



Connecting with Nature:

**A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the
Natural World**

A Self-Directed Programme

Tim Wakfer

**Connecting with Nature:
A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World
A Self-Directed Programme**

Tim Wakfer (C) 2023

www.connectwithnature.ca

This self-directed programme was developed as part of a Major Research Project in partial fulfilment of a Master's of Arts degree in Environmental Education and Communications at Royal Roads University, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

All the images are from the author

Connecting with Nature: A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World

Background - 2

What is this programme about?
What will you need to bring?
What are the benefits of connecting with nature?
What is meant by connection?

The Programme - 6

Step 1 - Discovery

Step 2 - Greeting

Step 3 - Meditation and Contemplation

Step 4 - Activities

Deliberate Walk
Giving Gifts
Creating Gifts
Accepting Gifts
Creative Writing
Capturing Images

Step 5 - Gratitude

Closing - 14

Acknowledgments and Credits - 15

Further Reading - 16



Background

What is it about?

This self-directed programme is designed to provide you with a framework for exploring your own connection within the natural world with the idea that through exploring this connection you will find a deeper meaning in it. The natural world is all around us and we are, in fact, also part of the wider natural world and not separate from it. However, society has been, over the past several hundred years, moving away from a sense of connection with the rest of the natural world towards a sense of separation from it. This programme will hopefully help you to return to and deepen this sense of connection.



The programme consists of a number of stages designed to help you build a relationship with a spot. This relationship will help you to foster your connection to not only that spot but the wider natural world and can be repeated in different locations over time. The opening stages are intended for you to slow down and create a relationship, one that is based on respect and reciprocity. The middle stages are a series of activities for you to choose from to help explore the spot and surrounding area so that you can deepen your relationship with it. The final stage is intended for you to pause and reflect on your new relationship and feel a sense of gratitude for your time together.



What Will I Need to Bring?

As this programme takes place outdoors, you will need the usual items for outside adventure (appropriate clothing for the weather and season, sturdy footwear, and so on).

Additionally, you will need to bring:

- A notebook or journal to record your journey,
- Pens and/or pencils, and
- A pad, yoga mat, blanket or camp chair to sit on.

Depending on the activities you choose to practice, you should also bring

- Camera or smart phone,
- Artist pencils, colour pencils, watercolour pencils, etc.,
- Watercolour paints, brushes, and water,
- Sketchbook or watercolour paper, and/or



What Are the Benefits of Connecting With Nature?

Physical Health

Being out and connecting with nature benefits for your physical health. Often this involves various forms of recreation and exercise and studies have shown that, beyond the effects of exercise, being exposed to the natural world can benefit other aspects of your physical health, such as reducing the impacts of respiratory illnesses. The practice of Forest Bathing or Forest Therapy (*Shinrin-Yoku*), that began in Japan, involves a series of activities that focus, amongst other things, on you breathing in the forest air to help improve your overall physical health. There is also a movement amongst some physicians in Canada to write their patients a prescription to get outside and into the natural world to help them improve their physical health.

Mental Health

Connecting with nature can also have a benefit on your mental health and well-being. Studies have shown that when you are connected with nature, your mood can be boosted and you are happier. Other studies have shown that when you are connected with nature, you can experience an increase in emotional functioning and a decrease in mental distress, including the impact of depression and anxiety. While any exposure to the natural world would be beneficial to your mental health, a deeper connection is achieved by slowing down and taking the time to build a relationship with nature and will have a greater impact on your overall health, both physical and mental.

Spiritual Health

Regardless of your religious or spiritual beliefs, by embarking on a journey to explore and foster a deeper connection with the natural world, you will move from a sense of being *with* nature, as if nature is your friend but still separate from you, to one of being *within* nature, connected to and of it and that you are a part of the whole of the natural world. In this way, you see the experiences of other members of the natural world through your mind's eye and share in them.



What is Meant by “Connection”?

A connection with the natural world is built on the foundation of a relationship and for the deeper connection we are looking for here, it must be two-way. It will be based on, as the ecologist and philosopher David Abram calls it, reciprocity. In his work, “The Spell of the Sensuous”, he explains this sense of reciprocity when describing a walk in the woods as:

“...such is the transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us”

However, to truly foster a deeper connection with the whole of the natural world requires you to expand your idea of what is “living”. Beyond the immediate understanding of seeing animals, insects, fish and other ambulatory beings as living, beyond even seeing plants, trees, fungus and other more stationary beings as living, the expanded viewpoint of seeing the rocks, soil, water and other similar objects as animate, living beings is key to fostering a deeper connection. This sense of connection with the whole of the natural world is best explained by the naturalist, poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau in his seminal work “Walden”:

“The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit – not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic.”

