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COMMENTARY

Back to Nature

What Is It About Simplicity and Solitude that Inspires Writers?

By *Wendee Holtcamp*

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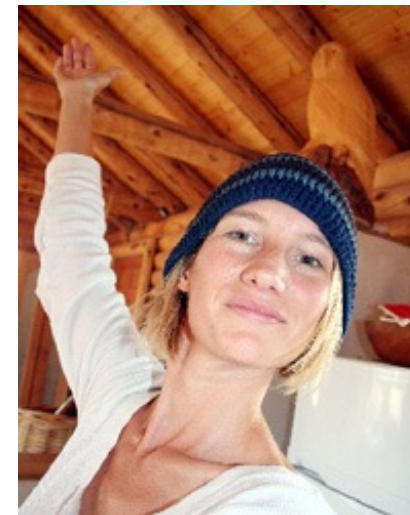
"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." – *Henry David Thoreau, On Walden Pond*

I'm sitting in an off-the-grid cabin in the red rock hills of New Mexico near where Georgia O'Keeffe used to live and paint, working by candlelight on my laptop run by solar-powered battery. Four weeks ago, I decided I would get away from my manicured suburban life--never mind the chinch bugs that have turned my green lawn into a scarred, weedy mess--and retreat into solitude and simplicity for inspiration. There's a long line of writers who have done this: Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, John Muir, Annie Dillard.

In two days I've not only explored new territory, dangled my feet over a mountain ledge, photographed the many colors of the changing high desert landscape, experienced a camp shower and composting toilets--both a return to my pioneer hippie childhood--I've been incredibly productive. I'm here to write my first book proposal, and the seclusion by way of nature is working: ideas and themes have come to me and in a very short time, I've come up with the guts of my proposal. And in this modern era I've made my ruminations available across the globe in my blog.

The cabin overlooks Owl Mountain, named for a rock outcropping that has long since withered, and is the manifestation of a dream for writer and educator Marguerite Kearns. She found the land, built the cabin, and sanctified it as a writer's retreat, something sustainable and out of the ordinary where the "land of enchantment" could beckon writers to tune out, be free and create.

The retreat has been unofficially open for the past two years, and in October Kearns finally held a dedication ceremony, "A reminder that all land is sacred, but that this land has been set aside as a teacher, to remind us of the thin veil between the material plane and the world of spirit which is more accessible, I believe, at certain places, like Walden Pond, or Abiquiu and other undisturbed places." Owl Mountain Retreat offers two competitive 10-day all-expenses paid residencies (a



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Cameo Life Story residency, and a Thoreau Residency) for writers who march to a different drummer.

I'm here for neither residency, but Kearns told me, "You are not here by accident." I found the place by asking environmental journalist colleagues if they knew of any low-cost get-away-from-it-all writers' retreats, official or unofficial. I came up with quite a list. I researched quiet monasteries, a secluded Caye in Belize and writer's residencies in my home state of Oregon, but Owl Mountain won out.

How did a single mom living in suburbia end up here, peeing in an outhouse, writing by candlelight, and monitoring my solar energy intake? What wild hair made me leave Houston and all the amenities of modern life for the illogical luxuries of the wild?

An unexpected divorce after a 10-year marriage, a job with small-minded people who couldn't see the forest for the trees beyond their office windows and too-tight ties, and a struggle for a square peg not quite fitting into round holes...I decided it was now or never for me to manifest my dream of not just writing (which I'd been doing for 10 years), but making a living at writing--something different entirely. A lot of my recent struggles have torn away at my spirit like vultures taking live prey. I tried to force myself to be happy, and occasionally was, but every morning I woke up with a stress and sadness with a cause I could not place my finger on. And so I leapt--from a cubicle to a tiny cabin in the high desert.

As I have my own private Thanksgiving, offering thanks for wisdom, sunshine, wit and joie de vivre, I write my book hoping that I can help remove the veil that hides truth from much of our nation, and reveal the wolves-in-sheep's clothing for what they are.

"What Owl Mountain has taught me as I've watched the cabin develop these past few years," Kearns tells me, "is that it has its own pace, spirit and character. I can't lay down my 21st century self on it and not be changed."

