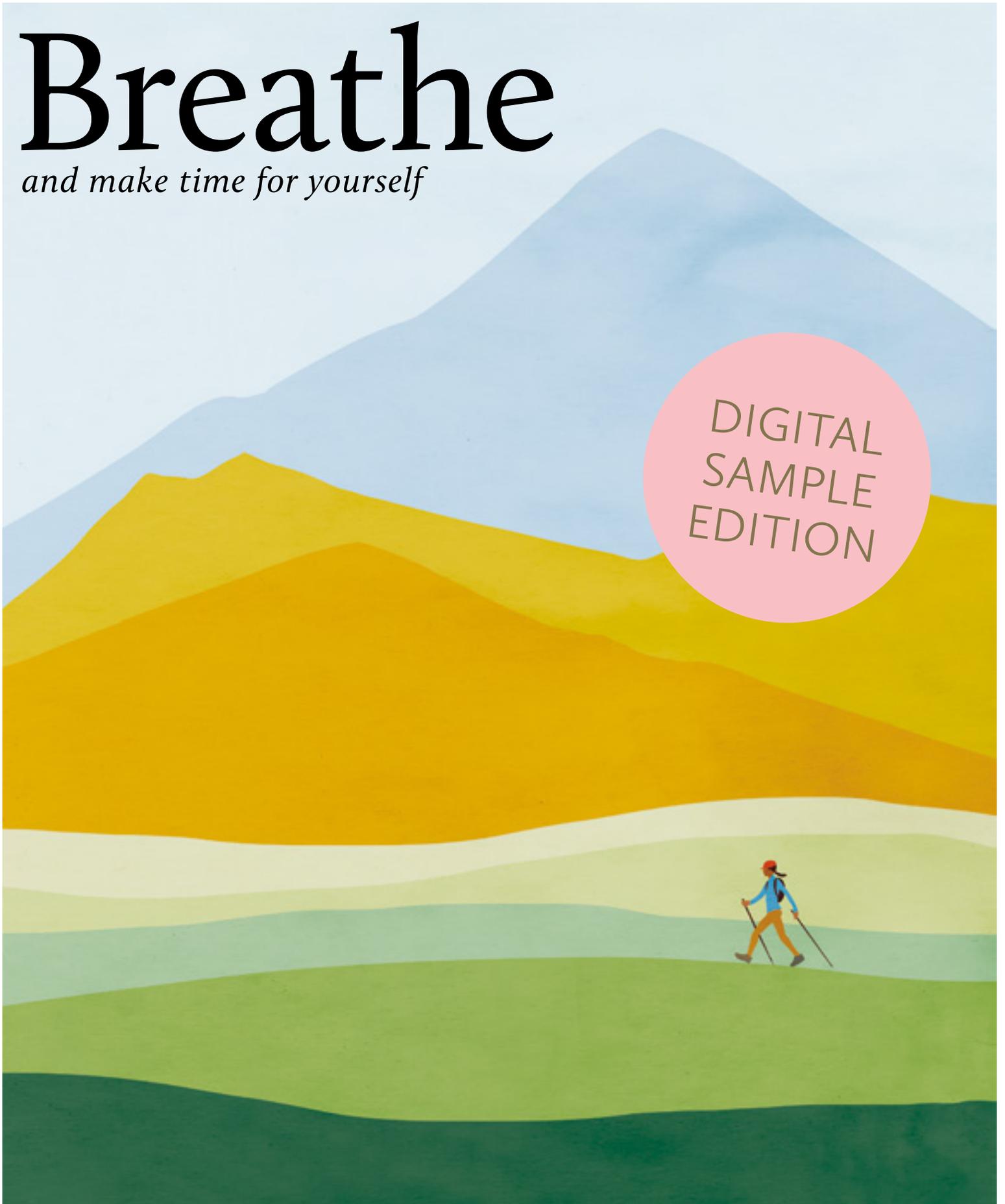


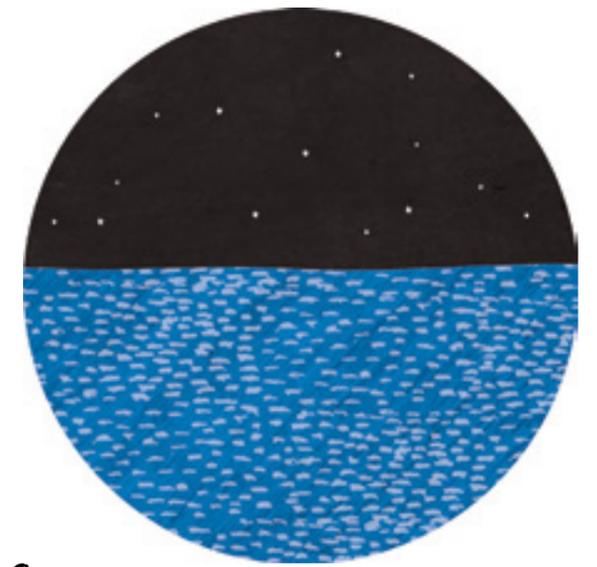
WELLBEING • MINDFULNESS • CREATIVITY • ESCAPING

Breathe

and make time for yourself

DIGITAL
SAMPLE
EDITION





Remains of the day

Evenings have a distinctive mood, especially in the darker months. Whether it's the fading light at sunset or that satisfying sensation knowing you have a few quality hours to do whatever brings you joy, there's a gentle energy that speaks to the soul and welcomes comforting rituals

Unwinding after a busy day is essential for your wellbeing and contributes to a restful night's sleep. But the evening is also a magical time to be inspired and appreciative of life. When you're mindful about how you spend the evening hours, you can ensure a fulfilling close to the day.

According to Stan Jacobs, author of *The Dusk and Dawn Master: A Practical Guide to Transforming Evening and Morning Habits, Achieving Better Sleep, and Mastering Your Life*, evenings and mornings 'represent "the gates" to your inner universe. Taking care of how you enter and exit these "gates" is your primary responsibility'. Indeed, how you end the day is just as important as how you begin it, and establishing some positive, soul-nurturing evening rituals can really set the mood and tone for this and the next day.

Although evenings offer an opportunity to rest, reflect and restore balance, what you actually do with these hours depends upon your own energetic rhythms and needs. Some people prefer being alone to enjoy a cosy night in with a good book or a creative project, while others opt for a livelier end to the day and enjoy dancing or dining with family and friends. Some people prefer to stick to the same evening routine day in, day out, while others like spontaneity and variety so that no two evenings are

identical. How you spend your evenings is really up to you... as long as you believe you're spending your time well.

If your evenings seem to disappear into a blur of tiredness or leave you feeling dull, bored or empty, then consider how you can make this time more fulfilling.

Do whatever lights you up. Establish what you need. If your days are hectic and full of chatter, you might relish tranquil, quiet evenings. If you work alone, then you may prefer your evenings to be sociable and fun. Perhaps you need an evening routine that will aid a restful night's sleep and a more organised start to the next day. Maybe you're keen to write in your journal or focus on a creative project. Once you know your priorities, you can make the most of these hours before darkness.

Remember, though, there is no 'one evening fits all'. What you do towards day's end is a personal choice and depends upon your circumstances. What's important is you choose to spend your evenings in a way that nurtures and enriches you. Those precious hours before sleep are an opportunity to appreciate life, to plan and create or simply to relax, and you'll wake the next morning feeling happier, revitalised and primed for your day.

If you're stuck for ideas, turn the page for Breathe's top tips for evening rituals and how to get the most out of them...

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR EVENINGS



Plan

Decide how you want to spend your evening and then make space for that to happen. This might mean making minor changes to existing commitments with your partner, family or friends. Establish what time you have available and what you need to put in place to enjoy these few hours.

Unplug

Technology is a wonderful thing, but a constant preoccupation with the internet, social media, screen-scrolling, television channel hopping and gaming consumes time and disconnects you from yourself and your loved ones. During the evening, unplug or limit your use of your computer, phone and other electronics. It's better for wellbeing and evidence suggests it can lead to a more restful night's sleep.

Exercise

Ease the day out of your mind and muscles with gentle exercise. Try yoga, tai chi (see page 22), a short cycle ride or a stroll in the park.

Meditate

A brief early-evening meditation can clear the day's noise and lets you step into the later hours feeling calm and refreshed.

Embellish

It's the little things that often make the difference. Embellish your cosy evening space by lighting scented candles or playing soothing music or snuggling up in your favourite blanket.

Create

Evenings offer a wonderful time to get creative. Start that writing or art project you've always wanted to do. Learn to sew or knit. Take up pottery. Experiment!

Read

There is nothing quite like spending an evening engrossed in a good story. Reading will help you detach from the day and is one of the most popular pre-sleep rituals.

Write

Put pen to paper and write down your thoughts, feelings and ideas in a journal. This evening ritual lets you release the mind's chatter so you can look forward to a restful sleep.

Organise

Write your to-do list. Do all the small chores that will bring you peace of mind and prepare you for the next day. This is exactly what author Leo Babauta of the *Zen Habits* series does. He will spend part of his evening tidying up, preparing food and generally getting ready to start a new day with freshness and purpose.

Reflect

How has your day been? How do you feel? Celebrate your joy and achievements. Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the US, had a dedicated daily schedule and a specific evening review. Every night he asked himself: 'What good have I done today?'. This evening ritual only took a few minutes, but provided honest reflection and encouraged him to achieve more good in his life.

Appreciate

Take a few moments to appreciate what's in your life. Write about it in your journal or add a note to your gratitude jar. Appreciating and expressing gratitude for all that is positive and loving in your life is a good way to close the evening.

