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for Hope-*full* and Sustainable Futures

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Our deepest affinity:

Connecting with nature as the wellspring of relational learning, leadership, and hope.

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I come with two basic assumptions. First, that the Earth is a gift, not a problem. Second, and related—that loving the world is as important as grieving for it.

To get to the punchline: it's all about love. Relational learning, leadership, hope, and sustainability—indeed, being an awake and engaged human being in this world—all are rooted fundamentally in an unequivocal love of the world. The biologist E.O. Wilson (1984) has coined the term “biophilia” to indicate this urge to affiliate with other forms of life. All good things emanate from this love of the world—caring, compassion, deep engagement, and meaning. So it behooves us to consider: what fosters love of the world?

The formula I'm suggesting here goes something like this: *natural history* fosters *love of the world*, which fosters *hope*, which, in turn, fosters *sustainability*.

The *practice of falling in love with the world* is *natural history*, which I have previously defined as “a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy.” (Fleischner, 2001, 2005). Simply put, natural history is the practice of paying attention to the world—both human and larger-than-human—around us. Nothing could be more important, for, as I have written, “we are what we pay attention to” (Fleischner, 1999). And too often we become distracted and pay attention to aspects of mass culture that matter least. Natural history, then, is a verb, not a noun—a *practice*, something we *do*. And attention, as the Buddhist psychologist John Tarrant has pointed out, is the most basic form of love (Tarrant, 1998). Human beings are designed by natural selection to do natural history—our senses, our limbs, our whole bodies have evolved for attentiveness. And we have always done so: natural history is humanity's oldest continuous endeavor. No wonder—our survival has utterly depended on our capacity to pay attention to the encompassing living world, full of threats, foods, and delights. Yet, we live in a very odd historical moment: there has never been a time in this history of our species when so few of us have paid attention to the world around. The good news here is that because we have been designed by natural selection to be attentive, natural history is a practice that can easily be reclaimed.

What then of *hope*? The American writer Scott Russell Sanders (1998) has pointed out that the words “hope” and “hop” derive from the same root, one that means “to leap up in expectation.” Novelist Barbara Kingsolver (2012) stated that “hope is a mode of resistance...something we actually do with our hearts and hands to navigate ourselves through the difficult passages.” Barack Obama (2008) declared that “hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it.” All these statements share the recognition that hope is neither passive nor vague, but requires specific energy, action, effort. As Kingsolver (2012) said, “hope is a gift I can try to cultivate.” Natural history, with its myriad windows on the world, offers endless beauty, fascination, and examples, often engendering joy which can fuel commitment and hard work.

The root of *sustainability* (*sustinère*) means “to hold up.” The key question about sustainability—too infrequently asked—is: what are we trying to hold up? Too often, “sustainability” is simply a buzzword in the service of the status quo. The attentiveness at the core of natural history serves conservation, by grounding our understanding of the geography, behavior, and timing of plants, animals, and their habitats. The successful practice of sustainability requires healthy doses of humility, compassion, and inspiration, all of which are woven through the experience of natural history. Sustainability also requires an insightful sense of place—which can only be gained through an ongoing natural history focus, over time, in spatial context.

Learning and *leadership* both follow the meaning of “educare,” the root word of education: to draw out from within. Recent research has affirmed the value of learner-directed inquiry, which is so often a hallmark of natural history. *Nature*, one of the most respected scientific journals in the world, editorialised on the importance of “informal science education,” while learning in the wild. As they pointed out, “the question ‘why is this relevant?’ never even arises” (Atchley, Strayer, & Atchley, 2012). Another study documented a dramatic improvement in creativity and problem-solving ability from students after only four days immersion in nature.

Leadership, then, entails the skillful *drawing out from within* of learners' inherent capacity for love of the world, hope, active sustainability, and creativity. Good leaders encourage attention to what really matters and provide meaning. Often, such leadership involves getting out of the way, and "leading from the back of the line," while allowing learners' innate curiosity and capacity for attentiveness to take precedence.

As I wrote in *The Way of Natural History* (2011), "natural history mindfulness offers many gifts—glimpses of wholeness, connection, and beauty that continue to teach, inspire, and heal for many years.... Natural history renews us as it scrubs clean our vision of the world. We need it to counter despair—there is durable beauty in this world. And we need it as an essential guidepost as we re-track our collective behaviour toward more harmonious ways." We are all born to do this. The path to natural history begins wherever you are, and leads everywhere. Just decide to pay attention, then do it.



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