**Showcasing the DNR: Nature’s intangibles**

*“Sixteen miles to seven lakes way up among the pines; in some hidden valley where the twirling river twines,” —* Gordon Lightfoot

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When we pulled around the corner of this quiet country road that bent toward the lake, the gravel crunched loudly under our tires. The sound echoed sharply into the high hills.

A moment or two later and we were there. With the hinges creaking before the doors slammed shut, only two steps outside of the vehicle we could already tell our voices and footsteps were way too loud for this place.

As we lowered the boat off the trailer, we’d made the adjustment, talking now in softer, almost hushed tones, deferring to the morning birds rehearsing their repertoires.

The water slurped as we slipped the bow of the boat into deeper water. For one of us, it was our first time here. For the other, the first time in about 40 years.

“Think about all of the things that have gone on in the world and society over all those years, and this lake has just been sitting here the whole time,” I said.

This place not only was ancient, a remnant of the Wisconsin glaciation, it felt ancient, and it even sounded prehistoric with the shrill cry of a pileated woodpecker slashing through the morning air like a knife. A moment or two later, the thundering drill of the bird’s sharp bill on the side of a tree trunk resounded over the water.

If this weren’t primitive enough, there were the strange dinosaur-like sounds of mating cranes in the distance, and, closer to where we listened, the springtime wing-drumming of a grouse atop his moss-covered log on the forest floor.

Over the side of the boat, small, striped minnows darted along the bottom of the deepening lake. This place was magnificent, a mirror of heaven that cast the vision of the sky back upon itself as it twirled.

And below, the lake was clear, cold, honest and true — from the flat reflection of the bare northern hardwoods that stood along its shore, straight through past the fish and the water reeds to its gravelly bottom.

How many more places were there like this? There had to be more. But lakes, rivers and creeks, like people, seem to be individuals, with their own temperaments, troubles, joys and heartaches.

This lake was not only beautiful, seeming to hold the wisdom of her years, but she appeared unafraid to reveal her profound secrets to those willing to be patient enough to wait, listen and receive. Today, she was soft and quiet one moment, choppy and rough the next.

As we floated on ahead, a loon that had been peering beneath the water, likely in search of some of those striped minnows, surfaced about 70 feet off the bow. It then dove and resurfaced again, this time closer. Then, in the distance, another.

From the sunlit trees along the shore, winter wrens, white-throated sparrows, red-breasted nuthatches and eastern phoebes all chose to sing, as though the sun energized the batteries in their music boxes.

But, while these birds sang, the loons remained silent.

Like the lake itself, the loon pair appeared in their silence and majesty to possess deep secrets hidden behind their brilliant red eyes they wouldn’t be divulging today.

We understood. We could hardly blame them, with one among us a first-timer here and the second not having returned to this spot in decades. Perhaps another time, when *we* were ready, they would be ready.

With our boat tied to a floating log, we spent a few minutes between the sudden tugs of swirling trout that raced and turned after our bait to have a few bites of lunch ourselves.

Painted turtles on logs, a bag of salted peanuts in my jacket pocket. A couple of ham and cheese sandwiches and some fresh drinking water. Our talk, in the face of the timelessness of this place, centered on changes, what’s gone and won’t be coming back.

The music and the miles. So many places we all knew so well, boarded up now if they still stood at all, clutching to an unstated pride, storytellers in their times, honored and respected — in a way, kind of like old trout anglers — grandfathers, fathers and sons. Grandmothers, mothers and daughters too.

An hour or so later, we were heading back out along the dirt road, heading north into those towering hills, where we would roll down over the other side through the pines of the plains, and eventually, to the big blacktop.

But before that, we’d stand within the walls of the river gorge and feel the power, and listen to the sound of that roaring water. More signs of ancient geology at work, more places for fish to hide, more places to feel alive and whole.

From the placid waters of the crystal lake, encrusted in shimmering diamonds, to the torrent of the tremendous river, though the wind was still cold for May, we certainly stood in high country today.

It’s days like these we look back to and we hope to soon find again, amid the noise and the busy, the commitments and the clock. Yes, it’s days like these that ultimately, among the wilds of nature, we cherish.

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