

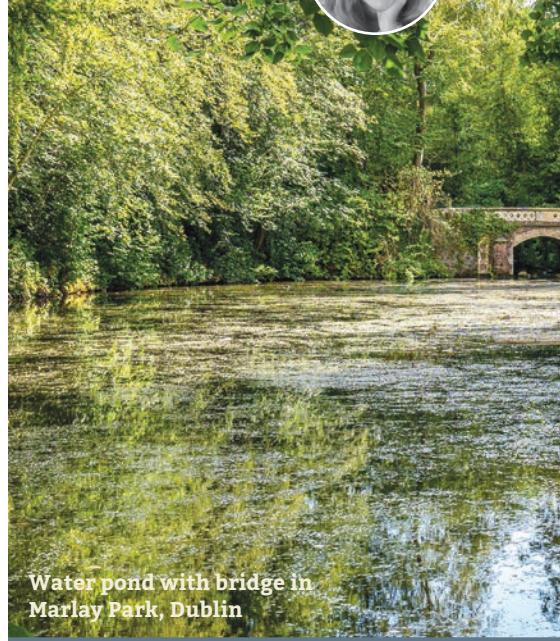


Park Walks as Spiritual Exercise

Andrea Hayes is an Irish broadcaster, producer and best-selling author. Her work includes TV3's hugely successful series *Animal A&E* and *Dog Tales*. She is also a familiar voice on Dublin's Sunshine 106.8fm and has trained with Anamcharadas as a Spiritual companion. She was asked to act as MC for the papal visit in The Phoenix Park.

Following a life of living with chronic pain and a diagnosis of a rare, incurable Chiari malformation, I was brought to breaking point. I surrendered to the 'will' of God. I left a job I loved and trusting instinct began a daily ritual of three strands: praying, walking and journaling. My daily walk I took in a local park. There I became attentive and felt I was walking on 'holy ground'. Unintentionally, this became a life-changing 'spiritual exercise', opening a doorway onto the divine.

As I watched the park change with every season, I noticed my interior landscape was also changing. A walk every day was guided by the Ignatian affirmation to 'find God in all things', most significantly in the natural world.



Water pond with bridge in Marlay Park, Dublin

This became an important spiritual transition in my personal story of conscious awareness. I believe that the power of nature triggered in me a desire to grow spiritually. By handing my health over to God I 'entered into the vision of God' on my walks and was guided to see 'God in all things'.

I trusted that my pen was guided as I wrote in my journals. This year of my own 'spiritual exercises' lead to more than just an increased self-awareness and wellness, it led to an uncovering of my authenticity.

I realised that the ritual I had embraced led to a healing that no medication could have brought about. A 'new' me was revealed, and as I unplugged from my 'old world' and plugged into the cosmic consciousness, this oneness with all



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things became my biggest teacher. My experience was life-changing. My transformation was grounded in the spiritual understanding that nature is an insurmountable force in our everyday lives, and as such, an expression of my spirituality.

Everywhere in Ireland there are places of natural beauty. There are many parks to explore and enjoy right on your doorstep. Even in urban spaces these little gems are hidden away. Why not make it your intention to visit your local park and be willing to be open, attentive and present to the experience?

Bring a journal and allow your pen to explore the experience, you might be guided to write a poem, take a photo, or just sit and take in the experience. The park I visited each day was

Marlay Park in Rathfarnham, at the foothills of the Dublin Mountains. It is an expansive space, home to many treks, beautiful lawns, a number of large ponds fed by the Dargle River as it runs through the park. It has a mature woodland with many walks and many extensive recreational spaces. It is also the starting point of the Wicklow Way hiking trail.

Some lesser known Parks:

- *Mary's Abbey Community Garden, Dublin 7:* A beautiful community garden, which was once a derelict site, and a natural wonderland that is just a stone's throw from the Jervis Centre in the heart of the capital.
- *The Dillon Garden, Monkstown Co. Dublin:* Noted horticulturist Helen Dillon has designed a beautiful scaled-down version of her iconic Ranelagh garden in the heart of suburbia in south Dublin.
- *Victor's Way Sculpture Park, Co. Wicklow:* An eccentric, meditative sculpture park, filled with Indian sculptures in the green of Ireland and dedicated to English mathematician Alan Turing. It is located in Roundwood and is spread out over twenty-two acres. Open May to October. €5 per person.
- *Cluain na dTor Seaside Nursery and Gardens, Co. Donegal:* This unique space is a hidden oasis that offers an outstanding selection of plants suited to both the exposed and more sheltered garden, including trees, shrubs, ornamental grasses and restios, alpines, and herbaceous plants. 