Being Pagan means being of the land. Literally. The root of the word pagan is the latin word pagus, which denoted a specific demarcation of rural land. If you were a person who lived in those rural areas, you were paganus, a rural villager, a “rustic,” or in modern terms a peasant or “country bumpkin.”

Another way of describing the people who were paganus was “uncivilized” or “primitive.” They were people who had not adopted the urban customs of the Roman cities, nor the official state religion, and their lives centered more upon the everyday world around them rather than the doings of Empire and the political fashions of the city. In a way, they were what we call “rednecks,” or people who are “backwoods.”

1 The word “primitive” means “first” or “primary.” However, because of bias against such people, primitive often has the connotation of being backwards, uneducated, violent, or stupid.
More than likely, these descriptions have elicited an emotional response or even judgment in you, as they once did for me. In modern industrial capitalist societies, we are taught to think of all those words as insults. We think of such people as being somehow lesser than others, not as intelligent, perhaps even violent or barbaric.

The Romans thought this way about them too, by the way, especially after Rome converted to Christianity. The meaning of *paganus* became even more negative after the Empire became Christian: pagans were people who were not part of the “army of Christ,” and thus were also a kind of enemy.

When you think about your own feelings and judgments of rural people, consider focusing instead on other versions we have more positive views of. For instance, imagine an indigenous Native American, or an African tribal person, or the rustic, peasant life that often appears in films about the Italian, French, and Spanish countrysides. These visions are considered “romantic” and often overly idealistic, but they provide a good counter-balance to our judgments against non-urban people.

In fact, it’s important to notice that we have two competing visions about what the rural means, and who inhabits the rural. On the one hand, we see images in our head of softly rolling hills, quiet evenings with fireflies, and a simple life of good food from the earth, close community and family, and a stillness only possible far away from the din of cities. On the other hand, we might imagine violent people with poor hygiene, racist ideas, and short, brutal existences.

The truth of such places is more complex. I grew up in the foothills of Appalachia, an economically poor and industrially-ravaged area filled with mining waste, pollution from paper factories, and littered with broken cars and other machines. We ourselves were quite poor: a truck came by each month to deliver government cheese and generic-labeled cans of peanut butter and beans to my family, as well as to our neighbors. We had electricity and running water, but our septic tank overflowed and our house leaked out heat in the winter and leaked water in during the rain.

My family and our neighbors fit into many of the negative stereotypes we have of the rural. For instance, not only had neither of my parents gone to university, but their high school education wasn’t quite evident in their life. Neither of them were very good at basic math, neither could spell very well, and the only books that were in the house belonged to my sisters and I. Though we bathed regularly, my neighbors—who relied entirely on a hand-drawn well for all their water—bathed only once a week and even less frequently in the winter. My parents and our neighbors weren’t particularly racist, but they also weren’t particularly current on—or even aware of—any of the "politically correct" terms for minorities at that time (they, like my teachers and also my black neighbors, still used the word “colored”).

Because we were not only isolated from the ideas of the cities and academic currents, with only a three-channel television to convey any of those dominant cultural ideas to us, we certainly would have seemed “backward” to anyone living in New York City or Chicago.

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2 Romanticism, which significantly helped rebirth paganism into Europe, focused heavily on the beauty of rural life.
On the other hand, my life was indeed full of the romantic visions we have of the rural. The land itself was beautiful, and daily life was quite simple. My father gardened and hunted when he was laid off from the paper factory in the town (some 50 kilometers or 30 miles from our ramshackle house), and summer days were spent playing in fields of flowers and by the creeks, chasing butterflies and cupping fireflies in our hands at sunset. Winters were likewise simple and idyllic, despite being a bit hard because of the difficulty keeping our house warm and our lack of resources.

We were connected to the land more so than I have been during much of my adult life. Wild turkeys, deer, and squirrels were often for dinner (squirrel isn’t my favorite, I must admit), as were garden vegetables during the summer and autumn (my grandmother’s watermelons were incredibly sweet). My recently deceased and much beloved great aunt took my sisters and I yearly to go pick blackberries, filling our stomachs the following days, weeks, and months with jams and pies the likes of which I’ve never tasted again.

