

Claire Dunn: Nature's Apprentice by Sarah Rowley

Claire Dunn leads the way, barefoot, down a winding track behind her house to the banks of Birrurung, or the Yarra river. As we sit on the dry grass in the late afternoon of a 40-degree day, the cicadas chirp and there's a sense of ease despite the intense heat. The only giveaway that we are in Australia's second largest city is the distant hum of traffic. As I talk with Claire in this little patch of nature, I start to sense how, as humans, we can also find our way back to the wilder parts within ourselves. The chatter of my domesticated mind begins to fade to a distant hum.

Claire is a guide to the wilds inside and out, and her passion is nature-based human development. Since quitting her job campaigning for the Wilderness Society over a decade ago, she has travelled her own mystical path. She left the confines of the offices, shopping centres and other concrete boxes of modernity to discover something deeper, more instinctive. She spent a year in the bush, which she recounts in her memoir *My Year Without Matches*, and now runs re-wilding events and guides Vision Quests. Since settling back into city life, she's been writing a second memoir about re-wilding the urban soul.

Why does all this matter right now? One of Claire's mentors, wilderness guide and psychologist Bill Plotkins, puts it well. He says that reconnecting with nature and our own wildness "not only re-enlivens us as individuals, but also erodes the outworn Western worldview of a meaningless, disenchanting universe upon which life-assailing business-as-usual depends." For Claire, delving into direct connection with nature helps us to know ourselves more deeply, so that we can grow up and show up for each other—and for the more-than-human world—at what is arguably one of the most crucial times for the health and longevity of the planet.

Interview by Sarah Rowley

We're by the river in your garden in Melbourne's northern suburbs. Do you want to acknowledge the land that we're on? And also talk a bit about the wildness that's here?

Sure. Well I just feel incredibly grateful to be living here. To be renting here. And it was one of those strange things where I feel like the land found me rather than me finding the land. Which happens to me with places. But I'm very aware of the long history of human caretaker-ship on this land, by the Wurundjeri people. I've spent a lot of time on this riverbank and I've often imagined or wondered what was happening on this land. What gatherings and songs and stories were being shared here. So it is a patch of wild-ish nature in the city that I live on. And it deeply feeds me, inspires, grounds, informs my work, my days and doings.

I've been thinking about the layers of experience that are present in places. So if I go for a walk along the river here I might think it's really nice and green and I really enjoy being

by the water, it's better than walking down the street in the suburbs. But if I'm with a friend who has an ecology background she might notice all the invasive species and ways in which the ecosystem has been degraded. And then if I'm with someone who can understand birdcalls then there's a whole other layer there. So I'm wondering what layers have emerged for you here?

It's a good question. 'Cause it really is a choice, you know. What am I aware of? What escapes my awareness and what am I attending to? I feel like I'm quite a generalist because I encounter the land through different layers, which overlap to form quite a rich conversation. In one sense I encounter the land like a naturalist—identifying the birds and plants, edibles, weeds. And then there's the felt sense, how I feel in the place. What does it invite me into? What does it evoke? Then over time, and it's not something that can be rushed, there's the layer of dropping into a deeper belonging and conversation and connection. So that layer of mythical relationship with the land takes time. Just like any long-term relationship I guess. You keep uncovering layers, which cultivate this much larger story that's going on that you can tap into. Mm.

I read on your website one description of your work as “connecting to the wilds both inside and outside of us.” I really liked that, and I wondered if you could talk about how you came to that path and what it means to you?

Another way of saying connecting to the “wild inside” for me is connecting to soul. Because soul is inherently wild. Soul is that unconditioned, mysterious, untamed, undomesticated, unique individual wild core of ourselves which is inextricably connected to the mysteries of wild nature. There's a reciprocal relationship between soul and wildness. Soul won't come to know itself inside a box. The language of soul is embedded in all the wild mirrors. Our dreams can be another expression of that wild core. So in essence we are wild. We all have our own ecological niche, our own piece in this giant puzzle—the one thing that only we can bring to the world. And a core part of the spiritual journey is discovering that.

