



Image Credit: Ian Leahy

Exploring a Biophilic Frontier Within

By Ian Leahy

“A passionate love of life and all that is alive.” This is the lofty, transcendent way German psychologist Erich Fromm defined biophilia. Yet, so often, our biophilic entry point in cities is infrastructural. Not surprisingly, those of us who advocate for green infrastructure immediately find ourselves in a literal turf battle against better funded interests. We suppress this potentially transformational bond, leaning instead into quantitative calculations and financial returns on investment to justify nature’s existence where we dwell.

It’s not that such data isn’t critically important, but the biophilia hypothesis posited by biologist E.O. Wilson is that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections

with nature and other life forms. Are we missing a deeper entry point?

Perhaps part of the problem is the word itself: love. While the Greeks defined *philia* as the friendship form of love, not erotic or divine, when we say saccharine things like “love all that is alive” we don’t have any context through which to experience or translate that into more than superficial appreciation.

Yet, anyone who has experienced transcendent love, even among friends, knows that it doesn’t define the ego, but rather dissolves it into something greater than itself. How, then, do we actually connect with “all that is alive” on a level that unleashes the full potential of biophilia, and how might that transform the

places we live?

On the Edge of a City Park

At the age of 18, watching the collapse of post-industrial Detroit on one side and sprawling development consume rural forests and farms on the other, I asked a question that would haunt me forevermore: What are we missing that keeps us from building a civilization that actually works?

Committing to an experiment where I would follow instinct regardless of outcome, I kept being drawn back to trees, as if they held an answer I could not yet access. It eventually became clear that what we’re missing couldn’t be found in the realms of politics or economics, but rather in how our psyches

fundamentally relate to the world. The pieces finally came together on the edge of a forested city park.

I instinctively responded to seemingly random occurrences in nature – a spider crawling, a bird flying overhead, a leaf flickering among thousands. Before my rational mind could negate the sense, I moved toward each in succession. The first time, I was guided to the largest tree in the park. It felt like the seemingly disparate aspects of nature were communicating with me as one coherent entity. For that brief period, the boundaries of my ego dissolved into nature. On my second attempt, an image flashed in my mind of a compost pile that I had never before seen. Sure enough, I was guided, instinctual signal by instinctual signal, to that very compost pile in the far corner of this forested park.

Peculiar as this may sound, such transcendent experience

driven by instinct is not a new concept. In fact, it was a defining philosophy of early America.

Salvaging the American Experiment

In his 1841 *Self Reliance* essay, transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson helped lay the foundation for a uniquely American conservation movement that would later be institutionalized by the creation of my organization, American Forests, in 1875. Rather than initially focus on policy, coalitions and infrastructure, Emerson implored people to first go within. He said we should move beyond dualism and trust our inner connection to the “unity in nature and consciousness.” To get there, he found it critical to “trust instinct to the end, even though you can give no reason.”

Likewise, philosopher Jacob Needleman, in his book *The American Soul*, described how

the founders of the United States envisioned that, once material needs were met, we would turn inward to explore that endless frontier. Suffice to say, we have yet to get in the right lane for that exit ramp.

Once the hope of the world, the American experiment of limited institutional control and maximum individual responsibility has become mired in consumption, overreach and an addiction to growth for the sake of growth. Our notion of self-interest often extends no further than our immediate families. Our quest for individual liberty, reflected in our sprawling built landscapes, has created many back patios and fewer front porches as we have drawn boundaries around individuals rather than relationships.

And yet, there is still a pulse in the borderland psyche of this liminal nation that yearns for something transcendent. We



Parc Du Mont Royal in Montréal
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readily gutted old institutions, governments, and systems to build aspirational new ones that distributed power to the many.

We are drawn to the mysteries of religion at far higher rates than other developed nations. Our entertainment is moving from detached, ironic postmodernism (think Seinfeld) into a metamodern era where disparate characters seek integration, unity and purpose with one another (think TV shows like Parks and Recreation or Community). After generations sought physical and psychological separation on the landscape, we have seen an unprecedented shift in development patterns, with around 80 percent of new construction nationwide being mixed-use in recent years. This voluntary shift suggests a cursory

yearning for deeper connection with other life. Even our free market ideal, increasingly out of fashion among the young who are largely driving this integration, holds an unrealized potential at such a unitive level.

The Economics Within

Both ecology and economy function on the same underlying principles. Trees in a forest compete for limited resources in the nutrient market the same way businesses compete for customers. A tree that gains an advantage in sunlight, water or nutrients can eventually force its competitors into submission. Meanwhile, an understory of shade-dependent species can emerge in that dominant tree's shadow just as the presence of a large industry in a community

supports suppliers, restaurants and other secondary industries.

But, what if, like quantum physics in relation to Newtonian physics, there is another set of less visible but equally valid laws operating in both systems? If seemingly independent components of an ecosystem actually do function as a cohesive, self-aware whole, then it stands to reason the same laws would exist in economics. And if individuals can access this set of ecological laws through sub-rational instinct, then we should be able to do the same for engaging the economy at a level that rises above any need for cutthroat competition.

Much like being guided to a specific destination in a forest by responding to seemingly random cues in nature, one

could learn how to instinctively respond to small cues in their everyday economic life that might eventually lead to a defining project, the right job opportunity or a career path the more superficial desires of ego never considered.

I don't mean to suggest this would be some guaranteed path to riches and glory. It is important to keep in mind that evolution advances through disruption and chaos. From violently shifting bedrock to galaxies crashing into each other, there is no evidence that our universe exists to be stable. As writer Leonard Cohen mused on the arrogant notion of taming life's chaos, the ideal psychological state is to ride "the drifts like an escaped ski." As such, we might eventually come to view the economy not as the purpose of our existence but rather as a tool capable of providing the necessary resources, or lack thereof, for each stage of our respective journeys into full potential.

The Urban Forest Gateway

While this may all sound utopian, the urban forest grounds it, providing a gateway into this integrated psychological space. For example, an enhanced version of forest bathing could be structured to teach individuals how to instinctually follow cues from nature in their own neighborhood parks. They would then be well positioned to learn how to apply that transcendent experience with nature to their own economic lives.

At scale, we might find that this once radical American



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experiment in self-governance, forged in the only nation to be founded on a philosophy, still has something to offer the global era. As the perception of separation between organisms fades, so too would the need for heavy regulation and forced redistribution. Each individual's economic behavior would voluntarily account for both their own and the collective interests simultaneously. A more integral economy would slowly emerge because we would experience the suffering of one as the suffering of all. Our desire to live immersed in transcendent connection to nature, both indoor and out, would become palpable. Every aspect of our cities, from offices to retail, transportation

and parks, might then come to reflect a passionate love of life and all that is alive. In other words, our cities could finally become truly biophilic.

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