

## **Biophilia, biophobia, and the voices in the trees.**

*“Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.” Khalil Gibran*

The full moon shines brightly through the trees. Rustling noises in the duff of the forest floor remind me of all the little creatures going about their nightly business. If I’m lucky, I can spot the great horned owl whose call I just heard. It’s dark and I’m alone on a trail far from home, but feel at peace and truly at home, the darkness like a soft blanket wrapping around me.

Biologist E. O. Wilson introduced a hypothesis back in 1984 that he called the biophilia hypothesis, which means love of life. He proposed, somewhat based on the works of philosopher Erich Fromm, that humans have an innate connection to nature and other life forms. While some scientists and psychologists refute the biophilia hypothesis, I think it makes quite a bit of sense. A deep connection to nature is in our genetic memory.

As humans, our evolutionary relationship with nature is complex. Throughout most of our history, we’ve been very closely tied to nature. As hunter-gatherers, we relied on forests for shelter and wood for our fires and the natural bounties of fruit, tubers, and animals for survival. We were closely integrated into an ecosystem, following herds of prey animals and the natural cycles of growth and harvest. Still today, there are some communities of humans that still follow the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Some call these people “primitive”, but I’m not so sure.

As we learned to cultivate the land to grow crops, our relationship with nature began to change a little. We tried to exert some level of control over nature by tilling the earth and domesticating animals. Nonetheless, a violent storm or long-term drought can shatter that illusion of control. But still we moved forward; progress, some say. Now we sit all day at our computers, in our air-conditioned rooms and artificial light (and yes, I most certainly see the irony in sitting in an office, at a computer, discussing connection to the natural world!), and light up the night with the glow from televisions, devices, overhead lights. We’ve become very disconnected from the natural world, in many ways. Many of us have become disconnected from our food supply, forgetting that that carrot was once in the dirt, that hamburger was once a cow.

When was the last time you stood barefoot in the grass? When did you last follow the natural circadian rhythm of rising with the sun and going to bed when it got dark? While that isn’t particularly practical for most of us, it can be a really nice way to reset yourself every so often. There is a practice called *earthing*. The premise of this practice is that electrons are drawn into your body from the earth through direct connection with the ground. These electrons, hypothetically, provide a whole host of benefits from reducing inflammation to better sleep. Now we can debate the science of that premise, Dr. Andrew Weil has a good article on his website that rightly cautions readers to the commercialization of earthing, but there might be something to it. Give it a try – go outside and take off your shoes, wander around for a little bit in the grass and the dirt, try to pick up a small rock with your toes. How do you feel? Silly, perhaps? Did you smile? Were you worried about getting dirty or injured? Did it take you back to summertime when you were 5 years old without a care in the world? Whether it’s electron exchange or just the freedom of getting out of your shoes, there is something about actually being in contact with the earth’s surface.

The love or dislike of nature and being outdoors starts young. I’ve talked to young people who “hate” being outside and through the course of conversation I find out that they’ve never really *been* outside. They grew up in front of TVs or game consoles, not out in the grass picking up rocks and climbing trees. Or if they did go outside, it was with the exhortation to “be careful” or “don’t get dirty”. Some kids grow up with the idea that nature is a scary and dangerous place. This too, may be a part of our genetic memory, and it can be a truly frightening place at times. Where there is biophilia, there is also biophobia. There is much being written of late about the benefits of instilling

a love for or at least a curiosity of nature at an early age. Some researchers suggest that getting kids to appreciate nature is the key to future conservation efforts. And that makes sense. Baba Dioum said it best: *"In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught."*

What are your own experiences and relationship with nature? Do you find peace sitting under a tree or would you prefer to view it from a window or in a photograph? Sometimes, on a backcountry hike and especially in the twilight hours, I feel like I'm not alone. Not in a spooky or frightening way, but in a very comforting way. I feel almost as if the trees, the rocks, the soil are all wrapping a reassuring cloak of strength around my shoulders. I reach out my hand and feel a connection. And if I stand very still, and listen, I can hear what they are saying.

\*\*Hiking and backcountry travel CAN be dangerous, and there is much to learn to do it safely. Before venturing into the backcountry, please educate yourself through classes at your local mountain club or guide service. \*\*

Further reading:

Biophilia by Edward O. Wilson, available in paperback and e-reader.

Andrew Weil's article on Earthing: <http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/QAA401221/Is-There-Anything-to-Earthing.html>

Excellent source for hiking and outdoor safety in Colorado: Colorado Mountain Club [www.cmc.org](http://www.cmc.org) .