

DRAFT ESSAY

Nature as muse: Outdoor therapy & walking meditation

Marion G. Dumont, PhD

The Raven and the Rose

A person can become aware of the constant flow of communication in the natural world in the form of chemicals emitted into the air, the soil, the water; electromagnetic radiation, colour, sound, taste, smell. A person can start to read the meanings... ”¹

There is ample evidence supporting the benefits of spending time outdoors. In addition the well-documented disconnect between humanity and the natural world and its consequences demand a solution. There are those who believe that our disconnection is one of the causes of the anxiety and depression that plagues our culture. It’s not my purpose here to review this literature. However, a simple google search will provide you with a significant number of examples that point to not only the problem but different solutions. For instance, the first international forest bathing conference will take place this summer in San Francisco.²

Forest bathing or “Shinrin-yoku” in Japanese, is a form of outdoor therapy that was developed in Japan in the 1980s. It has “...become a cornerstone of preventative health care and healing in Japanese medicine. You can find out more about forest bathing and its health benefits online at <http://www.shinrin-yoku.org/>. For a price, you can even become a certified forest therapy guide. However, each of us can benefit from being in the outdoors, whether it is in a forest, a field, a beach or the park down the street. In this essay I intend to give you examples from my own life of my own practice of outdoor therapy, walking meditation and its benefits.

This essay is designed to inspire individuals to develop a personal practice of engaging with the natural world for the purpose of building self-confidence and a sense of well-being. As a nature and wilderness mentor it is my intention to teach people ways to cultivate and nurture the simple art of outdoor therapy and mindful walking on terms that are comfortable for them. One of the ways this is done is simply to develop an awareness of the natural world while walking outdoors.

One of my guiding principles is to set an intention at the onset of my walk. I recite the following verse to myself:

*Listen to the spirit
Listen to the land
Listen to the spirit listen to the land*

¹Darrell, Nikki. *Conversations with Plants: Plant Medicine Path*.

²<https://www.forestbathinginternational.org/>

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The intention is to be in your body and follow your intuition. I sometimes squat down and touch the earth which is a grounding gesture or a way of centering yourself. Taking a drink of water or a few deep breathes are also ways of centering. Honoring the spirit and the land is a means of expressing gratitude. Once you have set your intention and grounded yourself, step forward into that sacred space that you have created—you are ready to engage with your whole self—mind, heart, body and spirit.

Throughout my life I have cultivated a personal relationship with the natural world through practice, study, and mentoring. Wandering and walking have characterized my engagement with the natural world since a very early age. As a result my teachings are based on decades of personal experience and study. Walking and wandering have enabled me to develop self-confidence and a sense of well-being that sustains me even in the most stressful circumstances. I have wandered the landscapes of such diverse places as Kodiak Island, western Montana, San Juan Islands, Olympic Peninsula, and Appalachia here in the United States. And, I have roamed through various regions of France including Normandy, Alsace-Lorraine, Aquitaine, Auvergne, the Pyrenees, as well Ireland and the Scottish Highlands.

My parents granted me and my siblings the liberty to wander outdoors from a very early age, early enough that I don't have clear memories of some of our adventures. However, there is one that has been told often enough in our family so that, even though I don't recall the incident, it is alive for me through the stories told. When I was three years old my family lived for a season on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Our house was on one of the beaches and we kids were allowed to play outside, supervised through the kitchen window as my mother would pause in her household task long enough to be sure we were staying out of trouble. On one such occasion, she looked out the window to discover that my brother and I had cast off from the shore in a small dinghy, without oars. He was 4 and I was 3; out rushed my mother making a mad-dash for the water in an attempt to save us from drifting out to sea. My mother has never learned to swim and we were far enough out had she been a moment later, she wouldn't have been able to get us to shore as she had gone in up to her chin before she was able to grab hold of the boat.

I don't recall the consequences of this mishap, perhaps there wasn't any because shortly after hauling us up to the house our mother found my younger sister, age 2, sucking on a bar of soap! A bar of soap, we were told, that was made of lye and there were sufficient consequences

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for my little sister as her mouth and lips swelled. As I ponder this day in the life of my family on Kodiak Island I can't help but wonder about my parents. Was parenting that much different in the 1950s than it is today? Were they the norm or the extraordinary? I'm certain that their own childhoods influenced their parenting decisions. My father had grown up on a cattle ranch in the wilderness of western Montana. My mother had grown up on a farm in rural, northeastern France. Life was hard but self-determined and lived close to the land. I count my blessings. My best childhood memories are made of many more stories similar to the one told above. Our family was poor but life was rich with adventure.

My life today continues to be influenced by the liberty and self-determination granted us kids. I don't harbor the fear and timidity that I often hear others express in relation to the natural world. I credit my love to wander and explore off the beaten path to a childhood lived outdoors. My growing-up years was religiously barren but spiritually rich. The spiritual practice of my childhood was getting dirty; it was walking on the earth barefoot and breathing the fresh, clean air of the countryside; it was swimming in streams and hiking in the woods; it was hiding in the tall, dry grasses of summer that grew well above our heads; it was breaking off chunks of salt set out for livestock and sharing it with my siblings; it was catching bees in jars, and cradling sleeping garter snakes in my shirt pocket; it was mud slides and ponds; it was the ebb and flow of the tides that washed away our hermit-crab cities built of sand and jetsam; it was watching wild horses from the ridge and stopping for the crossing of a grizzly bear; it was wildfires and miles and miles of wilderness; it was the smell of soft-packed earth after a summer rain; it was the comfort of nestling in the uncut fields outside our village. This spiritual practice continues to grace my life and I love to share it through creative expression—in the clothes that I wear, the arrangement of my household, my writings, photographs, and art forms.

