

From Memory

by Polly Brown

One path runs by the edge
of the pond, past rock reflections
and ghosts of rocks submerged,
past a thicket of greenthorn,
a woodpecker hollow,
two trees intertwined.

Another climbs between tall pines
to curve through an ancient quarry
full of waiting, half-cut stone,
and emerge high on a ledge
like a bare granite forehead
with a long view.

The third crosses swampy land
on a cart-path
built up with cobbles hand
by slow hand, to find the brook
quiet as a ribbon of black silk
under the trees.



You practice the three paths
daily, a pilgrim, a child. Through a lost
slow time in bed,
you travel far
from where your body lies,
and know the way.

Outside In

Bringing the Natural World to People Confined Indoors

by Thomas Conuel

In the spring of 1889, an ailing Vincent Van Gogh came to the asylum of Saint Paul de Mausole in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, seeking succor from the mental and emotional storms that tore at him. Inspired by the natural beauty of the place, especially the asylum's gardens where he spent days wandering and studying the shapes of flowers, Van Gogh began painting assiduously—producing in a short time 130 paintings including *Irises*, a now-famous portrait of blue irises with a single white iris in their midst, and orange flowers in the background; a rendering often considered a tribute to the healing powers of nature that soothed the artist at the time.

Van Gogh was hardly the first to find peace, insight, and creative growth in nature. Henry Thoreau found similar sustenance some 44 years earlier, living and writing on the shores of Walden Pond as he tried to find solace after the death of his brother, John. Scores of seekers have followed in his footsteps since, often substituting a slice of backyard greenery behind the garage for Walden Pond or the garden in Provence. Both Van Gogh and Thoreau were able to move about freely on the grounds and woods of their sanctuaries, seeking their own bonds with nature and finding in the natural world a bridge to fulfillment. But what of others who stymied by age, infirmities, or mental or physical disabilities cannot reach out to hug nature on their own?

That was the conundrum that led to founding of The Nature Connection in Concord, in 1983, with a mission to bring the healing power of nature to those who cannot find it without assistance. Originally known as Animals as Intermediaries, The Nature Connection travels bringing educational and therapeutic nature programs, biweekly or monthly, to hospitals, residential schools, at-risk youth programs, special-needs facilities, nursing homes, and

Alzheimer's care programs. All places where the residents are mostly confined inside.

Stop by the offices of The Nature Connection, two rooms in the back of a stately three-story brick building near Concord Center, and talk with Sophie Wadsworth, a poet, teacher, the executive director of The Nature Connection since 2010, and a member of the staff since 2008. In the back room, Sophie will show you the "ocean context box," a small container with a layer of sand, pebbles, and seashells inside. Tilt it back and forth and listen to the sound—like waves on the seashore; it's useful for starting conversations about the ocean and the many creatures that call it home. The room is full of other context boxes and jars containing herbs, spices, gourds, dried flowers—and all evoke memories.

Of course, there are the animals too, the perennial stars of every visit from The Nature Connection. They stay at the homes of various volunteer caregivers and include dogs and cats, owls and crows, hawks and robins, chickens and baby chicks, doves and ducks, rabbits and guinea pigs, and assorted catch-and-release tadpoles, toads, and turtles. On The Nature Connection website, the menagerie is listed as "current staff or visiting professors." (Those volunteers who keep wild animals do so as federal- and state-licensed wildlife handlers.)

Dogs, cats, and guinea pigs have comforted the sick, the elderly, and the disabled for many decades, but duplicating a slice of wild nature for therapeutic effects is a relatively new concept. The Nature Connection programs change with the seasons: perhaps a meadow in autumn, a salt marsh in winter, or the edge of a forest between suburbia and the wild in spring. The idea remains the same: bring the essence of a natural place to those who cannot get there on their own. "We bring nature; nature does the rest," is the guiding principle.

On a typical site visit, staff and volunteers wheel carts loaded with buckets and jars filled with treasures from a morning natural history ramble—a pinecone, a tadpole, an oak leaf, an acorn. They push through hospital lobbies, nursing home entrances, and locked juvenile facilities to introduce those inside to the

healing power of natural associations and to “gently transform the institutional setting with a sense of the wild,” says Sophie Wadsworth.

During a program, a volunteer might talk about the cycle of life and ask how seeds find their way to the right place where they can sprout into plants and trees, or how a snowy winter provides an inward resting time for plants and animals following the abundance of spring and summer. There are stories and songs, and reaching out, asking for others to share their own narratives.

