



# From Season To Season

## Healing Through Nature

Selections From The Blog



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## INTRODUCTION

*We've all been there.* Bad days, trying seasons, difficult situations, loss and grief. When we find something that helps us cope with those trials, that carries us through, we want to share it with others.

When I started TheParkNextDoor website, it was in an effort to share nearby nature spots for bird watching and nature hikes. In the ten years I have been profiling and sharing Wisconsin green spaces, I've come to realize how much they play a role in my life, in our lives. Certainly, outdoor recreation is paramount, but so, too, are the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of being in these green spaces.

Through many of life's ups and downs, challenges and changes, a thread of healing weaves between the weariness and renewal. During especially stressful times, I may not be able to get out for a walk, or to toil in the garden, or wander a nature trail. It is at these times that I change my driving route for errands to include a passage along a local parkway, where I can take in the scenery of trees, birds, flowers, maybe even spot a doe and her fawn wandering among the shrubs and tall grasses. These things are helpful to me. I know it's not for everyone, but some form of contact with the natural world is bound to keep you going when times are tough. Even if just a bit of shade under a tall tree on a steaming hot, sunny day.

The advent of my more personal connection to nature really kicked in after the loss of my mom in 2010. Her death left me unmoored for a long while. I managed to carry on, but struggled to find any peace. I was also under the impression that to connect with nature meant long, intense hikes, road trips across the country through canyonlands and deserts, trekking up mountains, and sunbathing on spectacular beaches. While these adventures are the perfect fit for many, they weren't the right fit for me, especially at that time. As much as I do love to travel and experience other places, I needed to find something that worked for me where I was.

A bit of backyard bird watching turned into so much more. A journey I've documented in many of the blogs here at TheParkNextDoor. Nature has healed me many times over, and I expect it will do so again and again. It won't always be easy, or quick, or permanent. But I have found it to be a balm to me more than just about anything else.

I've assembled a selection of these blogs into one place, to share what I have experienced and learned within and of nature. Perhaps some of them will resonate with you. Let you know that you are not alone in spite of how it may seem. The loss, and memory of, my mother is central to a few of the blogs, and so, I have dedicated this published selection to her. Though it may seem maudlin to some, I am publishing this on the anniversary of her death, in her honor. A day I mark each year with some form of tribute, and with a vast amount of love.

So, *in honor of my mom, Carol Walker*, and with love and gratitude for the small, and the big, bits of natural beauty that surround us, I present FROM SEASON TO SEASON - Healing Through Nature.

Wishing you the joy and healing that nature can bring, no matter where you are.

Kimberly  
August 27, 2024

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# Living On The Ecotone

3.15.2014

**Ecotone:** an area of transition between two biological communities.

I've been fascinated by this term from the first time I heard it. Frankly, it was a title of an episode of the TV series "Six Feet Under", and it really piqued my interest at the time. Basically, it underscored the closeness of the threshold between one species and another. Human to wild animal. Wilderness to city. Somewhere along the way is a dividing line. That line could be as near to you as your back door.

Look out the window and you see wild birds sitting on branches, rooftops, bird feeders, telephone lines. Explore a little further and you may see hawks, deer, coyotes, foxes, owls, vultures, hummingbirds.

Drive to the grocery store and you may see, along the way, a hawk perched on a light pole, or a wild turkey on top of someone's house. These things happen, and I find them fascinating. An example of how humans have, step by step, taken over this planet, and yet, a miracle of sorts, too. Since, in many ways, we have come to appreciate the nearness of the "wild" species. Though that appreciation may be one sided, the wild side has adapted in their own way, too.

We live in the city of West Allis. A neighborhood near busy streets. We put bird feeders in our backyard, and are treated to cardinals, house finches, house sparrows, goldfinches, chickadees, and an occasional nuthatch or warbler. We've seen skunks walk through the yard, raccoons, opossums, a wild turkey on the rooftop of our neighbors house, seagulls, chipmunks, and squirrels. But recently, on a fairly regular basis, we have hawk visitors. An adult, and a juvenile Cooper's Hawk. Beautiful creatures visiting our backyard, basking in sunlight on our fence, on the lookout for a meal, no doubt.

The other birds are scarce at these times. My hope is that they are picking up a mouse or two wandering the alleyway. I know they have to eat, and I hope they do. I just don't want to see it. Yeah, I'm a little squeamish that way. But I am thrilled to have these visitors. And amazed, because just this week I stepped outside to get a few photos, expecting the hawk would take off, though I was quiet, respectful, and cautious (I kept my distance). But he did not. He sat on the fence and posed so proudly. So grandly. In fact, I was surprised to see that he was still there when I left for the day about an hour later. I hope he found lunch. And then, I hope he had dessert. 🦅



# SOLACE

4.19.2014

A Golden-crowned kinglet at Greenfield Park.

Grief. Anger. Sadness. Confusion. Indecision. Stress. We all need respite. This week one of my precious pets died. A bird. One of a flock of 9 parakeets. I am heartbroken. It was unexpected. Sudden. She was fine. And then, she wasn't. It went quickly. Thank goodness for her. Swift and with mercy. At least I hope so.



Yellow-rumped warblers.  
Early spring arrivals.

I live with a flock. My own personal winged haven. I love them with all my heart. They bring me joy. But this week, sadness. As it turns out, not only do I love my home flock, I love the wild flock, too. Birds of every species, color, size, and season. I revel in discovering them hidden among the trees, in the parks, on a light post from the car window, on a power line singing their hearts out.

After a long day, a bad week, or just to get out and breathe the air, I venture to a park, take a walk, and bird watch. It centers me. I'm enthralled by these winged creatures. In awe. Something about them just speaks to me.

So, today, feeling sad at my loss, at the flock's loss, I spent some time at the park. And, behold, the spring migrants have begun to arrive. Golden-crowned kinglets, Ruby-crowned kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warblers. Flitting from tree to tree. Daring in their spring colors, close enough to almost touch. I watched them for awhile. Took a few photos. Walked the trail. Then went back again for more.

I'm still sad. But, returning to my home flock, I tried to stay in the moment, suspend the grief. For me, hope really is the thing with feathers. I adore them all.

They bring me solace. 

# Missing Nature

6.29.2015



A Great Blue heron spotted at Greenfield Park.

I've been missing nature. My mind has been cloudy with stress and worry. My husband has been in the hospital. Very sick. Scary sick. He's home now, and finally on the mend. Another close family member is now sick. Terribly so. Someone rear ended my car. Work is busy. Summer is passing so quickly. So many things to get done. It's already the end of June and I feel like I've missed so much.

Life comes at us full force some days. Some weeks. But what keeps us going? What keeps me going? Nature. Even a fleeting moment of fresh air and sunshine. Waxwings in the trees outside of work. Birds at the backyard feeder. Chipmunks and rabbits and squirrels passing through our urban backyard for a snack, a rest in some shade.

While I'm hankering for a hike on a wilderness trail, or an extended afternoon at a nature preserve, these are moments that sustain me. Today I was driving along Greenfield Avenue. Suddenly, overhead there appeared a blue heron. For a few seconds this nearly prehistoric creature hovered above the same road I traveled on. Then it quickly veered right over the trees and it was gone. I'm pretty sure it was probably headed to Greenfield Park.

So, I went, too. To Greenfield Park. Finally. And it did me a world of good. Another long week approaches and having gone will refresh me a bit.

If not, I'll try to appreciate the nature moments that come along as the days go by.

PS: The heron was there. :)





6.23.2017

# Wisconsin Longing

It took me a lifetime to realize what I'd been longing for. As a child, a young adult, and a grown woman, I longed for something. I can remember stepping outside at night, on some warm, breezy, summer evening, and feeling a longing, a sadness even, stirring inside me. In my teenage years I thought I was yearning for love. Teenage angst and all.



But now, decades later, I realize that what I have been yearning for all along has been a connection to nature.

Near as my backyard, a neighborhood park, the local nature preserve, the view from a Lake Michigan pier, the sound of a Robin singing at dawn, and again at dusk.



