Curriculum vitae

Middlebury College professor John Elder bridges nature and literature

by Trebbe Johnson

If individual sensibilities could occupy habitats, John Elder's would surely be the ecotone: the dynamic edge between two ecosystems, where plants and animals are more diverse than in the habitats on either side, and a greater density of species flourishes.

For years, Elder has been consciously seeking the fecundity of intellectual borderlands. "At an edge, creatures are always traveling in from other ecosystems," muses the Stewart Professor of English and Environmental Studies at Middlebury College in Vermont. "My own background is the humanities. So when I can meet people coming in from other fields, with different perceptions, different languages, different ways of working, I find you have a very rich forum for discussion and reconstruction."

It is unusual in itself for an English professor to head a college environmental studies department. But Elder is committed not just to exploring the affinities between science and literature, but also to fostering an environmentalism that straddles the usual boundaries—embracing both an activism that is beneficial to the community and an intellectual quest that is satisfying to the individual.

Tall and trim, with thinning dark hair, a man his admiring students praise with words such as "gentle," "humble," and "human," John Elder, forty-nine, does not have the hauteur one expects in someone The New York Times Magazine has included on its list of "gurus" at college and university environmental studies programs. On a July afternoon recently, his summer class at Middlebury's Bread Loaf School of English met at Texas Falls, a stream that surges through ancient, water-sculpted channels and bowls of rock. Elder sits with his knees drawn close to his chin, arms wrapped around his legs, bare feet resting on the soft humus of beech and maple leaves. He listens thoughtfully as his twelve students, all candidates for Masters of Arts degrees, discuss Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey's grumpy, eloquent classic on wilderness. Elder is masterful at catching the essence of one student's comment and using it as a path to reach more penetrating levels of insight. He shows sincere interest in what each person has to say and seems completely self-conscious of his own presence.

Yet John Elder has been at the forefront of Middlebury's drive to imbue its Environmental Studies department—the first in the nation, started in 1965—with a strong interdisciplinary character. Students immerse themselves not only in biology, chemistry, and geology, but in other fields increasingly influenced by environmentalism: the arts, social science, education, religion, and, of course, literature. For twelve years his "Visions of Nature" course has introduced students to evolving perceptions of the natural world as revealed through nature writing. The comparative literature classes he has taught include one on the pastoral tradition and one on Wordsworth and the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Basho. Along with a colleague, he has developed an "environmental house" on campus, where students live what they learn, growing an organic garden, practicing energy-saving measures, and studying issues of sustainability.

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During Middlebury’s summer sessions, Elder has literally breached academic walls. In 1993, his “Stories on the Trail” course took place during a hike over the Long Trail from the Canadian border to Bread Loaf. The eleven students and their professor packed over the mountains not just tents and cooking gear but also books by Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Joseph Bruchac, and other nature writers, along with their own journals. In 1995, Elder held his class entirely in the Adirondack Mountains, combining the literature of nature with a thorough study of the bioregion.

Elder is convinced that students thirst for these kinds of inclusive approaches to learning, designed to transcend the hermeticism and competitiveness that have long characterized academic disciplines. The growth of Middlebury’s Environmental Studies department would seem to support his theory. Only six or seven years ago, the program attracted about five majors a year; in 1997 sixty young men and women will graduate with degrees in Environmental Studies.

A s a boy, John Elder showed few signs that he would one day take the path that became environmentalism. His idea of getting into nature was biking from his Marin County, California, home to the redwood forest or the beach. His parents were a high school Latin teacher and a Baptist minister, both devout. Their faith was to be an important influence on his later life—not only because “We read the King James Bible, the apex of English prose”—but also because it instilled in him a conviction that the faith of one’s heritage can be profoundly important in these times of environmental crisis.

Hired to teach English modernism at Middlebury in 1973, right after receiving his Ph.D. from Yale, Elder found his interests taking a decisive turn, thanks largely to the influences of a particular book and a particular place. The book was Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, which Elder admired not just for its eloquent style and solid grounding in natural science, but also for its spiritual energy and breadth of vision.

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The place was Vermont, his new home, where the concept of nature offered a counterpoint to that in his native California. In the West, wilderness as defined by the National Wilderness Act—vast, untrammeled, and pristine—is generally seen as something opposed to culture. In Vermont, culture and nature form a patchwork. Moose and bear have their habitats in the reforested hills where cellar holes and tumbling stone walls recall the farmsteads of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Elder, his wife Rita, and their three teenage children can, and frequently do, reach beautiful hiking and camping spots simply by climbing the ridge behind their Bristol home. This kind of accessible, family-oriented form of outdoor activity is an alternative to what Elder calls the “Muir-like, Victorian-male explorer mode, which left out a lot of people.”

Finding ever more inclusive ways to bring people and nature together has been a preoccupation of Elder’s. His first books were Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature (1985) and The Norton Book of Nature Writing (1990), the latter co-edited with Robert Finch. Realizing that the majority of the essays in the Norton anthology were by white people whose experiences of nature tended to take the form of private revelations, Elder next worked with Hiertha D. Wong to bring out The Family of Earth and Sky in 1994. This book met the challenge of rendering oral myths and folktale about nature from indigenous communities around the world onto the printed page. He is currently at work on Directive, a study of Frost’s poem by that name, juxtaposed with descriptions of his own walks on the ridge known as Hogback Anticline and with a cultural history of the area.

