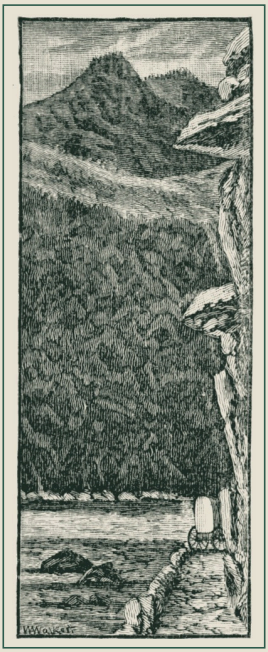
WAKING UP IN

BOONE

WHAT THE PRIMITIVE TEACHES

Lessons from the people of
A Search for the Primitive



A WAKING UP IN BOONE FIELD GUIDE

WHAT THE PRIMITIVE TEACHES

Lessons from the people of A Search for the Primitive

In the words of

JOEY HENSON
BAKER PERRY
HOLLY DRAKE
NATHAN ROARK
JUDSON CONWAY

WAKING UP IN BOONE
Boone, North Carolina

The words in this book belong to the five people who speak in it. They come from profiles published on wakingupinboone.com between 2021 and 2026 and from the interviews behind them, edited lightly for clarity. Short passages set in gray italic give context and are not quotations.

Each of the five gave permission for their words to appear here.

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Eat no wild plant unless you are certain what it is, and gather only where the owner has given you permission.

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wakingupinboone.com

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THE PEOPLE

JOEY HENSON

Climber, mapmaker, stone mason, and carpenter. He pioneered bouldering around Boone in the early 1990s, helped start the Blue Ridge Conservancy, and draws maps of the boulder fields by hand.

BAKER PERRY

Climatologist at Appalachian State University and National Geographic Explorer. He helped place the world's highest weather station on Mount Everest and keeps more than a dozen stations in the High Country.

HOLLY DRAKE

Forager and teacher. Through Wild Blessings she leads plant walks in Todd, Boone, and across the High Country, teaching people to find and eat the wild plants around them.

NATHAN ROARK

Teacher of self-reliance at Buffalo Cove Camp. He came to the mountains from Atlanta to attend Appalachian State and stayed.

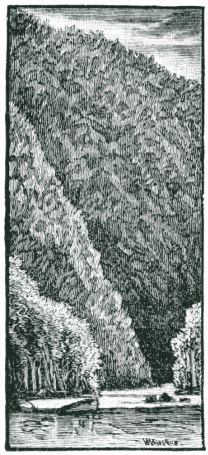
JUDSON CONWAY

Fly fishing guide with Elk Creek Outfitters. He has guided on the rivers of the High Country since 1991.

INTRODUCTION

A climber, a climatologist, a forager, a wilderness teacher, and a fly fishing guide were each profiled in the Waking Up in Boone series A Search for the Primitive. Each of them lives close to the land in the mountains of northwest North Carolina, and each of them has thought about what that life teaches.

This book gathers what they said. Their words are arranged by lesson rather than by person, so that in each chapter two or three of them speak to the same idea. Each chapter ends with one thing to try.



A Narrow Water-Way, 1883

CHAPTER ONE

START FIFTY FEET FROM THE ROAD

Most of what these five people know, they learned close to home, by going back to the same place again and again.

JOEY HENSON

There's a sort of magic out there that you can tap into that leaves you feeling revitalized. When you walk into the woods, even just fifty feet from the road, and you start looking for the beauty in it, and you start focusing on the beauty of it, there's almost an energy you get from it.

HOLLY DRAKE

I've trained my students to find a sit spot to go to every day as a destination, and to make a hiking habit, where they hike every single day, so that they're observing the changes in nature, because it's constantly changing. And the best time to start is today.

If you start in the winter, everything looks barren. But as you watch the life come up in the spring, it's astonishing to see those tree buds just getting larger and larger. And then they unfurl.

There's something about the discipline of walking the same path every day, observing the plants, the trees, the bark, the shadows, everything along that path, on your way to your sit spot. That can be a boulder. It could be in the middle of a creek. It can be a chair or a hammock. It can be any place where you can sit with your Bible and a journal and a cup of coffee and your jeweler's loupe, and just spend time with God, observing, and using all five of your senses.

I've done this every single day for maybe eight or nine years now. It's been kind of an anchor to my soul.

At her sit spot, Holly keeps a timer.

