

Micah Mortali: Rewilding by Tami Simon

TS: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is Micah Mortali. Micah is the director of the Kripalu Schools, which includes the School of Yoga, Ayurveda, Integrative Yoga Therapy, and the School of Mindful Outdoor Leadership, which he founded in 2018. With Sounds True. Micah has written a new book called *Rewilding: Meditations, Practices, and Skills for Awakening in Nature*. To be truthful, this conversation dropped me into a place that I wasn't expecting; a place of deep grief and longing about our disconnection as a human species from our very ground, the ground of the Earth. Micah Mortali, I think, has some powerful suggestions for how we can come and face that grief, and also engage in healing actually at the deepest level. Here's my conversation with Micah Mortali:

To begin with. Micah, can you explain what you mean by this word, the title of your new book, "rewilding?"

MM: Sure. Rewilding is a term that generally has two meanings. One refers to the rewilding of ecosystems, and one refers to the rewilding of human life. The rewilding of ecosystems could refer to re-introducing megafauna or predators into an environment where they have not been for some time. So that could be something like the introduction, or the reintroduction, of wolves into Yellowstone National Park. Or there are folks in Europe who are talking about re-introducing wild elephants into parts of the landscape where they haven't been since the last ice age. Rewilding could also mean letting certain bioregions or large ecosystems go wild, and trusting that the earth and those environments will govern themselves and come to a place of health and wellbeing without human interference essentially. So that's one aspect of it.

And the other is human rewilding. Human rewilding is based on the idea that modern human beings are essentially—you could think of us as a domesticated version of homo sapiens, like a terrier is a domesticated version of a wolf. Modern human beings have changed as the years have gone by; we've adapted to living in indoor environments, not being very physical, not being connected to where our food comes from, not being connected through our senses to stimulating environments, just outdoor environments that are so stimulating to our senses.

So human rewilding is about beginning to reach out and reconnect with ways of living and being that most hunter-gatherer societies have access to, but it doesn't necessarily mean being a hunter-gatherer. It may mean things like gardening, beginning to grow some of your food or foraging for food. It might mean walking barefoot or even just intentionally spending time outdoors, beginning to become more intimate with the lands that you live on. So there's a lot to it, but those are the two main categories that I talk a little bit about in the book. And I focus mostly on the human side of it.

TS: And in our conversation, we're going to talk mostly about human rewilding. But before we do, let's talk a little bit about ecosystem rewilding. One of the points you make in your new book that I thought was so interesting was that as human beings, you believe that in our collective psyche, there's actually something in us that longs to have some contact with, what you call apex predators. Even to the point—we have such a psychological need for this that we can even make up seeing, that we're seeing animals, big cats, because we long for this connection. So can you unpack that? Explain that to our listeners.

MM: Sure, yes. That's something that George Monbiot writes about actually in his book, *Feral*, where he really gets into that side of rewilding, and his work is really exceptional. And what he was talking about was in Great Britain there have been hundreds of sightings of large cats, like mountain lions generally, basically. And so, he talks about how the authorities have gone out and really tried to find these big cats that people are reporting seeing. And what they've concluded is that they're not there; that people might be seeing a house cat from a distance, but not being able to gauge its size and projecting onto it all these legends and stories and folklore about these cats that are there. And he talks about how, for hundreds of thousands of years, the saber-toothed tigers and these big cats were one of the primary predators that human beings were in a relationship with, they gave so much meaning to our lives. And he puts out this idea that modern people still hunger for that wildness.

And what I write about in the book is how I've experienced that living here in Western Massachusetts in the Berkshires, where we do have bobcats, and we have black bear and coyote, and even folks talk about having coywolves, which are a mix between coyotes and wolves. And there've been reports and stories of mountain lions who are moving through our region, [they] may not be denning here but certainly may be moving through the Berkshires. And I write about how people who come to Kripalu, their eyes get so wide and they want to hear stories about bears, and when people are in the woods and they see a bear, it's very meaningful and there's a fear, but there's also this sense of being alive.

And many people that I work with here want to hear bear stories. And I've had bear encounters in the woods. I write about an encounter I had with a bear in the book, which was really powerful and meaningful for me, and put out this idea that modern people, because we spend more than 90 percent of our lives indoors and 11 hours a day on a screen, we don't have relationships anymore with the more-than-human world: our relatives here on this planet, the wild ones.

And that we may be suffering from what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls "species loneliness," which I thought was an amazing idea; this idea of species loneliness, and certainly some people meet that through having pets, but with fewer and fewer, even farms, fewer people even have relationship with domesticated animals or farm animals that also played a big role in our lives for so long. So it's a real thing. It's something that I've witnessed and experienced and I think it speaks to our need for having connection with our relatives. I like to refer to what we call animals as our relatives in the more-than-human world, not just animals because we are animals too. I feel like human beings, we're an animal. We need to have relationships with other life forms on this planet.

