WILDERNESS

Honors Thesis

by

Stephanie Weisman

Advisor: Phil Repp

May 1, 1992
PREFACE

Many times I have sat and listened to the sounds of the woods. Many times I have looked at things in wonder but never really absorbing the true beauty that really existed in the depths. In the Fall of 1991, I began a journey into discovering what wilderness actually meant to me. I was taking a course entitled, "Wilderness: Past, Present, and Future" with Provost, Dr. Warren VanderHill. Never before have I been challenged in my thinking and beliefs in such a simple but effective manner. My major assignment for the semester was to keep a journal concerning my concept of wilderness. This journal helped me to develop a concept concerning vast expanses of wilderness and "miniature wilderness." This concept has challenged my thoughts, my paintings, my life, and has given me thoughts that can be continually developed for a lifetime. My wilderness concept has inspired me to concentrate part of my journal into writing.

My extreme gratitude goes to Dr. VanderHill for his method of teaching and his enthusiasm for wilderness. I believe he has challenged me for a lifetime. My thanks also goes to my family, Christopher, and Phil Repp for their continued support, help, and encouragement.
WILDERNESS

As I sit and listen to the sound of rain massage the roof of my apartment, I am carried back. Back to a time of quietness, relaxation, and slowness. I am called back to my childhood on a rural Southern Indiana farm. Quietness longs for reunion with my heart, and quietness brings me home.

I am lying in my bed and a cool breeze stirs the curtains and drifts over across my feet. The breeze passes on by and is soon followed by another and another. With the gentleness, the sounds of home are carried into my window. The crickets and frogs are singing their song in the darkness, and deep into the night I hear the coyotes howling into the wind. Their chilling sound is carried far, and I am thankful, for the moment, of the wall that separates us. I hear no cars, no people, no sirens. I hear only the sounds of the wild calling out my name. My name is called again, and I slip into my thoughts.

These moments are my best for thinking. I remember at the age of seven lying in bed until all hours of the night reflecting over my thoughts, which I of course believed were quite extensive. The crickets and frogs are singing a melody which keeps the tune for my
thoughts. The tune carries me into a slumber which
closes my eyes for much needed rest and peaceful
dreams.

My heart and mind cry out for that rest now.
Centuries have seemed to pass since I have been able to
listen to the sound of wilderness. A sound can never be
overrun from the bass of the neighbor's stereo, the
pounding of feet up the stairs next door, or the sounds
of the vehicles on the streets. The quiet which so
unnerves some people fills my heart with peace and the
thoughts of home. Time floats across the air slowly like
a seedling as it is released from the dandelion. Drifting
up and down, time moves while the air slowly carries the
seedling to its new destination. Slowly, slowly, the days
slip into weeks, and life is relaxed.

Relaxation is more than not "doing something." Relaxation is an attitude, a moment where pressure
does not exist and I am free from tension. Relaxation is
sitting with an ice cold glass of sun tea in my hand, and
the sun is beating down on my face so hard it forces me
to close my eyes. Relaxation is walking deep into the
woods where the sun just reaches to coat the ground
with its golden splendor. Relaxation is sitting next to a
stream and listening for the gurgle of the water as it passes over the pebbles.

Relaxation is home, and home is where my heart longs to find the quietness of the night, the slowness of time, and relaxation.

With these memories, I begin my investigation of wilderness. With concepts of wilderness that challenge my thoughts, I find myself looking for the unapparent, the unnoticeable, the apparent, and the noticeable.

The day is brisk and cold, and the wind sends a chill down my back that makes my skin shiver from head to toe. Moisture collects in my nose as I try to maintain my breath as I hike through the field. I am on a piece of land called the Hautsch Place, and the only sounds I hear are the wheezing of my breath and the crunch of the stiff, brown blades of grass that are underfoot. I turn and look. Spectacular. The view never changes but is always different. I return to my ascent up the hill anxious to reach my destination so I can stand in amazement. I become eager for the last few steps, and I spy a spot in the field where I can rest for a moment. My heart is racing with excitement. I want to stay in this
spot forever and take in the view, the sounds, and the smells. I look to the sky and see the hawks soaring overhead, resting in a current which carries them for a moment before they begin their descent on their next meal. I shudder. I am not a bird lover, and I cower at the thought of being the victim. I shift my focus back to what lies before me. Stretching out into the distance lies moments and years of growth and changes. My heart sings for joy at seeing the vastness of the wild that is just moments into the air.

