

## A Conversation with Jane Wodening: Doors of Perception

by Richard Whittaker, Anne Veh

Anne Veh told me about Jane Wodening. She told me Jane was an astonishing writer, that she wrote about animals, creatures, about the intimate life of nature around her. That her writing was like no one else she knew of. And then she thought of Barry Lopez. Well, it was okay to bring in Barry Lopez in the same conversation. In fact, Anne was putting together an exhibit at the Di Rosa in Napa, California. It would be called "Entering the Wild" and would feature a hand-illustrated book by Barry Lopez along with works by five other artists. It would also feature several of Jane's books of stories. Anne hoped to find a way to bring Jane out from Colorado for the opening. I remember how Anne spoke about Jane Wodening with both fervor and reverence. And, as it turned out, Jane did come out from Colorado. Shortly before the opening Anne and Jane and I, and a few others, had dinner at photographer Linda Conner's home in San Anselmo, California. It was a memorable evening. I remember being struck immediately by Jane Wodening's beauty. I mention beauty because it's something deeper than what we sometimes take it to be. It's something I think the reader will sense in the following conversation that took place a few days after the opening at the Di Rosa, which was a great success. Anne and Jane and I met again at Linda Conner's home to talk.

Richard Whittaker: Was there anything unusual about your early life?

Jane Wodening: Well, the first time I remember getting depressed I'd probably wanted to do something and my mother hadn't sanctioned it. I was kicking stones around the neighborhood and up the ally at the house next door there was a little dog baring his teeth, yapping and snapping at me and I thought, here is someone who wants to talk to me. So I squatted down, trusting his chain to hold him, and very slowly let my hand move up towards his face with me talking, "Hi Wagsy, good doggy. I know you like me." What a funny name for such a nasty little dog. So slowly my hand was reaching towards him. Then I could see his eye on my hand as he was yapping at me, and he was secretly sniffing it, barking and sniffing.

So gradually that it was almost imperceptible, I got to where my hand was in a place where he could decide whether to make a lunge, which wasn't going to work, or whether to give me a cheek I could scratch. And he decided the latter. He wanted a little girl to scratch his cheek. And so I did. I remember his eyes closing. It was a great occasion for both of us. He let me scratch his cheek. So I was petting him and he was at the far end of his chain. There was a fence there, it was something I could climb over, but I didn't on that day. We sat within reach and there was some possibility of the hand being bitten, still. Well, that dog was terribly important in his way, although I never could get him to stop biting everybody else but me and maybe his owners.

RW: You began this story saying that you'd been depressed and I wonder how that fits in there.

JW: Yes. I have noticed that when I get just miserable, I relax, droop, slow down—a very slowing down thing happens to me. I mentioned last night that being depressed is kind of a great thing. You can relax into it and be outside and then you want to look at something besides what you're depressed about. So you find yourself studying ants, or little creatures come up to you. Or maybe you even have the sense to grab some raw sunflower seeds when you go out the door and you can see if anybody wants to eat them if you keep really, really still.

RW: So I want to make sure I understand what you're saying. You started talking about being depressed and you mentioned this little yappy dog. So were you depressed when you met this little dog?

JW: Yes. I had to be depressed, or it wouldn't have happened. I would have just skipped on by. I mean a kid wouldn't go up to a yappy little dog unless she felt like she really wanted company.

RW: I see. And this dog was certainly focusing on you.

JW: Yes. And there was nobody else in the world who wanted to talk to me!

RW: Wow. Did you have siblings?

JW: I had a brother who was five years older.

RW: How old were you, more or less, when you met this little dog?

JW: About five.

RW: Okay. So can I assume you had a kind of a lonely childhood?

JW: Yes. My brother was ten years old and we didn't play together. There was just too much of a gap. Except for word games, we weren't interested in the same things.

RW: But you had such sensitivity to this dog and your approach was so careful. You were obviously watching it so closely and you kind of won it over.

JW: Yes. And maybe a year later my cousin Joan came over. Mom said, "You girls go out and play." She was a couple of years older and I didn't know how to entertain her. So, you know, the burden of responsibility. It was beyond me. Then I thought, well, maybe she'd like to do what I had done, learn to tame little Wagsy. Poor girl [laughs]. She just hated the thought. She started to cry. I said, "Come on!" I went over to Wagsy and said, "Now be a good boy" [laughs].

