



Finding Hope in Nature

By Melanie Salsbury, Walking through Grief Program Coordinator

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of strolling through the vast and beautiful landscape of Cave Hill Cemetery, both on my own and with those who are grieving. Lately, spring is beginning to appear in little bursts of buds and color around every corner. I worry that the buds are coming out too soon, but I'm hopeful they will survive. I continue to be amazed and heartened by the comfort, awe, and joy nature provides free of charge to all who seek its refuge.

There are so many benefits to walking in nature. From scientific research, we know walking regularly can help us maintain a healthy body weight, strengthen our bones and muscles, and improve cardiovascular health. And walking in nature proves to be of even greater benefit than walking in an urban setting because of the positive effects on mental health. Walking in nature can help reduce negative or circular thoughts which can be common in the grieving mind. When we experience loss and grief, it is possibly the most crucial time to connect to nature for the healing benefits. Rachel and Steven Kaplan, professors of psychology at the University of Michigan, are known for their research related to the benefits of "restorative environments" which include outdoor spaces such as yards and parks. They discuss how spending time in these environments allows the mind to rest

without focusing on one thing in particular, resulting in a feeling of mental refreshment. Getting outside and putting one foot in front of the other is a promising idea.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of being in nature is the sense of hope it provides during times of grief or uncertainty. Nature mirrors grief and loss through the natural cycle of the seasons. Although the temperatures are still cold some days, we have brief periods of warmth and sun reminding us that we will get through the remainder of winter or false spring. Spring buds are showing off their bravery and giving us a glimpse of the colors and textures that will soon be in full bloom. We know there will still be some challenging days ahead. But the natural world is showing us that spring is coming, and we too are resilient. It is unlikely that this fresh new season will arrive perfectly or perfectly on time. Like grief, nature is raucous and beautiful all at once.

Restoring in Nature

Sorrow is part of the Earth's great cycles, flowing into the night like cool air sinking down a river course. To feel sorrow is to float on the pulse of the Earth, the surge from living to dying, from coming into being to ceasing to exist. Maybe this is why the Earth has the power over time to wash sorrow into a deeper pool, cold and shadowed. And maybe this is why, even though sorrow never disappears, it can make a deeper connection to the currents of life and so connect, somehow, to sources of wonder and solace.

—Kathleen Dean Moore

Will you spend some time in nature? Following are some suggestions and resources:

- Take a walk.
- Sit in a park on a bench or in a forest and pay attention to what is happening in nature using all your senses (Forest bathing).
- Go birdwatching, or squirrel watching.
- Check out a new neighborhood.
- Take a nap in the grass.
- Read a book under a tree.
- Sit outside at night and look for constellations.
- Plant a flower, or a garden!
- Watch the sunrise or the sunset.
- Instead of driving, can you walk there?
- Can't get outside today? Look at an indoor plant for a few minutes or look at the trees outside of a window.

Recommended Reading:

Nature Heals: Reconciling your grief through engaging with the natural world.
Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt

Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature
Kathleen Dean Moore

Your Guide to Forest Bathing: Experience the healing power of nature.
M. Amos Clifford.

Source Material

<https://news.stanford.edu/2015/06/30/hiking-mental-health-063015/>

Opening to Grief: Finding Your Way from Loss to Peace, by Claire B. Willis and Marnie Crawford Samuelson
(Dharma Spring, 2020)

The Experience of Nature: A psychological perspective
Rachel Kaplan, Stephen Kaplan

~For more information about our Walking Through Grief program, please visit our website:
<https://www.cavehillheritagefoundation.org/walkingthroughgrief/>