So gather your items, look for a spot for you to explore, and begin your journey to find a deeper connection within the natural world.



The Programme

Now that you have your things together to start your journey fostering a deeper connection within the natural world, its time to look at how to achieve it. This is not meant to be a prescriptive step-by-step programme with all your activities neatly planned out, but rather a series of open-ended steps with activities for you to choose from that suit your interests. Even within these activities, it is not my intent for you follow them “to the letter”, but rather, to use them as a guide to spark ideas within you. Also, the level that you will feel a sense of connection will vary each time you enter into your relationship with the rest of the natural world. Do not be alarmed or discouraged if you can only sense a cursory or shallow connection on some of your journeys, we all experience differing levels of connection over time with all of our relationships, and this one is no exception.

So take a deep breath, open your heart and mind, and begin your journey to fostering a deeper connection within the natural world. Perhaps you will be surprised and pleased where it takes you.

Step 1 - Discovery

The first step in your journey is, as you might assume, to get outside. Find a trail, path, or area to explore and once there, slow down. This is the important part; if you try explore it too fast, you will miss the small details that are calling you. At other times, activities such as brisk walks, running, biking, and so on are good for health and mind, but they will limit the deep connection that you are trying to achieve here.

The instructions for this step are really very simple:

- 🌿 *Slowly become aware of the small and subtle details of an area that interests you;*
- 🌿 *Eventually come to rest at a spot that is inviting and comfortable;*
- 🌿 *Approach your spot with curiosity and desire, as you would a new friend.*



Step 2 - Greeting

As you quietly approach your new friend, remember that you are now in their home, perhaps their living room or kitchen. Although they seem inviting, do not assume that you can walk in and sit down. You must, as you would with any new friend, ask if now is a good time to spend with them. In approaching your new friend, notice the small details often missed, its size, its age, its health, its surrounding family, and so on.

How you approach and greet your new friend can be very simple on the surface, but it can be a very powerful way to begin your new relationship that will lead to a deeper connection with, not only your friend, but the whole of the natural world. For me, the steps I follow typically involve:

- 🌿 *Before you do anything, once you have approached your new friend, such as a large and wise tree, ask it if you can sit with it;*
- 🌿 *If you sense that it is receptive to spending time with you, reach out and touch the surface; notice its texture, hardness, and other sensations. This is the first step in building your reciprocal relationship together;*
- 🌿 *Lean into your new friend, place your head on it and feel the energy, yours and theirs, pass between the two of you. Hold this for a few minutes, a true relationship can not be rushed;*
- 🌿 *With your hand still on your new friend, ask it about it's life, it's family, how it's doing and other questions as you get to know it. Do this for as long as you like, until you can get a sense of your friend's life;*
- 🌿 *Now you are feeling comfortable with each other, settle in, unpack and get ready.*

Once you have settled in, open your journal, and reflect on your initial thoughts of your new friend and your relationship. What is its life like? What are its struggles and challenges? What are its joys and successes? You will be getting into these in more depth during the next step, so just keep your reflections here an initial thought.



Step 3 - Meditation and Contemplation

Now that you and your friend have gotten to know a little about each other, find a comfortable spot to sit near it, this can either on a blanket or mat or in a camp chair. In this step you will taking the time to pay attention to your soundings as well as yourself, looking outward and inward. Take your time with this step as it can both help foster your connection within the natural world and to heal your mind and spirit by an inward reflection and grounding. As with each step in this programme there are many ways to achieve this inward and outward healing, however, a typical practice to follow might involve:

- ✻ *Sitting on the ground or in your chair, slowly breath in and out and pay attention to your breaths to help you focus inwardly and slow down your rhythm. If you find your mind bringing to wonder off, focus again on your breaths entering and leaving your body. Continue this for about five to ten minutes;*
- ✻ *Listening deeply to sounds around you, both human and other-than-human. What do you hear? Is the human world intruding into the soundscape? If you can hear the sound of other human activity, use your mind's eye and imagine what it is like for your friend and the others around it. How, do you imagine, they are feeling? Record the sounds you perceived and what you imagine it is like for your friend;*
- ✻ *Contemplating further thoughts and ideas and record them in your journal. Some idea prompts might be:*

What is your friend experiencing with you being here?

What has it seen of us?

What life experiences has it had, such as storms, drought, neighbours, death, and so on?

The purpose of this step is to deepen your relationship with your friend by trying to develop a sense of empathy with it through seeing the world through its eyes. The poet, playwright and scientist Johann von Goethe imaginately perceived the life of a plant when he wrote "The Metamorphosis of Plants" in 1790 where he not only wrote about (and sketched) the physical structure of the plants he was studying, but also imagined the life of them from seed, to plant, to flower, and then back to seed.



