

The Peace of Wild Things Sample Reflective Essay

Writing prompt: There are writers who have learned much from the natural world. Write an essay in which you use at least two of these writers and their texts, as well as your own experience, to develop this idea.

Sample Essay

In his short story “A Day in the Country,” Antov Chekhov writes, “These people have learned not from books, but in the fields, in the wood, on the river bank. Their teachers have been the birds themselves, when they sang to them, the sun when it left a glow of crimson behind it at setting, the very tress, and wild herbs.” Here, Chekhov comments on the wisdom of the villagers, lessons they have learned directly from the natural world. Like Chekhov’s villagers, others have learned valuable and lasting lessons from nature. The natural world has been a great teacher for Annie Dillard, Don Welch, and me.

American author Annie Dillard’s experiences in and observations of nature have taught her to truly see things. In *Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek* (1974), she describes this new way of seeing:

But there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied. The difference between the two ways of seeing is the difference between walking with and without a camera. When I walk with a camera I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter. When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment’s light prints on my own silver gut. When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous observer.

Like Henry David Thoreau, Dillard went to the woods to see what she might learn and how she might live. Here, she explains that another type of seeing something requires letting go. When she moves from behind her camera, she claims that she becomes “an unscrupulous observer.” Although “unscrupulous observer” seems like an undesirable title, it really isn’t. Dillard’s letting go means that she is fully present in the moment, that she looks with her eyes and not from behind her camera, and that she relies on her “own silver gut”. This is a different, more personal way to see the world, and Dillard has learned this lesson from her intimate relationship with the natural world.

Nebraska poet, Don Welch, has learned that nature offers many opportunities for worship. In his poem, “Rowe Sanctuary,” he describes the crane refuge near his home in Kearney, Nebraska. He writes that “This sanctuary says, *Come in*” and that here, one might “*Co-create wonder with your eyes*”. At this

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refuge on the Platte River, Welch feels the spiritual pull of the natural world: the grasses, the river, and the sandhill cranes. It draws him in and fills him with wonder. In his final lines, he writes, *“Worship is a natural event. / It’s here you justify your lives.”* Welch learns that the natural world is a place of worship, a sacred and yet “natural event.”

Some of the greatest life lessons I have ever learned have come as a result of my experiences in nature. I often walk along an old highway near my home, and I am often amazed and intrigued by what I see. One day last summer, I stopped to take a closer look at the beautiful periwinkle blue flowers in the ditches along the road. When I knelt and looked more closely, I saw that these delicate blossoms were tethered to the earth by sturdy stems. Such fragile flowers on such tough—and ugly—stems seemed wrong somehow. And yet when I researched this plant, the wild chicory, I discovered that its ability to persevere through even the driest summer months was largely due to this tough stem. As I thought about this, I realized that this was also true of many people I know. They may have appeared to be fragile, but, in reality, many had an inner strength much like the wild chicory. This strength literally helped them stand fast in the midst of life’s trials. As I continue to walk along the old highway, I’m certain that I will learn more about plant, animal, and human life.

Annie Dillard, Don Welch, and I can give testimony to the power of nature as teacher. Dillard writes, “We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.” The natural world “need not play to an empty house” if we will bear witness to all it has to teach us. This witness is even more necessary today, for so many live out their days indoors, earbuds in and screens flashing before them. Writers, photographers, artists, and naturalists remind us that there is so much more to be learned if we will but get outside and let nature be our guide.