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The Power of the Woods: A Memoir

Daniel McCool

When I was in third grade my family moved to a new subdivision, just outside of Indianapolis, Indiana. All housing developments tend to look the same, but this one had one peculiar advantage: it was right next to a Boy Scout camp with a fairly sizeable chunk of forest-covered real estate. Virgin forest, or any type of forest for that matter, had become exceedingly rare in central Indiana by that time, so I felt blessed because I had a tendency—maybe genetic or maybe just a personality quirk—to prefer outdoors to indoors, to prefer path to pavement. Our new house was where I lived, but this patch of forest was my true home. In other places, such a natural refuge might be called a wilderness, or a forest reserve, or maybe a mountain. But in central Indiana we just called it “the woods.”

It didn’t take me long to figure out that, of all the kids in the neighbourhood, there were two other boys who had the same outdoor proclivity, Randy and Bobby. We began exploring the woods together. At first, the woods seemed big and intimidating to us, but there is strength in numbers. None of us wanted to admit we were scared as we entered the dark recesses amidst massive oaks, beeches, and maples, and it was reassuring to be accompanied by two other boys with equal pretensions of valour. As the woods grew more familiar to us, we became bolder.

We memorized every trail and knew every little swale and hillock. We discovered vines that, with a proper cut, could be used for swinging in great arcs through the trees. We turned over rocks in the streams and with a little patience could find salamanders of brilliant hue. There was an old beech tree not far from my house that had a rotted-out hollow trunk, and we discovered all three of us could fit inside—the perfect secret hideout. The woods became part of us, an aspect of our identity. When other kids went to the mall, we went to the woods. That experience of facing beautiful but challenging terrain together and making it as familiar and comforting as home, cemented the three of us together in a special bond. Such is the power of the woods.

For me ‘the woods’ was like an extra family unit. At times it was welcoming and soothing, like my mom. At other times, especially in winter, the woods, like my dad, taught me life’s lessons and forced me to face the consequences of my own decisions. It was stern and in some ways unforgiving, but the woods offered solace and a nurturing peace that, even at a tender age, I knew was a special gift. The woods also offered an endless parade of imaginary characters, all long dead in the real world but very much alive in the shadows and dappled sunlight of the forest, a mixture of the surreal and the natural. Anyone from General Grant to King Arthur could suddenly appear, sometimes in company with the boys down the street or the girl next door.

As we grew up, our sense of the woods changed with us. Randy, Bobby, and I, at about age nine, decided we wanted to be knights from the Days of Yore. 'The woods' was happy to oblige. We cut saplings and made long spears, and split lumber to make broadswords. My shield consisted of a piece of plywood with two tube socks nailed to it for arm braces. We competed with each other to come up with the most authentic weapons and garb. I sometimes wore my Dad's World War II helmet, which was as broad as my shoulders. It was a challenge to come up with anything even faintly medieval in the Midwest in the 1960s, but then I got a lucky break: a woman backed into my Dad's Buick in a parking lot and smashed the grill. All Buicks at that time had a grill ornament that consisted of three overlapping shields. When Dad got home with the damaged car, he allowed me to pry off the ornament, which I then bolted to my shield. This symbol of exalted power put me in good stead with my fellow knights; both Randy and Bobby were envious of my good fortune. They immediately went in search of grill ornaments to complement their kits.

As our costumes evolved, so did our friendship. We developed a bond that can only be borne of shared adventure. We began to dress alike and talk alike. The woods became our reference point, the source of our own special language and understanding of life. Each challenge in life was faced by asking, in essence, "what would Sir Galahad do?" With swords, spears, and shields strapped to our bodies, we'd kneel in the soft loam and discuss the pressing issues of the day, such as the use of boiling oil in sieges, or whether the invention of gunpowder was really such a good thing. In time Randy and Bobby became more important to me than anyone else except my immediate family, and even we didn't quite understand our transformation from being 'just me' to one of the three musketeers roaming beneath towering trees.

