Find Peace - Walk in Nature

Air Date: July 07, 2024

Guest: David Lowry, Don Drew

Resources: Peacemaking101.com

David Lowry: 0:29

Hello and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio, your place on the internet for cultivating a peaceful life. We're here to help you enjoy life more by eliminating interpersonal drama and conflict and developing some peaceful habits. I'm David Lowry and with me is Don Drew. Don, tell us about our show today.

Don Drew: 0:48

David, we're going to be talking about walking in nature and how it's good for our peace, our feelings of peacefulness, and bringing peace to our lives.

David Lowry: 0:57

I'm glad we're going to be talking about that. This show is about developing some peaceful habits as well as some of those things that eliminate conflict and drama. But before we get into the show today, Don, we ought to encourage our listeners to please like us, subscribe to us, download our podcast, tell your friends about us, and of course, visit our website, PeacefulLifeRadio. com, and leave comments with us. We'll get back with you. We want to hear from you.

Don Drew: 1:26

David, I'm an avid walker and hiker. My wife Christy and I do it whenever we can, but every morning, I'll get up and walk in nature for a couple of miles, and it's a wonderful experience. I use that time to sometimes watch herds of deer. I've seen as many as 17 deer on a single walk. And there's this great flock of Canada geese that often land in the middle of the field and it's a miracle to watch. It's beautiful. And I've learned over years how much being in nature, walking in nature, hiking in nature brings peace to my life. So, I'd like to share some thoughts about how that can help our listeners if they use that as a form of exercise or form of relaxation, how that can bring more peace into their lives.

David Lowry: 2:11

I so agree with that. I don't get out and hike like I want to, Don, but I feel better when I do it. And I've learned when I don't do it, then my body doesn't feel as good, I don't feel as good. And that interrupts other areas of life as well. I think it makes us more prone to disagreements with other people, makes us a little short-tempered. We really need to exercise our body, and I'm going to listen carefully to what you have to say today because an appreciation of nature opens us up to something greater than ourselves.

Don Drew: 2:45

Yes, David. And, over the years, my walking has been transformed from a form of exercise, which is what it originally was, into what I've come to call walking meditation. A couple of years ago, Christy gave me a small book by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh called Titled How to Walk. That's an interesting title for a book, isn't it? Ah. And there's a beautiful meditation in the book on sleepwalking. And this is a shortened version of what Han says. We're in such a rush, looking for happiness in one place and then another. We are walking, but in our minds, we are already doing something else. Planning, Organizing, Worrying. There is no more need to run. We can touch the earth and see the sky and notice all the wonders in between. In each step, there is the possibility of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. I think that's a beautiful description of a peaceful life, David.

David Lowry: 3:36

He's also talking about paying attention to where you are right now. Hanh is very big on mindfulness-- paying attention to what you're doing in the moment. And I feel a little guilty when I hear you talk, because I'm one of those people who's always thinking ahead. I'm in the moment, I'm thinking, what's the next thing I need to be doing? How much time do I have left? When instead, I could be enjoying the very moment I'm in, savoring it, and then moving on to the next thing.

Don Drew: 4:06

David, there are many benefits that come from walking in nature, and there are several ways in which nature can improve feelings of peace. So, let's consider some of those. First of all, reduce stress. Walking and hiking in nature has been shown in multiple studies to reduce stress hormones like cortisol. The calming sights, sounds, and smells of nature can have a tranquil effect on the nervous system, promoting relaxation and reducing feelings of anxiety. However, the benefits are not only psychological. Other studies have shown that there are desirable effects on physiological functions as well, including decreased blood pressure and enhanced immune functions.

