

## Noticing: How To Take A Walk In The Woods

by ADAM FRANK

April 23, 2013 3:53 PM

When was the last time you met someone who didn't tell you they were "crazy busy"? It seems like everyone these days is overwhelmed. From the endless tasks of maintaining home and family life to the ever-accelerating pressures of the endlessly troubled, endlessly competitive economy, it seems that all of us are running ragged.

In this permanent state of hyperventilation, the issue for us all is not stopping to smell roses. It's not even noticing that there are roses right there in front of us. Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of religion, hit the core of our problem when he wrote, "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive."

But how can we experience "being alive" in the midst of the crushing urgencies that make up modern life?

Well, it might seem strange, but one answer to that question is "science," at least science with a lowercase "s." Science, you see, is all about noticing. This is where it begins, with simple act of catching seeing the smallest detail as an opening to a wider world of wonder and awe. And here is the good news. You don't need a particle accelerator or well-equipped genetics lab in your basement to practice noticing (that would be science with a capital "S").

You already are a scientist. You have been since you were a kid playing with water in the tub, or screwing around in the backyard with dirt and sticks and stuff.

If you want to rebuild your inner-scientist-noticing-skills, the best place to begin is with a walk in the woods.

There are lots of reasons to take a walk in the woods. To get away from it all, clear your head, smell the fresh air. The problem, of course, is that even if we get ourselves into a park or a forest, we might still be so lost in our heads that we miss what's right in front of us. Practicing noticing, like a scientist, can change that by binding us to experience in ways that are thrilling, even in their ordinariness.

Noticing can take many forms. One trick is to count things. Scientists love to count stuff. How many trees are there on the sides of a steep hill compared with its crest? How many leaves are there on the stalks of the blue flowers compared to the yellow ones? How many different kinds of birdsong do you hear when you stop and listen, (by the way, this requires really stopping and really listening, which is awesome). Counting things forces you to pay attention to subtleties in the landscape, the plants, the critters.

Other things scientists love: shapes, colors, patterns. Do the rocks at the stream's edge look different from the ones near the trail? Do the big cattails have the same color as the small ones? Get your naturalist on and bring a notebook. Pretend you are Henry David Thoreau or John Muir. Jot down your findings, make little drawings and always, always ask yourself those basic questions: why, how, when?

You don't need the answers. As the poet Rilke once said, "Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language." Questions raise our pulse and sharpen our delight.

Noticing need not be a passive activity. Remember the words of the great scientist Ms. Frizzle (of The Magic School Bus), "Take changes, make mistakes, get messy." Who needs a gym when you can climb the steep face of a hill? Hoisting yourself up a tree is a great way to notice the trees, the branches and the roots. Sure, most of us won't be emulating John Muir, riding out a Yosemite thunderstorm in the crest of wildly swaying Douglas fir. Still, we might climb a few low-hanging branches, forcing ourselves into questions like: "Why do the big limbs give way to narrow branches?" or "Exactly where on the branch do the leaves start to grow?" and, of course, "How the hell do I get down from here?"

I am not a biologist, geologist or plant physiologist, so I am as clueless as the next guy when I get out in the woods. But these science tricks for noticing help me focus my attention and keep me present. And that's what it's all about: presence.

Refining our capacity to notice is an act of reverence that we can bring to everywhere and everywhen. It's an invitation, bringing the world's most basic presence into view, opening our horizons and restoring our spirits. And that is what science is really there for.