

## **Listen to the Landscape**

by Lisa Sausville

It seems I have travelled only to come home although I hadn't realized it. Growing up, one of my favorite places in the entire world was "The Farm." That is what we called it, but it was just a summer bungalow on one acre in Salem, Connecticut. It took over an hour to get there from our home in Stamford, which seemed forever. We all gathered there; uncles, aunts and cousins. Adjacent to the property was a dairy farm once owned by my great grandfather. How I loved to be up there, it felt wild. I loved exploring the old fields and forests, wandering the barn, and chasing fireflies at night. It was a place where I felt free to get lost and find pleasure in the discovery of the natural world. To me, it was an astonishing place full of wonder.

The history of "The Farm" was shared through bedtime stories told by my father. He shared about the train ride he had to take there from the city, about how they had to change the electric engine to a steam engine in New Haven. He explained how the work horses, Terry and Dolly, pulled the hay wagon and the plow. He told me about how hard his grandfather worked and he described the taste of his grandmother's stew that sat simmering on the old pot-bellied cook stove. He also delighted me with stories of his encounters with wild creatures –a bobcat, a whip-poor-will, a meadowlark, frogs and salamanders near the stream and wetlands. I too searched for these things. From him, I also learned how the farm was sold after my great grandfather died, all but our little bungalow.

My mother, not to be outdone at bedtime, shared her own stories. Hers were about Elsie the cow. These fictional tales about the antics of one crazy cow were always set at "The Farm." I was the hero of the story as Elsie and I explored the countryside, meeting animals both domestic and wild. These stories along, with the anecdotes told by my father, cemented this place deep in my soul.

The bungalow is no longer owned by my family. When I was sixteen, it was sold to avoid splitting the tiny parcel of land amongst the cousins. Although adventures on that particular piece of property ended, I have always remembered the serenity I felt wandering the land. Now, my home in Vermont has all the pieces of my special childhood place. An old barn to wander, fields to explore and an extended forested landscape that calls to me. I hadn't realized how much "The Farm" became a part of me, how those wanderings and stories connected me to the land. I wasn't conscious that I longed to leave the trappings of the suburban city where I grew up. I hadn't realized that my soul needed nourishment from my surroundings. But here I am, in rural Vermont, hiking mountains, walking the woods, romping through fields and wandering old barns. My travels have led me to a place reminiscent of all that I held dear as a child.

I am glad for the comfort of the rural landscape; the trees, the mountains and the fields. The sights and sounds of the city overwhelm me. There is too much of everything – people, noise, lights, and smells. If there, I would need to escape. Even now, I feel the need to break away. I am fearful of the future and our ability to meet our obligations. As a parent I worry about my children, I worry about paying the mortgage, the heat, the electricity, gas and food bills. I worry about sending three kids to college as the costs of education skyrocket. I have one there now, and it seems these fears are magnified. They possess me more than ever before. These are not the problems of the world, but they are what trouble me. I can feel the pressures of life standing on my chest.

I find it hard to breathe, hard to sleep, hard to move forward. I find it hard to embrace the challenges of life. I cannot speak to anyone. These are personal and trivial and great all at once. I get angry and lash out when I begin to try and talk these through. I feel engulfed as if by flames with nowhere to run. To allay these fears, I head out to the woods, not to escape but to find something. A quest to try and find that peace I had found in my woodland adventures at “The Farm.”

I start by running, maybe it is an escape, but then I slow to a walk. With each step I take, I heave a great sigh, an expelling of air and stress. Each step takes me deeper into the forest, away from my responsibilities. The sounds of civilization dissipate and are then gone. I hear the *seep seep* call of the cedar waxwing high in the trees, the distant cry of a broad-winged hawk, and the crackle of leaves beneath my feet. I let the sights and sounds of the forest wash over me and cleanse my fears. With each step, I can feel the beginnings of relief as the mass in my chest dissolves.

I veer off the trail and find a quiet place to sit beside a babbling brook. I like the word “babble.” It brings to mind the idea that the water is talking to me, taking me along on a journey. I wonder where each droplet has been and where it will end up. The sun peeks through the canopy and warms my face as I lean against a sturdy oak tree. I feel its strength at my back, fortifying me as I sit and listen. This is not a time for thinking. This is a time to listen, to watch, to hear the natural world, a time to delight in the simple.

As I sit, a gray squirrel darts around, scratching through the detritus, caching nuts and berries, always searching. A white-breasted nuthatch climbs down a nearby tree calling *ank, ank, ank* probing the bark for its next meal. A mosquito buzzes by my ear. I breathe in deeply and exhale slowly. Watching, listening, and trying to become a part of this place. I can smell the moist soil with each breath. It provides a signature to this place.

I sit, I listen, I watch. I hear the leaves rustle in the light breeze. I allow myself the luxury of time. Here, I can let go of the trappings of my life, to just be, instead of running and feeling as though I am losing the race. To my surprise, a doe walks out. Her tail switches. She is wary as she approaches the forest opening. I suck in my breath and sit motionless. My heart races. I am excited to see this creature, hoping not to spoil the moment. She slowly moves to the brook and takes a drink. She raises her head and surveys the area. I am sure she sees me but still she does not flag her tail and run off. Perhaps I have succeeded and become a part of this

place, adding my own mark. Having quenched her thirst, she carefully moves out of the small clearing back into the forest. It is as if she was never there.

My heart is still racing, in awe of this encounter. I want to jump up and follow the deer. I want to run home and share this experience with others, tell them all about it. I fight the urge. Instead I continue to sit, savoring this moment, my moment. The deer was wary and alert but looked unafraid. I begin to contemplate this and think of how the doe moves through life, always wary but always moving forward.

As I sit and consider the deer, the squirrel and the nuthatch I realize that their lives aren't simple. Each moment they are working, searching for food, watching for predators, or looking for shelter. Their lives although beautiful and calming for me are just as fraught with stressors as my own. Yet, they move onward, each day, in the quiet beauty of the forest.

My retreat to the woods is not a withdrawal. It is a place I feel nourished and alive, like at "The Farm." The forested landscape surrounds me, embraces me, and provides me with a sense of purpose, a sense that I too can move forward like my wild companions. It has offered a greater understanding of life, my life. The leaves rustle, the birds sing and the water babbles. Slowly, the weight in my chest eases. I sit a while longer and then amble home with renewed spirit.

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