Stargaze

On a clear night, find a few moments to look at the stars before you go to bed. It's deeply calming and will put your day and any troubles into perspective.

Sleep

A refreshing night's sleep is the goal at the end of a well-spent evening. Establish a good routine. Know exactly how many hours you need to be at your best and what you have to do to ensure you'll be well rested and revitalised when you wake.

RITUALS BEFORE BEDTIME

Breathe spoke to three busy individuals to find out how they like to spend their evenings.

Kate Waters is a transformational teacher, creator of the inspirational kittytalks.com and co-creator of The Network of Transformational Leaders.

'Evening starts for me when my partner gets home. We eat together and catch up. It's our time to unpack the day and share with each other the exciting bits. Our wifi timer goes off at 7pm and that signifies no more work or phone time. It's important to have downtime and minimise screen usage, especially before bed. After dinner, I tend to start writing my journal. Usually I will write about what I'm manifesting or currently working on. I will then start my chi kung routine. I love doing this before bed as it calms my mind and helps me sleep. I only do three exercises, which takes about 30 minutes, but it leaves me so relaxed. My partner is very dedicated (more so than me) and often meditates in the evening too, whereas I tend to meditate in the morning. We are early risers, up at 5.30am, and usually in bed by 8pm so we can read. I always have a book on the go. I'm currently reading *The Science of Getting Rich* by Wallace Delois Wattles.'

Gemma Roe is a spatial designer and founder of Rotunda Roundhouses (rotunda.co.uk).

'The one thing I truly crave after a busy day is a long, hot bath and a well-loved book. I have two young children and when I get them off to bed I relish some alone time. I can find myself topping up the bath water three or four times over a couple of hours if I am particularly engrossed in a good read. I sometimes listen to guided meditations or a teaching by one of several spiritual teachers. At the moment, it's Shunyamurti of the Sat Yoga Institute in Costa Rica. Sometimes I choose to stay in silence and practise independent meditation. I focus on candles and keep my mind clear to see what arises. I travel regularly with my work but I definitely find my quiet evenings with books, bath and meditation works best at home, in my own space with my children sleeping close by. It gives my mind a chance to rest and benefits my life enormously.'

Sue Read, artist at sueread.co.uk, paints beautiful pictures inspired by the Cornish coast, where she lives and works.

'My perfect evening ritual is to get in from the studio, quickly pack a bag and head to the beach. I'll get into the sea, catch a few waves and let my skin absorb the minerals. I'll then sit in the softer rays of the late sun to dry off. In winter, this becomes a wrap-up against the elements, but it's an exciting time for me to dream up new paintings as the winter sun is low. I watch the moving skies, dramatic seas and beautiful shimmering light and imprint these images for inspiration. There is a group of us who like to spend our evenings this way. We often cook a meal on the beach and enjoy a glass of chilled wine. It's a perfect way to relax and end the day.'

Words: Carol Anne Strange

ILLUSTRATION: SARA THIELKER

TIME TO REFLECT

It can be easy at the end of a demanding day to be exhausted and exasperated, feeling you've worked your socks off but have little to show for it. That's when you need to give yourself a break and let your mind and body unwind. Even if you can only grab 10 minutes, try to find a quiet space and do something just for you. You could meditate (see page 76 for easy-to-follow practices), try home yoga (see overleaf) or just think about things that bring you joy. Here are a few happy thoughts to sleep on...

People who make you smile

Friends who lifts your spirits

The wonder of nature

The beauty of words

Now think of an act of kindness – no matter how small – that touched your soul...



MIND THE GAP

The art of staying put

Do you sometimes feel like your life would be so much better if you only had a bigger house, a better job or more friends? Here's how to stop wanting more and find the happiness you've been looking for in the here and now

Have you ever found yourself browsing property websites despite no particular plans to move house? How about Googling unrealistic careers in search of that elusive dream job? Or perhaps, like me, you've spent an inordinate amount of time researching the best family-friendly dog breeds and poring over images of Scandinavian-inspired interiors on Pinterest.

It's surprising how much you can learn about your life goals from a quick glance at your internet browser history.

When engaged in this kind of research, it's easy to justify it as self-improvement or harmless fantasy. But this constant craving for a new, improved life carries an implicit message: that life is not okay just as it is. And this goal-orientated mode of thinking can chip away at wellbeing.

Firstly, it turns the focus of attention away from all the wonderful things you do have and towards the gap between where you are now and where you want to be, which can lead to a constant gnawing sense of dissatisfaction. Secondly, it tends to be driven by an underlying belief that once those goals are attained, life will really begin, as though life were a finite wish list with happiness waiting at the end: *'If I get a bigger garden... then I'll be happy.'* *'If I get a new job... then I'll be happy.'*

A bigger garden, a better job or an adorable puppy might deliver a short-term dose of pleasure – even a momentary release from the constant craving – but when engaged in this mode of striving, awareness of the present moment is restricted. Even if those long-awaited goals are attained, you'll likely be too busy focusing on the next goal to fully appreciate them.

The comparison crisis

Today's digitally driven culture doesn't help. If it's not the internet, drawing you in with its promise of a better life at the click of a mouse, it's social media. The edited highlights of other people's lives become unrealistic benchmarks against which to



measure happiness and success. And they are unrealistic: when was the last time you saw an Instagram picture of someone washing up or having a row with their partner?

'Online media can change your goals without you realising,' says Gemma Griffith, director of postgraduate programmes at Bangor University's Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice. 'When you see other people with seemingly better lives, jobs, partners and houses it widens the gap between where you are and where you think you ought to be.'

'The goalposts get moved and you can become dissatisfied with your life by seeing the highlights of the lives of others.'

The discrepancy monitor

This sense of insatiable wanting has been around a lot longer than Facebook. In Buddhist teaching, it is seen as greed, one of the three main causes of human suffering or Three Poisons (greed, hatred and delusion). This focus on the gap between what is and what is desired is a key theme of modern mindfulness-based teachings. Termed 'discrepancy-based processing' or 'monitoring', it's seen as a product of what is known as the 'doing' mode of mind.

'Humans are experts in discrepancy-based processing, it is how we get things done,' says Gemma. 'For example, I might be aware that I need to buy some bread. There is now a gap between how things are (no bread) and what I want (bread). I know how to bridge this gap by going to the shop. Once I have bought the bread, I have achieved my goal and I can tick it off my to-do list and let it go.'

The trouble begins when the mind becomes locked in 'doing' mode and this discrepancy-focused mindset is applied to goals that can't be attained, or to internal weather patterns, such as moods and feelings. 'If we're feeling sad, we notice a gap between where we are right now [sad] and where we want to

be [happy],' adds Gemma. 'We can do things that we think will make us happy to bring us closer to our goal, such as go to a party, but when the party is over, are we any closer to happiness?'

'The discrepancy-based processing is activated and, in doing mode, you try to "solve" the problem of sadness. But unlike the task of buying bread, this can't simply be ticked off a to-do list. This results in a constant monitoring of the gap, and if a mismatch is found this can make you feel worse. Then, as you ruminate on why you're sad, you make yourself feel even lower.'

Don't do, just be

It doesn't have to be like this. There is a way to escape the shackles of the doing mode of mind, to let go of this exhausting and insatiable desire for things to be different and to embrace things just the way they are. And it doesn't involve burning your laptop and smartphone. In fact, it involves *doing* very little – other than noticing when the mind is in this potentially harmful mode and gently escorting the attention to what is happening right now. Cue: the 'being' mode.

In their book *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*, MBCT founders Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale explain that doing and being are the two main modes of mind or mental gears: 'The being mode is not devoted to achieving particular goals. In this mode, there is no need to emphasise discrepancy-based processing or constantly to monitor and evaluate ("How am I doing in meeting my goals?"). Instead, the focus of the being mode is accepting and allowing what is, without any immediate pressure to change it.'

Likening these modes to the gears of a car, the authors go on to suggest that the mind can only be engaged in one gear at a time. By consciously shifting gears from doing to being mode, the former is naturally disabled and the mind set free from its tyranny. Mindfulness-based courses, such as MBCT, use techniques to train the mind to move from doing to being mode, and there are also exercises you can try at home (see right). Hopefully it will help to bring happiness to your doorstep.

Words: Georgia James



ILLUSTRATIONS: ANIESZKA BANKS

FOUR STEPS TO MOVE FROM 'DOING' TO 'BEING'

1 Notice The first step to disengaging from doing mode is to notice when you're caught in its vice-like grip. Unfortunately, one of the key traits of this mental gear is it tends to thrive when you're on autopilot. As such, you can spend long periods of time scrolling through Facebook or daydreaming, without even realising you're doing it. The more you practise, the more adept you will become at catching yourself in this mode. For now, try setting up a reminder system by placing stickers where you know they'll be seen throughout the day, such as on your computer or by the kettle. Each time you see a sticker, ask yourself the question: what mode of mind am I in right now?

2 Come back to the present When you've caught yourself in 'doing' mode, change gear by gently bringing the mind back to the present. Take a moment to pause and get a sense of the body right here, right now, focusing on the sensation of the feet on the ground. Note any thoughts, feelings or physical sensations that are present: what is happening for you right now? When you're ready, turn your attention to the breath. Take at least five conscious breaths, following each one all the way in and all the way out, as an anchor to the present. Next, widen your field of attention to include the body as a whole, as though the whole body were breathing.

