

Sucking the Marrow from the Bones of Life

Why do we go out in nature? Why do we enjoy it? What does it do for us? Provide exercise? Relaxation? A change of scene? Fresh air and sunshine? A place to be together with more friends than will fit in our apartments?

As UUs, we're fond of our principles, the inherent worth and dignity of each person, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, accepting each other, practicing compassion, working for justice and equality, the interdependent web of life. What better way to remind ourselves that we are part of the web of life than to get out in nature?

As human beings, we need to feel that connection with the natural world. It is the world that gave birth to our species and nurtured us as we developed into what we are today. For the vast majority of human existence, we as a species lived in close proximity with Nature, intimately entwined with her existence. Only since the Industrial Revolution, a miniscule drop in the bucket of time, have we moved away from this close embrace, and that in only part of the world. Most of our brothers and sisters on this planet still live far closer to Nature than do we.

We need this connection with Mother Earth. Something inside us feels an intense and unrelenting longing, feels restless and dissatisfied if we don't have it. Getting out like we are today helps fill this need, helps us reconnect. Nor is this just my personal sentiment.

More and more, Science is recognizing the importance of connecting with nature. A brief Google search turns up a number of studies in journals like Psychology Today, The American Journal of Public Health, and The Journal of Environmental Psychology, linking time in nature to mental and physical health benefits. For example, one study found that a 20 minute walk in a green area improved ADHD children's attention to a degree similar to that of Ritalin, the preferred drug for treating this condition. Green time is also linked with improved cognitive functioning, impulse control and self-discipline, as well as reduced anger, aggressiveness, irritability, mental fatigue and violence.

Time out of doors also benefits our vision. Nearsightedness in people between ages 12-54 has nearly doubled, from approximately 25% in the early 1970s to 42% now, in the US. In some parts of Asia among children it's as high as 80%. While researchers didn't find the link they expected between this and near work (reading, TV, computers, hand-held devices), what startled them was the link between the absence of nearsightedness and more time spent out of doors.

These are just a couple examples of the ways Science has demonstrated our need of nature. Pardon the pun, but how nearsighted would we be to prefer

psychotropic drugs and shortened vision over time spent reconnecting with the web of life?¹

Time in nature also helps us gain perspective and reset our priorities. Out here on a mountainside, we're removed from distractions, from our daily routines, from all the human-made technologies that bind us as much as they intend to ease our lives, from the works of our hands, which while giving pleasure and comfort, also enslave us to the demands of their maintenance and divide us from the reality of living, breathing, eating, sleeping natural existence. Getting out into nature re-submerges us in the real life we humans have been a part of since our beginnings.

This gain of perspective is not merely theoretical, a metaphor. In coming outdoors, we experience perspective. It's forced on our senses. Whether the vast skies viewed from a northern Wisconsin lake or a vista like the one spread out before us today, we feel the eternalness of the rocks and earth beneath us, the timeless, perpetual renewal of the trees and plants around us. We know in the core of our being, in our bones, in our souls, our place in this grand scene – not masters above, not slaves below, but partners with and within.

Time in nature, and the gained perspective it brings, also gives us space to reflect about what gives life meaning, what makes it rich and worthwhile. To paraphrase the words of Thoreau, I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to suck out all the marrow of life, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.²

How we suck the marrow from the bones of life, what it is that makes our lives rich in worth and meaning, is something each of us must answer for her- or himself. No one else can do this for us, and the extent to which we answer this ultimate question determines our success and happiness. I cannot speak for any of you, but for me a large part of the answer is summed up in this poem:

¹See <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mental-wealth/201306/natures-rx-green-times-effects-adhd>; and <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/opinion/columnists/krista-ramsey/2014/03/14/krista-ramsey-let-kids-outdoors-improve-vision/6404851/>.

² Henry David Thoreau, Walden: Or, Life in the Woods.

The Gods of Small Things

I worship

the gods of small things:

small stones

rubbed smooth

by wind and water;

small shells

picked up at sunrise

on a beach;

small moments

of fleeting time

plucked from life's

ever-rushing stream.

I worship

the gods of small things.

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