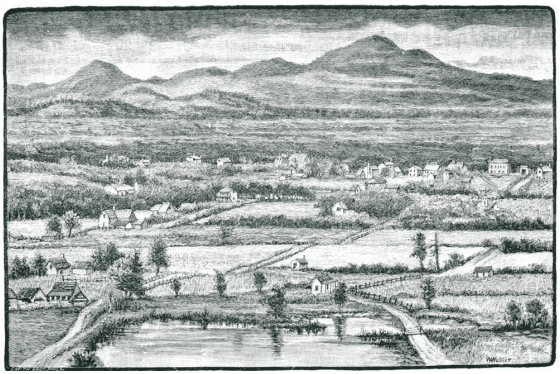
I always do five minutes of complete silence, where I hold Max, who's a Jack Russell terrier, and he's not still very often. But for those five minutes he lays there like he's asleep. I'm not really thinking. I'm just kind of being. And then the timer goes off and Max hops down, and I get back to just observing and listening.

The land where Holly kept her sit spot for three years was sold. A neighbor offered his side of the same fence line.

I had a bunch of kids come over, and they helped me create a path on my side of the fence. It's the same trees. So I get to watch them be birthed in the spring and watch them flower, and now they're making buckeyes and acorns.

TRY THIS

Choose one path within walking distance of home and one place along it to sit. Go every day for a month, whatever the weather.



Ochlawaha Valley, from Dun Cragin, 1883

CHAPTER TWO

READ THE LAND

Each of these people reads something the rest of us walk past: a windbreak in the rock, a stonefly on the ice, the pod of a chestnut in July.

HOLLY DRAKE

I think I've always seen the plants. But it's kind of like I could recognize you out of a crowd of people. Knowing more about you takes time. You have to spend time with the plants, as well as the people, to get to know them.

On a plant walk, she takes a small lens from her pocket.

This is a jeweler's loupe. You can see through here all the intricacies of this flower.

Her plant walks run every two weeks.

They're very different each time, because in two weeks things will have changed quite a bit. It would be silly to be collecting nuts in the summer, because there aren't any to collect. But you can certainly look and see that the pods are developing. You can look for the signs: oh my gosh, look at those chestnuts, I can't wait till the end of September.

JOEY HENSON

After a good steady rain, Joey searches the places where ancient hunters might have camped, such as a cleft in the rock or a natural windbreak. He has found tools and points that way.

I get into that magic where all that fades away, and you're just there with the woods, pretending it's ten thousand years ago.

JUDSON CONWAY

On the New River in January, with the water frozen solid in places.

There's always something happening under the surface. There may not be as much as there is on warmer days, but the fish still have to eat.

He kneels on the ice and points to an insect dragging itself across it.

That's a very sluggish small black stonefly. It's very odd to see it this time of year, especially after a snowstorm.

BAKER PERRY

Baker keeps more than a dozen research-grade weather stations in the High Country, on Grandfather Mountain, Roan Mountain, Beech Mountain, and at the top of the hill behind his house. The high stations give early warning of weather on its way to the valleys below.

TRY THIS

Carry a hand lens on your path. Each time you go, find one thing that has changed since the last time.



Watauga Falls, 1883

CHAPTER THREE

GET UNCOMFORTABLE ON PURPOSE

Nathan Roark teaches children to be cold, wet, and wrong on purpose. The others came to the same practice by other roads.

NATHAN ROARK

Within three to four seconds, what do you have to do after a crisis happens? You have to avert panic. You have to get your mind in control, because your mind is your number one survival tool. If you're in panic mode, your mind's not working. You're not able to logic and think your way out. And human beings are really good at logicking, if we give ourselves credit and time.

We have to train our brains and train our bodies that it's okay to be uncomfortable. It is okay for things to get hard. It is okay to be a little cold. It's okay to be wet, as long as we know how to remedy those situations.

One of the biggest things that I like to encourage students to do is to give themselves a multitude of mini-tests. Small tests all the time, so that you're building that resilience to difficulty.

You gain confidence through doing something hard. Through struggling through something hard and coming out on the other side successful. And success doesn't mean it looked good. It just means you got through it, and you learned something.

Throughout life, the box around you gets smaller, unless you're intentionally stretching it through challenge and struggle. Most people let it close in. By the time they're old, they're afraid to do anything different or difficult.

The process is where the magic is.

BAKER PERRY

Training for his first Everest expedition, in 2019.

I remember toward the end of the training cycle I did twelve hill repeats over four hours on my bike up on Howard's Knob. Howard's Knob is the best workout in Boone if you're training for a mountain climb.

JOEY HENSON

On the early 1990s, climbing in Boone, Hueco Tanks, California, and beyond.

Through that migratory lifestyle and being around campfires and living in caves, we realized just how little we needed to sustain ourselves. We minimalized everything and trained really hard.

