

Frances Thompson

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Mother nature, the great nurturer

Ever since I can remember I have been drawn into natural areas, this overwhelming urge to wander out and just be. Nature has that way about it, this tug from deep inside pulling us out to be alone. While at the same time nature never lets us feel alone. Nature understands the timing of the world and changes in the seasons, and her silence calls us in to understand.

When I have no peace in my life, my mind wonders, always to the same place. The small cave in my parents back yard, a little hole between two lilac bushes where the maple leaves from the last fall cover the ground like a carpet and little sprig of cat nip peek through. My safe spot, I remember the day it found me. Coming home from first grade, upset, trying to explain to my mom that while my hiking boots were my favorite shoes, I no longer liked them because all the girls at school said they were boy shoes. She refused to replace them, and explained to me why getting new ones would be wrong. Being seven, all I understood at that point was that my own mother wanted everyone to think I was a weirdo. Feeling betrayed, first by my favorite footwear, and then by my own mom, I was sure I would never be ok and ran dramatically into the backyard. Past the woodpile, past the garden, around the compost pile and then bam! I was stopped dead in my tracks by this little clearing in the lilacs. Deep in my gut I felt a pull to go inside. I ducked down, climbed in, and sat down, before I even realized what I was doing. Then something strange happened sitting in that little cove, my breath slowed, I no longer felt the urge to cry. I no longer felt alone. As the years went on and the many melodramas of middle school and high school unfolded, I always had my cove, and I was never alone.

It's wasn't until the last couple years until I realized just how special that spot was to me. All those years in my parent's backyard hiding from the big bad world, I was completely unaware of just how big and bad the world can be. Once when I was younger I found a dead mouse in my cave and I was horrified that something so gross and unpleasant could be in my perfect space, it took me time to go back there after that, but in a few months it felt perfect again. This was the first time nature showed me how cleansing it can be. Little did I know how that lesson would evolve as my understanding of life and nature grew.

Over the past year I have come to know real pain, true loss, and struggles I could have never imagined. I have felt foolish for thinking I knew pain before this year. In June, I said goodbye to my boyfriend's mom after a yearlong struggle with brain cancer. I mourned, I coped and I decided I would not be defeated; this tragedy would not break my sprit. After the grieving period I experienced some of the happiest months of my life and I became thankful for all I had been through. I was coming into my fourth year of college on top of the world ready to experience college this time focusing completely on school and myself. I got three days of this bliss. One the fourth day of my fourth year of college I got a phone call, from my mom. She has aggressive breast cancer and needs to start treatment immediately. I felt all the hope I had built up for life over the past year hit the floor. Panic set in, all kinds of horrible feeling bubbled up in my stomach and again like the first week of first grade I felt the urge to run. To run, to hide. I remember putting down the phone getting into my car driving to Lake Lansing Park, throwing the car door open running under the trees and throwing myself on to the forest floor. I laid there and cried for quite awhile not understanding why my perfect world and my glory years were being tainted by these horrible experiences and challenges. Once my crying stopped the silence

set in, the feeling that everything was going to be okay started to overcome me. Like a promise the forest made to me.

Nature can make this promise. Nature itself is the manifestation of the idea that everything will be all right. Looking at the forest at first glance it is beautiful, all of it from the bottom to the top. Most things in life do appear perfect at first glance, however as we look closer we realize the forest's beauty is much more than what you see from the outside. The forest, like life, and like people has its dark corners and spaces. Similar to our lives as humans the forest is a beautiful picture painted on a canvas of tragedy. Nature can bring us great peace because it offers a sense of understanding that we will find in no one person. Through my tragedies I have looked to nature to find sanctuary. I have come to define this sanctuary as being in a place where no judgment is passed and understanding is all around. I think the majority of the peace nature brings me is just from feeling understood, nothing is broken, it's only adjusting.

Going to the Rachana Rajendra Bird Sanctuary with class gave me a brand new chance to experience nature as a sanctuary. I remember standing six feet into the entrance of the woodlot with class, days after finding out about my mom, and not being able to feel anything but blessed by my life. I have never felt like I belonged somewhere so much. Moments ago outside of the forest half in tears thinking about the new battle in my life, then six feet in the forest and it wasn't a battle anymore. I felt more understood and at home than I have since that day in first grade when I found my cove. It was better this time though, not only did I have a sanctuary, but I had people around me who felt the same way. Finally understanding the freedom nature brings me. Nature didn't make me feel free because it gave me a place to hide myself, all these years. I realize I wasn't hiding myself I was looking for a place to be myself. It wasn't till being with my lab group in the woodlot that I realized I was not the only person to feel most themselves in the

forest. There are no words to describe the deep gratitude I feel towards the Rajendra Family, to have blessed the entire population Michigan State University with a place to come and be at peace in this crazy world.

Nature provides man and animals with a place to just be who they are. It provides a sanctuary for those looking for understanding and a place to belong. Nature teaches us that everything is important and unimportant at the time. To seek its sanctuary is to seek an understanding that the bad in our lives nurtures the good. That one does not experience the good without the bad, they are always together. Sanctuary is not about being alone its about feeling understood. I hope the Rajendra Family gains great peace from sharing the memory of Rachana in such a beautiful and timeless way.