



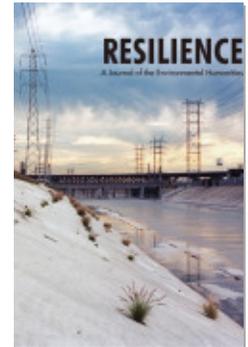
PROJECT MUSE®

Guard Bee: Storying Resilience

Heather Swan

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 2, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 53-64 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/597848>

Guard Bee: Storying Resilience

HEATHER SWAN

Get the f—— out of my garden! Get the F—— out of my GARDEN! yelled a little kid hanging halfway out of a school bus window as it slowly passed Alice's Garden, a community garden in a neighborhood in south Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The garden filled almost an entire city block, and so his voice floated easily over the chain link fence, across the many neat rows of mint and beans, to reach our ears. Over and over his commanding voice repeated the order as the bus traveled down one side of the block, turned, and then slowly crept down another.

Our host, Venice Williams—the visionary, charismatic director of the garden and its mission—stood in the center of a flowering labyrinth, consciously ignoring his shouts, and continued telling us the story of the garden. Stories were of huge importance to Venice. In this way she reminded me of August, the sage beekeeper in *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, who said, “Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.”¹ As we stood in the middle of the garden, Venice told stories about a tradition of resistance, perseverance, and change. She recounted the story of Juneteenth Day, which was to be celebrated in just a few weeks—the day in 1865 when the news of the Emancipation Proclamation finally reached Galveston, Texas, and the enslaved were finally free. She told the story of how this once-flourishing, almost entirely African American neighborhood had been torn apart when businesses and homes alike had been demolished in the name of progress to make space for a new freeway, and stories of how people had been slowly rebuilding. She told stories about her journey to make this garden a place without

segregation in a city that was famous for it, about how she had forced Hmong farmers and African American farmers to have plots side by side. She felt the garden was healing the community. I felt like the story-telling itself was an act of resilience.

It was this neighborhood's vision of healing and resilience that had brought us, a primarily white, middle-class interdisciplinary group from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. We were all part of a group from the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies Center for Culture, History, and the Environment, or CHE. Our plan was to investigate the workings of urban agriculture by volunteering at both Alice's Garden and Walnut Way Conservation Corp., "a grassroots association committed to sustaining a diverse and neighborly community through civic engagement, economic development, and environmental stewardship."² We wanted to spend a day or two turning over beds and digging up weeds to help, but we also wanted to learn why these projects had such a positive impact. Because I am a beekeeper, my own particular interest was in how bees were important to these organizations, both physically and metaphorically. The voice of the child from the bus reminded us of our status as visitors even as we basked in the warm, welcoming voice of Venice.

After our brief introduction to Alice's Garden, we piled into a bus to travel a few blocks to the house in Lindsay Heights where Walnut Way was headquartered. Stepping out of the bus, I noticed the beehives right away. Like skyscrapers of a tiny city, a cluster of faded-blue and dull-white hives, varying in size, stood together in a side yard. A few bees hovered above the hives as others loaded with pollen zoomed into the front entrances. The bees gave me a sense of comfort in this place where I was a guest.

Bees are not unique in urban settings. Beekeepers tend busy hives in New York City, San Francisco, Portland, London, Seoul, and Cape Town. The rooftop of the National Assembly in Paris is home to three beehives. The Fairmont Hotel in Washington DC has bees in its gardens that produce honey for its upscale restaurants. Bees float over the subways to find rooftop gardens and parks filled with black locust trees, lavender bushes, and squash plants. High-production urban farmers like Will Allen of Growing Power in Milwaukee need to keep bees to ensure their vegetable plants are prolific. But bees at Walnut Way are more than honey producers or pollinators; bees are also used as symbols.³

The owner of the beehives was Larry Adams, a sturdy, middle-aged beekeeper with a bellowing laugh. He and his wife Sharon have been the force behind the transformation of this neighborhood. A little over ten years ago, this street was filled with prostitutes and drug dealers; the houses were boarded up or falling down; and periodic gunshot was not uncommon. When Sharon had tried to get insurance for her house, no one would insure her. Now there were yards filled with peach trees surrounded by rows of collard greens and tomato plants. Houses were getting new paint jobs, and crime was down. Sharon and Larry loved to share their success story.

