

Why Practice Natural History?

Mount Auburn Cemetery

Clare Walker Leslie

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Today, I have come to Mount Auburn to see what is here – no lions, no tigers. Just minutes away from the daily business of my usual life, I enter a world so different from where I have just been – into the calming presence of chickadees, robins, a catbird, bumblebee, turtle, fall asters, and drone of cicadas.

Nothing special – everything special ...

Yes, the continual background hum of traffic, sirens, and people buzz, but all are muffled by the acres of rolling greens that now cool my eyes and refocus my soul. I get out my pen and draw acorns as they bang on the walkway and then continue with drawing the chipmunk fast stuffing bits in its mouth. With glittering, beady eyes, it stares at me, and I at it – together only in a moment, now, before it dashes off to a life I don't know.

For over thirty years, Mount Auburn Cemetery has been my studio, my classroom – my place of learning, my place for regaining spirit.

I did not begin as a wee child the life I now lead as a wondering and wandering artist/naturalist, like many others I know. In high school and college, I was a musician, an academic, and a confused child of the '60s. Nature to me was where you went with guys, finding shadows for a blanket and some cheap wine. Throughout college and for several years after, I never went outdoors, in the sense of thinking and

September 14 2011
Mt Auburn Cemetery
Camb. MA
11:30 am
80° hazy, humid
blue skies
☉ waning gibbous
getting towards
Equinox -
9-23



learning about nature as a subject to *study*. Instead, I taught and made art indoors, played music indoors, watched with despair the political world whirl about, and grew increasingly depressed by all that I saw around me.

Until, one day, a new friend of mine who was teaching science at the same school invited me, on a very early Sunday morning, to go with her out to a favored place of coastal dunes,

expansive tidal marshes, and masses of birds. I had never been bird watching before. I knew nothing about birds, had no binoculars, and had no idea I would even want to draw a bird, let alone learn what a Hudsonian Godwit was.

Within five minutes of loping along the dunes after my friend Jorie, I was hooked, and I am still hooked some 45 years later. *Why?* What is it about nature, the study of Snow Geese, fox tracks, rolling clouds, White-winged Scoters, and crumpled bayberry leaves ... the study of natural history ... that grabs at our very heartstrings?

This has not been my experience alone. I've spent 45 years watching students who have never before spent any time focusing/watching/drawing nature become similarly hooked, also within only a short span of time.

I ask teachers of all kinds – of elementary, middle school, high school, inner city, suburban, and rural classes – why their students are so easily and genuinely captivated simply by going out into their school yards

and fields to watch and draw dandelions or crows. One teacher replied, “How do you test *joy*?”

For me, the study of nature and natural history is the study of *joy*. It is a time when we can connect to that which is greater than us, yet includes us. We are watching “Our Tribe”: Crows are part of our world, as are Red-tailed Hawks, gray squirrels, and earthworms. Year after year, I have stood back and watched my students – all ages, all across the country – fall in love with the world that is before them. They are hungry for that connection, what I call “I/Thou Connection” with the non-human. E. O. Wilson calls it “biophilia,” which essentially means the need to love and be connected with nature, an innate understanding that nature is a core ingredient within us and was once at the essence of human survival.

It is in this “laboratory” of Mount Auburn Cemetery that I have learned much of what I know about nature. I often feel I am the humble student coming to the halls of high learning. Because Mount Auburn Cemetery is so close to where I live with my family, I can enter its high iron gates frequently and for bits of time as time allows: 15 minutes of study, 30 minutes, 1 hour, or 3.

Numerous drawings in my books come from along these paths, glades, dells, and ponds. Much of my writing begins from walking here. The foundation for the ongoing phenology study drawings I have kept in my journals since 1978 were done in these 175 acres of shaded woods once visited by Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, and the great naturalist/philosophers of the Cambridge region – this “sweet auburn” of Oliver Goldsmith’s poem.

As an art historian by college degree, I am fascinated by the foundation of natural history study throughout human history. Nature and culture have long lived side by side, at least as long ago as the early recorded art on the cave walls in Lascaux, France, some 17,000 years ago. My special interest is the American artist/naturalists of the 19th and early 20th century, who

sought to bring to the public’s eye the vast and wondrous wilderness landscapes of our new country, for preservation as well as for pure delight.

The Big Question I often have my students consider, which I think can be incredibly difficult to answer (have a go at it, yourself, and see) is, “*Why study nature?*”

Most often their answers have to do with: “to learn to better protect,” “because nature makes me feel good,” “because we are messing up nature”, “because if we don’t learn about nature it will go away,” and so on. Much of our relationship with nature has to do with what it can do for us rather than considering it as a foundation for community and mutual survival together. I still get jolted awake every time I look at the magnet we have on our refrigerator of a polar bear sitting on an ice flow, with a comment below the photo: “My home is your home.” That about sums it up for me.



When I dart into Mount Auburn Cemetery, no matter if I have just come from a class, food shopping, working on a painting or manuscript, a worrisome talk with my daughter, or more distressing NPR news, all that slides off as I begin to draw a spider skimming across a leaf or a Mallard dabbling in brown-shaded water.

Why? I can’t put this into words. There are so many superb writers, poets, photographers, painters, musicians, and dancers who can say it better than I. And you can, too. Go into your own landscape, wherever you may be, and just observe yourself as you slide into that warming envelope that is the nature around you – so present, so eternal. Nature saved me from being an early-twenties, despairing artist. What is it for you?

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