Notes from the Field

DAVID MARSHALL

peaceful warm quiet connection living musical soundscape breezy bright encompassing spiritual ecosystem playful gratitude curious spider diverse tranquil slow tactile mellow ancestral inquisitive organic entropy

—participant word salad

AS A VOLUNTEER land steward, I work for the Kawartha Land Trust (KLT), a non-governmental charitable organization in southeast Ontario, Canada that acquires and protects ecologically-important properties.[1] Last summer, I conducted two pilot workshops at a KLT nature sanctuary to introduce people to practices for deepening our connection with nature. Along with 16 participants,[2] we engaged in mindfulness-based methods intended to broaden our awareness, sharpen our observational skills, and strengthen our sense of love and caring for other beings and their habitats. My main goals in offering these workshops have been to promote conditions where participants can experience the delight accessible through ordinary sense perceptions, and ultimately to provide support for sustained environmental action. Toward these ends, we apply different modes of attention, learn the habitat types, species, and conservation values of the sanctuary, practice detection of human traces on the land, and enjoy aimless wandering and the power of stillness. We concluded with a sharing of our experiences. Here are my Notes from the Field.

The most intriguing pedagogical challenge of offering workshops for the public is to connect the heart of teachings from many different traditions with the phenomenological world in an entirely general way. To my delight, I saw that the natural world holds great power to facilitate the settling and opening of mind. The practices, which I call "attention training," were quickly understood and applied by all participants, only one of whom had any prior ex-

perience with mindfulness. The key element or "hook" of these practices is the engagement of all sense perceptions with resident nonhuman beings: bird, plant, insect, or mammal; and with the felt presence of earth, stone, water, wind, and sky.

I introduced the notion of bare attention, which I explained as attention to a being or element of the world without any agenda: to relax and set aside one's impulses to identify, classify, photograph, or interact with in any particular way. One specific exercise is to wander about until some being or phenomenon draws our interest (a foraging robin, the sound of wind through white pine trees), then to stay with that, noting further and further details of movement, sound, and smells, and remaining open to how much we can observe and learn. This practice can ultimately connect us with the endless depth and vastness of the living world. One sign I noted that this might be happening was when several participants lingered with their chosen being-of-attention well past the time allotted, and had to be gently cajoled into rejoining our group.

In their entirety, the suite of exercises[3] proceed in an alternating movement analogous to breathing, with attention directed inwardly (to feelings within the body) then outwardly (toward the sense perceptions of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch), and from a more focused, concentrated attention to a more open and relaxed panoramic approach.[4] The ultimate goal is a full-sensory immersion in life as movement and process. Most participants reported that these practices quickly led to relaxed and joyful states of mind.

For the reader who is not familiar with the methods and goals of mindfulness and awareness practices, an essential point is that meditation is not about learning a new skill, but rather becoming familiar with and cultivating inherent qualities of mind, which are the very same depth and vastness of the world that we usually attribute to the phenomena we observe. The participants' experience of these workshops once again brought home the lesson that nature, in all its complexity and vitality, can provide a practice environment with great power and immediacy to support this. My speculation from these workshops and from life experiences in wilderness is that the magnitude of this power correlates to the richness and overall health of the natural environment.

A personal story may help to illustrate this. Decades ago, as a high-wired graduate student, I would recuperate between long stretches of intense, focused lab work by backpacking or skiing into remote mountain wilderness. Reliably, by the fourth day of hard physical exertion burning through my accumulated busyness, I would experience moments of expansive, peaceful joy and contentment. I recall feelings of connection, love, and belonging, and attributing these to my immediate environment ("it's in the mountains"). Later in life, after four or five years of regular meditation practice and many long, intensive retreats,

I began to experience these feelings regardless of my surroundings. (One particularly strong flash came while contemplating the remains of a sticker that had been torn off a metal filing cabinet in a windowless office). I then realized that the qualities I had earlier given to the mountain wilderness were in fact inherent in my own mind. Yet, even today, I can readily access these feelings by simply walking out the door to my garden, or by looking at any bird or tree: no formal practice necessary. With the assistance of thriving natural spaces, whether a wilderness or a pot of flowers on a balcony, we are better able to cultivate an awareness that is deeper and more in tune with who we are fundamentally as beings of this Earth.[5] In this respect, the main teacher in these workshops is the land and life of the Kawarthas.

The Kawarthas, or "sparkling waters," an Anishnaabe word literally translated as "land of reflections," are a glacially-formed landscape of numerous lakes and rivers, wetlands, marsh, cedar swamps, hills, hardwood and conifer forests, with patches of agriculturally-rich limestone plains. KLT owns or manages over 20 properties totaling about 6,000 acres in this bioregion. Bordered on the south by the Oak Ridges Moraine, on the north by the Canadian Shield—exposed bedrock of red and black Precambrian granite formed over one billion years ago—and home to the world's second largest glacial drumlin field,[6] this corrugated, forested land of interconnected rivers and lakes is a canoer's paradise.