Well I didn't expect it to change me; living back-to-the-Earth is in my blood. I expected to be able to focus, write, and get things done without the distractions of daily life in suburbia with the kids and the mail and the laundry. It's not so different from the place I was raised. My hippie father built his own remote pioneer-style log cabin in the Oregon woods. I split time between him and my mom, but he won custody of me when I was eight, and we lived purposefully poor but free and happy.

We hauled water from a spring miles away, relieved ourselves in an outhouse, and showered from water heated on a wood stove and poured from a bucket over our heads. My nickname was "Urchin" because I had a



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heated on a wood stove and peered from a bucket over our hood. My nickname was "Grenn" because I had a penchant for attracting dirt. I played with Tonka trucks and old tree knots, which my brother and I called whacko-whammos. I was stubborn, smart, sassy, and silly, and born with a question at the tip of my tongue.

I grew up wanting to make a difference. So I studied wildlife ecology and evolutionary biology in college, swung on vines in the Australian rainforest, trapped small mammals (a nice name for rats and mice) in the post oak savannah and desert places, and then taught myself how to become an environmental writer for magazines. For years I've lived a life committed to doing more than flapping my jaw about the issues that concern me; I committed my days to making positive change happen and drawing other people toward following in these footsteps. My writing career has spanned 10 years, covering my own and other scientists' adventures worldwide--in Alaska, Australia, Costa Rica, Texas and beyond. Five years ago, I founded the nonprofit San Jacinto Conservation Coalition to promote smart growth and habitat conservation in the forested watershed of northeast Houston. Rick Bass pretty much sums up my life, "Suppose you are given a bucket of water. You're standing there holding it. Your home's on fire. Will you pour the cool water over the flames or will you sit there and write a poem about it?" And of course, you do both.

The book I'm authoring, which covers the fever pitch surrounding intelligent design, is taking on a life of its own. It warns of the dangers of having people blindly following their leaders without critically analyzing their beliefs, discusses how we got to this point in which people don't understand science enough to realize you can't vote a fact--like gravity or evolution--into or out of reality, and heralds a return to the Age of Reason, when science and faith peacefully coexisted (at least for those wise enough to realize it).

The title has morphed from *The Fish Wars* to *Dare to Be Wise!*, from a phrase coined by 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant in an essay written response to the question "What is Enlightenment?" He decried how the masses did not think for themselves, but let others make decisions for them. "If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay--others will easily undertake the irksome work for me," he wrote.

After all we have accomplished in the intervening 250 years, we've catapulted right back into another science-culture war. And despite what the media circus will tell you, it's not really about evolution vs. creationism, biology vs. the *Bible*, or the materialistic, scientific atheistic elite versus the believing public. The war is between propaganda and truth.

And so the world turns. As I walked back to the cabin, skipping from stone to stone on the walkway, I broke into a spontaneous smile and I thought to myself "pure joy," which is what the singer Jewel wrote in her album liner notes that she felt upon moving into her van, prior to being discovered. Living here in this tiny cabin in a vast beautiful high desert place, sitting in front of the wood stove at night listening to Simon and Garfunkel and writing by candlelight, I am in heaven. The spirit of Owl Mountain has snuck under my skin.



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I have jumped up and down like a kangaroo out of pure joy (thankful no one is looking), and spun around and been utterly blissful. I've cried tears of sorrow, and just sat outside in a chair staring at the mountain, contemplating--a disappearing pastime that Darwin himself often engaged in. This morning as I awoke, I realized that, at least for these few days, that mournful feelings have been completely absent. For all that I try to give to the world, to my friends, to my students through my teaching, writing and activism, I need to give myself the nourishing gift of a joyful day, every day, not just every few years.



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It has also reminded me that the suburban home I live in is not where I want to be. It is functional and has its benefits. But I feel joy and freedom from being true to my hippie bohemian roots, living in a sustainable place set amid a natural landscape. I must find my way back. I need to bring the spirit of Owl Mountain back home.

You can follow my back-to-nature adventures, which include ripping off clothing, eating maggot-infested chocolate, and hating cold bottoms in an outhouse at: <http://bohemianadventures.blogspot.com>.

Besides *E/The Environmental Magazine*, **WENDEE HOLT CAMP** has written for *National Wildlife*, *Sierra*, *Audubon* and *Discovery Channel Online*. She founded San Jacinto Conservation Coalition, and teaches an online nature and environment writing course.

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