

REWILDING:
A Path Towards Embodied Activism

by Nala Walla
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*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

The flesh of our beloved places – and the faces of all the creatures who inhabit them – are being disfigured as a matter of shortsighted routine. We all bear witness as the tree which sheltered family picnics is cut down, or our favorite bird-watching marsh joins the growing ranks of parking lots and stripmalls. That the healing of Place is tightly interwoven with the healing of Community and Self is a reality which becomes more apparent with each passing day.

Because most of our cities and their sprawling suburbs were formed after the advent of the automobile, we have perhaps more work to do here in North America than anywhere else in the world. How do we 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? How can we reestablish a *social ecology* based on harmony among diverse species and cultures instead of domination? After generations of desensitization of our daily lives from natural rhythms, how do we begin to relate, again, to Earth? At times, the walls of these questions seem to close in on us, demanding resources beyond our means. I hope to offer, here, a route beyond these walls that involves simple, accessible strategies we can institute daily.

BODY IS EARTH

We can be grateful that we already have an ideal place to look for solutions to global puzzles. Good fortune has granted each and every one of us a body – a perfect microcosmic blueprint of the structures and patterns that repeat themselves at every level of Earth's systems. Since we are quite literally composed *of* and *from* Earth (carbon, water,

nitrogen...) we can consult our bodies directly, anytime, to gather information about how to proceed along an Earth-centered path.

Aligning with our bodies may seem to be but a small contribution, but since our habitual denial of the body lies at the root of our mistreatment of Earth, these small ripples eventually become a sea change that affects the entire world community. We need not necessarily travel far afield, or create grand political schemes in order to be activists. Simply by becoming advocates for our own flesh and blood, we *embody our activism*, instantly strengthening patterns which are at once ethical and practical.

REINDIGENIZATION: THE WISDOM OF THE WILD

Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.
--Dr. Martin Luther King

In the modern world it can be difficult to find anything that has not been domesticated, bleached, prefabricated, commodified, sprayed, pasteurized, homogenized, hyped, or branded. Many of us spend the majority of our days inside or in front of some type of box—our computers, our apartments, our cars, even our food comes in a box. If we listen, we can hear our bodies reaching hungrily outdoors for the nourishing wisdom of the wild.

When we heed this call and take a walk outside – in our backyards, in our gardens and farms – we move closer to the source of our sustenance and may find our lives affected in unpredictable ways. We may be surprised to feel our fingers and toes rooting deeper into the Earth, becoming, again, indigenous to the places we live. Our newly sharpened senses may guide us towards the abundance we previously walked right by without noticing. Perhaps our eyes suddenly detect the wild edibles in our front lawns, which we previously demonized as weeds. Perhaps we stumble upon entire medicinal herb gardens thriving in abandoned lots. The wilderness is often closer than we think.¹

Like opening that secret door in the attic of our dreams, we find ourselves winding through caverns of our home that we never even knew existed. This is the shift in perspective which enables us finally to see the wellspring of creativity which was there all along, right under our noses. It is the gift of wildness. As we connect with our wild selves,

¹ please see Evan Eisenberg's *The Ecology of Eden: Humans, Nature and Human Nature* (1998) Alfred A. Knopf, for a fascinating philosophy of wildness and wilderness.

our alienation and apathy are replaced by connectedness and creative flow, and we transcend our fear of the future.

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.

---Martin Prechtel

One of the most basic ways in which we interact with the Earth, via our own bodies, is through our relationship to food. However, for most of us, the food systems which once connected us intimately to the Earth are now mediated by trucks, computers, experts, industrial chemicals, corporate “super”markets and slick advertising. In contrast, *food activism*² is a refreshingly simple and immediate strategy by which we participate more directly with what we eat, and it can affect enormous change in our lives and our world.

As we learn to trust our wild selves, we know innately that food we helped raise or gather with our own hands, and with our neighbors, is most respectful both to our bodies and to the Earth, restoring not only our health, but our sense of community and place, too. If we become more involved with what we put into our bodies, then we are already practicing activism.

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. 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.³ Small, local farms and gardens commonly steward their lands above and beyond organic standards. Thankfully, it is still up to us to decide 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.

² for more on Food Activism, see Katz, Sandor (2006) *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved: Inside America's Underground Food Movements*, Chelsea Green.

³ see Pollan, Michael (2006) *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Penguin Press.

Since no garden is more local than our own garden, it's always good to consider growing our own food. Even if we begin with just a small pot of herbs outside our kitchen window, we are reasserting local control over our food supply. Many communities have neighborhood pea patch programs and small-scale farms that welcome help. And, miraculously, food that you've had a hand in growing always tastes better!

Another simple strategy 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 neighborhood. 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

The majority of households in the world have never had refrigeration, and 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 foods that are past their prime, 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.⁴ Using other, age-old strategies such as root cellars, culturing, dehydration, and curing—as well as eating soon after harvest!—not only conserves precious energy, it encourages us to eat fresher, healthier food. When we truly listen to our bodies, we know this instinctively.

ART IS NOT A LUXURY

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

—Bertold Brecht

As our modern lives become so digital, so virtual, that we hazard living almost completely outside of our bodies, it is especially important that we engage in body-centered arts. 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 that the average person cannot afford.

⁴ please see Heather C. Flores' practical guide *Food Not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard Into A Garden, and Your Neighborhood Into A Community* (2007) Chelsea Green.

All of the arts originally evolved within the context of *place* and *community*. Long before they arrived in the halls of academia, on Broadway or within the walls of dojos and museums, the arts belonged to the Folk, who wisely cast them in valuable healing, therapeutic, and integrative roles. Though the above places can surely *house* the arts, the *practice* of these arts, like our bodies, is designed to move out of doors as well, where it can be put to practical use in our everyday lives.⁵ In true egalitarian fashion, the arts have always offered *anyone* who practices them deep understanding of Earth's grand cycles and strength of community. The good news is that these tools are still there. All we need do is use them.

THE YOGA OF GARDENING

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 yoga postures are only one of the many aspects of yoga.

When we recognize the yogic opportunity in Earthwork, 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 of better service to our goals of sustainability. 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.

I am referring here to another strategy—balance. I am not suggesting that we drop out of our yoga or dance classes. After all, we have much we can learn from good teachers. 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, practicing, and dancing the garden alive, all together—this *is* yoga.

⁵ 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.

BEYOND “THE BOX”

In short, if we seek to free ourselves from the confines of techno-industrial society, we can no longer 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 requires us to get wild, to get our hands in the soil, to get creative with our community and neighbors – a process by which we risk getting quite messy at times. But such a risk pays off in the long run.

When we respect our bodies, they guide us towards vibrant and living food, clean water, fresh air, heartfelt 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. Leading us “out of the box” of contemporary disillusionment and despair, our reward is vision of a thriving and sustainable culture that is indeed within our reach.

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 Bodyversity 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