Looking back down over the hill I just climbed, I see how it dips down into the bed of a creek, a creek whose waters are murky from the fresh fallen rain of the early morning. The creek is surrounded by trees which gnarl and twist through the air and dip out over the creek bed and young saplings which are just beginning their long journey into the sky. Overgrowth is thickest near the creek, but for the moment it is mostly brown from the winter months and pushed toward the ground from the howling wind. Beyond the creek, the land flattens out for the moment into the furrows of a field. My eyes dance across the blades of dead, golden grass which bend with each new gust of wind. Large clumps
of dirt can be recognized even from this distance, and I wonder in amazement at the contrast between the clumps and the straight edges of the grass blades. Enclosed by a creek on the far side, the field is surrounded by water and trees forming only a small part of a jigsaw puzzle that would be possible to see from the air. Thinking this, I look at the clouds and wish I could sit upon one and float across the expanse of land that lies before me. To see all of the patches, webs, and masses of a variety of land that lies below would be like viewing an incredible patchwork quilt. I return to examining the creek beyond the field is only identified by a small break in the trees and the twisting of the path that is left from the break. Cutting a path through the edge of a woods, the creek is a contrast in the large expanse of trees and entanglements that lie beyond. Trunks of the trees become a mass entanglement of webs and branches. My eyes become weary trying to separate trees from each other in the masses. The woods become a wall giving only faint glimpses of what lies beyond. Looking over the tops of the trees, I see the land stretch out for miles, and deep into the distance the hills and rolls of woods turn into a dimming grey-
blue which fades into the whiteness of the rainy sky. Even without the sun shining brightly, I feel the radiance of the vast expanse that lies in the view before me.

All this lies before me. Normally, I sweep the view in and move on, but today I plan on looking into that expanse and see the many intricate details that are so easily missed or completely ignored.

How often I drive past places which speak of this same radiance, and how often I ignore the beauty which lies just beyond my reach. Now, upon examining the expanse that is before me, I notice differences that I have never before recognized. The view never changes but is always different. If I walk to this same location every day at the same time for a month, the view would always be the same. But, would it? As I look now, the sky is overcast and filled with clouds. Shadows are scarcely found and the whole land appears to be in a deep slumber. The animals are quiet as if this day is set aside to rest and be peaceful. The trees seem to bend gracefully with the wind, and the grass folds gently across the fields. A light whisper fills the air, and I feel a gentle stirring for such peace and contentment to reign within my heart. The land itself even appears to be
resting for the day. If I returned tomorrow, would the conditions be the same?

I allow my imagination to run rampant, and I see this very ground covered and buried in ice and snow. I will no longer be able to see the ground, grass, or all of the overgrowth surrounding the creek beds. The trees are making loud rustling sounds as they chime in the wind with their frozen branches. The view has quickly and suddenly changed. But, has it?

I am still standing and looking in the original direction, with the same fields, creeks, trees, and vegetation. It is the same view. My point is this; before me, there is so much more to look at than just the casual observance can grasp. There are small unnoticeable changes, and there are noticeable changes. To find my wilderness I have to look, to ponder, and to think about what is really there and how everything fits into the vast expansion of wilderness that lies directly before me. I need to realize that taking the view as spectacular is like taking what lies before me for granted. Beyond what I see, there is more wilderness that I need to identify, and wilderness can only speak so loud. I need to strain my ears to hear each and every last
note of what the wilderness is trying to communicate to me. I need to identify what the land is trying to communicate, and I long to hear its quiet touch against my skin.

I walk down the hill toward the creek. My thoughts are racing, and I am determined to investigate these thoughts more completely. The wind is whisking between the hills and the breeze is stronger as I near the bottom. Bubbling over the pebbles, comes the sound of the water as it winds slowly down the well carved path. I look to find a tree leaning out over the water and stand in amazement that it has been able to grow so large at that angle. I turn and look toward the top of the hill. I was just standing there a few moments ago. Now, I am in the mist of the trees and overgrowth. The wilderness does not carry the vastness that I viewed from the hilltop, but once inside the trees, I see a new vastness which is cramped and overgrown. The difference is amazing yet so simple. From here, there are more details and more objects to examine. I can feel the texture of the tree bark with my eyes as I scan over every inch of the trunk. My mind is racing as I try digest every square inch of the ground that is before me. The
contrasts that are spread in the outstretched of land are completely amazing. Never could I examine and thoroughly know each object because they would change after I had moved on in my search. My head is overwhelmed by my racing thoughts. The time has come to return home and evaluate my thoughts. While walking back along the creek, I find a bright colored leaf still present from the fall months. I reach over and pick it up. The bright red and brown color is amazing so I place it into my pocket for a more complete examination later.