But I'll double back, how did I come to be focusing on this? Well I was always drawn to the wild. And in my early twenties became an environmental activist. So that was one way of defending the wild in a tangible way. It was a passionate calling, it consumed me. By being the voice for the voiceless, I deeply connected to the plants and animals and birds and wild ones that I was speaking for. Then during that time I started to feel a very strong calling away from that kind of work. But this calling became stronger and it wasn't a conceptual idea of “I need to do something else,” or, “it's time for a vocational swap.” It was kind of unbidden and unwelcome in a way, it was like, well, life's really good and I'm being paid to do this awesome work in the world, so what's going on here? I became very interested in exploring the human nature connection, spending solo time in nature, depth psychology, dreams, altered states of consciousness and realms of knowing beyond the rational. Because really the world I'd been working in was for the most part very rational. I started having a series of really strong archetypal dreams that were littered with wild creatures, gypsy women, images of dismemberment. Some were truly numinous encounters, both in waking life and dreams. By numinous I mean an encounter beyond the ordinary that feels like it has a strong meaning or significance for you; a communication from the mysteries. I started reading about the stage of life that is initiation and recognised that was what was calling me. I just needed to say yes to it. So the particular path I took then was studying shamanism, wilderness survival skills, tracking and nature observation, earth-based ceremony such as sweat lodge and vision quest. And I went deeply into that path, spent a year living in the bush practicing, living, experiencing, discovering, all those facets of earth-based mysticism essentially. I didn't

call it that at the time but it's certainly what it is.

Before you carry on I'm curious about these numinous encounters. Can you describe one of those?

Yeah. So one of them was a dream. In the dream I am looking for the power tree in the forest, the largest, most powerful tree. And I find the tree, a huge spotted gum. Around the base of the tree is a red-bellied black snake that crawled its way up my leg and I push it away in fear. I wander over to a rock ledge and pull out a stone tablet that has an Egyptian symbol on it with the words, "freedom." And that dream has been working me ever since. The first vision quest that I did I went on a walk, still very much in that altered state. And I pretty much came across the representation of my dream in real life, with the black snake at the base of the tree.

Oh wow.

Didn't crawl up my leg, but I sat near it and really felt into that fear. At that point I think it was fear of actualisation, fear of my power, fear of really stepping into who I am. And I've had other encounters with a powerful owl at the time. Really spoke to me of the world being animate and sentient and conversational. So those encounters opened up that dialogue with the more than human world. Opened the way for me to walk through the world, as if it's a magical place that is full of mystery and symbolism and meaning. And that this relationship can really tell us something of who we really are.

And so does this idea of mysticism, if we see mysticism as a direct experiential knowing of something that is greater than our personalities and our everyday perceptions of the world, is that a word that speaks to you? Or something that's been important to you?

I certainly resonate with the idea of it being a lived experience. For many people, spiritual life can be quite conceptual. You can just exist on a diet of podcasts and books and think that's it. But my feeling about mysticism is that it's a commitment to actually walk the path. To live from that greater sense of self. To connect to the wider field of intelligence that we're swimming in. And to realise that as a daily lived experience, or to have regular practices that connect you to that experience. There's some sense for me of the mystic as bridging the middle world, this daily reality that we're in, with the other worlds. Bridging ordinary reality with extraordinary reality.

How do we discern between completely projecting on our surroundings, or maybe hallucinating, versus the kind of connection that you're talking about?

Well the western culture has pretty much colonised our minds to be extraordinarily reliant on rational discursive thought. So much so that we think of the word "imagination" as fantasy or flights of fancy. So it would do us well to err on the side of believing, or at least playing with or entertaining the possibility that the world is conversational and full of meaning and sentience. Opening up the possibility that the world is as interested and curious in us as we are in it. So this idea of bringing back the wild imagination. And the deep imagination really does come from that wellspring of soul and the unconscious, our dream images. And sometimes we just have to have training wheels on, just be like a child again. Or the sacred fool who steps out the front door and says, "I know nothing about this mysterious world and I'm ready to play and to praise the birds and the trees and sing to them and sing to everyone who comes along." Just playing with that idea of

the world being deeply imaginative, ourselves included. And that imagination is actually a language that connects us to that.

So you gave yourself an opportunity to open up to this wild imagination a lot more deeply by spending a whole year living in the bush in northern New South Wales. How was that?

