

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode# 49: Meet Katherine Hauswirth, Author, Naturalist

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Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series 'The Holistic Nature of Us'.

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to introduce you to Katherine Hauswirth. She writes about nature and contemplation in her book, *'The Book of Noticing'*. Her blog, 'First Person Naturalist' reflects on experiencing nature. She has been published in the Christian Science Monitor, Orion on-line, Whole Life Times, Connecticut Woodlands, and Spirituality and Health. She was an Artist in Residence at Trail Wood in Connecticut in 2015 and at Acadia National Park in 2017. Katherine won first prize in the Soul Making Keats Literary Competition last year. Her book with Homebound Publications, *The Book of Noticing, Collections and Connections on the Trail* received honorable mention for general non-fiction from the American Society of Journalists and Authors in 2018.

Congratulations Katherine. It's a pleasure to have you here today.

KATHERINE: Thank you, I'm delighted to be here.

JUDITH: Well I would love you to tell us about yourself, your writing experiences and in particular how you got into nature writing.

KATHERINE: Well that's a great question. I think since childhood I've always had an affinity for nature. I was fortunate enough to have a mom who was a school teacher, which meant every summer she was around. And she took us to the beach and to Vermont for long stretches. And I think it was particularly in Vermont...I was a New Yorker, so I didn't get as high a dose of nature as I did in Vermont...where I really connected. And I must say I lived in suburban New York. I wasn't in the city. But it is a busier, faster place than where I live now which is in Deep River Connecticut. And moving from New York to Connecticut, I think I was in my early 30s, really reacquainted me with nature. I had sort of lost track of it a bit as a young adult going to college and having a boyfriend, and getting married, and my graduate degree, and all that. And I could feel myself slowing down and reconnecting when I moved up here to Connecticut. So, I was able to...I've always enjoyed writing, but I never really wrote about nature until I lived up here and I had the desire for a long time before I really acted on it in any substantive way. So, it was interesting to look back on my old writing journals and see that I wanted to write articles for Cosmo or, you know, travel about going to bed and breakfasts which is, you know...I'm different now than I was then and I'm glad I evolved in this direction.

JUDITH: Cool. Well your book does have a naturalist theme to it. You're writing about nature. You're observing nature. I know that there is the world of naturalist. Could you tell us more about them? Give us a little history?

KATHERINE: Sure. Well I'm not sure I can give a comprehensive history, but I know, you know, being a naturalist first came to vogue in the 17-1800s primarily and I think that it's really evolved over time. I think they were people who considered themselves naturalists at the time that in order to study something would kill it and stuff it, and we've come a long way, that way. I've done a lot of reading. I actually have a particular penchant for people who are naturalists in the 1950-1970s era. There seemed to be an explosion at that time. I guess being a naturalist is defined differently by different people. I define it very loosely as people who care about nature, want to spend time in it, want to learn about it and maybe share it. One of my role models from that 1960-1980s era really is Edwin Way Teal who owned Trail Wood, which you mentioned in my bio. It's now been given to

the Connecticut Audubon Society. It's 160 acre property. But he made it his goal in life to be able to quit his job, move to an old farm, live on the farm and go out in it every day and write about nature. He succeeded, which is a great role model for me because I haven't figured out how not to have a day job yet. But I got to stay at Trail Wood and live there by myself for a week and really be immersed and write about nature, so that's, a few of the essays in *'The Book of Noticing'* are about my experience there. So he's a great role model for me. And then a more contemporary role model is the poet Mary Oliver, who I don't know as much about her life except that I understand she's constantly outdoors with a notepad and pen in her pocket writing mostly poetry but also essays, almost always not just about nature but about connecting with nature and what it means to her personally and I tend to sort of follow that path.

JUDITH: Lovely. I know in your book I enjoyed reading about Trail Wood and the Teals and what he got accomplished there and your experiences there of slowing down. You had a chance to really slow down and not have a to-do list, you know, except for your writing and what you observed. And I found that very touching in your book.

