

The Nature of Things

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 09 September 2014 12:51 - Last Updated Wednesday, 10 September 2014 08:23



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I've been writing a lot about nature lately. Have you noticed? It's an interesting turn of events – to me, anyway – because up until recently, thinking about nature was not really... in my nature.

Oh, *human* nature . . . now, that has always fascinated me. But *nature* nature? As in plants and animals and insects and such? Never really my thing. I didn't grow up going camping, didn't fish or hike or climb mountains. Though the Alabama town of my childhood had a river running through it, I was a suburban girl. My friends and I spent plenty of time outside, but we were mainly riding bikes from house to house, playing kick-the-can in the street after supper, lying on trampolines telling ghost stories . . . that kind of thing. I started a neighborhood detective agency once, had a short-lived school for pets, and produced a few outdoor talent shows . . . but none of those youthful ventures required much nature knowledge.

Of course, nature was always there – above, below, and around it all. So much so, in fact, that I hardly noticed it. The evening symphony of crickets and cicadas, the spark of lightning bugs against deepening dusk, the weeping willow outside my window, the crunch of russet leaves beneath my loafers . . . they were all just part of my life's stage, the background music I mostly took for granted.

But I was a reader and a romantic, so I tried on many identities back then, and there was a phase (or two) when I actually fancied myself a Nature Girl – or, at least tried to be. I remember one moody fall afternoon when I fearlessly trekked into the clump of trees and bushes that separated my backyard from the neighbors' – a small patch of flora my family dramatically referred to as "the woods" – in search of sassafras roots. I scouted and scrounged and finally

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dug up a few, brought them inside, boiled them in water and made sassafras tea. And with a little sugar and a lot of imagination, it really *did* taste like root beer, just like the *World Book* said it would.

But it was an awful lot of work for a Dixie cup of flat, tepid root beer, and I think I got a few chigger bites, so I never tried it again. That it still stands as one of my proudest achievements in the realm of “nature” tells you what we’re up against here. I’m the girl whose bellbottom jeans caught fire while she was roasting marshmallows in the moonlight at Girl Scout camp. (Seriously.) To my young suburban self, nature was somehow unmanageable, intimidating, and boring... all at the same time.

But that was then. Over the past few years – and especially, the past few months – I’ve fallen madly, passionately in love with the natural world. For me, nature is like the boy next door – the one you’ve always known, but never really noticed – and suddenly, there he is on your doorstep, and he’s drop-dead dazzling, and you’re clunking yourself on the head, thinking, “Where’s *he* been all my life?”

Most writers I know are uncommon people. Intriguing people. People with wild imaginations and uncanny awareness, eccentric personalities and original perspectives. I always longed to be like them. But I have come to the somewhat disappointing conclusion that my gift to the reading world – if, in fact, I have one – is that I am an absolutely *average* person . . . who just happens to write stuff down. (Someone recently told me, “You do thoughtful writing for *normal* people.” A backhanded compliment, perhaps, but it seemed dead on. I guess I’ve found my niche!) So now I am settling into deep middle age, and apparently – according to the literature – what the *average* woman does around this time in her life is to become smitten (or, in some cases, re-smitten) with nature. As usual, I’m textbook.

But it feels like so much more than a casual mid-life fling. My love affair with nature has changed my very *nature*. Here’s an example: Ever since I’ve known him – which is over 15 years now – my husband has accused me of being incapable of just . . . sitting there. “You always have to be reading or talking or thinking,” he complains. “You can’t ever just . . . be.” He’s absolutely right. “Just being” has always been an impossible task for me, and one that, frankly, seemed pointless. I’ve tried meditation, prayer, exercise, what have you – and though all those things have their benefits, they don’t stop my hamster wheel of a brain from spinning. Even at bedtime, I must have a book; reading corrals my rambling thoughts, focuses my mental

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energy in one general direction until it finally wears itself out. My husband, on the other hand, is virtually comatose the minute his head hits the pillow. (Argh.)

While I don't kid myself that I'll ever develop that kind of mental "on/off" switch, my growing relationship with nature has truly calmed my careworn brain. I now spend lots of time on my back deck without a book, a Kindle, a newspaper or even an iPhone . . . just sitting. *Being*, if you will. I'm

watching

things, of course: blue jays and cardinals and giant swallowtail butterflies, the banana spider in my window, the scrap of late-blooming wisteria near the shed, the flowering weeds I can't bring myself to whack. But I'm

just

watching – not thinking. Not fretting. Not planning. Not debating or arguing with myself. Just watching. Occasionally, I'll start writing an essay in my head, but I've even gotten that impulse under control. And here's the real miracle – I'm not

bored.

Not remotely. In fact, I've never felt so engaged. Engrossed, even. The more I see of nature, the more interesting it becomes.

And here's another thing: For the first time in over twenty years, I'm actually sorry to see a Lowcountry summer go. With the exception of the beach at Hunting Island, I've avoided the outdoors religiously every summer since I moved here.

But this summer, I've grown so enamored of my own backyard, I can hardly bear to leave it. When I head back inside after my evening "just being," the TV is usually on – Amelia's watching a 'Dance Moms' marathon or Jeff's watching the news, where they're talking about the latest school shooting or ISIS beheading. My first instinct is to walk right back out the door – butterflies and bunny rabbits! – but dinner needs to be made and homework needs to be encouraged and a girl can't spend her whole night on the back deck . . . especially when that girl is a middle-aged wife and mother.

But still. Things are better since I took up with nature. The time we spend together is of such rare quality that the rest of my time feels zingier *and* more peaceful. (You gotta love a peaceful zing!) When I start my day with a few turns around the Cypress Wetlands Trail in Port Royal and end it with a glass of wine on my deck in Pigeon Point, I am able to face the hours in between with something I can only describe as an intense tranquility. Or maybe it's a tranquil intensity? Either way, it sounds almost like a paradox. But I've found that the best and truest things often are.

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Of course, none of this is breaking news. More like well-known ancient wisdom. And I'd have figured it all out a long time ago if I weren't so dang average.

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