Homeward Bound

The Joy of Nature and My Life Outdoors

Hamza Yassin



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Commissioning Editor: Jessica Minocha
Creative Director: Mel Four
Senior Editor: Leanne Bryan
Copy Editor: Sam Wells
Production Controller: Sarah Parry

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Introduction

It was early autumn and the blackberries were ripening on the brambles behind the whiteboard that Mr McGurk had rested up against a magnificent horse chestnut tree. I was already scanning the bush for the plumpest, darkest blackberries which were tantalizingly out of reach. I've been scratched more than an old vinyl disc when trying to reach blackberries, but that's the risk you take when searching for treasure in prickly brambles!

Mr McGurk was a teacher who changed my life. Many of us had a teacher like him, and I love the way we still call them 'Sir' and 'Miss' even after so many years. You never lose that sense of respect and reverence for what they brought to you. At school, I responded really well to teachers who

approached their work slightly differently. Mr McGurk was a marathon runner and never seemed to age a day. He'd take us on a jog before class around the playing fields because he knew, from his own experience, how much it energized and enlivened the mind. For all the initial grumbling and groaning, it made us more positive and more receptive. It also drew us closer together as a group, bonded by shared happy memories outdoors in the sunshine.

Mr McGurk applied 21st-century thinking to a 1990s classroom. He knew all about working smarter, not harder. His example was a gift that kept on giving, because not only did we get to experience the positive impact of exercise and being outside – but also it encouraged us to think outside the box more. And that chimed with me as a kid who spent a lot of his childhood thinking of creative ways to deal with the difficulties I experienced reading and writing. I loved going to school, but more than anything, I wanted to be outside.

I found out that the reason I struggled so much with written work was not because I was 'dumb', but because I was dyslexic. That might have been what drew me to the world outside the classroom window. But also, some kids just prefer to be outside making something with their

hands or learning among the leaves. You're much less likely to get bored outside because things are moving and changing before your eyes. You're more relaxed when you can sit where you want on the soft grass in the sunlight. You're immersed in an exciting new environment that's full of possibility. Under that horse chestnut tree in mother nature's classroom, I remember my bare feet on the grass, and how different the spiky shell of a conker was compared to its incredibly soft, smooth inside. I heard the calls of songbirds, the darting of dragonflies and the scuttling of beetles, and I gazed at the patterns of dappled light through the trees. I realized how connected we were to the ecosystem in front of us.

I think that the struggles I experienced inside the classroom meant that my brain compensated outside the classroom. I started being very aware of the world around me, like my uncle who developed an acute sense of hearing after he lost his sight. I realized that I was good at picking up patterns and nuances within those patterns, and that has been so helpful in my work as a cameraman. For example, when I'm outside, I'll notice a crow behaving slightly unusually and my brain is already scanning for the possible dangers a crow and her chicks might face in

this environment at this time of day. I'm already expecting a peregrine falcon to appear before it does and the crow to respond by mobbing together with other crows to see off the threat. It means I'm there and I'm ready with the camera. I think the combination of having to find creative workarounds for dyslexia and the nature of what I do for a living now makes me finely attuned to behaviour, especially if it's even just a little bit out of the ordinary.

It affects the way I am around people, too. If someone's telling me everything's fine, but the words they're using somehow don't match their body language, I know something's up. It's also helped me become a good navigator: I always know which direction I'm facing and where I need to go. I like the way my brain works and I wouldn't change it. I genuinely see dyslexia as my superpower.

I was lucky to have teachers like Mr McGurk, whose guidance, encouragement and belief gave me the tools to build my own self-belief. We all just want to be included and to be believed. We all deserve the opportunity to follow our dreams. And if you give it everything you've got, you can get pretty close.

My dream was to be David Attenborough's cameraman.

By the time I'd got to a position where that dream was starting to become a possibility, David had understandably dialled back his shoots on location and was spending more time in the voiceover booth. I ended up with the next-best dream coming true: one day, I received a voicemail telling me that 'David' liked the footage I'd shot of barnacle geese being hunted by white-tailed eagles. My first reaction was: 'David – I don't know a David. Oh, hang on, you don't mean. WOAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!!'

To record a sequence like that – and to have your idol, David Attenborough, narrate it – is what you live for as a cameraperson. If you'd told me as a kid that I'd be working for Sir David, I wouldn't have believed it. I still feel like a kid tearing open the wrapping paper and gazing in wonder at my first camera – a gift from my mother on my 12th birthday.