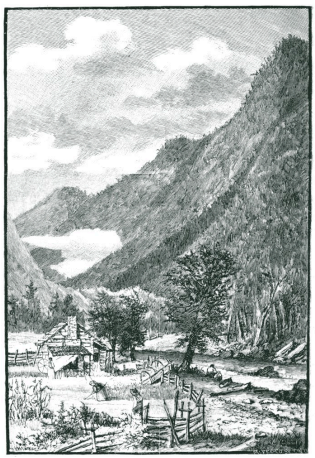
On seven years of weekly trips into Linville Gorge.

After days of exploring, camping, and climbing by the river, we often would finish up the trip by racing up the trail with heavy camping gear and bouldering pads on our backs. Towards the top of the trail someone would almost always start sprinting the final hundreds of yards up to the cars. We would push it hard, and most times we would arrive at the parking lot feeling like throwing up, yet exhilarated.

The Mexican restaurant on the way back to Boone never tasted so good. Then, after a couple of rest days, we would dive right back in and do it all again.

TRY THIS

Choose one small discomfort, such as a walk in the rain without a jacket or a fire lit without a lighter, and repeat it until it is no longer hard.



Valley of the Noon-Day Sun, 1883

CHAPTER FOUR

EAT FROM WHERE YOU ARE

Holly Drake calls gathering wild food "shopping." Most of her shopping is done along the New River, on land where friends and neighbors have given her permission.

HOLLY DRAKE

On a hillside of red clover in Todd, still deep purplish red in its early bloom.

Oh my goodness, look at all this! We're fortunate, because they were supposed to mow this field already, but they got delayed.

On how she started.

Getting to know the plants started when I went to a wild food feast back in 2009. I'd never done anything like that, and it just blew my mind, because it was more than just knowing the names of the plants. It was that we can eat them, and how do you eat them, and then discovering that they're useful for medicine.

I had never learned any of that growing up. My parents and grandparents distanced themselves from granny herbalism, because that was poverty in their mind, or it was just old-fashioned.

Even just the gathering of it is so amazing, because you're getting sunshine and exercise and bonding with other people, and adventures that you never forget. And then you come home with your baskets full and you cook them up.

On gathering in season.

I spend a lot of time getting what's out there now, at the height of its energy, rather than weeping over the fact that I missed out on Japanese knotweed back when it was available in May for three weeks.

We've gotten into eating things whenever we feel like it. We can get a watermelon in December, but we

both know it's not going to be near as tasty as it is right now, in the summer.

On weeds.

People call them weeds just because you can't control them. People want manicured gardens. They want lawns with no weeds, just a certain type of grass. But back in the 1800s, people would rip out the grass in their yards so that the dandelion could flourish. People brought the dandelion over from Europe, because they could not imagine life without certain plants.

On a dandelion dig with her students.

Imagine you go out and you forage for dandelion. You dig up the roots, you come back together, and you clean them in the river, and we splash water on each other. Then we chop them up and roast them in the oven, and we brew them in a pot of water and drink that with some coconut milk in it. And we've made a memory. Memories that you'll never forget.

As some of the land she used to forage changed hands, she brought the wild home.

I've got something like eighty-six different edible plants on my land that I brought here. Once you put them in the right ecosystem, they will flourish. A lot of my students get their starts from my land. But guess what? I got my starts from other people's land.

Each of her plant classes ends the same way.

I set the timer for the last ten minutes, and I say, you've got ten minutes to write a poem with everything you've just learned about this plant. Let's just

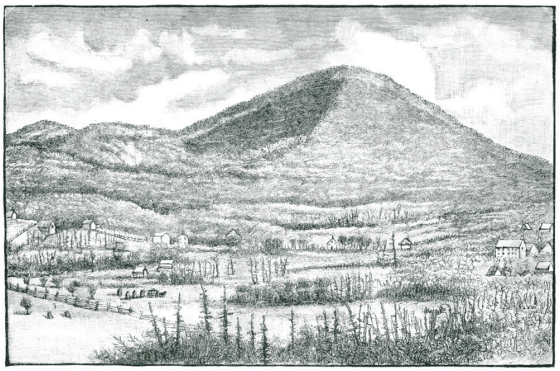
celebrate it. And everyone's groaning. And at the end of the ten minutes, we all read our poems to each other, and we laugh ourselves sick. Sometimes we'll cry.

BAKER PERRY

Behind Baker's house outside Boone are a kale garden, goats, and chickens. He credits part of his stamina on Everest to the omelets his wife, Patience, makes from their chickens' eggs.

