

MICAH MORTALI



REWILDING

MEDITATIONS, PRACTICES, AND SKILLS  
FOR AWAKENING IN NATURE

FOREWORD BY STEPHEN COPE

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# 1

## MINDFUL REWILDING

When I lead outdoor programs and retreats, I often invite participants to remove their shoes for periods of slow, mindful walking in nature. One beautiful trail I like to use runs along a stream where the ground is smooth and easy on the feet, especially for those who don't have calluses from years of going barefoot. I invite everyone to close their eyes and slow their breathing. We feel the sensation of our feet touching the earth, and as we begin to walk, we stay connected to our breathing. We move without any talking or social interaction. A five-hundred-yard stretch of trail can take thirty minutes to cover at our mindful pace. We are unhurried, in the moment. You can try this yourself in your own neighborhood or home, and take as long as you like.

Afterward, we gather back together as a group, sit in a circle, and pass a stone around from one person to another. Whoever holds the stone has the authority to speak, and everyone else listens with compassion to the speaker's observations and experience. What I hear them say time and again is that they have not walked barefoot on the earth for ten, fifteen, or even more years. After one group walked barefoot across an expansive lawn toward a tree they had chosen, one participant said that he found it difficult to maintain his balance without

shoes, that he had almost fallen over three or four times. It had been twenty-five years, he said, since he had walked barefoot on grass.

The simple practice of walking barefoot on the earth and bringing awareness to the sensual experience of contact and connection can be life changing. It's about so much more than just being barefoot. It's about opening yourself to sensual contact and relationship with nature. It's about a willingness to feel and connect with the great web of life that surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds us all together.

Making physical contact with the earth through the senses is one of the pillars of human rewilding. Another is connecting to where our food comes from and participating in its procurement. Whether you forage for wild berries or grow tomatoes, dig for clams in a tidal flat or at the edge of the surf, fly-fish for trout or bow-hunt for whitetail deer, rewilding is about reestablishing a connection to your place in the food chain and to the other living things that sustain our lives.

Rewilding is actually a vast subject, and it can pertain to the rewilding of ecosystems by reintroducing species that were extinguished, such as wolves or bobcats, or to the rewilding of human life by exploring ways of connecting with the earth and living more in harmony with it. Some people focus on wilderness survival, while others geek out on natural or primal movement patterns for the body, exploring how to go barefoot and move gracefully and powerfully over the land. Others are drawn to ancestral skills, such as friction fire-making, shelter building, animal tracking, or flint knapping to make ancestral tools. Still others explore plant medicine, foraging, wild food harvesting, or shamanic healing practices. Any one of these subjects could take up an entire book, but I'll keep our focus on personal rewilding, or the practice of mindfulness in nature, which connects us to our original natural or wild essence.

At one time across the continents, all of our ancestors lived close to the earth, its seasons, cycles, and many life-forms. Today, many people in the developed world are far removed from contact with nature and living lives of constant stress. Most people today recognize more corporate logos than the flora and fauna in their bioregion. Modern environments are often "ecologically boring," as environmental activist and journalist George Monbiot writes, and do not refresh the mind or support the

health of the nervous system.<sup>1</sup> Think about the average office environment or chain store, with its fluorescent lights, few windows, stale air, and computer screens. These places dull our senses, and their sterility can make us sick. Health crises that arise from sedentary lifestyles have increased dramatically around the world, and these diseases track closely with the disruption and destruction of our climates and planet.

Perhaps separating people from the earth is a purposeful effort by modern companies and governments. For the further we individuals are from intimately knowing our lands, the easier it is for organizations to destroy environments and the clean air and water on which we depend, in the name of progress and economic growth. With so many people spending so little time establishing healthy bonds with nature, who will speak for the planet? Where will the future earth stewards come from?

Rewilding offers a way out of this unsustainable cycle of existence, and it gives us a variety of ways to live in closer relationship with the earth, which also allows us to live in deeper relationship to the self. Our bodies, senses, minds, and hearts are but one expression of one species, one manifestation of the living earth. When we draw closer to the field of life pulsing through our feet, flowing through our lungs, and moving through our digestive tract, we are communing with a larger, more expansive model of who and what we are. In this sense, rewilding is also a journey of self-realization that leads us into nature, both the natural world we find within ourselves in deep meditation and the natural world we find in the forests, oceans, fields, and mountains of this living earth. In either case, it is a journey of self-discovery.

