Podcast Series, Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 16: Meet Brian Stafford, M.D.

judithdreyer.com

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.

And today I am so delighted to introduce you to Brian Stafford. Brian left his 20-year career as a psychiatrist to become a wilderness guide and agent of human and cultural transformation. He completed the intensive training as a psycho spiritual wilderness guide with the Animas Valley Institute and now guides individuals to the place they most long and fear to go; their soul place and purpose. He now guides primarily in Ojai California. Hi Brian, welcome!

Brian: Hello, thank you for having me Judith.

Judith: I am delighted, truly delighted. Brian I'd love you to tell us a little bit about your background and how you became a soul guide. That's not a mainstream term yet.

Brian: Yeah, well there's, I guess, part of the challeng: soul means about 10,000 different things in English. There's "Chicken Soup for the Soul", which in my understanding, according to the poets and the depth

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

psychologist has nothing to do with soul. And there's the equation of spirit and soul, I would say, in most spiritual disciplines. That there's little differentiation between the two of them. What I mean by soul is kind of related to what Carl Jung described and later that Bill Plotkin has kind of further evolved is (that) the definition maybe two fold. One is, to use an ecological term; it's our deepest eco-psycho-spiritual nitch. It's the unique place in the habitat of the earth that we can fit, that we fill, something like that. So that's one way to describe soul. Another way, David White the poet might describe it as the truth at the center of the image you were born with. That we know in most indigenous cultures people come away from pilgrimages or quests or walkabouts or medicine journeys typically with an identifying image and usually that image has a resonance and a deep calling to it. It is more like a destiny and it's usually something that is in nature itself. We can think about most Native Americans, they have some sort of nature-based name. And my understanding is that those are based on the image that they discover in their journey of becoming who they really are. It's no different from us, even though we may not feel indigenous to a place even though we're not connected to our ancestors they way they are or to the land. That we each, when we're born, have a unique identifying image, kind of like an imprint, that helps guide us through our life if we can connect with it, something like that. So that's what I thought.

Judith: Well those are great ways of explaining the soul because you're right; there are many different ways of looking at it depending on our perspective. I'm interested in the dream work, especially with archetypes and finding what those imprints are because I think, for me, those have really allowed me to take up the mantel of what I came here to do and accomplish. I think that's where we're trying to get to, so that we can create and grow a better world, a world that's more mature, as Father Rohr would say, so that we can grow up finally and understand that nature and we are really not separate. And how can we be in that relationship so to speak?

We've got (defined) about soul… go ahead.

Brian: Can I add something here related to what you said. You said related to growing up. And part of growing up is actually growing down.

Judith: Cool, tell me more.

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

Brian: I think in Western Culture we always think about growing up that the path of maturation is toward the future of toward heaven, an upper world kind of definition of oneness with God. And what's really missing from that equation, really what I understand makes people mature adults heading toward elder hood, is that they have to mature down, which means they have to go into what the mythologist might call the "underworld", this place of consciousness, again, where soul resides, this unique place where we can identify who really are. Then in a sense, we each of us have our own myth that we're living into the world. We have to discover that through ritual, ceremony, mythology, dream-work, and all those kinds of things. That's really how we define or discover who we really are by moving into these practices.

Judith: What you're saying is, it's learning how to really go into the inner world, you know our inner world. And of course, in dream-work we talk about the underworld. In Shamanic dream-work we go there all the time to try to help ourselves and to help others, but it still isn't mainstream yet in terms of practical application, you know, in every day life.

I understand that through this work that you do as a Soul Guide, you lead folks into the forest. Tell us more about that.