TRY THIS

Learn one edible plant that grows on your own path. Be certain of its identity before you eat it. Then gather it, cook it, draw it, and spend ten minutes writing about it.



The Macon Highlands, 1883

CHAPTER FIVE

TAKE ONLY WHAT YOU KNOW

The best places in these mountains have stayed that way because the people who know them are careful about whom they tell and how they ask.

JOEY HENSON

There's a whole world within each fifty-yard section of rhododendron. I don't tell people how to get to the places I've explored. I want them to find it for themselves.

Joey and other early Boone climbers worked to keep guidebooks from giving away the area's bouldering. He draws his maps of the boulder fields by hand, from memory, and he draws them so that they leave some of the guesswork in place.

HOLLY DRAKE

I have some really precious friendships. And I don't just take. I always feel like you should always give more than you take.

She gives her students an assignment.

If you see that somebody has a chestnut tree in their front yard, you just go up to the door and say, I'm a student of Holly Drake with Wild Blessings, and we were required to ask a complete stranger if they would let us forage for something. I noticed you had a chestnut tree. Would you mind if I got a basket full this season? And then take them something, like a jar of jelly, if they say yes.

On losing places to forage.

A lot of the places have been sold to people that are coming from out of town, and they say no, you can't be on my land. So it's narrowed down to less than I had before. But it's always still enough. Every time God shuts one door, he always opens another one.

NATHAN ROARK

You have to build a skill set and a knowledge set, and practice those skills and knowledge, so that you have confidence in your ability to act when it comes time to act.

TRY THIS

Before your next outing, learn who owns the land you will cross. Ask before you gather, bring something back, and leave the location off anything you post.



On the Cataluche, 1883

CHAPTER SIX

GO WHEN NO ONE ELSE GOES

Cold days, gray days, early mornings, and the off season show what the busy season hides.

JUDSON CONWAY

In early January, after Winter Storm Izzy, Judson and his son Colter fished the New River where it was frozen in parts, standing on the ice between casts. They caught a brown trout and a rainbow.

In a couple more days all that ice'll be gone, and we can fish those holes again.

There are very few places where you can experience the four seasons this planet has to offer so distinctly. There are very few places with such unique personalities. There's literally hundreds of miles of streams up here.

On a day in college, on the Watauga River, when he had just lost his last fly.

Being a poor college student, I could only purchase about a half dozen at a time, and I'd just lost my last one in the stream. I remember I sat down on a rock to just enjoy the river and the woods, because I wasn't able to fish anymore. And there comes a box of flies floating down toward me. I looked upriver as far as I could to maybe see the owner and saw no one.

HOLLY DRAKE

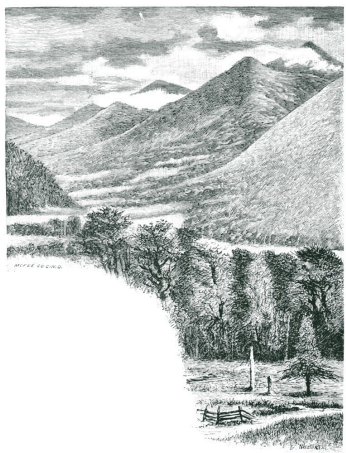
Depending on the time of day, it's even more magical, when you've got morning light or late dusk light.

I've always asked the Lord to give me eyes to see evidences of his love all around me, and he's always done that. I spend time with God indoors sometimes, but it's never as precious as when I'm out there. I'll hear a bird call that means something between me

and God, or I'll see a bird flying right over my head, or the way the shadows cast across.

TRY THIS

Go out on the worst-looking day of the coming week, or before sunrise on any day, dressed for it, and stay an hour.



The Junaluskas, 1883

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIVE WITH THE CONTRADICTION

None of these people has given up the truck or the phone. Each has thought about what those things cost.

JOEY HENSON

Joey built his house by hand from the wood of old barns. He keeps his Tacoma, his phone, and electricity, and he accepts the hypocrisy.

It's a sort of rebellion against modern society and all this materialistic work ethic and all the money focus.

Cell phone technology was a hard one for me. For a long time I didn't want people bringing their cell phones to the house. I think it's weakening our intuition, and I've read that it decreases the rapport between people if a phone is even in sight. But now, of course, I have a cell phone, because it's a major convenience.

NATHAN ROARK

We live in a world that's striving for sterility.

I literally have kids tell me, I'm an expert at building fire, I build them all the time in Minecraft. I know how to make flint and steel fires, I do it all the time in Minecraft. I ask, oh yeah? How do you know? I've watched it on YouTube a bunch of times. It's like, cool, then do it. And they can't.