RW: I take it Wagsy wasn't a good boy.

JW: Wagsy was not a good boy! He bit everybody. He bit anybody he could reach.

RW: But you made friends with Wagsy.

JW: I did. At five. When his owner saw me playing with him out in the back yard, she came running out saying, "You can't...!" Then she saw that he was lying on his back, wanting his belly scratched. She didn't know what to make of it.

RW: So was that your first experience of overcoming an animal's fear? This seems like a pretty strong memory.

JW: Oh, yes. It was a big deal.

RW: Did that open a door for you?

JW: Yes. It made me feel like I could do things with animals that other people couldn't, or wouldn't—because my cousin didn't even try.

Anne Veh: What's interesting to me is that when you are feeling depressed, you're kind of vulnerable. I think Wagsy might have picked up that you weren't a threat.

JW: Right. Or maybe what he picked up on was how he loved the smell of my hands and felt, God, wouldn't it be wonderful if that hand would pet my cheek?

AV: And your intuition to take it very slow.

JW: When some creature is going [makes sounds of vicious yapping] you're not going to go fast, at least I'm not.

RW: I'm wondering if another memory with an animal comes up?

JW: Some time later, Wagsy got loose in the neighborhood. The lady next door came over and asked my mother, would your little girl get my dog? He got off his chain and he's terrorizing the neighborhood. I was seven then and was sent out to do this job. I was very proud. Looking around, I could see curtains pulled back with faces in windows [laughs]. Up the street I could see a boy up in a tree. I saw Wagsy there under the boy in the tree and I walked up slowly. I got to him and he wagged his tail at me. He was very pleased to see me. He seemed to say, "Let's go together, you and I. I'll take care of you. I'll protect you from everything." I realized that if he sensed me refusing that, he wouldn't be catchable. So I bent over and picked him up. He was just a little guy. And I carried him and we talked as we walked slowly down the sidewalk.

Everybody was watching, the kid in the tree and all the people behind the curtains as this little girl walked carrying this little dog in her arms down the street. I wanted to go as slow as possible because it was a precious moment. But also, I knew he was going to want to jump and run. I think what happened was that he had trusted me not to take him home. So when I arrived and his owner took him from me there was this moment of trying wildly to get away. She grabbed him and got a good hold on him. I really felt bad about that [with some emotion].

RW: I hear that. Gosh, it's incredible how deep our connections can be with animals.

JW: I've never been able to write about him because I feel so bad. Not long after that she came over and asked my mother if her little girl would like to have Wagsy. My mother looked at me because I was right there. I thought, I can't handle him at all. So I had to say "no" because the neighbor woman said she could send him "out to the farm." I didn't know what that meant. It took years before I knew it meant that he was going to be euthanized.

RW: Oh, we're all in tears about that [some emotion of my own coming up because of a related event with my own dog]. On the way over, I was thinking about the Buddhist

principle about caring for all sentient beings. As you were saying last night at the dinner, we're all animals. Another way of saying it is that we're all sentient beings. I haven't read many of your stories yet, but I'm aware of the care and the depth of your attention. For instance, your story about the beetle really struck me, and a big part of it was just the careful attention you gave it.

JW: What I was trying to bring out last night was the attention to detail—really, the orangutan story and several of my stories are like a chronological list of the moves that creature made, and the explanation you come up with has to include everything. Then you may be getting it right.

RW: Yes. But through the careful observation of those moves, one is touched. I think one recognizes something in oneself about those moves.

JW: You know, people see those moves and they don't think to think that those moves are like some human doing something or saying something. And why they don't, I don't know!

RW: I was just listening on the radio to this psychologist who has researched mindfulness for years. The interviewer asked "What got you interested in mindfulness?" She answered, "Mindlessness is what got me interested." It's like what you're saying—we "see" all this stuff, but we don't really see it.

AV: Well, with that orangutan each gesture you felt...

JW: I understood her. This happened before I was writing and I would tell it. I would have to stand up and dance it. When I started writing, I thought, now let's see, what stories do I have that I could write? Oh, yeah—there's the orangutan. So that was one of the first stories I wrote.