This practice of engaging with the natural world builds self-confidence and a sense of well-being. It is my desire to share this practice with others so that they can also cultivate and nurture self-confidence and well-being. One of the ways this can be done is simply to develop an awareness of the natural world while walking outdoors through regular practice.

Several years ago I experienced a very deep loss and my everyday life was overwhelmed with grief. I cried for so many days, weeks, and months that my sinuses ached. I cried a river, an ocean. This grief was shared with my granddaughter, for it was a time of great loss for her—even

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greater than my own. We had lost each other in that we no longer lived together. For her, she had also lost her home and her canine companions who were like siblings to her.

For grief to unwind itself and let you free one must become self-centered for a time, like the Narcissus that bloom along the river banks. With bursts of gold they shatter the landscape, awakening from earth's winter slumber. For a person to be able to move through the winter of their grief they need time and they need an environment—at home, at work, with family and friends that is as adaptable as March weather. The ebb and flow of emotions and the transformative process of healing requires plasticity. Every individual experience of loss and grief is different, yet the same and in our contemporary world it is often difficult to find the time and space and acceptance needed to move through this process.

There were two things that saved me from this grief—art and nature. The more time I spend in nature, the more intimate our connections and communications became. There are many examples that I could draw from to illustrate these experiences. For instance, during my recent stay in France, I was hoping to find a Hawthorn tree in order to collect some thorns for an art project. I was uncertain as to whether or not this tree grew in the Haute Loire region but I soon discovered that there were several varieties that could be found in abundance along the footpaths and narrow, unpaved roads that traversed the countryside. The French word for Hawthorne is “Aubépine.” One afternoon while I was out walking I discovered a new route to my favorite village, Les Pinnatelles. On my way back to the house a broken branch caught in the fence that bordered the walking path caught my attention and I stopped for a closer look and realized it was from a Hawthorne!

A particular experience that I want to share with you that reflects the ways in which nature speaks to us occurred in 2016. I believe the natural world cares deeply for humanity. It requires us to suspend our beliefs and attitudes that inhibit us from experiencing the natural world as participants rather than dissenters. The experience I had was profound, perhaps because the period in which it occurred was one of profound transition for me marked by profound grief and loss.

It was an experience with Raven and the Rose, not just any rose, but the wild variety, the Nootka Rose, native to the Pacific Northwest. On two different occasions Raven spoke to me in my grief. One morning I went out walking near my home. Being outdoors and walking saved me

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from myself and the overwhelming sadness that made it impossible at times to do anything but put one foot in front of the other. I moved my body in space and time through the woods accompanied by my dogs, Coco and Emmett.

On this particular day I was especially distraught and chose to visit an area I'd never been before. Somewhere along the path I sat down and began to weep uncontrollably. As my sobbing began to subside a Raven passed overhead, calling to its fellow Raven who responded in kind. When I opened my eyes the ground was littered with rose petals and as my vision cleared of tears the rose-pink petals lay astonishingly vibrant against the dampness of the earth. It was as if the Raven and the Rose had witnessed my sorrow and their presence gave me comfort and courage.

The second occasion where Raven spoke to me was in January 2016 during a walk with my granddaughter who was visiting with me for a couple of days. Mathilde had been born at home in an apartment that I shared with two of my daughters. We had shared the same home since she was born. I can't begin to explain the joy I found in grandmothering but over the years she and I became very close. When my daughter completed graduate school this magic time of my life would come to an end as she bought her own home and she and Mathilde moved to the city, about an hour's drive from where I continued to live for a time.

As can be imagined, Mathilde and I were deeply grieved by this change and so began a painful transition for both of us. I don't know what hurt the most, my own loss or the knowledge of hers and my inability to be there to comfort her, to help her through this difficult time. It was a time of darkness and sadness and I really don't know what it was like for her, day to day. I recently heard a snippet of a story of one day when she attempted to run away from her new home and return to the home we had shared. This little snippet is a peep hole into the sadness and desperation she must have felt as she moved through her own grief. She had lost more than I—she no longer lived with me and her aunty and the three dogs that she had related to as siblings. She lost her sense of place, her sense of belonging, and her family.

In January 2016 Mathilde had come to spend a few days with me and as had been our practice since she was old enough to walk we went with the dogs to one of the logging roads near our home. Long walks in the woods were familiar and unhurried and gave us time to forget our sorrows. As Mathilde and I sat in the middle of the trail, sharing an orange, we heard an unusual bird song, one I'd never heard before. We walked a ways toward the tree it seemed to be

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coming from and I was amazed to see a Common Raven fly up! After Mathilde returned to her home I began to search the web for Raven vocalizations and discovered a recording that was similar to the song we heard on our walk. The author refers to this particular vocalization of the Raven as "comfort sounds". It felt to me that this Raven sang for Mathilde and me and gave to us the gift of comfort in song.

Sharon Blackie in *If Women Rose Rooted* writes this about grieving: "For all mourning may be transformed into joy if you have endurance enough to make the journey, and courage enough to face the Old Woman in the darkness of her cave."³

³Blackie, Sharon. (2016) *If Women Rose Rooted: The Journey to Authenticity and Belonging*. September Publishing: Denmark, p. 80.