Brian: Yeah, so many of us who trained with the Animas Valley Institute we call ourselves Soul Initiation Guides which is guiding a kind of rite of passage that's been mostly lost in Western Culture. When people usually at mid-life, but hopefully earlier and earlier, get to a place where what really matters is not safety, security, sex, status, that kind of social belonging. It's about: what I am really here to do; why I am put on earth at this time, that kind of question. We begin guiding people from that point on and actually a little bit earlier. In terms of rites of passage work because this is kind of a right of passage, we help people prepare for severance. It's kind of like in order to really find the deeper parts of yourself you have to let go of what you think you are now. It involves a death in a sense, a psycho-spiritual death, and usually grief and maybe celebration. In healthy indigenous cultures this is normative. Everyone knows that you have to go through this and it happens a lot earlier. In our culture it rarely happens, if at all. Maybe people on their death-bed might know what they're really here to do. They have those flashbacks of the soul encounter. But, we guide people kind of in ceremonial processes through retreats as well as intensives. Even vision fasts up to 11 to 12 days of kind of severing from who they really were and

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

descending future and through ceremony, ritual, poetry, nature walks, dream-work, all kinds of things like that. Our intent is that people will encounter, or maybe they might open up a couple of things. They might discover to be really present to themselves, present to nature, discover how nature mirrors back parts of who they really are. That their emotional way of knowing is opened up because in Western Culture we're pretty constricted emotionally. It's not really allowed too much in our culture. If you've ever been to funerals they're rather quiet. Most other cultures that aren't westernized allow people both joy and grief to kind of flow through them. We also open the way of knowing that we call the Deep Imaginal which comes through dreams or through these journeys that you're mentioning. We open up the ways of knowing because those are all important ways of knowing who we really are when we're in the underworld. We need to have access to being present, to our emotions and to the imaginal world when we're severing from who we really were. Usually people have very extraordinary encounters both from dream and in conversation with the land about who they might become or what are the barriers there toward who they're becoming, something like that.

Judith: Well that's also an interesting perspective because in this podcast series one of the cornerstones is intuition. I believe that is the way we connect with nature and of course that's the thing we least talk about, you know? We might accept it when we say, "I have a gut feeling." or "Guess what? I was thinking of my aunt and she ended up calling in the next hour." But nature reaches us through our intuition and I think that's what we're not taught. We're not taught how to use that inner guidance system to connect and, as you mentioned, to receive insight, illumination so to speak, about our path and purpose. And the other point I want to make is our society is so against death. We have new Archetypes now such as the Vampire and the Vampire lives forever and never grows old, and what does that say about us to? You're right, in indigenous cultures, that's part of the journey: to understand what needs to die so something new can be reborn.

Brian: Yeah, well I agree with you on all of those points. I think part of it is in our culture people are afraid to die because they haven't really lived. They haven't lived their deepest purpose so there's too much grief and a longing to know that, even though they may not know a way how to get there. And our culture is based on, as you mentioned, really safety and security and most of us don't have any spiritual experiences even if they've been in a church or a temple or something like that. We have a lot of

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

experiences of community perhaps, maybe of conformity – quite a few, and maybe of something of spirit. But we rarely have any experience of who we really are or what the natural world really is because we're primarily in a building or in culture. We have to remember that we're human nature, so we as humans are part of nature and for many thousands of years, maybe two or 3,000 years, Western Culture has been kind of moving further and further away from nature, seeing it only as a place to extract materials and maybe to recreate but rather as a place as most healthy indigenous cultures know, this is a place where you find your deepest place of service and wisdom.

Judith: Isn't it interesting too that as we get caught up in the building world, as we move from this building to the next building, most people find relief in nature, yet the dot still isn't connected that we are part of nature. So how can we, through our own efforts make a difference in the world getting that message out that we really need to bring more nature back to our land spaces. You know get out there more consistently. I find it so ironical that we've come up with the term "Earthling" to put our feet on the ground every day. Pardon?

Brian: Or bathing and earthing. All of these things are true. It's because we're so disconnected as a people.

Judith: Yes, but we have to come up with this term to put our feet on the ground on a daily basis. My elders said get out barefoot every day for 15 minutes. Get you feet on the ground, you know? It's all part of the journey.

You see a lot of changes with folks when you do take them out and I think one of the things we have to face, which happens to do with a death, is our fear of the dark and our fear of being in the deep forest by ourselves. Because after all there's bears and mountain lions and creepy crawlies and how do we handle that alone.

