

# Nature as Mythic Healer:

My Journey into the  
Heart of the Universe



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nurture my pain in the loving embrace of nature.*

Michael Sapiro

#### **MY LOVER, THE EARTH**

Slow down, she whispered.  
You're missing everything.

What you've begged and longed for,  
fought for and took flight after,  
dug down into and cried over,  
is *right here*.

Soothe your bare blistered feet in my soil.  
Caress my smooth bark with your roughened hands.  
Lay your whiskered face in my soft green moss,  
and your body down into my leafy ferns.

Smell my loam, my perfumed pitch of pine,  
that sweet decaying Balsam wood,  
and taste my moist earth in your mouth.  
Let me invade all your senses.

And I let her.

A loon's wail wakes me  
from this nubile dream,  
and once again I hear people  
and smell wood smoke in the wind.

I kept hearing people say "Travels with Charlie, huh?" And it was true, partly. Like Steinbeck, I did just lose my wife of almost 16 years, but in a loving, heartbreaking separation. I closed my practice, bought a camper, packed my dog, Bruce Moses, and gear into the truck, and headed off for a travel pilgrimage across America that had no foreseeable end. Right before leaving Boise I bought "The Wildwood Tarot," a new deck that was aimed at bringing out the forest archetypes from my own psyche, while teaching me respect for the great Mystery found within nature. There was no way to predict that this journey would not only take me into the healing heart of the forest, but would teach me the ultimate lesson in love: I've always wanted to be a mystic; it only took losing my wife to take God as a lover.

For me, going on retreat in nature has always been the best medicine. I wanted to feel all the feels, to truly touch the pain with loving awareness. I had to become the safe container for myself to experience all the grief and hurt, and I also needed something to hold me through this transformation. Nature was the mythic healing space I sought. So, I bought my first Tarot card deck, compiled my favorite works of mystical poetry, packed several books on myths and woodland archetypes, and headed for the Northeastern United States. I would be spending the next 3.5 months living in my camper



with my dog in the magical, sometimes frightening, but always enlivening forests of Upstate New York, Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. I set off not knowing how long this trip would be or when it would end, where I would stay, or who I would meet; my only purpose was to face and nurture my pain in the loving embrace of nature. I left most of my life behind not knowing what I would do after the retreat. What I took was 24 years of meditation practice and a firm faith in the workings of the universe.

Before leaving on this trip I would cry myself to sleep, my body racked in pain. My attachment to my wife was so strong I couldn't imagine ever feeling better (even though I have made my living leading people to their own inner radiant state of wholeness and health). In my delusion, I had no idea I would be sitting just months later in the gentle, healing embrace of the Mystery—that ever-present, radiant, boundless Love found in spiders and their webs, along river banks, in lakes, marshes and bogs, under trees, and on mountain tops. Once I slowed down to the natural rhythm of nature, I could hear, smell, taste, and sense the world around me in ways I had not since my time as a monk in the caves and forests of Northern Thailand many years before. My transformation on this retreat in nature began as short waves of calm and then bursts of energy. Flashes of the Earth's tremendous genius found and felt in twisting tree roots over rocks, the sunlit soft moss I slept in that held my body like a lover's embrace, in the way caterpillars fell from trees on my sweatshirt and hair and crawled down my arm. Once in the Catskills a spider crawled onto my leg and stood still, staring at me, into me, and I knew I found my way into the heart of the forest, that I was home.

During this retreat and pilgrimage I slowed down and became attuned with the living Earth and her creatures. I found myself interacting with the world around me, without fear and with a newfound respect. I began to welcome the visits of spiders, ants, the creepies, and the crawlies into my camper, on my clothing and wild hair, in my food, and into my life. I was learning from them, being invited into a world I

was often too much in a rush to appreciate or even notice. I began to witness the immense intelligence of the Universe in a spider, and this filled me with awe, and hope, because I was not alone. I am actually never alone. My personal and individual boundaries were dissolving as I was accepted into the grandeur of nature, and my grief had immense space to be felt without being all-consuming. Grief slowed me down, and brought me to my knees, which is where I re-discovered the majesty of Nature, containing the boundless Love I so needed to heal and grow:

### MISTY MOUNTAINS AND MUD

It's as if his feet were bound  
by chains making each step  
up the forested slope  
a major force of will.

