

Sir Tim Smit, Co-Founder, The Eden Project

SIR TIM SMIT is best known for his achievements in Cornwall. He 'discovered' and then restored [The Lost Gardens of Heligan](#) with John Nelson, which is now one of the UK's best loved gardens having been named 'Garden of the Year' by [BBC Countryfile Awards](#) (Mar 2018). Tim's book [The Lost Gardens of Heligan](#) won Book of the Year in 1997. Tim is Executive Vice-Chair and Co-founder of the multi award-winning [Eden Project](#) in Cornwall. Since its opening in 2001, over 22 million people have come to see a once sterile pit, turned into a cradle of life containing world-class horticulture and startling architecture symbolic of human endeavour. Tim is also Executive Co-Chair for [Eden Project International](#) which aims to have an Eden Project on every habited continent by 2025.

'Making Natural History'.

Hello everybody. I can't live up to the performances of those before me, so I thought I'd give a quick rant about what I do know, as opposed to riffing on stuff I don't. The first and most life-changing event was when my then manager at The Lost Gardens of Heligan, Peter Stafford, asked me whether I would give him one hour of my life, where I would do exactly what he told me to do. Having agreed, he took me to the East Lawn at Heligan, and he pegged out one metre square. He put a camping chair down, and he said, I want you to look at that square as if the devil itself is about to come out of it.

I don't know if any of you have tried to concentrate for an hour, but at the end of that hour I was utterly shattered, but my life had been changed. The oddest thing is, when you look at a patch of green grass, it is just grass. It took about fifteen minutes for me to get essence of grass-ness, changing into being able to tell them apart. Having got into the area of thinking, wow, look at all these grasses and types of plant, I then got into essence of insect. I saw an ant and as soon as my eyes were familiar with ants, I saw aphids, then spiders and webs. Suddenly everywhere I looked there were insects. Then once I had got used to essence of insects and essence of green stuff, there was a rustle and I saw a frog, then a mouse. After that, my ability to walk in fields was completely trashed, I felt as if I was enacting genocide every time I went for a walk. This is the biggest antidote to green health you've ever come across.

I read a book last year by Dara McNulty, [Diary of a Young Naturalist](#). He wrote the book when he was 15. A friend of mine Mike Dupledge said to me, 'I wish I had read that, or met someone who could write that well when I started my career.' What Dara said was that, when you are autistic, and you are dealing with normal adults, you have no idea how confusing they are. What they say and what they mean are almost

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always different. Their body language which suggests one thing, always surprises you with what they actually go and do next, so I fell in love with the woodlands, because I learnt by studying the woodlands that I knew what nature was going to do. It gave me a reset, because I knew what was going to happen next. It made me feel well.

Heligan and Eden do an awful lot of SP. [Nature's Way](#). For me the best part of SP is that my hobby in life is kissing frogs. I have always loved finding something which isn't in good heart and putting it into good shape, whether it be The Lost Gardens of Heligan, a damaged clay pot, or whether it's actually working with people. To me the sexiest thing on earth is working with people, especially if they are over fifty, who believe that their best days were behind them, and seeing the joy of finding their nineteen-year-old self, who they thought they had said goodbye to. Give them another adventure, another journey, another group of people. Suddenly you will find this tremendously uplifting and life affirming energy coming out.

At Heligan we had at a certain time over 100 volunteers coming to work there. We managed to do a restoration which should have cost about fifty million, for £435,000. That is extreme. The friends we made and the journey other people went on were absolutely terrific.

Today we are working with Lucy Loveday, who again will be known to many of you, who is now our Wellbeing Guru in-residence. I just can't believe how every time we do this stuff, everything sells out. They can't get enough of it. It is not so much the notion of forest bathing, that's cool, they like going down into the deep woodland. They are absolutely passionate about taking their shoes off and walking down the 100-metre path that we've created with all the different muds, slates and sands, while being blindfolded. But above all they love the things they cannot get enough of, which is A) going into our wildflower meadows, and being told they have to pick flowers. They have got to go down and roll on the flowers. Do you know how delicious, how almost erotic it is to go and what people used to do hundreds of years ago, but now is forbidden. They go and they come back with posies of flowers just giggling, laughing and happy, in the way you can't lie, there's the happy where they just can't control the creases in their eyes.