Brian: Sure. That's a great question. There are a couple of things here. One is maybe we project that which is dangerous onto other beings, when in fact we're the most bio-cidal creature on the planet but we're terrified that a mountain lion might come stalk us, or a bear.

Judith: Right, yes.

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

Brian: We're actually projecting that we're a dangerous individual onto something else like snakes and spiders and all these larger creatures, right? I think there's a great quote, something like, you're much more likely to be killed by a vending machine falling on you than killed by a wild creature.

Judith: Oh, that's funny, that's funny.

Brian: So, we think it's really what's out there. And most people, many people who come on our programs they are a little bit concerned, especially if they've never camped before. We have people who come on a… like I just finished guiding an eleven-day vision fast in Capital Reef National Park in Bureau of Land Management land just outside there in Central Utah. We had several women and maybe one man who'd never camped before and were terrified of these creatures. It's because they've never spent much time, they didn't have any wilderness skills, and they didn't know how to set-up a tent or a tarp, but they felt the longing. So, they come, and we teach them some of these, what we call, camp craft skills. How do you actually do these things? It's pretty quickly that they feel comfortable in the wild. They might still be afraid but they're more excited about seeing something. You give them lots of advice that you know, bears aren't really interested in you. Mountain Lions are really disinterested in you. The creatures that you do come across, speak to them. It's possible you might actually have a conversation with one of these beings. One of the participants had an experience with a rattlesnake and just began speaking to it and learning quite a bit about who this one is. Not seeing it as dangerous but just a being that knows how to be themselves. And most of us in Western culture we don't really know where we belong. It's really the question. We might go through phases where we feel like we belong in the kind of school or this kind of profession, or this relationship. But we're evolving and most of us are never finding what we call the "soul place" where it's our unique nitch, the only place that we can serve at the deepest level. And many people, again at mid-life, have this longing and maybe a grief and they're not quite sure what to do with it, you know? It's not depression for sure. It doesn't need to be medication; although, it's probably medicated away by many well intentioned but ignorant and ill-informed providers. Or it's numbed through entertainment or substances or escaped altogether.

Judith: Our culture certainly supports all those ways of numbing ourselves. We get addicted to the media. I think our culture is addicted to some very serious violence in general, and what is that all about too? Is that a

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

projection that we can accept it that way so that we don't have to deal with it within ourselves, you know?

Brian: Great. Good observation.

Judith: Well, you also have some thoughts about the breakdown in our ecology and what impacts you're seeing. And if you could share that with us, that would be great.

Brian: Yeah, pretty simple. I've witnessed a lot. I was in Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and I live in Ojai where the recent fires were in Southern California. I think climate change has a huge impact across the planet. My suspicion is it's going to be quicker and more devastating that what many of the scientist thought, actually. We're seeing so much disruption in terms of ecosystems and climate, especially around the poles. I think the temperature yesterday at the North Pole was above freezing which is terrifying.

Judith: Yeah, it is.

Brian: There's a fair amount of denial about that. The canaries in the coal mine have been talking about it for a long time but most people don't really see it because they're not looking that closely, nor do they know what a healthy habitat looks like, maybe part of it. And part of this, one of the analogies is maybe to think about, most people in the Northeast are afraid to go outside because of ticks and because of Lyme disease and because of how prevalent Lyme disease is now, actually not just in the Northeast but across the continent. A lot of that is related to ecological disruption. The whole forests that were in the Northeast, you know they were cut down pretty quickly by people who settled there and replaced with other types of forests. What forests even remains are not traditional forest. Plus, they're also cut up. They're not these huge swathes of land. The ecology of maybe what we would primarily call the mice and the tick, and the deer and the predators has been upset, so (because) there's not very many fox, coyotes or owls to get rid of all of the mice. And so that when there's mice everywhere then the ticks love the mice. Sometimes there can be up to 50 of these kinds of deer ticks on a mouse actually in the Northeast and that's how all these diseases kind of spread through these different vectors. When you have an intact ecosystem, everything is in a bit of a balance. When you destroy the ecosystem, everything can go a bit out of balance, especially when you take away the predators. Which again are the ones that we're afraid of because

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

they might kill our cat or dog or out west it's usually cattle of sheep. We get rid of the predators and then what you have is a problem with rodents. And then what happens with rodents is people use poisons to kill the rodents and then what happens is it destroys the streams and it destroys the fish. You're just in this incredible cycle of kind of irradiating the natural ecology of the land and using non-natural substances that end up poisoning the whole ecosystem.