David Lowry: 4:44

Now, I don't know if this would qualify with what you've just said, but guess what else it helps with? What's that? Weight control. I've discovered if I walk enough steps that it helps me maintain my weight. And for me, Don, it needs to be around 8, 000 steps at least in a day in order to hold the line-- the belt line, if you get what I'm saying right there! It also improves our mood. That's very important because people always remember how you make them feel, right? And nature can boost your mood and well-being. Now, I will say this, that there's a beautiful park where I walk, and one of the things I always keep my eyes open for, Don, is the cardinals. I love cardinals. I don't know why. I consider it my spirit bird or something like that. I love being in nature when I can see those cardinals.

Don Drew: 5:41

Walking in nature can also help us with mindfulness and awareness or focus. Such as focusing on the rhythm of your steps, the sights and sounds around you. The sensations of the fresh air can help quiet the mind and promote a sense of presence in the moment. This break from the constant stimulation of daily life allows for mental

clarity and reduction in rumination. You mentioned, for instance, thinking when you're walking, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's a good time to think about those things that are important to you and sometimes to plan your day, but it's also important to pay attention to the moment, try and retrain yourself to look up and not have your eyes glued to the path in front of you, see those things around you. And it's that paying attention, it's that openness of mind and awareness that lets all of that nature come in and have its positive effects.

David Lowry: 6:29

Along with this thinking about mindfulness and awareness, I typically get to work early, maybe earlier than most of the people at work. There's always somebody who's here before me though. But my point is I get out of the car and noticed the quietness of the morning, the beauty of the sky, a little bit of the breeze, and suddenly I'm almost swept away by the majesty of the morning that's ahead. I try to remind myself to slow down, a moment. Don't run into the building. Don't rush across the parking lot. Take a moment to take it all in. I'll also tell myself to be grateful. Be grateful for this moment-- just seeing what you see and being thankful that you can see what you see. The time may come where you can't get outdoors or can't look up at the sky as easily but enjoy it while you can and love it while you can.

Don Drew: 7:22

Physical activity is another benefit. You've already mentioned the exercise portion, but there are some pretty specific things that can happen when we're walking in nature. Physical activity of walking itself contributes to feelings of peace. Exercise releases endorphins, which have a mood boosting effect, and the gentle exertion of walking can also tire the body in a healthy way, promoting better sleep, which further contributes to well-being. There are some other physical benefits that come. An energy boost, for instance. Exercise can help you increase your energy levels because exercise helps to improve your circulation and oxygen flow. When you have more energy, you're able to cope with stress and feel more peaceful overall. And then there's pain management. Exercise can also help to manage pain. Walking in nature can help us to release those endorphins, giving a pain-relieving effect. Exercise also helps improve our mood and reduce stress, which can make pain feel less severe.

David Lowry: 8:16

And if some of you have pain, you know how that chronic feeling can be so terrible and debilitating. But it's even more important that you put yourself out there so that you don't freeze up entirely or lock up. I want to testify about that sleep thing. So I had the opportunity of being overseas for a couple of months. And where I was staying in Europe, you have to walk everywhere. And it's so easy to get your steps in and you get used to walking everywhere. When I came back, I got into my old bad habit of getting into my car and not walking as much. Then the other day I walked like you've been talking about and guess what? I slept so good that night. It was like my body said I've been needing to do this.

Don Drew: 9:01

Yes, and also one of the other benefits of walking in nature is that you're essentially immersing yourself where you can foster a sense of connection to something larger than yourself. We oftentimes get turned inward and everything is about our concerns, and our work, and our family issues or whatever. And it helps us realize that we're actually part of a bigger world. It's particularly helpful for those that are feeling isolated or overwhelmed from daily pressures. Nature provides a sense of perspective and belonging, promoting our feelings of peace and calmness. Now, some of our listeners are in urban settings where there is not necessarily an obvious source of nature but I have found even in the most urban settings, if you walk and pay attention and notice what's going on around you, you'll see nature coming in surprising ways. It will flourish even in cities. But we have to be aware of that. And if we're all tuned inside of us, we often don't see those things. Things like a heightened sense of awe and wonder can come from that. Witnessing the beauty and complexity of life can evoke feelings of awe. Seeing animals in their natural habitat or plants and observing the intricate details can shift our focus away from daily worries and immerse us in the present moment, which is really a lot of what this is about being present, being mindful, being aware of the world around us. And we too often fly through life on autopilot and don't see these things. They're there, but we don't see them.

