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TITLE: Rooting Exercise

SUMMARY: A facilitator leads visualizing exercise that explores the way plants move and communicate underground.

AGES: 10 and up

GROUP SIZE: Flexible.

SITE: Flexible, can be adjusted for urban or rural, interior or exterior, wild or domesticated landscapes and sites.

RESOURCE LIST/SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL:

“The Intelligent Plant”, by Michael Pollan, *The New Yorker*, December 2013

Dr. Monica Gagliano & *Mimosa pudica*: Prudence Gibson, “Pavlov’s Plants”, *The Conversation*

“The Wood Wide Web”, Ed Yong, *The Atlantic*, April 2016

LEARNING & EXPERIENTIAL OUTCOMES:

- Consider differences and similarities between the way humans and plants experience and move in the world
- Enhance empathy for nonhuman and “less charismatic” life forms
- Calm, center and connect body and mind
- Build solidarity among participants

INSTRUCTIONS:

Stand in a loose circle with about a shoulder’s width between participants, facilitator included.

Facilitator: This is a brief exercise in vegetative mobility. We’ll begin by settling into and connecting with our human bodies. Then we’ll take that bodily awareness and attempt to use it to explore how plants experience and move in the world. Let’s begin by breathing together.

3-4 deep breaths with facilitator leading, in through nose, out through mouth, feel your abdomen rise and fall

Facilitator: Now, if you feel comfortable, go ahead and close your eyes. Take a moment to attune to your other senses. Can you feel a breeze on your skin? Can you sense where the light is coming from?

5-10 seconds of silence

Facilitator: What about the surface under your feet? Rock up on your toes, back on your heels, and try to settle down into the surface below your feet. Feel how it supports you. How you push down on it, and it pushes back.

5-10 seconds of silence

Facilitator: How far below you is the soil? Here in the forest, we're only separated by whatever we're wearing on our feet* (*adjust this portion for whatever site you're working with. If you're on the 5th floor of an office building, guide your participants to imagine sinking through the floor boards, through concrete floors, through the foundation, through rubble and garbage, into the soil that's hidden deep below). Try to imagine that layer between your skin and the soil melting away. The moistness of the plants and leaves contacting the balls of your feet, your heels sinking in, coolness welling up to meet your arches. Let yourself settle.

5-10 seconds of silence

Facilitator: Your feet are coming into closer and closer contact with the soil, sinking through layers of decomposing leaves into rich duff. Up to your ankles now, you're very slowly descending into and merging with the soil. Tiny tendrils reach out from your toes, threading their way between rocks and compressed soil, finding tiny cracks and crevices with pockets of air and water.

5-10 seconds of silence

Facilitator: These tiny tendrils are roots. As they thread their way through the soil, they meet other organisms. How does it feel to intertwine with delicate white wisps of fungus? With the roots of other plants? Beneficial relationships form this way. Try to communicate & learn through the soil.

5-10 seconds of silence

Facilitator: Now that you're beginning to root, let's explore some movement above ground. You're firmly anchored at your base, exploring, growing and learning below ground. Now try flexing your stem. Maybe there's a slight breeze that causes you to undulate north to south, or east to west. What can your base support? Can you lean towards the light? Can you spread branches? Spend a little time learning what your above ground half can do. How might you respond to the inputs around you?

15-20 seconds of silence

Facilitator: Remember as you move that your above ground life is supported by a robust life in the soil. Don't forget your roots. As you bend and sway in the wind, your root network is actively expanding. Have you encountered a rich patch of soil? A large bolder to work around? Try to stretch your root network laterally, out around you, and also push it down below you. Do you have a strong deep taproot that reaches groundwater? Or a shallow horizontal network that spreads way beyond our circle? Are you intertwining with your neighbors and sharing nutrients and information? Maybe you have rhizomes spreading in the soil, pushing up new clones of yourself in a sunny spot across the clearing. Spend a little while attending to your underground life as you continue to bend and flex your stem and leaves.

60 seconds of silence

Facilitator: Now it's time to start to return to the human. We'll leave that robust root network underground to decompose and enrich the soil. Feel your toes separating from roots. Wiggle them a little. Then when you're ready, start to flex your right leg. Slowly pull your foot up from the earth, and uproot. Take one step, and another. Open your eyes.

Discussion questions:

- What did you notice most during this experience? When were you most engaged? When were you bored? Why?
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- What else moves in ways that are different than how humans move? What other kinds of visualizing exercises might we do to (attempt) to get outside human notions of time and movement?
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- Did you have any realizations about life as a plant during the exercise? Or any realizations about life as a human?
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- How would this exercise be different if it was done in a different location? Did anything about the place we did the exercise define the experience?