

# Deepening Your Relationship to Nature

This article is about how to understand and deepen our relationship to nature through nature-assisted therapeutic processes. Before I open this up, I would like to begin with a reflection on the bigger picture causes of our individual and collective suffering and the implications for how this impacts our relationship with nature. I will share with you some of the research on the benefits of spending time in nature, and then finally will articulate a variety of inquiries and interventions that I have found helpful in supporting the people I work with to engage with and deepen their relationship with nature. I will outline some of my thoughts on how nature can be a resource, a source of wisdom and guidance and a way to help symbolize and work with client's inner world and the parts of self they may have trouble integrating.

## **The relationship between nature and suffering**

### **Lost in thought**

In the eco-psychotherapy and eco-psychology literature it has been understood for a while that human suffering, is not only caused by the disconnection to ourselves, bodies and others but from the natural world around us (Rozsac, Gomes and Kanner, 1995). Our all-too-common alienation from ourselves has a lot to do with our disconnection from knowing we are intrinsically part of and born of this planet and natural world! But how did we become so alienated?

From my perspective, one big cause of this suffering and alienation is a result of being lost in, over-identified or over-blended with our thoughts. I often wonder if our over-emphasis on our narrative-dominated sense of self is driven by a need to distract from deeper split-off unmetabolized feelings of sadness, loneliness, anger, shame and fear that is often the result of the accumulated trauma over our life span. The impact of being overly identified with our thoughts (and our left brain) is that we become unnecessarily stressed, over-activated in our sympathetic nervous systems, and more and more dis-connected from our embodied life, our senses and the here and now. As Eckhart Tolle (2011) reminds us, living in the here and now can nurture a sense of presence, nourishment and a deep inner

sense of fundamental wellbeing. When lost in thought and our narrative self, we end up living above our eyebrows, constantly preoccupied with trying to tick off our to do list, problem finding and problem solving, planning or worrying about our future or ruminating about the past. This often leaves us in a state of low-grade sympathetic activation, with very little time to slow down and become truly present with our sense perception. Being lost in thought, not only gets in way of us being present to ourselves and others, but also to being available and receptive to the sensory nourishment of the natural world, which can, when immersed in it, support a sense of mindfulness and become a portal to presence. Presence is a word that as often used in many spiritual traditions across the world that refers to the part of us that is most unconditioned, immediate, open, spacious, naturally accepting, knowing and in touch with our existence prior to thought and concepts Presence is strongly associated with a sense of fundamental wellbeing and a feeling that everything is OK, even when its not. (Almaas, 2008; Eckhart Tolle, 2011).

### **Difficulty with emotional regulation**

Closely related to this, is the individual suffering that comes from having difficulty regulating our emotions. Ultimately this means having the capacity to identify what we're feeling, listen to and value, allow, contain, soothe and or express them in healthy ways. When we are not able to be present to our emotions, we lose the capacity to listen to the wisdom of what they're communicating and we become vulnerable to becoming disconnected, disembodied, reactive, depressed, anxious, lost and without an inner navigation system. Our categorical emotions drive us to take wise action. It also seems apparent to me from years of clinical practice that the more disconnected we become from our bodies and our feelings, the more we attempt to control and manipulate our experience, often wanting our inner or outer reality be better or different than what it is, and engaging in compulsive self-soothing behaviours to distract and numb ourselves. In my experience there is often a parallel between how we relate to our feelings and how we relate to nature! When we tend to relate to our vulnerable or uncomfortable feelings from the position of wanting them to be fixed or different, and grasping onto the states that we interpret as pleasurable, we often end up relating to our more than human world in the same way, as an object to be manipulated and used rather than as a sacred form to be honoured and listened too.

## **The impact of stress and developmental trauma**

There's a definition of stress you may be familiar with. *Stress is the gap between what is and how we want things to be!* The wider that gap, the deeper our suffering! From a Buddhist psychology perspective (Pema Chodron, 2005) unnecessary suffering is often caused by the desire for things to be different and aversion to how our experience is actually unfolding in the moment. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. Suffering is that extra layer we add by the way we interpret and relate to our pain! When we're really attached to the outcome of things, and wanting things to be a certain way or not wanting things to be a certain way, we go to war with reality and what is, which inevitably creates more suffering on top of the daily pain and existential challenges of being human we already face.

