

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #5

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FREEMAN PATTERSON



Winter at its most attractive – my back deck

I have long maintained that the Almighty created the southern hemisphere to apologize for having created the Canadian winter. Most years I accept that apology.

A century ago country Canadians were always prepared for winter, because they were not dependent on electricity. In fact, I was 12 years old before we had “power,” which enabled us to have an indoor toilet and refrigeration on the farm, although we lived comfortably without them. In those days schools rarely closed for a blizzard. In the worst weather our school van was a covered horse-drawn sled with benches and buffalo robes. Actually, in several ways a country winter today is more of an ordeal than it used to be. Besides, when I was a kid, the adults did most of the heavy work. I dug tunnels in snow banks, made snow men and women, spent hour after hour racing down hills on a toboggan and, sometimes, even went skiing on the many hills around my home.

These days the last thing in the entire world I feel like doing in winter is going skiing! It’s a beautiful sport for people who live in cities, towns, and suburbs, but I’m too tired. If you live on a side road in the country, as I do, apart from snowploughing the road, nobody takes care of winter for you – neither the municipality nor the province. It’s entirely up to me to deal with driving blizzards, huge drifts, temperatures so low that most of the world can’t comprehend them, and wind chill that paralyses the mind as effectively as the body. There’s also the fact that every power outage is accompanied by an immediate water outage, because the pump in my well depends on electricity. Of course, because I have electricity, I need a generator for when I don’t have electricity. This noisy machine, which adds almost as much work as it subtracts, turns country quiet into downtown pandemonium.

So, my winter sport is to sleep and to dream of spring, which comes to me as naturally as it does to a bear. After all, I’m a mammal too. As it is with the bear, it is with me; my psyche is forever calling me back to my original home – wilderness!



My barn after a blizzard; winter at its least attractive for me

Like the bear, I listen to my psyche’s call. Since the mid 2000s I’ve been leading a two-week wilderness camping trip during March in the Namaqualand region of South Africa and, because the seasons there are reversed from ours, I flee to summer about the first of February. This provides me first with the

opportunity to walk (at least six km. every day) in pleasant temperatures. During the two weeks of the month that the moon shines brightly I'm out of bed by four o'clock and, after a quick cup of tea, heading down an old country road, a silvery-brown ribbon twisting through dark hills and ancient black mountains. Back at my room just before sunrise I have a quick shower and then usually share breakfast with my friends Maryna and Helmut Kohrs, the "providers" for the camping tour and the owners of the little Kamieskroon Hotel. Then I often spend a couple of hours reading, or editing and processing photographs, or "napping," or simply being present where I am. These February days are pure "retreat" for me, a vital gift to myself. And then, feeling centred and fit, I leave with a small group for "the wild." Here's just one picture to illustrate why all this matters so much to me.



Our lives are filled with moments ... when the hidden beauty of life breaks into our everyday awareness like an unbidden shaft of light. It is a brush with the sacred, a near occasion of grace.

Kent Nerburn

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Recently I began early preparations for this year's INSCAPE workshop (Sept. 8-14) by reading again – for the third or fourth time – Ian McCallum's Ecological Intelligence, a book I mentioned in my third letter. McCallum is a medical doctor, psychiatrist, Jungian analyst, a director of Wilderness Foundation Africa and, as a young man, played on South Africa's national rugby team, the Springboks. He's also a poet and begins his book with his poem "Wilderness." Here are the first three stanzas.

**Have we forgotten
that wilderness is not a place, but a pattern of soul...?**

**Have we forgotten
that wilderness is not a place
but a moving feast of stars,
footprints, scales, and beginning?**

**Since when
did we become afraid of the night
and that only the bright stars count?
Or that our moon is not a moon
unless it is full?**

On the third page of his Introduction McCallum writes, "To lose one's sense of union with wild places is to pre-empt what I believe is one of the most overlooked conditions in modern psychiatry – homesickness. Often presenting as a restless depression, homesickness and a loss of wildness are the same thing. Anyone ... who longs for the chilling night call of the spotted hyaena or the shape and the shade of the Umbrella Thorn tree will know that restlessness. It is also likely that they will understand the unmistakable homesickness in these lines by the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke."

**Sometimes a man stands up during supper,
and walks outdoors and keeps on walking,
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.**

McCallum continues (and I quote this again), "The cure for homesickness is to remember where we have come from. It is to rediscover that original church within oneself and to remember that the wild areas of the world are the landscapes of the soul and that the creatures who belong there are soul-makers.... To remember that church is not enough. We have to be able to go there, also. Be it the desert, the savannah, the mountains, the sea or the wild lands of ice and snow, we have to be able to go to the places where we most belong and we are most ourselves. It is an inner and outer journey and our healing depends on both."

