

INTERVIEW FOR FILM AUSTRALIA'S WILDERNESS

Michael Leunig

One of Australia's best-loved cartoonists, Michael Leunig lives on a farm in eastern Victoria. His philosophical and poetic reflections on life have been published in numerous books and are seen regularly in *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The West Australian*.

Q: What is wilderness, is it important and, if so, why?

ML: Well, wilderness for me seems to suggest any place where humanity has not really cultivated or despoiled or inhabited. That's the first sense of it, and there's some quality of where humanity has never been, that humanity leaves alone—even places that are not obviously alive and abundant with natural life, there's still wilderness somewhere in these places. It also suggests not just the physical wilderness but a sort of a spiritual idea of something that is unknown but is intensely important—hugely important and natural and profound, and unexplorable in a sense. So that's what it means to me. I think of wilderness also as something within me, as if I have a wilderness somewhere within me which is very important to my serenity.

Q: In a sense you're saying that wilderness can exist anywhere?

ML: I think wilderness is not necessarily defined by its vastness, although to think of a vast wilderness is a very consoling idea. But there are small remnants of wilderness, there are kind of moments of wilderness which are now very vital to me because we are now faced, it seems, for the first time ever, with the idea of 'shall we let it be or shall we now invade it', and humanity's never been really faced with that idea; it's always been there more or less as we've gradually encroached, and suddenly for the first time humanity's faced with this choice. Do we stop here and allow it to remain and therefore humble ourselves before it. For the first time humanity's got to make this decision—do we humble ourselves and stop. This would be a huge step for humanity that it's never taken before, to say 'this far and no further'. And so it's what lies across that line that is wilderness.

Q: Following on from that, what is it about wilderness that inspires you in terms of your work?

ML: Well, the idea that nature prevails, that nature's integrity is more or less having its way, is not being dominated or controlled. Now this is a very important idea for the artist, because the artist works from a sense of inner wilderness, that there is this place within, which is shared also—the unconscious, if you like—the idea that there's something in us which is entirely natural and is not entirely known, and I think from that arises art. And it's a spiritual kind of idea, I guess, and the psychologists would say this is the unconscious, but I think most artists carry an idea of wilderness within. They might not call it that but they know it's an alive place—there's darkness there, there's also strong forces and a ruthless kind of dynamics, uncontrolled in a sense, and out of this arises this great vitality. So it's something we can't entirely measure or know or point to, but there's a sense that there is this place within, and the artist works out of this. Consequently I think artists just see in the wilderness, apart from seeing all the obvious beauty and the wonderful kind of aesthetic, if you like, and adoring it for itself, they also see resonated, they see this mirror of this place within and it consoles them, they feel an affinity to it, they feel connected in a spiritual way. So it's a source. Wilderness would seem to generate a pulse of its own which matters to humanity; it seems to generate some pulse and it's a spiritual pulse and it's a natural pulse and without this there's no art, I think. Without it there's no art at all—you know, this divine part of art that comes from somewhere, this thing they call

inspiration—the vitality of inspiration comes from some natural place, within and without.

Q: You choose to live not in a city but in the country. Is there in that a sense that this is something to help you work?

ML: Yes. I live in close proximity to nature, I guess, in its more obvious forms—the forest and all those uncontrollable things—and I live amongst that as much as I can and that seems to give me a lot and consoles me, and in its forms, in its dynamics, I see some truth and some reference point of truth. Whereas humanity seems to be going in some ways mad or is so ego-driven and so driven by unnatural qualities, it's lost, but nature never seems lost. It might be struggling, it might be suffering, but it's never lost, it knows what it's doing. So there's this pulse always coming off the natural world and I love its uncontrollability. I like that it's dangerous, I like that there are snakes that may kill me, I get an immense aliveness from being close to that and it's humbling to see, and I think to be humbled by nature is to be brought back to your truest self and your best ideas. You know, this is where you find yourself, when you're humbled by nature...

There was this cartoon I drew once. There's a couple, a rather bourgeois couple, sitting there in their lounge room saying, 'Well, I don't go to the Wilderness Shop but it's good to know that it's there'. And so people talk about nature like that and the wilderness. They say, 'I'm really glad to know that there is that thing out there, that wild place. I don't go there myself but I'm really glad to know that it's there.' Now this is not hypocrisy, this is the real thing, this is something really dear to people. Some people can't go into it too deeply.

I think it is okay that people are consoled and stabilised by the idea that there is something bigger than them, that there is something higher than humanity or deeper than humanity, if you like—there's something we can respect and revere. I think we need to know that. For some people, it's God, you see, it's important. Take it away and I think we'd all be in dreadful distress. And as we see wilderness apparently shrinking and being destroyed, I think we're getting very nervous and very distressed about this. You see, often people secretly love nature, they secretly hold it very dear.

