

# Nature Notes

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MARY SHARON MOORE

# Nature Notes

Stories and Reflections on  
Creation as Companion to the Interior Life

Mary Sharon Moore

AWAKENING VOCATIONS

Springfield, Oregon

NATURE NOTES

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Dan Villani

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## NATURE NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

I have always felt a homecoming, the moment I awakened to the presence of Creation around me.

It's not that I have entered *into* Creation, but that I suddenly become aware of its immediacy, its unfiltered, untamed, undiluted vibrancy, of which I am a part.

Just this morning at sunrise I look out my window and see a pair of mourning doves sitting on the utility wire, facing east, attending to the start of the new day.

Immediately my soul is dazzled by the shades of silver and gold in the morning's sky, the painterly

strokes of horizontal cloud. These doves invite me also to attend to the start of *this* new day.

I pause to receive its benediction.

Creation awaits me on the hiking trail, in the sweeping vistas, in the thick and noisy waves of geese traversing the early morning sky.

Creation *awaits me*, I say, as though my arrival is greatly anticipated.

Yet my every intentional awakening to the closeness of Creation reminds me that I am not separate from the immediate, unfiltered, untamed, undiluted vibrancy of Creation, but part of it.

*Welcome home!* Creation seems to say. *Where have you been for so long?*

Where I have been, on any given day, is mostly somewhere else, along with most other folks. We live like nomads, captives, refugees, in the Land of Elsewhere and Elsewhen.

Welcoming Creation as companion to my interior life admits the close connection, the befriending of a relationship that started when I was still stardust, a relationship that will continue far beyond my final breath.



The river flowing, the sunlight filtering through tree canopy, through shape-shifting fog, the birds offering up their trills that defy notation: I'm speaking here of relationship, companionship, of deepest vitality.

*Deep calls to deep*, the Psalmist sings.

Something unnameable is communicated. Creation becomes not only companion to the interior life but also language-giver, interpreter, opener of eyes, opener of the heart.

A walk in Creation, I have discovered, is a form of worship, an expression of the interior life, just as vital to me as gathering for worship on a Sunday morning.

I invite you to journey with me through these twenty stories and reflections on Creation as companion to the interior life.

In ways you are able, I beg you: Touch Creation regularly, come alive, notice things, give thanks, and defend, with all your heart, the Beauty of it all.

## NATURE NOTES

MARY SHARON MOORE

**1**

# **TRAIL ADVENTURES**

NATURE NOTES

## **A Walk in Creation is a Form of Wonder and Worship**

**T**he morning air feels crisp and promising as I wait for the No. 91 to whisk me up the west side of the Cascades, up the McKenzie River Corridor, for my weekly hike.

As I wait, a tree swallow sails across a cloudless sky, perhaps on a breakfast run for hungry nestlings back home.

A red-haired teenage boy and his Irish Setter zip with ease down the quiet street on their motorized skateboard, in the rich glow of early morning sun.

For me, this weekly hike is sacred work, a necessary form of worship. And I am outfitted in my vestments: blue jeans and work shirt over a tee, a light-weight vest to protect the shoulders from morning chill; hiking boots which I notice show a few seasons' wear on the tread.

And as I wait, I lean upon my hiking stick, hand-crafted from a tree branch by a young local artisan.

Everything about me feels ready for this day of worthy worship, this day of noticing things, savoring, and giving thanks.

A beautiful line weaves through my thoughts now, as it does on every hiking day: *All Creation rightly gives you praise!*

*All Creation*—of which I am a part—rightly gives praise to Creator, hidden and holy Source of all that is: seen and unseen, noticed and not yet discovered.

This phrase of worship *invites* me to put my heart, my soul, with the heart and soul of the elements of Creation which I touch and feel, breathe and smell, see and lodge in the memory; the parts of Creation I can climb and descend, the switchbacks and narrow ledges, the vistas through tall trees, which part just enough to reveal the sparkling river below.

These hikes, like all worthy worship, remind me that humankind is not the center of Creation. The amazing hidden-yet-seen Mystery is the center of Creation, vibrant and shimmering with divine vitality in the heart of all living things.

The amazing hidden-yet-seen Mystery is the center of Creation, vibrant and shimmering with divine vitality in the heart of all living things.

Now, from the trailhead, I walk reverently along the trail, through the grand and spacious living room of Grandfather Slug, Sister Trail Snake, Mother Chipmunk, Brother Brown-shell Snail.

