



## INTRODUCTION

# Forging an Emotional Bond with Nature

*We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own—indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty, and wonder.*

— WANGARI MAATHAI

*While science may lead you to truth, only imagination can lead you to meaning.*

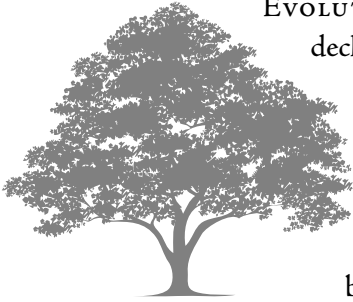
— C. S. LEWIS

*We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.*

— WENDELL BERRY

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EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGIST STEPHEN JAY GOULD declared, “We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love.”<sup>1</sup> As one of the “younger” species inhabiting planet Earth, we humans have embarked on an epic journey to redefine our relationship with the natural world. Our journey begins with the cognitive science breakthroughs that are revealing the impact of nature on our behavior and emotions, and expands outward to encompass a compassionate way of coexisting with nonhuman species and the air, soil, water, minerals and ecological processes that support all life on the planet.

Since we have gradually forgotten the importance of nurturing our emotional bond with nature, we are in a new epoch of remembering. Native peoples such as the Salish from the Pacific Northwest embraced a state of mind where we use our hearts to live by and to help the power, beauty and magic of nature flourish. In more recent times, environmentalist Rachel Carson reminded us that “it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*,” emphasizing the importance of our emotional connection to nature rather than relying solely on our intellect.<sup>2</sup>

Biologist E. O. Wilson expands on our emotional connection to nature through the biophilia hypothesis, which describes our “inately emotional affiliation” to living organisms.<sup>3</sup> And marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols promotes our emotional bond with nature through neuroconservation, focusing on developing a conservation strategy rooted in our neurological responses to nature, especially water. As Nichols points out, “It’s time to drop the old notions of separation between emotion and science.... Emotion is science.”<sup>4</sup> All of these ecological visionaries show how we need to rekindle our feelings about nature and blend our scientific breakthroughs with our emotions.

Recent cognitive studies, aided by technologies such as the CAT scan and the fMRI, have shown numerous physical, behavioral and emotional benefits from being in nature. These include being healthier through reduced stress, blood pressure levels and risk of cancer; and being happier, more compassionate, grateful and creative. But more important than what we take from nature is what we give back.

An ecocentric ethic asks: "What is our responsibility as stewards to give back to the natural world?" One way of giving back is by embracing a compassionate way of living and developing restorative initiatives that help people, other species and the environment to thrive. This is a reciprocal relationship rooted in embracing our interdependence with nature and taking actions that enrich our connection with it. Douglas Christie reminds us that "our ecological commitments, if they are to reach mature and sustainable expression, need to be grounded in a sense of deep reciprocity with the living world."<sup>5</sup> This reciprocity beckons us to shift away from short-term objectives and quick fixes and instead adopt a long-term, resilient vision for the future—one in which we play an integral role and take responsibility for its fruitful outcome.

Renewing ourselves and nature also involves a biomimetic approach in which nature is our mentor and teacher. We are already using nature's 3.8 billion years of experience to learn how to generate abundant renewable energy, grow healthy food crops without depleting the soil and water table, provide safe drinking water, design efficient transportation systems and access to medicines and develop new ways to eliminate waste and pollution and stabilize the climate.

We have much of the knowledge needed to achieve these objectives. Now we need to streamline the social-political systems that act as barriers. We can do this by remembering ourselves as compassionate beings who care for one another and for the environment. Taking care of each other and nature begins by emulating nature's living systems so that we live in harmony with it. This approach is based on a model not of scarcity but of abundance. It involves recognizing that

although we have an important role to play as a dominant species, we depend on nature for our survival. It's a relationship where we "give" and "take" so that everyone thrives.

Our relationship with nature also benefits when we practice the precautionary principle ("better safe than sorry"). When we consider our responsibility as stewards of the Earth with humility, we gain a broader perspective to make wiser decisions that affect all life on Earth. Many of the planet's global systems, such as the climate, are impacted by our actions. Following the precautionary principle in implementing a new technology, we take action only after ensuring a safe outcome.

