

# **NATURE AS TEACHER**

**CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS IN THE NATURAL WORLD**

**30 NATURE-BASED PRACTICES FOR DEEPENING WELL-BEING**

**JILL WARDELL**



## **AN INVITATION TO RETURN...**

There was a time in human history when each of us was alive and awake to both the beauty *and* the wisdom of the natural world. A time of awareness where we intuited that what was happening 'outside' was also happening 'inside' each of us. A time when nature was our teacher. The following practices invite you to return and rekindle this inner knowing for the sake of your own well-being, for the sake of our planet and for future generations to come who will inhabit it.

# PRINCIPLES OF MINDFULNESS



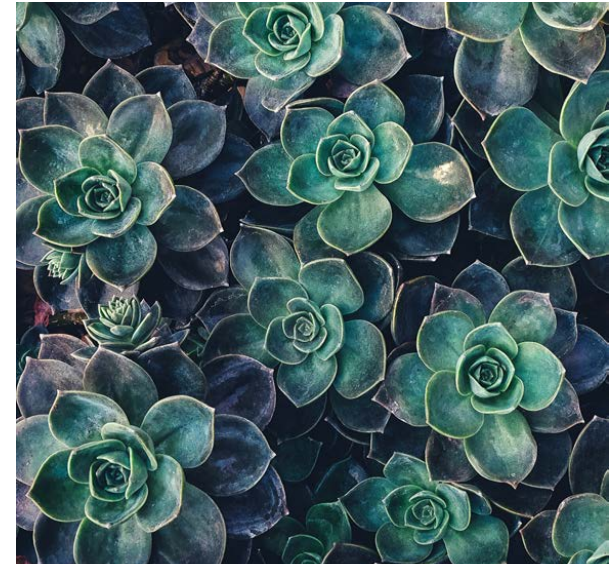
## **AWARENESS**

Paying attention to our attention - how and what we notice



## **NON-JUDGMENT**

Our ability to accept experiences as they are without evaluation or judgment



## **PEACEFULNESS**

Our ability to cultivate a state of peacefulness and equanimity amidst changing conditions

*Pay attention to these principles as you go through the following exercises, bringing with you a sense of wakefulness, appreciation, and wonder to each experience.*

## QUOTE

**"Ten thousand flowers in  
spring, the moon in autumn.  
A cool breeze in summer,  
snow in winter. If your mind  
isn't clouded by unnecessary  
things, this is the best season  
of your life."**

# 30 NATURE-BASED MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

## **01. BEGIN WHERE YOU ARE**

Let go of needing the perfect outdoor setting to explore. Venture out and explore your existing natural environment. Where is beauty present here?

## **02. SEE WITH FRESH EYES**

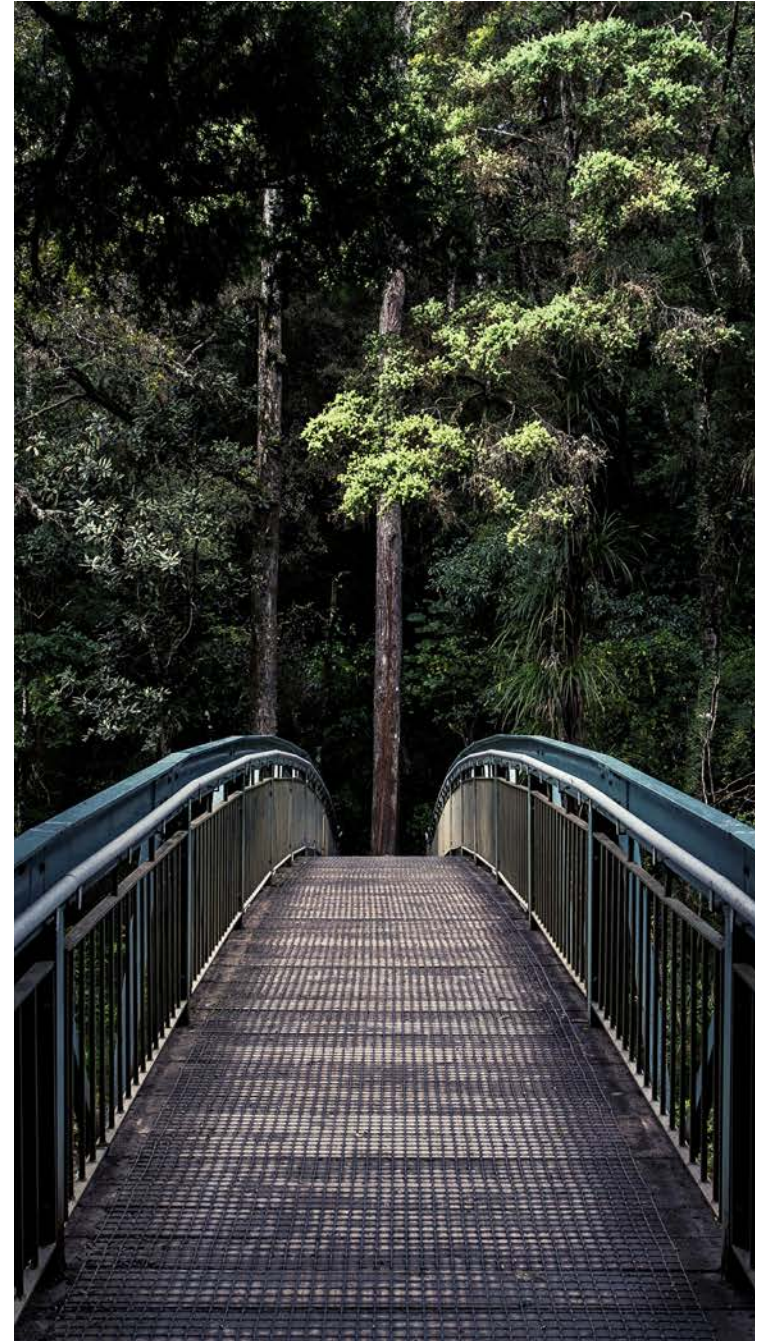
Frequent a spot in nature that is familiar but this time see it with fresh eyes, as if for the first time. What is new that you haven't seen before?