Judith: Well you bring up some very good points. I had Doug Tallamy on my podcast a couple of weeks ago, "Bringing Nature Home", and he drives home the point in a couple of aspects. First, over 4,000 species are endangered of being extinct today and that affects everything up the food chain.

Brian: Absolutely.

Judith: Secondly, we are not able to understand easily how these species are dying because in our backyards we don't see it. Iif we see the bluebird coming in or the cardinal eating and surviving in our backyard, we have no idea that in the whole region their populations have declined because other aspects of the region do not have the plant species that can support the insects that give them the food so that their populations can stay strong and healthy. And I feel we're, I don't know what the word is, almost anesthetized to understanding how nature works in that way. It's like there's a blankness there when you talk to people. I do garden clubs and I'm amazed at the lack of some of ecological awareness in their particular groups about how endangered certain species are and what can we do to prevent that. You bring up some really great points. And all of this, of course, takes us into the fear of the forest. I so feel for parents today in my neck of the woods on the east coast because there is a tremendous fear. I have seen people really suffer from Lyme disease. It's an issue that has to be dealt with and faced, in our region. I know it's spreading and getting worse as it moves across the country. Any thoughts about that, in terms of getting over that fear of going into the forest?

Brian: Well that's a tough one. We don't have that problem out here in the west that much. We have other tick born diseases, but I've had many friends and colleagues who have suffered from Lyme disease. For many it takes years for it to be even diagnosed actually because the providers aren't thinking about it because they didn't think it was actually prevalent in this

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

area, and it's a huge challenge. Part of it is just if we continue to teach our children to be afraid of that which is natural we're headed in the wrong direction, right?

Judith: Yes, I agree with you.

Brian: But we also have to take caution when we go to the wild because you know, things can happen there. Usually it's a twisted ankle. That's the primary thing that happens in the wild is that you twist your ankle. But you are away from medical care and with regard to ticks, the best thing is to teach people how do you really check yourself and how do you shout. Because we do run programs where we're in tick infested areas and there's a lot of ticks, especially the tiny ones, the young ones that are just coming and probably it's just taking care and having water and washing them off of you. So part of it is just kind of developing I would recommend like a family routine that we're going to watch and we're going to wash twice a day. In the morning we're doing quick check and then in the evening we're going to do a check. And the problem is now again with climate change is that the season for the ticks is also longer, right? Because the seasons get shorter and shorter, winter gets shorter and shorter. The ticks are out even more prevalently early and later in the year.

Brian: Yeah, we do lots of prevention here. We get a tick on us but luckily because of our practices we catch them quickly and that's the end of it. I happen to make a salve from plants and it's great for a tick bite and so far, we've been okay.

Judith: Brian do you have three practical tips based on your work for our listeners today.

Brian: (Laughing) Practical tips,

1. One possibility might be to just **go for a wander**, to frequently go for wanders, not necessarily hikes. Hikes are about where you're trying to get to. We already know that. It's kind of laid out ahead of you. Wandering is a different kind of archetype and a different kind of striding. And to wander out and choosing something that might serve as a threshold so that when you know you've crossed that you're in different consciousness. You're not in city or suburban consciousness, you're in the consciousness of the wild and you're really asking these questions. Where do I really belong? What do I really long for? What's stalking me? What things am I avoiding in my life?

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

So that might be one practical kind of suggestions. Maybe it's unpractical in the current world. It might lead you to where you really belong but make some changes.

