

Nature Wise October 2017

The novelty of nature

A friend recently shared a dozen New Yorker Magazines, a perfect gift for this zine-ophile. Flipping through the pages of a November 2016 issue, an article caught my eye. Something extraordinary had happened in Death Valley. The famously hot, dry Valley had been so wet in the fall of 2015 it became a shallow lake. The following Spring, the Valley experienced a Superbloom, an unexpected exceptional flowering, so remarkable that people flocked to the valley. Visitor stats spiked. Park services felt hard pressed to accommodate the huge crowds. According to author Alex Ross, these flower lovers even appeared to walk in an odd way. Apparently, no one wanted to step on the exuberant flowers that had burst forth in this improbable location!

News of this novel event wouldn't leave me be. Is it possible that we are more fascinated with natural phenomena and more attuned to nature than we acknowledge? Are we more connected to earth events than we know? Is it possible that those whose approach to the earth is aggressive and perhaps even destructive are just attempting to enhance that connection?

That thought grew when I saw a local mud-spattered vehicle, completely covered in juicy gobs of Okanagan muck. Only a truly dedicated mud-bogger could have achieved this level of goopy coverage...the muddier the better with an equally grime-encrusted driver. Sadly this ruinous exercise is happening in the fragile wetlands around us, turning clear running streams and still shorelines to turbid wallows that fish cannot navigate or amphibians survive, unnecessary destruction that takes years to recover.

Meanwhile another popular activity promotes direct encounters with Mother Earth in a gentler way...getting our feet in the grass, sand, dirt and water, giving our body a chance to interact with the minerals of the planet. Nature lovers engage in this way with every breath. And so do lots of other folks. I grew up running barefoot through the grass. Crazy giggles accompanied rolling down a grassy slope.

Consider a farmer of yesteryear who has been haying all day, heaving square bales into a pick-up bed, or chucking bales onto a conveyor. I've done those things and in addition to the physical work of it, there would be straw, dust, seeds, bugs and sweat thoroughly embedded in my clothes and skin. I couldn't tell where my environment ended and I began.

How about my relative, Saskatchewan farmer Ed? After an early morning of milking, Ed would amble up to the washhouse, his coveralls infused with cattle sweat, streaks of gluey milk, barn dust and straw.

Then there's the grandson of a Cortes Island neighbour. The kid, thirteen I think, agreed to help his logger granddad buck up and split a sixty-foot fir. At first the arrangement didn't seem to sit well with the young fellow who preferred to be playing video games. Before they had made much progress on the tree, the kid had brightened up considerably. He beamed from a sweaty, grubby; sawdust covered face...and showed up early for wood chopping.

Home gardeners celebrate soil under their nails and compacted dirt on their knees.

There's some interesting research that supports healthy contact with all the minerals, microbes and messiness of the ground beneath our feet, and all that other natural stuff. There's even a popular new practice called Grounding or Earthing. This refers to direct skin / earth contact with our bare feet or hands.

According to the US Journal of Inflammation Research, this earth contact is said to produce "measurable differences" in concentration of white blood cells and other molecules involved in inflammation, immunity and wound repair. An abstract from the Journal of Environmental and Public Health suggests benefits of "better sleep and reduced pain."

Maybe some of the activities we're unsettled by represent a deep need to make that earth connection. We can activate healthy earth touch without expense or doing any harm. Just walk barefoot on the sand or grass today.

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