Many of you would know that the impact of trauma and accumulated stress can also cause enormous suffering. Unresolved acute or developmental trauma without ensuing support sets us up for becoming chronically alone and activated into either the hyper-aroused states of fight, flight or freeze states within the nervous system, or the hypo-aroused states of para-sympathetic shut down and energy conservation (Steven Porges & Deb Dana, 2018), or flipping between both. Polyvagal theory beautifully helps us understand what happens to the nervous system as a result of trauma. It goes onto explicate how early and chronic unresolved trauma can activate deep states of fear, overwhelm and impending dread that without relational support, the nervous system eventually learns to shut down, leaving us feeling chronically deadened, numb, disconnected, and depressed. A lot of people that experience chronic stress or have histories of developmental and relational trauma will spend most of their time stuck in these states and robbed of the ability to experience feelings of safety and connection. Such states of safety and connection are mediated by what polyvagal theory calls the ventral vagal complex, the part of the vagus nerve (the largest nerve in the body) that helps us socially engage, feel safe, be curious and present to this moment. When we are stuck on 'on' or 'off' in our nervous system as a result of unresolved relational trauma we become disconnected from the soothing and connecting impact of the ventral vagal nerve, that naturally puts a brake on the revved up sympathetic nervous system. As a result of such trauma, the ability to trust, perceive safety and connect with fellow humans is often also compromised as well. However, the good news is that for many trauma sufferers I've

worked with, being in nature and with animals has often offered a corrective experience of feeling nourished and safe, helping to re-ignite the ventral vagal complex and the social engagement system to help calm down a traumatized nervous system. This then can become a bridge to learning to trust and engage with the human world.

### **The impact of western culture and our relationship to nature**

Even without a background of significant trauma, our hyper paced, achievement focussed and busy culture can keep us stuck in a low level of sympathetic activation, and when chronic and can often flip us into dorsal vagal shutdown and disconnection. Our western cultures overemphasis on left-brain linear and logical thinking, doing and performing, materialism and consumption, individualism, technology and industrialization, as well as urbanization and the emphasis on constant economic growth is another cause of human suffering and disconnection from ourselves and nature (Kanner and Gones, 1995)). As I said before, these western emphases pressure us to become stuck in low or high-grade states of stress and overwhelm that many of us now take for granted as a normal state of mind. This lifestyle of doing, performing, consuming, and technological pre-occupation tends to, in my view, entrain our brains to expect constant stimulation, and disconnects us from our sense perceptions and bodies, numbing us out to the present moment, ourselves and the beauty of the natural world. As a result of this, we stop caring for this precious planet. And as Florence Williams argues, the author of a 'The Nature Fix' (2017), we are suffering from an endemic dislocation from the outdoors. Interestingly enough, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, in contemporary western culture, 93% of our time is spent indoors, especially for us folks that live in cities and urban lifestyles.

Richard Louv, author of the landmark best seller, 'Last Child in the Woods', coined the term Nature Deficit Disorder, to describe our pervasive disconnection from nature and its detrimental impact on our potential for creativity, mental acuity and emotional wellbeing. And another researcher and writer called Chris Kresser (2018), used the term Videophilia, another term coined to point towards our increasing disconnection in the natural world, and our over access to technological devices and screens. What is the consequence of spending so much time indoors, in front of screens and

technology, intruded upon by constant advertising and media, not to mention the back ground impact of unregulated toxins, fast food, time stressed living, COVID 19 Lockdowns and a climate crisis to name a few problems of our day? According to the above-mentioned writers and researchers, this is a major causes of the rising statistics in depression, anxiety, stress and mental health issues. According to a lot of research that is coming out (Florence Williams,2018), being disconnected to nature is not only negatively impacting on our mental health, it is also reducing our empathy, sensitivity, respect, concern and our care for this planet. This planet starts to become something that is an object that we want to take from, rather than see that we are the flesh and bones in the body of this earth and completely interdependent on it.