## **03. PEBBLE PRESENCE**

Pay attention to stones that cross your path. Find one that speaks to you and bring it with you on your journey. When you find yourself drifting from being present on your walk, use your pebble as a guide, a literal touch stone to return to the present moment.

## **04. SAVORING RAIN**

Take a walk in the rain and take in the full sensory experience through your five senses. Instead of bracing against it, let yourself enjoy the freshness of this experience.





## **05. LET CURIOSITY BE YOUR GUIDE**

Instead of setting out with an agenda, follow the impulse of your curiosity. What naturally interests you? Are you compelled to stop and touch a tree, observe a flower, bow to a stone. Notice and follow what is beckoning to you, calling for your attention.

## **06. BE WATER, MY FRIEND**

Observe a body of water. Pay attention to the formless aspect of water and how it changes depending on the form or container its in. What do you see? Notice where these qualities are present in you.

## **07. OBSERVE UNFOLDING**

Find a flower that is in the process of unfolding. What do you notice? What enables this experience to occur? Pay attention to the places in your life where you are unfolding. What might you learn from the flower?

## **08. APPRECIATING OUR ELDERS**

Go for a walk in a mature forest and contemplate how many years our elders - the trees and rocks in particular - have on us. What might they have seen over the years? What might we learn about resilience and wisdom from them?

## **09. BRING NATURE IN**

Create a terrarium in your house comprised of native plants and materials from your walks. Allow this to be a daily reminder to appreciate and savor nature and the wildness both within and without.



## POEM: LOST

A Native American Elder was asked,  
*"What shall we do if we get lost?"*

**Stand still. The trees before you and the bushes beside you  
are not lost.**

**Wherever you are is a place called here,  
and you must treat it as a powerful stranger  
both asking to know and be known.**

**Listen. The forest whispers,  
*"I have made this place, you can leave and return once again saying,  
here."***

**No two trees are the same to Raven,  
no two branches the same to Wren.**

**If what a tree or a branch does is lost on you, then you are truly lost.**

**Stand still. Listen.**

**The forest knows where you are.**

**Let it find you.**



## **10. FLOWER FOCUS**

Take time to observe a flower. Explore this being through your senses...scent, color, shape, texture, feel. Pay attention to your emotions as you do this.

## **11. SKY GAZING**

Choose a location where you can view an unobstructed sky. Laying on your back, let go of all thoughts, allowing them to evaporate and move out of awareness like clouds. Encourage your awareness to merge with the sky. Notice the open, expansive state of being that gets cultivated as a result.

## **12. MINDFUL EARTH WALKING**

Practice mindful walking barefoot. Walking slowly, pay attention to each isolated movement of the foot: lifting, moving forward, placing, shifting, lifting, etc.

## **13. EARTH IMMERSION**

Lift a hand full of soil from the ground. Let the earth run between your fingers, feeling the texture, smelling the scent. Think of all of the soil on our planet and how it provides the ground to sustain life for all beings everywhere.



