



Are you listening
when nature
speaks?

activities & inspiration
for finding your deeper
connection with nature

by Sasha Daucus & Nancy Wisser

Thank You!

Activities on pages 4 - 6 adapted with permission from Reconnecting With Nature, by Michael Cohen, published by Eco Press / 8075 215th Street West / Lakeville MN 55044-9146. (800) 326-9272. www.finneyco.com.

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If you've experienced a special moment in nature
you'd like to share, please email us at
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Introduction

What do you experience when you are outdoors in nature? For me, it is a life-filled experience, and like life, beyond words. The world feels alive, deep and mysterious-- me and everything in it.

It's a great feeling of harmony. I know beyond doubt that I am a part of it all, in company with all other life. Feelings of alienation and separation disappear. It feels so good, I want to share it with others.

With this in mind, twenty years ago I started leading spring herb walks in the Ozarks. At that time of year, the plants and woods are so beautiful and easy to appreciate. I also think that the study of edible, medicinal and other useful plants is an excellent door to enter again and again into good feelings of connection with life, especially if you work directly with living plants and the environment they grow in. For me, then, it was natural to introduce people to useful plants in the spring as a way to open the door for others to feel wonderful experiences of connection with nature.



If you are motivated by the desire for a deeper connection with nature, words are not enough. Finding plants that can help you heal, that feed you, or provide materials for making useful objects or inspiring art-- all of these activities, because they are about more than words, and because they create a relationship between you and the plant, can open up the opportunity to experience this sense of connection and harmony with nature.

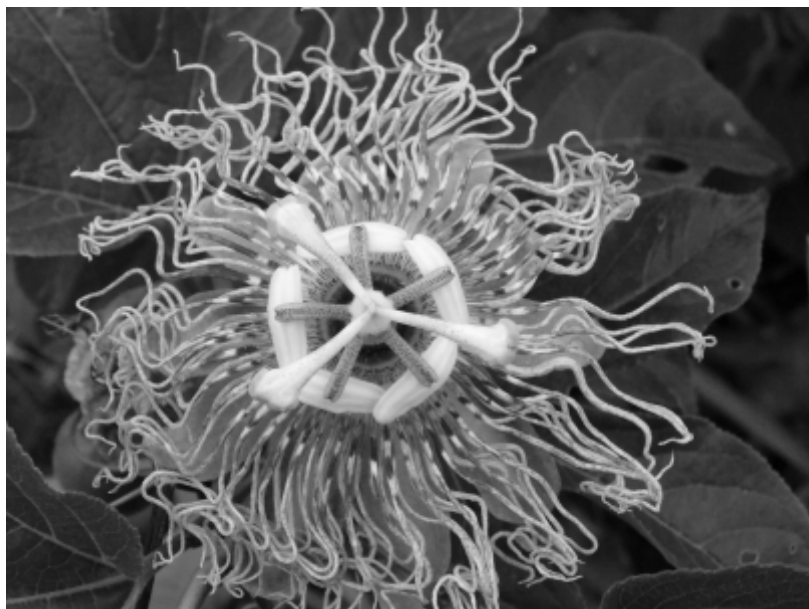
To eat, use or heal with a plant is to experience and affirm a connection with that plant. It takes some trust. You depend on the plant. Over time, a deeper relationship can develop. You bond with the plant and the places it grows, and like any respectful relationship, this bond can lead you deeper into life and connection.



This booklet is a little different offering to the experience of herbalism than I have written in the past. Instead of directly talking about plants, it offers some activities that highlight nonverbal, sensory connection to nature. It also offers some examples of how important this kind of connection with nature can be for you.

I hope you will use it to deepen your connection with nature and plants and to bring a special kind of attention to your work with herbs.

Sasha Daucus



Activities



To start

To the best of your ability, write a paragraph or two about the most attractive experience you can remember having in nature. It may have taken place while you were alone or with others, in a park, your backyard, or a wild area. It could have been with a pet, an animal, plant or rock.

If you think you have never had a good experience with nature, write a paragraph about why you think you would like to have one.

Partnering with nature: a discovery experience

An effective way to signal to nature that you want a deeper connection is to ask for it. Doing this increases your sensitivity to an area.