Inside a house that Sharon and Larry renovated and turned into Walnut Way's community center, the front room is filled with books and photos of gardeners. In a prominent spot on the wall hangs a woodcut of a man's face, which could easily be Larry's, surrounded by honeycomb and bees. The words on the woodcut say, "Bee Resourceful." Bees, I learned, are an emblem for this community. In one of her Walnut Way newsletters, Sharon writes,

Bees (and beekeepers) can teach us many lessons about stewardship. Their work ensures their community thrives. As stewards of our own environments, we all share the responsibility of making our communities wonderful places to live, learn, work, and serve.⁴

The bee is more than livestock for them—it is a symbol of stewardship, the kind of stewardship that will make this neighborhood stronger and more resilient. The community cares for the bees, the bees pollinate for the flowers, and the result is healthy vegetables and fruits, delicious honey, and healthier people. But this notion of stewardship for Walnut Way also means taking care of this community of people, working hard, and working together, as bees do.

Walnut Way is certainly not the first group to think of bees as a model for a good society. For centuries, bees have appeared in narrative and myth as models of moral authority and of ideal political systems. In the midst of Britain's industrial revolution, for example, George Cruikshank's illustration called "The British Bee Hive" represented an acceptance of the social hierarchy in Victorian England.⁵ Cruikshank's image reflected the natural scientists' perceptions about bees at the time—that each beehive was a tiny, industrious monarchy ruled by a queen. The idea of "industry" was both a moral imperative inspired by the Protes-

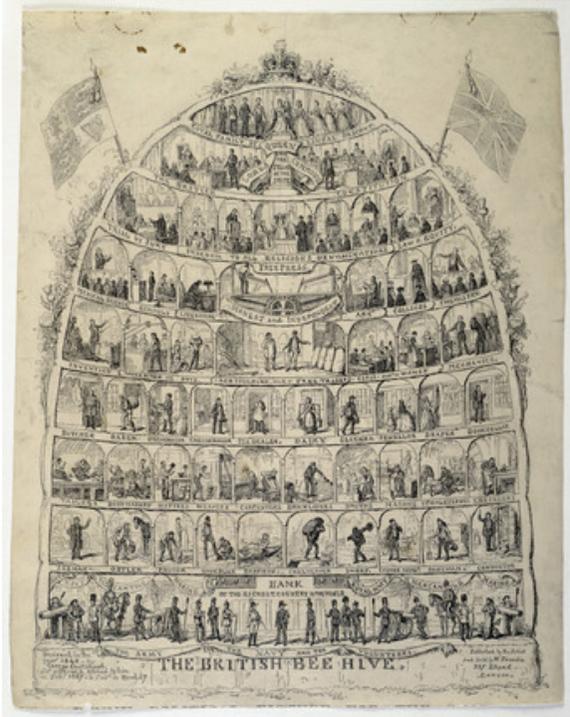


Fig. 1. *The British Bee Hive*, etching by George Cruikshank, 1867.

tant work ethic as well as a powerful symbol of economic growth. The dynamics of labor were changing. The agricultural industry was changing. The number of farm laborers dropped by half between 1860 and 1900 as mechanization changed farming. Coal production was increasing. Large numbers of men and women were leaving the countryside and moving to urban centers to become employed in the cotton garment industry.⁶ This moment set the stage for the world we now occupy. The story of progress, equated with industrial improvements and faster and better systems, had begun.

Bees themselves were the subjects of “progress” and “improvement.” In 1851 Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth developed a more human-friendly hive body, which, as we know, transformed the agriculture. Since then, the Langstroth hive has been used by commercial and noncommercial beekeepers all over the world.⁷ The question is whether or not the bee will be resilient enough to survive?