David Lowry: 10:28

One of the things you were mentioning about nature in urban settings. It's true, Don. You look up in the sky and if you pay attention, you'll see predators in the air, such as hawks, eagles. You'll see all kinds of birds that are, if you want to get down to it, wild animals, right?

Don Drew: 10:47

There's a great line from the original Jurassic Park movie which was life finds a way. And you'll find it in surprising areas displaying itself in unusually unique and interesting ways. It's something you have to train yourself to look for because it is there.

David Lowry: 11:03

One of Don's favorite authors is Henry David Thoreau, a fervent advocate for peace and solace found in nature. I thought I might summarize some of his key points of view. First, he saw nature as a source of tranquility. He believed that nature offered a refuge from the anxieties and complexities of human society. He saw it as a place to escape the pressures of materialism and reconnect with a simpler and more peaceful way of being.

Don Drew: 11:31

For those of our listeners not familiar with Henry David Thoreau, he was a 19th-century writer who was famous for living by Walden Pond near Boston for two years, two months, and two days, then writing about that experience. A few years back, I read his book Walden sitting against a black birch next to the pond. A leaf from that tree remains as a bookmark in my copy to this day. Two quotes from his book stand out to me. The first is an explanation of why he decided to spend time at Walden Pond. He wrote, I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach. And not, when I came to die,

discover that I had not lived. The second is an endorsement for finding peace in our lives apart from the demands of busyness. He wrote, our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify. Simplify. Thoreau believed a simple life, lived close to nature, was key to achieving peace. His experiment at Walden Pond was an attempt to demonstrate how to simplify his life and minimize material possessions, allowing him to focus on the essential elements of life and find true peace. David, in Thoreau's way of thinking, peacefulness came from this simplicity. It came from a recognition that we are part of a larger world, and we are a small, simple part of that. And focusing on that is one way that we can bring more peace into our lives.

David Lowry: 12:56

If you look at nature and see what's outside of you, you can create that same sense of awe as you have when you meditate. There is a wonderful spiritual significance to nature. He also was talking about mindfulness in nature, the importance of being, observing, and paying attention. He advocated slowing down and noticing how you feel, your sensory details, appreciating the present moment, which allowed for a deeper connection with nature, but most of all, a more peaceful state of mind.

Don Drew: 13:29

For Thoreau, nature wasn't just beautiful, it held a deep spiritual significance. He believed experiencing nature fostered a sense of connection to something larger than oneself, promoting inner peace and a sense of awe.

David Lowry: 13:42

And when we expand beyond ourselves to something greater than ourselves, wow, what a thing it does to bring peace and joy to our lives. Some of the great thinkers stress this one important fact, and it's something that I subscribe to and invite others to as well, if you wish, is The Unity of all Things, The Oneness of All Things. It's easy to become focused on yourself, your problems, what's going on in your family or neighborhood. But once you step out into nature, you realize the world is very beautiful and, despite all the things that's been taking up your headspace, the birds are still flying. The sky is beautiful and blue. The waters are still wonderful. It's all out there for us to take in.

Don Drew: 14:24

Right, David. Adding walking to your life will no doubt enhance opportunities for discovering peace.

David Lowry: 14:29

Don, how do we get started in all of this? How do we do this? You do a little more hiking and get out in nature more than I do. You have to make time for it, I think.

Don Drew: 14:38

You do. I mentioned at the start of this podcast that I walk every day for about two miles, somewhere between two and three miles. And that's become a habit for me. It's easy once you develop a habit, it's easier to keep doing that. Right. And then for longer ventures into nature, Christie and I take time to research great places in the area, some

of them we haven't been before, that we want to explore. And every time we go to a new place, it's a new adventure. I've traveled a lot in my life. I've been to a lot of countries and so on, but one of the great things about going to new places is the newness of it. The new life that you hadn't thought about before. And I get the same kind of feeling when I'm hiking and walking through the woods. It is enlivening, it's encouraging, it's uplifting.

