

SURPRISE VISITS:



When God Speaks Through Nature

It was a beautiful spring day in North Carolina. Tammy¹ was 18, about to graduate from the academy, and life was good. This particular Sabbath, however, found her alone and nurturing hurt feelings. Tammy's young boyfriend had awkwardly uninvited her to Sabbath dinner with his extended family. He explained that the patriarch of the

family did not believe high school-aged teens should date. On that sun-filled Sabbath, with her friends traipsing off to enjoy various adventures and her boyfriend sheepishly leaving campus without her, Tammy felt abandoned and very sorry for herself.

God met with her that day. Later, Tammy didn't remember the morning sermon. She didn't remember Bible class from the week before, although it was probably meaningful. She

didn't even remember vespers from the previous evening. But that Sabbath afternoon, on a blanket in an old orchard and surrounded by overgrown grasses, buzzing insects, and the sweet scent of apple blossoms, God and Tammy made a memory together. She sensed God's presence as she communicated her hurt and poured out her heart to her Creator.

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Nature can connect us with our Creator. “As we come close to the heart of nature,” Ellen White wrote, “Christ makes His presence real to us, and speaks to our hearts of His peace and love.”² We want our loved ones and our students to know God passionately. Nature is one of God’s best avenues for having a heart-to-heart encounter with Him. Nature is where all our senses take in stimuli that can relax and open us to reflective thought.³ In nature, we can be more in tune with God than in any other place—physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually.

This article will show how nature is God’s direct path for us to achieve a deep and personal experience with Him. Additionally, we will appeal to fellow educators and policymakers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to revisit the denomination’s educational mission and to provide a setting where students in our schools can encounter their Maker as intended in the Eden School.

Nature in Context

In 2005, Richard Louv’s best-selling book, *Last Child in the Woods*, sounded a warning: Our children are disconnected from nature. American young people are spending less time in nature than ever in history. To meet added academic mandates, schools nationwide are dramatically cutting back recess time. Afterschool programs keep most children busy and off the streets, where real and perceived danger prevents outdoor play in the form previous generations of children took for granted. Young students may be learning about the rainforest in school, but they seldom, if ever, venture into the forest or wooded areas near their homes.⁴

More than 15 years after Louv’s warning, and despite continuing research and discussion on the importance of outdoor activity in childhood,⁵ schools in the United States and Canada largely keep to their restrictive schedules and curricula.⁶ However, the news about the need for recess and active play is slowly getting

out. Some families limit screen time, and parents generally believe it is essential to encourage their children to be more active. But getting children outside and active often proves difficult for parents to accomplish.⁷ In the United States, schools are still churning out schedules, programs, and priorities that keep children indoors nearly all day.⁸

Many other countries are looking for ways to address academic curricula that keep children indoors. In Finland, considered by many to be progressive in its approach to education, some are concerned that students do not get enough physical activity.⁹ “The biggest challenge at the moment,” says researcher Nicole Ridgers, “is that time allocated to recess and lunchtime is decreasing in schools.”¹⁰ Some Adventist schools are in danger of tagging along with this trend.

There is, however, encouraging news. Northern European countries such as Denmark have a long tradition

of nature-based preschools and kindergartens. Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom have in recent decades embedded nature awareness and early-childhood forest programs into their ethos for education,¹¹ as have countries such as Japan and South Korea.¹²

In 2008, the Forest School methodology arrived in South Korea. It was soon recognized as a solution to a population of students who, though academically strong, frequently experienced depression and burnout throughout their education. The South Korean government adopted the Forest Kindergarten concept to connect children with nature and provide high-quality early-childhood experiences. Jiyoun Shin, chair of the Early Childhood Education Department at Sahmyook University (Seoul, South Korea) and vice-chair of the South Korean Forest Kindergarten Association, is the founder and principal of Sahmyook University Lab Forest Kindergarten. Shin is passionate about



nature experiences for children. Seventh-day Adventists, says Shin, already have the message and are well-positioned to adopt a nature-based approach to education.¹³

Healthy Brain, Healthy Minds, Healthy Hearts

Meanwhile, research has been accruing. When people spend time in nature, whether relaxing or engaging in active recreation, their health improves. Nature exposure has been shown to lower heart rate and blood pressure.¹⁴ It decreases cortisol in our bodies, allowing natural killer cells to increase in number and effectiveness. This, in turn, assists the immune responses and helps prevent cancer generation and growth.¹⁵ Trees emit phytoncides, volatile compounds that are antimicrobial and could explain some of the health benefits of *Shinrin-yoku*, or Forest Bathing, the Japanese practice of taking in the forest atmosphere during a quiet, observant walk.¹⁶ Nature abounds with benefits for health, many of which we are entirely unaware of, even while we enjoy them.

Nature experiences also calm us and make us more focused. Spending time in forest settings has been shown to relieve tension, depression, anger, and confusion¹⁷ and promote a sense of wellbeing.¹⁸ In children, outdoor activity is associated with improved cognition, better test scores, increased social skills, confidence, positive school engagement, and reduced attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms.¹⁹ Additionally, active play is necessary for optimal child development and academic success.²⁰ The research is clear: Exposure to nature and natural views helps keep us healthy, clears our thinking, and lifts our mood.

Spirituality and Relating to God

It would be a leap of logic to conclude that health and inner peace automatically translate to a relationship with God. It does appear, however, that God designed nature to predispose us toward a state of being that lends itself to enhanced spirituality.

