

At War with Mother Nature

An Interview with

Lorrie Otto

as told to Julia Ann Charpentier

Eighty-nine-year-old Lorrie Otto is the motivation behind the natural landscaping movement. After witnessing the destructive spraying of DDT pesticide in the 1950s and 1960s, she influenced government officials and this dangerous chemical was abolished in 1970, making Wisconsin the first state to warn of its threat to the environment. By 1972, DDT had been banned nationally in part due to her efforts. She was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1999. Otto wants us to reintroduce native plant life into our yards and abolish chemicals that create sterile "immortal" lawns.

JC: *The Wild Ones organization was founded on your environmental philosophy. What is your philosophy?*

LO: My first reason for not wanting to have lawns around houses would still be for the excitement and pleasure of my children... children everywhere. I lived here [village of Bayside, Wisconsin] maybe three years, and then the sewer line came through. The wonderful wild meadows were gone.

Within a year all the lots were sold off, and everything became lawns. It [had been] just lovely — little stream going past the house, woods on one side, lawn on the other, and many little evergreen trees.

When I looked around and saw the lawns everywhere, I had to do something better for my children. I didn't know much about native wildflowers. I just knew that destroying habitat was too dull. We're all connected. It seemed as if we were breaking the pattern, destroying so much life by shearing things off and then placing them with chemicals.

JC: *How many species of animals, insects, and plants do people destroy when they do this "normal" procedure in their yards with chemicals?*

LO: They take just about everything. What's left? Not

only do they shear off the vegetation that tries to grow, they introduce a kind of grass that doesn't belong in our part of the country, and then they shear it down so that nothing can live in it. Prairie plant roots go deeper than many trees, so they really break up the soil. We need soil insects to aerate and add to its richness.

If you go into a garden center and read the labels on the bottles, they brag about all these bad things this chemical kills. The majority of the insects in the soil we don't want to kill. We need healthy, good soils to grow the plants, and we need the plants to feed the animals and the birds.

I know many women who have beautifully-decorated homes, and they'll change the draperies every three or four years. They have patterned upholstery and Oriental rugs and lovely artwork. Then they open the door, and what do they look at? A bleak, poisoned lawn. And I keep wondering, how do they adjust to this? Are they not even thinking about it? Suburbia could be so gorgeous.

We don't need to go up north to find good smells and diversity of Divine and quiet. Suburbia could be that way. Beginning with the drainage ditches in Bayside — we have an ordinance. You're supposed to keep it mowed, but it should be just the opposite. We should turn all those ditches at the edges of our lawns into rain gardens.

JC: *Didn't you once have a disruptive incident when the city came in and mowed your wildflowers down?*

LO: That was years ago. No, I never have trouble. I used to get all kinds of calls. Once I went to Indianapolis to defend a man who was in trouble with the city ordinance because he had let his grass grow. We had a case with a man who worked for the forestry department. He had his degree in plant succession. He came from an eastern college, and after finishing his graduate



Lorrie Otto, 89-year-old environmentalist and member of the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. Photo by Ney Tait Fraser.

work, joined the U.S. Department of Forestry stationed in Milwaukee. He lived in New Berlin, and had let one part of his land grow to see what the succession of plants would be from raw soil in this new subdivision. It was an old farmer's field before then. That was just a lovely trial — should have been televised. This man mowed down the law, not the grass.

JC: *If somebody leaves the land alone, what are the worst results that could occur?*

LO: You really can't leave it alone because we have weed laws to protect the farmers. You wouldn't want poison ivy. You wouldn't want burdocks. Our highly beneficial and gentle, intelligent little bats get caught in them, and the warblers get caught, especially the goldfinches. You can't just turn your back and let it go.

JC: *Are you strategically removing plants?*

LO: For the first few years it needs highly-intelligent management. You don't want the species that don't belong on our continent. Some native wildflowers are so aggressive, unless you put another plant next to them that is just as aggressive,

that plant will take over your whole garden or front lawn.

JC: *Have you encountered difficulty with one age group more than another?*

LO: I have for many years. I gave a lecture called "Healing the Earth." Young people used to come up and say, "Oh, I'm going to do this as soon as my children are out of school." And I say, "Well, for heaven's sake, you should go home and do it right now because you're going to do it for your children." I've never seen children playing on a front lawn. Really... have you?

JC: *Some look at a wild piece of land and think of skin rashes and diseases from mosquitoes and allergic reactions to bee stings.*

LO: That's one of the reasons it's important to start our children out when they're little. They love the ants and any kind of bug or beetle they can find. They're interested in the chrysalises and the cocoons — butterflies. A lot of young mothers are absolutely terrified they'll be stung or bitten or poisoned. Bad television programs. I don't know why they're so turned off. Insects are so interesting. It's a whole other world to explore.

JC: This psychological compulsion to dominate Mother Nature — it's at the root of the environmentalist's problem. Where do you think this belief originated?

LO: When we first came to

this country it was important to clear the land. They didn't want the Indians sneaking up and stealing their horses.