David Lowry: 15:23

What are the things you need to do hiking the way you're talking about?

Don Drew: 15:27

If you're talking about hiking, you need to plot out what you're going to do, basically. You need to do a little bit of research. You figure out where you're entering the trail, how you're getting out, how long it is. And that is the mechanics, if you will, of preparing. Trails are typically marked anywhere from easy to moderate to hard or difficult. You've got to consider your physical condition and some people don't need to be on difficult trails. You want to have good footwear and I always take a small medical kit with me in case there's any kind of an injury or something like that on the trail.

David Lowry: 16:00

That's good thinking. My wife likes to take her favorite water bottle.

Don Drew: 16:04

Yes, yes, gotta have water, and we always take an energy bar whether we eat it or not.

David Lowry: 16:08

Sunscreen is a good idea, maybe a cap and some sunglasses, and you're good to go, really. I know this is a vanity thing, Don, but when I get outside, I love the fact that I get sun. I believe there is great benefit to having sunlight on your skin in small, moderate doses. I'm not talking about baking or anything, but it's good for us to have actual sunlight. Sometimes feel a little bit depressed if I don't get enough sunlight.

Don Drew: 16:35

It's the sun, it's the air. I also feel like I'm breathing better, more fully, when I'm hiking. Of course, there's some exertion there. And that's certainly good from an exercise standpoint. But the mental benefits I get from being in nature and experiencing it firsthand, observing and being aware of what's going on around me. It's enlivening and it's enriching.

David Lowry: 16:58

You've been hiking several years now. What are some things it's given you?

Don Drew: 17:03

Christy and I hike together a lot. It certainly helps our relationship. We have to work together as a team. We'll take turns leading. Quite often, on a trail, you can't walk side by side. So, we'll take turns leading and trust the other one to give us a heads up if there's something ahead, we need to watch out for a step that's particularly tricky. And then I've also hiked with other friends, and I've developed and deepened relationships.

David Lowry: 17:25

Some of my best memories are going places with friends and walking on the trail enjoying company with one another-- seeing the beautiful scenery, that's very special. Those are great memories that you have. But even small walks can be good too. Sometimes if you've been sitting at a desk, talking to people, and living in your head, it's time to get up and move your body a little bit. What is one of the things that you think people will notice right away if they start doing this?

Don Drew: 17:51

One of the things you'll feel right away is being alive. This feeling of I'm part of this bigger world. Feeling invigorated. Feeling like, your world is bigger than your head. David and I are both professors, and we tend to live in our heads. One of the things that you can get right away is you get out of yourself and into the movement and feel the earth beneath your feet and feel the wind. I walk year-round. I do it in the morning, shortly after I get up, and it gets me ready for the day. So, unless the weather is miserable, cold, wind blowing, things of that nature, I'm out there walking. That gets me ready for the day. It gets my head right.

David Lowry: 18:31

One of the things it's done for me, and my wife is we have come to love the land and nature more. In fact, we've got special equipment so that we can pick up trash off the trail or around the little ponds where we live because we love what we see so much that we hate to see it marred by all the things the wind blows up. And it's caused us to love the planet more, and that's a good thing too. As this episode of Peaceful Life Radio draws to a close, we'd like to remind our listeners that peace is closer than we think when our daily lives become overwhelming. You can easily boost your feelings of peace and well-being by immersing yourself in the beauty of the outdoors, Whether it's a short walk in the local park or a longer hike. So, the next time you feel stressed or disconnected, remember the power of nature and take a step outside. By breathing in the fresh air and enjoying the scenery, you will unlock a wealth of benefits that contribute to a more peaceful existence.