

THE BODYBASED ACTIVIST:
A Path Towards Sustainability with Body as Guide
by Nala Walla, June 2007
for *The Living Now Project*

*Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.
Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now.
You are not obliged to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it.*

-from the Talmud

*And if the old guard still offend
they've got nothing left on which you depend,
so enlist every ounce of your bright blood...
and jump from the hook.
You're not obliged to swallow anything you despise.*

-from "Sleeping Lessons" by James Mercer of *The Shins*

In North America, as each of us bears witness to the monstrous effects of auto-based sprawl disfiguring the flesh of our beloved Places, the healing of Land, Community and Self beckons louder with each passing day. As microcosms of the living, pulsing Earth of which we are all part, our own bodies join in the clarion call for a "Great Turning" towards a just and sustainable culture¹, petitioning for nourishment, for song and dance, for rest.

Because modern North American cities and suburbs were established after the advent of the automobile, we have perhaps more work to do here than anywhere else in the world. To retrofit an entire continent in a compact village-style based upon the length of the human stride instead of the depth of the gas tank; to reestablish communities based on synergy and harmony among diverse species and cultures instead of competition and displacement. The sheer enormity of these tasks can often make us feel completely overwhelmed.

After generations of busyness, desensitization and disconnection of our daily lives from her rhythms, how do we begin to relate, again, to Earth?

¹ please see Korten, David (2005) *The Great Turning: From Earth Empire to Earth Community*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA.

BODY IS EARTH

We can be grateful that we already have an ideal place to start. Good fortune has granted each and every one of us a body—a perfect blueprint of the organic structures and patterns that repeat themselves at every level of Earth’s systems. Since they are quite literally composed of and from Earth (carbon, water, nitrogen...) we need only consult our bodies *directly* if we desire to communicate with Earth, and gather practical information about how to proceed along an Earth-centered path.

Tuning into the needs, patterns, and flows of our bodies is something we can do anytime we choose, initiating changes that become far-reaching as they ripple outward from ourselves, to our friends and family, and on to the larger Earth-community. In the following pages, I will introduce the conceptual basis for several Earth-activist^s strategies, as well as outline some specific means for their immediate application to our lives.

FOOD ACTIVISM: A SIMPLE, BODYBASED STRATEGY

One of the most basic ways in which we interact with our own bodies, and therefore with the Earth, is through our relationship to food. However, for most of us, the food systems which once connected us intimately to the abundance of the Earth are now mediated by trucks, computers, experts, industrial chemicals, corporate “super”markets and slick advertising. For this reason, *food activism^s* is a simple and immediate strategy by which we can affect enormous change in our lives and our world. If we are already becoming more aware of what we put into our bodies, then we are already activists. Presented below are some ways we can interact more closely with our sustenance.

THE WISDOM OF THE WILD

In a world where many of us rarely encounter anything that has not been domesticated, bleached, prefabricated, commodified, sprayed, pasteurized, homogenized, hyped, or branded in some way, we reach hungrily towards the nourishing and diverse wisdom of the wild. When seeking pathways towards sustainability, we find important clues

² thanks to Starhawk for her creation of and unwavering commitment to “Earth Activist Training.” Her visionary work *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993) Bantam Books, New York has been a major influence on my philosophy, and my activism.

³ for more on Food Activism, see Katz, Sandor (2006) *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved: Inside America’s Underground Food Movements*, Chelsea Green Publishers, White River Junction, VT

whenever we reencounter the wildness within each of us, and relearn to see everywhere the wonderful abundance in which we are embedded.

Even when tossed within the vast seas of concrete which are our cities, pockets of wilderness persist in alleys, abandoned lots, and in the neglected corners of our yards—whole mini-ecosystems thriving within the cracks in the sidewalk. Many of the plants that volunteer along the fenceline and in our front lawns are edible and medicinal, or else provide twine, perfume, dye, baskets, tool handles, furniture and wildlife sanctuary. And, because they are wild, these plants thrive naturally—no watering, careful fertilizing or other human coddling required!