Harvest festivals, especially, were my favorite—apple cider doughnuts, indian corns and fry breads, and all the craft tables overflowing with handiwork wrought from the gleanings of forests and fields. Though we were not ourselves farmers, much of the culture around us revolved around farming. Also, Bluegrass music (an Appalachian music genre descended from the musical forms of the Irish and Scottish settlers of those mountains) was everywhere, even though I didn’t particularly care for it.
While my grandmother and her sisters were nominally Christian, they had some beliefs that were not traditionally Christian, especially about ghosts and the healing properties of certain plants. They also had some surprisingly “liberal” beliefs about homosexuality (“sometimes God just makes men want to be with men”). They didn’t know much about science and nothing about international politics, but they had a kind of earthy wisdom which was much more relevant to their lives and those around them than any academic theories were.

To anyone outside such a world, we no doubt seemed backwards and ignorant. Our view of the cities, on the other hand, was one both of complete bafflement and awe. How could people live so cramped together? When did they have time to go hike up the hills, or to idle on a rowboat along the creeks, or go swimming at the swimming hole? But also, what was it like for them to just go to the store and find anything in the world they might want? What was it like to have so many clothing stores, and fast food restaurants, and buses to take you where you wanted to go whenever you wanted?

This sort of divide is much like the divide between the ancient pagans and the dwellers of the Roman civitas, or the town dwellers in the Holy Roman Empire and the heathen. No doubt it was also similar to the divide between those who dwelt in the imperial cities of the Incan and Mayan Empires and those who kept to the rainforests and tiny villages on the slopes of mountains. From the moment there began to be cities, there were always those who lived in them and those who didn’t.

The key point to remember in all this is that “pagan” referred to people who lived more by the land and were less influenced by the current political, religious, cultural, and economic ideas of the urban centers. They were not “civilized,” meaning their behaviors, actions, and beliefs did not conform with civilizational norms.

Empires rise and fall; however, this kind of rural, “uncivilized” relationship to the land—a relationship called variously pagan, heathen, primitive, savage, and many other names in many other cultures—persists. If anything, it does not only persist, it seems to be the human default, with the sprawling urban centers of modern industrial capitalist society to be the aberration.

To be pagan, then, is to be connected to the land in a way that stands outside of—and often in opposition to—the concerns of the urban and of Empire. Even though the official histories of humanity always focus on them, empires and the cities they form are mere temporary interruptions to a more organic and mostly unwritten history of human life.

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3 Heathen comes from the old German word heiden, which meant “people who lived in the open-country.” Thus it is almost identical to paganus.
4 (from French “sauvage,” meaning wild)
5 The current official estimates are that 55% of the world now lives in cities, the highest percentage there has ever been in human history.
It is a history of relationship to land, of connection to it, of life lived in relative harmony with the nature of which humans are but one small part. It is not just a history, however, but a still-living reality for much of the world, and one we can still connect to and become part of.

Reconnecting to the land first of all requires reconnecting to a pagan sense of time, as was discussed in a previous essay. The reason we start there is because it is the time of the land itself, the rhythms by which the land breathes, grows, dies back, and comes alive again. The seasons determine the cycles of trees, plants, and animals, just as the moon tugs on the oceans and the water within our own bodies.

This sense of time, the time of the land, is not the time of Empire nor of the political and cultural reach of the cities.

Consider how this affects our sense of food. Now we have become accustomed to the same foods available all year, regardless the season. The time of land, on the other hand, tells us when a blackberry is ripest, when the animals of forest and field are giving milk or can be hunted or culled best with the least disturbance to their herds’ survival. It tells us when birds make their nest, when salmon swim up rivers from the sea to spawn, when the starchy and sugar-rich roots of carrot, potato, turnip, onions, garlics, and beet are best unearthed. The time of land tells us when fruits are sweetest on the branch and vine, when nuts are fullest and ready for roasting. And it tells us when all such foods will dwindle into scarcity, the first chill winds heralding winter and calling us to store what is left for long cold months of want.
his pagan connection to land is not just about food, of course. The sounds of wind through leaf, the calls of animals in forests, and the rush of water were all likely our first primitive words, the first noises we learned to mimic in order to convey meaning to others. Now, we rarely hear these noises, and instead find our ears full of the sounds of digitally-recorded voices, the engines of cars, sirens, the blare of televisions, and omnipresent recorded music.