I cannot possibly recall the number of times I have remarked that every year when I enter South Africa's mountain desert wilderness, the Richtersveld, I have the all-consuming feeling of "going home" and, every year when we collapse our tents and begin our departure, I have not gone five kilometres before I am flooded with homesickness. I belong in the stillness of that vast desert. I have roamed its mountains for at least a million years. (Click [WILDERNESS](#) to see some of my Richtersveld images.)

Ocean is also wilderness. It's wilderness that we can damage, but never "tame." Wayne d'Entremont, a fisherman from Lower West Pubnico, Nova Scotia, understands that in his very bones. Wayne, who has been working the North Atlantic for about 50 years in every conceivable kind of weather, telephoned me one day in the summer of 2017 and then came for a visit along with his wife Francine. He brought a collection of his photographic prints for me to see. In September of 2018, at Wayne's request, I led a five-day workshop from their home, where Wayne recently opened a small gallery.

Although many people are familiar with the sea, few actually perceive its wildness with the clarity of vision that Wayne does and no other photographer I know expresses its moods visually with such depth of feeling. Although Wayne's images cannot be broadly compared with the creations of any painter, his handling of light and atmosphere is frequently reminiscent of William Turner and his use of optical texture brings some of Jackson Pollock's more monochromatic works to mind. I have asked Wayne for permission to show you the print that I purchased from him (below). You'll find Wayne on Facebook and can reach him at home (902) 760-2432 or on his mobile (902) 648-7792. He's not always at sea, but he's always "seeing."



No matter how much we may yearn for the experience of wilderness, some of us will never be able to go physically to wild places. The most significant reasons are long illness and physical disability. However, some people may be able to make visits to wild places and wild creatures near them, including often much-neglected back yards, and there may be other opportunities as well.

I've just finished reading another book, a truly thoughtful gift, entitled [The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating](#). Written by Elisabeth Tova Bailey, her web site www.elisabethtovabailey.net describes the book thus: "Elisabeth Tova Bailey tells the inspiring and intimate story of her year-long encounter with a *Neohelix albolabris*—a common forest snail. While an illness keeps her bedridden, Bailey watches as the snail takes up residence on her nightstand. Intrigued by its molluscan anatomy, cryptic defenses, clear decision-making ability, hydraulic locomotion, and mysterious courtship activities, Bailey becomes an astute and amused observer. [The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating](#) is a remarkable journey of survival and resilience, showing us how a small part of the natural world illuminates our own human existence."

To quote the Huffington Post, the book is “An exquisite meditation on the restorative connection between nature and humans ... as richly layered as the soil she lays down in the snail’s terrarium: loamy, potent, and regenerative.

While reading Bailey’s book, I was reminded of another chair, just like the snow-covered one on my back deck, one that has been sitting for nearly 25 years in a cedar glen in the forest below my house. Only a few wanderers have ever discovered it, but most of them have paused for a while in this cathedral of the wild. I can’t describe what the place means to me, though I can evoke something of what it feels like to be there.

When I was emerging from a six-week induced coma (after my two liver transplants nearly 19 years ago) and was unable to move because of the almost complete atrophy of my muscles, I retained my grip on sanity and found hope and peace by imagining myself leaving my house in the pre-dawn light with a bottle of water to spend an entire day in the chair.

In my imagination, as the first birds began to chirp and sing and the light grew brighter and brighter, sudden shafts of sunlight streamed through the branches far above me, dappling the leafy canopy. As the sun gradually arced higher and higher, its rays spotlighted the forest carpet, highlighting first the curling bark on a toppled birch, then a tawny mushroom emerging from the deep cedar duff, or perhaps caressing the curving frond of a hay-scented fern. Ever so slowly, the rays that in the morning had cast long shadows toward me began to stretch them away from me until, for a few minutes in the cooling of the day, a big cedar here, another one there, and still another became shining pillars of gold. Then, with the light weakening more quickly, I was greeted by the first cries of the creatures of the night. Ever so reluctantly I picked up my now-empty water bottle and wended my way along the barely-perceptible path that led out of the cedar glen to an open hillside and up to my house.

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**A last look at the stars and then to sleep.
Lots to do at whatever pace I can go.
I must remember the snail.
Always remember the snail.**

Elisabeth Tova Bailey

.....

