
Going Out and Going In

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
By the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins**

God covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. ... God gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. Psalm 147

Somewhere John Muir wrote “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was going in.” As I write, I am in a cabin in Northern Colorado near the confluence of Rocky Mountain National Park and the Roosevelt/Comanche Wilderness Area. An alpine start and half day’s climb to Comanche Peak (12,700’) reveals the crenellated waves of mountains from Wyoming to the north, and the San Juans to the south and west. An unusually heavy snowpack remains well into July. Daily visitations from moose, deer, raven, and peregrine falcons—and, based on tracks around the cabin, brown bear, have enlivened and blessed our sojourn here in the lovely Pingree Valley. And indeed, in going out, I have found myself going in. But what might this mean? Why did Muir find such inward solace outdoors?

Each year for 20 years I have gathered in wilderness settings with friends for trail running, hiking, fellowship, and laughter. For the past 10 years we have gathered in the Pingree Valley, an artifact of glaciers following the uplift of the Rocky Mountains some sixty million years ago. Deep in a sub-alpine forest of spruce, fir, and aspen we are bathing in the pinenes, limonenes, and other aerosols emitted by trees, and believed to elevate NK cells, a type of white blood cell known to send self-destruct messages to tumors and virus-infected cells, and lower levels of cortisol and other stress-related hormones. We’ve known for a long time that factors like stress, aging, and pesticides can reduce our NK count, at least temporarily. After an unusually busy winter and spring, I am grateful for this time away with my friends, including the trees!

In “The Three Day Effect,” Richard Strayer studied the effect of time spent in nature on networks in the brain, especially the attention network. Strayer writes, “So many things demand our attention: emails, deadlines, chores, grocery lists, elusive parking spots, and, as William Wordsworth put it, all the ‘getting and spending.’ ‘The world,’ wrote the poet ‘is too much with us.’ ... When the attention network is freed up, other parts of the brain appear to take over, like those associated with sensory perception, empathy and productive day-dreaming.” And speaking of empathy, perhaps we can learn something from trees about being in community during what some are calling an “epidemic of polarization and loneliness.” Trees live communally in ways we are only beginning to understand:

“Before it dies, a Douglas fir, half a millennium old, will send its storehouse of chemicals back down into its roots and out through its fungal partners, donating its riches to the community pool in a last will and testament...trees communicate, over the air and through their roots...trees take care of each other...Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware.” (Richard Powers, *The Overstory*)

Our beloved Cathedral is, in many ways, like a deep and abiding forest. Community, like nature, as Muir suggests, has the power to heal, nurture, and sustain us, and to remind us that we are not alone. We are reminded that whatever our burdens we are part of God’s beloved Creation, in Deep Time.

So find a way to get outside this summer, if only to sit or stroll in a local park, or perhaps to plant a tree. And find ways to

reach into our Cathedral community, co-create relationships in this sacred space, and be filled with light! What we care for, we grow to resemble, and by going out, we may find that we are going in.

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