KATHERINE: Thank you. It was quite a treat for a working mother.

JUDITH: Yes, I can imagine.

KATHERINE: to have permission. And I found even with people who aren't lucky enough to have a residency, I've conducted a lot of nature writing workshops and mini retreats and so if people sign up for something like that, let's say on Sunday afternoon, I feel like when you set the tone and you give people permission, like it's okay to say I want to be outside. I want to wander around and maybe write about it or sketch what I've seen, people really blossom with that opportunity.

JUDITH: We do. There's something about breathing in the forest. To stop and think about the fact that the forest is breathing also and perhaps the winds that we're feeling is the breath of the forest and I love that from a poetic point of view, but also just a very practical point of view, you know?

KATHERINE: That's beautiful. Yeah. Go ahead.

JUDITH: Yeah, let's go ahead into the wheel. You have so much to share with us about holism and sustainability, etc. So, let's start there and get your thoughts.

KATHERINE: Sure. I took a few notes for myself. The Medicine Wheel is very meaningful for me and particularly for my son who's very into Native American Tradition. In fact, every piece of artwork he does, he works a little medicine wheel in. That's sort of become his trademark. And you had reminded me with the different concepts conveyed by the wheel are. And regarding Holism, I feel like when I write, in the background always for me is the goal of finding a way to illustrate how everything is connected. I really do believe that everything is connected. And even if I don't have that conscious goal it just seems to come out in my writing a lot. And in fact, *'The Book of Noticing'* subtitle is *'Collections and Connections on the Trail'* and initially it had a completely different title and it was going to be *'Cabinet of Curiosity – Talismans from New England Rambles'* which was fine, but it didn't really say what I wanted it to say. And I knew that the word connection had to be in there, so I was very happy when I was able to figure out a different way to say it and put collections and connections in the subtitle. Because collecting to me is not just necessarily picking things up or taking photos but sort of taking in what we're walking through but none of that is very good if it doesn't help you to make connections, whether to understand something about yourself or about the larger world.

JUDITH: Oh, that's a good point. I like that. I always think of Holism too is that if one part is suffering the whole system suffers and I think when we get out in nature and start observing something, we might get a clue about a bug that's rampant over here versus you know a dry patch and no plant life over there, and we start to maybe connect the dots a little bit, just in our own landscape, in our own neck of the woods, so to speak.

KATHERINE: Yes, I started to realize, and this comes out in *'The Book of Noticing'* that I'm definitely more of a nature appreciator than a 'sciencey' type and sometimes my eyes glaze over if I'm reading something too science heavy and even if it's to do with sustainability, I don't gravitate toward that. But I realize I need to pay attention to what's happening to our world. I feel that when you spend enough time in nature you want to protect it and be a steward. I got to be a frog watch USA volunteer where you learn 11 frog calls. We have 11 vocal frogs and toads that make different noises and then you go to usually a pond or something and you do a count. And I learned

that frogs are one of the barometers of how our environment is doing because they absorb everything through their skin. So, if they're not doing well, that's a big red flag. And in many cases, they're not doing well but it's nice to be able to contribute by doing some citizen science like that.

JUDITH: Yeah and who runs that kind of a program?

KATHERINE: Um, well in this particular case the organization is Frog Watch USA, which you can Google. But a lot of local organizations, like the Mystic Aquarium and Connecticut Forest and Park Association will hold training where you learn how to be a frog watcher.

JUDITH: That's cool.

KATHERINE: And it's a great experience for me. My local cemetery has a lovely pond and I got special permission to be there at night and count my frog.

JUDITH: Wow, how cool is that! Alright, so we'll jump off with the frog and go to the next place on the wheel.

KATHERINE: Okay.

JUDITH: So that's sustainability.

