



## Introduction

*We are human only in contact,  
and conviviality, with what is not human.*

DAVID ABRAM

“In the military, we’re taught to be given a task, to see to that task, and to complete that task. And it’s been hard with prolonged warfare for service members to see the completion of a task, to see something through. I think there are very negative psychological consequences to that,” said Tia Christopher, a US Navy veteran and now Chief of Staff for the Farmer Veteran Coalition. “We’ve found that when veterans can follow a plant cycle—when they prepare the earth, they plant the seed, they nurture it, they harvest it, and they eat it or they sell it—that process in itself is healing.” Farming, Tia explained, can offer “alternative therapy that isn’t therapy. I always say that the sweat of their backs and working in the soil and working with the animals really helps veterans heal.”<sup>1</sup>

Tia Christopher’s comments may explain the growing momentum amongst veterans throughout North America who are finding relief from stressful and traumatic military experiences through outdoor activities, from farming and gardening to hiking, canoeing and spending time with horses and dogs. *Field Exercises* tells the compelling stories of veterans from different generations who have discovered that their suffering is eased by contact with nature.<sup>2</sup> Their stories illuminate the courage required to live with and recover from experiences of violence and trauma, while also offering hope and possibility for others seeking

additional methods to ease the transition to civilian life, manage injuries and recover from military stress and trauma.

Nature-based health care approaches are largely unacknowledged in North America, despite a growing body of empirical research that supports them and the fact that many people are individually realizing the importance of nature contact in their lives. *Field Exercises* is a call for wider support for programs that bring farming, gardening and other outdoor activities to soldiers and veterans. “It’s not the silver bullet but almost across the board, in every case, nature contact matters,” said Keith Tidball, a former US National Guard infantry officer-turned-academic, who studies veterans and outdoor recreation. For veterans and active duty soldiers, “any kind of nature exposure will be helpful.”<sup>3</sup>

Connecting with nature, however, does not in itself guarantee transformation or healing and recovery, and nature contact is not a cure-all or magic treatment for veterans.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I recently learned about a veteran whose post-traumatic stress symptoms are triggered by the smell of dirt, which would make farming, gardening and many other outdoor activities difficult for him. Many veterans are also finding other activities and therapies to be important in their lives, ranging from medication and psychotherapy to writing and volunteering. Based on his own psychotherapy practice, Edward Tick observed that post-traumatic stress is best recognized as “an identity disorder and soul wound.” And understood this way, Tick has suggested that the symptoms of the injury diminish when veterans connect to the sacredness of life, through purification rituals, storytelling, healing journeys, amongst other rituals and ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> *Field Exercises* reveals how farming and outdoor activities might also provide a sacred connection to life for many veterans.

### **Why I Wrote This Book**

Veterans often wonder why a civilian would want to write this book. The seeds were first planted in 2004, when I watched the documentary *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire*, a devastating account of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda’s failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide.<sup>6</sup> In the years since, Canadian Lieutenant General (retired) Roméo Dallaire, who was commander of

the mission, has spoken openly and candidly about his post-traumatic struggles. In the film, Dallaire returned to Rwanda for the 10-year commemoration of the genocide, and there is a scene halfway through when Dallaire and his wife Élizabeth stand holding hands atop a lush terraced hillside, a place he visited often during the mission. He tells her, “C’est ici que j’ai redevenu humain” (English translation: “It’s here that I became human again”). Later, Dallaire returned with the filmmakers to that hilltop and remarked, “I want to show you where in all this I could find myself. I could find the solace and be one with my soul, with my heart, with my being.” At the time, these two scenes provoked me to reflect upon the serenity and calm beauty of that hillside contrasted with the extreme violence that occurred in and around it in 1994. But it wasn’t until several years later, while working on my doctoral research in Peace and Conflict Studies, that I became conscious of how often the images of LGen Dallaire standing on that hillside returned to mind.

A second seed came while reading neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s account of his experiences in Nazi death camps during World War II; it provides several glimpses into how hope and solace are found in human beings’ relationships with nature, even under desperate circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Frankl described how even in a concentration camp, prisoners would draw one another’s attention to the beauty of a sunset. And he recalled another time, when he and a group of prisoners were being transferred by train from Auschwitz to a camp in Bavaria, “If someone had seen our faces on the journey... as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage,” Frankl wrote, “he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that factor—or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature’s beauty, which we had missed for so long.”<sup>8</sup>

I have since come across many similar stories. For example, Canadian scholar Harold Adams Innis was wounded as a young soldier during World War I. In 1924, Innis undertook a summer-long canoe trip on the Peace and Slave Rivers with his friend John Long. Innis’s biographer, Donald Creighton, wrote that “the long summer, with its wind and sun,

its space, and peace, and friendly companionship, had done [Innis] an immense amount of good. He had, as it were, shaken off the last of the evil effects of the war. . . . He had recovered his health and spirits.”<sup>9</sup>

Throughout history, gardens have been cultivated around the world under the most extreme circumstances and in the most unexpected places. Kenneth Helphand’s book *Defiant Gardens* offers a glimpse of gardens planted and nurtured during wartime by soldiers, ghetto residents, prisoners of war and internees in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>10</sup> Soldiers in World War I even planted and harvested gardens right in the trenches, which Helphand argued demonstrated their “struggle to create something normal in the most abnormal conditions.”<sup>11</sup> Such gardens also represented soldiers’ hope that a future was possible.