3 Have a moment of gratitude Before you go back to your day's activities, use this pause as an opportunity to appreciate what you have in your life. Bring to mind three things for which you're grateful. This could be the roof over your head, the stable job you have or your family and good friends. Taking time to reflect can help you to appreciate what you have and to re-evaluate what *really* makes you happy. It could also uncover what's less important – particularly useful if you've just spent the past hour trawling the internet to find the perfect cushion to go with your new sofa.

4 Swap longing for living Instead of yearning for a happy future, discover joy right now. Every time you catch yourself reaching for your phone to scroll through your social media feeds make a conscious choice to seize the moment and spend the time doing something nourishing – an activity that is guaranteed to make you feel good. Dance around to your favourite song, read a thought-provoking article, get creative, take a bath. As John Kabat-Zinn says in his bestselling mindfulness tome *Full Catastrophe Living*: '...the present moment, whenever it is recognised and honoured, reveals a very special, indeed magical power: *it is the only time that any of us ever has.*'

Between the lines

It might be tempting to dismiss the notion that a literary classic can teach modern-day readers anything about mindfulness, but perhaps it's time to think again. Breathe takes a closer look at Gone with the Wind

It was June 2006, and I had just finished my final university exams. After three years of ploughing through reading lists and philosophy textbooks, I was determined that I would spend this summer devoting myself to the longest, most indulgent novel I could find. At 1011 pages, and with a smoulderingly romantic looking cover, *Gone with the Wind* seemed to fit the bill perfectly. I snapped it up and started reading it on the way home. Over the following few weeks it barely left my side and that same, well-thumbed, copy has enjoyed a prime position on my bookshelves ever since.

Thanks, in part, to the success of the 1939 movie adaptation, *Gone with the Wind* is a story of which many people have some knowledge – Vivien Leigh in red velvet and Clark Gable failing to give a damn, set against a backdrop of the American Civil War. But, while the film is a classic, it's with the book that my heart truly lies and I think it's there that we're most likely to find the real Scarlett O'Hara – squashed between those thousand or so pages – and it's this that transforms the story into a truly engrossing experience.

A record bestseller and Pulitzer prizewinner, *Gone with the Wind* was author Margaret Mitchell's only completed novel to be published. A lifelong inhabitant of Atlanta, Georgia, where her story is set, Margaret was raised on tales of the Civil War, and many of the most recognisable characters and locations find their origins in her relatives' first-hand experiences of the 'Old South'. Born in 1900, Margaret was, by all accounts, an unconventional individual and is said not to have particularly liked her work, dismissing it as a 'rotten book'.

In spite of its phenomenal success, there are those who might be inclined to agree with her. The novel has, after all, attracted its fair share of controversy. First published in 1936, it was already 70 years old by the time I read it and there's no doubt that there are some eyebrow-raising moments as well as some pretty uncomfortable terminology, but while contemporary audiences may find themselves a little ill-at-ease with some of the subjects covered, I think they'll also find space for reflection and, perhaps, a protagonist undergoing a thoroughly modern-feeling transformation. Since learning about some of the principles of yoga, I've been more convinced than ever that this, sometimes contentious, literary work still has much to offer today, speaking as it does, of timeless concepts and universal experiences.

It strikes me, for example, that what we see in Scarlett, certainly in the early part of the book, is very much in line with the yogic concept of maya. She's egotistical, materialistic and wrapped up in attachments that are not necessarily helpful to her. Yogis look to cast off maya in order to achieve moksha – the state of complete freedom and oneness. Yoga teacher Petra Barnby describes maya as 'veils obscuring our true nature' and

it certainly feels as though the young Scarlett is a character wrestling with external influences and her sense of self.

'The yogic journey,' Petra explains, 'is a process of removing the veils, so recognising what they are and how they stop us knowing our true Selves is the main work.' For Scarlett, as for most of us, this work is slow and painful and takes place, not in spite of, but because of, the extraordinary circumstances she finds herself in. Burdens, as the novel's author wrote, are for shoulders strong enough to carry them, and Scarlett's famous mantra – 'tomorrow is another day' – speaks of an inherent fortitude. Professor Helen Taylor, author of *Scarlett's Women: Gone with the Wind and its Female Fans* and *Gone with the Wind*, part of the BFI's Film Classics series, describes it as 'a good life lesson, and one that carries Scarlett through epic social and personal change'.

With change looming over my own horizon too, it wasn't difficult for me to sympathise with the cast of Georgians as they each, in their own way, grappled with the collapse of the established order, and the rise of a new world. It's amid chaos that we see Scarlett develop from immaturity and entitlement to adulthood, motherhood and resilience. It may not be a coming-of-age novel as such but *Gone with the Wind* has so much to say – implicitly and explicitly – about what it means to grow up.

But it would be far too simplistic to see Scarlett merely as a character who transitions neatly from naivety to wisdom – she doesn't. Without revealing any spoilers, Professor Taylor points out that Scarlett 'learns self-awareness too late' and, while there's no doubt that she has come a long way by the end of the novel, we're nonetheless left with the sense that she, just like a real person, continues to be complicated and incomplete.

In yoga, this need for sustained and ongoing dedication to self-actualisation is known as 'tapas' – a word derived from the Sanskrit for 'burn' or 'passion'. 'A huge part of the practice

is being disciplined,' Petra explains, 'which is about overcoming the negative tendencies of the mind, which try to sabotage our best efforts at growth...being committed to the journey is vital and it will last many years.' Just as Margaret's characters develop through adversity, our minds and bodies, which are apt to resist and complain when first required to adopt new postures, can eventually be calmed and soothed if only this discomfort can be endured and, ultimately, conquered in the face of overwhelming temptation.

On which note, what can be said of Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes? I mean, I can hardly write about *Gone with the Wind* without mentioning the two male leads. Both are crucial to Scarlett's journey, though whether either can be said to be an entirely positive influence is something you'll have to decide for yourself. Professor Taylor suggests that the pair may provide foils for Scarlett's developing personality: 'She becomes a supreme pragmatist by contrast with the futile romantic dreaming of her first love, Ashley, and the cynical cruelty of her best love Rhett.' Perhaps, what the author offers Scarlett through her prospective love matches is a sense of balance – the attraction of opposites and the elusive equilibrium that we all strive to attain.

There is another great affection in Scarlett's life though, and that's Tara – the home she grew up in, the plantation she fights

so fiercely for and, significantly, the place she returns to at the end of the book. It is as Petra says: 'Arriving at the destination is more a process of removing the "veils" of ignorance that cover up our true Self... the destination is often described as coming "full circle" and arriving home to our Selves.' Whether Scarlett has arrived, or continues her journey, is a matter for speculation, but it's clear that this is a heroine who has spoken to readers of their struggles for more than 80 years and who echoes sentiments and beliefs that have been handed down to society over centuries.

Despite her selfishness, indulgence and petulance, I felt, and continue to feel, a profound affection for Scarlett and, according to Professor Taylor, I am by no means alone in this. 'We all identify with imperfection and wrong-headedness,' she explains, 'and those qualities in a heroine allow us to empathise with her and examine our own failings.'

I may have set out to avoid philosophy books that summer, but I wonder whether I found one anyway. As Rhett himself discovered, Scarlett, once encountered, is not easily forgotten and, perhaps, like him, we continue to love her, above all, 'because we're alike' and because we recognise in her something of our own eternal quest.

Words: Victoria Pickett





DEMYSTIFYING MEDITATION

There are so many reasons and ways to meditate that it can at first seem daunting, but the benefits of sustained practice are worth the effort. You just need to give it a go

I've been practising meditation for a few years now. At first it was a private thing. Nobody I knew meditated and I often worried about what other people would think, imagining they might regard me as kookie or weird.

But any potential embarrassment paled into insignificance compared to my overactive mind that refused to be stilled. I was stressed at work and my mind was on constant overdrive, in a state of anxiety and worrying about the smallest things that may or may not happen. It was also holding on to stories of the past,

replaying them to justify the way I felt in that moment.

I was operating on automatic pilot and wished I could take a holiday from my mind and its overthinking. It would wake me up in the middle of the night still worrying and playing movies of the past. The whole experience was exhausting.

I felt lonely. Guzzling wine at the weekends was my only escape from the life I was leading and the mind that would never rest. Until, of course, I burnt out.

Since then a simple, sustainable meditation practice has honestly changed

my life and I truly believe anyone can benefit from it.

I don't see meditation as the answer or a fix but instead a vehicle to slow down and check in with myself. In this space I know and understand myself better and can make choices that are more aligned to what serves me best. It has ultimately led me to creating a life I love.

But meditation can be daunting and confusing to new practitioners. In this instance, it can be helpful to break it down and view it afresh (see right) to help you on your way to a quieter mind.

ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

FIVE TIPS FOR NEW MEDITATORS

1. THERE IS NO ONE WAY

There are many approaches, theories and philosophies when it comes to meditation. At the start, these can seem overwhelming. If you have already tried meditation and found it difficult, it is important to know that this is completely normal and to be expected. People are complex creatures. But rather than give up before you have begun, instead explore different types of meditation as a way to get to know yourself a little better. What works for one person may not work for another. Try movement meditations such as yoga, t'ai chi or breathing techniques (pranayama) or explore different guided meditations online or in a class. They are all equally valid and effective.

2. THOUGHTS ARE COMPLETELY NORMAL

We live busy, complicated lives that involve attending to myriad tasks, solving problems and looking after family members. So when you sit down to meditate, especially for the first time, do not be surprised when your mind wanders almost immediately. The art of meditation is noticing when your mind has taken a different direction and to bring it back to your original focus.

