

*Creating a Mature Relationship with Nature*



Recently I was asked to personify Nature in respect to Blue Design. Should we think of Nature as a rock star, an oracle, a therapist, a teacher? It seemed an apt question; Nature is often presented with a singular personality. Some think of Nature as the Mother, the provider of their needs. Others see Nature as a wise teacher, something to learn from and emulate. Still others see Nature as a discomfoting and foreign thing; the weird, unpredictable kid that we kept our distance from on the playground.

I believe it is dangerous to think of Nature with a one-dimensional personality. Such characterizations limit one's perspective of it, at the cost of understanding its richness and forming a mature relationship with it. Nature is all of the above and many more things: ingenious, dumb, kind, cruel, stubborn, indifferent, beautiful, horrible. Maybe the most fitting characterization of Nature is that it is schizophrenic, but in a positive way. Its personality is different depending on the perspective from which we see it or what we ask of it. Seeing Nature in this way, its complexity and the difficulty of understanding its totality, is a wonderful thing. The result is a mature, complex relationship founded on unfolding understanding and our resilience in appreciating its varied qualities.

Our world's situation requires that we individually and collectively mature our relationship with Nature. Blue Design is founded on the creation of sophisticated systems relationships between Nature and its Resources, and our Technology. This requires us to individually know Nature beyond our conceptions of the past, to understand how to form a harmonious relationship to it, and to learn from its methods of conserving Resources in systems. We can no longer treat Nature simply as a source of resources, a dump for effluents, or a pretty scene to reflect upon. Maturing our relationship is not only necessary for the solution of our resource and pollution problems, but also is required to form a truer, more fulfilling sense of our individual place within the whole, with each of us connected to the most basic ways that our natural world, and by extension, our future technological world, must work.

# Defining Nature

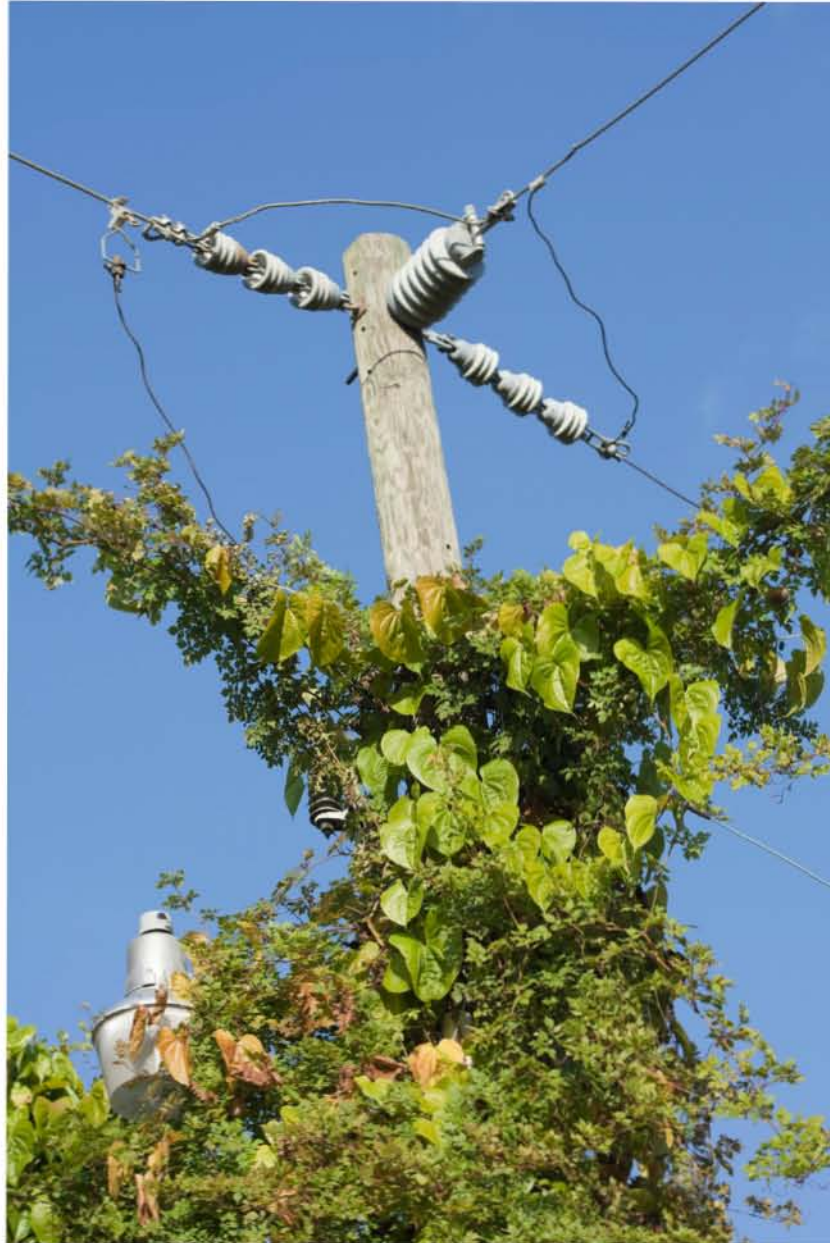
To know Nature we first need to establish some common ground regarding what it is. Rather than using an exact, scientific definition, I will default to a definition that is based on how we instinctively comprehend our world. Nature is what we see around us apart from the things made by us: the sky, the land, and living things. Notice that Nature is partially defined by what it is not: our Technology (the things made by us) and its separateness and contrast from that. This Technology may be made of materials that were once part of Nature (wood, minerals), but we have altered them. We see these materials, the products of our Technology, as thus being no longer a part of Nature.

