



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Communing with Nature – Tree Hugging may now have been proven to work – who would have thought it?

Vivienne Allen © 1 December 2024

Once upon a time in ancient Greece in the town of Delphi on the slopes of Parnassus, there stood a temple. This was a temple to the god Apollo. The ancient Greeks believed in many gods who had many different responsibilities. Apollo was the god of the sun, of music and dance, of healing and disease, and many, many more.

The temple of Apollo at Delphi was a very important temple because of the high priestess Pythia who served as an oracle or prophet. Greek leaders would travel from all over for the Oracle's wisdom. The Oracle of Delphi was one of the most prestigious oracles among the Greeks, and she was among the most powerful women in the classical world.

You may be wondering why I'm starting my talk with the Greeks, but please bear with me as this does give meaning to my talk.

Pythia, the oracle, would breathe in sweet-smelling vapors coming from a crack in the rock in the temple. These vapors would send her into a state of passion. She would channel the god Apollo and babble

out what she received while another priest would translate that babble to prophecies. It was a miracle—a direct connection and relationship with the gods.

Usually when we hear the phrase, “once upon a time,” we’re ready to hear a story of make believe. This is not one of those times. This story of the Oracle is real. The temple on the slopes of Parnassus is real. Pythia and the priest were real. Even the vapours were real. Really!

In 2000, geologists continued to think about the oracle and those sweet-smelling vapours that came from the rock of the temple. They wondered where those vapours may have originated. The rocks of the temple lay on the ground of the earth—could they be coming from there?

After more investigation and research, scientists discovered a previously unknown geological fault passing straight through Delphi on the slopes of Parnassus and through the Sanctuary and Temple of Apollo. This means that two tectonic plates of the Earth’s surface met far underground beneath the temple. And sometimes the movement of those plates could have heated up gases deep underground and lifted them up right into the temple into the nostrils of Pythia. Geologists believe these gases from the earth caused Pythia’s fits of passion and her prophecies.

So it was science. Right? That’s an easy way to end the story. It was just science, those silly Greeks. But that’s not the end of the story. The scientific answer does not mean the Greeks were foolish to believe they had a relationship with Apollo. The scientific reasoning

does not erase the relationship they had with their gods. When we walk in nature on a sunny day, appreciate the muscles in our body as we dance to music, or watch a loved one heal from an illness, we are witnessing science in the same way the ancient Greeks might have shown their devotion to Apollo and the Oracle. Through these actions, we can connect with the holy and the scientific. Believing in science and feeling connected to the divine can absolutely happen at the same time, and often, they do.

My talk is about our Connection with the Natural World but I thought that excerpt about the ancient Greeks very revealing as wasn't Prince Charles laughed at for talking to his plants? Sometimes we laugh at these things and then science comes along later and finds some substance to it all along. I'm guessing that when I talk to my plants that maybe in some way they appreciate it. I'll never know but I do get such peace and enjoyment out of my garden that I want to thank them or something for this beauty.

From the beginning, Unitarians and Universalists in America saw in the natural world a place to commune with God. By the late nineteenth century, the two faiths fully embraced wonder and gratitude for the natural world and drew lessons from the world of nature. By the time the Unitarians and Universalists consolidated to form the UUA in 1961, a generation of leaders had grown up using children's curricula that celebrated the natural world, exploring earthworms, stars, birds, rocks, and the human hand.

UUs have sought to protect the natural world as well as celebrate it. As early as 1843, Margaret Fuller a UU Author, editor, journalist,

literary critic, educator, Transcendentalist, and women's rights advocate.... questioned the Western cultural notion that the natural world was to be used as humans saw fit. Beginning in April 1970 with the first Earth Day, UUs have been part of broader efforts to lift up environmental issues through worship, witness, and service.

Today's Unitarian Universalists affirm the interdependence of all life on earth in our 7th principle, and also embrace the environmental justice movement.

When my children were young my ex Jim and I didn't have much money but luckily we enjoyed living in some beautiful areas including in Avoca Beach on the NSW Central Coast, then 6 years dairy farming in a lovely hidden valley in the Bay of Plenty contained on one side by the mountainous Urewera ranges and the other by the Rangitaiki river. After leaving the farm we spent 7 years at Snells Beach near Warkworth – all areas that were always near trees, rivers or the sea. When we left the farm to move to Snells Beach, we both found work and managed to buy a half-finished house up on poles. The house had a beautiful view of the sea that looked towards Kawau Island but being quite a new subdivision the area was devoid of trees and if we looked out the side windows we looked straight into the neighbours living rooms. After living in the house for a few months I felt very uncomfortable and put it down to leaving the spaciousness of the farm and feeling a little claustrophobic, but after selling that house and moving into one nearby where I could see grass and trees from the windows, I always wondered if it was the lack of greenery that had made me feel uncomfortable.

