


Why I Walk



The morning air is cold on my face and the sun is cresting the ridge, just beginning to cast long shadows of trees, as I walk into the woods. These are the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, a mountain chain that makes up part of the Appalachians. My companion is a large, old and very gentle golden retriever. When he stops, lifts his nose, and looks up the side of the mountain, I stop too and silently follow his gaze. I can see them clearly through the bare trees: three deer, two does and a buck. They stand still, watching us. After a while they lower their heads and continue eating. We do not move. They look again. Then, apparently deciding we pose no threat, they cavort playfully. We watch them for a long time. Finally the deer disappear over the mountain ridge, their tails waving like little white flags.

For the Cherokee (the native people of this land), the deer is a great teacher. The deer is associated with the direction of north, the time of winter and the place of the ancestors. The deer is also associated with qualities of gentleness, quiet and the wisdom of the elders. On this day, just days before the winter solstice, these associations are strong for me. I carry the memory of this meeting with me for many days.

The poet, Mary Oliver, in her poem, "The Place I Want to Get Back To," speaks of her own encounter with deer, and she closes her poem with the following words:

Walk in the Woods

An Aesthetic Response to the Earth

Sally Atkins

I have gone every day to the same woods,
not waiting exactly, just lingering.
Such gifts bestowed,
cannot be repeated.

If you want to talk about this
come to visit. I live in the house
near the corner, which I have named
Gratitude.

I, too, go every day to the same woods. I, too, am filled with gratitude for this privilege, knowing that one day, this patch of forest near my home will likely be replaced by houses and condominiums. My dog and I walk on a forest trail along a ridge that hangs above the oldest river on the North American continent, a river older than the mountains themselves. Often we follow the deer trail down the mountain to the winding path beside the river. We walk among trees that are elders, remnants of the earth's oldest forests, survivors of the last ice age. Sometimes I am startled by a snake in the path, or by the headless carcass of the latest victim of a Great Horned Owl. I am saddened by the signs of increasing damage to the hemlocks by the woody adelgid and the destruction of the pines by the southern pine beetle. But mostly, I am grateful for the constantly changing beauty of this place.

In his essay "The Soul of the World," James Hillman speaks of the anima mundi, the world ensouled. To experience the world as ensouled, he says, requires a participatory experience in an enduring intimate conversation with the world, an imaginative recognition of the things of the world and an aesthetic response to them. So how am I to be rooted in an embodied, ensouled relationship with earth? And how am I to speak of this relationship when our very way of using language and symbol to process experience actually separates us from the world? Poetry, for me, is always the place to try to speak about what cannot be said in words. Poetry is the place where I try to express my own intimate, enduring conversation with the earth I know.

I turn to Mary Oliver's instructions for living a life. She says, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it (Oliver, 2008, p. 37)." So I return again to my simple, daily practice of walking in the forest. I try to "patch a few words together," not trying to make them elaborate, and remembering that this act of poetic making is "not a contest but a doorway into silence in which another voice may speak (Oliver, 2006, p. 37.) It is here in this landscape that I experience beauty, fear, mystery, and the sense that somehow I belong. I try to pay attention, to open myself to wonder, to let myself be surprised and touched by what I experience and to tell about it:

Especially in Spring

Listen:

The world resists
Our best designs.

What is alive
Blooms in white stars
On a green carpet.

What is alive
Dissolves the flatness
Of our language.

What is alive
Wants to
Crawl out

Of the little boxes
We have made
With words.

—Sally Atkins

Entering

Forest still, ground soft and damp
After rain, first light casting
Long shadows over

The slow river rippling
Softly, hemlocks shimmering
Above thickets of laurel,

Remnants of Earth's oldest forests:
White oak, black walnut, yellow buckeye
Sycamore. Sassafras, scarlet oak

Black gum, red maple, American beech
Dogwood, black locust; table mountain pine
Redbud, red cedar, wild persimmon

Sourwood, sweet gum, shagbark hickory
White pine, tupelo, tulip poplar
Wild cherry, mulberry, chestnut oak.

Becoming the oak, food of deer,
Food of cougar, raven, the sentinel
Waiting to pick clean the bones;

Tracks of deer, scent of bear
Awakening the shape
Shifting truth of the senses,

Feeling pulse and pace
Quickening, remembering
Something still wild in me,

Seeing how life feeds on life,
Like insects, ingested, rewoven
Into the web of the spider,

Remembering it is all right
To break open, scattering
Seeds of my self to the wind.

Knowing I belong
To stories of stones, the pattern
Of bones, the dialogue of trees,

Seeing and seen in the ways
Of old magic, embodied, ensouled
In the round dance of seasons.

—Sally Atkins

As I walk in the forest I think about images of the earth, how these images inform my relationship with the earth and how they shape my life. I realize that my daily experience of this particular landscape throughout the changing seasons is the standpoint from which I perceive the world. Certainly I have travelled and lived in many other places on the earth: Europe, Africa, Asia, Central and South America. I have walked on other mountains, the Rockies, the Alps and the Andes. But it is here, in these old and gentle mountains of the Blue Ridge that I feel at home. This landscape inhabits my psyche just as I inhabit the landscape. This simple daily practice of walking in these mountains is how I know the earth.

References

- Hillman, J. (1992) *The thought of the heart and the soul of the world*. Woodstock, CN: Spring Publications.
- Oliver, M. (2006) *Thirst*. Boston: Beacon.
- Oliver, M. (2008) *Red Bird*. Boston: Beacon.