KATHERINE: Yeah, well you and I were talking a little bit before the call and beyond this Citizen Science that I like to partake in, and if anybody wants to read a good book about it; there's an author named Akiko Busch and of course now that I'm being taped I'm not going to remember the name of her book (www.akikobusch.com), but every chapter is like an experiment, an experience in citizen science, different things she did to volunteer, really good stuff. I would definitely Google her and it should come right up.

But you and I were also saying before the call, I've become a huge fan of Robin Wall Kimmerer who wrote '*Braiding Sweetgrass*', which got a lot of acclaim. She has Native American roots and she did a great job of describing things like an honorable harvest where if you are going to take from the land, first you ask the land as a sign of respect and you make sure that you're certainly not depleting whatever you find and leaving enough for it to continue to grow and for others to potentially harvest. And then another

author wrote a book called '*Time and Tide in Acadia*' (by Christopher Camuto). I spent a residency 2 weeks at Acadia in 2017 and he also wrote a lot about the local Native Americans and their just unfailing respect for the environment. And considering every entity, whether it's a rock or a flower, or a patch of moss as "a person", just as we're people. Not really a hierarchy of the people and then everything else.

JUDITH: Yeah, I agree. I have Native American roots and my elders would often refer to nature very personally, so one of my elders would say "Oh I saw brother fox today". And even the wind. They would talk about sister wind or grandmother moon, and it puts a personal connection again, there's the word connection to nature that brings it home to us in a way. Because we think of nature as very impersonal, and in some ways it is. The laws that govern nature are very impersonal but when we refer to them and create the relationship it changes us, I think, as you said, and we can't help in some way of being a steward. So that's a really good point.

KATHERINE: Thank you. I heard an interview, and I think it was with Robin Wall Kimmerer, if I remember correctly, on 'On Being' the podcast and she talked about we really need different language for creatures because now the way proper language is any way we say 'it' as if that 'it' has no being-hood you know? And our language you know we need to work on that.

JUDITH: I agree because I know for me once I opened my awareness to a more personal connection it's almost like nature responds. It's an amazing perspective to grow into, so to speak.

KATHERINE: Absolutely. This Edwin Way Teal I mentioned, it sounds like he was like the, you know, sort of like the Disney versions of Snow White where all the creatures are flocking around her, I think he was out there so often and so calm and so open that people would chuckle at creatures would just kind of wander up to him and I think that's because he was embodying that perspective.

JUDITH: Oh, that's a beautiful story, a beautiful story. Alright, so let's continue on here. What else would you like to share?

KATHERINE: Oh goodness, so much. I know you and I were talking about reverence as being a major aspect of the medicine wheel and I feel like that is where I am my most reverent when I'm in nature. I've had some very

deeply moving and personal experiences just being alone outside and I've written about some but not all. Emily Dickinson had a great poem about, 'some keep the Sabbath going to church. I prefer to keep it at home.' And then she goes on to describe all the things that make her church. She talks about a bobolink for a chorister and an orchard for a dome. And I might be misquoting her slightly because only Emily Dickinson could probably do it justice but that is the sort of poem that if your listeners haven't read it, they should look it up because it really is a great description of a way of being reverent but just being alone on your own somewhere beautiful in nature.

JUDITH: Yeah, I agree. Only Emily could write that way, and Mary Oliver too. She has her unique way of putting her spin on nature and I just, they're brilliant, that's all I can say.

KATHERINE: Oh yeah. She has a particular poem that starts, 'My work is loving the world' and then she goes on to talk about clams and little things she's finding on a walk and that first line is like, I think it's probably Mary Oliver's credo but I'm going to borrow that from her, and I consider it my work to love the world.

JUDITH: Lovely, lovely, alright. Let's continue again.