Night has come, and I find myself throwing thoughts around about my day. The hour is late and darkness envelopes the land. The crickets and other animals are quiet tonight so the stillness is more peaceful than usual. I think of my long hike up the hill, and I wonder if there is more to my wilderness than I am realizing. I wonder if there are more changes that occur than the casual eye observes. I think of the leaf that I picked up as I was walking back home. Not only was the color incredible, but the richness of the leaf itself was unbelievable. The veins of the leaf had branched out into a forest. Contained on this leaf was a denseness that I
had viewed earlier today. The resemblance reminded me of the entanglement of trees twisting and turning in the air, the very trees that had housed these leaves. Tomorrow I would return to the creek for further investigation.

The day was much the same as the one before. I was in a determined rush though. I no longer was taking a long stroll up the hill. My destination was immediately to the overgrowth surrounding the creek bed. I was on the verge of discovering what had kept me awake so long into the night.

Everywhere I looked, I found little intimate things that were fascinating and intricate. I collected walnuts, acorns, sweet gum balls, sycamore balls, and leaves. If I could have carried everything I touched at that moment, my pocket would have been flowing with growth. I found a place where I could be seated, and I began to examine the creations that were before me. I discovered hills and valleys, craters, lakes, and rivers, trees and growth. As I closely examined each object, I began to realize something very important. Each of these objects contained a miniature landscape. I was seeing a smaller version of the vastness that I held in my
eyes the day before. Was I now beginning to understand what was being communicated to me the day before? Each of these objects contained a charm and beauty that I never before had taken the time to really notice. I was looking into a new wilderness. I was looking into a miniature wilderness. My mind was racing back over the many times I had sat next to the trickling water of a creek. I heard the sounds, felt the water, and enjoyed the peacefulness. Then, I turned and left only to return when I needed the peace and slowness in my life once again. Now, I sit holding in my hand one of billions of natural wonders to be found on this earth. How often have I walked past something so incredible and amazing and not noticed its existence? How many times have I walked into a woods just to brush away the cob webs and never notice the beauty of what was there before I wiped it from existence? How many years will it take for human beings to notice the real beauty that lies in every handful of wilderness? Will all of our discoveries be too late because we are so wrapped up into our lives that we do not notice the beauty that exists even in our own back yards? I kick myself because every time I go into the woods it is for peace and solitude and for
myself, and I do not notice the wilderness that lies around me. I never enter a woods with the expectation of discovering something new and exciting. Now, I want to make up for lost time trying to discover every intricate detail of these miniature wilderness.

Millions of thoughts later, I break away from my perch to return home. I am walking along with my head glued to the ground trying the discover everything I have missed for twenty-three years. Suddenly, the clouds break for a moment and the sun peeks through. I look up to smile at the warmth, and something catches my eyes. As I stand in the sunlight, there before me lies the vastness and depths of the miles of wilderness. In my quest to make new discoveries, I ignored this vastness that lay all about.

The thought continued to disturb me as I walked toward home. How could I be so blind?

Night came quickly, and with the darkness, rain and winds came to visit. I listened to the rain pound against the roof, and my thoughts drifted off into the wilderness. This time my mind juxtaposed my two seemingly disparate views of wilderness together. The huge expanse of wilderness was laid out before me in all
of its grace and splendor, and lurking within its vastness was a intricate miniature wilderness blooming with another series of trees and hills and fields. Was this it? Contained within the vast expanse of wilderness was to be found a miniature wilderness that belied no small beauty. Each wilderness supported and influenced the other. The possibility of one without the other does not exist. Deep within the vastness there is an intricacy that supports and maintains the vastness. Deep with the miniature there is a need to fit within the vastness to sustain life. The process is supportive, life-giving, and perplexing. The process is quiet, timeless, and relaxing.

I have grown to love the sound of rain massaging the roof of my apartment. Each time, I am soothed and relaxed knowing that some part of wilderness somewhere is being nurtured with life sustaining water. I know that a miniature wilderness will probably be getting the nourishment needed to sprout and grow and become a part of the vastness that exists in the lands we view. In the wilderness lies a challenge for a lifetime of discoveries.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