When I shot that footage, I wasn't in some far-flung and exciting-sounding part of the world like the Canadian Arctic or the South Sandwich Islands, it was just down the coast from my house in the Scottish Highlands. I think at times we can take this incredible country for granted, in the way that people often do when something is so close to home. But, you see, I wasn't born here. The UK was

the far-flung and exciting-sounding place that I'd heard of as a little boy in Sudan. I think it's part of the reason why the UK will forever remain a source of never-ending wonder to me.

I love that we get to experience all of the seasons in the UK. It's something you miss when you spend a long time near the equator, where autumn, spring, summer and winter are basically meaningless. Up in the Highlands, I can't wait for that first sign of spring, when the snowdrops start peeking above the ground. That brings a smile to my face because it's the moment when we're past the coldest time of the year, but also because it tells me that nature knows best. If the snowdrops are sticking their necks out, then warmer, sunnier days are ahead. For me, summer starts when I get bitten by my first midge. And I say that with fondness, because when that midge is nibbling me, I know that the migrating bats and birds aren't going to be far behind. Autumn begins when my fingers are stained with the juice of ripe blackberries. Winter starts when I can see my breath outside. I love that I have a community that huddles together more in winter to ride out the long nights. Winter is mother nature's way of recharging. The ground recuperates, the rivers recuperate and the humans

recuperate. There's a reason why the deciduous trees drop their leaves and the nutrients get sucked back into the roots. Everything has a rest. We work hard from spring to harvest, then enjoy the fruits of our labour throughout winter.

There's still so much I still want to do outdoors in the UK. I want to hike all the hills of the west of Scotland. I want to pick up a fossil on the Jurassic Coast and find a shark tooth at the base of the white cliffs of Dover. I feel like I'm only just getting started, but I've been lucky enough to explore so much of the UK in the past few years. This book was inspired by the journeys I make between two places where I spend a lot of time: my beloved Ardnamurchan peninsula in the Highlands and Longleat Estate down in Wiltshire. The trouble is the distance between the two is 600 miles and it takes well over 12 hours to drive. I spend my life travelling almost the entire length of the country. I'm in my van more than I'm in my house. I could write a book about the merits of the different service stations around the country. And, for the record, Tebay services near Carlisle gets the gold star. It's like a National Trust version of a service station, with landscaped lakes and a wonderful panorama of the Cumbrian countryside. Frank

Skinner once said on Absolute Radio, 'If there is a road to heaven, Tebay would be the service station on that road.' He's bang on.

On my 600-mile journey, I travel across nine remarkable habitats: cities and gardens; wetlands and rivers; heathland; farmland; woodland; meadows and moorland; coastlines; the sea; and of course the Highlands. While driving my van, with Bob Marley and the Jurassic Park soundtrack keeping me company, I often think of the remarkable experiences, landscapes, plants and creatures I've discovered in each of the nine habitats I pass through. Over time, you start to notice things both by their appearance and by their absence. I'm thrilled that I started to see red kites in parts of England where they hadn't been seen since the 16th century. But I've also witnessed the dwindling insect population. Ten years ago, I'd have to stop the car to clear the unfortunate insects that had splattered across my windscreen, but the last time I drove from Longleat to Ardnamurchan, I don't think there was a single insect. I'm sad to say that it's symptomatic of a devastating decline in the UK's biodiversity. We've lost half of our biodiversity since the Industrial Revolution. Half!

I live my life with mother nature in mind as much as I can. I enjoy eating seasonally. We don't need to be able to buy blackberries every day of the year. And having something to look forward to sustains you. It's the power of delayed gratification. I long for that moment when the blackberries are ripe, and enjoy it all the more when I've waited for it. Similarly, instead of a journey being a functional solution to get you from A to B, why not take pleasure in another path – one that you haven't travelled? You'll see and hear things you've never experienced before. Instead of taking the M6 when I'm heading down south, I often drive through mid-Wales. A few years ago, I did this to see if I could chance upon the lone golden eagle that circled the Welsh valleys. I got so excited just with the possibility that I might see her. It became a quest, and when I did, she was magnificent. But when I didn't, I still had an incredible time, because I never fail to when I'm outside walking. It's where I'm at my happiest, with Midgie by my side, the collie belonging to my Scottish parents.