3. YOU CANNOT DO IT WRONG

See your meditation practice as time and space just for you. In the moments of quiet, you are free of life's complications and challenges. You can let go of the roles and responsibilities with which you identify yourself. You will most likely have meditated naturally in everyday life at times but might not realise you were doing it. Unless you are following a structured path or approach to meditation, I believe you cannot ever do it wrong. You have to start somewhere – if that is just a few seconds of quiet, a feeling of deep relaxation, being free of distractions or a calming of thought you are meditating.

4. IT TAKES PATIENT PRACTICE

Western science now proves what Eastern philosophies have taught for centuries – taking time each day to sit quietly to simply breathe, listen to your surroundings and your heart and quieten your mind has enormous physiological and psychological benefits and can lead to a heightened sense of general wellbeing. In today's fast-paced society taking time to be still is more important than ever. We remember to look after our bodies, other people, even our homes but often forget to look after our minds. The long-term benefits of meditation do not happen overnight, so be patient. Science and any long-term meditator will tell you the practice is worth it.

5. IT IS FOR ANYONE AND EVERYONE

You do not need to believe a certain thing, dress a certain way or have a certain outlook on life to benefit from meditation. Whether you are a chief executive trying to manage the pressures of running a company or a busy parent seeking to handle family challenges (or both) meditation is for you. Similarly, it does not matter if you are simply looking for a way to balance your emotions or you are a spiritual person hoping to deepen your connection to that which is greater than us... all are welcome. See meditation as yours – your mind, your meditation. Whether that is being more mindful in everyday life, carving out a few minutes each day to simply breathe with more awareness or a more formal practice, it is for you.

Words: Joanna Hulin

Joanna owns and runs Horizon Inspired and supports busy people to pause, reset and love the life they live.





More than words

Illustrator Jessie Ford has often looked to positive quotes for comfort. Now she's designing her own affirmations

'She believed she could so she did.' These seven words form one of Jessie Ford's new series of positive affirmations. Yet this talented illustrator, who has a friendly, warm confidence when she talks to *Breathe* from her Brighton home, hasn't always felt as assured as her message might suggest. Shyness and self-doubt peppered her teens and early 20s and she worried that she might never break into the competitive world of graphic design and illustration. That she did was thanks to a huge amount of determination and a not insignificant slice of luck, of which more later on. For now, let's return to those seven words.

'I really like positive quotes,' says Jessie, who graduated from Bath Spa University with a degree in graphic design and illustration. 'I know they're not new on the scene but for me they're something I've looked to in my life. I've had episodes of lower moments and they have brought me comfort.'

'I started doing this [series of affirmations] when all the awful terror stuff was going on recently. It just felt that the whole world was going crazy and falling apart – the Manchester and London attacks and then the fire at Grenfell Tower. It felt that every other day there was something horrific in the news and I was depressed about it all. That's why I did the first affirmation and then I did another before rolling them out. They were a direct response to feeling traumatised by the tragic events.'

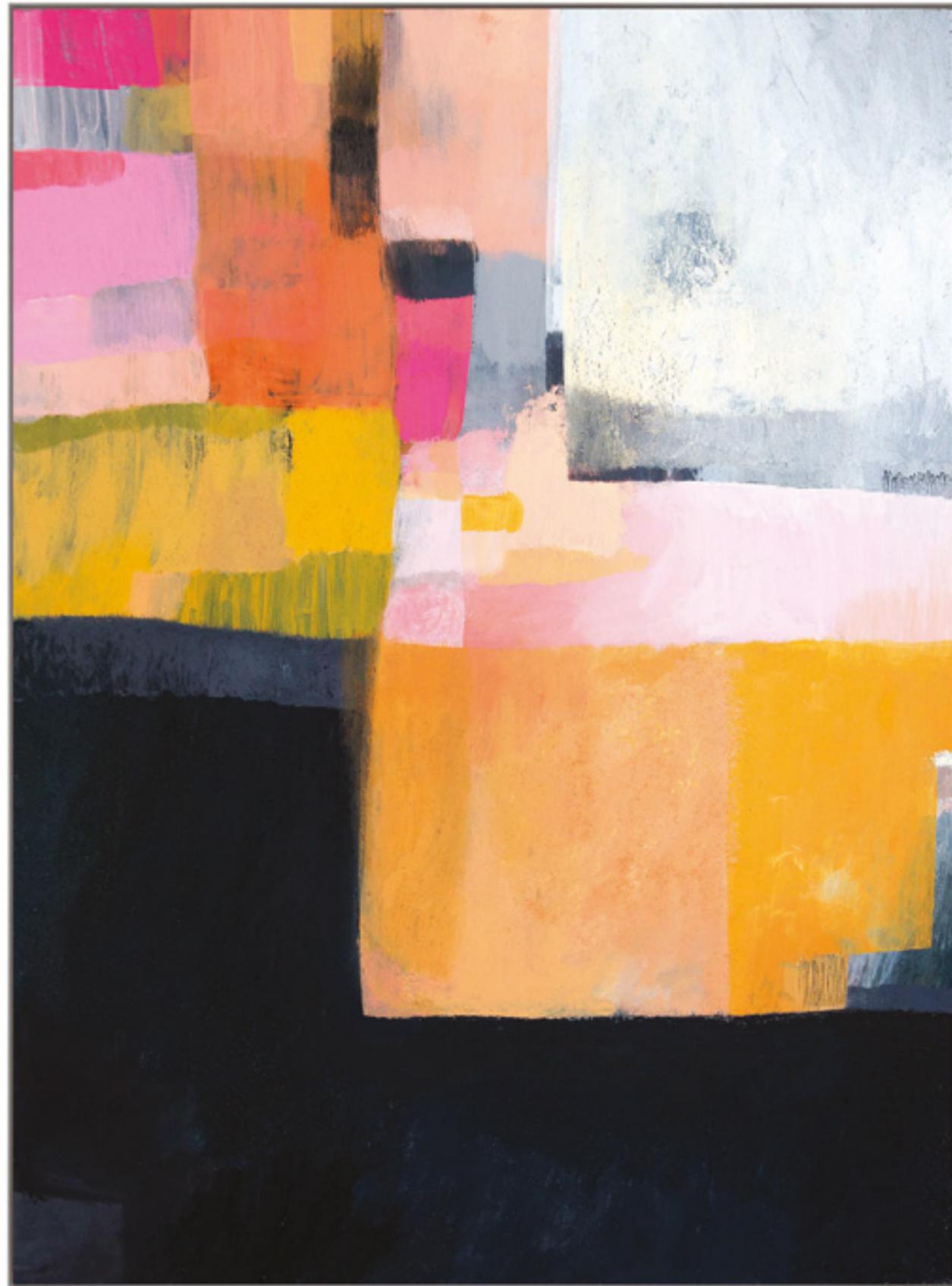
News of the incidents came through in the hourly bulletins at the two co-working spaces Jessie runs in Brighton and Hove in East Sussex. 'You feel you can't turn it off because you have a responsibility to know what's going on. I feel a lot of people might have been damaged [by the events] at some level.'

'I know a lot of people, and many women, who gain comfort from these quotes. There's always one that resonates and that's



PHOTOGRAPH OPPOSITE: © EMILIE BENNETT. ALL OTHER IMAGES © JESSIE FORD 2017





'I feel lucky to have been surrounded by lots of supportive friends who were on the same path as me and as determined as I was to succeed'



the one you choose. In our digital age, there's also a craving from people to have something to hang on a wall, a piece that really means something,' says Jessie, who has been a full-time illustrator for the past 10 years.

As well as the words, the affirmations are adorned with flowers and, like much of Jessie's work, there's a lot of colour. There is an underlying sense of optimism as well as a passion for the natural world. 'I grew up in the countryside in Stroud, Gloucestershire, and I am massively drawn to nature. I love flowers – in another life I'd be a florist. My work has a handmade feel and an earthy, organic element. I like to keep everything quite graphic.'