**POEM: THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS**

**When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives  
may be**

**I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great  
heron feeds.**

**I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.**

**And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For the time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.**

## 14. SYMPHONY OF SOUND

Find a place to sit, close your eyes, and observe the sounds of nature just as you would your breath. Allow each sound to come in and out of your field of awareness without judgment. What particular type of symphony do you hear in this moment?

## 15. FULL SPECTRUM COLOR

Make it your quest to observe all of the colors of nature - trees, plants, rocks, animals, water, etc. How many shades of each color do you see?

## 16. INSPIRATION THROUGH POETRY

Heighten contemplation and appreciation through poetry, either by those listed here or by other nature poets such as Mary Oliver, John Muir, Wendell Berry, etc. Practice seeing the world through their eyes and notice what difference it makes.

## 17. PUT PEN TO PAPER

Invoke your own inner poet. Let yourself be moved by your experience and crystallize it in written form via poetry, haiku, song, etc.

## 18. EXPANDING 'COMMUNITY'

Use the notion of family and community as a lens through which to observe the natural world. Where is community present here? How do trees, plants, rocks communicate, bolster and take care of each other? What insights can be applied to the human domain?



## **AN UTE PRAYER**

**Earth teach me stillness  
as the grasses are stilled with light.**

**Earth teach me suffering  
as the old stones suffer with memory.**

**Earth teach me humility  
as blossoms are humble with beginning.**

**Earth teach me caring  
as the mother who secures her young.**

**Earth teach me courage  
as the tree which stands all alone.**

**Earth teach me limitation  
as the ant which crawls on the ground.**

**Earth teach me freedom  
as the eagle which soars in the sky.**

**Earth teach me resignation  
as the leaves which die in the fall.**

**Earth teach me generation  
as the seed which rises in the spring.**

**Earth teach me to forget myself  
as melted snow forgets its life.**

**Earth teach me kindness  
as dry fields weep with rain.**



## **19. EARTH TEACH ME MEDITATION**

Before heading out for a nature exploration, first spend some time setting your intention. Begin by taking some long deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the nose, feeling your belly expand on the inhalation and contract on the exhalation. Allow your breath to resume to normal. Instead of using your breath as an anchor for attention, this time, you will use a question. Turn inward and silently ask yourself: "What do I need to know most now, in my life?" Allow what arises to arise (e.g., flexibility, understanding, service, connection, etc.) without censorship. Continue to ask the question for the next five minutes, paying attention to any themes that emerge. At the end of your sit, identify a theme that you would like to explore on your walk. As you venture out, hold this intention present, and let nature be your guide. "Earth teach me \_\_\_\_\_." Pay attention to what shows up and record your insights at the conclusion.



## **20. SEED CONTEMPLATION**

Observe a plant with visible seeds. How many possibilities are contained within this single plant? How far might each seed travel and what is the potential impact? What seeds of possibility lie within you waiting to be shared with a hungry world?

## **21. NATURAL STILL LIFE**

Find a spot with some sandy earth. Using only what you can find (e.g., twigs, stones), 'paint' the scene in front of you in the earth, exactly as it is in this moment.

## **22. TREE COMMUNION**

Use your intuition to find a tree that feels special to you and spend time observing and appreciating its:

- physical characteristics (perceived age, roots, trunk/limbs, leaves, etc.)
- uniqueness and personal character (what is special about it?)
- wisdom (what does this particular tree have to teach you?)

Listen for any messages meant for you.

## **23. TEA CEREMONY**

Bring along a thermos of hot water and herbal tea for a tea ceremony. As you drink the tea, contemplate and give thanks for all of the elements of the earth that are represented in the tea, including the humans who sourced, transported, and prepared the tea for you to enjoy.

## **POEM: THE SUMMER DAY**

**Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean the one who is  
eating sugar out of my hand, who is moving  
her jaws back and forth instead of up and down -  
who is gazing around with her enormous  
and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and  
thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall into the grass,  
how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed,  
how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?**

Mary Oliver



## **24. OBSERVING MICRO AND MACRO**

Find a place where you can sit comfortably. Using your senses, alternate shifting your awareness from observing the immediate micro world (forest floor, bugs, etc.) with the expansive macro world (what you can see and hear in the four directions). What similarities and/or differences do you notice?

## **25. OBSERVING STILLNESS AND ACTIVITY**

Similarly to the previous exercise, this time, alternate your awareness between observing stillness and activity. Spend five minutes noticing each and the relationship between them. What do you observe?