I am focusing the breadth of Nature to the forms in which we most often perceive it. Although we could include the universe beyond the Earth in the definition above (it is apart from the things made by humans), we mainly perceive Nature as what is contained within the Earth, upon the Earth, and in its atmosphere. While Nature can be defined as being limited to the world of living things, excluding the non-living minerals in the Earth and the gases in its atmosphere, I am including them. I cannot think of these non-living components of the Earth as separate from Nature, because the webs of Nature's systems reach into these things and dramatically affect them, and these things' availability and state in their cycle dramatically affect the state of Nature's systems. Nature has a critical role in many of the major elemental cycles of the Earth: the carbon cycle, the fresh water cycle, the nitrogen cycle, and others. I regard the non-living Earth and the living Earth as two inextricable parts of the Natural whole.

Although I have drawn a line between Nature and Technology, there are principles and processes that apply to both. They are subject to the same physical laws: thermodynamics, gravity, etc. The processes of Nature affect our Technology, and vice versa. The machine made of wood will rot just as the tree, and the laboratory's concentrated acid will corrode both rock and plastic.

And lastly, I must establish the distinction between Nature and Resources. Resources are commonly defined as things from our environment that we use to our purposes, as sustenance for ourselves or our Technology. Resources are produced by both the living parts

of Nature (wood, food, etc.) and the non-living parts of Nature (water, minerals, etc.). Blue Design defines Resources as separate from Nature so that we can better understand their interrelationship to both Technology and Nature. However, Resources are treated as part of Nature within this essay to simplify the discussion, to create a clearer picture of Nature's qualities without having to encumber ourselves with finer distinctions regarding Resource types and their myriad relationships to Technology and Nature.



## Part and Apart

Are we a part of Nature? Of course we are, in the literal sense. We are a part of its world of living things and subject to its processes. At times we feel a deep connection to it, and at other times we feel its character to be uncomfortable, apart from us, alien. In our relationship with Nature, we often seek to distance ourselves from its variability and to change its natural order with our Technology. Man without gun against Lion means food for the lion; the gun reverses our relationship with the lion in the food chain. The fossil fuel furnace isolates us from the cold. Our technology buffers us from Nature's undesired mechanisms. We strive for predictability, so we control what we can of our environment and hold Nature's inherent variability at bay. We condition our world to optimally meet our needs. We are a part of but seek to be apart from Nature.

Even the farmer, who we may think exists symbiotically with the land and with Nature, practices this control mentality. Industrial farming applies pesticides and herbicides to control the wildness of Nature's invading species. It irrigates to mediate the unpredictability of Nature's weather. It overloads the capacity of the land to sustain crops and livestock; maintaining yield by increasing chemical fertilizers and mediating effluent overload by hauling animal waste to remote land. The farmer seeks to homogenize the products of Nature.