Many fun, local adventures can be had by perusing a good guide to edible plants⁴, and taking a walk around the neighborhood to learn what herbs we can harvest for teas or soups. Perhaps we might even prepare the future by collecting a few seeds to scatter as we walk to work? Whenever we stroll down the street with an apple or plum, we can tuck the pits into the soil instead of throwing them in the garbage can. Our ancestors have done the same for thousands of years, encouraging edibles along favorite walking routes.

DEMONS, WEEDS and WASTE

Undeterred by narrowminded labels such as “weeds,” bees spend a lot of time visiting our neglected oases of urban and semiurban wilderness. It is simply good policy to view the bees’ attention as the very best of testimonials. Yet, many important, healing plants receive no more attention than a wasteful toss into the “weed” category. And please note, “weed” is not the only demonized group created by humans. It is no coincidence that the concepts *noxious weed*, *invasive*, and *exotic* bear frightening resemblance—both in theory and in practice—to those of *alien*, *immigrant* (no one is illegal!), *outsider*, *foreigner*, and *enemy*.⁵

It is a valuable activist strategy to question any attitudes or habits which reinforce us/them, angel/demon, winner/loser, self/other dichotomies. This dualistic thinking is a remnant of the old systems which are crumbling as we speak. When we welcome *weeds* and embrace *others* as wildly different aspects of ourselves, we reap that rich diversity which comprises the core of strength and resilience in any natural system. We

⁴ for the Pacific Northwest US, I love the illustrated guide with recipes by Schofield, Janice, J. (1989) *Discovering Wild Plants: Alaska, Western Canada, The Northwest* Alaska Northwest Publishers, Portland, OR.

⁵ for more information on the fallacy of *invasives* and *weeds*, see Theodoropoulos, David (2003) *Invasion Biology: Critique of a Pseudoscience*, Avvar Books, Blythe, CA

come to realize that the inclusive and harmonious world which we seek to create is more than just pleasant to live in: it is essential to our survival.

More specifically, when we take the time to notice, we can see whole hedges of wormwood, heaps of nettles, and mounds full of yarrow right under our noses in downtowns from Montreal to Seattle. As we drive to the supermarket, how often do we overlook the option to simply stop the car to harvest from abandoned shrubs and trees alongside the road, laden so heavy with fruit that their branches are breaking? In so doing, we are missing the opportunity to be fed not only delicious food, but reconnection with a precious wildness lacking in our daily digest.

Through wild foods and medicine, we literally ingest the keys to that diverse repository of knowledge contained within wildness. When city and country-dwellers alike begin to reframe our ideas about weeds and harvest our own food and herbs from our immediate surroundings, we shall have our (r)evolution.

LIVING LOCALISM

Just start with five square feet of your house in which everything you have is made by someone you know. Knowing who did the painting, who grew this apple, who made this cup, and who grew the herbs that made the tea, that's intimacy. Reverent living is essential for our effectiveness in the world.

---Martin Prechtel, Guatemalan Shaman

A simple rule of thumb: *the closer your table to the harvest, the more healthful the meal.* Industrial products and processes applied to our food such as canning, freezing, pasteurization, homogenization, petrochemical pesticides, and long-distance shipping not only drastically degrade the quality of any food, they require immense and unsustainable fossil fuel inputs to support them. And, buyer beware! Even *certified organic* foods are often imported from halfway across the globe and thus we must be mindful that they are not *automatically* a “green” choice.⁶ We always have the option of reading the label and deciding what to buy—and to *not* buy. The well-known *reduce, reuse, recycle* trio could become a quartet by adding *refuse* to the ensemble of choices.

⁶ see Pollan, Michael (2006) *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Penguin Press, New York

Since no garden is more local than our own garden, it's always good to consider growing our own food, even if it is just a small pot of favorite herbs outside our kitchen window. Many communities have neighborhood pea patch programs and small-scale farms that welcome help. Another option besides growing or wildcrafting our own food, is to purchase directly from local farmers through a *farm to table* or *community supported agriculture* (CSA) program. Many farms will deliver weekly local produce, eggs, milk and even fresh meat to our doorstep. This win-win-win situation provides more nutritious food, diverts vital support from large corporations to small farmers, and connects us more closely to Earth all at the same time.