Several First Nation communities hold reserve land in the middle and southern areas of the region. They are engaged in habitat restoration and other conservation activities in efforts to reclaim and enhance their traditional hunting and harvesting rights. Curve Lake First Nation,[7] located on a peninsula of land between Chemong and Buckhorn lakes, has begun consulting with KLT on traditional indigenous uses of KLT lands, with a view of reopening selected areas for traditional medicinal plant harvest. Alderville First Nation,[8] located south of Rice Lake, is expanding and restoring a native tall-grass prairie in a remnant patch of the rare Black Oak Savannah ecosystem. Traditionally, First Nations in this region have actively maintained prairies through periodic burning, mimicking a natural process that rejuvenates prairie species and establishes an important genetic reserve for this once-common habitat.

Many traces of human habitation and land-use by indigenous and settler peoples exist on KLT properties. Stories of human use were also of great interest to the workshop participants, providing another way to engage with the land. Several participants recommended an enhanced educational component for the workshops, with more details on geology, ecosystem types, resident species, successional processes of plant communities, as well as indigenous and settler histories. This knowledge may form a conceptual and cultural ground that

Photograph by David Marshall

facilitates connection. Here are some direct participant reports that reveal how this connection was expressed: "feeling a subtle joy in watching the sky traced by a swallow's flight, smelling the wind wafting through meadow grass, tasting a sprig of yarrow, listening to the complex and beautiful song of a Robin, and lying on the ground and sympathetically feeling the movements of a jumping spider."

Calling on the aid of the natural world to help people settle and connect is not without its challenges. In the first workshop in July, extreme heat and humidity shortened our planned seven-hour stay. While far from life-threatening, our resounding response to these conditions was to be reminded of our privileged habituation to enclosed, climate-controlled, and comfortable spaces. Particularly for those unaccustomed to meditation, it is rather pointless and somewhat aggressive to suggest becoming comfortable with discomfort when soaked in sweat and swarmed by mosquitoes.

In contrast, the ideal weather conditions of the second workshop in late September allowed us to remain outdoors comfortably for the entire seven hours. This led to deeper relaxation, and a general feeling in our closing circle that no one wanted to leave. To me, this was a further reminder of our earth-sprung nature. Having worked to abandon the masculine attitudes of my earlier wilderness backpacking years, and experiencing aches and pains in battles with a meditation cushion over two decades, I am sensitive to the importance of basic physical well-being to developing beneficial states of mind. While my ultimate personal goal and my aspiration for others is to expand the range of conditions that feel comfortable, good weather is a good example of the need to start where people are.

A more fundamental obstacle to feeling connected with the natural world is a sense of separation or apartness. Working with this deeply-ingrained habit of thinking and perceiving that situates ourselves *here*, and an observed world *there*, is the core work of many spiritual paths. No less transformative, a way of working with feelings of isolation in the human social world is to be in intimate relationship. Similarly, a powerful way to address this feeling of separation from the natural world is to consider and approach its nonhuman inhabitants in a more intimate way. There are some deceptively simple ways to do this. When those of us with the leisure and privilege to access less urban, more natural environments "get out," our orientation to the natural world is often to use it as a means of rejuvenating recreation. I know that when my mind is in this frame of reference, my pattern is to leave the car behind in the parking lot, strap on boots or skis, and go charging down the trails. Experienced trackers tell us that this creates a shockwave of birds flying off and mammals diving for cover. This bolting for safety occurs before I am even aware of their presence.[9]

However rich we feel the environment we are moving through might be, it is an environment impoverished by the absence of many of its wild residents. One of the core practices that I present in the workshops is the simple act of moving quietly and slowly into an off-trail area, then sitting down while holding still for at least 30 minutes.[10] This is typically enough time for birds to return to their territories, and for mammals to visibly resume their ordinary activities as they relax with a new but quiet and unthreatening presence.[11]

What is the benefit? As the local life slowly moves back into closer and closer proximity, as you sit and pay attention, particularly to birds and mammals, you might notice that the life being observed is observing back. This experience of noticing that a being is watching us watching them can arrive as a sudden sense of delight, curiosity, consternation, or even shock. These brief glimpses, like catching the attention of another human at a party, can be initiatory moments that, with practice, can deepen into relationships over time. Returning

to the same spot day after day develops in other beings a deepening familiarity with us, and as they relax, they reveal more and more of their lives. In these flashes of mutual awareness, this echo chamber of attention cuts through our feeling of separateness. And, just as a friend's attention toward us deepens that relationship, an increased sense of acceptance and recognition of and by other beings can deepen our sense of connection with them. Our love and desire to protect the natural world becomes palpable.

