

Lessons to Learn in the Parks

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During your daily activities, you may have come across interesting t-shirts with sayings like “Lessons Learned From...Trees, Birds, Dogs etc.” Each with a series of clever phrases that typify the animal or plant and could be converted to a lesson for humans. For example, from the tree you can learn to “Stand Your Ground”. These t-shirts are the inspiration for this article.

Whenever we visit a park, we are seeking something. It could be exercise, relaxation, or that elusive bird from our life list. These are certainly valid reasons, but beyond our own immediate interests lie valuable lessons about life in our families, communities and our greater planet spaces. Many of us seek ways to live greener and more sustainably. As we do this, we may make the mistake of turning to others of the same species for guidance. For example, news is filled with celebrities speaking of green living while occupying homes the size of small farm. Our social media feeds are filled with products for sale that promise to align us with a more natural lifestyle. Our television guides even try to convince us that we can free ourselves by condensing all our needs and dreams into a \$60,000 tiny home. The issue is not that there isn't promise in these, it's that there is a much better model to follow and better places to experience it.

Our community is blessed to have beautiful natural spaces where we can learn directly from Mother Nature. Unfortunately, she offers no easy solution for purchase. Rather, we have to be patient with her and open to the messages in her lessons. The list below is not exhaustive, but I've tried to offer a few life lessons:

1. Old ways are worth preserving: We don't need to seek a future through “new and improved” methods of living. Looking into the past, seeing many of our great grandparents' ideas are now repackaged into trendy new behaviors or products for us to try. Community gardens for example have a history going back over a hundred years. Great Grandma's Sunday dinners were more locavore than what most of us could do today. Looking back even further can teach us even better lessons. Native American cultures represent an alternative relationship with nature to what we have today.

Visit the Hopewell site at Portage Park District's Towner's Woods. This site represents one of many mounds created in Ohio between 100BCE and 500CE. Like other indigenous groups, the Hopewell maintained a different relationship between themselves and the environment around them. While there, think about how you treat the plants and animals in your neighborhood. Try to consider how you could build a better relationship with each.

2. Set your roots deeply: Most beneficial trees and other plants are native and set their roots deeply protecting them from sudden changes in the ecosystem. These roots hold soil in place protecting the streams, they support their stems and branches which provide homes and food for so many others. If we can settle into our spaces long enough and deep enough, we may be able to withstand the challenges of inevitable change. When the economy shifts, or life throws us a curveball, we might be those with roots deep enough to reach the resources beyond our eyesight.

Some beautiful large trees can be seen at Shaw Woods, opened in 2016 by the Portage Park District. Standing amongst them, lying down and looking up into their branches, can show us how these deep-

rooted species support a multitude of other plant and animal life. We can even walk along the streamside trails to see how the roots of native plants protect the soil from washing away and how large root wads create homes for aquatic life.

3. Be unique, diversity matters: Healthy natural communities are complex and diverse places. Diverse communities can develop relationships that endure. In fact, landscapes with little species diversity are the first to fail when changes take place. The key to our collective hope is to embrace the type of diversity that supports the varied skills and abilities of all our neighbors. Rather than dilute the importance of specialties, this builds resilience and strength.

Visit the Kent Bog State Nature Preserve. This unique landscape has endured millions of years of change because of the diverse networks of support from soil to treetops. Each unique species is given the support it needs from others in the ecosystem. Consider what it might take for each of us to reach out and provide support for unique assets of our communities. For example, how can we support a local food system, the arts, or small-town businesses so that our community character endures?

These few examples may not make for a great t-shirt design, but hopefully provide a bit of incentive for getting outside. When you decide to go exploring to learn from mother nature, here are a few tips to make your lessons most impactful.

1. **Know your limit:** Know the limits of time and attention you have. Whether you are visiting during your lunch break or spending a weekend, there is much to be gained. Short trails like those at Seneca Ponds can be great for a lunch hour reconnection with nature, while a full exploration of Shaw woods may better suit someone with a whole day immersion.
2. **Use all of your senses:** Nature is so much more than something beautiful to see. Be carefree and stand on top of a hill with your arms outstretched to feel the breeze. The lessons above and many more are better received with as many senses engaged as possible.
3. **Think group work:** You may not have liked group assignments in school, but in nature there are no grades. Some nature lessons are still best left as solo projects, but don't hesitate to share the experience with a friend or a loved one. In an age where friends are measured by likes on a social media post, be a rebel and hold hands on a trail, or take group selfies under the giant oak.

There are many more lessons we can learn from nature and I hope you will find them all as you explore the incredible natural spaces of Portage County.