

As many of you know I work for Three Rivers Park District and a couple years ago I was asked to provide some comments as part of the Earth Day service. I spoke about how staying in touch with Nature was good for the soul. My comments on a sense of place this morning may be considered a variation on that same theme.

As part of my comments that I shared two years ago I my background as a way of giving context to my career direction. I need to do the same this morning because where I've come from has to a large degree contributed to the opinions that I am sharing this morning.

I grew up on a small dairy farm in Pennsylvania. My parents were sharecroppers which meant that we farmed the croplands on 4 adjoining farms to support the dairy operation on the 109 acre farm where we lived in a rented house. I grew up in the 50's and I don't know if it is that fact or that I grew up on a farm, or the fact that my wife is younger and grew up in the suburbs, some conspiracy of these and other factors but when I share stories of my childhood, my son Zack tells me that it sounds like I stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting....so my apologies in advance if this just a little too Americana for your taste.

I frequently tell people that I had a privileged upbringing....not because we were wealthy because we weren't. But I was privileged to grow up in an environment that was in direct contact with many parts of the natural world. I have made the comment that I could jump off the backporch step, vault the pasture fence and before the screen door slammed I could be immersed in the woods and wetlands of the farm. All the life and death drama of nature was played out all around me 24/7. It was a rich learning lab that was mine for the taking.

One of my earliest memories is that of a summer day when I was 4 or 5 years old. I remember waking up, looking out my bedroom window and seeing my grandfather with a wide-brimmed straw hat digging thistles out in the meadow. I remember spending the morning tagging along with him as he tried to rid the pasture of thistles. What made the day memorable for me was the worm-collecting that accompanied each thistle removal. My grandfather gave me a can with a handful of soil in it. As we worked our way across the pasture the can began to fill with nice big earthworms and when we stopped for lunch we had enough for an afternoon of fishing. I don't know whether this was the first time I had ever gone fishing but I have an indelible memory of sitting on a stump at the wooded edge of the farm pond, leaning back into my grandfather and every now and then reeling in a bluegill. Truthfully I don't know if I caught any of the fish but I remember feeling very much a part of the parade back to the house, and I remember watching my grandfather cleaning and scaling the fish and I remember my mother cooking them for supper. And I can tell you just about every detail of the spot where this wonderful day unfolded for me. I lived on this farm until I was 16 and over the years I learned a lot of things about this place. I learned that the

stump I fished from had been a great American chestnut tree that had died years before when the chestnut blight swept across the country and eliminated these majestic trees from North American forests. I knew that the water that flowed out of the pond flowed westward in a small stream that joined a larger one, which joined the Big Elk Creek and eventually emptied into the Chesapeake Bay. I knew that the bottomland next to the stream was a place where you could reliably find Indian arrowheads if you walked the fields before the corn got too high. I knew where to find wild raspberries, blackberries, wineberries and in the fall Fox grapes. In fact for a few years I saw myself as the protector, harvester and quantifier of all of nature's bounty produced on the fencelines and woodlots of that farm. I kept records of how many quarts of berries were picked at each location. By the time we moved away, when I was 16, this farm and woods had provided me with the bulk of my natural history knowledge, numerous school science projects and set me on a path that ultimately turned into a career direction.

My knowledge of the home farm was extensive but my attachment to the place went beyond what I knew. It had more to do with what I felt. It wasn't so much that I thought that I was an integral part of the web of life. It was more that I felt that I knew so much about what was happening there that I had a truer appreciation or an extraordinary ability to not interfere with the natural order of things. I developed a reverence for all that happened there and in my own adolescent way I considered that place sacred.

It was years later when I was working as an interpretive naturalist that I first came upon the phrase "a sense of place". It was being used to describe having a comprehensive knowledge of a place. It was in a professional environmental education journal and the writer went to great lengths to identify all the physical parameters that one should know in order to truly know a place. And to some people this is what a "sense of place represents".... Now I'd like to take you through an exercise to see how well you have developed a sense of place for one of your favorite places. Picture a place that is near and dear to you...close your eyes if you'd like. As I list some of these parameters of place you can see how wellfrom an environmental educator's perspective..... you know the place.

The physical components include:

Knowledge of the cardinal directions...which way is north, where does the sun come up and set? Where does it come in the middle of summer vs. the middle of winter?

Topography.... slope and aspect, does your place have a sunny southern exposure or is it in the shadow of a steep north-facing slope?

Are you aware of the watershed? Do you know where the water goes that runs off your place?

Soil type...is it sandy and well-drained or heavy clay with little drainage? How much organic matter does it have?

Weather patterns and normal rainfall amounts, do you know how much snow falls in a typical winter? When are the first and last frost dates, and what seasonal temperature fluctuations can be expected.

And for the really naturalist oriented there is all the **phenological information** that can allow you to really know a place. When do the hummingbirds return from their wintering habitat in South America? When do woodducks hatch their eggs? When do thirteen-lined ground squirrels come out of hibernation? When can you expect to see the first bloodroots?