TS: It's interesting that you talk about how people come to Kripalu and they want to hear these stories with wild animal encounters because, even though I live in Boulder, Colorado and have had wild animal encounters myself and hear stories, I want to hear

your stories, Micah. I want to hear it and I want our listeners to hear it. And I do think it comes out of a sense of being cut off and hungry for more contact with wild animals. So, share your bear story with us and why it was so important to you.

MM: Probably about a little over 10 years ago or so, maybe it was 12 years ago, I was mountain biking in a forest near where I live. It was a beautiful October afternoon, just a perfect day, mid-60s, peak foliage, just really crisp air; just beautiful. And stopped my mountain bike on top of a hill in a very remote part of the forest, and got off my bike and saw this beautiful oak tree about 50 feet off the trail, which was on a little hill overlooking a little valley, a wooded valley. And I went over and I sat down under this oak tree, and this was a time before I was married with children and when I was doing a lot of yoga, I was really deep in my mindfulness, yoga, meditation practice.

And I sat down under a tree and I pulled my hood up over my head and closed my eyes, and I just started to meditate. And it was a really good time in my life. I was feeling a lot of gratitude, and I just started praying and I just said a prayer: I asked my divine Spirit to come and share in my gratitude with me. I was just feeling really good about where I was in my life and I just was saying thank you, and I really just invited Spirit to come and sit with me. And those were my words that I spoke out loud in that moment.

And for some reason or other, a few seconds after I uttered those words, I started to hear footsteps in the forest and I thought it was somebody hiking, so I just continued to meditate. And then, I noticed that the sound of movement was getting a little closer, a little closer, and I started to wonder what was going on. But I remained still. And then, I heard a twig snap right behind the tree, like two feet behind me. And I heard a loud exhalation, like a [makes loud breathing noise], and all the hair on the back of my neck stood up and every cell in my body, I knew that there was a bear right behind me. And the adrenaline was flowing, and I really slowly turned my head just to look over my left shoulder. And about 15 inches behind my shoulder, I could see the back side, from the shoulders to the rump of a really large black bear.

And I just slowly turned my head back, and in a split second all these survival thoughts went through my mind, like, "Do I run? Do I get up? Do I yell? Do I climb a tree? " And I immediately had the sense that the best thing to do was just remain calm and not do anything. So I just was sitting there and breathing and I guess what I was doing in that moment was what I was trained to do in Kripalu yoga, which is breathe, relax, feel, watch, and allow. I was just meditating on my fear essentially, and my fight-or-flight response.

And then, I heard the bear move and it came around to my right, and it was just about, again, a foot and a half or two feet to my right now. And it just settled down and actually sat right next to me. And it seemed like it was an eternity, it was probably only a minute that the bear and I were sitting next to one another, and I had this thought: "I wonder what it will feel like to have a bear bite my face." [Laughs] You know, "Don't think about that."

And then, the bear got up and it started to walk away and I was relieved. And I turned and I looked at the bear and, when it was about 20 feet away or so, it turned and it looked back at me and we made eye contact. And then, it just walked over the hill and out of sight. And I stood up and my legs actually gave out. I fell down because my legs were so wobbly. And I got on my bike and I just shot out of those woods. And as I was riding out of the woods, I simultaneously was just feeling so much gratitude, it was like the most amazing thing that's ever happened. And also like, wow, I felt lucky as well because it was incredible to be that close to a creature that was a couple of hundred pounds

heavier me and such an impressive, wild being.

So that experience has always stayed with me and I've had other bear encounters as well; a couple other very interesting bear counters. And then, as I've been a mindful outdoor guide in the Berkshires and launched our school here at Kripalu, I've had other really just profound experiences with barred owls or with ravens on the mountain, and squirrels and porcupines. It's quite nourishing in my life. It's been quite nourishing to have these experiences of interspecies connection out on the land.

TS: What would you say to someone who feels species loneliness, as you've described it, especially for some of these large predator species and they're just not in their environment? Like OK, they have a domesticated cat or dog and they see squirrels, but that's not really filling some part of their psyche.

MM: Yes. Well, what I would say is—and my experience has been that I can get maybe not the same but I can get a lot of that sense of that connection, that nourishing connection, from spending time with the robins that are nesting in my backyard. Or with gray squirrels that are in the park foraging for hickory nuts or acorns. There is something unique about these megafauna, and yet at the same time, I think that we also miss a lot of the simple everyday connections that are right there.