B) is dealing with the animals that we have in the rare breed park. We have a barn where the youngsters can harden off before putting them in the raw Cornish weather. I have seen people very distressed come in amongst the lambs, and they will be there for an hour, with a lamb on their lap, just stroking it. Getting lamb on their hands, being connected to something that doesn't question them, that just likes being with

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them. The most extraordinary thing is that people who come on our SP programmes, beg to have the chance to put their hands underneath a chicken in really nice straw, and pull out an egg.

These are joys that are about being human. It is essential to get people back on some sort of notion of normality. The most extreme example is in Heligan Gardens, there is one place which has the effect of making everyone feel as if they are a cat being stroked. It is in the Melon Yard, the smallest of our walled gardens, there is an area called the potting shed. It is the area where all these terracotta pots are lined up in relative sizes in this cabinet on the wall. There are stools that are worn with wood that has got the grain of dirt, then there's the zinc tabletop where the potting takes place, and you find the odd fallen bird's nest, that's been left there. You will find sweet peas in the right season. People go in there, and even HRH Prince Charles. We all know who his grandfather was, but he said, 'I believe that my grandfather must have worked in a place like this.' I said, 'I don't want to contradict you, but he didn't!' But it is funny, that smell of soil and creosote in the background, ground terracotta, it leads to something in the sensory tract which just gets you going.

I know that with our project we do in Eden call [People and Gardens](#), where we have about 45 people who have got a great deal of medical problems and who are unable to get a job in the normal world. They have built this incredible community based on making their own compost, growing all their own vegetables, creating a vegetable basket, and they just protect each other all the time.

If you were to ask all my 500 colleagues at Eden, who is the single person they most admire at the Eden Project, it would be a man called Ken Radford who pulls all of that together, and who, when the funding ran out, he just refused to take a salary himself. Everybody wishes they were Ken, and him and his wife Lorraine are just the most wonderful, sheltering mother hens of a community of 45-50 people.

I want to end with something which is completely left field because I am so excited about it. It is not about dementia, it's certainly not about art. It is about fractals, it's about the future of virtual reality, it's about augmented reality, it's about deep mind. I treated myself in February to a working holiday with my partner Gay in India, Madras as was. I went to see a company, which is regarded by people I know in the corporate world as the best company in the world. Not only the best company, but the best charity in the world, and just the best place they ever been. It was astonishing. Built by a guy who had Parkinson's, who went into a McDonald's, and as he sat there, depressed that he could never do

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another eye operation, he looked at the way they were doing burgers, and he wondered if he could do an eye hospital like this. I tell you what, if you visit the Aravind Eye Hospital in Chennai, you will see something that makes you weep, and it will make you joyous all at once! These guys are rock and roll medicine. Two patients come in, the surgeon comes in. The kidney bowl is held out, there's music, he takes the tool of his trade, he turns round and flips out two cataracts in 2minutes 48 seconds, and has the people wheeled out. He turns around, picks up new tools, another set of eyes, 2 minute 48 seconds. He does eight in an hour. By the end of that hour there is a bell. He has a shower, cup of tea and an hour off, and the next surgeon is in. They have 36 million cataracts operations in 25 years. The principle is that if you are rich you pay for the operations of the next two people.

Why am I excited by this? There are so many reasons, but the reason I want you to get excited is that I saw something which is like the future. On the last day of six with them, the boss of Google Asia came and said:

Do you want to know how exciting it is if you are DeepMind Google, and someone says would you like to look at 36 million photographs of eyeballs? Do you know how exciting it is, if those 36 million people give you permission to see their other medical records? Do you know how stunningly, awe inspiring and brilliantly exciting it is when you put those medical records together in a huge computer system, and you realise that particular veins doing a particular thing gives you 100% guarantee that you will get a coronary. These veins do that and give you this.

He spoke of an entire world of diagnosis being opened up, simply with the power of computing that normal humans couldn't see in fractals. These guys reckon we are on the verge of being able to look inside the brain and match the medical records to a point. He reckons we're on the verge of finding that half the things that the medical profession think are causes are actually symptoms, and half the things they think are symptoms are actually causes.

I wanted to say that so you can leave tonight thinking that we are actually on the verge of the most brilliant revolution. We should be so excited to be alive today, and stunningly excited for our children and grandchildren going into the educational system, who have got futures still to make, which will make some of the things we're talking about today into history within a very short period of time.

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