



Of Nature and Friendship

A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
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During difficult or pensive times, many of us venture into the sanctuary of nature seeking new wisdom for our big questions of life — or perhaps to re-affirm our comfort with old answers to the same questions. Other times we're not sure of our quest; we just feel drawn to our wild and personal refuges.

An intimate experience with nature can bring us tranquility and renewed insight, at least for a time. And if the bond becomes deep enough, for a *life* time. The natural world is a place for listening to the spiritual yearnings within us — those places of the soul that we struggle to visit amidst the grocery shopping, and office deadlines, and catching up on Facebook, and squeezing in 15 minutes more on the elliptical machine.

I am blessed to have long and deep bonds to several truly wild places. Nothing replaces visiting them in person, yet my spiritual link to them is so strong that when I still my mind, I can place myself right there. Lying on the nighttime sand at Assateague Island, with a riot of stars above and ghost crabs scurrying about my feet. Watching the otters play in Vermont's Bourne Pond, as the evening light fades and then sends out a last, giddy burst of magenta. Paddling through the sleet on the Boundary Waters' Saganaga Lake, with an icy/hot feeling of being fully alive while going head-to-head with a joyful challenge.

Whether traveling afoot, afloat, or through the mind, the joy and respite of nature are always there for us, when we are open to receive them. But nature was not *put* there for us. That kind of human hubris too often leads us to exploit and harm the natural world. Thankfully, we can never kill off nature, but we do have the dreadful power to dramatically alter its form, and even to eliminate our own species in the process. But I don't believe that is our fate. Most of us are especially careful with the welfare of our friends and loved ones, even on the rare occasions when a little hurt may be unavoidable. So if we — *humans* — can come to see nature as a friend, then we are likely to handle her with that same loving kindness.

Unfortunately, that has not been our course since the industrial revolution, and probably from the time science adopted the mechanistic, mind/body separation advanced by Descartes, Newton, and legions of their protégés. Too often we have seen nature as a beast to be tamed, or as booty awaiting our plunder, or as just a stage set for our human ventures. Not all cultures share that view, of course; some see the material and spiritual worlds as unified. But their separation has been a common mindset for ten generations now. When we finally grow beyond that — going back to the future, in a way — we will unlock an enduring and ecologically sound partnership with nature. We are progressing in that task, but clearly we have a long road yet to travel.

Ultimately, we need a re-birthing of our societal attitudes about the natural world. Nature itself provides inspiration for such renewal, with its rolling seasons of hibernation and re-emergence. Yet our own ecological awakenings must *not* be cyclical, waxing and waning with popular culture or with the short-term resolve that arises out of each new environmental crisis.

Instead, our bond with nature must mimic our best personal relationships, where our feelings for loved ones remain steady and affirming throughout our inevitable highs and lows, and despite all the utterly surprising episodes of life that sneak up on us. Truly meaningful connections with nature — just as between people — must be enduring, unshakeable, and grounded in our highest personal beliefs, integrity, and affection. They must not be fleeting infatuations that shoot off like rockets, only to come down like meteors.

Powerful and loving relationships with nature can arise anytime in life, but most often they begin during childhood — that magical period when our brains, bodies, hearts, and spirits are all developing in fluent synchronicity, like the one entity they are meant to be. So when we connect our children with nature, we are fueling deep spiritual foundations for both conservation and personal wisdom. Such intense and passionate connections remain much too rare — both among humans and between humans and nature. But once such potent bonds are activated, they last a lifetime. It is these deep personal connections that can best guide our loving friendship with nature in ways that will help all of us — young and old alike — to thrive.