The land did not just shape our early language, but still shapes our personalities, our ways of knowing, and our very thoughts themselves. Stand at the edge of the sea and talk to a friend. Hear how your voice changes, how what you speak of is unlike what you discuss in a bar or cafe. Walk through a forest for hours and note the shift of your thoughts, how certain ideas seem not only irrelevant but unthinkable in such places. Feel the sun on your skin in an open vast field and consider whether your inner landscape feels closed or suddenly vast—sometimes almost too vast. Try to think the same thoughts at the foot of a mountain as you would at its pinnacle, and notice the difference.

Some say that land has character, or is itself a kind of character reflecting in or manifesting through the people who live there. Consider the stereotypes we have of fishermen, those who live close to and by means of the sea. Gruff, grizzled, hearty, stoic, their personalities shaped by the mutability

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6 There is a beautiful discussion of this as it relates to indigenous language loss in *The Dead Hermes Epistolary*, by Slippery Elm.

7 From an ancient and possibly pre-Greek word that denoted a kind of stamping tool used to mark things or people (as in a tattoo). The character of a land is its defining mark, the thing which distinguishes it from other lands.
of the ocean’s will and moods. Compare such a stereotype to that of ‘hill folk,’ the sort of people you might encounter in Appalachia, or the mountainous regions in the American West, or the mountains in Wales, or the Basque people in Spain. Such people are often seen as very strange to outsiders, their extreme independence and self-reliance coming across as hostile to strangers. Think on such characteristics, and imagine how living amongst massive hills which constantly veil the horizon might shape your view of the land beyond them.

Compare all these with the stereotype of the imposing but good-hearted and loud Texan, or Saharan, or Arabian, and you begin to understand the character of those who live in wide-open and dry lands. And yet one more, the Mediterranean, and also the Caribbean (especially the Cuban and the Puerto Rican), and the coastal south-east Asian, with their raucous, fiery, and almost aggressively friendly temperaments that will turn a stoic stranger into an instant friend and perhaps also a temporary alcoholic. These, the stereotypical markings of coastal peoples in humid, sun-drenched, and ever-changing climates.

A typical way of understanding such differences is to look towards ancestry or cultural norms, writing the land out as a character within the stories of peoples. Regardless, we elsewhere understand that the land shapes our experiences, and more so that the land itself has a taste. Consider the French concept of terroir, the cultural knowledge that certain things taste differently and better when grown in certain regions. There are cheeses that cannot be reproduced outside of the region which birthed them, because certain microbes and fungi only exist in those places. Likewise, wines taste completely different when the same grapes are grown in one region (for instance, the Champagne region) versus others. There is a massive difference in the taste of Parmesan cheese from the Parma region in Italy than any other replication produced elsewhere, because the milk from cows in Parma tastes different from the milk from cows in the rest of the world.

The secret to these differences is the land itself, specifically the soil and water. The combination of minerals are different in some places than they are elsewhere, changing subtle qualities of the grains, grasses, and the animals which feed upon them. For instance, in the region of Normandy near the fabled island abbey of Mont St. Michel, there is a kind of lamb the French call presalé (pre-salted). The meat from sheep who graze upon the tideland grasses there taste completely different from anywhere else, not because the sheep are different but because the grass they eat is salty. Coffee grown in Nicaragua or Peru each has a different taste from coffee grown in Ethiopia or Indonesia, despite the coffee itself being the same species. This is on account of differences in mineral contents of the local water and significant differences in soil composition, the land manifesting its character in the character of the plants.

We tend to think we are different from the animal and plant world, that somehow the land shapes us less than it does everything else (if we remember that the land shapes anything at all). More so, we forget even that we rely upon the land, that we are part of it, literally composed of elements we draw from the air, water, and soil around us. We take in carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen each time we eat a carbohydrate, and those same elements plus nitrogen whenever we eat a protein. Those all our bodies then uses to ignite all our physical actions and construct new cells (for instance skin
and hair, which is hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, and sulfur). On top of those are the minerals and other substances, and the microbes which inhabit our intestinal tract and aid in digestion, as well as many other things we do not yet have the scientific knowledge to quantify.

