

WALKING IN NATURE

By Kathleen Balthrop Havener

With my eight siblings, I grew up in (then) pristine northwest Florida on a bluff overlooking the shores of Santa Rosa Sound, a body of water that connects Pensacola Bay and Choctawhatchee Bay. Seldom did a day go by when I did not find some time alone, even as young as six or seven, to descend the 56 steps to the wharf, then five more to the beach, to walk the sugar white sands about one-third of a mile to “the Point,” where the Sound and the Bay meet. From Town Point one could see two beautiful bays, the town of Pensacola across the water, and the aircraft carriers (first the *USS Antietam* and then



“Lady Lex”—the *USS Lexington*) that were then the flight training vessels for all naval and Marine Corps aviators at the Pensacola Naval Air Station. I would climb onto the rocks of the jetty that was the Point and listen to the wind and the waves. In fair weather or foul, in blazing sun or torrential rain, I learned very early that there was my comfort.

As I got older, and poetry became another refuge, I began to appreciate what I had always had. Edna St. Vincent Millay was a favorite when I was a girl. One of the first poems I memorized was “Exiled,” in which she declares herself “Sick of the city, wanting the sea.” She concludes, “I have need of water near.” Me, too. When I can hear the wind and the waves, my heart rate slows. My thinking clears. I am more myself than at any other time.

When, in the words of poet William Wordsworth, “The world is too much

with us,” I know of no better way of restoring our hearts than to walk away from the never-ending, rapid-fire nature of our lives, the everyday demands that are crying for our attention, and venture into the outside world. I do not mean the world outside our offices, although that might sometimes suffice. I mean entirely away, to move through space into a part of the world, large or small, where we can hear songbirds call, insects hum, wind sighing or whipping, the quiet of a still night, the easy lapping or cymbals crashing of the sea. Walking and listening are the keys for me. But what joy to be surprised by sights that leave me breathless: a butterfly, a rainbow, a porpoise surfacing, the sun streaming in visible rays, a thundercloud so angry and black I expect it to crash atop my head.

When we take the time to listen and observe, we cannot help but be grateful. And gratitude enriches us. So much has been said about extracting oneself from the clamor of the workaday world and filling oneself with the richness of nature that it could begin to sound trite. Except it isn't. From the early naturalist and conservationist John Muir came the advice, “break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.” Albert Einstein said, “Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience.” All of them were right. Nothing can make you think more clearly, breathe more easily, or appreciate beauty more than removing yourself from the task(s) that confront you and seeking refuge—even for an hour—in the outdoors. Emerson's comment is especially apt to me. Seeing and hearing nature slows me down. And I desperately need to slow down.

As a young mother visiting my childhood home, I would take any chance I might find to slip away with my three little daughters, inevitably carrying one, on the same walk down the beach to the Point. The girls would splash when it was warm, watch the shallows for minnows and crabs, comb the beach for shells, sometimes chattering, more often quiet

and watchful. One of my most vivid memories is of my youngest, at about three, tiptoeing wide-eyed into the shallow water, cupping her hands and calling breathlessly, “Mother! Look!” In her little hands was the tiniest seahorse I had ever seen, no more than an inch high. It was one of those moments of wonder that never fades.

My young daughter taught me a separate lesson. One cannot see if one isn't watching. One cannot hear when one isn't listening. Our lives, our desks, our homes, our families are so noisy and cluttered and demanding. Moving our bodies through the outdoors to watch and listen is a balm to our sometimes-battered spirits. It's an exercise in gratitude to the earth. Bessie Rayner Parkes, early feminist and mother of Hilaire Belloc, wrote:

All natural things both live and
move
In natural peace that is their own.

We humans are natural things. We live and move. Paying a visit to nature helps you to live and move in your own natural peace.