The pathway, so full of loose rocks,  
slugs, broken branches,  
bones, and slippery mud,  
seemed to have grown over.

His pace slow and breathing  
labored, he noticed more  
than if he had been free  
to move at his own pace.

There were indentations in the mud  
of footprints.  
Short shuffled steps,  
like his own,  
leading up the path.

There were indentations in mud  
of knees,  
where others had fallen,  
perhaps in prayer  
or exhaustion.

There were indentations in mud  
of foreheads,  
and bodies splayed,  
where others had lain  
posed in prostration of surrender.





Down in the mud life was bustling:  
marching colonies of ants,  
crickets chirping and jumping  
from blades of grass to rocks.

The sounds of birds,  
the whoosh of wings  
from overhead he heard.

Sunlight,  
wind,  
the soft babbling of a stream.

So how do we go from deep emotional pain to feeling the boundless Love of the universe? For me, it is facing the dragon of hurt directly, allowing nature with its slow pace and vibrant energy to soothe, nurture, and enliven, and to become the radiant source of Love we are seeking. We must learn to tolerate the discomfort of sitting with and holding our own pain. While Nature has the power to sooth, nurture, and transform us, it ultimately cannot help us heal without our own collaboration in the process. Healing occurs interdependently between ourselves (body, mind, spirit) and Nature. We name and feel it, Nature provides the medicine. Slippery Elm bark helps a sore throat (among other uses) but won't necessarily reduce a fever. You must know what you are facing so Nature can provide the right medicine. This is both literal and metaphorical as our ailments can range from spiritual, or psychological to physiological.

## ***Dreams, Spirits, and Scat***

I had vivid dreams on this journey, especially during intense weather or in incredibly wild places. Somewhere in the Rocky Mountains Bruce and I took a long hike at dusk and heard the moaning bellow of a cow moose calling in her bull to mate. That night I stood under the cobalt blue gray skies until the stars poked through the fabric of the cosmos to shine its ancient history on me. And then the winds came.

Gusts of 50mph winds rocked my camper from 8:30pm till 2am. I sat and comforted Bruce as he was jolted inside the camper every time a gust came

through. I realized why the ancients thought of God and the gods as rageful when angry and violent winds blew this way. I even began to wonder if I had transgressed to bring such ferocious winds on me. Probably. That night I dreamt I was in a Greek myth, watching Pandora open her jar (not box) and release a maelstrom of pain into the world, trapping in Hope by accident.

I dreamt of my wife and the ancestral love that was once our home:

## **FACE IN THE MIRROR**

I stand for a length of time  
facing myself.  
I stare so long I see canyons and rivers,  
craters and mountains,  
etched in my face.

There are whole villages,  
with houses and thatched roofs,  
horses and carts, wells and springs.  
The pace of life is slow, moves  
with the seasons, bound by Laws of Nature.

I find myself living in one such village  
with my wife who tends to chickens  
with our dog at her heels.  
Village children circle around her  
as she sings songs of our ancestral past.  
Even in the serious sadness of these fables  
she makes the children laugh and squeal in delight  
at the foolish tales of the trickster god,  
who like me, creates chaos and mayhem where none  
is needed, just for the sport of it.  
I watch her from my window  
where I write new stories  
of distant lands to share later  
near the community fire.

An itch on my nose wakes me  
and I see a man with shaving cream  
on his half-shaven face  
staring back at me.



I dreamt of a wolf walking up to me, nuzzling his head against mine, and then running off into the wild. I also dreamt of bears and woke to find scat near the creek by which we were parked. Nature, having slowed my mind and opened my heart, connected me to the spirit world, to my ancestors, and to a spaciousness that held all of this in place. The extraordinary was becoming ordinary.