As our Technology has increased in complexity the tools we use to control Nature have become more powerful, and the materials of that Technology have become more alien to Nature; more difficult or impossible to reassimilate back into its processes. But what about our relationship with Nature during earlier industrial times; was it more symbiotic, was it a relationship to the benefit of both parties? I would argue that we regarded Nature in much the same way we do now, seeking to control it and remove its variability, but that we simply did not have the tools to do it as effectively or in such a widespread fashion as we do now. The 19th century farmer did not care about the land more than the industrial farmer; he simply sought to ensure its maximum yield using less effective tools, with therefore less success at controlling or altering Nature. This required him to be more in tune with the natural processes over which he had less control. The materials used then were not less toxic by design; they simply were the products of the best technology of the day, more closely tied to their natural sources and more easily reassimilated back into Nature's processes: wood, stone, iron.

We can take this approach further to examine the relationship of preindustrial peoples to Nature. Indigenous peoples are often presented as living in harmony with Nature, understanding its processes deeply; living within it and according to its variability. I agree with this viewpoint, but I do not believe that this was the result of some noble, enlightened worldview; it was because they had no choice. Their Technology was so undeveloped that they lived according to the variability of their environment. In fact, they did seek a measure of control through mysticism, attempting to control Nature by satisfying its spirits.

When our control mechanisms, our Technology, fail in controlling Nature's variability, we lose our isolation and become uncomfortably close to it. Nature cares not whether our control mechanisms succeed or fail but it is opportunistic when they do, and its natural state rushes back in with all its variety and variability, seemingly determined to remove all evidence of our optimized and homogeneous suppression of it. The river floodplain fills every spring if the dam is not maintained, and the planted field fills with weeds if the herbicide is not applied.

Nature likes to remind us that we can never be truly apart from it; that it will stub-

bornly resist subjugation by our Technology. It may temporarily bend to our will but it is extremely difficult to truly dominate it. No matter how much I desire a weed free lawn, Nature does not comply. The clover and the chicory always creep in. I could resort to herbicidal massacres of such plants, but I will not. I respect such occurrences as symbols of Nature's persistence.

I appreciate the way Nature constantly reminds us that we are a part of it. I like the way it tries to invade the opening we thought was sealed, like the vine growing under the door of my workshop. When we are lax in our vigilance, it always comes creeping back in. I admire its stubbornness. Given all the mistakes we have made in our relationship with Nature, I am glad that it is always trying to repair things, to bring them back to what they were, after we cease our damaging practices. Nature heals itself, unlike our Technology which degrades without constant attention.

We may think we are apart, but Nature is always there to remind us otherwise.



## Making It Personal

Mature relationships are created through a deep, personal understanding of the other, through the close interactions of both parties, and through an acceptance of the perceived shortcomings of the other. Our individual relationships with Nature will be unique, as are the relationships we each form with our friends or family. My relationship to Nature will be different than your relationship to Nature. In my efforts to form a personal relationship with Nature, I have come to think of its qualities as personality traits, each of which shows itself depending on how I am interacting with it. Together, these traits form my internal conception of Nature. They help me to understand when I am working against it, when I am in harmony with it, and (most satisfactorily) when it and I are working together toward a shared goal. These traits together tell me what Nature wants to be and what it will return to if left undisturbed. A personal relationship with Nature gives me a firm grounding, an understanding of what my world is in its most unchanging terms and how I fit into its whole.

Nature, of course, is not human (although humans are a part of it), and there are limitations to this relationship analogy. Nature is not an individual. Under our definition, it is a diverse collection of living organisms, systems, and non-living elements. To call Nature a singular entity is a vast abstraction of its real composition. But it can be accomplished, with certain limitations. To characterize Nature as such, it has to be personal to each of us. Someone living in Alaska would characterize Nature much differently than me, living in the tame environs of upstate New York. Our individual conception of Nature depends on the particular variety of it with which we interact. We blend all these interactions in our mind and together, they form our individual conception of Nature's personality. But shared themes run throughout our individual perceptions. Nature functions everywhere with common qualities: resiliency, system relationships, diversity.

My relationship with Nature is not reciprocal in the common sense. This quality also distinguishes Nature from other relationships we may have. Nature does not care if I am frustrated or unhappy. It will not mourn if I die tomorrow. I am but one among many equals in Nature's systems; its relationship with me is no more special than it is to any of its other parts. Most of the qualities I perceive as negative in Nature are related to its lack of

care for the individual. Nature seems cruel. It decides what lives and dies based on the level of the organism's adaptation to its environment and the health of the larger systems it exists within.