Elder admits that his love for the Vermont landscape has sharpened his sense of despair about the global environmental crisis, which he sees as a cultural crisis as well. His young students, he says, share that pessimism. “As a group, these students are very idealistic, wonderful people. They are the healthiest, most outdoors-loving, politically active, enthusiastically reading and writing group of college students that you could want—and they are melancholy. As they look at the world, they have a sense of diminished expectations.”

Owning up to this sorrow is essential, Elder believes, and he is interested in working with others to engage an activist response that he calls “creative grieving.” He explains, “Grieving is not just lamentation. Grieving is the work we do to allow ourselves a future after we’ve lost something we thought we couldn’t live without. It makes it possible to say, ‘Imagine what comes next. Imagine a way to have an adult life, to have meaningful human relationships, to do good work, and be faithful to your experiences of kinship with nature. Imagine how that will work, and go for it.’ When you work from the premise that you need to look for real reconstruction, then you have a greater possibility for positive energy.”

To Elder, literature, art, and religion are essential to the process of mitigating suffering. In 1990 he worked with Middlebury Professor of Religion Steven Rockefeller to sponsor “Spirit and Nature,” an event that became the subject of a PBS special hosted by Bill Moyers. Besides a
terdisciplinary undertaking," he immediately thought about working with Elder. "John’s approach to problem-solving is collaborative, participatory, democratic," he says. "He has not only taught with passion, he lives what he teaches."

One way Elder embodies his beliefs is by taking principles of cooperation beyond the classroom and into the community. He spearheaded the formation of the Watershed Partnerships, a program administered through the Orion Society with a grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, in which students at Middlebury and seven other colleges work with local school teachers to design and implement place-based education for children. In one such program, children in Salisbury, Vermont, studied the multi-faceted history of a stone wall running through land sited for their new school building. Jennifer Sahn, Assistant Director of the Orion Society, calls Elder a "visionary thinker," adding, "I rarely go to any conference of environmentalists without meeting someone who says their whole life and direction were shaped by the time they spent with John Elder."

Part of Elder’s popularity as a teacher is his willingness to be, in his words, "a non-perfectionist." He would rather wade into the midst of a valuable experience, where the waters are murky and the footing unsure, than stand securely on dry, familiar land. He often invites writers and naturalists to his classes, relishing the opportunity to learn along with his students. A few years ago, he studied Japanese, partly because he is fascinated with the way in which Japanese art and poetry enable one to perceive an entire landscape in, say, a bough of cherry blossoms or a river-washed stone—an aesthetic that he feels has special relevance in this era of diminishing habitats. On sabbatical in Kyoto shortly thereafter, he once spent several hours playing Go in a parlor where native players of that classical board game, with a level of expertise much higher than his, would have hesitated to enter. In the introduction to Following the Brush, a book of lyrical essays about his trip published in 1993, Elder quoted the Zen teacher Suzuki Shunryu: "In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s few."

Elder reflects, "I can feel my interest going beyond the interdisciplinary. I’m interested in a more holistic approach to education, one that emphasizes the values of community. I envision a sense of community and vocation that includes people who are meeting you at the edge between their institutions and yours, in which students and teachers are learning from and teaching one another."

At a break in the class at Texas Falls, Judyth Willis, a white-haired third-grade teacher whose soft voice belies a fierceness of conviction, expresses gratitude to Elder for inspiring her as a teacher. "I teach in Iowa. All my students want to leave and move someplace else. If I can get just one of them to really know and appreciate the beauty of their place, I’ll feel I’ve done my work."

After the break, Elder asks whether anyone will volunteer to read a passage from his or her journal. Journal-keeping is often part of the coursework in his classes, for he wants students to recognize that the state of the natural world affects their own spiritual, intellectual, and emotional lives. Dexter Mahaffey opens his notebook and reads a description of a moonlit walk that he and other members of the class took to a nearby lake. Several people comment on aspects of the passage that might be developed into a free-standing work.

"Often," Elder advises the students about their journal-writing, "when you come to what you think is the end, if you push on, you’ll find that where you wanted to stop was really the push-off point."

For John Elder the world abounds in push-off points, opportunities for science and the humanities, individuals and institutions, teachers and students to transcend their limitations and come together on behalf of their bioregion. In the unexplored territory that results, where familiar landmarks take on surprising new meaning, John Elder will be at home.

Windfall

Eating an apple, I think of Emerson in another railroad berth traveling to another Chautauqua. This time, maybe it’s summer, he’s passing apple orchards in Ohio where he half dreams a bumblebee sipping nectar—in its belly, a mite glows with mite joy. In the mite’s belly, other living things the size of atoms climb mountains,… but he’s tired of revelation. It’s certain the cosmos is an orchard, or tree, or single bee bearing the whole apple future, & Boston, from one field to another, & bearing him. He’ll lecture this audience to find & live the secret of any windfall, to try, for god’s sake, to love that which is obvious, & themselves.

—William Heyen

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