



Wilderness, Far and Near

A Green Hearts Essay by Ken Finch
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There was a bare puff of breeze. The soft "yank, yank" of a nuthatch. And, twice, a just-perceptible rumble of distant thunder. All else was silence.

". . . untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" is how the law defines a Federal wilderness area — like the 16,000 acres of Vermont I was sequestered in. Many times I had been such a visitor here — 12 trips, maybe, or 20? — and nearly all as a solo backpacker. But it had been over 20 years, and now I was reveling in the reunion with one of the sacred places in my life. Moments of grace were paired with torrents of memories, all embracing the quietude of Lye Brook and Bourne Pond.

Something in me had begun changing the evening before, when a short burst of coyote song spoke of how alone I was, yet how much I belonged there. When the moonless night later draped my camp, the megaphone of darkness amplified the fall of every acorn and the crinkling of each leaf — harmless, sightless sounds sharpened by the vulnerability of solitude.

As my senses flared, I realized that this was not just nature "untrammelled by man," this was nature *merged* with man. Or *re-merged*. Once-firm boundaries were broken down; the inter-species treaties practiced on more-human turf meant nothing here. I still acutely knew my human form, yet felt more animal than I had in years. The sheer wildness of the place was calling out faint echoes of prehistoric instincts that sometimes — in the darkest of nights, or the darkest of moments — rustle far, far down in the cellars of our minds.

Later, in the very early hours, a barred owl seemed to ask, "Who let you in? Who let you in *here?*" And at the first tease of dawn, my eyes snapped open to more coyote song, and then the ghostly form of a white birch framed by my tent's screen door — a barrier that had pretended to define my territory during the night.

Breakfast found me atop a boulder at the pond's edge, where worlds dissolve into one another. Decades before I had shared dinner at this very spot with a beaver who stood in the shallows, barely six feet away, munching on aquatic tubers. We had both understood that the rules were suspended here.

On this morning I again defied the rules by calling out to a distant pair of loons. They were silent; I wanted them to sing. So I tried a loon call of my own. It was a pathetic imitation of that most wild and haunting of bird songs — and I was further mocked by the perfect echo that

reverberated back. In my normal life, in my normal haunts, I would never utter such an egocentric cry. What had happened to the rules?

As we grow up in American society, we learn those rules: where, when, and how to be singularly human. At least, that is, our modern manifestation of "human," which so often stands in separation from nature — and even in defiance of it. We are not born knowing those rules, nor with any pre-established life boundaries. In fact, according to the "biophilia hypothesis" we are actually born with an innate attraction to other life forms, and to the whole of nature.

Sadly, that attraction may not survive today's childhoods, which seem focused on teaching rules and limitations, rather than on fostering creativity and guiding spiritual growth. What if biophilia is a "use it or lose it" phenomena? If it is not fully activated during childhood, do the odds turn against it ever happening? I believe that is likely.

Today's parents face a dizzying menu of ways to enrich their children's lives, to help them become happy, healthy, successful, and nurturing adults. Among those perplexing choices, activating children's biophilia — i.e., building their enduring bonds with the outdoors — must be near the top of the list. It is a chance — in fact, the *best* chance — to give children the natural world as a life-long friend, as a personal therapist, as a source of constructive adventure, and as an ever-present sanctum. And has anyone ever grown up to regret their young days spent playing in nature?

Nature play doesn't need a far-off refuge. To kids' eyes, wilderness exists behind the shrubs that border the fence, and two branches up in the oak tree, and down in the mud of the tiny neighborhood creek. Their epiphanies do not come from beavers and coyotes, but from fireflies, fuzzy leaves, and slimy earthworms. Someday your children's personal wilderness may comprise thousands of acres, as my sacred place does. But today it is just outside your door or right down the street — and it is every bit as powerful!