But I still perceive reciprocal qualities in certain aspects of the relationship. If I care for Nature in the proper ways I am rewarded by the results; my garden flourishes, my land is healthy. If I spend the time to see Nature, I am rewarded with the perception of its intricate beauty and a deeper understanding of its systems of life and resource conservation. And if I am cruel to Nature, ignoring its processes and seeking to dominate it, I suffer its punishment as it works itself around my obstacles and gives me results I never anticipated.

Nature reveals its different personalities to me depending on the specific interaction I have with it. Sometimes its personality is dominated by stubbornness. I had an overgrown lot, filled with Sumac and vines and other sorts of fast-growing weeds, and I cleared it, planting pasture grass. For a few years afterwards, Nature wanted to return it to what it was: the Sumac and vines sprouted and I had to keep cutting them down. Finally, Nature grudgingly acquiesced to my wishes for a stand of grass. But Nature, to this day, continues to be persistent at defying my efforts; I need to continue to maintain the lot to keep the wildness from creeping back in, even after the original Sumac and vines are dead. Nature wants to become a certain way, and I have to exert continuing control to suspend that.



Nature stubbornly resists my attempts to create permanence. Not only is it trying to return the lot I planted to wildness, but it also seeks to tear down everything I build. Rot eats my fences. Water leaks through my roofs. Weeds grow in my gravel driveway. If I want to build with more permanence, then I have to escalate the battle. Fences are built with pressure treated wood; the driveway is paved with asphalt. My efforts are a microcosm of the development of our Technology, advancing to control Nature's unwanted qualities, adding materials foreign to Nature to its palette. The longer lasting, the more toxic the material. Isn't it funny how the world works this way?

We need to stop considering Nature as an adversary which we must battle, control, and subjugate.

Nature can seem helpless, in need of a guardian or a nurturer. I like my role in this relationship. The things I plant seem helpless at first, forced to root in a foreign place, with weak defenses to the unpredictability of the weather or to hungry animals. It is my role to help them through this weak period, nursing them until they are strong enough to weather Nature's variability. Nature seems to reward me with a bountiful harvest or a beautiful flower. However, these roles are easily reversed. If I wish to remove a plant that grew there natively, it can seem far from helpless. No matter how many times I chop it, mow it, or pull it out it still comes back. In this case I feel helpless at resisting what Nature wants.

Nature's materials feel clean and right in my hands. Soil or sawdust on my skin creates a connection to Nature. Nature's materials do not feel foreign; I am in no hurry to wash off their residue. Its materials have warmth, character, and variation. If I want the best results from my constructing or planting, I must understand each material's unique personality; not only the material in general, but the specific characteristics of the example with which I am working. Before cutting the piece of wood, I must understand its grain, its hardness, and the placement and soundness of the knots within it. While digging the soil, I feel its texture and moisture, I smell its richness, and by these things I know its suitability for the plant. Working with Nature's materials gives me a deep satisfaction in knowing their qualities, a respect for Nature's variability, and a willingness to adapt my work to be in harmony with it.

Sometimes Nature seems arrogant to me. It likes to remind me of my smallness and powerlessness. Sitting through a thunderstorm or working all day outside in a gusty wind are good examples. I am in Nature's hands; there is nothing I can do to affect what is happening around me, and Nature seems to brag about how small my efforts are compared to its vastness and power.

Nature is a teacher throughout these interactions. Not so much of specific solutions for my problems, but of deeper philosophical knowledge. As the source of all physical things and as the maker of intricate relationships, Nature shows me what is foundationally important: the relationships of all things to their source. I understand my food's relationship to the soil and the weather. I understand how the quality of the wood from the tree is related to how and where it was grown. I understand the effect of a cold winter on the reawakening world of the spring that follows. This gives me a firm grounding, a stable vision of my place in the whole. The things I observe in it and the interactions I have with it will not change with the next style or the mood of society; the physical things that our society values become pale, transitory ghosts when held against the unchanging values of Nature. The physicality of Nature is always changing, seasonally, and as its systems change in a given location over long periods of time; but the values that underlie these manifestations do not. The mowed field becomes the brush lot becomes the hardwood forest; the physicality changes, but Nature's underlying principles do not; it is always changing and always the same. Similarly, Nature remains regardless of my mood or as I change with age. I may not see the same things in it as I change from day to day and year to year, but if I look I can still find the things I knew from my childhood; Nature holds them while my eyes are turned elsewhere. I find comfort in this; that I can find a fitting relationship with it, no matter how I change and develop.