From a naturalist's perspective there is no end to the information one can learn about a place....and all of this helps one know a place. But again I would suggest that it is not what you know as much as how you feel about a place that matters. In fact usually the knowledge of a place occurs after one feels attached to it.

The work that interpretive naturalists and environmental educators do goes way beyond developing an understanding of the physical. The goal of environmental interpretation is to go beyond teaching the what?.... and to stimulate appreciation and commitment to protect the environment. Knowing all the types of trees and which songbirds nest in a woods does not ensure that one will have enough appreciation to protect it.

In the past year there has been a great deal of attention given to the phrase "nature deficit disorder" to describe the growing disconnect between people and nature. The phrase was coined by Richard Louv in his book The Last Child in the Woods and the premise is that the current generation of young people is being raised in an environment that is primarily indoors, and so structured that too many kids, and parents, have little interest in being outdoors. There are countless contributing factors to this situation which appears to be getting worse everytime a new survey is published. The MN DNR has completed a survey that indicates that participation in hiking, fishing, boating, and just about any activity you would pursue in a state park has dropped by 5 to 15 % in the past ten years.

Some of the barriers to enjoying the outdoors are the usual suspects often listed as whats wrong with our modern lifestyle:

- Too many things to do and too little time to do them.
- More appealing screen-based activities that diminish nature's "WOW factor" (Reference Bill McKibben's The End of Nature.) The ability for our technology to capture rare natural phenomena that may occur at locations, and over time spans that elude our powers of observation and then condense it into a 5 second video clip that makes it pretty difficult for the stuff you observe on a walk in the woods to compete.
- Another barrier listed is Fear of the Outdoors, but it is no longer just fear of poison ivy and spiders. Instant access to any bad thing that happens anywhere on the planet, and the news media's penchant for

spectacularizing and relentlessly promoting nonstop coverage results in new levels of fear and anxiety, and “stranger danger”, is listed as a reason to not go camping, to the local park, or even let your kids out of your sight.

So why does this matter? Things change...people’s activity levels and interests change and they always have. Why do we ALL need to have an understanding of things natural... Why not leave that to the few people that are actually interested in the natural world?

At a time when less than 2% of the U.S. population produces all the food for the rest of us it would be easy to convince ourselves that we can get along just fine by specializing. Let the naturalists and environmental scientists take care of nature.

Well, the cumulative effect of all of this is that we are collectively losing our connection with the land that sustains us. The life cycles and ecological concepts that once upon a time humankind knew instinctively because our survival depended on it, are no longer meaningful to us. Not knowing or appreciating the way the natural world works doesn’t have an immediate consequence for us. And so the disconnect becomes greater. And I believe that over time being disconnected from nature will result in poorer and poorer decision-making relative to sustaining our existence here on planet earth. But on an individual level I believe as we each lose awareness of nature’s ability to heal and keep ourselves in balance we also lose some of our ability to answer the big questions of “Why are we here? and What are we to do?...and How do we fit in? Seeing ourselves in relationship to the immensity of the natural world is at once humbling and reassuring.

In response to the suggestion that many of us are suffering from nature deficit disorder environmental educators, health professionals, teachers, and parents across the country are scrambling to propose solutions. I have met with, listened to and shared thoughts with numerous individuals who are wanting to be part of that solution. And one thing that everyone seems to agree on is that you have to LOVE nature first,.....respect, appreciation, value and protection happen later.

So how do we come to love a place?

Its not by learning all the physical elements that are found in a setting, although the obtaining of this information may help you love a place. One of the things I loved about the farm of my childhood was the chorus of little frogs called spring peepers that could be heard a quarter mile away on a warm spring evening. Knowing they were spring peepers and that thy were there is not what I loved...it was learning from my Dad that he had nicknamed them “knee-deeps” because of their two syllable call, and it was the effort I made to catch one to take to my second grade show and tell that causes spring peepers to be meaningful to me.

And when I hear spring peepers today it generates those memories as well as an awareness that they were in place long before I heard them as an 8 yr. old farmboy, and they will continue to chorus long after I'm gone.

As Wendell Berry said, we need to be mindful as well of a place's temporal extent, of the age of it, and all that led up to the present life of it, and all that may follow it

So how do we come to love a place?

I think you come to love a place after having meaningful experiences there. You learn to love a place when your presence there becomes part of the story of a place. I believe we all are looking for authentic meaningful, uncontrived experiences and when we find one we incorporate our sense of that place into our experience base....and we begin to value the place, we develop an attachment to the place ...and we want to protect it and all that it provides for us.

As I mentioned my parents were sharecropperswhen I was 16, they realized a lifelong dream and bought a farm of their own about 3 miles from the one they had rented. Although we still farmed the land and I still had access to my favorite places I grieved when we moved away. And I probably didn't give my parents the kind of feedback they were looking for after taking this once in a lifetime step. In my estimation the new farm had nothing going for it. It was flat, the soil was red clay rather than rich loam, it had a small woodlot that held no intrigue. There was no pond, there were no wineberries and no Fox grapes... and no attachment.