Waxing nostalgic, I recall childhood days spent at my grandparents cabin near Amery, Wisconsin. We would fish from the dock or go out in the fishing boat with my dad. We'd swim in the lake, or go for a walk down the dirt road and wander in the woods.

We slept on the enclosed front porch of the cabin and would wake to a view of the lake. To the sounds of American Robins singing in the trees. That glorious early morning wake up song.

To this day the song of a Robin is an all-time favorite. No matter where I am, in the city or in the woods, the Robin sings and I listen.





Traveling the southwest circa 1995.

This is not to say that I have ignored nature until now. On the contrary, I have traveled to many parts of the United States and marveled at the glorious landscapes. The mountains, deserts, rivers, streams, woodlands and swamps.

I have camped in the mountains of New Mexico, and hiked in the Badlands of South Dakota. Reveling in the beauty of these places. But still, the longing...

I fell in love. Got married. Still the longing. We have pet birds. Many of them. It makes it a challenge to travel far from home. We started backyard birding. I was amazed at how many different wild birds show up in our urban backyard. Amazing. I wanted more.

I discovered that our local city parks have birds. All different kinds of them. During migration season even more. More amazement. The exploring began in earnest, every weekend, and any day off, different parks and preserves, in search of birds.

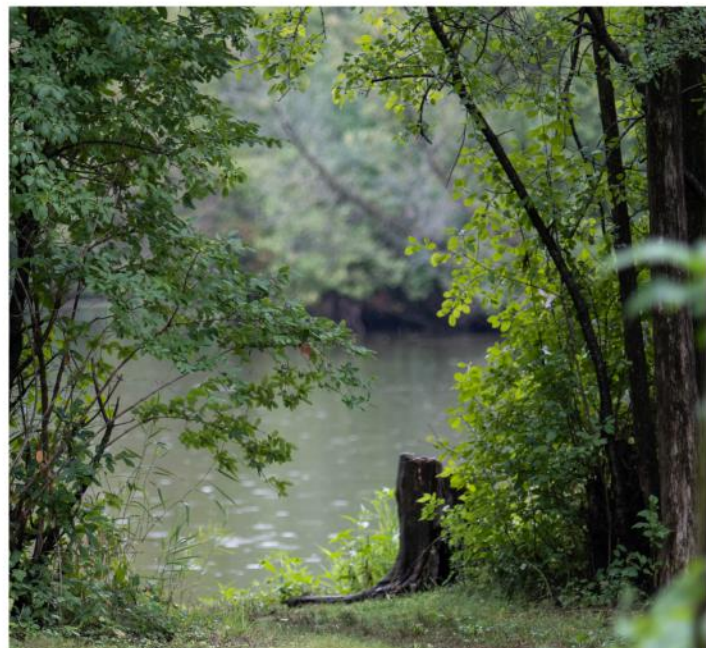


Cedar Waxwing photographed at Paradise Springs Nature Trail.

*But then, some days, you don't see many birds. And I began to notice other things. The color of the leaves on the trees. The different shades of blue in the sky. The sound of a river flowing. The buzz of a bumblebee on a flower, the vibrant colors of flowers in bloom, or the textures and shades of decaying plants and leaves in the autumn and winter.*

I began to notice that each season had more beauty than I'd realized before. It's not that I was blind. I just didn't get it. My perspective changed. My view through the lens changed. And the longing was finally identified.

I didn't have to travel across country to appreciate nature. To connect with nature. Nature's beauty is right here. It doesn't mean I won't travel. That there aren't other places I want to see. Adventures to seek. But I've learned an important lesson. Like Dorothy, I needed to go home again. The power had been with me all along. I traded ruby slippers for well worn hiking shoes, opened my eyes, and took a deep breath of the Wisconsin around me. There's no place like home. 🍃 9

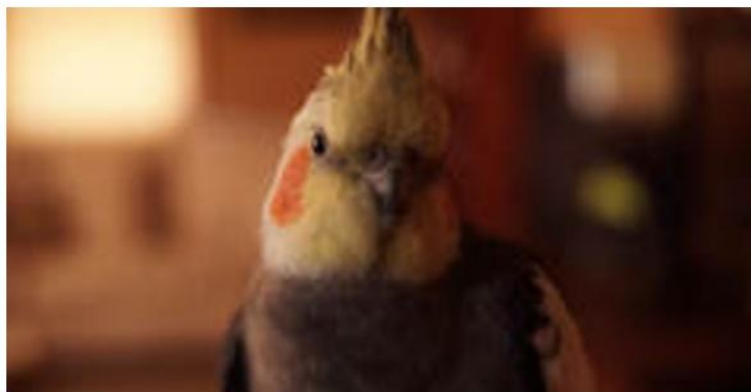


Adventuring local at Greenfield Park.

# Loss And The Healing Power Of Nature

3.07.2018

Last week my heart broke. My pet cockatiel, Google, passed away quite suddenly. Though I thought I had picked up on his ailment early, it wasn't early enough. Birds are fragile creatures. Google, all of 9 years old, declined swiftly, though several valiant trips to the vet were made, and last Thursday night he passed away. My darling is gone, and my heart is in tatters.

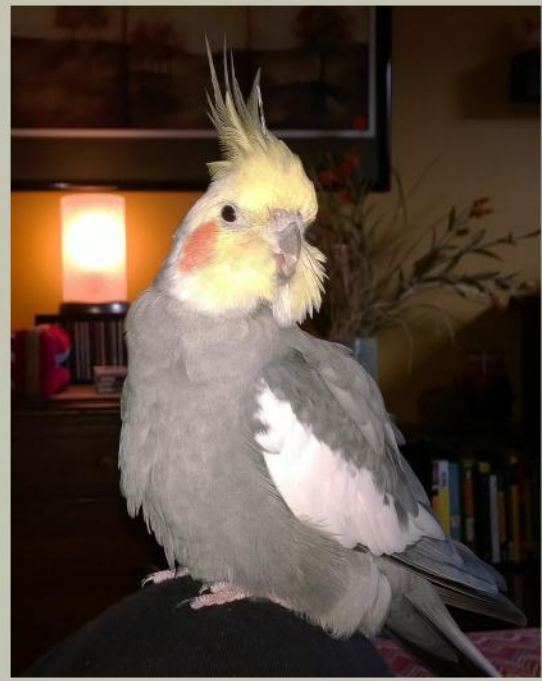


He passed away late that night, and neither my husband or I slept much. The shock, the grief, the guilt, too much to bear. He was ingrained in our lives so thoroughly. We have a flock of parakeets as well, but Google thought he was human. He spent all his waking time with us when we were at home. In fact, whenever I worked late, or when I worked Saturdays, I usually sent a text to my husband to let him know I was on my way home. His response would be "Google and I will be waiting."

Having had pet birds for over 12 years now, we have known our share of losses. I grieve these greatly. But during the past nine years, when we suffered a terrible loss, I would tell myself, at least we still have Google. I thought we would grow old together. Cockatiels can live to be 25 years old, sometimes more. Even our oldest parakeet lived to be 12. Most live to be 5-9 years old in our experience. And though they get great care, loss comes with the territory. Loss, as we all know, is the great price that comes with Love.



In the past several days I have struggled to come to terms with this loss. It has just been a week after all. And those of you who have loved and lost pets know the sadness of which I speak. He's not calling to us before we even open the door when we arrive home, he's not yelling to us to get out of bed and come let him out in the morning. He's not preening my hair while I edit nature photos, or chewing on my latest copy of whatever magazine.



I don't think there is a book in the house that he hasn't nibbled on. We often would hang out together at the back window in our bedroom watching the wild birds outside, the rabbits, the squirrels. Google often liked to sit in the warmth of the sun on the windowsill. Something he was at least able to do in the last few days he was with us. He often ate dinner with us as well. He'd finish his dinner first, then make his way over to sit on my husband's knee while we ate. He napped with us, sang with us, whistled with us, showered, even. This loss is going to be hard to overcome.

In the past several days I have begun the process of cleaning out his things. Since we have a flock of parakeets, it is imperative that we make sure to minimize any chance of any of them getting the infection that Google had. So, no closing the door and weeping in bed. Things need tending to. The desire to go hiking and expound on the beauties of nature low on my list.