Nature teaches me the short and long views, the importance of timely action and of waiting patience. It teaches me to sometimes rush, to make sure that I plant at just the right time in relation to the weather and season. And it teaches me to sometimes be patient, to passively observe decades or a lifetime while the tree in the forest becomes ready to harvest. It teaches me to know when to act and when to wait, and that I cannot rush something that has its own pace. It gives me a true perspective; my largeness in its seasonal cycles and my smallness in its glacial cycles.

I cannot personally know what it was long ago, but Nature seems much less than what it once was. In “The End of Nature,” Bill McKibbin argued that there were no places on Earth where Nature had not been altered by man to some extent, due to the encompassing effects of Climate change and pollution. I still feel Nature’s character and strength in my interactions with it, but I am saddened when I wonder what has been lost. Our Technology sits on Nature, like a flat rock left on a patch of grass. When the rock is pulled up after a week, the grass is a pale, emaciated version of what it was. Today’s version of Nature reminds me of that grass, trying to survive against something that has been placed on top of it: our will and our Technology.

Nature has no voice to cry out when it is damaged, although we can perceive its injury if we are empathetic. When I see its destruction at the scale we are now capable of, I wish it had a voice. I wish it could tell us of the ways we are irreparably changing it to make it less than it once was. I wish it could tell us of the ways we are hurting it which we are not yet aware of. I wish it could tell us the consequences of our actions. Nature is, above all, resilient. It will adapt to what we inflict on it, but it may become something unlivable for us physically and spiritually.

I feel wrongness in our collective relationship with Nature, and that increases my empathy to it, tempering and softening my actions in my personal relationship with it.

## Nature and Blue Design

Nature is all about relationships. All that we have done to break our connections with it work counter to its most basic mechanisms. One should not think of an element in Nature without thinking about the system it exists within, its cycles and its relationships to other things. Where does the plant get its water? What does the animal eat? Organisms in Nature do not survive unless they have successful relationships; with food, with habitat, for reproduction. These systems exist down to the smallest level and include the non-living in global cycles of carbon, water, nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulphur (Peter Graham: Building Ecology). Our Technology ignores the health of these systems and considers Nature only as a source for raw materials and a sink for effluents. It takes none of Nature's wisdom in emphasizing the relationship rather than the component. The computer, the automobile, the sneaker exist as isolated collections of refined resources, not as manifestations of a step in a resource cycle. We came from Nature; how did we come to think of our Technology under such a different conception than Nature?

Our Technology has evolved as a product of our worldview, blind to the importance of systems and relationships in Nature, only concerned with the immediate; fulfilling the present need without ensuring the long-term health. We manufacture the sneaker because there is a foot to be covered, without regard to the feet of the future or where the sneaker goes when its sole wears out. We see the tree as a source of lumber or fuel for our Technology without understanding the impact of its removal upon the things which rely on it. We see the soil as a simple medium for growing crops, without understanding the nurturing systems of life within it, using it as a sink for fertilizer to feed the plants above it without realizing the importance of the soil's life system on its long-term health. The ultimate manifestation of our attitude is the common conception of Nature as a collection of objects that may be arranged in a pleasing way to the eye. This is like treasuring a great work of literature only for the pretty picture on its cover.



Blue Design's approach to resolving the relationship between Nature, its Resources, and Technology is to treat each as a deeply understood entity, performing the difficult operation of separating them so that we can understand and repair their interactions. Using Nature as an entity, Blue Design abstracts Nature's foundational traits so that we can come to an understanding of its proper relationship with Resources and Technology. This is a larger version of the mature relationship with Nature advocated throughout this essay. In this respect, Blue Design begins in each of us, through finding our personal relationship with Nature and using the new perspectives gained from it to see the wrongness of our current Technology.

Blue Design does not worship Nature or regard it as the sole source of solutions. It treats it as a sophisticated entity with selected properties that our Technology needs to emulate and form system relationships with, with the overall goal of conserving resources within systems. Nature has qualities we must respect, but not reinforce or duplicate with our Technology. Nature does not care about the individual. We cannot accept all of its variability. We cannot return to living completely within it as our pre-industrial ancestors did. So Blue Design does not advocate worship, but rather the creation of harmony; one of the founding principles of any mature relationship.

