

With a Notebook in Hand

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"I have never seen such a perfect landscape before. Recently emerged from the crowded family minivan, I now stand on the edge of Jackson Lake, watching the Grand Tetons rise from the green valley opposite me with primitive jaggedness, expending their entire 13,000 feet of elevation in sheer cliffs and pointed peaks. Even in June, streaks of snow cover the mountain-tops, a drape that hides their elegant ferocity as unsuccessfully as a Santa beard hides the sharp-angled sinew of a tough old man."

I pause my typing, trying to recall this moment, looking for the words to describe exactly what I had felt as I stood on the pebbly beach of Jackson Lake, looking up at mountains fiercer and more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. This family vacation out west, a mere twenty days carved from a summer buried three years in the past, stirred something inside me, something that I have since struggled to express adequately in writing.

As I stood at the base of such high, ruggedly perfect mountains, I experienced the heightening of a sense that has lived in me my entire life. For me, nature has always induced feelings of awe and wonder, as well as an uncontrollable desire to touch, feel, smell, and understand. I felt this desire even as a toddler, escaping to the neighbor's yard to investigate the rocks in their driveway and slipping outside when Mom wasn't looking to crawl through the wet grass of our yard. As I got older, my interactions with nature became more scientific. I learned to identify local bird species and searched for their nests, checking them with regularity. When my family went hiking, I frequently brought up the rear due to my need to overturn every rock in search of salamanders. I was interested in all kinds of insects, especially caterpillars, and of these, especially monarchs. Every August and September, my plastic Dollar Tree bug cages were home to multiple monarchs in various stages of metamorphosis.

Through the investigations of my childhood, and, I admit, of my young adulthood, I learned much about the natural life of the Mid-Atlantic temperate region. I could tell the difference between the nests of catbirds, robins, and bluebirds, was able to demonstrate how a threatened black swallowtail caterpillar would unfurl slimy, putrid-smelling orange antennae, and could conclude firmly, based on personal observations, that the red-striped salamander was the most common species of salamander in the Appalachians. But I learned something else as well; I learned that the world is far too large and biology far too complex for me to ever know it all.

For every bird whose nest I could identify, there were four species I had never even seen, and for each species of caterpillar I had successfully raised into a butterfly or moth, there were ten species I had never held in my pink-lidded bug cage. Though I had never wanted to conquer nature with violence or smother it with concrete, I had tried to master it enough to reduce its mystery to orderly columns of facts. Now I was forced to admit, as countless others had done before me, that nature is unconquerable.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting to learn, and I still absorbed information about the adaptive mechanisms of trees, the overwintering habits of ladybugs, and the 17-year reproductive cycle of cicadas with fascination. Nature still enthralled me, but at the same time I realized that it is too vastly intricate to be completely chartable. If it is impossible to unravel the Maker's nature, doesn't it follow that His creation should be the same way?

Earlier, my focus had been knowledge. Now, I sought to find definition. The outdoors — trees and flowers and the sense of deep mystery that lived with them — meant something to me. They gave me the peace that comes from the presence of something more beautiful and perfect than I could ever be. Before, I had held this feeling unexplored as I pursued the knowledge I wanted. Now, realizing my inability to define the universe with facts, I approached the outdoors seeking to understand, rather than to conquer.

Now, I experienced nature with a notebook in hand.

I had always enjoyed writing, and I had always been good at it. Even as a 7-year-old, I would declare enthusiastically, when asked, that I was going to be an author when I grew up. However, that choice often seemed incompatible with my zeal for the outdoors. My first stories were about boys and mice making friends and lost dogs coming home. I wrote these stories under fluorescent classroom lights and in the concrete-walled basement that housed my parents' computer. Writing cut me off from the leafy woods and raspberry bushes that waited outside.

Eventually, I discovered that my new desire to understand what nature does to me fits perfectly with my love of writing. Sparked by a subject that fascinated me far more deeply than the trite storylines I first used, my writing improved to something I could be proud of. Now a college student, I continue the marriage of the two subjects with a dual major: creative writing and natural resources conservation. I love both studies, and I can see them working together in my future, whether I end up writing nature articles for magazines or describing the world I love in full-length books.

For the present, my body sits in front of the computer while my imagination stands at the base of the Grand Tetons and my mind searches for the words to describe the moment. The perfect words do not come, but I find something close, just a shade away from the purity of soul that I experienced. As I continue to type, I do not feel failure. I have learned before that nature is unconquerable. It will always evade my attempts to define it. I can only try and hope to come close.