

Reflective Article

Shelter From The Pandemic: Notes On Nature

By Siobhan Maher



“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished”.

Lao Tzu

Introduction

What paradoxical times we have lived through in these past months of Covid-19; separate yet together, apart yet connected, alone yet united. The pandemic posed severe challenges. It was a testing time, a time of upheaval, of isolation and of digging deep within ourselves. We were distant from Nature and in danger of losing a part of ourselves. This

article looks at our connection as humans with the concept of Biophilia. It acknowledges the appeal of the natural world to us. The fractal patterns in Nature are identified as a source of consolation and connection for us. The cultivation of a garden and the appreciation of its bounty and beauty are extolled as life-affirming. The impact of Nature on us as therapists is discussed. Ultimately Nature is presented as

a source of solace and healing for us all, as a shelter from the Covid storm.

Use of time

The Covid-19 crisis gave many of us, not directly on the frontline, the gift of time: time to have a look inside. Many of us had been forced to hit the pause button and thus were given time to reflect on our precious lives. Every crisis brings some opportunity. We became especially inventive and resourceful in the confinement days. Many of us turned to create in the kitchen. There was an avalanche of banana bread and sourdough starters! We knitted, held Zoom quizzes, sang in virtual choirs, painted the house and garden furniture, decluttered our homes, and overindulged on movies. At the same time, many were confounded by home-schooling or compelled to work remotely. We had to extend ourselves. Some of us took the opportunity to dig deeper inside ourselves, to have a look at our core values and see where our priorities lay. Technology, often derided for overloading and distracting us, served us well and kept us connected and less isolated than ever. We may have been warned that “algorithms eat empathy” (Haig, 2019, p.107), but in the Covid days of confinement, we ate them avidly and repeatedly. However, on another level, we became more aware of the space beyond us.

Perhaps we already knew that Nature was a healing force. Still, its potency was amplified when the Coronavirus came a calling. With the arrival of the pandemic, we were suddenly constricted, shut-in and deprived of Nature. Some of us were lucky enough to have a garden or even access to a few plants on a balcony, but with Covid-19 we were unable to be in the natural environment as before. Could this disconnect from the natural world impact our wellbeing and mental health? In the months of confinement, many of us had limited access to Nature. The distance we had to endure from wild places, from shorelines, rivers, lakes, mountain walks, forests, gardens and parks during the pandemic days was a source of privation. These places of ease, calm and healing were unfortunately beyond many of us as we were obliged to adhere to the restrictions around movement from home.

Nature and us humans

What is it about Nature's appeal? What is it about the primacy of Nature and its immense importance to us human beings? It has long been hailed as a source of solace, contemplation, nurturing and healing. Nature's elemental forces, its grandeur, beauty, form, complexity, and yet simplicity have long inspired awe and calm in us. In his 1802 sonnet "The World is too much with us", William Wordsworth was critical of the distance we were putting between ourselves and Nature. "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (Wordsworth in Turner Palgrave 1964, p.299). In this new pandemic world, it might be prudent for us to ponder

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about how frenetic our lives can be, with the emphasis on doing and achieving. However, Nature can teach us that elusive art of just being. It teaches us to be in wonder of its biodiversity. It helps us experience a sense of connectedness. (Thorne 2002, p. 43). In pandemic times, we were seeking connection. That intrinsic need was amplified and yet we were compelled to stay distant. As humans, we are hard-wired for connection. The quality of our connection impacts deeply on our contentment. Our confinement raised barriers in our relatedness with others and with the natural world - a potent source of solace and connection.

Pre-pandemic, we have been increasingly spending more time indoors. The EU Commission (2003) reports that some 90% of Europeans spend less than 10% of their time outdoors. Similarly, a study in the US revealed that more than half of adults reported spending five hours or less in Nature each week and that parents of 8-11 year old children said that their "children spent three times as many hours with computers and television screens each week as they do playing outside" ("U.S. Study Shows Widening Disconnect with Nature, and Potential Solutions", 2017). The same study highlights the social, economic and health benefits of spending time in Nature. In essence our connection to Nature

is indispensable for our wellbeing. There is a serious disconnect with the outdoors. Children are spending less and less time in Nature and discovering its joys. Our lives and those of our children are increasingly sedentary and removed from the elemental experiences of the natural environment. Yet our identification with and attraction to Nature is something embedded deep within our psychology (Kellert & Wilson, 1993).

Biophilia

Biophilia has been described by Eric Fromm, the German American psychoanalyst and social philosopher, as "the passionate love of life and all that is alive" (Fromm 1973, p.438). But it was a biologist, Edward O. Wilson, who turned to studying the positive effects of the natural world on humans. Wilson described Biophilia as "the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms. Innate means hereditary and hence part of ultimate human nature", (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p.31). His work explored Nature's positive effect on our psychological health and wellbeing. Wilson also highlighted the decline in the earth's biodiversity as harmful to the 'spirit' of the human species and to our mental health. (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p.39).

Studies have found that stress hormones are reduced when we are exposed to the natural world. (Hunter et al, 2019). Being out in Nature positively impacts our nervous system. (Robbins, 2020). The parasympathetic nervous system slows down, affecting heart rate and the dilation of blood vessels. Physical and mental health benefits accrue from time spent out in Nature.