Ask a natural area if it will help you learn from it. It will not give you consent if you are going to injure, destroy or defame it, or if you. Wait for about half a minute. Look for adverse signals of danger such as thorns, bees, cliff faces, etc. If the area still feels attractive, or becomes more attractive, you have gained its consent. If this portion of the natural area no longer feels attractive, simply select another natural part that attracts you and repeat this process. Do this until you find an area where a safe attraction remains.

Once you have gained the area's consent, compare how you feel about being there now with how you felt about it when you first arrived. Has any change occurred?

Write a paragraph or two about what you experienced.

Being in nature

The idea that nature contains intelligent love frightens many of us, yet we can learn to tune into it through our *senses*. The nature-separated way that we learn to think now often overrides these senses. When that happens, our thinking can drown out the information that comes into us through our senses.

Let's spend some time experiencing how your natural senses help you connect to nature, when you give them a chance. For several minutes, observe this natural area. Each attraction you feel, is a 'mini-love'. During these minutes, ask the natural area, "*Who are you without your names and labels?*" Wait for some kind of response to come into consciousness. Then ask: "*Who am I without my name?*" Again wait for some response to occur. Repeat this procedure for several minutes. Try to gently, safely know the area in the moment through your natural senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Dismiss thoughts that interrupt these nature-connected minutes.

Write a paragraph or two below about your experience.

Inspiration



What others have said about special moments with nature

I was out walking in the early morning. All of a sudden I felt very uplifted, more uplifted than I had ever been. I remember I knew timelessness, spacelessness, and lightness. I did not seem to be walking on the Earth ... but ... every flower, every bush, every tree seemed to wear a halo. There was a light emanation around everything and flecks of gold fell like slanted rain through the air ... The most important part was not the phenomena: the important part of it was the realization of the oneness of all creation ...

~The Peace Pilgrim



One day while I was by the brook catching trout, I heard a loud humming of insects above me in the gnarled spreading branches of an old willow tree. It was a beautiful warm spring day, and the sky was bright blue. The tree was covered with yellow pussy willows. Woolly black and rust-colored bumblebees were buzzing here and there. Willow warblers and pied flycatchers were hawking flies. The combination of sights, smells, and sounds gave me a delicious, light-headed feeling. Many years later during my Ph. D. oral exam at UCLA, I was asked why I wanted to study biology. I answered that it was because of what I saw and felt that spring morning in the Hahnheide. Of course, this was an inadequate answer, but I didn't have a better one. How could I explain the Hahnheide and all that led to it, to a group of five no-nonsense professors? Some things cannot be explained in three sentences.

~Berndt Heinrich, In a Patch of Fireweed

Many people remember exactly where they were when that ecstatic feeling of oneness washed over them, and feel a special intimacy with that place. We return to these places, physically or in our minds, for centering, as renewal for our values, and are reminded that, far from being alone in a sick and evil world, we are beloved by a divine and beautiful one.

~Nancy Wisser

I feel an indescribable ecstasy and delirium in melting, as it were, into the system of being, in identifying myself with the whole of nature.

~J J Rousseau

How well I know that rapture that comes sometimes when one is alone. I think perhaps it is the greatest joy of all. If only it would stay - if only one might live like that, always. I sometimes think that if one were well there is no reason why it should ever go. But that is nonsense. The feeling I mean is ... it's as though the barriers were down and you stepped into another world where even the silence lives and you are accepted, you are received as part of everything. Nothing is hidden. And there is that precious sense of awareness.

~Katherine Mansfield



It is a period I remember vividly, not only because I was beginning to accomplish something at last, but also because of the delight I felt in being completely by myself. For those who love to be alone with nature I need add nothing further; for those who do not, no words of mine could ever convey, even in part, the almost mystical awareness of beauty and eternity that accompanies certain treasured moments. And, though the beauty was always there, those moments came upon me unaware...

~Jane Goodall, *Shadow of Man*

When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye.

I turned to look but it was gone
I cannot put my finger on it now...

~Pink Floyd, *Comfortably Numb*



For many, their spiritual or mystical experience seemed to be of supreme importance, but they were unable to discuss it with their families and friends for fear of ridicule or being thought mentally unbalanced. This research has revealed in fact that there is a widespread taboo in our society against admitting to such experience....