This place, the Wilderness Shop, which was for a lot of city people their only connection to the idea of wilderness, it just seemed something funny that people like to have the idea that somewhere it's there, they need to know it exists, it's very important to people, even though they don't touch it. And that's the whole point—is there somewhere where any of us can refrain from going and kind of defiling, or let them tread carefully through it? I do believe that wilderness can exist within your backyard somehow, that there's some reverence for something that you don't dominate or rearrange the natural order too savagely, too egotistically, I mean, into nature. We are part of nature, and we can be kind of natural creatures in the wilderness. I believe we can learn to walk in the wilderness, and we are part of the wilderness, and I'm very interested in the idea—this word called 'human nature'—and I think there is nature within us and it is a wild thing and it's a wonderful thing. And I like the idea that we cultivate our human nature as well and keep it connected to the greater nature, and there's integrity of nature, the integrity of human nature, the ecology of the soul, as I call it. I think that we all have an inner ecology, a very finely balanced sensitive system of nature within us all, and we abuse it and we are cruel to it, you see, and then we wonder why humanity goes mad—and I think we dump things into our human nature to poison it and so this is why wilderness teaches us something about who we are.

Q: You see this human nature—this inner ecology—as being connected to a larger sense of the ecology?

ML: Yes, I think humans can see themselves as being outside of nature, or that we have outgrown nature and we can grow beyond nature, and we appear to do this from time to time, but ultimately this is madness and it does not work, and so I think that we have a nature which we tend to suppress, we think it's dangerous, we think it's dark and dirty or whatever, but it's also glorious, you see, and so it's this thing of how do we handle our own nature and how do we handle nature out there, and what relationship should we have with our nature and the nature out there. And this is where humans struggle, I think, and they choose to sometimes [say] 'Let us repress it, let us control it and then we'll rise up above it and we'll conquer the weather and we'll conquer the whole thing and get it in order', and this has been a great sadness and it hasn't made us happy. I think it waits—remnant nature waits for us to come to our senses and to revere it and to humble ourselves to it and to be part of it, as we are, and to walk in it, you know, get down, take our shoes off and be amongst it somewhat and feel at home in it.

Q: What is it in wilderness that inspires and helps artists?

ML: There's something about the thought of wilderness—it's something we hold dear. We hold the thought of it dear and I know that's not enough just to do that but that's very important for the artist because the artist is relating to an inner wilderness when they're working, their wild natural state. And artists have a history of wanting to be close to it, actually in nature a lot, and artists have often been the ones to point us towards nature, to say, 'Look at it—look what we've done to it—we need to apologise for it'—I think artists have a history of doing that. They find great consolation in it—it's holy to them, it's sacred—you see, this is what is sacred and this would seem to be the last chance to find anything sacred that humans can agree about—it's the wilderness. And I think artists have a sense of what is sacred, what is holy—it's a religious thing that artists do, in a sense, or it's certainly spiritual. It's this connection of art and spirituality and the soul of nature and wilderness—just a natural, integrated system.

I think artists have traditionally related to the wilderness or to nature. Artists have often been the ones to point to and say, 'Well, here is the truth, this is the truth'. When humanity loses its way and becomes really disgraceful, as it does, it's a source of great consolation. People go to the forests to weep and grieve—there's comfort here, you see, and so there's spiritual comfort and there's spiritual modelling, if you like, and the artist feels part of nature in a sense. I mean, art is a spiritual activity, it's a natural spiritual activity. And so this link between artists and art and spirituality and nature, it's just a little ecology—it's everything and it seems impossible that there can be art without the wilderness.

Q: Can we explore the idea of wilderness as a place of darkness as well as a place of light, and the idea that this is in a way an inspiring kind of concept?

ML: Well, my connection to nature and to wilderness always involves the idea of death as well as life. We think of wilderness as kind of bursting with life, which it is, but it's also full of death and there are trees falling and there are bones of animals and there are dying animals. Where I live, I'm made constantly aware of death. Now this isn't morbid; it isn't a morbid thing, it's very balancing, it's a very balancing and important kind of influence, to know of life's truth and that death is natural and it's important. And I find that very deepening but consoling—I don't know, it teaches us about death, the wilderness, it teaches us about life and it teaches us about death, and where do you learn these things? And it seems to provide some sanctuary for people in their distress; I mean, people turn to nature, to trees when they're grieving, when they're courting, you know, the idea of nature as the thing that holds them and

conceals them and provides sort of a cathedral almost, this idea of the forest as a cathedral. Humans probably depend upon it far more than they are willing to understand and we turn to our gardens or our trees or our forests when we lose our way and we need healing—it's a very healing thing...

I think many people hold the idea of nature and wilderness very dear. It's a traditional thing, they heard their grandparents talk about it, but they're a bit secretive about it, it's a private matter. They're afraid they're going to be seen as primitive or whatever or that they're going to be seen as Greenies—this so-called slur against people—a Greenie; I can think of nothing better myself—but I know farmers who you would think were redneck farmers, but I know they secretly dearly love the forests and their trees and are very bonded to them and care and know a lot about it—know a lot about the seasonal impact and all those things—and they love it in a childlike way also. Now this is very reassuring to me because sometimes they might not appear to be Green but there's a great secret Green-ness in this country, and I find this reassuring.

Q: Is it possible for human beings to live in the wilderness and for that wilderness to still have integrity?

ML: I think humans can live with integrity somehow in relationship to the wilderness. They must find a new way of walking on this earth, obviously, they must enter into a new relationship with nature, it seems to me—and they can do it. A lot is known about this, this isn't a mystery, but we're living in an economy and a kind of a system and within a philosophy that compels us to attack it [nature] and want to dominate it, and I think until we can overcome that, that egotistical, obsessional quality, that domineering impulse, and live with it...how else can we live? We were born here on this earth, we are part of it, we know how to do it—we can, we can—it's probably simpler than we imagine, but simplicity is not easy, of course.