**So, this is our time and this is where we are: Earth.
We are biologically in it and of it, children of a 4.5 billion-year-old planet and a 5.5 billion-year-old star called the Sun. Rotating around our parental star in a 365-day solar year, we are part of a tiny solar system in an equally tiny corner of a trillion-star cluster known as the Milky Way Galaxy. At the centre of our galaxy is a black hole around which our solar system and the rest of the Milky Way spins.... Earth has circled the black-hole centre of our galaxy roughly 20 times in its history. To put a human life span onto this time scale, three score and ten years translates into roughly nine cosmic seconds.**

Ian McCallum

YESTERDAY and TOMORROW

AUSTRALIA: My month-long visit to Australia's Blue Mountains rates right at the top of my travel experiences, thanks to the organization, generous hospitality, and caring of my friends Sue Lightfoot and Robyn Auld to whom I am deeply grateful. They provided me with a truly "holistic" experience, as I met an array of creative people, engaged in memorable conversations and discussions, led a five-day workshop on photography and visual design for 12 photographers, visited numerous private and public gardens, and gardened with Sue. Yes, it was spring, glorious spring! Perhaps the photograph of azaleas below will encourage you to click on [SPRING](#) to see more. And, just perhaps, these images will encourage you to visit the Blue Mountains yourself one year from mid October to mid November.



Azaleas at Everglades, a National Trust property, LEURA

O' HOLY NIGHT: Despite the negative press I've given the Canadian winter in this letter, I must tell you that, on the night of December 20, I donned my boots and winter parka and, accompanied by my beautiful and perceptive canine companion, Gaia, strode into the moonlit forest and the winter magic of which everybody dreams. In every open space, however small, the moon was scattering diamonds across the blanket of snow, a carpet that undulated out of shadows into brilliant glens surrounded by tall cedar, tamarack, and spruce trees and stretched across wide boggy spaces criss-crossed with the tracks of hares, foxes, and deer. In the perfect silence, I could hear forever. Now and again, the fantasy pictures on Christmas cards really do exist and, for anybody who can go there, the memory is eternal.

TOUR and WORKSHOPS: The Namaqualand wilderness camping tour in March is filled to capacity, as are the two workshops with Charles Needle in Claude Monet’s garden in April. The September and October New Brunswick workshops on photography and visual design with André Gallant are also filled, though at the time I’m writing this, a couple of openings remain in the August workshop. There are also openings in the INSCAPE workshop with David Maginley in early September. Please see **WORKSHOPS** on my web site www.freemanpatterson.com. Cancellations may occur, so we always maintain waiting lists.

INSCAPE Content: On page four I mentioned preparing for this year’s INSCAPE workshop by returning to Ian McCallum’s book Ecological Intelligence, one of several books I’ll read or re-read before this year’s workshop. The four INSCAPE workshops that David and I have facilitated so far have been deeply enriching experiences for David and me personally and, if we go by what many participants have told us openly and frankly, for them as well. This is always our hope.

Because everybody naturally interprets our description of INSCAPE (on my web site) on the basis of their own life experiences, this may cause some people to misunderstand or to be suspicious about the workshop’s content. I’d like to discuss this briefly.

One evening a few months ago a good friend and I sat at my kitchen table drinking wine, nibbling “munchies,” and discussing all sort of ideas and life experiences that matter to us. Toward the end of the conversation I remarked to my friend that he would value an INSCAPE workshop greatly. “Oh,” he replied immediately, “That sort of thing isn’t for me.” When I expressed sheer puzzlement, he asked, “Well, what sort of things do you talk about?” I replied, “Exactly the sort of things we’ve been discussing for the last two hours – what really matters to us and why.”

INSCAPE provides an open, comfortable, creative milieu for group and personal exploration. Although we have a very full program with superb resource people, everything on the program is optional.

Although the participants strongly influence the direction and character of each workshop, we usually have stimulating presentations and/or conversations about creativity, the significance of dreams, the parallels between symbols in dreams and art of every sort, the lingering emotional impact of negative religious experiences in childhood, near-death experiences, the meanings of “spiritual” and religious,” and other subjects the participants raise. We watch superb films, play or listen to music, and set aside time for personal or group meditation. Some participants journal or write poetry, many make photographs, others take long walks on the shores of the Bay of Fundy or hike a woodland trail. We always eat well and we laugh a lot!

By the way, my friend has decided to come along this year, especially after I told him that he doesn’t need a university degree and that we won’t be spending a lot of time talking about trucks and hockey, although they aren’t off the menu.

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Warm good wishes for 2019!

In the midst of and because of the hum-drum of daily life may you find excitement, stillness, happiness, and peace.

FREEMAN

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