If nature is inanimate, then experience of a mystical connection with a living presence or power in nature must be illusory, and so it is best not to pay too much attention to it lest it have an unbalancing effect on the rational mind. But if nature is alive, such an experience of a living connection may be just what it seems to be.

~Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature*

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

~Willa Cather, My Antonia



Sometimes he would take me out into the woods on that farm and we would walk. There is a special kind of shadow that happens in deep woods that are old and have been left undisturbed. Underneath the canopy of ancient hardwood trees the greens are deeper, the soil blacker, the smells richer. And there is a shadow that is over everything, calling out that there is a deeper world than the human of which we are a part. Something came out of that place and entered my body. I felt more whole, more human, more loved, more a part of the world. And in some indefinable way I knew who I was.

~Stephen Harrod Buhner, Lost Language of Plants

Whether you are aware of them or not, whether you recognize them as spiritual or not, you probably have had the experiences of silence, or transcendence, or the Divine – a few seconds, a few minutes that seem out of time; a moment when the ordinary looks beautiful, glowing; a deep sense of being at peace, feeling happy for no reason. When these experiences come...believe in them. They reflect your true nature.

~Ravi Shankar

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.

~Virginia Woolf

I did however used to think, you know, in the woods walking, and as a kid playing in the woods, that there was a kind of immanence there – that woods, a place of order, had a sense, a kind of presence, that you could feel; that there was something peculiarly, physically present, a feeling of place almost conscious.... like God. It evoked that.

~Robert Creeley



Suggestion: What is your earliest memory of nature? Can you recall the place, the time of year, and who was with you? What sensory experiences do you recall? Was it a positive experience? If the first experience that comes to mind is not positive, search for a positive one. Write it down. Recall it as vividly as possible. It will serve as a touchstone for renewal for your entire life.

~James A. Swan, Nature as Teacher and Healer

Coming up from the Land:

Receiving the Speech of the Spirits

by Nancy A. Wisser

"You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough--even white people--the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them."

~ Crow Elder, as quoted by poet and writer Gary Snyder

Eleven years ago or so, I was seated by a ceremonial fire in the back yard of a small property in Norristown Pennsylvania, there by invitation of friends who were members of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania. During a break in the proceedings, the young woman seated next to me asked how I came to be there, and I told her the following story.

Some months before, the editor of a local magazine had called to ask me to write an article on the Lenape people, the indigenous people of the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, her magazine's coverage area. I said no. I was a nature writer and never had much interest in history. She insisted. She had writers lined up for a series of articles about the area's past, but no one for the article on the original people, and she was counting on me.

As far as I knew at the time, the Lenape people no longer existed, or maybe a few were out west somewhere. I figured this would be an easy write--read a few books, maybe visit a historical society or two and rewrite what I found--and the deadline she asked for was far off, so I finally said yes.

Trying to spice up what otherwise looked to be yet another grim recounting of injustices like gifts of diseased blankets and the notorious Walking Purchase, I went online and poked around, leaving questions on a few pages; then I went to the library to begin reading through histories and old texts.

A few days later, to my surprise, I got a call asking me to dinner with two men, Fred Werkheiser and Don Repsher, who

had heard about my questions on the internet and seemed to think they could help with my research. Curious, I agreed, and in the course of the evening was let in on not one but two secrets: First, that our area, which I thought I knew so well, had numerous pre-Columbian stone work sites; and Second, that some Lenape people had remained in their sacred homeland hidden and passing for non-Indians but retaining some of their traditions, right down to today. A group of these people calling themselves the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania had now decided to make their presence public, and I might be among the first to know and write about it!

The next few months were a strange and wonderful era in my life. Enormous amounts of time were spent visiting stone sites and talking with Fred, Don, some of their friends and the Indians. It took me a while to believe these people were Lenape--they did not "look Indian," but my reading had prepared me for that. Early Europeans when they met the Lenape commented on how European they looked.

There had also been a great deal of intermarriage by this point, especially with German families. German men who came here to farm found Lenape women to be excellent mates,



not least because in Lenape society, farming was women's work, and they knew the secrets to cultivating the land here.

