



ALEXANDER MCLENDON



# Ocooch Mountain Echo

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## 2 FROM THE EDITOR

WINONA, MN

## 4 DISCOVERING THE PRESENT MINDFULNESS WITH TRISH JOHNSON

*Parker Forsell*

## 8 IT'S COMING DOWN

*Nickolas Butler*

## 15 SIMPLY BEGIN

*Ty Webster*

## 16 TALK OF THE REGION

## 22 BOOK FRIEND

*Liz Cassidy*

DUBUQUE & MAQUOKETA, IA

## 24 DRIFTLESS INSIDER

*Siri Steven*

## 26 LOCAL MUSIC

SAM AMIDON

FRANCES DENSMORE

LA CROSSE COUNTY, WI

## 32 PLACE NAMES: TIGER CAPE

*James Travis Spartz*

## 34 GET GOING DRIFTLESS

## 36 SKY WATCH

*Starman Bob Allen*

## 39 DISCOVERING THE OCOOCH MOUNTAINS

# Discovering the Present

## *Mindfulness with Trish Johnson*

By Parker Forsell

In highschool I loved to run. We had a serious track and cross-country team, and we trained year round. The coach was a Canadian Olympian and he ran us through the gamut when it came to work outs. But it was the relaxation and visualization techniques that really ended up sticking with me. Imagine 40-50 runners laying on their backs in a grassy field with the coach first directing your attention toward breathing and relaxing, to be followed by visualizing your entire run or race. I credit these techniques to part of my success as a runner and they definitely helped me develop a devastating kick in the 800 meters, mainly due to repeated envisioning of a burst of energy on the backstretch during the second lap.

Trish Johnson remembers her introduction to mindfulness techniques connected to sports as well. She was a competitive volleyball player in highschool, north of the Twin Cities in Forest Lake. She can still recall a guest of her coach coming to practice and having the players lay on their backs while they were walked through a series of prompts related to drawing attention to different parts of the body. It was a kind of invitation to a way of thinking and a presence that felt completely new to her. It was not an immediate leap toward meditation, but for Johnson it was the crack that opened the door.

The origins of meditation go deep into antiquity and have been connected to many different religions, within which it has been practiced. Hinduism, and its sacred texts, namely the Upanishads, are credited with the first written mentions of meditation. These texts were written anonymously and most credit them to around the 6th or 7th century BCE. A translated line from the early Upanishads (there are early, middle, and late) refers to “having become calm



CHELSEA KRINGS

*“ Once I began to realize that I could be available to myself during the ups AND downs of life, I began to understand how I could be more deeply and fully available for anyone I met along the way.”*

and concentrated, one perceives the self (ātman) within oneself.”

Buddhism can be traced back to Siddhartha Guatama (5th century BCE), who became known as Buddha, and was born into a Hindu family in India (in an area now known as the country Nepal). Although

many referred to Siddhartha as Buddha, in practice ‘Buddha’ is used for a person who has attained the highest level of consciousness and within Buddhism lives the idea that any human on the planet has the ability to become a Buddha. Buddhism is not a religion, but a practice, and the principle teachings of Buddha are called Dharma.

Johnson and her husband Paul Stern started Manitou Center/Dharma River in Winona in 2010. They offer Kung Fu, Mindfulness, Zen practice, Qi Gong, Tai Chi, intuitive movement, reiki, and Yoga, workshops and classes. Their work is all part of their nurturing of mind, body and spirit focus on community development. Johnson is also a zen priest and mental health therapist.

Although her experience during high school volleyball practice was the spark, Johnson admits it took awhile to integrate this profound experience. It wasn’t until the early 1990s, while at college at Winona State University, that she was re-introduced to the mind-body connection through a Tai Chi class. There was no turning back at this point and she continued Tai Chi work, which also included her initial introduction to meditation.

Particularly in the Western world, many people’s introduction to meditation might have come through yoga or Tai Chi. While yoga has become synonymous with mainly one aspect - asanas - the comprehensive posture exercises, it is actually a much more complex form of study. Also known to have derived in India, yoga includes physical, mental, and spiritual practices or disciplines. While most uninitiated may think of yoga as a workout class, in its deeper practices it includes breathing exercises, meditation, postures, and



# It's Coming Down

## *A Snow Day for Mrs. Braintree*

Story by Nickolas Butler, photography by Dylan Overhouse

# Simply Begin *Words and photo by Ty Webster*



One of the thousand reasons I'm grateful to live in the Driftless Region is the hundreds of varieties of wildflowers that grow here. White pasqueflowers and trillium, purple shooting stars and coneflowers, azure bluebells and lupine, orange lilies, red cardinal flowers, and dozens of varieties of yellow sunflowers--to name but a few--turn our forests, prairies and wetlands into a dynamic rainbow of beauty throughout the temperate months.