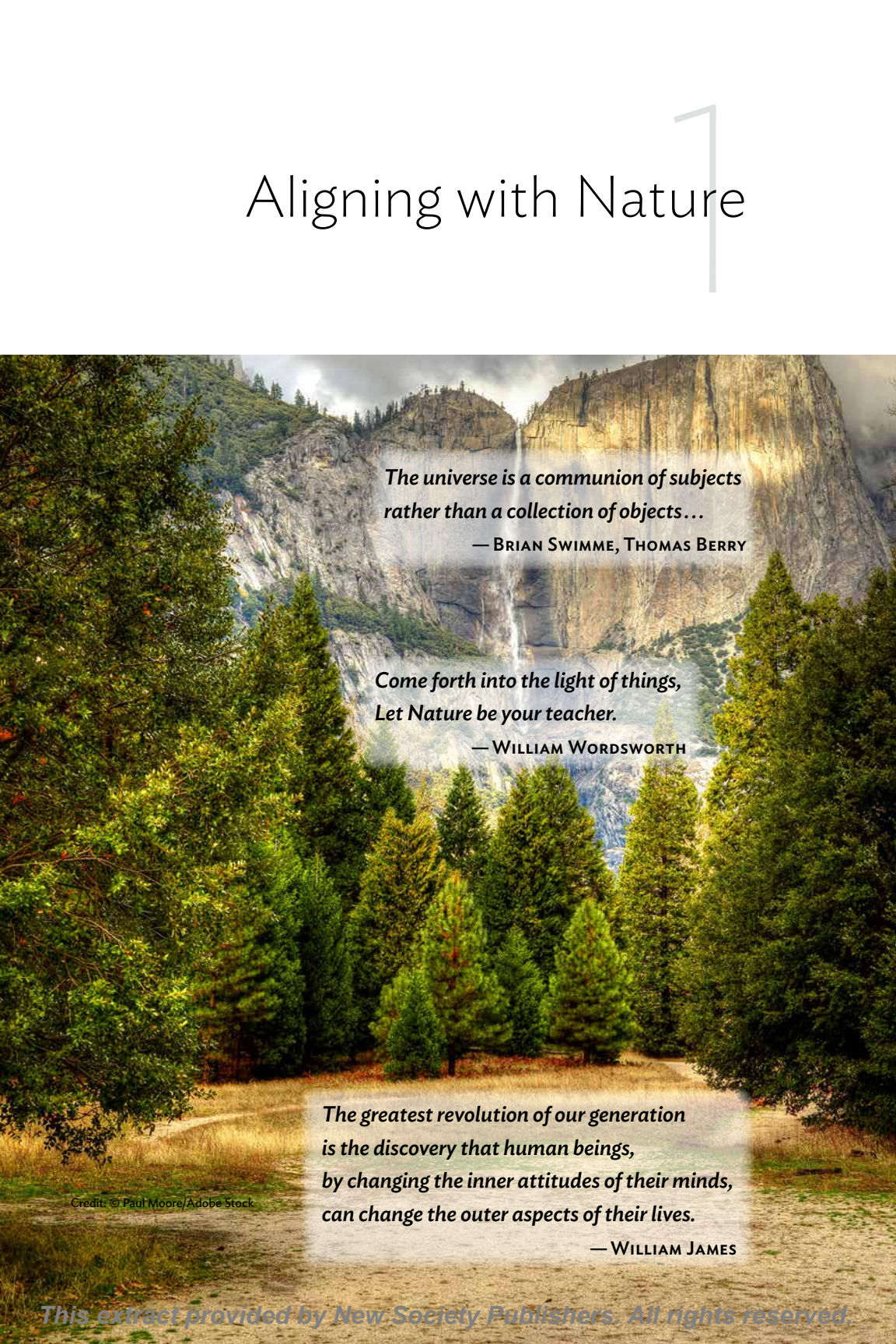
By nurturing our innate curiosity and our affinity for nature we can renew our respect and admiration for the natural world. We are learning, for instance, about the remarkable ability of bees in designing their hexagonal-shaped honeycombs, crows in communicating dangers across generations, caribou herds using swarm intelligence and evading wolves with precise movements and trees that communicate with each other about impending droughts. These examples ignite our passion for nature's genius. This passion is a recipe for falling in love with and protecting nature. Witnessing nature's genius stimulates the creativity we need to devise ways to enhance rather than degrade the environment.