### **What nature can offer us**

I wanted to say a little bit about the emerging research evidence of the benefits of being in nature. I was talking to a friend of mine the other day, who just had a week off and spent a lot of time in immersed in the natural world. He said, 'nature is a natural antidepressant'. The term absolutely resonated for me. I was thinking about why is nature a natural antidepressant? We all kind of intuitively know that right!! When I was researching this section of the chapter, I came across the biophilia hypothesis by American biologist, evolutionary theorist and naturalist, Edward O Wilson (1984). He says that we feel most at home in nature because that's where we actually evolved. We've spent less than .01% of our human history living in modern, urbanized surroundings. We've only had and lived in villages for 10,000 years. Prior to that, we were hunters and gatherers. So, for the whole history of the human race, we have spent a very small amount of time living in cities and urbanized surroundings. This theory points to why we naturally feel good being in nature. It's because we evolved there, we were born there, and our biological non-civilized selves yearn to be re-connected in nature. Hence, we have a wired in (often unconscious) innate tendency to seek connection with nature and with other living beings, which naturally make us feel good. This innate tendency has become veiled by the impact of conditioning and the pressures of the western world that keep us in our heads and disconnected.

There are many more researchers around the world, particularly in Japan, and America, and South Korea to name a few, that are exploring the positive benefits of spending time in nature. Florence Williams, author of the, "The Nature Fix", synthesizes a lot of the research around the world on the benefits of nature. One of the big areas of exploration into nature and healing is taking place in Japan where they are doing what is known as forest bathing. In Japanese this increasingly popular practice is called Shinrin-Yoku (Miyazaki, 2011). In fact, Shinrin-Yoku is a standard preventative medicine in Japan that is helping stressed out corporate people reconnect back to their senses and to nature; to their taste, to their smell, to sight, to sound and touch. One of the things that interested me is that being in forests allow us to smell phytoncides which are the natural aromas of the oils in forest leaves and soils. These oils naturally protect the leaves from insects, but they actually permeate a natural smell that has a positive impact on our well-being.

Scientists and researchers (Florence Williams, 2017: Miyazaki, 2011, Richard Louv,2011) have found that spending time in nature reduces our blood pressure, pulse rate and cortisol levels. Hanging out with mother nature for a few hours relaxes the executive functioning in the frontal cortex, reduces blood glucose in diabetic patients and increases natural killer cells called NK activity which fight off viruses and bacteria in the body. It increases serotonin and heart rate variability which is associated with having good mental health and greater parasympathetic nervous system activity, associated with being relaxed safe and connected. Time in nature also helps relax the frontal cortex from over concentrating and overworking, improves cognitive performance, concentration and focus, as well as boosting the immune system. What's interesting to me is that nature not only makes us feel good, but it actually makes us physically healthier! Research has also found that time in nature boosts positive emotions, like feelings of awe, gratitude, wonder, reverence and closeness. Even living near or in green spaces, like around lawns, and parks and trees, is enough to have a positive impact on us. Ming Kuo (2009), another nature researcher in the U.S also found that just being in green spaces alone reduces crime and symptoms of ADHD, provokes pro-social and naturalistic behaviour. She calls it vitamin N. This is just the tip of the iceberg of the research that's now out there. It's pretty interesting and pretty clear that time in nature has an amazing benefit on us emotionally, psychologically and physically. The

research shows that without doubt, the more time we spend in nature, the more we tend to feel better.

### **Inquiring into our relationship to the natural world**

One simple way that I found that I can start to support my clients to connect to nature is just to start to ask questions that invite them to reflect on their relationship to nature. So just the question of *what role does nature play in your life*, can be an important question to invite people to think about their relationship to nature. Another questions, like *'What places do you go to, to resource yourself?* Often the answer is nature! When I ask people, can you think of a place or an activity where you feel most like the self you'd like to feel, and many people say, it's when they're going for a walk, or spending time in their garden, hanging with their dog, walking by a river or going to the beach. This question can then open up a whole conversation around *tell me more about your relationship with nature and the natural world? What does it do for you? How does it support you? Or what does nature open up in you when you're spending time with it?*

Another way I might explore people's relationship to nature is to explore their relationship to nature growing up. E.g. *What were the influences that shaped your relationship to nature as you grew up? What was its impact on you as a child? How did your parents help support your relationship with nature?* For me, I had the good fortune of growing up opposite the famous Sherbrooke Forest in the Dandenong Ranges of Victoria, which it's one of the most beautiful unlogged forests in Australia full of massive eucalyptus trees. Between the ages 7 and 12, I spent a lot of time in that forest, riding my bike in there, build cubby houses and basically do a lot of walking and exploring, finding lyre birds and being fascinated by the wildlife. It made me appreciate nature and all the animals that I used to see. I remember loving the birdsongs and being fascinated by the yabbies hiding under the rocks in forest creeks. Just being able to have that freedom to go out and play in nature helped me get a break from the many challenges and stressors in my childhood home environment. And it was something that my parents did support. As an early adolescent I also joined scouts, which also furthered my relationship and confidence to explore and appreciate the power and beauty of the great outdoors.

