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Environment

A psychologist says this exercise can make you more hopeful in 14 days

This Noticing Nature Intervention is straightforward, but its results might surprise you.

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Column by Dana Milbank

STANARDSVILLE, Va. — For much of my life, winter was something to be endured. Preferably, indoors.

On dark winter mornings, I'd start the day under a light-therapy lamp to mimic sunlight. I'd count the days until I could expect the first daffodils, that glorious time of year when flu season subsided, the days grew longer and I could creep out, squinting, from my self-declared hibernation.

"If Winter comes," Percy Bysshe Shelley asked, "can Spring be far behind?" And so I waited.

But my days of waiting out winter are over. For me, it is no longer the cold and dark season. It is now the season for rebuilding hope.

Temperatures weren't much above 20 degrees on Skyline Drive when I set out this month with a friend to Shenandoah National Park for some bushwhacking, or off-trail hiking. During the warmer months, it's a thoroughly unpleasant undertaking. Leaves on the trees and shrubs make it impossible to see where you're going, and you'll wind up tangled in brush and vulnerable to bites from ticks and even snakes. In the winter, however, the forest opens up and invites us to explore.

We crossed streams bejeweled by rounded icicles, and under leaves we found tiny cities of ice sculptures built by a phenomenon called hoarfrost. On the forest floor, we discovered evergreen orchids with names such as puttyroot and crane-fly. We gaped at soaring tulip trees as old as the nation and ancient mountain laurels with foot-thick trunks.

We came upon ruins of an old mission and a cabin, where remnants of stone walls and iron stoves told a story of life in the mountains before the government seized the land for a national park.

We followed a forgotten road and reached a primitive cemetery. Rough headstones without inscriptions jutted from the ground, some at crazy angles, some toppled by fallen trees. There, we sat on logs and ate lunch, imagining the place a century ago when it was open pasture. We didn't see a soul all day.

As a child, I would walk in the forest and imagine that I was the first human to stand in that place. I almost certainly was not, because Native Americans hunted the land and European settlers cleared it.

But on the mountain that day, the knowledge that I was only the most recent sojourner comforted me. Others had been here long before me and will be here long after I'm gone. I'm part of something larger. I'm connected to those who lived in the crumbling cabins and now lie underneath me, connected to those 250-to-300-year-old tulip trees that were maturing when Madison started drafting the Constitution 20 miles from here at Montpelier and were already towering when Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, 90 miles to the south.

I left the forest with a renewed sense of faith in the possible. It's not that I felt any more upbeat about the state of the world. But I felt some hopelessness recede, replaced by a restored determination to improve my — *our* — stewardship of both the country and the planet in the short time we have.

I've written before about the extensive research showing that time in nature boosts well-being and helps us to flourish physically and mentally. It goes well beyond the exercise we often get when outdoors. The irregular patterns of nature reduce cognitive fatigue. Nature's vastness and variety fill us with awe. Legendary biologist E.O. Wilson hypothesized that we are evolutionarily programmed to feel whole in nature because of the millions of years our ancestors spent on the savanna.

The latest scholarship has improved our understanding of these mechanisms and produced targeted and efficient ways to unlock the benefits of nature. In particular, it appears that connection with nature boosts our sense of hope, which in turn predicts long life, ability to achieve goals and other aspects of well-being. This type of hope is very different from optimism: There is no Pollyannaish, everything-will-be-okay element to it; rather, it keeps us from despair and gives us a sense of agency.

Holli-Anne Passmore, chair of the psychology department at Concordia University of Edmonton, has been doing study after study testing ways to access the psychological benefits of nature; her most recent one was published in October. She has developed a simple method called the Noticing Nature Intervention. She has also tested a nature-centric version of the popular "three good things" psychological technique, in which people develop gratitude through daily reflections.

Such techniques boost mood and positive emotions in ways similar to non-nature interventions, but they also cause large increases in complex emotions that prove elusive when using other means, Passmore told me. They build a sense of "transcendent connectedness" (feeling connected to other people, to nature and to life in general), a sense of "elevation" (profound feelings of gratitude, moral uplift and being part of a greater whole) and a sense of "hope agency" (determination and confidence in pursuing goals).

"Those kinds of emotions are deep within us," Passmore said, "that really move us from being, 'Yeah, cool, that was a good piece of chocolate cake,' or 'Yeah, that was a funny little video,' to this very deep and rich eudaemonic sense of being alive."

One of the surprising discoveries of her recent work is that these benefits can be attained with minimal time and effort. You don't have to spend the day bushwhacking. Passmore suggested that people try to observe one thing in nature every day for 14 days straight, although as few as 10 observations over the two weeks should be sufficient. In real time, if you can, or later the same day, simply write down what emotions you felt.

You can take a photograph to help you describe and remember the moment, as long as you don't use that as an excuse to start scrolling while you're out in nature. If you do that, or if you already have an evocative shot in your camera roll, use this form to send it, along with a description of your emotions. I'll publish some in a future column.

Some examples from one of Passmore's studies:

"I always love hearing birds and squirrels from this tree, as it helps calm me."

"I felt awe that such a tiny bird can withstand the cold."

"The big blue sky and the trees that have stood there for years in all weather made me feel small and insignificant, but in a good way."

Those who completed the 14-day intervention, Passmore found, were 68 percent more likely than a control group to report above-average levels of satisfaction with life and 77 percent more likely to report above-average levels of elevation — though in a smaller sample size, hope agency increased about as much as elevation.