I love them all, but none more so than the radiant American Lotus, which rise up like shining jewels from the murky depths of many a midsummer Mississippi River backwater slough.

A superb specimen of these gallant beauties serves as the stately subject of this issue's Simply Begin Photo -- snapped from my kayak during a pleasant paddle on the serene waters of the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge.

Speaking of gratitude, this issue's Good News takes the form of an Elephant Journal article that astutely assures us that incorporating a practice of "natural gratitude" into our daily lives is beneficial to our general wellbeing. Listing "Five Simple Ways to Thank the Earth," and encouraging us to start our own gratitude practice, the article is well worth a read and can be found in its entirety at [www.elephantjournal.com/2015/11/5-ways-tothank-the-earth-on-thanksgiving-day-any-day/](http://www.elephantjournal.com/2015/11/5-ways-tothank-the-earth-on-thanksgiving-day-any-day/).

The article poignantly reminds us that "we are never really alone, but rather part of a vast and beautiful web of life that supports us every moment of our lives."

I hope the latest Simply Begin meditation supports you, too:

*As you gaze at the image of the lotus flower, simply begin to imagine that you are the flower. Feel your silky, white petals blissfully soaking up the warm rays of the golden sun as you sway slightly in a light, refreshing breeze.*

Take three slow, deep, breaths.

With your first breath, simply allow your mind to become calm and quiet. With your second breath, begin to feel PEACE flowing gently into and throughout your entire, flowery body. With your third, begin to emanate PEACE out to the world around you.

Deeply rooted in this PEACE, imagine that with every breath it is flowing out from you and filling the waters of the entire wildlife refuge. See it gently rising to form a fine mist that slowly spreads to cover the entire river valley. Growing ever outward, this peaceful mist softly blankets the whole Driftless Region. On and on, upward and outward it flows, until every last corner of the Earth is infused with this fine mist of sweet serenity.

With each peaceful breath, become increasingly aware that all of the people in every country throughout the entire planet are breathing with you. In unison; together, as one. Every precious person is filled with this mystical mist of PEACE. Every heart is opening--like a gently unfolding lotus blossom--and radiating LOVE and a deep reverence for one another, the Earth Mother, and all of Her precious children. Everyone, all together, everywhere, is fully aware that we are all integral strands of the vast and beautiful web of life on this flower-filled, rainbow-hued planet we call home.

Now, as you take one final, easeful breath, SMILE; and proceed with your day in your own PEACE-full way, firm in the knowledge that you are helping to make the world a more sustainable, peaceful place.



## About the author

**Ty Webster** - is a free-thinking, freelance writer and photographer from Trempealeau, WI. He is the founder of Simply Begin, a weekly, multimedia meditation for peace and sustainability

# Echoes we are hearing

## TALK OF THE REGION



WORM FARM ART/FARM DTOUR - GET TO THE PIE BY BRENT HOUZENGA | CONTRIBUTED

REEDSBURG, WISCONSIN

## Worm Farm Institute

By Margot Higgins

At a time when community health and sustainable food systems depend on bridging the rural-urban divide, there's an agricultural experiment underway. Innovated by Sauk County's Wormfarm Institute, a national leader in rural creative placemaking, this project will entail the implementation of six to eight new test plots throughout the Driftless region, with an unusual methodology, and unlikely collaborators.

Typically, an agricultural test plot is set up to inform farmers and researchers about growing conditions, pest management, soil health, etc—those factors that inform crop productivity and value. These tests increasingly take place not through

hands-on implementation on the farm, but more abstractly in a biolab, on university acreage thousands of miles away from an actual community. The findings of those experiments are often commodified, deepening pockets of corporate shareholders and farmers, and rarely benefitting rural communities and local farmers.

The Wormfarm Institute is putting out a new model for research to answer a different set of questions. Drawing on the conditions generated by dirt, language and art, the Institute is asking, what would it take to create a thriving rural community with a food system that decreases energy consumption, increases food security,

provides fresh and local food for hundreds of thousands of people, addresses critical environmental challenges, and offers new economic opportunities? What does a healthy polyculture look like, both in the soil and in our human communities?

In this investigation, farmers and artists will work in partnership to explore ideas and solutions to those challenges. These "test plots" will provide a platform for artists to engage with and support farmers and landowners in novel ways, and gain a more complete understanding of their current challenges. They can become laboratories for developing relationships, taking artists and farmers outside of their comfort zones, and into a space of curiosity.