Some people I've worked with described having parents that instilled into them that nature is dangerous, and something that is scary, unfamiliar and strange – “watch out for all the snakes and the insects that could bite you!”. So, some people's relationship to nature has been shaped by their history, their parents' attitudes, and the people around them. Our early conditioning about the outdoors and being allowed to take risks and explore can get in the way of us connecting to nature, making nature become something that is to be daunted and afraid of, or as something to be controlled, managed and fixed. We can get curious about how our cultural and familial conditioning has shaped the impressions, beliefs and assumptions we carry about nature? Where did we learn some of these beliefs? This inquiry can also be furthered into our relationships with animals as well. *‘What was our experience with animals growing up? Did we have a connection to animals? Were there any favourite pets or were you encouraged to enjoy and to be with animals? Where you allowed to have pets? So, the question - ‘What animals or places in nature now or in the past make you feel good? Or ‘Who and what do you spend most of your time with now?’ How much time do you spend indoors versus outdoors? How much time do you spend on technology compared to the time you spend with animals or nature? These questions open up a reflection on our lifestyle and our lifestyle habits which shape where we put our attention, and what we spend our time doing, as well as our moods. So, I find these questions are a nice foray into starting to integrate nature into therapy. Even if we're doing indoor therapy, we can ask these questions and invite people to open up their curiosity about their relationship to nature and the animal world.*

### **3 ways we can integrate nature into therapy - Nature as resource, guide and symbol.**

#### **Nature as resource**

I would like to talk about three ways we can integrate nature into therapy. The first one is nature as a resource. Nature is a great support and a great resource for cultivating our wellbeing. But the question is how can we start to take in the nourishment that the natural world can offer us? Well, as you all know, nature is a wonderful catalyst for connecting us to our senses. Being in our senses, slows us

down and then facilitates us to connect to a state of mindfulness. When we're more mindful we naturally become more present, which as I said earlier, creates a sense of immediacy, aliveness and the simple knowing of being here and now, prior to thought and concepts. And when we are present in that sense of immediacy and awareness, we can start to feel a sense of deep interconnectedness, peace and fundamental well-being. Just like in Japan, shinrin-Yoku and forest bathing supports people to start to connect to a sense of well-being. Many of the Japanese that come from the busy cities, and who are very stressed, just start to unwind and relax soon as they spend an hour or two in nature (Miyazaki, 2011)

Nature can also naturally invite us to orientate our attention to something safe, soothing and pleasurable. It gives us opportunities to shift our attention from our busy minds, or things that threaten us, to things that are pleasant to the senses. This shift in attention to pleasure or safety helps down-regulate the amygdala and the fear centres of the brain (Levine, 2011). When nature supports us to open to our sense perceptions, we can start to not just look, but to really 'see' deeply the particulars of what is around us. Instead of just automatically hearing, we can really listen deeply to the nuances of sound. And my experience and I'm sure many of you would know this, is that when we are really deeply plugged into our senses, particularly in the natural world, we start to open up to a natural sense of spacious presence, contentment and wellbeing.

### **The practice of consciously resourcing through nature**

I would like to share with you a few little exercises that I do when I'm with clients out in nature, and some of them, you can even do when you're doing room-based work.

### **Accessing a memory of nature**

The first one is for you to just take a moment to think of a place in nature that you have recently visited, or an animal that you have been with that evoked a positive feeling. Just take a moment to remember this moment. Simply take yourself back into that memory when it comes up for you and allow yourself

to relive what you were feeling and what it was like in your sense perceptions when you were with animals or in nature. What do you remember seeing? What colours do you remember seeing? What do you remember hearing? It might have been the sound of waves, or birdsong, or wind in the trees, or a stream running by. And as you plug back into that memory of being in nature, what do you remember feeling in your body, and emotionally when you are in this place? See if you can reconnect to that felt sense. Perhaps you felt safe? Perhaps you felt connected or at peace, or a sense of stillness or expansion. And then let yourself drop into your body as you evoke that memory right now, and just notice what happens inside. When you drop down into your body in this moment, what happens to your muscle tension? What happens to your breathing? Does it deepen? Do you notice your muscles relaxing a little bit? What happens to your sense of gravity? Do you notice that your kind of getting a little bit heavier and more grounded in the chair? What happens to your overall sense of being in your body? Do you feel more embodied after doing that little exercise? Just take a moment just to let that soak into you, this feeling that gets evoked by that memory. And of course, you can do this exercise when you're in nature but you can also do it when you're remembering a time in the past. Of course, you can do this exercise when in nature in the moment as well.

