

Learning

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IN LAST ISSUE'S column, I talked about the importance of developing a personal relationship with the natural world, and the



need to learn to observe nature. In this column, I want to offer a directed series of observation exercises, to hone and develop our ability to learn directly from nature. For nature is the only sacred text of the Goddess tradition, yet many of us are functionally illiterate!

We can, however, remedy that situation with a little bit of work and attention. These exercises are based on work I've been doing over the last few years when I've taught the Earth Path at various Reclaiming Witchcamps.

Ultimately, they derive from suggestions in the writings of Bill Mollison, the originator of a system of ecological design called Permaculture — for permanent culture or permanent agriculture — that seeks to develop sustainable ways of living on the earth.

One of the basic principles in permaculture design is to begin with careful observation — and to continue to carefully observe the results of what you do, for that matter. Before we can intervene in a system, whether natural or human-made, we have to know what's going on. Of course, learning what's going on in a natural system could take a lifetime!

These exercises can be done on a daily basis, or over a period of time, perhaps devoting a session or even a week to each one. If you are regularly observing some place in nature as part of your ongoing spiritual practice (as I suggested in the last column), you might use these to broaden and deepen

your observations. You might practice them on a camping trip, a hike, or a cross-country ski trip. Obviously, not every exercise will be relevant in your climate at every season. These exercises can certainly be done

alone, however, they are wonderful to do in a group. If you share your observations with others, you will be enriched, because your friends will observe things you did not, and vice versa.



Do these exercises outdoors, in some natural area that is wild enough—meaning uncontrolled—to be interesting. A forest or prairie or ocean shore is wonderful, but if you live in a city, you might find an unkempt garden or a vacant lot where weeds are taking over, or perhaps some unmanicured corner of a park. Begin all of these exercises with whatever grounding or centering exercise helps you to calm and focus.

1. I Wonder: In your natural spot, with your attention on what is around you, say to yourself, "I wonder..." "I wonder why lichen is growing on that side of the tree, only?" "I wonder why the snowdrifts are piling up in this particular pattern?" "I wonder what attracts that bug to that flower?" Don't worry about answering your questions, just notice what questions you can generate. As much as possible, keep

them focused on physical reality. Not "I wonder how that tree likes all that snow on its branches," but "I wonder why those branches don't break under the weight of all that snow." (The reason for focusing on physical reality is that as soon as we drift into emotional speculation and imagery, we're losing our focus on observation and we can easily get caught up in our own

projections and fantasies.) This is a great exercise to use with kids. You might ask them "How many 'I wonders' can you find in five minutes?" You could follow it up at home with a session with the encyclopedia trying to answer some of the questions. But the focus here is less on

answers than on learning to generate intelligent questions.

2. Observing Energy:

In your natural spot, ask yourself, "How is energy coming into this system? How is it being exchanged?"

There are many different sorts of energy you might observe: sunlight, heat, energy generated by motion of air or water, food, psychic energy. (But take time to focus on the physical before you jump to the psychic.) You can use your eyes, but also your hands, a pendulum, any tools you have for observing energy on all levels. Also, you might try drawing your spot, or a plant in it, purely as a pattern of light and shadow. Don't worry about producing a 'good' drawing, just let it become a



Observe

meditation on how light energy is intercepted by form.

3. Observing Flow: In your natural spot, observe flows of all kinds. How does water move through this system? How does wind and airflow affect it? What intercepts the flows? What marks do they leave of their passage? What is the source of these flows? How is that source replenished?

4. Observing Communities: What is growing together with what in this area? Are there patterns I can discern? What insects, birds and animals seem to be connected with what plants? (Note: these questions may only be answered by many observations over time.) Are some plants serving as 'nurses' for the young of others? Do some plants seem to stay distant from each other? Are some plants always found together?

5. Observing Pattern: What patterns can I see here in my spot?



Textures, patterns of growth, distribution patterns, stress marks, all are examples of patterns. What patterns are repeated, on what scales? Can I find spirals? Pentacles? Branching

patterns? Patterns based in fours or sixes? How many times does a tree branch from twig to trunk? What functions might these patterns serve? Why are certain patterns repeated over and over again in nature? Again, you might also wish to take a session to draw patterns or forms, without worrying about producing a work of art, but as a

photo by Randy Radstrom

meditation to sharpen your ability to see and focus.

6. Observing Edge: Where does one system meet another in my spot? Edges, where forest meets meadow, or ocean meets shore, are often the most diverse and fertile parts of an ecosystem. Is that true here? How does the edge differ from the center?

7. Observing Limits: What limits growth here in my spot? How do these limiting factors make themselves evident? What is succeeding in spite of these factors? What seems held back? How have the plants and animals adapted to these limitations? What characteristics do the successful adapters have in common?

8. Observing from Stillness: Just sit still in your spot for at least fifteen minutes—longer is better. Notice what you can see, and how that changes over time.

9. Observing Past and Future: What can I observe in this spot that can tell me about its past history, and how it might have changed over time? What can I observe that can tell me about its future?

If you practice these techniques of observation over time, you will have learned some of the ABCs of reading the book of nature. These exercises will suggest other forms of observation. At first, keeping your focus on physical reality may seem dull, even cerebral, but if you work through

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that moment of boredom, the physical world itself will start to become a rich and luminous place. You'll begin to be amazed at what there is to see, and to wonder how you could have lived so long without noticing what's around you. Eventually, you may not need to consciously separate out all these questions—instead you'll begin to intuitively 'read' a landscape, and the sacred text of nature will start to be revealed in all its complexity and beauty.