What exactly is a resilient community? There are many answers to that question. One way to think about resilience might be to consider ecosystem health. For example, which species of fish can survive in a lake that is filling with phosphorous? In this piece, I am particularly interested in resilience in an ecosystem that includes humans. Perhaps both the honeybees and the people in the neighborhoods of South Milwaukee are examples of resilient communities. How might stories be integral to that resilience? In the journal *Ecology and Society*, an article called, "Social Thresholds and Their Translation into Social-Ecological Management Practices," authors Lisa Christensen and Naomi Krogman investigate how human communities survive in light of the pressures of resource extraction and climate change in the Yukon Territory of Canada. Their research, based on the stories told in extensive interviews with community members, illuminates how the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations have been subjects as well as agents of change.⁸ While the people of Lindsay Heights and the bees have not experienced the disturbing effects of an oil pipeline, climate change, or deforestation, they have suffered ruptures brought on in the name of urban progress.

I realize the dangers of comparing an insect community with a human community; but in this historical moment, the actions taken by humans and the existence or nonexistence of nonhuman communities will be necessarily entwined. This is especially true of a species like the honeybee, which has a rare symbiotic relationship with the human. And some of the same historical trends that have affected the honeybee have also affected the human. While human trends are changing, the stories that science is telling us about bees are also changing.

In the past, as in the illustration by Cruikshank, the honeybee was often seen as a model for a well-organized hierarchical society. This mirrored the assumption among scientists that the bees were governed by the largest insect in the hive, the queen bee. But recently this notion has been overturned. US scientist Thomas Seeley has been quietly studying bees' social organization for many years.⁹ In 2011 he announced his findings. Through years of devoted observation of bees tagged with tiny numbers and colors, Seeley realized that the bees were making diplomatic decisions while they were swarming. A hive will swarm when the population has grown too large for their current home, and a small group of several hundred bees leaves with the queen to find new real estate. What Seeley observed was that the scout bees would return from

different prospective new homes and dance a map to the others. The other bees would then go check out the new location and return with their impressions. It is not until a majority of the bees is in favor of one spot, which is evident by the fact that they are doing identical dances, that they make their move. The fact that the queen was not making authoritarian decisions was groundbreaking news. The queen is obviously still essential, as she is the sole baby maker in the hive; but bees live in consensus communities. In the conclusion of Seeley's book, he suggests that perhaps the bees have something to offer the human race in terms of fair and just decision making. It's a new vision of the bees and a new vision for society.

Like the bees, Sharon and Larry have been interested in making changes that are born not solely out of their own minds but out of the dreams and needs of the neighborhood. They began by having potlucks and, over pasta salads and pies, began asking people to tell their stories. What did they remember about the neighborhood as children? What would they want to bring back? What did their grandmothers cook? What shops did they miss? What would they plant in their gardens? People used to sit on their porches in the evening, some people said. Others remembered peach trees. Everyone wanted an end to the violence. Many wanted a place where the children could go to read books and the parents could talk. Larry wanted to raise bees. To achieve these things, the neighbors had to agree to make boundaries for themselves. They had to participate in resistance against the forces that were keeping their community from becoming what it could be. They had to begin calling the police and reporting crime (which can be a complicated decision for some communities), refusing to let drug dealers onto their property, and standing up for the peaceful community they wanted to re-create. They had to attend the potlucks. And they were willing. They wanted change.

With these dreams in mind, Sharon and Larry then established a relationship with Will Allen from Growing Power. In 1993 a former professional basketball player named Will Allen purchased an old greenhouse in northern Milwaukee, as well as forty acres that had been owned by his wife's parents, to create an enormous urban farm project. Allen transformed the greenhouses into vibrant rooms where nasturtiums curl down from elevated trays that are watered from tanks teeming with trout and tilapia beneath them, where mushroom chandeliers

made from coffee bags hang from the ceiling, and where tanks filled with hundreds of red worms transform green waste into vermicompost. Behind the greenhouses, the quiet chatter of chickens and goats floats out over the piles of compost to the bee yard, which is vibrating with busy bees. This incredible, interconnected lattice of microindustries produces an abundance of healthy food. This food is taken to local farmers' markets, served in Milwaukee's fine restaurants, and fed to people who live in the food deserts of the city. In addition to the food itself, Allen offers classes to children and adults on everything from aquaponics to food sovereignty. His project has drawn attention from people across the nation and has landed him many grants, including a leadership grant from the Ford Foundation and a Genius Grant from the MacArthur Foundation. He has become the Superman of the urban ag movement.

