**Headline:** Connecting With Nature Is a Path to Finding Joy in Life

**Teaser:** An interview with the creator of the short film “Ode to Joy,” which celebrates connection with nature as a portal to deeper connection with self and each other.

By April M. Short

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**[Article Body:]**

Lying on the smooth rocks that sit in the middle of the Yuba River, water streaming around her body, Renée Wilson’s eyes are closed. She nestles into the bed of boulders, serene. At first, the rush of the water is the only sound; then her voice begins to narrate over the imagery:

“I am a woman, a vessel. The Great Mother pours life into me, and I am here to do her will. Reborn, alive, here. I am a lover, an artist, a sister, a friend.”

The footage cuts to Wilson’s hand holding onto the fungi-laden bark of a tree beneath a green forest canopy.

“She holds my hand through it all as I revel in her light,” she says, as the scene cuts back to the river where now Wilson is smiling. “She washes me clean. Joy is here for us all, and I am grateful, every day.”

A large dragonfly passes over the spot where she lies.

This is the opening of the short art film “[Ode to Joy](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CXUnr5TJgE9/?igshid=Zjc2ZTc4Nzk=),” which Wilson wrote, directed, and starred in. She said serendipitous moments, like the dragonfly’s cameo, happened often during the making of the film. “Ode to Joy” won the 2022 [audience choice award for the category of “stunning short film”](https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=507381911387347&set=a.476872491104956) in the 2022 Maui Film Festival, earned [third place for best short film](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ren%C3%A9e-wilson-6a972a27/) in the Peachtree Village International Film Festival, and was a [Jaro Shorts Competition](https://jaromedia.watchjaro.com/media-type/pviff2022/) finalist.

The film takes viewers through an experience of nature, poetry, and song. The narrative of the film is flowing rather than top-down. It winds open gently, much like the swirling pools of water or sea waves that make up many of its scenes. Wilson narrates via original poetry and creative prose, following broad themes of nature, life, the empowerment of women, and healing ways of being in the world.

“For a very long time now, the sacred feminine, divine feminine, the Great Mother, the Mother energy—however you want to name it—has been and continues to be on the back burner, repressed, shunned, and vilified,” she said during an interview with the Independent Media Institute. “We’re in a very patriarchal society with lots of misogyny, and many things that are damaging to us as humans. I personally believe we need a balance of healthy masculine, healthy feminine—and if you want to take all the labels off, just healthy people and healthy energy.”

This film, she said, intends to offer a counterbalance to the overtly masculine ways of being that prevail in a patriarchal society.

“This piece is about womanhood and femininity and whoever relates to that,” she said. “That’s not just women, but whoever can relate to the nurturing energy, the destroyer energy, the creator energy, the healing energy, the power of femininity. The fact of the matter is: no one would literally be alive on this planet without the body of a woman. To me, that is sacred and needs to be respected. I wanted to put my voice in the room.”

She said she also wanted to uplift a different creation story.

“I’m just not into the stories that keep getting shoved down our throats, whether that’s the Christian narrative or any other popular narrative that is not honoring the feminine.”

She said, to her, the feminine represents raw wisdom and power, like that of nature, when it’s allowed to be fully expressed.

Intermittently, while immersed in these wild and beautiful spaces in her [film](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CXUnr5TJgE9/?igshid=Zjc2ZTc4Nzk%3D), Wilson sings slow and soulful a cappella covers of a range of well-known songs.

Songs she covers include John Newton’s “Amazing Grace,” John Lennon and Paul McCartney’s “Blackbird,” Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” and “Bird on the Wire,” and Mickey Ioane’s “Hawai’i ’78.”

Wilson said she chose the songs she sang more or less on the spot, her choices informed by the energy of each location while shooting. Her cover of   
“Hallelujah,” for example, moves to the flow of ocean waves crashing behind a rocky backdrop.

**Creating Joy in Lockdown**

Initially, the film was sparked during the days of COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, when Wilson, her family, and a couple of close friends would venture into beloved natural spaces—including the Yuba River near Nevada City, California. The rest of the film’s scenes were shot in various locations across the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The project became a portal for Wilson’s personal creative expression during the height of the pandemic. Only after she had captured various scenes with the inkling to share them as separate snapshots on YouTube did she decide to make the project into a more cohesive film.