And I think I would really encourage folks to not put these big megafauna up on a pedestal like those are the kind of connections that are the most nourishing. I would say that you can make a connection with a tree in your neighborhood. You can make a connection with a family of nesting blue jays in the park near your home, or maybe up on this edge of your building in the city. It's not so much about how big the animals are, but for me it's more about, can you get to know an individual bird? First identify, "OK, I know that that's a robin, or of the robin species, but as I spend time out there every day or regularly, I get to know that, oh, that's a particular robin." And then, as you get to notice that bird, you'll notice like, "Oh, I see that it's struggling to raise its young." A whole world opens up of connection. And I think it's that intimacy and that recognition of individuals within different species that can be really powerful.

TS: That's very helpful, Micah. I think that applies to everybody. It's interesting, this term "species loneliness," I really took to it. And also another term that you introduce in your book, *Rewilding*: "place blindness." How many of us live so much indoors and in front of our screens, that we actually become blind to the place that we live? And I'd be curious to know, what do you think are some of the symptoms that somebody might have that they could identify; like, "I think I might have some place blindness"?

MM: Yes, sure. Well, I guess first off, I would say that I would want to encourage folks to not feel any shame around this. With our modern lives, it's not easy to spend time outside, especially if you have an office job or you have a commute, you're kind of forced to spend your time either in a car or in an office. And so, I think it's the structures of modern society that make that almost inevitable, that most people are going to have an experience of this. So just compassion for yourself if you feel like, "Hey, I don't know much about where I live."

But it can be overcome—well, first of all, some of the symptoms of it would be you walk outside, you look around, "I don't really know much about this land I'm on."

And I guess some questions that could get you started might be: who are the indigenous people on this land? Who was displaced by colonization on this land I'm on? That's always a good place to start. You could also start with what kind of ecosystem, what kind of bioregion am I in? What are the common species that grow here? What are the trees and the shrubs? What are the flora and the fauna? What kind of animals live here? What kind of birds? And just notice: what do I know about this land? And maybe start there.

In our school, we build into our mindful outdoor experiences, the first step always being what we call an orientation to place, which is created to purposely overcome place blindness. And so, we will talk a little bit about who are the indigenous people on this land. So for me, where I guide a lot here in Western Mass at Kripalu, the indigenous people here are the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans. And so, I'll talk a little bit about their history and invite their voice into the orientation. I'll also talk about where they are now. And we have friends in the Stockbridge-Munsee tribe who we invite out to teach in our programs. And so, their voice is speaking for themselves.

But then you can also just learn a little bit about the history of the land. Places like New York City, as an example, has an incredible ecological history to learn. It's an island, and there's springs bubbling up underneath the city that have to be pumped out all the time, and incredible bird migration coming through Central Park. So even if you're in a city or an urban or suburban environment, there's so much richness to learn about the land where you are, there's just so many things that one could begin by learning.

Another thing I'd suggest is spend a little bit of time regularly just sitting on your land, and maybe that's sitting in your backyard or in a park near where you live. Or maybe, if you don't have any of that, just sitting by your window and looking out and getting into a meditative state, noticing movement. And then, as the days and the seasons go by, beginning to understand and notice the movement of our relatives out there, who are flying and walking and crawling, and getting to know them. And that's a practice that we call "sit spot." It's known throughout the nature connection community as the "sit spot practice" and there's many different nature meditations that you can weave in, so that you can start to bring the mindfulness practice into your getting to know your land as well, which I think is really helpful.

TS: Tell me what you mean by that, "sit spot."

MM: Yes. So a sit spot is a place where you feel safe and comfortable and connected to your land, the land that you live near or on, and the sit spot practice is about going to that place regularly; if not every day, a couple times a week. And just sitting there with your eyes open for at least 15 minutes and observing movement and activity on the land. And this was a practice that originated with the really famous tracker, Tom Brown Jr, who learned it from his teacher Stalking Wolf, who comes from the Apache lineage. And Tom passed it on to John Young; John Young has a wilderness awareness school, and John's written about it in his books. It's just become a practice that's really become very loved and universal in the nature connection communities because it's very simple, it's very accessible. And because it's, in my opinion, probably one of the most effective ways to overcome place blindness.

TS: So I sit for 15 minutes in this spot that I've chosen and what do I do for 15 minutes?

MM: You observe movement and activity on the land. And that's it.

TS: What about when I start thinking that I'm planning my breakfast or my lunch or my to-do list and all the rest of that?

MM: You just come back to the movement on the land. The practice can be—you can use your breath as an anchor to get you in the moment, but unlike more inward forms of meditation, you're focusing on your senses here. So when I do the practice, I like to focus on, anchor my sense of sight as I go into—there's a way of seeing, which is sometimes called a wide-angle vision or owl vision, where you use your peripheral vision and you let your eyes relax, and you can pick up on very subtle movement on the land when you broaden your way of seeing to pick up on your peripheral. And it's called "owl eyes" or wide-angle vision, and you can make that be a part of your sit spot practice.

