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Preface

Some of my earliest memories are of nature. In Australia we lived on a dead end street. At the end were Weeping Willows which we walked through like we were opening beaded curtains, as a shortcut to the neighborhood park. A few years later I remember following deer trails and watching out for Poison Oak in the hills of California. Where nature and history connected in our neighborhood, leaving remnants of old stone walls and foundations partially overgrown, we pretended we were in Neverland, and perhaps in some sense we were.

As a child I had a close connection with nature. Although if you had asked me I might not have even been aware of it, as this is something all children have naturally. It is only when we lose it that we get into trouble. We often don't even know we've lost it. We may just sense a void in our lives or a sense that something is lacking. We may just feel frustrated or lonely.

Often we blame circumstances or the people in our lives for these feelings, not realizing that it is our disconnection from the rest of nature which may be at the root of these feelings. I say "the rest of nature" because you are part of nature too. We often forget that. Sometimes simply reminding ourselves of that can take the edge off of our negative feelings. At other times we may need to actually get out in nature and reconnect with all of our senses.

As many of us do, at some point in my life I lost that sense of connection with nature. In fact I've probably lost it several times over the course of my life. If I think back to time periods when I was the most frustrated or irritable or depressed, it was always when I wasn't spending enough time relating with nature.

As a teenager I became an alienated punk rocker. I spent most of my time skateboarding or in my room with friends listening to music. At least we got some exercise through skateboarding, but our focus was on the concrete jungle not the pervasive natural world surrounding us.

Later in my college years I began to reconnect with nature. I spent more time with friends hiking and camping in the mountains of Idaho. We took up rock climbing and went on backpacking trips. At the same time I began to discover some of the wisdom traditions of Asia. I began to read books on Buddhism and Taoism, and found inspiration in their

view of the natural world. I went on to pursue Asian Studies in college with a focus on Chinese language and culture. I also began to study taijiquan (tai chi) and qigong.

At the same time I minored in horticulture which led me to working with plants, first through landscaping and eventually as an organic farmer. It is work I still enjoy, though these days mostly in my own yard and vegetable garden.

After a few years working for an organic CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm, I returned to the academic world to study acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. While Chinese medicine stresses humans' connection with nature, the academic environment of the classroom doesn't. I found myself once again slipping out of touch with nature.

It was about this time that I discovered the idea of natural movement and the work of Erwan Le Corre through a YouTube video called "The Workout the World Forgot." Le Corre's system of physical education, called MovNat (which we'll return to later) also stresses a deep connection to nature. I began to study and eventually teach natural movement practices based on this system.

In the last several years I've been more focused on deepening my own connection with nature as well as helping others reconnect. I stress this in my acupuncture practice and when I lead groups in natural movement practice or taijiquan and qigong. While I enjoy advising individual patients and small groups in my classes, I wanted to reach out to more people and share some of what I've learned to help more people reconnect with nature. That's why I've written this book.

As I'll discuss further, our disconnection from nature hurts us all, both individually and collectively. Individually it affects our health in negative ways, both physically and mentally. Collectively it affects our societies through our interaction with each other as well as how we as societies interact with the Earth. We seem to be reaching a critical period where we will be forced one way or another to alter the way we live on this planet.

We can either embrace this change as a wonderful opportunity to discover and create new ways to live with the Earth, perhaps even learning from the Earth itself; or we can remain in denial with business as usual until we are forced to change. If we wait to be forced, will we change in time?

These things can get a bit heavy sometimes, seeming hopeless. It is easy to feel overwhelmed, especially if we focus on the environmental problems our disconnection has led to, but I remain very optimistic about the future. Often it seems that things will never change until suddenly, a tipping point is reached and seemingly overnight, dramatic changes happen.



Introduction

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

— William Wordsworth (1904)



People today have become increasingly alienated from their primal roots in the natural world. We can see the repercussions of this fact on many fronts, from climate change and environmental degradation, to species extinction and the exponential growth in food allergies and autoimmune diseases in humans. In our children we have seen a dramatic rise in autism spectrum disorders and ADD/ADHD. The list goes on.

Many people, justifiably so, trace the roots of these changes back to our separation from nature in one way or another. As an acupuncturist I see this everyday with my patients. Many, if not all, of the major health-related issues we're dealing with in the world today, stem from this alienation from nature. This separation is expressed in many ways. It might be an issue with poor digestion or weight gain due to eating an

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unnatural diet. It could be an issue with aches, pains, and poor strength and mobility due to a lack of natural movement. It might be a stress related illness due to a lack of proper posture, unnatural breathing patterns, or the loss of our natural coping mechanisms for dealing with stress. The ways in which we find ourselves removed from the natural living patterns of our species are numerous. As a healthcare professional a good part of my approach to patient care is geared toward encouraging a realignment with a healthier, more natural lifestyle.

