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A Waterfall in Our Backyard

John Rouse, the owner of the ranch we took care of in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, died. The people who handled his estate laid off most of the crew, including me. 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 packed into a pickup truck with sideboards and a car.

Whitney Valley had been Amanda's and Juniper's home most of their lives. They were 10 and 12 when we left Whitney Valley, and they were ready for the next step in their adventure of living. They walked around our part of Whitney Valley and said good bye to the barn, to ever-happy land, where the grass stayed green and lush all summer, to our 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 home for all of us for 8 ½ years. It had been good for all of us. We weren't in a rush to leave.

Eventually, we finished saying goodbye to Whitney Valley and 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. Juniper and Amanda helped unload, explored the house and some of the mountain around the house and returned to help unload everything into the house. With clean sheets on all our beds and showers all around, we settled for the night.

The ninety-seven foot waterfall in our 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 ninety-seven feet straight down through open air before it hit solid stone that gave it passage 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 falling water penetrated the well-insulated house. I lay awake hearing it and allowing it to occupy my senses until I couldn't sleep.

I couldn't make the waterfall sound 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 most of the next day looking at and listening to the waterfall from different places, trying to understand the waterfall, trying to accept it as part of my existence, part of myself.

The next night, I slept.

The waterfall fascinated all of us. Winter brought cold weather and shaded the waterfall from most of the day's sunshine. Day by winter day, frozen night after frozen night, spray from falling water froze on ice already formed. Ice climbed higher and higher in front of falling water and stood white from wall to wall of Tumalo Fall's 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 adventure could wait quite a while.

Mist froze on growing ice until solid ice stood in front of falling water and reached two thirds of the way up the waterfall, connecting the sides of the channel down which water fell.

The days and nights warmed in preparation for spring. Ice, hiding more than sixty feet of the waterfall, began to melt and gradually retreated lower and lower in front of falling water. Sun warmed the earth. More and more snow melted away. The remnant of ice in front of falling water, melted to less than twenty feet in height, fell away into the pool beneath the waterfall, and left the falling water clear.

Suggestions of new life of spring touched the mountain. Willows along the stream put forth the first buds of optimism that would become leaves. By then, I left the window of the upstairs loft, where Laura and I slept, open a little even on the coldest nights. Sound of the waterfall roared through the loft and washed into corners of our house. The sound of water falling toward the ocean for millennia soothed me despite all the new, man made electrical sounds of the house, and every night, I slept.

All of us, Amanda, Juniper, Laura, and I learned, about waterfalls, about wildlife, about all of life around us and moved steadily, confidently through each day toward our future.