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A Conversation with Wendy Weiger

A WOMAN WHO LIVES IN THE WOODS

By Mary Frances Barstow | Photos by Séan Alonzo Harris

In her quiet, knowledgeable way, Wendy Weiger, MD, PhD, urges people to think about two important, inter-related truths. First, spending time in nature can bring you significant health benefits. Second, it can also help us make necessary changes to protect our endangered environment.

Dr. Weiger, 59, has written several books so far on these topics, including *Heaven Beneath Our Feet: Finding God and Healing in the Wild*, and a book of photos and text that takes readers through a mindful year in the Maine woods, considering details that many might miss.

But she does more than write about the multiple benefits of living closer to nature. She has made radical life changes to live on her own in the Maine woods. Wendy and I spoke this winter, and her hardiness and commitment to her beliefs impressed me.

Mary:

What is your background? What has been your path to Maine?

Wendy:

I grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. I moved off to Boston to go to college. I went to Harvard College, and then stayed on. I was up there about 24 years. I got an MD and a PhD. My early career was in medical research in the Boston area. I worked mostly at Harvard.

And then I moved up to Maine just before Christmas of 2003.

Mary:

What made you leave the Boston area?

Wendy:

I wanted to live in an area that was closer to the natural world. When I had been through difficult periods of my

life, I personally had found healing for myself by spending time in nature.

Through my writing, I wanted to share the healing that I had found in nature. There's an increasing body of scientific evidence coming out that spending time in nature helps our health on many levels, including on the emotional level. It can help our cognitive performance. It also helps our physical health.

I also had become convinced that the damage that we humans are doing to the natural world is soon going to be the greatest public health crisis in human history. I think the only thing that will motivate people to make the changes that we need to make is if they have a deep connection with nature themselves.

So, my purpose in moving here was twofold. In writing about our relationship with the natural world, I hope to help my readers find personal healing. And I also hope to inspire them to work toward healing the damage that we're doing to the planet.

Mary:

What were your areas of research?

Wendy:

My PhD research was in neurobiology, the study of the nervous system. Then, after I graduated, I moved on to work at the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Harvard. It was set up to study complementary and alternative medical therapy from a western scientific viewpoint.

The idea was that conventional doctors knew that a lot of their patients were using some alternative therapies like acupuncture, herbs, or mind-body techniques. The doctors didn't know how to talk to their patients about these therapies. We were setting up guidelines that would help conventional physicians talk meaningfully with their patients about the use of alternative therapies in conjunction with conventional therapies.



Mary:

What amazed you about looking from the traditional side of medicine to the alternative side of medicine?

Wendy:

The therapies that impressed me and that I've been inspired to use myself are the mind-body techniques, meditation and mindfulness techniques, relaxation techniques. Those are therapies that can combine extremely well with conventional medical therapies and enhance our mood and potentially help with symptoms like pain.

And nature therapy—more research is showing that time spent out in nature has health benefits.

In particular, if you look at the health issues that are becoming so problematic in modern society with our modern dietary habits, lack of exercise, and sedentary lifestyles, we look at obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. . . Spending time exercising outdoors, obviously, is going to improve our physical condition in many ways.

The time in nature has not just the physical benefits but huge emotional benefits as well. It helps with depression and anxiety. It's beneficial to us on many levels.

Mary:

How did you pick Maine?

Wendy:

My mother and I were looking to move to a more natural setting. I was very close to my mother. My father had passed away when I was in college. I don't have any siblings. My mother was like my sister and my best friend, as well as my mother. For various reasons, the three places that we looked at were southeastern Alaska, upper peninsula Michigan, and the Maine woods.

In the end, we choose the Maine woods. I still had, and to this day have, professional ties and personal ties in Boston. Moving here has enabled me to maintain some of those connections.

And I can get deeper into the woods here on my own, without requiring aircraft assistance that you would need in Alaska.

Mary:

Is your mother still with you?

Wendy:

She passed away, it's hard to believe, almost seven years ago. She was 88 years old. We lived up here together for 10 years. She and I both loved not just the natural features of the area but the community up here





in Greenville, which is at the foot of Moosehead Lake. The cabin that we built is east of Moosehead Lake on First Roach Pond, about an hour's drive from Greenville.