In the end it was the way these people thought and spoke that convinced me they had a background and world view different from anyone I knew. I was fascinated and rapidly became absorbed in the things I was learning, as well as enchanted by the brilliant and good-humored people I met. My involvement went past researching the article. I began taking notes for a book.

Still, the article had to be written. After the usual struggle to get it right, I ran it past Fred and the chief, Bob Red Hawk, and with their approval submitted it to the editor. She called and asked me questions, fascinated. She wanted to meet the Lenape. She wanted to see the stone sites. She said it was well written. And--she rejected the article! She had asked for a history and somewhere in the excitement I lost sight of the assignment. I was stunned.

"So," I told the lovely young Lenape woman, "that's how I ended up here today." The editor trusted me to write the article. The Lenape Nation trusted me to get the word out. I went through months of intensive learning and involvement, but in the end the article, which was the sole reason I went through all that in the first place, was not published. I experienced the anguish anew, just saying it.

The young woman looked at me and laughed as if I'd told her a long joke. "That's great!" she said



It was not the reaction I expected, but I was familiar enough with this way of thinking to get the implication. She was admiring the wonderful round-about way that Spirit had used to involve me with the Lenape and the stone work for some purpose or purposes yet to be revealed: admiring the brilliant maneuver by Life, that crazy trickster. I wasn't ready to see it that way, but for a moment I wondered what that purpose could possibly be.

After that, for reasons mostly my fault, I lost touch with the people of the Lenape Nation and the others whose company I'd enjoyed. My way of seeing things was changed past the point of no return, however, and one idea in particular, formed from

parts of that experience, kept turning over in my mind. Once early on, as I returned from some sacred sites with a group, I talked with an outgoing young man, member of the Lenape Nation, about environmental issues, with which I had been involved prior to the assignment. He said they believed that people who work for the earth, no matter what their lineage, had been recruited by the earth--that the spirits had spoken to them.

Recruited by the earth

The Lenape I met were intelligent, down-to-earth people. While they didn't make a great show of talking about spirits or talk about them often, when they did mention them they spoke as if they were talking about cars or trees or people they knew--very matter-of-fact, the way you talk about something real, not something dreamy or mystical. I didn't understand how such sensible people could talk that way about something flaky like spirits, and now here was this recruitment-by-the-earth business. How would that work? It seemed crazy, completely out of character. I put it aside, but I didn't forget it.

Another piece of the puzzle came through Fred. His interest in the stonework, which was how he met the Lenape, was originally shared by a friend of his, Mark. They visited and were fascinated by stone sites in New England, at first thinking, as most interested people did then, that they were built by



Europeans visiting long before Columbus. At some point, though, Mark and then Fred read a book making the case that not only had Indians built the sites, but also some were still using them for ceremony.

Fred ran the risk of being considered a crackpot by some, but Mark, an archaeologist by profession, was subject to open contempt, rejection and derision from colleagues for his insistence on pointing out the stone sites, which supposedly didn't exist, and asserting their pre-Columbian indigenous origins. It



Pre-Columbian Stonework at the Oley Hills site in Berks County, Pennsylvania

didn't keep him from talking about it, but the criticism and disrespect may have taken its toll. He died young, before the Lenape and I met Fred, and never saw his views vindicated.

Mark's strength and courage in the face of mockery inspired Fred to pursue the topic. We had all heard Fred talk about Mark and knew he had been a brave man of vision. Intrigued by Fred's stories, I asked to read Mark's unpublished novel, which of course included his thoughts about the stone sites.

In the novel there is a passage in which Alan, the main character, obviously modeled on Mark himself, flashes back to

a wonderful childhood moment alone in nature, a moment that although wordless, felt like some kind of speech. The woman the character was with had also experienced a moment that in memory seemed like being spoken to.

"And what did it say to you?" [Alan asked.]

"It was like a happy thing, a celebration-that we live forever within a connection. With the ones we love. Forever. Always forever."

The Alan character called the impact of these moments "language in memory" and he believed that the stone sites were built as a written version, an expression, of that blissful experience.

