Quiet People In a Noisy World

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Celebration of a Family's Simple Existence

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Book One: In the Beginning

Soaking Wet in the Sierras

Laura and I lived in Toadtown, in the foothills of the Sierras, west of the Sacramento Valley, before we had children, a car, or many material possessions. We did own an aluminum-frame, nylon backpack that carried groceries and laundry well.

Now, because of dangerous experiences, I won't hitchhike. Then, however, we did hitchhike, because it was the only way we had to travel distances beyond what we could walk. Early that day, we hitched a ride down the mountain, visited friends, bought essential groceries, and laundered at the laundromat. When we headed back up the road, dusk descended, hastened by heavy clouds gathered close against the mountain.

With our thumbs in the air, we hiked about three miles of a necessary ten, and rain began to pour down. We didn't own rain clothes, but the rain was bearably warm, and we kept walking. Our clothes soon soaked through. Water ran off our hair, noses, and fingertips and into our shoes. Laura said, "Why won't anyone give us a ride?"

"We're soaking wet. We would get their upholstery wet. Besides that, anyone who would walk in a downpour like this has to be crazy, and people shouldn't pick up crazy hitchhikers."

The rain began to erode Laura's spirit. I realized I could easily become discouraged. Then we would be two wet, discouraged walkers with a long way to go in a rainstorm. I sang songs I already knew, and songs I never heard before but pulled out of the dark rainstorm around us. I sang upbeat, even crazy songs. I danced. I blessed the rain and praised the clouds. I found reservoirs of energy that fired me with warm enthusiasm.

Laura's beginning descent of spirit stopped, then reversed. She kept walking. She cheered up. She laughed and realized good still surrounded us. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than walk with a heavy pack on my back, Laura by my side, singing in pouring rain as cars sped by, spraying water from their tires and soaking us more, if we could be more soaked.

Laura said, "All those people are in their warm, dry cars, with the windows rolled up."

“I know. Think of what they’re missing. All the great outdoors. This wonderful rain. What do they have? A tiny, isolated little place, rolling along too fast, cut off from everything real. They’re missing out on this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Think of how boring their lives must be.”

Years later, tonight in fact, Laura told me I rekindled her energy and helped her appreciate the rain, the clouds above us, the water running off us, and the earth running with water under our feet, but she wondered if I was crazier than she had ever realized and if the dark, wet night might never end.

I thought her descent into discouragement might begin again, and I said, “We’ll get home in good shape, in good time, and we’ll look back on our rainstorm hike with appreciation.” The time had come, in her book, for that promise to develop.

A pickup passed us, and the brake lights came on. The pickup stopped on the shoulder of the road. A voice floated through the dark rain, “Jon, Laura, is that you?” and since it was us, and the driver was Pike and his passenger was Shirley, and they were our neighbors in Toadtown, we ran, put the pack in the back and crowded in front with them, because they said they didn’t mind if we were wet. They delivered us right to our front door.

We built a roaring fire in the stove. We discovered the backpack was, as advertised, waterproof, and while our clothes weren’t, our skin was, and our hair soon dried. We had carried home freshly laundered clothing, and we put some of it on after we hung what we had been wearing to dry.

I peeled and sliced apples while Laura made a pie crust, and the odor of baking apples and cinnamon soon filled the small cabin, already full of the sound of rain drumming hard on the tin roof and the sound of Laura singing of the joy of rainstorms and the joy of living.

A Unique, Light Grey Cowboy Hat

Someone who studied that hat might have concluded that it was a product of a hat factory and the Mad Hatter combining efforts. That was close enough to truth to qualify.

I camped out on Coalpit Mountain the summer I bought the hat, almost 25 years ago. I learned to walk again after having been hit by a drunk

driver. I needed a hat. Sunshine at 5,000 feet in the clean air of eastern Oregon is intense, and a wide-brimmed hat would shade my face and neck and provide some shelter from eastern Oregon's sudden cloudbursts.

The next time I went to town, I went into a western-wear store. A cowboy hat would be a good starting point, I had decided. It turned out as I had thought it might; there wasn't a hat in the store large enough for me. That was all right. The sweat band inside the hat took up some room, and it would come out, once I was on the privacy of my own mountain. I bought the largest, light-grey, felt cowboy hat without mentioning my plans.

With groceries and my new hat on the back seat of the car I had borrowed for the summer, I drove back up the dusty, gravel road and packed my supplies the last hundred yards up Coalpit Mountain to my camp, with the still too-small hat riding high on my head. I put everything away, ate lunch, and went to work on the hat. I removed the leather sweat band. Without it, the hat fit just right. The hat came with a double crease in the crown. I punched it out smooth. The double crease had been pressed in, so all the lines still showed in the felt.

I soaked the hat overnight in a bucket of water, then smoothed it over the bottom of a gallon jar and let it dry in sunshine. I liked the result, a high, round crown. I put a large dimple in the front of the crown, and I started wearing the hat.

Without a leather sweat band, the soft grey hat was very comfortable. Because there was less adherence between the inside of the hat and my head than there would have been with a leather band, it blew off easily in sudden wind.

The next time I left the mountain and visited my mother, I soaked the hat again and ironed it while it was still damp, to take the remnants of lines from previous designs out and to stiffen the soft felt somewhat. I bought a long, leather thong, circled the outside of the hat with it, cut holes both sides of the crown and pushed the thong through, rigged a sliding bead, and I had an effective chin strap, to keep the hat from blowing off.

Then a red tailed hawk left a very nice wing feather near camp. As the hawk screamed its hunting scream in the high air above Coalpit Mountain, I said, "Thank you. That's exactly what I need. I treasure this feather." I cut two holes in the side of the hat's crown and passed the feather's quill in and back out, and I had a feather in my hat. I rolled the left brim up, the right

down, and I adjusted the forward brim slightly up or slightly down, depending on where the sun stood or later, when I left the mountain and resumed social existence, depending on what I wanted to communicate about my willingness to communicate or my temporary taciturnity.

Nobody messed with my hat. I didn't have to tell anyone not to mess with it. Apparently, nobody even considered the idea. Until Laura came along. Every time I put the hat down, she picked it up and put it on. I thought that was rather cheeky of her. But then I decided she looked good wearing the hat. Partly because she was cheeky enough to wear the hat and looked good wearing it, we eventually married, and the hat went with us as we progressed through the world. Both of us often wore the hat, though it was too big for Laura, through nine moves.

We owned it still when we lived in Whitney Valley. When we weren't wearing it, we hung it on the wall, on a section of weathered barn wood that someone before us had nailed up as interior wood. The hat blended well with the aged, silver-grey color of the wood and with the ancient, almost forever quality of the old, ramshackle house.

The old, remodeled, unique, light-grey, wide-brimmed, high-crowned cowboy hat took on a slightly numinous quality over the years. It shaded our eyes from intense sunlight and gave our faces and necks protection from driving rain. To some degree, it symbolized the striving toward creative individualism that led me to learn to walk again, that led me through difficult times of finding and adhering to my own direction, largely against the currents of the culture. To some degree, it came to represent the melding of my forces and directions with Laura's.

It fits with the slightly numinous, symbolic quality the hat began to have that neither of us now has any idea what became of it. We owned it and wore it in Whitney. We no longer owned it when we left Whitney Valley. With all powerfully positive numinous symbols, the material manifestation loses importance as the symbolic meaning and the numinous weight are understood and absorbed. Though we still need shading from intense mountain sunlight and sudden rainstorms, we carry within us the memory and the meanings of the hat.

Sometimes I wonder what became of the hat. Perhaps it passed from material existence, in fire, in a dump, who knows how? Or perhaps even

now someone wears it, shielding eyes from sun, sheltering from sudden rain, building meanings for the wearer beyond its mere hatness.

Miss Molasses, She Goes Slowly Rolling

The people at the police station in Willows thought the old, green bicycle, superseded by narrower-wheeled bikes with gear shifts, wasn't worth much. They gave it to Laura when she asked about unclaimed bicycles.

Years later, when we moved to Willows, we got the bicycle out of Laura's mother's garage, put air in the tires, oiled the chain, and we had one bicycle. I bought a more modern, taller bicycle with three speeds, though only two of them worked, and we had transportation for both of us.

We didn't encounter much traffic on the side streets we rode, six blocks west to the Laundromat, and three blocks east to the grocery store. We carried an amazing amount of groceries or laundry on the green bicycle, with some in the child's seat in back and some in the basket over the front wheel.

Just to leave town behind for a while, we rode out to the edge of town and then along the gravel road by the big irrigation ditch. I rode around and around Laura while she pedaled steadily, and I started making up a song that stayed with us ever after; "Her name is Miss Molasses/ She goes slowly rolling/ She don't get very far/ Cause she don't go too fast/ But she gets where she's going/ When she's got someplace she's going to..."

As Laura got larger, some of our friends expressed concern that she still rode the bicycle, but we said exercise is good for mothers-to-be, and she kept pedaling. We had a good role model in the local mother who rode her bicycle everywhere, with her children close behind on their bicycles. She rode her bicycle to the hospital, and within hours, she bundled her new baby up and carried it home on her bicycle. Laura didn't duplicate that feat, because Juniper was born at home, but knowing about it helped us maintain our certainty that anyone's concern about a pregnant woman riding a bicycle should have no influence on us as long as Laura felt good riding the bike.

We soon carried Juniper in a backpack as we traveled around town on our bicycles.

We moved to Santa Fe, following a dream, a good dream while it lasted. Like many dreams, it eventually dissipated in daylight.

We bought an ancient pickup and returned to California, where the pickup went the way of all metal and wore out beyond our ability to keep it repaired. We retrieved the bicycles from Laura's mother's garage. By then, Juniper was big enough to ride in the child's seat on the back of the green bicycle. The first few times, I rode close on the other bike to be sure she didn't do anything unpredictable. Juniper loved traveling like that. She understood the need to stay still in the seat. We carried groceries or laundry in the basket on the front.

I went to work driving tractor ten hours a day. I didn't ride with Laura and Juniper much then, but they managed groceries and laundry. With the loads she pedaled home, Laura still didn't move very fast. "Dark and sweet at night time/ Slowly rolling home..."

We did go to the hospital for Amanda's birth, two years after Juniper's birth. Laura probably could have ridden her bicycle to the hospital, but her mother was glad to loan us her car, so I rode my bicycle over, got the car, drove Laura to the hospital, and drove Laura and Amanda home when they were ready.

The Blue Mountains of Northeastern Oregon called us away from the Sacramento Valley. We left the bicycles in Laura's mother's garage.

Since that time in Willows, we've lived a long way from stores, and we've had to rely on internal combustion engines for our transporting power. But we remember the time of quiet, slow, non-polluting transportation. We might live like that again, some day, pedaling quietly, in no rush about anything, "slowly rolling home."

Zinnias for Laura and Juniper

When we were two and one just beginning to expand Laura's waist, Laura stood by the front steps in sunshine. She said, "I'd like to have a flower garden right here. I want to grow zinnias for the birth. Will you get the ground ready for me and get me some seeds?"

I said, “I don’t think there’s enough sun here. It needs to be farther from the house, so the house doesn’t shade it.”

“It gets the sun all morning. It’ll work.”

I worked manure and dolomite into the ground. I told Laura, “Water it heavily. I’ll work it again in a few days, and you can plant it.” She planted the seeds I bought for her, and the flowers sprouted and grew and began to blossom.

I brought home a book, and we read and exercised together from the book. The fourth day, Laura said, “I don’t want to do it this way. A lot of this book is written to overcome fear, because fear makes birth more difficult. But, Jon, I have no fear. It isn’t necessary for me to overcome fear, because I know God takes care of me. This child is part of God’s plan, so there doesn’t need to be any fear, and there can’t be pain or problems.”

“Oh. Okay. But what about the exercises? Shouldn’t you get muscles built up for the hard work ahead?”

“I should be strong and in good physical condition, but if I rehearse it too much and exercise specifically for the birth, I’m taking the plan into my own hands and not trusting God to take care of me and this baby and this birth. I trust God to provide me with the knowledge and the strength and the stamina He gives woman for birth. I can’t do it part one way and part another.”

I read the book through that night. Laura was right; a lot of it had been written to overcome an expectant mother’s fear. A lot of the book meant to get the husband involved, and I was already involved without reservation. Still, I studied the book and understood why shallow, fast breathing worked best at times, and deeper breathing worked best at other times. I understood how to avoid working too hard at the wrong time, and I remembered everything I thought might be useful information.

I worked for a nearby farmer. I drove home late afternoons. Wednesday evening, late in September, when I came out of the bathroom after showering, Laura said, “This baby is getting ready. I’ve had three contractions.”

I threw the towel on the bed and started dressing. Laura laughed and said, “I think there’s plenty of time. They’re a long way apart and not very hard yet. But I’m going to call Chas and Loretta.”

I cleaned house and washed dishes. I picked large, beautiful zinnias of several colors from Laura's garden by the front step and I brought them in and put them in a vase. Chas and Loretta got there at nine that evening. I arranged pillows behind Laura to support her. She panted and strained and pushed, sweating, skin flushed red. She didn't make much noise. She said, "This is awkward. I can't push very well in this position." I crouched beside her and picked her up and held her.

I said, "You're going to have to make some noise. Quit thinking about the neighbors. They'll live through this in good shape. Getting this baby born takes first priority. I led her, "Come on. Do it like this," and I panted and took long, deep breaths and hollered out loud, as if I worked the hardest work in existence, and Laura followed my lead. She grunted with the work and hollered with exertion.

A contraction of her uterus started again. She breathed long and deep. She raised her voice from deep grunting to a shout, exultation and the beginning of pain from extreme effort, bordering on tearing muscles and ligaments. "Ease up, relax, catch up on breathing. Rest for a minute." She panted. Loretta wiped away Laura's sweat with a damp towel. I said, "Don't push yet. Pant. Let your muscles get started. Wait. Now breathe deep and push hard."

Laura breathed, stretched back to loosen muscles, and shifted position. I moved to accommodate her, holding her in the curve of my arms. Laura straightened and pushed with strength and determination, and her voice filled the small apartment.

Loretta said, "The baby is stretched out straight now. The baby is doing some hard work, too. Come on everybody, some more hard work now."

Chas supported the perineum. Laura hollered and pushed hard, and the baby emerged to the shoulders, face down, and then rotated so she faced up. She blinked her eyes open, found my face, and focused on my eyes. I thought my smile might crack my face.

I said, "Let's do it again." Laura pushed, and the baby reached for the world and emerged in one long, smooth motion. Chas caught her and lifted her up and laid her face down on Laura's abdomen. The baby raised her head and studied her mother's face.

Laura talked quietly to her. She said, "You're beautiful. You're really beautiful. We've really looked forward to this moment." Then the baby

looked at everyone there, one person at a time. Loretta and Chas patted her with towels to dry her, and we tied and cut the umbilical cord.

Loretta said, “She’s really a big baby. I haven’t seen newly-born babies raise their heads and look around like that. Baby, you’re strong and big. Laura, now we need to get the placenta out. There’s still work to do.”

I held Juniper and talked to her. She studied me, and I studied her. It didn’t matter much what I said. I told her everything that came into my mind. I said she would grow up, and maybe some day she would give birth to a child, and it would be very like this room the night of her birth, with people gathered, helping a child be born.

Loretta laughed and said, “She’s only about fifteen minutes old. She’ll have a few years to think about that yet.”

Chas started cleaning up. Laura discharged the placenta. She said, “Give her to me,” and I did. Laura held Juniper and talked to her.

We drank orange juice and put everything in order and talked with each other and with the baby. Chas and Loretta left at four a.m. Chas said, “The only thing I don’t like about these parties of yours is they last so late.”

Laura slept after they left. Juniper lay on Laura’s abdomen and chest, also asleep. I put a blanket over them, sat for a while and looked at them. I took the placenta out behind the garage at dawn and buried it. The next spring, I would plant squash there, and the bushes would grow lush and deep green and bear many yellow crooknecks all summer.

Some of the people who came to see Laura and Juniper said the zinnias by the front steps and in the vase on the dining room table were the largest and most perfectly formed zinnias they’d ever seen. The zinnias I had picked for the birth lasted in the vase for more than three weeks, and the flowers still growing by the steps put on blossoms for more than a month.

Laura said the zinnias were a gift from God for the birth, for her and the baby. Laura was radiant, as if a light glowed from her for the next several weeks, that never did completely fade.

Twelve Miles on Foot at 24 Below

Our pickup sat on blocks, surrounded by snow, waiting for parts. The thermometer dropped to twenty-four below zero during the night. I rode

with brother-in-law Red to the mine where he worked, higher up the Blue Mountains of Northeastern Oregon, early morning, to apply for work.

There was no immediate work. Also, there was no one driving back to Sumpter. Nothing to do but walk down the gentle canyon or abrupt valley, depending on perspective, briskly. Quite briskly. Brisk air. Brisk pace. Insulated boots. Two pairs of wool socks. Insulated coveralls over adequate clothing. Leather mittens over wool mittens. Wool scarf over silk scarf. Knit wool cap. Praise God for silk worms and sheep.

Daylight broke beautifully on the snow-clad world, but sun, nearly frozen to immobility by the deeply cold winter morning, courted eternity below the eastern ridge.

I stretch long, fast steps down the packed-snow road. Cold creeps to my toes, arms and hands, cold, but not dangerously cold. My clothing is adequate as long as I keep moving briskly. A mile of long, fast stepping. Two miles. Cold and I have struck a bargain. Cold will caress my arms, hands, toes, and face with delicious excitement, but it will not frostbite me. Three miles, four. Somewhere around six miles, a miracle, worthy of deep praise. Sun pushes its upper curve above the eastern ridge, slowly rises, shines from the clear, winter, mountain sky above the ridge. Sunlight touches me with golden, winter beauty and warmth, only small warmth, but I burst into grateful song and slow my pace a little.

My echo and I sing a joyous duet down the long, white road. Birds, Oregon juncos with jaunty black caps, Clark's nutcrackers, dapperly white, grey and black, and shiny black ravens fly the cold winter air to see what I sing about. The stream below me shows thick winter ice to the clean mountain sky.

The road curves in and out of shadow. I quicken my pace and slow again according to available sunshine. At twelve miles, winter sun shines generously on steep slope above the road. Snow has melted away under a tall ponderosa pine tree, exposing dry pine duff. I climb through snow and sit on soft accumulation of pine needles, lie back against the steep slope. This is luxury. This warm sun, brilliantly reflected from clean snow is beauty. This ease all through me is gratitude, for sunshine, for winter, for clean snow, for this day.

A long, lazy, warm time later, I hear a vehicle coming down the mountain. I cross the snow, thumb in the air, and catch a ride with the

sheriff to Sumpter. Home again, I greet my wife and daughters, “I took a long, cold, and wonderful walk this morning. Something to eat, and I’ll tell you about it.”

The Mail at Whitney 3

I transferred my published essays from their disorderly, “thrown in as received” cardboard box to an alphabetized file, and I received double rewards. Not only do I have a tidy collection of published essays, with easy access to whatever one I want to find, but at the bottom of the box of essays, I found several letters addressed “To Daddy; Our House; Whitney 3.”

Whitney 3 was actually our phone number when we took care of the ranch in Whitney Valley. The old, magneto-crank telephone in the mostly unused house down the road about a hundred yards from our house used the number Whitney 3. John and Mike gave us a key to that house, and we walked down and made phone calls when we needed to.

Our mail came to a post-office box in Sumpter, thirteen miles over a mountain pass. But “Our House; Whitney 3” was a sufficient address for the letters from my daughters, since they came to me through in-house mail, delivered to a small box thumb tacked to the wall near the doorway from the kitchen and living room into Amanda and Juniper’s bedroom.

We are mail-oriented people. Part of our earnings, checks from publications, comes in the mail. We write many letters and receive quite a few. When Juniper and Amanda were six and four, they learned to read and write, and they began to be disappointed that they rarely got mail. Laura said, “Let’s put up our own mailbox and write to each other. We can thumbtack this box to the wall right here and we can write letters to each other and put them in our own mailbox.”

Her idea received immediate approval. We started writing letters to each other. Receiving letters delighted us. Our in-house mail system worked best if the recipient checked the box without being told, but if necessary, someone said, “Have you checked the mail lately?” Juniper started writing letters first, because she learned to write first, but Amanda had little patience with being left behind, and she learned, posthaste.

We told each other what we'd been doing, what we thought about, what we dreamed about. One of Juniper's letters, which I found under all the essays, says "We bought some gingersnap animals in Austin Junction yesterday. I don't think I could reach up very far on that Smokey Bear statue outside the restaurant."

Laura and Amanda and Juniper had gone to Austin Junction, thirteen miles in the opposite direction from Sumpter. We sometimes got our drinking water from a spring near there and then drove another mile to the store and restaurant. That store was our best source for small boxes of animal cookies. Amanda and Juniper made each box of animal cookies last several days.

One of Juniper's letters says, "I think you're a good author. I would publish your books if I were a publisher." Having my own in-house support group gave me more rewards, in some ways, than getting my books published; it quickly pulled me up out of frustration to recognize my many blessings.

In that letter, Juniper told me she and Amanda had saved a handsome gray fledgling from our dog, Thorn, and she asked, "When can we go pick huckleberries?"

Juniper and Amanda illustrated their letters with color pictures, some realistic, and some whimsical. Amanda invented fuzzy little creatures called ground harts, and they graced many of her communications.

In my letters to our daughters, I often told about wild animals I had seen during my peregrinations about the ranch: hawks, eagles, sandhill cranes, deer, elk, coyotes, and dozens of other species. Reading about what I saw on the ranch increased Amanda and Juniper's desire to go with me when I worked so they could see more wild animals. I drew simple, unpracticed depictions of flowers to illustrate my letters. My daughters didn't mind my lack of skill in drawing.

Sometimes, especially in winter, the four of us spent almost all our time together, and we got out of the habit of writing each other letters. But soon, someone asked, "What happened to the mailbox? What happened to writing letters to each other?" and one of us tacked a mailbox to the wall, again. The container didn't matter, a paper sack, a used manila envelope, a small box. What mattered was what came in the mail. All the letters were always a pleasure to receive.

We haven't had an in-house mailbox for a few years. Sometimes members of this family remember traditions that seem to be part of the past and renew them. Lately, we've sometimes been disappointed that we don't receive more mail in the mailbox up the dirt road from this house where we live now. Some friends are faithful correspondents. Many aren't.

Modern existence trims the ranks of serious letter writers. Those of us who preserve the art form must support each other's efforts. The four of us here value communication through letters, but we are seldom far enough from each other to write letters back and forth, so we might need to renew the in-house letters.

The situation calls for a conference. Even if the tradition of in-house communication by letters does not lend itself to renewal, remembering it together in detail will be a rewarding experience for all of us.

Driving Flies

When cattle grazed the pasture closest to the house, flies swarmed thickest. Flies and cattle flock together, but the flies were always thick in summer in Whitney Valley, wherever the cattle grazed.

Though I tried to keep doors and windows adequately screened, the nature of our family, based more in love and adventure than in any concept of strict rules, meant that doors were sometimes ajar and the wrong windows, those without screens, were sometimes open. The old shack of a house, that we loved more than any mansion because it sheltered us well and allowed us many freedoms, including painting the doors any color we wished, seemed to leak flies between boards in any case. Flies laid eggs in the exposed insulation in the attic, so our best efforts only slowed down the fly population explosion indoors.

We wouldn't poison our environment with insecticides, especially because our daughters then were young and idealistic (and now are much older and still idealistic), and we had no desire to crush that idealism with adult practicality. Though Laura and I had thought for many years that people may, without troubled consciences, kill pests, Juniper and Amanda started our education over again with the innocent observation that the

commandment says, “Thou shalt not kill.” It does not add qualifications, “Except in the instance of....”

Within certain reasonable guidelines, which we all worked together to establish, we were and still are willing to be educated by our children. What are children for, we reasoned, but to improve the world and all the people inhabiting it, and what better way is there to improve the world than by bringing new, more humane solutions to old problems? Killing flies by methods other than sprays, for example with swatters or rolled newspapers, was also proscribed, so when the flies became an unbearable nuisance by their density in the house, we organized a fly drive, which took all four of us.

The house was L shaped, with the front exit at the end of the L’s shorter leg and the rear exit at the end of the longer leg. Simultaneously, two adults started from the confluence of the L and diverged toward the doors, each with one of our largest, heaviest towels, large to cover the maximum area possible, heavy, because a heavy towel swooshes through the air effectively. We grasped the towels, spread our arms so the towels would cover the largest area possible, and waved the towels forcefully up and down, driving air and flying insects ahead of us.

One daughter stood at the door from the back room and shut it after we drove flies from that area, and one stood at the front door and shut that when most of the flies had flown out of the house.

Perhaps the swallows, who lived in nests they built of mud under our eaves, came to recognize the shout, “Okay everybody, flies are too thick in here. Let’s have a fly drive.” As flies buzzed through the front door, some of them were an easy harvest for the swallows that provided an alternative to poisons for insect control and gave part of the answer to the question, “What are flies for?”

Sometimes, enough flies leaked back past the active towels that a second or even a third drive was called for. That was all right. Each drive took only a few minutes, gave us the opportunity to work together to solve a problem, and showed us there often are simple, environmentally sound solutions to problems we tend to solve in complex, environmentally unsound ways.

And afterward, the inside of the house was ours again, except for frogs under the house in the cool habitat where the pipe coming up from the well dripped, and spiders, who feasted on some of the flies that strayed and

stayed behind the drives, an occasional bat, cats, dogs, and sometimes a raccoon or two who snuck onto the back porch for a snack of cat food, and we were glad to share the house with all of them.

Storms Along the Pete Mann Ditch

Summer dried northeastern Oregon. The water in the river fell to a low level. Ranchers couldn't get enough water into their ditches to irrigate wild hay and alfalfa. As they did every year, they got together a crew of one or two men from each ranch that irrigated from the north fork of the Burnt River and drove up Greenhorn Mountain to start water down the Pete Mann ditch to the river.

Many years ago, miners built the ditch with shovels, picks, rock drills, dynamite, and horse and mule-drawn machinery to bring water around the mountain so they could wash gold from the rock and dirt of the mountain. The miners took out most of the easy to get gold. Legislators, responding to growing concern for the preservation of mountains, forests, and streams, outlawed hydraulicking the mountainsides to get the gold out. The miners left. Ranchers acquired the rights to mountain water and the use of the ditch to bring the water down to the river to extend their irrigation season.

Not long after the sun rose above Cottonwood Butte, John and Wayne Morin drove into my front yard. I loaded my chainsaw, shovel, and lunch into the back of the pickup, and we headed up the mountain, followed by two other pickups, nine men in all.

Wayne said, "We'll get soaked by heavy rain before we finish today."

I looked at the blue mountain sky above us, with no clouds anywhere, and said, "It doesn't look much like it."

"It might not look like it now, but we always get a big storm when we go up the mountain to bring water down the ditch."

And we did.

We split up into four crews. Gary and I dismounted from the pickups, unloaded a shovel, a hayfork, and my chainsaw, and we started just above where the ditch entered the river. We traded tools back and forth as we climbed the ditch up the mountain. We forked accumulations of conifer needles and alder leaves out of the ditch, shoveled out dirt and rock slides,

and threw out limbs. We cut up trees that had fallen in and threw out the pieces. We filled low spots in the downhill bank with dirt and rocks.

In some places, we climbed a hundred feet up the side of the mountain while we gained only a hundred feet forward. Gigantic granite boulders that had broken away from the solid rock of the mountain lay in the channel, leaving plummeting water to find ways under or around. We climbed to more level ground. Alder bushes grew densely on the downhill bank and extended limbs out over the channel. We stooped along under them, and we cut the lowest growing branches so they wouldn't stop debris floating down the ditch and form a dam that directed water over the bank of the ditch and washed out the bank when we turned water into the ditch.

Clouds filled the sky above us and darkened the day. Lightning danced down from thick clouds and struck the mountain. Thunder rumbled and cracked and roared.

Gary and I finished our section of the ditch, climbed out, and hiked up steep slope. We loaded our tools into the back of the pickup, got our lunches from the big toolbox, and climbed into the cab, and the clouds let go of drumming down, soaking rain. Dry and warm, we ate our lunch while seven other men worked through the driving storm, soaked to the bone. It rained for an hour, and the clouds blew east and left blue sky and sunshine and the freshly-washed smell of the day behind them.

The rest of the crew straggled to our meeting place. Some took their clothes off and wrung out water. Some had already done that and were only damp.

The ditch begins up the mountain at about 7,500 feet and delivers water into the river at about 4,500 feet. The slope most of the ditch crosses is so steep, no one has ever logged it. The dense forest of pine, fir, western larch, aspen and spruce includes bigger trees than are left most places in the west.

Each year I went up, I worked a different section of the ditch. The ditch ran down through magic forest, most of it untouched by man, with no one around for miles but we who cleared the ditch. Golden sun shone through clean mountain air. From some places on the ditch, we looked between the close trees out to thousands of feet of green forest falling away below us, miles of green forests and high meadows standing east across valleys and other mountains of the Blue Mountain range.

Each time I rode up the mountain and worked on the ditch, a heavy storm engulfed the mountain. Every year but the last, I got to the pickup just before the rain started, except for the year two of us took shelter in a miner's cabin, dilapidated but dry, with plenty of evidence of previous occupation by wood rats and porcupines, until the storm blew east and left sunshine behind it. I began to acquire a reputation of being a dry man.

The last year I worked on the ditch, we unloaded tools and supplies. I filled my back pack. Wayne and Russell watched me top off my load with my tightly rolled nylon rain poncho. "You'd better leave that in the pickup. Its just more to carry."

"You're not afraid to get wet, are you?"

"You guys watch. Later in the day, you'll offer me five times store price for it."

Maybe the mountain knew what I didn't know yet, that I would move on to another job, and it was my last time working the Pete Mann ditch. Whatever the reason, a spectacular storm descended on us.

Wayne and Russell and I worked our way down the ditch, forking and shoveling out debris and cutting what needed cutting. Wayne carried dynamite. We capped and fused sticks, and cracking concussions shook a small part of the mountain briefly when we blew rocks that had rolled into the channel into movable fragments.

As if to answer the puny statements we men made with red sticks of dynamite, when we walked the ditch through deep forest, crossing some of the steepest slope, the day turned dark; lightning and thunder shook the mountain; wind howled down through the trees and smelled of rain and lightning-struck rock and wet evergreens. I slipped out of my backpack, sat down on the ditch bank, and got out my poncho.

Wayne said, "It isn't raining yet."

My reply blew away in the wind. I put the poncho on, and rain hit, pouring cold down the mountainside on strong wind. Lightning struck and lit up the darkness under the clouds in startling-bright, blue light, closer than I've ever been to lightning. Thunder roared immediately after the lightning, painful to our ears.

I thought of some of the safety rules for lightning storms. Don't get under tall trees. A forest of tall trees surrounded us. Stay out of wet areas. The men above us hadn't yet turned Rattlesnake Creek and Lightning Creek

into the channel, but we walked in six inches of running water from springs along the mountain, and the downpour added to the water running around our rubber-booted feet.

We couldn't be anywhere but where we were. I prayed for our safety and trusted we would be kept safe. I gave myself up to the wild beauty of the storm and forgot for the moment any efforts to clear the channel. I had little idea of passing time. I only knew that a ways down the ditch, later, lightning and thunder rolled away down the mountain. Rain slowed, then quit. The wind calmed to a breeze. Clouds traveled east across a clean sky, and sunshine filtered down through the trees.

Wayne and Russell wrung out their clothes and put them back on. I took off my poncho, rolled it, and put it back in my pack. We worked on down the ditch and met with the other crews at the pickups. By late afternoon, water rushed down the ditch to the river, carrying mud and conifer needles in its first, channel-clearing run. Late the next day, water from the mountain spread across the wild mountain hay meadows I irrigated. I coursed through green growing grasses and cleared debris that had ridden the water down the mountain from my ditches to avoid washing out ditch banks.

I've moved on to other jobs on other mountains, but that mountain, with the ditch that brings water part way around its slopes and down to the river, where it slows into meadows of the foothills, with storms that engulfed us as we worked, strongly inhabits my memories.

If I'm ever in the area at the right time, I'd be glad to work with the crew, without pay. I would look to the sky and expect lightning and thunder and hard rain to welcome me back. I'd be sure to take my poncho.

Dragonfly in the Water

A trail close to the water circles Magone Lake, high in the Blue Mountains of Northeastern Oregon. Huckleberry bushes grow densely along the trail in some places, and the bushes bore many large, ripe huckleberries. Juniper said, "Maybe the people who come up here don't know huckleberries are good to eat."

I said, "Wonderful. Their ignorance is our bliss."

Laura said, “It looks like there are two different kinds. Some of them are red, and some are deep purple. Are both kinds all right to eat?”

I sampled some of each color. “Yes. Both colors are ripe, delicious, and quite safe.”

Four of us ate huckleberries. We grazed toward the swimming area. Two floating docks extend into the clean lake below the parking area. White gravel spread along the shore and into the edge of the lake provides a firm bottom for wading. Everywhere else, getting into the lake means wading through ankle deep mud and stirring mud into the water. So swimmers and waders gather near the docks.

The lake is not widely known. With more than twenty miles of mountain dirt road to drive to get there, people don’t gather as thickly as they do, for example, on the beach at Los Angeles, but we weren’t accustomed to more than five or six people at a time. Nevertheless, we established our beachhead and waded and swam. Sun shone hot through the thin, clean mountain air. Steep ridges, forested with ponderosa and lodgepole pine and western larch and Douglas fir, rose east and west of the lake. Stands of aspen grew in some places, close to the lake.

People picnicking up the ridge from us hadn’t secured all their supplies, and napkins blew away in the stiff mountain breeze that blew down the canyon and over the clear lake surface in sunshine. Napkins tumbled along the shore, and some of them dropped into the water. Amanda said, “How could they come up to this clean, beautiful place to enjoy it and then trash it up?”

Laura said, “I don’t know. Maybe they haven’t noticed.”

“How could they not notice?”

We had an uncomfortable moment, because we didn’t know how strangers talk to strangers about napkins littering a mountain lake. Laura started hesitantly toward the source of blowing napkins, showing more resolve than the rest of us, but still not much. The wind died, and papers stopped blowing. Juniper and Amanda ran up and down the shore and waded into the lake and gathered papers. They returned to the parking area and stuffed the napkins into a garbage can.

Laura said, “If everyone was as ecologically concerned as our daughters, we wouldn’t have environmental problems.” She looked at me. “They educate us as much as we educate them. Maybe more.”

We waded into the lake. Clear water deepens quickly from the shore. The steep canyon wall fell and dammed the stream to form Magone Lake recently enough that some trees, dead now, still stand in the water, but long enough ago that the ridge that gave part of its rock and dirt to form the lake grew forest again, and the dam at the foot of the lake is alive with forest, grasses, and brush.

Two young men and a young woman ran down the hill, the length of the docks, dove into the water, and swam out to where the top of an ancient western larch tree curved out of the water and invited swimmers to pause and sit in intense mountain sunshine. Two of the swimmers climbed onto the snag; the other stayed in the water but hung onto the tree. They laughed and talked in the sunshine and clear water. Then they left the snag and swam to the other side of the lake.

I swam toward the snag, but halfway, I turned back. I could swim that far, but coming back might be more than I wanted to do that day.

A light-haired boy, five or six years old, waded in the graveled shallows. A blue dragonfly fell into the water close to him and struggled, but it couldn't regain flight. A small breeze drifted the dragonfly toward the boy. He backed away from it and splashed water at it to try to float it away from him. I swam to the dragonfly, put my hand under it, and lifted it from the water. I stood up and walked to shore. The boy followed me out of the water. I said, "Its wings are wet. That's why it can't fly. If its wings dry out, I think it might fly again."

The dragonfly walked across my palm, onto my thumb. I turned my hand slowly, and it walked with the motion until it rested on my knuckles and spread its wings in sunshine. I said, "It won't hurt you. It doesn't have a stinger, and it won't bite." He looked at the dragonfly, up at me, and then back at the dragonfly. He stepped closer and studied the dragonfly.

Several other children ran up from the water to see what we looked at and talked about. They looked at the dragonfly and at me. The boy I had talked to said, "It won't hurt you. When its wings are dry, it's going to fly again." They all crowded close. No one said anything. After a thorough look, most of the children ran back to the water and waded in. The first boy walked into the water, but he turned and watched the dragonfly. The dragonfly dried out and rose above my hand on transparent, rattling wings

and flew up the lake, close above the shore. The light-haired boy watched it out of sight and then waded farther out into the water.

Wind blew again. I thought of the napkins. I thought talking to people about paper blowing in the wind would be simple, and I would be able to do it. I looked up the hill and saw someone had weighted down the paper napkins with rocks.

People swam in the clean lake in sunshine. My daughters shared their inner tubes with the small boy who had watched the dragonfly and with several other children. Laura floated at the edge of the children's play area, then saw they needed no adults, and she swam over and waded out of the water and joined me.

A flotilla of children gathered in shallow water above white gravel. Amidst chatter and laughter, they worked out a system so those without floating devices would have turns. All the children working together overcame any acrimonious attempts at assuming too much power, and the children achieved noisy peace. Several mallard ducks, close together, dabbled and spoke among themselves along the far shore.

Wind danced waves against the shore. Someone dove off the second dock, and the heavy platform rocked a little in the water above white gravel. The man and woman of napkins walked down from their picnic area and smiled at Laura and at me as they passed. Their children shared inner tubes with our children.

Laura stood close beside me. Her leg and side, still wet but warming in the mountain sunshine, lightly touched my leg and side. I felt at ease in the mountain sunshine, in the cold water, in the small group of people sharing graveled shore along a small, clean lake in Oregon's Blue Mountains.

Lessons Learned in a Dusty Corral

The old gray mare bucked straight up, into a shape like an inverted V, and Jack, her rider, continued up toward the bright blue sky. At his apogee, he laid out flat in the air, facing the sky. Then he contorted and twisted himself until his feet pointed downward, and, responding to gravity's insistence, he landed in the dusty corral dirt in a crouch, with his bending knees as shock absorbers, unhurt.

John, owner of the ranch and of the gray mare, stood close to my right. I asked him, “Did you see that?”

He asked, “See what?”

“Jack just got bucked off. I never did see anything like what he went through to get his feet downward and land right.”

“Well, Jackie’s been bucked off a few times.”

“What would have made her buck him off?”

“Don’t know. The old gray mare, she’s kind of a one-man horse. Maybe she realized I’m standing over here, and somebody else was up in the saddle.”

John was never in the least disturbed by nor inclined to make fun of my relative ignorance about horses and cattle. He was the best man I ever worked for. He didn’t pay a top wage, but he was generous with “please” and “thank you,” and he had a crew more devoted to him, and to the work that had to be done, than many ranchers who paid better wages. I didn’t work with cattle much, so when I did, I learned.

Rick stayed the summer in a cabin down the river about two miles at Cow Camp with his wife and two small daughters and six horses. Hired by a group of ranchers, Rick and his family rode National Forest grazing allotments and looked for cattle in any kind of trouble, kept the cattle out of the streams as much as they could, and moved them to longer grass when they grazed an area short. When the crew came to the Whitney corrals and worked with cattle, Rick came up from Cow Camp and helped. Rick specialized in working twice as fast and hard as necessary and swearing three times as much as I could believe.

The first time I helped work with cattle, we drove calves through a narrow wooden chute about thirty feet long, into a metal squeeze chute. The squeeze chute held a calf immobile while the crew administered insecticide and injections and cut off horns. The crux of our work along the long, wooden chute was moving the line of calves forward when workers released a calf from the squeeze chute and needed another.

Rick told me, “No matter what you do, you’re gonna get kicked, so you might as well get kicked and get it over with.” He jumped down into the wooden chute, twisted the last calf’s tail, pushed, got kicked, and swore. I’ve worked with men who used rough language, but Rick came up with phrases I’d never heard before. I concluded that the desire to be original in

his work methods and in his language was part of Rick's motivation for living.

I looked at John. He stood on a plank fastened to the outside of the chute, reached in with a stick, and prodded the calves on their flanks to remind them to move forward. He seemed to be in no rush, but he also seemed to be as effective at getting the calves to move as Rick was. I decided I could learn best by watching John.

Nobody suggested to Rick that he try another approach. As long as he didn't hurt the cattle or any of the other workers, he could get kicked all he wanted. Examples of other ways to work happened all around. If he wasn't paying attention, nobody intruded by paying attention for him. This hands-off-and-hope-he-learns attitude didn't apply to one who was ignorant from lack of having worked around bovines, like me.

During one spring-branding party, horseback men roped calves fore and aft and held them. Two men on the ground grabbed legs and pushed the calves to the ground and held them for branding and castration. I didn't have a horse, and no one volunteered the use of a horse, so I helped put the calves down, and I held them down.

John spoke to me from across a down calf. "He can still kick when he's down. Don't get behind him. Once you've got him down, get hold of both legs. If he kicks, you'll move with him instead of getting kicked."

I didn't plan to make working with cattle any large part of my future, but I learned what I could about them as we worked. It interested me more to learn about the people who worked with the cattle. I saw effective "neighboring." Crews from several ranches joined together when the work needed many hands. I saw different styles of work, and I saw tolerance among the workers for whatever style anyone used, as long as the work got done. I continued watching John's slow approach, and I confirmed an idea I'd had for a while. A relaxed approach usually gets more done than a frenetic pace.

I've seen men on horses try to move cattle so fast, they riled the cattle until they ran wildly in all directions, and horses and men had all they could do just to keep them together.

One evening after everyone but John and I and the old gray mare had traveled back down the river road, we discovered a cow and her calf in the willows near the river when they should have been up in the corral with the

rest of the herd. John rode the old gray mare. I walked along in case the cow and calf tried to turn east, where part of the fence had been removed, but John didn't really need me. He and the mare became a study in minimum motion. When the cow led her calf up toward the corral, horse and rider followed about fifty feet back at a slow pace. If the cow thought about turning back, they stopped while she thought it over. If she moved a step or two back, they moved toward her a step or two. Nobody hurried, so the cow didn't get excited. She found it easier not to go by a man on a horse, and she kept on until she and her calf entered the corral. John and the old gray mare followed them in, and I shut the gate.

We can't work every job with minimum motion, but watching John helped me learn to stay alert for the situations where the cow needs minimum encouragement and too fast a pace scatters energy. I learned a lot from John. Maybe the most important lesson was, take the time to watch and to figure out what a good approach is before rushing in to work. That, and stay off the old gray mare; she's mostly a one-man horse.

The Largest Playhouse in Oregon

People built the barn at Whitney about 1920 of western larch cut from the nearby forests and sawed to timbers and boards at the mill down the river a mile. The mill deteriorates, but the barn is still sound. Some of the metal roofing on the barn banged in the wind when we first moved into the nearby house, but I eventually nailed that down tight. The barn's east wall sags because the sill settled into soft ground. The hayloft floorboards bow downward between the joists that span the center section of the barn. I prohibited Amanda and Juniper from going up there, but as I became confident that they were careful, and after I tested the floor, I lifted that rule. Eventually, they had unrestricted use of the barn.

The year we took over as caretakers of the ranch, we harvested the hay and stacked some of the four-foot by four-foot by eight-foot bales on the dirt floor in the center of the barn. When winter snow covered the grass on the meadow, we used that hay to feed the cattle until the crew moved them to the owners' home ranch twenty miles down the river.