The altruism of nonhuman species inspires us to emulate their acts in our families and our communities. Brazilian ant species sacrifice themselves to protect their kin by sealing the colony's entrance and dying in the cold overnight temperatures; female bats share regurgitated blood to nourish other bats in need; and honey bees fatally rupture their abdomens after using their stinger to protect the hive. These altruistic acts illustrate how nature mirrors the best qualities in the human heart.

Nature can teach us how to live compassionate, creative and joyful lives. Our hearts grow as we remember the importance of loving nature. I hope the stories in this book inspire you to discover how you can make your life and nature thrive by nurturing a reciprocal, enduring relationship with the natural world.



# Aligning with Nature

A scenic view of a mountain with a waterfall, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. The mountain is rugged and rocky, with a waterfall cascading down its face. The foreground is filled with lush green trees, and the sky is overcast with grey clouds.

*The universe is a communion of subjects  
rather than a collection of objects...*

— BRIAN SWIMME, THOMAS BERRY

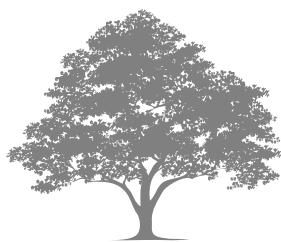
*Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher.*

— WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

*The greatest revolution of our generation  
is the discovery that human beings,  
by changing the inner attitudes of their minds,  
can change the outer aspects of their lives.*

— WILLIAM JAMES

Credit: © Paul Moore/Adobe Stock



BEING ALIGNED WITH NATURE CAN COME IN handy when one's life is on the line. I vividly remember a sunny summer afternoon when three of us decided to climb a nearby rock face. I was

halfway up when there was a mix-up and I found myself high above the ground without a rope. My friend who was above me tried several times to throw a rope down to me so I could tie myself and climb up to him, but because he had no line of sight, every time he threw the rope it landed several feet away from me. It was starting to get dark and I had to make a decision. I had three options: have my friend keep trying, hoping that the rope would eventually reach me, stay put and wait for a rescue or climb unprotected toward the rope, which was about 20 feet away. I decided to climb.

I knew there was no room for error but I also knew it was not a particularly difficult climb for me. I just needed complete alignment with the rock. As I made my way toward the rope, time stood still and every move flowed seamlessly. I focused on breathing and being present, grounded and fully aware of my body's movements and my connection to the rock. Nothing else mattered. In this attuned state, I made my way toward the rope with ease and assurance. Time was suspended. It may have taken me one minute or five minutes. What was paramount was my alignment with the rock. Everything else around me—the fading sunlight, the breeze and the surrounding trees and mountains—disappeared into the background. When I reached the rope, I had a huge feeling of relief followed by a physical and emotional exhale that enveloped me.

Being aligned with nature conjures an image of integration, co-operation and flow, similar to a current meandering through a stream or a breeze blowing through a forest canopy. We probably can all recall a few instances in our lives when we've felt a sense of unity with nature and with life while experiencing a special moment in the natural world—perhaps a walk in a park with a child, discovering a bird's nest, seeing a butterfly's intricate wing pattern, noticing a spider's web in the sunlight or marveling at a starry night. These experiences awaken our sense of curiosity and reveal the mystery and

beauty that surround us. However, in a world where more than half the population lives in urban areas and people spend 90 percent of their time indoors, this connection with nature is rare indeed. As our separation from the land and each other increases, the need to find viable ways to align with nature has become imperative. How can we realign with nature? The answers vary depending on our temperament, cultural background and interests.

### **Doorways to Nature**

The intellectual door into aligning with nature is our innate curiosity about the natural world. We may be drawn to learning about how nature works. This scientific approach builds on previous investigations and its goal is a new discovery or an improvement in the understanding of a process or an event. As technology matures, scientific discoveries are happening at an accelerated pace but the first step is asking a question, being curious about why something happens, followed by a possible explanation, which is modified based on the findings. Being curious is an innate human quality that is especially present during childhood and for many of us it continues throughout our lives. Nature is an ideal place to ignite our curiosity.

