

SPRUNG

BY KATHERINE HAUSWIRTH

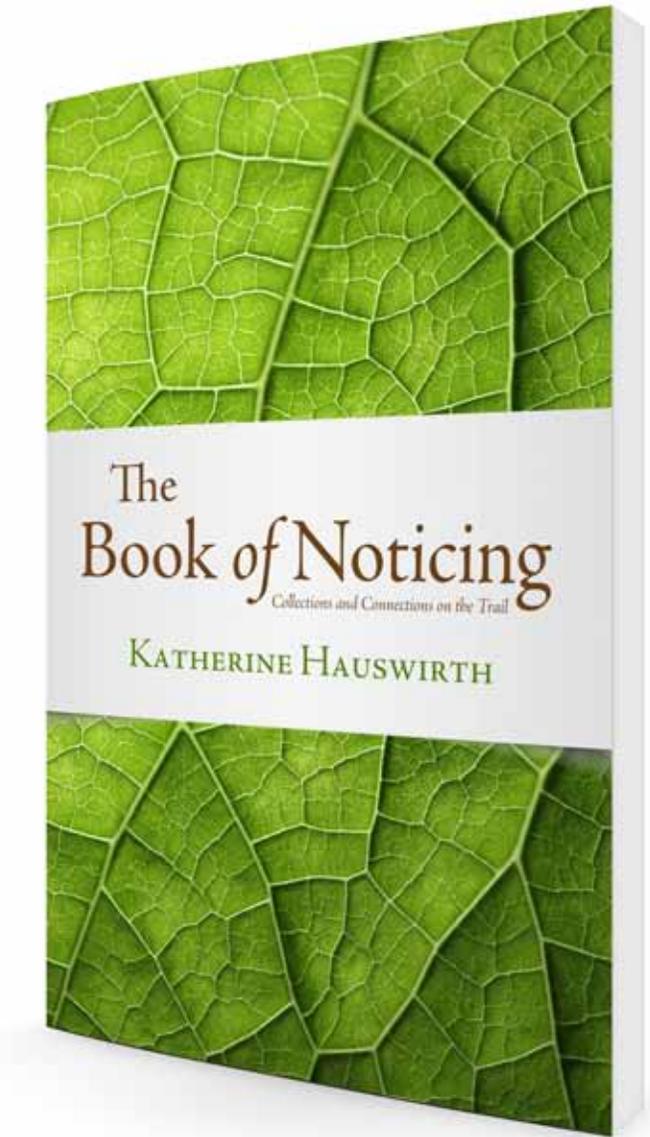
Abridged excerpt from *The Book of Noticing: Collections and Connections on the Trail*

My mother dusted off a favorite phrase with the start of every March: “spring has sprung.” I like the cheeriness of this pithy pronouncement, and the suddenness, the burst open floodgates of the new season that it celebrates. If any season seems simultaneously long in arriving and quite sudden, it is spring. We want it, we want it more, we agonize over its elusiveness and then it seems one day it is just here. Whether or not our calendars back us up, we feel it, hear it, can practically taste the pollen, and our hearts are often warmed long before we are officially in the new season.

The light brings a palpable sense of new possibility, even on frigid mornings. It’s as if the stage lights are gradually warming in anticipation of a gala performance. The “stage lights” are our sun, and as the Northern hemisphere turns toward it the hibernators are yawning, stretching, and suddenly very hungry. The plants are channeling their energy into born-again experiences everywhere. The performers are warming up, setting the stage for a show-stopping finale rife with cascades of chlorophyll and varied progeny. In some cases, though, it’s like the performer just couldn’t wait and ran pell mell into the spotlight while the orchestra was tuning up.

Take mushrooms. You walk the dog one moist, breezy morning and the lawn is free of them. The next morning, they are covering the front yard. (Of course, mushrooms aren’t only a springtime occurrence. But we notice them more as the weather warms and our time outside expands). According to the *Handy Biology Answer Book*, mushroom’s fruiting bodies (just one fraction of the fungi—the most visible part, above ground) are encouraged by warm, damp weather, and initially tiny round caps indeed expand voluminously overnight. The book cites an extreme example: the stinkhorn *Dictyophora indusiata* or *Phallus indusiatus* (it does indeed look like a phallus, with a fishnet skirt on)—which pushes out of the ground at about 0.2 inches per minute. If you happen to be there when this happens (so, someplace tropical), you might actually hear a crackling sound as the fungus expands outward and upward.

With all of this pop-up life inhabiting my synapses, the meandering trail of my mind had me recalling a class I took on the Old Testament in college. The professor shared a theory that the manna from heaven that appeared suddenly one morning to the exiled Israelites in the desert could actually



have been bird droppings. I have long since forgotten which type of bird was supposed to have such palatable droppings, and my attempt to flesh out that story has not been fruitful. But I did find one treatise about how manna could have been mushrooms, and the author makes a convincing argument about how the fungi match up with highly specific Biblical descriptions. Another theory published by *Smithsonian Magazine* likens manna to a sweet-tasting secretion of a variety of

plant lice that infects certain shrubs in the Sinai Desert, and this theory seems to have legs (so to speak) since Bedouins continue to harvest and eat the stuff.

I can imagine the Israelites' surprise the first time they awoke to find the mysterious manna, whatever its origins. For me, the Biblical description is a metaphor for the sudden-seeming new life that visits every spring with such abundance, heralded by melting snow and April showers: "The manna came down on the camp with the dew during the night." (Numbers 11:9, NLT).

Miraculous as it was, the Israelites didn't stay amazed about the manna. They craved meat, and the Bible story describes them as whining about it: "But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:5-7 [NIV]).

This part of the story jibes with something I have been noticing in myself. I am so happy and grateful for my chances to wander and muse outside. But sometimes I am just itchy for a sighting, one of those photo-op moments when a creature crosses my path or an exotic-looking bloom shouts out at me in full color. Manna, though miraculous, isn't good enough. Bring on the meaty moments!

In the woods and pools of April, life is less obvious than I might choose. I end up looking skyward, towards the bird-song, because the forest and the water seem largely a brown, orange, and green mosaic that keeps mostly mum about the life it nurtures. On a recent walk through a cedar swamp at Bushy Hill in Ivoryton, I was thrilled to see just a small cluster of new frog eggs after tramping about for quite some time. Doubtless there were plenty of other hidden eggs, as well as creature mothers, fathers, siblings, predators, and predatees, but spotting them would require tons of time and patience. I never seem to have both in stock at once, and wonder whether the instant gratifications of the world beyond the woods have primed me to expect an on-demand delivery of whatever is on my wish list that day.

Again my mind veers from trail to words, thinking about Susan Lovejoy's book *A Blessing of Toads*. Her title brings a strong and immediate sense memory of what has felt like a blessing on many occasions: holding a cool, pulsing, soft-bellied, warty American Toad between two hands, where it has sat at my mercy, completely noiseless. I know from my studies that the American Toad has an impressively lengthy, high-pitched, vibrating trill, like a bird. I know that I should get my hands dirty and hold him by the hips next time, so he doesn't have to absorb my chemicals or get injured when he tries to launch away. And I know that he will sing when he is ready, and not a moment sooner. Like spring and its myriad revelations, it will be worth my wait.