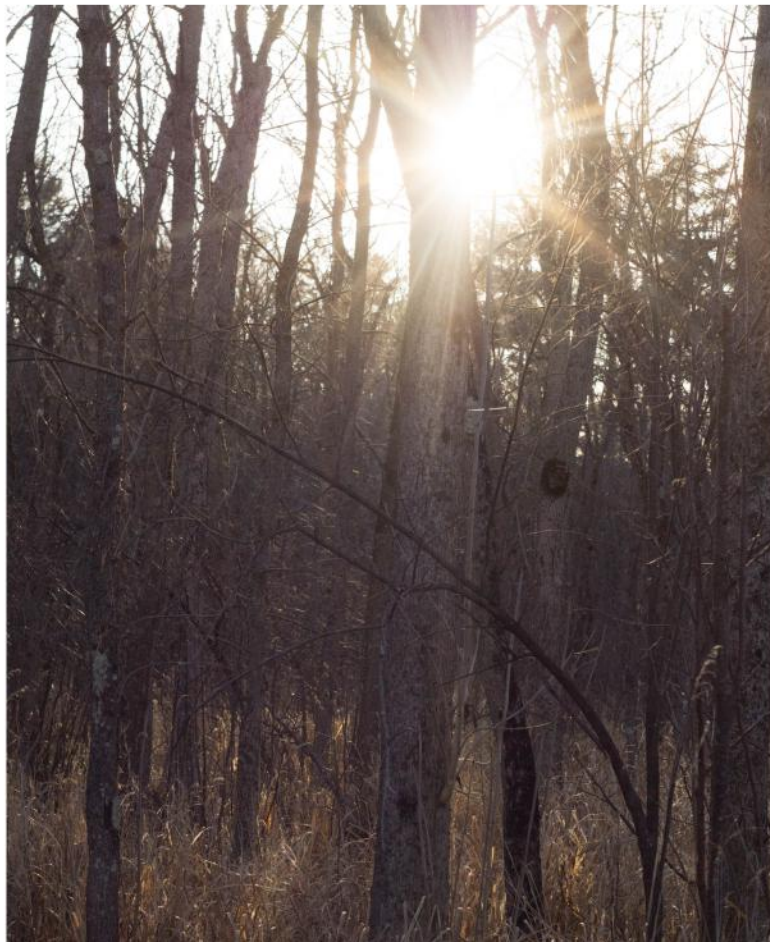
But at my husband's insistence, I have gone out to a couple local parks briefly. And, though it's been sad, it has been helpful, at least a bit. Saturday morning I dropped dear Google off at the vet to be cremated.





I could barely stand the idea of going back home, to where he would not be. I took a brief walk in the park, tears in my eyes, grief in my heart. The sound of the wild birds in the trees a thimbleful of comfort.

For me, the love of pet birds, and wild birds, coincides deeply in my life. We had pet birds first, then became fascinated by the birds visiting our backyard feeders. Even here, in the midst of the city, the variety is wonderful. Everyday birds like sparrows and finches, chickadees, cardinals, crows, mourning doves, blue jays, downy woodpeckers, nuthatches, starlings, and the occasional visit by a hawk. Precious creatures all.



This loss will not pass easily. The pain in my heart, and the knot in my stomach tell me so quite clearly. But I will let our flock of parakeets, and the coming bird migration, help me to heal. And we will let nature work her magic. Though she has her work cut out for her. Google, my fine-feathered little search engine, I miss you with all my heart.





# Out The Window

4.29.2020

A Northern Flicker visits our backyard birdbath on a gray spring day.

I stare out the window a lot these days. Particularly on gray, rainy days of late. The warmth of the sun seems scarce this spring. The days when it shows up are glorious, but, seriously, we need more of them.

Even so, I'm thankful for my room with a view. Our bedroom windows look out on our city backyard, and we are lucky to have habitat that is visited by birds and critters alike.

This is our second spring in this house, and I am anxiously awaiting the arrival of spring migrants.

Last week saw the arrival of Chipping Sparrows, and a small flock of White-throated Sparrows. We even had a Wild Turkey visit! The White-throated Sparrows are still here, flitting through the habitat, and singing in the rain. This is the beginning...



Last year our biggest migrant day was May 10. I watched in amazement, through the window, as migrant after migrant, and many feathered residents, arrived.

I counted a total of about 20 different species, in multiples, throughout the day, and in the few days after as well. Birds I had seen in the wild before, but not in our city backyard.

There were Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings, Clay-colored Sparrows, Song Sparrows, a Gray Catbird, Baltimore Orioles, Downey Woodpeckers, Hermit Thrushes, a Common Yellow-throated Warbler, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, along with some of the usual summer residents: American Robins, Common Grackles, Starlings, Cardinals, House Sparrows, Gold Finches, House Finches, and Mourning Doves. Crows, too.

I was so overwhelmed, I actually cried. It was incredible.

Just some of the birds that visited our city bird-friendly habitat last spring.

We've added many native plants to the garden since then, several native bushes, a brush pile, and a leaf compost bin. And a couple more birdbaths. I'm hoping these added elements will entice more migrants to visit our avian Airbnb. At the least, I'm hoping visitors from last spring will visit. And bring friends.

The prospect of Spring Migration has been a major balm for me in these Covid-19 times. I try to get out a couple times a week for a walk in local parks and nature trails, but being able to enjoy the comings and goings of wildlife in our backyard habitat has been a welcome distraction as much as a passion.



A White-throated Sparrow perches on a tree branch in our backyard habitat.



We were gifted some native honeysuckle, a favorite of hummingbirds.

I'm looking forward to working on the habitat in the coming months, too. We started some plants from seed, a first for us. We shall see how that turns out. I'm sure we will do some curbside pickup from local garden centers as well. Evenings in the backyard surrounded by flowers and birdsong will be a welcome retreat from the stress of current times.

I'm aware that bird watching is not everyone's cup of tea, but in times like these, the melody of bird song, and the beauty of nature might help to fill your cup. No matter where you live, there's bound to be some wildlife in view. Just look out the window. 🐦



# Let Nature Be Your Comfort

12.7.2021







The holiday season can be especially trying for those suffering with loss.

It's a difficult time of year for so many. The holidays, marketed as the season of good cheer, can also bring a multitude of sadness, grief, and loneliness into our lives. The loss of loved ones, whether through death, distance, or parting of ways, feels more profound in a season where togetherness is billed as the ultimate goal. I'm not saying we shouldn't strive for that togetherness. I crave it, too.

But if you often feel pangs of sadness during the holidays, let nature be your comfort. Get outside. Yes, even in the bitter cold; and take a walk through your local parks and preserves. Or, even, local cemeteries. Not always thought of as places of natural beauty, cemeteries are actually quite lovely. Peaceful, with paths to walk, birds singing in the trees, and benches for rest and contemplation.

My parents elected to have their ashes scattered in a river 5 hours away from where I live. I often feel myself missing having that touchstone, that grave marker, that memorial. But walking in local parks, and in local cemeteries, even though they are not physically there, helps me to feel closer to them in some way.

Today I visited my father-in-laws grave at St. Adalbert's Cemetery. I confess, it really helped to be in his presence in some way. It also helped me to feel closer to my parents, even though they are not buried there. Whatever works, I suppose.

After our visit, I took some time to traverse this historic Milwaukee cemetery. There's a lot of beauty there, though it is moments from the freeway and city traffic. And it was bitterly cold! I plan to go back on a warmer day to spend more time taking it in.

In the meantime, take heart, sad souls. Find the joy where you can this holiday season, and embrace those moments of sadness, too. After all, it means that the ones you miss are loved and well looked after in your heart. 🌿



Finding a way to honor those we miss can be helpful.

# Past, Present, Future

8.14.2022



Thinking back, to nearly a lifetime ago. I was just a kid growing up in St. Paul. During the summers, on weekends mostly, our family would make the drive to Amery, Wisconsin, where my grandparents had a cabin on a lake. It seemed like it was a world away, though it was only about an hours drive.

