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Last fall during my morning run I came to a yard that had a wooden table sitting alongside the road, complete with two wooden chairs and two benches. The sign on the table said “free.” Since I was almost home, I finished my run, jumped in the truck, and drove back to the house with the wooden items sitting along the road. As I began to load the furniture on my truck, the woman who lived in the house explained that she had no place to store the furniture during the winter, so it sat outside and began to deteriorate. She hoped someone might take them and restore them, making them useful again.

The furniture remained on my patio all winter, exposed to the snow and cold, but this spring I took the table and chairs into my garage and began to restore the wood. Soon the grey-looking wood began to come alive as I sanded off years of splinters and weathering. As I applied the polyurethane, the natural colors of the wood began to glow as hidden colors emerged from the wood.

The furniture now sits on my patio, protected from the weather as the rain beads up on the protective coating.

Ever since my young adult years, I’ve enjoyed the process of restoring wooden furniture, especially antiques, which now fill many rooms in our home. I’ve discovered that having a hobby such as restoring furniture is one way to restore my soul, for as I restore the luster of wood the process restores me as well. Through years of living, our surfaces become a bit worn by the stresses of life. Our luster may not be as shiny. We may have a few cracks in our veneer. Just like a weathered piece of furniture, we need to be restored.

It appears the writer of Psalm 23 had been restored, for he had walked through dark valleys, had eaten at a table amongst enemies, and had faced evil, but somehow he managed to get through these difficulties—possibly by walking along still waters and lying down in green pastures. In doing

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so, he felt rested, restored, once again able to walk along right pathways.

When Psalm 23 states that God restores my soul, the writer used the Hebrew word שׁוּב (shuv), which most often means “to return” or “turn back.” In the particular form of the verb used in Psalm 23, it can also mean “restore, refresh, or repair.” After a stressful day, walking along still waters in the presence of God helps us become centered and return to our sense of calmness. God restores us, refreshes us with new energy, repairs our minds and souls.

How many of you have ever experienced a sense of renewal while walking or sitting along gentle waters? There’s something about walking along still waters that restores our souls, brings healing to our minds and bodies. Being outside somehow connects us to a broader sense of God’s presence, reminding us that life is bigger than any of our problems.

When I don’t have furniture to restore, sitting beside the still waters of a pond is a second way I

can restore my soul. After a hectic day, the gentle movement of calm waters begins to calm me. In the stillness of the morning, I’ve even begun to form a connection with the swans on the pond in our backyard. The male swan approached me one day, wondering if I might have food. I threw him some corn pieces, which the swan delightfully sampled. For the next several days, every morning he would come for breakfast, getting closer each day. Eventually his mate began to join him for meals, coming closer to the pier each time. And then one day, young swans came with their mother and father, sampling the tasty treats thrown into the water. I was amazed that I had formed a bond with these two swans, a relationship with enough trust to even include their young.

Although I haven’t seen them lately, knowing that swans mate for life and return to the same area each year, I expect to see them again, for swans remember who has treated them kindly. The connection we have formed restores my soul,

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reminding me that God moves in the world in mystical ways, connecting even humans and swans in some mysterious way.

While I cherish the sanctuary in which we worship, there's something mystical about being outside to sense God's presence. Close your eyes for a moment. Listen to the sounds around us.... What do you hear?....

Open your eyes...Look around....What do you see?

Observing nature can restore our souls and might even lead to surprising observations, as in the case when seeing

two robins sitting in a tree. One said to the other, "I'm really hungry."

"Me too," said the second robin. "Let's fly down and find some lunch."

They flew to the ground and found a nice plot of plowed ground full of worms. They ate and ate and ate until they could eat no more.

"I'm so full I don't think I can fly back up to the tree," said the first robin.

"Me either. Let's just lie here and rest in the warm sun," said the second robin.

They plopped down, basking in the warm sun. No sooner had they fallen asleep than a big cat snuck up and ate both birds. As he sat washing his face after the tasty meal of robins, he thought to himself, *I just love baskin' robins.*¹

In addition to restoring furniture and experiencing nature as a way to restore our souls, humor is third way to restore our souls. The telling of a funny story or a joke can lead to the healing power of laughter. Studies have shown how humor can reduce stress and provide renewed energy.² Humor has the ability to—as the psalmist would say—restore our soul.

Music serves as a fourth way to restore our souls. Studies have shown that music can reduce stress and anxiety, decrease pain, improve our immune system, enhance our memory, and even help us exercise.³

As we celebrate the jazz festival this weekend in Elkhart, it's good to know that studies have shown

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that jazz is the most stimulating style of music. It reduces stress, stimulates the mind, and boosts creativity.⁴ In other words, music, especially jazz, restores our souls, returns us to our awareness of God's healing presence in our lives.

I imagine you can think of other ways that God restores your soul, for God has provided us many gifts for renewal. If you're having a bad day, stop for a moment and sense how God invites you into renewal: try listening to jazz, laughing at a good joke, restoring furniture, or walking along still waters. In doing so, you will discover God's healing presence restoring your soul.

¹ Michael Hodgin, *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, #330.

² www.psychologicalscience.org/news/minds-business/the-energizing-effect-of-humor.html#.WUuB0mjvDc

³ www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/02/music-and-health-rock-on_n_6573132.html

⁴ <http://liveforlivemusic.com/features/why-jazz-is-the-most-stimulating-genre-of-music-according-to-science/>