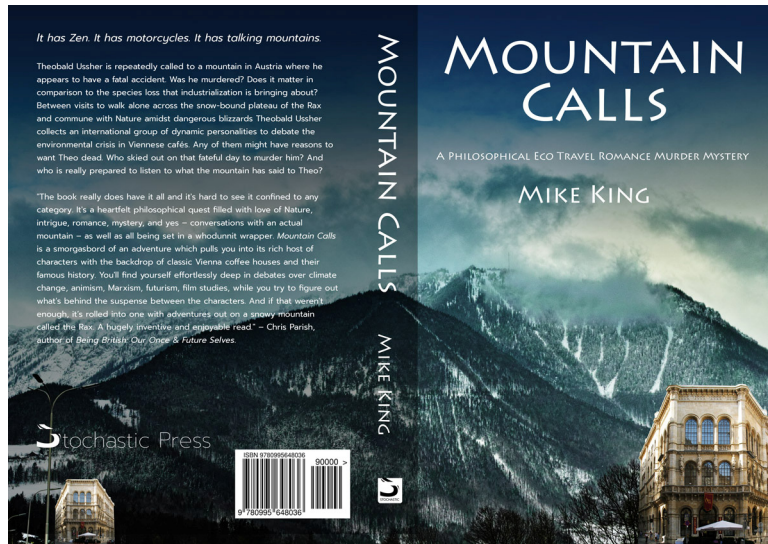


The Writing of Mountain Calls

Mike King, 2018

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Abstract

This short essay on the genesis of my environmental novel *Mountain Calls* was written for the Dark Mountain blog. It details the journey to the Rax – the last peak in the Austrian Alps – that inspired the novel. I describe the sense of communicating with the mountain, a place I have been repeatedly “called” to.

Keywords: nature, ecology, spirituality, philosophy, Vienna Circle.

First published: *Dark Mountain Blog*, 2018

It has Zen. It has motorcycles. It has talking mountains. I don't know how else to introduce my environmental novel *Mountain Calls*, apart that is from its subtitle: “A philosophical eco travel romance murder mystery.” The point about anything environmental or ecological is that it has to haul in everything to be anything. As John Muir says: “Tug on anything at all and you'll find it connected to everything else in the universe.” For me, this sense of everything being connected to everything else is a religious or spiritual feeling, and there lies the problem. Nature writing in its recent Western incarnation is determinedly secular, non-spiritual, non-religious. It is an exciting blend of science and aesthetics. But, in my opinion, it does not know how to take the insight of the great ecologists – that everything is indeed connected to everything – and apply that with any subtlety.

The connection that really mattered to me in writing *Mountain Calls* is with the last peak in the Austrian Alps, a mountain called the Rax. I regularly visit family in Vienna and on one particular trip in winter I longed for some snow, quite absent that time in the Austrian capital. My cousin suggested a day-trip to the Rax, an outing that led to profound changes in my life and outlook. That is because at the end of the day, looking back up at the peak from the valley below, the Rax spoke to me.

I had taken a double-decker electric train – an engineering marvel of the German-speaking world – to a village close to the mountain, and then a bus to the lower station of the thousand-metre cable car. In the lounge and car park at the bottom of the mountain, temperatures hovering just above freezing, I fell into conversation with two Protestants intent on converting the Catholic majority of Austria to Protestantism. I have adventures like that. We continued our discussion as the steel-and-Perspex cabin bumped and swayed its way to the top, temperatures there at around minus nine Celsius. We further continued our theological debate as we walked across the plateau from the cable-car station cum guesthouse to another guesthouse some miles away, a place frequented by Sigmund Freud on his summer holidays and the site of one of his major psychoanalytical insights. (I think it was to do with one of the waitresses.) On the way back, in intense discussion over the status and nature of disembodied spirits, we got lost in a blizzard and only realized our mistake in time before darkness descended. I bought them bean soup at the cable car station and in return they gave me a lift along the valley. At my request they dropped me off a mile or so before the train station, leaving me with the distinct impression they were glad to get rid of me. My theology was not to their taste.