We didn't stack hay in the barn again. It was tight work to get the bales out with the forks on the big tractor, and insurance on the hay was higher than if we stacked it outdoors.

But every year after that first year, we garaged the big diesel tractor in the barn. The exhaust pipe on the tractor ended about two feet below the hayloft floor, and every time I started the tractor, I worried that it might set the barn on fire. John said the tractor exhaust wouldn't start a fire, and it was his barn and his tractor, so I parked it in there. Diesel engines won't start if they get too cold. We had no electricity, so we couldn't plug in a block heater, and the barn, and cardboard I put around the engine and the radiator helped keep the big green tractor's diesel engine from cooling down too much.

About midnight, I dressed warmly, walked to the barn, started the tractor, drove it out of the barn, warmed it up about twenty minutes and then backed it into the barn again. Usually, I sat up in the glassed-in cab with the light on and read while the tractor warmed up. If the thermometer hit twenty below or lower, I warmed it up again at three or four in the morning. After about two weeks of feeding, John and the crew from his home ranch took the cattle and the tractor down the river to the home ranch for the winter.

I often walk at night. Away from the cities, where stars and the moon are the only lights, it rarely gets too dark to walk. One foggy spring night, I stood just inside the open double doors of the barn. Geese had flown back from their southern journeys. The big Canadas honked loudly above me in the dark fog and clouds. Then the smaller, softer voiced, more melodious snow geese flew above me. They don't stay in the valley like the Canada geese do, but they stop on their way somewhere else, down for a rest at night and up into the air and gone again early in the morning. It takes some concentration not to anthropomorphize their calls. These birds participate in life with exuberance. It is only to a human whose perspective slips that their calls sound lonely and lost.

Juniper and Amanda used the barn for a playhouse. Hide and seek possibilities were almost unlimited, with horse stalls, feed chutes, a grain room, with crawl space under it, and stairs to hide under. Juniper learned a lot about climbing in the barn. Braces of two by twelves support the boards between the ten inch by ten-inch uprights, lace the walls together at angles,

and provide hand and footholds for climbing. I could have been nervous about the possibilities for injury, but I remember being a child, and I think too much prohibition is ineffective. A parent can't watch all the time, so I said, "Be careful," and I trusted Juniper's sense and agility.

Amanda felt more uneasy about Juniper's climbing than I did, because she watched more of it. Juniper wanted to explore the world and test the limits of safety. Until her fourteenth or fifteenth year, Juniper thought she should have been a boy, and she adventured even more than most boys. Amanda, happy to be a girl, had plenty of adventurous spirit, but she sometimes couldn't keep up with Juniper, and she thought she should keep up. Torn between her loyalty to Juniper and her sense of responsibility for Juniper's safety, she sometimes reported danger to the grown ups. Juniper's climbing in the barn seemed to her to be one of Juniper's more dangerous pursuits.

I talked to Juniper about safety, and then I tried to reassure Amanda. I told Amanda she and Juniper were very different from each other, and that was as it should be. None of us is meant to be like any other. I tried to reassure her Juniper would be all right. I prayed for Juniper's safety and for the easing of Amanda's anxiety.

Laura also worried about Juniper's adventures, particularly up the straight, high walls in the barn. I attempted to reassure her that Juniper would be safe, and I attempted take the edge from Juniper's sharpest quests for adventure, that might lead her into danger. Juniper and I struck a balance between concern for safety, backed by a few workable rules, and freedom enough for our children to live and explore. In that balance between danger on one hand and too much restriction on the other, Juniper and Amanda found full use of the big barn.

During our coldest weather, I parked the pickup in the barn. I cleaned the dirt floor in the center area of anything flammable. When we needed the pickup, I put a long stovepipe on the ground under the engine, put a propane torch in the pipe, and warmed the engine until it was easy to start.

Juniper spent one winter day at the barn when she was ten, because she wanted to be on her own. She took food, water and books. Responding to Laura's concern and to my own curiosity and concern, I went to the barn for firewood and kindling, midafternoon. Juniper saw through my excuse of needing wood and saw my concern, but she tolerated with kindness the

adults she shared existence with, and she said nothing against my brief visit. The temperature that day climbed to twenty degrees. Juniper stayed at the barn until almost dark. She said she thought she'd do it next time on a warmer day.

We used the grain room, inside the barn, for an ice storage room the year we cut ice from the river, and the ice met our needs for keeping food cool until late summer. I stacked wood in one bay through the spring, summer, and fall, until we had plenty for our own use and some to sell through the winter.

After the deep winter of Whitney Valley, when spring sunshine melted enough of the snow so I could start irrigating the meadows and fixing fences, some days, snowstorms blew down off the mountains. I kept tools and materials in the barn and retreated there during the worst storms. I opened the big, south-facing double doors and worked inside, just out of reach of the storm. I split western larch into the right sizes for rock jacks, posts, and H braces for fences, nailed the materials into rock jack frames, and worked on ranch machinery. I dropped whatever I was doing and headed for outdoor work if the storm gave way to sunshine.

In the heat of summer, the barn provided a cool, shaded interior where we sharpened sickle bars during haying or worked on mechanical problems. Just inside the big, sliding doors was a good place to sit and visit with someone, a good place to sit alone for a while and think or not think.

Summer afternoons when we had company, sometimes we wound up in the corral, over by the barn. No trees grew close to the house, and the barn provided the biggest shade around. We sat by the barn and watched evening slowly darken the valley. Inside the barn, children played and laughed, and the sounds of their laughter wove through the adult conversation outside. As darkness enclosed the mountain valley and stars emerged brilliantly into the sky above the forests, smaller people drifted out from the barn and leaned warmly against us or climbed into our laps.

We moved on to other jobs and other places. The barn still stands in Whitney Valley, the golden brown color of weathered larch, from the time when there were only dirt roads, close to the paved highway now, marking three fourths of a century of changes, marking times and uses yet to come, the biggest playhouse in Oregon.

My Friend, the Wind

I get along with the wind okay. I have to. We've been working together for years. I work outdoors almost entirely. So does the wind.

I worked on a sheep ranch in northern California. Wind ripped through there fiercely a lot of the time. Often, the men I worked with complained about the wind. The head woman there, she said it was no use to complain about the wind. It blew anyway. She liked it. When her children were small, she hung diapers on the line, and the wind dried them quickly for her. I saw her point. See the good in it. Fighting it will just wear you down.

The sheep gathered on the side of the hill where we put out feed for them. Sheep's hooves chopped the manure fine. The wind picked the chopped manure up, carried it down the hill, and let it drop where a sharp bank had been bladed into the hill to let a dirt road through above the barn.

I built a flower garden for Laura in front of the house we lived in and a vegetable garden in our back yard. I helped build up the soil for Laura's mother's garden. I backed the pickup to the sheep manure the wind had dropped. It was easy to load, about two feet deep right there, so I didn't have to chase all over the ranch after shovelable manure. The finely-chopped manure was easy to work into the soil and excellent fertilizer. Laura's zinnias, without exaggeration, were this big around, and they lasted weeks in a vase. Our small garden in the back yard and Laura's mother's garden did really well. The wind had been kind to leave the manure like that for me.

When I cut wood along the edge of Whitney Valley, I kept a place in reserve, where I had cut the dead trees down for an acre or so. If the wind got too forceful for it to be safe cutting where dead trees were standing, I moved into my reserve area and cut wood. Sometimes the wind blew fiercely for days on end, and I worked my entire reserve into firewood. That was okay. Ditches and fences needed attention on the open meadow.

The wind sometimes presented me with exciting challenges, as if to say, "Let's see how much you remember about force vectors and let's see how well you can combine that kind of theoretical knowledge with what you've learned from cutting a few hundred cords of wood."

I got out of the woods in a hurry one afternoon when high wind whistled into my work area. Three days later, when the wind died down, I said, "Thanks. This sure does keep the job from getting boring." The wind had blown down fifteen dead lodgepole pines and eight live ones, all in one tangle. I had to untangle it, because buried somewhere underneath it was about 150 feet of fence I had to find and rebuild.

Blown-down trees are unpredictable and dangerous. They usually haven't fallen as far as they can fall. Everything unbroken is stressed toward breakage. Green trees especially, when bent, hold a terrific amount of potential energy, like giant springs that will snap toward straight when cut in the bend. They often shatter through the bend, so they act like many springs bound together, ready to release in 20 independent motions to strike anything close and to bind saws and wedges. A cut anywhere in the blowdown can affect the whole mass of trees.

What fun. It took me more than two weeks, because every time I got to a place where the next cut was particularly dangerous, I went to work someplace else for a day or so and let ideas about how to approach the blown-down trees percolate through my mind. Every time the wind blew in to see how I was doing with the puzzle it had left for me, I'd say, "I'm not going to work with you looking over my shoulder," and I went and worked in the open somewhere until it quit nosing around.

And there did come a day when I had many neat piles of branches out of the way, several cords of wood ready to load and haul, and a stretch of fence nicely repaired. I didn't say, "Okay, let's see what you can do next." I learned long ago never to issue that kind of challenge.

Wind in Whitney Valley often conspired with rain and snow to see how serious I was about whatever work I was doing. I've had wind, even in June, plaster snow all down my back as I shoveled mud out of an irrigation ditch. I've had wind almost blow me off the motorcycle as I traveled across the meadow to irrigate. I took it in good humor. Some friends' sense of humor is more primitive than others'.

I stayed home one day and worked on songs, and the wind came to visit. I hadn't yet put a good latch on the back door. The wind blew the door open and blew loose items in forty directions. Juniper was six then. I stationed her at the door between the back room and the center bedroom. "Hold that door shut," I said, and I ran around the house and in the front door, closing

doors and windows as I went. I ran back around the house, blocked the back door shut with a chunk of firewood, and turned around to find the door between rooms wide open and Juniper nowhere in sight. I looked behind the door, where there was just enough room for a six-year-old girl.

Juniper stood in that small space, looking startled and a little afraid. “I couldn’t hold it,” she said, as if she thought I might admonish her for not doing the job I’d given her.

I hugged her and said, “You did fine. That’s powerful wind.” I knew the wind had told me, don’t put too much responsibility on a child. I found songs scattered over more than an acre of sagebrush. I found everything but one page of a two-page song. I looked for a while, but I finally decided the wind was right. That song had serious problems and deserved blowing away.

When we took care of Tomahawk Ranch, my friend the wind often came to visit. Workers gradually put together a new lodge. The builders blamed the wind for litter when it blew away empty cement sacks, plastic tarps, even sheets of plywood. I didn’t blame the wind. The wind’s regular duty included ripping down through that small valley and rearranging everything that had been left loose. I blamed the builders who didn’t adequately secure their materials.

The wind blew with such enthusiasm there one night, the big glass windows in the front room bowed in. So did the sliding glass doors in our bedroom. Forty-pound pieces of firewood blew around on the porch. The woodbox cover blew open, ripped loose its hinges, and slammed against the house. I went out to rearrange things so nothing could blow through the windows. I picked up our improperly-discarded Christmas tree, and the wind decided to do that job for me, took it out of my hands, blew it fifty feet into the air and up the hill to a secure place, where it would be safe until morning. I leaned forty-five degrees to stay on my feet, shifted to forty-five degrees in the other direction as the wind changed, and bit by bit, I got all the materials secured.

When I got back inside, we weren’t sure about the wind’s intentions for the areas of big glass, so Laura and I carried our mattress into Amanda’s room, where there was only one small window, and slept there.

Now we manage Magic Sky ranch, and my friend the wind comes to visit. It helps me plan my work. It reminds me that the office screen door is

loose and needs attention. It calls loose gutters on various buildings to my attention. It reminds me, never leave any potential litter unsecured. Get the dead trees cut down in a calm time so they aren't an unpredictable force in some strong wind. The wind points out loose shingles on roofs.

As with just about any friend, there are times when I don't want to be with the wind. If I have heeded its admonitions about keeping the work caught up, I can come inside and leave it to its various peripatetic pursuits, resting confident that, partly because of its earlier reminders, little will be lost when I do go back out.

Wild Mushrooms and New Boots

Dark clouds hung close above the Blue Mountains. Lightning flashed. Thunder roared across ridges and canyons. Lightning started fires. Forest and mountain meadows burned. Smoke darkened the sunshine that hot, dry August. Workers from the owner's home ranch brought two swathers up the river road. Then Cody drove up the rough, gravel road every morning and down again every afternoon. We cut wild meadow hay while forest burned three directions from us. Green Forest Service pickups and trucks populated roads and highways. The Forest Service set up a fire camp in Sumpter's fairgrounds, thirteen miles over Huckleberry Summit from us.

I cut hay along the edge of the marsh above the highway. Above the marsh, along the foot of the ridge, I steered the swather through heavy clover and left a twelve foot wide swath cut to stubble behind me, with cut clover windrowed in the middle to dry into hay. A red tailed hawk perched in a dead pine tree at the edge of the meadow and watched the new stubble for motion of small animals. Light green moss grew in the northern branches of the dead tree. The smell of freshly-cut grass and clover hung heavy in the air.

I turned the machine and cut the long meadow toward the highway. A sandhill crane walked stately along the edge of the meadow, just below the ridge that rose to sage brush, juniper trees, and second growth ponderosa pine.

Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I kept track of the closest fire. Amanda asked, "Will the fire burn to here?"

I said, “I don’t think so, but it could happen. We need to sort out and keep our most important stuff ready to load, just in case.” Amanda and Juniper picked out their most treasured toys and books and kept them ready to put into boxes and load into the pickup.

We baled the hay and hauled it down the river to the owners’ home ranch. Smoke diminished. Fire fighters contained the forest fires, then put them out. Cranes and other migrating birds flew south.

I cut and sold firewood from beetle-killed lodgepole pine along the ranch’s west boundary until winter snow accumulated more than two feet deep. Then I participated more in the education going on in the rest of the family. I wrote, skied, and played my guitar until most snowstorms gave way to warm days. The sandhill cranes returned and flew close above the house, trumpeting spring greetings.

Wild mushrooms grew profusely in burned-over forest. Mushroom buyers set up shop in northeastern Oregon. Word spread among the local people faster than wildfire, good money to be made picking “shrooms.”

I irrigated meadows, repaired fences, and watched birds, wild with spring, all around me as I worked, bluebirds, geese, ducks, meadow larks, snipes, phalaropes, hawks, eagles, herons, cranes, and many more. I told Laura, “My feet hurt when I walk more than a couple of miles a day. I need new boots.”

We sat down at the kitchen table and figured finances. Spring wind blew across the meadow and curled around our old, ramshackle house. Laura said, “Going without paychecks all winter makes it really tight. There isn’t much for new boots.”

I said, “I think I’ll go pick mushrooms.” I quit work early and drove up to Huckleberry Mountain, where the nearest fire had burned. The mountain harbored unburned islands of green trees, brush, and grass among all the blackened, dead trees. In burned areas, new green grass already grew.

I carried a bucket and a knife, and I hiked up Trout Creek. I saw many dried stumps of mushrooms and a few pine-cone-shaped morels that had grown since pickers came through. I cut mushrooms and put them in my bucket. I hiked back to my pickup and drove into Sumpter just before dark. Behind The Nugget restaurant, a buyer had spread out tarps to dry mushrooms. He poured my morels into the scoop of a scale and weighed them. He gave me a twenty dollar bill and a quarter.

I took the money home and put it on the kitchen table. “Hey, look everybody. Soles of a pair of boots, and maybe boot strings. From mushrooms, wild mushrooms.”

Friday, a small rain washed the Blue Mountains. Sunday, I drove up our curving mountain highway to the Huckleberry burn again and hiked up Trout Creek. Most pickers had moved to the higher burns, where the first flush of mushrooms had just started. That good picking was too far away for me to do anything about in the time I had. I hiked about five linear miles, in and back, but I cast about like a dog trying to find birds, up and down the steep north slope. I looked under and behind down, charred logs. I picked my way through rock jumbles. I searched small flat areas close to the tumbling, melodious waters of Trout Creek. A startled deer expelled air, “whoosh” and bounded up the hill with a solid thump each time it hit the ground. I couldn’t see it because of the burned but still-standing trees between us. The mountain smelled like wet charcoal and newly-growing grass and fresh water.

I came out from densely-standing black, dead trees into a open area close to the creek, where new, green grass began to cover the blackened ground. I said, “Oh boy, look at the morels.” Small, pine-cone-shaped mushrooms grew in the new grass and from black, bare ground. I took my boots and socks off, washed my feet, and dried them in sunshine. Then I cut mushrooms. Going barefoot on the wet, cold ground refreshed me almost as much as a nap. Clean, rushing water sang to me about new life beginning in burned forests.

Wind blew up the canyon. Two burned trees across the creek from me crashed to the ground. For the first time in a while, I looked farther than the ground in front of me. Many of the smaller trees around me had burned nearly through just above the ground. I climbed along the steeply falling stream into an area of bigger trees, killed by the fire, with burned bark, but still apparently sound, then beyond them into an open, flat area with morels. The wind died. The songs of water over rocks carried farther into sunshine.

I looked around as I cut morels on the sharp slope north of the creek. If the wind came up again, I needed to know what was around me, and I needed to be ready to move. Barefooted, I watched for stubs and rocks. Needles dropped when scorched trees died after the fire pricked my tender feet. I harvested all the mushrooms on the flat along the creek. I washed the

charcoal, dirt, and ash from my feet, dried my feet in sunshine, and put my boots back on. I climbed the slope and gathered a few scattered mushrooms into my bucket.

I heard a faint, rapid, rhythmic susurration and saw a grey, fuzzy mass under a jumble of limbs of a down fir tree. I thought it might be some kind of mold growing from the soil. I looked closer and realized it was the source of the rhythmic sound. Details resolved into ears, brown eyes, frozen forms of five quarter-grown rabbits tightly bunched together. I worked away from them and got out of the area as rapidly as I could without missing too many mushrooms. Somewhere, their mother waited until it was safe to come back to them.

In the middle of the afternoon, dark clouds cut off the warm spring sunshine. Thunder rumbled on the mountain. Rain poured down between the burned, black trees. I covered my nearly full bucket, hiked out, drove to Sumpter. The buyer gave me two twenty dollar bills and two ones.

Home again, I said, "The buyer in Sumpter said some of the people in the higher elevations burns are making $300.00 a day."

Juniper said, "That's a lot of money."

Laura said, "Can you go up there?"

"Not yet, anyway. My first commitment is to this job, even if it doesn't pay a lot of money, and there's a lot of work to do right now." I looked out the big south window over the kitchen table at the evergreen forest covering ridges rising steeply from the south end of the valley. "Years ago, I gave up regretting not being somewhere else or someone else. I love being who I am, where I am, doing what I'm doing."

I walked across the meadow and changed the way ditches spread water through rapidly growing wild grasses. Geese flew up ahead of me. Two of the big Canada geese ran for the river, with nine fluffy yellow goslings between them. A great blue heron stood in the river and concentrated on the life beneath the water's surface.

When I repaired enough of the fence and irrigated most of the meadow, I took a break. I said, "I want to write a photo-illustrated article about wild mushrooms and pickers, buyers, shippers and driers." I wrote query letters and found an interested editor.

The photographer who had agreed to work with me discovered he could make more money in the harvest. He went to work in a drying and shipping

operation. I borrowed his camera and drove up to the Olive Lake burn, planning to camp out, cut mushrooms, and compose photos and text.

Rain poured from the dark sky. Lightning struck the mountain. Thunder roared and rumbled.

Buyers don't want wet mushrooms. Most of the pickers camped in the area went to town. Clouds hung low against the mountain. Heavy rain blew in the wind. There wasn't enough light to take pictures. Rain paused when I drove down into the graveled parking area next to the lake. I got out of the car and walked out on the dock. Wind roiled the water's surface, but in the lee of the dock, undisturbed water showed a clear view ten feet to the bottom. Two beer cans on the bottom advertised their brands through cold water of the clean mountain lake. Forest of ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, and aspen stood close around the lake.

I stopped on my way back around the lake and talked to buyers, shippers, and pickers.

A bearded, gray haired man caught my eye as he spoke and wove his story through with artistic, believable detail.

"I said, 'Wait a minute. You guys don't understand the situation at all. There's guns in every room in this house, and you guys sit there with your skinny little briefcases, trying to tell me who gets what part of my money and what I'm going to do with my life. You'll be pretty damn lucky if you even get off this mountain alive.' Both those guys went as pale as chantarelle mushrooms. They stuffed papers back into their briefcases and headed out the door in a hurry. Last I saw them, they were headed down the mountain at 60 miles an hour, and nobody from the government has said a word since about taking a cut of the action."

Hard rain blew down the mountain again. I drove slowly down the winding road. I stopped at another buyer's camp and talked to the young woman who held down the fort while the men went to town to get drunk. She said, "The only thing I want to do is get off this God-forsaken mountain and get back to the city. About one more day of rain, and that husband of mine is going to find himself with no wife." I could have been astounded, but I already suspected some of the people in cities must be there by choice.

Gray, rainy day faded to black, wet night. I let go of everything but looking at the country and the people and listening to fascinating stories as the day slipped away from me. I pulled into the driveway at midnight, got

out of the car, walked into the house, and stood by the stove for a while before I went to bed. Rain stopped in the dark, early hours of the morning.

The sun rose into the clear sky. I irrigated, fixed fence, and wrote essays and poems for a few days.

Sunday, I drove back to the Huckleberry burn. Pickers harvested mushrooms when I got there, drawn by heavy rain. I hot footed it up Trout Creek. If I got far enough from the road, I might get past what had already been picked. I did find morels. Some ground-covering picker in number twelve rubber boots got there ahead of me and cut the biggest mushrooms. He left enough smaller mushrooms to make the rest of what I needed for a pair of boots, and that's all I cared about. Midafternoon, clouds drifted in and let go of increasing rain. I covered what I had in the buckets, hiked out, drove to Sumpter, and traded my mushrooms for cash.

Two days later, we drove to Baker, and I found my boots. They fit as if they were made for me. I walked several blocks through town, and I knew I had bought a pair of really good boots. I had enough money left over to fill the gas tank and take my family out for dinner. With my new boots on.

After we ate, we walked out of the restaurant and down the sidewalk toward the pickup. I danced on the concrete as I walked. I said, "These boots were made for dancing."

Amanda said, "Then let's dance." She grabbed my hand, and we spun down the grey concrete sidewalk. Juniper ran and caught up, grabbed my other hand, and the three of us spun down the sidewalk. Laura took Juniper's hand and Amanda's hand, and we danced in a circle toward the pickup. Some people walking past smiled at us. Some looked at us as if they thought we were crazy. Late afternoon spring sunshine warmed the town, the streets, the pickup parked next to the sidewalk, four dancers spinning in a circle and laughing together into golden sunshine.

Harvesting Ice from the River

Most nights dropped to twenty or thirty below zero, forty below some nights. Days hadn't warmed above twenty degrees for two weeks or more when Jim drove up the river road to see us.

Laura and I had talked about cutting ice from the river to keep our food cool during the summer. When workers built the barn north of the house, they built a room to store grain for the horses they used for work on the ranch and in the timber. No one uses the barn much now, and the grain room isn't used at all. The room is sturdily built, with an air space between its floor and the ground, and sunlight never shines into that part of the barn. It would be an ideal place to store ice.

I had gathered sawdust from house logs we brought into the corral, culled in favor of better logs, and cut into firewood lengths. I didn't have nearly enough sawdust, but I had begun our ice-storage project, and I was content with that beginning. I prepared to sit around and visit with Jim, maybe play a game of chess. But Laura wasn't content with that. During summer, she had to find containers to freeze ice in, take them to my mother's freezer in Sumpter, pick the ice up, and bring it out and put it in the disabled freezer we used in lieu of a real icebox for our electricityless house. She didn't feel secure about next summer's ice, and she was ready for action.

She said, "Jim, would you help Jon cut ice from the river and store it in the barn?"

"Sure would. My saw's in the pickup, ready to run."

I said, "I don't have anywhere near enough sawdust."

Laura said, "By the time you get enough sawdust, will there be any ice on the river?"

Jim said, "We could drive down to Baker and see if they'll give us a pickup load at the mill."

I could see chess and sitting and visiting were iced out. I didn't know if I was ready, but I decided it was better to go willingly than to be dragged along protesting, so Jim and I visited on the way to Baker and back. We took my pickup, because it had a much bigger bed.

They did give us sawdust. They even loaded it for us with a big machine. The sawdust was damp, and damp sawdust isn't ideal insulation, but Laura was right. If I waited until I had everything ready, the river would be running warm, and daytime temperatures would be in the eighties and nineties. Damp sawdust beats no sawdust. We shoveled a foot of sawdust onto the floor of the grain room. We left my pickup, with the rest of the

sawdust still in it, parked in the barn, shoveling distance from the door of the grain room.

The next morning, grey clouds full of snow hung close above the valley.

Scott had two sets of ice tongs he kept for their antique value. While Jim drove up to see if he could borrow those, I got my saw ready. Jim came back with the tongs. I loaded my tools, and we drove down to the river in his pickup through two feet of snow.

We walked on the ice. I said, “This is deep through here. If we stay where it’s deep, we won’t cut gravel and mess up a chain. We need to empty the oil tanks. Water will lubricate the chains enough, and we don’t want to put oil into the river.”

Mike walked in the pickup tracks through the snow to the river. “You guys going to cut some ice?”

“We are.”

“I’ll help you if you want me to.”

“The more help the better. We’d appreciate it.”

“Okay. We have to mark the surface. Then we have to build supports for the saws, so the bar goes 90 degrees from the surface. I’ll need a straightedge eight or ten feet long and a square and something to mark the ice.”

Mike had worked with Gene, cutting ice from a pond Gene built in his yard. Gene works with precision in all his projects. I told Mike, “This is just ice. I’m not going to build anything with it. Precise measurements don’t matter in this project. If it bothers you not to have the blocks all exactly the same size, then Jim and I will handle it, and thanks for the offer anyway.”

“They have to be exact. That”s the way we have to do it, ...”

Jim and I both yanked cords, and our saws roared. Jim cut north to south. I started at his starting point and cut west. He came back to the starting point and cut two more sides. He cut a piece from the edge of the main surface, and I pulled that piece out and pushed it aside, and we had room to get the tongs onto the bigger piece. Mike approached the floating block with the other pair of tongs. I thought, “Good man. Even if we won’t argue it out, you’ll still work. You do just fine, for an ex-New York city cab driver transplanted to the wild west.” I didn’t say anything, because Jim cut into the next block, and his saw made the only conversation anyone would hear for a while.

Mike and I had everything we could do, working together, to get the first block up onto the surface of the river. Once we did, I tried to lift it. Jim saw the problem and adjusted his cuts, so by the third block, he cut them to manageable size, about seventy-five pounds. Small flakes of snow drifted down from dark clouds above us. Clouds opened up, and the sun shone for about six blocks of ice, and the clouds closed up again and let go of a few flakes of snow at a time through the rest of the afternoon.

Jim cut most of the ice. Mike pulled it out of the water and slid it over to me. I loaded it into Jim's pickup. We tried not to get wet, but we did lug some ice around when water froze on our clothes. Mike dropped out after the third load we hauled to the barn. He went home with thanks and an invitation for lunch and dinner soon. Jim and I cut the last load and hauled it and stacked it in the grain room just before dark. We took the roof boards off the room the next morning and finished shoveling sawdust around the sides and over the top of the ice.

"Well," Jim said, "I'd best get on down the road."

"Thanks Jim. Don't forget to get up here next summer and help us eat some of the food this ice keeps from spoiling."

He didn't forget. He did get up there.

I dug ice out of the sawdust all through the hot summer and then covered up what was left, until I took the last ice out of the grain room in early September. By that time, the seventy-five pound blocks had melted down to less than ten pounds, and by that time, I'd found an affordable propane-powered refrigerator to keep our food cool.

Even if Laura did have to push me to get me started into it, I wouldn't trade that experience for electric refrigerators or anything else.

Airborne

Jim and I cut and sold a lot of firewood summer, fall, and early winter. When fall rains started, we burned the limbs and tops we had piled as we cut our way through the dead lodgepole, and we cut more wood.

Cold weather hit Whitney Valley, and the ground froze hard. People drove up the mountain again and bought, loaded, and hauled away firewood. Snow blew into the valley. We plowed a road through the snow

with the wheel tractor, out across the meadow to the timber where we cut firewood. But the snow kept falling and accumulated deeper and deeper on the meadow. We worked long and hard just to get through the snow, and we had less time to cut and sell firewood, until the day came when we agreed, this is it. It's no longer worth fighting winter. We'd been looking forward to it. We stored our tools in the barn.

We played chess, and we taught Juniper and Amanda to play chess. We played some music, and we skied and snowshoed across the meadow. Jim and I stopped by the cabin Mike was using for a while, to see how he was doing. We talked for a while, but neither Jim nor I cared for long conversations. Jim walked out the front door, stood on the porch, and looked at winter lying cold, white, and quiet in the valley. Several plastic coffee can lids and margarine tub lids lay on Mike's table. I picked one up and threw it spinning across the air, through the door to Jim. It made a better frisbee than a frisbee. It achieved a straighter flight and was easier to control. I picked up several and said, "Hey Mike, could we borrow these for a while?"

He said, "Sure. Take 'em. Keep 'em if you want 'em," so I sent two more to Jim. He trotted away from me, and I walked out the front door and sent him two more as he returned the first two to me, airmail. We trotted up the road, with from twenty feet to a hundred and fifty feet between us, and with up to six plastic lids in the air at once, flying both ways.

Laura, Amanda, and Juniper came out from the house and joined our game. The plowed, narrow road kept us from spreading out, but sub zero nights had frozen a hard crust on three feet of snow, so we climbed frozen banks of snow out of the roadway, stepped over the fence and spread out on the crust of snow above the meadow. Plastic lids flew in five and ten directions at the same time. We played no stationary game, stand and wait for the missile. Everyone kept moving, and we covered some ground.

After several hundred transits of the round plastic lids, Laura said, "This is fun, but I have bread rising and yogurt cooling, and I want to read." Juniper and Amanda stuck with Jim and me for a while. Then they picked up their toboggans and headed for the hill north of the barn, but Jim and I wouldn't, or couldn't, quit. We retired all lids but three, and we kept those three busy.

We ran, walked, jumped, and circled on the crust above three feet of snow, all the way up the ranch on the east side of the river. We threw and caught and laughed. We crossed the river on the logcrib dam, and we walked and ran all the way down the west side of the river and never completely shut down the spinning pieces of plastic. We developed as fancy throws as we could think of, through the legs, over the shoulder backward, left handed, both hands at once, for two parallel-flying plastics.

We saw beaver slides at the river, coyote tracks on the meadow, vole tunnels coming up through the snow, and wing marks where a hawk or owl had picked up a vole for lunch, elk sign at the edge of the meadow, an owl sitting in a fir tree, probably wondering what humans had come up with now, a red-tailed hawk who flew down close but didn't accept our invitation to join in, two ravens who croaked as they swooped down toward us to see what we were up to and who seemed as if they might join us but then decided finding lunch was more important than playing our silly game. They flew on up the meadow.

Down the meadow, we crossed the river again on a beaver dam, and we kept the plastic lids spinning between us all the way. I reached for one flying through the air, and I slipped from the dam of sticks and mud, broke through the ice, and stood in water to my knees, but I scrambled out so fast the water didn't penetrate my gaiters into my boots, so I wasn't in any trouble from iced feet.

I found the lid I'd been reaching for when my feet went out from under me. We kept the other two flying as I looked, and we didn't miss more than a throw and a half when I slipped into the water and scrambled back out. I picked up the missing lid and ran on across the dam. I received and returned lids as I ran.

We threw and caught lids all the way across the lower part of the meadow, onto the county road, and about a mile back to the house and across the yard. The crust on the snow softened in the afternoon sun, and sometimes, we broke through and sank to our thighs in the snow. That made us miss some catches and track down errant plastics. We threw and caught up onto the front porch and into the house, where Laura gave us cookies and hot chocolate and said, "Don't throw them in the house. I'm afraid you oversized boys are going to break something in here."

We figured we had covered at least six miles on foot, and the little plastic covers had flown, as Jim said, “Hundreds of miles. Must be just hundreds of miles.”

Woodsheds that Never Were

We lived in Whitney for more than eight years, and I never did build a woodshed. Even when I talked about it and measured a spot on the ground where it would go, I knew, deep down, I wasn’t going to build it. I just didn’t want to say right out loud that I’d never actually get to it. Everybody has a woodshed.

But now that the Whitney times are behind us and we are quite modern, with electricity, plumbing, propane heat, and yes, a woodshed (I didn’t build it), for the fireplace wood, I can talk about why I never did build one in Whitney.

I stacked wood in the barn through summer and brought it to the house a part of a pickup load at a time, as needed in winter. All winter, I had to keep a road open to the barn. Every time we accumulated six or eight inches of new snow, I started the tractor and plowed through the corral, down the county road, and into the driveway. That was a fair amount of work, that kept me busy for up to half a day, counting splitting wood, loading it, and unloading and stacking it on the porch and in the front yard.

I could split wood in the barn even during a heavy storm and take it to the house when the storm let up. Inside the barn, it was quiet and very cold, even colder than outside. The frozen dirt floor provided a good foundation for splitting wood. I liked the sense of security that came from looking at the fifteen to twenty cords of wood I’d stacked in the bays on either side of the road through the middle of the barn.

When I stacked wood in the yard, close to the front door, snow built up on the stack. I shoveled snow off the stack to get at the wood, and I cleared an area in front of the stack so I could sort and split wood. I shoveled the entire stack clear of snow several times a season, so when the snow melted, the wood wouldn’t get wet.

When woodshed-building weather was upon us, I irrigated meadows, cut hay, cut firewood, fixed ditches, repaired fences, planted and maintained a

garden and participated in my family's adventures. When it was a good time of year to use a woodshed, I had shifted into my winter gear. I wrote all I could, went to town and socialized some, and enjoyed time with my wife and daughters. I avoided building anything. But I did need some physical activity. I shoveled snow off the wood. I shoveled an area clear to work. I split wood and carried in wood. Amanda and Juniper helped carry in kitchen wood. The bigger wood, for the back room heater, I carried all the way through the house.

The guy who wrote the article on how to do this wood-heat thing said build a small door through the wall right by the heater. Stack your wood outside that wall, and shove it through the door right into the woodbox. Save thousands of steps. That's an excellent idea, if you want to save steps. I didn't want to save steps.

I wrote a while, got up, went out and worked on wood, came back and wrote some more, spent some time with my family, went out and shoveled snow and carried in more wood. Then I wrote some more. A little at a time, as the day went, I took care of all the outdoor chores. By the time the day was done, I'd achieved a lot of indoor work, sedentary stuff, but I'd also done some vigorous work outside. It kept me awake. That and two or three walks day or night, and I didn't have to join a fitness club for exercise.

My mother didn't have a woodshed either, though I had promised for two or three years to build her one. She covered her wood with a sheet of plastic. After every storm, I drove over the mountain to Sumpter. If she hadn't done it, I shoveled the snow off her front walk. I shoveled a path from the back door to the wood stacked in the back yard. I swept the snow off the wood and chipped away the ice that built up on the back step from water dripping off the roof. Most of the time, my mother carried in her wood, but sometimes she didn't feel up to it, and I carried in enough for a few days.

When I stopped to see what she needed done, we visited for a while before I did the work. When I was through, we visited a while again. We talked about plans to take a few days to prospect for gold next summer. We wondered if the huckleberry crop would be good up Bald Mountain Road next summer. We compared memories of thirty and forty years ago. If she had a woodshed, or, more modern yet, if she had gas or electric heat, my visits wouldn't have been as necessary. I'm sure they would have been less

frequent. I become absorbed in my own projects and don't leave home if I don't have to.

We followed work to earn a living away from Northeastern Oregon and left my mother without a woodshed. I was concerned about that, but news from the area tells me it worked out the way it should. My brother stops by and helps her with wood, or my sister does. Sometimes people who aren't even part of the family stop by and help her with her wood or shovel off the walk and the woodpile and the back step. She wouldn't get as many visits as she does if she had a woodshed convenient to the back door, with the wood split and neatly stacked, ready for use. Visits and a sense of family, a sense of community are more important than woodsheds all days of the week.

Shuffling Cards, Feeding Fire

I had heard of a winter in Sumpter, years back, when no snow fell until late winter. Without the insulation of snow on the ground, cold penetrated deep, and many water lines froze. The people with frozen water lines hauled water to meet their needs all winter. There was no way to thaw pipes four feet underground.

We had snow the year two service lines froze, but it was obvious what happened. It was exceptionally cold. The snow plow bared the roads. The cold penetrated deep beneath the roads, and if the water in a service line was motionless for too long, it froze. First, Mrs. Matthews' line froze. Mickey and a couple of other workers laid logs across the road and kept a fire burning all day and night. I didn't think that would work. Heat rises. It would take something covering the fire to reflect the heat down, or there would be little possibility of it penetrating four feet of soil. That was my theory.

Several days after the large, unsuccessful fire, I had the opportunity to test my theory. I stopped by to see how my mother was doing, and she said she was doing fine, except she had no water in the house. The water master had turned the stop and waste valve at the edge of the dirt street, and water from the house had drained, so we knew it was frozen under the street.

I had some used metal roofing and plenty of firewood. I went home and got some of each, came back, and built a small fire the street side of the stop and waste valve. I wanted to build the fire in a hole, but the frozen ground just bounced my pick back at me, so I built it on the surface and propped the metal roofing over it and around it. I went in, and Mom asked me, “Will it work?” and I said, “It’s too soon to tell. We’ll just have to see.”

We played cribbage. I went out and added fuel to the fire between games. Mom won three out of five that first day. By dusk, I had a good mound of coals. I added wood, covered the fire with several layers of roofing metal, and went home, but I was up and ready to go by daylight. I moved the metal and raked ashes and coals aside. The fire had softened enough ground that I was able to dig a hole about eight inches deep and a foot and a half around. I knew a fire down in a hole would work better. I started one, covered it with the metal, and left.

I shoveled snow one place up the hill and replaced a broken window another, odd jobs to earn money, and walked back down the hill at noon. The sun shone. The temperature rose to fifteen degrees. The fire had burned down to a mound of coals. I pondered for a moment, dig now, or add to the fire? Hunger decided me. I added wood, watched fire start in the wood from the coals, and walked home for lunch.

Midafternoon, I scooped out ashes and coals, dug out dry, dusty, hot dirt, then swung the pick for a little more gain.

Now I have the beginning of a trench, eighteen inches deep, over two feet long, and two feet wide. I shovel hot coals back in, add kindling onto the coals, and the kindling quickly ignites. I add bigger wood to the growing flame. I put sheet metal over the fire several layers thick, with space left for air to enter and feed the fire and exhaust to escape

Two things to do before dark. First, I find the water master and tell him what I’m doing. He has doubts. What if the pipe is frozen all the way under the road? I can’t dig up the whole road, can I? What if it takes me all winter? Nevertheless, he says sure, he’ll bring barriers and flashers so no one drops a wheel into the excavation. I walk home and spend some time with my wife and daughters. Then I rummage around in the shop until I find some four inch steel pipe. A fire in a hole burns better if it has air delivered. Just at dusk, I add wood, put a pipe down into the hole, and rearrange the

metal cover until I have the fire burning well, with a minimum of openings in the cover, so the metal holds the heat in and reflects it down.

Mom and I play Scrabble. She wins. I haven't the patience to be a good Scrabble player. I'll play three tiles before I'll sit and study to find I could have used six. I don't like most games, but Mom enjoys them, and it's something to do together while we visit, so I do the best I can.

The next day, I dig the trench longer and deeper. Now I leave the surface intact and tunnel under. I keep the trench and the tunnel as narrow as I can and still have room to dig. I move the metal down into the trench, and I place pipe to feed air to the fire and another for smoke to escape. People around town are interested in my project. Some say it will never work. Some say it might. I'm content to keep working and see what happens.

Mom says, "Aren't you using an awful lot of wood?"

I say, "No. I've only burned about twenty-four hours' worth of wood for the house stove. It doesn't take a lot, if I keep the heat directed where I want it."

"It's taking a lot of your time."

"Not that much. You couldn't talk me out of doing it now if you worked at it. I have to see if it will work, and I'm having fun doing it. Stop worrying about it and draw your tiles."

She did. She beat me by seventy-five points and had to settle for a card game the next time I came in between digs, when the trench was three feet and two inches deep and seven and a half feet long, with a hot fire in the bottom, pipes leading in and out, saw horse barricades around, a pile of powdery dirt, with ashes mixed in beside, the shovel and pick leaning against the picket fence, the thermometer up to fifteen degrees again, and clouds moving in for another snow storm.

Several people stopped by to see how it was going and ventured opinions on what would happen. I just nodded and kept digging. By dark, I was almost four feet deep, but I didn't see the water pipe. I knew I was close, but even if I saw the pipe, that didn't mean I could thaw the ice in it. That night, I left a larger opening in the metal cover. I got up at midnight and walked up the road. New snow squeaked under my feet. Clouds cleared. The thermometer said thirty-five below zero. I fed wood into the fire and then sat there on the side of the trench, my feet down into the end away from the fire, soaking in the warmth radiating up through the metal,

absorbed in thinking about nothing at all and watching the firelight cast through openings between pieces of sheet metal I'd bent around the fire. I felt cold behind, away from the fire, and too warm toward the fire, so I fed it two more pieces of split pine, covered the opening and walked home, feet squeaking on the cold snow.

In the morning, I had several things I needed to do, so I didn't dig but just fed the fire. Mom worked at the store down the hill in town. When I went in to her house at noon, water ran full force in her kitchen sink. No water surfaced in the hole, which meant we had no broken pipe.

I got back up to Mom's house before she got home. When she came in, I reached over and turned the faucet and let the water run while I sat down at the kitchen table and shuffled cards. She was too pleased to do anything but cheer and dance around. When she slowed down some, I said, "I'll play you one game of cribbage, just on the chance that I'll win. Then I have to fill a hole while you put your groceries away and leave just a small drip running until spring."

What If

What if we had written down all the "what ifs" when we made them up and said them? At the time, everyone in the family considered each new "what if" and, perhaps, added an as yet unexpressed perspective that brought laughter or some serious thought about what the world and life for us might be like if it differed in some basic quality from the reality we knew.

We were younger then, and we considered almost anything possible as we wandered together, children and adults, on the meadow at Whitney or in the small town of Sumpter or as we rode together down the mountain toward Baker to buy groceries and to make our twice-monthly visit to the library.

"What if," Juniper said, "we contained stories cover to cover, and books bought us and kept us in neat lines on shelves and only took us down to dust us off and read us once in a long while?" We all thought about that for several miles of winding mountain road, where a river, wild and frothing

white with the high water of spring, ran close beside the road. Evergreen trees rose in steep forest up rough, rocky canyon walls both sides of us.

Amanda said, “What if we were kept on shelves and in freezers and refrigerators in stores, and groceries came in and bought us and took us home in sacks, and beets and carrots ate the parts of us they liked best and threw the rest in the compost to build garden soil?”

Laura said, “Ugh. That sounds terrible.”

Amanda said, “Well, now you have some idea how a mama beet or a mama carrot feels.” We walked together on the meadow, staying on high ground, because irrigation water ran across the lower ground. Green grasses and wildflowers grew toward the sun.