### **Consciously communing with an object of nature**

The second exercise is an exercise that I really love doing, which you can really only do when you're actually in nature. And so, I would encourage you to take this exercise and go out and practice it when you get a chance. So basically, the invitation is to find a place in nature that you enjoy visiting. One of your favourite places where you can get some privacy, and go and be there. It might be by a river, or in a forest, or on top of a hill, wherever this place is. And when you get there, allow yourself just to start to be present and open to your senses, by becoming mindful. And if you remember the definition of mindfulness, its paying attention on purpose without judgment to the present moment (Kabat Zinn, 2003). As you really start to enter into your sense perceptions and become mindful, allow yourself to notice something that draws your attention. It might be a rock, an insect, it might be an animal, a tree, a pond, or a branch on a tree. And as you start to look at this object of the natural world, I invite you to really notice its particulars and what you appreciate about it. Really take your time. Is it something

about the colour of it, or the texture, or the smell, or the aliveness of it. Really taking that in, what do you appreciate about this object in nature. And then allow yourself to commune with it, letting go of being a separate self, and allowing yourself to really merge with this object. Could you imagine just letting that part of nature know what you see and appreciate about it? In expressing it, noticing what it's giving you in return? Does it have a message for you? Is this part of the natural world wanting to communicate something back to you? Allow yourself to be open and receptive to any messages that are coming to you, and feel what happens in your body as you do that. Again, coming back to this present moment and your what you're noticing now in your body as you complete this dialogue with nature.

So I offer these little experiments when I'm out with clients doing nature therapy e.g. going for a walk in the forest or out with the horses on the hill at the back of our property. These exercises open up opportunities to connect with nature.

### **A Case example – Using nature as a resource on zoom!**

Here's a little case example of a client that I was working with a couple of weeks ago while we were doing a zoom session. Unfortunately, a lot of us have to do zoom sessions these days while in lockdown or limited by COVID restrictions. My client started to get activated as he spoke about an element of his history that carried traumatic memories. I asked him to slow down and describe what he was aware of while speaking so I could track his window of tolerance and activation levels. He described his sense perceptions were becoming quite narrow and was losing a sense of groundedness, which is a signal that he's starting to do into dorsal vagal shutdown. Because he was showing signs of being out of his window of tolerance, I invited him to shift his attention to a resource. I invited him to look around the room and then to look out the window, and to tell me what he could see. He took a few moments to orient to his surroundings. And as he looked, he said that he could see a tree outside. I asked him what he noticed about the tree and he said he could see new growth on the leaves. I then invited him to really look for a couple of minutes, really look at the tree and the new growth and just to take it in. After a few minutes I asked him what he was appreciating about the new growth on the leaves, and

what was it about that, that drew his attention? He could have paid attention to anything else, but he paid attention to the new growth of the leaves, which is interesting to me. What was organizing that perception?

He said that he appreciated just the sense of renewal, the trees are constantly growing and renewing themselves. And there was something about that he was drawn to. I then asked him if there was anything else he noticed or appreciated about the tree. He said that he appreciated how the tree had rich soil, deep roots and a solid foundation, which he said was supporting the new growth of the leaves. All of a sudden, his understanding of the way the tree functioned started to open up. And then I simply asked him, "*what does the tree need to grow, and what supports the tree to grow*"? I then asked him, "*what supports you to grow*"? As he explored this parallel, he described his feet and legs being like the roots of the tree, and that they were helping him become grounded. A sense of regulation came back into his nervous system and he described his senses opening up again. That resource of looking at the tree and seeing how it functioned then opened up the whole question of *what supports his own growth*? This then opened up the inquiry into the rest of the session as my client explored what gets in the way of him growing and being more regulated and what inner and outer supports facilitate his growth and regulation. Even on zoom, this session utilized nature as a support to become more resourced.