I walk through the expansive back yard of Sister Black Bear, Brother Cougar, and the ferociously protective Mother Barred Owl—all of whom remind me that I am not at the top of the food chain but respectfully a part of it.

And so I worship and give thanks for this amazing part of my own expansive back yard which refreshes and restores me by its very existence.

And now, ten minutes into my seven-hour hike, I notice ... a massive ancient Brother Doug Fir which has fallen clean across the trail.

Assessing its reclining girth, I know that clambering over the trunk is not an option.

So I remove my vest, fold and place it in the front pouch of my backpack, and toss the pack over to the far side of the trunk.

That toss, I feel deeply, is a solemn commitment. I shall not turn back. I shall not even *think* about turning back.

Now I do the next obvious thing. I lie prone on the trail and slowly scooch toward the tree's underside, just barely squeezing head and shoulders through the open space beneath, across the tree's blanket of debris.

My mind is all concentration; my muscles, all exquisite teamwork.

I feel grateful that the trail is quiet this early in the day. No one sees me making such a fool of myself.

Now on the other side, I brush off the trail dust, the bark dust, don my backpack, take a satisfied breath, and continue on.

Humbling myself before the majestic forces of Nature, I discover, also is a form of worship.

Humbling myself before  
the majestic forces of

This natural forest is both  
fragile and resilient.

Nature, I discover, also is  
a form of worship.

Massive ancient trees

uproot, crash, split in two across a ravine, across the backs of other fallen trees, shed their shredded bark, grow moss, and become fertile ground for the next generation of seedlings and forest vegetation.



I am amazed at the slow and perfect cycle of natural forest life.

This stretch of forest could be gone in a day. It could smolder for weeks in its own live coals and hot ash in the aftermath of Brother Fire's fury.

Such fury raged last September, a few miles downhill and west of this trail, as the entire region watched the flames, and breathed the smoke, in shock and horror.

So I carry a grieving in my heart, and a hope, for this amazing and fragile and beautiful planet, exposed everywhere to Nature's forces of destruction, yes, *and* regeneration, subject to Nature's forces of death, yes, *and* the emergence of new life.

## Reading the Trail

### A hiker's insights into the interior life

**M**y world is small, and beautiful. Even more so, since I donated my car to charity nearly ten years ago.

I used to drive myself around, concentrating mostly on the concrete trail of road ahead of me. Now, I go where the bus routes go. Someone else drives me around, and I am free to look out through big windows at the passing scenery.

I am free to notice Beauty, and expand the boundaries of my physical universe.

Now, instead of concrete trails of road, I concentrate on the soft, earthy Nature trails beneath my feet as they meander invitingly ahead of me.

Life, I notice, is different on the trail. Here I create nothing. I am in charge of nothing. I consume

Life ... is different on the trail. Here I create nothing. I am in charge of nothing. I consume nothing. I am not here for any of that.

nothing. I am not here for any of that.

And because the trail lies outside the magical powers of cellular service, I have no need, or even desire, to scan and scroll.

I think, now, of a lovely line written by the late essayist and nature writer Barry Lopez, in a piece called “Flight,” in his collection titled *About This Life*. He writes: “I had risen before sunrise to take a long walk. I wanted to see things that couldn’t be purchased.”

The Nature trail is a place blessedly free of things that can be purchased. I need these noncommercial spaces of encounter in my life. I need to visit, and touch, and be touched by them, often.

In Creation, I find time to think, to reflect, to imagine, to breathe deeply, and to Nature-bathe my senses, to be renewed and ready for life’s invitations and assignments that await me.

I want to share with you, now, some elements essential to the trail: the Path; the River; Switchbacks, Bridges, and Narrow Passages; and the rhythms of Living, Dying, and Birthing New Life.

**PART 1**  
**THE PATH**

**T**he path is pretty much the focus of my attention on my hiking days. For nine, ten, eleven miles, over the span of my seven-hour hike, the path is the main thing.

Path is metaphor, I discover, for the *interior life*. Some might call it the “spiritual” life, a word that tends to disembodify our here-and-now experiences. Hiking the trail, reading the trail, is all about being *in* your body, your physical senses fully alive and communicating rich and vital information.

So, Path is a worthy metaphor for the interior life—*your* interior life, which is intimately connected to the world you touch.

