

Go Outside, Sink Your Feet Into the Dirt and Engage With the World

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By Raquel Vasquez Gilliland

Ms. Vasquez Gilliland is a Mexican American poet, novelist and painter. She is the author, most recently, of “Witch of Wild Things.”

I grew up in Florida, surrounded by my extended family, but we can trace our lineage back to Texas when Texas was still Mexico. Our language, customs and even the names my ancestors called themselves have since largely been lost to colonization and forced assimilation. Yet our oral traditions, expressed through storytelling, poetry and jokes, persist.

When I was a kid, we often gathered around a table, with beer and buttered tortillas, or café con leche and buñuelos, telling tales that most would consider tall. Even then, I was enchanted with how we fed ourselves with stories. There was the uncle whose hair turned entirely white when he learned his son had died in an accident. The dog who ate only meals covered in diced hot peppers.

My grandmother and mother also taught me that the natural world around us has stories to tell if you listen closely. After all, language is not unique to humans. One of my earliest memories is sitting on my grandmother’s cracked concrete porch, watching one of the many doves she had nursed back to health land in her raised hand after she called out to it. When dark storm clouds gathered over the half-finished roof, my mother would take a steak knife from the kitchen to the sky to cut the rain away. My friends thought it was magical how nature seemed to bend to their will.

It makes sense, then, that I became an author, that my life is built around stories — that the idea of my first novel came tumbling to me when I was out on a walk, as if a piece of the sky had been cut over me. And whenever I am overwhelmed or anxious or stuck in my work, my mother’s advice to me is always the same: Go outside. Be in nature.

Our busy schedules can make it hard to find time to spend in nature, and it may seem especially hard in urban areas. But at a time when so many Americans are [struggling](#) with loneliness and isolation, spending a few moments outdoors can help us feel more connected.

Fortunately, there are several easy things you can do to get out in nature, no matter where you live. You can start by sinking your bare feet in a patch of dirt and consider the ways by which the soil nourishes the plants and animals that in turn nourish us. Maybe you can find a tree to befriend, be it a pine, mango or tulip tree. Use all your senses to engage with it — observe its leaves, feel the smooth wrinkles of its bark.

When I lived in New York and Los Angeles, I’d have to hike very far to find a piece of nature to be in — the rare tree in downtown Los Angeles, the canopy of [ginkgoes](#) near Inwood Hill Park in New York City. Now, in East Tennessee, I walk a few steps past my porch, into my garden — two small strips of land that flank my two-story white and turquoise farmhouse.

When I first moved here, nonnative European grass blanketed the thirsty clay, red as dried blood. I bought a shovel and set about digging up eight garden beds in the middle of that grass, filling them with plants native to my region: coneflowers and aromatic aster, bee balm and Virginia blue bells. I tried

growing squash, peppers, yellow watermelon and white eggplant, but the plants languished and many didn't yield any fruit at all. My land seems to want nothing but flowers. So I am trying my hand at breeding zinnias, cosmos and dahlias instead. Each bloom, as rich as a jewel, now attracts butterflies and hover flies and bees to feast where there was once nothing but a wasteland.

If I am creatively blocked, I walk barefoot on the earth, no matter the season, allowing stories to feed the roots of my entire body. If I have a plot hole I need to fix, I visit my lemon and lime basil, staining my fingers with their citrus scents. If I need to make my writing more lyrical, I sit with the dahlias, imagining that their vast genetic possibilities fill me when I speak with them.

When the summer gives way to cooler nights, my focus moves from leaves and blooms to the change in the angle of the sunlight. I think about how many times it has shifted over the entire lineage of humans, signaling to the trees to change from green to citrine, smoky topaz and shades of ruby. I reminisce about how I sat in that same autumnal light as a child, listening to the stories of my elders.

You, too, can listen to my mother's advice and see what the land has to say to you — be it a wide hillside of bluestem grass or a single window box filled with petunias. If the practice of listening to the earth and the beings that inhabit it feels inauthentic, consider that humans have long been in dialogue with the natural world. Indeed their survival depended on their connection with the land and discerning what it had to say. When they died, what was left of them in turn nurtured it, too.

It could be that newly sprouted blooms or subtle shifts in sunlight signaled the changing of seasons — giving them instructions. Perhaps your ancestors, as mine most likely did, believed that the world around them was populated with sentient beings that communicated with them. I like to think that the stories my grandmother still tells when I sit at her table have inklings of those the animals, trees and rivers shared with our ancestors. Paying attention to what the land has to say is how I honor this legacy.

The languages of the lands that make this earth are the mismatched puzzle pieces connecting us to the knowledge our ancestors drew from the land — as generous as a song to a rose and as soft as the feathers of doves.

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