

THE POWER AND PRACTICE OF EXUBERANCE

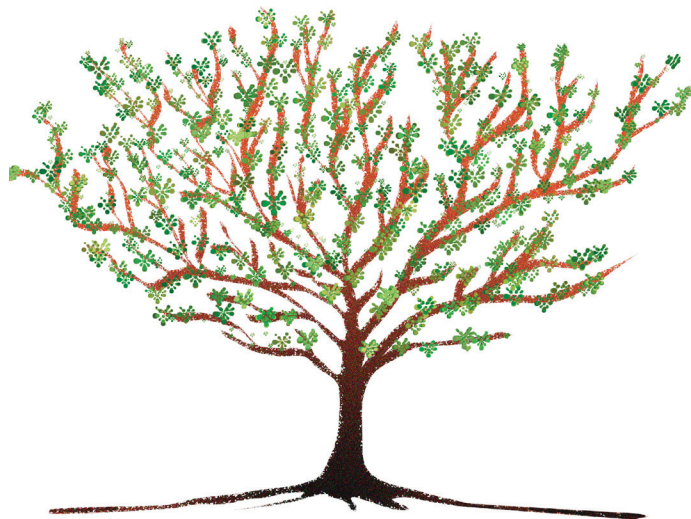
“Nature is self-evidently exuberant.”

Kay Redfield Jamison
Exuberance: The Passion for Life

Imagine that you had the entire power of the biosphere at your back. Imagine that your actions and behaviors were powered, not just by muscle and nervous system, but by the very essence that powers the growth and proliferation of all life on earth. Imagine that you had access to the same vitality that courses through spawning salmon, charging elephants, growing forests and leaping killer whales. Imagine that you could concentrate and focus this immense energy and bring it to bear on the challenges that you face each day.

This, brothers and sisters, is the study of exuberance: the power of the natural world that courses through our bodies, minds and spirits. Exuberance is an ideal word for expressing this quality. The prefix *ex* suggests a stepping out, an action, a movement. The root is from the Latin, ‘being abundantly fruitful’ and the verb *exuberare*. It suggests a quality of growth that is abounding, branching, expanding and overflowing.

In our natural state, exuberance flows directly into us without restriction. As biological beings, we are deeply embedded in the flow of life; our bodies are continuous with all life on earth. We are part of an ancient generative process that is billions of years old, a small leaf on an immensely powerful, growing tree. When we feel our continuity with the rest of creation, great power begins to flow through us.



Unfortunately, Western culture has given us a false story of separation, isolation and division. We tell one another that we are a different kind of creature, above and apart from other living things. This artificial distinction is not only false, it robs us of the very thing that would keep us healthy, fit and happy. When we deny our intimacy with nature, we lose contact with our primal exuberance and fall into illness, physical apathy, depression and delusion. Sadly, many modern people have become so disconnected from their primal physicality that they can scarcely recall any sense of vitality. Consequently, we are in desperate need of remedial education and a reminder of how it feels to be embedded in the biosphere.

To refresh your memory, exuberance is what we feel when we're 10 years old and fully engaged in vigorous, physical outdoor play. It's what we feel when we do vigorous outdoor sports and push our bodies to new levels. In this state, we are energized, alert and capable. We are in flow and ready to engage, participate and learn. Exuberance is thus an ideal performance state for people of all ages, in all walks of life and work. Because it taps into the deepest wells of biological history, this feeling is profound and for many, transformative.

RECIPE FOR EXUBERANCE

The good news is that we know how to recover and replenish our natural exuberance. Trainers and coaches in many fields, from athletic training to corporate management, often suggest some combination of the following for improved performance—otherwise known as exuberance:

- Get out of your box, your cubicle, your dwelling. Put your body into intimate physical contact with the natural world. Sweat. Breathe hard on the uphill. Climb rocks and trees. Surf in the ocean and swim in cold lakes.
- Expose your body to natural light and natural sensation. Take physical risks. Walk barefoot on natural terrain. Put yourself in positions of physical uncertainty; observe the way your attention sharpens and grows. Your body is capable of much more than you think.
- Monotask. Resist the fragmentation of your attention. Immerse yourself completely in the challenge at hand and then, when your task runs its course, disengage completely and move towards rest and recovery. Pulse your activity in harmony with natural cycles of light and season.
- Clarify your purpose to focus your energies and cut through chaos. Meditate. Learn how to pump oxytocin, the hormone of relaxation, trust and affiliation. When we relax, we make ourselves more receptive to the power and beauty of our surroundings, especially the natural world. We slow down and look at the life around us.
- Seek out other exuberants in your community. Look for people with high levels of vitality, curiosity and a sense of adventure. Spend more time with people who go outdoors. Observe the vitality of non-human animals and mimic their passion for the physical. Limit your contact with non-exuberants.

THAT WHICH WE FOCUS ON GROWS

Our study of exuberance must not be seen as a one-time curiosity or an occasional diversion. Rather, this is a vital practice that is ideally suited for sustained, lifetime study. Especially now, as the modern world challenges our bodies and spirits so relentlessly, we must stay focused on that which sustains us. By keeping your attention focused on the deep power of the biosphere, you'll find more and more examples of vitality, creativity and abundance. Maintain this study for months and years and you'll begin to see exuberance all directions.

Many people presume that their physical vitality is simply bestowed on them by genetics or upbringing, but exuberance can in fact be cultivated. Think of this process as a discipline, a practice and a meditation: Start with a focus on the natural, life-sustaining qualities of the biosphere and then, when your attention begins to stray into the chaos of the modern world, bring it back, gently but firmly, to living plants, animals, land and sky. If you feel the subtle tugs of depression, distraction, anger or confusion, look towards the living world and remember the depth of its history, its reach and its power. Remind yourself that, contrary to superficial appearances, you are part of something immense, resilient and regenerative.



The practice of exuberance is far more than just a way to be happy or boost personal vitality. At this time in history, it is a matter of supreme importance for our culture, our future and of course, the biosphere itself. With millions, even billions, of people divorced and insulated from the natural world, separate from the source of life, we are in grave danger of forgetting who we are and what sustains us. By practicing exuberance, we keep the natural world alive in consciousness. By cultivating our power, we position ourselves for creative action.

Ultimately, it's a question of identification. When we choose to identify only with our independent selves, bodies or possessions, our powers become fragmented and distorted, even destructive. But when we connect our identity to the immensity of the living world, we become more powerful, integrated, relaxed and creative. We become part of something far larger than ourselves. This is vital work.