Juniper said, “What if green grass lived in houses and hiked all around and we grew from roots in the meadow and stayed in the same place year round?”

Amanda said, “And deer and elk and geese grazed on us and lay down on us to sleep?”

Juniper said, “And snow covered us in the winter, and all winter, voles stayed active among our roots?”

Amanda said, “And we were wet and cold when the snow melted in the spring, but then the sun came out warm, and we turned green and grew toward the sky?” We drove to Sumpter to eat dinner with friends, sat together on the front steps, and watched the western sky turn orange and gold. Silver and brassy spokes of brilliant light radiated across the sky.

Juniper said, “What if we sat in plates, cut our food with chairs and moved it to our mouths with tables?”

Amanda said, “What if we drank glass out of containers made from milk and water?” We laughed at the incongruity of that idea, and then we sat in silence for a while. Small wind blew across Cracker Creek and through the trees growing in the front yard and whispered secrets it had learned on its way across the mountains. Amanda said, “What if Ash had to grind up water before we could drink it, and Cracker Creek ran full of whole wheat flour?”

Juniper said, “What if fish were loaves of baked bread swimming in the whole wheat flour?”

Juniper said, “What if birds lived in houses and sat by the stove, and we flew around and ate the seeds the birds put out for us and said, Skee, skee,

skee, put out seeds for us,' and we flew south two thousand miles when the days got too cold, and we grew to be adults in only a year?"

I said, "What if the refrigerator and the cookstove got tired of hearing what ifs, joined hands, invited the dishes and forks to go along, and walked away together down the road and never returned?"

It was not that we grew old and curmudgeonly but that we used up most of the what ifs we could think of for the moment and moved on to other patterns of thought.

Now Juniper and Amanda attend college, and Laura works at a summer job. I'm gainfully employed halftime, and I heat the midnight tungsten in the process of revising two book manuscripts and writing shorter pieces I scatter to prospective publishers across this nation.

Still, once in a while, we remember and remind each other, "What if the world was not at all the way it is but turned to new possibilities of imagination?" And we stop again and wonder at new, very different perspectives on possible realities.

Skunked

Vinegar and tomato juice help wash away the oil and the smell of skunk spray, but only time completely removes the odor. However, a person can adjust remarkably well to a heavy dose of the odor, if there is no alternative, and there wasn't.

Laura and I walked together across the driveway from the house one cool, summer morning. The skunk crossed the county road and staggered toward the front porch. It fell repeatedly as it walked. Its eyes were badly inflamed. The skunk hissed steadily as it walked erratically across the yard.

Our dog lay on the front porch. He smelled and then saw the skunk. He stood up and prepared to defend the house. From where we were, I tried to talk him away from the door. His dog's duty to defend the home meant more to him than what I told him about the dangers of a sick skunk. He wouldn't budge. I told Laura, "Go around the house and in the back door and let the dog in the front door." She started toward the house, and I said, "Look out the window first. If the skunk is too close to the door, leave the dog out."

The skunk climbed the firewood stacked on the edge of the porch. The wood rolled, and the skunk fell and then got up and climbed the stack again. Laura let the dog in and shut the door. She made sure Juniper and Amanda were in, and all three of them watched through the window.

The skunk stood on the small pile of wood on the porch. I ran for Guy's place, across the gravel road. I didn't own a firearm, but I knew Guy had a .38 special he'd let me use. But Guy's padlock secured his front door, which meant he had gone fishing. I ran back across the road to our house. I called to Laura. "Go ask Gene if you can borrow a rifle. Hurry." She went out the back door, ran around the house, jumped in the pickup, and drove down the road. The skunk stood on the front porch, wobbling and hissing. I didn't want it to leave. The skunk looked like a rabid skunk. A rabid skunk is dangerous to other animals and to people. I didn't want it in the area alive.

The skunk walked across the front porch and fell off and rolled over and struggled to its feet. Then it saw the hole the cats used to take shelter under the house and started toward it. I couldn't let it get under the house. A sick skunk under the house would be bad enough. It might die under there, and that would be even worse. I ran onto the porch, grabbed my shovel and jammed it down in front of the skunk, which had its nose under the house by then. I saw the fluid it fired at me, a fine spray, up to droplets as big as small pearls, with red mingled through the milky fluid. It was an amazingly accurate shot for a sick skunk with its head pushed against the ground.

With my shovel, I scooped the skunk away from the house as the spray flew through the bright sunshine and hit me full in the face and all down my chest. I maneuvered for position. I didn't know how much ammunition the skunk had, but if necessary, I would take another fusillade to keep it away from the house. Even as I readied for further battle, I noticed the fluid was very oily. Although it was all over my face, it didn't get into my eyes or my mouth. The smell was powerful, but it didn't slow me down, and it didn't particularly bother me. I counseled myself not to touch my face and not to rub anywhere, so I wouldn't spread the oily fluid

The skunk wobbled away from me. It stopped just behind the house and stood still. Gene roared into the driveway and jumped out of his pickup, carrying a twenty-two rifle. He ran toward me and stopped. I stepped toward him and started to reach for the rifle, assuming he was going to hand

it to me, but he brought it to his shoulder and fired, once, twice, three times, and the skunk was dead.

Briefly, Gene seemed more dangerous than any skunk, because he fired past me rather than warning me to clear to the side and waiting until I did. However, the skunk was dead, and the bullets hadn't passed all that close to me. I checked the swing of the shovel and rested it on the ground, and Gene didn't realize I had come very close to hitting him in the head with the shovel. After-the-fact lectures about firearm safety seemed out of place in that situation, so I thanked him. He said tomato juice is supposed to be effective at overcoming skunk's odor. He had a lot of it, and he would give some to Laura to bring home. He retreated from the odoriferous scene. I scooped the dead skunk up with the shovel, carried it to the back of the garden, and buried it.

The day warmed up. Laura brought two gallons of tomato juice and a gallon of vinegar. She put the cans and bottles on the ground and backed away. She said, "I'm going to take Juniper and Amanda and go to Sumpter, because the smell is unbearable." I walked toward her, as if I would hug her and kiss her goodbye. She retreated as she reminded me of several things she had done for me that were close to heroic and said, "But I'm not going to kiss you, and please don't get any closer." She gathered Amanda and Juniper into the pickup, and they drove toward Sumpter.

The smell didn't particularly bother me. I conjectured that I either had to adjust to it or be very ill, so I adjusted. I opened several cans of tomato juice, placed them around me in the back yard, stripped and washed. I wished I had thought to heat the juice. It was cold, but it was effective at washing away the oily fluid. After several rinses, I walked in the back door and left tomato juice tracks on the floor. I poured hot water, still in the canners on the cookstove from our morning fire, into the galvanized tub, and I bathed. I poured the bath water down the sink and carried the tub out to the back yard and soaked my clothes in half vinegar and half water. I poured vinegar and tomato juice on the oily spots alongside the house.

Only after I had reduced the intensity of the odor did I begin to feel effects. I developed a headache, and while I was not nauseated, I didn't want any dinner. As far as I could tell, I had overcome my own odoriferous condition, though when Laura came home at dusk, she said I was mistaken. I rinsed again in tomato juice and bathed again in hot water and soap.

Laura said I still smelled pretty bad, would I please go sleep at the hunting cabin, which I did for the next two nights, with all the windows open. We sprayed the side of our house and the grass beside the house with vinegar, tomato juice, cinnamon tea, pinesol, and every other concoction we could find or invent, over and over again every day for a week, marveling that the odor penetrated the wall, before our bedroom was bearable.

Then it rained. The moisture reactivated the odor, and we had to start all over again. Two months later, we still sometimes smelled it. Three months later, a new rain brought the odor up again.

Our olfactory senses adjusted to the smell of skunk, and we didn't know we carried a souvenir of the experience with us for quite some time afterward. Although Laura had had no contact with the skunk's oily fluid, people in the post office mentioned that there must be a skunk around when she went in several days after my encounter with the skunk to mail letters. She gave nothing away and got out into the open air as soon as she could.

When we went to our friends' house for dinner, Ingrid said, "It's really nice outside. There's a pleasant breeze, and the mosquitoes aren't as bad as they have been. Let's eat outside. The breeze is blowing this way. You sit here, and we'll sit over here."

The next spring, over the skunk's grave, I planted mint and grape hyacinth. The plants grew vigorously, blossomed early and spread their sweet odors into summer breezes.

Book Two: Central Oregon

A Waterfall in Our Backyard

John Rouse died. The people who handled his estate laid off most of the crew. We found another caretaking position, near Bend, in Central Oregon. We sold or gave away or hauled to the dump everything we could get by without, and we left the ranch in Whitney Valley in October, four humans, one large, shaggy dog, one short-haired cat, and everything we owned in a car and in a pickup truck with sideboards.

Whitney Valley had been Amanda's and Juniper's home most of their lives. They were ready for the next step in their adventure of living. They walked around our part of the valley and said goodbye to the barn, to ever-

happy land, where the grass stayed green and lush all summer, to the house, empty now of habitation but still full of memories, and to every other meaningful place. Laura and I also walked slowly and said goodbye to Whitney Valley. We had time for thoughtful farewells. The place with no electricity and no running water, only a hand-operated pitcher pump by the sink, with an abundance of wildlife on the meadows and in the forests around us, had been good for all of us. We weren't in a rush to leave.

Eventually, we gravitated to the vehicles, climbed in, and drove from the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon to Bend, and from there thirteen miles to 5,000 feet elevation on Tumalo Mountain, where we would take care of the water inlets for the city of Bend. We arrived on the mountain mid afternoon and unloaded into a modern house, with electricity and running water. Because the house had a washer and drier, we had packed dirty laundry last.

Though I hadn't missed any of the modern conveniences while we lived in Whitney, I appreciated them now that we had them. Laura, on whom the primary responsibility for laundry and household chores had fallen, had missed the modern conveniences. Though she appreciated everything Whitney gave us, she accepted the modern, equipped house with gratitude. We both worked at laundering nearly everything we owned as we moved into the house. With clean sheets and showers all around, we settled for the night.

The ninety-seven foot waterfall in the backyard impressed me even more than running water and electricity in the house. Bridge Creek tumbled and roared down the steep mountain and joined Tumalo Creek, which flowed rapidly down another canyon to its confluence with Bridge Creek. A few hundred yards above the place where the two streams blended their waters together, Tumalo Creek leaped off an edge of eroded-away stone and fell 97 feet straight down through open air before it again found solid stone to support it in its long journey oceanward. That waterfall, called Tumalo Falls, performed its dramatic plunge less than two hundred yards from the back door of the house we were just settling into.

I wasn't surprised that the sound of the electric refrigerator clicking on and running and the furnace clicking on and running woke me and kept me awake. Mechanical sounds always have bothered me. What did surprise me was that the sound of the waterfall bothered me. Even with windows shut

for the cold, autumn night, the steady roar of the falling water penetrated the well-insulated house. I lay awake hearing it and allowing it to occupy my mind until I couldn't sleep.

I couldn't make the sound of the waterfall part of myself our first night there, even though the sound was natural and a good sound, the sound of water striving toward the sea. I spent some of the next day looking at and listening to the waterfall from different places. The next night, I slept, though I woke throughout our time there to electrical, mechanical sounds, because I couldn't incorporate those sounds into myself.

The waterfall fascinated all of us. Winter brought cold weather and shaded the waterfall from most of the day's sunshine. Ice climbed in front of the falling water and stood white from wall to wall of the vertical channel in rock.

Away from the falling water, where mist filled the air, frost rimed the ground. I found Juniper's tracks going farther under steep cliffs than we had said she could go, toward the waterfall about two thirds of the way up. I remembered when I was young and adults limited where I was allowed to go, and I went where I would go anyway. I reviewed my responsibility as a parent, and I knew part of my responsibility since our children were born was to gradually release them into God's hands, to trust them and all the universe with their safety.

I spoke to Juniper, "Be really careful if you approach the fall over icy ground. I'm concerned that you could slip or that rocks above you in the cliff could loosen from ice freezing and thawing."

She said, "I am really careful. I won't get hurt."

A man who said he had climbed the ice in front of the waterfall several years before gave me his phone number and asked me to call him if the waterfall froze all the way up. He wanted to come out and climb it again. I sometimes hoped it wouldn't freeze all the way up. I thought it might be too early for Juniper to see someone climb the waterfall. She would want to climb it. Despite knowing I needed to continue releasing her to her own sense of direction, I thought that particular adventure could wait quite a while.

Tumalo Falls gradually froze until a solid wall of ice stood in front of the falling water two thirds of the way up the waterfall, connecting the two sides of the channel down which water fell. Then the days and nights

warmed in preparation for spring, and the ice, closing off more than sixty feet of the waterfall, began to melt and eventually fell away into the pool beneath the waterfall and left the falling water clear.

By then, I left the window of the upstairs loft, where Laura and I slept, open a little even on the coldest nights. We heard the waterfall. With the sound of falling water foremost around us, all the mundane electrical sounds of the house didn't bother me as much, and I slept.

With the Wind at Our Backs

Three miles of gravel road ran from the caretaker's house near Tumalo Falls to the gate. If tourists drove up the road and got stuck in the snow, crews coming up to work on the inlets might not be able to pass, so the city workers kept the gate locked all winter. We had a four-wheel-drive pickup and a key to the gate. The City of Bend gave us the use of an ancient snowcat and a garage below the gate, near the paved road, which was plowed all winter.

City personnel planned to keep the road from the gate to our house plowed all winter, for our use and for access for crews. Winter weather brought so much work for the crews in the city that sometimes no one could get away to plow our road. Snow stormed down from a dark sky on weekends and holidays, and no one was available to plow. Sometimes during the week, a crew came up and plowed the road, and wind blew and drifted it closed again only hours after they finished.

We drove in and out through ten inches of snow, then through more than a foot of snow, but when a storm brought the accumulated snow up to about a foot and a half, I didn't want to try it. I didn't want to get the pickup stuck above the gate and have no way to get to town for groceries, Juniper's violin lessons, whatever town needs came up.

On my way home from town, I drove the snowcat and the sled that hooked behind the snowcat out of the garage, transferred supplies from the pickup to the sled, backed the pickup into the garage, closed and locked the door, and roared off up the road. I unlocked and opened the gate, roared through, shut and locked the gate behind me, and started on up the road. The engine died. I started it again and gained two hundred yards, and it died

again. I started it again and found it very difficult to get into gear. When I got it into gear, if I let go of the shift lever, which was behind me, and applied power, the machine popped out of gear.

I rode half-turned on the seat, reached back to hold onto the shift lever with my right hand, and steered with my left. I didn't mind riding an open machine. I was dressed for it, and it was just me and the ancient, roaring machine out in all the beautiful, snow-covered country. Except for the skiers I passed. I felt like apologizing for roaring up their quiet day. I wanted to explain I wasn't out for fun; I necessarily transported self and groceries, just as they did with their cars up their driveways.

Skiers couldn't hear me over the noise of the machine. As difficult as it was to start, I wasn't going to shut if off and tell them what I was thinking, so I just nodded and smiled and roared on past. Some of them smiled back. Some of them heard the noisy machine above all else and gave me strong looks of disapproval. I kept score for a while, and it ran about seven to three, disapproval to a friendly response.

Then I came to rough snow that had drifted into the roadbed at all angles, and the fun ended. The machine, circa 1950, weighed many times more than any contemporary machine, and it was too narrow and too tall. It tried to follow the lay of the land rather than going where I tried to steer it. I thought if it got much off level it might tip over. I kept one hand on the gearshift lever, two hands on the steering, to fight the machine's tendency to drift sideways downslope, and one hand on the throttle, to apply power when it headed where I wanted it to go and to slow it down when it didn't.

I worked hard and harbored some fear the rest of the way home. The drive track spun on the icy surface and wouldn't pull the sled up the last hill to the house, so I unhooked the sled, roared up the hill, and recruited Laura, Juniper, and Amanda to help carry the groceries the rest of the way home. I didn't try to use the snowcat and sled again.

The road provided an ideal surface for skiing. A mild to strong wind often blew down the canyon and out onto the flats. Laura and I discovered we could spread our coats like sails and ski on the downslope and the wind clear to the Robert R. Berry memorial sign.

Then we had to get home again. Laura used no-wax skis, with steps cut into them, and she easily climbed back home. I glided down the mountain on wax-type skis, without steps, and I didn't have the right waxes, so I

worked hard going back up, against the wind. I took my skis off and walked up the steepest, slipperiest parts. I didn't mind.

More snow drifted down from the grey winter sky, until the snow on the road lay too soft and deep for good skiing. We needed groceries. I'd never snowshoed, but I strapped snowshoes on, shouldered my pack, and trotted down the hill. Running on snowshoes seemed as natural as skiing. I crossed the road, crossed varying hare tracks, porcupine tracks, coyote tracks, cat tracks, maybe a big bobcat, maybe a lynx. I didn't know how to tell the difference, but I would look it up when I got home. Bright sunshine reflected from the snow. I took my jacket off and stuffed it into my backpack. I backed the pickup out of the garage, drove to town and bought groceries and other supplies, drove back to the garage, and snowshoed home.

By then, night had fallen, but the full moon reflected bright light from the snow, and I had no trouble finding my way home.

A few days later, friends came to visit, and we had to get everybody up the road. We loaded everyone who would fit into the cab of the pickup and more, mostly the young, hardy, and adventurous, into the back. I shifted into low range, four-wheel drive, and we drove all the way home with no trouble, which surprised me. The front bumper pushed snow most of the way. The pickup would go where I hadn't even suspected it would. We could have been driving in and out the whole time. I was glad I didn't know that sooner, because I loved the adventures I had had getting in and out without the pickup.

Late that winter, a warm spell softened the snow, and then cold weather froze it hard. Laura, Juniper, and Amanda and I rode the pickup back from town, with groceries in the back and the violin crowded in with the four of us in the front, so we needed to make it all the way in.

I ran out of traction halfway up the road. The wheels spun, but we didn't go anywhere. I got out, dug snow out of the way, chained up the front wheels, climbed back in, and continued driving up the road. Halfway more, and the going got rough. The front wheels dug snow down, climbed up on it and moved forward a foot or two, then spun and dug snow down again, so we spun in place, then moved forward a ways, spun in place again, and moved forward again, slow going, but still going.

Amanda asked, "Where did you learn to drive in snow like this?"

I kept my foot steady on the gas pedal, feeding it enough power to keep going but not enough to start spinning too wildly, and I said, “I never did. That’s what I’m doing now. Learning how.”

We parked the pickup beside the house, and we carried groceries in. Dusk climbed the mountain. The dog and the cat said welcome home; how could you leave us all day? I thought, all our living is learning how, just as we’re doing it, learning to ski with the wind at our backs, learning to snowshoe, learning to get out and home again through deep snow, learning to find the fun and the adventure and the education in all of existence.

Ouzels on Tumalo Mountain

Snow covered Tumalo Mountain. I walked down from the caretaker’s house to the intake house, where water captured behind a small, concrete dam rushed into a concrete structure, through screens, and into a pipe that ran underground down the mountain to supply the city of Bend, Oregon. After I checked the screens and took my daily temperature and depth readings, I opened the frost-covered window and looked at the pond.

Bridge Creek tumbled down through thick ice along its banks into the ice-surrounded pond. A water ouzel (cinclus mexicanus), a blue-grey bird, shaped like a wren but larger, seven or eight inches from beak to tip of tail, did rapid deep knee bends on a rock protruding from the pond. The bird is also named “dipper,” for its constant, rapid bobbing up and down. I thought I heard a high note it sang to the sub-zero morning, but the sound of the wild, forest stream hurrying down the mountain drowned out most of its song.

The bird thrust its short, square tail jauntily up and walked into the clear water and along the bottom until it walked six feet deep, and I couldn’t see it anymore, because currents through the center of the pond distorted the lens of water. The ouzel surfaced near the other side of the pond, walked up onto an ice-covered rock, resumed deep knee bends in sunshine, and looked around at the brilliant, winter morning.

The book I read to supplement my observations tells me ouzels are the only song birds with an undercoat of downy feathers. They need that insulation, because they don’t migrate, and they live almost as much

underwater as they do above water. Ouzels are solitary birds. They share their habitat with others of their species only during mating and nesting season. The energetic birds eat crustaceans, insects, and other small creatures they find along and in the stream. They will live only by and in very clean water.

Through the winter, I usually saw the ouzel in or near the pond, because the pond provided the largest expanse of water that wasn't frozen over. The small bird flew short flights along the shore and often flew into the water and continued flying, much slower, underwater.

Ice and snow melted. Two ouzels courted along our part of Bridge Creek. Male and female are so similar, I couldn't tell which was which. The small, grey-blue birds built their nest on a ledge on the downstream face of the dam, behind the curtain of water pouring over the dam. I watched, fascinated, when they flew through the falling water and walked along the ledge. Through the water, I saw an indistinct outline of the spherical moss nest. I peered behind the falling water from the end. I saw the nest more clearly, but I saw only one side of it. Most of what I understood about the nest, I read from the book.

I used the same approach for learning about how the ouzels feed and raise their young. I was curious. I wanted to see the tiny babies, the nest, the busy process of feeding rapidly-growing young birds, but I couldn't see up close without an impolite intrusion into the ouzels' lives. I decided to err on the side of politeness rather than attempting to intrude. I saw the adults fly through the curtain of water pouring over the dam. I saw the adults enter the nest carrying food, exit again, and fly away through falling water.

One bright, spring morning, the sun shone down through tall trees and brought warmth and a golden glow to clean, fast-flowing Bridge Creek. I walked down to the dam below the intake house and watched four blue-grey ouzels bob energetically up and down and walk in and out of rapid water below the dam. I thought of my daughters, growing, beginning to venture out into the world on their own. We were involved in the same processes the ouzels were, but the ouzels moved rapidly through the cycles, completing in two seasons what would take us twenty years.

Spring warmed toward summer. The ouzel family dispersed. I saw only one ouzel again, busily flying, in air, in water, walking, eating, completing the cycle from solitary existence, to courting and raising young, and back to

solitary existence, with exuberance, in harmony along the clean, wild, mountain stream.

Wildflower Fire Watch

The golden sphere of the moon faded to flat white and sank behind the western mountains as dawn washed the sky pale blue. Feet on the floor, hand on the refrigerator door, I got ready for my work in a drought-afflicted summer. My day's assignment was to hike the watershed that supplies the city of Bend and look for smoke and fire.

I left our house on Tumalo Mountain and hiked up Bridge Creek past manzanita brush and young ponderosa pine trees, where the forest burned nine years before. Odors of pumice dust and granite dust, pine sap, and flowers stirred in morning breezes. The sun rose. Heat soaked into the mountain. Three deer grazed in the timber, beyond where fire had burned, across noisy, rapidly-flowing Bridge Creek. One deer saw me and bolted, and the other two followed her in high-jumping bounds into the timber.

I left the trail and climbed the steep slope of the ridge truncated by Bridge Creek, dust and ashes soft under my feet, up through ancient pine, fir, spruce, and western hemlock trees above the burn. I climbed a granite bluff above the timber. I looked above dense forest, over part of the burn, above treetops, miles down the canyon. Central Oregon's forests and meadows spread out flat below the canyon. Clean, blue sky covered Oregon. Stonecrop, tenacious succulents, green and red-green and blue-green, grew from cracks in the rock where I stood.

I spoke into the radio I carried. No response. Radio waves weren't getting down the mountain to the office. It didn't matter. If I saw smoke, I'd think about the radio again. Timber grew on the broad top of the ridge rising toward the mountain's peak. I hiked through old growth forest of huge trees, with open ground between the trees.

When I was a child, much of Oregon still supported natural forest. I hiked then with this same feeling, quietly a part of the forest, the mountains, and the world. I would like the world to preserve the remnants of this quiet feeling of oneness. I would like the world to preserve the remaining old-growth forest that engenders this quiet feeling of peace.

I crossed the ridge and looked down into Tumalo Creek drainage, where dense forest grew and rock formations eroded, and no fires burned.

I hiked up the ridge. Near the center of the broad top of the ridge, timber opened to a meadow. Springs trickled water down through mossy ground and ground lush with tall, green grass. Elephant head flowers bloomed among the grasses, scarlet and red Indian paintbrush, western larkspur, blue camas. Solomon's zig zag, blue dicks, wild garlic and onions, clover and dandelions bloomed. I dug a wild onion and ate it. The powerful taste of the tiny bulb penetrated my existence and absorbed my consciousness enough to last me all day.

A broad-tailed hummingbird flew close on singing wings, to see if I was a flower, or to ask what a human was doing in wild country, or just to greet me. Water from springs around the meadow joined in a channel down the center of the meadow and then spread and irrigated moss and grasses. Deer and elk had browsed through above their hoofprints. Coyotes had hunted mice. At the edge of the timber, a bear had torn apart two rotten logs, searching for grubs. Years ago, I ate some of the white grubs that inhabit rotting logs. The soft, white, piney-tasting creatures make acceptable food for one in hunger, but not so acceptable that I would dig through these shredded logs to see if the bear missed any. I carry an adequate lunch.

This watershed, free of cattle, provides a strong contrast to the rangeland I hiked in northeastern Oregon. In rangeland, cattle eat the grass to the ground and stomp springs to muddy seeps; cattle eat many of the wildflowers or trample them out of existence before they make seed.

I hiked up the ridge and over its west shoulder and trotted down in slope-reducing zig zags to Bridge Creek, lay on the bank, and drank. The water was so cold, I drank, let the water warm up inside me, and then drank again. Meadows above where the stream begins rise to conifer forest. Grass and trees grow shorter at this higher elevation, with a shorter growing season, in shallow soil underlain by granite.

Wildflowers' odors added depth to the high, clean air. Yellow and red pinesap grew in clusters. Small white flowers, tipped with pink, of bearberry, matured toward red berries. White yarrow, orange mountain dandelion, yellow pretty face, yellow fleabane, and daisy fleabane, pink and yellow, leafy aster, purple flowers with yellow centers, blue lupine, and Indian paintbrush bloomed across the meadow.

At 7,000 feet, I hiked toward Broken Top crater. Jagged remnants of a peak blown apart by volcanic eruption stood against blue sky. Grass under my feet gave way in places to bare granite.

I sat on sun-warmed rocks and ate a sandwich, an orange, and yogurt. I spoke into the radio and heard other workers from the city, who had driven up the long highway south of the watershed, who sat in pickups a mile up the mountain from me in busy traffic, recording license numbers and warning tourists of fire danger. Voices emerging from the small, black radio gave the only evidence they existed. I invited the other city workers to join me for a quiet lunch in sunshine, but they had eaten, and their jobs bound them to their posts.

Intense sun shone too hot. I moved into the shade of a granite boulder larger than a rich man's summer cabin, and I soon felt cold. I switched back and forth from sunshine to shade. Then I sat half in sunshine and half in shade.

I packed the remnants of my lunch and started down the mountain toward home. Along the trail, vetch grew lush, with purple blossoms; red clover and white clover bloomed, and several kinds of small white flowers, and leopard lilies, beautifully-yellow, orange, and maroon, tall above most of the surrounding growth. A large, dark brown predatory bird flew between tall trees and was gone from sight before I knew what species it was. A rabbit disappeared into dense brush ahead of me.

I hiked a long way down the trail and emerged from old growth timber back into the relatively open ground of the burn. A steller's jay scolded me from new pine trees. Bluebirds and nuthatches flew from bush to bush, from tree to tree. Common mullein bloomed, bright yellow flowers on thick green stalks above broad, fuzzy green leaves. Canada thistles and bull thistles bloomed purple and maroon, growing to rebuild the burned soil. Abundant, giant, pillow-like growths of blue lobelia graced the rock slope facing me.

I trotted down the trail. Sprinklers cast circling, staccato bursts of water into afternoon sunshine and rainbows above the hillside. I ran between sprinklers. Cold water splashed across my back and side. The sudden, shocking cold after running and sweating in the hot sun became a good part of my day, as did wet clothing. I ran onto the lawn in front of the house. I

sat down on the rock wall, dried in sunshine, and thought about everything I had done and seen.

I looked for smoke and helped take care of the watershed. Since that was part of my job as caretaker of the water inlets for the city of Bend, I fulfilled the need to keep money coming in to pay our way. I hiked about ten miles, continuing a commitment to stay in good enough condition to see and appreciate some of the world around us from the soles of my feet, without machinery between me and the earth. I looked at the soil, the plants growing from the soil, animals and birds who live from the plants and from each other, and I looked at the blue sky above everything. I saw that some of the earth, what we don't develop aggressively, is in very good condition.

I saw that even parts of this world that have been devastated, as the burned-over area had been, will heal, given time, water, living soil, and the force of life. I realized mankind is capable of fulfilling our obligation to take care of the earth. The people of Bend depend on the watershed to supply them with clean water, so they protect the area from damage, from logging, mining, cattle, and fire.

When part of the watershed burned, workers stabilized steep slopes by turning down trees across the slope and staking them into place to reduce erosion. Workers salvaged fire-killed timber, with minimum disturbance to the soil and remaining life. They planted trees to replace burned timber. All sorts of plants grew, seeded by natural forces. Deer, elk, coyotes, foxes, squirrels, badgers, bears, snakes, and birds moved back into the area.

We have needs beyond needs for water, food, and shelter. We need beauty. We need the spiritual sustenance of knowing the life force in many colors, odors, and forms exists in good health partly because we fulfill our obligations as caretakers. Humans protect and help heal this mountain. The life force restores plants and animals that live here. The life force restores life into the depths of the soil.

All of the earth can heal like this, if we give it freedom from violence and fulfill our obligation to be benevolent caretakers and love the earth, love the mountains of the earth, love life itself.

Bat and Seek

Since our children were quite small, we have lived rurally, first as caretakers of the ranch in Whitney Valley, then as caretakers, up on a mountain, of the water inlets for Bend. Because we have lived so far from schools, our children have been homeschooled. We have all had plenty of physical activity, just living, so we've never had sports in our school.

Juniper is thirteen now. She still doesn't lack exercise. She hikes the trails on this mountain with the family, with Amanda, by herself. My knee caused me pain recently, and Juniper took care of fire watch through the watershed for me. She packed the radio and her lunch, and she hiked up to the concrete diversion dam and read the water level marker. She hiked to all the high points in the watershed and looked for smoke. By the time she got back to the house, she had hiked eight to twelve miles through a hot summer day.

But she wants to learn sports so she can participate with other people when the opportunity arises. Amanda is eleven. She isn't as interested in sports, but she's interested enough to be a third member of a team. We haven't a television, to which I could turn and say, "See how those guys throw the ball? Watch them a while and see how they do it." Juniper and Amanda have never seen sports.

Juniper asked me, "Can you teach me what you do know about baseball?"

"Sure."

We bat, catch, throw. We don't run bases. We don't have places for bases. The front lawn gives us our only level area. On the batter's close right stands a stone wall, two and a half feet tall. The ridge rises steeply above that wall. Sprinklers irrigate the slope above the rock wall, and the sprinkled ground grows lush with grass and clover, though deer keep the clover eaten down. A ball smacked up the hillside is easy to field, if someone on the lawn keeps an eye on where it went and guides the hillside climber to it.

The lawn lies in front of the batter, seventy-feet long and twenty-five-feet wide. The driveway is to the left of the lawn, bordered on its left by a low rock wall, and left of that, a steep drop into the ravine. Conifers, alders, willows, gooseberries, currants, thistles, nettles, and grass choke the ravine. The ravine swallows our ball. We hope the rock wall will stop what the fielder misses, but it often doesn't, and the search is on.

We tried to teach our dog to find the ball. Amanda says, “He finds it all the time, but he doesn’t say anything about it. He doesn’t see why it should be any more exciting than ground squirrel possibilities or the scents deer leave.”

Down the driveway, which cuts across the head of the ravine, grows a bush with tiny, dark purple fruits. When Juniper slugs the ball past me, past Amanda, down the driveway, I say, “Let’s all go get it. I want to show you something.”

They are cautious, as we have taught them to be. “Are you sure it’s a currant bush?”

“Yes. And this is my third day of eating them, and I feel fine.” I grab my stomach and fall on the ground and writhe, but Juniper and Amanda aren’t much impressed by my acting, and I get back up. We strip the bush and eat the sweet fruit. We find the ball, and we climb out of the ravine to our practice area.

Juniper smacked the ball into the ravine. We looked for quite a while. We looked again the next morning. Nothing. When we went to town, we bought another ball. A dollar seventy-nine. It isn’t a real softball, but it will do for practice. We come up with ideas. Amanda said, “We could put a beeper in the ball. Then we could follow the sound.”

I said, “I don’t think we could put that together just now. I think we just need a lot more practice at stopping the ball before it goes over the wall.”

Juniper said, “Well, we don’t have much time to practice, because we’re always down in the brush looking for the ball.”

I said, “We could quit trying.”

Juniper said, “No. I like it. It’s more exciting this way than just playing ball. You never know if you’re going to find the ball or not. You don’t know if you’re going to get rubbed by nettles, or if you’re going to grab one of the bushes with thorns.”

Amanda said, “It’s a good thing there aren’t any poisonous snakes around here.”

I said, “My thought exactly. Last time I reached down to move the brush around so I could see under it, I ran my face into the top of a small spruce tree hidden in thick growth. It gave me excruciating pain across my eyelid, the corner of my eye, and my cheek, briefly. Those needles are so sharp, and the pitchy exudation adds intensity to the pain. Now that the pain’s

behind me, I wouldn't choose to not have had that experience. It's part of the adventure."

Amanda smacks the ball. She gets better and better at catching. More and more often, she throws accurately and powerfully.

Juniper asked me to teach her to throw overhand. I threw in slow motion, with exaggerated movements, to communicate what the motion is. "Throwing right handed, lean far back to your right, with your arm extended. Bring the ball in your hand in an arc from that low reach, up over your head and down, and release the ball about here, with your upper torso also moving through the arc with the ball, so you throw with your whole body."

She moves deliberately, with exaggerated motions, exactly as I have shown her. She arcs back and forth a dozen times without releasing the ball. She understands the arc and seeks its effective form. When she powers all the way through the arc and releases the ball, it steams through clear mountain air, just where she meant to put it.

Similarly, Amanda looks almost like she caricatures taking a batting stance. She goes through each step, places each finger, hand, wrist, shoulder, foot, individually, and when she's set, wham. Often. We're still pitching easy.

Juniper said it, when the ball disappeared down into the ravine again, and the three of us pawed and peered amongst trees, shrubs, wildflowers, nettles, and grasses. She said, "This isn't baseball we're playing. It's bat and seek."

"A dollar seventy-nine," I said. A dollar seventy-nine is something someone has to say when the ball begins to seem unfindable. It renews determination in the searchers.

I teach them baseball. We all learn that incorporating distractions and interruptions into the game bears good fruit. It expands into adventures I wouldn't have thought were included in baseball. Excuse me. I mean bat and seek.

A Bridge over Tumalo Creek

Eleven miles west of Bend, the pavement ends. A dirt and gravel road brings vehicles, bicycles, people on foot through forest, brush, grasses, wildflowers growing up steep canyon walls of black rock another three miles and crosses Tumalo Creek to an area where people park their cars and walk up to look at Tumalo Falls and hike the trails through forest up the mountain. Two-hundred feet up the mountain from the parking area, we live in the house provided for the caretakers of the water inlets for the city of Bend. A contractor is going to replace the bridge to the parking area and to our house.

Spring storms blow down the canyon, swirl around the house, and leave an inch of snow on the ground, but it doesn't stay long. The contractor brings machinery. We leave our pickup and our car below the bridge, and Steve, usually working alone, breaks up the concrete bridge. We no longer have a regular bridge to cross the rapidly-flowing, clear, cold water.

Two hundred feet downstream from the missing bridge, a logjam gives us a way to cross Tumalo Creek. We walk halfway across on one large log two feet above the water. We climb down onto another log just above the surface of the water, then onto small wood tangled up together across the last third of the creek and up the steep bank onto the road and into one vehicle or the other for modern travel.

We keep the gate, three miles down the road, locked, because traffic would interfere with the bridge work. Our house is secluded enough that we don't feel crowded, even when the parking lot is open and many tourists come up, but this becomes a particularly private time for us, and we appreciate it. At the same time, when we head for town, we hike clear to the other side of Tumalo Creek instead of driving from the house, so we meet more of the people who do come up. Hardy souls walk more than three miles to see the falls, and some of them hike on up the trails that climb the mountain.

One man of a group who walked all the way up asks me if I will give them a ride back to the gate, and I say sure. Some of the people ride in the back of the pickup. When we get to the gate, I think I hear the man who asked for the ride say that they appreciate my time, and I say, "Sure."

He offers me a folded bill, and I realize he actually said, "Can I pay you for your time?" and I assure him, "No, I don't want your money. I'm happy to do it for the children among you, if for no other reason."

One morning, I walk down through the parking lot on ice and snow, headed for town, and a man asks me if I will give him and his wife a ride back to the gate. “These are brand new boots, and they’re giving me blisters.”

They have come to Oregon from Switzerland. They plan to move here in the next few years. Driving three miles down the rough road to where they parked their car gives us the opportunity to learn something about each other. When they get out of the pickup at the gate, I say, “If you do move to Bend, come up to see us,” and they say they will.

Amanda and I cross on the logs, climb the bank, and meet two men, a father and son, from Australia. We stand in the road and talk. They admire the mountains, but the father says Oregon has almost too much timber. We talk about Australian timber and Oregon timber and the history of the timber industry, and we talk about the land in Australia and in Oregon. We are concerned about the same thing: Will the earth survive what man does to it? What can we do to try to bring about change so people become more careful of the earth? We talk about all there is to see and do around the world and in our own yards.

Before the father and his son cross on the logs and hike farther up the ridge to see the waterfall, and before Amanda and I head for town, I say, “I’m curious. Do you have trouble understanding what I say?” Though we have the English language in common, I’ve strained to understand them.

They laugh. The younger man says, “At first, we had trouble, but we’ve been in the United States for more than two months. It gets easier with practice.”

The older man says, “You yanks are easy, especially on this side. Some of them on the east coast are really hard to understand.”

For about two months, we carry groceries and everything else we need across the logjam and a hundred yards up the mountain. A storm drops an inch of snow. Ice forms on the logs we use for crossing the creek. The storm blew Steve out of work for the day, so I don’t have to worry about anybody watching as I sit down and scoot across the logs.

In contrast to my conservative ways of crossing, I know Juniper considers the logjam one more in a long series of adventures. I have tried to train myself to trust in her sense of safety and in her ability and sense of balance. For the most part, I have succeeded. I do say, “Juniper, if you’re

going to fall in, fall in downstream from the logjam. Then the current will carry you downstream and give you a chance to get out before you freeze to death. If you fall in upstream, the current would probably carry you under the logs, and you might not be able to get out at all."

She looks at me and grins. She says, "I'm not going to fall in, upstream or downstream."

Days and nights warm up. Snow melts above us on the mountain. Water runs into the stream, and the stream rises. The swift current rises above the logs, and we can't use them for a bridge. By then, Steve has removed all the old bridge. He braces between the concrete abutments with twelve inch-square timbers, so we cross high above the rushing water on the timbers.

Only the most determined among our friends come to visit. They phone us so I can drive down and let them in the gate. Then they have to cross Tumalo Creek by whatever method works at that moment. When I explain the problems with getting to our place, Marty says, "Hey, we're mountain people too. We've only been in the city for a year. We'll get there." I like his attitude.

The contractors place the concrete spans, and we can drive across the bridge, but we still keep the gate locked until they rail and pave the bridge. Amanda buys a piano, and I bring it home, over on its back against the rail of the bed by the time I get there, and we can discuss how that happened some other time.

Steve comes up and helps me get the piano upright and unloaded and placed. I help him. Running jackhammers and backhoes and heaving timbers around and being big to start with has put Steve capable of doing a lot with the weight of a piano. We all congratulate each other on being fortunate enough to have him close at hand at just this moment, and we thank him profusely.

Steve hauls away the machinery, tools, and leftover materials. We lock the gate open. People drive up and look at the falls and hike the trails. We settle back into more seclusion, though we meet and talk to some of the people.

The last of the snow melts, and the creek falls to cold, clean summer levels. The logjam stands above the water. Most people cross in vehicles on the new concrete bridge. To most people, that's just a big logjam in the creek downstream from the bridge. To us, it's a logjam and a bridge. That

bridge gives us a way to cross Tumalo creek to the other bank, and it gives us a way to cross months of memories, back to last spring, when that was the only way home.

Essays From a Family of Four

I dig traps for myself. When I forget where I dug them and fall into them, I have the opportunity to remember the process of digging, to decide if the reason for digging was valid, and to examine the quality of my own workmanship as I attempt to find a way out of the trap or decide to accept that particular trap as part of my existence.

In addition to writing the essays that several newspapers and magazines have published, I write short fiction and poetry, and I have written several books. I've been at this with varying degrees of intensity since before our daughters were born. I have attempted to sell my writing most seriously in the last five or six years. I've published twelve short stories in four magazines. I've sent many other stories to many magazines, without good results. Sometimes, I say what I think about attempting to market essays, stories, and books, that the process uses a lot of time I could better use writing more stories or essays.

When our daughters first started public high school, Amanda as a sophomore and Juniper as a junior, they came home with the information that career counseling was part of their schooling. People at the school tested them and advised them to direct their education and talents into channels aimed toward particular jobs.

I said, "This culture is far too oriented toward jobs. It's too early to be thinking about career choices in anything but very general terms." The ensuing family discussion brought out several interesting points. During the process of selecting classes at the beginning of the semester, teachers and counselors emphasized the importance of math and science classes, at the expense of art, voice, drama, and literature classes. To meet requirements for graduation in three years, Amanda went without an art class and a drama class, where her interests actually lie, so she could have a biology class and an algebra class, where her interests are not.

The solution to the nation's difficulties with low scores in science and math among high school students does not lie in insisting that all students gain advanced knowledge in those subjects. Not all students can make a career in fields that rely heavily on math and science. Someone has forgotten we also need singers, authors, painters, actors, and musicians. One who intends to concentrate in one of those disciplines needn't spend undue time with science and math, assuming a basic acquaintance with both, which Amanda has.

I told Amanda and Juniper they should lay down a broad educational base during high school, and they should decide how to earn a living when they go to college or after high school if they decide not to go to college, an idea Amanda entertained after what became a somewhat sour experience for her in public school. Students should not focus on earning money at this early an age. Education should be first, with the freedom to still be a child also having considerable importance.

Everyone in this family writes. Laura has published three essays, and Amanda one. Amanda has fiction scheduled to publish in Creative Kids and in Brilliant Star. Juniper has published letters in The Christian Science Monitor and in The Atlantic Monthly. With two other students, based on one essay written at leisure and another written against the clock, she was chosen to represent her school in an international writing competition this spring.

Impressed by all these achievements and realizing that four people trying for publication might increase the income from writing, I attempted to get four to produce and send out many essays. I made almost no headway. Juniper and Amanda are not interested in writing for money. "I want to write what I want to write. I don't want to design anything to fit an editor's standards," Amanda said. Amanda and Juniper both said they had seen how much time I put into attempting to market the products of my writing, and they had no desire to use up their time attempting to market when they could be writing. Besides, Amanda said, "If high school students are too young to be directing their energy and attention toward careers, then they are too young to be concerned about publication for financial gain."

