

# BostonWorks

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## Slow down, you move too fast



JIM DAVIS/GLOBE

Psychologist Abby Seixas believes we've lost touch with spiritual and emotional essentials, and advises finding time for solitude.

### Learning your landscapes (inner and outer) can bring surprising benefits

#### **Balancing Acts**

MAGGIE JACKSON

It's the last day of the year, a perfect time to try on a fresh perspective. The world has that turn-the-corner feeling. So drop your to-do list and take a pass on the easy-to-make, easy-to-break resolutions. Instead, simply look up. View the landscape of your life, in other words. You may be surprised by what you see.

Landscapes might not seem to have much to do with juggling. But think again. What kind of environ-

ment comforts us, makes us feel at home, inspires calm or creative thinking? What makes a dark alley forbidding and a walk on the beach a tonic? The kind of landscapes we prefer can give us crucial clues about how to navigate a busy, complicated high-tech world.

Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, a husband-and-wife team of environmental psychologists, have spent decades researching this question of environmental fit. By studying people on wilderness trips or reacting to photographs of varying landscapes, the Kaplans conclude that humans have deep-seated needs to both understand and explore their environment. These are surviv-

al skills that are directly related to life back on t vannah.

"If you think about our prehistory, we were ar with not much speed or teeth or claw, and our sc had a lot to do with knowing our environment. Stephen Kaplan, a psychology professor at the U city of Michigan, where Rachel Kaplan is a profes natural resources and environment.

So whether you are lost in a strange neighbo or among a thicket of open files on your com screen, you're bound to feel uneasy. We prefer to

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# Know the landscape, and find calm

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places that are "coherent," i.e. easy to understand. We also prefer scenes with elements of "mystery" — such as a garden with an enticing open gate — because they hold out the promise of learning. Other researchers have found that people gravitate toward scenes that offer a long-distance view and the opportunity for shelter or refuge.

So perhaps we should try the longer, more scenic commute home once in a while, and think twice about teleworking from the basement. Seeking out places that fit our needs is a powerful antidote to our overscheduled lives.

But that's only half the story. Along with tuning into our physical world, we need to cultivate our inner landscape — something Abby Seixas has been helping people do for more than a decade.

The Weston-based psychologist, who is gaining a national following, is convinced we've lost touch with spiritual and emotional essentials amid our busyness.

"The deep river is a metaphor for our inner selves, that place of depth and wisdom and clarity that we all have inside ourselves, that



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

Seixas is a psychologist whose practice is based in Weston.

place that so easily gets buried by the to-do list and the pace that we're living," says Seixas, author of "Finding the Deep River Within: A Woman's Guide to Recovering Balance and Meaning in Everyday Life" (Jossey-Bass, 2006). "We need to get to know our inner landscape."

Seixas doesn't use the vocabulary of the Kaplans, and yet there are sparkling parallels between

their conclusions. Seixas advises clients to find time for solitude, make boundaries, and try being "in the moment," among other practices, in order to gain fluidity, perspective, and calm — essentials that resemble learning, prospect, and refuge. All this seems simple, and yet doing so is an uphill battle in a climate of speed and overload.

"When you're caught up in this sense of hurry-up and not-enough-

time, it's really difficult to remember or to trust or to know there's any value to slowing down," says Seixas. "But once you experience it, then you know there's value to it."

If you can take any one step toward tuning into the landscape of your life, try this: a bit of nature. Perhaps because humans historically have lived so little time in a built environment, we show a striking preference for natural landscapes and we gain enormously from them. Nature — even a tree outside your window or a tree-lined city street — makes people more calm, effective, and focused, says Kaplan. As well, nature almost invariably provides the kind of quiet, unhurried setting for rediscovering your inner landscape.

Seixas heads to the woods behind her house for a long thoughtful stroll several times a week, and Kaplan walks nearly every day in his tree-lined neighborhood. Is there a quiet spot beckoning outside your door?

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JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

Seixas wrote "Finding the Deep River Within: A Woman's Guide to Recovering Balance and Meaning in Everyday Life."