

I'd like to begin with a poem by the late, great Mary Oliver.

It's called "Praying."

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

I appreciate this wonderful reminder that the divine is everywhere, in all things, and that even the most humble of them is worthy of our gratitude.

Although we live in a special place, immersed in the land and the beauty of the seasons, we still forget to pay attention, to really take in what surrounds us. My work as a naturalist and guide is all about trying to mitigate what I describe as "the epidemic of disconnection."

We've become disconnected from so much: paradoxically, from both community and self-sufficiency; from our past and from our future; and, most fundamentally, from our true natures. It has cost us that feeling of belonging to the Earth, a sense of ourselves as wild souls. Instead, we have come to be defined by our job titles, our bank balances, how many followers we have on social media.

Nature cares little for any of that. And so, in response to this epidemic of disconnection, I strive to put people in touch with what Thoreau called "the tonic of wildness."

First by trying to combat plant blindness. Have you heard this term? It was coined twenty years ago by a couple of botanists who noticed that modern humans ignore plants out of a kind of cognitive bias that turns our incredibly rich botanical diversity into a blurry sea of green. Although we are using our eyes to look, we do not truly see. One plant remains undifferentiated from the next, until we pause, slow down and come into relationship with our fellow beings.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, the acclaimed writer, bryologist and enrolled citizen of the Potowatomi nation, states in her excellent book, “Braiding Sweetgrass,” that being able to call plants by name is a sign of respect in the indigenous tradition.

Only when we can name something, can we begin to truly *know* it.

I believe this knowledge opens the door to love.

Our deep reliance on plants has become entirely unconscious. Consider the linen shirt you’re wearing, the wooden chair you’re sitting on, the mineral-powered battery in your cell phone—now realize that the very oxygen we breathe is produced by trees. They exhale so we can inhale. It’s both science and poetry.

And then, of course, we literally consume plants in order to live. Since we don’t photosynthesize, we must eat them every day, benefiting from the nutrition they provide, either directly or through the animals that subsist on them.

While we often take the ready availability of this food for granted, it’s the pursuit of wild edibles that seems to have captured our imaginations lately. If I list one of my guided outings as a foraging walk, it books up immediately.

Why is this so compelling to us?

Because it’s in our DNA. For nearly 200,000 years, we roamed the woods and fields as hunter-gatherers. In total sync with the seasons and cycles. Intimate with the plants and animals. Inextricably intertwined with all living beings. It’s how we survived and thrived.

When you explore the forests and fields, you encounter the bread of heaven at every turn. Especially in this season of great abundance,.

Berries drip from the bushes. Nuts fall to the ground. Mushrooms pop up underfoot.

So, what does it mean to eat this manna of the wilderness?

It’s a special kind of communion to take this sun-warmed bounty into our bodies, to be powerfully nourished by these wild foods. It’s an exchange that taps into something deeply primal in all of us, this knowing that we have carried for millennia.

But this interconnectedness is not just pragmatic. Think about why we climb the highest peaks and sail the seas to find ourselves. Why we gaze up at the stars to ignite our imaginations and inspire creativity.

The sustenance offered up by Nature comes to us not just as literal food, but as fuel for the spirit. As resonant metaphors and crystalline life lessons that appear wherever we are willing to look and truly see:

In the curling bark of a yellow birch gracefully disintegrating on the forest floor, reminding us of the essential and cyclical nature of decomposition.

In the miracle that is the mycoheterotrophic ghost pipe, a non-photosynthesizing plant that gets its nutrition from the fungal network, clearly demonstrating how distinct life forms depend so closely on another.

In the joyful sight of a vulnerable newborn fawn stepping into the unexpected power of its slender legs.

In the ruthless evisceration of a blue jay by a fierce Cooper's hawk, confirming that life and death are locked in a terrifyingly beautiful and eternal dance.

The awe and the wonder.

The thrill of belonging to a Universe this complex.

Its enormity undoes us, tears at the very fabric of our being, until we are confronted with our own small selves in the midst of a giant mystery.

Witnessing all this helps us to discover how we fit into the grand scheme of things—or, as Mary Oliver calls it, “the family of things.” When the problems of the world seem insurmountable, time spent in the wild never fails to remind us that we are just one infinitely small being among so many others, all of us intimately connected and clinging to life.

This is humbling, but it's also reassuring. For in eating this manna of the wilderness—allowing it in to nourish and heal us—we are sustained and transformed. Connected to our true natures, we step into our birthright and onto the path of righteousness.

How does this journey into the divine, and toward yourself, begin?

First, locate your curiosity. Open your eyes, then your heart.

As Mary Oliver's poem reminds us, it doesn't have to be the blue iris. It could be weeds in a vacant lot. The scruffy dandelion growing right outside your door. The enormous stands of knotweed along the river. The mighty oak, sun-kissed St John's wort or shy pipsissewa. Maybe ripe blackberries will prove irresistible, or you'll succumb to the siren call of the chanterelle.

Whatever it is, give it your full attention. Call it by name. Hold a listening silence into which that other voice can speak.

If you need a guide to accompany you on the path, look for a teacher and one will surely appear. Perhaps it is the cardinal who comes to your feeder. The witch hazel that reaches out from the understory. Or the humble naturalist, offering to share the wonders of a world that belong to us all.