

Knapp: Aging in place: The benefits of spending time in nature

By Guest Column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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I grew up in a city triple-decker. In the back of the house there was a plantless, dusty yard that became muddy in the rain. Nothing blossomed there. The only tree I remember from my early childhood was the one that grew in the drab, crumbling playground next to our driveway. As I came into my teen and young adult years I had only a bit more exposure to the out-of-doors but when I moved to the suburbs as a young mother with small children I wanted my kids to understand and appreciate a part of living that I had limited exposure to. I had to read up on natural things before going out for walks with them in the neighborhood. I learned what “puddingstone” was and could explain how it was formed. The little stream in back of the elementary school was a place to find tadpoles and where I could explain how pollywogs became frogs.

Over these many years since that time, I have learned a little more than rocks and frogs, and have gained immense respect for the spectacle of nature. This has come about because I have purposely prodded myself to look and listen with intent. Now when I walk in the woods I notice the dazzling patterns of light on the ground and how they change when the wind blows through branches. I have become enamored of the velvety look of mosses when they are wet and the astonishing variety of lichens on dead tree limbs. Mostly, though, I cherish the peace I feel when I am in an outdoor space where there is quiet all around me except for the swish of dry leaves in the fall and the jumbled sounds of birds whose names I still don't know.

I have found that these precious moments in nature expanded the joy I felt when I or someone close to me achieved an important goal, or when I heard the terrific news each time I was to become a grandmother. Nature soothes me and feeds my spirit when there are tough decisions to make and losses to embrace. Last spring when my vibrant, 40-year-old friend – an environmental scholar and activist - died suddenly, I found sad solace imagining her spirit in simple, intense displays of nature.

Jane Sender, president of the Newton Conservators understands these life issues. She spoke with reverence about the positive, reflective value in being outdoors. “There is spiritual nourishment to be found in nature,” she says. “Through it you can develop a fuller appreciation of life in all its forms – it is all there in front of you. We tend to think of ourselves as separate from the natural world but we are not; we are part of it.”

Being in the natural world can help us put things in perspective if we take the time to slow down in places that are different from our routine haunts. Many people appreciate the benefits of nature but others of us may need a gentle push to get out of doors.

“The natural world is so much slower than our sometimes frenetic, anxious lives,” Sender says. “It is perfect for reflection, especially for people as they get older. There is so much to learn. Sit quietly on a bench by the river for an hour and watch the vibrant world around you. This ever-changing scene of birds, insects, mammals, and plants is something to learn from and wonder about.” Simply noticing helps put our own lives in a larger context and offers a different perspective on our particular life-stage.

We don't have to go very far to find places to walk, sit, and think. Parks and conservations areas are close by. The Newton Conservators has just published a newly revised trail guide with maps for 34 nature areas in Newton and surrounding towns, and works to acquire new land (not much is available now), conserve what is natural in developed areas, and advocate for open space. Some areas are very large (800 acres) and some are very small (.5 acres). Some of them can be challenging with sharp inclines and complicated pathways. Others are flat, easy to walk, have benches for sitting, and, amazingly, hidden from busy streets and bustling neighborhoods by just a few yards of colorful trees and shrubs. You can read all about the areas, buy the trail guide, and find out about walks and events by logging on to

www.newtonconservators.org.

Newton Conservators will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2011 and, although I have lived in Newton for more than 40 years, I have only now discovered the terrific work they are doing. Trying to make up for my ignorance, I have set a goal to visit and, if possible, walk all 34 areas – mostly in the order listed in their guide. A friend and I have visited six so far (definitely check out the mile-long, walkable, accessible Charles River Path – Bemis Dam which has an entrance at Chapel and California Streets). I will give you a report sometime in the future when we get further along in discovering places to reflect, relax, and find comfort as we incorporate nature into our lives.

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and care-giver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia”. She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a Commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging.

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