The great historian and theologian Thomas Berry put it this way:

In ourselves the universe is revealed to itself as we are revealed in the universe. Such a statement could be made about any aspect of the universe because every being in the universe articulates some special quality of the universe in its entirety. Indeed, nothing in the universe could be itself apart from every other being in the universe, nor could any moment of the universe story exist apart from all of the other moments in the story. Yet it is within our

own being that we have our own unique experience of the universe and of the Earth in its full reality.<sup>2</sup>

Rewilding is an endeavor to be awake, alive, and aware on a planet that is crying out for us to listen and respond with skill and wisdom. It is a journey of coming home to our human selves, to a reunion with our sensing and feeling animal bodies. In rewilding we awaken to the miracle of life, give thanks for every breath, and assume our role as caretakers of this precious and sacred living earth. We remove the shoes that insulate us from the energy flowing in the grass and through the earth and stones. We open our windows and listen to the language of birds, wind, and clouds; the voices of thunder, rain and space; and the sounds of the moon and the stars.

## **Ecological and Human Rewilding**

Man always kills the things he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness. Some say we had to. Be that as it may, I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map. ALDO LEOPOLD

For hundreds of thousands of years, our species lived intimately with the earth. We were in the wild and of the wild. Efforts to rewild ecosystems aim to protect lands from human development, creating wildlife corridors that allow animals to move from one area to another and reintroducing keystone species or apex predators, whose presence is essential for the overall health of the ecosystem in which they evolved. When these animals are absent, imbalances occur. For instance, white-tail deer populations now overpopulate suburbs around the country because natural predators are lacking. This leads to a variety of negative ecological impacts, such as soil erosion and the destruction of plant species on which other animals depend; the loss of native species, including birds; and the overgrowth of nonnative species. It also results in sickness and starvation of the deer themselves.

Internationally respected environmentalist Bill McKibben has proposed that half of the earth's land and water be set aside as wild in order to minimize humankind's negative effects on the planet's systems. In such a model, rewilded ecosystems would only require minimal human management because they would in essence regulate themselves with a natural balance of predator and prey. The intelligence of the living earth would be in charge, as it was before humans became such a dominating force.

Other proponents of rewilding ecosystems advocate for the reintroduction of apex predators, such as mountain lions in North America, wolves in Scotland, and even elephants in Europe. Apex predators could not only help restore ecological balance but also contribute to the psychological well-being of the people who live near them. In his book *Feral*, George Monbiot writes about an interesting phenomenon: people all over Great Britain frequently report seeing wild large cats. These sightings of ABCs (Alien or Anomalous Big Cats) number well over a thousand, and the authorities have thoroughly investigated every report—though no large cats have been found to exist or to breed there. Monbiot posits that humans have an innate need to be in relationship with large predators, that their existence is inextricably bound with our own. Without them, we feel a sense of emptiness and loss.<sup>3</sup>

This psychological need for the presence of large animals, especially cats, historically our most feared predator, is deep and may lead to the large volume of false sightings. Perhaps this is similar to the phantom pain that a person missing a limb experiences (when the brain produces pain in neurons that correspond to a limb that is absent). Perhaps our minds produce phantom images of a vanished member of our natural world. Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson refers to humankind's fascination and need for interaction with other life-forms as "biophilia," while Native American scientist and professor of environmental biology Robin Wall Kimmerer refers to our modern disconnection from other life-forms as "species loneliness."<sup>4</sup>

To the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves. E. O. WILSON<sup>5</sup>



Recently, while walking out my backdoor one morning to see what new animal tracks I might find, I noticed that the goldenrod growing along my border with the woods was trampled in a big circular path. The trail, which had been thoroughly compressed, led to a patch of black raspberries. It was clear that a black bear had been here very recently and that the bear had enjoyed a meal. In fact, I had been out there just an hour before and not noticed the trail, so the bear may have been by just moments ago. When I came back out, I had my daughter Cora with me and showed her the bear trail. Her eyes went wide. It's exciting to live so close to such animals. The week prior, while I was sipping my coffee and listening to the morning chorus of birds, a large bobcat crossed the backyard and headed into the forest. The furious alarms from jays and robins followed that cat into the woods and beyond. What a gift it is to share the land with such beautiful and powerful beings!

