

Nature's Comfort Donald Drife

I grieve the loss of a loved one by disappearing into nature; I struggle to see everyday items anew—in a fresh light—and delight when I succeed; I am willing to feel pain because it allows me to feel pure unadulterated joy. Kathleen Dean Moore created *Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature* just for me. These themes—my life's themes—reoccur throughout this book. It is a book personally written to guide me on life's journey.

Diffuse light silvers the water; I can just make out a dragonfly nymph that crawls toward the surface with no expectation of flight beyond maybe a tightness in the carapace across its back. No matter how hard it tries or doesn't, there will come a time when the dragonfly pumps the crinkles out of its wings, and there they will be, luminous as mica, threaded with lapis and gold.

No measure of human grief can stop Earth in its tracks (102-3).

Nature is unconcerned with our grief. She continues on her course oblivious to our state of emotion. In mourning, we often feel that the world, our world, has stopped. Nevertheless, here Moore coaxes us into action. She compares human grief to a dragonfly nymph, which having lived its entire life underwater, now needs to emerge. It is coming into the surface light and the world of flight. Staying in its accustomed world—this comfortable, watery world—would mean death. The time has come for it to change and if it fails to transform into the world of flight, it will drown.

We too can choose to remain in our underwater world of grief and despair. However, we can safely persist in sorrow for only a limited time. If we linger too long, that world can become comfortable, can become our accustomed world, and snatch the life from our soul. Either we take flight and become the beautiful creature God intended us to be or we die.

Moore goes on to explain this miraculous metamorphosis, "Wonder leads to gratitude. Gratitude opens onto peace" (103). This metaphor of metamorphosis breaks down because, unlike the almost instant change from nymph to dragonfly, the change from despair to joy is a lengthy process. By observing Nature, we are encouraged along this path. We admit that some greater force than us exists, becoming grateful that Nature surrounds us, and we obtain peace through her plan.

Dei plena sunt Omnia

[All things are full of God]

I'm near Grayling, Michigan, walking through the 90-burn. This area of jack pine burnt in 1990 during a hot wildfire. Burning at a speed of thirty miles per hour, hot enough to vaporize aluminum canoes, it was fifteen minutes from consuming our beloved little cabin when the rains extinguished it. I walked this circuit for the first time ten days later. Bird's foot violets bloomed from the burnt ground, their divided green leaves and blue flowers appearing in stark contrast against the blackened cinders that littered the sandy earth.

Bracken ferns already stood knee high, their triangular fronds waving defiantly in the breeze. The air smelled of ash, and the acrid odor of charred wood hung in the air. My hands and clothing became black with soot.

The following year, blueberries grew by the thousands in the ash-enriched soil. Acres of low bushes covered with sweet, dark-blue berries. Wild blueberries are smaller than their domestic cousins are but with an intense flavor. Jack pines sprouted in the enriched soil after the fire opened their cones. A few years later, Kirtland's warblers nested here.

I walked this circuit after my mother died, taking comfort in Nature's endless cycle of death and rebirth. My father and I hiked and photographed here, finding a den of coyote pups. We observed the debarking technique of a black-backed three-toed woodpecker as it searched for insects among the dead trees. We discovered sneezewort goldenrod, a white-flowered goldenrod, beside this trail. We photographed fritillary butterflies sucking nectar from the purple spikes of the blazing-stars that dotted the charred openings. What my human eyes saw as destruction Nature saw merely as change. Life returned to this burn, a different life in many ways but a rich life.

I found comfort along these trails after my father's death. From the blackened world of grief, I have moved on to a new life. One that is different but still rich. I maintain my connection with him through this natural world he taught me to love. Nature teaches me that death is part of an endless cycle having neither an end nor a beginning. She inculcates that the time of my death is unknown. She admonishes me to live each moment and cherish my surrounding world.

Twenty-two years later, the 90-burn still entertains me. Charcoaled tree trunks are still easy to find. The pine seedlings that germinated that first summer are now fifteen feet tall. Growth is now slow in this sterile sand. Kirtland's warblers have moved to other, younger jack pine stands. The forest floor is now a carpet of shade loving woodland sedge choking out the bird's foot violet. Blueberry bushes are scarce and blueberry fruit unheard of. Trees killed by the fire have fallen, littering the earth as if giants were engaged in a game of pick-up-sticks.