AV: But coming back to mindfulness, many people would look at an orangutan in a zoo and just be amused by its movements. It's "an animal." There's not really a connection.

JW: Like a toy monkey. Monkey see, monkey do—haha, so to speak.

AV: Right. There's not much thought to the intelligence of the animal. But because of your sensitivity, you could see what was happening when the orangutan responded to your child's feet, seeing their happy kicking.

JW: Objectivity. Okay, so then the orangutan reached her arms through the cage bars, her fingers were moving a little like, "Come on, I can just feel that baby in my arms!" But the fact of the reaching through the cage bars. Of course, I was analyzing it at the time, but if you simply note it, you've got a start. You could write it down, make a list. When Lukas [Lukas Felzman, panel discussion at the Di Rosa in Napa, California] asked me why do you write?—and I answered, "To understand," that was exciting to him. He said he does that, too. If you write down what moves were made, then you can understand what was going on. It's like interpreting a dream.

RW: Now I'm wondering if there's another strong memory?

JW: I can't think of anything between that and going to Colorado.

RW: And you came from where to go to Colorado?

JW: A suburb of Chicago. I was eleven when my family moved to Fraser, Colorado. It's high on the western slope of the Continental Divide. Something like nine and a half [thousand feet]. At the time, it was considered the coldest spot in the nation. Then the cabin I had much later was about 30 miles from there over the Continental Divide on the Eastern slope at ten thousand feet.

RW: Why did your family move to Fraser?

JW: My father was ill. He lost his job when The War ended. They were having some trouble I never did figure out. This was right after WWII. Daddy's job was in an aluminum factory and everybody was being laid off. They had both graduated from the University of Illinois with teaching degrees, so they decided to teach. He needed a drier climate, so why not offer their services out west? So they got this job at Fraser. He was the principal of the school and he taught English and Math to the high school kids, and mom taught third and fourth grades. My brother was a senior in high school and I was in the fifth grade, or something like that.

RW: Did that initiate for you a new exploration of nature around there?

JW: I was traumatized by the move. I already had enough trouble with people, but to find people acting and talking differently, dressing differently, I had a big, kind of neurotic response. Always before I'd had to wear dresses or skirts to school. So I said, "I'm not going to wear any skirts or dresses again, ever!" [laughs] And I've just about done that. Of course, there you didn't have to.

RW: Was that a problem for anybody?

JW: No. My mother knuckled into it. I remember her holding up my Brownie Scout dress and asking, "What about this?" [laughs] "No!" And I had a little jacket, a light jacket and that was my coat for the year.

Now Mr. Pellini across the street, he had one arm off at the elbow. He had a white box in the middle of his chicken yard. And that white box was his weather station. He would go out every morning a few minutes before I'd take off across the street and over the tracks into the schoolyard. He would go out and take the weather and he would report it to the nation. The nation would say, well, Fraser is the coldest spot in the nation again. [laughs] It got down to fifty below three times that year. And I was wearing that little jacket and making it.

AV: How did you survive? [laughs]

JW: Well, I moved fast. I didn't stay out long. And nobody went out to play in that kind of weather. I was trying to be tough and independent.

RW: There must have been a very strong self-will or something like that in your character from a very young age.

JW: Something like that [laughing].

RW: My daughter announced at one meal—she was maybe eight years old—I'm not going to eat meat anymore. And that was the last time she did. It's been over thirty years since then. She didn't want to have anything to do with killing and eating animals.

JW: My brother said that one day, that he didn't want to eat any more meat. So my mother, who always tried to appear demure and obedient, quit feeding him meat at dinner. But she kept giving him his bacon to put on his toast, which he loved more than anything else [laughs]. And he kept on eating his bacon not realizing, or not wanting to realize, that bacon was meat. And months went by. At one point, was it Mom or Daddy, I don't remember, who said, "You know, Jack, bacon is meat." He wouldn't give up the bacon. So he had to say, all right, I'm not a vegetarian anymore. [laughs]

AV: And I was curious to know if you had an animal story from the days you lived in Fraser?

JW: That's where I acquired my first dog. Mr. Pellini had two pups. Evidently he had talked with my parents because at the end of the year, when he was about to leave, he came up to me. I was playing with the dogs and he asked, "Which one do you want?" I was really startled, but I was thinking quick. I said, "Spot!" [laughs] The other one was Tippy.

