

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

9. Mother Nature's Son

7 August 2014

Though I was born and raised in Chicago and later moved to New York, I feel discontented and anxious when I am confined to the city for longer than a month. Sometimes it takes less than a week. Civilization is enormously overrated.

Even as a child, visiting my mother's family in northern Wisconsin along the shore of Lake Superior during the summer or staying on a dairy farm in north-central Wisconsin with an aunt's family on my father's side, I was always very sad when it was time to return to the brick and concrete and traffic of the big city. I learned more about how the world works on a farm than in the park. I also learned about calendars and how to use them because I wanted to know how many days remained before I could again roam and explore the countryside. The feeling remains with me to this day: a great sadness when I must leave the wild places.

While the parks and beaches of the city offer respite from the sun-baked pavement and the preponderance of ugly man-made environments, it was not enough for my soul. I often had to contend with hordes of other people in the same small green spaces. Many had no more respect for nature than they did for civilization. Litter, graffiti, defacement, and noise were everywhere. It felt as though barbarians had invaded my private sanctuary and destroyed anything of beauty.

As a young man of thirty, I and my wife bought a twenty-acre parcel of land in central Wisconsin about 225 miles from Chicago. It abutted a wetland conservation area on three sides. I cleared hiking and walking trails, maintained a two-acre spring-fed pond. We planted over 13,000 coniferous and hardwood trees, particularly ash, over the next twenty-five years. At first there was no house and we camped beneath a stand of old red oaks. We swam and bathed in the pond. I took care of all that nature had bestowed on this piece of land and planted bushes whose fruit and berries the wildlife ate.

I spent as many weekends as possible and every vacation and other time off from work on the land. My wife grew less enamored of "roughing it," though I continued to sleep outdoors often. I camped in winter several times as well. I learned nearly all I know of the natural world though unobserved observing: keeping still and watching all the wonders to which nature opened my eyes.

But, over the next quarter century, the area grew more populous and the noise from the county highway, once it was paved, grew to an incessant reminder that I was no longer as alone as I desired. I could not only see the smoke from my neighbor's chimney, I could also smell it. It was time to move on.

For two years I returned to the place in Friendship, Wisconsin, in between jobs in New York City. I did my best to be a good steward of the land. But it became clear that I would have to sell the house and acreage and build a very different life with my partner in the big city once again.

I satisfied my hunger for green and quiet places with treks through nearly every New York City park, though they were not always so quiet. Still, I learned where I could be most alone. I hiked along the trails in the New York and New Jersey Palisades and climbed Bear Mountain and other places near to the city whenever I had the chance. I joined the New York Hiking Club. But I missed the solitude, the aloneness with nature that made my appreciation complete. Frankly, I am selfish: I want a little piece of nature all to myself. Absolutely No One Allowed.

When I cashed in my meager stock portfolio in early 2001, Anthony and I went scouting for the right place in the western Catskill Mountains. We settled finally upon six acres in Bovina, New York, that had a completed two-car garage on the property, though there was no driveway leading up to it. But the view was breathtaking.

Casa Bovina, as we call it, is only 150 miles from New York City, but it is a world away. Like Wisconsin, it is an area of dairy farms. It is Wisconsin with mountains. And, as I learned, emigres from Friendship, New York, settled Friendship, Wisconsin, in the 1840s.

Over the next few years we slowly turned the garage into a year-round cabin. It sits near the top of Bramley Mountain at approximately 2,500 feet, commanding a view of the mountains and valleys to the east, including Mount Pisgah. Once the house was liveable beyond what Anthony called “camping in the hard tent,” I turned my attention to the outdoors and devised a never-ending string of projects. I cleared trails, rebuilt the dilapidated stone walls, planted a few trees and berry-bearing shrubs, erected cairns and other monuments of stone, dredged a creek with hand tools, and built a small wildlife pond at its lowest end.

I learned about what species of plants, herbs, and berries and fruits I could encourage, cultivate, and harvest. I made peace with my two-legged and four-legged neighbors, and spent longer and longer stretches of time in the country. The more time I spent in the mountains of Bovina, the more my respect and awe for nature increased. I was at last, after a hiatus of less than two years, once again in my element.