

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Walt McLaughlin
Alone in the Wild

Siamese Ponds Wilderness is calling my name. For months I have been reading and ruminating about nature and reality, trying to wrap my brain around that which is absolutely true about the world. Now it's time to set the books aside and go into the woods for a different take on things. I toss a loaded backpack onto the back seat of my car then head for the southern Adirondacks – a three-hour drive from my home in northern Vermont. A little after noon, I'm signing into a trailhead register. There is only one other car in the parking lot. That's a good sign. I don't venture into the woods to socialize.

My trekking poles click against the rocks as the trail slowly rises into a wooded notch on the shoulder of Eleventh Mountain. The mid-July heat has me sweating in no time. A few black flies and mosquitos show up to steal a little blood from me if they can. The gradual descent on the other side of the notch is relatively easy. Soon I am fording Diamond Brook and making my way deeper into the wilderness as the trail hugs the East Branch of the Sacandaga River. This is easy hiking. And it's a good day to be alone in the forest.

I maintain a brisk pace, occasionally stopping to drink water, catch my breath and look around. The miles slip away quickly, or so it seems. Soon I am standing in front of a lean-to just a few yards away from a footbridge spanning the river. Thunder in the distance, hmm... After a long break, I cross the bridge then follow a narrowing trail going steadily uphill towards the Siamese Ponds. One of the scattered storms in the area catches me half a mile from Lower Siamese Pond, soaking me to the skin. Since my t-shirt is already soaked with sweat, I welcome the rain. It keeps the bugs down.

The rain stops right before I reach the pond. A loon calls out shortly after my arrival. Looks like I have the place all to myself – just the loon and me that is. While pumping water to fill my bottles, I see a flash of red on a rocky outcropping a quarter mile away. Is that a person? Without binoculars, I can't say for sure. But it doesn't make a whole lot of difference if it is. I'm here, and they are way over there.

I backtrack to a worn campsite a hundred yards away from the pond then bushwhack beyond it to a small clearing in the forest understory. If another party comes along, they won't disturb me here. They won't see me, either. I drop my pack and set up the old tent that I used during a trip to Alaska long ago. I usually sleep under a tarp when I backpack, but with storms in the forecast I have opted for better protection this time. I strip off the wet shirt then put on a dry one. I clear out a small campfire ring that someone left behind. Gathering wood is easy, but it's still soaking wet from the recent downpour. No matter. I strip off the bark of each stick and that makes all the difference. I have a small fire going less than an hour later. Fixing dinner is no harder than boiling a quart of water for ramen noodles and tea.

Hikers are not supposed to go alone into the wild. All the literature preaches against it, and rightly so. As Gary Snyder warned us in *The*

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Practice of the Wild: “The wilderness can be a ferocious teacher, rapidly stripping down the inexperienced or the careless.” I get this. It’s best to have someone with you when misfortune strikes in the wild, especially if you are injured. This is why I can’t with good conscience recommend hiking alone. Yet I do it all the time. I do it because wilderness solitude gives me something I can’t get any other way. Call it a fresh outlook – a different, much-needed perspective on things. The deep calm that comes to me when I’m alone in the woods enables me to see things as they really are. No distraction. No filter. As a natural philosopher, now in my advanced years, I find this to be the only way I can make sense of the world.

Back in the early 90s, I had a bush pilot drop me into the wilds of Southeast Alaska. There I stayed for two weeks, completely alone. Didn’t run into another human being the entire time I was out there. Plenty of bears, moose and eagles, though. And bush planes flying overhead. That was company enough. It was a spiritual journey of sorts, for I had wanted to confront my Maker in the Alaskan wilderness or die trying. I soon learned that I would simply die trying. Upon realizing that, I slipped into sync with the wild instead, taking good care of myself so that I could exit the bush in one piece. Again, going alone into the wild isn’t something I would recommend. All the same, I’m glad I did so then and am doing so now. This is the only way I can escape my own elaborate illusions about What-Is.

After dinner I walk back down to the pond. I kneel on a flat stone along the water’s edge to splash a little water on my face. No loon in sight. A veery sings at dusk, followed by an eerie quiet. Dark clouds roll eastward along the northern horizon. I groove on the great wild silence as the last bit of twilight fades away. This afternoon while I was hiking, I brooded about the claim made by Idealist philosophers and some theologians that reality transcends nature. But now, immersed in the wild with water dripping from my beard, that concept seems laughable. What am I if not something real in a real world – a figment of my own imagination? This world is all that I can know, all that I can experience. Everything else is abstract, removed from reality.

I return to my camp and settle in for the night. Barred owls hoot back and forth through the darkness. I sleep fitfully at first – my body still aching from the hike. The loon calls out all night long.

First thing in the morning, I go back down to the pond’s edge to splash water in my face. Afterward I sit on a rock, half-expecting some flash of insight. But no insight is forthcoming. Instead, I think about nothing, nothing at all. It’s a partly cloudy day with a huge thunderhead in the northwest. There’s a loon way out on the water, cruising along... Snapping out of my reverie, I say out loud: “I love the Adirondacks!” Then I laugh at myself. When am I going to get it through my thick skull that *thinking* is not what being out here is all about? The naturalist John Burroughs once said: “A man who cannot dream with his eyes open had better not court solitude.” Yes, indeed. That’s what it’s all about when I’m out here alone: dreaming with my eyes wide open. Thinking is what I’ll do later when I return home.

Breakfast is a long, leisurely affair. Once I’m good and ready, I break camp and slowly, ever so slowly, walk six miles back to the car. Chip-

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munks chatter in the surrounding forest. Deer flies try to have their way with me but I swat them the moment they land on the crown of my head. Red efts appear on the trail. I step over them. I stop a couple times during the hike to watch the river meandering along at its lazy, low water, mid-summer pace. Wildflowers pop up that I didn't see yesterday, as do the tracks of wild animals. A waterthrush calls out, then a wood thrush, then a chickadee. A raptor of some sort glides through the forest so fast that I can't identify it. The wild is full of surprises.

"God does not direct the universe, he underlies it." Annie Dillard wrote in her book, *For the Time Being*. That makes sense to me. It makes sense every time I walk alone through the woods for a couple days with a pack tugging at my shoulders. It makes so much sense that I've become something of a pantheist in my old age, seeing God in rugged mountains, quiet ponds, rushing streams, and the sprawling forest all around me. How foolish I was thirty years ago, when I went all the way to Alaska to confront my Maker. Nature is everywhere, and what is absolutely true about it there is just as true here. Are God and nature one in the same? I don't know. What I do know is that every time I go alone into the wild, I feel closer to God. And that is reason enough to do so.