Voices of Sisters
Spirituality
Environment



(Nodelyn Abayan)



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"*I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree, on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind. As long as this exists ... and I may live to see it, this sunshine, the cloudless skies, while this lasts, I cannot be unhappy.*"

—*Anne Frank*

Now and then, during my afternoon walks, I take my phone camera out and snap beautiful pictures of whatever catches my attention, here and there — wherever I lay my eyes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, my physical exercise goal of accomplishing 10,000 steps a day has become more and more a leisure time of encountering beauty, of keeping in touch with the now-ness of life.

The world's suffering seems unbearable and overwhelming. The life that we knew before no longer exists. It seems to have become a thing of the past.

Sometimes it is tempting to just not pay attention anymore and be numb emotionally and psychologically. It is so easy just to raise our hands, give up and say, "That's it. I am done with all of this crap!"

But then again, what would happen if we surrendered and gave in to depression, isolation and loneliness? What good does that do? What would that make us?



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My afternoon walk has become a lifesaver for me. Not only does it oxygenate my brain (which helps me relax and stay calm), but it also makes my heart and spirit well up in gratitude and love for life! As Anne Frank said, while this lasts, I cannot be unhappy.

Mother Nature is God's way of letting us know that it is not all bad. Happiness is a choice. The Earth, our home, is holding us all continuously. She embraces us every time we take notice of the tiny yellow daffodils. Or whenever we exchange smiles

with our fellow human beings, inhale the freshness of the morning air or bathe in the morning light — or even when we have the opportunity to rest our mind and our bodies in sleep at the end of the day.

Sometimes we get caught up in our heads and thoughts, and we begin to believe that this is all there is. Yes, I agree; sometimes, it does feel that way. By "this," I mean the narratives of not-so-beautiful thoughts that become more like a broken record, and yet they are mere thoughts. Most of these are not real and they do not have any basis.

And that is normal. But luckily the loving Creator made us in such a way that we can enjoy the gift of creation. We have our bodily senses, so we don't just function like robots but can truly live fully! The Benedictine monk Br. David Steindl-Rast wrote,

> God's inexhaustible poetry comes to me in five languages: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting. All the rest is interpretation — literary criticism, as it were, not the poetry itself. ...
>
> When and to what do your senses respond most readily? If I ask myself this question, I think immediately of working in the garden. The hermitage where I am privileged to live for the better part of each year has a small garden. For fragrance, I grow jasmine, pineapple mint, sage, thyme, and eight different kinds of lavender. What abundance of delightful smells on so small a patch of ground! And what variety of sounds: spring rain, autumn wind, all year around the birds — mourning dove, blue jay, and wren; the hawk's sharp cry at noon and the owl's hooting at nightfall — the sound the yard-broom makes on gravel, wind chimes, and the creaking garden gate. Who could translate the taste of strawberry or fig into words? What an infinite array of things to touch, from the wet grass under my bare feet in the morning, to the sun-warmed boulders against which I lean when the evening turns cool. My eyes go back and forth between the near and the far: the golden metallic beetle lost among rose petals; the immense expanse of the Pacific, rising from below the cliff on which this hermitage is perched to the far-off horizon where sea and sky meet in mist.

Every day, I thank God for the gift of my senses, like those that Brother David described.

I guess happiness can be very relative — and very subjective, for that matter. I am biased when it comes to spending time outdoors, and am privileged to live in one of the world's most gorgeous cities, San Francisco. Part of why I love nature so much has to do with growing up poor and living my childhood years in Manila, Philippines — where the sights were mostly jeepneys, basketball courts and buildings.

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My family always had either a cat or a dog, which I can say was the closest thing I had to nature (besides the other human beings I lived with). In the summer, sometimes, we went to the beach together and had a picnic. I remember swimming into the open sea and forgetting everything; it was simply a mesmerizing childhood experience. Even as an adult, the memory still has the same effect on me.

As a Sister of Social Service who ministers to children and families in a child care setting, and as a spiritual director, I give a lot of myself. It is the nature of who we are as ministers of God. We offer our best in everything that we do.

Therefore, it is essential that we also take care of ourselves. We can only give from whatever reserves we have. How do we replenish our souls?

I do that through my walks and hikes. And it is for free! Although it takes discipline and intentionality, it is hard not to be happy if my soul is tethered to the very thread that connects us all as one human and sentient family, which is the essence of God in everything and all things.

That "thread" I consider sometimes to be "grace." It is something that is so real, but yet so mysterious, which oftentimes can only be felt by the heart. My walks, my hikes and even writing this reflection are indeed "graced moments."

"*The whole thing is grace. Everything of the Universe — everything that has brought forth the carbon in my body, my body itself, the trees that are shining outside my window, the bees that are flying around collecting pollen — it's all grace if we recognize it. It's there for us.*"

—*Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis*