

## **Wanderings**

by Sydney Lea

My wife and I enjoy a slew of retirees' freedoms, one of them being that we can make spur-of-the-moment decisions. Within reason, that is. We have three dogs, and while I dote on them for the most part, I do sometimes resent them. Our spontaneity can't include, say, a departure for Montreal, to our minds the most beckoning nearby city. A few unplanned days in May there might have been lovely.

We have an excellent local vet, and a timely phone call could have gotten our pets boarded at her practice; that would not have been the same as immediate indulgence of an impulse, but it'd be the next best thing. Unfortunately, we ignited our most recent spark of wanderlust one of her closed weekend days, so even that was out.

Along with so much else in Montreal, we're especially fond of the Musée des Beaux Arts. Its permanent collection doesn't dazzle, but it often has intriguing guest exhibits: I think, for instance, of an exquisite Vuillard show a few years back and of another featuring the stage settings of Chagall, of which we'd been unaware. He also painted the ceiling of the Paris Opéra; but I knew that.

Onward, and on a less hifalutin level. We always look forward to lunch at the museum's restaurant. The chef prepares his paté, to name a favorite, even more skillfully than I remember in France, back when I used to go there a lot. I even worked in a Paris suburb one summer, where I sometimes yearned, counterintuitively, for a greasy burger from the United Diner in my college town. The United operated all day and night, and there were some, well, memorable wee-hour outings there, with friends or alone. But never mind all that, another irrelevant detour.

We also enjoy Montreal's Botanical Gardens, its Biodome, even its Insectarium, where I've eaten not burgers but larva cookies. Depending on the show, the Imax cinema down by the St. Lawrence River can be entertaining, and merely strolling around the Vieux

Quartier is time well spent: the Old-World feel is palpable, and available fewer than three hours from our house.

Yes—digressions galore in my opening paragraphs, but again, that's unsurprising: for better or worse, I'm well known within the family and elsewhere, precisely, for going off on tangents. I can't seem to cure myself. How did I start all this anyhow?

Oh yes, retirees' freedom to honor impulse whenever they choose. Two days back, however, spontaneity took us, dogs in the backseat, no farther than a village thirty minutes north. We traveled there on a big highway that ends at the Québec border, which may well be what spawned my musings at the outset. Interstate 91 is the first step toward Montreal.

The hardscrabble former mill town we chose to visit instead lies in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom and is home to a bakery where we've become regulars. It has an incongruously Upper West Side feel, but the shop produces a rustic sourdough loaf, now a staple at our house, as well as good sandwiches, coffee, and cookies. It was close to noon, so we bought a take-out lunch there.

We made our short trip on one of those gorgeous upper New England days before the blackflies arrive but after the north-country chill seems truly to have vanished. All along the way, we'd been treated to the radiant bloom of shadbush, our earliest tree to flower, on the verges of fields and dirt lanes and above all to ridges showing so many shades of green they were beyond counting.

My wife had been reading a book that includes a chapter about various species' capacities to see. When I exclaimed over that plethora of greenness, she informed me that humans see more shades of that color than any other. At the same time, there are certain birds that perceive thousands more degrees of *any* color than we can. There are also fish that are able to detect ultraviolet and infrared light. Dogs, on the other hand, while blind to yellows and oranges, can see movement more acutely than we do. I could go on. The point, though, is the nearly infinite variety of visual experience among sentient creatures.

Where were we?

We were back in our car and too hungry to wait until we got home to eat. It would have been a crime to have lunch anywhere but outdoors that day anyhow. So instead of

taking that lightly used interstate highway we'd driven north, we headed toward home on the even less traveled state road along the Passumpsic River, thinking it more likely to offer a good place to picnic.

There's a little red barn on that road, perfectly round, Shaker-style. For whatever reason, I've always found the building and its streamside location very appealing. Because I've never seen any human activity there, I can find myself imagining a reclusive single, male inhabitant. Our late, beloved Neighbor Tink joked that the original owner died "lookin' for a corner to piss in." Farther south, there's a property belonging to a railroad enthusiast: he does live alone in the old station, though I can't remember how I learned that. Four archaic train cars and one steam locomotive stand on the rusted tracks running through his yard. I wonder how he came by that rolling stock?

No matter. Our picnic place, the Passumpsic Cemetery, presented itself before we reached either landmark. The burial ground lies just west of Vermont route 5 in a well-tended meadow, from which we could look across the river to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, many of which I used to climb with passion in younger years. The Long Pond trail was a favorite.

