



How Can We Turn To the Healing Power of Nature?

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The virus is everywhere: my blood, my lungs, my stomach,” my husband weakly croaked through the phone from his hospital bed in Manhattan. I imagined the virus to be like the Blob from the 1950s movie: dark, invasive and taking over everything in its path.

My chest weakened in disbelief. Just 15 hours earlier, we were making home improvement plans in his hospital room. Now, there was a virus giving him a 104 degree fever and taking over his poor vulnerable body.

This was just one of the many twists and turns of the journey we had been on since his life-long lung condition deteriorated a few years ago. One of the most significant landmarks had been a double lung transplant he received just a year ago. It was a roller coaster ride of ups (YES! A set of matching lungs for a transplant!) and downs (What, lymphoma?). Just days earlier, my 36-year-old husband had come home after finishing his third round of chemotherapy. When his temperature spiked a few hours later, we rushed him to the hospital.

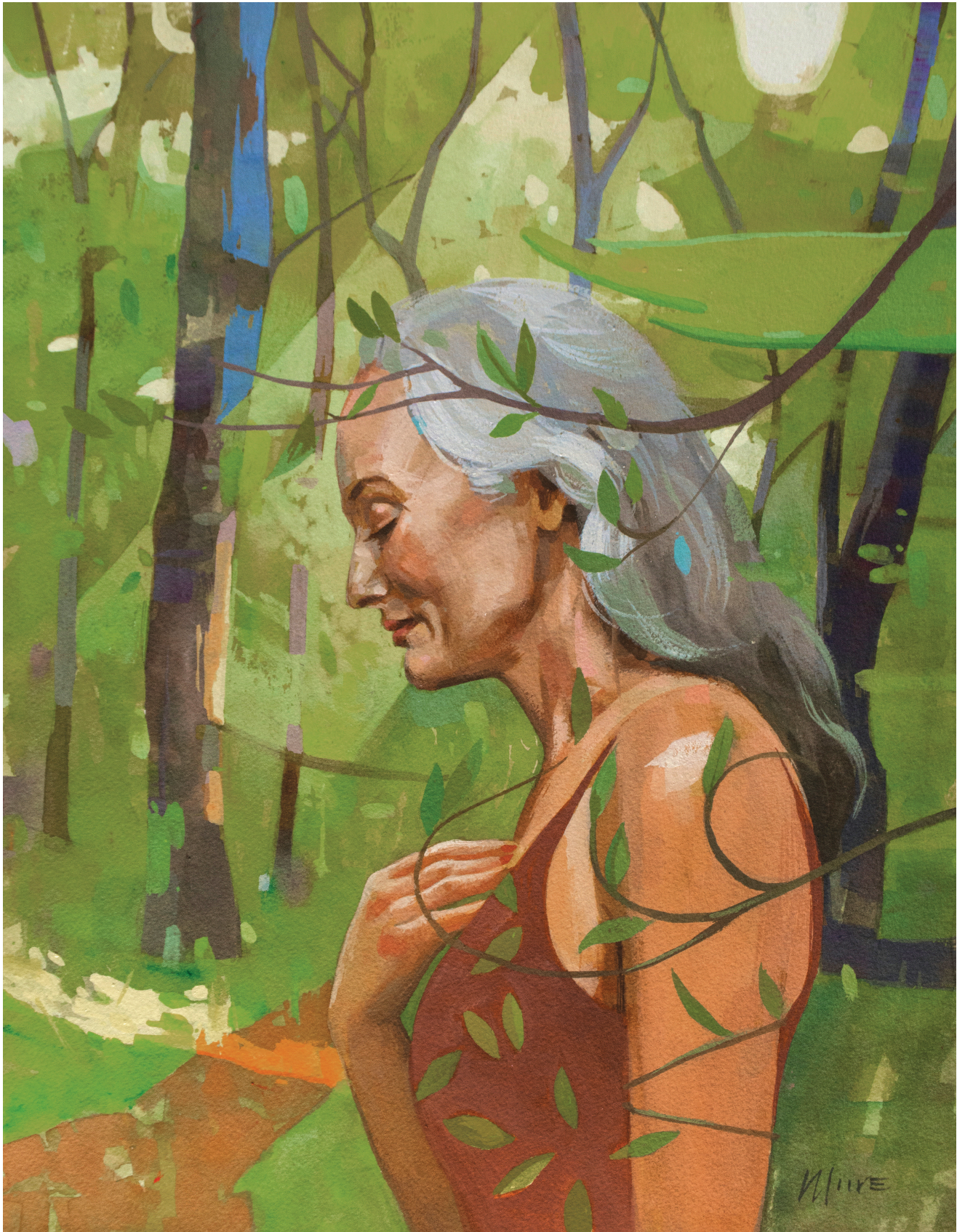
I put the phone down and took a couple deep breaths before joining a Zoom meeting I was already late for. During the meeting, I focused on staring at the boxes of people, breathing deeply into my belly. As the meeting was coming to a close, the meeting chair softened her voice and

asked, “Christina, how is your husband? We prayed for you all at the beginning.”