The recovery by Nature appears to be slow. However, what is she recovering from? The fire was part of Nature. She designed jack pine plains to burn. This habitat wants fire. Fire provides nutrients for this soil and thins the trees allowing light to reach the forest floor. Perhaps fire rejuvenated the area and what I'm seeing now as a maturing forest is in Nature's eyes an old, worn out place.

I don't know what despair is, if it's something or nothing, a kind of filling up or an emptying out. I don't know what sorrow does to the world, what it adds or takes away. What I think I do know now is that 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 (x).

Is despair the loss of hope or becoming hopeless? The loss of hope is temporary, maybe even momentary. Hopelessness is hope forsaking you. This to me is true despair. It

requires action by the individual to recover from hopelessness, and at some points along that grieving path, action is impossible. I understand despair as if it is a temporary cloak that I wear hiding my inner hope. I treat it as something that engulfs me, cleverly masking hope. Despair reminds me that I am part of "Earth's great cycles." Death is part of these cycles, and despair serves as a mini-death. Part of me dies; my inner self is changed even after despair's cloak is stripped away in a new resurrection. Sorrow reminds me to appreciate and love the people and things around me. When this resurrection cycle plays out, I become aware of the blessings my life holds.

Eheu fugaces. Labuntur anni

[Alas, the fleeting years slip away]

I'm sitting on the edge of a mudflat that recently was a beaver pond. It's a warm, sunny, autumn day. A turkey vulture soars overhead; after ten minutes it is out of sight, never having flapped a wing. I wonder if he's having fun, just soaring wherever the wind currents take him. A few spotted sandpipers are teetering along, feeding beside the stream. In front of me, cut alder branches stick out of the mud, each end carefully gnawed, the remains of last winter's food cache. Seedlings are staking claim to this fertile mudflat. Wild mint seedlings are emerging, their sweet smell revealing their identity. Rough goldenrods, one of the last flowers to bloom, add yellow streaks along the former waterline.

A flock of birds flies onto the mudflat. At first, I think they are migrating robins; however, they are too small. They are dull brown with faint double wing-bars. Their sides are streaked and they fly while foraging calling *pip-pip-pipit*. They are American pipits migrating through on their long journey south.

The beavers exhausted their food supply of poplar, willow, and alder and moved to another location. A family moves in, dams the stream, spends five to seven years, runs out of food, and then moves on. This family required two lodges and spent seven years here. The dam is now breached, leaving behind a mud flat of rich, black, silt with a faint odor of barnyard manure. This rich earth will spawn a wildflower meadow, blooming for several years until the poplars and willows return to shade it out. Then another beaver family will return, patch what remains of the dam, and the twenty-odd year cycle will begin again. I have seen one-and-a-half beaver cycles here and I now wonder if I will see another. Will I as a seventy-four year old man sit where I sit now? Will I once more look over a bare mudflat? Beaver cycles I understand; however, I don't know where I am in my own cycle.

[W]hat if I could see the familiar world as if I had never seen it before, even if I see it every day—with that wonderment and surprise? Or see it as if I would never see it again? Then imagine the glory. I'm thinking it's a paltry sense of wonder that requires something new every day....

To be worthy of the astonishing world, a sense of wonder will be a way of life, in every place and time, no matter how familiar: to listen in the dark of every night, to praise the mystery of every returning day, to be astonished again and again, to be grateful with an intensity that cannot be distinguished from joy (36).

We live in an amazing world, but I often lack amazement for what I consider common. I need to glory in the everyday sights, remembering that each one could be my last. I watch the circle of seasons, rejoicing in the first phoebe every spring, the first robin hatchling, or the first fall junco. However, I should rejoice in every phoebe, robin, and junco Nature provides for me. Moore is reminding me that I won't know or remember many of my last sightings, things that I won't see again. Will I ever find another flock of American pipits? I saw them every year when I was in high school and when I observed my last one I never dreamed almost four decades would pass until I saw another. George Bernard Shaw once remarked, "I am doing more things for the last time than for the first." Lately, I am more aware of this.