I loved being there. Among the big pine trees, the wildflowers, waking in the cool of the early mornings to the sound of American Robins singing. My uncle would rake the bottom of the lake along the shore and boat dock so we could wade in and swim. Once in the water there I rarely wanted to come out. The water was clear enough we could stand in it and watch perch swimming quickly past our feet.

I used to fish from the dock, watching the bobber go under water, thrilling to the bend in my fishing rod, reeling it in. Most often it was sunfish, sometimes perch.

Sometimes we kept it for eating (though I'm not a fish eater), most often I wrestled up enough courage to hold the fish in my hand to release it from the hook and put it back in the lake.

On the drive home I would close my eyes and see that bobber dancing on the surface of the water, then lunge under. I haven't fished in decades, but I can still recall the thrill of it. The peace it can bring, too.

In the evenings the fireflies lit up, dancing among the trees and the wild grasses and flowers that lined the dirt road to the cabin.

The air was clear, as was the sky. Stars appeared after dark in numbers I could never imagine seeing from our home in the city. Like magic.



The sight of a fishing bobber on the water brings on nostalgia.

Once back home, evidence of our trip to the woods, to the cabin and the surrounding wilderness, was evident. There crusting over the grill of the family car, and gunked in bits on the windshield were the remains of thousands of bugs.

Moths, mosquitoes, flies, beetles. All met their demise in collision with wind, speed, and heavy moving machinery.

It took a little elbow grease and a lot of soap and water to clean them off, but it was a small price to pay for weekends away.



A lot of soap and water, and a little elbow grease were needed to clean away windshield bugs, years ago...



Crucial insects are vanishing at alarming rates.

Fast forward a few decades, and here I am wondering When was the last time I had to clean a multitude of bugs from my windshield? I can't even recall. And this, in fact, makes me sad. I spend a fair amount of time driving to parks and preserves out in the wilder spaces of Wisconsin, and I rarely come home having to clean my windshield of anything more than leaves and dust. Which begs the question, Where have the bugs gone?

"Entomologists call it the windshield phenomenon." So says Gretchen Vogel, in an article she wrote for Science.org back in 2017: Where Have All The Insects Gone? In it she explains how there have been ongoing studies by entomologists in Germany, since the 1980s. Their tracking showed a decrease, within three decades, of nearly 80% in the number of insects in the 100 nature reserves studied.

I have to say, the details of the article are sobering. As they explain, the decrease in insects of all kinds, means a depletion in food sources for other animals. Birds, for example. Which leads to declines in their species, and on and on.

What is causing this loss? The usual suspects, of course. Over development, loss of habitat, pollution, pesticides. The research continues in an effort to find out more. *But now what?*

How can we enact a difference in our day to day lives? What can we do to make a difference? Just the question alone can be overwhelming.

I'm looking to conservationists and gardeners for inspiration. To the idea of preserving existing, and building new, prairies and forests. Restoring wetlands, woodlands, and wildflower fields.

And to the idea of adding native plants and trees to our existing gardens, no matter how small, in an effort to increase the food and shelter sources for our birds, bees, butterflies, and everything in-between.



Coneflower - beneficial beauty

Here in the state of Wisconsin we have an abundance of conservancy organizations that have taken up the task of preserving our existing wilderness, and restoring it as well.

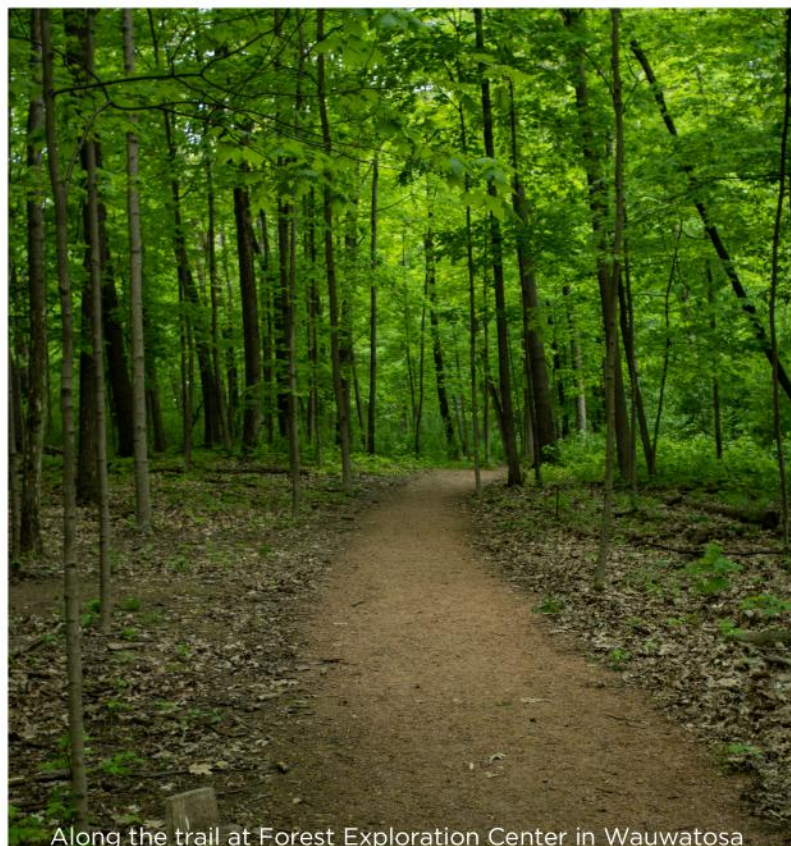
Gardening organizations and clubs offer information on how to add natural habitat to even the smallest of yards. They provide details on what plants, shrubs, and trees can benefit the wildlife and ecosystems they need to survive, maybe even thrive again.

Community gardens have sprung up in cities and towns, rural and urban. Planting fruits and vegetables for personal sustenance, and to benefit the community at large; insects, animals, and humans alike.

I have a real soft spot for natural areas in Wisconsin that have been built or restored by their owners with a goal of providing wildlife habitat and natural recreation space, along with a plan for preserving the spaces for generations to come. Their passions leave a legacy that will survive long after they have gone. These visionaries come from all walks of life. They create legacies large and small, but all improve the world we live in.

If you're curious about some of these special legacy preserves, check out the new Special Feature Page: [LEGACIES OF NATURE](#), which highlights 18 of these amazing spaces.

They will leave you hopeful, and may inspire you to join or support these types of projects as well.



Along the trail at Forest Exploration Center in Wauwatosa



Even a small container garden can be beneficial to the wildlife around you. And lovely, too!

Finding hope for the future from a local perspective, there are lots of organizations that can provide guidance to make a difference at a more personal level. Something as simple as carving out a bit of space in your yard for native bird and pollinator friendly plants can help. Avoiding pesticides on your lawn can make a big difference. If you don't have a yard, but have space for a planter or two, plant natives and pollinator friendly plants in those. Every little bit can make a difference.

Volunteer for a clean-up or weeding day at one of your local parks or preserves. Join a community garden where you can learn along with others how to plant and grow produce, flowers, and other plants. Following is a list of organizations and websites that might be of



The Wild Ones organization is helpful to gardeners aspiring to add native plants.

[Homegrown National Park](#)

[National Wildlife Federation](#)

[Wild Ones](#)

[Monarch Joint Venture](#)

[Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin](#)

[The Nature Conservancy, Wisconsin](#)

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[Wisconsin Pollinators](#)

[Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#)

[Home Gr/own Milwaukee](#)

[The Gardens Network](#)

[Urban Ecology Center Community Gardens](#)

[Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources](#)





Ten Minutes at Greenfield Park: Wide open sky, Great Blue Heron fishing, Duckling swimming, Goldfinches eating, Osprey on the hunt, and butterflies feeding on thistle.

Last summer, in the lead-up to my knee replacement surgery, and for several months after, I sought out local parks and preserves with easy paths and trails. And they were always worth the effort. But, this summer I've taken advantage of the stronger knee, and adventured further from home. I've been thoroughly enjoying it. Even so, sometimes I get so caught up in the search for new parks, trails, and preserves to explore, that I neglect to visit the ones nearby.

