



TALKING POINT SIMON BARNES

“Nature helps us to enjoy life better and to endure it more steadfastly.”

Let's start with a flask made of diamond, a flask containing a magic fluid, like the one given to Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The wonderful juice in the flask, just like that in Lucy's, can cure the sick and heal the harmed. It also does a great deal more.

It soothes the soul. It eases those who are feeling the strain of modern life. It helps those whose lives are out of kilter. It makes things better for people suffering from breakdowns, depressions and the inability to cope with the bruising rhythms of the 21st century.

The juice is especially good for children, making them happier and stronger and better able to work and to learn. Children with difficulties become better able to cope with the world and its challenges. The juice also helps people to feel more kindly towards each other and to deal with each other more fairly. It helps people to live better lives. It consoles the bereaved; it brings succour to people oppressed by worry and care.

But the juice doesn't just undo damage. It also brings wonderful things to anyone who sips from the flask: deep joy, a profound philosophical acceptance of life, a sense of belonging to the world and even, at times, an ecstasy of pleasure that lasts for a moment and stays forever.

So the leaders and the people thought about this for a while. Then they decided to pour the magic fluid down the sink – because a diamond flask could be flogged for a lot of money and you can never have too much, can you?

The name of the flask is Planet Earth; the name of the liquid is Nature.

The central truth of 21st-century life is that we are throwing away the most precious thing in our lives because we've got a madcap notion that we can do better without it. It seems that we honestly believe that when our divorce from nature is complete we'll live richer and happier lives.

Let's forget, at least for the moment, the fact that nature also keeps us alive. Nature is the life-support system that permits the plants to grow and allows us to breathe and drink and eat. But nature doesn't just keep us from death: it also makes life worth living.

We seek nature instinctively and we do so in a hundred different ways, some so convoluted that we hardly know that nature is behind it. We go for walks, we garden, we fish, we play golf, we jog through the park, we swim, we sail, we cycle, we ride horses, we keep dogs and cats, we take weekends in the country, we take weeks by the sea, we look out of windows, we move to the suburbs, we drink in the pub garden, we have barbecues and picnics.

Thousands of experiments have shown us how nature makes life better. Patients recover faster after operations if they have a view from the hospital window, better still



if they can see a tree. Autistic children work much better when they have access to nature. People doing complex tasks perform them better after a break and better still if the break is in natural surroundings.

One experiment asked people to pass judgement on offenders. The judges who could see only skyscrapers routinely punished harder than those who could see trees, and were particularly severe on offenders from minority groups. In a different experiment, one group said that what mattered in life were fame and wealth, while the other said it was family and friends. The latter group were questioned in a room to which three – just three – pot plants had been added.

Nature helps to keep us sane, balanced and cheerful. When we perform good actions we call ourselves “humane”: we are more likely to perform humane acts when we have access to non-human life. Nature helps us to enjoy life better and to endure it more steadfastly. Nature helps us to feel less bad: it also brings us some of the greatest moments of our lives. And – sorry about this, but this is a blunt column and I'm going to use blunt language when it suits me, so brace yourself – love. Yes, that old thing. Love of family and friends is an essential part of life, and again and again nature brings us supreme moments when we feel a great outpouring of love for life itself. It comes in David Attenborough's cry of joy on seeing a blue whale, it comes in Gerard Manley Hopkins' ecstatic poem about a kestrel – a bird you can see on the motorway – and it comes to you and me when we hear the song of a blackbird on a spring evening.

Seems a shame to chuck all that away. ■

Learning an appreciation for nature and the world around us is beneficial at all ages.

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