As we perfected our medieval getup we induced other kids to join the fray. We had mock battles deep in the woods, where the boys from Wallingwood Drive challenged the boys from Boy Scout Road to full-scale battle. We had a motley assortment of body armour and weapons made from pilfered kitchenware and lawnmower parts, but our imaginations transformed it all into the Battle of Hastings and the crowning victories of the Round Table. I became convinced that I had a striking resemblance to Sir Lancelot. It was all great fun, miraculously no one lost an eye, and we developed a sense of courage, camaraderie, and *esprit de corps*. 'The woods', even though we didn't realize it, was shaping us, helping us to grow, teaching us valuable lessons and giving life a fullness that we never could have found in a dull man-made environment.

After many mock battles fought over fair maidens and mead, we decided to move ahead chronologically and become soldiers in the Seventh Cavalry. We dressed in blue, yelled "Yah Rinnie" every few steps, and fashioned a guidon out of an old handkerchief. We ran through the woods while trying to simulate horse-back locomotion. It is really quite taxing physically to run at full-bore while pretending to be mounted. We'd hold one hand out front with imaginary

reins, slap our own behinds to get more speed, and induce an awkward gate as we tried to gallop with two legs in lieu of four. I harboured a secret desire to be an Indian rather than a soldier blue, but that would have corrupted the closeness that we three shared. So I suppressed my gut-feeling that the Indians were the real good guys, and pointed my stick-rifle at enemy warriors lurking among the may apples and the thistle.

With time the woods evolved. At first imposing, it became too small, too confining; there just wasn't enough of them to sate our lust for untracked forest. I had always felt a kind of urban claustrophobia when I was in developed areas; that same feeling was beginning to present itself in the woods—that therapeutic haunt that had always treated that malady so well. I needed a bigger woods to accommodate my growing wilderness wanderlust.

Each summer my family embarked on a great road trip vacation. We'd all pile into the car and spend weeks exploring different regions of the country. I learned more on those sojourns than I ever did in school. At the beginning of each trip Dad would put a strip of masking tape down the middle of the backseat to demarcate my half and my sister's half, and off we'd go to points unknown. The year was 1961 when Dad decided we'd do a month-long tour of the American West by driving in a great loop that drooped down to Arizona, swooped up through California, and then bent back towards home through Montana and Wyoming. About halfway through the trip we spent the night in Tucson, Arizona. By then, after two weeks in a car, I felt like a caged animal and just had to get some space, so I wandered around the motel complex. On one wall I found a ladder bolted to the side of the building next to a sign that said "Do Not Climb!" I furtively began climbing and popped out on the roof just as the sun was setting over the mountains west of town. It was one of those glorious crimson sunsets over a jagged horizon; open space enveloped me, summoned me, scared me. I realized that here I would never run out of land; this place was a million times the size of the woods. I placed my hand over my heart, and solemnly recited: "I promise I will move here, I promise I will move here." I was 10 years old.

When I got back to Indiana I regaled Bobby and Randy with stories of massive wilderness out West; it made our little woods look puny. I don't think they quite grasped the geographic scale, but we collectively dreamed of riding horses across the desert, chasing bad guys and buffalos. As we grew, the woods remained important to us, but life is like a river, constantly flowing. Randy developed diabetes and became progressively weaker; it became difficult for him to hike with us. Bobby and I made the wrestling team, and we figured out a way to cut through the woods to get to school and still get to morning wrestling practice on time. All we had to do was scale a 12-foot fence behind the school and make sure the security guards didn't see us. At about that time I had my first quasi-romantic experience in the woods when a girl from the neighbourhood and I cut school and roamed through the woods until we found a secluded

glade—the exact same place where Bobby, Randy, and I fought off the Wallingwood Boys while wearing tunics made out of throw rugs.

In high school other interests crowded out the time spent in the woods. I saw less and less of Randy as his condition worsened. He had to drop out of school and remain cloistered in his home. Bobby and I were together on the wrestling team for two years but then we got a new coach we didn't like, and reluctantly, we quit. In an earlier era we would have made a mad dash for the woods, looking for the emotional balm it provides. But we had lost some of that connection and there was no replacement. Not long after that, Bobby joined the Marines. The year was 1969. They sent him to Vietnam. I graduated from high school and headed to college, where I immediately realized that my whole world was just too small. Like the woods, everything in my life that had once been comforting became confining. I had to find the emotional and moral equivalent of that sunset on the roof in Tucson—a bigger woods.

