

Ecophilia: Loving Earth Madly
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During one of the most trying times in my life, when my marriage was coming to an end, there were two things that I could count on to ground me, to soothe my tortured heart, to calm and focus my mind, and to help me get in touch with what I needed to do.

The first thing was a walk, a long walk every morning, rain or shine or cold or sleet, I would dress for the weather and set out. I headed for some hills near my home, with rocky outcroppings where hawks perched, then soared and played on the downdrafts. Sometimes I would pause and just watch for a while. I would come back home ready to face the challenges with more calmness and clarity and courage.

The second practice – and I practiced daily – was gardening. I had made some raised beds out of the clay earth, and filled them with rich loam and a variety of vegetable plants. Every day I would flood the beds and let the water sink slowly into the dry Utah soil, where the thick layer of mulch I had placed on top of the soil would keep the moisture in all day. Then I would weed, and tend, and breathe in the scent of wet earth and growing things. And cry, and rage, and argue with myself, and come to terms with the unfair and crappy hand life had dealt me. And resolve to bring my best self to the situation, for this one day, and make my choices and take my losses and keep my integrity and my faith with my children. For this one day. And the sun was shining on my back and I had an arm full of lettuce and radishes and peas and summer squash, and I could find some solace in that, and the strength to do whatever it took.

As for many people, nature serves for me as a refuge to inspire, reflect and heal. Because of this, I have always thought of myself as a “nature lover,” kind of in the sense that some people are cat lovers or music lovers, or find rejuvenation in dancing or painting. But recent studies seem to show that the power of nature may be something much more universal than that. What seems to be emerging is a strong argument that regular doses of the natural world may be extremely important to our health. Studies reveal that being in nature has a powerful positive effect on the mind, body, and spirit.

Here are some of the effects that have been documented: Being exposed to nature can help speed recovery after an illness or injury. Just 30 minutes a week walking in a park or green space can significantly reduce blood pressure. People who took long walks in nature over two consecutive days showed a 50 percent increase in their NK, or cancer fighting cells, and the activity of these cells increased by 56 percent.

Experiencing nature not only reduces stress but also improves our cognitive ability. Gregory Bratman from Stanford University and his colleagues enlisted 60 participants who were randomly divided into two groups: The first group took a 50-minute “nature” walk surrounded by trees and vegetation, and the second group took an “urban” walk along a high-traffic roadway. The nature walkers showed cognitive benefits including an increase in working memory performance, “decreased anxiety, rumination, and negative affect, and preservation of positive affect.” Our tendency to brood, referred to by cognitive scientists as “morbid rumination,” often makes us focus on the negative aspects of our lives and can lead to anxiety and depression. Bratman and his colleagues found that the participants who walked in the quieter, wooded portion of the campus had lower activity in the brooding portion of their brains than those who walked near the busy roadway. The psychological benefits of being in nature are also affected by the biodiversity of the natural environment. As cities design urban green spaces, incorporating diverse vegetation and wildlife improves urban dwellers’ health and well-being.

(<https://www.yesmagazine.org/happiness/health-nature-science-outside-20190410>)

Even a view of green spaces is beneficial. At Luther College, where Ginger taught and I finished my bachelor degree, the library had an entire wall furnished with study tables, where students could look out of large windows at trees, gardens and grassy areas. I found myself gravitating to those tables to do my homework; I felt more productive and even more interested in the subject I was studying. Later I learned that I was not alone. That study space was designed based on scientific evidence that studying in a place with a view of nature increased retention of the material being studied by a significant amount. Medical professionals are catching on to the benefits of nature, and incorporating in medical facilities architectural designs that include views of nature, images of natural scenery, natural lighting and healing gardens, like the beautiful two-story atrium at St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester, which includes full-size living trees and a waterfall.

An article by Andrés R. Edwards in *Yes!* magazine, posted Apr 10, 2019, highlights some of the research about the benefits to children of more exposure to nature:

The statistics on the health benefits for kids of being in nature are remarkable though perhaps not surprising. Outdoor activities increase physical fitness, raise levels of vitamin D and improve distance vision; being in nature reduces ADHD symptoms; schools with outdoor education programs help students score higher in standardized tests and improve their critical thinking skills. Nature also reduces stress levels and enhances social interactions among children.

