

Enchanted and Nurtured by Nature



By Marwan Tarazi

I am often asked the question: “Why do you like nature, and why do you like to be outdoors so much?” The question has always bothered me because no matter how much I try to *atfalsaf* (sound philosophical), the only answer I find myself repeating is: “I don’t know.” I just love the outdoors. It feels natural.

This Week in Palestine invited me to talk about hiking and being in nature. So I decided to *atfalsaf*...

Homo sapiens have been around for some three hundred thousand years, and for almost all of this period, they lived as hunters and gatherers, immersed entirely in nature. Although some ten thousand years ago they began to settle down, most humans still worked in agriculture and farming – still very much in tune with nature and its cycles. Only relatively recently have humans begun to have a lifestyle that is removed from nature and rather un-natural.

We humans are genetically programmed to resonate with nature: This is why we enjoy a nice fresh morning breeze, feel sleepy at night, feel romantic when the moon is full, get all sorts of unexplained feelings when we smell a flower, feel alarmed when we hear a hissing sound, get an adrenaline rush when we sense danger, and so on. Our bodies are even programmed to release endorphins that make us feel good when we engage in strenuous physical exercise.

This is why all children love the outdoors and love being in nature. It is just natural – part of our human nature. What happens as children grow, however, is a different thing. We condition nature out of them. We live in a sterile habitat and avoid contact with earth so that we are not “contaminated” by dirt. We ensure that we live and play in artificial “safe” places away from “dangerous” rocks, woods, and natural and ordinary outdoor elements. We condition our children to freak out or be grossed out when they see a bug, and we bring them up as members of religions that place humans above nature and instill the need to dominate it.

Fortunately, while we work hard to take humans out of nature, we cannot take nature out of humans. I was a lucky child in this respect. I grew up in Ramallah when it was still a beautiful town where

nature prevailed: small houses that blended in with the hills and the natural terrain, plenty of gardens and orchards to play in, fruit trees to raid, and wild valleys a few minutes away. Streets were just playgrounds with occasional cars. We’d spend weekends with my grandparents, either in Birzeit, or in Gaza. Birzeit was a small village then, where stepping out of the family house meant being almost immediately in nature. In Gaza, my grandfather’s huge orange orchard with an ancient well that had hundreds of fruit bats nesting in it was an amazing playing field – and the magnificent sea, of course: rough, challenging, exciting, and beautiful. And most importantly, my parents were relatively “chill” about letting us stay outside in nature. Admittedly, all the heavy-duty adventure stuff had to be done in secret, but that was a different story.





So I grew up loving nature and the outdoors, and without giving it much thought, it became an important part of my life. I would find myself spending weekends hiking, climbing, camping, biking, swimming, etc. This is where I spent time with people I liked and felt comfortable with – typically nice, easygoing people who respect nature and are humbled by it. It came as no surprise to anyone when Ranya and I decided to get married. Ranya had just come back from studying abroad, and we would engage together in nature activities all the time...
 طنجرة ولقت غطاها, people would say.

As our children were growing up, we would take them with us into nature; and those were amongst the most pleasurable moments with them. The entire world was our playground. We would make toys with anything and be active, creative, and relaxed – neither bound nor controlled by “modernity.”

Working in education, I always think of ways to engage people – especially children – in nature. How to bring out nature and the love of nature, knowing how much children enjoy nature activities. For three years, I supported

the establishment of a hiking club at my children’s school. It was another beautiful experience. The children loved it and I loved being with them. They wanted to form leader groups, to plan and to organize ... but then “rules and regulations” killed the idea. I have not given up, of course, and through my work, I continue to plan and strategize learning activities in nature; it is the natural way to learn after all. Just think about it. Our educational system is designed to cram 30 to 40 students within four walls and then force them to sit still to listen to a teacher and behave. Just imagine what kind of learning could be done in a natural setting – as it relates to the development of social and life skills, physical and mental well-being, love and respect for nature, for each other, and for our country... and all this while having fun! Of course, to implement this strategy, much reflection and thinking outside the box would be needed, but this is the type of research I’m involved in.

My advice to anyone – Go out into nature! You have it in you. It’s a great way to switch off completely: from

work, politics, and technology. Don’t go out with pots, pans, *طبيخ* (*tabikh*, which typically refers to heavy, plentiful food), charcoal, and the works. Go out light and just enjoy it. Remember, once you eat a sandwich to satisfy your hunger, all the fantasies and cravings about the meal will disappear.

If you are physically active (through modernity’s artificial devices – e.g., the gym), test out your muscles in nature: go for a power hike in nature, try snorkeling in the sea – it’s a lot more scenic than the pool’s tiles; try mountain biking, rock-climbing, etc. Luckily today, there are many groups and initiatives to encourage outdoor activities in Palestine. I’m sure that many of them are featured in this issue – so you don’t even have an excuse to say, “I don’t know where to start.” A final note: once you overcome the 30-second agony of waking up early on a weekend to set off for an activity in nature, the following 24 hours are bliss. It’s worth the effort!

Article photos courtesy of the author.

“When we were children, our parents used to take us hiking all the time. When I would go to school the following day with all sorts of stories of adventure and excitement, I would realize that most of my classmates had just hung around the house and done nothing exciting. I would say to myself, “Haram” (poor souls). I could never understand why their parents would deprive them of something so beautiful and wonderful – yet so easy to do.”

Sari Tarazi

Marwan Tarazi is the director of the Center for Continuing Education at Birzeit University. He firmly believes that only through good education can the world become a better and safer place for all. Marwan has dedicated his career to redesigning or creating new educational models necessary to prepare future generations for an extremely fast-changing world and uncertain future. Marwan loves nature and the outdoors and believes that it is our responsibility to teach our children how to interact responsibly and respectfully with others and the environment.

*Tungera wa' laqat ghataha, literally: the pot found its lid, an ancient Palestinian proverb.