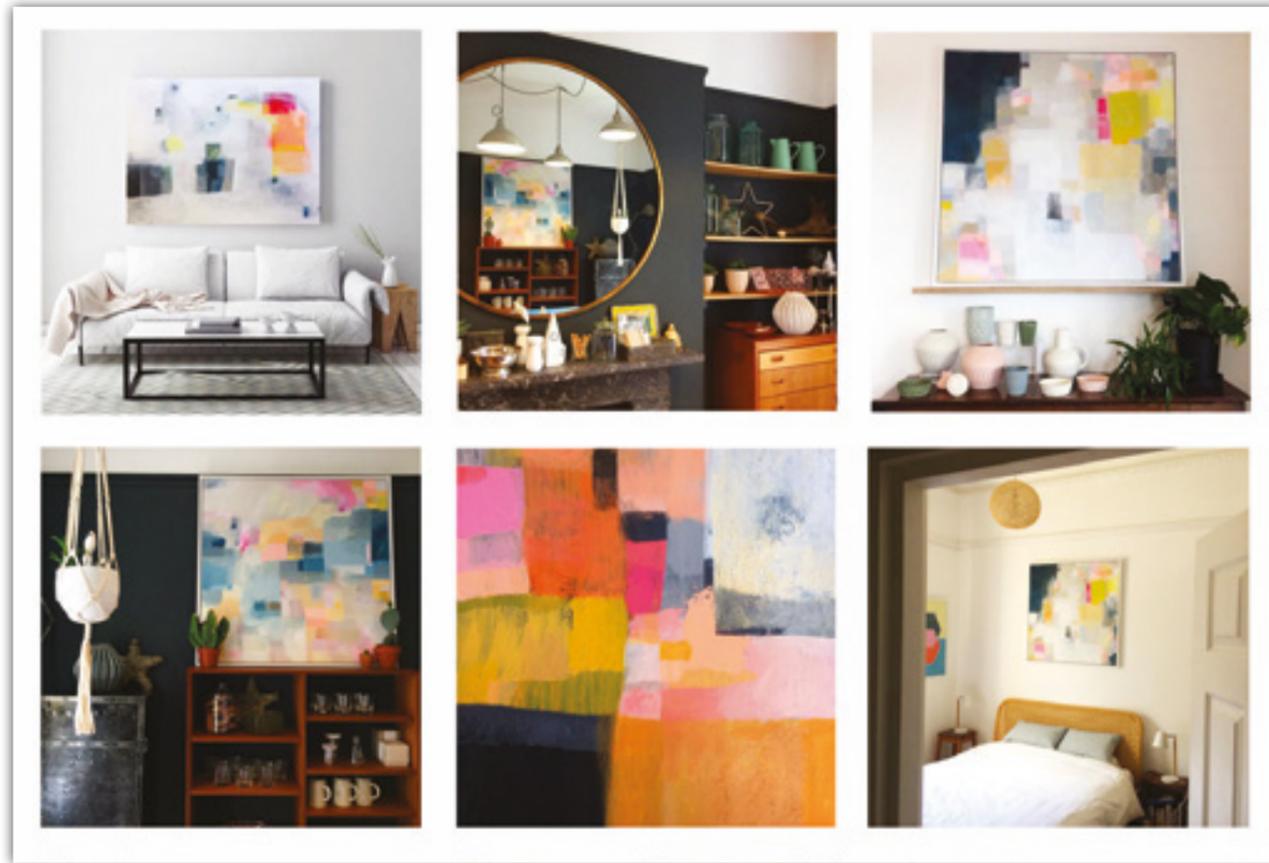
Jessie's plan is to roll out the affirmations as a series of greetings cards and to use them as cover illustrations for journals. This will add to her existing portfolio, which includes hand lettering, pattern design, art licensing and advertising campaigns – clients have included cosmetics and skincare specialist Kiehl's, retailer Mothercare, car manufacturer Volkswagen, supermarket chain Tesco, household staple Fairy Liquid and Gwyneth Paltrow's website Goop. Her work has also graced the covers of *The Guardian's Saturday Weekend, Review* and *Travel* as well as books including an entire series for Alexander McCall Smith, Paul Torday's *The Girl on the Landing* and Ruby Violet's *Ice Cream Dreams*. She also illustrates for children under the moniker Sugar Snap Studio, producing colourful designs for the advertising and gift markets.

Chance encounter

She's a busy, successful woman. Yet, as alluded to earlier, she harboured real doubts about whether she would thrive in her career. So much so that after graduating she questioned whether or not she should even apply for jobs in the industry, most of which were in London. 'When you're starting out, it's really terrifying and you don't know if you're completely fooling yourself,' she explains. 'I didn't have a lot of self-belief and I didn't really want to move to London. I was worried.' So what changed? 'I went for a jog with my best friend, who's also an illustrator and confided in her. "I know there are jobs out there, I just don't know if I'm going to get any," and she said, "If the jobs are there, why shouldn't it be us?" She was – and is – steadfast and inspiring. Having her by my side has been important because she's always been a bit ahead in terms of her self-belief. I feel lucky to have been surrounded by lots of supportive friends who were on the same path and as determined as I was to succeed.'

Even so, finding illustration work in the early days remained difficult and Jessie took on a role as a nanny as well as shifts in a restaurant to pay the bills. It was the latter that brought that slice of luck. 'I got talking to one of our regulars and he asked me about myself. I said I'd just graduated from an illustration degree and he replied, "You should meet my friend, he owns an illustration agency." A couple of days later he returned with the legendary Brian Grimwood, owner of the Central Illustration





Agency. I had a meeting with Brian and we talked about my work. Then, a few days later, I was at an awards ceremony and bumped into the agency's MD, who'd been in the background during my meeting. She'd been impressed by my work and passion for illustration and asked if I'd like to work for them.'

This led to a part-time job as an artist's agent, which gave Jessie, whose influences include artist-illustrator and expert colourist Andrew Bannecker and the late graphic designer Paul Rand, the opportunity to continue working on her own portfolio. 'I did that for five years,' she recalls, 'and it was an amazing introduction into the world of art directors and other illustrators. It was also useful to see what sold well and what didn't. I had taken a jump from being a student, doing work in my bedroom, and thinking, "How the hell am I going to break into the industry?" to suddenly being in the middle of it – and all from having that conversation with a guy in the restaurant. So I owe him a lot for that lucky moment. It pays to talk.'

Not that she had found the conversation easy. 'I was quite a shy person, especially in my teenage years. But working in the restaurant meant I had to be really friendly. I'm fine now and I'll talk to anybody and I'm quite confident but it's through time and practice and having more faith in myself. It is important, though, to talk to people and tell them what you do as you don't know who that person is and where that conversation might lead.'

Jessie is now represented by the Central Illustration Agency, but she also promotes her art on social media, which, she admits, can be a mixed blessing. At the moment she's exploring fine art

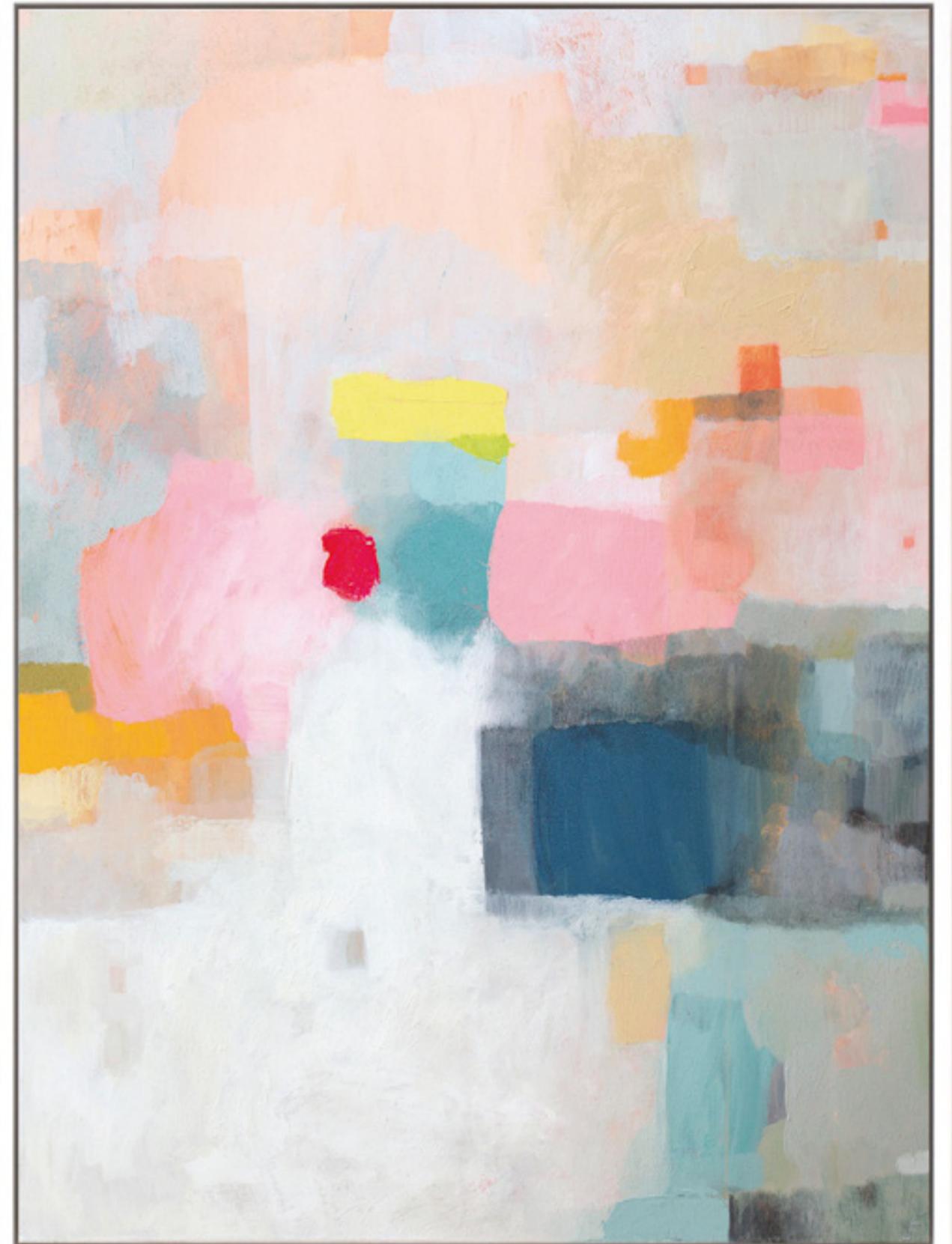
and it affords her the opportunity to showcase and sell paintings. The downside is that she's on it quite a lot, which doesn't endear her to her boyfriend Emile, social media's biggest non-fan! 'I have a lot of accounts and I am a bit addicted, but I'm promoting my paintings and it's hard to have your phone sitting there knowing you might have a message from a potential customer. I've already sold lots of paintings through Instagram, and it's exciting to be able to talk directly with customers and get valuable feedback. I probably do need to put some time slots in place, though.'

When she's not on social media – or working – Jessie can be found walking along the sea front, practising a 'bit of yoga' and listening to Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*. 'I'm prematurely old,' she laughs (so is *Breathe*, then, because we're also hooked). 'I think I've listened to every single programme, some as many as five times. The Cath Kidston one is a particular favourite – I've probably heard that 10 times now. Because I'm naturally curious about people as well as entrepreneurial I'm fascinated to find out how people got to where they are – the nuts and bolts. It's one of my ambitions to appear on the show one day.'