While in college I lost track of both Bobby and Randy. I came home one summer for an extended visit, and my father told me that Randy was on his deathbed. I felt an obligation to say goodbye, so I paid him a visit. I didn't even recognize him. His features were distorted from his disease. I didn't know what to say, so I began talking about my latest girlfriend problems, thinking that we could commiserate. But Randy said, "I've never had a girlfriend. I've always been too sick." I felt like an ass for bringing it up. There was an awkward silence. Then, one of us, maybe me, maybe him, mentioned the woods, and we started telling old stories about our many escapades. It did not take long before we were both laughing. He reminded me that, actually, I was *not* Sir Lancelot. I reminded him that he was always jealous of the Buick emblem on my shield. He confessed that was true. As I got up to leave, I said something about how good those times were. Randy said it was the best time of his life. He died soon after that.

A year or so later, I was home from college for a visit when, unannounced, Bobby—now Bob—showed up at the door. He was dressed in his Marine uniform. We had not seen each other in years, but in a certain way he still seemed so familiar to me, despite the grown-up uniform. Randy's death came up. I said Randy was the first friend I'd ever lost. Bob said he'd lost others. I didn't ask for details. Bob asked what I'd been up to. I explained that I had recently been arrested in Washington, D.C. while protesting the war. Bob said he'd been fighting that war. We both stared at the floor, afraid to look at each other. It was painfully silent. We'd always fought our battles together, and even though they were pretend they still melded us together in a sort of brotherhood of the woods. Now we were on opposite sides of the great gulf that had enveloped the entire nation. Bob got up to go. I mentioned my last conversation with Randy—the stories, the memories. Bob smiled. He looked at me and sallied forth with a few Galahad stories of his own. As he stepped towards the door we were both laughing.

Two months after I graduated from college I moved to Tucson, Arizona. It had taken me eleven years to keep that childhood promise. Within days of arriving I began searching for trails. In the ensuing years I spent most of my free time in the deserts and mountains, hiking and backpacking in sumptuous space. It was as though the woods had grown enormously and morphed into a wondrous and varied landscape. I had found my new home, and I made new friends who shared the adventures with me. Thirty years later they are still my best friends.

I moved to Salt Lake City in 1987 and began to explore a whole new world of wilderness. A few years later, I was called home suddenly. My father was about to undergo an emergency heart operation—a heart bypass that would give him a few more years of life. The family spent several days at the hospital, and when it became obvious that Dad was going to survive, we all came back to the house—the house of my childhood. I immediately headed for the woods. I wandered old trails filled with memories. I thought about my father, knowing that his life was ebbing. I thought about Randy and his aborted life, his lost chance at happiness. I wondered if Bob had survived the war. I cried openly, but a man can do that in the woods and it is okay; the woods will comfort you.

A few days later, just before I headed back to Utah, I visited my dad in the hospital one more time. He had survived the operation and would go home in a few days. While I was there my mom and I took a break and went to the cafeteria for a snack. While waiting in line I heard a voice: “Dan?” It was Bob. He held a baby in his arms.

“Bob! It’s great to see you. What are you doing here?”

“My wife just had a baby.” He peeled away the blanket to reveal a tiny face. “I think I may be the proudest father on the planet.”

We hugged each other warmly. He was anxious to get back to his wife, so we didn’t have time to talk. That was 20 years ago. I haven’t seen him since, but I sense he’s doing well and whatever successes he has experienced are, at least in part, due to all that character building we did when we roamed the woods together. That is certainly true for me.

Often, when my wife and I hike in the mountains near our home, I look up through the trees, see the sunlight filter through in a teasing way, and am transported back to a time when I brandished a sword chiselled from a discarded two-by-four and Bobby, Randy, and I felt like there was nothing on this Earth that we could not conquer. Such is the power of the woods.