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NATURE NEVER WORRIES

WHAT IS IT EXACTLY THAT WE CAN LEARN FROM NATURE?

CAROLINE BUIJS DISCOVERS THAT NATURE SIMPLY ‘IS’,
AND UNDERSTANDING THAT CAN HELP US PUT
THE CHAOS OF EVERYDAY LIFE INTO PERSPECTIVE.

Even though I lived opposite a big park as a child, I never went there willingly. Every Sunday afternoon my parents made me go for a walk with them and I never really enjoyed it—I just wanted to stay home and read. I found nature boring, a place where ‘nothing ever happens’.

It’s funny how things change as you get older. Now I live in a city and when I visit my parents it has to be a huge storm and raining really hard for me not to go for a walk in nature. Every step I take there, every tree I see and every bird that flies past me clears my head a little bit more. The things I’m stressing over loosen their hold on me, be it an article I’m stuck in the middle of writing or an argument I had with my teenage son. Nature brings things into perspective. But how?

Research shows it has to do with the shapes found in nature. In an article in *National Geographic*, Agnes van den Berg, an environmental psychologist and professor of landscape perception at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, writes: ‘The most important difference between natural objects and those made by man lies in their fractal patterns of self-repeating shapes. If you look at a cauliflower under a microscope you still see a cauliflower. These fractal patterns are also found in flower petals and trees. The forms are eye-catching and they

take no cognitive effort to look at, so the part of your brain used to focus your attention can rest. Subjects performed better on complex tests and showed a faster rate of stress recovery when they were exposed to fractal patterns.’

According to Martin Drenthen, environmental philosopher and associate professor at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, the beneficial effects of nature have to do with its autonomy: It’s a world that still exists without opinion. In society you’re expected to have an opinion about almost everything, but in nature that’s not the case. “What’s more,” says Drenthen, “there is nothing to have an opinion about. It is what it is. What happens, happens. Maybe it’s always been this way and, in essence, will always be this way. That puts the things we’re overly worried about into perspective.”

CLOSED CURTAINS

It’s hard to believe: As re-energized as you may feel nowadays after taking a walk in nature, those who lived in the 1800s found the very same nature chaotic and dreadful. The European elite would close the curtains of their stagecoaches as they journeyed through the Alps—they thought that the chaos and horror of the wilderness would infect their bodies and souls, so they kept it

out. “You were only human if you were civilized, and civilized meant taming and organizing the wildness of nature,” says Drenthen. Nature meant different things for people throughout the ages. Drenthen thinks that in every era, however, people have used nature as a sort of mirror to recognize themselves and to understand what is important to them. More and more people think: If I forget the natural order of things, my way of life will no longer fit with how things are supposed to be. Is this renewed interest in nature something typical of our time or has it been occurring for a while?

With the Industrial Revolution and the rise of cities came an increased interest in nature. It was no longer seen as an uncultivated wasteland to avoid, but as a place of peaceful harmony created by God to be appreciated by man, explains Dutch botanical philosopher Norbert Peeters. “This idea of escaping into nature to get away from everyday life is not a new phenomenon, but it’s becoming more and more popular,” he says. “People want to escape from the stress of everyday life—a life based on economy, income and so on.” Still, Peeters is hesitant. “To be honest, I’m not sure if people appreciate or acknowledge nature now more than they used to,” he says. “On the one hand, we see a >



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decline in the understanding of local nature—for example, children now know less about, or can’t recognize as many, different types of plants; On the other hand, there is an increasing concern for nature and we’re living in a time where biological and ecological research is being conducted on a more regular basis. This means that our knowledge about the complex web of nature has grown and we see the blind exploitation of nature is more readily criticized.”

Prussian explorer, naturalist and scientist Alexander von Humboldt revolutionized the way we view nature. He is back in the spotlight thanks to

Andrea Wulf’s novel, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World*, a book that reads like an adventure novel. Humboldt is famous for perceiving the complex web of nature that Peeters mentions: He saw connections everywhere.

Wulf writes: ‘Nothing, not even the tiniest organism, was looked at on its own. “In this great chain of causes and effects,” Humboldt said, “no single fact can be considered in isolation.” With this insight, he invented the web of life, the concept of nature as we know it today.’ Another beautiful excerpt is: ‘Fascinated by scientific instruments, measurements and observations, he

was driven by a sense of wonder as well. Of course nature had to be measured and analyzed, but he also believed that a great part of our response to the natural world should be based on the senses and the emotions. He wanted to excite a “love of nature”. At a time when other scientists were searching for universal laws, Humboldt wrote that nature had to be experienced through feelings.’

