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# The Wild Path of Recovery

## *A Way Out of Our Addictive Culture*

MARY REYNOLDS THOMPSON



*The North Rim of the Grand Canyon, Arizona.*

*For everything that lives is holy.*

~ WILLIAM BLAKE

**I**t was 1983. After eleven years of spiraling downward with alcoholism, I had my last drink. I was twenty-seven years old. And I can honestly say that Nature saved me.

Born and raised in Central London and a former resident of Manhattan and the Russian Hill district of San Francisco, I felt at home in urban landscapes. The idea of backpacking was as foreign to me then as the inner workings of a computer are to me now. Early in my sobriety that changed when I dated a man who loved to hike. It wasn't long before he was out of the picture, but hiking remained my mainstay, the one thing that continually grounded me. As I wrestled with an aching emptiness left by years of blackouts and sad and crazy behavior, I walked the hills above the Golden Gate Bridge. Later I would backpack the Himalayas, the Grand Tetons, and the windswept pampas of Patagonia.

Out of doors the cutting winds cleansed me. In California, I spent hours exploring the trails above the churning Pacific and, in time, saw more than my inner turmoil reflected back at me. The rhythms of my walks, and the rhythms of the waves, became a source of gathering strength.

On mountain trails I tested my limits. In the gloaming light of giant redwood forests, I discovered my mysterious and complex self. In meadows of wildflowers I found what the

*Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* refers to as 'the sunlight of the spirit,' an unwavering source of joy.

For over thirty-five years now I've been sober. And I've come to understand that my recovery was a long journey of reclaiming my wild soul, learning to feel at one with the Earth. Wildness made sobriety possible. I drank, in part, to escape the confines of my overly narrow and domesticated life, hoping to feel what mythologist Joseph Campbell called the "rapture of being alive." But now I could get there without any drama or artificial stimulants, simply by heading outdoors.

In our culture the importance of connecting to Nature is too often drowned out by the drumbeat of materialism. With our emphasis on striving and financial gain, many of us seek aliveness in unhealthy ways. I call this living the "shadow wild." Separated from our playful, adventurous, spontaneous nature, we try any means possible to feel alive. And it doesn't stop at alcohol, sex, food, drugs, and shopping; our out-of-control appetite fuels our global consumption too: of oil, forests, minerals, topsoil.

Today, the Western industrial world finds itself in a place familiar to every addict. We are headed toward total destruction. Each step along the way is demoralizing. Our

insatiable cravings now threaten every aspect of our daily lives, and every sector of the planet, from the oceans to the air we breathe. If we hope to survive, we cannot continue down this path.

Given the stakes, why are we still so reluctant, or seemingly unable, to change our behavior?

There's a clue in a Greek myth about a King of Thessaly. Erysichthon comes across an oak tree sacred to the goddess Demeter and asks his men to cut it down. They refuse because they know the tree grows on hallowed ground. So Erysichthon fells the tree himself. Demeter, hearing of this sacrilege, curses him: The more he eats, the hungrier he will grow. In the end, he consumes all he possesses, including his own children, and eventually his own flesh.

Viewing the Earth merely as a resource to serve our greed, we threaten our own existence.

And when we cut ourselves off from Nature, we lose an essential aspect of who we are that keeps us "right sized" and helps us to deal sanely with life's inevitable challenges and losses.



*Redwood forest, Mendocino County, California.*



*The shore of the Beagle Channel in Tierra del Fuego National Park, Argentina.*

I learned this from experience. Almost from the moment I got sober, while my hands still shook and my heart still trembled, the Earth began to fill the black hole inside of me. I discovered that I felt better outdoors, happier. Over time, learning the language of the wild, I was led to my present work. Today I help others to spiritually connect with the natural world. In listening to the song of the river and the quiet breath of forest, dancing barefoot on spring grass, they, too, recover some lost part of themselves.

There is a wild and creative energy that flows through the universe and that is our birthright. We don't just live on the Earth, the Earth lives in us. As we open to the wisdom and wonder of the natural world, we discover that we are neither infallible gods who control the planet, nor are we merely small, helpless creatures. We are, above all, a force of Nature. This is what our souls long for: to be a part of this amazing world, connected and belonging.

Until we heal the gaping wound of separation from Nature, we shall continue to exploit the Earth, trying to feel alive on a planet dying by our own hands. Denial of our situation is no longer an option. It is time to reweave our psyches back into relationship with the Earth, while recovery – that surprising and wild path – is still possible.

Sometimes, it takes 'bottoming out,' to find the way back home.

*All photos © Mary Reynolds Thompson.*

**Mary Reynolds Thompson is a pioneer in the emerging field of spiritual ecology and author of the award-winning, *Reclaiming the Wild Soul: How Earth's Landscapes Restore Us to Wholeness.***