As I said in the beginning, when one finds oneself in a hole of one's own digging, it is a good time to examine the history, the motivation, and the quality of workmanship. I asked myself again, "What are children for?" and

the answer still seems to be, to learn, to love, and to be children. I asked, "How long are they children?" and the answer seems to be, "Until they become adults, by their decision and by ours, working together." I'm as unconcerned as ever about what the rest of the culture might think of our answers and methods. Our approach to education and to living has worked well for us and continues to work well for us.

It surprises me that some of this entrapment I have fallen into pleases me. The history makes good sense to me, as does the motivation, and a careful examination of the workmanship shows it to be not perfect, but far from shoddy.

Juniper and Amanda are right in what they say. They have learned self-motivation and accurate and critical thinking, and they put what they learn to work.

When she withdrew from public school and returned to home schooling, Amanda said we would need to give her regular assignments, because she had some fear about letting go of all the structure of public school. I think she caught her fear from people who feared the change, as if education were held captive by public schools. Now Amanda is out of public school, and she remembers she can trust herself for motivation and direction, so she wants to back away from assignments.

Before she remembered she could trust her own motivation and sense of direction, I did get one essay from her, on why she withdrew from public school. Just this evening, I got a commitment from her to revise it so it might be publishable, because I think what has taken place and her view of it could be important to people who are concerned about education and because I want her to pay for her own piano tuning next time the tuner comes up the mountain.

Juniper still attends public school. She said the educational experience, including the opportunity for some social education, is important to her, but she will not be molded to anyone's concepts of careers or how she is to make her way in the world. She said, "I'm not interested enough in money to attempt to write essays to sell. But I do plan to work next summer, as a wrangler or a ranch hand at Adventure Unlimited," the camp she went to last year. She plans to work for the love of the experience and for money, with money far secondary.

So, the fact that I can't get essays written by anyone but, occasionally, Laura (we adults value money more than our daughters do), is in part my own doing. I might be able to talk Amanda and Juniper into more essays, but I would have to back up and disown a large part of what I've said, that reexamination tells me is valid; I don't want to disown it. So, most of the essays will continue to be what I write. We will have to settle for that.

Winter Guests

When we took care of the water inlets on Tumalo Mountain, the gate, three miles down the mountain, was kept locked once the snow began to accumulate. A few people skied up to look at the waterfall behind the house and then skied out again before dark, but the mountain mostly belonged to us and to wildlife. We did have visitors sometimes.

Laura, my wife, called me from the kitchen, "Come and see this." She and Juniper and Amanda stood around a spider hanging on one strand of web, about chest high, near the kitchen stove. "This spider likes music. She came down when Vivaldi was playing, and she moved back and forth and up and down to the music. Then we put on this quieter music, and she got real still." We all watched her for a while.

I said, "She likes the social situation here."

Laura said she wasn't sure she wanted to share her work space with a spider hanging down right in front of her.

"You can work around her. Don't break her thread of concentration."

"Don't break her thread." She retreated up the thread. We ate dinner. I roasted some almonds, and the spider hung about a foot above my head. I liked the company. We all agreed that her name was Charlotte, after her many times great grandmother in the book, *Charlotte's Web*. Juniper and Amanda washed dishes while Laura read another chapter of *Moby Dick* to them. Laura and Amanda sang together. Juniper practiced her violin in the living room. Charlotte hung around. By the time the evening was done, Charlotte was stationary, standing on the ceiling.

Laura and Juniper went to town Sunday, for a group violin lesson. Amanda and I explored books. Amanda said, "Apparently, all spiders eat insects."

I said, “I’m afraid she won’t find many in this house in the winter.”

“I think spiders have the ability to make it through some times without food. Otherwise, how would they make it through winter?”

We concluded there was nothing we could do for her. She was welcome to share our provender if she would. There was water out, by the kitchen sink. The morning of the fifth day, she was gone, and we didn’t know where. There were other spiders in the house. A jumping spider lived under the refrigerator and another upstairs. We decided spiders were not quite guests. They were welcome in our house, but they weren’t invited and planned for, so they were on their own for meeting their needs for food and water.

The mouse was different though, because it was brought in, and therefore, we were responsible to see that it had food, water, and shelter, and to see that the cat treated it as a guest and not a snack. Amanda and Juniper picked it up down the road after a night of twenty-five below zero. Amanda came up first, to prepare the adults for what Juniper was carrying carefully up the hill. They feared the adults would be unsympathetic. After all, we employ a full-time cat specifically to keep the house clear of mice.

Amanda said, “Mama’s probably going to be mad about it, but we have to try to save this mouse’s life. We can’t just leave it there to die.” Her effort to include me immediately among the sympathetic forces was transparent but effective.

I said, “It’s better to assume she won’t be mad.” And she wasn’t. She helped install the mouse in a shoe box, with part of an old towel for rug and mattress, and with rolled oats, sunflower seeds, and water.

We all celebrated, the second day, when the mouse began to eat. It tucked its head tightly into the corner whenever we lifted the lid from the box. Laura called the High Desert Museum. The animal-care technician said what we were feeding it was good and it would be best to wait until the cold spell broke and then return it to where it was found. She pointed out that it is illegal to keep any wild animal. Juniper and Amanda had already decided the mouse must be returned outdoors when it was ready, and the information about the law cleared any reservations they might have had. The third day, the mouse chewed material from the towel and made a nest in the corner of the box. It ate a sizable helping of oats and sunflower seeds.

We cheered its hearty appetite. The more it ate, the better prepared it would be for its return outside.

It was twenty degrees at daylight, and the temperature rose rapidly when the sun came out, so Amanda and Juniper took the mouse back down the road to where they found it. They said they turned the mouse out of the box by the food they had put down. It paid no attention to the food but looked around, then headed purposefully down the hill over the snow. They both said it seemed to know where it was going. It had been an ideal guest. And the cat, though we thought it necessary to watch him closely, was a perfect gentleman throughout.

Soon after that, one moonlit night, the dog announced approaching people. All four of us popped out into the cold night to see who was coming down the trail along Bridge Creek and to welcome them in. Mother, father, and two daughters had turned right when they should have gone straight some eight miles and several hours earlier. They were tired, hungry, and grateful to find a well-lighted, warm house, with hospitable people eagerly waiting their traverse of the last hundred yards from the trail to the house.

Once they had climbed the stairs and divested themselves of skis, the first priority was water to drink and water onto the burner for tea, then to the telephone, for they were hours overdue, and they were sure the people they were staying with north of Bend had called out searchers, which was the case.

We fed them, drank tea together, and squeezed as much conversation as possible into two hours while we phoned periodically to be sure the last searchers were notified to stop searching as soon as they radioed in from up on the cold, moonlit, snowy mountain. We found a lot of common ground, especially since we were two families with daughters of similar ages, with a public school teacher in one family and two home schooling teachers in the other.

All good things must deal with the threat of turning into pumpkins if they extend too long into the night, so we squeezed all four of them and me as driver into the cab of the pickup, and I took them down the mountain and north of town. On the way home, in bright moonlight reflected from snow, I realized I almost never heard complaints from my family about loneliness, despite the fact that we lived away from other people. A strong sense of

completeness among us helped. And visits, expected and unexpected, helped us maintain our contact with the world around us.

When the Alarm Went off at Midnight

Midnight, at zero degrees, the full moon hung in a clear sky above our snow-covered mountain. The phone rang. I rolled out of bed, thundered down the stairs, grabbed the jangling instrument, and the woman on night shift at the security company in town, fifteen miles down the mountain, said, “The alarm at the intake house went off.” I couldn’t think of anything to say. She asked me for my security number, to be sure she was talking to me and not to someone who had tied me up, and I told her what it was.

Two hundred and fifty feet up the hill from the water-intake house, inside the caretaker’s house, with the sound of the waterfall behind the house drowning other sounds, I couldn’t hear the alarm. I said, “Is it still going?”

“It shut itself off.”

“So that means whatever set it off isn’t there anymore?”

“Or has stopped moving.”

“Oh good. Standing very still and waiting. Those things can go off when there’s no one there, can’t they?”

“They aren’t supposed to, but it does happen sometimes.”

The alarm was set off by a sensor that detected motion. Warm motion, which was good, because I didn’t want to meet anything cold-blooded, mid-winter, midnight, several miles from our nearest neighbor, and me with no weapons of defense and committed to a non-violent existence. I watch no television and very few movies, so my imagination about what I might meet down there was limited to my own inventions, which were more than adequate.

The woman on the other end of the telephone line said, “I can send the sheriff up.” It was a long trip for a sheriff, who might be needed somewhere else, and I was almost sure nothing was down there that shouldn’t be there. There was nothing at the intake house to steal but water, and the water could be reached without breaking into the locked building.

I said, “I’ll go down there, but it’s going to take me a few minutes to get ready.” I put my insulated coveralls and boots on. I phoned the woman back and said, “I’m on my way, but I plan to take my time. Give me twenty minutes to scout it out.”

“Okay. If you don’t call me twenty minutes from now, I’ll send the sheriff up.” It’s good to have backup troops. Twenty minutes until she called the sheriff, and then twenty minutes for the sheriff to get up the road. Meanwhile, the desperadoes would patiently wait.

I took my dog with me. Not exactly an attack dog, he would probably welcome new friends. At least he would bark to alert me if something was out of the ordinary, and he might frighten breakers-in by leaping on them to welcome them. He was somebody to talk to, very quietly, as we walked down the steep hill.

The metal-sided building stood silent in bright moonlight, with snow on the roof and on the land all around. The dog sniffed rabbit tracks, trees, and powdery snow. He was glad to be out exploring, and he smelled nothing out of the ordinary. No light showed from the intake building. I approached slowly and looked at three sides of the building. No tracks but mine and the dog’s marked the snow. Water pooled deep on the fourth side. No one could enter from that side without swimming. The doors were still locked. All the windows were intact, locked from inside.

My worst moment came when I unlocked the door and stepped into the dark interior. Attempts to discipline my imagination nearly failed. All manner of sinister activity writhed around me until I flipped the light switch, then stepped over and punched in a series of numbers to shut the sensor off so I wouldn't trigger the alarm. There wasn't anyone there. I looked in each room, and there still wasn't anyone there. I picked up the phone and called the security company with several minutes to spare.

It had been an interesting experience. I was wide awake, so my dog and I walked the mountainside up to Tumalo Falls and up the creek above the waterfall, then back down to the house. I sat down at my desk and wrote until daylight and then went to bed and slept until late morning.

No one knew why the alarm went off. Theories were offered in several forms of technical jargon, all of which translated to, "Machinery is even more fallible than humans are." The alarm went off three times more that winter, every time after midnight, but not always on a moonlit night. I never got over some fear as I approached the dark building, silent except for the sound of strenuousl- running water, which could cover the sounds of stealthy motion. I never conquered the moment of wild imagination as I stepped inside and reached for the light switch. Fear and imagination helped insure that I approached the building carefully, because, no matter how many times the alarm cried "Wolf" without cause, it could eventually mean there was danger.

And always, having been keyed up to an extreme degree, when I determined all was safe, I was quite awake and fired with new energy and enthusiasm, ready to explore the nighttime mountain and then settle to writing from new depths of appreciation for life, safety, and the occasional deep stirring of the center of my existence.

Book Three: Colorado: Tomahawk Ranch

Country Boy in City Traffic

I haven't gotten over being the country boy in the city when I drive down into Denver traffic. Probably, I will never get over it, since I don't go there often. It doesn't matter if I get over it, as long as I eventually get where I need to go. I have made some progress. The third or fourth time

down, I realized that clamping my lower teeth with all available force into my upper teeth didn't help me drive in heavy traffic. I worked at being alert, but with muscles and mind at ease. Gripping the steering wheel hard enough to thin it to half its size didn't help, either in getting me through traffic or in getting me found when I was lost.

Actually, I was never lost. As I said to Nancy, my supervisor, when I drove fifteen miles extra, trying to get where I needed to be, "Were Lewis and Clark ever lost? Often, they didn't know where they were, but they weren't lost. They were exploring, and that's what I was doing, exploring. Now I understand part of Denver much better than I did, and that will stand me in good stead in the future." And it did. I avoid that part of Denver at all costs. Broadway goes in six different directions there, and there are places where going around the block again and again will never put me back where I started. That block or series of blocks never does (do) complete itself (themselves). I understand what I mean, and you would too, had you been with me.

Today is a challenge such as I wouldn't face if I could think of a believable way out of it. John and I have been wanting to meet each other. I've suggested that he come up the mountain to my place, but nothing has developed in that direction. So Nancy is driving to his office in her car, and I am to follow in the truck. She hands me a piece of paper with instructions, in case we get separated. I read the instructions three times and decide we won't get separated. It isn't that I'm so nervous I can't remember what I've just read. Rather, it is that she has not remembered that I am not bilingual, and she has written part of the instructions in Chinese. I think of pointing this out to her, but we are already on our way from the office to our respective vehicles.

The last three figures of Nancy's license plate are 899, and I keep that 899 right in front of me. A left turn, a left turn, a zig, two zags. I realize where we are, Sixth Avenue, which is actually a highway, but with much narrower lanes. I was here once before. That time, I was terrified and very tense. This time, I am relaxed. Terrified, but relaxed. Traffic is heavy and fast. I can't look at the speedometer, because I am concentrating on the 899, but I think we're doing about sixty-five and so is everybody else, but some of them more. The idea that people in the cities don't trust each other is totally false. Only people who completely trust each other can drive almost

bumper to bumper at sixty-five m.p.h. I try to join in the spirit of it and trust everyone around me.

I'm sure the truck is much too wide for the narrow lane it's in, but I keep the accelerator down and trust that the people on either side of me will work with me and allow me room. I don't hear any scrapes, crashes, or bumps.

It isn't a sudden thought, but it develops gradually that, although in so many ways so different, this feels like the time we headed down the road from Whitney, driving a herd of cows to Unity, with an overnight stop planned at China Creek. I was supposed to be out in front with the big green tractor, pulling a wagon load of hay that gave the cows promise of what they could have if they kept up a good pace and made the corrals before dark.

The tractor spit, sputtered, coughed, and quit, and I spent a half-hour clearing water and ice from the fuel lines. I got it running again and caught the herd in the narrow part of the canyon. Men on horses drove the cows along, but slower than we wanted to go, and four tons of lovely meadow hay in back of them slowed them down even more.

Jim rode his horse, Edward, in front of the tractor, which I drove at about two m.p.h. Jim turned around, looked at me, patted his horse's rump, and kept patting until I realized he meant, "Ride my tail." And I did. I tapped the throttle up, and Jim picked up the pace. I tapped the throttle some more, and Jim urged his horse to a trot.

Cows that wouldn't give passage to a tractor pulling a wagon load of hay moved aside for a man on a horse. Cows spilled off both shoulders of the road, and we went right through the center of the herd at about twelve m.p.h., Jim on Edward, Edward at a strong and steady trot, the big green tractor about ten feet from Edward's tail, me up there in the glassed-in cabin, hand on the throttle, foot hovering over the brake. We made it all the way through. Jim put Edward over on the shoulder, and I went by him, pulling the herd down the road after me like a magnet pulls iron filings, and we did make the China Creek corrals well before dark and spread more than half the hay out for the cows, to prove we hadn't been lying to them.

It's a good memory. Nancy isn't Jim, and 899 isn't Edward, but because everything came out just like it should that time, and this time feels a lot like it, I know this time is going to come out just fine too. And it does.

We exit Sixth Avenue, and the traffic isn't that bad, and I don't get caught behind any traffic lights. We cross 70 and find places to park in front of buildings 51 and 52. We meet John in his office, and the three of us sit there and talk. It's worth the trip across town. I don't even tell Nancy, "If I'd been told where we were going instead of how to get there, I could have found it myself," because I probably couldn't have, even though I recognized the place when we got there. I recognized it, but I didn't know its name in Chinese or English, and there were just too many speeding cars between.

When we leave, Nancy goes her way, and I go mine, and it's easy for me, because access onto 70 is right by the building. I know my way from there all the way up the mountain, and I'm home by dark.

Now that's one more place in the city I can probably find if I have to, and it's a lesson that nothing needs to be as alien and terrifying as it at first seems. Every time it works out just the way it should, which it always finally does, it's that much easier the next time.

Images Captured Without a Camera

Laura and I drove south along the Rocky Mountains to pick up Amanda after her two weeks at camp. We had unfolded the map on the kitchen table and picked a way that stayed high in the mountains. It probably took longer than driving down to Denver and then back up into the Rockies, but we wanted no part of the freeway traffic, so the extra time didn't matter.

As we drove a dirt road along the edge of a steep canyon, a hawk flew up from the canyon, flew alongside us a few feet from the car, crossed just in front of us, landed on a fence post above the road, and screamed a shrill scream. Along that stretch of dirt road, a pronghorn stood close to the road and waited for us to pass. We drove through many miles of lush grasslands, stopped some places, and looked out over huge expanses of high mountain aspen groves, pine forests, sagebrush, and green meadows.

Juniper was also there at camp, as a counselor in training, for the entire summer. The pay was not high, but it was one of those jobs a few of us are fortunate enough to work once or twice in our lifetimes, where we

sometimes stop and ask, “You mean, I get to do all this, and they pay me for it?”

We arrived in the afternoon, looked the camp over, ate dinner with staff and campers, attended a talent show, and danced two dances. We stopped after two dances, not because the music was too fast, but because the beat had no variation. I could only stomp, stomp, stomp over and over again. There was no opportunity for stomp, stomp, weave, sway, and wiggle. They just don’t make rock and roll music like they used to. It was fun, nonetheless, and the younger people seemed to find everything they needed in the music of their choice.

Laura and I walked over the rough, gravel road under a million stars, bright, cold, and beckoning above the high-mountain night filled with smells of evergreen trees, aspen groves, horses, hay, wildflowers, and grasses. After the reception for parents of campers, we went on to what seemed a brief night’s sleep and then an early breakfast with campers and staff.

Morning mist and clouds lay on the mountain. Sunlight burned through. It was worth seeking out that first sunlight on a cool high-mountain, summer morning. Goodbyes were in progress. “Are you coming back next year?”

“Yes. I’ll be here.

“No, probably not.”

“I don’t know yet. I hope so.”

Hugs everywhere. And pictures. Flashes went off. People grouped together for pictures of all who were in a cabin together, of all who went down the river together in one raft, of many combinations of campers and staff. There will be hundreds of photographs of this camp. All this led me to a moment of critical introspection, for I had no camera with me and have not had for many years.

Through my high-school years, I was a professional photographer. I took portraits, photographed weddings, and took pictures of people working in mills and factories. I went back to the factories and mills at shift changes and sold the pictures I’d taken. Photography was a good source of income for me. After I finished with professional photography, I rarely took the camera out of its carrying case. More and more, I didn’t take the carrying case with me.

Too often, I had attempted to get a picture of an experience and, by that involvement with machines and mechanical processes, I missed out on part of the experience. The camera between my eye and the image I sought to capture interfered with my direct experience of that image. I no longer cared to look at a two-dimensional representation afterward. I wanted to see the three-dimensional scene itself, as it happened.

When I camped on Coalpit Mountain one summer, I had the camera with me, but I never used it. One evening, I sat leaning against a granite boulder, watching dusk settle on the earth. A great horned owl glided silently down the mountain, circled my camp, and landed in a juniper tree. Across the valley below us, the full moon rose above rough stone mountains and silhouetted the juniper tree and the owl. The owl studied the side of the mountain from the tree, then flew on down the mountain, hunting silently.

Long after the owl had flown away, it occurred to me that I could have photographed it and had an unusual and powerful image on paper. It was an idle thought. If I had tried to photograph the owl, I would have been getting the camera and setting it up rather than sitting quietly, experiencing the owl, the juniper tree, the moon, and the mountain at dusk.

It is not as if a powerful image disappears or assumes a state of having never existed if it is not captured on film. The summer I saw the owl was a time of powerful images as well as a time of profound change for me. I slowly turned from a belief only in the physical toward a foundation in the metaphysical, toward that which cannot be encompassed by merely material explanations. That I rarely thought of the camera and always left it in its case seemed to mesh with the changes in my thoughts and ways of living.

Now, more than twenty years later, my memories of the images that were so powerful and important to me then are as vivid as at the moment of viewing and laden with meaning that would be hard for a photo to convey. Existing as an anomaly in the contemporary culture is not difficult. I watch no television and no movies, listen to no radio and to very little recorded music. This existence can become difficult if I am surrounded by manifestations of the culture, such as cameras flashing as the young people at camp work at filling their albums of experience. Because of my daughters, I experience some self consciousness as I attempt to examine the validity of what I have become.

I think my daughters are all right. They will want some photographs, and they are making arrangements for people to send pictures to them. Friends who come to visit take pictures and send copies, so we do have family photos. I still have a very good, though old-fashioned camera, and I have sometimes taken family photos on special occasions or set someone else up with the camera.

We traveled the same route home, pleased that Amanda could see the beautiful high country we drove through the day before. Above the canyon of the Poudre River, I rounded a turn and startled a moose calf, who turned and bounded back into the willow bush. I turned the car around, hoping Amanda and Laura might see the moose. It obliged us by crossing the highway in good view. I turned around again and resumed our homeward direction. Down the highway several miles, two pickups and a car had parked on the shoulder of the road, and a multitude of cameras were in action, so I knew something momentous was near.

A bull moose grazed in a pond about a hundred yards from the road. Moose were reintroduced into Colorado several years ago, and they are doing well here. The bull was unconcerned about the people watching him. He dunked his head underwater and grazed plants from the bottom of the pond. He lifted his head and massive antlers above the water and chewed and swallowed and looked around. We watched for a while, then continued our journey. Down the road a ways, it occurred to me that the bull moose grazing in the pond is another photo I don't have. I have no regrets.

What I chose a long time ago, the experience and the memory of the experience, works well for me. I still don't want to tinker with a camera during the experience of the moose, of the owl against the moon, of life itself.

A Man Called Grandma

John started it. I took him in as a partner in my wood-cutting business. I said, "You don't cut wood with me without wearing a hardhat." He didn't argue with that. He knew it made sense. Even if you're such a good faller that trees always fall exactly where you want them to, a top or a branch can break out of a tree and hit you, or a tree can fall into a green tree that throws

it back to hit the faller. He didn't like it as well when I watched him work and said he was going to have to revise some of his techniques. He'd been falling trees longer than I had. I said, "It doesn't matter how long you've been doing it. Some of your work isn't as safe as it could be. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to carry you out of here if you get hurt or killed, so you go by my safety rules if you want to keep cutting on my contract."

Sometimes, after we sold a load of wood, we picked up my wife and daughters and drove to Sumpter and ate dinner in a restaurant. John usually drank a beer, or several. When he ordered the first beer, I held out my hand, and he deposited the keys to his rig in it. I wasn't, and my family wasn't riding with a driver who'd been drinking. John took all of it well, and it was all by agreement, but some time along the way, he started calling me Grandma. "Okay, Grandma, we do it your way."

I took a job as site manager of a Girl Scout camp in the Rocky Mountains. The camp director, counselors, everyone who works at the camp goes by a camp name. The site manager can or can't. I couldn't think of anything for a camp name, and I didn't care much about it, so as we started gearing up for resident camp, I was just Jon.

Then I had security problems. Too many people knew the combination of the gate lock, and some of them abused their privileges by coming in late. Somebody who came in late didn't lock the gate. I photocopied rules from the manual and distributed copies. I changed the combination and gave it only to authorized personnel. I lectured everybody about security. I lectured again about visitors. "Read the rules. I have to know who's in camp. If somebody comes to visit without letting me know, they're unauthorized visitors, and they go out, and the counselor being visited gets called on the carpet. Clear it with me first, and they're authorized."

I upbraided the animal care specialist for tying the llamas wrong. "They have to be tethered on a swivel, so their ropes can't wrap around anything, or they have to be watched. They could wind their ropes around those trees and choke to death."

We had a staff meeting, and the camp director asked me, "What's your camp name?"

I thought of John, and I said, "Grandma." That caused surprise, so I explained about John; then I said, "I'm responsible for the safety of twenty-five counselors and up to two-hundred and fifty Girl Scouts, and I'm never

going to give anyone any peace until I know they're observing every rule about personal safety and camp security. John thought that concern for safety and the willingness to keep after it was a grandmotherly quality, and he was probably right, so call me Grandma."

And members of the staff did. And they told the counselors, and the counselors called me Grandma. Most of them. A few of them just couldn't do it, and that was fine. They called me Jon, and nobody objected. The counselors told many of the scouts, and some of the scouts called me Grandma and seemed delighted that this grizzling, bearded man answered quite naturally to that name.

And something happened that I couldn't have predicted. That name helped the rest of the camp personnel and I be at ease with each other in a way that otherwise might have taken us weeks to work our way to. I did my best to manifest the positive attributes of a grandmother. It's all part of my job, but somehow, being known as Grandma made it easier to reassure counselors and help work out ways to keep scouts and adults warm, fed, and at ease when a summer snowstorm weighted down our power lines and short-circuited them.

Bright blue flashes lighted up our small valley. Lights in our buildings dimmed, brightened, dimmed, and appliances went off and on. Then the electricity went off and stayed off all night and half the next day before electricians got it fixed. The safety switches on the propane were electric and shut down, so we didn't have propane heat. We used the fireplace in the big lodge for heat and gathered everyone there until the electricity was turned on again. Grandma organized everything and reassured everyone that we would come though all problems in good shape, and maybe everyone had a little more confidence in my ability to take care of them because I was their grandma.

Being known to everyone as Grandma seemed to make it easier to work our way through all the emergencies that came up through the summer. There's something reassuring in calling Grandma for help.

Some of the counselors delighted in drawing me over in front of parents who hadn't met us before and calling me Grandma. It took practice to keep a straight face, to act totally natural about it, and we all took pride in achieving it.

That summer and that group of counselors are gone from the mountain, and most of this winter has passed. I'm starting to look forward to the time, early next summer, when all the counselors who have been hired meet and I stand up in front of them to explain rules, how to take care of kerosene lanterns, how to use fire extinguishers, and say, quite seriously, "My name's Grandma."

A Hot and Snowy Day in Summer

I heard complaints about the heat from some of the people we worked with at eight thousand eight hundred feet in the Rockies. I gave advice. "Wear long-sleeved, long-legged, light-colored cotton clothes and a hat, and you'll feel cooler." I received incredulous stares from counselors wearing the minimum allowed in camp. My efforts to explain the sense of keeping the sun off one's skin to keep from heating up didn't get through, so I gave that up.

I also wanted to give this advice, "This high in the Rockies, don't complain when it's warm. Give thanks," but I knew that would bring more incredulous stares.

June 21, the first day of summer, in the middle of the afternoon, clouds moved down from the higher mountains west of us. The temperature dropped about sixty degrees. Big, wet, lazy flakes of snow drifted down from the dark clouds above us, a few, and then more, until snow came down densely. It didn't take long to build up more than an inch of snow on the ground, and the falling snow didn't slow down.

I drove from our house up through camp, picked up my helper, the camp director, and the assistant director, and we drove to the first tent unit. The weight of snow will tear canvas and break ridgepoles, so while the counselors moved the Girl Scouts from tents into lodges, Margo and Bobbie moved cots to one side of the tents and put possessions under the cots, and Mike and I took the tents down.

The snow had already accumulated so heavily on the tents, we couldn't lift the support poles. Snow was still falling fast. I decided speed was of the essence, and we abandoned all finesse. The ropes were so tight, with the weight of sagging tents pulling on them, many of them wouldn't release the

usual way of yanking on the end of the rope. Mike said, “A lot of these knots aren’t clove hitches at all. After this is all over, we’d better give a class in clove hitches.” We cut most of the ropes. We couldn’t ease the tents down, so we just aimed them the way we wanted them to go, let them fall, and hoped nothing tore. We kept moving as fast as we could. We hadn’t taken time to change into waterproof boots or clothing. Snow melted on us and soaked our clothing.

When the last tent of the first unit dropped onto the wooden platform, we crowded into the truck and headed for the next unit. The inside of the truck’s windows steamed up. The heater didn’t gain much warmth in the short trip before we hit the ground and sloshed through sloppy snow and started on the second tent unit. We joked and laughed as we worked. One outcome of our hasty, hard work was that we knit ourselves together into a better team than we had been, and that feeling of working well as a team lasted through the summer.

Dusk and then dark came down with the falling snow. By the time we took down the last tent in the last unit, we were wet through and thoroughly cold. I dropped everyone off, drove home showered, and quit for the day. Or so I thought. Snow kept falling. About nine o’clock, Margo called and said they’d seen several bright flashes of light. We heard crackling over the phone, and I saw the valley light up with an intense, blue flash of light. I hung up the phone and drove to the staff office. We stood in the front room and watched the snow come down. Twice more, we saw brilliant flashes of light. It was like lightning, but there was no thunder. I hadn’t been site manager there long, and I didn’t know enough about the place to figure out what was happening. No harm seemed to be coming from the flashes of light, so I went home.

Midnight, the phone rang. Margo said strange and scary things were happening at the staff office. Lights dimmed. The electric-stove burners warmed up but wouldn’t get hot. I went up and shut the electricity off at the office. Everybody who was staying there moved up to the big lodge. Then the power at the lodge started acting strangely. I didn’t have to do anything about it, because the power all over camp went off.

Everybody got through the night fine. Losing electricity meant we also lost all propane, since safety devices shut the propane off when the electricity went off. The kitchen staff put together a cold breakfast for about

a hundred and twenty scouts and thirty staff. We kept everyone at the big lodge and kept the fireplace roaring. All the little girls thought it was a great adventure, and the counselors maintained calm and order.

I checked power lines and found the heavy, wet snow had weighed down the high-power line coming across the pasture until one line touched the other, and the short circuit caused the flashes of light and the power outage. By the time I went out looking for the cause of our electrical problems, the heavy, wet snow had started falling from the wires, and the lines maintained a safe distance from each other.

The sun came out. The snow started melting. We called electricians out, and they tracked down burned wiring and turned the electricity back on by early afternoon. We swept and shoveled snow from downed tents to minimize the amount of water they soaked up as the snow melted.

Two days later, staff from the Denver office and volunteers came up, and we worked all day and put tents back up.

By the next day, camp was back to normal. The scouts who were there for that session had dramatic adventures to tell about when they went home. Intense, high-elevation sunlight heated up the mountain. I walked into the main lodge to fix problems with the water heater, and counselors sitting on the front porch complained about the heat. I just smiled at them and kept doing what I was doing.

Rocky Mountain Cattle Drive

Late in the afternoon of a hot summer day when we managed Tomahawk Girl Scout Camp in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, the phone rang. The camp director said, "Pathfinder just called on the C.B. They have a herd of cows down there."

Four counselors and about thirty Girl Scouts camp at Pathfinder tent unit. I said, "Tell everyone to stay well away from them. Cows don't usually hurt people, but it can happen. I'll be right there."

Laura, Juniper, Amanda and I got into the truck, drove through camp, picked up the director and the assistant director, who rode in the back of the truck, and drove down through the swale to Pathfinder. Counselors and Girl Scouts gathered by the tents and watched sixteen cows, six calves, and three

bulls. I had picked up a garbage can lid and a piece of steel rebar on the way. I banged on the lid, and the cattle reluctantly began to walk back the way they had come. They had wandered into cow heaven, where lush, deep grass had been grazed only by a few deer and elk who passed through camp during quiet times.

That was part of the reason I wanted them out of there without delay. Tomahawk Ranch supports a wide variety of wildflowers. It wouldn't take long for twenty-five bovines to graze grass and flowers to the ground. I banged on the garbage can lid and followed the cattle, staying close to trees I could retreat behind if need be. I called back, "When I get around the willows, bring the truck up."

Laura told me later that, when I had walked a ways, Juniper asked, "Can I go with him?"

Laura said no, but the assistant camp director said, "I want to go home." Somehow, Juniper, always seeking adventure and very independent, took that as permission and ran after me. Laura yelled, "Juniper Remmerde, you get back here right now." Laura said six small Girl Scouts ran to her and stood at attention. Juniper also came back.

I walked around the willows and onto the road again. Laura drove the truck up. Everyone in the back of the truck yelled and pounded on everything available, and the cows kept moving. I climbed into the back of the truck, relieved, because the biggest bull had turned toward me and pawed dust over his back, a warning that, much more harassment, and he might charge a man on foot. Each time the cows moved on, he joined them, but I didn't know when he might decide that enough warning was enough.

Clouds slid down from the mountain peaks and hid the blue sky above us. The cows walked away from the road, up the hill. We followed in the truck until dense brush and down trees stopped us. With an already-angry bull in the herd, I wasn't willing to follow farther on foot.

Heavy rain burst from dark clouds above us. All six of us squeezed into the cab, and we headed back. I said, "Maybe they'll realize they aren't welcome and head on home." When we got back to the house, I phoned cattle owners, with possible results, messages left and promises to call me back received, but without immediate action.

When we got up the next morning, the first words I heard were, "Guess who's back."

I looked up camp, where most of the cattle gathered around the flagpole, minus the two older bulls. I said, “They’re having trouble up there. Comes out, I pledge a-moooo!’ They try it again, I pledge allegmoooo!’

Amanda and I took the truck up. The training the cattle had the day before did some good. The cattle moved better, just from the noise we made banging on the side of the truck. Amanda and I rehearsed once and then sang it on the C.B., “Ride around little dogies, ride around again slow, for the fiery and snuffy are raring to go. You feed em in the coulees and water in the draw. Their tails are all matted, and their backs are all raw.” We received applause back over the airwaves.

Below the Blue Feather buildings, the cows scattered out. I jumped out of the truck and ran around them, yelling. They grouped up closer together and started up the ranch again. I jumped back in the truck, and we followed them up the dirt road. We stopped at the second gate above camp, and the cows kept moving away from us, as if they might go on home. I got Kevin, the handyman, on the radio and asked him to come up on the ATV and watch for a while to make sure they didn’t come back, while Amanda and I got some breakfast.

Cow owners showed up that day, with horses in trailers. They figured the cows had probably stayed on the trail home, but they rode the trail to be sure, and they explored timber and brush to see no bovines lingered. The cowboys said they’d tighten fences to keep cattle at home. Most of the scouts and counselors had never seen real, live cowboys, so they gathered around and watched and watched again when the men rode back down the trail, loaded their horses and drove down through camp and away.

The next two days, I looked into every thicket and every possible hiding place on the ranch to make sure we didn’t have any bulls close. Then I felt like the real ranchers do. The herd is in the high range. It’s time to get work done on the home ranch, and I started catching up on chores around camp.

Weeding Strawberries, Eating Carrots

I walked up to the garden on the hill behind the house and started an overdue task, pulling weeds from our strawberry bed. The beds we planted are raised, without containment, so they slope from nearly two feet high to

nothing in a horizontal distance of about two feet. I don't know how carrots got planted among the strawberry plants. Perhaps one of us who watered let the spray get too heavy or stay too long in one place, and carrot seeds washed down the slope.

Note for next year: Be sure some carrot seeds get planted between strawberry plants. Pulling carrots along with weeds and eating them as I work makes the project more interesting and tastier. These are small, very tender carrots. I wash two dozen at the garden hose and take them down the hill and into the house. "Eat a lot of carrots," I say. I hear no arguments. In ten minutes, they are gone. "I'll bring some more next time I come down."

Anne, site manager of another camp, comes to this Girl Scout ranch we take care of. She and Laura are going to organize tents and other camping equipment. On their way up the ranch, they stop at the garden to visit. Anne is also a gardener, so we talk about gardens as I loosen soil and pull weeds and carrots. I say, "If I figured all the time I put in and allowed a reasonable wage, the produce we're getting probably costs ten times what it would cost at the store."

But carrots like these can't be bought anywhere, at any price. Even friends who also work a lot of organic material into their soil don't grow carrots quite this tender and sweet. I'm not bragging, of course, just telling about something I've noticed. As far back as when we lived in northern California, my reputation with carrots was getting started. Our neighbor called me Captain Carrot, and the name has come back to me a few times since then.

When we lived in Sumpter, Oregon, we got together with friends and made ice cream. I suggested carrot ice cream. Not everyone liked the ice cream we made by adding finely-grated carrots before we cranked it. I did. Some others did, too. When we added carrot juice instead of grated carrots, it was a total success. Even those who had wrinkled their noses at the idea of carrot ice cream came back to see if there might be just a little left in the bottom of the container, or they said they would do all the cranking if we would mix up another batch.

I mention to Anne and Laura that birds have been eating the few strawberries we've been getting on these first-year plants. Anne makes several suggestions, including owls, wooden owls, plastic owls, and owls filled with air. I don't know why I didn't think of that. I knew people who

put models of owls around their house to scare swallows so they wouldn't build nests under the eaves. "That's a great idea. It might work. Wait. I'll get you some carrots." I turn on the hose, wash those I've accumulated as we talked and hand them out. Anne and Laura leave for the upper part of the ranch, munching carrots as they go, a dozen or so in hand.

I don't plant rows of carrots; I plant beds of various lengths, just narrow enough that we can reach the middle from either side for weeding, thinning, and harvesting. We have carrot beds four feet wide and ten feet long, with no more space between the carrots than they need to grow to full size. This is not more carrots than we use. I eat forty or more carrots every day, and my family follows my lead.

I need a place to move the well-rooted strawberry plants that have started from runners. I have one small planting of peas that have stopped blossoming. They have no small pods. I know what to do with the nearly mature pods filled with full-sized peas. Edible pod peas are a marvelous invention. I pick all the pods and add them to three dozen carrots I've pulled from among the strawberries since Laura and Anne left. Then I pull the pea plants and add them to the pile of weeds and carrot tops. I shovel dirt over them and plant pea seeds in the resulting pile. There might be time for another crop of peas before cold weather shuts the garden down. The decomposing green plants will provide nutrients for the growing plants.

My soil is not homogenous. I can't rake out some of my raised beds, because the spoiled hay I buried there hasn't decomposed yet. The rake will pull it out in large clumps. The hay takes a lot of nitrogen to decompose. So I added chicken manure, covered it with dirt, and watered heavily over a period of several weeks before I planted peas, cabbage, kohlrabi, kale, spinach, and lettuce. It's an adventure. If I put in too much nitrogen, it will kill the plants. Too little, and they will be stunted. I did it right. The plants are healthy and growing well.

I used to have a soil-testing kit. I never used it, so I gave it to a friend who did use it. I watch how the plants grow, and I study their colors to see if anything is missing from the soil. I've built many gardens, and my experience serves me well. Building good soil without testing it is like cooking without a recipe. For some, it works. Smells, colors, consistencies, and tastes guide the cook and the gardener.

I've stopped all work. I sit, mind slowing down, thinking about a lot of gardens I've built. I think about the spoiled hay, horse, rabbit, chicken, goat, and llama manure, and the dolomitic limestone I added to the decomposed granite soil here. I think about the best gardeners there are, earthworms working persistently within the soil. I think myself into my favorite state of mind, where there are few verbal thoughts, just a wide sense of contact with the soil, the plants, the garden, the world around the garden.

I don't know how much time passes. A crow lands in the fir tree outside the garden fence and caws, urging me to leave the garden so it can come and see how deeply I've buried the last bucket of kitchen compost. I have no objection to its presence in the garden. Smaller birds have already eaten the strawberries. This is cold country, and I don't grow corn. Crows stir up the compost and the dirt where it's buried. They're the closest thing I have to the type of machine that mixes the soil. "Crowtotillers" they are, when they're in the garden.

I've weeded half the strawberries. I'll save the other half for tomorrow afternoon. I water everything and wash three dozen carrots. I pick a few onions and some kale to add to the carrots and the peas. I put the entire harvest into my shirttail and hold it up for a carrying sling. I leave the garden and close the gate behind me. If everyone is in a carrot-eating mood, someone might have to come up and harvest more before dinner. There are plenty.

Largest Birdhouse in the Rockies

Our house is built into a hill, so the second story in front is the first story in back. Four-by-twelve inch beams, which pass through the upper walls and extend outside, over the second story front porch, support the high ceiling.

Four humans live in the house; me, my wife, and our two daughters, and seventeen houseplants, one dog, and one cat. The cat lives mostly indoors just now. We tell him it is only until the fledgling swallows gain flight skill and the intelligence that comes with some maturity. For a while, they are too clumsy and too uninformed about predators. He can go out once in a while at night, when they are tucked safely into their nests.

The mountain blue birds were the first to use the house in the spring. They repaired the nest of straw they used last year, under the front-porch floor, on a support beam about ten feet off the ground. They picked their nest site with intelligence. I watched the cat try again and again to get to the nest, from above, from below, from the nearby steps, and he never got close.

Colorado was unusually dry last spring and into summer. The only mud available was around the small pond across the driveway from the house. Horses, donkeys, llamas, coyotes, one pair of wild mallards, and many other animals shared the pond. The swallows extended that sharing of resources up to the house. They picked up mud at the pond, flew to where the beams and the roof boards join, and packed the mud into place, fastening their nests to the underside of the roof and to the beam below the roof. The swallows make a small tube, extending down from the body of the nest, for an entrance.

We have forty swallow nests attached to the house. The swallows leave a bit of a mess on the porch and on the windows, but we don't mind cleaning it up. Clean up is part of the sharing. Swallows swoop in and out, away from the house and all around the near airspace, catching insects for their own food and to bring to their hatchlings. This summer, we have not been troubled with insects, and the small amount of work we trade is no bother. What we can clean up into a container, I take to the garden and work into the soil. It is excellent fertilizer, and it will help improve our crops next summer.

We also share the house with hummingbirds. They nest in nearby trees and fly to the feeders hanging from the beams. Two of the feeders hang just outside the windows in front of my desk. The hummingbirds come and go from daylight until dark. They drink while hovering or rest on a perch while they feed. We had twelve or fifteen broad-tailed hummers at the feeders at a time. Sometimes, two of them faced off. They disputed who would drink next, and one retreated, straight up, backward, sideways, or away in an arc, but it appeared that all were eventually getting food.

Then two pairs of rufous hummingbirds moved in. They are smaller than the broad-tailed; a golden red, with gold to red gorget, depending on the angle of the light. The book describes them as very aggressive, and indeed they are. Soon, the two males completely controlled access to the two

feeders on the south side of the house and the one on the west side. It didn't matter if the rufous weren't interested in feeding just then; they still guarded what had become their food source. Sometimes, one of the males just sat on the perch, waiting to drive off any intruder. Its nest was in a tree about a hundred feet away, and it also observed from there and came rapidly on noisy wings if any broad-tailed approached, and drove it away.

We had put the feeders out and kept them filled for all, but we didn't see very many broad-taileds for a while. I don't know any details about negotiations or changes that came about. I think the broad-taileds decided that the noisy-winged, rapidly-approaching bluff would stop a fraction of an inch short of physical contact. The broad-taileds began to come back, and within a few days, there were as many as there had ever been. The rufous made an all out aggressive effort and then accepted the rules and shared with everybody else.

Fall comes early here, 8,800 feet up in the Rocky Mountains. In a few days, our cat can spend as much time outdoors as he wants. Fledglings have vacated thirty-seven swallow nests. The occupants of the last nests are nearly ready to become independent travelers of the air.

The bluebirds fledged earliest of all and are seasoned fliers now. Soon, we will take down the hummingbird feeders so the tiny, iridescent birds are not encouraged to stay here beyond their time to fly south. We will clean up the last of the swallows' droppings and wash the windows nearest their nest sites. It will be quieter. We will miss the birds, though the season for the elk to cross the ranch daily starts soon. Now that the summer camp on the grounds is over, we will see more deer and coyotes.

