

Two Prompts

by John Elder

1.

Yes, I can recall a vivid encounter with nature during childhood.

Our family had driven to the Pearl River in southern Louisiana for a long-planned weekend of waterskiing. We were going to be staying at a camp down there that was owned by friends of the family. I was a skinny 10-year-old who'd never been on skis before. As a water-loving kid, though, I was wildly excited about the prospect of such new, high-speed adventures. Immediately after we arrived everyone walked down to the dock to see the gleaming mahogany run-about that would be our ski boat. It was decided that, as the youngest member of the party I should have the first turn. So I sat down and dabbled my feet in the warm, shallow water while being coached about putting on my skis and using the tow-handle. Then, just as I felt that things couldn't get any better, the day took a terrifying turn.

One of our hosts casually remarked that the opaque brown river was home to some great big old gars. Though skiing was new to me gars were not. When my parents took me to the aquarium at Audubon Park, near our New Orleans home, I always gravitated toward the huge, scummy tank where alligator gars glided menacingly back and forth. These primitive, armored fish, reaching well over five-feet long and with tapered snouts filled with a tangle of yellow teeth, were both horrible and fascinating for me. When they brushed against the glass partition between their world and mine they made me shiver.

Now, as I slipped into my skis on a muggy summer day, I shuddered again at the knowledge that I might soon find myself entering the gars' native element. There was suddenly just one thing in my mind—the fear that I might topple over unseen into the now menacing river as the ski boat sped gaily away. And when I did those uncanny, plated monsters would be waiting for me down below. The mental image came from a movie called *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* that my best friend Billy's mother, Rose Rester, had unwisely taken us to see three years before. The scene when the Creature watched an unsuspecting swimmer splash past overhead had haunted my dreams ever since.

Suddenly the boat, with me precariously attached, surged out from the dock and began to swerve back and forth to avoid the mangrove roots elbowing up on both sides of the channel. I clenched my stringy limbs so tightly that my body took on the rigidity of an ironing board that had been stood on end and was now bumping along above a pair of skis. Though I never did in fact fall I can recall few other experiences in childhood to match the heart-stopping intensity of that day. It continues to live vividly in my body and mind because all that adrenaline made me so awake, opening my eyes as wide as they could possibly go.

But thinking back to the experience now I find that I can also remember much more than the horror filling me then. Back come the delicious spatters of water on my skin as I managed to swerve with the swerving boat. A fragrance of bay leaves and gumbo filé floats out over the bayou of memory too. When the rest of us went down to the dock my Cajun grandmother made for the old wood stove inside the cabin, and was soon cooking up one of the feasts that to this day define “holiday” for me. It turns out that, over an interval of 57 years, the experience of childhood terror also lends permanence to many other details of that swampy day—even though I’ve never returned to the Pearl River except in my dreams.

2.

Okay. Now I’m supposed to connect that intense early experience to the terrain of my adult life in Vermont.

This is a challenge, given how distant Louisiana feels to me, in space and culture as well in time. Our family moved to northern California soon after that water skiing weekend. Then, after my wife Rita and I finished grad school in 1973, we settled down in Vermont to raise our own family. The vividness of fall here, the brisk onset of winter, and the heavily forested slopes embracing our village of Bristol resist placement on the same map as that murky, fecund bayou world where I skittered over unseen gars.

This is the time of year, though, when I drive home from Middlebury looking up through Bristol Gap, in order to see if the day has finally arrived when Mt. Abraham will emerge pure white above the gray-brown lower elevations. Eagerly anticipating the coming snows helps me now to relate that far-off episode in Louisiana to a beloved but daunting seasonal ritual right here in our northern New England home.

Soon after Rita and I moved to Vermont we were introduced to several other couples of our age who made a practice of climbing Mt. Abe on snowshoes every New Year’s Day. For a decade and a half we enjoyed hiking up with them, picnicking cheerfully amid the drifts, then sledding down after an exhilarating stop at the windy summit. Gradually, though, children came into the picture and (oddly) preferred other celebrations, their parents’ knees got creaky, and the number of participants on these expedition steadily dwindled. I seem to be the last one from the original group still snowshoeing up Mt. Abraham, generally in company with my always game (and somewhat younger) friend David Brynn. Like skiing so long ago on the Pearl River, this annual adventure has become an inescapable landmark in my life.

When climbing Mt. Abe I’m never seized by terror equal to my dread of gars in the Pearl River. Still, a certain wary insecurity is the context of my enjoyment. The snow can be so deep that I have to lift my feet really high on the way up. This means that my heart is soon pounding, my head swimming. If, on the other hand, it’s a year when the early drifts have been scoured away by wind, the exposed ledge right below the mountain’s treeless crown will be encased in ice so thick as to be impervious to the crampons under the snowshoes’ foot bed. Under such circumstances I have to pull my way up the final portion of the trail, lying on my stomach and grunting with effort as I reach through the krummholz for one gnarly fir trunk after another.

David and I have to set out earlier each winter in order to make it back before darkness. And though I can readily keep up with him on the ascent, on the way back down I tend to fall more and more frequently from fatigue—spectacular wipe-outs that could easily break a bone were it not for the cushioning snow. Each winter, too, I find that my recovery from this New Year’s adventure takes longer. A couple of days now feel necessary to recover my wind and get my pulse back down to normal. My sensible, grown-up children have begun to worry in my hearing about whether it is wise for me to continue on these snowy expeditions.

I find it impossible to stop trying, though. The freezing winds on top make me feel so awake, while the dramatic views out over the landscape offer a helpful perspective on life’s daily challenges. I can look straight down through the Gap’s broad, glaciated U to the village where Rita and I raised our three kids and beyond that to Middlebury where I taught for 37 years. Closer at hand is the rocky western margin of the summit where 16 years ago I scattered my father’s ashes and, more recently, brought those of our dog (“Good dog, Maple. Stay!”) Our family’s story is consolingly inscribed in this stony topo map.

When gusts of wind make me totter on the summit I am always reminded how quickly a Vermont winter could do me in were I to fall with no friend at hand. In reality, extreme cold is probably more of a danger than those gars ever were. But just as tropical Louisiana made the drops of water on my bare arms so delightful, so too below-zero temperatures make the heat of my sweating exertion a feeling to relish. That afternoon on the Pearl River became indelible because I was awash in adrenaline. In a parallel way the increasing effort of snowshoeing up Mt. Abraham makes these outings live for me with a vividness few other experiences can match.

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