



Mindful Living Blog:

Nature Collection

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Introduction

Welcome to the Mindful Living Blog – Nature Collection!

This collection has been designed to bring together a series of articles from the Mindful Living blog, all of which centre on the theme of nature and ways to reconnect with it. The articles in this guide provide an introduction and an entry point into this topic, which you can explore in your own time.

Within each article you will find information on the topic, as well as an invitation. We hope that you will find these invitations thought-provoking and use them to engage in your own process of self-exploration and mindful practice. Above all, we hope that this guide will help to inspire you as you progress on your own journey.

This downloadable guide can also be printed. Please feel free to share it with others who you think may benefit from the content it contains.

As always, we really enjoy hearing from our readers and our wider community. Please feel free to share your thoughts and experiences with us. You can connect with us via the website or by emailing anna@dunami-somatics.com.

Happy reading!

Anna and Diana

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Exploring Nature Through the Senses

Exploring the outdoors through our senses provides an opportunity to rediscover a setting anew. By taking the time to slow down or pause, we create an opening in which to fully immerse ourselves in all the natural wonders that a space has to offer. What can we learn and discover about a place when we engage our sense of smell, open our auditory awareness and really take the time to see the minute visual details?



Photo by Anna Dako.

The Senses

We use our senses every day. They are complex and we rely heavily on them to provide us and our brains with important information which help us to not only perceive, but also understand the world around us. Although they are active and working, we are often not actively aware of them, unless an event or situation arises which brings them to the fore of our attention. For instance, a burning smell, a sharp prick on the skin, a loud noise, an unpleasant taste, or a sudden change of light.

But what if we were to actively engage our senses when out exploring the outdoors? What more would we be able to discover about the world around us and ourselves?

Touch

It's thought that touch is the first sense which humans develop. Texture appears to be particularly important in helping to evoke associations, as well as abstract concepts. As such, it has been suggested that touch can influence the way in which we make decisions.

As such, exploring the outdoors through touch can be a particularly powerful experience. What happens when you touch the bark of a dry tree? How does that sensation change when the tree is wet from the rain? How does it feel to lie down on the grass or on sand? How does the wind feel as it brushes against your skin? What emotions are stirred when the rain falls upon your face?



Photo by Anna Dako.

Sight

When we are outdoors, particularly in settings which may be very familiar to us, we have a tendency to miss small visual details. So accustomed are we to the outdoor setting, that we may fail to notice small, new details. A change in light can be a particularly stimulating experience as it enables us to perceive a recognised space in a new way.

Engage your sense of sight by taking a walk at a different time of day. Early morning or sunset can be particularly effective as the changes in light are most noticeable. Instead of exploring a large area, try instead to devote a portion of time to simply exploring one small spot.

What can you notice? How does the light change the space? What can you notice about the way the plants move and bend? Try to focus on small details too. Can you see anything growing or decaying? Can you see any insects crawling? Focus your lens to allow you to see the minute details which so often go unnoticed.



Sound

One way to explore an outdoor space anew is to take a walk where you focus upon your sense of sound. Take a moment to pause at the start of your journey, closing your eyes and taking the time to open your auditory awareness. What can you hear? Try to let your awareness explore the deeper layers of sound available to you.

Can you hear any wildlife? What sound does the wind make as it rustles through the plants? Can you hear the rain falling on the ground? Is the sound soft or harsh? Is there any sound of human activity?

Repeat the exercise at different points on your walk. What do the different sounds at each point of your walk tell you about the different areas within your familiar location? Which areas are busy with the rhythms and sounds of life? Which areas are quiet and sleeping, hibernating? Explore too the different sounds at different levels. How does the environment sound when you are standing compared to sitting or lying down?

You could also try to record the natural sounds in the environment on your phone. Listen back to them later. Was there anything unexpected in your recording? Were there sounds close to the ground that you couldn't hear whilst standing, or vice versa?



Photo by Anna Dako.

Smell

The sense of smell is another great way to explore the outdoors, particularly in different weather conditions or at different times of day. How does the outdoors smell to you in the sunshine compared to the rain? What smells come to the fore when the ground becomes wet or moist? What smells are the most powerful, which are the richest as you take a walk?

How do different parts of the outdoors smell? If there is a field filled with flowering plants, can you smell them? If you are walking through a dense woodland, can you smell the richness of the earth? A stroll on the beach may carry the smell of the sea on the breeze, or the promise of a coming storm. As you open your olfactory sense, consider what images, memories and sensations are triggered. Do certain smells evoke particular moments in your life? How do these smells make you feel?