Crows and magpies and some of the hardier small birds stay here all winter. We won't be lonely. But we will be looking forward to sharing our house with wild species again, when winter is almost over, when the first bluebird arrives to tell us spring is coming and the migrating birds will return to our house again.

My Guitar, but Our Music

My shining, beautiful, thirty-year-old, valuable, mellifluous Gibson Hummingbird guitar seldom comes out of its case these days, and that is a

shame and a violation of my own principles, though this state of affairs won't last, I hope and vow.

I do have the tape I recorded, a few months ago, playing the guitar and singing, mostly my own songs, that I had meant to record, oh these long years, but didn't get to until recently, fortunately perhaps, though what I heard when I played it back was not unexpected. I don't sing that well. The feeling, the enthusiasm is there, but my voice isn't fully under control. Neither is my guitar. Close, at times with both, especially when I've practiced a song many times, and when I'm not trying to project my voice to an imagined audience of hundreds.

I bought the guitar about twenty years ago, for so low a price, I won't name it, for fear you'll accuse me of stealing it. I had been playing a twelve dollar Sears guitar, and I was not dissatisfied, but when the Gibson came to me through an estate sale, I willingly passed my first guitar along to a friend who needed something to begin with.

During some difficult financial times, when we lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, some years ago, I decided to pawn the Gibson, the only thing of much value that we owned. A five-mile walk turned up what I thought was an extraordinary chain of events. Two pawnshops, which would ordinarily have been open that day, were closed, no explanation given. The proprietor of the next shop offered an absurdly low price. The money would not have met our needs. The next would have given me my price, but the owner had just taken in so many goods, he hadn't the cash, and he had no one to watch the store while he went to the bank. If I could come back after the weekend, he said, he would have the money.

By then, I had decided the message was quite clear. I wasn't to let go of the instrument, even temporarily. There must be another way to meet our financial emergency. And there was.

Several times since then, I have been tempted to sell the guitar to ease our financial situation, but each time, my family has made it clear that it's my guitar, but it's our music. Money is only money and would soon disappear, but the guitar and its music will not leave us.

Early on, I made myself a deal. I had no intention of aiming for any kind of career in music. I would make music for the fun I could have with it and for the enjoyment a few others might find in it, though I would be careful to

always allow any listeners room and freedom to move off if what I was doing did not suit their tastes.

I had the idea that music of the people, for the people, from the people, was dying out. People, I thought, who played instruments aimed for professional status, and if it became apparent they weren't going to achieve it, they gave up. People getting together for music plugged in the record player much more than they dusted off the piano and opened instrument cases. Even home audiences expected performers to be polished, or they would edge them aside in favor of the electrical outlet.

But that isn't how I approached it. My listening to radio music or records always has been very limited. It isn't according to my tastes to be a consumer, though I willingly listen to live performers. Most of all, I want to participate.

There have always been times when the guitar stayed in its case for weeks at a time. The work I do for a living has always had very busy times. Firewood-cutting season is short in country where firewood is essential. Ranch work has hay-cutting season, when the work goes from dawn until dark. Girl Scout camps have summer camp, when a site manager is on the move to keep all the facilities operating. This site manager also tries to keep several essays and several short stories progressing.

One of our daughters plays piano and the other plays violin, so there is still live music to keep the cobwebs from our ears.

Steadily through the years have come those times when I do have some time. I open the battered black case, tune the guitar, and see what I can remember and if there's anything new I can work up. My audience is small. Myself, my wife and daughters. My daughters' musical tastes have developed. There isn't much contemporary vocal music they will listen to. No rock and roll at all. Some country and western, but it has to have content. Doc Watson. Flatt and Scruggs. And me. They listen to me. Not that my music is all country and western, but a lot of it has that flavor.

From when they were very small, they have always been a rapt audience. Since we have always lived in cold country, often in houses that aren't very well insulated, and most of my time for making music is in winter evenings, they have also usually been a wrapped audience. Ideally, they hear me from their beds as they settle for the night.

Their repertoire on their own instruments is expanding. It's founded mostly on classical music, but lately I've heard the piano speaking of Susannah, who was coming down the hill. I have heard the violin reminding us that this land belongs to you and me. I know those songs. My daughters are away at Horsewomanship camp, but when they come back, we are going to find the time to begin to blend our music, two instruments, then three. My wife, Laura, sings well, so we will also include her voice.

Sometime, perhaps this winter, we will make a tape. If my guitar playing and my voice is the least professional of all the music I hear when we play it back, still I won't have fallen short of what we were aiming for, because sharing, working together to create music that transcends any of our individual efforts, the joy of the process itself, is what I have always been reaching for.

Wintering Animals in the Rockies

Nine horses and two burros stand in sunshine by the haybarn and cast baleful looks toward the house, toward me. Actually, their looks are baleless, since I'm starting late this zero-degree morning. They want me to get out there, cut wires on baled alfalfa, and spread it around the barn so they can break their night's fast. Their food is their furnace; the colder the weather, the more they need to eat to keep warm, and I sympathize with their situation too much to slow my donning of insulated coveralls, boots, hat, gloves and scarf, even though I feel tired and lazy after a long day's work yesterday.

Juniper and Amanda climb into warm clothing and fill water jugs to provide for the small animals, two chickens, four ducks, five rabbits, three goats, one shoop. (Shoop is the singular of sheep, as also goose and geese, though my daughters say it could as well be shoup, as also mouse and mice. These philological discussions don't slow down our preparations to feed, the animals are pleased to know.) Caring for the animals is part of our responsibility as caretakers of this four hundred and sixty acre, fifteen building, four tent-unit Girl Scout ranch 8,800 feet up in Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

When summer's resident camp closed and the animal-care specialist headed back to college in New York state, Laura and I made a deal with our daughters, that they would take care of all the animals and receive twenty dollars a month each in wages. For the time it would take, it was a low wage, but Amanda and Juniper were willing to have part of their work be a contribution to the family's welfare.

Then it snowed, and we had to start giving the horses hay. There were no objections and no requests for a raise, but I decided Juniper and Amanda should get forty dollars a month each, and Laura agreed. They were pleased when we told them. I particularly liked the figure, because, in all the cowboy novels I've read, forty a month and room and board is the standard ranch hand's pay, and that made our arrangement seem appropriate.

Then came the wind that rips down through this small valley at thirty miles an hour or more, and cold feet. I instructed Juniper and Amanda to put their boots on just before they went out and to be sure their boots were cold when they put them on. The absence of sweating feet kept their socks and boots drier, and their feet stayed warmer.

But Amanda particularly began to feel pressured by lack of time. She is learning to play the piano, and Juniper is learning to play the violin, and they need time to practice. They need time for their at-home schooling in other subjects. They need time to write and time to read for enjoyment and time to play and be children.

So now I feed the horses, and Juniper and Amanda feed the small animals. We work together when Banner needs medication for an infection from a cut on his face and when Diesel Smoke needs shots for a kidney infection. The arrangement satisfies all of us, except, possibly, for the equestrians, since I often do get there later than Juniper and Amanda, though my daughters lately tend toward my winter practice of staying up late and sleeping late.

The shoop and the goats usually come out of the fenced barnyard in the daytime and eat with the horses. These small ruminants, two wethers (neutered males) one small female goat and the shoop, are charming animals. Burros are quite territorial, but when we put the small animals on pasture, it was only a few days before the burros changed from trying to run the small animals out of the pasture to allowing them to stand under their necks and share warmth and companionship.

The animals' needs change as the days change. Cold winds begin, and we carry the rabbits and their hutches into the small barn. We're satisfied that the rabbits are much better off there, and they seem to be satisfied too. There are enough windows for sufficient light, and there is no wind inside. When the snow comes, the ducks' legs are shorter than the snow is deep. Juniper and Amanda say the ducks walk a little, then flop down, with their feet tucked under their wings, obviously in distress. So Amanda and Juniper pick the ducks up, one at a time, carry them into the barn, and confine them to an area where there is plenty of straw spread underfoot.

I have never heard these ducks say "quack." My daughters said when they captured and carried the ducks, one held her head up quite high and said, "Pow, pow, pow." Another, when being carried, said, "Help, help, help," but it was relieved to be delivered unharmed to a warmer area. Their calls, when we enter the barn and move around their area, sound like creaking hinges, though considerably more melodious and repetitious.

The chickens, Biddy and Higgledy Piggledy, almost never come out of their small house. The snow does not please them, and they seem content to wait until spring before they make contact with the ground again.

We clean horse hooves and trim goat and sheep hooves when necessary. Amanda and Juniper take the rabbits out of the cages and let them run around the barnyard for exercise. We make sure every animal has enough water and food, and we keep living areas clean. Sometimes, Juniper and Amanda ride horses, though that has dwindled with the winter's short days and crowded schedules.

Troops come up for weekends. Some of them arrange to have Amanda guide them through the barnyard, so they can see and pet the animals. Otherwise, the animals spend all their time being animals, living contentedly enough toward spring and summer.

Get Up, Shiloh

Juniper ran in the front door. "Shiloh's down on his side, with his back legs in the hay barn, and he can't get up." I grabbed jacket, hat and gloves, threw tools and rope in the truck, jumped in, and sped through camp. A

stuck horse can be a serious problem, because many horses will panic, fight what they're stuck in, and injure themselves.

I left the truck a hundred feet from the barn and walked down. Juniper had run the shorter way back. She and Laura and Amanda knelt by Shiloh's head and talked to him and petted him. Shiloh had lain down close to the barn and rolled over, and his back legs broke wire fencing around the open barn and stopped on the floor, a foot above the ground. He had nothing but loose hay to push against to try to right himself. His front legs were outside, around the corner of the barn.

Laura said, "He was quivering all over when we got here, but we've talked to him and petted him, and he's calmed down. He's been down for a while. He's melted the snow away under him."

I cut wire and pulled fence away from his back legs. Juniper said, "You're right where he could kick you."

"I have to get this wire out of the way. You keep him calm and tell him I'm back here because he needs help. We'll have to trust him." I pulled staples and fence out of the way.

Juniper said, "There's room enough. Let's try it."

I looped a rope around Shiloh's front legs and another around his back legs. Four of us pulled for all we were worth. A thousand pounds of horse doesn't roll over easily. We pulled his feet almost straight up. My feet slipped on ice and then Juniper's slipped, and Shiloh crashed down, with his back legs in the barn again.

Juniper said, "Don't give up, Shiloh. Don't give up."

I said, "I could bring the truck closer and pull him over with the truck."

"He got really nervous when you drove that close. I think he'd panic if you brought the truck any closer. If we can keep our feet from slipping, we can pull him over."

Shiloh had admirable patience. We looped the ropes again and pulled. Shiloh kicked, and the combination of efforts scooted him away from the barn. I said, "That gives us clearance to get him up without rolling him over. Let's get him up."

The sheep and the goats came around the barn looking for food and jumped over Shiloh's neck. The other horses crowded around too close. Laura said, "I'll feed them on the other side of the barn," and she took all the other animals away.

We coaxed Shiloh with grain, talked to him, and pulled on his halter, but he wouldn't move. Juniper clipped a rope to his halter, and we both pulled on the rope and got his head up. Amanda pushed on his neck, and his front legs started to come under him. We all yelled at him to get up, and he believed us and gathered his front legs under him. We pulled hard. Shiloh lurched forward, gathered his hindquarters and staggered up, nearly fell again, stayed up, and kicked in every direction.

I yelled, "Get away from him. He's kicking." Juniper and Amanda backed away. I pulled hard and forced him to move forward. His right rear leg almost didn't work, but I kept him moving, and he took a step and another and several more.

We cheered. "Yay, Shiloh. You did it. You're up. Keep moving. Hooray."

I led him around the barn and up past the tack shed and back, and his walking smoothed out. I stopped so we could wipe him dry, but he kicked in all directions again. I walked him some more, and then we did brush and dry him. Juniper led him up to the gate and down to the water tank. He drank, and she led him back. He walked normally by then, so she unclipped the rope, and he joined the other hoses eating hay.

After he ate for a while, Juniper and Amanda tried to walk Shiloh some more, just to be sure, but he said he'd had enough of that for now, and if he kept at it, the other animals would eat all that good alfalfa hay, so he'd stay where he was and keep eating, thanks. We went home, and all of us wrote about our experience in journals, essays, and letters.

When we walked out in the pasture the next day, Shiloh followed us around and nuzzled each of us. Amanda said, "Animals aren't dumb. He's telling us he's grateful to us for helping him. He's glad to be alive and up on his feet today."

We were all sure she was right, and we were all glad that he and we were all alive and up on our feet this fine winter day.

Book Four: Colorado: Magic Sky

Family Cohesion on the Ranch

When Juniper reached the age when she would have started school, we took care of a remote ranch in northeastern Oregon. Getting to school on the rambling rural bus, being in school all day, and then getting home would

have taken twelve hours. We weren't willing to commit her to that long a day.

We had already started her education ourselves. When she was six, Laura helped her learn to read, and Juniper launched into an avid reading career that has rarely slowed down since. Amanda, four then, listened in on the reading lessons and learned enough to read simple books. She expressed an intense desire to gain access to more difficult books. I worked with her, in between and during ranch work and garden work. Within a year, she could read almost anything she was interested in reading, and she had made a good start at writing.

Juniper and Amanda are sixteen and fourteen now. Tests required of homeschoolers by the state show our approach to education has been academically successful. It has also helped build a firm foundation for a cohesive family. Our interests center around the home, the family, and the creative interests each of us pursues. We have no television. We pursue enough interests, writing (all of us), drawing and painting (some of us), music (all of us), reading (all of us), a deep and active interest in the outdoors and wildlife (all of us), that we never have time for television.

My jobs have not been full time, partly because I was severely injured in a highway accident, and it was many years before I recovered enough to work anywhere near full time.

When the owner of the ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon died, the crew was laid off. We found a part time job caretaking the inlets of a water system for a central Oregon city. It was ideal. We were able to continue our home schooling and to have time together. I was able to complete a book about our ranch experience. After a year and a half at that job, we were offered a job as site managers of a Girl Scout ranch high in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. During our long time of working at jobs with low wages, more and more needs had come up that we had not been able to meet. We were ready for a fulltime job. I was ready physically, and we moved into the job with enthusiasm.

Our only transportation, a pickup, no longer comfortably contained the four of us, and it was more and more expensive to maintain. We sold the pickup and bought two older cars. We arranged for Juniper to continue with violin lessons in our new area. We helped Amanda buy a piano and get started on lessons. We caught up on buying clothing and other essentials.

We worked that job for twenty-one months. My working hours often far exceeded the scheduled forty per week winter and forty-eight summer. Laura worked twenty hours per week in the winter and ten in the summer. The higher wage was convenient and enjoyable, but we saw that the job cost us irretrievable time together and experiences that couldn't be replaced, once missed.

Our supervisor, aware of our interests and priorities, offered us a position taking care of another ranch. We took the job and made the move, even though it cut our cash income to a third of what it had been, because it cut our hours to less than half of what they had been. We have been living and working here for seven months now. None of us regrets the change. Amanda said, "I feel like I have my parents back." Juniper agreed.

Our home education is going very well. I've gone fishing with Juniper. We have all worked together in the garden. Some afternoons, Amanda and Juniper and I get into the car, and Juniper drives, practicing for her driver's test. Amanda and I hiked up the ranch and found a dense area of wild columbines. Soon after, we took Laura up to show her the flowers.

We have time for leisurely mornings, when all of us work together to prepare breakfast, clean up afterward, and linger to talk about what we've dreamed or what we're thinking about. We sit around the table after dinner and talk. Juniper or Amanda reads to Laura as she works in the kitchen or Laura reads to them as they work.

Juniper, Amanda, and I take a volleyball out in the driveway and hit it back and forth, learning. Next time they go to a gathering of teens at the local church, when all play volleyball, they won't feel odd person out from no experience with the sport. Amanda and I work together with guitars. She's learning to play the instrument, and we sing together. We talk about going, taking Juniper with her violin, and Laura with her voice and singing in the old part of town in Fort Collins, with cases open on the sidewalk, for coins. We are saying it lightly, and yet it is an experience we would like to try, and not just for the possible coins.

Juniper's and Amanda's creative efforts receive audience in the family, when they want them to, and they didn't, much, when we worked full time. Laura has begun to work on a long held ambition, writing, and has sold two essays since we moved. I've been able to continue writing essays and to sell some of them. I've organized and sent out a book of my short fiction. I've

revised my book about our northeastern Oregon experience, and I've begun two other books. In shorter words, we are usually able to give the family and the individuals in the family priority over the need to make money.

Is our existence ideal? No. Sometimes financial pressure can be intense. When we decided to make the move, I had been selling enough writing regularly that we thought we could count on at least two hundred and fifty dollars a month additional income from writing. My average went up for a while after we moved. Then the car we use (the other is inactive, without insurance) suffered a series of mechanical problems that cost us a thousand dollars in less than two months. The washing machine quit. A newspaper that had been a dependable source of income had staff changes, and my publications there dwindled, which meant our income dwindled.

But we have what we really need. A house, with utilities paid, is furnished with the job. Our income takes care of food needs, music lessons, and other essentials.

We haven't given our daughters a rich environment in material terms. Most of our clothing is from secondhand stores, and we are pleased with that. None of us is caught up in style. Amanda likes pretty dresses, but she would rather have them cost four dollars from a secondhand store than sixty dollars new, because she knows the difference in price can serve other needs better, including a small contribution to an effective environmental organization or a donation for people who need food.

When I think of enriching children's environment, I don't think of material enrichment. I think of enriching their environment with love, with the parents' support, teaching, revering the children and being there to help with their needs.

We haven't been able to give our children this enrichment and a wealth of material goods, so we chose this. Do we ever regret our choice? Was it too much of a sacrifice?

No. Far from it. We love our children, and love becomes the environment. We, children and adults, love and grow in love. We teach our children, and we learn so much ourselves, from what we must learn to teach, from what our children learn on their own and then teach us.

When we help our children get out into the mountains to experience the wildlife, the flowers, the forests, the freedom of movement, we also have the experiences, and we experience the joy of having them together. Our

experience together increases the depth of our experience and the openness with which we receive. There is no guide as effective as a child for bringing one into experience with openness.

Sacrifice? Far from it. It is not always the easiest way to live, but it is the most richly rewarding.

Between Storms, a Garden

With the saw roaring, I cut low into the dead Douglas fir, dropped it crashing to the ground, stuck the sharp point attached to my logging tape into the end of the fallen fir, and worked my way up the tree, cutting limbs off. I checked the tape reeling off behind me from the device hooked to my belt, and I cut the tree through at twelve feet. I looked up the slope to where I had cut several posts. Juniper looped her rope around the end of a post and tried to pull it down toward the road. She didn't get very far with it.

I shut the saw off, picked up the axe, and walked up the hill. I said, "If you knock off stubs of limbs, they drag easier." I rolled the post and knocked off stubs. Then I pulled on the rope and said, "That is a heavy post." I helped her pull the posts down to the road, and we loaded them into the pickup.

Down in the meadow, two miles south of where we cut posts, a hundred yards north of the house, Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I have removed turf, loosened the soil, mixed in manure, and planted seeds. We carried water from Lone Pine Creek, flowing by within fifty feet of the garden, and sprinkled the planted areas. Peas, lettuce, spinach, kohlrabi, garlic and cabbage sprouted, and the race was on. Deer and elk graze this mountain, and we needed to get the fence up before they discovered the succulent new plants.

Juniper and I drove down the ranch and unloaded the posts by the garden. Juniper said, "I'd like to do something besides work hard all day. Can I go fishing?"

Youth is for helping on projects like gardens. It's also for having fun and pursuing adventures. I said, "Sure. You've helped a lot. Do what you want to do." She ran to the house and got her gear, then came back to the garden, dug worms, and trotted up the creek. I dug postholes. We hoped to get a

garden going on the Girl Scout ranch we take care of in the east slope of northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains before our short growing season at seven thousand, seven hundred feet was too far gone. I dug deep, peeled a post, stood it in the hole, and started digging the next hole. Amanda shoveled dirt around the post and tamped the dirt with a digging bar.

The sun dropped toward the peaks west of us, and I said, "Enough for today. Time to quit."

When we got to the house, Laura said, "Juniper should have been back by now. If she's gone much longer, it'll be dark."

"I'll go look for her. Do you want to go along, Amanda?"

"Sure."

We drove the pickup to the end of the dirt road at Tentsite 3 and walked from there. We left the open meadow on the west boundary of the ranch. Huge granite boulders rose on every side. The stream flowed noisily over, around, and under boulders, from baseball size to house size. Both sides of the rapidly-flowing stream, granite boulders become granite ridges. Loggers couldn't get into the rough area along the stream, down between steep granite ridges, and the fir trees are hundreds of years old. This is a beautiful, ancient place, hidden away by the mountain.

The sun set.

We met Juniper coming down with three trout. I said, "Your mother was getting worried."

"I kept trying to get one more trout so we could each have a fish."

I worked in the garden every day when I finished the work required for the scouts. Rugged rock formations rose both sides of our small valley and thrust green trees into the sky. West, the valley grew aspen trees but kept them low enough that I could see the mountains rising miles toward peaks, clouds gathering grey above mountain forests, and lightning dancing down toward granite and green forests. Dark clouds consumed the blue sky above me. Lightning and thunder flashed and rumbled down the mountain toward me. I wasn't willing to stand on the meadow like a man-tall lightning rod and see what happened, so I ran for the house and left the work for another day. Rain poured down.

The next day, wet soil made hard digging. Dirt stuck to the posthole digger, and I had to scrape it off. Amanda tamped dirt around the posts with

the heavy digging bar. Lightning and thunder approached again, and we ran for the house.

One sunny spring morning, bluebirds courted and chased each other from tree to tree. A flicker hammered the metal extension above the chimney on the house, and the sound filled the small valley. Deer browsed the meadow across Lone Pine Creek from the garden, up by the old barn. I set the last post, strung, tightened and stapled the wire, and built the gate. Lightning and thunder rolled toward us from the mountain peaks west of us. I started for the house. From a hundred feet away, I stopped and looked back at the garden.

Can a round fence, fifty-two feet in diameter, nine-feet tall, with twenty-one wooden posts be beautiful? To me, there was no question about it. It was beautiful. Only deer with wings would get over it. Lightning struck up the creek a half mile. Thunder roared and shook the ground and reminded me how tiny I was on the vast mountain. I ran for home.

Rain and sunshine and the force that drives plants to grow toward the sky continued their work. Though we had fenced elk and deer out of the garden, we still had to deal with mice, voles, ground squirrels, gophers, rabbits, and summer frosts, but we knew that when we started. It is the way of mountain gardens.

Midsummer, we ate lettuce, peas, and the first tiny carrots. Amanda asked, “Well, was it worth all the work?” We all remembered working together and thought of the work that still went on. I thought, nobody ever said living in the mountains and making a living there was easy.

We weren’t interested in the easy life but chose the more difficult way, because out of the difficult life come adventures, continuous contact with the mystery of the life force that is still nearly wild in these mountains, and rich memories, and we all agreed, “Yes. Oh yes. It is worth it.”

Growing Lettuce, Essays, and Reverence

I’m too avid a gardener to be a good writer. I left two unfinished essays and a short story I’ve been revising and walked down to see if the garden needed water. It did, and I watered it. Then I picked up the long-tined rake and mixed the soil more thoroughly where I had spaded, mixed in manure,

and watered heavily a week before. I mulched the bed in which I had planted lettuce, onions, leeks and broccoli the day before, and I watered the mulch so it would stay in place in the wind.

Several buckets of goat and rabbit manure sat by the last area I spaded. I intended to mix the manure into the soil some time ago, but I haven't done it yet. I think I am too avid a writer to be a good gardener. We depend on the checks I receive from my writing to make the difference between our small wage as part-time caretakers of this ranch in the Rocky Mountains and enough to live on.

Amanda, my youngest daughter, walked down the road and joined me in the garden. We looked at the growing plants. I told her what I had planted that was not yet up. We looked at the garlic she planted, that pushed through the soil and aimed green spears at the sun. She had planted in the shape of a symbol for peace. I liked that. The garden is a peaceful place. Peace is a powerful force.

I said, "Look what the swallows do. They take mud to build their nests, and they leave all these little holes."

Amanda said, "I certainly wouldn't begrudge them the mud, but don't they take seeds with the mud?"

"Some, I'm sure. I plant densely, so everything always needs thinning. As long as they don't go overboard in one area, it won't hurt anything. But it's one reason I mulch everything I plant now. They don't know there's mud under the hay, and they leave it alone. The creek has dropped, and they're getting mud from that bank there, so they still have everything they need." The swallows flew from the mud bank by the flowing water up to the eaves of the abandoned animal shelter across the creek from the garden. They placed the mud, building nests that will hold their eggs, their young, the future of their species.

We like sharing the swallows' habitat. They are acrobats of the air, worth watching. Their swooping, diving, agile flight has as its purpose catching insects to eat and to feed their young. Where there are many swallows, there are fewer mosquitoes, biting flies, and other troublesome insects. The sun shone through clouds above the mountains west of us and cast tints of pink across the grey clouds to our south. Amanda said, "Ashes of rose." We shut the garden gate and headed home as the mountain evening turned cool.

After dinner, I wrote. I always have several pieces I work toward completion. It is my impolite answer to writer's block. If hesitation on one piece slows me, I go on to another. The one that seems blocked will resolve itself if I don't push against it too forcefully. That is also my pattern for living. I write, garden, take care of a ranch, and share existence with a lovely wife and two lovely daughters. It is a seamless whole, without compartments. No good activity is excluded by the pursuit of any other good activity.

I would not need to put that into words if it were as easy to live as it sounds. I have to work to bring my existence toward that state of seamlessness. I have to work to keep it close, and I am not always successful with that work. I sometimes have difficulty keeping many projects moving forward in a timely fashion. I sometimes waste energy wondering if enough checks will come in from sales of my writing to meet our needs. I sometimes waste energy and time wondering if I am trying to do too many projects, if I should concentrate on fewer, more complete achievements.

When I let go of all these distracting thoughts, while I garden, ideas for essays and stories come to me. I carry the contemplative, at peace feeling I find in the garden back with me to my desk, and I achieve a smooth flow of ideas. When my thoughts remain free of divisions, writing doesn't exclude gardening; slow, careful gardening improves my writing. When I remain free of compartmentalized living, I learn an important lesson; every life, every action is a symbol, a metaphor.

Every swallow that takes mud from the garden or the creek bank, in its enthusiasm for life, in its activity to continue its species, becomes a symbol of all swallows, a symbol for all life, for the force that animates all life.

I stand in the garden, thinking about what I will do next. A hummingbird flies close on singing wings to see if my red shirt might offer nectar, then looks into my face, backs away from me, and quickly moves on to other flowers. Carrots grow, slowly. Radishes grow much faster. Cabbage plants, peas, and lettuce sprout from the damp soil, add leaves, and reach toward the sun. Ideas sprout in my mind and grow as I prepare soil for more seeds. Ideas blossom and bear fruit in the intense, high-elevation sunshine.

At my desk, I bring an essay together. Carrots, peas, garlic, and onions send roots deeper into the soil and leaves toward the sun as I write.

Swallows warm the eggs in their nests. Bluebirds hatch, grow, push their eggshells from the nest to make more room, grow flight feathers, and learn to fly as I write, as I garden, as I work for wages, with wild birds and other animals active all around me.

I harvest vegetables from the garden. They become part of what feeds us. Wildflowers, trees, marmots, coyotes, deer, elk, and wild birds grow around us and feed our need for beauty, our need to know we are part of the life force, an ever-continuing, seamless whole.

Journey to the Ridge of Spiral-Grained Trees

Amanda and I went up the ranch this morning, to a hill of spiral-grained trees. We didn't know that's where we were going. We just set out to explore and to talk. I had been absorbed in my parttime job taking care of this ranch, writing, and gardening so much that Amanda, who pursues her education at home, had had time with me only as she sought me out during the work I did and during the brief mornings and evenings I wasn't involved in one kind of work or another. We had good conversations while gardening together, but her excursions into the world around us had been mostly by herself. Laura works a full-time job just now and isn't available to be company to Amanda much of the time, and Juniper is away at college.

So, as Mole says early in the book *Wind in the Willows*, "Hang spring cleaning!" and we bolted out of the house. "Hither and thither through the meadows... finding everywhere birds building, flowers budding... everything happy, and progressive and occupied." A Rocky Mountain cold-morning wind made us wonder if we had wrapped ourselves heavily enough. We stayed to the course, almost too cold, but not quite.

Up the ranch, where meadow gives way to a drop off into a small canyon, we walked out onto a high point of rough granite rock, with small trees, grass, and flowers growing from spaces between broken, eroding stone. We looked miles across stone mountains. Dramatic rock formations thrust up toward the clear blue sky. Miles of trees spread out before us, large trees in low areas where granite had eroded and built deep soil, where centuries of grass, flowers, and shrubs had grown, died, or dropped dead leaves, adding organic material to the soil. Smaller trees grew up in the

rocks where the soil was shallow, sent roots down into the soil, down into the rock itself.

When we stood still, we felt the chill of the wind more. We walked down into the top edge of the small canyon we had stood above. When we walked out of the wind, we experienced an abrupt change of climate. Granite boulders sheltered us on three sides. The wind blew above us. Sunshine warmed us. We sat on a blown-down tree whose bark was gone. The wood had weathered silver-gray and smooth. We talked of cabbages and kings, many things, as they came to mind. Birds sang around us. Amanda said, "I'd like to be able to identify more birds by their songs. That one is a familiar song, but I don't know what bird sings it."

"We could follow the song and see if we can find the bird," I said.

"Every time I try that, the bird flies away before I see it."

I felt lazy in warm sunshine. "I'm content to let the bird songs drift around us without knowing what bird is singing," I said. "The songs I connect with particular birds are songs I know because the bird allowed me to see it when it sang. I didn't try to find it. I'll probably go on being lazy about it, learning what is given to me and not trying to find the singers."

"That's a good way to learn, too," Amanda said. "Maybe you learn more that way. If you sit quietly, birds come around. If you stalk them, they flee." A red crossbill finch landed on a rock above us, dipped his head down, and then raised his head. "He's drinking," Amanda said. "There must be water up there."

His mate landed beside him and also drank. They lingered briefly, then launched on rapid wings into the wind still blowing across the sky above us. We climbed the rock and looked down into the small hole, nearly full of rusty-colored water, lined with moss. Amanda said, "I wouldn't want to drink from that."

"Birds aren't bothered by ideas, the way we humans are."

We climbed back down to our sitting place. We had not finished talking of cabbages and kings. "When I stayed all summer on Coalpit Mountain in eastern Oregon, years ago," I said, "I thought I was going to buy the place. There was a place at the top of a bluff with huge granite boulders. I intended to build a house of stone there."

"How would you do that?"

“Well, it didn’t look quite like this, but if these two boulders were going to be part of one wall, I’d mortar together smaller rocks between them until I filled in this space. I’d do the same thing between these two, so most of two walls would be the boulders that were already in place here. This side, I would have to build the entire wall, with big windows to look out on all the country. Then I’d build a roof to fit. I planned to have one door on top, so you could climb out on top of the tallest boulder and stand up there and look at the world. The walls wouldn’t be regular or the corners square, but I never thought people needed flat walls and square corners.”

“What would you do for the floor?”

“Just clear most of the loose rocks and dirt out,” I said. “If we were building here, we’d dig down to solid rock, and that would be our floor. It wouldn’t be level, but people don’t need level floors. It could be irregular enough to have places to sit and different levels to put stuff, books on the rocks, dishes on the rocks, some kind of a sink placed where it would be easy to use, maybe just a pan you could pick up and take outside to empty.” We thought the tree we were sitting on could be left there, for furniture.

We walked down into the small canyon. Ponderosa pine trees long ago blown down lay in the deer trail we followed. The bark had fallen off the trees. The first one we passed had spiral grain, completing a turn around the tree in about two feet. Then we saw several more down trees with spiral grain. I said, “Maybe they grow that way so they won’t be good for lumber. It takes straight grain to make good lumber.”

“But you can’t tell when the tree is alive and still has the bark on.”

We found a live, standing tree with part of its bark gone near the top, knocked away by lightning a long time ago. The exposed wood showed grain turning around the tree. We came to no conclusion about what caused the trees to grow with spiral grain. There is something liberating and strengthening about being able to say, “I don’t know.”

Aspen grew and lush grass and flowers and larger pine and fir trees, down in the bottom of the small canyon, where the soil had accumulated thicker over many seasons and years and centuries. We sat on a stump for a while, still talking of thoughts that have little to do with the daily necessities of our existence but mean everything in our growth, thoughts about kings, the way of the world of men, both destructive and glorious. And cabbages, mundane physical food, yet marvelous in complexity and in

that force which causes everything in the natural world to grow toward the future, just as we grow and talk toward the future.

We walked slowly back up to the rim, going an easy way. We climbed up onto the high point of rock and again looked out over miles of wild, rough, uninhabited country, mountains of wild stone, that made it clear where the name "Rocky Mountains" came from.

While we were sheltered down in the rocks and down in the canyon, cold wind moderated to a warm breeze. We carried our jackets and headed for home, still feeling warm and lazy, having set aside for a time the exigencies of living to live. As is always the case when I take time to be with our daughters, doing nothing of consequence but living, I have received more than I have given.

Over the Edge

My brother, Bob, and his son, Jason, coach me in the rocks above Turkey Creek. They say the first step, over the edge, is the scariest. They say once I make that first step, the rest of the descent will be easy and fun, and I'll be glad I did it. It might not matter if the rest is easy and fun, because I might never take the first step over the edge.

I'm fastened into a nylon harness. A rope fastened to a tree ahead of me passes through an aluminum figure eight attached to my harness and then passes around me. I hold the rope with my left hand, ahead of the figure eight, and I hold it with my right hand after it passes around me. From my right hand, it hangs down fifty feet of cliff face. I'm supposed to lean back until I am horizontal and walk backward down the cliff face, letting rope pass loosely through my hand and gripping it tightly again to regulate the speed I descend the cliff. Rappelling, they call it. I say, "I can't bring myself to lean that far back over a fifty foot drop."

Bob says, "You have to. If you don't get ninety degrees to the cliff, your feet will go out from under you, and you'll smack into the rock and probably break yourself up."

"That won't be a problem, because I'm not even going to start down. I'll just come back up, and somebody with more nerve can take my turn."

“Everybody is scared the first time. Isn’t that right, Jason? I was scared the first time. But once you get over the edge, you can’t get enough of it.”

Nephews, nieces, and daughters watch from top and bottom. Juniper, my sixteen-year-old daughter, who had her initiation several months ago, preceded me down the rock face. She pushed away from the cliff with her feet, so she bounced as she descended, and she swung merrily side to side, adding to her excitement. If I back out, I have to face everyone afterward.

I’ve lived a good life, and I’ve had a lot of fun and rewarding times. Nobody lives forever. Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar said, “A coward dies a thousand times before his death. A brave man dies but once.” I lean back until I’m ninety degrees to the face of the cliff. I step down, release rope, step again, and release more rope. One small, white cloud looks down at me from the blue sky. Family members look down at me from the top of the cliff.

It is as they said. The worst part was getting horizontal. Now I’m comfortable with the position. Beyond comfortable, I’m thrilled to be acting like a spider on the face of a vertical cliff, facing the sky, suspended in space. I push away from the rock. I walk backward down the cliff, releasing rope as I go. I step down onto level rock at the bottom of the cliff.

The cliff looks so much smaller from the bottom. I climb the long way around to get back on top and get in line for another turn. Every other initiate goes through the long building up of nerve at the top. Now I can add my voice of experience to the encouragement. “Once you’re over the edge, it’s easy. You’ll be glad you did it.”

A few months later, we take over the management of Magic Sky Ranch, where many huge, varied rock forms startle us by their beauty and steepness. Jason brings his rope and other equipment, and we rappel several rock faces. Then we start climbing back up the cliff faces. Jason is a good coach for rappelling and for climbing, supportive and conscious of safety, never pressuring anyone to go beyond what she or he feels ready for.

We use the harness and the rope when we climb. One person ties at the top to a tree, becomes part of the safety rope, and pulls up slack as the climber ascends. That’s called belaying. The rope isn’t used to pull the climber up, but to keep him from falling if he slips. Or her. Juniper is the most adventuresome climber, after Jason. She has wanted opportunities for adventure, and she is finding them. I get part way up the cliff face and take

pictures of her as she climbs the face of the rock, into a crevice, and up the crevice to the top. Some discipline on my part is called for, to swallow all the "be carefuls" I might say.

Juniper is tied to the rope, but she could still slip and swing to the side. At a moment of particular concern for her safety, I think, "She could be growing up in a city and facing a far more dangerous environment there, so keep the mouth shut and the camera operating."

When it's my turn, I climb to the difficult spot where I must know just how far out of vertical I am, and I use very small handholds to pull up over the protruding rock. After three tries at stretching myself up the face of the rock, I decide this is one challenge I'm not going to surmount. I say, "I'm going back down."

Jason says, "OK. Slack on the rope," and he gives me a little bit of slack at a time, until I stand back on level rock at the foot of the cliff. I untie the rope, and the next climber ties on and climbs the steep, grey rock all the way to the top. We try different rocks, to climb, to rappel down. Sometimes I climb or rappel, or both. Sometimes I just watch; sometimes I find perches to the side and take pictures.

It occurs to me I've been nervous about the safety of the young people, as parents and uncles will be, but all the young people are harnessed and fastened to ropes, following all the safety procedures while I'm twenty feet down the face of a steep cliff, perched on a small protrusion of rock, so I can get pictures of everyone rappelling. I have neither rope nor harness, and I'm not even sure I can get back up the route I came down. But when I have enough pictures, I do climb back up, and I counsel myself to be more careful about where I go to take pictures.

It becomes a series of adventures, climbing and rappelling with friends and family, taking pictures and laughing and joking and working closely with each other, encouraging and supporting each other. Hang on tight to the rope; hang on tight to the rock. But start letting go of the young people as they seek their own adventures.

I could try to make an allegory of climbing and rappelling. At first, the parents caution for safety and oversee the processes, then begin to let the young people go on their own, except Jason taught Bob, and Juniper learned before I did, and she's probably already more proficient at rappelling and climbing than I will ever be. Jason counsels his dad to be

more careful, to pay more attention to the rules for safety. Maybe that doesn't stretch an allegory too far. Our children have taught us much, particularly about how to appreciate living, how to find the adventure in every day's existence.

Owls Trade Observation for Observation

I walked out late last night and looked at the sky, about half clouds and half bright with millions of cold stars. Two owls called back and forth, hoo, hoo-hoo from close, somewhere up behind the shop, and an answer from far off, over by the rock ridge across the meadow, hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, deep tones, with a slight tremolo some of the time. I'm not an expert about owls. I usually have to refer to a book for identification when I hear or see them, but I think I'm hearing great grey owls.

About a week ago, on one of her hikes, Juniper saw an owl flying through the forest. Her description of it, very large, grey, round-headed (without ear-tufts) sounded like a great grey owl, and she picked the great grey picture from the book. Since she saw it, I've been keeping a sharp eye as I walk about the area, hoping to see it. Maybe I will, though I've never seen owls from looking for them but always when I was doing something else and happened upon them.

Years ago, when I did blister-rust control work in the Sierras of northern California, I worked my way through dense whitethorn brush. The last few yards, I had to crawl to get through. When I came out of the brush and stood, I faced a small owl perched on the branch of a fir tree, about four feet from my face. I looked at the owl for a long time. It looked at me just as intensely, undisturbed by my presence. I was thrilled that this small, solemn bird would allow me so close. Eventually, I worked on around the slope away from it.

I have never found an owl quite like it in any of the books I use for identification. It was the right size for a saw-whet owl, about eight inches tall, but its breast was a solid, soft orange color. In my mind, it's filed under, "maybe a saw-whet with color variations I haven't read about or seen in pictures." The identification isn't all that important to me. The experience was, and it will never fade from my memory.

Two years later, I worked through pine and fir forests. I looked up and saw a great grey owl on a pine branch about fifteen feet off the ground, about twenty-five feet ahead of me. I looked at the owl for a long time. I talked to it. Nothing important, just, “Hey owl. How are you doing?” While I stood there staring, I saw my coworker above us on the slope, and I called to her to come down. She walked down the side of the ridge and stood beside me, and we both looked at the owl looking at us. The deep yellow eyes do look very wise.

I looked away from the owl to say something to Andrea, and I saw another owl at the foot of the tree. It spread its long wings and flew up and sat beside its companion. We all looked at each other for quite some time. Eventually, Andrea and I decided we needed to get on with our work, and we went on our way. The owls sat on the branch, turned their heads, and watched us leave.

I tractored farmland in the northern Sacramento Valley. A large drainage ditch ran down through the fields, and I often saw a burrowing owl on the bank of that ditch. This small, brown, long-legged owl lives in a hole in the ground, dug by some other animal. It is called a burrowing owl, not because it digs, but because it lives in a burrow. I eventually saw its burrow from a distance. It watched me without fear, even when I shut the tractor off and climbed down from it to eat my lunch. I had no desire to cause it alarm by trying to get closer to it and its burrow.

I drove across eastern Oregon just after dark. I rounded a sharp curve and saw a large snowy owl standing in the middle of the road. I thought I was going to hit it, and I would have happily wrecked the car to miss the magnificent, very large, very white bird, but I actually had plenty of room to stop. The owl stood without moving. I thought the headlights might be blinding it, and I shut them off. The owl gazed into my eyes and I into its for several minutes before it took to wing and flew over the car and away into the night. I thought it was the largest owl I’d ever seen, almost three feet tall.

The book I referred to later, however, said snowy owls are twenty to twenty-seven inches tall, smaller than the great grey owl, so my sense of drama as I looked at the owl may have added to my sense of its size, as it added to my sense of speed and my sense of danger that I might hit the owl. Later editing out everything I might have added into the experience under

the influence of awe and excitement still leaves a dramatic encounter that impressed me deeply and left me continuing my night journey at a slow pace, delighted and lost in thought about all the creatures of the world around me.

I've seen several barn owls. I built a garden in farmland near Vale, Oregon, just south of an abandoned milking shed, which a barn owl used for a daytime roost. I tried to disturb the owl as little as possible, and it did tolerate my activity for more than a month. It kept my garden free of rodents. When it moved, it may have been for reasons other than my close presence. Barn owls are quite tolerant of people. Three barn owls I have known tolerated all sorts of nearby human activity. One who nested in a tree in the yard near Unity, Oregon accepted the residents of the house and all their dogs, cars, tractors, cows, and visitors and seemed to do quite well.

In Whitney Valley, in northeastern Oregon, I saw two great grey owls that reminded me of the two I saw years before in northern California. Just into the edge of the forest from the meadow, two great grey owls sat on a branch and observed me while I observed them from about thirty feet away. They were not alarmed.

Particularly when I write about wildlife, I don't want to impute qualities that are not there, but over the years, again and again, I have the impression the owls I see close at wing know that, though I am human, I will bring them no harm. They know I am curious and thrilled by the opportunity to see them, and they are also curious about me and appreciate the opportunity for close observation.

