



Harmony

A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
Autumn 2010

I know this road like the old friend it is; Kelley Stand it is called. It is a narrow dirt ribbon that twists and climbs into the Green Mountains of southern Vermont. Today it is in good shape; I'm cruising. But in springs past I've driven it when the road strained to merge with the adjacent stream, and I needed the help of passersby to pull my hapless station wagon back onto dry ground. The locals don't even try to keep this road open during the winter.

As a child, some magical alchemy of place, play, and parents bonded me to nature, forever. My presence here, on Kelley Stand Road, is a direct outcome. I'm heading for a trailhead that will launch me into a short backpack camping trip inside a gentle and beautiful wilderness. I've made this same excursion many times before — nearly all of them solo, like today. Lye Brook Wilderness has become the most sacred place in my life, a sanctuary that offers peace to my spirit, clarity to my thoughts, and beauty to my vision.

Reflecting the destination, even the drive itself has taken on meaning and power for me. Windows are down so I can capture the smells and sounds. The latter include flute-like hermit thrushes, plus white-throated sparrows singing of "Oh Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada." But the dominant sounds come from the stream, aptly named Roaring Branch. Water gushes over, through, and around rolling cobblestones, giant boulders, and patches of shattered gravel — more rocks than there are stars, I am certain. No one would ever build a road like this today, right on the banks of a forest stream. But my god, it is beautiful.

The stream's song mixes with Loreena McKennitt, singing of ancient places and questing journeys. I consider turning the CD off, but the birds and frogs in the music fit well with the tumbling water. Besides, I'm deliberate about my music choices before backpacking: the final tunes I hear will stay with me on the trail. Over thirty years ago, bad luck and a Denver oldies station conspired to make Connie Francis' "Lipstick on Your Collar" the last song in my mind before beginning a three-week Outward Bound course — with no electronics allowed. That thoroughly mediocre song became the everlasting

soundtrack for my O.B. experience; it was outright cruel. I remember that lesson, and decide to leave Loreena on. I do my best to absorb the melodies.

I drive onward, savoring the voyage which is so fully a part of the magic. Reluctantly pulling my gaze away from the scenery to actually watch the road, I notice a bright red, rather brawny pick-up truck backed into a pull-out at the very edge of Roaring Branch. At first I can just barely see a man near the rear of the truck. As I go by I glance over, expecting to see him whipping a fly fishing rod — a common sight around here. Instead, he's standing still and alone beside the water, facing upstream, playing a violin.

I almost stop. It is a wonderful scene, infused with spirit, surprise, and delight. I have shared my preceding week with 35 accomplished and budding nature writers — creatives all, tree-huggers all. Those days were drenched in warmth, passion, and art. Now, beside this rough and little-traveled dirt road, I witness something so similar in essence, yet solitary.

Two hundred yards further I'm still debating whether to turn around, go back, and ask to take his picture. I downshift and tap the brakes — but then decide, *no*. He is in his own spiritual place; I respect and understand that. And in my mind I hear him playing majestically, notes soaring and blending with the creek's percussion. I don't want to risk being disappointed. I want to hold the image and memory unsullied and perfect: a person expressing his love for nature — his personal harmony *with* nature — in a way he cherishes.

As I drive on towards the entry point for my own sanctuary, my own place of harmony, I realize that I want my children to grow up to be like the man with the violin. I want *all* of our children to be like him.