## **26. CIRCLE OF LIFE APPRECIATION**

On your walk, observe your experience with an appreciation for the circle of life. Pay attention to the qualities present in birth, youth, adulthood, old age, and death. Where are these qualities present in nature? What can you appreciate about each stage?

## **27. PEACE WITH CHANGE**

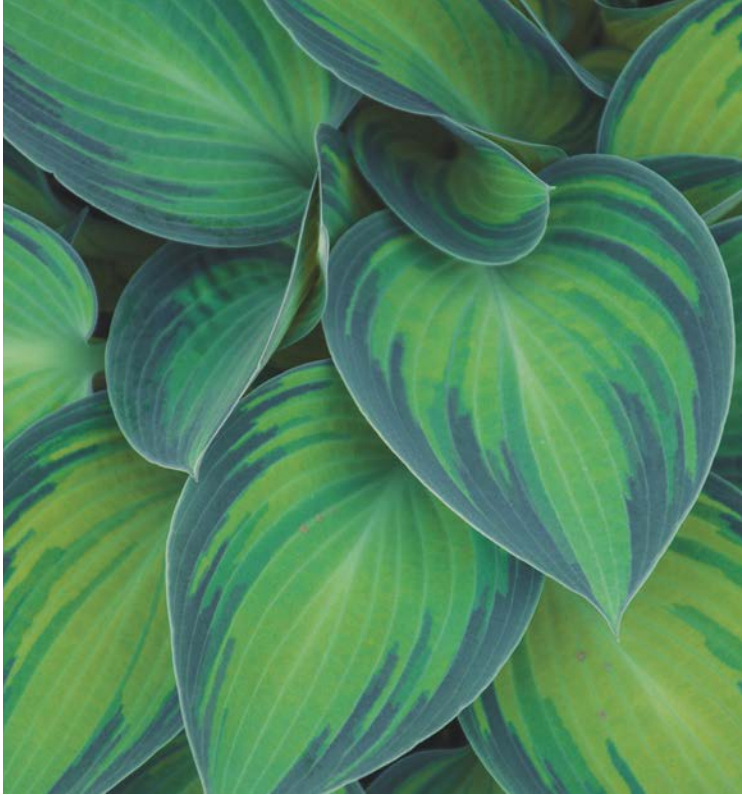
Look at how nature operates through the lens of change. We humans have a hard time with change and yet change is all there is. Observe directly... what lessons does nature have to teach us here?

**POEM: EARTH, I THANK YOU**

**Earth, I thank you  
for the pleasure of your language  
You've had a hard time  
bringing it to me  
from the ground  
to grunt thru the noun  
To all the way  
feeling seeing smelling touching  
—awareness  
I am here!**

Anne Spencer





## **28. CULTIVATE SEVEN GENERATION TIME**

This practice is that many Native American tribes have used to convey respect for and protect all life on earth. When we cultivate seven generation time, we take a step outside of ourselves, our needs and wants in the moment, and instead view all of our decisions in light of how they will impact the next seven generations. This practice increases our accountability and responsibility for caring for that which we control in our daily lives. Begin small by taking action in your daily life through reducing, reusing, and recycling, growing your own vegetables, considering utilizing solar or wind energy, taking public transportation, and/or purchasing hybrid or electric vehicles, etc.

## **29. WALK GENTLY AND APPRECIATE**

As you go through your day-to-day life, remember that you are always on the earth, no matter where you are. Extend the same gratitude and appreciation that you have being on a nature trail to every space you're in, regardless of how little or how much nature seems to be present. Know that everything that has been created has its root in something that came from the earth.

## **30. BEFRIEND AND TEND**

Move from simply witnessing and appreciating nature at a distance to seeing yourself and acting as an enduring friend, one who will do their part to protect and tend to preserving nature's bounty for future generations to come. It matters!



## QUOTE

**"By accepting responsibility, we take effective steps toward our goal: an inclusive human society on a habitable planet, a society that works for all humans and nonhumans. By accepting responsibility, we move closer to creating a world that works for all."**

Sharif Abdullah



# CONTINUING ON THE PATH...

**Thomas Berry: The Great Work and The Sacred Universe**

**Sharif Abdullah: Creating a World That Works for All**

**Joanna Macy: World as Lover, World as Self**

**M. Amos Clifford: Your Guide to Forest Bathing**

**Cheryl Strayed: Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail**

**Peter Wohlleben: The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate -- Discoveries From a Secret World**



# THANK YOU!

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For additional information & programming, contact Jill Wardell at [jwardell@umbc.edu](mailto:jwardell@umbc.edu).