



Maria Fadiman: The Narrative of People and Plants

November 17, 2017 | Nicole Duggan



Sometimes-if we're lucky- we come across people that move on a different frequency than most. Their essence is the almost-perfect balance between mirth and earnestness, humor and meaning. Because of this, they become a force-field of energy that attracts others and makes them listen. It's the perfect recipe for a storyteller.

Maria Fadiman is this kind of person. In less than two seconds her tone can switch from the elasticity and bounciness of a joke, to the mellow seriousness of someone who knows there's something more profound and vital in her message. As an ethnobotanist, geographer, and National Geographic Explorer, Maria works with people and plants to bring awareness to the inherent connection that exists between them.

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There are the stories she tells her students in the class room at Florida Atlantic University; or, when she's walking on a TED stage pretending to sword fight the air with a machete. Then there are those she records of plants in booklets for indigenous communities. "What I think stories do for people and for me is that they make things come alive. If you feel something about a topic, you're more likely to take action."

What's particular about these stories is that most are not about her. She collects them, only to place them at center stage so that other people's realities and ecosystems become tangible. And more importantly, accessible.



Achuar indigenous man living near (but not in) oil areas.

Maria had always been interested in conservation, but science had never truly appealed to her. While studying Latin American literature in college, she "finagled" (as she put it) her way into being a rainforest volunteer guide. It was there, after battling spiders and snakes and counting the days to go home, where she first learned about the thread holding all the pieces together. The fact that every living thing on this planet contributes to its existence, and that it wasn't only about the plants, but also about the people who we're teaching her about them.

"I think it's inherent in us, because we're all connected," she says. "We're all made up of the same stuff. When I go out in the Redwoods, I feel myself fill up, and there's something I just can't explain about the feeling of being in nature."

It's almost unfair, blasphemous, to try to define that feeling; the force of it, the way it flaunts itself, with its coy posture and volatile, artistic temperament. Language, a man-made tool, fails us. So while we talk we have to rely on mimicking the effects it has on the body: that hold-your-breath feeling, or how you feel yourself expanding and shrinking at the same time.

She has encountered this feeling her entire life. Once, she recalls, she was walking behind a Maori guide in the forests of New Zealand, when they came upon a Kauri tree- of spiritual significance to the Maoris. She remembered thinking his body movements emulated the forest, as if he were just another part of its ecosystem. The man took out a small bag full of rice, and a coke bottle filled with water- sprinkled the rice first, then the water- and asked Maria to put her forehead against the trunk and then tell the tree whatever it needed to know.

"It's hard to find the words sometimes to describe something that is such a sensation. An instinct," Maria says. "There was this moment, when I realized I was with somebody who knew what's going on, on a whole different level."

But to her, the most exciting thing is to watch people using plants in an everyday way. For example, watching basket makers weave vine together to create an item that wasn't there before. Or when she was in Ecuador, and Felipe, whose home she had been visiting, wrapped a duck they had gifted to her in leaves, so he could carry it on his back on an 8-hour trek back to the research station.



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"It just made so much sense to me. To live that way. And to understand that everything around us is useful," says Maria.

Our day to day encounters with nature go unnoticed in more urban spaces. But, Maria says she likes to focus on the ways we are still connected. "I was in Shanghai- where you can't even breathe the air and if there's a blue sky everyone takes pictures- working at the parks, looking at people's interactions with the green spaces. They're flooded with people. Specially during the day, people are doing tai chi, and their doing sword fighting, and they're singing and playing instruments," she recalls. "A house with a view, a natural area, is going to cost more because there something about that that we're attracted to. People's gardens, having house plants. There's just a piece of us that wants that natural connection and the way we've constructed our world it becomes harder and harder in many ways."



Women dancing in Shanghai park.

Like any good story, Maria's work exposes the contradictions every human being lives with today. Even her, she says. "You know, I take an airplane, and I pollute to get to Ecuador to try to help. So I live my own contradiction." The processes are disconnected from the natural world that provides us with resources. Factor in time, in a world where everything is thrown into a hyper-loop of speed, and the contradiction grows.

It's even more difficult when dependence kicks in. "I like to work with choice," Maria says during her TEDx talk at Berkley. Later on, when we talk about the realities she's come across, the not so pretty side of adventure, she tells me she thinks decisions based on necessity, or people encroaching on your land, are not true decisions. In other words, when you have to feed a family of ten, when there's no economic opportunity, or alternative, for you to do so, then, to what extent do you have a choice?

"This makes my work that much more important. I can't just be crushed. I want to keep doing what I'm doing." All of this speaks to the multifarious nature of her work. The fact that there are so many different layers to it. "It's about how do we keep ourselves whole in this community" she says.

It all begins with making the connection something of real importance and realizing that our disconnectedness from nature, has a lot to do with how disconnected we are from each other. Ultimately, we're cells of a larger body; cells, who can't fully grasp the grandiosity of that body. To Maria, nature is an important, essential, part of communities- especially indigenous ones- but, as important as it is, she says, "when it begins to ebb away, just like with us, you don't notice it going..." That is, until it's too late.



Teenagers interviewing elder woman in Tibet.

Throughout the years, Maria's work has focused on intergenerational communication within indigenous communities. She has worked with elders, schoolchildren, teenagers, and adults to help keep their interest for their individual natural worlds alive. "I have this wonderful image of a woman sitting and some teenagers with these books figuring out what to ask her." She was working on a project in Tibet, where students were learning how to interview their elders about plant knowledge.

Here lies another important layer of her work, which sends out a powerful message: That age doesn't make us obsolete; and, that progress doesn't mean we forget our past.

The energy in all living things, which forms the basis of it, connects us all. "I think its really important that everybody does whatever they can within their context. This is how I'm choosing to do it," she says "but everyone has their own way to do it and no action is too small." Through her work, her charisma, humility and passion, Maria creates a space in which others can feel that connection. Like baskets made out of vine, her work attempts to weave everything back together, and in this way, keep the narrative of people and nature alive.



Ecuadorian girl holding flowers as a gift.

About the Author:

Born in Sao Paolo, Brazil, to Argentine parents, Nicole Duggan grew up hopping around North and South America, collecting stories and experiences that would later lead her to become a writer. Content creator, translator, and copywriter by day; poet, essayist, and fiction writer at night. An avid bookworm, wannabe Picasso, and passionate traveler, she has a knack for making bridges out of words.



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