During the early 20th century, *garden therapy* was incorporated into the treatment regime for US soldiers suffering from shell-shock.<sup>12</sup> At the end of World War I, the US military implemented a number of gardening treatment programs for veterans.<sup>13</sup> Influential US psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who along with his father F.C. Menninger founded the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, strongly advocated for horticulture therapy to support veterans in recovering from their experiences in World War II.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the horticulture therapy movement, which today works with a wide clientele, first became organized in the US around work in veterans’ hospitals.<sup>15</sup> Menninger viewed horticulture therapy as holding possibilities for bringing “the individual close to the soil and close to Mother Nature, close to beauty, close to the inscrutable mystery of growth and development.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1942, the Canadian government instituted the *Veterans’ Land Act*, which provided grants and low-interest loans for veterans to become farmers, smallholders and commercial fishermen. The loans and grants were provided for purchasing land, farm equipment and livestock. Veterans were also given access to agricultural training, both through hands-on training with other farmers and in the form of information and lessons from instructors and inspectors. The program supported more than 140,000 Canadian veterans before being terminated in 1977.<sup>17</sup>

As part of my doctoral research in Peace and Conflict Studies, I interviewed veterans who are finding that nature supports them in man-

aging their post-traumatic stress symptoms. All described how contact with nature gave them the space to voice their suffering, to develop resiliency, to have meaningful conversations about their experiences and to find ways to continue living their lives. All spoke about their continued desire to serve their communities, and through their individual work, began creating a social foundation to support others in also moving toward healing. Deeply moved by the veterans' courage and personal resolve to move through pain toward recovery, I vowed to bring these stories to a wider audience.

Interviewing veterans has been a reminder of the fragility of all life. War and other forms of political violence directly affect all people on the planet—soldiers and civilians alike. Lives, relationships and families are harmed and destroyed by extended cycles of violence and conflict. Yet as I have worked on *Field Exercises*, I have come to realize the deep disconnect between the North American civilian understanding of war and the experiences of military service members. Most civilians have little awareness of the activities and experiences of military personnel. Moreover, unless they have direct contact with someone who suffers from post-traumatic stress, they have little sympathy for the invisible wounds of war; they have difficulty understanding why recovery isn't a more immediate process. Civilians tend to uphold many stereotypes about veterans, including a sense that veterans can be a risk to their communities—a perception often sensationalized and exacerbated by the media but which is generally untrue. As Greg Prodaniuk, the western regional coordinator for the Operational Stress Injury support program in Canada, has explained, “The vast majority of them suffer in silence and in their basements, and they don't hurt people.... But they do destroy relationships.... They have difficulty controlling their emotions. They have reactions they're not in control of.”<sup>18</sup>

The third reason I wrote this book is because of my own experiences with and in nature. I spent most of my childhood in rural Alberta, much of that time outdoors, trekking in and around swamps, lakes, rivers, forests and brush, stacking wood for fires, canoeing, camping, cross-country skiing, riding horses and pursuing small critters. These experiences gave me a deep understanding that human life was connected

with the natural world. In my occasional university teaching, I have also experimented with taking students outside. In this age of laptop computers, tablets and cell phones, most students are continuously plugged in and distracted by their electronic devices inside the classroom; when we go outside together, sit in small groups on the grass, surrounded by pine and deciduous trees, feeling the sun and a light breeze on our skin, students put these devices away without being asked and genuinely focus on one another. Compared with the days we stay in our windowless classroom, when we go outside together, students seem to engage in better discussions and develop deeper and more intimate connections with one another. For the past four years, I have also seen how, for my young son, nature is enchanting at every possible turn, in stories, toys and outdoor play. And I often wonder, at what point do animals and rocks and trees, pinecones and leaves, the moon and stars lose their voices and only become the passive backdrop to our human lives?

For the veterans in this book, nature is not a passive backdrop. It has become an active participant in their lives. And both veterans and non-veterans can learn much from these stories of reestablishing relationships with the wider world—about what is fundamentally important to us as human beings and our psyches, and the ways we are not separate from the world of nature. The veterans provide deep insight into the human-nature relationship, and through them, other military personnel and their families, and civilians, too, might find additional ways to cope with and manage their injuries, reduce their suffering and support soldiers' transition to civilian life.

Accordingly, this book is an offering, intended to gather support and bring awareness, in military and civilian communities alike, about the importance of nature contact. It tells of the relief that veterans are personally finding and investigates how their anecdotal reports have support from a growing body of empirical research. Veterans are doing this work in spite of the regular and significant challenges they encounter from day to day—and this work often helps some of the personal difficulties fade, even if only momentarily. They passionately persevere in their endeavors regardless of the obstacles, and as I argue in the final chapter of *Field Exercises*, they are at the forefront of a veteran-led move-

ment for green care in North America. But despite their passion, success is not assured, and veterans need wider community support.

The veterans who participated were chosen for the ways their stories provide insight into different aspects of military and post-military experience. Each chapter is based on multiple recorded interviews and is written in the veteran's voice as much as possible, with a focus primarily on recovery efforts. Each veteran was invited to read drafts of his/her chapter and to help decide which parts of his/her experience would be included in the book. It is important to remember that these stories reflect a certain time in the life of each person, and those lives continue to change and move forward day by day, year by year. By the time you are reading their stories, some details and aspects will have changed.