The spiritual door into aligning with nature goes back to indigenous cultures, where humans are seen as part of the web of life. Human history is intertwined with the Earth's evolution and is seen in the creation stories of the First Peoples from all continents—Aboriginal, Native American, Amazonian, European and African tribes. Through their ceremonies and stories these cultures have found enduring ways to remain aligned with nature. As author Wilma Mankiller notes, “indigenous people have the benefit of being regularly reminded of their responsibilities to the land by stories and ceremonies. They remain close to the land, not only in the way they live, but in their hearts and in the way they view the world. Protecting the environment is not an intellectual exercise; it is a sacred duty.”<sup>1</sup> The spiritual alignment with nature prevalent in indigenous cultures has an important connection to our collective responsibility to see ourselves as stewards of the land. As an integral part of the

web of life we have the choice to take care of the land and the species that inhabit it.

The spiritual door into nature also beckons us to explore the meaning of the natural world in our lives. For some of us, nature acts as a spiritual sanctuary that provides us with clarity during challenging times. Witnessing the infinite expressions of nature—through torrential thunderstorms, ancient trees, saturated sunsets, resilient plants, curious animals, relentless insects, exquisite flowers and meandering streams—often fills us with wonder and humility.

Finally, there is the experiential door into nature—getting out there and being in the wilderness. The underlying motivation can range from education to a desire for personal growth and well-being to simply relaxing and having fun. In *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice*, developmental psychologist Howard Gardner describes “naturalist intelligence” (one of several human intelligences), which focuses on our affinity with nature.<sup>2</sup>

I recall my earliest memories of fishing and camping with my family and marveling at the opportunity to be among the trees and rivers and lakes, away from an urban environment. In college I read the works of Thoreau, Emerson, Carson and Leopold among others, gaining a deeper connection to nature. Later I led groups into the backcountry and worked with youth in the outdoors, cementing my appreciation of and caring for nature. But the seed was an emotional bond that took root in my childhood.

Nature helps us get out of our heads and into our hearts. Experimenting with our senses in nature is a powerful way to increase our awareness of everything around us. When we close our eyes, for instance, we often hear more acutely and may feel the breeze on our face and sense the texture of the soil beneath our feet. Focusing on the smells of spring flowers and the taste of wild berries gives us renewed appreciation for nature’s bounty. And sometimes when we sit in one place for an extended period of time and observe everything that’s happening, we notice that remarkable stories are unfolding all around us. Perhaps it’s the termites meandering toward their mound or the ever-changing patterns of the clouds or the fish that briefly



jumps up above the pond's surface. These ongoing stories provide us with a front row seat on life as it unfolds every second of every day. What a gift! As Jack Kornfield said, "The present moment is all we have, and it becomes the doorway to true calm, your healing refuge."<sup>3</sup>

In our modern culture, experiencing nature includes a mixture of natural and artificial sounds. The soundscape of nature is made up of nonbiological sounds such as wind, rain and thunder, known as geophony; sounds from living organisms such as birds, dogs and dolphins, known as biophony; and sounds from humans such talking, music, cars and airplanes, known as anthropophony. All these sounds make up the living tapestry of many wilderness areas. I remember once spending many days in a remote desert in Utah immersed in a biophony without hearing or seeing another human for days, yet experiencing moments of anthropophony as passenger jets flew high above me. I've also enjoyed the biophony of remote wild areas where only bird sounds greeted me at the dawn of a new day.

Alonzo King's and Bernie Krause's *Biophony*, which integrates ballet with natural sounds, brings to life the richness of nature's soundscapes. Krause writes, "This is the tuning of the great animal orchestra—the inspiration for the ballet. It's an illumination of the acoustic harmony of the wild, the planet's deeply connected expression of natural sounds and rhythm. It is the reference for what we hear in today's remaining wild places, and it is likely that the origins of every rhythm and composition to which we dance come, at some point, from this collective voice. At one time there was no other acoustic inspiration."<sup>4</sup> Artistic performances such as *Biophony* illustrate the powerful lure of nature as a portal for artistic expression.

Perhaps our most common means of experiencing nature is through recreation—hiking, climbing, rafting, skiing, kayaking, fishing, camping and a myriad of other wilderness activities that all entail being in outdoor settings. These activities often immerse us in our sport while we enjoy a deeper awareness of and connection to nature. The closer to the "element," whether it's the snow from skiing, the water from kayaking, the rock from climbing or the stream current from fishing, the deeper our immersion. We are transported



Andrés Edwards

Paddling a kayak immerses us in a state of being where  
we are aligned with the rhythms of nature.

into a different state of being in which we are attuned to the rhythms of nature.