Photo by Anna Dako.

An Invitation...

We invite you to continue to explore the outdoors in all weathers, with a focus on your senses. Rediscover a familiar place by exploring it through touch, smell, sound or sight.

Allow yourself to pause or be entirely still. Observe how in your moment of stillness, the natural environment around you seemingly speeds up. Note the sounds, smells, textures and tiny details all around you, vibrant and vivid.

Repeat the exercise at different points on your walk. Allow yourself to explore different areas of your familiar, outdoor setting. What new discoveries can you make? Try taking a walk on different days, in different types of weather and at different times of day. What changes, what stays the same?



Photo by Anna Dako.

In so doing, you are actively awakening your senses and allowing yourself the opportunity to explore and (re)discover the familiar. Through this exercise, you have the possibility to create an array of new sensory-scapes for yourself.

(Re)Connecting With Nature – Indoor Plants

How can we find ways to reconnect with Nature during uncertain times? What actions can we take, not simply as individuals, but as families to improve our wellbeing?

One small act we can each take from our own homes, and which has proven quite popular amongst parents in particular, is to do some planting. Whether you have a garden or simply some space on your windowsill, you can plant flowers, plants or even try to grow your own vegetables.

Not only does this simple act allow us to reconnect with Nature, with the very Earth itself, but it also has multiple physical and psychological benefits, as well as helping to decrease indoor air pollution.



The Benefits of Indoor Plants

Having plants in your home has been shown to help reduce indoor air pollution. Plants are able to absorb some of the harmful toxins in the air. These include the group of substances known as Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) which are most often emitted from paints, furnishing and detergents which we use indoors.

All of the toxins contribute to a condition known as Sick Building Syndrome (SBS), which can cause irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, skin dryness, headaches, fatigue and chest tightness or wheezing. Luckily, plants can absorb these toxins and break them down into gentler by-products, which they store in their soil to use at a later date for food. Moreover,

plants produce oxygen as a result of photosynthesis, which helps to contribute to the quality of the air in your home.



However, there are many more benefits to having plants in your home beyond improving air quality. Having an indoor plant can help to improve psychological, as well as physical wellbeing.

Indoor plants have been found to help improve mood, creativity and reduce stress levels. In some scientific studies (although not all), indoor plants have also been shown to improve concentration, as well as to increase the speed of reactions when engaged in computer tasks. In office environments especially, plants have been found to help support the productivity of workers, whilst in hospital settings, they have been found to help develop increased pain tolerance.

With regards to physical wellbeing, plants can help to reduce headaches, fatigue and blood-pressure. Where plants have been used in hospital rooms, some patients have reported a decrease in post-operative pain.

A Shared Activity

Yet growing plants or vegetables also has additional benefits, especially to families. This is an activity which you can undertake and enjoy doing together, which is perhaps part of the reason it has been so popular during lockdown. Ultimately, it is an activity which you can do as a family, whilst spending meaningful, quality time together.

It's also an enjoyable (if somewhat messy) activity. Regardless of how well or not your plants/vegetables may grow, by spending time together talking about it, engaging in the act of planting itself, this is time well spent and which can become calming and relaxing.

Not all families have outdoor spaces in which to grow copious amounts of plants or vegetables. But for those in flats, even taking time to plant some seeds in one small pot which is kept by the window can be a fun experience.



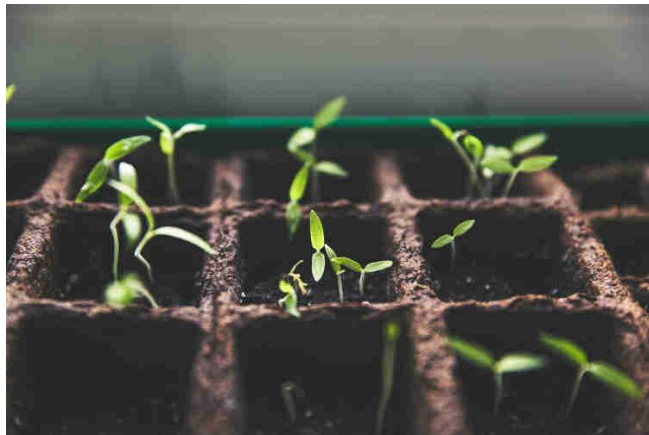
Photo by Diana Monteiro Toombs.