I would have preferred not to separate them, but that was what he was offering. So I took Spot. Another thing that happened was—directly across town and above the schoolhouse, and way beyond, was Byers Peak. It's one of those sweet, beautiful mountains. And I loved it. It was like, "Good morning, Byers!" I knew when it was fifty below because the sky would turn purple. So I would greet the fifty below and Byers Peak together. We were secret friends. I was friends with a mountain. So those are two things.

RW: Can you say something more about being friends with the mountain?

JW: It was so great. Since I left Fraser, I've had to settle on the moon. I'm very honored to be accepted by the moon [laughs].

RW: Did you say, "accepted by the moon"?

JW: Yes. When I was living up in the cabin alone, days and weeks would go by without seeing any people. I would go to sleep at night under the south window and, at some point, the moon would come up and look at me. Sometimes it'd be big enough that I'd wake up and I'd say, "Hi, moon!" But I'd done that before in my adolescence. The moon was a great chum when I was an adolescent. He looked like a freckle-faced boy and when he'd smile, it was going to be a nice day. I remember I'd see the full moon and look until I could get a clear picture of the expression on his face. Then I'd say, well, that's what kind of evening I'm going to have, or day, tomorrow.

Living alone in the canyon, I could ride him. I could get up there and look down and see what he saw. I'd seen the photo of the earth, so I had visual aids. But of course I used a zoom lens, and went all around in the world.

RW: So you had the experience of looking down from the moon?

JW: I wouldn't say I experienced it; I imagined it. Then I'd take my zoom lens and say, where should we go tonight? How about Samoa? [laughs]—since it was a cold night. So we'd go to Samoa. I'd imagine somebody lying in a hammock there and a little breeze through the coconut trees. Waves beating on a shore. And that person loved the moon. So there was a connection between me and that person who loved the moon.

And I was going down to other friends of the moon. I wrote a little booklet to the moon called Moonsongs. That was a way I could keep in touch with a big world while living in that narrow canyon.

RW: Is there anything else to say about Byers Peak? You'd said the mountain had

accepted you.

JW: Well, such a smiling mountain it is; it looks like it loves the sun—and there I was east of it in the morning. It reflected the beams from the sun, and I reflected the beams from Byers. I felt Byers as a friend, and it was. Looking at it gave me courage.

RW: Did you find yourself talking to nature in other ways, “Hello tree or hello birds”?

JW: I do that all the time. I also talk to the frying pan and to the fire. And I talk to the car. This is all from being a lonely child, I think. You’ve got to find somebody to talk with, or to.

Once I was walking with my friend Tom and I saw a Canada jay looking at me to ask me if I had any food on me. I elbowed Tom and said, “Tom, watch!” and I held out a handful of raw sunflower seeds and the bird flew across the road and up the hill to land on my hand and eat the seeds.

RW: Laurens Van Der Post writes about the Bushmen people, some of the earliest people we know of.

JW: In the Kalahari.

RW: Yes. His nanny was a Bushmen woman. She taught him how to speak that clicking language. And in one of his books, he wrote that they were the last people on earth who felt known by their surroundings. What you’re describing reminds me of that.

JW: I do feel that.

RW: Would you say something about that?

JW: Well, this seedpod [picks up a large gourd elaborately inscribed by an indigenous artist] has a spirit all its own. It is somebody. It’s a seedpod. It’s from Peru. It’s been drawn on and contains all of itself as one spirit and whoever did the drawings and what they mean, and wherever it goes, it brings these auras so that it won’t lose its place of origin. But here it sits and it cries out, “I’m here.” It says, “Hi Anne. Hi Richard. Hi Jane.” It says its self and its history. It has a lot of presence, all three aspects of it, and other aspects too from its history.

RW: That reminds me. I spent a summer hiking in Point Reyes National Seashore after my marriage had fallen apart. It was very healing; all the trails in Point Reyes are really beautiful. One day I was walking quietly among the little birds and insects in this sort of bushy, coastal plain when all of the sudden I became present on that trail in a way I’d never experienced before. I realized I was in the home of these little creatures. It’s hard to describe this. It was like being in my living room at home, but it was their living room and I was in their home. Do you know what I’m talking about?