My reading leads me to believe the great grey owls I saw in Whitney Valley are only occasional visitors there and not usually residents. We did always have owls. All seasons of the year, I heard the nighttime calls, which fit the pattern described by Roger Tory Peterson for great horned owls, resonant hoo, hoo-oo, hoo, hoo (male) or hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-oo, hoo-oo (female). I saw them many times in the eight and a half years we lived there, but never close, and usually at night, when I saw a dark form flying and wasn't sure if it had the tufts of feathers called horns or not.

Identification of the species adds something to the experience of seeing owls, but not enough that I get frustrated when I don't know for sure what kind of owl I'm seeing. Seeing an owl is a thrill for me, regardless of what species it is.

And please don't try to convince me that the wisdom of owls is another human-created myth. Any wild animal is a wise creature or it wouldn't have survived this long. A bird who can live as close to our house as this bird lives and almost never be seen is a particularly wise creature.

Every time I walk around, close to the house, or farther away, out through the granite ridges and across the meadow, up into the forest, I watch for wild animals, identifying them when I can, enjoying them even if I can't identify them. If I see one of the owls I've been hearing, it will be an extra-large thrill, but seeing it won't be because I've been wise enough to find it and get close. It will be because the owl lets me see it, has the wisdom to know I will do it no harm, and decides to trade observation for observation.

Working around House Wrens

The fire escape on the lodge at the Girl Scout ranch we take care of needed repair. I looked the second story landing and the staircase over, bought lumber, deck screws and lag bolts, added materials I already had in the shop, two ladders, and tools, backed the pickup as close as I could get and unloaded enough to start work.

Shrubs grew under and up through the staircase. Two house wrens worked busily in and under the shrubbery, capturing insects to feed a nest of young wrens. The first order of business became locating the nest. I watched the wrens. Under the circuit box, on the wall of the lodge, the electrical cable coming into the lodge has been covered with a wooden box. The wrens took the provender they caught into that box, through a small opening under the side of the box.

These small, light brown birds are about five inches long. They keep their tails and wings active, cocking their tails straight up, then down and up again. They move their wings most of the time, in short flights, for balance as they perch sideways on a limb or on the wall. They move their wings in rapid small motions, close to their sides, even when it seems they don't need the motion for balance.

I don't know what purpose this activity serves, if any. I often whistle, sing, and improvise a few dance steps as I work. I carry on parts of a

conversation with tools, materials, or imaginary companions, so I don't try too hard to fit all of a wild creature's movements into a sensible work pattern. Some of what they do could be just for fun.

One of this pair is probably the wren who flew into the lodge earlier in the year. I had gone down to the lodge for our usual pre-departure inspection to make sure the scouts left the lodge in good condition. When I opened the door, a wren flew past, into the lodge. I told the adult leaders of the scouts, "Just because it's called a house wren doesn't mean it can live indoors. There isn't enough for it to eat in there. The first part of inspection will have to be evicting the wren."

Three of us followed the bird around the big main room, moving slowly. It flew from window to window, successfully avoiding my huge and scary hands. The sixth window has an inside screen. The wren landed on that screen, and I closed my hand around the tiny bird. It wouldn't let go. I pulled just a little, but I thought I might injure the bird if I pulled too hard. Its claws, gripping the screen, seemed no bigger around than sewing thread.

"Let's take the screen out," I said. My two co wren capturers unfastened the screen and pulled it out. I took the screen from them, grasped it with my left hand, right hand still closed around the bird. I carried bird and screen out the front door and put them on the ground.

We told the girl scouts who waited outside what had happened, and we asked them to stay well away from the bird, who clung to the screen, tail high in the air, feathers ruffling in the wind. We progressed with our pre-departure inspection. After about ten minutes, we looked out the window and saw the wren still clinging to the screen. Five minutes after that, we finished the inspection, and the scouts were ready to leave. The screen was vacant. The scouts waiting out front said the bird had flown.

Could it be the tiny bird remembers I am concerned for its welfare and communicated that to its mate? Or are the wrens such dedicated parents they will go on feeding their young no matter what happens? Whatever their reasoning (and yes, I think birds reason, remember, and have emotions), they go on with their work while I trim shrubbery, remove wood, screw new pieces of wood into place with a noisy electric drill, climb up and down the ladders, as close as two feet from their nest.

Parts of three days, I worked on the fire escape, and I never heard the adults make any sound but the fluttering of their wings against the air,

though the babies raised a ruckus inside the nest every time the adults departed. Then Laura came down to clean the lodge in preparation for more scouts coming in, and she brought Thorn, our large, shaggy dog. He wanted to lie under the remaining shrubbery, but I told him he couldn't do that, because the wrens considered his presence as something entirely different from mine. He moved to the porch, but the wrens still wouldn't go on with their work. They scolded the intruder without let up. I showed Thorn the attractive shade under the pickup. He stretched out there for a nap, and the wrens went back to their quiet work.

When I put the ladder closest to the nest box and climbed it, my legs were within a foot of the wrens' entrance to their nest. One of the parents flew in with a choice moth. It landed on a branch and waited. I was too close, and it wouldn't enter the nest. I also had to work on the staircase farther from the nest, so I alternated, a few minutes on the ladder, then a few minutes farther from the nest. When I worked on the landing, leaning over the edge, the parents wouldn't enter the nest. Apparently, looming directly above them was too scary.

I worked on the landing a little at a time and moved down and worked on the staircase when I saw either parent waiting with laden bill. It was a good way to work. I like varying my work, and I can't think of nicer people to share my day and my work area with than house wrens, so we did whatever was necessary to accommodate everyone's needs.

Friday, scouts came in for the weekend. Saturday morning, I showed them where the wrens nest and work, so the scouts could be careful of the birds and so they could enjoy watching them. The scouts showed me a robin's nest, a few feet outside one of the dining area windows. Some of the scouts had been quietly sitting near the window, watching the robins fly into the juniper bush to feed three hungry nestlings.

The nestlings seemed to be mostly hungry mouths, expectantly open. I needed to be about my work, so I left the lodge to the scouts and birds, but I have more work to do on the fire escape after the scouts leave, and trim to paint and other tasks. I will continue to watch birds as I work. Perhaps, in addition to watching the parents take care of their broods, I will see the fledglings leave the nest and learn to fly. I enjoy the work I do. I enjoy it even more when wildlife shares its existence with me.

A Reverberant Woodpecker Sounds My Chimney

I don't know where the woodpeckers went for the winter, but they have returned. Weeks ago, I saw flickers crossing the meadow in their characteristic flight, curving rapidly upward, falling toward the ground, and curving upward again, as if riding invisible, fast ocean waves. I've been hearing their calls, "wicka-wicka-wicka" carrying across Colorado's Rocky Mountains. I'm pleased to share the world with these enthusiastic birds, but I had forgotten, perhaps in hope, until this morning at daylight, that one among these brown, red, white, black, and grey, sharp-billed, thick-skulled (in the best sense of the phrase) birds is a moralist out to refine my character.

As much as has been practical, I have been a "night person." In northeastern Oregon, in a house without electricity, with human controlled, wood-fueled heat, through the coldest times of winter, I stayed up most of every night and fed and monitored the stoves. I composed songs. I wrote essays, stories, and poems through the quiet nights, when all others in my family slept. I went to bed at four or five in the morning and slept until eleven or twelve. My wife and our daughters cooperated with me and my peculiar schedules. We always have worked well together.

Since we moved from Oregon, I have stayed up far into the night to write, to study, or to play my guitar and sing, when the next day's obligations were not against my late schedule.

I met a few people who expressed a moralistic attitude toward the hours we keep, some variation on "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Some, it seemed, thought that "night people" were inherently immoral, regardless of what they achieved during their late night hours. That attitude never bothered me. I did what I did and lived quite well without concern for the disapprobation I sometimes heard expressed about my hours of waking and sleeping. Until I met this strong-billed, hard-headed fellow.

Above my bed, the living room fireplace, which we never use, extends its chimney above the roof metallically into the forest sky.

Woodpeckers peck not only to obtain food, but the males rap hard to create sound that carries far through the forest and impresses the females of

the species with the power, the perseverance, the worthiness of he who raps. As far as woodpeckers are concerned, disadvantages the ex-European culture brought to this continent mean little beside the fact that the culture brought metal, for he who raps on metal is heard far beyond he who raps on wood, particularly if the metal has hollowness, as for example, a metal chimney.

I sat suddenly up at daylight, far earlier than I intended or wanted to finish dreaming, and said, “I forgot all about you in the months since you stopped your peculiar music, but I certainly remember you now.” When rapping for sound, the bird strikes hard ten times or more per second and sustains the sound for several seconds. He stops for a few seconds to admire what he has created for the early morning world and then gets back to work.

I never bother wildlife that does no damage. I chased a flicker away last summer, who rapped on the house’s wood, because that did damage, until he decided it wasn’t worth his effort to return. But the metal suffers no damage. Reinforcing my policy is the fact that I’m reluctant to dress and venture out that early. Who cannot be won out over, join. There is also a peaceful time, very early in the morning, good for contemplation and creation.

I think I will begin to rise before daylight and study and write until after the sun rises and the morning warms. Then I can fully appreciate my friend’s dawn concert through all the spring and early summer. And, after all, perhaps my small, fine-feathered, moralist friend is right. In an automatically heated house, worthy people do not lie slug-a-bed until late morning.

In the Midst of Lightning and Thunder

About this time last year, Juniper and Amanda went up to Red Feather Lakes to join the walkathon that raised money for playground equipment for the local grammar school. It was the first time our daughters got lost and the only time they’ve been caught out in the open in a driving hailstorm with lightning and thunder striking and roaring all around, while I strove desperately to find them. They were to head home by the back road, and I was to give them time to walk two or three miles and then drive up and get

them. When I drove the agreed-upon route, they were nowhere along it. The people at the school said Amanda and Juniper had headed in the planned direction at the planned time.

I drove all possible routes from our house to Red Feather Lakes, but I still saw no trace of our daughters. I drove back to the school and phoned home, to see if they had called. Laura said, no, they hadn't. Static crackled periodically on the phone, which meant lightning was active somewhere close to the telephone lines on the mountain.

Juniper and Amanda would not have gotten into a vehicle with anyone, so they were in the area. They had taken a wrong turn somewhere. Dark clouds approached from the mountain peaks west of us. Thunder marched down the mountain toward us. As I searched roads, I wondered if being out in a lightning and thunder storm ran in the family. If it did, I knew getting through the experience in good shape also did.

Years ago, I camped on Coalpit Mountain in Northeastern Oregon and devoted my summer to learning to walk again after having been severely injured in a highway accident. A high rock bluff truncated the south-facing saddle where I camped on north slope. Huge granite boulders above the bluff formed the highest place in more than two hundred yards. I knew the danger in being in a high place during a lightning storm, but I stood up there as a storm came down the mountain, not in defiance of natural forces, not to dare death, but in celebration, for love of life, for love of all the natural forces around me.

Sun just above the western mountains turned the mist under the clouds soft orange, then pink, then pastel blue. Lightning and thunder shook the mountain under my feet. Heavy rain hit my high, rock bluff and instantly soaked me. The sun set, and the mountain turned dark under dark clouds. Then continuous lightning lit up everything around me. Thunder nearly deafened me. I danced and sang with the primitive power of the storm.

Forces of the mechanized world, abetted by a driver under the influence of alcohol, had nearly killed me on the highway. I thought I was entitled to this celebration, once, on the mountain in a way similar to the way people in "primitive" cultures sometimes faced potentially deadly natural forces and, through their understanding of and reverence for the Life Force that creates all forces, overcame the danger. The storm blew north, and I walked down to my camp and changed into dry clothing.

Once since then, I was caught without shelter in a lightning storm. I had worked my way through thickets of beetle-killed lodgepole pine to the top of a nearly bare ridge, where a ponderosa pine snag, struck by lightning the day before, burned furiously. Parts of the snag had been knocked to the ground. I dug a line to mineral earth around the burnings pieces. I thought burning material might blow down into dead lodgepole and start a fire that would burn for miles, so I stayed to watch the fire while wind, lightning, thunder, and then rain came down the mountain.

Again, I was in the center, with lightning and thunder all around. There were differences between this time and my time on Coalpit Mountain in a storm. I had a wife and children now. I still thought reverence for and understanding of the forces in action armored me against injury, but I didn't feel as absolutely confident. It took steady prayer to allay fear of brilliant lightning and roaring thunder. I could not retreat from my exposed position on the ridge. I had come through dead lodgepole, and I wouldn't retreat through that thicket in a strong wind, because the tendency for dead trees to break or to uproot and fall is much greater than that of live trees.

Heavy rain put the fire out. Eventually, the rain blew east along the Blue Mountains. Eventually the wind died, and I found my way off the ridge about three in the morning and went home to a warm fire and dry clothing.

Fear for my own safety in a storm was mild compared to fear for my daughters' safety. I thought of those previous times and prayed as I had done then.

Brian, the pastor of the church in Red Feather Lakes, is a member of the local Search and Rescue and carries a radio that puts him in touch with other local members. He stood on the porch of his house as I drove by. With the storm coming rapidly down the mountain, I thought I'd better get help. Several vehicles could cover more ground faster. I drove in and explained the situation quickly. He asked, "Did you check at the store?"

"No. They wouldn't go into the store. I'm going to check the road to the school once more. Wherever they turned wrong, they could be back on the road by now." I drove away, and Brian followed me in his car. I knew they wouldn't go into the store. Yet, Brian's words stuck with me. I stopped at the store. Rain and hail slanted down from dark clouds. Lightning and thunder struck closer.

The store owner talked with a young man. I interrupted. “Have you seen two girls, one with long, red-gold hair, the other with short, brown hair... .”

The young man said, “I just drove past them. They’re up on Crystal Lakes Road.”

“Thank you.” I ran out, called to Brian, “They’re up Crystal Lakes Road,” jumped in the car, and took off. Some of the lightning driving down from the dark sky every few seconds appeared to strike right up on Crystal Lakes Road. I drove the road to get there faster than it should ever be driven. Hail and rain poured down. Lightning and thunder came almost without interruption. Amanda and Juniper stood right at the intersection, soaking wet, afraid to cross the metal cattle guard or the metal fence, prime targets for lightning. I pulled up beside them, leaned across, and opened the door. They hesitated. I said, “Get in, right now.”

One after the other, they jumped in. Juniper shut the door. She said, “You shouldn’t touch a car in a lightning storm. It’s a very dangerous thing to do.”

Amanda said, “If you do have to get in or out, you should jump, so you’re not in contact with the ground and the vehicle at the same time.”

I took a deep breath and then let it out. “I’m glad I didn’t remember that for a minute. Now you’re in, and a vehicle is a relatively safe place to be in a lightning storm.”

I rolled my window down and thanked Brian, and we headed for home. Brilliant lightning and earth-shaking thunder danced from dramatic clouds above mountain meadows, forest, and huge granite formations. Now that Juniper and Amanda and I were together, grateful that we were all safe, the storm’s progress down the steep east slope of the mountain filled us with awe and inspired us with its beauty.

Intimations of Spring in Winter

I drove down the mountain to Fort Collins to a meeting of tree farmers talking about how to provide habitat for wildlife. As a gardener who has had problems with mice, voles, and ground squirrels on the ranch we take care of in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains, I seized on the information that owls can hear the little creatures moving in the grass from half a mile away.

I began to think of building nests for great horned owls and screech owls near the garden.

The meeting ended about nine. I walked through the nighttime parking lot to the pickup. Snow drifted down through light from street lamps. Flakes melted when they touched the pavement, and the pavement shone with water as I drove through town.

Twenty-two miles north of town, I turned left and drove more sharply up the mountain. Cold fog lay tightly against the mountain highway and the grassy meadows on both sides of the road. I slowed to fifteen miles an hour. Curious about traction, I almost stopped, then stepped down on the accelerator. The drive wheels spun. At this higher elevation, earlier water had frozen. I shifted the large, blue, Girl Scout truck into four-wheel drive.

In dense fog, sometimes I wasn't sure where I was, but I've driven up the mountain so many times, I usually recognized the shape of the road. I felt cocooned inside the warm cab with my own thoughts. A song burst from my lungs once in a while. Dense, white, cold fog occupied the night close around me, I found it a pleasant drive.

I walked through an inch of new snow and through fog still covering the mountain at seven-thousand seven-hundred feet and opened the gate to the dirt road home.

In the morning, Amanda and I fed her black rabbit, Nildro-Hain, at the animal shelter down the ranch from our house, and then we walked across the ranch through a beautiful, magic world. Thick fog had frozen on all the trees, turning them to soft white forms. Thick frost cushioned the new catkin buds striving toward spring renewal on the willows along the creek,. Thick frost, white and soft-looking, covered the huge boulders in the granite ridge rising untamed from the wild white forest. Beneath dark grey clouds, cold found ways through heavy scarves and insulated gloves. This beauty all around us, of dense white frost, if I never saw this beauty without this depth of cold, then drive frost to my bones.

Tiny, brave new leaf buds and grow on the willows; newest growth just begins on evergreen needles. Stone erodes to soil and cradles seeds.

The sun breaks through grey clouds and turns the white landscape golden, and we stop, without words. A hawk glides above the ridge. White feathers on the underside of its wings reflect the gold of the ridge in sunlight.

Was creation like this moment, cold, still with expectation, then, in an instant, warm, bright, beautiful, with life bursting forth into warm, golden sunshine?

The First Year on the Big Yellow Bus

Our daughters went off to school for the first time Tuesday morning. Laura drove Juniper to school, because there was no bus for her class, that first day. Amanda caught the bus at seven. I walked up to the highway with her, to where the bus would stop,. Amanda and I hugged each other, and she scrambled onto the bus and sat in the front seat. The driver shut the door, and the bus roared away. I felt regret at letting go, some fear, will she be all right, out there in the world on her own? I'm sure she'll be all right. She's fourteen. Juniper is sixteen.

Until now, they've been homeschooled. This year, they decided to try public school. They go down the mountain forty-five miles, to Poudre High School.

The first day was for orientation of the students. Juniper said, "A thousand people; way too many for me to deal with. I hated it. Everybody was in cliques, screaming and swearing."

The second day, Juniper and Amanda caught the bus at six-fifteen and got home at four-thirty. Amanda had not understood the assignment in World History. She couldn't finish it in class, and she brought it home. I saw the problem had two parts. The teacher had written the assignment in modern-day complexese, in which "your everyday life" is substituted for "you," and unnecessary words are thrown in for style, like "currently," when the sentence is in present tense. Amanda and I had a lesson in penetrating complexese to find the simple meaning.

The second part of the problem was that a realistic response to the question would have been, "Can I bring you two-hundred pages of answer in a few weeks?"

I said, "You have to look at how much space and time he allows for an answer and figure he wants a very brief, very general answer. Write the first thing that comes to mind, and when you get this paper back, it will give you some further idea of what he's looking for. You need to respond to what the teacher wants more than to what is the answer to the question."

I didn’t like telling her that, but to keep up with the class, she needed to learn, give a correct answer, but don’t aim for depth. After dinner, Juniper sat at the kitchen table with her algebra book open, and she soon bogged down. “There are too many problems,” she said. The sun still shone, and all of outdoors called.

I said, “Speed through it. Don’t think about anything else. Show your work.” I worked all of a problem and had her follow me through. I handed her more and more of each problem until, for the last few, I walked away and said, “I’m here if you need help with the rest of them.” She didn’t. Later, she found out she hadn’t heard the part of the instructions that said, do only every other problem.

Juniper and Amanda were used to one teacher with two students. They could clear up any confusion, because the teacher was available all the time. The two students set the pace for infinitely flexible assignments. They soon adjusted to classes of about thirty students, where the schedule doesn’t bend much.

Juniper and Amanda dress according to their own tastes, without regard for style. Some of the other students didn’t know for a long time if Juniper was a boy or a girl. She had, by then, decided she was pleased to be a girl, but she didn’t like dresses, and she enjoyed the other students’ uncertainty. Amanda liked long dresses and other older-style clothing she found or Laura found for her in secondhand stores. On several days, after arriving home, Amanda went through moments of fury at teasing she had been subjected to, primarily about how she dresses and about the hair on her legs.

Amanda and Juniper have grown into attractive young women, but they disdain makeup, expensive clothing, and other elements of the consumer-driven, male chauvinist-driven beauty myth. Amanda considered shaving her legs, but she decided she couldn’t acquiesce to that kind of pressure and maintain her sense of integrity. Juniper stoically bore the teasing she received for several weeks, but eventually she said she felt like punching some of the students.

The teasing seems to have abated somewhat. Amanda and Juniper have had more practice at either taking it or dealing with it. Amanda received help from counselors and students, and she moved to a different locker to be away from some of the worst of the teasing. Juniper introduced herself to

some of the students who made uncomplimentary comments about her, and that defused their unfriendliness.

We have encouraged our daughters to stick with school if that is their goal, but, when they had difficulties, we have also reminded them they could give notice and return to home schooling.

Their home schooling never took more than two hours a day. After lessons, they had the rest of their day to explore the outdoors, to pursue their own creative projects, to read whatever they wanted to read. That their home schooling was successful is testified to by the fact that, at midterm, their public school grades average above three point five.

Juniper said, “I can learn more with home schooling, but I also have to have a social education.”

A frequent criticism we received of our home schooling was that it didn’t provide for social education. After Amanda and Juniper started public school, we talked about that and concluded the public schools do not take care of social education. The high school hasn’t even one class in communicating, in learning how to get along with each other, in learning how to help one another. Social education is coincidental, handled by the students whenever they have time and opportunity, without adult guidance, according to whatever rules the students find appropriate.

Amanda said, “Why don’t they have a class in teasing, its origins, functions, and effects?”

Juniper said, “They should have classes for social education. Learning to socialize and socializing could be taken care of in classes devoted to that, and the students in British Literature would be able to quiet down, leave the social life for fifty-five minutes, and concentrate on the subject.” She said, “The system is rather inane, but you can learn if you’re interested enough. My friends are good people who in some way buck the system,’ a phrase teachers hate.”

Though they consider it less than ideal, Juniper and Amanda stick with school. They develop friendships. Juniper enjoys orchestra and team sports. Amanda likes choir. They could not have these group experiences at home. They also like their other classes, and they find the group experience and grades interesting and challenging.

Here at home, we have also had to adjust. We have much less time when we are all together. Several days into the semester, Laura suffered a time of

grief. I comforted her as best I could, but it seemed to me to be an odd reaction. After all, we still see our daughters every day, and we have more time together than many families do.

When it became clear Amanda and Juniper would stick with school, I found myself nearly overwhelmed by regret. I hadn't really thought their involvement with public school would last. I apologized to Laura for taking her earlier emotional reaction lightly. She was not more subject to emotional upset than I was. She just saw the handwriting on the wall much sooner than I did.

But we have adjusted. Perhaps I regret the loss of their free time more than they do. I am concerned because they haven't had much time for their own creative projects since the first day of school, but they have boxes full of stories, novels, poems, songs, drawings, and paintings. What they have done is not lost, and what they learned while doing it is part of them, as what they are doing now becomes a part of them, giving them wider experience, leading them further toward what they seek from education.

Lyrics and Lemonade

We drove down the mountain to attend "Lyrics and Lemonade," an event celebrating the completion of the local high school's literary magazine, Kaleidoscope. Grasses and willows and aspen trees on the mountain strove toward green and down the mountain, the plain achieved the first new green. Farmers tractored fields in preparation for planting. New, long-legged colts graced some of the pastures near the highway. Summer and the end of the school year galloped toward us.

Juniper and Amanda had tried public school for the first time, Amanda as a sophomore and Juniper as a junior. Amanda enjoyed some of her experience with public schooling, but she eventually decided it interfered too much with her education and, midyear, she returned to home schooling. Back in command of her own schedule, she gradually resumed her creative pursuits, writing, music, nature studies and drawing, that she had mostly let go of because of the long days required by public school. Before she left public school, she submitted material to Kaleidoscope, and the editors accepted a poem for publication.

Juniper also thought public school used more of her time than the rewards for attending justified, but she particularly liked orchestra, team sports, and the social contact, so she stayed with it. She had an essay and a poem published in the literary magazine.

We parked the car, and the four of us walked into the school and into the library. The school's orchestra teacher and four students, with bass viol, two violins, cello and viola, played very well. People arrived and sat down. The time came for the students to read their work. The musicians bowed and carried away their instruments. Then, most of the students who contributed to the magazine read aloud one or more of their pieces.

I knew our daughters wrote well, but I didn't know so many other high school students were such capable writers. We listened to students read their poems, essays and short stories. We witnessed the good feeling among the students and the teacher and student teacher who put this magazine together.

After the readings, the adviser, Mrs. Ludwin, announced the winners of awards. Students stood and bowed as she called their names. Amanda received second prize in poetry, and Juniper received first prize in essays. After Mrs. Ludwin announced all the awards, we surged forward from the folding chairs, past the lectern, to the table where lemonade and cookies waited. I was less interested in the food and drink than I was in expressing gratitude for the refreshment the readings had given me. I thanked several of the students, and Laura and I spoke to Mrs. Ludwin. I said I thought the students did better with their high school literary magazine than my fellow writers and I had done with our college literary magazine.

A standard we learned, back then, is that life is at best not understandable and at worst without meaning. Only the naive would write as if good or love or reason triumphs. It took me a while to overcome that modern learning about writing, art and life. These students have not learned it to begin with. Their work is direct, unashamed of love, unashamed of the assumption that good is a powerful force. They write from confidence that reason, love and good do win out, because life is meaningful and understandable, and art can reveal that meaning.

In the midst of the positive celebration, a few of us spoke of news and stereotypes. Mrs. Ludwin said, "If one of the students at this school is caught with drugs or gets pregnant or carries a weapon, that will get into the

news. But the twenty students who put out this magazine and the students who presented us with classical music before the readings started will not get into the news. This country we live in is very anti-teenager."

I think she is mostly right. My daughters have called this to my attention, and I see evidence of it in the culture around us. If we are aware of the context of this lovely experience, "Lyrics and Lemonade," we can bring about change in stereotyping of teenagers as without direction, even dangerous.

Treasures surround us. Some of the obvious treasures are these students and their writings and drawings and music. If we allow stereotypes to blind us, we will miss the offered riches. We can overcome the unreality of stereotypes, recognize our children as the treasures they are, and receive and support the riches they offer us.

All the Winter's Interruptions

Snow falls from a grey, twenty-degree sky onto our house in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains and onto the forest, meadows, and granite ridges around us. I work on two essays and a short story, moving from one to another as sentences and paragraphs coalesce in my mind.

Juniper, our oldest daughter, attended public school last year, her junior year of high school, to see what it was like. She did well, but she returned to home schooling this year. She enjoyed and appreciated some of the students and some of the teachers and particularly classes she couldn't have at home, such as orchestra and team sports, but she decided she could achieve more directing her own education.

Now she applies for admission to college. Besides the forms all parents fill out for college, we put together transcripts, counselor's reports, and other forms school employees supply for public school students.

In the fiction under my pencil, Anton shoulders his pack and walks in pouring rain north into the mountains. Then Juniper brings me a partially completed transcript. It, along with other forms, needs my attention. Juniper has done her part. She provided most of her own motivation for her home schooling and some of the decisions about what to study, especially as the

years went by and her picture of the world filled in more and more. She researched colleges and filled out most of the application forms.

Anton has a good poncho, and he has experience in the wilderness. I leave him in the rain, with Rocky Mountain lightning and thunder moving down the mountain, and I help Juniper revise her home-built transcript and counselor's report and a record of extracurricular activities. Then I read her essay, required for an admissions application, and I make a few general recommendations. It is an excellent essay, but too long. I can't help much with solving how to meet the requirement for no more than three pages. I have a long-standing agreement with the three other writers in this family that I don't intrude much into their writing with specific suggestions. Years ago, we realized it would be easy to end up with four writers from one mold, which none of us wanted.

I return to writing, not to the story about Anton, but to an essay about sprouting seeds. I can work with it a few minutes at a time, whereas Anton seems to require more concentrated, uninterrupted time. Conversations go on as I write, about the college applications and about anything a family can discuss. I hear some of the conversations, but I make no contribution. Some conversations, I join in.

Snow keeps falling. I am gainfully employed half time as caretaker of this ranch we live on. My schedule is flexible, but I will have to plow our roads tonight or early in the morning. If I start to become nervous about being too scattered out, with too many projects going on at the same time, an effective response is to refuse to accept the idea that I am limited in scope and start another project, which I have done, with this essay.

The phone rings. Tami invites Amanda, our younger daughter, to her madrigal dinner in Fort Collins this evening. Amanda looks with some trepidation at the manuscripts spread in front of me on the table, and she asks, "Can I go?" She knows someone must drive her forty-seven miles down the mountain if she goes, and I am probably the designated driver, because Laura so far lacks confidence about driving in snow.

Up here on the mountain, our children pursue their education at home. We live far from friends and activities, so we stay alert for cultural and social opportunities for them.

Tami's parents will happily keep Amanda and feed her if this storm makes the roads unsafe for us to drive down the mountain tomorrow to

retrieve her, so I say, “Yes. You can go. I’ll take you, but see if it’s okay to get there early. I’d like to get back before the snow gets too deep.” I have almost finished the essay about sprouts, and it will benefit from simmering in the back of my mind without direct attention for a while. Anton will mature if I cultivate patience.

Dusk settles on the whitened mountain as we drive onto the highway. It took us a while to get ready, not entirely because a teenage girl takes a while to get ready to go. As usual, I take warm clothing, boots, sleeping bags, and paper and wood for a fire, in case the car breaks or the storm strands us. Down the mountain a few miles, the snow lies deeper on the road, and the snow falls faster. We are in no hurry, and I am grateful for studded snow tires and for other drivers who are cautious on snowy roads.

Earl, Tami’s dad, says, “You sure would be welcome to wait out this storm here. We have a bed for you and food. This snow is coming down pretty hard.”

I say, “Thank you Earl. I’m going to see if I can get back up the mountain. I want to keep writing if I can get there.”

I don’t exceed twenty-five miles an hour up the mountain, because falling snow limits my vision. Halfway up the mountain, six deer walk across the road, with snow built up on their backs. I slow down to let them cross without vehicular harassment. I climb the long, steep mountain. In the edge of the light from my headlights, a large owl rises from the ground and flies away, into deeper darkness.

The slow drive up the mountain becomes a time for contemplation, much of it without words. As frequently happens, I’m not doing what I had planned to do, but I enjoy what I’m doing. Large snowflakes float down densely, illuminated in their softness by my headlights pointing up the mountain toward home. I have no deadlines to meet, no schedule I’m locked into.

Enough of my work centers in or close to our home that, as our daughters’ horizons expand, I’m there to participate. Their education continues to be my education.

One view of the world claims work toward material gain is all important. According to that view, this day has been full of interruptions, and I am far behind what I aimed for. Another view, that fits my family better, says the interruptions of my writing and of my caretaking work make up the actual

substance of the day. Without the interruptions, without my daughters' needs for assistance in living and the drive in a snowstorm, the deer crossing the highway, the great horned owl flying into deeper darkness, with small prey held in powerful talons, I would have no need to earn a living, and I would have nothing to write about.

The night, darkness mingled with clean, white falling snow, is advanced when I return to writing. I pile my partial manuscripts together and start on a clean pad of paper. Seeing the owl stimulated many memories of experiences with owls, and I want to write about the mysterious birds while the memories move vividly through my mind. Wind rises and blows snow against the house. Except for the sound of the storm and the sound of my pencil leaving words on the page, the night is quiet around me.

Walking in a Winter Wonderland

Most of last winter, the ground stayed open on this ranch on the east slope of northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains. A storm blew down the mountain and left several inches of snow. Wind blew the snow off the meadows into drifts in low ground, or several warm days came, and much of the snow melted. Early in February, I left insulated, waterproof boots in the closet and hiked lightly in running shoes up the ranch, while the sun hung low in the southern sky and shone warmly on my adventure.

Centuries of erosion took the softer parts of the granite ridge that cuts across the ranch just north of the old barn. A confusion of giant boulders, with pine trees and juniper trees growing from the soil captured between boulders, stands against the sky. I climbed through the low pass in the high ridge. Tall rock and green conifers shade the trail there. I zigged and zagged to avoid snow still on the trail. I picked my way down the other side of the pass and walked under tall pine trees into open, sun-soaked meadow, where most of the snow had become water that soaked into earth to water roots. Below me, Lone Pine Creek, solid ice on top, meandered through dense willows.

I heard singing in mountain sunshine, and I saw a beautiful young woman with long golden-red hair sitting on a rock singing, with a large, black, shaggy dog at her feet. I walked quietly closer. When she finished her song, I clapped, for in this family, we often applaud each other, and Amanda had pulled a new song from the blue sky and had sung it for the dog and the forest and the warm, winter day.

We hiked toward the old homestead, wandering to avoid patches of snow. We observed tracks in the snow along the creek, mostly dog tracks from earlier walks that included the family dog, but also deer tracks and elk tracks. Amanda said, "Some of these tracks could be coyote tracks." Laura, wife and mother, caught up with us then, and we three pursued our zig zag course together and continued a zig zag course of rhymes, songs, observations about the world around us, and times of silence.

This winter, Amanda, home briefly from her first year in college, and I hike that trail again, again with running shoes, weaving around places with snow. We recall our adventure of the previous winter and laugh about the

simple forms of entertainment our family comes up with. A hundred yards from us, something grey hangs in the willows. I ask Amanda, “Is that a hornet’s nest?”

“I don’t know. Can we get to it?”

“Looks like we’ll have to cross the stream.” The grass among the willows close to the creek is much longer and insulates the snow from melting. We dismiss concern about wet feet and walk through snow. The creek is not completely frozen over here. We seek a place to cross, but then I say, “We don’t have to cross. The creek turns. It’s on our side of the creek.”

Dense willow bush slows us, but we make our way through to the large, grey nest, about head high. The bottom has torn away and the cells we can see into are empty. “Bald-faced hornets built that,” I say. The nest is about a foot through its thickest part. Multiple, thin layers of grey, paper-like material, separated by air spaces, make up the containing wall, smoothly curved into an almost round shape, built onto live willow twigs.

Inside, several round cell bodies hang. Each somewhat resembles a small sunflower, whose large seeds are gone. Each has many cells where the eggs become larvae and larvae become bald-faced hornets. Amanda and I voice questions. “I wonder if they usually keep a nest for more than a year and something went wrong here, or if they abandon a nest after the offspring become adults?”

“Even though it is abandoned, I don’t want to damage what’s left. I like letting things deteriorate in their own way.”

We exit the willows along the creek and climb the slope that gradually changes from deteriorated granite fine enough to qualify as soil and support grass, brush, and trees, to large boulders, with some plants growing in pockets of soil between boulders, and then, high against the sky, to massive granite boulders, where orange and grey and green and white lichens growing on the stone are the only plants. Fierce wind tries to blow us from our high place in the rocks back down to the creek.

In the powerful wind, the highest boulder in the formation we’ve climbed looks insubstantially balanced on the rocks supporting it. In the strong wind, I feel insubstantially balanced on rocks supporting me. Wind tries to push me toward the sharp drop behind me and yells “jump,” but I drop to all fours and grasp the rock almost as tightly as lichens. The wind

increases, so we retreat down sloping stone faces until we are partly sheltered by the rocks above us.

We talk about how we could dwell in this place on south slope that absorbs warmth from sunshine through all the seasons. “Not a big house, that replaces the entire slope, but small rooms, a greenhouse here, dug into the slope, up there a study, just a desk and a chair, sheltered from winter. No electricity. We’ve lived without electricity, so we know how possible it is and how rewarding it can be.”

We head back toward home, leaving behind the dwelling place made of dead wood that bald-faced hornets chewed to pulp and mixed with saliva. Dreams of dwelling places on a high rock ridge, where the natural world is close around us, linger on the south slope behind us.

Back in our everyday dwelling place, with much of the natural world close around us, we pursue additional knowledge about bald-faced hornets, also called white-faced hornets, by going through the books we have.

Only the queen winters over. She hibernates and starts a new colony in the spring, but the book doesn’t say where she hibernates. In the nest, that deteriorates with winter?

With songs in the wide meadows and the dense forest, with wet feet, with observations of an intricate structure for living, with something new learned about some of God’s creatures and powerful wind withstood, with dreams that withstand winter and continue to grow, we have lived another good and creative winter day.

Taking the Untaken, Exploring the Unexplored

Laura caught the ten; fifteen train to Boise, and she’ll be gone a week. The people from the camp Juniper is going to were kind enough to pick her up at the train station, and she’ll be at camp, concentrating primarily on riding horses. After leaving Laura and Juniper where they needed to be to make their travel connections, Amanda and I drove back to Fort Collins and stopped at the Lincoln Center. We watched the Overland Stage Company perform “Ivanna and the Rainbow Serpent” during lunch on the sculpture garden terrace (bring your own lunch) with mostly children in the audience. The sun broke from behind the clouds, and the day turned hot. Pity the poor

performers, who were dressed for their roles in heavier costumes than the day would have reasonably allowed.

At first, I thought the performance was overacted and contrived. Not more than a minute later, however, I was caught, enraptured. Three performers with their costumes and a minimum of props (a walking stick, a wrapped piece of wood that represented a horse, a few streamers of crepe paper that represented the rainbow serpent, and the sunshine in the air for rope, clouds, dogs, canyons, hawk, bees, and more) created the desert, a yurt, a camp, magic, adventure, humor, and a lovely story of a princess seeking adventure and romance and finding adventure and wisdom.

I was glad I had crushed the subversively rising head of my adult busyness that tried to influence me to say, "We don't really have time to stop for that." So was Amanda. She stopped to compliment the actress who had been Princess Ivanna. I wanted to compliment all three performers, but I didn't intrude into the younger people's domain. I leaned on a speaker stand in the hot sun until Amanda was ready to go, and we drove up the mountain, home.

And today, I continued the policy of stepping on subversive adult busyness. After all, part of the reason we transferred to this part-time position as ranch caretakers was so we would have time to actually live, time to do things just for the fun of doing them. I said, "Let's go up the ranch and see what there is to see."

And we did. We saw deer. Horse tracks. Someone's horse is loose and has wandered through a lot of country up here. We saw many birds. We saw a vulture close overhead. Amanda said, "They're pretty birds." And they are. We crossed a small stream and walked up the trail, with an aspen grove on one side of us and granite rocks rising above us on the other side.

We have had a lot of spring and early summer rain, and wildflowers grow everywhere. We walk into a profusion of columbines. Amanda stops, startled, and I jump to the side, momentarily mistaking her enthusiastic delight for alarm and reacting in alarm myself. But she is delighted rather than alarmed. She has discovered, close beside the trail, a solid mauve she says and blue I say columbine. Every other columbine we've seen is blue, or mauve, and white. We don't know if it is rare. It is for the area we walk through, dense with columbines, but with only one of solid color. We wish we had the camera along.

Up the trail a ways, Amanda points out the orange something she saw on an earlier walk and was puzzled by. Several hundred yards away, it faces us from the side of the hill, definitely not a natural color. A switch on the usual structure of time and responsibility, Amanda has to go to work, so we don't have time to walk over and see what it is.

We walk home. Amanda leaves to babysit. I water the garden, make and eat four bean burritos, get the camera and binoculars, and hike back up the ranch. I'm still pursuing this resolution to have more of my life be seeing and enjoying what is around us and less of it be involved with earning or trying to earn money and fulfilling busy adult responsibilities. I've let too many possible pictures and mysterious orange things go untaken and unexplored.

It's a long way up the ranch. When I'm halfway to where I'm going, clouds cover the sun. When I get to the columbine, there isn't enough light to take a picture of it with the slow film I have in the camera. I sit down and wait. The mosquitoes see me as the local fast food restaurant and order one with everything a thousand times in the thirty minutes I wait for the sun to show through the clouds. Then it does, nicely backlighting the blue or mauve flower, and I take two pictures. The clouds take over again. Two photographs will do.

From the place of many columbines, I walk up the side of the hill until I can see the orange thing. I find it in the binoculars, but I still don't know what it is. I keep looking at it as I walk along the hill, trying to see where it is in relationship to a large granite formation and the dirt road that goes up the hill across from me. Then it's out of sight behind trees as I walk on down to the road and follow the road up the facing slope. I leave the road and walk up through trees, past the point of the granite formation I saw from the other side, until I see orange ahead of me. I climb rocks until I see a flat orange rectangle fastened into the top of a pine tree that hasn't attained more than twenty feet of growth because of the rocky ground it grows from. I walk all around the area, looking for any indication of why the orange rectangle is in the tree. I find nothing.

Clouds that have hung darkly in the western sky move down from mountain peaks and cover the rest of the sky. Wind rises. I follow the dirt road toward home, the easiest, shortest way. Rain blows in the wind. I carry camera and binoculars in a plastic sack. Rain soaks me, but I trot, and I stay

warm, and I'm soon home. Amanda comes home early, and the day gives way to dark in the Rocky Mountains. We agree it has been a good day.

And the orange rectangle in a tree? I'm not going to try to find out what it is. I'm going to let it be a marker left by a space ship or something else of mysterious origin, unknown to man. It fits better that way into our day of an unusual columbine, our day in which a few streamers of crepe paper swished back and forth in the air become a rainbow and then a rainbow serpent, upon which the princess and the wizard ride away to wisdom, to the everlasting freedom of imagination.

Amanda's Effective Education

Amanda, sixteen now, hiked twice this sunny day on the ranch we take care of in the Rocky Mountains. Most of the rest of the day, she wrote, building a novel. Laura asked me, "Do you think we should insist Amanda use some of her time to learn science and math?"

I said, "I think we should let her do what she's doing. When her interest in writing isn't so intense, she can study math and science."

Juniper completed her junior year in public school, then skipped her senior year and started college. Amanda stayed in public school until she knew she could handle all the teasing she received, mostly for being different in dress and manner from the other students, and until she knew she could handle all the academic work.

Though she enjoyed most of her classes and liked her teachers and many of the other students, she was not happy, because she had little time to write songs, poems, and stories, to draw, to read what her interests led her to, to practice piano and guitar and singing. Midyear, Amanda left public school and returned to home schooling. She again had time to pursue her own interests, and her muses fed her all day long.

When Juniper was thirteen and Amanda eleven, they took tests required of homeschoolers. They did well in everything but math. Their low math scores ignited their interest in learning math. They didn't want those low scores. We bought text books, and I helped them. They learned math as they had learned to read, rapidly, stimulated by their own interest in learning the subject, with very little repetitive study, called "review" in the public schools.

When they started public school, Juniper and Amanda both took first year Algebra. What they learned in the class and their grades (above three point five) satisfied them. They did well in Algebra because, though we started late, we built a solid foundation in math. From their earliest years of home schooling, when we searched for and began to find an effective approach to education, they built a good foundation in knowing how to learn.

Early today, her day of long walks on the ranch and of writing, Amanda closed a book about forests. She said, “I know most of that from being out in the forests.” And, I’m sure, from other reading and from our conversations as we talked about what we saw as we walked through the forests. She did well in Biology in public school, because she is interested in all forms of life. She observes life around her, and reads extensively about it.

Learning to read was not a long process for Juniper and Amanda, developing over a period of years as they gradually learned to read ever more complex books. It took them less than a year to learn to read anything their interest led them to. They rapidly expanded their vocabularies. Our tattered dictionary testifies to their early and sustained ability to help themselves when their reading led them to words they didn’t know.