And of course, your mind is going to wander, but you just keep bringing your focus back to what you can see and feel. And the really cool thing about it, Tami, is that you will begin to notice like, very subtle air current movements as the grass at your feet begins to just move ever so slightly. You'll begin to pick up on things, like you might notice hundreds of ants moving in different areas on the ground, things that you normally would totally miss. You might pick up on a butterfly just very gently moving its wings 50 feet away and to the left; something you wouldn't have noticed.

The more still you become, the more you're going to pick up on, and the more you pick up on, the more you're going to have a window in to the incredibly rich and exciting world that's unfolding outside of our helms all the time. You'll see birds of prey flying overhead and how it affects the songbirds in the area. You'll notice the way that—you might even, if you become still, notice a fox or a coyote or some other animal on the land that normally might not come out if we're just tromping around, making a bunch of noise. But when we sit still, we create less disturbance and we can pick up on more activity.

TS: There's a word that you introduce in your book *Rewilding* that I wasn't familiar with that really intrigued me. The word is *spanda*, and you define it as "sacred tremor," a word from Tantric yoga. And I wonder if you can help connect that to this experience where we're sitting in this period of time. Will we start to become aware of this sacred tremor, potentially?

MM: Yes. *Spanda* is a really cool word and it's based in Tantric yoga. The sacred tremor is the movement that's going on, the vibration of all creation. In a lot of yoga and meditation classes, we talk a lot about stillness and yoga, certainly Patanjali's definition of yoga, to still the fluctuations of the mind. And there is definitely a stillness that we seek in our bodies and in our awareness when we come into our sit spot, and when we're bringing mindfulness onto the land. But it's the stillness of the observer amidst all of the vibration and activity of creation. So it's that still point within, you could think about it like almost ... I think about it like it's the eye of the hurricane, there's that still point within, but there's the swirl of activity that's always unfolding as well simultaneously.

And so, my experience has been in the sit spot that when I go out and I sit and I allow myself to become more still, to slow my breathing, to settle into the present moment, that as I find that sense of presence and that sense of relative stillness, that there is also this constant sense of vibration and movement on the earth. And even on the stillest day in the forest, there's still subtle, subtle currents of air that are moving. There's

always movement happening. And as you become more attuned, you can pick up more on what that sacred tremor is in each moment. And it can be a very awakening experience as one's awareness becomes more heightened.

And that's one of the things that's very beneficial about these mindful rewilding practices, is that along with helping to overcome species loneliness and place blindness, there's this other idea, and maybe you were going to ask about it, of sensory anesthesia, which is when we are in indoor environments too much, our senses are not stimulated in the ways that they were during our evolution when we spent most of our time outside. Our senses become dull.

So when we're outside in the elements, paying attention to this sacred tremor, paying attention to these more finely subtle movements on the land, it awakens our senses. And when our senses are more awake, we feel more alive. And that's one of the wonderful benefits of these practices, is that we do walk away with a sense of more aliveness. Which is also, I think, one of the great benefits over thousands of years of many of the different yoga traditions is that awakening of prana, awakening of life force, stimulating and awakening of the senses and feeling alive and awake in our human experience.

TS: You also talk in Rewilding about this feeling of being in exile. And you put this all together—species loneliness, being in exile, sensory anesthesia. I mean, it's a dark picture. And I'm bringing this up because I notice as you're talking, I'm feeling an incredible sense of loss and grief, to be honest with you. And I'm feeling that in my own experience—and yet I feel like a very lucky person to live right on the edge of open space in Boulder, Colorado, and to spend time up in the Pacific Northwest. And yet, I work in an office building, I commute in my car, I spend a whole lot of time involved with digital media. And I feel such a loss, to be honest with you. And such a sense of longing. And I just wonder if you can address that head-on, and when people encounter that, how you work with them with it.

MM: Oh, that is such a great question. I mentioned John Young, who is somebody I really respect, a great nature connection teacher, and a friend of mine who was at an event with him shared the story with me as a person in the audience asked John, "What would you recommend somebody learn to be a great nature connection guide?" And he said, according to this person, he said, "Do grief work." And that really stuck with me. There is a tremendous loss. I tried to address this in the book and not hide from the fact that we're living in a time of great crisis and, not to sugarcoat this as ... I didn't want to make rewilding be a prescription for just getting by in modern life.

I feel like yoga and mindfulness and rewilding are practices that are going to, in some ways and should in some ways, disrupt a little bit, and invite us to imagine different ways of living on the earth that's more in harmony with the earth. But the first step is to acknowledge that it hurts, and it's painful, and there has been a tremendous loss. I feel it. Tami, I work in an office too. I have a full-time job at Kripalu, and the vast majority of my time is at my desk. And all the things you just described, I can really relate to. I don't live off the grid, I'm not out in the woods 10 hours a day. I have to squeeze and integrate these practices into my life as well.