### Types of Nature Alignment

What is alignment with nature? It is being attuned to nature's subtle changes and activities. I had a friend who loved watching the "dancing trees." When I observe a tree's trunk and branches, even on a day with only a light breeze, I notice a slight dance. A similar dance occurs in the rustle of leaves, the flow of water, the flight of butterflies, the orbit of our planet and the motion of all the stars in the universe. When we are in alignment, we feel connected to other species and to the natural world and from this connection arises a caring and love for nature. When we are in alignment we have a clearer sense of how we fit into the fabric of life, giving us an opportunity to redefine our role, if we choose to, as land stewards rather than as consumers or resource exploiters.

What happens when we are not aligned? We feel separate from the fabric of life that sustains us. This separateness manifests in a sense of isolation from other species. Nature becomes merely a set of "resources" that keep us alive: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil in which we grow our food, the timber and fish we harvest and the minerals we mine, all of them simply objects for our consumption. Instead of seeing ourselves as members of a larger community of species, we become detached exploiters of nature's bounty, disconnected from what nature provides. We also lose track of the knowledge of what keeps us alive, including where our water originates, where our food is grown and where our electricity is generated. All of these essential sources help us connect to the land. In a sense they are the threads that reconnect us to nature, and when we lose these threads we are adrift.

Some of the most complex environmental issues we face—climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution—are exacerbated because we cannot clearly see the connection between our actions and their effects on the environment. We are not aligned with the rhythms and cycles of nature. How, for instance, does food that travels 1,500 miles

impact the climate? How do large multinational fishing fleets impact the livelihood of coastal fishing villages? And what effects do industrial agriculture and unsustainable timber harvesting practices have on the health of the land and its capacity to replenish itself? These issues demand that we step back and reenvision our relationship to the natural world, become aware of the impact of our actions and then seek enduring solutions.

Since the majority of the world's population lives in cities and only a small percentage of residents from the developed countries are directly involved in activities such as farming, fishing, logging and mining, many of us are removed from daily exposure to nature. People living in inner cities with limited opportunities may rarely have a chance to travel to a wilderness area and see a starry night, a rushing river or an elk or a bear. For them, nature is an abstraction that may appear boring or even dangerous. I recall a friend telling me that when his family first moved from the city out to the suburbs his young children were afraid and had a difficult time falling asleep at night because of the sound of crickets, which they had never encountered before.

People who are more fortunate and have grown up with access to the wilderness see nature as a destination for recreation, contemplation or an opportunity to relax and leave behind the stresses of modern life. In these situations we are able to immerse ourselves in an activity or simply enjoy the natural surroundings and revel in being at ease with what is all around us. It's an opportunity to be present in the moment and relish the beauty we may discover if we look closely. It's also a chance to develop a contemplative state of mind.

Identifying the qualities in nature that we appreciate gives us insight into our character. How does nature, for instance, exemplify resilience, endurance, adaptation, thresholds, cooperation and interdependence? Maybe we see examples of these qualities in the branches of an oak tree, the flight of a dragonfly, a rugged coastline or a meadow in springtime. How do these qualities show up in our own lives? How can we fortify our own resilience, understand our thresholds and discover our interdependence with our family, friends

and colleagues? Nature is the springboard for exploring our personal lives and provides a mirror for how we can navigate our social connections.

Nature also provides a timeline to give us perspective. Geologic epochs give us a sense of how species and the geography of the Earth have evolved over time. Changes in nature may take seconds or minutes from a lightning strike, a flash flood or an earthquake or millions of years as in the erosion of the Grand Canyon or the evolution of our own species. This long-term perspective provides a context for gauging the impact of our actions. Sometimes human activities such as the construction of cities or development of landscapes may appear to be long-lasting, but in the geologic scale 100 or 500 or 1,000 years are a mere fraction of time that may be a blip on the geologic radar. Taking a hike in the Grand Canyon, a forest or a city highlights the impermanence of life and the constant evolution taking place year after year, much of which we cannot detect on a day-to-day basis.

