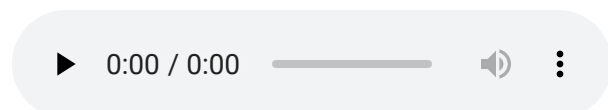


# Wander with a Question

 [journal.workthatreconnects.org/2023/09/02/wander-with-a-question/](https://journal.workthatreconnects.org/2023/09/02/wander-with-a-question/)

by Anna Switzer



Recorded by author

**What the activity does:** It helps a person gain insight into a meaningful question they have in their life, with the natural environment\* providing guidance.

Each person doing the activity creates their own question around grief.\*\* Here are some potential questions in this context:

- How can I 'be' with my grief?
- What is my grief here to show me?
- What is mine to do regarding this grief?
- What is mine to do in the world right now?

The question needs to be open-ended; not yes/no or include expectation of a discrete answer.

\* The environment can be a backyard, a park, or any other place with relative quiet. It doesn't have to be remote or completely removed from the built environment... the more natural the better, however.

\*\*The question can be changed for any purpose, at any time.

**Who it is useful for:** This exercise is useful for anyone who is willing to set aside their "logical" and "problem-solving" mind, and who is open to a new experience of gaining wisdom through interacting with their environment. It is great for learning how to "problem solve" with a different part of the mind than we normally rely on for wisdom or solutions.

## Introduction

Most people have not spent time in nature in quite the way that this activity invites. Most of us are steeped in busy-ness, and so we go to nature to unwind, but often spend that time moving through nature in the same busy way...getting our "steps" or "miles" in. This exercise will have you moving through nature in a slower and more deliberate way, which can offer powerful insights into a question you are grappling with. This exercise builds on two others, so I briefly outline those first.

## Activity 1: Feel the Pull

I invite you to stand in one spot in the chosen/available environment, and **very** slowly rotate your body, paying attention to the feelings in your “gut.” Keep rotating until you “feel the pull” to move. This pull might feel like a small desire or tug to go forward while facing in a certain direction. It is usually subtle, so it might take some practice at first to notice it. If you feel like you are “making it up” at first, that is okay; just go with it. Once it is felt, walk in the direction of the pull; again very slowly. Notice the sights, sounds, shapes, shades, shadows that are on the path you are walking. When something draws your attention, the idea is to stay with that something for a few minutes. You can even sit down to be closer to whatever it is. See what messages come through from spending time with it. Do this activity a few times (ideally on different days) to get comfortable with it before moving on to Activity 2.

Consider doing some reflection here— thinking, journaling, and/or drawing— about: What was this experience like for you?

Did you feel a pull? What did you find when you followed the pull? What did you notice or wonder about the things you found?

## Activity 2: Awareness and Attention

These two words are sometimes used interchangeably, but this exercise will help distinguish them. The more advanced exercise (Activity #3) builds on understanding both. Neither attention nor awareness is inherently “good” or “bad” but it is important to be able to use the appropriate one at the appropriate time. This can include being able to use both at the same time. The essential difference between the two is the type of focus one is using. *Attention* is a narrower type of focus, while *awareness* is broader.

A classic modern-day example that helps distinguish the two is when people are walking down the sidewalk looking at their phone, their *attention* is on the phone. Their focus is narrow. They have lost *awareness* of their surroundings and can even find themselves walking into things.

One way for you to experience the difference between attention and awareness is to practice with your vision. Sit somewhere for a few minutes and focus on a blade of grass, leaf, branch or any object that is in your near field of vision. Then, without changing the direction of your gaze, relax your eyes so that you can “see” everything in front of and around yourself. Some of what you see may be hazy or out of focus, and that is okay. This is sometimes called “soft focus.” Slowly, toggle back and forth between near vision (attention) and relaxed vision/soft focus (awareness).

Consider doing some reflection here – thinking, journaling, and/or drawing – about: How would you describe your experience with this difference? How does it serve you to have both awareness and attention (in general, not just visually)?

When you are ready, you'll put these two skills together in Activity 3.