First checking that no one was visiting a grave, we drove in and parked. The sun warmed our faces the minute we got out. Shirtsleeve weather at last! We stopped by a grassy hummock marked by a set of headstones and footstones memorializing a member of the Hale family, all born in the middle to late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Patriarch Thomas married two women, the first of whose names I can't fetch now; she died at a fairly young age. The second, Abigail, lived just shy of a hundred years. What changes and upheavals she witnessed, including the American Civil War, two world wars, and a moon landing among innumerable others.

Less epically, I thought of a woman whose husband was Harlan Hale; he had the memorable name of Walborg. I wondered if Walborg had been born in what, as of 1791, had become the state of Vermont, had she immigrated from one of the Scandinavian countries? Her distinctive name prompted my curiosity. On closer inspection, I saw that her family name had been *Olsen*, so I guessed her ancestry was Danish or Norwegian, the Swedish equivalent being *Olson* or *Olsson*.

How do I know that, and why? It's maybe because one of my very closest friends is an Olsen.

Since the grass was still a bit wet from recent rainfall, we each chose a footstone to sit on. Mine was Abigail's, just because it looked a little larger than the others and would better accommodate my considerable rear end. As the granite's warmth seeped into me, peace settled on my soul. Songbirds trilled in the surrounding woods, a graceful trio of turkey vultures coasted on thermals high above, scarcely a car passed on the highway, and unaccountably, even the nattering ravens suspended their racket.

The feeling in body and mind took me back to a place my father inherited from his own father. We called it The Cabin, a treasured family retreat 400 miles south of where I've lived all my adult life.

Even before my grandfather bought the property, a dam had been built to create a three-acre pond. Lush hardwood forest crowded the house. There was a spring cluttered with pond lilies a little way back among the trees, and it was always full of frogs. We used to lure them out of the water with a strip of red flannel tied to a string, a trick taught to us by an aged Pennsylvania Dutch neighbor. Mr. Fusslugger trapped frogs for food, but we just did it for fun, my younger brothers and I competing to see who could fool the biggest specimen. I wonder now if the color of the flannel really mattered. Can frogs even see red? I should ask my wife. It's more likely that the fluttering of the cloth was what drew them. Or sometimes drew them. Frogs turn out to be fickle.

Our paternal grandmother had planted a small bed of perennials, bordered by four once well-trimmed cedar hedges, in a tiny clearing near the Frog Hole; we called it The Secret Garden. The flowers, which my mother casually weeded once a year, were still blooming in our childhoods. In fact, some had leapt from the original bed and meandered wherever they wanted, even while berry canes and beech shoots grew over more and more of that tiny dell as we children grew too.

Now that I think about it, how did my dad's mother do her planting? Multiple sclerosis had pinned her to a wheelchair very young. Either she tilled that soil before the disease got to its more disabling stage or, by an immense act of strength and determination, she left the chair and dragged herself along the ground to complete her task. Of course, her husband may actually have made the Secret Garden, though my

father always insisted his mother had. I never asked either grandparent; I was only five in the year they both died, but thinking of my mother makes me consider a cherished Irish friend of mine whose MS quickly did cognitive damage. He doesn't know who I am at this point in his illness. The whole thing breaks my heart.

Our Burial Ground sort of day came earlier at the Cabin. We three brothers and eventually two sisters loved a ritual, almost always in April, that marked the genuine onset of spring. Our father would cook hot dogs on an open fire down by the pond, and we kids would eat them sitting on the dam's sun-soaked apron. Sunfish, appropriately, nibbled at our toes as we dabbled them in the water. After lunch, we'd go chase each other around on a wide field of glacial-erratic boulders, working up the sweat we'd purge in the first swim of the year.

One event marred the celebration when I was ten. Just before lunch, I climbed a big rock and put my hand right on a copperhead snake, which had been warming winter out of its system at the flattened top. I remember a rattling trip in Dad's '48 Chevy wagon to a doctor's office in a postage stamp-sized town nearby. The GP injected me with anti-venin and the poisonous bite's only memorable effect, apart from lingering pain, was a stiff neck for ten hours or so. I do remember that I'd never loved my father as much as I did each time I woke up; there he'd faithfully be through the wee hours, squinting in lowered light at some magazine, barely rocking his chair.

There I go again.

Back to Abigail's stone where I perched well after we finished our meal. Meanwhile my younger, less lazy, and more inquisitive wife took a tour of the headstones, several of whose inscriptions implied a common misfortune: the deaths of a mother and infant on the same day, no doubt in childbirth. When she came back, my wife reported some of the tales those markers told, ones among other things to check my aged man's penchant to regard the Good Old Days as—well, good.