Her question cracked the fragile shell I had been attempting to keep together. A rush of tears broke through. I was simultaneously embarrassed and touched by her compassion. After the call, my manager, who had been part of the call, sent me a message over Slack encouraging me to take time off, to give myself space. My initial reaction was to respond that I was OK, that work was actually a welcome distraction.

By some act of grace, I recalled my recent training to become a Mindful Self-Compassion teacher. Developed by psychologists Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, self-compassion is the invitation to offer compassion to oneself as you would to a friend or to another person who might be suffering.

As an act of “soothing touch,” I placed my hand on my heart and asked the ultimate question one is to ask oneself when experiencing suffering or pain: “What do I need right now?” I stopped and listened. And what my heart said was, “Get the





heck out of here.” An image of myself biking along the water’s edge popped into my mind. Nature, healer and guide, was beckoning.

So often in my life, nature has been a solace, a place of refuge in times of distress. The healing power of nature is something instinctual to many of us. Indigenous cultures have long maintained a holistic relationship with nature as part of well-being and wholeness. Now, emerging practices such as the Japanese meditative exercise of *Shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing,” are renewing this relationship with nature to support mental and physical health. In forest bathing, one is invited to immerse oneself in nature by taking in one’s surroundings with one’s physical senses, to live in the present moment. A growing number of studies validate the positive impact that forest bathing can have on the nervous system, blood pressure and other health indicators.¹

I cancelled my three scheduled meetings and went downstairs to get my bicycle out of the basement. After about 15 minutes, I was on the path along the Hudson River at Nyack Beach State Park. The gravel path crunched beneath my bicycle tires as I sped along the water’s edge. The red cliffs of Hook Mountain towered to my left. On the right, the river was still.

Several years ago, I participated in a “forest bathing walk” in Harvard University’s Arnold Arboretum in Boston. One of the practices was to experience one’s surroundings using each of the five senses. Connecting with the physical senses is a way to shift the attention from the thinking mind to the feeling body. How many of us have found ourselves in the middle of a gorgeous landscape, only to be focused on a worry or problem in the mind? The practice of forest bathing invites the practitioner to experience the present moment in nature by transitioning from “doing” mode to “being” mode. It is a chance to step off the hamster wheel of our often overactive mind and, literally, take a breath of fresh air.

As I was biking, I allowed myself to do the same. I focused on the sun’s fiery heat on my skin, the wind rushing through my hair and past my face, and the soft earth below me. I slowly felt the rawness of the morning softening as the elements surrounded and immersed me. I was reminded

of a quote from Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*: “The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.”² I felt caressed by God. At this moment, I felt invited to rest in this affection and receive the ultimate compassion.

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis also shares the wisdom that is imparted through creation: “This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us.”³ As I continued to bike, I could feel my per-

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spective widening. On my left, I saw patches of berries producing their summer crop. On my right, five snowy mute swans were swimming parallel to the shore. The sun was flitting through the shimmering leaves of the trees. I was slowly opening up to other rhythms of life beyond my own circumstances. I was reminded that life was so much bigger than my personal universe.

And death was a natural part as well. Up ahead, I saw a turkey vulture bending over some hidden carrion. It flew away as I approached, leaving behind the acrid stench of its meal. I smelled the reminder of death that is part of the natural cycle. There are comings and goings that I do not need to push against.

I reached the base of a hill, where trees shaded the shore, and a few picnic benches were scattered on the small beach. There was a man with a young girl, perhaps his daughter, who had also biked here, eating their lunch. I felt the healing effects of nature therapy. I was ready to turn around and head back home.