With Will Allen's inspiration, the neighbors of Walnut Way neighborhood cleared trash from vacant lots and began building raised beds for vegetables, planting trees, and setting up beehives to pollinate the flowers. Artists painted murals on fences and walls. Now the neighborhood is flowering. As Sharon has said, "People heal working collectively for the common good."¹⁰ Like Venice at Alice's Garden, Sharon beams as she tells the stories of resistance and improvement.

Her stories bring to mind another group of storytellers who take the bee as their symbol, a group called the Beehive Collective; but their stories are told with pictures. In August of 2010 I sat outside a farmhouse in southwestern Wisconsin with artist Tyler Norman, looking at the large, intricate mural printed on silk that he had spread out on the grass. The mural was covered with images of mammals, birds, and insects—all characters in an illustrated story of environmental degradation and human greed. Tyler is an illustrator and storyteller in a group of activist artists. The artists, who call themselves bees, hope to pollinate the world with ideas for radical changes in human behavior. They address such issues as pesticide use, mountaintop coal removal, monocropping, and unfair labor practices. For them, the bee represents the ideal community member—going out to the fields and returning with news and then heading out again. The artists travel from community to community, sharing their artworks and hoping to motivate people to change. The incredibly intricate drawings depict animals of many kinds working in small collectives against huge machinery and faceless

industrial giants that are extracting resources for money while destroying ecosystems and social networks. Salamanders work on bioremediation by planting cattails and oyster mushrooms to restore contaminated soil, honeybees harvest rainwater and plant gardens for community supported agriculture systems, and turtles and raccoons with banners and signs spread the word about the grassroots organizations that are fighting to make the world cleaner and healthier and more just. As Tyler spoke, I recognized a tempered anger in his voice.

I thought of the boy on the bus, his voice like a fist in the air. He seemed in some way to be voicing the fierce energy that is the stem of many movements, the energy that matures and transforms into creativity and action. It occurred to me that I know very few children with that emphatic and proud sense of ownership in a plot of ground filled with vegetables and flowers. But this garden is special. It is a physical manifestation of a new moment in a movement against a long history of racism, of redlining, of destroying community.

Honeybees do not usually sting, because in the process of stinging they will die, as the stinger is torn out of their abdomens and left in the skin of an intruder. But they do have guard bees, and eventually they will sting if they feel their community is in danger.¹¹ Bears are a well-known source of antagonism to bees. Bears break into a hive and destroy it, in order to steal the sweet results of the bees' long labor. While the human relationship with the bees is also one that results in robbing the bees of honey, the mindful beekeeper only takes what would be the surplus and works to preserve the health of the community. Guard bees are bees who warn a visitor to the hive, who will fly around the head of a beekeeper who is being careless in his or her activities.

Like a guard bee, the boy on the school bus reminded me of the ways in which sometimes a community needs protection and mindfulness around boundaries. Boundaries of community and place are contingent upon the historical moment. We were standing in a community that had faced obliteration when bulldozers took out entire buildings to make space for a freeway, a community that had faced years of vicious racism, a community torn asunder by displacement and unemployment. This community was in the process of healing, and trust does not seem to come instantly but, rather, needs to be earned.

The following afternoon, one of the residents of the Walnut Way neighborhood led us in some volunteer work. We talked as we bent



Fig. 2. *Biodevastation 2000*, by the Beehive Collective.

over shovels and knelt pulling weeds in the garden skirting the meeting house. I guessed he was in his midfifties. He asked us many questions, perplexed at why we would come such a long distance by bus to his neighborhood just to get dirt under our nails. When he learned that some of us were teachers and some of us were students, he said, “Oh, so you’re being graded for this. No wonder you’re all working so hard.” We laughed but perhaps mostly out of embarrassment. No, we were here doing this labor because we craved a real connection to people and the earth. We were often stuck in rooms discussing ideas at length. We craved blisters on our hands. We craved sore shoulders. This felt good. It felt real. But we were not doing it for survival. We were labor tourists. As we worked, we told our own stories and became individuals. Some of us had our own gardens. I had bees. He used to do construction but was happy to garden now. He showed us how to pull the crabgrass with the full root system intact. He laughed at how slow I was, and eventually he relaxed, realizing we really were there because we wanted to help.