At a hospital school serving young children, the volunteers “build” a meadow—placing on the floor a large canvas mat or two and then grasses, rocks, soil, logs, pine needles, cattails, pumpkins, gourds, grapevines, and a rabbit. All treasures from a walk through a meadow that morning, except the rabbit who resides with a volunteer at The Nature Connection. The children ask questions and appoint themselves as caretakers of the rabbit. “He needs a place to hide,” notes one child. Others move grasses and sticks around to create a nest for the rabbit.

At another site on another day, a group of boys gathers to first watch and then hold a five-foot gopher snake, in the process overcoming their own fears of snakes and learning to work together to safely hold and not drop the large and writhing reptile. A few moments later, a small screech-owl perches on a hand as the instructor points out how the owl rotates its head in a near full circle.

In a classroom full of teenagers in wheelchairs, Suzanne, a staff member, brings a barred owl with a missing wing. The noise and disruptions stop and the questions begin. Will the owl ever fly again? How does it eat? Can it grow another wing? Several of the teenagers are missing limbs of their own. Suzanne explains that the owl’s wing will never grow back, but that the owl has grown strong in other ways, using her tail for balance to compensate for the missing wing, becoming extra vigilant when strange creatures approach. The owl hops about on the ground. She has adapted to her injury and survives. It is a lesson for the teenagers, one of whom looks at her missing hand and then at the owl.

At yet another site, this one for the elderly, many suffering from memory loss,

a woman sits alone, refusing to participate in the afternoon's program. But then somebody offers her a gourd to touch. She turns away, but then after a moment turns back. Slowly she reaches out to touch the gourd. This, she says, speaking for the first time in months, reminds her of her youth and her family's farm, and the deepening autumn days, and the gourds her family gathered for Halloween. She smiles.

It is a tenet of The Nature Connection that, while animals enhance and illustrate the program, the same draw toward nature and the great cycle of life on earth can happen as someone looks at and holds a rock or a leaf. A maple leaf on the ground in autumn evokes the closing of a yearly cycle—the seasons change and go round. Living things bloom and flourish and then die. Winter comes, but spring follows. The maple tree must prepare for winter, but it will once again be green.

Dogs are always popular and help build trust, serving as an “excellent reference”—as they bring assurance with their trust and love that we, the people with the dog, are good people. And like all animals they are nonjudgmental; they don't pull back from a person who cannot speak or is missing a leg or a hand.

The origins of The Nature Connection go back to the early 1970s and the holistic philosophy that inspired many educators at the time. Sarah Reynolds and Nancy Mattila collaborated with several other teachers to start the School for Centered Learning in Concord that, among other accomplishments, created a traveling educational, therapeutic arts, and nature program. Since then The Nature Connection has taken as its mission the task of bringing the natural world to those who cannot find it on their own.

Sarah Reynolds's daughter, Rebecca Reynolds Weil, worked with her mother and served as executive director from 1993 to 2002. Rebecca documented the work of The Nature Connection and its successes in her award-winning book *Bring Me the Ocean: Nature as Teacher, Messenger, and Intermediary*, which tells the stories of the powerful relationship between those in need and the natural world.

The Nature Connection is growing—300 individuals at eight sites in 2015,

but with a vision that foresees site visits spreading across Massachusetts, including pilot programs that will “teach the teacher” and help spread The Nature Connection mission.

In *Bring Me the Ocean*, Rebecca Reynolds Weil describes an encounter with a disabled man with a strange request: “Bring me the ocean,” requested Jim. But how does one transport the ocean to a severely disabled patient who suffered a traumatic head injury that left him as a triplegic unable to speak? All Jim’s language-based interaction occurs by way of a communication board on the armrest of his wheelchair.

After a second request from Jim, Suzanne asked Jim, “How should we bring you the ocean?” And Jim replied, “in buckets.” The staff thought about that and on their next visit brought buckets full of water from the Atlantic and other buckets with seaweed, mussels, clams, periwinkles, and a lobster. Jim, it turned out, had been a lobsterman before his incapacitating injury, and had spent much of his adult life at sea. He wanted to see, smell, and feel the ocean around him once again.

“A past emerged,” writes Weil, “and Jim showed us that anything, even the ocean, can be brought into an institution. Over the years, requests such as Jim’s have extended the scope of our programs, encouraging us to expand our own perception of what is possible.”