Fast forward almost 40 years...I'm living in Minnesota married with kids and making annual summer trips to my parents farm in Pennsylvania. A couple years ago I while sitting at the family computer table I came upon a draft of an essay my daughter Emily had written for her English class. Apparently the topic was special places...and as I read I discovered that one of her most special places was her grandparents farm in Pennsylvania....besides learning that Emily and her cousin had climbed to the top of a very unsafe silo and in my opinion were lucky to be alive, I learned that she felt a connection to the very place that I had rejected. She was able to wax poetic about some of the same things that I had been most critical of. The lesson I took from this was that "a sense of place" is as much about how we feel about an area as it is about what is actually there.

Several weeks ago when Weld Ransome and I discussed the possibility of putting this program together, we talked about the sense of place that many of us may have for this church, particularly as the prospect of moving to a new place becomes more apparent. We know that like many of the hilltops overlooking Lake Minnetonka this place was in some ways sacred to the native Americans who lived here for centuries before European settlers arrived. The

abundance of burial mounds found here before the houses, churches and libraries were built on top of them provide proof of this.

As the town of Wayzata was established this very spot maintained its sacred nature as part of Piety Hill, home to numerous churches and cemeteries, and all the worship services, weddings, and funerals that has made this a sacred place for people over many generations. I am certain that many of us here this morning can recall numerous reasons that this little church at the top of the hill is one of our special places..... and there will be some grieving if and when we move to a new location. But once we view a place as sacred, once it is special to us, we are not likely to ever see it as anything different again because we have become part of that place's story.

My attachment to the farm I was raised on has not really diminished. In fact the distance, less frequent visits, and perhaps my increasing nostalgia have all heightened the importance that I attribute to my sense of place.

The farm has been developed with McMansions dotting the pasture where my grandfather dug thistles and the pond has been drained, some of the woods has been cleared to build houses, however the place still holds magic for me. When I drive the curbed and guttered residential road that breaks through the former fencelines I notice that all of the new paved surface drains into the little creek which now has to accept larger quantities of poorer quality water. I notice with sadness...and some irony that a majestic oak that was 200 years old when I was a kid has been cut down and replaced with a transplanted maple cultivar as part of someone's backyard landscape plan. Because I know this place I can see through all of this environmental disturbance and recognize it as it used to be. I see the things that have escaped the bulldozers and its almost as if I'm seeing an old friend after a long absence. I notice that my Fox grapes are still hanging on the trees at the woods edge and the feeling I had as a boy returns...the feeling that I have a truer appreciation of this place, and I smile as I remember a quote from something I read once that said "the weeds will win in the end, of course."

Simone Weil, the Christian mystic and activist, has said that "To be rooted is perhaps the most important but least understood need of the human soul."

If by the term "rooted" Weil meant attachment to a place... I'd have to agree ..about both parts of her statement. I'm living over a thousand miles from where I grew up yet, I still revere the place I know best and I'm thankful for all that it taught me whether it was the bits and pieces I know about the natural world or the inner peace that I know it can provide when my life gets too crazy. And yet I can't explain why.

As part of my job with Three Rivers Park District, I occasionally have to speak to

groups of staff, or volunteers, or park users about a new facility or some aspect of our recreational or educational program. One concern I often have is that of straying off topic and getting too preachy with my own opinions ...and this was a concern as I was preparing for this service. And then it occurred to me...its Sunday morning....I'm standing at a pulpit.....perhaps I am supposed to get a little preachy!

And so I'd like to end with a message that I would like you to consider and take to heart if it makes sense. Its quite simple....it can be boiled down to three words.....Get Outside Everyday. I've often heard that to maintain your creativity you should do at least one thing differently every day. I'm suggesting that to maintain your soul, you should purposely take notice of something outdoors everyday. You don't have to turn into a passionate birdwatcher or develop gardening as a new hobby, just be outside in a place that you know and take something in....look at the clouds, close your eyes and listen to the wind moving the leaves, sit on your deck and mentally inventory how many different bird and insect sounds you hear, sit on your lawn and look for a 4 leaf clover, make a date to watch a sunset, or a sunrise....whatever it is, do it intentionally. And as you're purposefully considering some aspect of your special place, think about the timelessness and vastness of nature and feel small.....and be reassured by the things that are as constant as nature's cycles.

If something positive comes of the commitment to making this little step part of our daily routine then pass it on to your children, and to your next door neighbors, and maybe more of us will realize that staying in touch with the outdoors is one of life's simplest pleasures, and one of the easiest stress relievers, and we owe it to ourselves in a world that is becoming increasingly stressful.

Even if tuning in to nature doesn't become the societal response to the frenetic lifestyle dominated by computer screens and too much technology, I wish for you the peace that it can bring.

Thanks for listening.