They can't even begin to do it. Because you've watched something doesn't mean you know something. You have to connect the learning of information with the doing of the skill to own the knowledge.

HOLLY DRAKE

We are stuck on our screens. We need green time, not screen time.

I have a lot of New Age friends, and they worship the earth, and I can understand that, because it's so amazingly created. What they do is they try to get out in nature and empty their mind. Well, I like to get in nature and fill my mind with God's word and with his world. I'd rather worship the one who created it than the earth itself. It's only reflecting, the way the moon has no light of its own and only reflects the sun.

BAKER PERRY

A scientist who installs weather stations on the highest mountains in the world, Baker once rented a sharecropper's shack while he was in college, with a spring tap outside and an outhouse. In graduate school he built a lean-to cabin on Joey Henson's land in Vilas. Today he keeps a small cabin with a desk, a cot, and a few books on the hill behind his house.
In college at Duke I lived in a cabin like that.

TRY THIS

Choose one tool you rely on and set it aside for a day. Write down what you missed and what you noticed instead.



Cascades, near Warm Springs, 1883

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MOUNTAINS CHANGE

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene reshaped these mountains. The people who had practiced their skills were ready to help, and the land began to recover on its own terms.

NATHAN ROARK

As Helene's rain clogged the culverts in his valley, Nathan spent hours running up and down the road with a shovel, clearing debris and dodging falling trees. With water rising, he used a mini excavator to claw out the blockages. Then he cleared the route and helped neighbors who were cut off.

If those culverts go, the whole road goes.

If I can take care of myself, then I'm not a burden. I can be an asset. And I can help the people who really need it. There's a void in our confidence in our skill set to manage our own.

You don't wait to learn when you need a skill. If you're in the middle of a crisis, the time for learning is gone.

JUDSON CONWAY

Two months after the storm, Judson described streams near Boone that the flood had "gorged out," stripped of logs, soil, and sand down to bare rock, and others that showed no sign of it. He called it a science experiment no one had seen before. Recovery, he said, could come faster than people expect, or slower.

Why do I still love to fly fish? Well, you're out there in God's world. You get the mountains, you get the river and the water and the flowing, you've got the aquatic life. It's always exciting. Always something new. There are so many variables, and there's so much you don't know. You'll never be perfect, but you'll just want to do the best you can and learn as much as you can and enjoy the process. It's a sport that's always challenging and will always give back, decade after decade.

HOLLY DRAKE

In the spring of a year when Holly was caring for her mother full time, her son Brian was badly hurt in an accident overseas. He lived three days. When the family decided to let him go, she went up the mountain where she had been going to pray.

I knew I had an hour. And during that hour the Lord met me in the most significant ways imaginable for me. If I had been indoors, I would have been distracted by just stuff around me. But to be there in nature, it was so loving and so precious. It's proof that God sees me. He knows me. He hears me. And he's right here, closer than my breath.

NATHAN ROARK

Waking up is making that switch in your brain where you're no longer afraid of doing hard things. You're willing to try. You're willing to struggle. You're willing to learn. The mountains are a good place to learn.

TRY THIS

Learn one skill you would need if the road to your house closed for a week, and practice it before you need it.

FURTHER

THE FULL STORIES

Read the profiles of all five, in the series A Search for the Primitive.

wakingupinboone.com/a-search-for-the-primitive

HOLLY DRAKE

Plant walks, classes, and free guides to foraging.

wildblessings.com

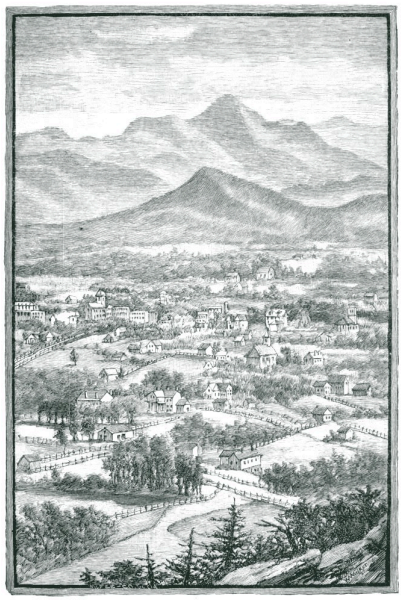
NATHAN ROARK

Two downloadable guides, *Survival Philosophy* and *Everyday Discomforts*, are linked from his profile on wakingupinboone.com.

JUDSON CONWAY

Guided trips for trout, smallmouth bass, and muskie.

ecoflyfishing.com



Mount Pisgah, 1883

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