This week, en route to run some errands, I decided to make a quick trip to Greenfield Park in West Allis. As I pulled over and parked along the lagoon, I immediately spotted a thicket of Milk Thistle in bloom, bustling with butterflies. I decided to get out of the car and take a closer look. As I got closer I could see several Fritillary and Swallowtail butterflies fluttering about from bloom to bloom.


Walking along the paved path I saw a male Goldfinch plucking away at the thistle seeds. One by one, he pulled them from the thistle head, plucked out the seed and let the soft white floss float away on the wind.

As I watched, another Goldfinch joined him. Milk Thistle is a non-native, invasive species, but that was of no concern to two hungry songbirds.

When the Goldfinches moved on, I did, too. Just a short ways down the path to an opening on the lagoon where I could see a Great Blue Heron doing a little fishing by the small island out there. A woman and her young son, and an older gentleman with camera in-hand, were sitting on a bench watching the heron, and a family of ducklings preening on a log.

Their conversation turned to talk of an Osprey that has been seen at the park throughout the summer. The woman mentioned she saw it earlier. When I pulled up I saw a large bird fly over the trees of the little island. I had assumed it was a hawk. Turns out I was wrong, and it was an Osprey. How do I know?

As I walked just a short distance further, I could see it perched on a large tree branch on the other side of the lagoon. I asked the gentleman if that was it. He quickly popped up and came over to look. Sure enough, it was. He snapped some photos and headed off on his way. I took a photo with my phone, just for proof, but even that would be a stretch. The best thing was that I had seen it.

Had I not taken just a few minutes from my day to absorb a little nature, I would have missed all of these little joys. It's amazing how just a bit of fresh air and greenery, some sunshine, and signs of life can improve our day. Help to temper the stress and worry that comes with being human on this planet of ours. It was a good reminder to me, to appreciate what's out there, on my doorstep, and at *TheParkNextDoor*. 



# STAGES: Life, Death, Grief, & Sunflowers

8.28.2022

Blooming in all stages at Lannon Sunflower Farm

The answer was right in front of me, but it took a while to come into focus. My mother passed away 12 years ago, on August 27, 2010. The anniversary of her death was coming again, and I was looking for a way to honor her. Or to connect with her, you might say. Her wishes were that her remains be scattered in the St. Croix River, almost 6 hours away from here. And we honored those wishes. But since then, I have struggled to come up with a place to go when I'm missing her.

Over the years I have tried a few different things. More than once, when opportunity presented, I made the drive to the St. Croix and stood on the bridge we scattered her ashes from. I talked to her, took pictures. Cried. I've driven through the little town she lived in during the last decade or so of her life. Considered finding a church and a memorial service. Taken walks in nature, of course. Some years I just sat down with a photo book we made for her 70th birthday and paged through memory lane.



Scattered ashes  
Missing souls  
Here, a touchstone  
For those we loved  
And the days we mourn

I've lamented this before. The lack of a physical space to go to in order to feel her presence. And, really, it shouldn't matter. Wherever I go, her memory goes, too. But some days it just seems like having that space would make a difference.

It's been more than a decade, and I miss her every day. And most days, that's fine. It's something you learn to live with. It becomes a part of you, the missing. Just as much as their memory is a part of you, too.

But as the anniversary of her death nears every year, I feel an obligation to find a way to honor her life, and her loss.



I've been visiting sunflower farms over the past month or so. I put together a list of Sunflower Farms as a feature on the website. The other day I was remembering how much my mom loved sunflowers. She had a couple large framed sunflower posters in her kitchen. She enjoyed the blooms, and the cheer they spread. And it occurred to me, finally, that I should honor her with a sunflower bouquet.

My husband and I took a drive to Lannon Sunflower Farm, and picked a bouquet of sunflowers. Then brought them home and made an arrangement that included some flowers from our garden, too.

I put it together with the invitation to, and memory book of, her memorial at the St. Croix. I took some time and read through the book again.

I took a photo of it all and sent it to my sisters, a way to share the day. Seems it was the right thing to do, this year. Next year, well, time will tell.





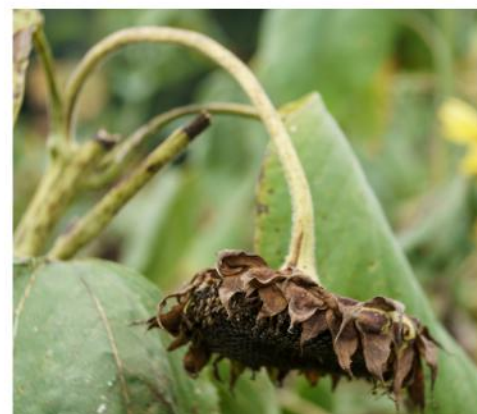
Something struck me as we walked the flower farm. There were sunflowers in all stages of life. Barely a bud, ready to bloom, mid-bloom flower heads, wide open blooms bursting in all their glory, blooms missing a few petals, some missing seeds that have already been feeding the birds, drooping flowers, faded blooms in every fashion, some laying finished on the ground. All of these stages with their own beauty. Their own stories. Their own past, present, and future.



I'm reminded that every stage of life has its own allure. In spring we sow seeds and watch over them, wait anxiously for them to sprout and grow. We marvel at the magic of it all. Then the buds come, and the flowers, and we smile as we admire their colors blowing in the breeze, beneath a summer sky. We preen them, hoping for a second bloom, and on and on, until, as the summer fades, the petals fade, too. A little straggly, worn, crisp on the edges. But the seedheads, now, are teeming with potential. The birds know it and they will feast on them.



Then autumn comes, and the leaves become the flowers, their colors bold and warm. Until they, too, fall, and decorate the ground. Leaving the trees to stand naked, branches making room for snow to settle. **26**



Yes, then winter arrives. And we are enamored of the crisp white artistry of it. The way it sparkles over everything. At least in the early days.

Like the blooms of summer, the glory of winter fades, too. And our thoughts turn towards spring. Anticipating the melting of the snow, spring rains, the greening, again.



Living here in Wisconsin, we are accustomed to these stages. We anticipate them. It's an innate feeling. Even though we long for summer to linger, we are drawn towards fall, and so on. There's a reason writers liken the seasons of the year to the seasons of our lives.

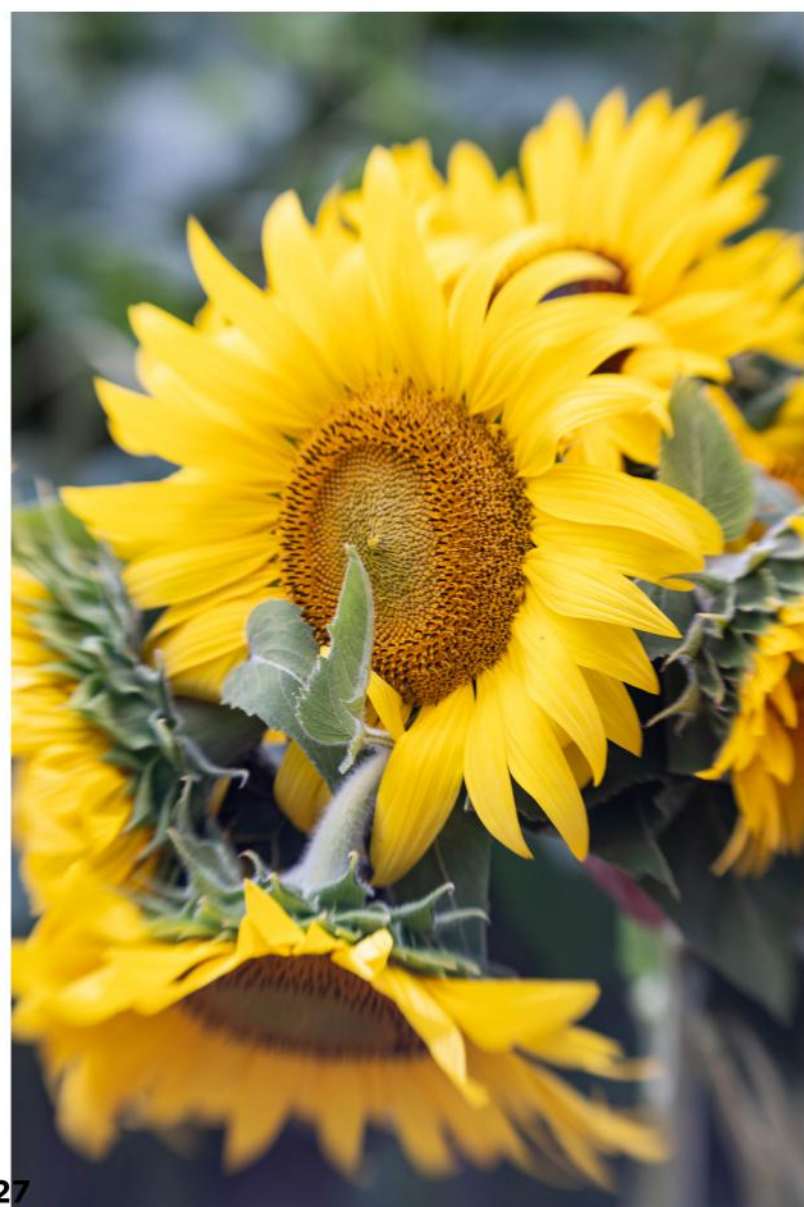
We are born, we grow, we bloom, we struggle, we love, we laugh, we lose, we start over again. And if we are lucky, we can recognize the beauty in all of these stages, though sometimes it takes looking back to do so.