CLEAN OUT THE REFRIGERATOR

Consider this a friendly reminder that the majority of households in the world have never had refrigeration, and that even in North America, refrigeration was relatively rare only fifty or sixty years ago. Lack of refrigeration does not correlate with malnutrition. In fact, the opposite is true: refrigeration encourages us to eat “dead” foods, as we expect food to “keep” as a matter of personal convenience, not nutritive value. And because it hums away day and night, refrigerators are often a household's single largest consumer of energy. Using other, age-old strategies such as culturing, slow dehydration, and curing—as well as eating soon after harvest!—not only conserves precious energy, it encourages us to eat fresher, healthier food.

Many of the products that clutter our refrigerators are condiments which will last for months in the pantry. Vinegar is a natural preservative present in many dressings, pickles, salads, hot sauces, relishes, etc. which enables them to keep just fine in the cupboard. Other products which contain live-cultures such as yogurt and cheese do quite well on a cool shelf for a couple of weeks or more. The same goes for eggs.

If we clear all the above items out, among the few things left in the fridge are fresh meats, milk and vegetables, all of which are MUCH more nutritious when eaten right away. If we are blessed with a bounty of fresh milk or veggies that we cannot consume immediately, we can try preparing our own healthful yogurt, pickles, sauerkraut, and miso. These living, cultured foods⁷ can be quite simple to make, and have been used for centuries by our ancestors to store food safely for weeks,

⁷ for specific instructions on culturing and many other traditional recipes, as well as a well-researched and thought-provoking challenge to conventional nutrition, see Fallon, Sally (1999) *Nourishing Traditions*, New Trends Publishing, Washington, D.C.

months or even years. And who among us couldn't use a little more culture in our lives?

There is almost no food which will spoil in one day at room temperature. For fresh salad items, and cool beverages, we can try the basement, the porch, or a screened-in box on the shady side of the house. Now, if we look in the fridge, there's almost nothing left. Maybe we can consider unplugging the electricity-hogging beast altogether and create valuable counter space instead.⁸ Now there's more room for new food adventures such as homemade cheese and pickles!

THE REINDIGENIZATION PROCESS

When we reconnect more directly to the source of our sustenance in gardens, farms and in our own backyards, we often find our lives affected in unpredictable ways. We may be surprised to feel our fingers, toes and roots searching deeper into the Earth, becoming, again, indigenous to the Places we live. At times we stumble upon aspects of ourselves already engaged in *rewilding* and *reindigenizing* processes—our newly sharpened senses guiding us towards the abundance we previously walked right by without noticing. When we trust our wild selves to guide us, we know innately that food we helped raise or harvest with our own hands, and with our neighbors, is most respectful to our bodies and the Earth.

Like opening that secret door in the attic of our dreams, suddenly we find ourselves exploring entire wings of our house that we never even knew existed. This shift in perspective which enables us to see the great wealth of the natural world which was there all along, all around us, is the gift of wildness. Our center of gravity shifts close and low to the ground, and feelings of stability and rootedness replace those of disconnection and fear. Direct experience with the wildly generous Earth is thus an effective antidote to the despair and pessimism that is all too common in our modern lives.

IMPROVISATION: THE ART OF CHANGE⁹

*"Art is not a mirror held up to reality,
but a hammer with which to shape it."*

--Bertold Brecht

⁸ for more on "refrigerator activism," water and compost systems, and many other practical strategies, see Flores, Heather (2006) *Food Not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard Into A Garden, And Your Neighborhood Into a Community*, Chelsea Green, White River Junction, VT.

⁹ many thanks to Keith Hennessy, for this simple definition of improvisation.

Every one of us maintains the ability, at any time, to tap into a vast wilderness deep within ourselves. We do this anytime we hear music and feel ourselves moved to sing and dance. We display our wild selves when we make a spontaneous joke that lightens the mood in an overly-serious conversation. When we improvise a work of art out of materials headed for the trash¹⁰, we are enacting our wild, creative selves. In a society obsessed with ever-accelerating productivity, we may be wild simply by taking a nap in the middle of the work day, honoring our tired body above all else.