KATHERINE: Sure. Let's see, we were talking about intelligence as a concept on the medicine wheel too and I really had to think more about that one. I think as humans sometimes we see intelligence very narrowly. And I think there's a movement to expand that. You know I think within the last couple of decades people start talking about emotional intelligence. How important it is to be aware of what's going on at an emotional level and there's also a movement now where people are realizing, for example, somebody with autism might have a different form of intelligence that we didn't pay attention to before. Like maybe everything they see, they see in pictures and it may take them longer to respond to another person because of that. But they're processing in different a way that sounds beautiful to me but I think people are starting to recognize you can see intelligence in difference. It's not just one mold. When I'm in nature I just feel like ecology itself is brilliant, you know? The way everything connects and feeds different aspects of the cycle, feed other aspects of the cycle. You know it just makes a lot of sense to me.

JUDITH: Well it does. I had the wonderful privilege of talking to folks from the Biomimicry Institute and one of the founders, Janine Benyus says that there is an intelligence in nature. We are surrounded by genius and the institute looks at nature for a solution to, in particular a climate issue we're having today. But they look at very specific species in nature for the solution and their work and the innovation and creativity of students from all over the world, it's just breathtaking. I highly recommend listeners go back and look into the Biomimicry Institute. They have challenges and they have middle school students, high school students, as well as adults around the world. And the solutions, they believe that the solutions that we need right now, today, are in nature. So to me that's where the intelligence and the genius is that surrounds us.

KATHERINE: I will have to look them up. That's wonderful.

JUDITH: Yeah. Good points, good point. And lastly on the wheel is intuition because that's the center of the wheel. We have to run everything through our intuition. So how do you see that in nature?

KATHERINE: I see that by, I think intuitively when I go off into nature there's something in me that tells me, 'you need to be quiet here, you need to listen' and I don't just mean with your ears, you know, listen with every aspect. And it's interesting. I think the more you do that, the more things sort of pop up before you. Maybe you'll see a particular thing in nature and maybe it was going to be there anyway but because you're attuning to your soul or what's going on inside of you, you become more aware of the things that you need to see. I had a conversation on the porch, I was on the phone on the porch with a good friend yesterday and I've been wanting to write about morning doves, so I started writing about them and I thought, they come and go, I don't see them very often. Of course, I look up from my phone call and there's a morning dove watching me from a telephone wire, and it was just sort of a reminder to me, like hey you're going to write about me and I'm here. You need to spend some time observing me. I've had a lot of lovely moments like that. I talked to you a little bit about before the call of having a piece published in a magazine, I really love called the Wayfarer. It's put out by Homebound Publications and I wrote a piece called wind of the tarn. And it was about my time in Acadia as a writer in residence which was such a gift and really connecting with the fact that I've always felt the wind has spoken to me. I feel like that's sort of an intuitive thing. Whatever I'm going through in my life, when I'm walking there's usually at least a

little breeze and sometimes that breeze kind of wakes me up and says, ‘oh, I’m being spoken to here’. And I had done some research on the sacredness of the wind in a lot of native traditions. I had shared just a little thing in this piece I’m having published, and you and I were talking about it, about how in the Navajo tradition, they had a ceremony when there’s a new baby and present the baby to its parents the wind coming from each direction. And I wrote this down because I wanted to remember this. There’s a...the winds were supposed to give the baby a little wind which was hidden in their ear folds where it couldn’t be seen and would give them direction and guide them and I just really embrace that. And they were not the only tribe to kind of have this believe that the wind had very profound things to offer.

JUDITH: But that gets again into the fact that they’re paying attention #1. They’ve developed a personal relationship in some way, #2. And their connection to nature, #3. And that’s I think the piece that Western Society has, we’ve forgotten. We’ve really stepped away from it and you’re reminding us the beauty of listening to the wind and feeling the wind, and it may not be the wind for you in terms of the listeners out there. It may be something else. It might be the way the sun dapples through the trees that always catches your eye. So, what I like about what you’re saying, and sharing is – pay attention.

