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Nature journaling goes beyond drawing and documenting. It's also about reconnecting with nature.

Celia Jiménez

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Melinda Nakagawa says drawing and keeping a nature journal helps people to create a relationship with nature: "If we don't love it, then we're not going to protect it."

CELIA JIMÉNEZ

Feeling the sun on the skin and listening to the wind, observing the textures and colors of nature – simple acts occupy a group of women on a recent Saturday morning near the Marina library. They carry journals, watercolors and colored pencils as they venture beyond the library grounds into the community garden.

Since summer, the Marina library has offered a monthly nature journaling workshop. Melinda Nakagawa, a marine ecologist, artist and educator, combined her passion for nature and drawing and began to explore – and later to teach – nature journaling.

Nakagawa has been nature journaling for 23 years. At first, her form of journaling focused on identifying different types of birds. “Over the years, it’s changed,” she says. From jotting down thoughts and adding glued-in photographs, her efforts expanded as her confidence with art improved. More imagery found its way to Nakagawa’s pages.

Documenting one’s surroundings is part of the process. But that isn’t the main goal of nature journaling. “The way that I teach nature journaling is not just about drawing, it’s about spending time in nature or with nature. If you can’t get outside, you can still bring nature inside,” Nakagawa says.

And nature is everywhere, even next to the Marina branch library.

During the workshop on Sept. 24, Nakagawa demonstrates a couple of drawing techniques. Blind contour drawing involves creating a sketch of, say, a flower without looking at the paper. “The goal is not to draw the flower. The goal is to see the flower,” she tells the group.

The second technique is continuous drawing, where the artist works without lifting the pencil or cutting off a line until the piece is complete. These techniques are intended to help with hand-eye coordination and the process of observation.

At the end of the workshop, the group retires under a large tree and shares their experience. Participant Caroline Haskell laughs, noting that one of her contour drawings gives a completely different impression than the plant she was trying to capture.

“But then I looked at it and I saw something,” she adds. “It was really the perfect drawing of a bird.”

Berta Chatman says blind contour drawing is challenging. “I had trouble just focusing on the plant and not looking at what my hand was doing,” she explains. During the workshop, Chatman used contour drawing for leaves. While sketching, however, she took notice of other natural features.

“The most fun I had was drawing some of the insects I saw on some of the trees – all the different insects with all their different colorings,” she notes.

Having an art background isn’t required to attend these workshops, and Nakagawa says people don’t need to aim for perfection. People who attend the workshops regularly do show improvement in their artistic skills, but the practice requires ignoring the inner critical voice. And that mindset serves a purpose, Nakagawa says: “It gives me permission to make it messy because it’s not focused on making the drawing, it’s focusing on looking at the subject.”

There is immersion in nature too, even in an urban setting, and observing that it is part of the learning process as well. Nature journaling is about the seasonal similarities and differences between plants and animals – and looking closely enough to really see them.

“When we draw something, we are noticing the details that we wouldn’t see otherwise,” Nakagawa says. “It helps us to learn more about nature by developing a relationship with what we’re seeing.”

She observes that journaling also provides a space for people to relax. “I can slow down and really focus in on one thing or one place.”

To her, it’s important to understand and fall in love with nature. “We need to develop a personal relationship with nature so that we can develop a love and a care for our natural world.”

The next **NATURE JOURNALING WORKSHOP** is 10-11:30am Saturday, Oct. 22. Marina Branch Library, 190 Seaside Circle, Marina. Free. sparkinnature.com

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