no good reason at all. The crack in the ice where nobody breathes, the teacher's failings in which the students do *not* grow wise. It's a trick I catch myself at a lot: taking a vacation because "I'll work so much better when I get back," or watching TV because it's "educational," or playing outside to get "exercise." I seem to have to learn the lesson again and again, that I can't charge rent on every hour of every day. Some parts of me can live free.

But even when I forget, even when my visits seem years apart, the old rattletrap place out back is still there, and it's still mine. Sometimes I lose the path, but it's just steps away, through the mud, up the stairs. And the rooms there are filled with light. ✎