

Northeast, by Sherry Poff

Several years ago, I traveled with my husband and two of our grown children to Cadillac Mountain in Maine, a treat I had anticipated for some years since learning that it was reportedly the first spot in the United States touched by the sun each day. We missed sunrise on Cadillac, but one afternoon we drove up the road that snakes around the mountain to the summit. Each of us enjoyed a walk atop massive cliffs and along a paved trail overlooking the ocean, taking in the beauty of the place in our own silence and finally gathering for pictures. It was spectacular, even on a cloudy day. Wind-blown pines and shrubs on the mountain's side seemed to blend with the green further down and spill right out into the Atlantic, creating islands of emerald and jade in the blue-gray water.

But we were not alone on the mountain top that day in June. Many other visitors had arrived to enjoy the view and experience the magic of the place. On-line guides to Acadia National Park, of which the mountain is a part, boast of the accommodations for tourists who visit the site, noting the large parking lots, restrooms, and “even a gift shop.” When one has the mountain and the sea, I have to ask, who needs to shop?

In 1960, author Wallace Stegner composed his “Wilderness Letter” to members of the Wildland Research Center of Berkeley, California. Stegner's main point in his now-famous letter commenting on the upcoming report of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (Even the title oppresses.) was that the *idea* of wilderness is necessary to American freedom—to the notion that we have a place to escape the noise and pollution of our everyday lives. But the author was not interested in opening up more spaces for fishing or camping or even hiking. What America needs, he claimed—what people need—is a place free from the taint of

human smells and waste, a place that we know is there as a buffer against crowds and noise, against total domination by humankind. Even if we never go there.

In 2014, on a road trip with my eighty-five-year-old mother-in-law, Dorothy, I whiled away hours on the big tour bus reading Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*. Bryson's tale about his experience on the Appalachian Trail with his buddy Stephen Katz is funny, informative, and impossible to put down. I read it all the way from Princteon, West Virginia, to Niagara Falls, pausing occasionally for meals and chats with my traveling companions.

After a quick drive across eastern Canada, with stops in Toronto and Quebec City, the bus headed south back toward the heart of Appalachia. One whole morning, we rolled through New Hampshire and Vermont, right alongside the mountains. Traveling down the highway with soaring slopes out the left window, I mused while Dorothy dozed. Here, a variety of tree species creates a seeming carpet of green, but looks are deceiving, and I recalled Bryson's stories of rocky trails and steep vistas.

"I can't help but wonder," I said to one of our group as we stepped off the bus to get some much-needed exercise, "who might be walking on that mountain ridge right now." I was standing on an asphalt parking lot next to a noisy bus emitting smelly fumes. But up on the mountain, under the shelter of oaks, hickory, and maybe even some chestnuts, the path was surrounded by birdsong and fresh air. The knowledge of its presence was like a secret promise, like the tiny shell one carries home from the beach in the sandy bottom of a dress pocket.

For much of the past year, we have been trapped by an enemy we cannot see. Crowds were discouraged—even forbidden. In a time when loving my neighbor has meant staying away from my neighbor, I learned to lean more heavily on the distant view, the view of the trees across the road, the blue sky overhead where crows and the occasional hawk move about, unhampered

by boundaries. I look to the hills in my east Tennessee home, and my mind travels northeast, past fields and farmland, along river valleys and up I-77, through the tunnels, Big Walker Mountain and East River.

Here the air is light and fresh. Though it is mid-summer, wild honeysuckle fills the evenings with fragrance, and nights are cool enough for a sweater. Along the ridges, fireflies dot the evening with tiny lights, and barred owls engage in long conversations filled with laughter. I search the now-dark sky for familiar stars not visible near cities but sharp and bright here in the hills. And far to the north, way up on Cadillac Mountain, the edge of America is slowly turning to face the sun for another day.

Wallace Stegner noted that while early Americans were working their way West across the continent, the “wilderness was working” on them, shaping the American conscience and showing us that there is value in what we leave alone, what we choose to leave wild.

The wilderness is a promise, assurance that—when we have the time and the leisure and the freedom—there is a place we can go, even if only in our minds. A place where green and blue melt together in the distance. And we won’t need a gift shop.