The trail path you hike has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Your life has the same: a beginning, a middle, and an end. A hike well done, a life honestly lived—step by step, day by day, with all your heart—gives you a sense of satisfaction, a sense of meaning and worthy contribution, whether what you contribute is well received, appreciated, well remunerated, or not.

Path is a worthy metaphor for the interior life—*your* interior life, which is intimately connected to the world you touch.

The eastward path I take each week, along my beloved McKenzie River, continues far beyond the range of my hike, up into the higher elevations of Oregon's western Cascades, past spectacular waterfalls and amazing vistas.

Without a car, I accept that these higher elevations are beyond my reach. I could rent a car, or I can be at peace with this limitation, this very small form of poverty in my life. I choose to not have a car, in order to be closer to the experience of others who cannot afford the privilege of car ownership or rental.

I embrace these limitations and grow within their territory. This, too, is a work of the interior life.

The path is smooth, until it's not. Between one week and the next, things in the forest can change. Like this large tree which this morning I notice has fallen since I was last here, although no storm passed through the area in these last few days.

And I wonder: Might a tree fall across my path, catching me unawares, as I walk through this mature forest today? It's possible. Would I be prepared to notice and run to safety?

I ponder this possibility at some point or another on every hike.

You start to live your life differently, when trees falling in your path are a possibility. Living life differently—more awake, more aware, more focused and appreciative, more present to the moment—is a fruit of a dynamic interior life.

In another way, too, the forest path is metaphor for the interior life, in the tree roots and occasional rocks that I encounter on the path.

I read the trail constantly, especially when sunlight is strong but dappled by the shade of foliage. Tree roots and rocks hidden in shade seem to rise up an inch, just to make sure I'm paying attention.

And if I'm not, they are there to bring me back to the here-and-now.

A path without tree roots would be a forest without trees. A life without obstacles is no life at all.

Roots in my path remind me of an innate human limitation: I am not entitled to cruise through life free of obstacles.

A path without tree roots would be a forest without trees. A life without obstacles is no life at all.

**PART 2**  
**THE RIVER**

**T**he McKenzie River, which flows in Oregon's western Cascades, also follows a path, the path of least resistance, as water always does.

Like the trail I hike, like my own life, the path of the river has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The McKenzie bubbles up from a sulfur spring in a little cove of Clear Lake, high in Oregon's western Central Cascades. In silent,

sacred awe I have canoed  
over the spring-fed origin of  
the water source for my town.  
To behold this work of  
Creation is an amazing thing!

In silent, sacred awe I  
have canoed over the  
spring-fed origin of  
the water source  
for my town.

The river progresses from this little spring, at one point running underground, then surfacing again, at some times in racing white water rapids, and at other times branching into meandering channels created by tree debris which, over time, forms islands of rich vegetation.

Sometimes my hiking path and the path of the river run side-by-side. And sometimes, not. Sometimes the roar of river rapids drowns out the delicate song of

birds in the tree canopy. Sometimes the paths diverge,  
and I feel the solitude of a forest trail without a river.

Indigenous peoples understand what we urbanized,  
faucet-dependent folk too easily forget: Water is Life.

*Water ... is Life!*

I don't want to think about life without water. Yet  
across the globe, communities lose their pure water  
source through industrial degradation, war, or  
infrastructure collapse. Persistent extreme drought  
dries up reservoirs. Urban areas grow beyond the  
ecosphere's capacity to provide.

And what happens, far too often? Water, a vital part  
of Earth's commons, becomes a privately owned,  
profit-driven commodity.

I feel sobered at the thought of these things. And I  
feel grateful. My *interior* life becomes hydrated when  
I walk alongside this amazing, pristine, and beautiful  
river.

I do not, and cannot, nor would I  
want to, take this pure and  
sparkling river for granted. Water  
is amazing, a miracle, a blessing, a  
gift for which I give heartfelt  
thanks. Daily.

Water is amazing,  
a miracle, a  
blessing, a gift for  
which I give  
heartfelt thanks.  
Daily.



The path and flow of the river is the path and flow of life. The river flows by invisible gravitational pull, and by the push forward of more water upstream.

Interiorly I too am changed, awakened, pushed by the flow of things, and sometimes pulled forward by life's circumstances.

And always, I am immediately refreshed and renewed when I return to the river, to its many sounds, its sparkle, its rhythms of dance around and over river rock and half-submersed tree snags.