JC: The land developers will claim that it was originally uninhabitable.

A Sacred Blessing

A Reminder of An Nadur
(Nature in Gaelic) In Rural Ireland

By Paraic Donoghue

I was in Western Ireland recently, the place where my own journey begins. I had the honor of being around two wise elders during my visit to Connamara. From a very young age, I always had admiration for the elders in my community. During my stay, I had the privilege of witnessing a sacred blessing, a long-forgotten ritual from a lost legacy.

Growing up speaking Gaelic, I was surrounded by a highly-intuitive and sensitive tribe of people. I trace my ancestry to ancient rural Ireland and even to this day have a strong connection and reverence for nature and how we are guardians of a lost forgotten knowledge.

The connection and respect for nature and the animals was apparent to pagan Ireland. In my opinion, the Celts were a highly-advanced ancient civilization.

Upon arriving in Ireland this year, I decided to visit two elders and pay homage to their journey. The old woman, my grandfather's sister, and her husband were in their 90's and the old woman's health was not very good but her husband still had the wherewithal to give insight into realms of profound thought. He was kind enough to share with me the wisdom of the ages and how nature can liberate humanity.

These people were simple, hard-working folk who grew up in a region where all people understood the laws of nature and the importance of integrating this wisdom into their daily lives. It was obvious that my heart was starting to open while I was in their presence.

I realized that I was receiving a sacred blessing from a long lost tradition, a reminder maybe, passed on by the Druids when they initiated people into certain rites. The blessing was a soft kiss on my hand from the old woman. The old man shook my hand and said, "Son you have a good heart." Through these words and actions, I felt that a sacred blessing had taken

place. While in their company I felt a shiver in my spine and tears in my eyes.

By the end of the conversation, the feeling was an immeasurable act of love from one human to another, a forgotten ritual maybe — I can only say that the emotion was overwhelming. Two people opened my heart in milliseconds, a process of love mirrored from one human to another and vice versa in the form of a profound sacred blessing.

There was no ego, no logical thinking and it came from the essence that is rooted in all individuals. It was magical and mystical and I felt honored to have witnessed this. The old man gave a synopsis about what we must do. We must integrate the symmetry of nature and the awesome power nature holds in our life, and we must begin to journey back to her. "An Nadur" (Nature) he calls it in Irish Gaelic.

It is documented in ancient codices that the observation of nature is the building block to perceive the divine spark within each of us. Humanity in the present form has forgotten to connect to this advanced perception and maybe nature is the road back to creating the celestial presence within all of us.

I express my deepest gratitude to these two wise people for the perception they gave me on that day and acknowledge them and their beautiful journey.

If individuals release all attachments to their identity, I believe they have an opportunity to attain a higher perception to decode and trace our divine heritage and birthright. It is time to remember.

Begin to be present today to experiencing the humbling science of nature. Start by asking for forgiveness from An Nadur. It is the first step to reclaiming our quintessence.

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LO: What do we go out and camp for? I keep thinking how absolutely gorgeous suburbia could be. It could be so beautiful and so quiet. Our houses could be shaded with not one or two little trees that you put in front — just dump leaves all over your lawn in the fall. In the springtime, plant a lot of little trees, and watch your woodlands grow up around you.

JC: In the 1970s, pollution was at a dangerously-high level in the United States.

LO: I was driving over River Edge, and I had the car radio on. A river in Ohio had caught on fire. And a week later, it caught on fire again. I thought, "What on earth are we doing to show such disrespect for a river we have it so polluted?" Of course, I had known by that time because I had gone through the whole DDT thing, and so I knew about pesticide pollution.

JC: DDT was in widespread use in the 1950s and 60s. You witnessed the horrible effects it had on wildlife when it was legal.

LO: We'd spend all of our Sunday mornings in the woods. When the village started to spray there was an astonishing loss of life. The salamanders disappeared.

The grass snakes disappeared. The luna moths disappeared. In one morning I picked a bushel basketful of dead robins that had died since dawn. We used

to have so many robins that my children learned to count by counting robins. Wrens no longer sang around the house in the springtime and summer-time. It was so quiet. Warblers would fall out of the trees.

When we finally stopped spraying DDT, it was twenty years before I saw a robin. It was twenty-two years before I saw one with a speckled breast — a successful hatching of robins.

Every single stream, every single lake, including enormous Lake Michigan, had DDT in the fish. We started out with sixty-three eagles in nests around Lake Michigan. It was down to two or three eagle nests, raising only one little eaglet.

JC: If you had to sum it up, who or what is the biggest threat to the environmental movement today?

LO: It's overpopulation. The earth is finite. It can sustain just so much life, and we've got too much of it. I've never had a clothes dryer. I've never had a dishwasher or a garbage disposal or air conditioning. I drive a Prius [hybrid] car. We can behave much better. Ban the use of power lawnmowers. Ban the use of chemicals to control our environment.

Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance writer and editor. She holds a master's degree in the humanities from California State University. Her articles, interviews, and reviews have appeared in trade and consumer publications.

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