**Awakening to Wild Places**

*“I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in” John Muir*

If we climb a mountain and feel the exhilaration of achievement, then perhaps this gives us courage to face challenges in our own life. When we look over an expanse and see dots of houses that seemed so big when we first set out for our walk, this perhaps gives us a different perspective on issues that seemed unsurmountable within our own lives. Somehow what we are experiencing externally in these wild places can often mirror our internal landscapes and literally give us the space to reflect and to see things differently within ourselves.

We know from personal experience that being out in nature is good for our health and there is significant research to support this. The physical benefits are well known; walking in nature offers a healthy environment that helps to tone our muscles, improve our circulation, reduce body fat and can limit the risk of chronic conditions such as diabetes and cancer (Trekfast, 2020). However nature also provides a holistic approach to wellbeing through psychological and spiritual benefits too. For example, after as little as four minutes among trees stress is reduced, as measured by significant drops in a person's heart rate (Ulrich et al, 1991). The mental health charity, MIND funded a five year research programme called Ecominds consisting of 130 projects using nature for wellbeing. Their findings showed that 70% of participants had a significant improvement in their mental wellbeing. They also found improvements in self-esteem and sociability as well as participants wanting to continue to connect with nature and being more environmentally-friendly (Bragg et al, 2013).

Within the mental health sector, there is growing interest in ecotherapy (an umbrella term which includes green care, nature-based therapy, wilderness therapy, wild therapy and other variations). All these approaches are about intentionally being in nature and connecting with it in a structured way in order to improve wellbeing. Wild places in particular give us a sense of empowerment and freedom that we can then take back into the everyday.

Nature offers an alternative setting from the traditional therapy room and walking therapy can encourage a more active and creative process in talking through difficulties than sitting within four walls. You may have had the experience of walking alongside a friend or family member and being able to talk more deeply and freely than when you sit together at home. This is partly because there is less eye contact when you are both facing forwards which can sometimes help people to open up. There is also a more even power balance in that neither of you are the host but instead nature is hosting you both. The physicality of walking alongside and facing a challenge together can also symbolise the desire to ‘walk alongside’ and face whatever life challenge you are discussing together instead of sitting in a more oppositional stance in a room.

One of the main therapies used for trauma is EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). This involves people processing trauma memories through the therapist guiding the client through systematic eye movements or repetitive behaviours. This process was first discovered during a walk in a park and the awareness of the repetitive eye movements which occurred through the rhythm of walking and observing trees (Shapiro, 1989). Sadly this therapy developed into an approach confined to the clinical room instead of a form of ecotherapy. However the underlying principle of processing traumatic memories through walking offers another explanation of why a walk can improve our wellbeing. Within my own psychological profession I have integrated ecotherapy into my work, along with other aspects such as creativity and spirituality to develop Holistic Cognitive Behaviour therapy (HCBT). This is a more strengths based and contextual approach to standard Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and, amongst other things, encourages people to connect with nature for our wellbeing (see [www.hcbt.co.uk](http://www.hcbt.co.uk) for more information and resources). Outside spaces literally give us more ‘headspace’ to think and process and as St Augustine of Hippo said ‘it is solved by walking.’

Whether you are walking in the context of therapy, socially or on your own, nature offers us rich symbolism and metaphor which can speak to us in powerful ways. For example there are the different seasons; Winter reminding us to take time to rest and renew and Autumn teaching us about submitting to the inevitable letting go of people and things we love and trusting for the new life of Spring. Mountains and hills can symbolise consistency and the eternal and the reliable rhythms of day following night, of high tides and low tides and the endless cycles of life and death can become symbols of security and hope. There is also the symbolism of certain places that are perhaps associated with childhood memories or reminders of loved ones. Returning to a familiar place can feel like returning home or reconnecting with a long lost friend.

Nature also encourages creativity and can remind us of childhood memories playing freely and being spontaneous. I found that in writing this article I needed to step away from my laptop and into local woodlands in order to verbalise what I wanted to share. In the freedom of the outside, and in particular within wild places, we can find a deeper creativity and a freedom of expression. Nature offers a natural art gallery that is free to enter and can inspire our own creativity.

So having considered the physical and psychological benefits, let’s turn now to the spiritual. This term is often associated with the term religious and for some who have a faith, being out in nature helps to strengthen their belief in a creator God. However spirituality is a lot broader than this: it is about what is deepest within us; what gives our life meaning, purpose and hope and helps us to feel connected with something greater than ourselves. For many the fight against climate change and the protection of wild places is an expression of spirituality. Many find being by the sea or climbing mountains a way of reconnecting with themselves but also perhaps in connecting with something beyond themselves. As we walk in wild places this can awaken the wild places within us; those places of our deepest dreams and potential. In connecting with the wild places of our countryside it can dare us to connect with what is deepest within us. Going out for a walk can be the first steps in defining unspoken longings or giving ourselves permission to dream and as we walk, it can increase our resolve and motivation to step towards those dreams and potential.

Another area of growth in mental health (as well as in the business world and education) is the recognition of the benefits of mindfulness and meditation (eg Zhang et al, 2021). Mindfulness originates in Buddhism but all faith traditions recognise some form of meditation practice such as Christian contemplative practices and Islamic Sufi traditions. Wild places offer the ideal setting in which we can stop and take a breath. Reaching a summit, seeing a beautiful view or catching sight of a rare bird all make us pause and savour the moment – a gift of stillness and being in the here and now. A walk can act as a mini retreat and a way of debriefing or stepping back from day to day challenges or busyness. The de-stressing concept of Forest Bathing, from Japan, is based on this idea and offers an immersive experience of fully being in nature and soaking in the goodness of it. Next time you are out walking you may wish to try the simple mindfulness exercise, using the senses, which is described in the box below. Exercises like this can help us to feel more grounded and present to the gift of the moment, giving our minds a break from our distractions and concerns.

Research on spiritual experiences shows that nature is often the setting for these numinous moments (Hardy, 1979) and so being in nature can also facilitate spiritual growth and wellbeing. Before the Romans bought their more formalised and hierarchical Christianity to these lands, the Celtic church would worship outside and would talk of two holy books to read – firstly, the written Bible and secondly, God’s creation in nature. How different our land would be if we had continued to read both. The survival of earth-based spiritualties such as Wicca and Paganism alongside a renewed interest in Celtic spirituality and developments such as Forest church and Wild church can offer ways of connecting spiritually with nature. Both scientific knowledge alongside these ancient wisdoms, remind us of our interconnectivity with all life forms and our need to care for the planet which we share.

**Ecotherapy Mindfulness Exercise**

Go for a walk in nature with the intention of awareness rather than getting to a destination. Firstly focus on what you can see both near and far, observing things with fresh eyes as if you are seeing them for the first time. Then stand still and close your eyes for a moment and be aware of what you can hear; then block your ears and with your eyes still closed, see if there are any smells from the natural environment around you; lick your lips and see if the setting offers any tastes in the air. Finally continue your walk and be aware of the sensation of touch, perhaps the wind in your hair, the rain or sun on your face and an awareness of how the terrain feels under your feet. You may wish to touch the bark of a tree or a rock as you pass to immerse yourself more fully in that moment. Fully engage with nature through all the senses, without judging or evaluating but just being.

Being out in nature is good for us – physically, psychologically and spiritually. As we recognise how nature cares for us, we need in turn to care for nature. As we value this connection, we are reminded of our responsibility to both thank Mother Nature but also that Nature needs ‘mothering.’ We need to give back and care for the earth that cares for us, recognising that we are all interconnected in this beautiful richness of life.

Dr Hilary Garraway, consultant clinical psychologist

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