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Smugglers Notch

Shaking Off the Snow

by Jeffrey Harrison

The snow was heavy and clung thickly to the trees, and there was no sun yet to start it melting and give them some relief. Some trees had cracked, others bowed in fringed arcs over the trail, and some bent so low they blocked the trail entirely. I shook one off and watched it spring back up and laughed as it dumped snow on me, and on the snow-covered ground with muffled thunder.

Then I kept following the closed-in trail and opening it up, shaking the trees and letting them go, and showering myself with snow. The branches that sometimes whipped me in the face


and the clumps of snow stinging my neck and forehead were a price worth paying to see the trees fly up. One pulled my glove right off, a woolen leaf. One good-sized oak almost lifted me off the ground.

I thought of Frost's birches, lifting the boy up, and of his crow that shook snow down on him, changing his mood. It seemed I needed more than just a dusting. I needed to be covered from head to toe. And I couldn't get enough of the bowed-over trees springing back up. By the end, I was soaked under my clothes, almost happy, my pockets filled with snow.

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Preface

Green Health

n his first ascent of Mount Katahdin in 1846, Henry Thoreau looked out over the savage, inhuman vistas of wilderness and was shocked by the vast indifference of the world below him. “Think of our life in nature,” he wrote about the event. “. . .to come in contact with it—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?”

Fifty years later, in 1896, on the Pacific Island of Tahiti, the artist Paul Gauguin, confronted with what he viewed as the savage, free aspect of the native people, had a vaguely similar reaction. He created a painting of a group of native Tahitians each looking in a different direction and titled it: “*Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?*”

These are good questions. It may seem hard to believe, passing through a busy airport, or immersed in the turmoil of city streets that we, the multitudes, are in fact merely Cro-Magnon hunter-gatherers only recently emerged from the wide savannahs of the Serengeti Plain of Africa. But the fact is, we are deeply ensconced in the natural world, even though we may not realize it. You have but to watch some tight-vested urbane banker striding along a city street tear open a stubborn plastic-wrapped bag of peanuts with his teeth to understand this. Or to reach even farther back on our evolutionary tree, all you have to do is watch a group of unsupervised children clambering on a jungle gym.

This book is an account of the emerging studies of human contact with the natural world and the resulting healing powers of nature, everything from trees, rocks, wind, sand, and even our relationship with formerly wild but now domesticated animals.

Evidence of this deep interrelationship with nature is well documented on the cave walls of the Périgord in France. Here and elsewhere around the world are the painted and scratched forms of our fellow travelers—wild horses, bison, antelope, lions, bears, and woolly mammoths. The exact purpose of these well-drafted images is not clear, but there can be no doubt that the artists who painted them were skilled observers of nature.

These earliest works of art, whose vitality and fluid energy would not be depicted again until the Renaissance, according to art historians, may have been

somehow connected with magical thinking, or religion, or they may have just been paintings, art for art's sake so to speak. Either way, as Ron McAdow's essay, "The Enduring Animal," makes clear, human-animal mutualism eventually resulted in the domestication of certain species of wild animals. And perhaps not surprisingly, it turns out that association with animals is good for our health.

Further evidence of the deep connection with nature and human health can be found in the ancient knowledge of plants and their uses among people of what are currently termed preliterate cultures, the so-called medicine men, shamans, and curanderos. The traditions of these tribal groups goes back millennia, well before recorded time, and some of the cures they used, the surviving ones at least, must have had beneficial effects. In fact, as Teri Dunn Chace points out in her story, "The Garden of Earthly Cures," scientists from the industrialized world are well aware of this and have sent out botanical researchers to the uttermost ends of the earth in search of new cures from ancient medicines.

Perhaps even more significant, as far as the human species is concerned, is the fact that the young world in which we children of an industrial and agricultural society came of age was a green and florid landscape consisting of glades, marshes, wide savannahs, hills and mountains, green valleys and forests. Even today, mere visual exposure to this verdant world seems to have a calming and salutary effect, lowering blood pressure, slowing the heart rate, and even releasing a flood of hormones that induce a sense of well-being.

Illustrations of the ancient intimacy between people and nature are well known. The first cave paintings of animals were discovered in Spain and France in the nineteenth century and have been a subject of study ever since. And in the New World, the hunt for medicinal plants reaches back to the eighteenth century, and fostered some major scientific findings, including, incidentally, Darwin's discovery of evolution. Furthermore, for years now, anecdotally, contact with nature has been believed to impart beneficial health effects. But what is just now emerging is the scientific research and subsequent documentation of the physiological mechanisms of the beneficial effects of nature in healing and in the maintenance of mental and physical health.

The essays in this book document the various aspects of these new discoveries, including the combined mental and physical benefits of exposure to green space, even in small green urban parks; or association with natural objects and animals carried into

institutions where people are confined indoors. Some of these stories, such as Thomas Conuel's "The Heart of the Matter" and Karl Meyer's "Places Between Bus Stops" are personal accounts of the mental and physical sanctuary that nature can offer.

Other stories document the unexpected health benefits to our brain chemistry as a result of time spent outdoors, and a few are excerpts from earlier works on the subject such as Edward O. Wilson's theory of biophilia and Richard Mabey's account of lifting his depression through his observations of swifts. Also included in this book, and tying the various essays together, is what is an elemental expression of the human reaction to contact with nature—poetry.

There are, however, currently two major threats to our ability to come together with the ancient rhythms of nature. In order to attain the health benefits from nature, we have to, as Thoreau pointed out, make contact with nature. And in a world where adults and, nowadays children as well, are cut off from the natural world by an addictive attachment to electronic devices, that contact is hard to achieve. We may learn facts about nature from computers and television programs, but encounter no real immersion in the wild world, no rich scent from the morning forest, no birdsong, no fragrance of flowers, nor feel of the moist skin of frogs, or of the rough underside of cleavers or lady's thumb. This aspect of the break with nature and what we can do to restore it is documented by Michael J. Caduto's story, "Children of the Wired World."

Finally, in order to have contact with nature, we must have wild nature, and as we know, worldwide, there is massive habitat destruction in progress, with over half of the world's wildlife populations gone in a matter of a few generations. Ann Prince's story, "Wildness and Wellness," addresses this loss, touches on the communion with nature that motivates land conservationists, and expands on the efforts of individuals and groups around the globe to preserve wildland for the sake of human health and happiness.

But the overarching point of this book, the singular commonality, is the basic fact that nature is good for us. It is preventative medicine, and it has a multiplicity of healing effects—yet one more good argument for preserving nature. Nature cures, and in order to maintain its benefits we have to save it—all of it—rocks, trees, wind, and water.