The aim of this book is to offer some pathways toward reconnecting with nature, the primal matrix from which we all have evolved. There are two main reasons for this; for the health and wellness of each of us as individuals, and for the health and well-being of the planet as a whole. Of course this very separation between humans and the rest of the planet is at the root of our problem.

We do not realize that we are a part of nature till we begin to think about it. Our lives proceed as if we were two—humanity and nature—two great antagonistic or contrary facts, but the two are one: there is only nature.

— John Burroughs (1921)

We must encourage a change in consciousness, a shift in perception in which we no longer make this distinction. But until we do, it may be useful to encourage people to reconnect with nature for their own health and well-being as a starting point.

Tao of Nature

Condensed into a single phrase, the injunction of Lao Tzu to mankind is, 'Follow Nature.'

—Lionel Giles (1914)

As many people even in the Western world know by now, the Chinese word Tao (Dao) means "the Way," as in the way of the universe or the way of nature in its grandest sense, but it can also be used to refer to a way of doing something or the way of practicing something. For example a phrase like "following the Tao of the buddhas" is not uncommon in Chinese Buddhist texts. As a general term, Tao is used widely in ancient

Chinese philosophical and religious traditions. Most people associate its use with Taoism and of course, the *Daode jing* (*Tao-te-ching*) attributed to Laozi (Lao-tzu), Taoism's most famous text, but it was also used in Confucian and Chinese Buddhist writings as well (see Mitchell 1992; Feng 1972; Mair 1990).

In the following pages, I draw on Chinese philosophical thought and the tradition of Chinese medicine. I also gain inspiration from the realms of taijiquan (tai chi) and qigong, as well as other movement disciplines from Asia and beyond. As the bulk of the philosophical inspiration for this book comes from Taoism and other traditions in tune with Tao, it provides the overarching framework. Just as ideas of Tao jumped the borders of China long ago and influenced other cultures in Asia and increasingly the rest of the world, I touch on useful ideas from many periods and places, from ancient Stoic philosophers to modern scientists. At the present time, it is easy to see how ideas can spread virally, as we can watch it happen in real time. In the age of the internet, things happen literally overnight. In the past, ideas spread in similar ways, but they might have taken years or decades to effect cultural change instead of days and weeks.

Tao refers to the way of nature or the natural course of things. This is most often thought of spiritually, as most people in our modern world seem to have difficulty thinking beyond the mind-body split. But in reality, and as recognized in some traditions, there is no mind-body split. They are connected. In reality is there even a split between ourselves and nature, or do we just choose to think so?

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

— Albert Einstein

Many of the meditations, awareness exercises, and movement practices suggested in this book aim at reconnecting us to nature, but they also serve to reinforce our sense of mind-body connection. Ultimately I hope that, after reading this book and putting it to use, you experience a new

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level of connection beyond just mind-body to mind-body-nature and realize your identity as part of the universe.



One would think that as our scientific knowledge has progressed that our understanding of nature has changed. While this is true to an extent, it is also true that the simple, straight forward advice of Taoist sages, ancient Chinese physicians, and Stoic thinkers to “follow the natural course of things” has not really been changed by our refined understanding. The basic premise still stands. We do best as individuals, as societies, and as a world community, when we seek to follow nature, our source and our ultimate destination. As Zhuangzi says, “Life comes from the earth and returns to the earth”(see Feng 1974; Mair 1998).

There have of course been other naturalistic or back-to-nature movements throughout history, which encouraged us to follow nature. One of the most recent is the Paleo or Primal movement. The Paleo diet falls within this as well. Paleo is often equated simply with a diet fad inspired by what our hunter gatherer ancestors ate, and for many people that is all it is. But some take that same inspiration and apply it more broadly to their entire lifestyle.

In many ways this is not so different than what the early Taoists were doing. Many of the early Taoists, especially those who left us texts, were scholars and intellectuals who retired from the various royal courts of the Warring states period. They left their city lives behind to learn from nature in the wilderness. Often they encountered more primal cultures which still lived in tune with nature, from whom they learned as well (see Girardot 1988; LaChapelle 1992).

We can see this reflected in the story “Peach Blossom Spring” by Tao Qian (365-427 CE). This work relates the tale of a fisherman who stumbles upon a sort of utopian village in a hidden valley where the residents are so in tune with nature that all their needs are met without needing any contact with the outside world. This story was so influential that it has been retold or alluded to by later poets and writers in China ever since (see Davis 2009 ; Ko 2005).