Mary:

How do you find living alone?

Wendy:

Well, this is the first winter that I'm spending the whole winter in the cabin. Mother passed away at the very beginning of 2014. For five years, I actually kept the house that we had in Greenville Junction. Then I sold it in early 2019. I had been wanting to spend a full winter in my cabin by myself. But as a writer, I needed to get internet access set up, so I got a very simple minimalist system this winter where I have a marine battery and a small generator that I can pick up in one hand.

When I'm out there in the woods, I don't ever feel completely alone. I have my natural surroundings and the creatures who live there as my companions. But, also, through the internet, I share what I do in the woods. So, I feel connected to people who tell me that they are experiencing my life in the woods vicariously through me.

Mary:

Do you have heat and other amenities?

Wendy:

It's a small cabin. I have a wood stove for heat, and I have propane for lights and cooking. I have a hand pump for water. It's about 200 feet from the cabin, so I have to carry it a distance. Now I have this little, minimal electrical setup to power a satellite dish and charge my laptop.

Mary:

Do you ever get afraid?

Wendy:

In general, no. I feel very comfortable in the woods. I've had a lot of training. When I moved up here, I dove into doing every outdoor activity that I could. I am a registered Maine guide, so I went through that training. I've done a winter survival course. I've done a wilderness first aid. Despite being a doctor, I learned a lot in that course that I didn't learn in medical school.

In some ways, I feel less stress and anxiety being alone in the woods than I do in a city. It feels like my home to me now.

Mary:

How do you get your food?

Wendy:

My plan is to stock up on stable food supplies in town. Once the road closes by snow (and you never know exactly when that's going to happen), I can't drive my car there. Usually, the road is open until after Thanksgiving and closes shortly after that. I could use a snowmobile, but I don't have a snowmobile.

So, I'll park my car at a lodge run by the Appalachian Mountain Club, which is three-and-a-half miles away on trails through the woods. I will snowshoe in. I have a sled, where I buckle a harness around my waist and pull the sled behind me. I can get supplies in that way. But, it'll be more of a project.

Mary:

Do you miss relationships?

Wendy:

Well, I dated a man when I was in the Boston area, but I have to admit I never met one with whom I had a strong enough relationship that it felt like I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

I do have a lot of close friends. I'm very active, actually, in Union Church in Greenville, which belongs to the United Church of Christ. Before COVID, I sang in the choir and enjoyed that. Now we can't do group singing anymore, but I still am participating . . . Some of the material that I have used in my book I've adapted for worship services there. My worship services tend to be focused on appreciation of the spiritual aspects of the natural world.

Mary:

What are your dreams and wishes?

Wendy:

What I'm hoping is that through my books I will find a publisher for my longer book, and through that and my photo book that I'll connect with readers.

Then, with my small nonprofit, Achor Earth Ways, once COVID has passed to some extent, I want to start offering in-person programs where I show people different ways in which they can connect more deeply with nature and experience some of the same joys in nature that I have found. I'm hoping that over the next five years that my connections with a wider network and a wider audience will grow.



Mary:

What are some of your favorite aspects of nature?

Wendy:

I love the birds. I love all of the wildlife. I'm into studying the edible plants, poisonous plants, trees, mushrooms, creatures, fish. Everything interests me.

I think one thing, though, that I like about birding, being musical, is that I do most of my birding by ear. I have enjoyed learning the different bird songs. Some of the songs I just love. My absolute favorite bird song, I would say, is the hermit thrush. I would describe it as sounding like a flute meditation played by an angel. It delights me every time that I hear that song.

Mary:

Are you happy with your decision about going to Maine?

Wendy:

Yes. I can't imagine now living anywhere else. Up here, there's so much space and so few people that I was always able to get outside and I didn't feel claustrophobic at all.

One of the downsides, obviously, of venturing out on my own as an independent writer is you give up a lot of the financial security that you would have with a steady career in a city. But to me, it has been worth it. I feel that I am living an authentic life. I am trying to realize who I am and what I am meant to give the world through my work up here.



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