

## **Daffodils as Antidepressants (What Wordsworth Knew)**

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Treatment trends come and go, but nature is forever, and the allure of daffodils endures. Today's miracle cures may become tomorrow's poisons—but daffodils become more delightful over the decades. William Wordsworth recognized the value of daffodils over two centuries ago when he penned his poem about “Daffodils” and lamented how he “wandered lonely as a cloud” . . . until he came upon a crowd of daffodils.

Wordsworth's daffodils poem was originally titled, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” Written in 1804, it became the most-read poem in the English language. It remains as popular today as ever. Wordsworth's words relieved the deep and dark depression experienced by John Stuart Mills (1806-1873), naturally and without any professional therapeutic intervention (which was very limited at the time). Mills went on to become the 19th century's most significant English-speaking philosopher—but who knows what might have become of him were it not for Wordsworth and his daffodils.

Wordsworth also influenced asylum superintendents, alienists, and psychiatrists, inspiring 19th century “nature cures.” (“Alienists” were professionals who attended to persons who were “alienated” from society because of their mental illness.) Tranquil landscapes and harmonious architectural designs were part of the therapeutic regimen at the best asylums,<sup>1</sup> which were diametrically different from the notorious British Bedlam and other heinous “snake pits” that became infamous through American films and memoirs that bear that same name.

Wordsworth's praise of daffodils emerged from his own personal experience. The sight of daffodils sprouting from soil catapulted him into a state of ecstasy and rescued him from the solitude that he suffered when he “wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills.” Wordsworth's overwhelming sense of sadness did not remit “until [he] saw a crowd / A host of golden daffodils / Beside the lake, beneath the trees / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.”

Once enthralled by those daffodils, Wordsworth was compelled to write more, describing the daffodils as:

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought

What wealth the show to me had brought.

Wordsworth rhapsodized about the yellow flowers for several stanzas. As astute as he was, it is doubtful that he expected his verse to translate into nineteenth-century asylum treatments with their so-called “nature cures.” It is even less likely that the poet foresaw Freud’s fabled “couch cure,” which emerged as the nineteenth century ended. Yet Wordsworth concluded:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They [daffodils] flash upon that inward eye. . .  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

In other words, Wordsworth tells us about his flashbacks of flowers, of delicious yellow daffodils. To put it in contemporary psychiatric terms, Wordsworth uses “creative visualization” to counter unpleasant memories. Unlike trauma survivors who unwittingly revisit painful places through daydreams and nightmares, Wordsworth conjures up images of beautiful botanicals. When alone in reverie, he uses his recollections to his best advantage. In contrast to Freudian-style psychoanalysts and some insight-oriented therapists, who excavate their patients’ hurtful recollections, without necessarily lifting the pain as promised, Wordsworth found relief when he rejoiced in the rebirth of nature. He regaled in spring’s bounties.

Today, we teach related techniques to persons with PTSD. Variably called “creative visualization” or “imagery rehearsal,” these approaches teach trauma survivors to substitute pleasant and peaceful imagery for unsettling thoughts and distressing memories that pop up in their minds’ eye, with little or no prompting. This pleasant approach—exposure to delightful daffodils—is far-removed from standard “desensitization” techniques that require re-exposure to painful past events, sometimes with the assistance of “beta blocker” medications to dull anxiety.

No wonder New York City officials planted 10 million daffodils after 9/11, when the city was recoiling from the Twin Towers tragedy. Ordinarily intrepid New Yorkers were afraid to leave home after that event. By spring, when newly-planted daffodils sprouted on city streets, in public parks and along riverside highways, Manhattanites could once again wander throughout the town, searching for specks of gold (gold flowers, that is). Wordsworth himself spotted “Ten thousand . . . at a glance”—and that was enough to send him into ecstasy. New Yorkers were gifted with 10 million! The mayor subsequently named daffodils as New York City’s official flower in 2007—without crediting Wordsworth for this insight.

How can daffodils help us today, at a time when psychopharmacological treatments advance by the day, and when high-tech (and high-priced) neuromodulators are brought to market, intended to relieve depression? Revisiting the romantic era and re-experiencing Wordsworth’s “natural supernaturalism,”<sup>2</sup> when he and his contemporaries deified nature, nearly turning their nature worship into a religion, seems strangely out of date, at least on the surface.

Still, many say that flowers boost their moods, sometimes even better than medications or meditation. Gardening therapy is growing, both in popularity and in respect. Several prestigious institutions are granting degrees or certificates in horticulture therapy. Some people are ready to

dig into the ground, to plant bulbs that bloom in early spring, but many city dwellers have no earth to dig. Most people in urban areas become spectators only, whereas some of the most dedicated refuse to wait for spring and “force” bulbs to bloom indoors in the winter.

Scientific studies from the University of Copenhagen identified chemicals in daffodils that cross the blood-brain barrier, which led to speculations that daffodils may help synthesize better antidepressants at some point in the future.<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen if those studies will be replicated, but, right now, we know that Wordsworth’s wisdom about Daffodils persists.

At a time when Americans are mourning the ravages of California forest fires and recovering from rains that washed away Midwestern farmlands, and contending with record-breaking heat waves, why not delight in the goodness of nature, in the form of daffodils?

Not everyone can enjoy daffodils (or other flowers) first-hand. For those who suffer from hay fever or other allergies, or shun the sun for medical reasons, YouTube offers an abundance of “Daffodil” readings online. World-renowned actors post their poetry performances on YouTube (at no cost to the viewer).<sup>4</sup> Many more Wordsworth readings are homespun and heart-felt. Some talented actors or intrepid amateurs even dress as daffodils to dramatize Wordsworth’s poem. Slideshows of photomontages and paintings add to the listening experience and allow even the homebound to participate in Wordsworth’s spring ritual of “dancing with daffodils.”

As fond as I am of Wordsworth’s poem, and of daffodils themselves, I feel compelled to add a disclaimer: it is entirely possible that Wordsworth himself had been suffering from seasonal affective disorder when he spotted the daffodils and lauded the flowers. Wordsworth does not mention it, yet we know that daffodils are an early sign of spring. They signal the end of winter. Sometimes, they sprout when snow still covers the ground. Perhaps Wordsworth incorrectly credited daffodils for the spontaneous remission of his winter depression. After all, he did name his poem, “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” suggesting that he was very sad at the start. Only afterwards did his verse come to be called, “Daffodils.”

While this explanation is possible, maybe even probable, we must ask ourselves, is it important? Given that doctors practice in an era of “evidence-based medicine,” when anecdotal reports are less convincing than case-controlled studies with formal experimental designs, medical professionals cannot automatically accept Wordsworth’s words at face value (in theory, at least). Or can we? Perhaps Wordsworth’s daffodils should be grandfathered into our psychotherapeutic armamentarium, since his insights have withstood the test of time. Plus, no adverse effects have been reported (hay fever aside). And many, many daffodil enthusiasts concur with Wordsworth’s esteem for daffodils.

According to Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis who changed 20<sup>th</sup> century thought, “wherever psychologists tread, poets have been there before them.” Freud’s pronouncements about poets are still quoted today. Although contemporary doctors and therapists disagree often with Freudian theories and treatments, and outspoken mental health advocates such as E. Fuller Torrey lambast his influence entirely, denouncing it as “Freudian Fraud,”<sup>5</sup> I’ve never encountered anyone who successfully contested Freud’s observations about poets. And I’ve never met a daffodil lover who did not delight at the sight of daffodils in spring.

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