When our sympathetic nervous system is rested, it benefits our ability to emotionally regulate ourselves and this impacts positively on our cardiovascular health (Jones, 2020). Similarly, the Japanese practice of Shinrin-Yoku or Forest-bathing, both a psychological and physiological practice, impacts positively on the immune system. (Robbins, 2020). Our removal from Nature has implications for our physical wellbeing and our mental health. Nature is thus “not only nice to have, but it’s a have-to-have for physical health and cognitive functioning” (Louv cited in Robbins, 2020).

Fractals in the natural world

Benoit Mandelbrot, a Polish-born, American-based mathematician coined the term fractals in the 1980’s (Mandelbrot, 1983). His theories have since been influential in the Sciences, Arts/ Humanities, Economics and even on Social Media (Lipton, 2020). A fractal can be defined as “a non-regular geometric that has the same degree of irregularity. Fractals can be thought of as never-ending patterns (TechTarget Contributor, 2016). These patterns are all around us in Nature. They are evident in trees, shrubs, plants, mountains and even on coastlines. The human brain responds to these fractals. They engage with the Para hippocampus which is helpful in our emotional regulation (Taylor cited by Williams et al., 2017). Physicist Richard Taylor has studied fractals intensively and has suggested that “our visual system is in some way hardwired to understand fractals, and the stress-reduction [of being in Nature] is triggered by a physiological resonance when the fractal structure of the eye matched that of the fractal

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image being viewed” (Taylor cited by Williams et al., 2017). Some evidence exists that doctors are increasingly offering ‘nature prescriptions’ to their patients. Scottish NHS doctors may now issue so called ‘green scripts’ which prescribe time outdoors in nature as part of their patients’ health care (Sheikh, 2020). Furthermore, a recent monitor of engagement with the natural environment study in the UK revealed the positive effects of people spending two hours or more a week outdoors. Those hours impacted positively on the health and wellbeing of those who ventured out into nature as opposed to those who did not (White et al., 2019).

So, when we take time to wander in the park, to walk in a forest, to hike in the mountains and be out in Nature, we are taking care not only of our physical, but also of our mental health. In observing Nature our stress levels are lowered. It has been suggested that there is a kind of kinship between our brains and the natural world (Taylor cited by White et al. et al., 2017). Our senses are stimulated while also soothed by Nature. As Eckhart Tolle wrote “Look at

a tree, a flower, a plant. Let your awareness rest upon it. How still they are, how rooted in ‘just being’. Allow Nature to teach you stillness. When you look at a tree and perceive its stillness, you become still yourself” (Tolle, 2018).

What benefits might we bring to our clients when we first nourish ourselves through a ramble in the countryside, a walk in the woods, a forage in the hedgerows, a stroll through the garden, a climb of a mountain or a wild-water swim? The calm we experience there is the very antidote to anxiety and stress. Not alone as therapists but as human beings we need that solace and connection with ourselves and with Nature. The words of the late John O’Donohue emphasise the centrality of this connection; “as humans we need a forceful dialectic of physical, sensuous, elemental interaction with landscape (O’Donohue, cited by Quinn, 2015, p.70).

The Garden and Psychotherapy

“Il faut cultiver notre jardin”
Voltaire.

Voltaire’s exhortation brings us back to the garden; not only as a physical but also a mental space which offers quietness, connection, time, wonder and work. To work in the garden gives an opportunity to be alone, to enter inwards, to have the senses ignited, to work with the clay and ponder our own mortality. It can become a place of sanctuary and of solace when uncertainty and fear trouble us.. To plant is to place hope centrefold. A gardener is inherently optimistic, always looking ahead to the future crop, the future flowering. Seeds reek of tomorrow. Hope and resilience are inherent in them. Jung believed that every human should have a plot of

land. He grew his own vegetables. He believed that we humans had become alienated by technological life from the “dark, maternal, earthy ground of our being” (Jung cited by Smith, 2020).

Carl Rogers was similarly a lifelong gardener. His concern was always for humans to achieve their potential, to ‘flower’; “My garden supplies the same intriguing question I have been trying to meet in all my professional life. What are the effective conditions for growth?” (Rogers, 1980 cited in Van Hesteren, 1988, p.7). He believed that providing the right conditions for the plants in his garden was analogous to adhering to the core conditions of his person-centred approach to therapy. This was the fostering of the human being’s innate potential to heal themselves and to flourish. More recently, during the Covid-19 crisis, Michael Harding extolled the gifts of a garden in that it “roots you to the ground

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and opens you to the cosmos” (Harding, 2020, 04:18:00) Such is the paradox of Nature’s power to embed and yet to liberate.

Conclusion

As human beings and as therapists we have an opportunity to care for ourselves and be present to our clients through our interaction with Nature, e.g. digging in the garden, delving, planting, listening to birdsong, walking in a forest, being aware of the landscape and experiencing the enigma and essence of Nature’s healing force. As we rediscover Nature in this “era of virtual worlds and fake facts, the

garden brings us back to reality.” (Smith, 2020, p.13). We can learn from this pandemic. We need to stay connected to Nature. Ultimately, it is possible for us to kindle our awareness of Biophilia, to become more emotionally resilient, and to allow ourselves to be sheltered in Nature’s pervasive fractals. ☺

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