FLYING PAINTINGS

Experiencing nature through feelings is something that was beautifully portrayed by Dutch author Jan Wolkers in a TV show that opened

REDUCE STRESS

A fifteen-minute walk in the woods causes measurable changes in physiology. Eighty-four participants of a study held at Chiba University in Japan took a stroll in seven different forests, while the same number of volunteers walked around city centers. The forest walkers hit a relaxation jackpot: Overall they showed a two percent drop in blood pressure, a sixteen percent decrease in the stress hormone cortisol and a four percent drop in heart rate. Lead researcher Yoshifumi Miyazaki believes our bodies relax in pleasant, natural surroundings because they evolved there. He says that our senses are adapted to interpret information about plants and streams, not traffic and high-rises.

Source: *National Geographic*

with the words, ‘As he talks about nature, what is ordinary becomes extraordinary, what is small becomes big and what is ugly becomes beautiful’. In the program—which is about his backyard—Wolkers looks at a spider’s web, for example, and says, “Such a beautiful construction! If I was an architect then I’d want the soul of a spider”. When he talks about butterflies, he says, “The beautiful thing about butterflies is that they are just flying paintings. When I’m painting I think: Which red should I use? Then they just open their wings and I know”.

In the program, Wolkers also shows us dead animals, because death is not always a tragedy—it also gives life meaning. “If death didn’t exist then in ten years I’d need to use a walker for maybe two million years,” Wolkers says. When he spots a dead woodpecker, he tells us that when something pretty dies, “you have to wipe away a tear. It’s actually a shame to have to bury it, but unfortunately, beauty fades”.

Dutch coach and psychologist Jaap Duin tries to look at nature through the eyes of Wolkers in his course ‘How to Reconnect with Nature’, which he gives at The School of Life in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. “Nature can be very raw and intense,” says Duin. “I ask people to look for death and decay in nature just like Wolkers did. I believe that when people think they are looking for happiness they are actually

unconsciously looking for excitement. Nature is full of excitement but it’s not necessarily friendly, beautiful or pleasant. With the light comes the darkness, but that’s also just life—maybe it’s not always beautiful but it touches you.”

As a psychologist, Duin also takes ‘lessons’ from nature. For example, in nature something either grows or it dies; there’s no in-between. This is also applicable in everyday life. “For example,” Duin says, “if you’re having a difficult time in your relationship you can ask yourself, ‘Should I invest more time in making this work or should I leave? Is my relationship growing or dying?’ This beautiful but difficult distinction can help you gain insight into complex problems. By asking yourself these questions, you’ll usually know the answer immediately.” Duin also asks the same question to people who are unhappy in their jobs: Is it living or is it dying? “When someone answers that it’s dying I then ask, ‘Are you okay with that? Because, then you have to say goodbye to it or change things so that it keeps living.’”

NATURE HAS THE TIME

The idea that nature puts things into perspective can be healing, but also threatening, explains Drenthen. “Once while I was walking in the Pyrenees, I saw vultures flying in a circle and heard thunder in the distance and I thought: Oh no, I need to make sure I’m back >

'Nature puts things into perspective and that can feel threatening'

down in time." Then I saw the vulture's faces, and their expressions said: 'We don't care about you. You don't belong here.' I knew, however, that my loved ones did care about me and that they cared that I got home safely and so did I. Nature is indifferent about these things. The moment you truly realize what it means—that nature puts things into perspective—it can feel threatening because the things we hold dear are also put into perspective." Drenthen often finds this duality in nature. "I'm preoccupied with nature because I'm a philosopher, but I don't think it's just me. The dualities found in nature are meaningful—not necessarily positive or negative, but definitely important."

Personally, I find that I get the most out of nature when I can wander around aimlessly without a time constraint—preferably alone. It doesn't always have to be in a beautiful forest or on a heath: I also enjoy my time in the park around the corner. I go there when I feel like it, sit on every bench I find and really look at everything around me in detail. I study withered flowers, observe the changing colors of the seasons, try to identify the fragrances I smell and sometimes I draw a quirky piece of tree bark. Time and time again I'm amazed that all of this beauty simply exists. It's comforting to know that in my busy city life what Wolkers said is true: "The best thing about nature is that it's slow. Nature has all the time in the world." ●



WANT TO READ MORE?

- * 'The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World', by Peter Wohlleben. Bestselling author and forester Wohlleben talks about trees and, among others, their social network. One beautiful insight he shares in the book is: 'Why are trees such social beings? Why do they share food with their own species and sometimes even go as far as to nourish their competitors? The reasons are the same as for human communities: there are advantages to working together. [...] Every tree, therefore, is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible.'
- * 'The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World', by Andrea Wulf
- * 'The Wild Places', by Robert Macfarlane