I look through my mother's 70th birthday photo book, and find all the seasons there. Some more colorful than others. But all part of her story. Her final season was too short, if you ask me.

But it was still beautiful. She was surrounded by the love of her daughters, family, and friends. Laughter was shared. Tears, too.

But her impression was indelible, like the beauty and cheer of a sunflower in bloom. 🌻





# This Is 59

10.6.2022

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*Yup, 59 today. I can see 60 from here. And what have I learned in these 59 years? A thing. Or two.*

Birding is cool. Nature is for EVERYONE. I don't have a green thumb, but I keep trying. I am not the only person who speaks to bees. I miss my mom. I miss the pets and the people that I've lost. Grief is inevitable, and permanent, and the cost of love. And that's ok.

I can't go a day without ukulele. Self doubt is constant, but keep going anyway. It's better to be kind. It's ok to let go. Do Not Litter. Birds are amazing. I don't like ketchup and I never will. A little bit of nature everyday cleanses the body and the mind, and can help to heal a broken heart. My husband is a keeper. Our traumas may shape us, but they do not define us. Laughter and song, a good book, chocolate cake, and a walk in the woods: a prescription for a good day.

I'll be outside with my husband Joe today, exploring nature. Somewhere in the day there will be chocolate.



## *An Unexpected Companion*

10.7.2022

In my experience, cats are either cuddle buddies, or wanderers. We had cats as family pets, growing up. But I haven't had a cat as a pet in a long time. Definitely not while I have had pet birds. Unless they start out together, it's not the best combination.

We have had experience with feral cats visiting our backyard habitat. In the summer of 2021, there was a mother cat and six of her kittens that liked to hang out in our garden, sunning on the stone wall, napping in the quiet afternoon. I know the damage feral cats can do to the population of songbirds, and other bird life. As a bird watcher, I understand that well. And yet...we couldn't get near them to attempt any kind of rescue.



So, it's October now. And it was my birthday. We planned to go for a hike north of Milwaukee, near Fond Du Lac. My favorite way to spend the day.

The weather was still rainy in Milwaukee, but by the time we got to the woods, the sun was shining, and clouds were few. There was a cool wind, occasionally, but it was beautiful outside. We pulled into the parking lot, and got out of the car, putting on our jackets, and collecting the camera gear.

That's when I heard it. A tiny mewling sound. I looked towards the bushes and trees surrounding the parking lot, and there, soaking in the sun, was a small black cat. I stepped towards it, fully expecting it to take off running. But it did not. It came towards me. Happily. Suddenly it was wrapping itself around my legs, moving in and out, around my feet, purring, rubbing its head on my shin. It wasn't a kitten, but based on its size, I'm estimating it was somewhere between 6 months to a year old. Very healthy, well fed, clean. And very friendly.



I gave it some attention, lamenting I didn't have anything along I could feed it. My husband stepped away for a minute, to handle a work issue via phone, and I got my camera out, and readied myself for the hike, began documenting the surroundings.

When he had finished, we headed towards the main boardwalk entrance to the woods, to start our hike.

The cat followed along.



We had never been to this woodland before, so we were unfamiliar. We were just following the trail, discovering as we went along. And for every step we took on the trail, the cat continued with us. Sometimes she ran ahead, then sat on a tree stump to wait for us, sometimes she moved amongst one or the other of us. Sometimes something in the understory caught her attention, and she lingered, sniffing it out, chewing on a leaf, playing with falling leaves like a colorful cat toy. And then, she would join up with us again, moments later.



She was beautiful. Solid black with soft green eyes. The softest fur. The sweetest face. A musical mew. When I would stop to take photos of the surroundings, she would hover about my legs and feet, softly purring and mewing, occasionally batting at my camera strap when it dangled.

By this time I was calling her by the name Binx. If you've seen the movie Hocus Pocus, you understand why. When she wandered off for a moment, or took a rest when we took photos, I would call to her as we moved on, and she would come running up to join us again.



Maybe I'm making too much of this. Maybe people go hiking with cats all the time. But in all the hikes, all the walks through parks I've taken in my life, I've never seen anyone walking along with a cat. This felt so unique. More like a journey. Strangers in the real world, kin on the trail. It was simply remarkable. And I was starting to feel a very strong connection to this beautiful, wild-ish creature. I was starting to worry what would happen when the hike was over. I didn't want it to be over.

And, in the unspoken looks between us, I could tell my husband was wondering the same thing. Was he somehow going to have to drive back to town with a cat in his lap. From his perspective, this would be a no-win situation.



We don't often cover a long distance on our hikes. While many people will hike a couple miles quickly, we take our time. I tend to take a lot of photos, in an effort to illustrate the surroundings for the website listings, so I can easily take an hour just to hike a mile or so.

The trail we followed through [Hobbs Woods](#) was a winding one, following along Parson's Creek. We hiked about two miles, in about two hours. Stopping frequently to take photos, and take in the details.

Which means, for two hours, Binx was our constant companion.





If you've ever held a kitten, a puppy, or even a baby bird in your hand, you know how quickly an attachment can form. Their innocence, their cuteness factor, their vulnerability, just imprints on you, and you don't want to let go. It may be a bit selfish, I suppose, but I think it's natural.

Deep down I knew I was going to have to say farewell to my new friend at the end of this hike, but I'm not going to pretend I wanted to.

The truth of the matter was, Binx was a healthy, friendly, well cared for cat. She belonged to someone. There was no indication that she had been abandoned there.

I did my best to focus on the rest of the hike, and to enjoy her presence. As we grew closer to the end of our trail, we stood along the banks of Parson's Creek, watching the water flow.

Binx hovered along the shore, taking a drink of water as it trickled over the fallen autumn leaves and the rocks and stones. The wind blew, falling leaves drifting on air, and landing on the flowing water. Binx wandered further along the waters edge and sat down among the leaves, facing the curve of the creek. I took a picture. Maybe three.

And then we continued on, finally crossing the bridge on the path towards the parking lot. Where, once again, she took respite and I committed her face to a photograph. To my memory.

To a space in my wanderers heart.