The reality is that many of the folks that I work with, what I'm seeing is they're running to our School of Mindful Outdoor Leadership, they're running into these programs, they're getting here, and they're desperate. They have a pent-up, a hunger, a need for reconnection with the outdoors, and it is real. I think that the iPhone

was developed in 2007 or so. Back in the late 90s, early 2000s, Internet addiction was like, 23 hours a week was considered you were addicted to the Internet. You had an addiction. Now, the average American's on a screen 11 hours a day. So we've blown past that. The change has been so sudden and so dramatic that we're just in totally uncharted territory.

The grief is very real. We're losing species at an alarming rate. I was watching this Amy Poehler movie on Netflix. She and her friends go on a trip to the wine country—it's this totally goofy, SNL team film. And it's a really funny movie all the way through, and then right at the end, Amy Poehler has an emotional breakdown, and she starts really crying about the loss of the rhinos. "How am I supposed to live in a world where there's no rhinos?" And it was very poignant and I think it was very powerful for me to see that.

And I really wonder how much grief normal folks are carrying today around the loss of these things. The scientists are telling us that our oceans could die in the next 30 years. This is heavy stuff. So how do we address it? I wrote *Rewilding* because I think the only way to address it is to go outside and begin to rebuild our relationship with the living earth. I think that the earth has the solutions. I don't think we have them. And I think we have to get out there and start listening and paying attention to the weather, to the animals and the plants on our lands. We have to become a part of this earth again if we're going to be a part of what's coming next.

TS: What do you mean, Micah, the earth has the solutions?

MM: Well, I heard somebody say this not too long ago, and I can't remember who. I think it might've been Thomas Berry, but I think he was referring to hurricane Andrew that hit Florida 25 years ago. He said the hurricane is our teacher. It will teach us how to live in Florida. It will teach us how to build our houses and where to build our houses. The earth can teach us how to live here if we listen. But if you look at the modern home, it's built with absolutely no consideration of where it is on the land. Our entire society today, for the most part, is built without any thought about how we can be a beneficial presence on the earth.

So I think if we're going to shift that, then we need to figure out where we fit in; how we can live with the bears, how we can live with the salamanders, how we can live with the bumblebees. And the only way we can do that, I believe, is if we actually go outside and start to develop personal, intimate, reciprocal relationships with our bees and our bears and our wildflowers.

Because the problem, as I see it, is that because we're so disconnected that we're not really noticing the losses that are happening in our local environments—and, especially for children, and this is something that Richard Louv wrote in his book *Last Child in the Woods*. If children are being brought up today without intimate bonds with their natural environments, where will the future stewards and poets and environmentalists and activists come from? Because all the folks who are doing that work today can trace their passion for it back to childhood experiences of deep bonding with the earth.

So that's why I think we have to do the cognitive work, we have to make the decisions about what products we're going to buy, and all of those things. But I think deeper than that, at a more psychological place, we have to actually begin rebuilding our relationships with the living earth.

TS: Now, you said something I thought was really interesting, how yoga, mindfulness, and rewilding, being out in nature, that your hope is that these practices will be disruptive—not just ways we can find to calm the you-know-what down and survive this time that we’re in, but that they’ll actually be disruptive and create changes. Tell me more what you mean by that. How, if we engage in a rewilding practice, that will have a disruptive effect?

MM: Well, it’s hard to gauge the effect that little things will have on people. I think we’ve all in our lives maybe met someone, even briefly, in our lives who’s had a small impact on us and caused a whole chain of events to lead us down another path. I think it’s like that with rewilding and with mindful nature connection practices. The experience of getting to know the land that you live on has all of these benefits for us as individuals. It can help us reduce our stress, and boost our immunity, and sleep better, and reset our circadian rhythms, and all these things that are really important. But they can also, as we get to know our lands, as we get to know our watersheds, as we get to know the animals that migrate through our areas, and we start to appreciate their presence, and we start to learn from them, that actually can change big decisions that people make in their local areas, in their towns and their cities.

It’s these experiences of appreciation, of gratitude for all of the gifts of our environments, that compel people to work to develop land trusts and get into conservation and get out and start growing food in their backyard. And all of these little changes, if more and more people start getting outside and not just hiking, through the woods with their earphones on, but listening, feeling, awakening their senses and paying attention, I think it can reactivate a way of being in relationship to the earth that’s been dormant for a couple hundred years.

TS: Now, there’s a really interesting part of your book that introduced me to something that I wasn’t familiar with, which is that people are developing ancestral skills, is what you call it. Things like friction fire building. And I was like, really? People are going out into the woods and they want to start a fire without using matches or a lighter? What are these people doing, and why are they doing it? So broaden my understanding here, Micah.