### Internal and External Alignment

Aligning with nature has an internal and an external component. These two aspects are interdependent. Although they complement each other, they are essentially part of a whole. As philosopher Thomas Berry pointed out, “The outer world is necessary for the inner world; they’re not two worlds but a single world with two aspects: The outer and the inner. If we don’t have certain outer experiences, we don’t have certain inner experiences, or at least we don’t have them in a profound way.”<sup>5</sup>

In learning about our internal alignment we may ask ourselves what rejuvenates us—exercise, yoga, walks, friends, gardening, reading, music? What brings us joy—time with our spouse, kids, grandparents, friends, a walk in nature? What brings us peace—meditation, reading, painting, solitude? What gives us purpose and meaning—pursuing our passion, being of service? What opens our heart—witnessing a compassionate gesture, an act of kindness, the love between people? What inspires us—a beautiful musical





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Identifying a tree species or understanding the carbon cycle or the migration of monarch butterflies gives us insight into how nature works.



performance, an athletic feat, overcoming a daunting challenge? What humbles us—a starry night, a hurricane, a redwood forest? What makes us playful—making a snow angels and sand castles, flying a kite? And how does nature help us with our internal alignment?

To examine our external alignment we may wonder what is our connection to our family, friends, community and country—family ties, social networks, volunteering? What links do we have to water, soil, food and the air—health, recreation, business? What is our connection to our bioregion, our city or town—cultural, geographical, professional, personal? And what are our ties to the mystery and beauty of the natural world?

These questions bring up the various ways in which we create our alignment with nature, namely: personal experiences, cultural ties, intellectual and emotional connections. On the personal level, Chandra Taylor Smith, an educator from the Audubon Society, recounts the story of a recently immigrated Mexican mother living in Baltimore who shared her desire for her children to learn about birds “because these same birds we see in the park here in the city may have been in my mother’s back yard back in Mexico before.”<sup>6</sup> This direct link between the birds’ migration and her own family’s journey to the United States speaks to her affinity with a bird species that reminds her of her culture back home. Perhaps she also identifies with how the birds and her family were able to survive the migratory journey.

In another instance, a group of African American women who were recently trained as naturalists and were leading a group through a park on the south side of Chicago suddenly stopped and one of them said, “I feel like doing the Beyoncé dance, because it makes me feel so good to be out here!” Another said, “I feel free and relaxed in a way that I cannot be at home, in the city.”<sup>7</sup> Then they proceeded to dance freely and share their joy in feeling vibrant and alive in nature.

In these two instances the personal alignment is sparked by a connection to a familiar sight such as a bird species and a moment of inspiration because of the natural beauty around us. I recall a similar connection as a child in Chile and climbing around in a pair of tall eucalyptus trees in our backyard. Now as an adult living in Northern

California, seeing eucalyptus trees and smelling the scent from their leaves bring back instantly those fond memories. Being in nature often sparks a memory or a feeling that takes us back to another time and place.

On a cultural level, one of the strongest connections to nature stems from food. Traditional dishes from various cultures help us bond with our cultural roots. Thinking of our favorite “comfort food” often takes us back to a childhood surrounded by family traditions and cultural holidays. Whether it’s a hamburger from America, moules-frites (mussels and French fries) from Belgium, tandoori chicken from India, borscht from Russia or pastel de choclo (pie with corn, chicken, beef and vegetables) from Chile, each dish links us to our ancestors, our land and our culture.

The origin of fruits, vegetables and nuts also provides a bridge to particular regions: avocado, corn and squash from Peru, Mexico and Central America; blueberries and sunflowers from North America; potatoes and quinoa from South America; broccoli, cauliflower and walnuts from the Mediterranean; eggplant and peaches from Asia; and coffee and watermelon from Africa.<sup>8</sup> Food acts as a cultural and biographical thread that ties us to nature’s diversity and our agricultural practices over the centuries.

The intellectual thread of nature provides us with a methodology and language for interpreting the natural world. Learning the scientific names and understanding the processes of nature give us a powerful tool for making discoveries and sharing them with others. Identifying a tree species or understanding the carbon cycle or the migration of monarch butterflies gives us insight into how nature works. Becoming literate about the environment—developing ecoliteracy—builds a bridge for sharing our understanding of natural systems. This common ecological language has its limitations, yet it provides a baseline from which to discuss nature.