What is spirituality? Defining it can

be difficult because it is a concept and can mean different things to different people.²¹ Usually, when attempting to define spirituality, people use language such as imagination, human creativity, or relationships.²² Others use terms such as *mystery*, *transcendence*, *interior life*, or *awareness*, and note that spirituality can refer to both the religious and non-religious experience.²³

History is rife with people groups who adopted a nature-focused spirituality out of harmony with God's plan. Like all gifts of love from the Creator to His children, true spirituality has its counterfeits. The children of Israel discovered and often answered the call of idolatry, practicing evil arts within groves of lofty trees. Today, people worldwide practice spirituality in forms that do not mirror God's intent. Counterfeit spirituality is available at

every bookstore, at the touch of a smartphone screen, and even in some churches. Now more than ever, we need to provide our students with the real thing, an authentic walk with God that is relevant, Bible-based, and sparked with frequent, joyful encounters with the living God.

The Original Plan

We can look to the Bible for a pattern to follow for genuine spirituality. In the creation story, God is pleased with His work and initiates a Sabbath day for celebration, rest, and communion with His children. There, we are told, in the schoolroom of the Garden of Eden and with the Creator as the instructor, "The book of nature, which spread its living lessons before them, afforded an exhaustless source of instruction and delight. On every leaf of the forest, every stone of the mountains, in every shin-



ing star, in earth and sea and sky, God's name was written."²⁴

Throughout the biblical record of redemption, we find humans encountering God in nature: Moses at the burning bush; Elijah listening for God in a whirlwind; David singing of God among his sheep. God repeatedly brings us truths about Himself with illustrations from nature. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"²⁵ God asked Job and outlined in incredible detail the vastness and the minuteness of His creative works. "As for man," wrote the psalmist, "his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting."²⁶ These lessons are not contained in dry, intellectual verbiage. The biblical narratives speak of powerfully emotional experiences: Moses' astonishment and curiosity; Job's placing a hand over his mouth in awe and dismay; Elijah's dramatic search rewarded in a still, small voice; and David's restfulness beside still waters.

If we conclude that God offers nature as an avenue to know Him better, and if we hope to help our students connect with Him in nature, we must carefully consider the approaches we take to facilitate spiritually loaded moments outdoors. The truth is, we cannot make lesson plans that guarantee our students a personal connection with God. Nor can we give grades on a report card that reflect what our students have achieved in their personal walk with God. However, we *can* provide the time and place for time outdoors and reflection. We can structure our schools, curricula, and schedules to ensure that nature becomes a daily part of what we do. We can use nature to teach anything and everything, and we can intentionally plan reflective moments that provide an opportunity for God to work.

Tammy's afternoon with God in the orchard more than 30 years ago was not an isolated event. It followed Bible classes and worship talks. It resulted from a childhood spent playing outside

Links to Forest School and Outdoor Education Resources

The **Outdoor Education Resources** search page on CIRCLE links to more than 25 planning, managing, and instructional resources by Adventist educators for Adventist educators: <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/251/>.

The **Lester Coon Adventist Forest School** Facebook page showcases an active Adventist Forest School. It links to training for teachers and various activities that will be helpful to anyone looking to start a forest school: <https://www.facebook.com/LCAForestKindergarten/>.

The **Alberta Teachers' Association Forest School Guide** provides links to books about forest schools, activities and lessons, outdoor classroom design ideas, teaching tips, and the philosophy of outdoor school: <https://teachers-ab.libguides.com/c.php?g=712400&p=5078151>.

Graduate Outdoor Education offered at Southern Adventist University provides Adventist educators with further training and degree options: <https://www.southern.edu/academics/edpsych/graduate-outdooreducation.html>.

North American Association of Environmental Education is a national organization for environmental education that offers an abundance of EE materials: <https://naaee.org/>.

Natural Start Alliance is branch of NAAEE specializing in early-childhood education: <https://naturalstart.org/>.

Project Wild is an interdisciplinary conservation and environmental-education program with curriculum for K-12. Its goal is to develop awareness, knowledge, skills, and commitment to wildlife and the environment: <https://www.fishwildlife.org/projectwild>.

and wandering the woods. That afternoon was the culmination of many smaller parts. It was a 1st-grade teacher sending children outside during morning worship to find illustrations of God's love. It was keeping a nature journal and mapping birds' nests as a young teen. It was nature walks and fireside songs, ant farms, and polliwogs. It was exposure to nature in the context of God as Creator, Friend, and Savior.

To be outdoors in nature is to experience it with all our senses, to be awake in every sense of the word. With our feet planted on the earth and with life stretching and growing around us, we are in God's classroom.

Through His creation, we learn about Him and connect with Him. Intentional, spiritual encounters with God in nature are powerful and personal, and they can add up to a lifetime of deep friendship with God.

We hear many challenges in the words "Adventist education." An important one is to be at the forefront of a trend that harkens back to the Eden School, as described in the book *Education*. Outdoor education is in the collective DNA of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For more than 100 years, we have known that "Next to the Bible, nature is to be our great lesson book."²⁷ In nature, we find illustrations of the story of redemption. We see Jesus on the mountainside—not at the syn-

agogue or even a rooftop, but on a hillside—engaged in a heartfelt conversation with His Father. Our Bibles contain His words in red: consider the lily, a seed, a sparrow. What lessons about God does nature hold for us? How can our students find Him? We propose a simple but effective method: *Take our students outdoors.* ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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