## Epilogue

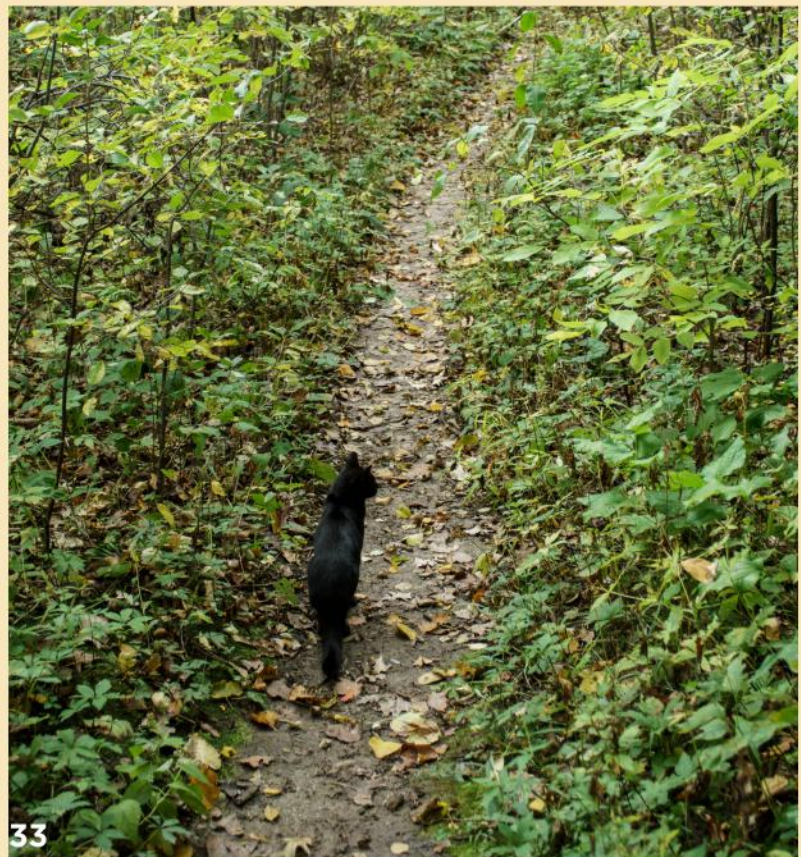
We returned to the parking lot at the end of our hike. Still conflicted, we took a walk up and down the road. Just behind the parking lot to the woods was a house, though it did not look like anyone was at home at the time. Across the road a field, and a short ways off from the field a farmhouse, and barn. Up the road in the opposite direction, houses with barns and wide open spaces.

Further up the road, another black cat was crossing. A sibling perhaps? Maybe Binx's mother? She followed me briefly, as we surveyed the possibilities, but returned to, and seemed content, sitting in the parking lot.

It took me a while to finally start the car to drive away. My husband watched to make sure she didn't move in the way of the vehicle. She was sitting in the lot, looking towards the woods. We drove away in silence.

I was surprised at how emotional I was feeling. We humans, we like to read into things. It was my birthday. I was missing my mom, the anniversary of her death just a few weeks before. She was a cat person. I told my husband maybe my mom sent her to me as a birthday gift. Maybe it was her way of walking the trail with us, of spending the day with us. Like I said, we like to read into things.

It's true that on the way back home I shed a tear, worrying about Binx. Would she be okay. Would she have food to eat and a warm place to sleep. But the truth of the matter is, she more than likely had a home in one of those households, and was simply an outdoors cat who went on an adventure with two kind strangers. I'm still thinking about her. And I'm still tempted to return to see if she is ok. And I'm still conflicted. But one thing I do know for sure, is that her presence, her companionship, on our hike that day was a gift. And one I will always treasure. 





# Be Leaf In The Beauty Of Fall

10.27.2022

Dear Autumn,

Please don't go. Stay, a little longer. Charm me, once more, with your bold and warm wardrobe of falling leaves. Your reds, and oranges, and golds. With the musky scent of you. With the sound of your voice blowing in the cool night breeze, and crisply rising from beneath my walking feet. With the distant call of migrating birds passing overhead beneath dark skies.

Keep me company while the days grow shorter. Temper the melancholy as I find a sunny spot to watch you fall, while I sip something warm. Put your branches around me as I mourn the fading of the flowers in my garden. Show me, kindly, how time marches on, beauty by its side. Teach me to find comfort in the brevity of your days, even though I want to hold on.

Sweet Autumn, I am grateful for our time together. I savor the moments of beauty spent walking the woodland trails, and your companionship creek side, as the waters flow, artfully clothed in your fallen bits and baubles.

I don't want you to go. I need more time. There's so much more about you I want to know. I want to see. I want to breathe. I want to feel. But I know it's not for us to say. Time marches on. And so do you.

But I will be here waiting for you, come next September. 🍁



Autumn beauty is spectacular in our local parks.



# Holiday Longing

12.15.2022

I'm at that stage in life where looking back is both nostalgic and painful. Where there is a built-in longing for days gone by. Not so much a desire to relive yesterdays, but to recapture the hope and dreams once held for the future. To experience again those youthful longings. To dream of possibilities unmarred by the tragedies and missteps of life.

In the earliest years that I can recall, the holidays were filled with a lot of activity. Visits with my parents' families, both sides of them. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. The grown-ups chatting, drinking cocktails, singing carols around a piano. A pot luck of everything from Minnesota hot dish, Jell-o and Christmas cookies, to chips and dip. The usual fare.

As the parties faded, we headed home to put on our pajamas, have a snack, and open our Christmas gifts from our parents.

Mornings, of course, were reserved for Christmas stockings and opening the gifts delivered by Santa.





When it came to Christmas, my mom was a holiday queen. She loved to put up holiday decorations. She delighted in things that sparkled. She often put up more than one tree. One for inside the house, and another, smaller tree, on the front porch. And she never forgot anyone.

Did we always get what we asked for? No. But no one went un-gifted at Christmas. Stockings were filled. Oranges, chocolate, candy canes, a trinket or two. Lifesavers, slipper socks. Simple things. But thoughtful.

As I got older, I would enlist my sisters to help me put together stockings for my parents. It bothered me that they weren't included. I guess my mom's desire to include everyone sunk in for me somehow. I can recall, in the aftermath of gift opening, a puzzled look on her face. Usually followed by a comment on how there was supposed to be one more gift for...fill in the blank...

She'd go upstairs, and you could hear her rummaging through her closet, maybe her dresser. It was there somewhere. Sometimes she found it, sometimes she didn't. No matter, really. We were far from well-to-do, but my mother put plenty of effort and thought into gift-giving.

At the end of August, 2010, at the age of 72, my mother passed away. We spent many weeks afterward cleaning out her apartment, and her storage unit. Sifting through boxes, drawers, and cupboards.

One evening there were several of us at her place, sorting through items. My sisters and I, their spouses, and some of their children, were there. I was going through a bedroom closet. Inside was a big Rubbermaid container.

I opened it. Inside, among a menagerie of items I don't really recall, were four sets of large metal angel candle holders. All with the tags still on them.

I took them out. Then hesitated for a moment to show them to my sisters. There were four of us. I was afraid of the tears that might fall. I knew that my mother had purchased these for us. Most likely during an after-Christmas sale the previous holiday. Like most, she enjoyed a bargain. I debated on whether or not to save them until the holiday, and gift them to my sisters from her. But I decided not to wait.





To be honest, I can't recall whether or not the moment brought on a world of tears. Some things stand out during difficult times, some don't. But we all agreed that it was my mother's intention to gift her daughters these Christmas angels. And, that she probably got them on sale. We each picked a set, and displayed them at Christmas that year.

Four daughters, four sisters. We were far from angels ourselves, but we loved our mother.

It's been twelve years now, since she passed away. I still miss her every day. Her absence especially felt around the holidays. But the memory of her still flavors the season. With every beautiful light display I see I recall how much she enjoyed the way they twinkle. Sometimes decorating every tree in the yard.

We lived on a dead-end road, the highway on the other side of a large field. At night, you could look across the field from the highway and see all her handiwork, all the time she spent on a ladder, putting those lights up. I didn't appreciate it then the way I should have.

One of my mother's twinkling Christmas trees from my early childhood years.

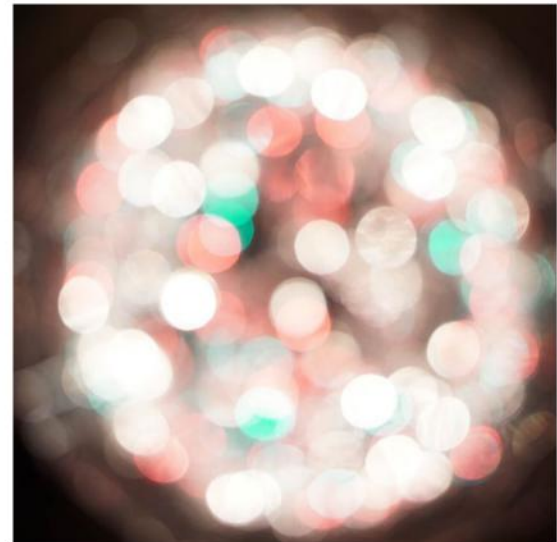


I'm older now. Many years, and holidays, have passed since she's been gone. For me, the holidays are a perpetual pendulum. I want to go all-in. Decorate, celebrate. Give to others. Make gifts. Write holiday songs. Donate to good causes. Be filled with good will.