Other modern movements besides Paleo also seek to do this, under different names, such as Ancestral Health or Evolutionary Health. Critics of these movements, especially of Paleo, often oversimplify their methods and stereotype their advocates. Still they are actualized in the modern world in a wide variety of ways.

For example, there is a Primitive Skills movement which seeks to learn about the forgotten skills of our ancestors. Many of these are basic survival skills which could be useful to anyone should they find themselves stranded in the wild or the victim of a natural disaster. Many of these skills also offer us more sustainable, less energy intensive ways of meeting our needs.

Rewilding is another way of framing the idea that we have lost our connection with nature. We have become domesticated and therefore we need to get back in touch with our wild selves. As Erwan Le Corre, founder of MovNat says, we have become “zoo humans.” Just as we have come to realize the importance of providing captive animals with natural habitats to reflect their ecological niche so they can flourish, we

are realizing more and more that humans too need exposure to our natural habitat to flourish.

Michael Cohen, an innovator in the field of Ecopsychology, calls this separation from nature “Bewilderment”, defined as “to detrimentally be separated from wilderness.” (Cohen 2003) Often changing our language allows us to reframe things and helps us think about life in new ways.

In an essay on rewilding our language, Frank Forenich has proposed replacing the word “wellness” with “wildness.” This makes quite a bit of sense if we think about the fact that what is best for us as a species, and every other species on the planet for that matter, is what we are best adapted to, our wild environment. As a species we are extremely successful due to our adaptability. We have been able to adapt to live under practically any conditions on earth. We have even figured out how to live in space for brief periods of time, but does that mean that we can, or should, disregard the environment of the earth?

Astronauts serve as a good example. It is true that they can live in space for short periods of time, but what we see with astronauts is that living so far removed from the basic conditions they are adapted to, especially the gravity of the earth, plays havoc with their biology. Our bodies have evolved to operate under the earth’s gravitational pull and when that is removed we suffer. The ill-effects range from short term effects like vision changes and loss of proprioception (awareness of our body’s position in space), to bone and muscle loss and weakness. So far the longest anyone has spent in space is 438 days. In many ways what happens to astronauts is like an accelerated version of what happens to all of us if we remain disconnected from nature.

In our wildest dreams we might want to somehow magically turn everyone into rewilded eco-warriors, defending the earth and living idyllic, low-tech lives like indigenous tribes still do in many parts of the world, but is this even a realistic goal? It would be more realistic to encourage a shift in consciousness, to encourage everyone to think about the impacts of their decisions on future generations, as the *Constitution of the Iroquois Nations: The Great Binding Law* states,

Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground, the unborn of the future nation.

The truth is, we are all very different and are coming from different places, both figuratively and literally. In our attempts to shift the consciousness of entire societies toward more healthy, natural patterns we have to realize that we must also shift the consciousness of individuals. Doing that requires meeting people where they are and giving them options and ideas which seem realistic and doable in their own lives. Baby steps, if you will. At the heart of all these ideas however is changing our relationship with nature, for as Amos Clifford says,

All of our efforts to become an environmentally sustainable species must be rooted in a deep relationship with nature. Without this relationship, all our efforts toward sustainability will be subtly flawed in ways which will eventually be our undoing. (2013)

Realizing that people have different personalities and varied interests does not make the task of reconnecting people with the earth harder, it actually gives us more options. Trying to make everyone fit one mold is an exercise in futility. Acknowledging our differences allows us to see many possibilities for moving our collective consciousness in a more positive direction ecologically speaking. It gives us tools to bring people back into a closer relationship with the earth through a variety of means.

Some people seek a closer relationship with nature by realigning their diet and lifestyle with more natural patterns. Others are more interested in exercise, so they may take up barefoot running or natural movement practices. Some people are particularly upset by the environmental degradation and species extinction we are seeing around the world, so they may focus on activism. Some people find that nature inspires a sense of awe and feelings of spiritual connectedness in them, so they turn to nature-based spirituality and religion, or they may simply reinterpret the faiths in which they were raised in a way which places a greater emphasis on caring for nature. We are seeing this happening right now with Pope Francis' Encyclical on the environment. There are many paths to our goal of reconnecting humans with nature.

In *The Nature Principle*, Richard Louv asks, "What could our lives be like if our days and nights were as immersed in nature as they are today in technology?" (2011) I hope the following pages offer some paths to explore, so that together we can answer this question, for ourselves and for future generations.

