

Camping Without Fire and Without Camera

Night settled. A great horned owl soared down Coalpit Mountain. Silent on its wings, it flew a wide circle above my camp and looked down at me where I sat leaning against a rock between two juniper trees. Soft smells of a soft night, as flowers closed to sleep in darkness, soil rested, and animals moved toward darker existence came to me in air moving in coolness slowly down the mountain.

I said, "Hey owl, how you doing? Stop and visit."

The owl landed in the juniper tree at the top of the bluff and settled its wings. It looked toward me, then down the slope falling away from camp.

The moon rose. The tree and the owl stood silhouetted against the huge golden moon above black stone mountains. The owl turned its head left, right, down, scanned the area, then flew from the tree and hunted down the mountain, quiet as bright moonlight.

I'd been working toward finding a way to live without becoming part of the industrial culture, without contributing heavily to damaging the world, when a drunk driver hit me and severely injured me as I rode a motorcycle back from Oregon into California.

Six months after the wreck, an orthopedic surgeon cut away the last in a series of casts that had bound me from hip to toe on my left leg.

Warming weather encouraged green incursions of spring into the valley's hard winter then started up the mountains.

I withdrew from places where hard surfaces dominated everywhere I could walk, withdrew to minimal involvement with the part of man's industrial world that did the most damage to the world.

I camped on Coalpit Mountain in eastern Oregon, rebuilt strength and stamina and learned to walk again. I found softer surfaces of dirt and organic materials decomposing to dirt on the mountain and walked. I found freedom from self consciousness about clumsiness that came from a partially

destroyed sense of balance and from my weak left leg. Clumsiness bothered me in cities, on unyielding sidewalks where other people watched me struggle to learn walk again.

I found physical healing on Coalpit Mountain. I found spiritual healing, a more complete vision of my role in the universe, a more complete vision of man's role in the universe, a more complete realization that we are not alone, that we share life with other species, with people who are different from us, with the earth itself, and I found a more complete realization that sharing life can come to us in harmony and joy.

I had a good camera in my camp. I didn't try to get it when the owl came to visit. I already knew the camera would stay in its waterproof, padded packing all the time I was on the mountain.

Images are important to me, but I didn't want anything between me and what I experienced. The image of the owl, every image of the summer would exist in my mind, in my memories.

I left campfires behind when I worked in the forests of northern California several years earlier. I started cooking on a gas stove in a dry season, and I never went back to using campfires. Without a fire, I saw the night, the owl, bright stars, the moon. I saw a flying squirrel glide from tree to tree, silhouetted against the lighter sky. I heard wildlife moving closer to me because of my willingness to blend more into the forest. When I no longer focused on a fire at the center of my camp, stars and moon provided light enough to walk at night, and I often did.

Early in August on Coalpit Mountain, thunder rumbled. I climbed the highest rock above the bluff. Sun above western mountains shone under clouds and turned mist hanging between mountain and clouds soft orange, then pink, then pastel blue. The sun set.

Lightning and thunder shook the mountain under my feet. Heavy rain blew down the mountain and soaked me on my rock bluff. Lightning lit up everything around me with brilliant, blue light. Thunder nearly deafened me. I knew the danger of a high place during a lightning storm, but I stood above the granite bluff as the storm marched down the mountain.

I didn't defy natural forces nor dare death. I celebrated love

of life, love of natural forces around me. I celebrated the numinous power of the mountain in the way people in pre-industrial cultures sometimes faced potentially deadly natural forces and, through their understanding of and reverence for the Life Force, overcame danger. I found healing on the mountain, from physical injuries, from losing awareness of and attunement to the world around me and all the untamed species who inhabited it.

I danced, shouted, and sang with lightning, thunder, and rain, with the power of the storm. Lightning and thunder blew away north. I walked down to my camp and changed into dry clothing. I slept in my tent that night, out of the rain. I had free use of Coalpit Mountain all summer, like the owl, like the deer and elk, like the coyotes, like lightning and thunder.

I healed on the mountain. I became aware of life, love and respect all life to a depth I otherwise wouldn't have achieved.

I walked without limping, without pain. I ran. Healing continued. Faith in the powerful positive force of life continued when I left Coalpit Mountain.

I recognized even more than I had before that humans are part of all life, part of the Life Force that the great horned owl is part of, the flying squirrel is part of, the juniper tree, the vole the owl hunts. Life force heals, opens us to spiritual depths we can't find without respect and reverence for all life, recognition that every form of life is an inseparable part of life.