There is also something to be said for the longevity of the activity because the activity doesn't end once you've planted your seeds. The daily act of watering your plant, checking its growth and progress, observing the changes and the eventual need to repot, make this activity one which you can share for many weeks.

For those with children, it also offers a fantastic opportunity to help teach them about plants and what they need to grow, as well as helping them to develop a sense of responsibility and understanding of what it means to care for plants and other living things in our wider

environment. If you choose to grow vegetables, it also opens up the opportunity to talk about where food comes from and ways to grow food more sustainably.

Allowing your children to become involved in the act of caring for your plants and monitoring their growth can be an extremely powerful learning experience. Moreover, children (especially younger children) greatly enjoy watching plants grow. You can even begin your own family plant diary and help inspire a love and curiosity of plants and nature.



An Invitation...

Getting back in touch with nature helps us to reconnect with the Earth itself. It allows us to become (re)grounded, to reduce our levels of stress and mental fatigue. We invite you to find a small way to reconnect with Nature.

Whether you take a walk through a park or woodland, lay down on a patch of grass and allow yourself to simply be, or you embrace your inner child and roll down a hill, find a way which you feel allows you to rediscover Nature.

If you are feeling inspired, why not grow your own plant or vegetables? Even if you only grow one very small plant in a small pot, you may well find that it helps to lift your mood during these challenging times.

Showing Gratitude to Nature – Part I

In recent years, the value of the natural world has perhaps become more noticeable than ever. As so many aspects of our lives were forced to come to a standstill, the natural world remained open to us. Local green spaces which had perhaps been underused or gone somewhat unnoticed, became a much-needed space for individuals to reflect and re-energise. As we reconnected with the natural environment and sought refuge in it, we also reaped the benefits that it had to offer.



Photo by Anna Dako.

We invite you to consider ways in which you might show your gratitude to the natural world for the value and support which it has provided. From large gestures, such as volunteering with local organisations and planting trees, to quiet personal reflections and creating artworks, there are a variety of individual and personalised ways in which we can thank Nature for all it has to offer.

Consider and explore ways in which you and your family can meaningfully engage with the outdoors, whilst simultaneously showing your gratitude.

Give Private Thanks to The Natural World

Showing your gratitude to the natural world doesn't have to be a time-consuming, arduous or expensive task. Instead, you can simply incorporate this into one of your regular walks. Set aside some dedicated time to thank nature on your next walk. It can be especially engaging to do this on a walk to a natural reserve or green space which is of particular significance to you.

Take some time to pause during your walk. Allow yourself the time and space to be silent and simply observe the natural world around you. Open your senses to all that the space has to offer and take a moment to engage in meaningful reflection, meditation or other mindful practice. At the end of your reflection, offer the space your thanks and gratitude. You may choose to do this out loud, or silently to yourself.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Take A Family Gratitude Walk

Instead of taking a gratitude walk alone (or in addition to one), involve your family. Take a family gratitude walk to your local nature reserve. Dedicate the walk to simply observing the natural world around you, taking the time to fully appreciate it. You could discuss the things you notice throughout your walk or instead, walk silently together and share your

observations at the end. You could even take a moment to pause in your favourite space within the local nature reserve and take turns thanking the space or sharing your favourite features or aspects of the natural world around you.

Show Gratitude Through Creative Expression

Another fantastic way to show your gratitude to Nature is through creative work. This can take any form which is most reflective of your thoughts and emotions. You may decide to write a letter to Nature which you then read aloud on your next outdoor walk. Alternatively, you could write a poem. This could be a really enjoyable activity to share with your family, even writing a poem together.

If you are musical, you might choose instead to compose a piece of music for the natural setting. You could record the sounds of the natural environment and then rearrange them into a composition or create a soundscape. Alternatively, you could create music on site using found, natural materials.

Artists may prefer to create a work of art in response to a local nature reserve or to capture its essence in a landscape painting. You could also create an artwork using found, natural objects.

On the other hand, you might find that you prefer to take some time to respond physically to a site by creating a piece of choreography or movement as a gesture of thanks and gratitude. You could even engage in some embodied practice outdoors, whilst dedicating your session and practice to the natural environment.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Make Eco-Friendly Ornaments

You could show your gratitude to the natural world by making your own eco-friendly, sustainable ornaments instead of buying new ones. This can be a really wonderful activity to do with your family, especially if you have young children. Create home-made baubles and make Christmas tree decorations out of salt dough or using papercrafts.