Living in the hills of western Massachusetts, I feel fortunate to have black bears, coyotes, bobcats, and even the occasional mountain lion pass through. Spending time alone in the deep woods and knowing that these creatures also share this land awakens a great hope in me. I grew up in Connecticut before the return of the wild turkey and the emergence of the eastern coyote, and when there weren't any bears around. As a young man in those woods, I longed for some greater encounter, even a taste of danger, more than what the deer and ticks could afford me. Just knowing that these powerful creatures are here now sharpens my senses. I am more alert and aware. I know that these other beings are not out to get me, of course, but I also know that they are faster and stronger than I.

Off the coast of Cape Cod, in Massachusetts, seals have returned to the waters, and they've been followed by great white sharks who come to feed on them. Over the past few years, during our family trips to the Cape, I have noticed that these powerful predators shape how I feel in the water. As with the bears and the large cats near my home, I know that I am back on the food chain when I see seals swimming just ten to twenty feet offshore because I know that the great whites are hunting nearby, however unlikely an attack is.

In the Berkshires, people love talking about bears, bobcats, mountain lions, coyotes, fishers, and other wild predators that live in the region. Like Monbiot, I wonder if this fascination is a longing for connection with the alpha predators that held such an important role in our lives for hundreds of thousands of years. The bear and the wolf are mega-entities in the human psyche. Some anthropologists believe that the earliest evidence of human religious behavior was the worship of the cave bear (*Ursus spelaeus*), whose remains have been found in the Chauvet Cave in France, along with magnificent red paintings of these enormous bears. These creatures were the gods of old. They were the teachers, spirits, and ancient dangers of a world before humans developed written language.

When guests come to my retreats at Kripalu and see signs that advise them to be aware of bears, their eyes widen, as my daughter's did, and they smile. They enjoy the sense of adventure that a wild animal's presence brings, the idea that they are somewhere where bears roam and that they might encounter one on a trail. This is primal stuff. The fascination with which people respond to the presence of our wild friends speaks to our loneliness as a species and our need for connection with the more-than-human world.

My barber is a local man who lives on the other side of my mountain. He often shares with me reports about a black bear who lives in our woods. According to him, when the bear stands on its hind legs, a white patch of fur in the shape of a heart is visible on its chest. He calls the bear "White Heart" and says the creature is old, large, and legendary. I've never seen White Heart, but I love the story. One day I hope to see him standing in the goldenrod, eating black raspberries. What I love about White Heart is that the bear is a local legend on our little mountain. Once upon a time, every forest, mountain, and little hamlet had its own legends. I hope rewilding will give that to us again.

Sightings of mountain lions have also long been reported in western Massachusetts. The state says that there is no evidence that mountain lions are breeding here, but if they're not living here, they certainly seem to be passing through. One mountain lion that was killed by a car in Connecticut in 2011 had traveled 1,500 miles. And according to my barber, a hunter friend had the following experience.

While sitting in his tree stand one October during hunting season, the hunter got the funny feeling that he was being watched. He turned to look behind him but saw nothing. When he lifted his gaze to follow the trunk of a white pine up above his position, there in the crook of the tree, thirty-five feet off the ground and fifteen feet above him, he saw the body of a dead deer! What animal is strong enough to carry a dead deer thirty-five feet up a tree? There's only one: a mountain lion.

When my barber told me this story, I got a chill, as I would from a science-fiction or horror movie. Is this story true? It certainly could be, and I can imagine how humbling it would be to see something like that. It was an indication for that hunter that he was definitely not the only predator in those woods.

Modern life shields many of us from those kinds of experiences, though you certainly don't need to be a hunter to draw closer to the cycles of predator and prey. You need only to make a habit of sitting outside in a regular spot to watch the birds. Before long, a whole other world will begin to open. We'll explore some practices for peaceful encounters with nature and our relatives later on in the book.