Passmore thought it remarkable "how little nature it takes for people to have these big shifts upwards in well-being." In fact, you don't need to spend any additional time in nature beyond what you already do. "Look out your window: You will see the sky, you will see a bird, you will see a tree," she said. "Look in your house: Almost everybody has plants in their house. That's nature."

Another surprise finding: The emotional benefits are just as powerful in winter as in the rest of the year. That was the same conclusion reached by University of Chicago neuroscientist Marc Berman, author of the 2025 book "Nature and the Mind." He measured the benefits of a 50-minute walk in the Ann Arbor arboretum and discovered that those who walked in January experienced the same benefit as those who walked in June.

It's not yet proven, but, Passmore speculated, there may be an additional "kind of joy in being able to withstand the discomfort" of the cold. "It's an opportunity to gain strength and resilience, and realize that all these things from an evolutionary perspective give us joy and well-being in our lives."

Building a fire in the fireplace in winter is pleasant, but doing so after time out in the cold is sublime.

If you live in the vast swath of the United States forecast to get hit with a monster snowstorm this weekend, it could be a perfect time to start your observations — whether you're on cross-country skis or simply watching from your bedroom.

I've been making my own observations as frequently as I can:

I felt wonder and a sense of mystery watching the northern lights Monday night; though barely visible to my eye, the pink and green auroras appeared in a long-exposure photo taken with my iPhone.

I laughed out loud at the opossum that kept waddling across my driveway at night, setting off my Ring camera. I spoke to it through the camera, which made the curious critter approach the door.

I feel gratitude toward the turkey vultures that patrol the skies over my farm. When one of them spots a dead animal, a sanitation crew of as many as 18 enormous birds flies in to dispose of the carrion.

I feel calm standing in a meadow as the golden-brown grasses sway in the breeze.

And I feel exhilaration when I see the bold pinks and oranges of a January sunset through the dry, cold air.

No doubt some people will scoff at noticing birds and sunsets while a fresh feud with Europe has begun and 1,500 active-duty troops are on standby to deploy to Minneapolis. “The country is burning and you continue to navel gaze,” one reader commented on last week’s column. But I’m asking you to gaze at birds and sunsets — what you do with your navel is your business — precisely *because* there’s so much anger and despair right now. It can paralyze us. We need to build up our stores of hope because hope motivates us to make things better.

The neuroscientist Berman told me he has found that nature interactions boost attention by about 20 percent. “That attention is critical for work, for being productive,” he said, “so if nature can recharge that battery, it should be able to energize people.”

When I think about the pace of climate change and the rapid loss of habitat and biodiversity, it’s easy to become overwhelmed, and lose hope. Instead, I’ve spent this winter killing invasive vines and shrubs at my place, rehabilitating old hayfields, and planting some 1,700 tree seedlings. I know my work won’t make much of a difference to the planet. But it sure beats feeling hopeless.

You don’t have to go bushwhacking to get the mental benefits of nature. But to immerse yourself in nature, it helps to get away from human-made trails, bridges and river crossings and beyond the invasive plants that frequently get a foothold where we tread.

Of course, it’s not a good idea to go wandering in the wilderness by yourself. (My friend knew the area well and guided me.) If you want to try it, go with a group, download GPS-powered maps in advance, avoid treacherous terrain, try not to contribute to erosion, and don’t disturb cultural sites or remove artifacts.

Here in Shenandoah National Park, there are, in addition to 80,000 acres of wilderness, 135 cemeteries and traces of hundreds of home sites. Steve Bair, a retired park ranger, suggests picking one of the old mountainside roads, where you won’t have to go far to see the cultural sites. There’s Keyser Run Road, reached from the Little Devils Stairs parking lot; Corbin Cabin Cutoff Trail (Corbin Cabin parking); Hazel Mountain Trail (Meadow Springs parking); and the area I explored, Pocosin Horse Trail, accessible from Pocosin Road off Skyline Drive.

My friend and I spent four hours in the woods, scrambling up and stumbling down steep hills where there were no switchbacks.

We found plants you don’t typically see on the beaten path: a cucumber magnolia, a native plant called leatherwood because of its rubbery stems, blue cohosh berries, an elaborately twisted chestnut oak and

the stalk of a pink lady's slipper. The extraordinary abundance of the forest, even in this time of planetary stress, gave me hope.

We examined the evergreen leaves of hepatica, once believed to treat liver ailments because its lobed leaves look like a liver, and the rattlesnake plantain, once used to treat snakebites because its fragmented leaf pattern resembles snakeskin. Contemplating the enormous progress science has made since this "Doctrine of Signatures" dominated medicine gave me hope.

We found fresh coyote scat and even bear scat (they don't fully hibernate here), discovered a fallen tree being consumed by termites, and came across a pile of red-shouldered hawk feathers and a squirrel's tail. The perseverance of forest life in the harshness of winter gave me hope.

We looked at the dead and dying hemlocks lining a stream's banks, victims of the woolly adelgid, an insect accidentally imported from Asia. But then a brilliant flash caught our eyes: A tiny golden-crowned kinglet, a winter migrant to the park, was displaying its regal plumage. The surviving beauty amid human destruction gave me hope.

We gazed up at a centuries-old tulip tree — *Liriodendron tulipifera* — and thought about the millions of creatures it may have nurtured: bears, woodpeckers, eastern tiger swallowtail butterflies, and on and on. I tried to wrap my arms around it. Feeling its immense, life-sustaining sturdiness gave me hope.

And we wandered the ruins, admiring how the black gum, witch hazel and black cherry had sprung from within the walls where people lived a century ago. Nature had healed — and I have hope that it will again.