

North Country Notebook



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Silence: The Call Of The Wild

A bunch of students over at Memorial High School are going up into the north country on a wilderness camping trip in about three weeks, and they asked if I could drop in after breakfast and talk to them about "silence."

I said the person they really wanted was Steady Eddy, because when he falls silent on the Catfish Flats you can cut the silence with a fillet knife. We are talking *quiet—silencio*—the lull before the gaff hook. Steady knows more about the meditative possibilities of stillness than any other guru who stalks the catfish like a cat burglar.

Steady was, alas, even at that early hour, over at Atlantic Seafood Market, removing Y bones from the northern pike, so I went to Memorial alone.

Actually, being in a high school first thing in the morning is not exactly being *alone*. It's akin to being hip-deep in a salmon river when the salmon are running.

Sigurd Olson knew about silence, I told the students, and he had talked about it at length when I interviewed him back in 1977 at his home in Ely, Minn.

I brought some of that interview to read them, and before we settled in I told them: *As you listen to my voice, I hope you hear his.*

"I remember very well an experience in Paris," Sigurd Olson had said that day in Ely. "I was in a friend's apartment on the Left Bank of the Seine, and, as usual, talking about wilderness. My friend said:

"Do you see that vine coming up past my window? Well, I'll never know the wilderness that you've seen all over the world, but that vine is my wilderness. In that vine is all of nature, all of growth, all of God. *There is my particular wilderness.*"

"I've often thought of that. My friend understood."

The many young people who come through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area have much the same feeling, but in a broader sense.

They're going into the wilderness now to find something bigger than themselves, something sacred as opposed to secular, something the Indians sensed long before we came here.

The Indians had the sacred places where they didn't speak, just as we have the sacred places in our great cathedrals and in our places of worship.

They had it on the Kawashaway, the land they called "No Place Between." They had it on Darkey Lake. They had it on LaCroix.

They tried to epitomize in such places the values they felt deeply about. They tried to put those values into words long before there was such thing as a written language. And the legends have come down.

In the caves of France and Spain—in the

dark recesses of those caves—other early people painted sacred pictures and legends. They were all animists at heart. The spirit world was in everything.

So, when people go into the wilderness today—where there's any left unravished by noise, by mechanical motors—they are looking for the same spiritual inspiration the early people found. Many people today, more than ever before, are finding it again.

They find it in the sense of harmony and oneness with all living things. They find it in a feeling of communion and meditation. As I said in one of my books, one doesn't have to be a Buddhist to meditate, or get into any special position. Just looking at any natural thing is, in a sense, meditation. It is communion with God, or the Spirit.

I think that's what people are looking for in the wilderness today. They're looking for spiritual values, and these values are almost impossible to define.

I remember one time, years ago, I guided a business magnate on a canoe trip back into the bush. It took him about four days to settle down, to get calm, to notice sunsets and moonrises.

On the fifth day, I found him sitting on the ground, just watching a colony of ants. I asked him what he was doing. Was he all right?

"I have never noticed ants before," he said. "Never before in my whole life. The enormous loads they carry—they all seem to know where they're going."

I noticed another thing out in the back country.

As people approached town after a long time in the bush, the civilization would reach out and take them, two or three days out from town. They knew they were coming back to the old life, and they were anxious to get back. I could see the change.

Their minds were no longer concerned with sunsets and the calling of loons or the hermit thrushes. Their minds were involved once again with the old lives they were going back to. But even after they got back to their old lives, their cities, their jobs, they never really forgot the impact of those days in the bush.

Sometimes I'd visit them, and they'd dig out the old maps and the pictures and we'd spend an evening or two talking about the fun we'd had and the joys we'd known.

They had absorbed some of the spiritual values, and once you absorb spiritual values you don't lose them very easily.

Later, Steady Eddy said that was all well and good, and that he was all for the spiritual too, but that as long as I was telling people how to get into the wilderness I should also be telling them how to get out those Y bones.