A deep relationship to Nature exposes the inherent wrongness in our Technology; in its treatment of Resources and its relationship to Nature. Blue Design is founded on repairing these things at the largest levels; working on our most abstract, encompassing definitions of how our Technology interacts with Resources and with Nature. The foreignness of our Technology's processes to Nature creates the requirement for the creation of a new Technology, not a betterment of the old Technology. Not additive change, but foundational change. Not a more efficient light bulb, but a light source powered by current solar income, with parts that can be disassembled to continue through a mixture of natural and technological cycles.

This Technology must recognize the importance of the systems formed by Nature, Resources, and Technology; that the activities of any part affect all the parts, and that no decisions can be made without this holistic, systems view. Our new Technology must use resources as Nature does, not manufacturing them only to fulfill an immediate need, but rather to fulfill both the immediate need and to satisfy the requirements of the cycle that it exists within: Where does it go when we are done with it, how do its resources become reassimilated; reborn into new manifestations in either Nature or Technology. This is the transition from a Technology of linear resource paths to resource cycles. Our resource systems must have the ability to be shared between Nature and Technology; much of our current environmental problems lie in the fact that our Technology leaks into Nature and overloads or poisons its systems. We cannot divide Nature's resources and Technology's resources into separate cycles; we must create a Technology that can share its resource cycles with Nature, so that the two are symbiotic and neither pollutes the other.

# Marriage

Our world seems to be speeding on a course of ever-increasing superficiality and disconnection from grounded principles. Forming a personal relationship with Nature has given me an anchor as the world speeds along, a yardstick to measure the true value of what society and Technology tells me is important. Many do not see this value. We admire Nature past the fringes of our controlled lawn or zooming past our car window, but we treat it as our world has taught us to treat many things: as an image only, as something to be judged for its worth, as something to be controlled and improved upon, as something to be avoided if it is uncomfortable, as something to be used and disposed of.

Limited natural resources and a world that is filling with the effluents of our Technology are forcing us to see Nature in a different way, to finally grow as individuals to see the patient value of a mature relationship with Nature. Even if these crises did not exist, I would still argue for the value of a mature relationship with Nature, as a means to reconnect ourselves, to provide a direction for our own spiritual development.

The creation of a mature relationship means we cannot characterize Nature in our previous ways. We must understand the different personalities of Nature as we encounter them; we must understand its complexity and how to interact with it. The hallmark of this maturing relationship is acceptance, acceptance that Nature's underlying principles always seek to return it to what it wants to be, and that instead of continually escalating our battle to control those mechanisms, we need to learn how to harmonize our activities to them. This quest for harmonization is at the core of Blue Design.

Successful marriages are built on the long-term harmony of two partners; this is my own relationship with Nature. I have formed a meaningful relationship with something that is apart from me, for the betterment of both entities. Some may say that this characterization cannot apply, that my marriage with Nature involves a partner that can not actively maintain the relationship. I believe otherwise, that my interactions with Nature are reciprocal, but not with spoken words. Nature is other than me, and understanding that otherness is key to the success of the relationship. Marriages can be composed of two very different people.

A successful marriage is not created by one partner controlling or dominating the other; successful marriages are built on an understanding of each partner's personality, and by the continual adjustment of a dynamic relationship in the search for optimal harmony. We can love something that is apart from us without worshipping it, and with the understanding it has qualities we do not like. We understand if we seek to modify the qualities in the other person, or to remove them, something vital in the marriage is lost: the uniqueness of the other person. Strong marriages weather the good times and the bad, periods of harmony and disharmony; there is a willingness to endure, to adapt, to constructively work on repairing problems to create a prosperous future for both partners.

We may not like to acknowledge it, but we have always been married to Nature. We are a part of Nature and cannot escape it. We are inextricably linked, despite our attempts to push Nature to the fringes of our psyche or how adept our Technology becomes at controlling it. Our marriage has become unhealthy for both parties, and the mistakes of our industrial development have taught us that try as we might, divorcing ourselves from Nature is not possible. It will require personal investment and emotional maturity from each of us to repair it.