Well it was such a precious time. I mean to have the opportunity to turn my attention so wholeheartedly to nature. I was just so curious. What happens if I take myself as much as I can out of western mind and steep myself in the wild world? What happens to me? What awakens, or what drops away? And one thing was clear was I wanted to spend a lot of time alone. Even though there were others sharing the experience, there was something for me in that solitude that was very intuitively important. Well lots of things happened to me out there [laughs]. I'll speak to it in a few different ways. Certainly some of the illusion of separateness dropped away. So that I felt at times this deep restful belonging that is not dependent on anything, it's not dependent on what I'm doing or who I am in any kind of external sense. It's just inherent. There's nothing you have to do to get there.

It's so against all these self-help books of you know, to achieve this mystical state we have to do this or that practice, this is the opposite. It's just through intention and time and patience. A true state of connectedness, that true belonging. Just arises like grace. So really to be able to steep myself in that place was an incredible gift. But in a broader way what I was looking for that year was a transformational experience. I didn't really know what that meant, just that I wanted it. In hindsight what I set myself up for was a rite of passage, within a broader initiatory period. This is something I've come to research a lot more 'cause I'm so fascinated by nature-based human development, and really influenced by the work of Bill Plotkin who first introduced me to the concept which then became a lived reality and one that I've seen mirrored in so many other people's experience. The cosmology I've come to understand through myth and depth psychology and my own experience is that there are two arms or realms of the spiritual path—the upper world and the lower or underworld. We exist on the middle world day to day. The upper world pulls us to transcend, to connect to what one might call spirit or source or Great Mystery or God, to realise one's oneness with all. It's a well-known path in the west. But the pathway that's been most suppressed and least understood in modern times is the underworld path, which is all the descent. Many myths take us there such as the Greek myths of Persephone or Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey which all speak of this descent to soul where one explores the mysteries of nature and psyche, and often encounters great upheaval, disintegration and chaos in one's life. And a series of initiatory experiences that shift the centre of gravity from adolescence to adulthood. It's the capacity of the human to know its depths. To know what its soul's gifts are, and to go through the crucible in order to come out the other side and bring back the treasures for the village. In the Lord of the Rings terminology it would be going on that arduous journey to find the ring. And then returning, integrating the experience in the middle plain, in the community.

So that year for me was my kind of self-designed initiation because it really broke me open in lots of ways. It was incredibly arduous with significant ordeal and challenge, which was really important. And it regularly altered my state of consciousness so that the deep imagination and dreams were in conversation with the land, in conversation with my soul, and it shook the very foundations of my egoic structure. So all my social identity dropped away because there's just nothing to mirror it back in that environment. With it came a lot of terror. And that terror generally means you're close to something really valuable 'cause the ego is freaking out that it's not in control anymore, and that you're going to have some kind of experience that transcends the ego. Which absolutely happened—many times, often through practices like deep nature connection, through the earth skills,

through my apprenticeship to fire and water and shelter, through days and days of just wandering without time or destination. Which is really what I did a lot of the time. I was like the kind of butterfly in the cocoon just really turning to mush. It was incredibly difficult and ecstatic.

Can you give an example of a hard time and of something that emerged?

Yes. I mean what started to happen in winter was I went into hibernation. And the elements were really working me. I was soot covered and lighting fires with my hands twice a day and not really seeing many other humans and I'd been there for six months. So I was really starting to drop into that very instinctive, intuitive, animal-like nature. And I was deliberately doing things to break any routines, like sleeping at different or wandering around at night in the forest, amping up the sense of extraordinary and uncertainty. I did that primarily to train the muscle of intuition so that I was responding to the world from impulse. When do I actually want to sleep? When do I want to eat? Et cetera. And I was wandering and dancing a lot. And reading and writing. And what started to happen was all this old emotional material from childhood just started to rise up—anger and grief and fear, all of this was all very foreign to me. I didn't really know what to do with it. All I could do was let it out and trust that there was some kind of clearing going on. One of the classic mystical analogies is becoming a hollow bone. So life can just flow through you, so creator can just flow through you. And so it was in service of that really, becoming more of that hollow bone.

[Laugh]. Yeah. I'm laughing because I feel like I've been going through a similar process to that this year but I've had quite a lot of support. Like mentors and a counsellor. And I'm just imagining you going through that by yourself.

It was mostly by myself. I did have a mentor that I'd get on a call with once a month. And he basically said, "Just keep releasing it, keep releasing it, keep dancing it and moving it through the body." And so I dove deep into my descent, and it was real and raw and humbling. And the grief really opened me to much deeper states of connectedness, to the spirit that moves in and through all things.