MM: Yes, so this is really cool stuff. Yes, there’s a big movement today of folks who are beginning to and have been getting reacquainted with what I like to call ancestral skills, or earth skills, is what they’re called in the community. So, these are practices like learning how to make fire with a bow drill, which is an ancient, ancient technique. It’s something you might have read about in your Boy or Girl Scout manual maybe as a kid, or you knew maybe an uncle who told you that they had done it once upon a time. But for many people, this is like magic, it’s like secret knowledge. But the reason why I fold it into our work in the School of Mindful Outdoor Leadership and why I practice these skills is because these skills helped me feel a sense of connection to the earth in very practical and sacred ways.

I learned the bow drill and some of these skills down at the tracker school, which was founded by Tom Brown Jr., who’s one of the preeminent nature connection, tracking teachers in the world. And what Tom taught us in the school was that we approach these practices from a place of deep gratitude. Gratitude for the wood that we build our bow drill kit out of, gratitude to all of the elements, gratitude to the element of fire, gratitude to the ancestors who have passed this knowledge on.

Because when you go camping or you spend a few nights out in the woods away from modern life, one of the things that becomes clear to most folks, certainly for me, is that your needs become very basic and very simple. I need a little bit of shelter, I have a tent. I need to stay dry. I need a hot meal and a fire, and companionship, somebody to talk to. And if you cover those basic needs, you feel so happy generally. Folks who go out on week-long or multi-week expeditions, most time folks come back, they feel amazing, they're sleeping better.

So there's something to be said about simplification and getting in touch with what's basic. At the end of the day, what do we really need as human beings? And what we really need is we need fire, for the most part, to cook our food and boil our water and warm us and give us companionship and comfort at night. We need to be able to create shelter. And so, how do you create a shelter if you don't have a tent or a tarp or all this other expensive gear? Well, there's ways to do it and they're really fun.

And if you know how to do these things, it forces you to get down into the earth, to get your hands dirty, and to get really close to the soil, close to the leaves and the branches. All of these earth skills that people are really interested in these days, they're very nourishing and they're very meditative as well. They also awaken the senses.

So, the bow drill is one example of it. And essentially what happens with the bow drill is—and there's some illustrations in the book to demonstrate this, but you're essentially turning a wooden spindle against a small piece of wood with something that looks like a bow and you're drawing the bow back and forth, and the spindle is spinning and it's being pressed down into another piece of wood. And the friction creates heat, and that heat begins to smoke. And you have a little bit of dust from the wood that's being ground off. And eventually that dust will ignite into a coal, which just smolders, and you place it into a little bundle of tinder that you hold in your hand and you blow into it. And then, out of your palm leaps a flame.

And if you've ever seen it or if you've ever witnessed it done or if you've ever done it, it's an experience, for me, which sometimes just brings tears to my eyes. It's as if you step out of time into an eternal moment. And you share an experience which was so pivotal for the human species, to be able to perform this almost magical task. And even for modern people today, who could just take a lighter out of their pocket and make fire, when they see a bow drill fire leap into flame, it's something they don't ever forget. It's very powerful. And there's some mystery around it. I'm not always sure exactly why that is, but it never fails to be something that folks find very, very impactful.

TS: OK, just to be a little provocative for a moment, that person who says, "Look, I live in the modern world. I get spending 15 minutes or more sitting and observing and being with what's actually here, but why wouldn't I go to my local camping store and buy a great tent that is waterproof? And they have such great technology in the last couple decades to make these lightweight tents that work so well. Doesn't that make a lot more sense? And then I can be a lot more comfortable." And also this boundary of like, "I don't want to be that uncomfortable. I don't want to have water dripping on me at night when I'm outside and I don't want to be cold. That doesn't sound fun."

MM: Yes, and it's not for everybody. Yes, I have tents and I usually camp, I usually do use a tent or a hammock or something. And yet when I go off into the forest with my

kids or on my own, I always know that I could stay out there that night and make a debris shelter with nothing but the leaves on the forest floor. And even if the temperature dropped to 10 degrees or 20 degrees, I could survive out there overnight like the squirrels do by burrowing into a pile of leaves.

And there is something about knowing how to do that and having done that, that for me changes my experience of being out on the land. And I offer it in the book because I wanted to provide some things that were aspirational for folks. You don't ever have to do them, but to know that they're there and if you feel called to endeavor to learn and embrace some of those more advanced skills, it can be extremely empowering for folks. So yes, I agree. Sleeping in a debris hut, not always the most comfortable thing, but to have the knowledge and to have the experience of it can be very life changing.

TS: Well, I think it also just brings up this challenge for some people, which is, "I don't want to be uncomfortable." And it could be at an even simpler level: "I don't want to get bitten by bugs." All the reasons people have for not getting outside more. Just talk to that for a moment.