### **Nature as a teacher and guide -discovering the wisdom of nature!**

Another other way nature can support us is as a guide or teacher. I refer to this as 'tapping into nature's wisdom'. So, what can nature teach us? Well, the way that I tend to do this when I'm doing this in eco-psychotherapy is, when a client is exploring an issue, I invite them to turn the issue into a question. With my above-mentioned client, the question was 'what supports me to grow'? As he saw what supports this tree to grow, he gained insight into what supports him? I often invite clients to take their question out with the horses or into nature. Give it to nature, surrender, wait and see what nature offers us in response. When we spend time communing with nature, and appreciating it, we can also ask nature 'what can you show me', what can you teach me about the issue I'm grappling with?

A few years ago, whilst at a retreat, I spent an afternoon in a beautiful part of the bush an hour outside of Sydney pondering the question of what nature can teach me about my own life long struggle of self-comparison and inability to really trust and value myself. Here are some of the things that came up for me in my own inquiry that afternoon. As I held this question in my mind, one of the things that I noticed about nature that day was that everything in nature belongs in nature, nothing is excluded. Everything has its place, from the tiniest little piece of grass to the biggest, oldest, most amazing ancient tree. I could see clearly that everything in nature has equal value; nothing has more value than something else. It felt to me like the tiniest little flower has the same value as an ancient river or mountain. For me I could see that all the diversity and parts of nature had equal relevance and value. This realization felt like a beautiful piece of wisdom that supported me to see through the fallacy of thinking other people have more value than me. As I saw this, I remember feeling a sense of peace and contentment filling me up from the inside out.

Spending time in nature can also teach us about impermanence; about the cycle of death, rebirth, and life. Nature can remind us that everything comes and goes, and gets recycled back into supporting the next stirrings of life. I also think that nature can teach us a lot about natural imperfections and limitations. If you spend time looking at a tree, you'll see that it is perfect the way it is, shaped by the context in which it grows. It might have scratches, missing bark, old gnarly nodules, indentations, jagged and broken branches. All of this reminds us that each tree is unique and perfect in all its imperfect glory, just the way it is. You would never expect a tree or a plant to be different from what it is. We intuitively know that a tree is growing in the angles and height it's growing into because of the environment and the quality of the soil it's growing out of. There's a sense of seeing nature as perfectly imperfect. Why is it so hard to see this about ourselves?

Nature also can show us that there is constant growth and evolution. It can show us that there is interconnection between everything. Everything is dependent on everything else in nature, which can be pretty obvious when you spend time in it. That a tree will only grow because of the water in the soil and the nutrients in the soil, which is supported by the dead matter and animals that do their business

that fertilizes the soil. So, we can start to sense that beautiful interconnectedness when we spend time in nature, and how everything communicates with and is in harmony with each other.

The other thing that I've often got the sense of is that in nature, everything exists as it is. A tree is just a tree, a rock is a rock, or horse is a horse. The only thing that thinks that we should be different to what we are is human beings; we tend to think that we should be something other than ourselves. We can invite people to ask what would it be like if you just let yourself be where you are, without any expectation to be different just like that rock over there doesn't expect itself to be different. Everything in nature just belongs exactly as it is. And animals themselves are wonderful teachers. As those of you who are familiar with Animal Assisted Therapies, animals teach us about organismic self-expression. Horses are wonderful teachers for modelling authenticity, having good boundaries, saying no to someone. Animals teach us about unconditional love. They teach us about the inherent value, that you don't have to earn and that you can't lose your value because it's an intrinsic part of who you are. It's like when you look at a dog or a cat or a horse, you can just see that it doesn't have to earn its value, its inherent. Animals teach us about being embodied and instinctual and grounded. They model to and teach us about how to relax, how to play, and about the simplicity of just being.

So, coming back to that question, *how can nature guide you or teach us something?* I invite you to take a question into nature, surrender and let nature answer it. It can be a wonderful exercise to explore the wisdom of nature.

### **Nature as symbol**

Lastly, nature can be implemented and utilized as a symbol or a metaphor. When I've spent time in nature with clients, I sometimes ask them to choose an object that represents a part of them they might be exploring. It might be a leaf, a rock, a stick, a clump of wood, or a something else. So the question that I might ask is, can you find something in this forest that represents your inner critic, a young part, a disowned part of you, your anger, an imperfection, a fear, a need, your shame, something you value, or something that's triggering you. Once you are asked that question and find something in nature that represents that part of you, then you can open up a dialogue with that part of nature that

symbolizes this part of you or a triggering situation or person. This can then open up a communication between you and a person, or you and a part, which can then deepen our understandings around what does this part feel, need and want to communicate? If that part could speak, what would it say? And also, how do you feel towards that part that is represented by that log or that plant or that rock? And that can then open up kind of a beautiful and deep inquiry into the relationship we have with these parts? We can then invite nature as a guide to see if has something to teach us about this part? What could nature's wisdom tell us about this part of us that we've been struggling with?