There is a still greater benefit. Climate change and development are putting increased pressure on many wildlife species, plants and animals alike, and threatening their extinction. KLT is addressing this by preserving areas that are critical habitats. These areas require ongoing stewardship, and this increases the need for citizen volunteers. Ultimately, my motivation for providing these practices and experiences for people is to encourage them to actively strengthen their connection to nature and thus their motivation to engage in long-term, sustainable action. In my own life, I have learned that action is sustainable when it comes from a place of enjoyment and love, and that love is local and specific—not "the world" but a chickadee. My greatest hope in writing this essay is that readers will be likewise encouraged and motivated. For those interested in learning and teaching the methods I have touched upon here, please feel free to contact me if I can help you explore these practices further.

Based on the heartening response to these pilots, I am organizing a monthly series for KLT, in what we are now calling "Immersive Nature" workshops. These workshops will contain two basic components: a morning of sensory immersion practices based on attention training and other contemplative approaches, followed by an afternoon of guided educational walks featuring different aspects of the natural history, conservation values, and human influences on the land. I intend to more deliberately expand beyond my European settler roots and perspectives to include a view and practice aligned with the indigenous-led movement sometimes called Two-Eyed Seeing.[12] This blending of a fully engaged and reciprocal participation with nature from an indigenous perspective with Western ways of knowing is beautifully described in Robin Wall Kimmerer's seminal work "Braiding Sweetgrass."[13]

I end these Notes from the Field as they began, with words of the participants. To the question "What would you find appealing in future workshops?" they replied: *more guidance and education on the attention-training walks; more education on the different paths the land could take under different approaches to stewardship; more information on the natural and human history and uses of the land*; and finally, most deeply felt and expressed by many, *more time for solo exploration, hanging out, and wandering without destination or goal on the land.*

May we all be granted more time to wander, more time to connect, and more time to love and protect our world.

Acknowledgments and Photo Caption

I gratefully thank all my teachers, human and nonhuman, and all my friends and colleagues of the Kawartha Land Trust, especially Thomas Unrau, Patricia Wilson and Ralph McKim, for bringing joy and a sense of purpose to this post-retirement phase of my life. That's me, third from the left in the shorts and loud T-shirt, Ralph on the far right, and Patricia shoulder-to-shoulder with him. Thom must have been in the office that day (or canoeing). Photo taken during a KLT native tallgrass prairie restoration project on Ralph's Ballyduff Trails property. Photo used by permission of KLT.

DAVID MARSHALL has participated as a volunteer and citizen scientist over the past 45 years in a wide variety of environmental activities including wilderness field studies, advocacy for wilderness preservation, sustainable forestry and wildlife management, and environmental journalism. He has

taught meditation for over twenty years in meditation centres, colleges, prisons and other venues to students, social workers, church congregations, and the general public. As a member of the Kawartha Land Trust Stewardship Committee, he helps with invasive monitoring, assessment and control, development of property monitoring forms, and leads workshops on property monitoring and meditation-related nature awareness practices.

Notes

1. For more information on the Kawartha Land Trust, see https://kawarthalandtrust.org/.
2. Participant demographics: age groups from high school and university students (the majority) to middle- and retirement-aged adults; near-equal genders; predominantly white (one person of color); of European ancestry; and with the leisure time and resources to travel to and engage in a workshop located 20-30 minutes from their residences. As a retired, white male and former university scientist, I share in this level of privilege. One challenge is how to provide the benefits of these workshops and their practices to people less able to access relatively remote areas. Fortunately, there are many extensive city parks within easy walking distance of most towns in my region. The challenge would be greater in larger, more urban settings.
3. A detailed description of these attention-training practices is available from the author.
4. A helpful technique for encouraging a more panoramic attention is to walk slowly while relying on peripheral vision.
5. And thus, the sadness and heartbreak of a world where far too many people do not have the means or opportunity to access and connect with natural spaces. This, when connection is vitally important to halt and reverse the ongoing human-caused destruction of the earth's capacity to sustain life. I have no easy answers to this worsening dilemma.
6. Drumlins are elongated, teardrop-shaped hills of rock, sand, and gravel up to 2 kilometers long that formed under moving glacier ice. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drumlin.
7. For more information on Curve Lake First Nation, see https://curvelakefirstnation.ca/.
8. For more information on Alderville First Nation, see https://alderville.ca/.
9. Jon Young, *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013), 67.
10. A comprehensive guide to this and many other practices can be found in Jon Young, Ellen Haas, and Evan McGown, *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature* (Shelton WA: OwlLink Media, 2010). Available at 8 Shields Institute, http://8shields.org/.
11. My regular solo practice is to choose two or three different "edge habitats," border zones between e.g. forest, wetland or meadow, and sit for at least an hour in each spot, settling into stillness. It is also helpful to wear clothes the colors of the season.
12. For more information on Two-Eyed Seeing, see https://achh.ca/about-us/guiding-principles/two-eyed-seeing/.
13. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

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