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## **The Transformative Experience of Nature (TEN) Initiation**

Chris Hoffman

When priest and earth scholar Thomas Berry was about ten years old, he had a transformative experience upon seeing a certain meadow for the very first time. He says: the sight of that meadow in early May, “together with the sounds of the insects – the crickets, the birds – all of this somehow struck me in such a way that ever since then that meadow has become my norm of reality and value...If we don’t have certain outer experiences, we don’t have certain inner experiences or at least we don’t have them in such a profound way. We need the sun, the moon, the stars, the rivers and the mountains and the trees, the flowers, the birds, the song of the birds, the fish in the sea. All of this evokes something in our inner world, evokes a world of mystery. It evokes a world of Sacred and gives us that sense of awe and mystery” (Berry, 2002).

As a child of ten years old the poet William Wordsworth had several experiences like Berry’s during his wanderings in the hills and vales of the Lake Country of England. There, he says, “I held unconscious intercourse with beauty old as creation, drinking in a pure organic pleasure from the silver wreaths of curling mist...the earth and common face of Nature spoke to me” (Wordsworth, 1950). Similarly, as a child the founder of modern Jewish Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, would run away from school to be in solitude in the forest (Ben-Amos, 1970).

There is abundant evidence that having a strong positive childhood experience of nature like these is key for allowing a person’s creativity and full humanness to blossom. Edith Cobb studied the lives of some 300 people from the Middle Ages on who were notable for creativity and well-being. She found that “genius” almost invariably comes out of a childhood mystic experience of nature (Cobb, 1977, 1993). Richard Louv gives further evidence in his book *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2005).

In many traditional cultures, experiences like these were a normal part of growing up. Human children are innately curious. And when one's family's life is deeply and intimately interrelated with the natural world, opportunities for connection with and learning from the natural world appear daily. Initiations were also formally structured. For example, many Native American cultures sent their youth on an initiatory vision quest (Neihardt, 1972; Brown, 1979; Hallowell, 1966). Similarly, young Australian Aboriginal people would go *walkabout* – a ritual journey across the bush for expanding their wisdom and understanding.

Confirming the teachings of traditional cultures, many scientific studies establish the connection between “nature relatedness” (affinity to the natural world) and a variety of aspects of physical and emotional well-being (in addition to pro-environmental behavior and empathy) (Martyn & Brymer, 2016; Craig, Logan, & Prescott, 2016). For example, exposing humans to nature has been associated with increases in concentration, increases in self-concept, improvements in student test scores, decreases in the time it takes to recover from surgery, decreases in symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in children, decreases in aggressive behaviors, and decreases in stress (Reese, Lewis, Myers, Wahesh, & Iversen, 2014).

At some time in your life, you may have taken a walk along an unpopulated water shore or on a path through a mature, undisturbed forest, or you may have sat beside a waterfall, or enjoyed being out on a prairie watching birds in flight. If so, it probably won't surprise you to learn that people who are more connected to nature tend to experience more positive affect, vitality, and life satisfaction compared to those less connected to nature (Capaldi, C. A., Dopko, R. L., & Zelenski, J. M., 2014). Even spending just 120 minutes a week in nature can significantly improve one's sense of health and wellbeing (White, Alcock, Grellier, Wheeler, Hartig, Warber, Bone, Depledge, & Fleming, 2019). Since contact with green space and natural environments is a health asset, access to the natural environment is also a social justice issue. We must ensure that all people regardless of socioeconomic status have access to nature and opportunities to develop a relationship with Earth's natural systems (Prescott, Wegienka, Logan, & Katz 2018).

A transformative experience in nature is not just something nice to have. It is one of at least three initiatory experiences that are essential for full maturity in the Hoop of relationship.

