

A Commentary: One with Nature

By Roger Steinbrock

The other day I took a walk in nature. It took me back to my childhood – a different time; a different place, but yet very much the same. It reminded me of mind voyages I'd take as a kid when in nature – a realm of fantasy. Whether it was hunting for buried treasure, stalking wildlife or discovering uninhabited land, it brought a smile to my face. More importantly, it brought a calmness I hadn't known in quite awhile. It was like the feeling you have when you arrive home after being away for a while. Somewhere you felt safe and anxiety free.

That's what nature does. In among the shadows of the tall, foliated trees, one can seek personal refuge and forget the troubles of the every day. As I made my way down a winding footpath of fallen leaves, the echoes of nature could be heard – the sway of branches and leaves hit by a gentle breeze, the hum of insects' wings as they flew to their destination, the call of birds in the treetops above and many other sounds that provided a soothing calmness.

Yes, nature can have a profound effect on a person. It not only heightens the senses, but it also can awaken the imagination. I was also brought back to reality by the intermittent sound of automobiles and industrial equipment being used not far from where I stood. It reminded me just how important natural spaces are to not only create buffers but to provide a habitat for the creatures living in nature.

I recently heard Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, speak at a conference and he read an excerpt from his book where he describes his trips as a kid into "his" nature, "his" place. It made me think of today's kids and if they really have the sense generations past have of nature. Sure, they know structured-play – games with rules on well-manicured fields, but do they still know how to "play?" Do they seek the calmness that sitting on a fallen tree in a natural area can bring? With all the technological advances today, natural areas will undoubtedly become even more important in keeping a healthy mental outlook. With the evolution of the cell



phone providing so many options – text, e-mail and access to information via the Internet, no wonder kids find distraction the norm. Even adults can't seem to live without their Blackberry. It's a new kind of addiction, a self-imposed stress.

Being in nature can also alleviate the stresses of everyday life, even those of the self-inflicted variety. It helps in developing a healthy lifestyle. A 30-minute walk everyday, when coupled with a healthy diet, can have a profound effect on a person. Plus, if an adult takes a child with them on a walk, it can assist in developing a stronger bond between them. Exploring nature together can build memories that last a lifetime.

Louv comes to the realization that the lack of nature in a child's life is creating a nature-deficit disorder. *(You can read more about this in the feature on page 16, Take It Outside: Nature's Playground).* It's a

phenomenon that needs to be prevented. When kids can't live without television, video games, cell phones and other vices, there's a big problem. Many kids today don't know how to use their imaginations. They've become disconnected from the natural environment. They don't know how to explore the natural playground, the hidden world of bugs under rocks and fallen logs, the habitat of animals in the wild and the tapestry for natural beauty. As Louv says it isn't too late to reconnect with nature. Here in Lawrence, we have many open spaces that are kept natural like the trails around Mary's Lake and Prairie Park Nature Center, the Pat Dawson-Billings Nature Area, the KANZA Southwind Wildlife Preserve, the McGerw Nature Area and the Thomas-Hunter Walking Trails within Folks Road Park just to name a few.

It is important we pass on to future generations what a connection with nature can bring to a person's life; what a quiet, settling walk in the woods down a footpath fosters in the mind's eye; seeing the beauty in nature and natural beauty of a space untouched.