As an external tool for understanding the natural world, ecoliteracy supports an objective approach for defining our connections to nature. This ecoliteracy language is multicultural, intergenerational, evolutionary and at its root intellectual. Learning this language chal-

lenges us to understand the scientific concepts and terminology that are the building blocks of nature. The physical, biological and chemical topics covered through ecoliteracy lend us a perspective that is supported across the world through scientific inquiry.

Ecoliteracy provides a basic understanding that aids in the debates surrounding ecological issues. Understanding the basic terminology and the “operating instructions” for the natural world gets us all on the same page when it comes to discussing important environmental issues. Unfortunately much confusion and misunderstanding arise because of eco-illiteracy—not having a background that provides a baseline for having sensible conversations about environmental issues.

However, the ecoliterate mind still benefits from an emotional component. The emotional alignment with nature manifests through the arts and sciences. Whether it’s nature art such as the work of Andy Goldsworthy, the nature photography of Galen Rowell or the work of hundreds of thousands of naturalists, educators and scientists making discoveries every day, they all help us explore our curiosity through the natural world.

The emotional link to nature comes through biophilia (see Chapter 6). This is the door that for many of us is first opened in childhood when we naturally live more in the present moment and are filled with curiosity and affinity for life. When we are mesmerized by a twig or a ladybug or a heritage oak, we develop a visceral bond with natural systems that is born from a feeling, not an intellectual pursuit, and remains with us for the rest of our lives. It is the force behind our love of a particular place, a kinship with a particular species and a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves, which is life itself.

### Natural Principles

An enduring alignment with nature is based on a set of bedrock principles: interdependence, stewardship, regeneration and compassion. Instead of thinking of them as lofty ideals, we can find creative ways to live them in our daily lives.

As humans we are dependent on water, air, soil and plants as well as the biodiversity of species to stay alive. These elements form part of an integrated system that can't be broken down into its component parts. As John Muir so eloquently pointed out, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."<sup>9</sup> We experience our external interdependence with the natural world through our land stewardship practices that can either enhance or degrade the health of nonhuman species. Our internal interdependence happens more subtly through our emotional connection to nature, our empathy for other species and our appreciation for the beauty and mystery of life.

As environmental stewards we must explore our responsibility to the natural world. The role we choose to play is ideally aligned with our temperament—thus we may express our values as an activist, educator, entrepreneur, politician or community leader. While stewardship emphasizes our role as an integral part in the web of life, the most tangible approach begins at the local level by taking care of our own backyard and our community's parks and open space areas. Then we begin to discern the connections between our home and our region, our state, our country and the world. In a wired world with a 24/7 news cycle it's easy to get immersed in stories from distant lands. Yet perhaps the most important question to ask is: where can we have the greatest impact? As stewards, what actions can we take individually and collectively that will make a difference? The answer may be as simple as participating in a neighborhood cleanup or a community garden project or installing a drip irrigation system to conserve water.

Regeneration is a fundamental process of life, a process of perpetual renewal. Our bodies are constantly regenerating—at a cellular level our cells renew themselves, starting with our blood cells, bone cells, muscle and skin cells—to keep us vibrant. Similarly, nature regenerates itself through fires, rain and sunlight, which bring new life to animal and plant species and their habitats. Internally, we regenerate and reinvent ourselves as our knowledge and opinions evolve throughout our lives. Just as plants and animals adapt to their

changing environments, we adapt to our constantly changing life circumstances and progress through our roles as children, adolescents, adults, workers, parents and grandparents. Our regenerative qualities flourish when we're open to new ideas and fearlessly embrace the unknown, trusting that our resilience will give us the strength and stamina to move forward.

Compassion (see Chapter 7), which many social scientists believe is inherent in our being and can be cultivated through our life experience, provides a powerful way to align with the natural world. Studies are revealing that the vagus nerve, a cranial nerve that influences our speech, head motion, digestion and heart rate, also impacts our empathy, sympathy and compassion.<sup>10</sup> Similarly oxytocin, called the “cuddle hormone,” plays a role in our social bonding and makes us more trusting, generous and empathetic towards others.<sup>11</sup> Our bodies thus have the key “ingredients” for being caring and compassionate.

