

Nature

A Sacred Summer

STORY

“I think your soul is starving.”

Those were the words of my counselor to me as I wrestled with past history and mental health issues. We talked about all that I was doing in my life and in ministry and how overwhelmed I felt about it all. At one point, she asked me about how much time I had spent in certain places up to that point in my life. For my first 22 years, I lived in Colorado and then in Arizona - two places where I could easily get away from cities and into nature. Then after seminary, I lived for nine years in South Dakota. Again, a place where it was easy to simply drive out of the city where we lived and be out in open country with the big sky and big horizons. After moving to Ohio, I found it much more difficult to find those spaces. My counselor wisely asked me whether open spaces were important to me (they were/are). She then made that statement... “I think your soul is starving.”

In the years since I have tried to be super intentional to be outside in nature every day at some point. Maybe it is simply walking a nearby golf course with my dog or going to a nature center or a park or getting away for a few days and into nature. It is in those spaces where I have grown to truly hear the Spirit speak in ways that I don't in other settings.

I believe God has wired us to not only live in the natural world but to be refreshed by it. For it is in the natural world where we see some of the most obvious examples of God's creative and transforming power. It is in nature that we witness the cycles and rhythms of life - that of birth, life, death, and resurrection.

*Written by Edward Goode.

PRACTICES

Each day of the week, take time to do the 5 or the 15-minute practice.

Plan a time to do the Going Deeper practice sometime during the week.

- **5-minute practice:** Wherever you are right now, stop and look out a window. If you aren't near a window, go somewhere where there is one. If the weather is cooperative, open the window and feel whatever comes through to you. A breeze, the temperature, the sounds, the smells. Take it all in. Breathe deep and slow. Simply let the space you are in speak to you.
- **15-minute practice:** Go for a walk, get outdoors wherever you are. Wherever you are, look for something beautiful in the natural world around you. A tree planted along the street. A flower in a window. The face of a person who walks by you. The color of the sky at that time of the day. The feel of the weather upon you. Set a timer for 7.5-minutes, and when it reaches 7.5, turn around and walk back.
- **Going Deeper:** Same as the 15-minutes, but don't set a timer. Just go until you are ready to turn around and come back. Can you go somewhere that takes you away from where you usually are? Can you go to a park? A nature center? Somewhere you can see the horizon?

With each of these, write down one thing in the natural world that spoke to you. Maybe even draw it as you remember it in your memory. Why did that speak to you?

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 19:1-3, Isaiah 55:12-13, Psalm 8, Luke 12:22-32

QUESTIONS for Journaling and Discussion

- How have you experienced God when out in nature?
- Talk about a favorite place you've been or visited where you felt close to Jesus.
- How do the Stars, Sunsets, Clouds, Mountains, Storms, the Desert, Rolling Hills, Vistas, etc. speak to you of God's glory?
- Use the scripture above to reflect on how the natural world declares God's glory. What do you notice? How can you plan time in nature this week?
- How did Jesus use the beauty of nature in his teachings?

EXPERIENCES

Choose one or several to try.

- **For Communities, Small Groups, and Families:** Plan a day or an afternoon outside. Go to a place of beauty, a park, someplace you can experience being in God's creation. Bring a journal and pen and take time to notice. Use the questions below. **With time in nature, we often just rely on what we see. Take time to be intentional about what you:**
 - Hear - What birds do you hear? How does the wind sound? What sounds does the rain make when it falls? How do you hear the wind? What other animals do you hear? Can you focus on one natural sound and see how you can hear that above all the other "noises" of life?
 - Smell - What are the smells of where you are? What immediately arises for you? What about really getting close to something and taking in the scent? Smell a flower or a tree from close up. How does the grass smell? What does sand or dirt smell like?
 - Touch - What does that leaf feel like? What about the bark on the tree? What about taking your shoes off and walking barefoot in the grass or the dirt? How does that change your experience?
 - Taste - This one is a bit trickier because we don't want to eat something that will hurt us. But what about the foods that you eat? How does each taste speak to you of where it came from?
- **For all ages and entire church communities:** Take a PARABLE WALK [see the handout]. Listen to a passage of scripture (like the ones above). Then go for a timed walk and let God speak to you through what you see and hear. See the handout for more details.
- **For all ages, individuals, and groups:** Go on a Nature Scavenger Hunt and collect items. Look for things that represent God's love, like a heart-shaped rock or leaf. Or something that represents peace or freedom like a feather or a flower. You can also do this process with your camera, taking pictures of things that represent various attributes of God. Love, Joy, Peace, Hope, etc. Create a slideshow or Instagram hashtag with the various photos and have people share about the photos.
- **All ages:** Use magazines to create a collage of beauty and nature. Use this as a creative prayer practice and as a visual reminder of our Creator.
- **For families and kids and youth:** Plant some seeds and watch them grow. How is God growing good things in you? What do you know about seeds? What do they need for growth? What do you need to grow closer to Jesus?
- **Listen:** Check out the song "Everywhere" by David Wilcox. How does this song connect you with Jesus?
- **Watch:** What place or part of the world would you like to visit? Find a show on the Nature channel, YouTube, or Netflix, etc. and watch it with a prayerful heart and notice our world's beauty and wonder. Spend some time thanking Jesus for his creation.

- **Read:**
 - *The Wisdom of Wilderness* by Gerald May
 - *Afoot and Lighthearted: A Journal for Mindful Walking* by Bonnie Smith Whitehouse

PUSHBACK

Perhaps you find yourself pushing back on this practice. That is perfectly normal. You might be considering...

- *I don't like being in nature - I don't like getting dirty, sweaty, etc.* Yup, totally understandable. But maybe it is just 5-minutes to experience something that you don't typically experience.
- *I am physically unable to get out and walk.* Do a search on YouTube for nature videos and just watch one of those for 5, 15, or 60 minutes - close all other computer tabs/windows and sounds and simply try to focus on that. What does that "window" into nature do for you?
- *I don't have time.* We're all busy. But I believe that we all make time for the things that we feel are necessary. Maybe just start with the 5-minute Practice and see what happens.

No matter where your soul is today, remember that God sits with you in your questions.

PRAYER

Close your eyes.

Breathe deep.

Listen.

Breathe deep.

Sense.

Breathe deep.

Open your eyes - what do you see?

Pray for what you experience of the holy in what you hear, feel, see.