The human body is the product of billions of years of evolutionary success stories, and as such, is our gateway to immense storehouses of creative options—after all, if the only constant in this world is change, then evolution is the consistent process of improvising ways to accommodate these changes.¹¹ For this reason, cultivating ways to keep the flow of communication open between the rational mind and the instinctive body is essential to finding new pathways towards sustainability. Body-based practices such as yoga, martial arts, dance, theater, storytelling, and music have always helped us to discover deep, clear wells of energy and inspiration—the nourishing places located within our internal wilderness.

ART IS NOT A LUXURY

“Poetry is the natural speech of the human heart.” —Michael Meade

As our modern lives become so digital, so virtual, that we hazard living almost completely outside of our bodies, I believe it is especially important that each of us engages in body-centered, artistic practices, both personally, and in groups. It is a profound activist strategy to refute the notion that the arts are only for the “talented,” for “professionals,” or that they are a luxury we cannot afford.

All of the arts originally evolved within the context of Place and Community. As such, the arts have always truly belonged to the Folk, who wisely cast them in valuable healing, restorative, and therapeutic

¹⁰ *trash* and *waste* are concepts exclusive to modern humans. In natural systems, one systems’ waste is automatically another systems’ food. To paraphrase Bill Mollison—one of the co-founders of permaculture—our real problem is not waste, but a lack of imagination. There is no such thing as waste.

¹¹ For an in depth, inspirational exploration of the improvisation concept, and its application to our lives, I highly recommend Nachmanovich, Stephen (1989) *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York.

roles. In an egalitarian fashion, the arts have always offered *anyone* who practices them—not just professionals—deep understanding of Earth’s cycles, patterns and harmonies, and strength of community. The good news is that these tools are still there. All we need do is use them.

That being said, special care must be taken in these overly-domesticated times to avoid cloistering the arts exclusively within studios, theatres, dojos, museums and concert halls. Though these can be valuable places for the arts, like our bodies, our practice is designed to spend time outdoors as well, where it can be put to practical use in our daily lives.¹²

THE YOGA OF GARDENING

Morning Yoga: The whiskers of the broom make a satisfying click on the floor as crumbs of sleepiness are swept from my muscles, sliding into the compost bucket. I switch hands, twisting to lubricate the other side of my spine. It feels good to be awake. On the next exhalation, I bend my knees gently to grasp this five-gallon bucket of offerings, now on its way to the compost deity. As I walk, bucket half-full (be kind to the joints, mama say!) a scene in the pay-per-gym flashes through my mind. Must we now pay for the privilege to release steam? Must we incarcerate with all of our huffing more horsepower than ten engines? Shovel and wheelbarrow abandoned to rust in the field? I breathe again. I empty the bucket. I mop my brow with my sleeve. The day is beginning.

-journal entry, Marrowstone Island, WA, April 2007

In recent years, many Westerners have begun exploring various martial arts and yogic traditions of the East. A yoga practice is a wonderful way to tune into the messages your body (and therefore, the Earth) is broadcasting. However, many of us tend to confine our practice to the studio or the living room, sometimes forgetting that the yoga *postures* themselves are only one of the many aspects of yoga.

The word *yoga* originally comes from the Indo-European root **-yeug**, meaning “to join, to yoke.” Through meditation and yoga postures, we gain deep understanding of how to join our individual bodies with universal currents, and to harness their enormous energies. However, such powerful energies come with a responsibility to apply them beyond our individual benefit. Thus, *karma yoga*—the service aspect of yoga—is of crucial importance to a holistic yoga practice.

¹² for examples of grassroots arts and a history of art for social change please see Cohen-Cruz, Jan (2005) *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey

At this time in human history, the healing of our landscape is a grand opportunity for application of the service aspect of yoga. When we “chop wood, carry water” in a mindful way, we are joining the *hatha yoga* of physical well-being with the *karma yoga* of service.

The strong, ergonomically-aligned bodies we develop through body-centered practices prepare us precisely to perform the Earthwork that is so desperately needed to get us back on the track of sustainability. Not surprisingly, the “erg” in *ergonomics* comes from the root *-werg*, which means “work.” Thus, from this perspective, our yoga practice is destined to be taken with us into the garden, where we put the postures to the ultimate test of real work.

