



Pathways in the Urban Wild

As Lucy Jones and her daughter encounter wildflowers in a housing development, Lucy considers the healing benefits of an attentive relationship with the living world and the complex barriers to that relationship within urban areas.

Five petals in the absolute definition of scarlet. Ultraviolet purple center with a baby pink core. Crimson pink stamens ending with all-important anthers in sunshine yellow.

It was sunny, so the flower was open. Serendipity and the sublime, in broken concrete. We looked up to see the red kite circling the construction site, and swifts screaming through the skies, echoing the wonder at our feet.

I've been taking my three-year-old daughter on "wildflower safaris" on our street, seeking beauty in small handkerchiefs of land and patches of soil beside the building site. During the height of lockdown, this was our one mandated walk outside, for just an hour. We inhaled as much life as we could find.

At first, there wasn't much to see. I live on a big, wide road that feeds into the center of a town in the English countryside. It's a bare road compared with other tree-lined avenues nearby, with a few, small trees dotted about. Across the street is a large

construction site where they are building around six hundred new homes. I can see the deep-green countryside on the horizon over the scaffolding and breeze blocks; in our ward, there is an under-provision of open space, and the immediate area looks very industrial and urban.

But as we looked, and looked some more, our eyes adjusted. And something else happened too.

I want to tell you about the magic on my street. The borders of the road, left unmown by a council busy with the virus, became banquets of nectar for pollinators and brimmed with shapes, patterns, colors, scents. Clover in different shades—dusky pink, candy-floss, a memory of pink—spread among the sharp oranges and lemons of bird's-foot trefoil. Bees sucked sweet sap. Giant oxeye daisies with their disc-like yolks shivered and quivered in the breeze. Before the clamorous engines of the cranes and diggers were turned on again, we heard the ticker-tape of grasshoppers and the honeyed drones of bumblebees.

The noise had started to crank up again—various industrial tones and staccato beats—and the roads were newly busy. But at our moment of discovery—Quick! Come and look at this!—we didn't hear any of it; we didn't hear the fears of illness, the daily death toll, the anxieties of living in a society predicated on destruction and inequality, the Arctic reaching 100.4°F. Instead we zoomed in: I crouched down with my knees on the tarmac (my daughter is short enough to enjoy tiny wonders) and observed, closely, a scarlet pimpernel.

Why did we go in search of worms and shepherd's purse and starlings? Spring was unfurling, and looking closely, actually noticing, truly seeing, became a grip on hope. It was also a meditative escape. A little later, setting out to find snails in the warm summer rain, examining the different helix patterns, forced us to focus on the present while our subconscious was trying to furiously process what it meant to be in a pandemic.

What happens to our minds when we hear a cuckoo, as I did in lockdown for the first time since childhood? What happens to our emotional selves when we feel stressed out and decide to go to the woods or the river? I've spent the last eight years researching the relationship between human mental health and the natural world for a book called *Losing Eden*. After a period of ill health, I wondered what was happening to my mind, body, and brain when I went to the marshes, or the sea, or the rivers for healing. Soon, the question flipped, and I explored how our modern-day disconnection from the natural world, and living in societies involved in the degradation of the earth, affects our minds.

I don't take my young children on "wildflower safaris" simply because it's a good activity, I'm personally seeking the medicine of connection with the rest of nature. So what, exactly, does that mean? What's happening to my body and mind?

Studies suggest that when people spend over twenty minutes in "urban nature," levels of two physiological biomarkers of stress—salivary cortisol and alpha-amylase—drop.

If it's been raining, and I can smell petrichor—that metallic, ferric scent of the earth after it's rained—then brainwave activity linked to calmness and relaxation may be triggered. Listening to birdsong rebalances my nervous system. Watching the daisies move in the wind soothes mental fatigue. It's an example of "soft fascination," which can restore attention, according to Attention Restoration Theory, developed by leading academics Rachel and Stephen Kaplan.

When we go out looking for wildflowers, I'm nervous about becoming attached to these small areas beside the road. I imagine the wild growth will be pulled up, or mown, or killed with pesticide. At the moment, these tiny patches of green feel like an ignored network, where nature is allowed to thrive because no one has noticed it quietly regenerating, because the system—which would normally remove these overgrown patches, which would see them as errant—has been under stay-at-home orders. The scarlet pimpernel is living in an area that is being turned into houses. Judging by the other new dwellings, where there are only token scraps of greenery, the pimpernel is an aberration, an anomaly that will soon be corrected.

I've been thinking about the soup that a caterpillar digests itself into in the cocoon or chrysalis. Just like these months of lockdown and pause, the period between caterpillar and butterfly or moth is a liminal space; the post-caterpillar is essentially a brothy goo, a non-thing. It releases enzymes that dissolve its tissues and grows "imaginal discs." These are organized groups of cells which survive the breaking down process. Some imaginal discs will grow new body parts—eyes, wings, legs—that will eventually turn it into a butterfly. Others will remain dormant. Unnecessary tissues are disintegrated.

What imaginal discs do we want to hold with us, in this liminal space? Can we bring the expanded connection to the rest of nature that many have experienced during lockdown into the new world, seeing the living world in a new way, as kin, rather than something separate? As the evidence for connection with nature and health stacks up, it's clear that a repaired relationship with the more-than-human world is not an indulgence, or something niche or kooky, but imperative to our wellbeing and health, and that of the planet.

Perhaps this is a moment not of action or fixing, but instead of listening to the natural world, to the Arctic at 100.4°F, to our innate biophilia, tuning in to the soil and the trees, to a plant-consciousness we all need.

Perhaps this is a time of not-doing, of not-mowing, of not-dominating, of not-taking. A time of resting in caterpillar soup, preparing to leave the tissues—the attitudes we don't need—and instead reimagine, reimagine, reimagine what it might look like to be good co-tenants with other species.