JW: Yes. I haven’t really articulated it for you and maybe I should. For years, I’ve seen a patch of land, just a corner or a sunlit cranny somewhere, and I’d say, “There’s a place!” Well, what do you mean, a “place”? That’s hard to answer. It’s an ecology—a living room, as you say. When I see one, and I see its welcome, I like to go and sit in it awhile. A place might be very small or cover acres and acres. It’s full of people—I mean, critters and plants and water and air and dirt and light—living their lives and raising their children and being affected by the sun or the shade. There’s so much in each place that you can’t possibly stop talking about it if you want to get it all. Then when a place would call me like that, I’d go there and watch the critters and plants and things and learn a little about their

lives and how they inter-relate. In a way, it's always the entire environment that really counts—and every part of it as a hologram.

RW: That experience is a very deep and beautiful moment, but also very difficult to put into words.

JW: Oh, I would really like to be able to explain what a place is! But I think that is exactly what you're talking about.

RW: It was so beautiful to be in the home of these little creatures.

JW: Yes. Yes. Creatures—the whole gathering of sentient beings.

RW: There's the story about a man who gets lost out somewhere—he's wandering around and very frightened when he runs across a Native American. The man says, "I'm lost out here." The Native American asks very calmly, "Why do you say you're lost?" The man says, "I don't know where I am. Can you help me?" And the Native American says, "Yes, that's easy. You're right here."

JW: [laughs] That's right.

RW: Now Anne, you've spent more time with Jane. I'm wondering if you have something to bring in here.

AV: I hadn't really thought of this until you shared that experience you had in nature, but when I was young—and this goes back to being depressed. I was from a family of four, but I felt kind of alone and I would find solace and my greatest happiness and joy in the garden. I would talk to the plants and I would spend hours in the garden. I would create little bouquets for my mother. It kept me going and even to this day, I talk to the flowers.

JW: What do you feel when you see that a flower is about to die?

AV: Well, I don't mourn like if it's a rose and it's passing. If the leaves have rust, I trim them and care for it. I accept the life of the plant.

JW: That's a good system. Don't forget it.

RW: What do you mean by it being a good system?

JW: Well, to love the garden to accept the life cycle. If you see something like aphids, you do something. You can prune, but you accept that the flower will die and the garden continue.

RW: I wonder if it isn't in our nature to relate deeply and very specifically to nature? Now when you were living in that cabin alone, you described wild chickadees landing on your hand. Can you talk about your relationship with birds?

JW: I had learned how to tame the chickadees. First, you feed them for weeks, usually raw sunflower seeds. I would place them on the windowsill and I would not feed them steadily because they must train their babies to hunt for food in the wood and wildflowers. Eventually, they would come to me if I would stand nearby for long enough. And, they all commenced with this "Eew, yuck" look when they touched my hand.

RW: You mean “eww” getting close to a human being?

JW: Touching that warm, resilient flesh of a gigantic human being would be a new level of recognition to a four-ounce creature.

RW: A friend of mine would occasionally go to a Catholic monastery, Christ of the Desert in New Mexico. There was a rigorous schedule of prayers in their daily practice. My friend followed their schedule, and would pray with them. From his little room, there would be a walk to the chapel and back again. There were little rabbits along the path in the sagebrush. When one saw Chuck coming, it would scurry back into the brush. But after about a week of silence and prayer, my friend’s state had been changed. When he was walking back from the chapel to his room, the rabbits that had scurried away, didn’t scurry away. Does this makes sense to you?

JW: Yes, definitely. This is the religious way of attaining what I call “depression.”

RW: Interesting. Say more about what you call depression.

JW: It’s a state. Inwardness. It’s as if you’re drifting through air instead of stomping down a path. When people walk fast, they cut and swirl the air.

I relate it to the dancers in a Sun Dance ritual. They dance four different times a day for four days without food or water. On the third day there’s a healing ceremony. The supporters line up around the outside of the circle. The dancers go around and touch each person in the circle with their feathers and wands. By the time everyone has been touched 25 or 30 times by these incredible dancers, they get disconnected; they loosen up and become connected to something else.

