**The Chautauqua Fix**

A sermon preached at the Kupferle Chapel, New Piasa Chautauqua, Chautauqua, IL

Based upon Genesis 1:24-28; 2:15

Sunday, June 18, 2015

By Rev. Dr. Clint McCann, Resident Minister

Over the years, I have heard several of you allude to the feeling that many of us have as we travel toward Chautauqua. For me, coming from St. Louis County, that feeling really begins to kick in after I turn left at the grain mill in Alton onto the River Road, and then pass the Piasa Bird that is painted on the bluff.

It seems that my back and shoulders relax a bit, and I can breathe more easily. By the time I pass the last stop light at Clifton Terrace and cross Piasa Creek so that the big smoke stack is behind me, I have a clear, unhindered, view of the Mississippi River; and I feel even more relaxed. And when I get to Chautauqua and walk around for a few minutes, it’s almost like I have arrived at a different world entirely.

To be sure, some of this feeling of relaxation and contentment may be due to the fact that most of the time when we travel to Chautauqua, we’re able to leave behind, at least temporarily, schedules and chores and various responsibilities and claims on our time and energy.

But at least part of what we feel may be due to the simple fact that we have left the city behind, and have located ourselves in the midst of nature, which Oscar Wilde once defined as “a place where birds fly around uncooked.” In other words, when we get to Chautauqua, we have left behind cement and asphalt and busy intersections and stoplights and office buildings; and we are surrounded by hills and valleys and water and trees and an array of lovely vistas on which to look out. And this, in and of itself, can make us feel better, more relaxed, and more content.

At least, that is the conclusion of Florence Williams in her very recently published book, *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative.[[1]](#endnote-1)* In preparing to write her book, Williams spent months traveling with and interviewing various scientific researchers in the U. S., Japan, South Korea, Scotland, Singapore, Finland, and more; and she even served as a subject in several of their experiments. And what they and she concluded is that being outdoors actually has beneficial physiological effects – things like lowering blood pressure, decreasing heart rate, and releasing brain and nervous-system chemicals that facilitate relaxation and enjoyment. And, of course, these sorts of physiological effects are what can help reduce the risk of things like hypertension, stroke, heart disease, and depression.

As the title of her book suggests, Williams calls this “The Nature Fix.” But for our purposes this morning, I am calling it “The Chautauqua Fix.”

Scientifically speaking, it makes sense that contact with nature – being outside – would have beneficial effects. After all, throughout most of human history, people spend significant time outside – as nomadic hunter-gatherers at first, and later as farmers. Our human brains and bodies developed in a context where we human beings spent lots of time outside, immersed in nature.

And biblically speaking, it also makes sense that contact with nature – being outside – would have beneficial effects. We heard in Genesis, chapter 1 a portion of the account of the sixth day of creation. And notice, it is not just humans that are created on the sixth day. There’s also “livestock, crawling things, and wildlife” (CEB). We’re part, you see, of a creaturely community. Granted, we humans are accorded a special status – imaging God, but this very status involves “taking charge,” or better, “exercising responsibility,” for the fish and the birds and the crawling things. Biblically speaking, we humans were not meant to be alone or to be inside – we are to be *out there, with the other creatures*! And with *the earth itself*! In Genesis, chapter 2, the setting is explicitly a garden; and the human role or vocation is “to farm it and to take care of it” (CEB) or “to till and to keep it” (NRSV) or better, “to serve it and preserve it” (The first verb in this sequence literally means in Hebrew “to serve”). We cannot do this without being *out there* somehow – in the midst of nature or creation.

Now, if we were created to be in community with nature or creation, as seems to be the case, whether you are listening to the scientists or reading the Bible, then the bad news for our day and age is that increasingly our connection to creation has been and is being curtailed. Only relatively recently, 2008, for the first time in human history, more human beings worldwide lived in cities than in rural areas or on farms. And it is harder to connect with nature in cities, particularly perhaps in this technological age in which we’re tempted to communicate via devices and screens rather than face to face – the average smart phone user checks his or her phone 1,500 times per week, and children, including my children, spend hours a day interacting with screens, almost exclusively indoors. And remember that statistic we have mentioned before here at Chautauqua – the average adult spends 98% of her or his time indoors.

Almost certainly, our increasing lack of connection to creation and to each other contributes to the increasing rates of our dis-ease – both physical maladies like hypertension, as well as psychological conditions like ADHD (attention deficit-hyperactive disorder) in children, and depression in adults, and increasingly in children as well. Bad news indeed!

But the purpose of a sermon is not to share bad news. It is to share good news, and there is good news! We’re beginning to realize what we’ve been missing. And it doesn’t have to be this way. Increasingly, psychotherapists, and even physicians, are prescribing outdoor-time as a means of prevention, but also as a treatment. Many cities and some countries are increasing park land and green spaces, and preserving what little wilderness is left on earth. One of the greatest things we have done in the history of our country is to create a robust system of National Parks and public lands – Teddy Roosevelt is one of my heroes in this regard. And we need our public lands and National Parks now more than ever!

As for Florence Williams, her advice in conclusion is this:

The more we recognize these innate human needs [for being in contact

with nature], the more we stand to gain. I’d love to see more wilderness therapy,

more kids in summer camp and on nature field trips and on scouting expeditions

and on quests of one kind or another, and more opportunities for city populations

in general to touch the wild. We all need a regular check-in for personal introspection,

goal-setting and spiritual reflection. Best to turn the phone off.

Distilling what I learned, I came up with a kind of ultrasimple coda: Go

outside, often, sometimes in wild places. Bring friends or not. Breathe.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Friends, the good news for us Chautauquans is that it is *not* hard for us to follow Florence Williams’s simple advice. “The Chautauqua Fix” is at our doorsteps! Chautauqua may not be exactly a “wild place.” But its hills and valleys, streams and rivers, and trees and trails afford us ample opportunity to be outside.

So, friends, for your own sake, for the sake of your health and happiness and creativity, “Go outside, often . . . [and] Breathe.”

And since God created us for community with the other creatures and with the earth itself, for God’s sake – quite literally! – for God’s sake, “Go outside, often . . . [and] Breathe.”

Thanks be to God for the goodness of creation, and for our little corner of creation, the New Piasa Chautauqua! Amen.

1. Florence Williams, *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)