“[At the start of the project] I was in Nevada City and just really vibing with the trees and the water and Goddess nature, and wanted to create something around that. So the first part of the film is shot in Nevada City, really around just being with nature. And then it evolved over time,” she said. “I left there and went to Kauai and I knew I wanted to continue this idea of honoring Mother Nature and our connections, and the feminine aspects of that… I also knew I wanted to add music. And then it evolved into becoming a fuller story. It felt like it needed more space and more room.”

Until the end of the project in December 2021, the film had no title. After watching an early screening of the film during postproduction, one of Wilson’s friends—who is credited as the inspirational muse for the film—called it an “ode to joy,” which was so befitting it stuck.

“I just think that being joyful is where it’s at, even in the hard times,” she said. “If you can still find something that’s deeper than what’s happening externally—the deeper current—then you can handle anything. It doesn’t matter what’s happening. Someone can die, and yes, it’s hard and I’m grieving and I’m sad, but I still have a deeper current that is connected to the universal wholeness of things.”

Wilson said initially her inspiration was simply to create a cathartic project that encompassed that vibe of joy for herself—especially through the difficult year that was 2020—but also for others who may be going through challenging times and may need a reminder “of where they came from, or who they are, or nature itself, whatever that means for them.”

“The idea was just to feel a deep reflection of love and joy—I feel like you can handle your life when coming from that expression,” she said. “[The project] didn’t start off as an ‘ode to joy.’ It was a very organic process. We’d say, ‘Okay, the weather’s amazing today—let’s go shoot at such and such place.’ And we really just went with the vibe and the momentum of the piece.”

**‘We Deserve to Exist Here’**

She said though it was not at the forefront of the film’s conceptualization, racism played a part in the making of the film.

“[Racism] wasn’t at the forefront of my mind in the film’s creation process, but definitely was present in the process because of everything happening with the [presidential] election, Black Lives Matter, killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, many named and unnamed Black women, and more,” Wilson said. “But inherent in the film is a Black woman in serene settings. These are settings we do not often see ourselves in—resting in, luxuriating in, feeling in, connecting in, etc.—and yet we do. In real life we do exist here, and we deserve to exist here, and in any space in the world we feel like we want to be in.”

She pointed out that the media does not often amplify this narrative for women of color, but instead “does quite the opposite.”

“The narrative we’re fed wants us to work our asses off until we die,” she said. “So yes, a Black woman/woman of color/spirit represented by me in the film gives an inspirational and visual representation of us all, but in particular—and very specifically—a visual representation to those of us who are Black and Brown in the United States and beyond. Rest into that. We’re here, and we will not be pushed out of our divine birthright to enjoy life.”

**Inspiration to Enjoy Life**

Wilson has an [extensive background](https://www.reneewilson.org/) as a singer, actor, model, and filmmaker, and is perhaps best known for [playing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUvBIRNAsVo) Raelette Pat Lyle in the Academy Award-winning film “[Ray](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0350258/).” Originally from New Orleans, Wilson made the documentary “[Crepe Covered Sidewalks](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1338572/),” which captured the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in her hometown.

She said that while growing up in New Orleans, she was “always surrounded by music, culture, and art,” which influenced her life path, exploring the arts across different mediums.

She said she hopes everyone who watches “Ode to Joy” comes away with their own inspiration. For her, she said, the process of making the film was always centered around the empowerment of women, healing, joy, and simply being and existing in the world.

If “Ode to Joy” were to leave viewers with one takeaway, Wilson said, it would be to enjoy yourself.

“Here we are on this Earth,” she said. “We get to live here, and breathe, and enjoy life, and be around people we care about, and love ourselves. From there, you can come from that place of helping other people and loving other people, and healing yourself if that’s what you need. Don’t be greedy and stingy, share your wealth, share your knowledge, embrace people, be compassionate, be kind. And I would say for the film, just allow it in, and see for yourself what resonates.”