

TOO OFTEN, OUR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATURAL WORLD FADES WITH CHILDHOOD. BUT SOMEWHERE, IN EACH OF US, AN ESSENTIAL CRAVING REMAINS.

I WAS RAISED IN RURAL MINNESOTA and spent most of my childhood deeply engaged with the outdoor world that surrounded me. Creeks, riverbeds, dark forests, grassy hills — from sunup to sundown (and sometimes long past), they were my playground, my home, my rightful place.

After moving to the city to start my career, I felt that something was missing from my life. It seemed to be something important, though I couldn't quite name it. Eventually, my career took me to a company located outside the metro area. I moved away from the city, green space replaced concrete space, and finally, I figured it out. I am a person designed and built to be in nature.

I hunger for nature. It's a hunger that has been with me a long time, and I believe that on a deep level, it is a hunger we all share. The bulk of our human existence has been

inextricably intertwined with the natural world. Relative to the thousands of years that homo sapiens have been walking the planet, our species move away from a nature-centered existence and into paved, densely populated cities and climate-controlled buildings is a very recent, and distinctly un-natural development.

While many would consider our current living situation a great improvement over the brutal struggles of earlier times, at core, we all still belong to — and in — the natural world. Genetically, it makes sense that our bodies should be disposed toward spending time in close contact with nature. And yet, how much time do any of us spend in forests and in large bodies of water, on craggy mountains looking out at vast views, in lush valleys smelling plants and earth? My guess is, not nearly enough.

NATURAL HUNGER

Daily Allowance

Science has shown that spending inadequate time in natural light can affect our circadian rhythms (body clock), and by extension, our body chemistry. Serotonin, melatonin and a host of other hormones and neurotransmitters secreted by our brains are all directly affected by exposure to natural light.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a formal-sounding diagnosis that actually describes a whole collection of maladies, including depression and fatigue, most of which have been closely linked to natural-light deficits. Some research also suggests that getting starlight and moonlight in our retinas plays an important role in supporting our neural micro-circuitry.

Increasingly, our sciences are providing evidence for truths that our bodies have always known, namely, that spending time outdoors is essential to our immunity, our mental health and

even our metabolic function. But whatever the scientific reasons, most folks — even cynical, insect-averse, die-hard city dwellers — find that getting out into nature offers them something of innate and intensely personal value. Even if it is just several deep lung-fulls of fresh, oxygen-rich air.

Mental Break

One great gift of nature is that it helps us improve our sense of balance and perspective. It shifts our outlook, often in surprising ways. In particular, nature helps us break our obsessive patterns of thinking.

The philosopher Eckhart Tolle tells us that only five to ten percent of the thoughts that pass through our minds are new thought. Everything else is a rehashing of old information. We crowd our minds with details, reliving the past and worrying about the future. In the midst of this mental chatter, it's hard

for us to notice the present moment, much less entertain new ideas.

In a natural environment, things slow down, new vistas open to us and we instinctively shift into a different gear. We interact with the world in a more intimate, focused way. As we become absorbed in the beauty of nature, the internal chatter quiets. Our repetitive thinking patterns subside, creating enough space for new synapses and new ideas to pop in. This is why time spent in nature often helps us ignite creativity.

Stepping into the natural world also provides a way to temporarily step out of our life routine long enough to reflect on whether or not we are living the life we want for ourselves. When we break out of our habitual patterns and ruts long enough to see a bigger picture, it offers us opportunities to question where we are headed.

Back to the Garden

Reintegrating nature into our lives may mean retracing a path back to what many of us last knew as children. Back then, nature was a mysterious place full of secrets that were ours to discover. We splashed in mud puddles, dug in the dirt, hid behind trees, picked flowers, laid in the grass, and studied caterpillars as they scrunched their way along twigs, often losing ourselves in these activities for hours on end.

As adults, we rarely take this kind of time for anything. Even more important than time, though, is intention and focus. Whether your next nature foray is for ten minutes or ten days, practice giving your total attention to being in your chosen environment. Use all of your senses: How many different sounds do you notice? Breathe deeply, taking in all of the scents in the air. Study your surroundings — what do you see when

you really look? Touch your surroundings — how do the leaves, trees, rocks, and dirt feel?

Your result will depend upon the fierceness of your focus. Distraction and rushing will dilute your experience, so if you decide to get nature time by cutting across a city park while answering voicemails on your cell phone, don't expect too much.

One other thing to keep in mind: We all need a certain amount of alone time in nature, and we also need to experience it with others. Once you've rediscovered your natural inclinations, don't keep them secret. Share your new world with your spouse, children, friends and other special people. Plan to do more of your daily activities out of doors. With regular practice, you'll harvest the benefits of once again making nature an intimate part of your everyday life.

Dave Wondra is a professional coach who helps people find ways to incorporate nature into their lives.

QUICK ESCAPES

Getting out doesn't have to be a huge undertaking. Remember, even a couple hours a week spent mindfully communing with nature can rejuvenate your body, mind and soul.

Get up early, go outside, lie on a blanket on the ground and watch the sun rise. Or, if you wake up in the middle of the night, consider stepping out and doing some stargazing instead of watching TV.

Contact a garden club and inquire about local public gardens. Visit greenhouses and botanical conservatories during early spring and winter. Breathe in the moist smells of living things.

Plan a weekend adventure with your family, staying at or near a state park. Leave behind all your electronics and spend every possible moment exploring the landscape.

Even if you've never gardened before, start planning this winter how you might convert a small, sunny section of your lawn into a fresh tomato and herb garden next spring. Getting your hands in the dirt and touching and smelling the plants as they grow can be a deeply gratifying experience.

Have your morning coffee or lunch in a city park. Instead of reading or writing, spend some time really observing the plants and small animals there. Imagine what that part of the city might have looked like before the city was built. Call your city office for locations of local miniparks.

Find out how to get foot access to the local rivers and lakes you usually drive by. Get a copy of your city walking trails and plan lunch-hour jaunts.

Bike, hike, canoe, climb or cross country ski at city, state or regional parks. "Silent sports" are a great way to experience out-of-the-way places.

If you get really desperate, just walk out the door, sit down on the first open ground you come to and close your eyes. Feel the sun on your face, the air around you, the earth under your body, and remember — you are a part of the planet, formed from billion-year old carbon and stardust. You belong here.

OVERFLOW - RENEWAL - SIDEBAR

Next time you find yourself near any kind of forest, do a little exploring. Climb a tree. Poke around under stones and logs like you did when you were little. Contact the Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org) to locate accessible properties in your area.

Make a point of connecting with the elements. Next time it starts snowing, drop everything and go outside to watch it fall. Take a moonlit walk by yourself and enjoy the crunch of snow under your boots.

Plan a short retreat at a spiritual center located in a natural setting. Web sites like www.retreatsintl.org will help you start your search.

Join science-museum nature trips or participate in community education programs (mushroom hunting, native-plant walks, wetland conservancy) that offer nature experiences. Call your County Extension Service to learn about programs in your area.