You could also source sustainable materials and use these to create your own decorations, including making your own Christmas wreath or table decorations. You could even offer these homemade creations as gifts over the festive period.

Create an Eco-Friendly Object for Your Garden

Perhaps you are particularly skilled at making objects, in which case, why not make one using eco-friendly materials? For instance, you could use natural materials to construct a swing for your garden or make a natural bench or stool, which you could place outside your home as a space to pause and reflect. You could create a bird box, make a bin out of natural materials or even create an eco-friendly hanging basket.



Photo by Anna Dako.

An Invitation...

We invite you to consider how you might celebrate and thank the natural world. You may choose to show your gratitude privately and individually or instead, involve your family and turn this opportunity into a family project and the chance to spend some quality time together. Most importantly, we encourage you to find your own unique way to express your thanks to the natural world.

Showing Gratitude to Nature – Part II

In this article, we invite you to consider and explore ways in which you can show your gratitude to the natural world through wider actions in your community.

Join A Local Clean-Up

A fantastic way to show your gratitude for your favourite outdoor space is to do a clean-up. It may be that there is a local organisation that arranges regular clean-ups. If so, join them for a session and help to keep the outdoors clean and safe for everyone to use. Alternatively, you could organise a local clean-up yourself or simply go for a walk alone or with your family, with the aim of collecting as much rubbish as possible. Make sure you dispose of it responsibly when you are done.



Grow Your Own Vegetables or Herb Garden

Growing your own vegetables or buying local produce is also a lovely way to show your gratitude to the natural world. In doing so, you'll be helping to boost and promote your local economy and support the farmers in your local area. You'll also be investing in fresher produce and helping to minimise your carbon footprint. Furthermore, you'll often be reducing your use of plastics and packaging too.

If you don't have space to grow your own vegetables, consider instead growing your own herb garden. One of the nicest things about this is that herb gardens often don't require very much space. You can often grow a healthy herb garden on a windowsill and they are generally easy to maintain, requiring only minimal effort. They can be an ideal choice for individuals who are very busy, as well as being a really nice activity to do with children. The added bonus of course, is that you'll have fresh nutritious herbs to add to your meals.



Plant Trees

Trees are an essential and extremely important part of our world. They produce oxygen, which is crucial for the survival of all the species on our planet. By planting trees, we can help to combat and begin to offset the carbon in the atmosphere. Trees also provide a home and shelter for a variety of wildlife.

Of course, you may not be able to plant a tree in your back garden. However, there are a range of organisations which are dedicated to planting more trees. You could find a local organisation and help them physically plant some trees or donate to their cause. You could also get support and advice from these groups on how to organise a local event to plant more trees in your area.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Plant Flowering and Native Plants

Flowers are visually pleasing, but they also serve a much more important function, especially with regards to wildlife. By planting flowers in your garden, on windowsills or in hanging baskets, you can help to provide essential food and shelter for a range of animals. Furthermore, flowering plants will also help to attract wildlife, which will pollinate other plants.

A particularly effective strategy can be to plant more native plants. This will help to promote the native biodiversity of your local environment and support the wildlife which depend on it. It will also help to boost the number of bees, which are currently in decline but are an extremely important part of nature. Moreover, planting can be a relaxing activity to undertake, promoting your mental wellbeing. It is also a really nice family activity to do, whilst also helping to educate children about the natural world.



Photo by Anna Dako.

An Invitation...

The natural environment provides us with a range of physical, mental and emotional benefits. More than ever, perhaps, we have been reminded of the importance and support that the natural world can offer us.

Showing gratitude to the natural world can take many forms. Personal, small acts of gratitude are perhaps easier to attend to and act upon on a more regular basis. Are there ways in which you can engage with the natural environment, which also allow you to show gratitude? Are there events (physically or virtually) which you would like to participate in to promote the health of the planet? Do you want to join a local organisation to help care for your local green spaces? Can you volunteer at a charity? Are you able to help educate others in your local community about the importance of the natural world?

Or perhaps you want to take the opportunity to develop new skills. Maybe you want to learn how to be a beekeeper? Perhaps you want to give gardening a try or adapt your shopping habits so that you begin to buy more locally-sourced produce? Or perhaps you want to start developing and practicing some new sustainable lifestyle choices?

What action will you take (however big or small) to show gratitude to Nature and help promote the health of our planet and all those in it?

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