I think the example of how quickly they learned to read defines what is possible for interested learners who are not encumbered by ideas of how much a student can or can’t learn at a particular age and who are not encumbered by being part of large classes, where the teachers’ abilities spread over thirty or more students and lack of time limits individual attention and help.

Lack of cultural encumbrances on our daughters’ time and interest also helped them learn effectively. We have never watched television, because anything we can get from it is so low on our list of priorities, we don’t have time for it. The absence of television supported Juniper’s and Amanda’s pursuit of knowledge through our own classes when Laura and I worked with them, through experience with the world around them, and through reading.

The public school Amanda attended didn’t offer a class in theology, so she pursued the subject on her own. Among other books, she read Mohandas Gandhi’s autobiography, which gave her insight into religion,

history, politics, the power of nonviolence in solving world problems, the place of politics and religion in community, the power of morals and ethics in the world community, the definition, place, and power of human compassion in dealing with world problems. The history she learned from that book included much about the British empire and India and sent her to many other books.

I think our culture has lost touch with classical education, the objective of which is a broad understanding of the world, of humanity and our achievements, that can guide us into the future with moral and ethical literacy, and with an understanding of ourselves in relation to family, community and the world.

Amanda's education at home comes closer to classical education than what she received in public school, because she has had careful, individual guidance into wide fields of knowledge, and she has had the freedom to follow her interests in depth. Learning largely directed by her own interest fires her enthusiasm.

Amanda does lack some education she should have. Laura and I speak only English, so we can't teach her a foreign language. She wants voice training, and she cannot receive that at a professional level at home. I don't worry about these lacks. She has learned to find what she needs. There is yet a long life ahead of her. She will find and learn what she needs and wants to learn. Her education so far has given her a cohesive structure of values and knowledge within which everything she learns and experiences fits. Her education will continue all her life, because she has a deep-rooted habit of learning and a well-developed ability to learn what she needs to learn.

I think we have defined an effective education by our experience. We have achieved an effective education, not because Laura and I are brilliant teachers, nor because our daughters are exceptional, but because intelligence and enthusiasm for learning are natural. Starting our daughters' education early, in our home, helped us avoid many of the most common distractions from learning. Keeping the primary responsibility for education within our family helped us nurture everything natural to growth and learning.

Our daughters have thrived on learning, and they continue to learn enthusiastically. I've worked with their education long enough to know that,

while mass education might not work for many students, individual education based in love and interest works very well.

Obviously, to teach as we have taught our daughters, parents must shift their priorities and values, so love, family, and education of their children mean more than material gain. That shift contributes to the effective education of their children and to a culture based more in sustainable, rewarding values than the contemporary culture is based. If we hope for a culture based on values transcending the most material values, everyone gains from effective education.

Driving the Crumpled Car

Laura stopped for traffic, and the man behind her crashed into our car and smashed it around the right taillight and the hatchback. The crash startled Laura and Amanda, but no one was hurt. Our car was still operable and legal, so after the interview with police, Laura and Amanda took Juniper on board after her music lesson, and they all came up the mountain, home.

My family's tenuous position on the lower edge of the consumer culture dominated my thoughts while I examined the car. The loss of dependable, inexpensive transportation could cause an economic crisis. A sense of continuing adventure and wonder at the challenges existence presented us shaded my apprehension. I think existence close to material poverty has given me a more fulfilling and more educational existence than material wealth could have given me the last twenty-five years, after my earning ability was limited by injuries from an uninsured, propertyless drunk driver.

The damage did not appear to make the car unsafe to drive. Before the car received its crumpling, when we invested in repairs and new tires, I said we could pay for what the car needed and have dependable transportation cheaper than we could buy a newer car. We didn't have a choice. We didn't have enough money to make a down payment on a newer car.

I examined the newly crumpled car in warm afternoon sunshine in the driveway in front of the house. I clarified how I felt about automobiles. I have no pride of ownership. Why should I be proud of an automobile? I didn't design or build it. On the other hand, negative feelings toward

material objects waste energy. I am grateful we own a car, since we live forty-three miles from town, and we have frequent needs there.

I hope this nation will develop mass transportation, give up some of our American individualism, and coordinate our needs on community levels so we don't continue to burn enormous amounts of fuel and foul the environment to meet our needs. If that ever happens, it will happen sometime in the future.

Meanwhile, the other driver's insurance company offered to pay us the nine-hundred dollar value of the car. We could pay the salvage value, three hundred dollars, and keep the car. We couldn't buy a dependable car for nine-hundred dollars but the agent insisted his company's obligation was only to pay what the car was worth according to the book, not the local price for cars of the same make and year. I accepted six hundred dollars, and we kept the car.

The appearance of the car doesn't concern Amanda and Juniper. The car transports us, so they devote no thought to the smashed-in back. Juniper practiced for her driver's license test and took and passed the test in the crumpled car. She drove it down the mountain to classes at the college, and its dentedness didn't bother her. We drive an automobile worth almost nothing, monetarily. Miles add up, a hundred and sixty-five thousand and climbing.

Someone used the car as a supply depot when Juniper parked it in town. She brought it home minus one turn signal lamp and a hubcap. Other parts wear out, and some parts fall off. Yet it continues to meet our transportation needs. Now Amanda practices for her driver's test in the crumpled car, and its crumpledness doesn't concern her. I think lack of concern for appearances is unusual in the consumer culture, particularly among teenagers.

We study to understand the meaning of our existence in eternity. We pay attention to ancient words of advice that seem very relevant in this modern world: Do not become enamored of material possessions. Live in the moment, without particular regard for the past and without anxiety about the future. Excellent advice.

I work half time so I can also pursue interests other than earning a living. Or I am only able to work half time. Being somewhat unsure how much I define my way of living and how much my way of living defines me adds

to my sense of adventure and to my quest to understand what existence is and what we are capable of within the definitions of existence.

I write. My first objective is not to gain materially, but to say something that might add positive insight or some small, joyful moment to the reader's life.

I look at our car and at our non-existent savings for our future, and I wonder, should I have found a more materially rewarding path through life, and should I now write something more sensational, possibly more popular, aimed toward increased income? I look at our daughters, who don't care what our car looks like, as long as it gets us where we need to go, who don't mind if most of their clothes come from second hand stores. They make their way into the world, but they maintain strong ties with Laura and with me. They haven't fallen into undue concern for material possessions nor into a sense of meaninglessness that seems to occupy so many in the contemporary culture.

Our first concern has been to be available to our daughters, teaching them, guiding them, sharing the joy of existence. Attempting to fulfill our ideal of parenthood added to our direction away from the accumulation of money and material goods. Juniper and Amanda mature with strong values that keep them aimed toward a positive future. They understand meaning and joy are not resident in material wealth.

Much of what I write explores depths of meaning rarely touched on in the consumer culture. We have lived as we wanted, in the mountains, in undeveloped areas. We observe wildlife in natural habitat. We have freedom to explore the country around us, to be together, to play and learn together.

I have no certainty that our future is materially secure. I do have the answer to my questions, should we have aimed more toward material wealth? Have our decisions to devote our energies to the family, to less tangible, more transcendent values been wise? I avoid coveting material possessions. I avoid confusing material accumulation with success, and I avoid confusing lack of material wealth with failure.

I am rewarded every moment for the way we live and for the values we pursue. I couldn't have found that depth of reward and that sense of fulfillment in the largest paychecks, nor in the newest, most expensive, uncrumpled automobiles.

Finding My Way Around Campus (After 25 Years)

Lost again. I expected to exit onto a concrete walk, go down some stairs, and put dimes in the parking meter. I had brought quarters, but they were not accepted, so I went into the student center for change. I allowed myself plenty of time when I left the ranch and drove down the mountain as the sun rose and spread orange and red light across the partially cloudy eastern sky. Instead of the concrete walkway I expected, I exited onto a tiled patio area. If I could see the Rocky Mountains, I would know which way was west, but buildings blocked my view in all directions. I remembered a joke. “Do you know why the Israelites were lost for 40 years in the desert? Their leaders were men. They wouldn’t stop and ask for directions.”

That does seem to be a characteristic primarily of men in our culture. It was time to work my way out of that one. I asked a young woman, “Which way is north?” She pointed, and I said, “Thank you,” and walked straight through the building north of us. I was making interesting discoveries about myself. I would approach a woman to ask directions or to ask if she could change quarters to dimes and nickels more readily than I would approach a man, maybe because our household is three-fourths women, and I am used to talking with them.

The meter ate my dimes with an automatic click and whir, and the needle indicated two hours. I walked east. I thought I knew where I was, but I wanted to be sure, so I stopped a man walking lost in thought and asked him, “Is that Laurel Street over there where the cars are moving?”

He smiled a broad, warm smile and said, “Yes it is.”

“Thank you.” Implied was a thank you for that smile. It evaporated the edge of tension I felt in unfamiliar surroundings on my second day of classes.

On the mountain, I am never lost. The wild ridge of granite south of me as I walk is a reference point, as is the canyon north. I remember the configurations of the land and the way the forest gives way to meadows. Down here on campus everything is almost flat. It take me a while to pick out any sense of order in the way buildings and open spaces are arranged and to begin to recognize individual buildings.

I walked out of class twenty-five years ago, a thousand miles from here, a little over halfway to a degree. I kept walking until I was on a mountain, with everything around me natural and green and busy with living. Somewhere on a mountain has been where I've centered most of my time since then.

I've had some teaching experiences lately. I'm tutoring individuals in writing. I also talked about freelance writing to a university journalism class. I discussed nurturing the human spirit with three other writers, a moderator, and about a hundred honors students at the Colorado School of Mines. These experiences helped ignite a fire in my head, fueled by the desire to teach and to continue asking the questions we talked about: How does literature, all of art, nurture the human spirit? What is art in the human experience? Are we writers, obligated to adhere to moral standards as we write, and if so, what are those moral standards? If you have something within you, wild for release to your fellow humans, can I help you learn to write it as you mean to write it?

Our home schooling is nearly finished. Juniper has started college in Illinois. Amanda enrolled in public high school for her senior year. I enjoy the half-time job I have, taking care of a Girl Scout ranch. I am writing two novels and several shorter pieces, but I took steps to honor this fire in my head, this calling that keeps getting stronger. To qualify as a teacher within the academic world, I need to complete the degree I abandoned so long ago and then earn an advanced degree.

Getting lost on campus again and again is part of becoming a qualified teacher. It gives me moments full of meaning, and it contributes to the broadening of my education. I learn reference points, that oddly-shaped building and the oval drive instead of a granite ridge and a trail worn by the passage of wild animals.

I learn that people are much warmer, more ready to help than I thought they would be. I stood somewhere inside the student center, wondering why my feet remember animals' trails but have no idea how many flights of stairs or left turns they have carried me through. A young woman asked, "Are you lost?"

"Yes, I am. I'm looking for Student Services, in the ballroom area, someone said."

"That's where I'm going," she said. "Come along, and I'll show you."

Most of the students are about the age I was when I walked off campus twenty-five years ago. For a little while, I felt out of place among these young students. Then the people around me showed me this is a community, and we all work together to achieve myriad individual and community goals. The classes I take work toward my goal of becoming a teacher and the community goal of having effective teachers, on fire with enthusiasm for the process of teaching and learning.

Now that I'm driving down the mountain three days a week, friends who live down there have asked me to help their sons learn about writing, literature, and mathematics. Will that fit into my schedule? I think it will. My schedule takes on the shape of learning and teaching and loses the shape of hours and minutes. Everything relevant fits.

I don't understand large areas of the campus yet. I'm looking forward to more times of being lost and being found, when what is strange to me, without reference points, becomes sensible and familiar, as faces around me light up with friendship at the opportunity to teach me something useful. "See that building? If you walk past it and turn right...."

Catching the Copper

Smoke. Fire. Smoke boils from the covered bucket. T.S. Berger, art teacher, track coach, Impala Man, grabs the bucket and runs like crazy. I run beside him. Eighteen high school students trot after us, lagging. A student says, "Come on you guys, run," and the rest of the students pick up the pace down the polished tile hallway, through the smoke, down the stairs. We pour out of Poudre High into the cold winter day.

Berger grabs welder's gloves and steel tongs and quickly transfers eight student-made pieces of pottery from the bucket to a barrel. He sprinkles hay over the pots and sets the lid on the barrel. Dark, pungent smoke, lacking oxygen to make flame, leaks around the lid, out into clear, winter air.

Berger waits a minute, then picks pottery from the smoking garbage can with the long-handled tongs, dips the pieces into a bucket of water, and then sets them on the concrete walkway. Berger picks one up, turns it over and looks at the bottom. "Look at the copper." He shows us the molded clay

cup. In the broad, green brush stroke that circles the outside of the cup, irregular areas of copper shine forth, almost like gold.

"This one is really good. Whose is it?"

"That's mine, Mr. Berger." The young man takes the cup and looks at it and feels it, turning it slowly in his hands, as if his fingers are remembering the careful process of forming it from shapeless clay.

Berger squats, picks up the rest of the pieces, one by one, and hands each one to a reaching student. "They're really good. We got copper on all of them. These are really good. They're good for four reasons. One, we ran like crazy. Two, we said some good Japanese words. Three, I'm wearing this Japanese headband. Four, we got them into the water fast and stopped the molecular action. Okay, everybody raise your right hands."

The students raise their right hands. Berger says, "Now, repeat after me, I (state your name)"

The students speak as one, "I, state your name..."

Berger says, "do solemnly swear not to tell first period pottery class how well these came out. I don't want them to feel bad." Berger. Mr. Berger. Some of the students call him Berger. He doesn't object.

"Berger? Yeah, I like Berger. He's my favorite teacher."

Berger came in early this morning, carrying boxes of supplies. "Today is going to be a great day. Raku today. I was excited last night. I had a hard time going to sleep."

He took pots from a cupboard. "If I show them these, will they feel bad?" They were good pots, with fine glazing, pots with soul.

I asked him, "Who made them?"

"I did."

First period students came in. They sat down and focused on Berger.

He spoke to them. "Jon's shadowing me today. He knows nothing about Raku. We'll review Raku, and you address your answers to him. He wants to know something about Raku." One question for each student. "What is a glaze, Dave? What is a refractory element, Melissa? What is flux, Amy? What is crazing, Andrew?"

They told me the answers quickly, confidently.

The principal came in. Mr. Hubka, Poudre's other art teacher, came in, and three more adults. They jested a bit, not quite comfortable, but they settled down when they recognized that Mr. Berger and his students were

quite serious about this ceremony. Mr. Berger took head bands from a cardboard box. The students came forward, one at a time; Mr. Berger bowed; the student bowed. Mr. Berger centered the red sun emblem on the student's forehead, and the student took the ends of the band and walked away, tying it. After all the students were head-banded, the adults received theirs.

Mr. Berger checked the bottoms of cups and bowls for names, but the students recognized their work and reached out for the pottery pieces. Mr. Berger handed out extra pieces to the guests. Everyone received chopsticks. Mr. Berger poured tea, and a student assistant served rice. Mr. Berger started a tape of Japanese music, and we ate rice and drank tea. The Raku process, wet, amorphous clay molded into shapes of a bowl and a cup, fired, decorated, fired again, smoked, dipped in water, inspected and then used for rice and tea, was complete. The students would take the pieces home and begin the next step in learning pottery.

Second period is Berger's free period. He moved materials, changed some of what hung on a big board, got ready for his next class. Two students, advanced enough in their work to qualify for independent study, worked quietly at foot-powered pottery wheels, drawing pots up from lumps of clay. Amanda's pot collapsed inward as she drew it up. Berger stepped forward with a knife, held it against the spinning clay, and cut the collapsed top away. He spoke quietly to Amanda and said something with the motion of his hands against the clay. She started again, drawing a hollow pot shape upward from spinning clay.

Anderson didn't need pointers. He kicked the concrete flywheel until the metal wheel on a shaft above it spun the clay at the speed he wanted. He drew up a hollow cylinder and bulged it out into vase shape. When Anderson put his materials away and walked up to the sink, I followed him. "Do you plan to go to college?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Will you major in pottery?"

He washed clay from his hands. "No, but I'll take pottery. I'll always make pots."

Eighteen student drawings on the wall illustrate "A pot without a soul is just clay around a hole."

Pots, pieces of pots, garbage cans full of clay, pieces of fired clay decorate the room.

Third period, Berger lifted the lid of the kiln; eighteen hundred degrees of heat glowed. He lifted out fiery red cups and bowls, put them in the can with hay, and ran down the hall with smoke pouring from around the lid of the can. He sent May down ahead of time to tell the people in the office there would be smoke, but, "I don't ask," he says, "I just do. Sometimes they might say, I wish Berger had told me ahead of time.' That's okay. I like to let them know we're here. I don't push the envelope too far. Jello wrestling, we did jello wrestling for a fund-raiser, and some of them thought that was busting the envelope, but we made a lot of money."

Five years ago, Berger's pottery students made and sold pottery at the mugathon and raised a thousand dollars for five scholarships for Poudre students.

After Berger made the first, smoking-bucket run, students took over that job. He wanted all of them to experience each step in the Raku process. Students catch energy and enthusiasm from Mr. Berger, but they are a little tired, part of the price of being a high school student, or they are, despite the enthusiasm, a little too cool to put their total energy into the project, so their runs down the hall take longer than Berger's did, and the pots in the next batches don't catch much copper but go beyond to green, a respectable enough finish, but not as exciting to Mr. Berger as the copper color achieved when the action of the glaze gradually cooling is stopped by the plunge into water.

The fifty-five minute class ticks away. One young man, nearly a head taller and forty pounds heavier than Berger, repeats what he said a while before, "Mr. Berger, I burned my finger." Mr. Berger steps over and hugs him.

Flames burst from the garbage can when a student removes the lid. Another teacher walks by, and Berger grabs him and lifts him high, "And now, for the human sacrifice," but he lets him go short of the flames, and the man walks on, accepting it as a normal part of experience close to Berger.

Berger runs water over a pot and polishes the green with fine steel wool until copper begins to glow through the green. He says, "It doesn't always work. The copper has to be there. Sometimes it isn't there."

Berger. Mr. Berger. Art teacher. The students in his drawing class move from realism to surrealism. Mr. Berger shows slides of Magritte's work and Dali's and hangs a definition of surrealism on the board. The students divide a large sheet of drawing paper into quarters and sketch their ideas. They talk quietly to each other, about ideas for drawing. Two young men confer over a book of Dali's work.

Berger says, "I don't teach them drawing. They teach themselves. I set up a system where they..." he makes a going forward motion to complete the statement.

Once a year, they perform a ceremony. The students burn their worst works behind the school. "My mess-ups," says one student as he drops drawings into the fire. "I get those out of the way."

"To succeed in my class, you have to give something of yourself. You can't come in here because it's an easy elective and get anywhere. Some of the kids, we do have discipline problems." He touches a student, and the student smiles at him.

When Berger walks across the room, I ask the student, "Was there a discipline problem? or was that Berger's joke?"

"He was joking. That's just Berger." He touches my shoulder gently as he speaks, to reassure me or to include me, then turns back to the paper and sketches.

A student comes up to show Mr. Berger his drawing of a cup melting above an ink bottle, and Mr. Berger says, "That's cool, you're ready to go."

The student indicates the blank three sections of his paper and says, "Should I..."

Mr. Berger says, "No. You're fine. You got everything you need. Put it on a full-sized sheet."

To another student, "H-o-t. Hot. That is hot. Move this down. Get it in the picture more. It's almost crowded off the edge. Otherwise, go for it."

"Mr. Berger, do you have a picture of the earth?"

"The earth? This world? I think I do." He walks into the supply room, reaches into a cupboard, and comes out with a picture of the earth.

I walk among the students concentrating on their tilted drawing desks and look at what comes from their pencils onto paper. I think of saying, "You people, all of you people are doing really well. Keep at it." I don't say it. There is no need. Berger has taken care of it for weeks. He will go on

taking care of it. He burnishes the students. The golden glow of copper begins to shine from them.

After school, Berger coaches track and runs. Some evenings, as Impala Man, with antlers, with a blue cape trailing out behind him, trying to keep up, he leaps and runs, a stirrer of enthusiasm among spectators at various events, a welcomer, “Hello. I’m Impala Man. Welcome.”

Tomorrow, southwest Indian pottery. More background in pottery, more details about different kinds of clay. A film about Maria Martinez and her pottery. Today has been a great day. Tomorrow will be a great day. No fire in a can down the hallway, no pungent smoke bringing comments from students and teachers about getting high right by the school entrance, but the always burning fire in T.S. Berger, Mr. Berger, Berger. Some smoke, too; there’s a bit of smoke about the man, but look closely, and you see it’s real smoke, underlain by fire, rising up from real fire.

Fast English

“Zisfere?” the woman behind the cash register said, after I ordered at a fast food restaurant. Her rising inflection led me to believe she had asked a question.

I asked her, “What did you say?”

She slowed her delivery somewhat. “Isisferere?”

By an intuitive leap, I understood what she asked, “Is this for here?”

I said, “Yes.” She gave me the food on a tray.

I sat down with Juniper, my daughter, and we ate. I said, “You need a second language to work in a place like this.”

She said, “You do?”

“Yes. Fast English.”

I phoned a theater recently, to hear a schedule, so my wife and daughters could plan their day. I heard a recorded message, whose recorder believed “time is money.”

I understood something would happen at four twenty-five having to do with hearts, harts, or the way something is heard or possibly with herds. There is no way to interrupt a recorded message to say, “Slow down so I

can understand what you're saying." Laura and our daughters stopped by the theater and looked at the posted schedule.

Often, a living person answers the phone and gives rapid information. A statement that I have not understood leads to a louder, faster rendition. I've already used time, leaving less time in the world, so the answerer rushes through even faster. "Dsrylyhdwrnpnt. Help you?"

People in a rush happen also in friendships. "Hey Jn, seppening? Thing newn yrlf?"

Should I speak faster and louder and wedge my words into conversations so people will have some idea what I'm about? I don't think I will. Time is not more important to me than meaning. Of course, the world is too fast paced for a slow, carefully considered delivery to be practical. Or is it?

Every time I encounter fast English, it costs time, because the delivery has to be repeated. Steady, carefully considered speech or work gains the highest degree of understanding and the highest quality of work completed.

William Blake saw deeply into time and reality. We can ...see a world in a grain of sand/ and a Heaven in a wild flower,/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And Eternity in an hour." if we take time for contemplation.

Each moment holds too much meaning to slur it from existence in a rush toward some uncertain moment ahead, when the rush is finally over, and I have time for meaning to begin. All I have is now. I'll continue seeing, hearing, touching every moment's meaning in an unhurried fashion.

A Garden of Memories

I've been sitting here an hour or more, reading entries from 1979 in my journal. I strongly recommend keeping detailed journals. I direct this recommendation to any listener or reader, but especially to myself.

I have journals in notebooks from January of 1979 to now, and the only fault I find with my journals is, they often have no entries for a month, two months, or even more. The missing times usually came in summer, when I have been busiest with earning a living, irrigating the meadows when we lived in Whitney Valley, fixing fences, cutting hay, cutting firewood, and all the caretaking duties of various places since then. When I page through my journals, I regret those missing dates, and I resolve to do better.

Here is an entry for Tuesday, the twenty-third, before we moved from Sumpter over the mountain to Whitney Valley to take care of the Rouse Brothers' ranch. Ash and Ingrid and Bob came for dinner. Alice came after dinner. We all made music; three guitars, an autoharp, and many voices.

I read that entry from my journal, and an expansive process begins in my memory. I might have gone the rest of my life and never remembered that evening, but now that my journal entry has called it into memory, I remember more and more about it. We ate spaghetti and garlic bread, and we created music. I remember some of the songs we sang almost as clearly as if we just finished singing them. It was a good time, a warm time.

My journal tells me I sought work those days. I applied for jobs the 24th, 25th, and 26th. According to my journal, there were two 24ths that month, a Wednesday and a Thursday. I don't know what the mixup was, and I didn't correct it at the time.

To apply for one of the jobs, I caught a ride with a friend who worked at one of the mines and then walked twelve miles back before I caught a ride the rest of the way. There just wasn't much traffic that twenty-below-zero morning, which was fine, because I enjoyed that walk and appreciated early morning sunshine more than I ever had before.

Our pickup sat on blocks, waiting for parts I'd ordered. I realized acutely just then that many people believe anything goes when it comes to selling an automobile. Let the buyer beware. It startled me, because I'd bought the pickup from a friend, and, as best as I could figure, he'd lied about the condition of the pickup and about what work had recently been done to it. I adopted a policy then that I've adhered to since. I always tell a potential buyer everything I know about the vehicle I'm trying to sell. I've never regretted that policy.

One of those 24ths, the same bunch of people played music at Bob's place in the evening. "A pleasant time," I noted, and indeed it was. Having stimulated my memory with the journal entry, I remember the progression of the evening quite well, even a lot of who said what and what the response was. That night stayed clear and cold. Northeastern Oregon's myriad stars scattered casually across the sky when we headed home. Juniper and Amanda, our daughters, were five and three. We kept them up late, but no one minded. They loved the music. They loved the people.

We employed baby sitters twice in the first dozen years.

I was having an argument with myself about journals then. One hand held forth for a simple reporting of the basic facts of existence, what the weather was that day, what we did, with little interpretive comment. “A pleasant time,” for example, would be sufficient. The other hand said I should also record detailed analysis, how I felt about the facts of the day and why I felt that way and any underlying meaning I found in events, feelings and thoughts, to provide more perspective from the future on my life then.

I never completely settled that argument. Most of the time, I recorded just the facts of the day, because it took less time. I wrote stories, songs, and books then too, and those pursuits often fulfilled all need I had for expressing emotion and psychological analysis. “A journal might become painfully self conscious,” I wrote then, “which is why I didn’t keep one for a long time.”

I see that I suffered some agony over the question, “Why doesn’t more of my writing publish? I deserve to make a living with my writing.” All these years later, I still suffer some small agony over that question, but I am calmer about it. I have at least a partial answer to the question. I write what I want to write, what I think is necessary, not what I think will publish and sell. After I write it, I see if someone will publish it. I am not in the mainstream of literature, and I have no desire to be.

Not long after these journal entries, made after I had two books turned down by a literary agency, I published a short story, then another. Eventually, I started selling essays. Eventually, the income from those sales helped our existence. Steady publication eased the urgency of the question.

My journal also reminds me that I never placed earning more than enough money to meet basic needs as a very high priority. Alongside entries that mention having barely enough money to buy parts necessary to get the pickup roadworthy are entries about songs I was writing. A line from one of the songs is, “I should be finding jobs for money, but I’m writing songs instead.” Oh yes. I sought work, but I didn’t lose sight of songs, stories, essays, visiting and sharing music with friends, and day-long walks, just to see what we could see.

Sometimes, during those days, I wondered if I spread my energy too thin. I spent a lot of time with my family, with my guitar, singing songs, writing, gardening, looking for a steady job. I wrote, “All the projects, all

the activities and relationships knit together into a good, productive life. Even failed projects fit, because they are part of a learning process, steps on the way. Rejection from an editor or an agent does not necessarily mean I have failed. There are many editors in the world. There's a lot of life to live yet."

When we started our garden where we live now, in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains, the garden did not do well through the first part of the summer. I worked hard, as I had time, at solving the problems. In August, we left for two weeks' vacation. When we got back, I walked down to the garden. It had rained heavily while we were gone. The garden grew beautifully. Every plant flourished. Edible-pod peas hung thickly on the plants. We harvested and ate cabbages, spinach, green onions, and lettuce.

Coming back to my journal after a long time of not reading from it reminds me of coming back to that garden. I built the soil and planted the seeds with what I wrote.

Now, I look back, and I see so much more than what I wrote there, memories that were not included in what I wrote, answers to questions I had then, understanding of what the seeds we were planting then grew to over the years since. Problems that loomed large then have been solved, or we still work on them in more mature ways. As with the garden that I walked down to look at after two weeks away, there is more here to harvest, memories, essays, stories, and songs, than I ever expected there would be.

Trimming Material Possessions

The set of Audubon Nature Encyclopedias sits back in its honored place in the bookcase.

Amanda and I hiked up the ranch this past winter, and we found a bald-faced hornet's nest built into the willow bushes along Lone Pine Creek.

We wondered how the hornets built the deteriorating nest and what happened to them with the onset of winter. Back at the house, I looked up hornets in the Audubon Nature Encyclopedias, and we learned they use dead and deteriorating wood to make the fine, grey to white paper from which they build their nests.

The book says all the hornets but the queen die when the weather turns cold. The queen lives through the winter, and the species carries on from eggs the queen lays in the spring of the year.

Amanda asked me, “Why are these books in the garage?”

I said, “We’re reducing our material possessions, and we’re trying to recycle books we won’t use anymore. This set is thirty years old. Mama bought it used for very little money when we lived in Whitney, about ten years ago.”

“These books are still useful and valuable. You found what we wanted to know about bald-faced hornets.”

“Yes. You’re right.” We brought the box in and put the set of books back into place.

We started reducing our possessions after I helped friends move. They regretted that they had not sorted and trimmed their possessions before it was time to move, because they packed and moved what they would happily have disposed of had they not been too rushed to sort and pack properly. I came home determined to keep our possessions trimmed to necessities and only the most treasured of “not necessary to existence but treasured.” Any of us might be required to move sooner than we can effectively deal with our material possessions.

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda cooperated. Boxes of unusables went to secondhand stores, friends, and the dump. Amanda and Juniper were called away by college schedules before they finished sorting their belongings, but they made good progress before they left.

After they left, Laura and I continued the project. We moved books and other goods into the garage pending approval to recycle by all interested parties.

During spring break, quite a few books migrated back into book shelves. One small box, approved for recycling, still waits in the garage.

When we left Whitney, on our way to a year-and-a-half stay in central Oregon, everything we owned fit in one pickup truck, with sideboards, and one sedan, dog and cat and four humans, with water to drink and lunch included. When we left central Oregon, we filled the pickup and a small rental van. Almost two years later, when we moved north in the Rocky Mountains, we needed a much larger rental truck and our car.

Did Thoreau actually say a sane man could load everything he owned in a wagon to move, discover the wagon wouldn't fit through the gate, and walk away and leave it? I gave that book to the Salvation Army store, so I can't check my uncertain memory. Only a man without a family could say that.

Amanda's piano transcends its material existence. It is music, as is Juniper's violin, my guitar, and Laura's autoharp.

Both our daughters have written almost all their lives. They own boxes full of manuscripts and drawings. So do I, and so does Laura. All manuscripts transcend the materiality of the paper they are written on.

And books and magazines. Could anyone be asked to give away stacks of *Cricket* magazines full of memories of childhood or to callously turn away from Kenneth Grahame, E.B. White, J.R.R. Tolkien, Emily Dickinson and many others who have been friends, teachers, and companions for as long as memory exists?

It is easier to part with tables, chairs, desks, and couches, but we need those things to have places to build everything that is not merely material.

We've trimmed our possessions. We've had the opportunity, as we have had each time we moved, to consider the value of everything we own and to review our lives and our achievements.

I've learned something about the blending of memory and values with material goods. External markers of time blend with our internalized treasures. I've reinforced my knowledge that my plans and ideas will always be valued but considerably modified by my family, and from that process, I will learn and grow.

Poems for Your Suppers

Some were vegetarians, while some preferred mostly meat, and some ate between. We supplied all with good food that met their standards and needs, but none of them escaped the requirement that each of us, guests, cooks, heads of the household, and afternoon visitors would read a poem, of that day's creation, to earn dinner.

Laura, mother, wife, one of the nominal heads of the household, primary cook of the household, established the rule. Our daughters, Juniper and

Amanda, brought guests home with them during their break from college.

Juniper and Amanda both took a class from a sparklingly creative teacher and poet, lover of original similes and metaphors, who recommended everyone write a poem every day and who required of his students, as willing as native trout leaping from the pool at the foot of the waterfall toward multiple rainbows hung like mobiles from the black basalt cliffs, a poem every week. And Laura, hearing of his requirement, said, "We will require a poem from everyone every day before dinner." Understanding that procrastination fells more students than double-bitted axes fell stout pines, she added, "Everyone who wants to eat dinner. No poem, no dinner. But the poem can be anything, funny, serious, short, long, very bad, good."

Liz, primary guest at that time, looked like someone who suddenly saw dinners might become as scarce as sharks in our nearby small stream. Juniper reassured her, "They don't have to be good. Any kind of poem will do."

Liz further relaxed when I started the readings that evening before dinner with a very bad poem, worthy only to start the organic activity within a slow-to-work compost pile. I didn't do it to encourage Liz, nor to show her every aspiring poet would be treated gently by family and guests. I just started late, wrote fast, and was abandoned by every muse. It didn't bother me. I have never been afraid of failure, or I never would have attempted to write in the beginning nor would I have stuck with it this long.

We wrote, early in the day, some time during the day, or at the last minute, as dinner began to arrive on our table. Laura turned out to be a wonderful writer of limericks, interspersed with more serious, highly metaphorical efforts.

I think Liz became pleased with what she could write under the pressure of must. I know she was pleased with the dinners that followed, and we were all pleased with what she wrote and read aloud and with what every one of us wrote and read.

When Brett came up the mountain for the afternoon, we required a newly created poem from him. He and Juniper helped Amanda make the salad (Humankind cannot live by poetry alone), and when everyone read before dinner, Brett's and Juniper's poems, while very different from each other, shared the subject of radishes. We all clapped just before we bit into slices of radishes in the salad.

Now we are back down to three of us, and Amanda will fly east, toward college, Saturday. Laura and I will probably not adhere to the rule of a poem from every diner for dinner. But be forewarned, all future guests. The rule will apply.

After the first, momentary trepidation at writing under pressure and at performing, all of us will be enriched by sharing the warmth of everyone's appreciation for the performer's effort, by increasing the size of each poet's portfolio, by hearing and appreciating each other's efforts, and last but by no means least, by being given leave to dig in to the vegetarian's dinner, to the dinner of mostly meat or to the dinner somewhere in between, with elements of both.

Housework by Gender

Our daughters came home from college for the summer. Amanda walked up the driveway and across the highway to a dude ranch six days a week, to work four or five hours a day, cleaning rooms and cabins. Juniper drove up the mountain about ten miles to a resort, where she cleaned rooms and cabins, took care of horses, and guided horseback trail rides.

Laura, wife and mother of our family, drove about eight miles five days a week to a country club, where she cleaned cabins, rooms, and the club house.

Twenty-seven hours a week, I took care of the Girl Scout ranch where we lived in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains, and I wrote stories, books, essays, and poems. Sometimes, I sold part of what I wrote and helped pay our way in the world.

While Juniper and Amanda lived away from home, we forgot some of the smooth, team habits that held our household neatly together. During our busy summer of all living together again, dishes accumulated or other household chores lacked performance. We agreed to hold a meeting to establish a path toward more order.

I rehearsed a defense. "I put a new starter motor, a water pump, and a battery in the Subaru and got it ready for the road. I cleaned the garage. I take care of recycling, and I cut the grass. I usually fix breakfast and wash dishes after breakfast. Sometimes, I vacuum and sweep."

I read a survey. Many men think they do a larger part of the housework and child care than their wives would agree with. The survey reinforced an idea I've long held: "Don't treat surveys as fact. People often tell you what they wish or what they think you want to hear, not what actually is."

I said, "Men feel guilty because they're part of a male chauvinist society. Because of their sense of guilt, they lie about what they do and about their attitudes toward housework, child care, and all the other unpaid work of existence."

Laura said, "Not necessarily. Some of the discrepancy between what men say and what women say probably comes from a difference in perspective. A man washes the dishes and sweeps the kitchen floor, and he's finished the housework."

Amanda said, "A woman, especially a woman trained in professional cleaning, washes the dishes, bleaches the sink, cleans the countertops, the stove, inside and outside, the refrigerator, washes the cupboard doors, sweeps, mops and waxes the kitchen floor, and that room is finished until she finds time to clean drawers and cupboards inside."

Juniper didn't participate in the discussion. She rode her horse to the top of a rise, where the trail emerged from the forest into meadows, and saw a bull moose, antlers spread wide against the morning sky. She told us, "I was really excited. I wanted the people on the ride to see the moose, but he walked into the forest before they got to where I was."

If what Laura and Amanda say is correct, differences in perspective by gender still speak of a culture in which women often do the largest part of unpaid but necessary work to maintain households, even if their for-pay jobs take as much time as men's jobs.

Around the kitchen table, we conferred about how we would achieve necessary housework. I didn't get much chance to defend myself. I launched into the first part of my dramatic defense. My audience looked at me tolerantly. Amanda interrupted me, "Nobody said you didn't do your part. We love you just like you are."

Juniper said, "We're busier than we ever were before, because all of us have jobs. If we want a more orderly house, we'll have to make that a higher priority. I think we can all try harder, but we need some time just to be, too." We magneted a written schedule to the refrigerator, with the main household chores assigned.

We ended our meeting and walked together in late afternoon mountain sunshine. Birds sang and flew across the meadows and through the forest. Deer grazed near the small stream that runs through the ranch.

Despite lack of criticism, I tried harder to ease part of the burden for the gainfully employed women of the household. Their jobs took more hours than mine did.

Juniper and Amanda saved money for their plane tickets to England in the fall, with a college class. They studied and wrote papers for that class. Jobs, housework, and outdoor adventures took up much of our time. We found some time for writing, drawing, and music.

We didn't refer much to the schedule on the refrigerator. Whoever had time did what most needed doing. If anyone wandered too far from order, we reminded that one that we were a team and all members must contribute.

One car broke. I got up at four-thirty and took Laura to work, again at seven and took Juniper to work. I drove off in the afternoon at different times to bring them home.

I watched red tailed hawks soar above the meadows and forests of the Rocky Mountains. A bald eagle coasted on air currents above me after I took Juniper to work. Deer grazed the ridges above the road. A grey, white, black, and russet coyote crossed the dirt road and ran into a densely growing stand of aspens whose leaves yellowed and began to fall.

At daylight, elk trotted down from the ridge above the road. There were so many of them, they looked like the brown, tan, and black ground turned fluid and flowed to lower ground.

Cold days and nights came to the Rocky Mountains. Juniper and Amanda flew to England.

Together or apart, we support each other. We found a solution to the problem of how to divide housework by gender. We still have a core of identity as a family, as four people who love each other and work together, that also allows each of us our individual direction and goals.

How to Become Water, Early in the Day

The south fork of Lone Pine Creek runs east onto Magic Sky Ranch, meanders through the tall-grass meadow below our house, then runs

through a low area in the granite ridge, and southeast, down through jumbled granite boulders.

Downstream from the boulders, soil finds room to grow small meadows and ponderosa pine forest northwest of the stream before grey granite rises above everything into the clear mountain sky.

I meander gradually downslope, like a wild mountain stream, out before sunrise to see the early day. Always before, I stayed upslope from the willows, because they grow so densely, they slow all progress to laborious duck down, push aside, crawl under, retrace steps and seek a more open path.

I'm going no place in particular, so I explore the dense willows close along the creek. Lush grasses and blooming wildflowers release their colors and odors into movements of the air in the cold mountain morning. Small creatures scurry away from me through the tall grass as I wander into their quiet world.

Beavers build dams in the stream here. They cut willows, spin the lengths like corn on the cob, eat the cambium, and then weave the sticks into dams and pond water into habitat that supports them and myriad other creatures who like water, ponds, mud, smooth water surfaces, marshes, lushly-growing grasses and willows and wildflowers.

I work my way through dense willows downstream. I count six ponds, six dams, and six areas where beavers have harvested willows.

Sun rises through forest and shines intensely down onto willows, warms the grasses, the growing bushes, the wildflowers, me. Above the dam farthest downstream, before water leaves the tightest constriction of canyon walls rising above it and runs leisurely through another green meadow, the slope in a small area clear of willows accommodates me like an earthen lounge. I take morning ease and soak up warmth and light of sunshine, lazy, half-dreaming, quiet as morning grasses, morning trees.

My sense of time and most of my sense of self abandons me, evaporates in sunshine and soaks away in the sound of water running over the beaver dam and downstream. Ponded water lies in front of me, almost still, yet moving with all its weight, patiently, gradually toward the whitely wild rush it becomes when it leaves this next green meadow and plummets into the steep canyon toward the plain, toward the ocean.

I become water. Early in this day, in sunshine, absorbed by my surroundings, I am water. Life inhabits me, fish and water snakes, amphibians, plants and crustaceans and creatures far smaller than water divided into drops. I journey homeward, seaward, resting, patient here behind and in and through beaver dams made of willows and mud and leaves.

The biggest beaver floats, eyes above water, and studies me. Still though I recline, the beaver knows I am something new in this habitat it owns. The beaver knows a way to make me move so it can identify me, if I am living being.

I am living being. I have enough individuality still operating through my senses to understand what the beaver is going to do, but not enough to steel myself. It curves down into water, raises its flat tail, and whaps it hard against the water.

WHACK! The explosive sound fills this area, and YI! I sit straight up fast as a beaver's tail against the water, heart of startlement racing like white water down steep stone, returned quite quickly to humanness.

I stand up in sunshine and brush off clinging earth and discarded leaves. Thank you, beaver. As a human being, I have wandering yet to do in this day of sunshine. Thank you for the excitement of this moment, just beginning to calm.

The day is quite large. I remember becoming water.

Climbing the Granite Overlook

Weeks of revising short fiction for two collections I'm putting together, halftime maintenance work on the Girl Scout ranch I take care of, and then a frustrating telephone session with a machine-generated voice telling me select options, enter account numbers and identification numbers and disagreeing with me several times about who I am, and I needed to unplug everything and leave man's world behind for a while.

Dark granite cliffs fall east and west into the small body of water miles from the nearest human activity. In hot sunshine, I explore for a new route up the eroded, jumbled granite formation rising west of the lake. I've climbed to the top more than a dozen times, but never from this, the north

side. I climb dark grey granite, over grey lichen, white lichen, red, orange, several shades of green, black lichen.

I stand and try to pick a route by eye, and then I climb. I backtrack and start over. I have two rules. I find an easy enough route to avoid falling. I see where I'm going to place my foot or my hand. I've never seen rattlesnakes or scorpions up here, but it is good habitat for them, and I have no desire to meet either animal close up and unexpected.

Some of the stone I climb is one with the mountain. Some has eroded until huge boulders and smaller boulders lie on the stone of the mountain. All the granite has eroded into varied forms beyond fantasy or description.

I stand on a high point of stone. A secret garden grows below me. Enclosed by rock on all sides, decomposed-granite soil supports three pine trees, three juniper trees, currant bushes, flowers, prickly pear cactus, green grass in some places, and bare, gravelly, brown to pink soil in other places.

I climb down into the garden. I have passed within fifty feet of this garden, below it, the other side of granite stone, and I have stood a hundred feet above it, on the high point of rock I hope to climb to from this side, but because the granite formation holds it secret, I have never seen it before. The garden grows grass, several type of wildflowers small trees, raspberry bushes, wild strawberry plants, and bushes whose names I don't know.

I climb up out of the garden. The rock becomes too steep. I retreat and try another route, too steep, and I retreat from that. I crawl under dense, low-growing branches of a juniper tree and between boulders steeper than I can climb. I climb granite eroded into hundreds of footholds and handholds, weave back and forth across steeply sloping face, and find a climbable route that takes me gradually higher.

