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The Music of the Wilderness

Wilderness—in today’s world, few people have a true grasp on the meaning of this concept; an even more select group has actually experienced it. Among these few, one man, Sigurd Olson, made journeys into the wilderness more than an experience—he made it part of his life. However, while Olson surely acted with the noblest of intentions, and made great strides toward conservation in the process, his drive was not wholly selfless. No, Olson was acting to find and save something which he had searched out his entire life—something which, though many don’t realize, is falling away in much of our world today: The Singing Wilderness.

For Olson, the singing wilderness did not represent itself in any simple way. It could not be *heard* in the mournful, heart-wrenching call of the loon. It could not be *felt* in the crisp, still air of a northern winter. Nor even did it *show* itself in the majestic undulations of the aurora borealis. Instead, the singing only made itself known when Olson forgot his



The loon, though a part of Olson’s singing wilderness, did not create the music alone, but in symphony with the world around it. (Photo by Dr. Matthews)

worldly cares and became, as much as one can, a part of the nature around him. He saw, as so many others have, how frenetic and restless society had become. Happiness has increasingly become tied to gadgets, power, and achievements, while the simple things of life go unnoticed or unwanted—trees stand in the way of new roads, creatures simply become novelties at the zoo. Olson also saw, however, a way to revitalize lives caught in this downward spiral: silence. “...Without stillness there can be no knowing, without divorcement from outside influences man

cannot know what spirit means (131).” He knew that the wild offered a solitude and peace unknown anywhere else. Even the struggle to attain these remote areas was significant—the journey itself caused introspection, while reaching the destination was a triumph and relief. While neither the loon, winter, nor the Northern Lights alone could bring such feelings—they can each be experienced in far less dramatic places—their presence, along with that of untouched landscapes, served as crescendos and fortes when the singing began.

My own trip to the area once graced by Olson was surely more brief than most of his journeys. I did not have the knowledge on entering the wilderness to at first understand its meanings. And even upon leaving, I felt only that I knew now how much I had yet to learn. However, none of this barred me from opening myself to new experiences; in fact, my ignorance may have allowed me to see things in an unfiltered light.

The first inkling I (and most in the group) had of the singing came on the heels of our fourteen hour torment/van ride, just after the sun had set in a blaze of color. Sitting on the shore of Sawbill Lake, an unforced, unexpected silence overtook all present; as any adult well knows, a



Sunset at Cherokee—virtually every evening we were blessed with this sight. (Photo by Megan Larsen)

group of willingly silent teens is as common as an aurora above Nebraska. In my own time of reflection there, I began my assimilation into the ambiance of the wilderness. My senses were at first overwhelmed, most noticeably by what I heard; or, more correctly, what I did *not* hear. I kept expecting the drone of an engine, the barking of a dog, or at least the thrum of a cicada. As the minutes passed, though, I began to realize that, to this point, my whole life had been so filled with sound that even my most solitary moments were noise-filled. This new freedom of senses no longer assailed by impurities—for all senses felt equally heightened—was a wonder and joy. I

was able to think, reflect, and pray without fighting external forces. For this brief time, I came near to feeling the oneness with the earth that Olson described; I felt closer to the world around me than perhaps ever before.

A further instance in which I heard the singing occurred at Cherokee lake, on a night when all in our group were exhausted from the day's journey. As we sat around a fizzling fire, content from a filling meal and socializing as any family (how we'd begun to see



*The "Family" around the campfire.
(Photo by Cole Marolf)*

ourselves) would, the world around us began to come alive. Whether in reality or only in our minds, a wolf sent up a cry, setting off a cacophony of noise on the lake. Birds, particularly loons, called chillingly out into the night. Conversation all but ceased, and we listened to the mysterious and haunting sounds filling the air. While we were later to be told that we had not truly heard a wolf, we still could not understand the intensity of the bird calls at such a late hour. They seemed to be simultaneously alerting one another of a danger and locating the members of their family. In this instance, the singing wilderness took on a form much different than previously; it conveyed the mortality that all living things are faced with, but also hinted at the bonds that all creatures share, both within and across species. For while we, as humans, rarely must fear for our lives because of our surroundings, we nonetheless empathize when we see fear in other animals. Though we cannot communicate with other species, we have an intense desire to understand why they are as they are, and to share something with them. Just as Olson guided the lone mallard home, watched the antics of the otters, and looked into the eyes of the wolves, we long to connect with the living world around us. Hence, I see no strangeness in the hint of fear we felt when we heard the "wolf" call and the loons reply—we were simply remembering our

connection with the world, a connection that, though difficult to see in our boxed in lives, never fades.

For me, the moment where the music of the wilderness came to its climax was the night of the full moon. Sitting in our canoes on wonderfully calm Brule Lake, we reveled first in the fading sunset, which was held an amazing array of colors, laid across the sky as if by a giant's

paintbrush. Waiting for the moon

nearby rapids; laughed together

ducks flying to roost; and

whispered talk of all that was

the moment came in which the

horizon. Instantly the watery

orbs, the Man in the Moon gazing

terrestrial bound, we found great

We had come into our own world,

woodland, supported by a silky

black blanket, and lit by a moon



The full moon casts its reflection on Brule Lake. Though a beautiful picture, this scene's true grandeur could not be captured on film. (Photo by Megan Larsen)

to rise, we listened to the rush of

as we were nearly broadsided by

immersed ourselves in

wonderful in the world. At last

moon cleared the tree-filled

world was lit by two glowing

at his own reflection. As for the

difficulty in taking in the scene.

enclosed by a perfect ring of

wet floor, covered by a velvety

all our own. In this time, few

animals stirred; both loons and ducks had bedded down, and now only a lone bat attended us. I

suppose now that this moment may have been the closest I'll ever come to abandoning the fears,

apprehensions, and other human failings ingrained in us by society. For one evening, I felt as

though I truly belonged in that world, that I was a necessary and inseparable part of something

too spectacular for words.

While I have expressed here some of what transpired in our journey, I know too well that my words fall far short of what was witnessed. In reality, transposing the singing of the



Canoes resting on the shore—for now.
(Photo by Dr. Bricker)

wilderness is much akin to a review describing a moving concert—while the critic may have nothing but complimentary words for the stellar performance of the orchestra, the reader can only dream of what he missed. While I do enjoy being part of society once again, I will wait for, and seize, any opportunity to visit those places where the world reaches out and touches one's soul. In anticipation of that day, the memory of the singing as I heard it will live on, hidden away until it is returned to its native stage.