Breathe will make sure to tune in...

To see more of Jessie's illustrations, go to jessieford.co.uk. Her children's collection can be viewed at sugarsnapstudio.co.uk and prints can be bought at etsy.com/uk/shop/GoodVibesGang. To view her paintings, go to jessicaford.co.uk.

Words: Catherine Kielthy



Poetry in motion...

Often perceived as the work of old, white (dead) men, poetry gets a bad press. Yet the likes of Dizzee Rascal and rapper-poet Kate Tempest, who recites her verses over beats, suggest it's time to remove the blinkers and explore this misunderstood art in all its multifarious forms

Take a look at the powerful lines written at the bottom of the left-hand page. Now give yourself a clap if you recognise them from the emotional funeral scene in 1994 British romcom *Four Weddings and A Funeral* and deem yourself top of the class if you knew the poem was WH Auden's *Funeral Blues*.

It was an iconic scene in the film and the poem became one of the nation's most memorable, yet poetry is still an art form many feel uncomfortable about. The word alone is enough to cause eye-rolls from many either because it evokes memories of listening to old relatives reciting Rudyard Kipling's *If* at every family occasion or because during their school years, they were forced to analyse poems by old, dead men with long white hair with whom they had no connection.

But like art, poetry, which comes from the Greek for 'creating', comes in many forms and there is poetry for everyone – and everyone can create their own.

'There are as many types of poetry as there are types of music,' says Judith Palmer of the Poetry Society in the UK, an organisation with a mission to advance the enjoyment of poetry. 'A Stockhausen fan will likely be bewildered by Dizzee Rascal. It's about finding the poets who speak to you. Some poems are firmly grounded in the everyday, others are more allusive. But the best poems don't reveal everything at once and work on different levels, giving more to think about each time you re-read them.'

What exactly is poetry and why do people fear it?

When I was a student, my late grandmother, a Pam Ayres fan, used to tell me the poetry I studied was not 'proper' poetry because it did not rhyme. Now an English teacher, I find that my young pupils are also perplexed by the idea that poetry does not have to rhyme – but it does not!

A good definition is that poetry is the expression of feelings or ideas using imaginative language, a distinctive sound and rhythm. There are many types of poetry, including narrative poetry, shape poetry, concrete poetry, nonsense poetry, limericks, haikus, free verse and sonnets.

I try to instil an appreciation of poetry by showing my students how rap by artists such as Jay Z and Kanye West can be poetry, the words of pop stars such as Adele and Coldplay are poems and how speeches from films can be poetic.

As part of the GCSE courses, pupils must study certain poems dictated by the exam boards but to build their confidence in discussing them, it helps to look at something they like first. It is also important for me to reveal that it is not something that I find easy. I want my students to confidently share ideas of what they think a poem could be about and why they think that.

As children, poetry is recited in the form of nursery rhymes – despite some being shocking. (Who can forget what happened to those three blind mice?) Then as we grow older we sing songs – poetry to music. So why is it that as adults, poetry is a word that brings up feelings of fear, indifference and boredom?

For centuries, the most successful poets were well-educated men and poetry became associated with high intelligence. The fear also stems from those formative secondary school years. I recall how my teachers seemed to know everything about the poems. It seemed obvious to them. As the pupil, I felt embarrassed that I couldn't easily understand poetry and became fearful of discussing it. As adults, we should be free of those inhibitions and read poems we like or relate to us.

What poetry will I enjoy and how will I understand it?

You could start by visiting your local library and reading through its collection of poetry books, perhaps exploring poets who have been voted the most popular in national polls, such as TS Eliot, Ted Hughes, John Donne, Dylan Thomas, William Blake, Lord Byron, Sylvia Plath or Christina Rossetti. Online there are many sites with sections to choose from, including poetryhunter.com.

For more modern poetry, you could start by reading the works of current poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, or those by Simon Armitage and Wendy Cope. In recent years, there has been a rise in the love of performance poetry thanks to the likes of John Cooper Clarke and Benjamin Zephaniah. I am enjoying the emergence of spoken word rappers, poets reciting their verse over beats, such as the compelling Kate Tempest and George the Poet, who sell out gigs across the country.

When it comes to understanding a poem, be fearless! You will have your own interpretations of what it says to you and what it could mean. People see and take different things from a poem. Keep in mind that the poet is trying to get a message across and if you find it hard to understand the first time, so will others.

Think of poets as people leaving you a series of clues to uncover. You must piece them together like a detective to try to find out what the poem is about. Like a painter uses colour and texture, a poet will use devices such as powerful adjectives (describing words), similes (comparing things using the words 'like' or 'as') and metaphors (describing something as something else for effect). The rhythm, rhyme scheme and lengths of lines may have been carefully considered for mood and atmosphere.

'A poem isn't all about meaning,' says Judith. 'Enjoy it too for its rhyme and music, take pleasure in the phrase that lingers in your ear, the shape your mouth makes when you read it out loud, the atmosphere it creates and how it makes you feel.'

Why should I write poetry?

It can be cathartic and a relaxing, pleasurable way of getting your emotions and feelings across and gives a sense of satisfaction when piecing ideas together to create your own piece of art. Creating something from nothing can be hugely life-affirming. 'The act of writing can bring you to a new and unexpected understanding of your subject,' says Judith. 'But it can stir up strong feelings so be kind to yourself. Joining a writers' group can provide support and help keep any self-doubt in perspective.'

If you feel brave, you could share your work with others, attend a poetry class or start entering competitions. Whatever you choose to do, the most important thing is to enjoy it.

How can I start my own poem?

1. Begin by considering what it is about the poetry you like that appeals to you.

2. Brainstorm ideas you would like to write about. For example, nature, the weather, a person, a pet, a memory, a story, a feeling about an issue, an emotion, a question.

3. Consider what style of poem you will write it in. For example, a Haiku, a sonnet (14-line romantic poem), acrostic poem in which the first letter of each line spells a word, a poem which rhymes or not, a story poem or a shorter poem. You may plan a rhyme scheme or how many lines will be in each verse.

4. Make a list of images associated with your subject. Aim to include some literary devices such as:

Similes – Use 'like' or 'as' in comparisons to enhance the images. 'My smile was as big as the ocean' or 'His heart is like stone'.

Metaphor – Compare something to something else for impact without the 'like' or 'as'. 'His heart is stone' or 'I was the fox being chased by the hound'.

Personification – Describe an object using human qualities – 'The sun kissed my face' or 'The leaves danced in the wind'.

5. Experiment! Play around with words. You can go back and change things. The more you try, the more the ideas will flow.

6. Avoid writing too much at the start unless you are trying to beat the Mahabharata, a poem from India, which contains 1.8 million words and is the longest poem in the world!

For information on poetry workshops, competitions, projects and local classes, visit poetrysociety.org.uk.

Words: Donna Findlay

Gloucestershire-based Donna is a former journalist who retrained seven years ago and now teaches English and drama to secondary school students.

EXERCISES TO GET YOU STARTED

1. Avoid clichés like the plague! (Yes, that is a cliché!) Try to be original to add impact to your poems. Consider how you could improve the clichés below:

Busy as a bee
Heart beat like a drum
As cold as ice
As fast as a cheetah
As hot as the sun

2. Try to write a Haiku, a traditional and beautiful form of Japanese poetry. It has five syllables in the first line, seven in the second and five in the last and rarely rhymes. This one is about spring:

Tulips are blooming
Sun is out and shining bright
Green grass is growing

3. Try writing a poem using metaphors. Choose a person you admire. Consider what they would be if they were a colour, animal, type of weather, a place, a liquid/drink and two characteristics. Use he is or she is and write about them using these metaphors.

He is burning red.
He is a roaring lion.
He is an unexpected storm.
He is sanctuary at the end of the day.
He is water in a desert.
He is mercurial
He is mine.

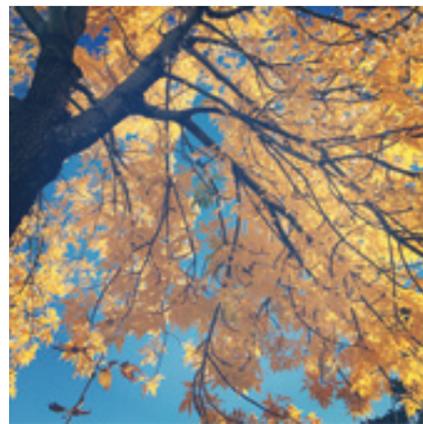
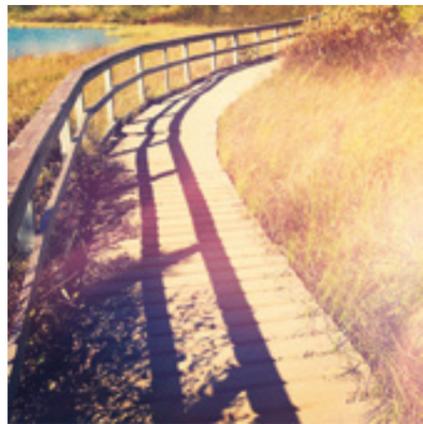
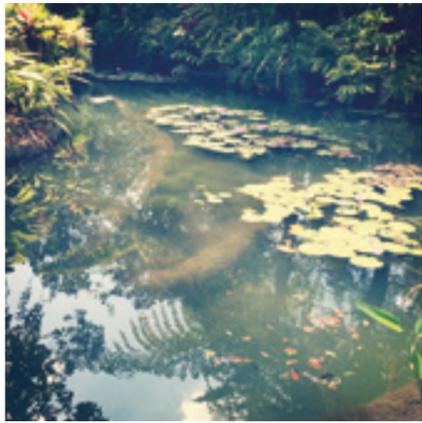
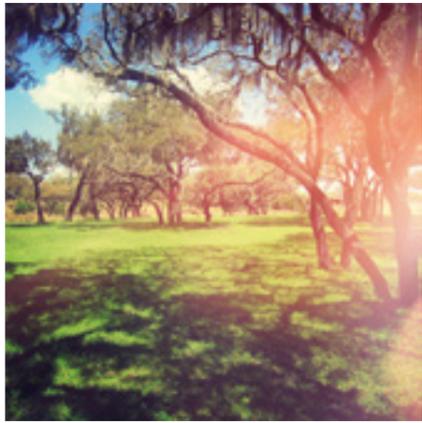
4. Write a poem about an animal using similes to describe its actions.