So in that moment when you felt that connection to everything, how did you feel it? Did you see images or was it in your body, or did you just know? I know it's hard to explain these things but I'm going to ask you to try anyway!

So I'm remembering one moment where I was just walking back up from the waterhole. And my mind was pretty thoughtless. Just wasn't much chatter at all. I was walking towards the trees and their edges became fuzzy and they just appeared more three dimensional, and I could see the water flowing through them almost. And just this sense of them coming closer to me. Like this kind of ecstatic sense of connection and beauty. That's one moment of grace, one might call it mystical. They just drop in and it could be on a city street, or just suddenly having that felt, somatic, embodied sense of interconnectedness and knowledge that I am a wild magical creature like every other creature on earth.

It's funny that you say on the city streets 'cause I was thinking before this conversation, you know, have I had any experiences of these other ways of knowing? And I thought actually one that really stands out for me was when I was a teenager living in London. My mum had to have a serious operation at one stage and I was really afraid about it. I'd

been at school all day and I was feeling really nervous. And as I was walking home, I passed this Italian restaurant that's just before our house, and suddenly I just knew that she was okay and that it had gone okay. And I've no way to explain it, I don't know how I knew. I just had this real felt sense of knowing.

Knowing without knowing how you know. For sure a kind of mystical experience. It makes it sound like they're really uncommon, and maybe they are, but I don't think they need to be or have been previously. I think they're available to us all the time. It's a lot to do with intention and then attention. It's a reciprocal relationship. We're not the only ones in the conversation, you can't force it. It's like, you take yourself to bed but you can't force sleep. You just put yourself in the right conditions where grace might visit.

And what do you think people can do to open themselves up more to richer layers of experience? And what stops us from doing that?

I guess there are small and large gestures, you could think of them as. I've just come back from guiding a vision quest. Which is funny 'cause when I first got Nathan's email about this edition, mysticism, I said, "Well, funny, I'm currently guiding 14 people who are right now out on a mountain for four days and nights fasting on their own." It's a contemporary practice of mysticism in a shamanic way. These people sacrifice a lot for a mystical experience. They sacrifice food for four days, they sacrifice comfort, familiarity. And when they come back in on that fifth morning, that first light, it's so exquisite. They're so unmasked. They're so raw. And I'm the lucky one who gets to hug them and welcome them back, and I can feel it now, the power of what they've experienced. So that would be one practice, but it's not a daily practice, it might be a once in a lifetime. But these experiences are available to us in a contemporary way that's designed for westerners. Smaller gestures are things like simply leaving your phone at home and wandering out in nature, which could be a city park, and playing with that invitation that everything is as interested and curious in you as you are in it. It really does open up the doors of perception.

My sit spot which is down by the river here, I leave my phone inside and go down to the river and do what one of my teachers calls, "revelling in the temples," revelling in the temples of creation. Expanding my senses to soak everything in. It's a wild state of mind. Which of course in maybe hunter-gatherer culture was probably more of the default. Less so for us. But it's not unobtainable. There's just different layers of it. I've seen people experience significant shifts in consciousness through just wandering in the city and observing nature and tracking. Like really being curious and following your nose about what are the foxes doing and where are the birds? It's like developing a mythic relationship with the land. Like, migratory birds and animals and the movements of weather, and for me that definitely cultivates the conditions that are ripe for kind of deeper experiences of being.

You mentioned that these vision quests are not cultural appropriation, but a lot of these ways of connecting with the land, and in particular the land that we're on right now as settlers, do come from Indigenous people. And I wonder how you navigate that in your work.

Well I certainly wouldn't be interested or it wouldn't be appropriate to offer a ceremony that's particular to one culture that's not my own. But so much of the basics of these ceremonies are pan-cultural. They're not specific. Like the vision quest. There's a form of

that particular kind of ceremony in so many different cultures, of going out to fast in solitude on the land. And we so need to draw inspiration from and learn from our ancestors and their practices. From diverse cultures. We desperately need it. And there's a real danger of being so scared of doing something that could be drawn from another culture in an unintended way that we're missing out on actually engaging and creating our own ceremonies and being inspired and recognising that inspiration and weaving it in. It's a global cauldron of ceremonial practice. And, you know, what is universal is our inherent indigeneity to the earth. That can't be disputed. We are all indigenous to the earth. Our birthright is to live a life of deep connection to Earth and self and other. To celebrate the seasons and know the ecology of our place and our own place within it. To know deeply how to live well on the earth. How to celebrate, how to grieve together. How to initiate our young, how to create rites of passage. All that is universal. And we so need to claim that.