In Scandinavian countries, the value of spending time outdoors is encapsulated in the word *friluftsliv*, which translates to "open air life." In Norway, Sweden, and Finland *friluftsliv* supports a connection with nature that is incorporated as part of their cultural heritage. It means, for instance, kids playing outdoors and exploring the insects under rocks and logs or a bird's nest. In Finland, teachers have competitive salaries, independence in their curriculum design, shorter school hours and plenty of time for their students to play outdoors. The success of their system, which blends work and outdoor play, has students repeatedly ranking near the top in academic achievement scores on a global scale. Playing outside is not merely an opportunity to rest and decompress but instead an important part of the learning process. As author Erik Shonstrom points out, "The central tenet of *friluftsliv* is the importance of entering into nature in an uncomplicated way. No Matterhorn ascent required—we're simply talking about kids playing in the woods, parks, and fields."

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I know that the ecosystem is in a precarious position. I find it interesting that one of the things that best helps me to shed my anxiety over that fact is actually allowing my whole self to feel the embrace of that system, to let my mind and spirit be cradled in the healing arms of the natural world.

But doing so is not just an escape, a way to feel better for a while. As the studies show, nature can make me healthier in mind and body, more resilient and more ready to engage the work of trying to protect our environment. Immersing myself in nature on a regular basis helps me get past feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, so that I am more able to do my part to protect the natural world I love so much.

Naturalist John Burroughs once said, "I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order." The more time we spend wandering and wondering out of doors, the more our hearts become filled with love and reverence and even awe at the beauty and marvelous workings of the natural world. There is even a name for this: Ecophila, or "Love of the Earth."

I've spoken before about the Environmental Education class I took in 2009, where we spent at least half of our class time, plus an hour a week of lab time, out of doors. Professor Emily Neal taught us the importance of cultivating in children *and* adults a close-up familiarity with and a deep love of nature,

before teaching facts about pollution and the climate crisis. “Only love can really motivate us to sustained activism on behalf of saving our environment,” she said. “You can’t save what you don’t love.”

Charles Eisenstein, author of *Climate—A New Story*, agrees. He says, “Here is what I want everyone in the climate change movement to hear: People are not going to be frightened into caring.”

It is only by embracing love of nature, he writes, that people will be moved beyond denial and passivity, to the action necessary to protect life on our planet.

Climate change poses a challenge that can only be adequately met by a revolution in the relationship between nature and civilization. It is not the technology revolution that will save us, Eisenstein maintains, if we leave in place our drive to always expand and extract value from our land, air and water.

No, what it will take is a revolution of love. That revolution, Eisenstein says, “is to know the forests as sacred again, and the mangroves and the rivers, the mountains and the reefs, each and every one. It is to love them for their own beingness, and not merely to protect them because of their climate benefits.”

Counterintuitive as it may seem, deep and active care for the planet comes not from fear of future ruin, but through experiences of beauty and grief, from loving Earth completely and madly. The language of costs and consequences won’t make people care about the environment, but only about costs and consequences, which are at *best* a very limited piece of the picture.

Eisenstein concludes: “The ecological situation on Earth has deteriorated steadily, despite the adoption of data-driven models and the cost-benefit arguments that follow them. We have tried being reasonable. Perhaps it is time to be unreasonable. The lover does not need self-interested reasons to cherish his beloved. If we honor our inner nature lover and speak from that place, others will hear us. Perhaps we have been speaking the wrong language, seeking a change of mind when really what we need is a change of heart.” (https://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/why-the-climate-change-message-isnt-working-20190104?fbclid=IwAR1Szb_W6VVefU399Lkfq9Zp2glgRKVXWzfC6souboh0a8CK9BBt2dNtOjw)

Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, sounds a clarion call for centering our children’s lives on the out-of-doors. Nature-deficit disorder is not a medical condition; it is a description of the human costs of alienation from nature. ‘Our children,’ he writes, ‘are the first generation to be raised without meaningful contact with the natural world.’

Louv speaks with fondness of his own childhood exploration of the wooded lot behind his house. “The woods were my Ritalin. Nature calmed me, focused me, and yet excited my senses.”

Go outdoors with your children, he urges. Sit in the backyard and watch an anthill. Learn the names of flowers and birds and the cloud formations. Walk in the park or along a wooded path.

“We have such a brief opportunity to pass on to our children our love for this Earth, and to tell our stories,” Louv reminds us. “These are the moments when the world is made whole. In my children’s memories, the adventures we’ve had together in nature will always exist.”

I will say it again: we can only save what we love. May we find ways to keep our romance with Earth fresh and alive; to love her, madly and without reservation.

May it be so.