I walked perhaps a half mile, conscious of the peak of the Rax lit up by the sunset behind me and looming ever larger as I walked away from it, clearly some kind of optical illusion. Then it spoke to me.

We are anxious about what your kind are doing to our world.

I did not hear it as English words, but was forced by the intensity of the experience to record it in this way. The sense was clear. There was an anxiety. And it was about what humans are doing. And that this world is shared between the human and the non-human.

For four years this experience lay in the background of my busy life as a university lecturer. I knew I had to go back, and that I had to write up the next trip as a novel, a travelogue of a journey into the unknown. I had to converse with the mountain again and I had no idea what would come of it. To prepare myself for the longer exposure to its snowstorms and blizzards – I felt that winter wildness was essential to this process – I had formulated a question to put to the Rax.

I think I grew up with a sense of the land as *situated*, as the great eco-philosopher Arne Naess puts it. When you place a Cartesian grid over the land, build grid-like buildings, and live with the Lego-like modernism of contemporary interiors that sense of being situated through a living thing like a forest, or a mountain or a river is lost. To live the more deeply connected life that nature demands of us means to have a consciousness that roams over the entire planet, encountering all of its *situated* peoples and asking of them: what are you doing to *our* world in *your* particu-

lar situation? The grid is at one end of a spectrum occupied at the other by war, all of which hurts and disrespects nature. Our bombing leaves small-scale ecological disasters in its wake, all part of the mosaic of the large-scale ecological disaster whose first face to us is of catastrophic species loss. So, with all this in mind I had a question for the mountain, a way of focussing our conversation, though I knew well enough that no preparation I could make would be adequate for the coming encounter.

My journey to Austria for that second winter-time visit to the Rax began with the human activity of the London Underground, Luton Airport, and then the incredible view of the planet from the EasyJet 737-700, not that different really in its impact from "Earthrise," taken by astronaut William Anders in 1968 during the Apollo 8 mission. Comparing that image of the planet with the deeply poignant account by Julian of Norwich of seeing the world as a hazelnut in her palm, fragile, vulnerable, sustained only by the love of God, I wondered what would sustain us now, transported by the luminosity of the view. The clouds that mostly obscure the land below had a lacunarity, a rhythm, and density that varied from vermicelli, to can-end spurted shaving cream, to cake icing. The piles of cloud-stuff were punched, twisted, blurred, re-focused, scattered and drawn together; heaped and roped – topologies and geographies of the temporal, just like the limestone-granite of the Alps but on a different timescale and plane. Like the membrane of an egg-sac the cloud-cover stretched brilliantly under the shimmering blue – what would sustain the globe beneath it? For humanity has now so disrupted the biosphere that its very future is in doubt.

This time it was minus fifteen Celsius on the mountain. Over just three days I walked in hired snow-shoes in wildly varying weather, pretty much alone, as the busy season for the Rax is in summer when the wild-flower meadows of the plateau soothe and bewitch visitors and present few dangers, as long as you do not wander near cliff-edges. In a blizzard you have to be more careful, but at the same time it gave me the right conditions. The snowstorms obliterate everything human. I was protected only by my winter clothing and my wits; otherwise I was still, silent, available. I did not expect anything specific. My earlier years pursuing various meditation practices had taught me that. You make yourself available, as Henry Thoreau did at Walden Pond, and wait for "it" – as he called it – to happen. You walk and make yourself available for grace, undemanding, uncomplaining. So I flomped around on snow-shoes, the sharp cold air in my lungs and the dramatic skies above me, alternately opening to brilliant sunshine and closing in to cocoon me in soft grey swirling silence, alone, available.

Nothing happened. Of course. I knew better than that. But in the guest-house in the valley below on the last night I lay in an overheated bedroom, melting snow dripping from the big red pines outside my window, and, yes, I heard again from the Rax. It was faint. I tested it, because we have to be clear about one thing: the hu-

man imagination would always like to rush ahead and arrive at the desired outcome. It doesn't like to wait. But I tested what I heard by eliminating all that could possibly be my desire and my imagination and I got something I didn't like at all.

