

Wonder, Laughter and Delight

brother Peter

LISTENING TO THE BIRDS SINGING AS I WALKED IN A park a few years ago, I crossed the path of a person wearing ear-phones. She seemed self-absorbed, not noticing my approach. I made eye contact. She pointed to the earphones. “Birdsong,” she said . . .

The relationship between immediate and mediated reality constantly confronts me. I find delight in the immediate, the local, the present, the direct, and the particular: the wonder of nature at my fingertips, within eyesight, “in my backyard”; the persons in front of me, within reach of my hand; the savor of the sounds and smells surrounding me. I am invited to ground myself in these irreplaceable experiences. They bring me joy and wonderment that, in a second movement, through the use of various media, interconnect with wider, global realities. These palpable, ordinary experiences of life around me are an opening to surprise that gift me with a serendipitous sense of well-being.

On the first, unstructured day beginning our monthly retreat times, I like to go to the woods and meadows around the priory to spend time there. As a precaution, I tell brothers generally where I’m going. I pack a light lunch of an apple, an orange and a banana; take along the Nikon D80 camera, my Epi-Pen (I am allergic to bee stings), and my walking staff: a pole found at the nearby beaver pond, debarked by the beavers, with a knot forming a contour that exactly fits my hand grasp. These excursions are up-to-six-hour, round-trip, adventure walks. What surprises the woods yield up!—wildflowers, rock formations, bark patterns; insects, butterflies, moths, forest animals and birds; the interplay of sound, breeze, and light; and vestiges of the farms, pastures and homesteads that this land once hosted!

On one occasion, in June, I went to the beaver pond in the nearby Green Mountain National Forest which borders all of our woodland. I wanted simply to spend some time there in quiet.

As I approached the pond it began to rain—a gentle, I-hoped-passing, shower. I found a comfortable stone under some densely spaced



trees in a spot overgrown with brush at the edge of the pond and sat there. This place would form my real-life “invisibility cloak!” I remained there, still and quiet, within view of the beaver house on the pond. I half heard the sound of rain drops and the distant gurgling of the water-flow at the dam. My eyes were semi-focused at mid-distance—the beaver house—taking in a wide panorama in my peripheral vision, watchful, expectant, waiting, suspended in internal peace.

The rain stopped. My absorption broken, I saw some movement close at hand, at my feet—a large insect, wings upright—a dragonfly?—maneuvering slowly through a forest of wet grass and leaves. Yes, a dragonfly! Its wings now horizontal, it was slow-walking! I noted a glint of light off its wet wings—was it unable to fly? Now it climbed a tall blade of stiff grass and hung there. Was it drying its wings? Enthralled, I snapped some photos. What a wonder! Usually dragonflies are so fast-flying it’s nearly impossible to take a good photo. After some time, I headed home, hopeful that the dragonfly would be able to fly again and grateful for a view into the micro world of life.

During our July retreat days, I went north along what had been the old county road. We now maintain it in good condition for more than half a mile up to our north field, a hay field, and then as a logging road for another quarter mile. It then becomes barely discernable in the forest. At places what remains of the stone walls on either side is its only trace. Towards the end of the logging road, at a landing which is now overgrown with high grasses and bushes, I spotted a flash of red in a passing spot of light. Along the side, in a damp, wooded area, was a wildflower, a form of wild rose, on a bush with maple-like leaves—later identified as a Purple-Flowering Raspberry plant. I spent some time photographing it from different angles and passing light effects. Thus engaged, I glimpsed, out of the corner of my eye, a large bird—a raptor?—perched on a fallen log at the edge of the grassy area.

With camera already in hand, I began to stalk—moving slowly

and in a direct line facing the raptor. (Movement is less noticeable in a direct, frontal line than across a horizontal line—a clue I remembered from a book on photography.) I held my breath as I crouched in the high grasses—the raptor did not stir! I inched forward. What luck to get so close! Congratulating myself on my ambushing skills, in slow motion, I raised the camera, zoomed in, and snapped a first shot—the raptor did not move! I continued my route, inadvertently snapped a twig underfoot, inhaling my dread at the sound, and quickly took a second shot—the raptor remained frozen in place! I thought: “I’m so close, if I really startled the bird, I could get great photos of the raptor in flight.” I leapt up—the raptor stayed put! Finally suspicious, I rushed the log. The raptor!—was nothing but a withered, twisted stup, protruding up from the log, nature’s trick sculpture. Hoodwinked by a shriveled scrap of branch! First bewildered, then with full-throated laughter, I rolled in the high grass (being conscious enough to hold the camera protectively). What a surprise!—and I got two good shots!



On another excursion into our woods, in August, I came upon a large growth of Indian-Pipe along an old logging road off from our north field, in an area darkened by a stand of pine trees. I have usually seen only a single plant or a few together, but here were multiple clumps of ten to twenty. Interspersed and just as numerous were some dried stalks, each with a woody, brown, rosebud-like head. It has delighted me to observe plants growing from seed to mature gone-to-seed stages. Could these Indian-Pipe and dried stalks be related? Were these waxy, white, translucent stems with a single drooping head plants or fungi? And do they



have seeds at all? I saw a single bee land on one of the drooping heads. Do they, then, get pollinated by bees? I took several photos of this wondrous plant and went home with many questions.

I returned a few weeks later to see the developing plants and found that some were now a pinkish color, tinged with blue on the edges, and the flowers had turned upright. I could see a similarity between the ovary of the flower and the dried fruit husk on the stalk. So, I took more photos of this delightful plant and left, determined to check the Internet to discover more. Here is what I found:

The Indian-Pipe is an herb in the heath family which thrives in acidic soil. It does not contain the green pigment, chlorophyll, and does not rely on photosynthesis for its food. It relies on wood-rotting fungi to transfer nutrients from nearby tree roots to it and so is parasitic on the fungi. It propagates itself as an angiosperm, its seeds enclosed in a fruit. Little is known about its pollination, though bees and skipper butterflies seem to visit the flower. The flower turns upward after pollination. The ovary develops into a woody capsule with five slits through which the tiny seeds are shaken out. The seeds germinate when the proper fungus is available in the soil.¹

Wonder at a walking dragonfly; laughter at nature’s prank, the raptor statue; delight in the surprising strategies of plant life; and always more to come, and nearby, right here: these are gifts that reveal the gift-giver! At hand, always accessible, Wisdom at play in creation invites me to seek and know the ever wider realities of life, to engage in the ever more encompassing relationships of our world. Wisdom delights in us as we delight in creation.

*Day after day,
God’s Wisdom at play in the universe,
delighting to be with us, the children of earth.² ■*

Reflections

by brother Columba

We are a community of twelve brothers who follow the Rule of St. Benedict. We try to have a balance of prayer and work, times for recreation in the evening, and extended times for retreat.

We take three Vows of Monastic Life: Obedience, Stability and Community Life. We encourage each other by our choices and inner freedom to live responsibly.

We nurture and support each other. We make time for *lectio* and listening. Work and leisure are foundational for our community life.

Faithfulness to prayer focuses us; leisure time keeps us energized and restores our vision.

¹ cf. Cheryl Kraynak, *The Indian Pipe of the Forest*: www.suite101.com/content/the-indianpipe-of-the-forest-a133711; and Carol Gracie, *Summer Ghost of the Forest*: www.bedfordaudubon.org/seasons/summerindian_pipe01.html

² From the song, “Wisdom at Play” (based on Proverbs 8: 30-31) © 2010 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc., Weston Priory, Weston, VT 05161-6400