Some people have a glass-half-empty outlook; others prefer to see things half full. My glass is completely full, overflowing with hope and wonder. I just keep topping it

up. I'm always looking up, in both senses, and it means I put myself in the best position to see something incredible. Sure, I spend time on my phone – I love watching reels on Instagram because it's a way to escape, or to be amazed by something new – but when I'm outside, I'm like the dog from the film Up! Everything is exciting.

The day that I stop learning about mother nature is the day I'm happy to meet my maker. Mother nature's given us each a brain that's powerful beyond measure so let's use them for the right things. If there's one thing that Covid lockdowns taught us, it's how much we value the outside world. That one hour outside was the highlight of everyone's day. There were no cars on the road and the night sky became clearer. Birdsong sounded all the more beautiful because we tuned into it again. We became grateful for our green spaces again. We realized what matters. We focused on what's important.

I wrote this book to celebrate our lesser-known creatures and plants. I'm still learning about all of them, and that's the best part of what I do. In each chapter, I've interviewed one of my favourite people, who happens to be a leading authority on the relevant family of animals or plants. I can't thank them enough for our chats, which

were illuminating and joyful. And that's what being outside is all about: finding a new wonder, whether it's on your doorstep or on the journey of a lifetime, that puts a smile on your face.

Three of my favourite quotes have helped shape this book, influenced by our past, present and my hope for the future. The first is from the final letter Robert Falcon Scott wrote to his wife and their infant son on Scott's doomed return journey from the South Pole.

'I am anxious for you and the boy's future – make the boy interested in natural history if you can, it is better than games – they encourage it at some schools – I know you will keep him out in the open air'.

These words inspired his son, Sir Peter Scott, to spearhead the modern conservation movement with the founding of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, to pioneer natural history broadcasting and to inspire a generation, including Sir David Attenborough, with a passion for the natural world. That letter was the touchpaper.

The second quote is a saying that emerged in the 1960s: 'The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next-best time is now.' It shows that we're playing catch-up, but it's not too late to make a difference. It also conveys its

message with humour, which always manages to make a serious message stick in my mind.

The third and most powerful quote is like the antidote to the world of instant gratification. The origins of the quote are unclear, but I first heard it on the TV programme After Life, in a very moving scene on a park bench between Penelope Wilton and Ricky Gervais.

'A society grows great when old men plant trees the shade of which they know that they will never sit in.'

It's a beautiful sentiment. We need to leave this world in a better state than how we found it, for our children's children. One day, I want to show my children the beauty, love, fragility and resilience that mother nature has to offer. I want them to understand the impact we can have on the lives of future generations through the actions that we take today. I want my children to know that their dad went outside and fought for something that he thought would make the world a better place.

That journey starts as soon as we open our front doors. The view's never exactly the same day to day, wherever you are. Even outside your place of sanctuary that you know so well, you never know which of nature's marvels is going to reveal itself to you. It's all there to discover, just a

short walk from your doorstep. There might be a peacock butterfly on that dandelion or a waxwing in that berry tree in the supermarket car park. Wherever I am in the world and whatever extraordinary animal or landscape I'm lucky enough to be filming, I'll get a yearning to return to Ardnamurchan. I want to see what I might be missing, especially as John Coe the killer whale always seems to turn up when I've left the peninsula! When the cameras, drones and emergency smart shirt are loaded in the back of the van, I'm almost spent, like the late-night embers on my wood-burning stove. But I'm homeward bound and that thought adds fuel to the fire.

The journey from London is going to take me 12 hours, but I spend weeks at a time in a camouflaged hide – and I know patience and delayed gratification are your most important tools as a wildlife cameraperson. But we all need a little ray of light to keep us going, and fortunately, there are two moments on that long journey back home that fill up my heart. The first is when I'm approaching the sign for the Scottish border and I can't stop myself from saying, 'England, England, England . . . SCOTLAND!' when I cross it. I'm still five-and-a-half hours from home, which is why I need a second pick-me-up towards the

final furlong. And that arrives when my front wheels edge off the Corran Ferry – the gateway from Fort William to the Ardnamurchan peninsula. Everything beyond the southern shore is the work side of my life. The north side is home.

When the front wheels of my van touch that jetty, I'm finally back on my driveway. Only, it's a 44-mile-long driveway, and 38 miles of it is single-track road. So I'm just going to sit back and enjoy the most beautiful landscape on the planet. It's why, two weeks after first visiting this special place in my early 20s, I gathered my belongings into my car and drove up here for good.