KATHERINE: Yes, yes. And that’s something I have been learning over the years. And I spend more and more time outside and writing about it and I’m still learning. I have to constantly remind myself to, you know, step away. Step away from the Smart Phone. Take a breath. Look around. Look up, you know, look down. I mean even if you’re just looking at the leaf litter, there’s so much beauty there and so much going on underneath it that we’re not typically aware of unless you really look. And also, when I read about it, I find it very enriching to read a lot of other nature writers. I don’t always retain the facts that I read but I love that sense of discovery.

JUDITH: And their descriptions are unique to them as a writer, which I think makes the reading very interesting. In yours, in particular, I love the way you describe some of your walks and how you observe or what you observed or what came to your awareness that day. And to me that’s all part of the intuitive process is to, you know, two people could walk the same path and see two entirely different things and that’s perfectly fine, you know? Because you’re in tune with your essence, so to speak, walking through that woods.

Well, Katherine before we sign off could you give us 3 tips that are practical that people can apply in their everyday life?

KATHERINE: Absolutely. I did a little thinking of this beforehand and a lot of these sound pretty basic, but I think we all need the reminders. And I think if you're wanting to spend that time, more time outside whether or not you want to write about it or do art about it, maybe you just want to feel it and experience it or experiment with it, while **you can get something even out of 5 minutes by going to your stoop and looking at the mum plant you** placed there or something, if you can allow yourself a more generous window of time...and maybe you have a busy life. Maybe that's at first just 15 minutes. For me it's a good hour. I think it's important because it takes time to let go of the work a day stuff you're dealing with and open your mind and your eyes and your heart and really take it in. And that's a gift that you can give yourself.

The second tip I thought about actually is so practical, but it took me awhile to learn, which is, you know, I don't know. Again, an example might be if you were to go to yoga class. You'd probably **put the appropriate attire on** so you could stretch and function in that setting. And I feel like for being outside...I used to go out in whatever I was wearing, and I thought, 'oh I don't go out in the winter because I'm chilly'. Well now I have my under armor and I put my layers on now that it's getting cooler and I have my jacket, and good shoes. And I find that I can enjoy it more because I'm comfortable and I'm not worried about being chilly or tripping on my own feet. It's a little thing but I think that's another thing that's sort of worth treating yourself, if you can, even if it's going to Good Will and picking up a new pair of sneakers that fit you better to just take care of the basics so that you can enjoy the moment.

JUDITH: Yeah, that's a good reminder. I like that very much. I go out with a backpack because I'm an herbalist and if I find any plants that are in a protected area, again, I don't take everything. I might take a sample, that kind of thing. But I bring my tools with me, a bag to put them in, a knife to use out in the forest, my walking stick so that I'm safe. That's a great reminder.

KATHERINE: Oh, thank you, thank you. And I saved my favorite tip for the last which is just I think it takes a conscious effort to really pay attention in the deep sense. And it takes practice. So, I think just as with, and to me it

is a kind of a form of meditation...I know people try to meditate and they get discouraged because there are all these random thoughts entering their mind and that's okay. But again, I would quote Mary Oliver in the whole podcast if I could because she's just such a role model for me. But she said something that really struck me and actually influenced my book title ultimately and she said in an interview that '**attention is the beginning of devotion**'.

JUDITH: Mmm, oh I love that.

KATHERINE: Me too. And I can't say enough wonderful things about that phrase, about her influence on me. And you know that's how I hope to live my life. To be attentive in the deepest sense of the word and that to me that is my devotion. So, in my best moments that's where I'm at.

JUDITH: Aw, that's great! That's great! Well all I can say is thank you. Thank you for your sharing. I highly recommend the book, '*The Book of Noticing*' for those of you who want to step into the world of a naturalist and want to maybe hone your own skills for observing nature. Katherine's writing is lovely, but she also marries some science in there too, in terms of what she's learned. And I also love your practical advice. Thank you Katherine.

KATHERINE: Thank you so much.

JUDITH: You're welcome. Well I want to say this is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of 'At the Garden's Gate', book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. And please like and share them. Let's support each other and get the word out. And remember, now is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.