Step 4 - Activities

As your connection with your friend deepens, it's now time to explore the world around it through a number of activities. Below is a list of activities to choose from. Review the list and try two or three that match your interests and talents. Each time you go out to foster your deeper connection, try a different activity or develop one of your own. The point with this stage is to explore the wider area through different senses and to understand your relationship with it. Remember, as with the other stages, to record your observations, thoughts and emotions in your journal.

Deliberate Walk

A deliberate walk involves taking a slow and meandering walk through the trees or grasses, and using your sense of touch, smell and taste to experience the world deeper than how one typically experiences it, through your sight.

- 🌿 *Walking with deliberate steps, pay attention to your footsteps. How do they feel as they contact the ground? How does the ground feel under your feet? Can you sense the ground pushing back?*
- 🌿 *Reach out your hands - brush the branches, leaves, bark, tall grasses and so on as you pass. How do they feel? Can you sense them touching you in the same way you touch them?*
- 🌿 *Are there other beings of interest? Perhaps some moss or lichen. Reach down and touch them. How do they feel? Get close - how do they smell? If you are feeling brave - how do they taste? (Only do this if you are sure they are not toxic);*
- 🌿 *Pause and take in deep breaths - through both the mouth and nose. Can you smell anything? Depending on the time of year, this can be tricky, but try a few times. Sometimes it also helps to close your eyes to reduce the visual stimulus.*

As well as helping you to explore the unseen world around your friend, a deliberate walk can also be a form of meditative walking, much like the meditative sitting you did in step 3, only this time focusing more on your footsteps than your breathing.



Giving Gifts

The giving of gifts to your friend and its neighbours is a way deepening your relationship and connection within the natural world. It is a practice of reciprocity by giving from your house to theirs, just as you would when visiting any other friend:

- 🌿 *Bring seeds, nuts or berries, either fresh or dried, from your house (Do not bring any processed foods as they may be harmful);*
- 🌿 *Place small piles of them on tree stumps, rocks, the ground and so on;*
- 🌿 *What does this giving feel like?*



Creating Gifts

Another aspect of giving to your friend is the creation of a gift to leave them. A common gift to build a piece of art from found objects to form a pattern or design and is a way of showing caring and respect for both your friend and its neighbours for spending time with you:

- 🌿 *Explore the area and pick-up small objects such as leaves, branches, cones, flowers (just not too many), stones and so on;*
- 🌿 *Find a location near your friend, preferably flattish;*
- 🌿 *Arrange the found objects to create the mandala as an offering to your friend;*
- 🌿 *How does this creation and offering make you feel?*

When you are done creating, you could either take a picture or make a sketch in your journal of your mandala.

Accepting Gifts

The final aspect of gifts is the gift that your friend or its neighbours can give you for your house, such as offering you some branches or flowers for decoration or fruit, such as berries, to eat (make sure you know it is safe first). When accepting any gifts, always:

- 🌿 *Ask the parent, such as the main plant, if you can have some of its children, such as its fruit or flower, as a gift. If you sense a “no”, do not take the gift;*
- 🌿 *Take only if there are many and only what you need, remembering not to take all the gifts from the same part of the parent;*
- 🌿 *Before you leave, thank the parent for its gift and how much you appreciate it.*



For more information about the *Honourable Harvest*, read “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Creative Writing

In this activity you will be moving beyond a descriptive text of place and features to writing more about your emotions of this place and your friend. It involves seeing the world through your mind’s eye and expressing your ideas in a more creative way. The specific format you use will depend on your comfort with and experience in, a given format. So, pick a format you enjoy working in or, if you are brave, experiment with a format that is new to you that you have always wanted to try; this is your time to play:

- 🌿 *Find a comfortable spot; it can be with your friend or an area around it;*
- 🌿 *Think about that area or your friend and reflect for a while on your relationship with and connection to it;*
- 🌿 *In your journal, write a very short story or a poem about what it is like to be it. Think about its experiences and feelings, its fears and concerns, its hopes and joys;*
- 🌿 *Alternately, your writing can be done in the form of a message from it to either you or to all of us.*

The purpose of this activity is to, using your imagination, put yourself in the mind of your friend or the area around for a wider perspective, and see the world and us through its eyes. Enjoy it, have fun, and, most importantly, play.

