



Letters to Nature Kids



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Dear Nature Kids,

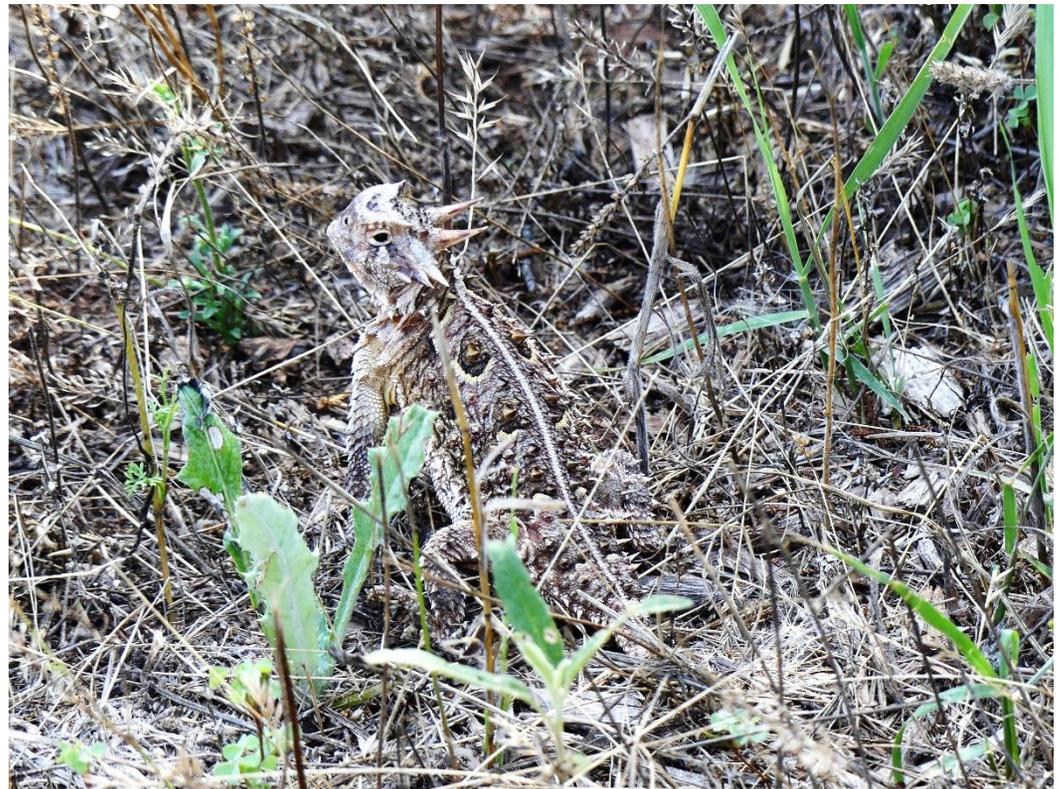
I want to write to you about how I like to visit nature, because I think you might like it, too. It is a way to use your attention to get more deeply into the place, notice more of it, and enjoy all of it.

At the start of a walk, I want to be there completely. That means I want to let go of thinking about what happened earlier or what may happen in the future. I don't want to be wondering what someone else may be thinking. In other words, I don't want to be distracted.

I've already done whatever planning I need to do. I've thought about what I need to bring and when I need to be back. Now it's time to enjoy what's happening right now.

So I start by noticing my breathing, how I take the next breath in and then how I breathe out. If I would like to be a little more relaxed and calm, I'll take a shorter breath in and a longer breath out, like I was gently blowing out a candle. It's a way to cue ourselves to relax.

If I'm tired and need to be a little more lively, I'll breathe in a little deeper and longer, then let the breath out. That way of breathing can be energizing.



You have to use your attention to spot this Texas horned lizard, seen at Copper Breaks State Park

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Or I might not need to do any of that, just breathe normally – but I'll still pay attention to how it feels. How it rushes through my nose or fills my chest or belly. That way, I'm paying attention to what is right here and right now.

After noticing my breathing for a short time, I can start paying attention to everything around me. And if I start thinking about other stuff, I'll just let it go and come back to how the sun or the breeze feels. Or my breathing. Or the trees, the water, or birds. I'm somewhere in nature and I want to notice everything.



Shining the light of attention on this giant post oak tree (Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve)

Noticing things means using your attention. And attention is like a light you can shine on things. At first it is like we were shining it on our breathing. And then you turn it so the light of your attention shines on a tree, or the whole forest. Sometimes it is hard to shift our attention from one thing to another and keep control of where we are shining the light. But with practice, we get better at it.

When you are outside, try imagining that your attention is a light that you can shine on one thing or another. Put the light on a tree and keep it there for a count of five (or more). Then turn the light toward something nearby and count how long you can keep your attention there. How far could you count?

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You can narrow your attention down like a spotlight or like a flashlight, just noticing what is within that circle of light. And then you can broaden your attention out like a floodlight to notice everything around you. Try this: put the first finger and thumb of each hand together to make a circle and look at just what is within that circle. That's your mind's flashlight. Then move your hands apart and notice the bigger and bigger picture.

Maybe your attention is drawn to a group of pink flowers near you. You start narrowing your attention – your flashlight – to a particular flower that has something in it. The flashlight beam gets so narrow that you have to get down near the flower to focus attention that much. The insect is a tiny baby form of a katydid, and look at those



Pink evening primrose (above). The close-up at left shows an early stage of a katydid, which is a grasshopper relative.



long, black-and-white antennae! Keep the focused light of your attention there for a little longer. Have you noticed the pink veins or lines on the flower petals before? (Also, there is another very tiny insect on one of them.)

And what about the stuff sticking up in the flower? Even if you don't know the names of the parts, you see that there are several little "stems" each holding up a yellow powdery bar. And in the center (a little out of focus)

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there is a sort of “X” on a stem that comes right out of a little hole at the bottom of the flower. Have you ever looked that closely at a flower before? It’s like an amazing miniature world. Taking control of your attention and using it like a flashlight is what let you notice it.



Widening your attention to take in the whole marsh at Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge

Are you still right here with us in this moment? If my attention flies off somewhere, thinking about something else that is not here, I can always bring it back. Maybe back to breathing for a few breaths, or back to the flower right in front of me.

When I focus the attention floodlight on the land in front of me, there is so much to see and hear! Sometimes I'll notice the shape of the land – maybe flat, or maybe it slopes down toward me or in some other direction. If there is any water, maybe it settles into a pond or runs downhill or flows like a creek or river. Where do most of the trees grow, and are they different kinds in different places?

And I always remember to notice sounds – birds calling, breezes, or even traffic sounds. What about smells? If we stop and really try to notice, there may be smells of flowers, soil, or wet leaves decaying in autumn. And how does the sun or raindrops or breeze feel on your skin? There is SO much to notice if we take the time to let that floodlight of attention shine. When we notice movement or a particular

sound, we can narrow our attention down to a flashlight to find a lizard or bird. Or maybe a fish or dragonfly.

You might try it next time you are out somewhere. Set aside some of your time to be still, notice breathing, and then use your attention, on purpose, to focus on everything you can find. Remember: breathing, floodlights and flashlights!

☞ Michael



A cricket frog, in the imaginary flashlight beam of my attention

All the contents of Letters to Nature Kids is © Michael Smith. If you would like more information about me, or to see more of my writing, please visit <https://livesinnature.com>. You can reach me by using the contact form at my website or by email at masmith.tx@gmail.com.