The dancers have acquired a power from the lack of food and water and the dancing that goes through those feathers and wands (which might be made out of a piece of shrubbery). They go along and make changes in everyone around the whole circle. They soften, open up and change. And then the dancers go back to their dancing. It’s kind of a trance state. Saying a “trance state” is misleading. It’s suggesting there’s a “normal” state. And I don’t think that’s necessarily so. It’s simply different levels of awareness and activity.

The Catholic monks go there to attain a state, like monks in many religions. The dancers in the Sun Dance do this once a year for at least four years. And there are other things they do to go at it other ways, like sit alone on a mountain for four days without food or water. Like Meditation.

RW: So “depression” is a state. Is it right to say that it’s a state without a lot of inner tension, with a kind of relaxation inside?

JW: That’s interesting, the question about the word “relaxation.” And you’re thinking about attaining it. I don’t know. That’s a thought. To say, “I am going to relax and attain that state.” It could be achieved with some of that. But a certain type of humility seems to me a big part of it. It really helps to get a sorrow, a loss, some kind of blow. The Sun Dancers are severely stressed by the lack of food and water, and stress seems part of the process. And the monks acquire humility from the endless discipline and praying.

RW: Yes. That can take you out of yourself somehow.

AV: Can I share one more thought? I had the luxury of reading so many of Jane’s short stories. I keep coming back to your beloved goat “Tree” and the story, Tree’s Last Gift. I am so taken by your friendship and what you experienced in relationship with Tree.

JW: She was the best friend I ever had.

AV: Can you speak to that?

JW: She came to me when she was a month old, with her sister. They ate birdseed. Something happened with the birdseed and her sister died in just a week or two. Tree was going to sleep in a chair beside the bed. I could see she was thinking of dying, too. And I spoke to her. I said, "Just give me a chance." And she looked at me, like what do you mean, are you crazy? "Really, I will do what I can." I could see her thinking about it.

She was a month and a half old. So she decided to live. I nursed her with a bottle for weeks, months. She grew up toddling after me like a child. Then after a year or so, she got knocked up and had a baby. And she got milk, and I started milking her. Then she was my mother after I had been her mother, and also she was my sister as we ran together on walks in the woods. Then when she got quite old, she was my grandmother and my great great-grandmother. She was like a goddess.

At the same time, I am sure she thought I didn't change my age. And in 18 years I didn't change that much, but 18 years is a very long time for a goat to live. Sometimes, I can still see her when I go into the canyon on snowshoes, I can see her looking at me. Kind of like the moon.

She was always true to me. She never lied to me. She would always tell me when things were wrong from her perspective. She disliked people who didn't have the proper opinion of me. In a way, she was a good friend like Wagsy. I would go on a walk with the goats and with other animals and people, too. I had to stop bringing her when there were people lest she give them a hook with her horn. One neighbor who was good with animals generally, Tree always treated badly. I never figured it out until I was told that that neighbor was no friend of mine!

AV: I would like to read a passage from Tree's Last Gift: "I knelt in the straw by her side, the flashlight shining obliquely onto her as on an icon, and I sobbed wildly over her, over her pain, her coming death. The cats came to my cries and crawled over me, worried, consoling. I ignored them. But Tree rose to the occasion. Though her face was partially paralyzed, her icicle beard in the way, her body hardly functioning, she managed to move her head enough that she and I, for the last time, butted heads. "Don't feel bad, dear friend," the gesture said, "it's just something I have to do." I stopped crying on the spot. She had had babies in this shed, and this was like that—the straining, the weakness, the bellowing, the infant cry.

"I stopped crying and looked at her face and there it was. Her face, the expression, seemed to contain all of life, birth and death, dance and decay, flying and crawling. But it went beyond life. It was light and darkness. It was time relentless and the caught and savored instant. It held the idea of the lightest speck of dust at the top of the atmosphere and the heaviest jewel melted in magma at the center of the earth. She seemed to be observing all of this with joyous fascination and passing it on to me effortlessly by simply allowing her face to reflect what she observed.

"What she showed me was life unseparated from death, from earth, life as energy, energy as the natural essence of being-matter. She seemed to be observing all at once the whole universe, every speck, in some way or another bursting with this energy. Her death was only the end of one story."