The elements, the minerals, and the microbes from which we are composed come from the land and are themselves part of the land, along with all those who dwell there with us. Industrial agriculture and food production has displaced our direct relationship to that land, making food “cheaper” for us but altering our localised economies of mineral and elemental exchange. Despite this, we still generally drink water from aquifers close by and breathe the air directly around us, so we still maintain some degree of direct relationship to our immediate environment.

Reconnecting to the land requires reconnecting to this physical exchange between ourselves and the actual living world where we live. “Eating local,” while a faddish and expensive trend for urban hipsters, has been the default relational state for humans since we existed. To reclaim this relationship, little money and no specialized restaurants are needed. A pot of herbs grown in local soil (even if it is potentially polluted urban dirt) is the simplest way of doing this for the city dweller who lives far from the rural. A garden if one has space is a more significant way, as is learning to forage the countless edible plants and flowers that grow in any locality.

Though the relationship of humans to land often starts with the food we eat to survive, this is but the most basic and primary of our connection. Few of us in the modern world know the shape of the land where we live, what else lives there with us, what its history has been, and how its existence influences and shapes the way we think and interact with each other.

An easy way to rediscover this is to go for a walk. Walking is not only a means to get from one place to another, but a way of experiencing the land through the human body. Walking slow, meandering, strolling, and rambling all are better ways to experience the land where you live than walking fast and with purpose. Note the way your body feels when you pass certain places, let your eyes and ears rest upon certain visions and sounds you haven’t noticed previously. Notice what lives in specific trees and shrubs, how they grow and in what patterns and cycles, especially over time.

Explore the land around you, and explore your inner world while you explore the outer world. Note the way certain thoughts change, certain emotions come or disappear. Cities can be very fraught and difficult places for this sort of exploration, with moments of sudden despair or extreme anxiety suddenly arising “out of nowhere” when you pass certain
streets or sites.\textsuperscript{8} Despite this, if you live in a city, this is the land which shapes you, so start here rather than traveling long distances to experience nature.

You notice other things when you walk through the land. Specific places seem to affect your thoughts, shaping the particular ones in your head at that moment. Some places make you feel good, or sad, or hopeful, or irritated.

Within a city, this can be a jarring experience when you notice it. A decade or so ago, a partner and I always seemed to have the same sort of argument at a particular point in our daily walk. Those arguments often ended up involving feelings of abandonment and regret, strange and inapplicable sentiments for our relationship. Then one day we noticed the pattern, the place where those discussions always started. It was always when we walked by a large government-run assisted-living center, run down, with obviously small apartments for the elderly who had been abandoned there by any family they might have had.

More recently, I noticed something similar happen at a particular point in my daily bike ride. Feelings of social awkwardness and immature pop songs about sex seemed to sweep over me each time I passed a particular place. That place? A middle-school, full of awkward adolescents struggling with the absurdity of human puberty.

Such experiences tend to be obviously human-related, but there are many other places far from humans that tend also to shape our sentiments. For me, there have always been particular trees by which I feel immensely restful, as if they are old friends or a family home. I have also had the opposite experience, trees I just didn’t feel good around. The same goes for hill sides, streams (certain parts often feeling better than other parts). There have been places I am drawn to with an almost irresistible pull, and others I find myself unconsciously always avoiding.

These are things you can only notice when you know the land the way a pagan would know the land. Daily experience with land unveils these subtle differences, as well as providing an extra way of checking any conclusions you might come to. Sometimes you’re just in a bad mood because you are tired, and sometimes it is the land. You can only get closer to understanding which influence is more likely by being in that particular land over many days, months, seasons, and years, and never in just one visit.

To be pagan is to be of the land, and to reconnect to the land is to get closer to a pagan way of seeing the world than any amount of books can give you.

\textsuperscript{8} Though these often have specific reasons, if you are new to this sort of exploration, it’s best at this point just to explore the feelings such places engender
Rhyd Wildermuth

Rhyd is a druid, a writer, and a theorist, and is also the director of publishing for Gods&Radicals Press/Ritona a.s.b.l.