

CAN A WALK IN THE WOODS HEAL US?

Sermon by The Reverend Kathleen Hepler

First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist

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Can a walk in the woods heal us? Well of course if you ask Little Red Riding Hood or Hansel and Gretel if their walks in the woods healed them, the answer would probably be, “Not-so-much!”

These old fairy tales reflect a fear of the woods, of the natural. They remind me that how we humans have viewed the earth through time has everything to do with how we have treated our planet. Biblical Scripture tells of God making the world in seven days and calling it “good”. Yet, the Bible also says that man will have “dominion over the earth”. This idea, the attitude that the earth was made for human use, for our comfort alone, for our sustenance, and our profit is still very much with us. Add this view to capitalism and unbridled corporate power and we are injuring the earth at a rate that is almost (but not quite yet) unredeemable.

On this Earth Day week, we Unitarian Universalists take as our earth-view our seventh principle: “We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence.” Science presents this truth, as do many other nations and groups in our time. And this view, will save the planet if we as a species make decisions with this principle as their basis.

Can a walk in the woods heal us? This sermon question was submitted by Diane Engel. Diane and I discovered that we both attended Camp Mowana in the summer as kids; a Lutheran Church Camp in Ohio. We both remember, even as small children, the exercise of going out into the woods alone to sit under a tree to pray or reflect. Our little souls were already learning that nature heals, that there is something important and eternal to be felt, experienced, and realized in nature. What a simple and accessible activity this is that we can do with our children, by ourselves, or with one another!

Most of us will answer “yes” to the question “Can a Walk in the Woods Heal Us?” We have experienced its calming and healing magic.

Science affirms that the healing nature of the natural is verifiable. Study after study reveals this. In Paoli, Pennsylvania gall bladder patients whose rooms faced trees recovered a day sooner and with less pain and complication than those whose rooms looked out onto a brick wall. Patients who gazed out onto a natural scene were four times better off than those who faced a brick wall.

If this is so....imagine the healing effects of a walk in the woods! Indeed studies have been done about this too. We are spending 50% less time outside than 20 years ago. And here is what we miss by so doing:

1. Nature clears our heads/ lower levels of brooding and worry
2. Unplugging from technology makes us more creative. People who took the “Remote Associates Test” (which measures creativity),before and after they spent four days in nature without technological devises, increased their creativity by 50%.
3. Attention and focus are proven to increase with a walk in the woods.
4. Burns 400-700 calories an hour.

5. Memory and recall improve with nature's healing help.
6. The more time we spend in the woods, or anywhere in nature, the more we esteem ourselves.

A walk in a city scape does not have the same effect. The difference in the two is how they draw our attention. Cityscapes draw our attention to specific things and tasks which activates a part of the brain that says "Look!", "See over here!", and "Now over there!" It is mentally tiring. Yet, being in a natural, non-human-made setting draws our attention to the larger picture in a way that rests the busy mind. "Forests, streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans demand very little of us, though they're still engaging. We are able to think as much or as little as we like, and this replenishes our mental state.

Can a walk in the woods heal us? The Japanese have a natural therapy called shin-rin yoko, or "forest bathing". It requires that patients walk for extended periods of time in forested areas. Germany has a similar treatment. These are not just "cultural quirks". People who bathe in the forest have lower blood pressure, lower pulse rates, and lower cortisol (or stress hormone) levels. Across the board those who walk in nature report less depression and more hope. (much of the above information taken from an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "How Nature Resets Our Minds and Bodies," March 29, 2013)

So a walk in the woods does affect our physiology and our psychology for the good. And, this is healing. Add to this that, spiritually, being in nature expands our souls beyond our own drama and reminds us of the large and beautiful mystery of living. It can seem like we return "home" ... to the nest of the cosmos where we remember the largess of creation....God's bounty.

It is Passover time and because I have had walking on my mind, I got to thinking about the long and arduous walk across the desert that the Israelites took to escape Pharaoh's oppression. They were led by Moses who had been raised in Pharaoh's household, but then answered the call to lead his people, the Hebrew people, out of slavery.

*When Israel was in Egypt's land.
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand.
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ol' Pharaoh to let my people go.*

40 years across the desert was no walk in the woods! It was a long wandering in the unrelenting sun with little resource. I doubt they would have named this walk in nature healing... but I am sure they would name liberation from slavery as a healing event!

As relates to the earth and climate change, how are we in need of liberation?

This year there was a Passover Seder developed by Rabbi Arthur Waskow called *Passover When Earth Really Matters*. It takes the original Passover journey out of exile and applies it to the current issue of Climate Change. In it we all travel out of denial about climate change, and walk toward action to heal the planet. This progressive Haggadah is multi-cultural and interfaith including Scripture from faiths other than Judaism.

From Judaism this part of the Passover meal script, or Haggadah:

“In every generation there is a Pharaoh who arises to enslave us and destroy us. In every generation we must all see ourselves: It is we who must go forth from slavery to freedom, not our forbearers only.” And from Christianity: the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says “I tell you, if they keep silent the very stones will cry out. “

“In our own time, the stones are crying out. The frozen stones we call glaciers are groaning as they melt. The Mountains of West Virginia are moaning as they are destroyed in order to mine coal. The Coral Reefs are wailing as they blanch and die. And all these silenced voices call us to speak and to act. To speak against the Empires of Oil, Tar, Coal and Unnatural Gas. To stand up to the Pharaohs of Fracking. “

In another part of this earth-caring Haggadah, Pharaoh says to the midwives of the Hebrews, whose names were Shifrah and Puah, “When you help the Hebrew women give birth, if he be a son, put him to death; but if she be a daughter, she may live. But the midwives held God in awe, and they let the children live”. (Rabbi Arthur Waskow, The Shalom Center, April 4, 2016)

Like Shifrah and Puah, we are called to be the midwives, those who bring forth the sacred truth of our responsibility to the earth. We must decide to be those who speak up against all of the greed-based behavior that is ruinous to this planet and its inhabitants.

Can a walk in the woods heal us? Yes. Without doubt. Science confirms this and we know it in our souls.

Yet, earth does not exist to meet our needs alone. We cannot stop there...with our own healing only. If we do we will be participating in that worldview that the earth is here to serve our purposes only; that attitude that pushes us into the slavery of consumption, the hubris of national righteousness, and a selfish disconnected living.

The Earth is so very generous, and so very forgiving of our excess and plunder. But Earth is not inexhaustible. All humans are called to stay the course in changing our own lifestyles, lobbying, writing, picketing the Pharaohs of our time so that the Earth can heal.

Let any walking in the words we do inspire us to stay focused on the earth we bequeath to those who will live long after us. Let us keep our spirits tuned to the Seventh Generation beyond this one, as some Native American Tribes have said. Let us love the Seventh Generation beyond now with our actions. May those who we will never know be born into a world that has found its balance again; the Promised Land, the good land, and a large land; a land flowing with milk and honey for every creature.

(to the tune of “Let My People Go”)

“Oh set all Earth from bondage free, Let all my peoples go;

And let all life be free to be. Let air and water flow.

Go down Moses, way down in every land.

Tell all Pharaohs; Let our creation go!