Some doctors have begun to recognize the healing benefits of being outdoors. In her blog post “The Coronavirus is Heading Your Way. Grab a Tree and Hold On,” Dr. Suzanne Bartlett Hackenmiller says, “I prescribe nature to my patients on a daily basis. ... Even Hippocrates said, ‘Nature

itself is the best physician.” She shares that being in nature does not have to include a long hike in the woods. Some studies have demonstrated health benefits arising from connecting with natural elements in our everyday life, a tree outside our window, a potted plant, even nature-themed artwork. “All these actions are likely to improve immune function either directly or indirectly.”⁴

I have even found that just imagining a place in nature can bring solace. I recently participated in a meditation in which I was invited to bring to mind a special place in nature inspired by a quote from *Laudato Si'*: “The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning ... revisiting those memories does us much good ... [It] is a chance to recover something of their true selves.”⁵

Immediately the sandy beaches of St. Augustine, Florida, near the place I grew up, emerged in my imagination. I began to feel the warm sand beneath my toes, the salty breeze blowing on my skin, in my hair. Nearby, seagulls were squawk-

ing. My body began to relax and settle. As I gazed at the ocean, I saw the shimmering light on the water. The sea was rising to meet me. And then it fell away. I became mesmerized by this rhythm of the ebb and the flow, the approach and the departure.

As the sea receded, I could feel my breath shorten, as if I was not ready for the loss of departure. I thought of my and my husband’s situation, the rhythms and changes beyond my control. I often am asking, “Are things getting better or getting worse? Coming in or receding?” The sea’s movements seemed to remind me of how natural this ebb and flow were. They are but different moments and the same. I followed this pattern of the sea for a few more cycles, feeling the invitation to not change it, but just ride it. Can I allow them to just be?

Here on the edge of the Hudson River, I felt again the same invitation: Can I just allow things to be? This illness, my grief, the gift of our relationship and family, this moment? Can I allow them to come and go? This is as much a part of life

MEDITATION: PRAYING WITH CREATION THROUGH THE IMAGINATION

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis shares, “The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good.” Here is a meditation to help you pray with creation using the imagination:

Enter into a time of prayer — perhaps closing your eyes, noticing your feet on the ground, being held by the earth, and taking a few deep breaths to ground yourself in this moment of prayer. Offer a prayer to be open to God’s presence in the gift of creation.

Bring to mind a place in nature that is meaningful to you. It can be a place from childhood, a place visited during a special trip, in your neighborhood, or maybe somewhere you’ve never been, but has significance to you.

Imagine the place as vividly as possible, as if you are there right now. Notice the colors. The textures. The different shapes. What are you hearing? Smelling? Touching? Notice how you feel in

this place. See if you can name those feelings, allowing yourself to relax further into any feelings of safety, comfort and peace.

“[T]o contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.”¹ As you imagine yourself in this special place, ask if there is a message God is sharing with you at this time. Perhaps you have a question or something you would like to bring into prayer. Just notice if anything arises, not worrying if you do not hear anything. Just open yourself to hear the message of creation.

When you are ready, close by offering a prayer of thanks to God for the gift of creation and whatever message you may have received at this time.

NOTE

1. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 84, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html.



as the berries, the carrion, the seas and the beauty.

As I bike back home, I think of how my conditions have and have not changed. My husband is still sick in the hospital, but my relationship to my present moment has transformed. I remember something I heard in an interview with Benedictine monk Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB: "... not for everything that's given to you can you really be grateful. You can't be grateful for war in a given situation, or violence, or sickness, things like that. So the key, when people ask, 'Can you be grateful for everything?' — no, not for everything, but in every moment."⁶

At this moment I feel grateful. Not for my husband's illness, but for this moment of finding my grounding again in the beauty and wisdom of nature. "Nature is filled with words of love," Francis reminds us in his encyclical.⁷ In this moment, these words of love I have heard in nature give me the strength to move forward with a lightness and confidence, despite the uncertainty. I am held in the rhythms of life.

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NOTES

1. Bum Jin Park et al., "The Physiological Effects of Shinrin-Yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): Evidence from Field Experiments in 24 Forests across Japan," *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine* 15, no. 1 (May 2, 2009): 18-26, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12199-009-0086-9>.
2. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 84, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
3. Francis, *Laudato Si'* paragraph 85.
4. Suzanne Bartlett Hackenmiller, "The Coronavirus is Heading Your Way. Grab a Tree and Hold On," Integrative Initiative, February 29, 2020, <https://integrativeinitiative.com/2020/02/29/the-coronavirus-is-heading-your-way-grab-a-tree-and-hold-on/>.
5. Francis, *Laudato Si'* paragraph 84.
6. Interview with David Steindl-Rast, "How to Be Grateful in Every Moment (But Not for Everything)," On Being with Krista Tippett, original airdate January 21, 2016, <https://onbeing.org/programs/david-steindl-rast-how-to-be-grateful-in-every-moment/>.
7. Francis, *Laudato Si'* paragraph 225.

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