Turning Over Stones

by Alice Leeds

One fall weekend my friend Martha drove up from Boston for a retreat from the city. My husband and I took her to Kingsland Bay State Park, a wooded area rising slowly above Lake Champlain. When Martha and Rick stopped for a view across the lake, I continued on alone, filled with restless thoughts of my upcoming retirement. It was time for a change, of that I was certain, yet what came next was unclear. Would I find a thread of continuity across this sweeping shift?

Heading down the path, I noticed vivid parallel patterns traveling up the trunk of a striped maple. Once its broad leaves surrendered to forest floor, detailed artwork in the smooth bark below was revealed. I stopped for a moment to enjoy the gray and green vertical designs, and my mind wandered to another time of careful observation.

The woods behind my childhood home was a magical land. Just the other side of our groomed back yard, beyond the picnic table and the slate patio, beyond my mom's climbing roses and our well-used swing set, was an expanse of deciduous trees sloping down and leveling off into a narrow valley where a lazy brook meandered. This was always our destination.

As soon as we arrived at the brook, our exploration began. My two sisters and I kicked off our shoes impatiently and dispersed, wading the shallow water in search of flat rocks which we lifted and turned over gently, then hunkered down and watched closely, waiting for any sign of movement. Water striders were usually our first discovery. They quickened our pulse, yet their spidery legs and darting movements across the water's surface made them seem too ephemeral. We were looking for a more substantial treasure, the intricate and earthy brown creature camouflaged by rocks and stream bed who sometimes revealed itself, its reaching claws, segmented body and fanned tail a small brown version of its cousin, the lobster.

If one of us discovered a crayfish, our foraging was fulfilled. We drew together like a flower closing in on itself, hovering over the little crustacean and following his slow movements in the stream, hoping he would grab a pebble with his claws or wave his tail at us. Robin might pick him up gently, coaxing these responses, her blue eyes gleaming, but if the little crayfish appeared too distraught, we urged Robin to place him back down, both from fear of getting our noses snapped and out of sympathy for the crayfish. At that point, our treasure often glided to a quick retreat under cover, and we breathed a deep group sigh. To us, he was magnificent.

Eventually we wandered home, wet and muddy, satisfied and filled with stories of our find. Along the way, if we spotted an orange salamander among the leaf debris, we gazed in awe

and felt a deep thrill. We took it as another sign of our good fortune and a reason to keep coming back to this place for more. This stretch of woods and stream were deeply imbedded in our sense of home.

Writer Michael Chabon laments the loss of this sort of independence and freedom experienced by today's youth. "A very grave, very significant shift in our idea of childhood has occurred…If children are not permitted—not taught—to be adventurers and explorers as children, what will become of the world of adventure, of stories, of literature itself?" As a teacher I saw my students' joy when they were immersed in outdoor explorations, when they had repeated opportunities to independently know and connect to a wild place, and I hope more parents, like Don Mitchell, check their impulse to hover and find a way to accept the risks of growing up.

I wondered about the inverse question. Do our early adventures provide us with unique resources? In particular, do my early communal explorations into the life of the brook provide support for my present internal terrain as I launch into the post-career years? For close to four decades I defined myself, to a great extent, by my livelihood. As I faced a new chapter full of freedom and uncharted territory, I found myself looking back to discover the person sitting beneath the layers of career identity, the person who explored with such curiosity and wonder many years ago.

Like Annie Dillard's refuge, the wilderness of my youth bloomed in the midst of a suburban neighborhood, making it both limited and fragile. The woods where we wandered no longer existed by the time I was in college. They had been bulldozed, developed and landscaped. I vividly recall observing the huge equipment poised on the edge of our woods, leaving me with an ache in the pit of my stomach and a deep sense of loss. I had witnessed my determined Aunt Esther speaking out against a similar local development at a select board meeting. I could tell even then that hers was such a small voice against a force so large. A quiet yet committed activist was already stirring in me, prepared to join my voice with others for environmental and human justice.

As a young adult I chose to attend a new, innovative school on Mount Desert Island, a shining gem filled with granite-covered foothills, glacial ponds and enchanting carriage trails. I had never been surrounded by such continuous and protected stretches of natural beauty. My roommate Annie and I went for long night walks exploring wooded paths along the rocky shore that was our territory alone during the school year. One black night as we crossed a causeway, we gazed down into the salty water below. Thousands of phosphorescent plankton poured across the spillway like streaming galaxies. How miraculous life could become in an instant, just by stopping to take a closer look. The pressures of college assignments melted away.

When my sisters and I gather to reminisce about our explorations at the brook, we take pleasure in our many-varied perspectives. Marcy recalls how Robin splattered and ripped her school clothes with joyful abandon, her bright eyes thrilled with each discovery. Robin remembers a time the brook flooded and filled with minnows. She grabbed a cup and bucket and raced down the slope, scooping out fish and watching them swirl in circles until, in her exuberance, she fell and gashed her knee so badly our mother had to bring her to the emergency

room. “I squeezed Mom’s hand as they put in the stitches,” Robin recalled. These aspects were completely beyond my own recollection. As Leslie Marmon Silko points out, we seek “a communal truth, not an absolute.” We share this “web of differing stories” and hold them within, a common connection to our heritage, the earth and its creatures that helps root me when I feel ungrounded and unconnected.

Back at Kingsland Bay State Park, Martha and Rick trailed along behind me. Coming around a bend, I was suddenly startled by sounds of large movement in a tall tree directly overhead. As I gazed up roughly 20 feet, a bald eagle spread her wings, flapping them loudly, then lifted off. For a few awestruck moments I turned to stone, my mouth hanging open, my head tilted back, my arms poised as if trying to grab hold of the moment. When my fellow travelers caught up with me, the majestic raptor was already aloft. But there’s more. Continuing down the trail a few paces we spotted a small golden fish, gleaming and still pulsing with life fifty feet above the shoreline. In her sudden exit, the startled eagle must have dropped her catch. We drew together like a flower closing in on itself—as my sisters and I did in the brook—and hovered over the eagle’s prey, grateful for this opportunity to witness a shining thread in the web of life. It was a sign of our good fortune. Then, because the eagle was gone and her prey was alive, we gently carried the little fish to the edge of the cliff and tossed it back into the lake.

In the midst of uncertain moments, these shared surprises increase my comfort with the unknown. Perhaps that is the legacy of my early explorations. Like childhood, the post-career years are an unscripted time of freedom to wander without a set destination, to pause without a planned purpose, to stare at a sunrise or a crayfish or at nothing at all. My years of exploring wild places beyond our backyard provided perfect practice for what comes next. If I am to face the surprises and challenges ahead, I need to learn again that each day—for that matter, each moment—can be an end in itself. I need to unlearn decades of working within deadlines to meet defined objectives and begin once again the process of circling around and closing in on the things that call to me. And I need to listen closely enough to hear them calling.

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