And in this particular time that we're in with the climate crisis, why do you think it's so important that we connect to the wild outside of us and also to soul, or to the inner wild? Why should we prioritise that right now?

Well the reason we've got ourselves into this mess in the first place is that western culture has for the most part failed to move us through the stage of adolescence. The stage of adolescence is all about social security and ambition and social identity and so forth. And we've lost the practices that move us into true adulthood, and true adulthood is all about being eco-awakened and serving the earth community rather than just your immediate family. So if we don't learn how to initiate our culture collectively so that we are living from that soulful place, we're not going to make the shift to a life-affirming society. So this work is frustratingly urgent and terrifyingly urgent. And this other project of rewilding ourselves, rebuilding that bridge of deep connection with nature and therefore the wildness of our soul and coming to serve the earth community, that's long-term. So there's a dilemma there. But I see more and more people are hungry for soul and feeling the pull to deeply know themselves in relationship to the wild earth. So I don't know what to do about the urgency of the climate crisis versus this slower moving current of the renaissance of soul.

And the alternative of operating more within the current structures and campaigning, which you've done, is not simple either. I know lots of people who have done that work and have burnt out with it, got very frustrated. So it's not like that's an obvious solution; all the ways of addressing it are complex.

Yeah. They are. And you know we need all the ways. We need all the ways of addressing it and supporting each other. So the activists are also engaging in their own reconnection work. And those who are swimming in the mysteries of nature and psyche also turn up to the climate marches. We actually need to do it all. But asking ourselves the question of "what is mine to do?"—not what is someone else's to do or what I think I should be doing, but truly what is mine to do? And for that answer to be coming not from the rational mind or the egoic structure but to be coming from that deeper current of soul and wild nature.

So we're coming to an end in our conversation, and I wonder, when you look back on your journey so far, are there some pivotal moments where you've had a sense of being guided by something greater than your own will?

Well, beginning to study wilderness survival skills and going over to America and studying with trackers and a shaman over there. These are some of the kind of external nodal points I guess. But there are subtle ones like when someone comes up and just mirrors

back to you who you are. That's incredibly powerful. Writing my book and having my book published, that felt like something I had to do. But then I tried to give up writing a couple of times. And at one point I really did, I'm like I'm not doing this, it's too hard, it's a fool's errand. And I was living in Bellingen at the time up on the north coast of New South Wales. And I put it in a drawer and went into town. And walked into one of those crystal shops, which is not the kind of shop I usually walk into. I was in such a strange mood I was like, "Okay, I'm just going to get a tarot reading." Maybe the first time I'd ever done that. And this woman said to me, "You've got this project, this writing project. It's really hard. Quite overwhelming. But you have to write it. It's scripture. And here's my card and please make sure I get a copy after you've finished it." Funnily enough I did give up another time after that. But you know it really was that sense of something wants to be birthed in the world through me. And I even had dreams of like different stages of the birthing process. And me the midwife throughout that time. It was incredibly difficult. But there was absolutely a sense looking back of something wanting to move through me. And Elizabeth Gilbert talks about that so beautifully, the muse wanting to move through you. And that ideas have independence, if you don't seize the idea then it'll go knocking on someone else's door. So it's that idea of needing to be open enough and receptive enough for creation to move through, like the hollow bone. And it really did feel like that with my book. As much as I struggled with it.

Yeah. I guess that's one of the hallmarks of following a deeper calling—that it's not necessarily what you think you want [laughs]. Or what's easy to do.

Yes, you get what you need, not necessarily what you want. I feel like the foundational kind of one-liner that facilitates some sense of mystical life for me is really surrendering to what life is offering. Really surrendering to how life is showing up for you. Fighting against reality is no fun. And there's just such an ease and trust and acceptance that comes with that surrender. To say, "Okay, I'm going to stop scrambling, I'm just going to let go of the bank and enter the river, have fun, navigate the rapids and see where it takes me."