## **Domestication Antidote**

Modern people have become domesticated. We trade a part of our essential wildness to be part of society. We trade our time at jobs for food, shelter, and the other essentials we need for survival. The term *domestication* comes from the Latin word *domesticus*, which means "belonging to the house." Considering our modern, sedentary, and indoor lifestyle, "belonging to the house" seems an accurate description of most people's lives today. In creating safety, creating places without edges, without danger, without risk, we have removed the element of gravity, the downward pressure that strengthens bones, muscles, and will. Domestication has brought us comforts, but not a sense of accomplishment, gratitude, or humility.

With personal rewilding, we relearn ways of being in relationship to the earth, ways that predate the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Making a fire or a shelter is not just done for utility; it can be

a work of art, a reverent expression of our love for the gifts of life. World-renowned founder of the Tracker School, in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, Tom Brown Jr. learned from his teacher Stalking Wolf, an Apache tracker, that ancient skills were always taught with thanksgiving and reverence for the living earth.

Acquiring and using these skills is profoundly transformational. The bow drill, for example, involves birthing fire by creating friction. You use a small bow that turns a spindle on a hearthboard to create smoke and eventually a small coal that, if handled carefully and attentively, can be breathed into fire in the palm of your hand. When I demonstrate this technique, people are often brought to tears. There is something primal, ancient, and profound about taking part in this ceremony. Before people experience it, however, they often ask me, “Why do you need to know how to make fire with a bow drill?” It’s as if they think that because we have matches now, there is no value in knowing the old ways. I can’t blame them for asking, since they have never experienced what it is like to embody the archetype of Prometheus and bring forth the element of fire through sweat, focus, dedication, and surrender of the ego. It changes you.

Are we different from our wild ancestors who lived outdoors year-round and hunted, gathered, or grew their food in relationship with the seasons and the living earth? And if we have changed, can we rediscover and reignite our essential wildness and intimacy with nature’s forces?

I believe we can, and I’m eager to share with you the methods and practices I promote to rewild my students. First, let’s explore a little about the effects of domestication on us and why we would want to supplement our “sivilizing” (as Huck Finn spelled it) with rewilding.

## **Nonuke the Wild**

When I was five years old, my parents adopted a Siberian Husky and named her Nonuke, a take on *Nanook of the North*, the 1922 documentary about the Inuit people, and also a nod to my parents’ role in the antinuclear-power movement following the accident at the Three

Mile Island power plant. As a little boy, I was thrilled to finally get a dog. I imagined her sleeping on my bed and being a loyal and loving companion. When we brought her home, I asked if I could walk her. But when my dad handed me her leash, she took off running so hard and fast that I was literally dragged down the gravel road on my chest for fifteen feet. Cut, scraped, and crying, I was astonished by her raw pulling power and saddened that she wasn't the docile companion I had hoped she would be.

Nonuke went on to break every rope and lead we ever put on her. No matter how we tried to train her and keep her home, she always escaped. Once she jumped out of my dad's Jeep on the highway, and another time when she was loose, she attacked a poodle that walked in front of her mate's house. One Saturday, she returned to us after being gone for days, bounding out of the woods with a deer leg in her mouth, as happy as I ever saw her. Whenever it snowed, she was in ecstasy. Once when we were out in the snow, she ran at me so hard from behind that she flipped me up and onto my back before I even knew she was coming. Then she turned toward me with her big tongue hanging out and her eyes smiling, so perfectly in her element. She was a husky, and huskies need to run. Nonuke couldn't live on a leash, in a crate, or in an apartment. It wasn't in her nature, and she never surrendered. She always broke free and expressed her wildness—no matter what.

Like many people today, I often wish I didn't need to drive a car at all. Although I love my work and must travel to my workplace, I often feel trapped in my modern lifestyle. With a mortgage, grocery bills, and all of the other aspects of life that require money, I feel compelled to stay on the hamster wheel, even though I know I am contributing to the degradation of the earth. Sometimes, in meetings at work or sitting in a chair for hours at a time, I feel cooped up and jittery. I want to stand up and move. I watch my coworkers chewing gum, clicking their pens compulsively, adjusting their papers, rearranging their folders, and moving their phones from here to there and back again. I can feel their urge to move, and I know the self-control required to sublimate these ancient impulses. I look out the window and feel the way I did in second grade, counting down the minutes to recess or the end