**Showcasing the DNR: Picturing the new year**

*“It’s often said that life is strange, yeah but compared to what,”* – Steve Forbert

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With the turning of a new year, there’s often a good deal of hope welled up for new and better things to come in the days ahead.

It seems like the first stirrings of these forward-looking new year aspirations start sometime in early fall, when the leaves are turning and tumbling.

By then, it begins to become clear that the end of another year is just around the next few bends in the river. I’d liken it to when trout first start to change color for fall spawning.

It’s interesting to me that changing colors portend other types of changes in nature.

I wonder how many other cues nature provides that I do not sense or discern? The number must be staggering. For all the things I’ve learned over decades of experience, it seems I still know so much less than I’d like to.

There are dozens of tips or tricks, like the clues to identifying animal tracks or plants or birds, that once learned become easily understood and remembered going forward.

For example, I never knew, but just learned today, that if you break apart a leaf into two pieces and strands remain connecting the veins of the leaf, it can reliably be determined to be one of the dogwood species.

I guess those things have always intrigued and fascinated me and spurred me on to always want to learn more.

This explains why I can grab a book, find a quiet corner and disappear into the obscure worlds of lichens and mosses or grasshoppers and ants, emerging a few hours later with my mind buzzing full of new stuff to grab ahold of.

It’s intoxicating.

An additional thrill then follows by taking this information and looking for proof of its existence on hikes and haunts all over backwaters, hills and hollows across the countryside.

When those worlds found in books collide with the world outside my window, it’s like lightning crackling across the sky. It’s a dramatic thing to experience.

I’d say this is akin to a child’s first snowfall, a Midwesterner’s first hurricane or when those of the southern climes first encounter the northern lights.

And so, I sat at the breakfast table wondering what the new year might have in store.

My head was still kind of cloudy and my body felt wrecked, having just tumbled in my space capsule through re-entry into earth’s atmosphere from the other-worldly experience of the past year.

The quiet of the house on this early morning was like a balm for my soul.

As the queen and I enjoyed our eggs, ham and melty cheese sandwiches, I noticed an animal moving low to the ground through the trees off the edge of the backyard.

It was a fisher. This is the second one I had seen out there, but a first-ever sighting for the grand and regal queen.

Here it was barely the new year and something new already. Cool. I took it as a harbinger of good – more to see and do in the days ahead.

I read today that fishers are the main predator of porcupines, but they will also eat red squirrels and blue jays, which may explain their presence around our yard.

Then there was the email I received from my brother, via my niece. The message contained an unexpected new for me that I didn’t think was possible.

Staring toward me from an included image was the familiar face of my dad.

In my mind, I thought I had catalogued all my memories and images accordingly and had acquired every piece of what there was to collect – those pictures from various stages of life and profession and his own explorations within the halls of nature.

But here was something new – shocking not only in its existence, but in its brilliance.

The picture showed my dad, probably at about age 24, standing among some young jack pines and dead bracken ferns, with both hands holding grouse he’d shot.

I could see by the surrounding habitat that the picture was taken at a place different from where he’d shot the birds. The ferns also confirmed it was fall.

He wore a familiar white undershirt that was covered by an unfamiliar checkered flannel shirt and a jacket straight out of “Leave It to Beaver*.*” Most surprising was what appeared to be a typical belt holding up *blue jeans*!

This appears to be the first proof that my dad ever once wore blue jeans.

His face is so young, his black hair cut in usual fashion above his ears, short in the back, parted on the left side. It was beautiful to see all of this. It was like seeing him for the very first time.

Before sending this photo to my younger brother, he had written on the back “There was patridge (sic) around 1950.”

Just seeing and recognizing his handwriting touched me. It was like time was warping and wrinkling, coming straight toward me.

The picture back showed the print had once been in a photo album, but had been torn out, leaving some of the black paper album backing attached.

There’s a rust-colored spot on the photo, maybe from a picture from the opposite page in the album being in contact with this one and the two, at one time, sticking together before later being pulled apart.

Perhaps best is that the photo is in Kodacolor – faded and a little blurry, but exquisite.

With a little help from my digital photo tools, the colors snapped back in better shape than I would have thought. I still can’t replace what’s missing though.

Of all the things I might have guessed would happen in the new year, I never would have anticipated a new image of my dad. Since his death in 2008, my mind has traveled widely over the Navy photos, the bowling and baseball pictures, those in his mailman’s uniform and those later, sad portraits of decline.

My brother also sent a black-and-white photo of nine gents at a deer camp with their rifles out and three deer hanging on the buck pole. One of them is my grandfather, but I could only guess which one.

He died before I was born.

Now I am wondering if there are more photos of my dad my brother and I might be able to trade with each other. This was such a tremendous start to my new year.

I will likely cherish this photo more than many of the others because of how it came about. Finding it was so unlikely after all this time, like when they found a rare acetate in an attic of Elvis singing “Roustabout.”

I am excited to think that there might be more.

Over the past several days, I reviewed a list of “excursions” I’d hoped to take during the past year. I discovered that the majority of these have now been moved to a to-do list for this new year.

However, I am grateful for the experiences I did have that I had set out to do last year. Among them, I returned to the waterfall of my youth where I’d seen my first brook trout. I explored new places and refurbished dad’s old fishing reel.

So, here’s a toast to the new year, to the things as-yet-unrealized and the magic that remains snapping like a towel out there somewhere, even on the darkest nights.

It’s all somehow connected and related and it keeps rolling forward with a destination uncertain. Like a leaf caught in a tumbleweed, I’m along for the ride, watching the wheels go around and around.

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