

May 3, 2019

## Grateful

I am not sure what it is about the arrival of spring that makes me feel more than thankful; it makes me feel grateful. I sometimes wonder if I am experiencing something deep and universal going back through the millennia, experienced just as my ancient ancestors did. They must have been thankful that winter was over and that signs of life, as seen in growing plants and pregnant animals, gave reassurance of their survival.

Do we need reassurance of survival? We might be happy that winter is over, but did we fear death from it? We might be happy that there are signs of crocuses coming up but does our life depend on them? Aren't we independent of nature compared to the people of, say, 35,000 years who sculpted the amazing little Venus of Willendorf in hopes of and in honor of fecundity? Our lifestyle of instant gratification, technology-based outcomes and constant supply of food just down the street in a big supermarket could easily lead us to believe that we are, indeed, independent of nature. I see children in the supermarket who do not know where the food comes from, as though it grew at the store, or just magically arrived there.

"Look deep into nature, then you will understand everything better", said Albert Einstein.

What do you see when you look at nature? Perhaps you see beauty. Beauty is good. Perhaps you see a livelihood as a landscaper or ski instructor. A livelihood involving fresh air and exercise is good. Perhaps you see a hobby or a sport or rest and relaxation. These are all good things.

What do you see when you look deeper? Do you see something essential that we cannot do without? Have you ever tried to imagine what life on earth would be like without something from nature? Without all of nature? Is that even conceivable, outside of a Michael Crichton book? It makes for an interesting discussion. Try it sometime with your family and friends and see what concepts and outcomes develop.

My brother-in-law lost a toe from a lawn mowing accident. It was just his little toe. He thought the police officer was supposed to bring it to the hospital, but it never showed up. It's O.K. It does not even affect his balance. It is a minor loss. He does not mind that one foot looks a little different. If he lost lots of toes, or fingers, well, that would be a different story. If he lost an organ, he may not have survived.

We seem to function fine without the passenger pigeon. I do not know what the consequences are from mankind's willful extinction of that species. Maybe they were little toes in the grand scheme of things.

We are surrounded, though, by so much of nature, at work all the time in the ecosystem, sometimes even at work as major organs, so to speak, that we take them for granted, just as we do the beating of our own heart.

The part of nature that is frequently referred to as the kidneys of the earth is the network of wetlands, and New England is so blessed with them. The wetlands filter water acting as a buffer, without which, areas become prone to flooding and erosion. Losing your house in a flood is not a good thing. When there is erosion, we lose roads, landscaping and our clear water in lakes and streams become cloudy with silt. That same silting process can fill the gills of fish, blocking their ability to pull oxygen from the water and it creates such turbidity in water that plants are not able to photosynthesize. Fish kills and algal blooms and floating dead plants look gross and stink.

A well-functioning wetland can remove pollutants from surface runoff and small streams. They do this by retaining sediments and the toxic pollutants attached to those sediments, such as PCPs, phosphorous, heavy metals and pesticides. Wetland plants also transform nitrogen and phosphorous into available forms, reducing algal blooms and fish kills caused by these nutrients. For a wetland to continue its ability to perform as our wonderful "kidneys", it must maintain its hydrology, its position relative to nearby streams and other water bodies and its own unique microcosm of plant life. It is not any old plant that can thrive in or even at the edge of a wetland.

I once read an old Senegalese proverb that translates into something like this: "In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; we will understand only what we are taught." I am learning about wetlands and coming to appreciate them more. I even have a favorite one, the vernal pool, a temporary oasis fulfilling one main function; that of a breeding area.

I am grateful spring is here. I love the sound of spring peepers and I hope I never have to encounter a spring without their song. That loss would be far greater than losing a toe. That would be the loss of soul.

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