



The Magic of Nature

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Magic is an old dog — 14 or 15 — we're not exactly sure. Mom inherited her from my brother when he moved to an apartment that didn't allow dogs. Magic spends most days and nights in the prone position. She spends the day lying on the couch, barely moving except to lift her head when someone enters the room. She spends the night on the floor next to Mom's bed, as she can no longer jump up onto the bed.

When we go in the car now I have to help her onto the seat. Until we get to the beach. She jumps out of the car, sniffs around a bit and hits the beach. She runs and hops and runs some more. She glances back to make sure you are still there and then runs and hops some more. When she gets back to the car she jumps right up onto the seat unassisted. The magic of nature.

The Germans recognize the magic. On Saturdays and Sundays in Germany you see people out walking everywhere. Families. Couples with baby strollers. Older people. All enjoying "die gute Luft" — the good air. Whether strolling through woods, fields, city parks or gardens, they know they need time in nature.

They make it accessible, too, with groomed trails all over Germany. In Heidelberg where we lived, there are 375 miles of walking/hiking trails. The fields often have cemented narrow roads throughout to facilitate farmers reaching their work areas. These trails are taken over by walkers on weekends. Benches interspersed throughout the woods and fields invite you to stop, sit and enjoy the view.

"Schrebergarten" are found in every town and city. These are areas of small garden plots that apartment dwellers can cultivate. Their little piece of land. People take great pride in their plots, filling them with flowers and vegetables and small huts and picnic areas so their families can savor weekends and evenings "in the country."

I have a theory that part of this deep love for nature comes from having lived through the devastation of war. And part comes from having lived in small quarters. Many Germans live in apartments smaller than we Americans are accustomed to.

But I don't think any of us need to be deprived to appreciate nature. We do need to acknowledge its importance and be proactive about spending time in it.

I often spend long days at the computer. The best thing I can do in the evening to renew my body and soul is to get outside where I can see green and walk. I listen to birds. I watch the changing light in the sky behind the hills. My mind floats. And I relax.

Studies show that views of nature decrease stress and increase feelings of elation and positive thinking. But do your own study.

I spend two weeks at the Pentagon for my annual reserve duty. Like workers in many government and corporate offices, I work in rooms without windows, or with windows that don't open. You could easily spend your entire day indoors, traveling by metro, entering the Pentagon through the metro stop that requires no exposure to the outside, walking throughout the building through enclosed corridors and stairways. I did that my first time there and suffered with headaches and stress the entire two weeks.

This year I took corrective measures. I walked through the flower shop in the concourse daily, smelling the flowers. The owner stopped asking me if he could help me. He knew my answer, "I'm just taking a joy break." I walked through the courtyard whenever possible. Birds greet you as you walk out, the canopy of trees filters soft light, blue sky beckons above. I could feel my body relaxing each time as I took deep breaths of fresh air (once I got past the smoker sections). My stress level was much lower than the year before and I didn't have to reach for aspirin even once.

Find your own flower shop. Stroll through a city park. Move dirt in your garden. Listen to birds. Breathe deeply of the fresh air. Do stop and smell the roses. Then let it register in your body. What are the gifts you are giving yourself? Quiet? Renewal? Less stress? Beauty? Joy? Life? Magic?