

HOW TO LISTEN TO A RIVER



A Guide to finding your own personal spiritual connection to a local waterbody

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INTRODUCTION:

Everybody knows that humans are creatures of habit, but aren't we also creatures of our habitats? The same way that food nourishes our bodies, our surroundings influence and nourish our spirits, our thoughts, and our sense of well-being. Spending time in nature is more than just fun it is also a fundamental vector for how human beings reconnect with our natural connection to fresh air, pure water and open space.

It is a basic instinct for us to draw inspiration from nature and especially from rivers as our world and our surroundings have become increasingly dominated by artificial or human-made factors it is fairly easy for people to lose their sense of connection to their own basic relationship with raw nature. Kids grow up being fearful of being out of doors, people resist being outdoors because of a fear of bugs and they are out of physical shape. By contrast, our economy and our society are dominated by artificial joys and pleasures that generally can be purchased, licensed and franchised.

So the idea of sitting quietly in a natural setting and just waiting for inspiration to tug at you is an experience that has not occurred to everybody. My old friend Tom Wisner used to tell me that if you take your problems to a river then she will tell you what to do. But after ten years of running river based outreach programs, I know realize that many people sit next to a babbling brook or a river and hear only what they expect to hear--or that which is obvious—the sound of running water. Far fewer experience the outdoors as a catalyst for unleashing and reconnecting themselves to rediscover nature as a source of inspiration and uplifting their hearts and their sense of belonging to nature as a source of spiritual renewal. That kids on outdoor excursions often have to be compelled to unclog from their I-phone, iPods or other devices, is a reflection of the difficulty modern day humans have in tuning out the unrelenting sound of commercialism and civilization. The idea is not so people can hear what we want them to hear, but to elevate the capacity for folks to hear that which most people must and can only hear for themselves.

The simple truth is that in modern society, lots of diversions vie for our attention but in the wilds, the voice of nature is subtle and unassuming by comparison. (How often do we go out into nature with the expectation to see the superstars – whale watching, Serengeti photo safaris, bald eagles in flight? It is another commodity to purchase a guide service that guarantees the sightings. But this is missing the deeper experience.) Hearing nature's voice requires a mindfulness that is scarce in a society dominated by media and various other diversions. Nature speaks to each of us in a unique and special voice meaningful only to us and

that our individual heritage with the great outdoors is a birthright that is far more precious than anything we might ever purchase at Best Buy. Moreover, teaching people about nature or training them to exercise stewardship for nature is really not the same as helping them develop a recognition for or an appreciation for sense of place and for the most elemental aspects of the unbuilt world.

This series of essays is for people who want to regain the natural ability to listen to nature or who have been immersed in the mechanized world for so long that they have forgotten how to listen to Mother Nature and hear her infinite voices. Arguably this is different from what is commonly thought of as environmental education or environmental literacy which often concentrates on helping people identify and understand nature and often from a scientific or naturalist perspective. This booklet is instead a form of mindfulness training aimed at helping people develop a deeper understanding of their own spiritual relationship with nature and to discern how we each fit into nature.

NATURE AND SPIRIT

When we speak of the spirit of a person we speak in general terms about their essence beyond and apart from those attributes that we have learned to project onto everyday life. The clothing we wear, your formal education and the social persona you have adopted during the course of your life are entirely constructs that sometimes obscure one's underlying individualism and personal expressions

Many environmentalists approach environmental experience as scientists or educators. .

Many environmental activities unfold within the context of affinity groups. In most of these groups, shared values and feelings about the environment are inherent.

EXERCISES

EXERCISE #1

Natural Listening:

Sit quietly and listen. Slowly try to isolate each of the sounds within range of your hearing and identify each by their source. Pay particular attention to the sounds that are in the background and that are often “white noise” or go un-noticed in our everyday lives. Once you have brought the background sounds to the forefront of your awareness, then try and push those sounds back to their original place in the background of your consciousness.

EXERCISE #2

Hearing the nature’s music:

Nature generates sounds that often enough have variable pitch and rhythm. Decidedly, nature makes its own music that is quite different from the music made by humans. Learning to harmonize with nature you can make your own music in partnership with nature. The sound of cicadas, or bullfrogs, the whispering of wind through trees all present us with an orchestra of sounds for adding our voice, foot tappings, hand claps and whatever sounds of which we are capable. The results are nearly always personal and perhaps not always ready for prime time-- but immensely satisfying nonetheless. Alternately you can use a musical instrument of your choice to accompany nature’s impromptu music.

EXERCISE #3

Movement in nature

Being in nature lends itself to self-expression through movement. There are no bounds to the ways the human body can sway, articulate and interpret both your moods as well as to express how being in nature makes you feel at a particular point in time. Get on your feet and let yourself go! Close your eyes while you move, if it will help you move in an unrestrained and completely un self-conscious way.

EXERCISE #4

Sensory memory

Sit quietly in a special place (a place you like) and slowly bring yourself to awareness of the sights, sounds, smells and tactile sensations that go along with this particular place. As you become aware of sensory impressions, then try and think back to an earlier time when you were aware of a similar feeling? Try to roll your memory back to the earliest time you can recall that precise same sensation. Once you conjure up a lucid memory try and reconnect it in your mind with the other senses you experienced at that same point in time.

EXERCISE #5

Explore sense of place

Sit quietly and mindfully in a familiar place and try to better become aware of the natural attributes of that place. Mentally make note of how this special place difference from other familiar places in your life. Contemplate how you would describe this specific place to someone else who had never been there. Write down your description in your journal. If you do not have a journal, then start one!