

## Exploring a Sense of Place

By: Karen Harwell & Joanna Reynolds      Publisher: Conexions

Exploring a Sense of Place, by Karen Harwell and Joanna Reynolds, offers a straightforward, ground-up possibility. It's fundamentally a practical guide, showing us concrete ways to get to know the natural world we inhabit, helping us to move from an abstract idea of planetary wholeness, to a direct relationship with our immediate surroundings.

"The human mind is not some otherworldly essence that comes to house itself inside our physiology. Rather it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth. The invisible shapes of smells, rhythms of cricketsong, and the movement of shadows all, in a sense, provide the subtle body of our thoughts....."

-David Abram

"I do not know whether it is possible to love the planet or not, but I do know that it is possible to love the places we can see, touch, smell and experience."

-David Orr

We are slowly recognizing that our connection to the natural world is the umbilical cord to our own existence. Many are beginning to glimpse the implications of this complex relationship, not only in terms of our physical survival, but for the survival of our psyches as well. As Therese MacGillis said, "Reawakening our inherent spiritual, psychological, and bodily bonds to the Earth is now a necessity."

Many authors have described ways that the planet has suffered due to the human community operating in a disengaged state, too often experiencing the living earth as a mere backdrop to the human drama, rather than as the very ground of our existence. We may sense that we have lost something, a richer relationship, a truer intimacy with nature. The fallout of that disconnect, isolation, and elementary grief can manifest as acts of aggression toward other living beings. Sensing this, how do we begin to rekindle our estranged relationship to inner and outer nature? To move from separation to communion? How do we actually foster a real experience as we begin to embrace the notion that we all belong to an interdependent whole?

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inhabit, helping us to move from an abstract idea of planetary wholeness, to a direct relationship with our immediate surroundings. It challenges us to rethink our understanding of community. For example, we know where the supermarket is, or the bank, or the schools. How many of us know the wild animals of our place, or where our water comes from, or on what day the shadows are shortest? This guide helps us ask these questions, and then shows us how to go out and find the answers. Along the way, we deepen our relationship to place in a profound way.

This unassuming book offers concrete how-to information and suggestions about exploring place. It offers ideas on how to decide what local areas to explore, at what times of the year, how to find local guides, experts, and storytellers as resources, and how to get to know the many kinds of histories of our place. It shows us how to go about getting to know the weather patterns, fauna, flora, and cosmology of our bioregion. It also has an extensive resource section in the back of the book.

This is a visionary work, large format, filled with lovely photographs, botanical drawings, and peppered with inspired quotes. It contains exercises for deepening our experiences outdoors and suggestions for self-examination that can lead to a sharper awareness of the attitudes we hold, allowing for the transformation of patterns. This book is also a manual, giving step-by-step instructions and all the practical tools needed to help create one's own "Sense of Place" program.

However we want to use this book, whether as a guide to lead us and our friends into a deeper relationship with our community or as a primer to start a program, it offers those of us concerned with the destruction of the natural world a healthy response. Here is a guide to foster the kind of intimate relationship with our place that will naturally inhibit a desire to harm it.

Angelica Jochim, M.A., MFT

Angelica has a mindfulness/depth-based practice working with couples, individuals, and adolescents, specializing in spiritual issues, depression, women's issues, and sexual abuse. She is the director of the Life Skills program at New Beginnings Counseling Center, and also works with the Franciscan religious order to assist survivors of clergy sexual abuse. She is a long-time practitioner of vipassana or mindfulness meditation.

With appreciation to Angelica Jochim for supplying this Book's Review.

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Santa Barbara CAMFT

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