As a beekeeper, I understand the need to protect a thriving but still vulnerable society. As my bees leave the hive in the spring on an intrepid voyage to find nectar, they face a more and more perilous world. Under the auspices of production and development, there are fewer and fewer flowering native plants as land is developed by industrial agriculture, pesticide use is ubiquitous, and GMO crops destroy global seed diversity.¹² As the Beehive Collective illustrates in their murals, there are many forces at work that are not conducive to healthy living for bees or people. So the resistance of urban farmers and community gardens is not only of social significance; it is of ecological significance as well. These models of small diverse crops, of low pesticide use, of beekeepers who understand the importance of bees and other pollinators to their food production are examples of how we could move forward toward a more sustainable world.¹³

When Christensen and Krogman went looking for resilience, they asked the Champagne and the Aishihik to tell them stories. In the stories being told at Walnut Way and Alice’s Garden, we hear stories of change and resilience but also of an imagined future.

On several Friday nights in the summer, Larry and other folks who are interested in learning about bees light up the smoker to calm the bees, open up the hives, and pull out frames of honey. They uncap the comb, and out pours the liquid light, the sweetness pulled from the

neighborhood flowerbeds, peach trees, and cucumber blossoms—the sweetness that comes from so much hard work. Often, customers at the market ask Sharon, “Why is Walnut Way’s honey so fragrant, sweet, and clear?” She responds by saying, “This is what I know: The bees are loved. We provide safe hives, good water, and plenty of pesticide-free plants to sip nectar from. Larry always leaves enough honey-filled frames for the bees to eat and eat well.” The stories of Larry’s honey, Sharon’s peach trees, and Venice’s chocolate mint are the stories I want to retell. They are the stories that are imagining and confirming the world I want to live in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Swan’s poetry has appeared in such magazines as *Poet Lore*, *Cream City Review*, *Iris*, and *Basalt*. Her creative nonfiction on bees has appeared in *ISLE* and *Aeon Magazine*. She received her MFA in poetry and PhD in literary and environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she is currently teaching. She is also a beekeeper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to thank Rob Nixon, whose work deeply influences all the best thinking behind this essay.

NOTES

1. Sue Monk Kidd, *Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Viking, 2002), 107.
2. “Sharon Adams: Co-Founder and Program Director, Walnut Way Conservation Corp. Purpose Prize Fellow 2011,” *Encore.org*, accessed September 8, 2015, <https://encore.org/purpose-prize/sharon-adams/>.
3. See “Bees,” *Growing Power*, n.d., accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.growingpower.org/education/what-we-grow/bees/>.
4. Sharon Adams, “The Buzz: Sharon Adams on Stewardship at Walnut Way,” *Walnut Way Conservation Corp.*, September 19, 2012, accessed September 8, 2015, <http://www.walnutway.org/news/buzz-sharon-adams-stewardship-walnut-way-o>.
5. See “The British Beehive: 19th Century,” by George Cruikshank, *London Museum Archives*, n.d., accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.museumoflondonprints.com/image/142089/george-cruikshank-the-british-beehive-19th-century>.
6. See Paul Atterbury, “Steam and Speed: Industry, Power, and Social Change in 19th-Century Britain,” *Victoria and Albert Museum*, n.d., accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/industry-power-and-social-change/>.
7. See Hattie Ellis, *Sweetness and Light* (New York: Harmony Books, 2004).

8. See Lisa Christensen and Naomi Krogman, "Social Thresholds and Their Translation into Social-Ecological Management Practices," *Ecology and Society* 17, no. 1 (2012): 126–34, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-04499-170105>.

9. See Thomas D. Seeley, *Honeybee Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

10. "History and Timeline," Walnut Way Conservation Corp., n.d., accessed September 8, 2015, <http://www.walnutway.org/history-timeline>.

11. See Roy A. Grout, ed., *The Hive and the Honey Bee* (Hannibal, MO: Standard Printing, 1946).

12. See Marla Spivak, Erik Mader, Mace Vaughan, and Ned Euliss, "The Plight of the Bees," *Environmental Science and Technology* 45, no. 1 (2011): 34–38, <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/es101468w>.

13. See Deborah Burns, ed., *Attracting Native Pollinators* (North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2011).