MM: Well, we're too comfortable today. I think as a species, we're way too comfortable. And I think that's one of the reasons why we have a host of all these health issues. Being in temperature-controlled environments all the time and not experiencing the stimulation, the sensory awakening of having our bodies come into contact with the elements in the earth, isn't good for us. It's strengthening to be uncomfortable and be outside and get cold and get hot and get wet and get dry. We evolved in relationship to the elements in the environment. So there is something to be said for getting out there.

One of the things that we say in the school, and I believe, is there is no such thing as bad weather. There's like bad clothing, bad preparation. So being prepared—and that's why I write in the book about you should dress appropriately. Have layers, have a waterproof layer on, have the right gear in your knapsack so that when you go out to mindfully connect with the earth, that you feel ready to do it. But I think a little bit of discomfort is, a lot of times, exactly what most modern people actually really need.

TS: How do you help people who say, "But I don't want to be uncomfortable!" That's the whole thing, that there's a Rubicon we have to cross.

MM: Yes, well, you can't really force people to do that. I think if folks don't want to cross that threshold, then that's their decision if they'd rather not. But in my experience, when I have folks in my programs who maybe haven't walked barefoot in 25 years and are a little uncomfortable sitting on the grass maybe because they're afraid of ticks, usually if we create a safe space—in other words, if that's OK, and I think that's an important thing. It's OK if you don't feel safe in the woods or if you're worried about ticks, that's OK. That's understandable. It's OK if you're concerned about being uncomfortable, getting bitten by ticks. There's things we can do to help you. You can use bug spray or you can wear clothes to cover yourself so you are comfortable.

But I would encourage folks to just explore those edges a little bit. It doesn't mean you have to go out and do something extreme or sleep in a debris hut. Everybody has a different edge around their relationship with being outdoors. And [with] Rewilding, and I tried to make the book very accessible so that no matter where you are in your comfortability, just explore where your edges are. So maybe it is just walking barefoot

outside a little bit every day, or maybe it's just sitting on the grass and seeing how that feels and if you can push that edge. Most folks I work with who have those little bits of discomfort initially; after a couple of hours, a day, those walls really break down. And most of the time, I would say all the time in my experience, folks are so glad that they did because a whole other world opens up to them.

TS: I mentioned, Micah, that you use this term of people feeling exiled in the contemporary world, exiled from being—this is my language now—embedded and part of the living earth, a phrase that you use. And what I want to get at here is for you to paint the picture of how you see yourself as part of—you have this quote, "We are an evolutionary expression of the evolving earth." I feel like in the book you're pointing to something, and I want to see if you can point to that for our listeners here, of what it's like to really feel like—not that you're an exile, but that you're an expression of an evolving earth.

MM: Yes. You know, it's funny. We use this term "nature" in our society to talk about the outdoors, and it's very dualistic in a way because when we talk about nature as something external, something out there, we take ourselves out of the equation. And I think even in conservation and environmental circles, sometimes this is the case, where we see ourselves as something other than the earth, and we're here in this role of, "How can we care for the earth?" When the reality is that we evolved right up out of the soup of this planet. You could make the argument that we are carrying the consciousness of Earth in our consciousness. We are the consciousness of, or one version, of Earth's consciousness because we evolved right here. And so for me, thinking about it that way breaks down some of the walls that we use to separate ourselves from "nature."

So I guess what I'm pointing to in the book is that we're at a point in our evolution as a species in our society where we now realize that we can either destroy the life support systems that we rely on to be here as a species, or we can support them and enhance them, as well as support and enhance those systems that support all life on Earth. So we're at this very powerful moment. And Thomas Berry refers to it as like, it's the great work, as we transition from this place of looking at the earth as a resource that we are here to use, to seeing the earth as a part of us. As Thich Nhat Hanh would say, that we're in a state of interbeing with all life on this planet. And so, the book and rewilding is just my offering toward how do we begin to—from a personal standpoint, begin to make that transition through contact and relationship with this earth, which is very much alive, and I believe, which is speaking in its own ways. How can we listen? How can we work with the earth, which is really working with ourselves?

TS: OK, just two final questions, Micah. You gave us some good instructions for the sit spot practice. I wonder if you could give us some basic instructions for a rewilding walk that we could take, whether we live in a city or we live in a place that has more trails and more of a nature walk. What's your suggestion?

MM: Yes, absolutely. And in the book, I give a step-by-step process of how you can do that. So, one of the first things to do would be to do a little bit of research on the history of your land. So just before you go on the walk, if you can, learn a little bit about the indigenous people on your land. Learn a little bit about the history of your land, the pre-colonial and the colonial. Anything you're interested about, just begin to learn just a little bit. That'll stimulate your awareness before your walk. It'll open up your senses a little bit. It'll change your experience slightly and begin to help you overcome that place blindness.