It sounds far out and mystical, but the thing was, I knew the moments he meant. I had had one, too. When I was a girl, maybe six years old, I

had a moment of bliss

that in memory some-

how resembled speech,

and in which I, too, received a certainty that I was connected to everything and we would all live forever. The wheels in my head started turning: recruitment by the earth, the casual talk of spirits, and now this. I felt like I was following bread crumbs but I didn't know where they were leading.

"Language in memory"

At that point I was still working on the article, so the next time I was on the phone with the chief to ask a few questions for it, I also asked whether, in the case of someone like Mark, who loved nature and had so much courage and vision, the chief would say that spirits had spoken to him. Chief Bob said, "Yes". When I got off the phone I was elated.

The idea was alien to my way of seeing the world, so it came together slowly. What if the childhood moments that both Mark and I had were the recruitment by the earth that the young Lenape man had mentioned? What if that sense of having been spoken to, that "language in memory", was what they meant by the spirits speaking? That would mean... (Something in me didn't want to go to where this sentence ends)... that would mean that what they meant when they used the word spirits was something real in my life, too.

Not only was my childhood timeless moment something real, but also as I thought about it, I realized that it had played

a huge part in making me who I was. It had remained alive in me and like an inner guidance system, affected my likes and dislikes, my aspirations and, at times, my despair. I had never thought about it before, but that childhood reverie, that experience of unity and eternity, was one of the most influential incidents in my life.

I dropped the idea at the time, but after parting ways with the group, I got curious. If Mark and I had these moments, how many other people had? Were the interests Mark and I had in common, like poetry, spirituality, nature, the land, and a fascination with non-Western cultures, common to other people who had them? My first break came when I happened on a quotation from the writings of Catholic priest and



environmentalist Father Thomas Berry, describing just such a moment from his childhood and mentioning its lifelong effects. One paragraph read:

*Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life. (Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*.)*

I was moved to find something that was such a good match to the ideas I was exploring. Searching for similar accounts from the early years of famous people, especially those who seemed to fit the mold--poets, environmentalists, artists, scientists, and nature writers, I quickly found many, including writer Virginia Woolf, chemist Albert Hoffman, biologist Berndt Heinrich, poet AE Russell, musician John Lennon, and many others.

I was also intrigued to realize that I could often see the signs in people when I met them, although I found that the question to ask was whether they had spent much time alone in nature when they were children. Many did not at first recall the moment or recognize my description as matching it. In one instance, I was sure a friend had experienced such a moment but he said he hadn't. When I saw him months later he was eager to tell me that he had since recalled it. After our conversation, a memory had surfaced, and then more--he'd had several. He was more surprised than I was.

This ability to spot people who had the experience reminded me of an incident from my time with the Lenape. I knew some of them had done vision quest, and it occurred to me to ask whether one man whose attitudes and manner seemed very different from the others who had done vision quests. He had not.

Could these childhood experiences be like vision quests in some ways--vision quests happening by accident to people who were not seeking them? I remembered reading in an early

observation by a European of the Lenape vision quest tradition that relatives of a young person about to go on a vision quest would sometimes feign neglect and abuse of the child because it was believed that the spirits took pity on abused or neglected children and came to them more quickly.

I knew that Mark suffered serious abuse as a boy--one family member even tried to drown him. I was not abused, but my parents' disintegrating marriage, an older brother who liked to hit me, and my parents' perception that I was mentally challenged and unable to understand them meant that I spent a lot of time alone, much of it outside. Maybe the experiences we had were like the raw material from which the technology of the vision quest was developed.

This thinking was far from ways we had been taught to see the world. It seemed to me that it was important for people to know about. If I had been taught what that moment was when I was a child, and what effects it might have, would I have struggled less with feelings of isolation and with clinical depression when I got older? Would I have felt less odd and ashamed when my strong urge to be with nature interfered with things other people wanted for me? Right now are there other girls and young women, and boys and young men, who could have happier lives if they knew what I now know?



Questions like this and others related to the topic drive me to learn more and reach out to express the ideas I stumbled upon. I wonder, do animals and plants have these experiences, too? Does it connect the living things in an area and make possible those stories we often hear about unusual bird behaviors people see, for example, after the death of a loved one? And was Mark right--are some ceremonial stone sites in our area and beyond built to express or mark the places of these or similar spirit experiences?

