

# OFF THE LINOLEUM, INTO THE WILD

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*to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.*

from Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native.

On a recent flight from the New and its ugly changes--to be precise, on a

backpacking trip along the Appalachian Trail--a companion asked me, "why are so many pagans wimps about the outdoors?" We had ample time to explore this paradox and how tentative first steps in our own gardens led us to a deeper journey into the Wild and all that it entails. My next two columns will focus on ways that all of us, treading any spiritual path, can deepen our connection to wildness in nature and in ourselves.

The irony of nature-shy pagans is enormous; too often this community celebrates its rites barefoot on linoleum floors. For years I have encouraged those who consider the earth sacred to move their worship and other practices outside, even into the rather tame "wilderness" of our East-Coast National Forests and Parks. If I achieve nothing else in my writing about modern-day pagan practice, I hope to get my fellow spiritual seekers to feel grass beneath their feet as they honor the spirits of Demeter, Pan, Artemis, The Green Man, and other sacred archetypes of the eternal Power that moves in all life.

Getting away from the "conveniences" of our civilization has become as necessary to me as food or water. Trips into the woods re-energize the wild part of my spirit with the Wild. Like art, which feeds me with beauty or shocks me with a creative vision, wilderness has spurred some of my best spiritual work and my best gardening. As readers here know, gardening and spirit are one for me, yet as I have spent more time hiking and canoeing, my definition of "garden" has changed.

As I write this a garden surrounds me, one made by the greatest Gardener of all. Wild Yarrow, Queen Anne's Lace, Wild Mint, ripening blackberries and blueberries are near enough to pick. Clouds chase each other over the mountains, and in the near distance, swallows--their wing-tips as sharp as knife-blades--dip from the air into the woods. How could anyone, after a trip into the Wild, not want to mimic such richness in the back yard, transforming it into a wildlife refuge, thereby shouting a life-affirming "NO!" at the rapine of the earth for short-term profit, the convenience of automobiles, and a landscaping aesthetic that puts conformity ahead of ecological preservation?

In a word, discomfort. It is hard work hauling a 40-pound backpack for miles in the mountains, just as it is hard work driving less, recycling every scrap, using organic methods in the garden when every Roundup commercial bids us to take an easier path. Of course, avoiding deceptively easy trails often leads to a better destination for the soul and the earth. We gain healthier bodies and quieter minds from vigorous outdoor exercise like backpacking (consider the irony of people coming home from a corporate cubicle to run on a "treadmill"). We also create healthier soil and water by organic gardening. There is not enough in our culture to encourage such long views, but we can make a start together.

### **Step One, Knowing Your Garden**

Can you name all of the trees and other plants in your own yard? In your neighbors'? If not, do so by consulting guidebooks like Audubon's. Careful observation throughout the year for each plant--especially those that were present before you arrived--will draw you closer to the *Genius Loci*, or spirit of the place. Watch the fall of light, the presence of animals, make notes, start a journal, mediate on what is visible, and what immanent, in the place you call home.

### **Step Two, Meditating About Discomfort**

What makes you irritable outdoors--sweat? dirt? bugs? What frightens you--snakes? darkness? While I do not advise snake-handling, I do recommend gentler methods for confronting discomfort. For instance, in humid weather go outside in comfortable clothing (or nude, if privacy allows it) with a meditation pillow and drinking water. Just sit in a shady spot for at least a quarter hour. Let the sweat pour and sip your water as you consider what your body is doing, how the plants and animals around you handle the heat, how every slight breeze brings pleasure. Likewise, a night-sit in the garden or woods will reveal sounds and other subtleties of nature you may never have noticed before. If you are in deep woods near bear, hang up your food in a tree and just sit as the darkness changes from a scary unknown to the other half of daylight.

### **Step Three: Blessing Silvanus' Garden**

In *Whole News* one of my first "Sacred Gardening" columns discussed the idea of leaving at least a small corner of the property untouched to let nature do what She would with it. In letting the Wild into my garden like that, I honor the spirit of all such places (Silvanus to ancient Romans; you might prefer a dedication to Diana or St. Francis). To

work with such a space, spend time in the wild part of your land on days special to you. Keep notes of the details you notice--insect behavior, shapes of leaves, color and texture of the soil. For instance, did you know that dandelions can bloom all summer? Ten feet from me, though it is mid-July, one flower is about to shed its fluff. Before writing this, that was a fact I did not know. In such observation, I find inspiration instead of finding reason to grab the herbicide--why *do* so many folks hate dandelions? Try to find a child who hates them.

With such inspiration comes humility and creativity. We become better gardeners when we realize, for instance, that left to their own devices, dandelions would grow, with their edible greenery, on the graves of presidents and paupers alike. The Wild came before us and it will outlast us. It is indifferent--though not consciously hostile--to us and our shining beast of a civilization.

#### **Step Four: Eating Wild Food**

One strong way to reconnect to the land is to have it sustain us directly. While growing enough food to sustain a family is impractical for most people, we can re-establish a symbolic link to the land by growing food in our yards or even on our window-sills. Anyone can grow basil, a tender annual that will produce enough, from a few plants, to supply pesto to the table weekly from July to first frost. Each bite of pesto reminds me to thank forces almost completely beyond my control--wind, rain, sun, and soil--for what they have done to sustain my flesh, bones, and spirit.

Another type of food grows without any intervention by us. For those who tend the land without chemicals, as I have done for nearly a decade, there are edible wild onions to pull every spring, berries to harvest in late summer, dandelion greens to cook or

toss in a salad. I do not pick in neighbors' yards, even though I am certain they would love to have me "pull their weeds"; it is unwise to eat anything "urban" unless we are certain that no pesticides or herbicides have been applied for a long while. What grows in the woods can also kill us, so be wary. I recommend taking a class if you do not have a family background in gathering wild food. Of course, a few easily identified exceptions--wild blackberries and blueberries--make some wild foods very easy to collect indeed. Again, every bite of such delicacies should remind the gourmand that food is not something to take or granted. Our ancestors did not have our massive technological infrastructure to harvest, pack, transport, store, and sell fresh foods in any season.

#### **Step Five: Giving Back to the Wild**

I always walk in the woods with plastic grocery bags: one to collect and recycle aluminum, plastic, and glass, the other for trash. We can all think of similar actions; perhaps a tree limb lies across a sapling, bending it to earth. Certainly, that limb fell in a "natural" event, like a violent storm. But as shepherds of the Earth and Her bounty, we have a responsibility to move that limb and restore the sapling so it can again grow straight and tall. We are not usually very good shepherds; our carbon is helping to warm the atmosphere and make more storms; our "need" for more consumer goods and "dream homes" leads to the destruction of woodlands and animal habitat for yet another suburban "Miracle Mile" of the same old chain stores. We can strike a blow against such mindless destruction by setting an example and, even when others are not watching, thanking the Earth by tending Her.

All of the advice here is but a start, yet the end is crucial: if we nurture and protect the land, it will better nurture and protect us. I have encouraged my fellow pagans to try

these practices; now I ask all of my readers to do the same. Blessed be in this dark half of the year.