J: But everybody can walk out their door and do a wander, I love the term wander because it's not as specific. Specific is not the right word. But when we say walk or hike it's almost like we've got this specific purpose and what you're suggesting is to wander without purpose and see where it leads us.

B: That's right. It's a specific state of consciousness, just to be open.

J: Exactly

B: And to be drawn by what allures you rather than; this is the hike; this is the destination; here's how much time we have to get there, something. And that might be one thing.

2. The other thing might be to begin **keeping a dream journal** actually. Again, dreams are kind of the language of the unconscious. It's when the ego, which tries to protect us and keep us who we are, is asleep. We can typically enter what we would call the night world. There's different wisdom coming from the night world. I think beginning just to keep a dream world. Realizing that there's this deeper world all the time whenever we allow ourselves to record it there. And it's always there. Most people say I haven't remembered a dream in 20 years. And I'm like, well that's okay. Tonight, in your journal, get a journal or a piece of paper or even a voice recorder, you can use that, and maybe write something down like this: On the first night of the dream journal process I dreamt… That kind of tells the psyche that you're open to something and maybe respond to it. That's really my understanding. The more we're filled with wanting to move deeper into our nature, imaginal that comes in dreams, one of the most primary parts of our nature, the dream maker responds, and we have a dream.

Judith: Oh, I love that. I know that to be true. I've done a lot of Shamanic dream work. I'm a dreamer myself. I'm hoping to do more teaching on that level just because it's missing and it's missing with our young children and there are ways of teaching young children and adolescents so that those generations can carry that forward. Because they're very open, you know? They have no problem. I know they love it!

Do you happen to have a third one?

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

Brian: A third one? Yeah here's one maybe for those people that are ready to move more deeply away from who they are and deeper into the mystery of who they really are, might be to do a

3. **type of ceremony** which would be to, we call it a Sinking Fire Ceremony but most of the time we're in places where you can't have fires either. We call it the Sinking Sticks Ceremony. But one thing you might do is to maybe journal for a while. I don't know maybe for about 10-15 ways that you identify yourself. These are personas or something like that. It might be, I'm the smart one. I'm the protector. I'm the whatever. I'm not the … so the positives as well as the negatives of the ways that you've defined yourself. And it could be great. They're probably wonderful parts of yourself but some of the other ones, like frequently people will write; "I'm not creative"; I'm not artistic. We ask them to take all of these things on a piece of paper. You're just collecting, I don't know, 10-15 sticks, dig a hole ceremonially and say something like: "You know I've defined myself in a certain way for such a long time and I'm actually not sure if that's true but I'm willing to release the way I've identified myself so that something else might come to me. And then we ask them one by one to drop the sticks into, they usually do this individually, drop these sticks that represent something into the hole and they might state something about it. Here's the story of how I became known as the "brainy one" or the "funny one", or whatever. And they tell it and tell it with gratitude about what it's brought them and then they say; "And I release my attachment to this way of understanding myself." Then they put it in the hole and then after they've done all the ways they've identified they cover it up and the ceremony is completed. That actually is a pretty powerful process that begins in some sense a re-wilding of the psyche. Part of the severance that I mentioned here is that once you release about who you understand who you are but you long to know more deeply who you are, the psyche begins responding. You might begin having dreams or other synchronous things begin to happen and you just keep going from there.

Judith: Well what I've learned in that kind of process is that when we really, deeply commit to something and it could be as simple as this ceremony is with a little bit of work and a little bit of digging in, our soul responds ten-fold. It's amazing how we're guided in the most unexpected ways. If we just stay open and I love that about the process. And that to me is where the magic and the mystery is of being here as a human being. That's part of

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

what we don't have in our society in some ways. We don't have that little bit of magic and mystery in terms of understanding who we are.

Brian: That's right.

Judith: Brian, how about before, I've asked Brian to share a poem because I know that's a big part of the soul work, that creative aspect. But before he does that, could you please give us your contact information and any classes coming up that you'd like to share?