My cat lies in wait
Like a soldier ready for a command
His eyes as wide as his gaping mouth.
One movement and he pounces
Catching his prey like a cold-blooded killer.

5. Try writing an acrostic poem, where the first letter of each line spells the theme or message it is talking about.

Pen ink flows
Over the lines,
Each little feature
Made by me.





Dare to be wild

Evidence suggests that time spent in nature works wonders for the spirit, but is it true? There's an easy way to find out. Reconnect with nature by completing 30 tasks over 30 days and see how the experience moves you

Growing up, I spent much of my time in the open air. My parents built our house in the middle of a nature reserve. I walked home from school through a forest, listening to the sound of the river rushing in the valley below me. Sometimes I finished my homework while sitting on the banks of a reservoir. These days, I have less time to enjoy nature. Take last year, for example. The summer came and went without my even noticing because I spent three months permanently attached to my laptop. Between working, selling a property and searching for one to buy, free time had been minimal and getting the chance to spend some of it in the great outdoors almost impossible.

I'm not alone. Around half the UK population visits the natural environment once a week, but 33 per cent admit to infrequent trips, and around 12 per cent of young people are in nature less than once a year. People have less space and more anxiety, depression and obesity than ever before. Yet they are increasingly glued to their devices.

Nature deficit disorder, a term coined by nature writer Richard Louv in 2005, is now used by government and charities to describe the departure from nature. It was even the subject of a report by the National Trust, which concluded that 'Nature Deficit Disorder is society-wide'. It's a picture echoed by many commentators, who fear that humans are heading for a man-made dystopia despite the efforts of media and governments around the world sending out the message that time spent in nature is worthwhile.

It's a fashionable message, too. Last year, *Vogue* reported on the trend for forest bathing and, after losing the US election in 2016, Hillary Clinton was photographed walking in her local woods, prompting a frenzy of interest from lifestyle magazines and a Twitter feed, 'Hillary in the Wild'.

But is there any truth to the idea that nature is the route to health and happiness? I turned to the non profit-making American organisation We Are Wildness for answers. Its 30-day experiment in nature, called The Rewild Your Life 30-day Challenge, prompts people to spend 30 minutes outdoors each day, working through tasks that help them reconnect with nature. I came across We Are Wildness last year, and completing the challenge was soon added to my to-do list. After my sedentary indoor summer, September seemed the perfect time to begin...

Day one

I'm cosy and comfortable. I don't want to go outside. After giving myself a pep-talk, I set off for some local woods. The weather is my favourite kind, bright sunshine with showers. The first task is to free yourself and settle into the wildness. I poke



around the hedgerows looking for specimens even though I have no clue about their names. I trudge through sudden downpours, breathing in the scent of plants in the rain. I walk past a farm, where a horse approaches me. Back at the house, to my surprise, I look up the names of the flowers. I'm more cheerful. I think about checking the weather for tomorrow. I even open the windows. Still, I'm sceptical. Is this really any different to a trip to the cinema or the gym?

The answer is, possibly. Knowledge of exactly what happens when people are in nature is deepening. Mike Rogerson from the University of Essex conducted research with The Wildlife Trust into the effects of performing a range of activities in nature - 95 per cent of those with low wellbeing reported an improvement. 'During time in nature, the brain shows neural signatures indicating a more meditative state and lower stress,' he says. 'In terms of biology, so long as there is no current threat, nature environments stimulate positive emotional responses, suggested to occur because historically [people] have lived and thrived in these environments.'

One of the most thorough pieces of research conducted on this topic is a European-funded project led by the Institute for European Environmental Policy. According to its policy analyst Jean-Pierre Schweitzer: 'Evidence that green spaces contribute to health and wellbeing are present everywhere. We identified more than 100 cases of initiatives from across Europe where people were directly or indirectly benefitting from nature. This included men at risk of diabetes losing weight in Finnish woodlands; the young unemployed finding work in forest-fire

management in northern Spain; and the rehabilitation of war refugees suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder through gardening in Vienna.'

Day five

So far, I've learned to listen more, slow down and notice the sky. Today, the task is to go barefoot. Sitting on a rock to take off my shoes and socks, I worry that people might think I'm odd. I remember times when I have observed hikers and campers and it's true – you can sometimes look a little strange when engaging with nature. I step into the river. It's icy cold, but so refreshing that it makes me want to go on a river swim. In September.

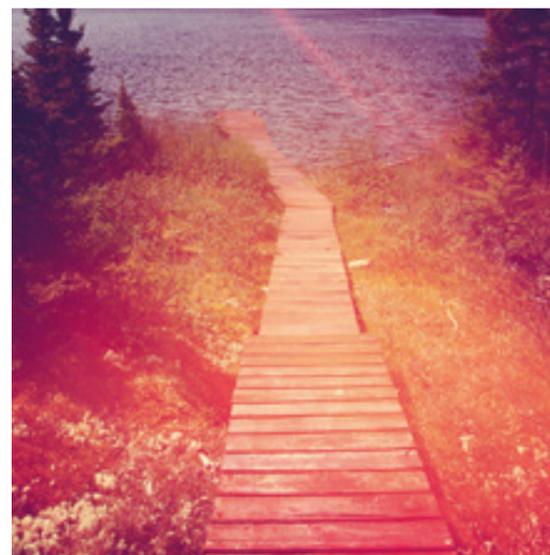
Research now shows that natural environments cause actual changes in the body. In a 2009 study, the Japanese practice of forest bathing was found to result in an increase in something known as natural killer activity, which boosts the body's immune system. And several studies have found that levels of the stress hormone cortisol decrease when in nature. It fits with my experience so far. I've developed a healthy glow. I'm sleeping better. I want to be more active. At this point, I'm a convert.

Day six

Feeling bolder, I venture deeper into the woods. It's a breezy day and leaves are falling slowly. It's enchanting and I pause for a while to watch. The wind picks up and it turns cold. Rain is on the way. I begin to feel alone. It isn't that I'm frightened exactly. Instead it feels as though I have travelled back in time. I sense how ancient the woods are, how they have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. It's a primal feeling, coming from the pit of my stomach. I turn around and run out of the woods.

This is something I've read about happening to people time and again. In his new book, *ReWild*, naturalist Nick Baker describes an encounter with a bear: 'When my eyes finally focused on the hulk and they were able to decipher the dark fur from the dour foliage in the twilight, I felt a primeval jolt, unlike anything I'd ever felt before. A direct connection with everything that was and is now.' More alarming reactions have been documented and written about in fiction, from Christopher McCandless, aka Alexander Supertramp, in *Into the Wild*, to the student misfits in *The Secret History*.

According to Alexandra Hatfield, a wilderness retreat leader based in the Lake District, time alone in nature can be profound. I recount my experience. 'Nature is nature, neither good nor bad, malevolent or benevolent,' she says. 'If you experienced nature as malevolent, then maybe this is your



way to come into relationship with your own malevolence, to bring into your consciousness what you may be ready to see. For example, I may experience a forest as feeling scary so that I can process my own fears about myself.' Whoa. Accepting the idea that I am scared of myself, rather than the situation, is challenging. It's something I suppose I should consider – after all, people impose interpretations on everything from people to books to buildings, so why not on nature?

End of week two

So far, I've learned about grounding, mindfulness and where my water supply comes from, but I'm falling behind in my ordinary life. It occurs to me that to properly rewild, you cannot slot the experience into your lunch break. You need time to think and enjoy each encounter. When I do find the time, my need to get things done dissipates and, with it, the feeling of stress. I can relax and plan things. I could use this time in my daily routine.

One of We Are Wildness's tasks is to remove litter, which prompts me to think about my responsibility to the outdoors. I worry about melting ice-caps all the time, but I'm not so concerned about green spaces local to me. While I might be doing well in keeping up with the challenge, I don't feel prompted to take things a step further and volunteer. Is it okay to have fun in nature without any added responsibility? Graham Duxbury is CEO of Groundwork, a UK charity that supports communities to improve their local green spaces, from parks to nature reserves. I ask him.

'We can, and we should,' he says. 'Humans are well-versed in the notion of giving something back and leaving somewhere in the condition that they'd like to find it, including natural environments. Suggesting that only those who can contribute – either financially or through their labours – to the upkeep of natural environments should be able to enjoy the benefits of them, goes too far. But at the same time, everyone should do what they can to ensure others, both now and in the future, can have as much fun as they're having.'

My favourite experience is called Sink into the Earth, where you literally do just that. It is a hazy, warm afternoon and I stop on some heathland and lie down and gaze at the sky. I can't remember when I felt as properly relaxed and disconnected from all the things that stress me out.

