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The Ashokan Way: Landscape's Path into Consciousness

Gail Straub
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Gail Straub's contemplative walks along the Ashokan Reservoir, nestled among the Catskill Mountains, are chronicled in thirty-six poignant and heartfelt essays that are a feast for the senses. As the seasons change, moving through light and dark, calm and storm, birth and death, the landscape whispers ancient truths that teach, heal, and reshape her.

"In the company of this water and sky, these mountains, forests, and creatures, I feel a profound sense of sanctuary," Straub, a social activist and peacemaker, writes. They ground her with their constancy, provide respite from noise and urgency, and remind her that the dharma is living one's true nature. Inner and outer landscapes intertwine, enriching each other in a partnership akin to dance, the stability of the one allowing freedom for the other.

With a spirit open to embrace other creatures as kin, she observes a crow funeral with its own etiquette, ritual, and expressions of empathy. The drowning of a baby gosling in the reservoir's turbulence is a reminder that while nature can nurture, it can also destroy, and we are subject to both.

Silence, solitude, open space, and contact with inner worlds through meditation and prayer are vital to her. "An ongoing bond with the unseen is essential to both my faith and my capacity to find hope in a dense and complex world," she writes, inviting us to form such a bond with whatever landscape it is that surrounds us.

Lacking a connection with the natural world that awakens awe and astonishment and provides the air and water we need to survive, we are nothing more than "hungry ghosts," obese with the nonstop chatter provided by our electronic devices. For real sustenance, *The Ashokan Way* advises three pathways: spiritual practice, the arts, and the natural landscape.

KRISTINE MORRIS (May/June 2018)

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