So these are the three ways that I tend to find bring nature into therapy and support a deepening of our relationship to nature. In summary nature as resource is a wonderful way to support a sense of well-being and regulation, often needed for people who suffer from chronic stress or dys-regulated nervous systems. Nature as guide, is a way to access the deep wisdom of nature, and what it has to teach us. And nature as a metaphor and a symbol is a wonderful way to explore our inner world and start to explore our relationship with different parts of ourselves that we have disowned or been in conflict with.

### **Case example – working with the inner critic!**

I was recently working with a client who had a very harsh inner critic, and we were out in nature and sitting in the forest, and I asked him to find an object that represented his inner critic. It ended up being this gnarly, old root from a tree that was sticking out. That in his mind, was like his critic - an old gnarly, ugly looking root. I then asked him to then notice how he feels towards his inner critic, which was being represented by this gnarly old root. He said he felt fed up with how it was always undermining him and making him feel like crap. As he expressed his anger at his inner critic, he described a feeling of satisfaction in being able to set a boundary with his judge or the first time in ages. An unexpected feeling of space from the judge opened up. This then allowed him to inquire into what his critic was actually trying to achieve for him, albeit in a misguided way. He discovered that his critic was trying to protect him from making mistakes, by making sure he was perfect and never 'fucked up'. As he explored this, he was able to see that this reminded him of growing up in his family where

his father was critical and had high expectation on him around anything he achieved. He learnt that if he makes mistakes he will lose his parents, particularly his father's love. The fact that the inner critic was representing this gnarly old root also reminded him that the inner critics are just part of the human condition, just like gnarly old roots are part of the tree, they belong and they have a place and purpose. And that opened up an inquiry around how his critic could work for him rather than undermine him. Could he find a healthy part of the critic that could be a support and a coach and an encourager rather than to judge his limitations?

So, there's lots of creative ways we can do those kinds of dialogues. Another little example is to ask your client what is it that they are needing at the moment, or what would support them to move forward in facing a challenge? Then we could invite them to choose an object in nature that would then represent that need (or needed support) then go out and spend time with that object and see what unfolds from that. That can be another way to kind of integrate nature as both a symbol and guide. These three ways of working with and integrating nature into therapy can be a great support for exploring our process, finding wisdom and accessing a sense of peace, calmness and regulation.

Finally, before I finish, I just wanted to collect my thoughts and summarize a few final reflections. Being in nature can connect us to our senses, our bodies and a feeling of presence, which is that part of us that is most immediate and alive. When we're in connection to that sense of presence, we're not lost in thought, caught up on the hamster wheel and worrying about the next thing that we need to achieve or avoid. When we are in that sense of presence, we're able to start to feel our interconnectedness and oneness with all of life, and a fundamental sense that everything is O.K. Instead of being a separate witness, we can start to feel how we are one with our environment and one with this planet. This can help us recognize that we are cells in the body of the earth and that our psyche is as big as the earth (Theodore Roszak, 2009).

We are not living on this beautiful planet, we are of this beautiful planet, and it is something that we can actually take care of and nurture. When we can learn to re-connect to ourselves, our emotions, our bodies, and to nature, we can begin to feel a sense of wanting to care for this one and only precious

planet. More than at any other moment in human history we are at a cross roads, where we need to choose to care for this planet and its resources, or let this impending climate crisis destroy our planet and all sentient beings that inhabit it. If we want to save our planet and its beautiful diversity and resources we need to start to care for our soils, our oceans, our forests, animals and biodiversity. How can we start to care for nature instead of treat it as an object to take from, or as a passive tourist ? We need to take care of our planet, the way we take care of ourselves, our children and our families and each other. In my view, this means we need to move from a me centred perspective to a world-centric perspective, which is a big enough to include and care for everything in it. Big enough to take care of everything. And finally, we need to resurrect determination and wisdom, not just intelligence, to keep our hearts and minds open and sensitive enough to take action in caring about this exquisite home we call planet earth.

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