Talking Back: Lessons in the Wilderness: Student Immersion and Inspiration

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I do not recall why I went alone that day. Fishing excursions to nearby Swedetown Creek were almost exclusively accomplished in tandem with Randy, my good pal who lived but a few houses away. Maybe he had a dental appointment. Whatever the case, I could not resist perfect fishing conditions - light mist, calm winds, 60 degrees - so I embarked unaccompanied into the Upper Peninsula’s deciduous forest that grew beyond the end of Poplar Street.

Approaching the 12-foot-wide creek bed, I pulled up short to bait the hook, position the sinker, and tune the reel’s drag. Since Michigan’s state fish was sensitive and easily spooked, it was best to minimize time next to shore, where my prepu-bescent shadow would broadcast warnings to everything beneath the water’s surface. Once sufficiently prepared, I paddled toward the creek, just below one of our angling hot spots. Starting from a downstream location would cloak my presence, as the current washed the sounds and vibration of my footsteps away from fish lurking upstream. I was ready. The familiar sound of water over rock and slate intensified as I made my final advance. I peered across the stream’s small gully to locate my first cast. Then I saw him on the opposite bank.

His size struck me. I had never before seen one, save for one included in a taxidermy exhibit and those
illustrated in science books. He stretched three and a half feet from his mischievously whiskered nose to the tip of his tapering tail. Handsome in every way possible, his appearance came complete with an athletically svelte frame and an Arthur Fonzarelli, slicked-back, mousey-brown hairdo. He frolicked along the water’s edge in a fusion of shadow-boxing and prancercising that included rock lifting, barrel-rolling, and water-splashing in fits and spurts. I watched for as long as my fleeting concealment, bolstered by my fishing prowess (skill) and downwind location (sheer luck), permitted. I watched and smiled.

Fast-forwarding 30 years found me again in the U.P.’s wooded heartland. Nine Rockhurst University retreatants stood with me in silence on the eastern shores of Loon Lake, an over-the-top showpiece of God’s pristine creativeness. As was our custom, we paused from canoe paddling and portaging for noon prayer. Standing arms’ length apart, we silently looked westward across the half-mile wide lake. The water, colored somewhere between the blue of a robin’s egg and the green that one might associate with the Mediterranean Sea, easily lapped the shore. Dr. Seuss-like white clouds floated by, aided by a soft breeze and reflected on the water surface. Hardwood leaves, lime-green in their adolescence, back-dropped darker green conifers lining the far shore’s banks. The students and I breathed together in gratitude.

I heard her first, a rapid series of pint-sized eeek, eeek, eeeks that betrayed her majesty. Rapidly glancing over my right shoulder afforded me the sight of her skimming the forest’s top. She swooped low directly overhead and then flapped chocolate wingtips to gain altitude over the water. Dumbstruck, we watched her and her six-foot wingspan soar across the lake and over the opposite shore’s wooded horizon. We couldn’t muster a syllable.

We had obviously piqued her curiosity. Given her vantage point and her keen eyes, she had seen us from afar. Given our status as the only humans within the 18,000-acre wilderness area, she clearly wanted to see us that morning. She chose to fly over us. She wanted to watch us. Wild animals possess far more efficacious veiling abilities than my best fishing tactics; they had likely watched me from afar on many previous occasions. However, this was my first, or at least my most poignant, experience of being deliberately sought and intentionally watched by one of my evolutionarily older animal siblings.

We humans have watched nature for a long time. We have watched, studied, and prayed over the signs of the times on planet Earth. We have cored the depths of Antarctic ice and plumbed the depths of our sacred texts in search of themes and guidance and motivation. Our watching has rendered fruits, even if they continue to evolve.

I believe, however, we are now moving into an intense period of being watched. The scientific community has rendered its verdict: human activity has and will continue to destabilize the climate and destroy entire ecosystems. Can societies use our best scientific and technological advancements to live regeneratively? Pope Francis has spoken. Can the church grow a spirituality that moves us into right relationship with God’s created world? A Climate Summit convened last November in Paris. Can nations abandon competition and the myth of perpetual growth in favor of collaboration and economies of enough? Our older siblings – the Brook Trout, River Otters, Bald Eagles, Hemlocks, Maples, Cedars, and White Pines - watch in hopeful curiosity.

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