Capturing Images

When you take the time to capture an image of any object, you are forced to slow down and notice the small details about it. This slowing down and focusing on the details also helps you to foster your deeper connection within the natural world. As with creative writing, the format you choose is not what is important but it can be either one you are comfortable with or one you are wanting to try and can include:

- ✻ *Taking photographs of your friend, its friends, neighbours, and family as well as the area around it;*
- ✻ *Making sketches, either in your journal or a separate sketch book, in pencil, colour pencil, or other medium you like, of your friend, its friends, neighbours, and family as well as the area around it;*
- ✻ *Creating a painting, watercolour is easiest, of your friend, its friends, neighbours, and family as well as the area around it;*
- ✻ *Taking a rubbing of an interesting surface, such as some tree bark or a rock, using a blank piece of paper and a soft pencil.*

Look around the area, do any objects speak to you in particular. Some ideas of things to focus on might include:

- ✻ *An interesting or appealing texture or pattern in the bark of a tree;*
- ✻ *The interplay of tree roots across the ground;*
- ✻ *An inviting colour or shape of a plant or fungus;*
- ✻ *The grandeur of the trees when viewed from the ground up.*

After completing your sketch or painting or taking your photographs, reflect on the subject of them in your journal. A few prompts to help with this reflection might be; what did you notice about the object or what attracted you to it? You might also reflect on what this says about your relationship with the rest of the natural and how this influences your deeper connection within it.



Step 5 - Gratitude

Before leaving your friend and the area around it, it is important to reflect on your relationship with and connection to the natural world there. Reflect on how grateful you are to have met a new friend and how grateful they are to have met you. As with any relationship, hopefully this is not as much of a “good-bye” as it is a “good-bye for now” with a promise to see each other again. As with the greeting, this is a tender time. After you have packed up everything, except my journal, it is now time to leave your friend’s company, for now:

- 🌿 *Sitting or standing quietly with your friend and reflecting on your relationship and connection with it and how your friend also feels;*
- 🌿 *Reach out and, touching your friend, thank it for sharing its time and its home with you;*
- 🌿 *Take a few moments and record your thoughts, feelings and emotions in your journal;*
- 🌿 *With a final “good-bye for now”, slowly leave taking in the last sounds, sights, smells and feelings of this place, these are your memories that you carry with you on your journey home.*



Closing

I hope this programme has helped on your journey to foster a deeper connection within the natural world. It is important to remember that, on occasion a deeper connection may not be sensed the during the first outing. Do not give up, the fostering of a deeper connection within the natural world is an ongoing practice. Try it again perhaps in other spots, at different times of the day, or even in different seasons. Even after you have experienced a deeper connection within the natural world, you may not always sense it in some of your outings afterwards; you may not be mentally or spiritually ready at that moment to sense it, or the rest of the natural world may not be receptive to connecting with you at that time. This is a reciprocal relationship after all. Just remember, whatever happens is the right thing.

I will leave you with a final thought on the interconnectedness of the forest. As you walk amongst it realize that you are not just walking on a surface of soil and rock, but on a vast and interconnected network of the forest. This network consists of a web of mycelium (tiny hair-like strands) that carry nutrients and messages between the plants of the forest, from trees to flowers to mushrooms, and runs through the soil. So that tree that you befriended does not stand alone, it is interconnected with all the living beings around it, including the soil and rock that you are standing on. It is not a stand alone being living in isolation but connected to all around it. By touching it, sitting with it, and breathing in what it exhales (as well as it breaths in what you exhale), you are now also connected with that world too. You are no longer a casual observer just passing through but are now part of that large and complex interconnected world of the forest. It is a part of you, and you are a part of it.



Acknowledgments and Credits

I would like to acknowledge that the research to develop this self-directed programme was conducted in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. This territory is covered by the *Treaties of Peace and Friendship* which the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) People first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.

I am forever grateful for their ongoing stewardship of the lands and openness to share it with all parties in the spirit of peace and friendship that made research such as this possible.



All of the photographs used in this self-directed programme were taken by me, either on the trails around where I live in Nova Scotia or on the campus of Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia

Further Reading

Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia, Stephan Harding, Green Books (2009)

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Milkweed (2013)

Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred, Victoria Loorz, Broadleaf Books (2021)

Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to “The Work That Reconnects”, Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, New Society Publishers (2014)

Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures, Merlin Sheldrake, Random House (2021)

Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest, Suzanne Simard, Penguin Random House (2021)

Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth, James Lovelock, Oxford University Press (2016)

Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul: Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to What Our Souls Know and Healing the World, John Phillip Newell, HarperOne (1989)

Sacred Nature: Restoring Our Ancient Bond with the Natural World, Karen Armstrong, Alfred A. Knoff (2022)

The Forest Unseen: A Year’s Watch in Nature, David George Haskell, Penguin Books (2012)

The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate, Peter Wohlleben, Greystone Books (2015)

The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World, David Abram, Vintage Books (2017)

To Speak for the Trees: My Life’s Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest, Diana Bersford-Kroeger, Penguin Random House (2019)

Walden: Or, Life in the Woods, Henry David Thoreau, Various publishers