Challenge complete

The 30 days are up. Sooner than expected, I'm at the end of the challenge. I haven't had time to do every task. Some days there has been torrential rain and, let's be realistic, there are many

'The sight of sky and things growing are fundamental needs, common to all men'

OCTAVIA HILL, NATIONAL TRUST FOUNDER



other barriers to performing all the tasks, including how near you live to somewhere green and personal safety. But I'm sure being outdoors so much has been good for my mind. I'm sold on the physical benefits, too. I haven't felt so invigorated for a long time. But my early experience of feeling fear and fleeing out of the woods shows there's more to being in nature than mere fun.

I've been most struck by the fact that there is a huge difference between me being someone who enjoys the outdoors and someone who helps take care of it. Robbie Blake is a nature campaigner from Friends of the Earth Europe. 'Evidence is strong and growing that people and communities can only thrive when they have access to nature. And yet people are increasingly losing contact with nature. Natural and wild spaces are still in fast decline. In future we risk nature only being the preserve of the rich – so we must focus on access to vibrant nature for all citizens. If we fail in that task, new generations will be deprived of its benefits, less prone to understand its value and less willing to protect it.'

I've learned that while my local countryside might not look as enticing on Instagram as far-flung places, the human community needs it. I may have completed the 30-day challenge, but I've landed myself with a much bigger one: my conscience.

For more information visit wearwildness.com, wildrites.uk and groundwork.org.uk.

Words: Jennifer Hudson

Escaping alone

'Me time' often happens indoors – a bubble bath, a TV binge, staying tucked up in bed for the morning – but finding an hour or so to indulge yourself doesn't always have to be inside. Exploring and discovering new experiences on your own in the outside world builds confidence, makes you more independent and resilient – and boosts your wellbeing too

The first time I ever went to a concert alone, my friends and family couldn't understand why I'd go to a public event by myself. There is still a stigma attached – why would anyone want to be alone in a crowd? They didn't know how I'd be able to enjoy the experience. Granted, you can feel vulnerable and a little self-conscious being on your own in certain situations, but it's also a chance to be independent, it's great for your self-confidence and self-esteem and being alone gives you an ideal opportunity to simply focus on yourself.

Twenty-one-year-old Hannah Sayer, who graduated with a BA in English from Royal Holloway, University of London, is an advocate of venturing out alone. 'It's not as bad as you think,' she smiles. 'Going off without a set plan that has been arranged with a friend seems daunting at first, but now I find it empowering. When I'm stressed it's helpful to go out on my own to clear my mind, but mostly I love being able to indulge my interests without waiting for someone else to be free to join me. I've learnt to value and enjoy my own company.'

Freedom to act

As well as being good for the soul and allowing you time to recharge and reflect, venturing outdoors alone helps to develop your independence, which ultimately is good for your wellbeing and happiness. Now a freelance film critic, Hannah's top choice of alone activity is, without hesitation, 'cinema!' Unphased by surrounding groups or couples, Hannah happily feeds her inner film fanatic as and when she chooses.

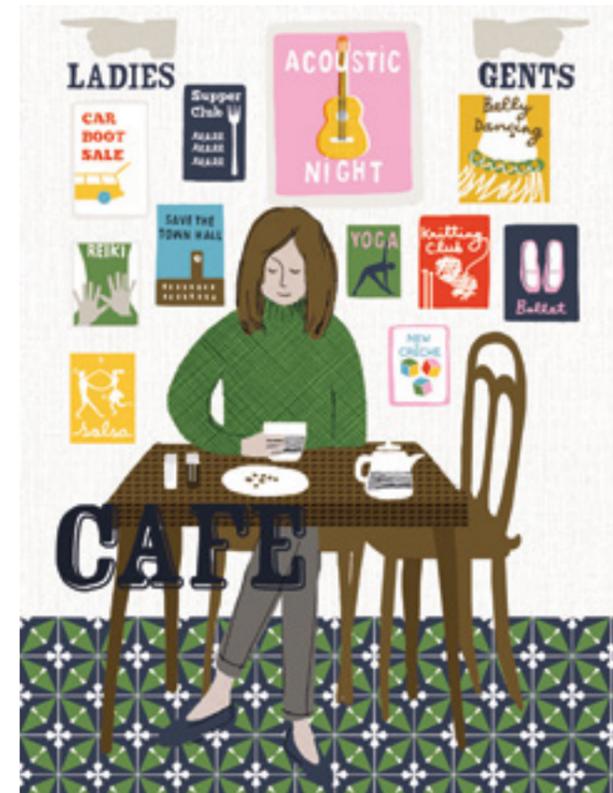
A *Journal of Consumer Research* study published in 2015 encouraged people to go to an art gallery, some in groups and

some alone. Before going inside the gallery, they had to predict how much they would enjoy the experience. It turned out that the people going alone enjoyed their visit far more than they had predicted and regardless of whether the individual was in a group or solo, everyone experienced near the same levels of enjoyment. People expect fun to come with company, but you also have the power to do this alone.

Discover your comfort zone

Being alone can also bring you refreshing anonymity, especially in busy places. It's liberating to know that you have your own plans and are only relying on yourself to make them happen. Passing by other busy people, noticing but not fully acknowledging their presence, quickly becomes easy to do. Everyone has their own place they need to get to, and essentially you're doing the same. Company or not, it doesn't change your actual action. Feeling comfortable with this will make the experience peaceful and relaxing. And doing your own thing can range from enjoying a coffee in a café to embarking on a holiday abroad.

Verity Leigh, programme manager at Summerhall, an arts and events venue in Edinburgh, sees people experimenting with their alone time through her job. 'During Edinburgh's famous Fringe Festival I notice a lot of people going solo,' she says. 'I think that's because the Fringe overturns many social conventions and people feel more empowered by that. There's opportunity to chat with a random stranger after a show and groups often separate – the whole social experience is more fluid.' Attending a festival like the Fringe can allow you to



make friends. People in these sorts of environments tend to be friendly and excitable. When asked about her own take on doing something alone, Verity replies: 'A moment of slight self-consciousness is worth it to avoid a lifetime of regret.'

Older and wiser

Within the events industry, a trend has been observed by Abbie Jenkins, regional programming administrator for ATG Tickets, who sells tickets for shows and entertainment events at venues all over the UK. 'I notice that a lot of people attend plays on their own, more so than for other types of events I work on. Normally it is people over the age of 60 who confidently attend things alone, and often more women than men. I think people in their 20s can be reluctant to attend an event on their own because of the influence of social media and constant sharing.' Confidence in stepping out of your comfort zone comes with experience, which may be why Abbie notices this pattern most in an older generation.

But why wait and let the years pass by before taking the plunge and escaping alone? If your wellbeing benefits from time on your own, then put the fear of what other people might think to one side and take your first steps outside. Hold your head high and get truly acquainted with yourself while doing something that you love.

If eating out alone is good for wellbeing, think about what going on holiday without company could do. See our feature on page 116.

Words: Tanyel Mustafa

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO BY YOURSELF

Attend an arts venue

Go to a cinema or theatre, visit an exhibition or gallery – be spontaneous. Get your art fix and some inspiration for your own creative projects. The best thing about attending exhibitions alone is that you're allowed to enjoy them at your own pace, reading as much or little information as you wish. You may also find that you get more easily lost in plays, musicals or films as you don't have to worry about any other person's enjoyment, simply your own. The experience becomes more personal.

Visit a museum

There are a vast number of museums across the UK – established or pop-up – so there should be plenty of options, no matter where you live or what you can afford. Look at their websites for information about new exhibitions, or find out when visiting is free. The opportunities to seek education and expand your knowledge are endless.

Take a stroll in a green space

Weather permitting, put on a comfortable pair of shoes and enjoy a leisurely walk alone in the peace and tranquillity of the natural world. It's free, it's good exercise and it can give your mind time to process or reflect on things you may have been putting off. You might pass people walking their dogs, families or joggers, but one thing you can guarantee is that everyone will be absorbed in their own activities, so this may be a good choice if you're feeling anxious about the prospect of taking that first journey somewhere alone. After your walk, find a comfy spot to sit and either pull out a book or simply watch the world go by.

Explore your city, town or village

There's a good chance you won't be familiar with every area on your doorstep, so either turn up with an empty itinerary and see what takes your fancy on the day, or come with a plan of places you want to see. Stop for lunch or dinner – enjoying a meal alone is possible! – or just a rest, and by the time you arrive back home in the evening, you'll be glowing with happiness.

Go (window) shopping

Shopping alone allows you to browse, try on and take your time without the pressure of considering if your company is bored and ready to move on. It might also make you look at items you normally would disregard as 'not suiting you', and as a result help to build your confidence. If you're in need of a friend's opinion, in this social media age, anyone can be reached by sending a photo in an instant. However, one of the great things about shopping alone is that you don't need anyone else's approval – if you feel good in the new item of clothing, then that's all you need to know to make a decision on purchasing it. Trust your own instincts.

WELLBEING • MINDFULNESS • CREATIVITY • ESCAPING

Breathe

and make time for yourself

EXCLUSIVE
OFFER



Living with claustrophobia *Strength of mind* A sense of guilt *Memories from a Persian kitchen*
Hop back to school *The power of anger* Forever young *Tea, poetry and peace* The joys of collecting



FREE NATURE JOURNAL

Connect with nature in our *Breathe* special,
free with a 6 issue subscription for only £35.

Visit breathemagazine.com/nature-gift or call +44 (0) 1273 488005

Offer code: R5342. Expires 31/12/2018. While stocks last.

Valid for UK customers only.