That was over 35 years ago but a few weeks ago I think I've found out why I felt like this after listening to an [interview of Oxford Professor Kathy Willis on Radio NZ](#).

Fifteen years ago, Professor Kathy Willis read a study that radically changed her view of our relationship to the natural world. The study revealed that hospital patients recovering from surgery improved three times faster when they looked out of their windows at trees rather than seeing walls. Recently she also discovered that it's been proven that there is a link between the amount of green space in our lives and our better health, mood and longevity. Did you know that touching wood makes us feel calmer? Or that the scent of roses helps people drive more calmly and safely? Even having a pot plant by your desk can make a difference.

If you're a stressed-out office worker, one of the simplest things you can do for yourself is to buy some flowers. A [study conducted by Chiba University in Japan](#) found that employees who had a vase of pink roses on their desk became physiologically calmer, even after just four minutes. The smell of roses is so soothing that it has been shown in experiments to [make people better drivers](#): slower, more relaxed and less likely to crash. Another study, which used an EEG to measure brain activity while participants were [looking at flowers, found that yellow ones were best for boosting productivity and creative thinking](#).

Our UU spiritual ancestor Henry David Thoreau writes in Walden, "Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of

wildness. . . . We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks. . . . We need to witness our own limits transgressed.” The interdependent web of being that Thoreau described in all but name in Walden “is just one of the connections he made that we now take for granted.”

[Dr Kathy Willis has written a book called 'Good Nature'](#) with applications to everything from which way we walk to work to choosing where our kids should go to school. I'm still waiting to get my copy from Auckland Library but I have recently listened to Dr Willis being interviewed on RadioNZ. She shows how nature can help reduce the costs of healthcare, by bringing nature into our towns and cities and I'm so pleased yesterday to see the first of the greening of Victoria Street starting from Albert Park – eventually the greening will go from Albert Park all the way to Victoria Park -and hopefully then they will build an overpass of Customs Street to enable people to continue walking along the lineal park in Wynyard Quarter to reach the harbour. Hopefully I'll see this finished in my lifetime.

We all take for granted the idea that being in nature makes us feel better. But if you were a skeptical scientist—or indeed any kind of skeptic—who wanted hard scientific evidence for this idea, where would you look? And how would that evidence be gathered?

In fact, in the last decade there has been an explosion of “proof” that incredible things happen to our bodies and our minds when our senses interact with the natural world. Having a vase of flowers on

your desk or a green wall in your office makes a measurable difference to your well-being; certain scents in room diffusers genuinely can boost your immune system; I am one of those skeptics who rubbished the thought of diffusing oils could supposedly help your mood – now I'm curious about these findings. Apparently, it's been proven that smelling lavender actually works to help you sleep and reduces anxiety.

Dr Willis learnt that touching organic soil has a significant effect on the healthiness of your microbiome. One of the most incredible findings was that after walking in a cedar forest, the natural killer cells in your blood are elevated for 7 days after walking in the forest, giving you added protection against viruses. When you stroke unvarnished wood it can lower your blood pressure. Tuneful birds, not the loud screechy ones, the melodic ones have been shown to lower stress and pain. Wind in the trees, trickling streams all help to calm us.

What is remarkable is how these revelations should be commonsense—schools should let children play in nature to improve their health and concentration; urban streets should have trees—and yet Dr Willis reveals just how difficult it is to prove this to businesses and governments. She says and I quote, “We now know enough to self-prescribe in our homes, offices or working spaces, gardens, and when out walking. However small these individual actions might be, overall, they have the potential to provide a large number of health benefits. And we need to be encouraging others to do the same. Nature is far more than just something that is useful for our health. It is not a dispensable commodity. It is an inherent part of us.”

Now next time when you listen to the rustling of leaves generated by a brisk breeze, sniff a fragrant flower, touch the bark of a tree, or simply gaze at green space, now you'll know there is much more happening as your senses engage with nature. Flora appears to be fantastic for human health, mental and physical. Thank you for listening.

Meditation / Conversation starter

Let's share with others what impact (if any) you believe that nature and green spaces have had on your life, mood and health and how this relates to our UU seventh Principle, the respect for the interdependent web of all existence.