Near the top, I climb a small juniper tree growing against rising stone. I step out of the tree onto level granite, then pull myself up through a deeply-eroded channel in stone, walk around boulders, and I have achieved the familiar high place in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

The top of the stone spreads wide, eroded into channels, standing boulders, and irregular shapes of mountain stone. This high place grows a stunted pine tree, low juniper bushes, patches of grass, lichen, moss, and flowers.

I look over wild Rocky Mountains, canyons, pine trees, bright green groves of aspen, bare grey rock formations, pink to light-brown-rock

formations, meadows green with summer grasses. I look between upthrusting rock of the Rocky Mountains. Far to my east, I see the plain spreading flat. Above me, mountain blue sky reaches unmeasurable distances. A few small, white clouds change shapes as they fly east.

Two yellow and black swallow-tail butterflies fly around and around each other above the rocks, separate and fly out of sight in opposite directions, then rejoin in spiraling, rising flight above grey stone again.

The sun hangs low above the mountain peaks to my west. Far below me on the ground next to the pond, I make an exuberantly dancing shadow. I could be a butterfly and fly weightless, dancing in the gentle breeze. I could be one of the many small birds flying and singing in the forest below me. I could fly to tops of rock formations and drink water held for me in natural reservoirs in the stone.

I could be my human self, settled down, renewed by hours in close contact with the natural world, at peace with myself and the world again, thinking of dinner and descending southeast down the granite formation. Hundreds of flowers, dozens of kinds, grow every place they find soil enough for roots. Of high interest to me, because I have seldom seen them, are the yellow, waxy, multi-petaled, large flowers of the plains cacti, also called prickly pear cacti, profuse on the steep slope where granite stone has decomposed to soil.

Down from the stone formation, I walk beside the pond in shade from the tall, rock formation I have stood upon. I head for home. The hot day has begun to cool toward high elevation mountain evening. I am ready to work again.

Book Five; Before and After

Getting Clean in the Great Outdoors

Friends said they didn't like camping out because there was no way to keep clean. I started to tell them the several ways I know to achieve cleanliness out, but they quickly changed the subject. We need our excuses, or perhaps that discussion was too personal for mixed company.

In any case, I have since wanted to finish what I started to say, and I take this opportunity to do so.

First and simplest is to jump in the river, lake, or creek, and I used to do that without hesitation, wherever I was. Scrubbing is okay, but soaps and shampoos are forbidden. Fish and other creatures of the water are not fond of soap. If soap must be used, the bather carries water inland some distance and rinses a soap of low environmental impact onto the ground.

Until my mid-twenties, I never tested the water first; I just jumped. When the water turned out to be fluid only because it was flowing fast, I jumped out just as quickly. A light rinse sufficed, and scrubbing could wait. As I matured, I developed a preference for warmer water and a habit of testing the water before jumping.

For several summers, I did blister-rust control work for the Forest Service on a contract basis in the mountains of northern California, and I camped where I worked. This was after I stopped jumping before testing, and the nearby water was always cold, so people I worked with and I developed an effective contrivance.

Forest conditions permitting, we cooked over a campfire, so we heated water for bathing above the campfire in the largest cooking pot we had with us or in several pots. We fashioned a tripod of dead poles, gathered in the area, with a small pulley hanging from the apex. In the bottom of a clean bucket, we punched several nail holes, not too many, and not too large. More can be added later if needed.

We threaded the rope on the bucket handle through the pulley; diluted the hot water with cold water, dumped the water into the bucket with holes in the bottom, hoisted the bucket, and tied it just above head height. The water ran out of the holes we had punched in the bottom of the bucket and provided a very nice shower. Three gallons is more than enough for a shower and shampoo. A board or flat rock underfoot is nice and another, dry one to step onto when toweling dry is also nice.

When I camped on Coalpit Mountain in Eastern Oregon, I thought at first I would buy the place, and I started a small garden near the top of a south-facing saddle. Every morning, I packed water in plastic jerry cans up to the garden and left them in the sun. Every afternoon, the water was as hot as I could stand for a shower, and the run-off watered the garden.

A garden hose full of water in the sun is an effective solar heater. Laura and I used that for our showers when we lived at Toadtown (yes, there really is a place named Toadtown). The person inside the small cabin could

always tell when the one showering had been too slow and the hot water ran out before the shower was finished, because the water came from a very cold spring, and vocal effects were unrestrainable. Fortunately, we had no close neighbors.

Jack's place almost doesn't count. Plumbing came from inside the house, with plenty of hot water, out onto the back deck while Jack and his helper tore the bathroom apart and rebuilt it. It was lovely to mix a hot shower with a rainstorm, and getting quickly dried and back inside when there was frost on the ground created a small adventure.

Camping, or during auto trips cross country, a gallon jug of water, left in the sun several hours, will suffice, for warmth and quantity. The water can be carefully applied directly from the jug for most effective and conservative use. I added a half gallon and had enough for shampooing, though my hair and beard are not long.

When we lived in Whitney Valley, I jumped in the river a lot of the summer. Spring and fall, and summer days when I thought I wouldn't get to the river, I put a black canner full of water (about four gallons) out in the back yard in the sunlight early in the day. If time or sunshine was in short supply, I surrounded the canner with reflectors to increase its absorption of light and heat. Then I used a small sauce pan to dip from the canner. We had a corrugated tin tub for baths indoors, but I liked to save the time and fuel required to heat water, and I liked to avoid heating up the house.

Now, in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, in a Girl Scout Camp, I haven't yet rigged anything outdoors. But when I get the greenhouse built, up by the garden, I'll have a small solar-powered water heater on the roof, and I'll build a screened off shower and dressing area, open to the sky above and the ground beneath.

Wild Music from the Mountains

I drove through eastern Oregon on my way to visit my brother in Eugene. High in the Blue Mountains, I stopped, hiked away from the highway and the car, and watched dusk capture the mountains. A beautiful musical sound, from some unknown wind instrument, rising in pitch and

then falling, followed by several deep, short sounds, as if from a lightly-struck, hollow-sounding drum, resonated through the high conifer forest.

I couldn't tell where the sound came from, left or right, far away, or fairly close to me. The sound was unlike anything I had ever heard. When I heard it again and then again, I was no closer to knowing what it was or to knowing how to describe it.

When I got to his place and tried to describe what I had heard, my brother told me I had heard an elk bugling. A male elk bugles to impress female elk and to notify other males he is powerful and able to defend his right to the females he has gathered together. The almost percussive coda to the bugle is a series of deep, grunting sounds, perhaps to demonstrate the animal's size and strength.

Many years passed before I heard elk bugle again. I took a job caretaking a hay and cattle ranch in mountain meadows, sage brush, and forest on the confluence of Camp Creek and the north fork of the Burnt River in northeastern Oregon. I repaired fences in the spring, irrigated meadows through the summer, helped harvest hay late summer, and then repaired irrigation ditches.

Nights turned cold. Aspen trees, alder and willow bushes took on fall colors and dropped their leaves. Elk began to bugle.

Meadow fell away to the river running about 150 yards below the house. Across the river, several hundred yards of meadow rose gently to a heavily forested, sharply rising ridge. From that ridge, at dusk, an elk bugled. The wild music and the following deep, grunting sounds echoed through the small mountain valley.

From far south on the ridge, another elk answered. I thought there was a third bugle, so far away I wasn't sure I heard it. It could have been just a memory of the far-carrying, musical, mystical sound echoing through and above the forest, singing of thousands of years of this elk herd's existence in this mountain country, singing of the future of the species.

Often in the spring, summer and fall, elk came down onto the meadow at dusk to browse the lush, irrigated grasses and especially the clover that grew wild in places on the meadow.

The ranch owners encouraged me to keep the elk off the meadow if I could, to preserve the hay crop. In the evening, about seventy elk came down from the timber onto the far edge of the meadow. I started the

motorcycle provided for getting around the ranch and took off. I rode around the barn and down onto the meadow, still half a mile from the elk, and they headed back up the ridge into the timber.

I roared into the timber after them. Up the ridge a ways, I shut off the engine and listened. I didn't hear any elk. I thought they were probably miles away and still on the run. But elk, I was soon to learn, would never make any effort to fit my ideas about them.

I started the motorcycle and rode back down the ridge. The trail runs a ways just inside the timber, parallel to the edge of the meadow. I thought at first my vision was fooling me; we imagine all sorts of things in dim light, but then I realized I was fooling myself. The elk really had returned to the meadow ahead of me.

They cut across in front of me at an easy trot, not a hundred feet away as I rode onto the meadow. They trotted up into the timber, except for two older females, who stood at the edge of the timber and watched me until I was within fifty feet of them; then they followed the herd up the ridge.

I didn't try to run them off the meadow after that. My employers had said keep them off if I could, and one attempt showed me I couldn't. Cattle eat the largest part of the grass and forbs in National Forest, where the elk would eat if they were kept off the meadow. Elk browse through the meadow but leave most of what grows there, so there is hay to feed the cattle through the winter. It seemed only fair to let the elk continue to use the meadow.

When we lived near Baily, Colorado, elk frequently traveled across the ranch, browsing the meadow as they went. One morning at two o'clock, an elk bugled from the meadow, less than a hundred yards below the house. His self-contained wind instrument was in excellent tune, and he gave it a thorough work out, with breaks of only a few minutes.

For about the first hour, I was thrilled that I was close enough to hear every note. By four o'clock, I began to wish he would move up the ridge the other side of the pasture. By five o'clock, I thought of going out on the front deck and yelling at him to knock off the noise.

I was stopped by the knowledge that his tribe laid claim to those mountains and bugled there millennia before pale folk of my ilk moved in. We usurped the land with little thought or consideration. At least I could give him the freedom to sound off from where he stood.

About daylight, all became quiet, and I slept as hard and fast as I could until it was time to get up and go to work.

The next fall, we drove from the continental divide down toward Bailey after dark, on our way home from vacation.

A male elk with an impressive spread of antlers reaching toward the sky, with about a dozen females attending, crossed the highway close enough ahead that I had to stop the car. We rolled down our windows, and I called to him, “Bugle for us. Bugle.”

He did. He faced us, stretched his neck forward, elevated his muzzle, and gave forth a long bugle. Rising and falling tones echoed across the high Rocky Mountains. He punctuated the end of the bugling with deep grunting sounds.

After a moment’s silence, I said, “Thank you.” He and the females walked into the night.

They went their way, into the wild, into the dark night, into the future of their species, and we went ours, down the highway behind headlights, modern people caught up in humankind’s world, but touched deeply by that contact with the wild world, tuned to hope for the future of all our wild companions on this earth, to hope that our human companions would always understand the need and leave room for all the wild species.

Autumn on the Mountains

Leaves of deciduous trees and bushes among the evergreens at six thousand feet in the Sierras where I worked began to turn a hundred shades of colors that spoke to me of autumn coming to the mountains.

I climbed into my sleeping bag. Hours before daylight, I woke, cold. Stars shone bright and cold in the clear sky above me. I wondered if it was worth getting up, digging out my long underwear, putting it on, and climbing back into bed. I decided it wasn’t. I had read that being a little cold was good for a person, and I kept that in mind as I coiled into a ball and went back to sleep.

At daylight, I grabbed my clothes and dressed quickly. I broke the thin layer of ice on my water and cooked my breakfast on a two-burner gas stove, grabbed tools, and walked down the steep slope to continue work where I had left off the day before.

I covered ground methodically, leaving a line of thin cotton string to define where I had worked. I dug out currant and gooseberry bushes (ribes) as I went. The bushes are intermediate hosts for blister rust, which infects and kills sugar pines. Uprooting the ribes bushes stops the blister rust from continuing its life cycles in the pines.

That was years ago. They stopped that kind of work a few years later, and as far as I know, they never started it up again.

But way back then, the Forest Service issued invitations to bid on removing the ribes from areas of twenty acres to a hundred and twenty acres, and we bid and got some of the contracts. The work started when leaves grew on deciduous trees and bushes in the spring and ended when the leaves dropped in the fall.

I had had a crew, but everyone else had gone back down into the Sacramento Valley to go to school.

I wasn't going back to school that fall. I had worked in the mountains three summers, and I found it harder every year to return to densely settled areas and to go through the daily routines of highly-civilized classes. When everyone else left the summer means-to-an-end work behind, I stayed, already beginning to suspect that the work, or more accurately, the mountains and forest where the work took place, was becoming an end in itself for me.

Dogwood leaves turned bright red. Aspen leaves turned yellow. Leaves on the ribes bushes turned red and yellow.

Ribes bushes grew large and densely just below the logging road, around the curve from my camp. I was sure that seeing that scary area of huge bushes had encouraged other bidders to bid high, but I had looked at the rest of the lot, and I saw many acres free of ribes. I kept my price low and got the contract.

I worked in that area an hour or two every morning, splitting the crowns of the bushes with an axe and prying the pieces out with a rabbit-eared pick. Then I hiked down into the steep canyon, where the bushes grew smaller and much farther between.

I worked several acres through the middle of the day. Down in the canyon, with a clear, cold creek running in the bottom, the sun left early. I worked my way back out of the canyon and dug bushes in the heavy concentration until almost dark, then headed for camp.

That was the first time I had been alone for that long. I felt as at home alone on the mountain as I did anywhere in the world. But sometimes, I filled up with deep, uncomfortable longing.

I had given up campfires. I cooked my meals and heated dish-washing water and bath water on my gas stove. Campfires at night restricted my vision to the circle of light cast by the fire. Without a fire, I sometimes saw nocturnal animals, an owl briefly silhouetted against the sky, a flying squirrel gliding from high in one tree to another tree. I always saw the stars or clouds, shifting dark masses across the sky.

I fought the feeling of longing at dusk. I built a fire and sat close to it. It helped, a little. I was short on groceries, so the next morning, I drove twenty-one miles of gravel logging road to town and mingled with my fellow humans. The feeling of longing dulled in the noisy, busy, diurnal activities of acquiring groceries and gasoline, but it wasn't cured.

On my way back to camp, I planned. I needed supplies that would be cheaper in the valley. If I worked full speed daylight to dark two days, then left at dusk, I could spend the morning hours before daylight and all of one day in the valley, while only a few more leaves fell to the ground.

While I was in the valley, I bought enough supplies to last until the end of the job, but the trip and communicating with friends and family, while rewarding, did not much assuage the feeling that resided, hollow and asking for attention, within me.

I returned to the mountains earlier than I had planned. Up in the foothills, I stopped for a drink of water at a spring that had been captured and piped to exit near the road. The sun set. There was no traffic. I stood far above the busy, mechanical sounds of the densely inhabited valley.

Geese flew in an orderly formation above me and spoke among themselves about their plans and destinations and bid goodbye to the valley and the mountains. They were headed south, and then I understood. From deep within me, a voice seemed to say, "Go with them. Fall is upon the land. Spread my wings and fly south with the migrating birds."

I had largely withdrawn from human company for a while. I lived and worked where deciduous trees changed color and dropped their leaves for winter. Animals gorged on the wild autumn harvest, added layers of fat for their winter sleep. Other animals gathered and stored, to have supplies

through the winter, and many of those who did not hibernate or hoard moved to lower elevations, where the winter was milder.

I saw all the preparation around me, and I knew at a level before thought, it was time to prepare for the changing seasons.

Understanding the hollow, lonely feeling inside of me did not completely alleviate it. It did turn it from something that ate at my substance because I didn't know what to do about it, to a creative, driving force that added energy to my day's work. Yes, the seasons are changing. I won't fly south. I won't hibernate, but I am preparing, and leaves that blow past my face in the ever-colder mountain winds tell me, keep moving; five more acres completed today is that much closer to fully prepared.

I shared the mountain and the changing seasons with all the wildlife around me. I shared the urgency, are we ready? I wore long underwear to bed. I wore heavier clothing cold mornings and cold afternoons, and I worked most of the daylight hours until I finished the lot along the gravel logging road and down into the steep canyon.

The lot passed inspection, and the paperwork ground through slow processes until the check emerged and reached me in the valley, where I was ready, with a new dimension added to my life.

I understood and made use of the deep, driving feelings brought to me by the changing season. I had shelter and money for supplies, and I watched the mountains, where I had recently been, turn white as snow piled deep there.

Sprouting Memories

By late August, we knew we would not win out over the mice, voles, ground squirrels, gophers, and an occasional rabbit harvesting the garden. I tried various solutions all summer and gained enough victory that we had lettuce, spinach, a few edible pod peas, green onions, and carrots. When we left for vacation in mid-August, the word got out that the garden was undefended, and when we came back, there was little left to harvest.

Though vegetables fresh from the garden are high on my list of necessities, when it becomes impossible to obtain them, I resort to other methods to obtain fresh, low-cost vegetables for the table.

I went to the cupboard and found some alfalfa seeds. I covered the bottom of a quart jar with the tiny seeds, added water, stirred until the seeds settled to the bottom, and left them to soak overnight. I also put lentils and kidney beans in jars to soak.

My beginnings with sprouting seeds are shrouded in the mists of history, but my attempt to live almost entirely on sprouts is clear in my memory. I planned to travel from California into Oregon to look for land to buy.

My friend, Chip, temporarily unencumbered by a job, asked if he could go along, and I said sure, if he was willing to exist as I planned to exist, with a row of gallon jars across the back seat of the car, with seeds in various stages of sprouting. I planned to have sprouts to eat and little else, in an effort to keep expenses down. Chip was willing to give sprouts a try.

A few pounds of seeds go a long way, since the ready-to-eat sprouts are many times the weight and bulk of the dry seeds. I took along alfalfa seeds, mung beans, pinto beans, two kinds of wheat, garbanzo beans, corn, lentils, and hulled sunflower seeds.

Chip said he had enough money to buy us something different to eat once in a while to break the monotony. I said there wouldn't be any monotony. As long as we maintained the right attitude, that our food was healthy and sufficient, it would be enough. We could live on sprouts and direct our attention toward locating affordable property.

Chip decided to go anyway, filled his wallet as best he could, and stashed a five pound bag of granola somewhere in our luggage.

We soaked seeds overnight, drained them, and then rinsed them twice a day. We ate sprouts five or six times a day as we worked our way north, looking at land as we went.

About the third day, Chip dug out his sack of granola and ate some of it, dry. He was just too hungry to keep going, he said. He offered to share, but I wanted to see if I could keep going on sprouts alone. I had plenty of energy and, other than feeling half hungry all the time, no signs of not having enough food.

Wheat sprouts taste like watermelon and ball up and last like chewing gum. Popcorn sprouts are sweeter than anything else I have ever tasted, too sweet to eat much of, better used as an accent mixed in with other sprouts. Growing in sunlight, sprouts green up nicely.

We outran spring several times and waited for it to move north. Chip said, “We’ve seen spring come four times already. If we keep going north, we’ll see it again. I like seeing spring take over from winter. I’d like to do this every year.”

I learned that I was naive about land prices. The small windfall I had was not enough. I learned that tarps under and over our sleeping bags were sufficient against frost, snow, and rain. We didn’t need a tent.

I learned that we couldn’t get too far ahead of spring, or I’d have to get up in the night once or twice, start the car, and run the heater to keep the sprouts from freezing. I learned that it doesn’t necessarily matter if I achieve the goals I set out to achieve, as long as I find and appreciate the adventures that come my way. I learned that I probably could live on sprouts alone. I would be lean, full of energy, and eating all the time.

Now, years later, I’m not trying to use sprouts alone. I’m including them in our diet so we’ll have high quality, fresh vegetables, and we’ll keep the grocery bills down.

Sprouted kidney beans cook in a few minutes, and they are at least as good as those cooked without sprouting. I use them for chile beans.

All sprouts, but especially those from the larger seeds, are good in any kind of casserole. Sprouted lentils, alfalfa seeds, garbanzo beans, popcorn, and sunflower seeds all make welcome additions to salad. A full plate of almost any kind of sprouts, with some of a favorite dressing, is a very acceptable substitute for a salad made from store-bought vegetables. Sprouts go well in sandwiches.

Everyone in my family participates in sprouting seeds. Rinse and drain. Refrigerate the mature sprouts. Eat. “We have plenty of lentil sprouts. Eat a lot of lentil sprouts today, and we won’t start any for a couple of days.”

“We used to use garbanzo beans. Let’s get garbanzo beans.”

We sprout a variety of seeds and eat them daily. We sprout a variety of memories. We sprout our way through this deep winter toward spring.

Raindancer

I rented a dilapidated house on a farm in the Treasure Valley in eastern Oregon with the agreement that I would work for the rent and for cash

when I was able and when there was work to do.

I planted a garden across the swale from the house. A barn owl roosted in the long-unused milkbarn north of the garden. I tried not to infringe on its privacy. It became accustomed to my nearby activities and continued to use the barn.

I found a killdeer nest at the bottom of the garden, just a scraped-out spot in the grass, with four small, spotted eggs. I avoided that area until the killdeers hatched and, able to meet their own needs much earlier than most birds, ran away into the grass.

Seeds sprouted and grew. Insects ate two cabbages, two spinach plants, and a few lettuce plants. They left plenty for me and for the friends I began to share my garden with. Quail ran through the garden, called softly, and hid from me behind cabbages, corn, and kohlrabi.

I drove tractor to pay the rent. I put a metal holder around my neck, fastened a harmonica into the holder, and blew wild music of my own design as I scored the field with ditches that wobbled from straight in time with my music.

I siphoned water from the ditch at the head of the field into the small ditches I'd formed behind the tractor. The curved aluminum siphon tubes of different sizes became effective wind instruments when I pursed my lips and blew resonant music through them down the field and into the sky

I played my guitar and sang under a big cottonwood tree by the house. A weasel pranced down the dirt driveway, long, low, reddish brown, with a white underside and a black tip on its tail waving jauntily at the sky.

The weasel looked me over as it passed. It ran up the back steps and into the house. I followed. The tiny animal circled each of the four rooms, looked at my sparse furnishings, then passed me in the hall, trotted out the door and down the road. I resumed guitar and song, played a weasel trot, happy and confident about existence.

Reverence for life was part of my healing process. Reverence didn't come to me only by conscious cultivation. Gratitude for my life, for all life, for the Life Force itself and the joy created by that gratitude were gifts given to me as I regained consciousness after I had been injured. That joy ebbed in the hardest times, of pain, of economic difficulty, but it never left me entirely. It knit together my life as rhythm knits together a complex

piece of music, and it became part of the cause of my raindance in the cornfield.

Summer scorched the land. I irrigated corn, but there wasn't enough water to reach the ends of the longest rows. Gary, the owner of the farm came out, and I explained why the ends of the rows stood dry. He said, "We sure do need rain."

I said, "Want me to do a rain dance?" He laughed and said, "Sure. Do a rain dance."

I thought about it after he left. Hopi dance. They believe the universe is a complex, spiritually-driven system, of which man is an integral part. If any part doesn't function correctly, then the entire universe will be out of balance. Man's responsibility is to maintain the complex structures of belief and ritual that recognize, reinforce and revere the creator, all of life, and all the forces that knit together the universe in harmony.

Their dance was not for rain. The dance was to fulfill man's function, reverent performer of rituals in a harmonious universe. In a harmonious universe, rain comes as it is needed.

I thought of the weasel, the owl, quail, great blue heron, deer, the bear, all forms of life that needed rain to ease their survival, and I danced between the corn rows in the dust-dry soil, soft under my bare feet, corn stalks taller than I was.

I walked up and down the corn rows in the stately crane walk. I danced as I had seen sandhill cranes dance. I became a bear, down in the dust in a wallow, a bison in a dust wallow, a ground squirrel inventorying corn, a grouse, a blue dragonfly, a crow, dancing, running, flying, resting, all of them knowing the creator drives the universe in perfect harmony.

I was not Hopi, and I knew none of the rituals. I was not Native American, just awkward, self-conscious, modern man, but as I danced, I thought of life and the earth dry beneath my feet, and the creator of everything, and all limiting consciousness fell away from me. I became simply a man alone before God, trying to fulfill man's potential and man's responsibility.

I danced deep into reverence and gratitude for life, for all of life, for the Life Force.

Clouds gathered dark above the valley, and rain poured down. I knelt in dust turning to mud, and I sang and laughed in gratitude for the pouring

rain. I walked back to the house, scraped mud from my feet, and went inside.

All night long, I listened to heavy rain drumming on the roof, and I smiled and laughed out loud.

Several days later, when Gary came out and said, “That rain sure put things in shape,” I said, “I danced for rain.”

He looked at me and laughed.

Then I laughed.

I didn’t laugh away anything that had happened. I laughed at the absurdity of modern man’s scientific concept of the universe, a mechanistic universe of chance and chaos, where love, reverence, and responsibility for all life, where worship and rituals for holiness are no longer understood. Modern man has discarded as superstition prayer, ritual, and belief in the holiness of all life and of every force in the universe. We have discarded the largest part of our spiritual power.

I laughed at my own naivete. Alone in the days after the storm, I had forgotten that, if I had changed the way I saw the universe and acted in the universe, that did not mean anyone else had changed.

The modern world still existed, just as it had before my dance in the cornfield, ready with the challenge, “Wouldn’t it have rained even if you hadn’t danced?”

Sourdough

I was busy, so the jar of sourdough starter Nancy brought stayed in the refrigerator almost two weeks. Starter left too long will rot, but when I took the cap off, it smelled like good, very sour starter, so I mixed flour and water for bread and stirred about two thirds of the starter into it. I added flour and water to the remaining starter to give it something to work on. I put the renewed starter in the refrigerator and left the mixed flour, water, and starter on the kitchen counter to work.

When I was a child, my family used to go to visit my mother’s parents on the mining claim where they lived, near Jacksonville, Oregon.

They kept their food cool in a spring house. My grandmother and grandfather dug dirt and rock from the hill with pick and shovel and

wheelbarrowed it to a wooden long tom and worked it with water from the creek. They took out enough gold to provide them a small amount of cash and legal rights to their claim.

Grandpa baked sourdough biscuits. They were light, fluffy, and delicious, without a trace of sourness. I didn't understand then that sourdough starter can be used sparingly as leavening without imparting a sour flavor.

Because sourdough starter can provide leavening with nothing needed but careful attention and flour and water added periodically, cooks carried it in their chuck wagons through cattle drives. Miners used sourdough starter. Where yeast was hard to get and keep and cooks wanted leavened bread, there was sourdough starter.

But sourdough starter can also be used to make the bread taste sour, and that is what I achieved twenty years ago, when I worked with it on Nimshew Ridge.

Joe brought me a small jar of starter. A friend brought it to him from a starter that had been kept going in Alaska for more than fifty years. Joe said he didn't want to use it, but he didn't want it to go to waste.

I didn't know what to do with it from experience, but the brief instructions Joe had received made sense to me, "mix it with flour and water and keep adding flour and water to the starter," so I took it and started making bread. I like very sour bread, so that's what I aimed for.

My nose was my guide. I quickly learned that the flour and water mix that will be used as leavening has to be more liquid than bread dough or it will rise before it sours, expand out of its container, onto the table, over the edge, onto the floor, and it is very hard to clean up. Flour and water makes an effective paste. If it is slightly sour, it doesn't inhibit its adhesive quality.

So the mix had to be just fluid enough that bubbles would rise through it. When it smelled sour enough, I set part of it aside for future starter, added flour to the rest of it until it was kneadable, kept adding flour until I could knead it without sticking to it, shaped it into a loaf, let it rise, and baked it in the oven of my wood-fired stove. Very good. Very sour.

The next lesson I learned was, if bread is left rising in the house, be sure the doors are tightly shut.

Friends came for a visit, and we went for a hike up the ridge. My dog, King Edward, followed his nose through a door left slightly ajar and ate

both rising loaves. When we came back, we couldn't figure out what was the matter with him. He seemed quite happy, without pain, but he could hardly walk. He staggered, fell, dragged himself along with his front legs, worked at it a long time to stand, and fell again.

I took him to the vet, and the vet said, "This is a drunk dog."

I hadn't realized alcohol was part of the sourdough process, but the vet assured me that it is, though it evaporates during baking. Edward slept off his binge, and I started another batch of bread.

I moved to the cabin by the reservoir in early summer. Baking inside made the house unbearably hot, so I dug into a bank above the cabin, set in a twenty-gallon, steel drum, covered it with two feet of dirt, with an exhaust pipe coming up from the back and a sliding asbestos door in front, bricks on the bottom to level it, and I had an earth oven.

I built a hot fire inside the oven, let it burn about half an hour, raked out the coals and ashes, capped the pipe and covered the cap with dirt, put bread dough into the oven, and slid the door down. I waited about forty-five minutes, opened the oven, and took out beautiful loaves of bread.

I made sourdough rye, white, and whole-wheat bread. I brushed egg whites on the loaves and had a glazed, golden crust. I brushed on butter and had a softer, golden crust. I added food yeast to my dough, oatmeal, finely ground cornmeal, bran, wheat germ, anything that seemed like it would work, and everything I baked was delicious.

The whole-grain flours made dense, heavy bread, but I liked that quite well, as did most of the people who tried it. I winnowed out fans of light, fluffy bread and didn't give them a second helping.

Bread became a major part of my diet and of the diet of my most frequent visitors. I had no refrigeration, so I had to keep producing a lot of bread to keep the starter from souring.

Then I got hit by a drunk driver and didn't get back to the cabin for more than a month. By then, the starter had rotted.

I've had a few short involvements with sourdough since then. Sometimes, I've developed a starter just by mixing flour and water and letting it stand. Here again, my nose is my guide. If it develops a sour smell without smelling like rot, it's good.

But it's been years since I've done anything, and I don't remember all of it, so now it's a process of jogging my memory and experimenting again.

The first loaves of white bread were popular with my wife and daughters. The second batch, a loaf of white and a loaf of whole wheat, went rapidly. I tried half barley flour and half white the next time. We ate it, but it wasn't as popular, a little too sweet.

We haven't been able to get rye flour at local stores. I mean to speak to the managers. Meanwhile, a bowl of whole wheat and a bowl of white sour on the mantel.

Sourness is a function of time and temperature. The more of either, the sourer, though too long or too warm will over proof. The starter will die and the bread won't rise. I mean to find out more about starters. I'd like to know if the fifty-year-old Alaskan starter was any different from what I have now. I'll see what I can find at the library.

Meanwhile, primary research, in the jar, in the bowl, in the oven, through the sense of smell, over the taste buds proceeds full speed.

Quiet People in a Noisy World

When we managed Tomahawk Girl Scout camp, I had Tuesdays off. I wrote at the dining area table while Mike, a young man who worked on fireplaces, glued blue tiles onto the hearth, along the sides of the fireplace and over the mantel I'd built. The sound of my pencil leaving words on the page, the clink and scrape of tile, and the occasional sharper sound as Mike cut tile to fit his work were the only sounds.

After more than an hour, he put aside his work and stood up. He said, "This could be the longest quiet time I've ever spent in my life. I always have the TV going, or the radio. When I work outside, I pull the van up close and open the doors and let the music blast out of there. I'm going to have to do this more often. I like it." He went back to work, quietly. So did I.

Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I live quietly. We make our own sounds without reservation, including music from instruments and voices, but we employ no electrically-driven background sounds. We have a television set, because someone who had excess and was alarmed that we had none gave it to us, but it never comes out of the closet.

We own a radio and tape deck. Some early mornings, we listen briefly to the radio, to see if the school Juniper attends will close because of snow. If we play a tape, we listen to it. We don't use it as background to our other activities. It becomes our activity.

For eight and a half years, we lived in Whitney Valley, with no close neighbors, no electricity, and little sound from traffic. Our thinly-insulated house let in the sounds of nature; a chorus of hundreds of frogs in spring, bird songs, elk whistling; during mating season, the bull elk bugling, coyote serenades, wind, thunder, rain on the metal roof; and we listened. We had a battery powered tape deck, so we could listen to music, but when we did, it became our point of concentration.

When we moved to better-insulated houses, supplied with electricity, we didn't change our habits concerning sound much. We still lived away from busy cities and traffic, so we opened windows, weather permitting, and let the outdoor sounds in.

The car we bought, more than two years ago, has a radio. I thought it didn't work. One day, I drove about Fort Collins, Colorado, the city nearest us, filling various needs. When I left the Mini Mart after buying gasoline, the radio began to play some music for me.

I was surprised and momentarily pleased. I turned the knob and found more than a dozen stations with people talking and with various kinds of music. None of it interested me much, so I shut the radio off.

When I got home, I told Laura, "The radio started working after I bought gas today."

She said, "It always has worked. Nobody ever turns it on, because nobody cares about listening to it."

It takes about an hour to drive from our home on the mountain to Fort Collins. Several times since the day I discovered the radio worked, I've turned it on as I drove down the winding road. The longest I've left it on has been less than ten minutes.

Were I talking with the people or hearing the music live, I would be more interested, but I don't participate with what comes over the radio. The engine running, tires on the pavement, the sound of the heater fan require no concentration from me, and I am satisfied with my own thoughts or my own singing.

On a warm afternoon in Fort Collins, I rolled the window down. Pedestrians waited for the light to change and tell them they could cross as I stopped.

I was doing rather well, I thought, singing “Glory, glory hallelujah, His truth goes marching on,” when I looked at the pedestrians. I don’t think I imagined several of them looking at me with some incredulity.

I kept singing, working some to avoid having self consciousness at the unexpected audience cause me to slip off key or into diminished volume. That song requires full voice more than many do.

Singing for our own enjoyment may be unusual. Thus, dozens of cars at stoplights, with music machines turned up loud enough to shake the pavement and rattle the traffic lights, cause not a second thought, but a man building his own music with his own voice stands out from the norm, for better or for worse.

The light shone green, and I drove again, still singing and still thinking. Most stores I go into have music playing or voices, electrically reproduced, talking. Anyone singing should be as valid as music coming over speakers. Were I self confident enough, I would continue singing as I disembark from the auto, cross the parking lot, and shop in the store.

I am not that self confident. My voice fades to a whisper halfway across the parking lot and gives way to nothing but breathing as I enter the store. At the same time, a young woman carrying a “boom box” across the parking lot plays raucous music at high volume without a trace of self consciousness and without turning anyone’s head.

That’s all right. I’m seldom in town. If I were in town more, if it were more a part of my life, I might want to attempt to bring about some changes in the world around me and in me. For now, I’ll accept the ways it seems to work.

I’ll sing in the car, because it is, at times, my habitation. I’ll sing at home, in the garden, even at a declared performance, when the audience has consented to be an audience.

One day, I may be able to overcome self consciousness, because I know any living voice should have as much right to be heard as music coming over speakers, but that time is not quite yet.

Culture Shock

Because we lived away from most people, taking care of ranches, and because we didn't watch television, Juniper and Amanda were not much acquainted with their peers or with attitudes prevalent in the culture.

They stepped into the midst of the culture and into the midst of their peers by age when they started public school, Amanda as a sophomore in high school and Juniper as a junior. They rode the bus more than an hour each morning and evening.

The bus drivers devoted their primary attention to driving. The students, in close contact with each other, had very little supervision.

Amanda and Juniper said that, except for them, the girls on the bus accepted harassment from the boys. Amanda said, "They liked the attention. They agreed with what the boys said, Yeah, I'm fat. Yeah, I'm dumb.'"

A boy put his arm around Amanda and said, "Hi sweetheart. I really like redheads."

She stamped on his foot. He let go of her. Amanda told him, "If you ever do that again, I'm going to deck you." He left her alone after that.

Two boys in a seat behind Juniper and Amanda pulled Amanda's hair. Juniper turned around and slugged them. They didn't bother Amanda again.

Amanda's and Juniper's reactions to sexual harassment were effective. I could not advise my daughters not to react with violence. I will never be where they were, needing to deal with sexual harassment quickly and to the best of their ability to avoid escalation into more serious sexual harassment or into violence against them. I support their decisions and actions to protect themselves.

After those first encounters, Amanda and Juniper were largely left out of interactions among students on the bus. They sat in the seat directly behind the driver, because discipline waned as the distance from the driver increased. One driver put boys on one side and girls on the other, which reduced the problems but did not completely solve them.

Gender stereotyping and actions based on stereotyping disturbed Juniper and Amanda and permeated classrooms, halls, and gymnasiums. They said most of the girls seemed to accept most of the stereotyping.

Adults at the school also often acted on gender stereotypes. Often, teachers expected boys to lead classroom discussion, and girls allowed that pattern to exist.

"In Physical Education class," Juniper said, "the boys say, Stand up close and throw the ball easy. She's a girl.' If they have to hit the ball, or throw any distance, the girls say, I'm just a girl. I can't do that.'"

Juniper asked, "How can girls learn to be the best they can be if they give up before they start and if they're encouraged to give up by everyone else's reduced expectations?"

Amanda and Juniper found it particularly offensive that the function of the two sexes for each other in this culture is seen to be romantic love, so that "mere" friendship between a boy and a girl is nearly impossible.

Juniper started to develop a friendship with a boy, but comments from fellow students about "Your girlfriend" scared the boy off, and the friendship died.

In their home schooling, in our lives together, from our religious teachings, Amanda and Juniper had learned that all humans are worthy of respect, with equal power and equal treatment, from the government, from other humans, before God.

Our friends, male or female, young or older, treated our daughters with respect. Since Laura and I treated them as equal human beings, our friends also treated them as equal. People who didn't accept them as equal weren't usually our friends for long, because an approach that excluded children from adult occupations and conversations meant we tended to share little common ground.

From their reading, and from what they saw and heard of the world around them as they grew up, our daughters knew our approach to living, to each other, to education, and to gender was in many ways not typical of the culture, but experiencing the difference on the bus and at school startled them.

They knew the students around them were not completely responsible for what they believed and acted out. They act as they are taught to act. They reflect the culture. If television and movies show a crippled, limited relationship between the sexes, and if the students watch television and movies, they will act out what they have learned.

If parents and friends live, communicate, and act in ways that express less value for females than for males, except as possible partners in romantic love, then the students will also express less value and respect for females until something stops them and makes them think through what they live, communicate, and act out.

Juniper and Amanda expected peer pressure to attempt to push them toward change, and they started their public schooling with determination to maintain their values and their individuality.

They adapted well to the world as it came at them and as they approached it. They did maintain their values and their individuality.

Amanda returned to home schooling midyear, but sexism around her played only a small part in her decision. Her loss of time to pursue her own interests and her own education meant most to her.

She returned to public school her senior year, and she did well academically and socially. She had several excellent teachers, including a woman who had overcome many gender stereotypes in her own career and taught her students as intelligent individuals.

Amanda graduated from public school. She thought that year was time well invested and excellent preparation for college.

While Amanda completed her sophomore year at home, Juniper completed her junior year in public school. She skipped her senior year and started college. While she attended the nearby college and commuted, during a vacation, when the campus was nearly deserted and Juniper was home, an unidentified man raped a student.

I read about the rape in the newspaper, and I called the college and checked all security procedures on campus. Juniper and I together covered details of existence like requesting an escort around campus after dark, checking the inside of her car before she got in, and other common sense practices for safety in a sometimes dangerous world.

When Juniper and Amanda and I looked in the library for Naomi Wolf's book, *The Beauty Myth*, an important study of the position of women in our male dominated consumer culture, we also found *Back Off*, by Martha J. Langelan, a book about effective techniques to end sexual harassment, from verbal harassment to attempted rape. I ordered two copies from the book store and sent them to Juniper and Amanda after they returned to college in Illinois.

The book does not immediately solve all problems. But now that book circulates on campus. From the book and from many other sources, awareness among the students about their right to be free of negative influences from the culture grows.

On the small, conservative campus where Amanda and Juniper attend college, students have a Sexual Harassment Education Committee that meets weekly, circulates printed material, and operates a hot line on campus.

Awareness that women need not allow any degree of sexual harassment and that boys and men do a serious disservice to women and to themselves when they participate in any form of harassment increases on campus. Amanda tells me her male friends have given her some of the most sensible advice and staunch support in dealing with sexual harassment.

Despite what many of the students see as lack of support from the administration and an unwillingness to admit there is ever a problem, students have formed a women's rape support group on campus.

Our daughters pursue their education. They participate in a surge of awareness of problems in the culture and problems in the institutions of education. By their activities, by their pursuit of education, by their participation in the dissemination of information about the problems they and other students around them see, they attempt to reduce the severity of those problems. They see progress, and through them, I see progress in increasing awareness of problems, and in starting to solve some of those problems.

They also pursue extra curricular activities, maintain high grades, develop friendships, and pursue their own creative desires.

The question that so often concerned Laura, "Are we doing okay at our daughters' education and at raising them?" seems to have a clear answer. They have become adults, and they walk in good directions, with strong, positive values. They have some positive influence on the world around them, and that is what education is about, and that is what life is about, and that is what love is about.

Now we can say, "Yes. We did okay with education and with life and with love. Now let us celebrate the work we achieved together, the life we have lived and continue to live and the love we built that spreads around us and still continues.

Owl Magic

by Amanda Rose Remmerde

The summer we found the owl feather
that floated down the river
softly whirling in the water

was the same summer we heard the owl
calling in a tall pine at night
and in the dark saw it spread great grey wings

and drift to a dark tree
softly like the feather
while in the night we tried the sound
the sound so soft and big and round
saying Owl, Owl, Owl.

Thunder

by Amanda Rose Remmerde

When the Mother of All Things
stirs from her dreaming
after rips rending
the wide leaden sky
to let down the rain
on a ladder of spiderwebs

Then men may wonder
and in fear may say
whether it is drums for dancing
or whether it is birds beating broad wings
But it is only the Mother of All Things
who stirs from her dreaming.

Response to my Aunt upon Being Asked to Shut the Door

by Juniper C. Remmerde

Was I born in a barn?
No, Aunt Sharon,
but I was raised in one.
You know that barn in Whitney Valley? Well,
from the time I was four to the time I was thirteen,
everybody lived there-- our pinto pony,
our collection of coyote skulls and deer joints
in the loft “museum,”
and our mental crowd of friends,
and my red-haired sister, and me.

At least fifty friends lived in the barn.
None of them were children.
Some friends were racehorses.
Some were kings, some wizards,
one was a tall, laughing cowboy named Jim.
The ranchers built the barn a hundred years ago.
It could house a hundred horses, maybe two hundred,
but now most of them were imaginary horses.

In the winters, the huge roof dipped inward
because in northeast Oregon, the icicles reach to the ground,
and the snow gets five feet deep.
In the summer I climbed up to the rafters
which were made of hundred-year-old trees.

The barn was sometimes a barn,
but usually it was a racing stable or a castle.
One winter it was a dungeon.
The prince crawled through the stalls,
and tried to escape by climbing up a hay-chute.

He had dressed in rags as a barefoot beggar
because he didn't want to become king.
The barn was a starship one fall.
Officers and aliens spilled out the big double doors
into the hay meadow.

In winter once, when the snow came up to my shoulder,
I lived in the barn all day, on a large hay bale.
I read a book in the half-light and ate cheese sandwiches
and green apples that felt cold when I bit into them.
My dad approved my experiment
in independent living in sub-zero weather.

But later in the day, he sauntered to the barnyard,
ostensibly to cut wood.
He talked about the mountains,
and we threw some hay on the snow for the pinto pony.

I was nine years old then. Now I am twenty.
I am going back someday. I plan to live there
when I am a hundred years old.
I think my sister is secretly planning to live there, too.
I imagine hobbling back to the meadow.
After a lifetime, I would again
push open the huge double doors,
and creep into the barn with a joyful cackle.
Suddenly, I would hear someone else laugh,
and see another old woman run toward me.
Her hair still would be faintly red.

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