### ***Making the mystical ordinary***

How do we bring mystical states into our everyday life? If I am not able to integrate these life affirming, expansively radiant experiences into my being, (that also means my thoughts, behaviors, speech, and relating to others), I am not sure they have value. Yes, the experience itself can be revelatory, life enriching, and transformational for sure. However, for me, unintegrated mystical states are like incense smoke: they leave a fragrant smell behind, but have no substance. My practice is to make mystical states ordinary through embodiment: my aim is for all of my interactions, my work, the way I operate in relationships, how I take care of myself and others, and the ways I play, to be filled with love. For me, mystical states influence and impact my everyday decisions and behaviors: the way I practice self-care, to the foods I choose to eat, the prayers I say before eating, the way I remain kind and open-hearted during conflict with others, etc.

Nature with its shining presence was my mirror in which I saw and felt my own inner, radiant goodness. In its rhythms of storms, the pounding of wind on my camper, the swish and swirl of lapping water, in the chirps of birds and the scurrying of moles feet, I found a beating heart that was the same as the beating heart in my own body. I heard the Heart of the Universe in nature, like a drum through a forest. I sat in wonder on river banks and heard the pulsing of life living in the current, like blood flowing in my ears and through my body. What was me and what was It? Universal consciousness makes no distinction between forms. Mike was infused by It until he and It merged. I found calm, resolute strength inside me that I never knew was there. I found patience with

myself. What I believed to be some kind of spiritual experience was me not feeling anxious for two weeks straight, which actually was a spiritual experience it turns out! I became just a guy with his dog. Nobody special, and totally free. It was time to return home.

### **Homecoming**

#### **FIRESIDE**

Somewhere in the forests of Ohio  
I'm not waiting, and have nothing  
I'm wanting, and there is no search  
for something I'm hoping to find.

I'm not wondering or weaseling,  
nor begging or borrowing.  
But there is a bargain being  
made on my behalf, by the better

half of my own being. I keep  
God as my innermost companion,  
my Lover, and tend this fire,  
that burns my toes and face,

and give up nothing.

It was time to go home. I felt the call to serve my community again, to bring this immense stillness that radiated love back into the world. I felt no more grief, only peace and a deep grounding. I felt at ease with the separation from my wife, as I found the Lover that resides inside my own heart. I was free to let her go, or to work it out, to move on, or move back in. I left brokenhearted and was returning back into life wholeheartedly. Nature was the mythic healer, mending the wounded soul and body, and bringing me to the very heart of the universe.


About two weeks after my return, I watched Dave Chappelle being interviewed by David Letterman and he talked about the power of the Zamzam Well in Saudi Arabia: "They say that it's an inexhaustible well. The thing that comforts me about it is the idea that all of this is from a singular Source. That this Source



is ultimately kind, and that even though we may not understand the intentions of this Source, we are all connected and bound by it... The idea is that this place does mean something. It's a place where you come to learn. Where you come to know. You come here knowing nothing then you get a head full of shit and you go on." And on I'm going, with a head full of knowledge, and a heart filled with the majesty of it all!

Author's Note: One month after coming home I am writing this article in a snowy cabin next to the Salmon River, looking out at the majestic Sawtooth Mountains. Back to solitude for a weekend. I woke up sometime in the night thinking my wife was next to me and I asked if she could hold me. Then I realized it was my dog Bruce pressed against me and I fell back

asleep. I texted that to her upon waking and this was her response: Aww I must have felt that in the middle of the night... I thought you were next to me too.

Leave room for magic. 

To learn more about how I bring the mystical into the ordinary please listen to this podcast interview with *Psychedelic's Today* <https://psychedelictoday.com/2020/10/20/pt214-dr-michael-sapiro-engaged-spirituality-bringing-the-mystical-into-the-ordinary/>



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