Our first relational initiation is our initiation into what it means to be a human being. This formally begins with a birth ceremony (naming ceremony, christening, baby-welcoming ceremony, etc.), some form of which exists in all cultures. This initiation then continues over many years, as our parents or principal care-givers model for us what it means to be a human being. If we are fortunate, they are good at it. They don't need to be perfect, just “good enough” (Winnicott, 1971). If we are lucky, they are good role models and for the most part they know when and how to use praise and to set limits on our behavior for our own benefit.

After a person's initiation into the Hoop of humanity has begun, there are at least two additional key initiations to the Hoop of relationship. Both of these are initiations into the ecological ring of the Hoop. As with Erikson's Eight Ages of Man (Erikson, 1963), each of these coincides with a critical period in the development of the human psyche. And, as with Erikson's Eight Ages, each can result in a positive forward-trending resolution, or a backward-trending resolution, or simply becoming stuck. The first of these additional initiations I call the

Transformative Experience of Nature (TEN) initiation. (The second of these I call the “Kali” initiation, which I discuss further in *The Hoop and the Tree*.)

The essence of the TEN initiation is a fundamental shift of consciousness: from viewing ourselves as separate from nature, to understanding that we are each a jewel-like knot tied into the infinite webbing of Indra’s Net, the largest relational Hoop of all. It is often nature herself who performs this initiation, not some human intermediary as is true with the human ring. “TEN” is a useful mnemonic because the Transformative Experience of Nature, when it does happen, often takes place when a person is about ten years old (or sometime in the early teens). This seems to be the age when the developing psyche is primed for the experience.

Nature initiated a relationship with Thomas Berry that evoked in him a sense of wonder (“the Sacred,” “awe and mystery”) when he was ten and later developed into active caring for the environment. It became the basis for his moral compass. Berry is the one who gave us the Hoop teaching that “the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects” (Swimme & Berry, 1992).

We could say that all three of these relationship initiations have to do with developing a sense of Care. The first relational initiation, into the human world, teaches us to take care of each other. The second, the TEN initiation, teaches us to take care of the earth and her beings. The third opens us up to the cycles of birth and death and teaches us to take care of the generations. We do this by honoring the past generations and uplifting our elders and by safeguarding and teaching our youth and becoming good ancestors for the coming generations, even to the seventh generation coming. This helps us heal intergenerational trauma.

### Wonder and Kinship versus Disrespect

A successful TEN initiation ignites our sense of Wonder and of Kinship with the natural world. Wonder is the prerequisite for creativity. Kinship naturally evokes a sense of responsibility or care for the natural world, the same sense that one would feel in a relationship with a significant other human being. An unsuccessful or absent TEN initiation results in alienation from, and Disrespect for, the natural world. This enables the commodification of it.

Psychotherapist Kaisa Puhakka puts it this way: “It is only when intimacy is felt palpably as no separation that its essential connection with care becomes evident. Thus, a child experiences his finger as inseparable from or of the ‘same stuff as,’ his self, and were he to stick it in a fire he would spontaneously pull it out without conscious thought. Similarly, indigenous peoples who took their natural environment to be their sustaining mother and themselves of the same flesh as her, showed the same care and concern for their environment as they did for themselves and their families, presumably without the need to be persuaded by argument or evidence.” Yet, “contemporary educated, thoughtful folk often find themselves in the curious predicament of being persuaded by evidence and argument from evolutionary biology and ecological science that they are ‘part’ of nature, yet not feeling a part of nature in their bones and at the basis of their moral compass” (Puhakka, 2014).

As we humans navigate a passage through the treacherous straits of ecological overshoot in the world today, of which climate change is the direst symptom, and seek to arrive at the sea of tranquility of ecological justice and sustainability, we must preserve and promote these three initiations of relationship.

**Author Bio:** Chris Hoffman is an ecopsychologist, poet, climate justice advocate and retired management consultant and licensed professional counselor. He is the author of *The Hoop and the Tree: A Compass for Finding a Deeper Relationship with All Life*, from which this article is adapted. [www.hoopandtree.org](http://www.hoopandtree.org)

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