Health and Wholeness: A Return to Nature

By Stacey O’Connor

I was driving home from my job a few days ago. I was annoyed with traffic. I had just worked 9 hours. It was coming close to 5. I had been up since 5:30. I talked to myself as I aggressively jumped from one station to another. I ran over disappointments and inconveniences of the day. I ran over the upcoming disappointments and inconveniences that awaited me once I got home. Make dinner, go to the gym, clean the dishes, I needed to pay that bill, I needed to make that appointment, and I needed to get into bed early enough to be cheerful enough to do it all the next day, and the day after and the day after. Taylor Swift sang me into a dazed oblivion as I drove home and tried not to imagine that this day, would be like the next day, and the last day, and all the days for the rest of my life. “Shake it off. Shake. Shake it off.”

I began to wonder, why are we all so depressed? Why are we all so unhappy? According to the National Alliance on Mental Health, 1 in 5 people in America is estimated to suffer from a mental illness. So why? This is not, I would argue an endemic illness (those always present in a given population), rather a massive epidemic (those not always present but occurring in greater frequency at a certain time). We can turn to the obvious reason which is our clear disconnect to one another and our over connection to technology. Today, the average American spends 10 hrs and 39 mins devoted to screen time a day. This is a one hour increase from last year. When we consider that we spend 7(ish) hours asleep, roughly 1-2 hours feeding ourselves, about an hour cleaning ourselves (give or take) this leaves us less than 4 hours a day to partake in things we value.

But I think it’s more than just our devotion to technology. I think this deep, societal unhappiness is a symptom of our disconnection to ourselves and our environment.

Recently I read an article by Ole Berg called “Health and Quality of Life”. In it, Berg wrote about our overall health and argued that we are taking a much too fragmented approach to our health. He said that “ours is a fragmented society – the unsteered – society” (3) When we try to fix ourselves, we fragment off our lives and attempt to pinpoint the problem area. We do the same thing with our health. Berg argues that if, say, our brains, are broken, we can’t waste time only looking at the brain; That the illness cannot exist in a vacuum. Our bodies are connected and must be treated as such. He argued, “it has become increasingly problematic to rely on the piecemeal approach”. And therein is a key example of our problem. We have forgotten how to be whole.

Our lives are cut into too many pieces. We live in and move from one small box to the next. Our apartment to our cars to our jobs and inside of this we hold and manipulate a number of smaller boxes: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Snap Chat. These small boxes give us access to smaller boxes that tell us how we should look and act and what we should buy and where we should go and by the end of it all we are so suffocated by trying to place our entire selves inside of one tiny box after the next.

We have become Russian dolls. We have become a hall of mirrors and no matter how far we stretch out our arms we will never reach our realest selves. That self is far away inside of a cubicle, inside of a smartphone, inside of an app, recorded as a picture, validated by likes.

So we get sick, and we stay sick because we are trying to fragment our full selves into a million tiny fractions and only deal with one tiny sliver at a time. But this will never work because we are full beings that have only recently become fragmented in an attempt to survive this lifestyle.

So what is the solution? The Greeks believed that health was a basis of equilibrium. They believed this was achieved between environmental forces and individual habit. The internal equilibrium depends on the external equilibrium between a person and his/her environment. We have lost connection to our whole selves because we have lost connection to our whole environment. We have convinced ourselves that our lives take place in our cars, cubes, homes, screens, and we have detached from what is happening in the wide world around us. Study after study tells us that our connection to nature is our most basic necessity, and yet we ignore it. We have just tipped the balance where 50% of the world’s population now live in urban settings. In America, 80% of us live in urban settings that have separated us from our natural selves.

What does this mean for us, today? Today I’m going to turn off my screens. I’m going to step out into where I came from, and go to where I’m meant to go. Today, let’s try to find our balance by remembering that our most basic instinct is to engage with nature. Let’s try to remember that our whole selves are the selves that we need to nurture. Let’s try to remember that the majority of that disappointment and annoyance we feel is a response to us breaking ourselves into tiny pieces, trying to keep ourselves from our natural settings, and denying ourselves time and space to be with what we genuinely value.