Her accounts of those inscriptions put me in mind of a time when, as a fit young hunter, I came upon the 19<sup>th</sup>-century headstone of a certain John Goodridge in the upper White River valley. I wondered if anyone ever visited that site, because it stood so far back in the woods; I couldn't even make out the ghost of a track leading to it. Who had

performed the burial, set up the monument? A nearby cellar hole suggested that a farm once stood here, and that the farmer lay buried under that slab of white marble.

But he didn't lie there alone. Below the carved dates showing his lifespans of five dead before him: four children, whose dates were tragically close together. The last showed the names of the youngest child, *Sarah*, and surely enough, perished on the same day in the same year, *Elizabeth Goodridge, Beloved Wife*. I whistled up my dog, bushwhacked to the truck, and drove back home where I'd started—and where I'd be glad to end my day.

Good Lord, it's time to get back to now.

Yet without wanting at all to sound more philosophical than I am, I wonder what we mean when we say *now*? Or when I do. Though my efforts on the page or simply as a raconteur tend to be full of natural and physical detail, I can't seem to stay fixed in my thoughts, can't root myself in a single geographical or psychological place, in anything called *here*.

As I inspect my own wanderings, I recognize—hardly for the first time—that reminiscence, even elegy, is somehow my stock-in-trade, and, as with one of my literary heroes, William Wordsworth, this is not a late development. It's a habit I cultivated early. Why? It's not as though my childhood and youth were pure idyll, after all. It's only that the past is such a repository of material. How can anyone resist it? I couldn't, not even in my twenties, when I launched what would evolve into a half-century's writing career.

So if you assume that my divagations and sketches of earlier life are ways of dodging the notion of capital-D Death, I'll resist *you*. At my age, I know, I don't have all the time in the world; it would make perfect sense for me to feel mortality's cold hand more keenly with each passing season, and yet somehow I don't. To me, death is a very clear concept, but I can't make it real to me personally.

As if I were immortal, I go on writing poems, stories, even novels, a few of whose characters can be death-haunted. But I was far more haunted myself at forty than I am at eighty, so as I sat on Abigail Hale's grave, I did not make that plot, as might be expected, into any sort of *memento mori*.

This may be because seven years ago, I had a dress rehearsal for death. Though the symptoms were surprisingly mild—more a pinch in my chest and upper back than a

crush, more deep fatigue than lightheadedness and shortness of breath—it turned out that my right coronary artery was one hundred percent occluded.

My most vivid recollection of that day and night is how unterrified I felt to confront the Reaper. I veered instead toward practicality, somehow grasping that panic or any other mental turmoil on my part would impede the efforts of professionals whose expertise, unlike mine, was crucial here. Whatever was meant to happen would happen. The doctors hadn't knocked me out completely, but I was sedated while the surgeon ran a stent up from my groin to my affected artery. Modern medicine to the rescue, as, sadly, it couldn't be for my poor, adored father, dead of a heart attack at fifty-six. So, virtually at the moment my grogginess passed, my gratification over the operation's apparent success blended with a deep sadness. Fifty years before, confronting the same crisis as my own, Dad had proved beyond saving. Modern medicine was not yet modern enough.

Good Old Days? I ask you.

One lesson did emerge from my cardiac event. *Seize the day*. Things I'd scarcely noticed before seemed suddenly wondrous: the ritualism, for example, involved in my barber Paul Tétreault's giving me a haircut: the sameness of his comments and gestures each visit, his courtliness and gentleness.

I hadn't forgotten certain other details, but now they had a kind of robustness: a photo on the shop wall of a huge black bear at his feeder; hair tonics on a shelf that were so ancient they stopped being manufactured, I think, in my boyhood; Paul's horseshoe pitching and ballroom dancing trophies. These were icons both of stability and reiteration.

Paul himself, sadly, died of his own heart attack within a year of mine, so any suggestion that my remembrances of him exemplify *carpe diem* won't hold. He sprang into my past as boldly as those posies leapt from my grandmother's Secret Garden.

My life, as implied by that blessed interlude at the Passumpsic graveyard, in the best company I know, on as lovely a day as any Creator could create, eating as good a sandwich as that shop could create, thinking about imminent visits from our creative children and grandchildren—my life is far richer than I could claim to deserve.

So why all these wanderings into the past? Am I searching for milestones, toting up experiences, sorrowful and jubilant both, as I approach the end of a long life? Perhaps. But finally, as I've indicated, I've been involved in such reverie from very early in my

existence. I can't, then, authenticate any reason why I elegize—except that it's the nature of the man.



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