Shoveling and spreading compost can take us through several yogic poses, including warrior one, and downward dog. If we want to stretch sore muscles after a long session on the computer, why not simply help our neighbor plant her orchard, or harvest the broccoli for dinner? Each tree we plant will remove enormous amounts of carbon from the atmosphere, simply by growing, over its lifetime. We can create *food forests*¹³ of edible plants all around us, lower our carbon-footprints to zero, and get good exercise—all at the same time—simply by participating in Earthwork. Our bodies, and the Earth will thank us for breathing deeply, keeping our muscles and joints toned, sharing songs and information, and creating positive change in the landscape. The boundaries of our bodies—and our practice—expand to include garden, neighborhood, Earth-community.¹⁴

When we recognize Earthwork to be the yoga that it is, we move more slowly and deliberately, checking for proper alignment, and we heed our bodies’ requests for a break. If we rest when we are tired, hungry, thirsty, or sunburned, we avoid injury and can be available for service the following day. By treating our bodies kindly and humanely, by dancing and telling stories in the garden much like our ancestors have always done, the line is blurred between work and play, between action and activism, between life and art.

¹³ the *food forest* is a valuable permaculture strategy which creates human food systems that mimic the resilient, fertile and self-perpetuating qualities of natural forests. To learn more about *permaculture*, see Holmgren, David (2002) *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, Holmgren Design Services, Victoria, Australia

¹⁴ many, many thanks to living-systems thinker and ecofeminist Joanna Macy for her wholistic work in moving beyond despair and into action. I first grasped the concept of expanding the boundaries of the self through her teachings. Please see her experiential guide Macy, Joanna and Molly Young Brown (1998) *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, B.C.

I am referring here to another strategy—balance. I am not suggesting that we drop out of our yoga or tai chi classes. After all, we have many good bodybased art teachers in our communities who need our support! However, I am suggesting that we add some self-reliance and an expanded, wholistic perspective to our practice. Especially at this time when our landscapes are in a state of profound neglect, many strong and healthy bodies are needed outdoors, healing and sculpting the sustainable gardens and villages of the future. Working, interacting, and participating, all together, in service of Earth—this *is* yoga.

The sun shines on my face, and for a moment my attention flies out the window to the beautiful boulder almost completely overgrown by grasses in the empty lot next to this building. Rock speaks. She tells us she was cast clumsily aside by Vulgar Bulldozer. She says she is waiting for us to come outside and roll her to her place of honor in the garden wall. We cannot, I say. We cannot come outside because we are working in here. Rock waits patiently.

-journal entry, Oakland CA, 2006 (revised June 2007)

“OUT OF THE BOX” SOLUTIONS

In short, if we seek to free ourselves from imprisonment within the “box” of techno-industrial society, it is required that we cease to expect nourishment—neither physical, nor spiritual—to come to us in a tidy, prepackaged box. Conveniences and comfort zones represented by the refrigerator, the office cubicle, the frozen dinner, and even the four walls of yoga studio, cannot contain the curvy, organic, and wholistic solutions we need at this time. Accessing the most vital nutrition and freshest ideas sometimes requires us to get wild, to get our hands in the soil, to get involved with our community and neighbors—a process by which we risk getting quite messy at times. But such a risk hints at great rewards. When we respect our bodies, they guide us towards vibrant, living food, clean water, fresh air, free, creative play, and rest at the end of an honest day’s labor. Thus, we honor the Earth by treating ourselves as one of her sacred creatures. And the Earth rewards us with the ability to see our way “out of the box” of contemporary disillusionment and despair.

“When we don’t live out our dreams, the dreamless take over.”

-Michael Meade

ABOUT NALA WALLA

Nala Walla is a transdisciplinary artist, teacher and activist living on an off-grid homestead near Port Townsend, WA. Nala is a founding member and facilitator of the BCollective: an umbrella organization dedicated to creating healthy, sustainable and commonsense culture by enriching diversity along the boundary between the arts and ecology. The Bcollective offers community-building Bodyiversity workshops, creates participatory, educational performances for kids and adults, and hosts permaculture skillshares from water catchment to creative mediation. Please visit our website www.bcollective.org for more info, or drop Nala a line to say hello: nala@bcollective.org