

Nourished by nature

To camp is to connect and commune with nature and family

My mother grew up in a tiny little town in central Wisconsin where nature was a stone's throw from her back door.

Her summers were filled with long, lazy days spent poking around “the Rips” — what folks in Greenwood called the rushing waters of the Black River. She'd spend hours there, lost in whatever youthful daydreams filled her imagination, sitting on giant granite boulders, dangling her feet in the ice-cold pools, tossing in sticks and watching them bob down the root beer-colored water till they floated out of sight.

When my sister and I were little, our parents shared their love of the environment with us by taking us hiking through Parfrey's Glen near Baraboo, camping at Michigan's Copper Harbor, and exploring the pine forests at Bagley Rapids in the Nicolet National Forest.

Because they took us to these special places, we developed a deep love and respect for nature.

Today, my sister lives with the Waupaca River in her back yard. Her family see beaver at breakfast and deer at dinnertime, cranes on a regular basis and the occasional fox.

We live in Milwaukee. My children see squirrels.

They are “nature disadvantaged.” They don't get a daily dose of nature the way my mom did and my sister does.

And that's a problem, because we have biophilia.

Actually, we all have it — the entire human race. Biophilia is what Pulitzer Prize-winning author Edward O Wilson defines as the “urge to affiliate with other forms of life,” the biologically based need for the healing balm of nature.

Research shows that people respond strongly and positively to trees, meadows, water, winding trails — in other words, people need nature.

Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in The Woods: Saving our children from Nature-Deficit Disorder,” says spending time in nature is essential for healthy childhood development. It's something we all need, somewhere deep in our souls.

I know he's right because every time I get back to nature, it feels *deep-down* good. And one of the best ways for a city family like ours to experience nature is to go camping.

In our family, we camp to disconnect from the artificial world, to commune with the natural world, to reconnect with one another — and to see God.

To begin, we disconnect. We leave the phone / TV / computer behind, toss the calendar out the window, and drive to one of Wisconsin's many beautiful state park campgrounds. Sometimes we go to our friends' woods on Lower Bass Lake near Antigo.

Once the tent is pitched, the sleeping bags unfurled, the folding chairs opened, and the campfire started, we know we're back — back to the “Ahhhh . . . this is so-o-o- nice” contentment of camping togetherness.

If you love camping, you know the feeling of being there again. There's nothing in the world like the peace, the separateness, a calm of knowing you have nowhere else to go and nowhere you'd rather be.

A good camping weekend — usually that's all the time we can spare — consists of equal parts relaxation and work. But the difference between work at home and work while camping is about as wide as the Mississippi River over the green Wyalusing bluffs.

Camping work is fun because it's so rewarding. Though my three kids might not come right out and call it that, I think each of us appreciates the rare pleasure to be found in finally sitting down to a breakfast that took twice as long for five people to prepare and cook over a camp stove as it would have if you'd done it alone in your own kitchen.

We make it together, we eat it together, and food never tastes as good as when we take our place at the brown wooden dining table of the great outdoors.

Once our campfire conversation wanes, we climb into the soft flannel nest of sleeping bags on our tent floor and sink into the restful slumber a day of fresh air delivers.

Morning comes early, with chirping birds and sunlight streaming through the leafy canopy above your tent.

That might be the moment you see God.

Or it could be later that day when, in exploration of the world around you, you notice the perfect trillium or see the delight in your child's eyes when he spies a small turtle crawling toward a hollow log.

Nature is perfection and beauty. This, I tell my children, is how I know there is a God.

We have such a brief opportunity to pass on to our children our love for this earth, says author Louv, whose children are now young adults.

Looking back, he says, "The times I spent with my children in nature are among the most meaningful memories."

These are the moments when the world is made whole, he says.

These are the brief moments in family life when time stands still, and we want for nothing.