

Nature and the Attributes of Connection

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“Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.”

— Khalil Gibran

Imagine getting up at dawn, and after a delicious breakfast buffet that includes tropical fruits exotic enough to tantalize even the most jaded palate, climbing to an aerial walkway suspended above the rainforest canopy. From there, you and your family watch as the morning mist dissipates, revealing a sparkling emerald world of toucans, monkeys, and vines descending one hundred and twenty-five feet to the ground below.

When people ask me why we lead family retreats in nature, I recall what my friend and colleague Jon Young said at the first workshop I attended with him several years ago: *“Nature is always communicating with us, and it’s always ready to heal.”* It’s a remarkable statement. Yet there’s plenty of accumulating hard science confirming the benefits of spending time in nature, as even such scholarly—and seemingly unrelated—publications as *The Harvard Business Review* are beginning to note¹.

Simply put, nature is without peer as a powerful, supportive environment for human transformation, bonding and growth. For *Family Nature Retreats*TM, it’s our “secret ingredient,” which multiplies the power of the conversations and processes that we bring to our professional legacy work with families. When we deepen our connection to nature, we are deepening our connection with ourselves, and we begin to relate to others on a more fully human basis. This virtuous circle of discovery, inspiration and connection extends far beyond intellectual thought processes. It touches and taps deeply into our emotional world and inner wisdom. Nature helps us get out of our heads and into our hearts.

“We need the tonic of wildness... At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.”

— Henry David Thoreau

On a simple, pragmatic level, we can readily identify a number of advantages that a natural setting can provide. First, being in nature can remove us from distractions — including the increasingly ubiquitous electronic ones — that keep interrupting us and hijacking our attention^{2,3}. As a result, the nature experience allows us to become more attuned and present to our own feelings, thoughts and energetic

patterns. Second, natural settings continually provide fresh, unexpected experiences. Even if visiting the familiar family cabin in the woods, nature itself is constantly in flux. Seasons, weather, animal activity and vegetation are always changing. This helps wake up and enliven us, making it less likely that we will slip into habitual patterns of thinking and reacting. Third, nature invites us to step out of our heads and into the symphony of sensory experiences which are our birthright and such a great source of joy. Additionally, nature is relaxing; and relaxation brings myriad benefits — including reinvigoration, healing⁴, and an enhanced ability to learn.

Of course, simply being in nature — while highly recommended — is not sufficient in and of itself to foster the strong ties of connection between family members that we're seeking to nurture in our work. Rather, it's the combination of nature *and nature-based mentoring* that leads to truly exceptional results. It's important here to note that we draw a clear distinction between mentoring and teaching. Rather than being explanatory or didactic, mentoring points to a process of encouraging an individual to find answers and discover problem-solving skills within themselves, while nurturing a sense of agency and encouraging awareness of connections. It's an interactive, empathic and highly personalized relationship.

It's difficult to overstate the value of skilled mentoring. When I started my senior year in high school, I enrolled in a fencing class to satisfy my physical education requirement. But a few of us went a step further: we signed up for extra-curricular coaching with an internationally renowned fencing champion. The results were remarkable. After just three outside sessions, and in less than one semester, I placed *third* in the Southern California championships. Even though he spoke no English, my mentor's embodiment of wisdom was sufficient to convey a sense of key aspects of the sport that greatly accelerated my progress and mastery.

My first introduction into what we call *deep nature connection* and mentoring came in 2008, when I attended Tom Brown, Jr.'s weeklong *Tracker School Standard Class*. Designed as an introduction to a wide variety of primitive living skills handed down from indigenous peoples, it went far beyond the interesting but shallow man-vs-nature shows that have become popular reality TV fodder. The best I can do to describe it is to say that it was like a direct connection to the heart of creation. I developed an enormous visceral respect and reverence for life and nature — and my ability to relate to it — that has held me in awestruck thrall ever since.

Then, a few years after attending Tracker School, I was fortunate to meet Jon Young, whom Tom Brown had mentored for eight years during Jon's boyhood in the same way that Tom's elder, Stalking Wolf, had mentored Tom during *his* boyhood. Jon's life work is based on his mentoring experience with Tom, other remarkable mentors, and his own extensive research and testing of mentoring models. Jon has focused on combining nature's neurobiological benefits with indigenous connection practices to serve society as a whole, in work he calls "culture repair." When I glimpsed Jon's overarching vision, I could see that it directly paralleled the pioneering work I had been involved with for several

years with professional estate and legacy groups. Jon’s fieldwork over the last 30+ years had clearly demonstrated that there were proven, complementary approaches we could employ to reawaken and cultivate our natural capacity to connect with ourselves, others and nature.

“Nature’s beauty is a gift that cultivates appreciation and gratitude.”

— *Louie Schwartzberg*

Much of Jon’s work is based on the premise that when people’s neuro-biological needs are met — e.g., via nature mentoring — they naturally thrive and exhibit attributes that are healthy for themselves and for the communities and world they reside in. These attributes include *vitality, creativity, empathy, natural helpfulness, child-like curiosity, and a quiet mind.*

Imagine the conversations and interactions that ensue when family members embody these characteristics of confidence, curiosity, and genuine empathy. Imagine further the durability and adaptability of individuals and family systems to changing demands, circumstances and opportunities over time. They aren’t just resilient, they’re durable and *regenerative*⁵.

“When someone dies in an unhealthy society, it leads to isolation and mistrust.

When someone dies in a healthy culture, it brings people closer together.”

— *Jon Young*

This, then, is the role of nature in our work. It provides the ideal setting for vivid, life-affirming experiences and transformation — a return to our natural, competent and cooperative state. When imbued with a shared story, trust and open channels of communication, families have the foundation they need to establish renewable, authentic pathways to lasting legacy: shared joy, connection and contentment for generations.

By the way, that suspended walkway above the rainforest? You can find that at Sacha Lodge, in Ecuador. Highly recommended!

1. "Why You Should Tell Your Team to Take a Break and Go Outside"

Harvard Business Review

Emma Seppala Johann Berlin, June 26, 2017

<https://hbr.org/2017/06/why-you-should-tell-your-team-to-take-a-break-and-go-outside>

2. "Tech Addiction is More of a Problem Than People Realize"

NBCNews.com

October 13, 2017

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/tech/tech-addiction-more-problem-people-realize-ncna810246>

3. "Apple Investors Urge Action on iPhone Addiction Among Kids"

NBCNews.com

January 8, 2018

https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/apple/apple-investors-urge-action-iphone-addiction-among-kids-n835866?cid=eml_onsite

4. "How Nature is Good for Our Health and Happiness"

Jeremy Coles, April 20, 2016

BBC.com

<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20160420-how-nature-is-good-for-our-health-and-happiness>

(5) Regenerative Design

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regenerative_design