

Preface

The Way Home: Essays on the Outside West

Maybe a good place to begin this story is at the end of a long pier in downtown Cleveland. On a day so windy the sky blows itself clean, a boy of seven looks north across Lake Erie into a vast expanse of sky and water stretching clear to the horizon. The effect is instantaneous. For the first time in his young life, he beholds a world without any sign of human presence. Born in the fifties, a decade many regard as the threshold moment in man's historic quest to control nature, he comes of age in a changing landscape--wetlands filled for shopping malls, woodlands cleared for subdivisions, mountains strip-mined for coal. But standing on the pier that day, looking out across the whitecaps, all that freshwater air stirring in his blood and bones, he senses an immediate recognition. On some level he must feel that it is not only a big natural space he is looking into, but a lifetime of possibility as well. The sound of crashing waves ringing in his ears, a cool wind blowing off the Canadian Shield, it might also occur to him that he stands at the brink of some awareness--some quality of experience that might define who he is as he, in turn, would try to define it.

If this seems like a curious way to introduce a book on the American West, well, consider it a confession of sorts--a roundabout way of admitting that I probably don't think of myself as a westerner, at least not in the classic sense, even if I have lived here a good deal of my life. The boy standing on the

pier that day was me, of course, or at least a glimpse of myself as I might have been years ago. And while I am not native to the West, I often think of this moment as my first western experience. A sense of place can be a complicated matter, defined at various times by any number of factors. My affinity for the West would come naturally, as it turns out, and it would be firmly rooted in the land. Which leads me to this next point. If the West seems at times to be as much a state of mind as a place on the map, one thing ought to be clear: western landscape remains every bit as big and strange and wonderful as the wildest imagination.

This is a story of coming into a place with the idea, ultimately, of making it a home. The essays in this book all describe some form of nature or wilderness experience in the mountain West. All involve what Aldo Leopold called “primitive arts of wilderness travel.” The hiking and river running and backcountry skiing function as ritualized activity, the purpose of which is to engage the elements of nature as a way of making a connection to place and feeling at home in the world. That all sounds fine, but it begins to get tricky once you get down to the particulars of what that means exactly. And that’s what these essays explore. The particulars.

When I first arrived in Colorado more than twenty years ago, I knew enough to get into the backcountry, exploring some of the more remote and beautiful places of the West just to see what was there. I didn’t reflect much on what I was doing or why, though it was clear from the outset I was drawn

to these places. The West seemed to hold a kind of promise, and nowhere was this more evident than in its wild and natural areas. Over time, my reasons for being in the backcountry began to change, having less to do with seeing new terrain and more to do with understanding where I was. I found myself returning to many of the same places, something I rarely did in the early years. I read books on natural history and human history and anything else that might deepen my appreciation of where I was. While my interest in the West had taken on a different meaning, it all seemed part of the same project of exploration and discovery.

Eventually, I came to realize that if I were to consider any connection there might be to a wider world, I had to understand not only where I was but what I was doing there. Accordingly, the “primitive arts of wilderness travel” assumed a new significance. Whereas before they might have simply provided the means to get into the backcountry, they now became important in and of themselves, for they allowed for a certain kind of experience—a way of knowing based on sensory participation with the more-than-human world. It mattered how I ran a rapid or rolled a cast or what line I took through the trees down a mountain. The better I got at these things, the more intimately I could engage the natural features of a landscape. At some point it occurred to me that these were rites of initiation, all part of a long process of coming into a country.

It was also at this time that I began to think seriously about what it means to feel at home in the world. I had moved around a lot before coming to Colorado, living in six states in as many years and spending significant time in a few others. I was ready to settle down, feel grounded. For point of reference I thought back to my earliest memories of childhood, growing up in the hills and valleys of northeast Ohio along the glacial edge of the Allegheny Plateau. Memories of chasing fireflies on warm summer evenings. Slogging through crick muck for crawfish and tadpoles. Fishing for bluegill and catfish in neighborhood ponds, where mallards nested in cattails and painted turtles sunned themselves along the water's edge. This was the original imprint, where my sense of belonging in the natural world began. Any feeling of home I might find in the West would take root in similar fashion, that is, with an intimate connection to a local place.

And I found that place in the narrow ecotone of plains and mountains along the Front Range. From there, my sense of home would expand west to include the South Platte watershed, the Central Rockies, and eventually the canyon country of southern Utah. The horizon would move northward as well, though to less familiar terrain, to include the big wilderness areas of Idaho and Montana. Never a simple equation, my notion of home place would fall roughly in line with the Rocky Mountain chain. This was home ground, I believed, the place where I could take some measure of myself and view the wider world.

If my sense of place expanded over the years, so too did my sense of time. Drifting through the canyons of western rivers, I could trace a record of earth's history etched in the rock walls. Count the various times, for instance, an ancient sea covered the area. And just as the landscape looked different eons ago, it was sure to transform itself again in the future. This much was certain. But there was another reason now to look through the lens of geologic time. The planet was changing. Mass extinction and global warming, two phenomena that seemed virtually inconceivable a half century ago, were facts of life. Man's geophysical impact on the planet had become so profound as to convince some earth scientists that we've already entered a new geologic epoch. This was not the same world that existed for the boy who stood at the end of a pier so many years before. The environmental changes I witnessed then seem modest in comparison, more like a harbinger of bigger changes to come.

What I've described here, and what the essays allude to, is a long personal journey years in the making--a journey that traces its path by qualities of lifestyle and worldview. To the extent that a good deal of any story resides in the listener, the hope is that the reader will find something familiar and worthwhile in these pages. Time in the backcountry serves a restorative or salvific purpose, for sure, but I believe it goes beyond the personal realm, just as I believe the pursuit of Leopold's primitive arts amounts to more than aesthetics. If this story begins as a personal quest, its

themes broaden as the focus shifts to the places themselves. And if this preoccupation with the backcountry has led to a lifetime of questions and concerns, it culminates finally in a conservation ethic.

This is a story of coming into a country, but it's also a story of coming into a life. A long journey home.