But compassion is not only a human trait. Researchers are discovering compassion in the animal world. Chimpanzees, for instance, will take care of their ailing and elderly kin by helping them and getting them water. Using their tusks, elephants will come to the aid of an injured member of their group, and bonobos, known to be mostly peaceful in their behavior, will lick the wound from an injury they have caused someone else.<sup>12</sup> These actions illustrate the similarities that we share with other animals. Moreover, these types of actions from other species bring out feelings of empathy and compassion in ourselves. Our own compassionate actions toward animals range from the extreme measures, such as efforts to save whales stranded in sea ice, to the rescue of dogs and cats in urban settings.

### **Awareness and Humility**

A successful alignment with nature involves developing our awareness coupled with a dose of humility. The first step in awareness is to “wake up”—to open our eyes, listen with our ears and open our hearts to how we fit into the tapestry of life that surrounds us. Being aware involves recognizing our role and responsibility as the most

powerful species on the planet. How do we wield that power with respect and reverence for all other species? How do we protect nature's cycles, processes and ecosystems that allow life to thrive on the planet? And how do we ensure that our actions serve to create a livable future for all? These challenges are more easily tackled at the individual level where we investigate our personal motivations. Identifying what gives our lives meaning and purpose leads us to make choices that we can evaluate for their environmental impacts.

Awareness also requires slowing down and being still instead of worrying that we will "miss out" if we don't always accept the next event to fill up our schedule. Attuning our rhythm to the rhythm of nature ensures that we have the space and time to rejuvenate and reflect, providing context and meaning for many of the challenges we face.

Iain McGilchrist reminds us of the importance of seeing the connections in nature for therein lies meaning. As he points out:

Meaning comes from connection and our brains are designed to attend to the world in two ways. [The left hemisphere] sees static, distinct, lifeless pieces, fragments that are then just put together to make up a kind of mechanical world.... The right hemisphere is the one that sees everything is connected, that nothing is ever static, that nothing is ever discrete and separate from other things. Modern physics confirms that the world is like that, and poetry and music have told us that since time began.<sup>13</sup>

Discovering these dynamic connections heightens our awareness of being an integral part of the universe and living a meaningful life. As the connections become more apparent, we are often humbled by the complexity and beauty of the natural world.

Humility emerges in different ways. I am humbled by the vastness of a starry night, the beauty of a sunset and the force of a rushing river. I realize how tiny and insignificant our planet is in the context of the cosmos. I'm also humbled by witnessing the remarkable land-



forms and species that inhabit our planet—from the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains to the coastal redwood forests to the tiniest ladybug resting on a leaf. Geologic forces have been around for millions of years and species have evolved accordingly. Now in my comparatively brief lifetime I have a chance to experience them.

Humility is often highlighted during natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and droughts, where we have limited control of the events as they unfold. We are often humbled and awed by the destructive power of the natural world. Perhaps an equal humility is required as we develop technologies for which there is uncertainty about their potential consequences such as new chemicals, genetically modified crops and nuclear energy sources. Making decisions fueled by greed and commercial interests can often lead to undesirable results. Applying the precautionary principle (“better safe than sorry”) to technological “advancements” calls for our humility to step forward and to proceed with caution or not proceed at all. Embracing a sense of humility recognizes that we are not the only players on the world’s stage and that we can still be overwhelmed by natural forces.

### **Natural Ingredients**

What are the “ingredients” we need for aligning with nature? To start off, we might want several “cups” of awareness, stillness, reverence and compassion. Then we can add several “tablespoons” of: humility, awe, appreciation, wonder, pleasure, playfulness, observation, curiosity, creativity, solitude and respect. Add to that a “pinch” of flexibility for being open and grateful for the unexpected. These ingredients make up the recipe for a reciprocal relationship with nature in which we not only derive nature’s benefits but also give back by renewing habitats we have destroyed through our short-sighted exploitation of natural resources.



### QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- How have your outer experiences in nature influenced your inner experiences?
- What does being “aligned with nature” mean to you? What actions help you to be in alignment?
- What are the principles that would help you to develop an enduring alignment with nature?
- Find out if/how ecoliteracy is being taught in your community and offer to help spread its message.
- Recall a time that you felt a sense of unity with nature. How did it feel? What impact did it have in your life?
- How does nature renew your mind, body and spirit?
- What makes you curious about the natural world? How do you manifest your curiosity?