The next day I walked in the valley, along a river made blue-green by cobalt minerals from the Rax. I thought that its looming presence would clarify for me what it was saying. The mountain was snow-peaked but maroon-tinged by the early spring buds of deciduous trees on the lower slopes; its presence never left my consciousness as I walked under it. I watched a chaffinch as the day warmed; I sat on a park bench by the little Victorian railway line that would have taken Freud and his family from their hotel in the valley to the cable car, and was baffled by the flight of a large insect, or was it a small bird? It was neither, it was a bat. At midday? That is the point of being in nature. It always surprises.

The mountain had spoken to me that night. The first impact of it was an incredible benignity. It took months to wear off after I returned to my family and university life in London. It is a sense of peace with others, an expansiveness that is a direct parallel to what the mountain seems to be: a nurturing presence. Mountain minerals run through our fields, give nutrients to plants and animals and sustain all of life; in the oceans too the limestone and granite residues feed the brilliant quicksilver ballets of predation in the green light of its depths. The mountain is not concerned over the sufferings and deaths of individuals. That is what makes the it non-human, but in the non-human of the mountain and in all of the non-human life that depends on it I am made human. Indeed if I wanted to say one thing in my novel it is this: that the non-human makes us human, and if we imperil the non-human we imperil ourselves. But the message I did not want to hear from the mountain on that second trip was that its anxiety had been replaced by another sentiment.

It is not at all certain that we are going to avoid environmental catastrophe. It is already upon us with the mass extinctions of the Anthropocene. But it is "anthropos" – man – that the mountain has adjusted its understanding of, and so made me think differently about what it is to be human. It has taught me this: that we are the unique animal, the special animal, one that can recapitulate all of nature within us. And so the mountain loves us uniquely, specially. Yes, in a dim and now largely discredited way Ernst Haeckel suggested that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" meaning that the human recapitulates animal forms in the womb. But the mountain meant it at a far deeper level than Haeckel could imagine, in an animist or shamanic way perhaps. Does not the shaman, on donning a fox-fur mask, do so to recapitulate that animal, to experience the manner-of-being-in-the-world of that animal? What is more, we are the only animal that can fully recapitulate all the other creatures within us, all of nature within us, and that is our role.

It is not necessarily our role to "save" nature. We have to do what we can of course, but what really matters is that as individuals we go to nature, find it within

us, and preserve the Earth inside our souls. The Buddha taught that everything is impermanent. We cannot know the timescale over which the Earth shall come and go. Hopefully we can collectively avert disaster. But merely avoiding polystyrene coffee cups, turning down the central heating, buying electric cars, wearing second-hand clothing, living in an earth-build or whatever we actively do to halt catastrophe, is neither enough – probably – nor where the only effort should lie. It should also lie in profound communication with nature in the smallest ways, observing a robin on the window-sill, a London plane tree towering over choking congestion, the world as reflected in the eyes of an interlocutor, whether friend, family or strangers in a blizzard on a mountain. One can do it looking up at the sky, working on an allotment, or walking by a city canal with its cormorants and herons and the other few birds remaining to us. It lies in *putting oneself in the way of nature*.

So I walked that day, under the mountain, indirectly upheld by its mineral sustenance, only a few alimentary processes removed from those of the bat which ate the insects – which I see as flying minerals – hatched directly in the blue-green waters that flowed from the mountain's snow-fed springs. I danced in synchronicity with the bat as I attempted to keep its gorgeous orange-brown fur, ears and nose framed in my binoculars. I had to give up the choreography of alignment as the bat flew into the bushes but I continued to dance inside, to a music that was the gift of the mountain above me. And I knew I would return to its upper slopes yet again, another year, to put myself in the way of its winter moods, when the non-human would take me yet deeper into the human.

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