The moments also have something to do with place. In every instance when people recounted their experiences, they remembered, even five decades later as in my case, the exact spots where childhood moments of bliss and ecstasy descended on them. Many seem to have their perception of all places modified, almost to a kind of personification.

I can turn the idea of these moments over and keep finding new learning and purpose for the rest of my life. As I research and write about the topic, my problems with clinical depression have almost completely dissipated.

I don't know whether that local magazine ever ran a historical article about the Lenape. I do know that the Lenape Nation contributed to and was featured in an exhibit at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and they now have a cultural center of their own, so I guess they managed to get the word out without me.



It certainly seems that the young woman by the fire that night in Norristown was wise beyond her years. The crazy set of circumstances that opened my mind, broke my heart, and turned my life in new directions--I guess it was great after all!



Resources

BOOKS

*Cohen, Michael, **Reconnecting with Nature.*** Ecopress, Lakeville, MN. 2007. Eco Press / 8075 215th Street West / Lakeville MN 55044-9146. (800) 326-9272. www.finneyco.com.

The activities at the beginning of the booklet you are reading right now are from Cohen's book. In *Reconnecting with Nature*, he offers a much more complete series of activities that help you learn to tune in to nature. Highly recommended.



*Cowan, Eliot, **Plant Spirit Medicine.*** Swan • Raven & Company. Columbus, NC. 2005.

This book is both a fascinating story and also a unique view of what our relationship to plants can be. Based on the authors study with the Huichol Indians and his own clinical practice in the US, it describes a deeper and more relational approach to working with plants for herbal healing.

*Seed, John, **Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings.*** New Catalyst Books, BC, Canada. 2007.

A short collection of writings from the Deep Ecology movement. Mixing essays, activities, and art, the book offers the perspective that we are part of a web of life. It provides instructions for holding a Council of All Beings, a group workshop that seeks to heal the pain we suffer because of our separation from nature and the our response to witnessing to the damage done to nature.

ON THE INTERNET

*Daucus, Sasha, **The Golden Light Center facebook page.***

<http://www.facebook.com/thegoldenlightcenter>

Photos and discussion to help you tune into whatever is currently going on outside. Come ask questions, post comments and photos about your own experiences.

*Erickson, Sheryl, **Powers of Place Initiative.***

<http://www.powersofplace.com>

Initiative believes places are alive, and that working toward right relationship between people and the places where they gather and inhabit is part of what the world needs at this moment in history.

*Hardin, Jesse Wolf, **Kindred Spirits: Up Close with Our Plant & Animal Teachers.***

<http://www.creationsmagazine.com/articles/C89/Hardin.html>

Focusing on the details of a particular natural area -- the microcosm-- can reconnect us with the whole.

Mathews, Freya, On Desiring Nature.

http://earthsong.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/on-desiring-nature.IJE_.pdf

Indian Journal of Ecocriticism 3, 2010.

Mathews puts forward the idea that true sustainability will be achieved when humans evolve systems of value and meaning based on respectful communications with nature. These communications, she believes, will often take place through synchronicities and be articulated through evocative and poetic language.

Wisser, Nancy, Geopysch Tumblr blog.

<http://geopysch.tumblr.com>

Photographs, reflections, and quotations about the living earth.

Wisser, Nancy, This Moment Returns to Me: Childhood Reverie and a Lenape Idea of Recruitment by the Earth.

<http://arrow.monash.edu.au/hdl/1959.1/523005>

PAN, Philosophy Activism Nature, No. 8, 2011, pp. 57-66.

This article is a longer version of Nancy's essay published in the booklet you are reading right now.



About

Sasha Daucus is an herbalist and energy healer. She has worked in her own herbal and healing business, Golden Light Center, located in the Missouri Ozarks, since 1984. She teaches classes and does private healing consultations; and is the author of *A Spring Guide to Field Herbalism*, and *Favorite Herbs for Common Health Problems*.

Recently she has been moved to go back to the beginnings of her inspiration: deep moments of happy connection to nature.

Nancy A. Wisser is an editor and nature journalist. She has a particular interest in relationships between people and land, and the raw natural experiences from which spiritual technologies like vision quest and shamanism developed. She lives in Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

Recently she was named Administrative Assistant to the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania and she is pretty pleased about it. She has plenty more stories to tell.