Sometimes I am overcome by joy at finding something common. Walking on campus and seeing a woodchuck or finding a praying mantis helps me to relax. But for me, common becomes special when I can share it with someone. This helps me to cultivate my sense of wonder. After sharing a buckeye butterfly with an Oakland professor, I now think of that person whenever I see one. I relive the joy of our shared experience. I feel the same joy I felt upon observing my first buckeye.

Moore encourages me to see the complete world anew each day. This is active observation not just passive being. Look at that robin it hops, it does not walk; look at how yellow that goldenrod is; see how the branches of that tree sway in the wind, or the raindrops splash in the puddle. Observe life, feel life, celebrate life. Hunt for and unearth the joy in all of life.

Minima maxima sunt

[The smallest things are the most important]

I'm kneeling on the forest floor, setting up a spotting scope to look at a Cooper's hawk nest. The eyepiece is less than three feet off the ground. I'm showing a Brownie troop through Tenhave Woods in Royal Oak, and the female Cooper's hawk is perched alongside the nest. As the Brownies take turns looking at the hawk its mate returns to the nest. He has a sparrow in his bill and starts to feed it to the female. One of the young girls spies the sparrow before I do and is upset. I explain that this is part of the cycle of life and if sparrows and mice were not eaten there would soon be too many of them. The girls accept this, much to my surprise.

We move through the woods looking at everything and I mean everything. Trillium, sticks, rotting logs, bugs, trees, mushrooms... each girl finding something. I'm forced to look at what I easily regard as mundane. The stick has an annual growth scar marking where one year's growth ended and another began. The rotting log is a fallen ash, and the trails of the emerald ash borers, who killed the tree, are visible where the bark peeled away. The bug is an anchor beetle that survived the winter. The mushroom is a worm-eaten morel. Spring ephemerals are in full bloom. The girls love the showy trillium and even the green-flowered jack-in-the-pulpit. I have seen these things hundreds of times but I see them anew through their eyes.

I am again at Tenhave Woods, but now it is night, a cold, cloudy night with a sharp wind, biting right through clothing to your bones. I pray that no one will turn out to walk through a snowy, dark, woods but the Royal Oak Nature Society has scheduled an owl hoot and it's

my turn to lead. During an owl hoot a tape recording of an owl calling is played. With luck an owl answers, and if the group is still and quiet an owl sometimes flies in close enough to be seen.

Twenty people gather and to my surprise the group includes a small child, about four years old, bundled up against the wind and the cold with only his glasses visible. He dearly wants to see an owl in the wild so he came with his mother to the owl hoot. Walking quietly from the parking lot to the edge of the woods, we pause to play a tape recording of a screech owl. On this still moonless night, the only sound is a distant barking dog.

We move into the center of the woods. The young boy walks quietly with the rest of the group and stands patiently as I play the recorded call again. A dark shape appears on a branch maybe five feet over the child's head. Shining my flashlight on it reveals a red phase of the eastern screech owl. The kid lets out the first sound I have heard from him, a squeal of pure delight. He remains mesmerized by that owl as it stealthfully flies from branch to branch. It never calls but puts on a fabulous show for us.

I have probably seen hundreds if not thousands of screech owls during my lifetime. They nest in a tree in my front yard and are a common sight to me; however, the encounter with this owl will be long remembered. The act of sharing something that is familiar can make it feel as if I am seeing it for the very first time. I saw that owl through the eyes of a young boy and shared in his excitement. This might not be a lasting memory for this youngster, but I will never forget his first owl.

Moore attempts to see joy and wonder in everything. I also try to see wonder everywhere, and I'm never bored. I love showing people the natural world. It does not matter if it is a Brownie troop, a young boy, the adults on a Royal Oak Nature Society walk, or a university professor's first buckeye butterfly. This is how I see things fresh and keep my sense of wonder alive.

Moore states in the book's introduction that she is trying to understand "the power of water, air, earth, and time to bring gladness gradually from grief and to restore meaning to lives that seem empty or unmoored" (ix). Moore teaches that we gain comfort by realizing we are part of Nature's cycle. Through observing Nature we see the little details and how we are connected to them. We cannot control her and she gets along quite well without us. We understand the world better, more completely, when we humble ourselves, and see that we are a small part of the greater whole.

Works Cited

Moore, Kathleen Dean. *Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature*. Boston: Trumpeter, 2010. Print.