Interiorly, my life flows with fresh vigor for what lies ahead—the challenges, the invitations, and the possibilities of who I might yet become.

Learn from the path and the flow of the river.

**PART 3**  
**SWITCHBACKS, BRIDGES,**  
**NARROW PASSAGES**

I know I'm gaining elevation when I come to the switchbacks, the tight zigzags in the trail that ease the climb on steep grades.

Whether I'm going up or coming down the switchback, I have to pay fierce attention to the trail, keep my body relaxed, and place my hiking stick just so, as brake or leverage, with every step.

This, too, is a work of the interior life: taking the steep ascents—and also the precipitous descents—one courageous, carefully placed step at a time.

The interior life is the place of commitment to the parts of the journey that will stretch you, challenge you, and guide you across thresholds of endurance beyond what you had imagined.

My favorite series of forest trail switchbacks begins with a steep ascent up to a ridge overlooking the robust Lost Creek, roaring and crashing its way to the McKenzie River.

The interior life is the place of commitment to the parts of the journey that will stretch you, challenge you, and guide you across thresholds of endurance beyond what you had imagined.

Lost Creek is not lost at all. It rushes, tumbles, announces its arrival with vigor, and on a mission.

From high on the ridge I look down through a dense stand of firs to a bridge far below that crosses Lost Creek not far from its confluence with the river. To get to that bridge I must descend through another set

of switchbacks, down to the deep ravine that forms the creek bed.

The bridge, sturdy with hand-hewn log railings on either side, gives me a spectacular view of Lost Creek racing toward its immediate destiny a few hundred yards away, confluence with the McKenzie River.

This confluence also is metaphor for my life: my existence is not separate from the existence of any other part of humanity, nor separate from the irrepressible flow of Creation in its totality.

Together we all flow back to our divine Source, the One unseen within the Creation we see.

I cross other bridges on the trail, much smaller, which require my full attention: narrow split-log bridges, which tilt slightly toward the single handrail, where mountain bikers port their rides single file, and where I feel the give-and-take tremor in the log base and rail as I slowly, mindfully, make my way across.

Bridges hold a significant place in the interior life. They appear when we need them, with spans which

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are thoughtfully crafted by someone who has walked the path before us, from here to there.

Bridges carry us over impassible terrain, over treacherous waters, over thin air, enabling us to achieve what otherwise would not be possible.

The bridge you need at this moment may be a book, a line of a poem, or an unexpected insight. It may be an offer of work that matches the gifts within you. It may be a remembering of who you most truly are, in this difficult moment, in your rags of exhaustion and hope and deep intention.

Bridges, interiorly, are arcs of possibility, arcs of peace, in an often prohibitive and traumatized world.

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world.

And every forest trail has its narrow passages, barely more than a foot's width wide, precarious, seemingly impossible passages, with a wall of earth hard against your right shoulder, while to your left earth severely falls away to the wooded ravine.

You know you have come too far to turn back now. And you dare not look back, nor too far ahead, lest you lose all sense of balance.

You know you have it in you to take the next cautious step. You summon your breath—*in*, hold and focus, and *out*—your interior reserves now mingling with fresh forest air filled with heartbreakingly beautiful morning birdsong.

You are a creature among the creatures of the forest, standing still and tall like the Ancient Elders who surround you and who remind you that you deserve to stand tall, that you *must* stand tall, in the dignity and intention of one on this pilgrim path.

And now you walk this narrow passage, finding possibility and mercy in each small, careful step.

**PART 4**  
**LIVING, DYING,**  
**AND BIRTHING NEW LIFE**

**H**iking through this natural forest, I notice, is like walking from room to room through a very large home, where every stage of life right now is being fully lived.

I see seedlings growing on the backs of fallen trees. I see this season's vigorous new growth on the tips of fir and cedar boughs. And I see the Ancient Ones in their slow progression of collapse, their bases

encircled high in the debris of outer bark and inner wood decomposing, slowly, season by season. Thick coats of moss cover gently hollowed tree stumps like plush upholstery, turning them into magnificent thrones worthy of forest royalty.

As I walk, I read the trail now within the fuller scope of life. I behold Creation in its continual work of living, and dying, new life coming forth from the rich matter of what has been. My weekly hike becomes a perpetual generational walk, here, on the forest trail, as sure as the perpetual generational walk I take among my people.

Living, I discover, is part of the larger environment of dying. And dying, I discover, is part of the larger environment of living new life—holding space for the past even as I move into my future.