Brian: Sure. Well there's maybe one invitation. Most of this work that I guide I've learned through Bill Plotkin and the Animas Valley Institute, which is in Durango, CO. And if anyone is at all intrigued by what I've spoken of here you may want to get his book, "Soul Craft, Crossing into The Mysteries of Nature and Psyche". It's really the book that kind of describes this process of the journey to soul. I guide with them and I have a couple of trainings coming up on Vancouver Island for some people who are interested. And usually they're therapist or other mentors who are interested in this whole-ing of the psyche. How do we open our imagination? How do we open our hearts? How do we open our emotional body, all those different kinds of things? And then I am also guiding another Animas quest in Aravaipa Canyon which is in Arizona between Tucson and Phoenix in November. Those are available on the website of Animas and then I also guide programs for health care providers through a company called Wilderness is Medicine. You can just Google that and find that website. And in Southern California I guide through a group that I call Eco-psyche-artistry which is kind of to make fun of Ego Psychiatry and I'm changing that name to Earth Soul Purpose shortly, but you can Google that and find different programs or if you want personal mentoring or conversation I'm open to it as well.

Judith: Oh great, thank you. Those are great resources. And for those of you who haven't checked out Brian's website and Bill Plotkin with the Animas Valley, do so as they have really great information there, books and programs.

So how about a poem before we sign off?

Brian: Sure. I was trying to figure out what would be the best one to share and I've actually decided to share the first one that came to me when I went on my vision fast, actually.

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

Judith: Cool.

Brian: And in this poem you might hear that nature is mirroring a place of where I am in my own life. Because I went out onto this vision fast a very highly successful physician in academia but wondering, "Where do I serve now?" You know now that the planet is heating up and being plundered. There is so much social injustice. There has to be a deeper place for me to serve than to medicate or to heal as a therapist. Not that there's anything wrong with either of those. I got to that point where there was something deeper and so I went off on a vision fast and after a ceremony I noticed a plant, which I'll describe in the poem, and then I wrote this poem spontaneously. Or maybe the poem wrote me.

Judith: Yes.

Brian: This one is called, "But Not Forever".

In the middle of the sandy wash that lies beneath the immense rock swale that looks like elephant skin, sits a vibrant, spiny cactus made of 80 green barbs with light brown tips and sharp teeth along the spines.

The spines protect the heart of the cactus. Amongst the spines are delicate white hairs, 4 for each spine it appears. It thrives in the wash collecting the rainwater through its roots and holding the liquid in its heart and spines.

There are days when it is submerged by the flood of rainwater anchored by its roots. There are seasons when very little water comes through the wash and the spines protect the sacred liquid from creatures wishing to lap at the water at the core.

Attached to its base and lying in a downstream direction is its former self, no spines, no hairs, just the husk of the dried-out heart. How does the cactus know when it's time to die? Does new potential push it off its main root? Do wander vandals make it through the defenses and create a sacred wound? Or does it die in its own timing sharing the water from its center with the lizards in the wash, allowing new life to spring from it's new heart?

These are mysteries I do not understand. These are mysteries I do not understand. The raven soars high above the land. The spines protect the heart but not forever. The white hairs wither and blow away and the heart dries up but not forever. A new heart, deeper roots, succulent green spines

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.

and soft white hairs sprout from the new soul that holds the source continuing life in the middle of a dry sandy wash below an immense rock swale that looks like elephant skin.

Judith: Oh, that's beautiful. Well Brian all I can say is thank you. I am deeply grateful for you joining us to day and I hope everyone feels as inspired as I do by your talk, by your advice, by your wisdom.

This is Judith Dreyer, author of At the Garden's Gate book and blog. For more information go to my website judithdreyer.com and you will information about this podcast as well as the transcript.

I like to end The Holistic Nature of Us with a quote from Paul Hawkin, environmentalist and author, who reminds us

"Sustainability, insuring the future life on earth is an infinite game, the endless expression on behalf of all."

Enjoy your day.

Copyright ©2018 - Judith Dreyer, MS.- All rights reserved.