### **Activity 3: Wander with a Question (Putting Activities 1 and 2 together)**

This exercise utilizes both of the above skills to create an experience that can be mind-opening and connect you more deeply to the wisdom available in your environment. By following these steps, nature becomes your guide in a way that is very personal and empowering.

**Step 1:** Determine a question that you are grappling with and are open to receiving guidance on. This should be a question that is important to you, and maybe has been running in the back of your mind for a while. Ideally, this is a question that only you can really “know” the answer to, and having clarity on it will influence how you think, feel, or behave in some way. See the examples in the first paragraph above.

**Step 2:** Find a starting spot, ideally in a natural setting. Bring a journal and pen or pencil with you, perhaps in a little backpack so that your hands are free to interact with nature.

**Step 3.** Focus your *awareness* on the question you are grappling with. Spend a minute or two really stepping into that question in your mind.

**Step 4.** Now, do the “Feel the Pull” exercise. Stand in your starting spot, rotating slowly until you feel drawn to walk in a certain direction. Proceed very slowly in that direction.

**Step 5.** Focus your *attention* on what you are finding along the path. Note that this does not have to mean an established path or trail. It just means the path that you are walking. When something attracts your attention, you are invited to stop walking and spend some time with that thing (it could be an item, a sound, a smell). You can sit down. You can get close to it, if it is safe to do so. You can pick it up, if it is safe to do so. Turn it over in your hands. Interact with it if it will not be harmed by you doing so. Ask it what it has to “say” about the question in your awareness. Be patient. Keep silent, so that messages can be heard/felt. Let them come. And, again, there is no worry if you feel like you are making things up! This feeling often comes when the brain is being engaged in a different/new way.

**Step 6.** Stay with the object or in a meaningful location until you get some sense of completion with whatever it was that grabbed your attention. Completion might feel like you have gotten some part of an answer to your question. Completion might also be a realization that the question actually needs to morph into a different question.

**Step 7.** In your own way, thank this object (tree stump, leaf, spider web, shadow, aroma, waterfall, piece of litter, beetle, man-hole cover, feather, etc.) that you have spent time with. Note that there is no expectation to only attend to “natural” objects.

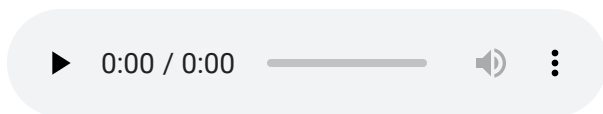
**Step 8.** Stand up and re-anchor your awareness into the (old or new) question. Repeat the steps starting with Step 3 above. Note that you may travel anywhere between 2 and 200 (or more) steps during each phase, but there is no way to prescribe limits on it. It is designed to be open-ended. Follow your own guidance; the “path” you are walking may zig-zag across the space.

**Step 9.** When you feel an overall sense of completion or you only have 10-15 minutes left in your availability, take some time to do some reflection. Again, thinking, journaling, and/or drawing are all welcome. Questions to consider are: What did you experience?

What insights do you have into your question now? What would you like to do upon leaving this session and heading back into your day/week/month?

### **Other Important Tips:**

1. **Repeated note:** This exercise is not limited to totally natural environments. Any environment will do, but quieter or more natural environments will allow you to experience/“hear” the guidance much better than those filled with traffic noise, etc.
2. If possible, turn off cell phones, etc. during this exercise so that there won't be disturbances. You can, however, set a timer for your experience, remembering to leave 10-15 minutes for Step 9, for the final reflections.



Anna is a long-time outdoor educator, science educator, and educator of educators. She has studied Physics, Oceanography, Science Education, and Nature Connection. Anna has worked for organizations including Outward Bound and National Geographic Society. She has spent thousands of hours outdoors, with students and without; it is where she derives her most consistent inspiration. She was introduced to WTR through an event in 2021 and has been intrigued by the work since. Anna is the author of *License to Learn: Elevating Discomfort in Service of Lifelong Learning* (2020). For additional information and/or connection go to [annaswitzer.com](http://annaswitzer.com)