I know that eventually I will lose strength and capacities for these arduous hikes. And, eventually, I will lose strength and capacities to step, on my own, farther onto the sacred ground of interior transformation.

Living ... is part of the larger environment of dying. And dying ... is part of the larger environment of living new life—holding space for the past even as I move into my future.

At some point, I will be carried, not by any strength or willing of my own, but by the gentle force of a Mystery to which I give my urgent and necessary *Yes*.

Life carries us in this way.

We can trust Life, I discover, just as we can trust the Path, the River, the Switchbacks and Bridges and Narrow Passages.

Knowingly or not, we have trusted the Trail all along, which is how we have arrived at the astonishing miracle of today. One step, then the next, and then another.

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It's tempting to imagine the ease and thrill of a helicopter ride to the top of the ridge, hovering awhile over the spectacular views, perhaps capturing the experience on video.

But this, honestly, would not be life. It would be a paid-for experience, a thrill, a memory, a video to share of what my camera was recording: a purchased experience, ready to be filed among other purchased memories.

I prefer to take the slow path to the top of the ridge.

I hike, in these woods, alongside my beloved McKenzie River, in part to challenge myself physically, and to hone the skills of reading the trail—to gain trail literacy.

I hike, too, to step away from the close-in work and demands of daily life, in order to Nature-bathe and purify my physical senses in chlorophyll and filtered sunlight, to feel the touch of rough bark, smell the earthy fragrance of mountain-fresh plant life in spring, and fallen needles in dry late summer, and hear the melodies of birdsong and roaring rapids.

Most especially I hike in order to immerse and renew myself in Creation, which is larger than me, older than me, wiser, more patient, and which has much to show me, and teach me.

I faithfully hike these trails in order to hone my skills in reading the interior trail. I want to read well the signs, the markers, the invitations and challenges in life. I want to develop interior capacity for emotional and intellectual strength, for social, moral, and relational strength. I want to develop resilience amid life's unfolding challenges.

Why? Because the world I inhabit, the world I touch, needs me to show up, to be wholeheartedly present, in every form of capacity and every expression of generosity within me.



I need to know, and know how to  
read, the trail which is my life. I  
need to love and care for the trail,  
because this trail is not mine alone.  
It is the trail of this one precious life  
which you and I share.

The trail is the good road, open to  
all.

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## PUBLICATION NOTES

These works have appeared in the following publications:

- **A Day's Hike in the Wilderness:** McKenzie River Trust Winter Writers Series 2022-2023
- **Hidden Lake Found:** *Passages: Anthology*, Cottage Grove Harpies (Cottage Grove, OR, 2022)
- **How Young Song Sparrow Learns to Sing:** *Passages: Anthology*, Cottage Grove Harpies (Cottage Grove, OR, 2022)
- **Noticing the Many Shades of Green:** McKenzie River Trust Winter Writers Series 2022-2023
- **Rise, and Be Beautiful:** *Passages: Anthology*, Cottage Grove Harpies (Cottage Grove, OR, 2022)
- **Working for Peanuts:** A version of this story appeared in the January 2011 issue of Liguorian magazine; available from the author

These works have appeared in the author's Noticing Things blog, at [marysharonmoore.com](http://marysharonmoore.com):

- **A Day's Hike in the Wilderness**
- **A Walk in Creation is a Form of Worship**
- **Climb the Buttes that Beckon You**
- **Hiking Buddies**
- **How Young Song Sparrow Learns to Sing**
- **In Praise of Creator**
- **Little Columbine, Object of Divine Love**
- **Noticing the Many Shades of Green**
- **The Wild Raw Power of Nature**
- **Where on Earth is Heaven?**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Avid hiker, blogger and essayist, and seasoned storyteller Mary Sharon Moore is passionate about helping people to connect their ordinary experiences with the mystery called Life.

Mary Sharon believes that every day, every activity, every moment is a fresh invitation to enter wholeheartedly into communion with the Divine. The hiking trail is her classroom, and wherever she is with notepad and pen is her workspace.

Mary Sharon's books and videos offer fresh and compelling language that serves as a portal to insight, action, and deeper meaning—an antidote to a hurry-up scan-and-scroll world.

Her two spoken-word albums, *Free to Be Free*, and *Living as Jesus Taught*, with music by David Phillips, are on Spotify.

Her YouTube channel offers inspiration and insight you can live with.

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