

The great outdoors

In what may feel like the wettest start to the October half term holiday we've had for years I'm reminded of the mantra that "there's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing". I hope I haven't changed my tune after a week in the Perthshire borders embarking on essential map reading practice ahead of my daughter's Duke of Edinburgh's Award expedition...

I wanted to write this month about making the most of the great outdoors, initially because of the idea that spending time outside supports our mental wellbeing. This is an idea that seems to make perfect sense to me, but it's great to see people trying to quantify this in research too, and results of [a study announced earlier this year](#) suggested that, for people living in cities, exposure to trees, the sky and birdsong is beneficial for mental wellbeing.

Just this week, the [Government announced](#) that "three quarters of GPs surveyed have said they are seeing between one and five people a day suffering with loneliness" – something that has been linked to heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease and "can be as bad for health as obesity or smoking". With "200,000 older people having not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month", the Government has launched a strategy to tackle the issue of loneliness that commits NHS funding to improving the quality of patients' lives by introducing them to activities such as cookery classes and art groups – and walking clubs.

It's fantastic to see quality of life taken seriously in this way and some of these community-building activities, that were once commonplace (and in many ways still are in some communities), being recognised for their value. A week or so ago I heard Kate Humble talking about her new book *Thinking on my own feet*, which highlights the power of walking outdoors to change lives. She doesn't exaggerate, either – she shared the story of an ex-soldier who spent time in Afghanistan and, on his return, suffered terrible 'conflict guilt', a form of post-traumatic stress disorder ([BBC Radio 2 Thursday 4 October, approx. 6.37.55m](#)). Despite receiving support and treatment from the NHS he felt that no-one could relate to his experience of fearing for his life every minute of every day for seven months.

At his very lowest point, at which he felt he had run out of options, a thought came into his head: "you just need to go for a walk". So he packed an incredibly heavy bag and set off to walk all the way around the coast of Britain. By month three he had made progress, in that having realised once again that "the world is beautiful", he didn't feel the need to stick to the exact path in order to just manage to keep going – he could go off the beaten track and enjoy taking a detour, discovering the world around him. What's more, he learnt that the people he came across while he walked wanted to stop and chat and, even if they couldn't directly relate to his experiences, they cared enough to listen.

So I think there are two key elements at work here in relation to how nature impacts our wellbeing.

Putting everything in perspective

First, there's the natural world's purity, beauty, and its ability to surprise and amaze us – you need only look at the winning and shortlisted images from the [Landscape photographer of the year 2018](#) for a few breath-taking examples. My favourite experiences in nature are those moments when the weather is particularly extreme; when it's really hot or really cold, when there's an impressive storm or it's incredibly windy. Similarly, one of my favourite places to be is on a wildlife safari in Africa, where not only are the animals fascinating, but so too are the stars at night, which are just phenomenal when seen from such an unspoilt vantage point. The landscape is, to use the word in its original sense, epic. I think it is these elements of nature that fill us with the most admiration; that it continually impresses us while it goes about its interlinked millennia-old cycles, even when we can't always predict or understand them.

Spending time reflecting on nature – whether lying in a field and watching the summer clouds slowly float by, or walking the dogs on the beach in the winter in the wind – being outside simply gives us a chance to pause, and to spend time in appreciation and wonder about how it all works together, effortlessly. My own response to this is to feel insignificant – but in a positive way. In comparison to the way the world is this enormous, self-sufficient system, I feel like the minutiae of my busy life floats away. It can be very meditative to feel less urgency, less stress, less worry about day to day life, as everything becomes a small part of a much greater scheme. It's almost as if nature is levelling everything out and reorganising our priorities.

Of course living in the countryside has been shown to be good for your physical health, too, as ["life expectancy is higher, the infant mortality rate is lower and potential years of life lost from common causes of premature death are also lower in rural areas"](#). So even if you only compare air quality, the difference is tangible. In North Norfolk it's extraordinary how clean and beautiful the air is – there's no pollution, in stark contrast to what you find in a congested city. And physical fitness is intertwined with our overall happiness and wellbeing, so exercising while spending time on the beach, in a forest, or in the school's 200 acres on what is North Norfolk's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, just makes sense on so many fronts...

Putting a slower pace on life

The other element that plays such a vital role in supporting healthier and happier lives in the countryside was touched on when the ex-soldier that Kate Humble had met felt that the people he met walking had really taken the time to chat and listen to him, and cared about his experiences. We should remember how easy it is for those living in more built up areas or spending hours each day on main roads or trains commuting (I recognise I am very fortunate in that my morning commute consists of wandering across the school grounds through fields and woods!) to see days or even weeks pass by without any noticeable or purposeful interaction with natural habitats. I've often heard it said that, on driving out of London towards North Norfolk, as soon as you pass Cambridge you can begin to

literally feel a change of pace. And it's not just that the roads are prone to being held up by local tractors – it's the change in the pace of life, itself.

Consider the difference between the road rage you see in rush hour on the motorway and the time people take to have a chat while buying a newspaper in the local paper shop in Holt. While I can't say for certain that this slower pace of life, in which people find time to chat, is directly related to the proximity to nature, I do think it's all part and parcel of life in the countryside and, to some extent, must be related to the attitude of country-dwellers. They have an understanding that nature is in charge and don't have the attitude of many city dwellers to just try and avoid extreme weather at all costs – perhaps because people in the countryside are more prepared for it, or perhaps because life is simply less regimented. That seems to ring true whichever part of the countryside you find yourself in across the UK.

At Gresham's we are fortunate that we don't have to do much to cajole our pupils to spend time outdoors. Many of our local pupils, in particular, are regularly out dog walking or sailing, and this element of normality that comes from living in the countryside rubs off on our boarders many of who come from more urban areas, too. We want to do more though, to make sure pupils are really making the most of what will be, for some, a short-lived 'escape to the country'. Many will leave the countryside to head off to university, to travel, to pursue careers in the city – so we really want them to seize the day in terms of enjoying their surroundings while they're here! They truly have the space to grow into healthy and happy young people, away from some of the pressures and fast pace of life in more urban areas. So, within the school, we are focusing in the coming months on taking 'Gresham's off-grid', as we look to encourage even more use of our grounds, such as the new Bourdillon Tower, visits to the beach, sailing trips from Blakeney Point, and much more as part of weekly boarders' activities.

In a month when we've heard ever more stories about the negative impact humans are having on nature, there's another great reason to develop a love and respect for the natural world, and to encourage pupils to do so too. Only from sparking this passion for nature do any of us grow our consciousness and develop the agency to look after the planet. Regularly spending time outside we learn to notice the seasons as they change, and the differences year on year; we spot changes in habitats and the behaviours of the animals that we share them with. And so we should. The fauna and flora all around us work together so seamlessly to sustain each other, but they also sustain humanity. So it's right that we should return the favour, and care for the natural world, protecting its interwoven balanced ecosystems.

So, for our own sakes, and for the sake of the planet, I encourage others to make the most of the school holidays and spend more time outdoors, falling in love with nature, developing a better understanding of how important it is, and striving to be better custodians of our natural environment – even if it rains! With local parks hosting activities for families or the National Trust challenging children in its ['50 things to do'](#) campaign, getting outside doesn't have to be costly. I'm positive that everyone

would share my family's enthusiasm for that feeling of coming indoors from the cold or the rain, to be greeted by a hot chocolate and warm fire.