And then, if you have a spot in mind where you're going to do your walk, when you get to that place, that threshold from where you've just been traveling to where you're about to begin your rewilding experience, it's really nice to pause there and center yourself. Maybe you close your eyes, take a few deep breaths in and out. Let go of your day. Let go of what came before. Just invite your presence, invite your awareness into your body, notice how you're feeling, and then maybe set an intention for your walk. And perhaps it's just to be present with what you're noticing as you're moving across the land.

You might open your eyes and just take a look around, just notice what you can see, feel, hear, touch, sense, smell. And then what I like to do is do just a little bit of mindful movement. So if you know a little bit of yoga or Qigong or maybe just some gentle stretches, just take a moment to stretch out, warm up your body, and then just begin to walk with awareness. So this is a time to let your mindfulness practice really come in and be very mindful of each step. Move slowly and stay connected with your breath. So just a little bit of mindful walking and very much keeping your senses open and aware of what's happening.

At a certain point in your walk, you might pause again and just be still and notice what's going on around you. And then, you could do a sensory invitation. So you might say, "I'm going to focus on my sense of touch, " and for the next portion of your walk, reaching out and feeling the bark of the trees, feeling the moss of the stones, feeling the texture of the earth, whatever the soil is near you, the grass, sand, whatever it might be. Maybe touching leaves on a tree and just noticing how they feel, awakening that sense of touch.

And then, you might want to take 15 minutes or so and find a place where you can sit and do your sit spot practice. And that's a time to just settle in, slow your breath, and then take 15 minutes to watch any movement that is moving around you and let that be your meditation. When your mind wanders, you just come back and notice movement. You might notice a squirrel scurrying through the forest, or you might have little chickadees sort of landing in the trees near you. You might hear the caw of a crow soaring over and across the land. Just letting each one of these gifts draw your attention even deeper into the present moment.

After about 15 minutes with that, you might get up, and this would be the time where in the book I say, hey, this is a good time for what we sometimes call bushcraft, or earth skills. So this could be a time where you might have a little project; maybe you're working on making your own cordage out of plant fibers that you're foraging for. Or maybe you know that there are some wild edibles that are in your area and this might be a nice time to go on a little forage. This could be a time where maybe you're going to make a small fire, you're going to work on your bow drill kit. You're just going to start working on these skills that you enjoy doing, that are meditative, that are ancient, and that connect you to an old way, an ancient way of being on the land and being in relationship with the land. And that could be 15 minutes, it could be an hour out there working on a little hand project, a little handcraft.

And then, when that's complete, you could take a few breaths and just reflect on your experience. It might be a nice time to journal. If you're doing this with a group of other people, this would be a great time for a council practice. Maybe you stand or sit in a circle and just pass a stone around. Each person gets to share their experience. And then, you can go back and carry on with your day.

TS: And then, Micah, just to conclude our conversation, this show is called Insights at the Edge, and you suggested to listeners, find their own edge when it comes to rewilding, whatever that might be where they're at. The people may not be ready to go, as you called it, sleep in ... was it a debris shelter?

MM: Yes.

TS: Was that the word that you used? Yes, yes, I don't know if I'm ready for a debris shelter, but I know where my edge is, so I think that's good advice. And my question to you is, when you think of your own edge in the process of rewilding, Micah Mortali, what is it?

MM: Ah, that's a great question. I think for my edge right now, what I'm working with currently ... well, there's a number of things, but I think one of them for me is how do I maintain my daily practice of rewilding with my busy life? As I said, I've got a full-time job and to and from work and all of these things. So for me, my edge is maintaining that daily practice of connecting with the living earth.

What I've been doing recently, which is very new, is I've started running outside. I've never been a runner, but in the last few months I've been going outside about five times a week, and I've been running. And here in the Berkshires, it's almost winter, so it's snowing and raining and cold a lot of the time. And I've been running in that weather, and on the land that I love, and it's been a really surprising and unexpected new experience in my rewilding journey because people have been running for a really long time and I've always hated running. [Laughs] I've never been a runner, but I have, for some reason, just really opened up to it and I really have felt it just become a whole new part of my experience because it really does get me out there and get me into my senses and into all kinds of weather, and out into places alone, oftentimes at night. And I've really been enjoying it, so that's been a new sort of edge for me and something I'm enjoying a lot.

TS: What I really appreciate about your answer is, here you've written the book on rewilding, quite literally, but it's still challenging. It's just challenging, even for someone like yourself, with the demands of our contemporary life to have the time that you long for to be outside. That's interesting. Micah, thank you so much. Thanks for your vulnerability, your great intelligence, your love and the beautiful new book you've written, *Rewilding: Meditations, Practices, and Skills for Awakening in Nature*. Thank you.

MM: Well, thank you so much Tami, and I'm just incredibly grateful for the opportunity, and to work with your team, and for all of the wonderful work that you and Sounds True do and the information you spread. So I'm incredibly grateful. Thanks for having me on the podcast.