And I also want to not do any of it. To just skip it. There are days where the whole idea of Christmas is actually filled with disenchantment. Maybe it's because my husband and I never had kids.

Maybe seeing the holidays through a child's lens can help a person rediscover the joy of the season. Maybe not.

I definitely enjoy spending time with my young nieces and nephews doing holiday things. Those are some of the most joyful moments each year.





Beyond that, it's a bit of push and pull. I long for the excitement of the season. The magical moments it can bring. The kindness it can show a perfect stranger. The way it can bring people together for a common good.

Somehow, my mother hung on to that dream. Right up until her last Christmas on earth, she was already making plans for the next one. Four daughters, four angels. Something I will never forget.



With all that she lived through in her life, she still believed in kindness and the magic of twinkling lights on a Christmas tree.



Life isn't perfect. We have a lot of work to do in this world to make it a better place. To protect the planet, and heal ourselves. Tasks that shouldn't require a Christmas holiday to motivate us to be kinder, gentler, more forgiving.

But this is where we are. And if the month of December brings twinkling lights, Christmas carols, and a heightened desire to put some good out into the world, I'm on board with that.

Because somewhere within this hectic, mad, fairytale of a holiday, is a true longing. A longing for a future with heart, soul, healing, and kindness. We don't get to where we are going without remembering where we've been. It's all part of the process.

And, though those we love may not be here with us now, they take the journey we're on within us. Which may be the best gift we can ask for. 🧚



# It's *Ornamental*

12.23.2022

Ornaments, from handmade, to elegant glass-blown works of art, tell a tale of the giver and the recipient. And, over the years, are infused with personal history and memories of holidays spent with those we love.

I'm not one of those people who has her tree up and decorated first thing. If I'm on top of things, I might get the tree in place the weekend after Thanksgiving. But then, it will take me a while to finally get the ornaments on the tree. Sometimes just due to a busy schedule, sometimes because I have to push myself to get at it, and find a little holiday spirit.

As the years go by, there are fewer holiday get togethers, fewer people to gather, and generational differences in holiday plans. Being without kids, it's just the two of us, and Christmas is nowhere near the top of any wish list for my husband. Once upon a time, when I was single, and when we were first together, I loved to decorate for the holidays. But as the years have gone by, and life has changed, loved ones have passed on, finding the festive inner spirit has gotten more difficult.

I've written about this before. And I know that I'm not alone in this. The holidays are a very difficult time for many. Grief, sadness, depression, loneliness, these are all amplified by the holiday season. My cover for this, over the years, is to immerse myself in the gift list. Something my mother did with aplomb. I try my best, and sometimes I succeed.

And there is nature, a saving grace. Though the to-do list for the holiday season, and the preparation for winter in general, sit front and center, getting outside for a walk in a local park, or on a nature trail, revives me in a way nothing else can. It takes me out of myself.



As I get older, it seems the holiday season is a mix of muted grays and ambient twinkle.





Freshly fallen snow along the Root River Parkway

I'm taking in the scene, I'm breathing deeply, listening to the birds calling, and the sound of my feet along the trail. I'm noticing the different colors of bark and lichen on a tree, the variety in size and shapes of pine cones on evergreens. Maybe hearing the sound of a stream trickling along, or the crackling of worn branches in the wind. The way the light finds its way through the trees, illuminating the understory, the faded grasses, or berries on a bush.

Arriving back home after a walk, it is rare that my mood hasn't improved. All my troubles or worries may not have disappeared, but the volume on my negative mindset is turned down, and a kinder voice rises to the surface. At least for a while. Long enough to decorate a tree. Wrap a few gifts. Bake something decadent.

This myth of constant joy and wonder during the holiday season is just that, a myth. Life is filled with ups and downs, blissful moments and tragedies. The Christmas season is not exempt from the trials and tribulations of life. And yet...



A precious ornament, filled with dried flowers from my mother's funeral arrangements.

Taking the time to finally decorate the tree, I go through my ornaments. Selecting favorites, one by one.

Several ornaments related to birds and nature. Many of them handmade gifts from family, friends and co-workers over the years.

A clear glass ball ornament filled with dried flowers from my mother's funeral floral arrangements, lovingly prepared and gifted to me by one of my sisters. Several of us hang this ornament on our trees every year.

A framed photo of my parents wedding photo. Hand painted ornaments from my nephews, a needlepoint of a deer from a friend.

The process of decorating the tree conjures up so many feelings. So many memories and kindnesses received throughout a lifetime.

Minus any other holiday decorations, a Christmas tree does the job. It adds a bit of twinkle, a bit of greenery, and artful reminders of a lifetime of connections big and small.

It makes no matter if the tree fits on your tabletop, or reaches the ceiling. Because the space it truly illuminates is within the heart. ♥



A hand-blown glass ornament, a gift from a friend many Christmases ago, adds a rainbow of reflection to my Christmas tree each year.



A needlepoint deer was a gift from a friend, and is one of my nephew's favorites on my tree.





However you choose to spend them, may your holidays be just what you need them to be.

Peace,  
Kimberly

# Stormy Skies, Unexpected

4.16.2023

Life has a tendency to catch us off-guard. An unexpected thunderstorm on a sunny afternoon. You go to bed under clear skies, wake up to unpredicted snow. Of course, not all unexpected events are weather related (though lately there are a lot of those).

The curveballs, for me, have been more personal lately. And while we're all still standing, we're on uneven ground, and it looks to be that way for a while. I'll spare you the details, as everyone has their own troubles and tribulations. We'll do our best to hold it together and will, hopefully, come out on the bright side of the road.



Nature is a healthy distraction from difficult days.



In the past near-decade since I started TheParkNextDoor, whatever tragedies or struggles came my way, I found solace and strength by escaping into nature. Whether in the woods further from home, or at a park or preserve just minutes away.

Through tears of loss, anxiety or doubt, the time spent outside walking a trail, birdwatching, photographing a flower, observing butterflies in flight, or just being somewhere green, was comforting, calming, perspective altering. Like a reset button, respite.

I've always had a connection to nature, but not quite in the same way. I didn't consciously go to it as a balm for what ailed me. I would go for walks, to cool the heat of my emotions along the way. Or a bike ride on the outskirts of the little town we once lived in. But I was young then (so darn young...). **44**



Observing wildlife can bring us a few moments of peace, relief from stress, and a bit of pleasure.

It wasn't until later in life that I realized that connection to nature, in its simplest form, just being within it, could help to quell whatever angst or worry I was wrestling with. At least now I know.


Lately, with some of the personal drama in our midst, I find it even more necessary to get outside. To explore, to visit natural spaces, to breathe deeply the fresh air, take note of the leaves finally budding out on the trees.

What relief to thrill to the sound of returning songbirds, and spy rabbits running through our garden, which is tired of waiting for spring.



Watching a robin splashing in a birdbath can be a joyful experience.

I don't know what I would do without it, the great outdoors. I hope that others can find peace and hope in it, like I do, when they are going through difficult times. Everyone has their coping mechanisms. But a few minutes in nature is a worthy prescription for enduring what ails you.

A break from the chaos, wherever you can find it. In the backyard, on a front stoop, a balcony with potted plants, a garden center, the neighborhood park, a walk on the beach, a bench under a shady tree somewhere. Little moments, big results. Stormy skies, suddenly clear. 





# Unfolding Gratitude

9.30.2023

The unfolding of a Calendula bloom in the garden this fall.

I should have gone out for a hike today. Anywhere. It's the last day of September, it's beautiful outside, and I need the exercise. I need to get out my camera and feed my creativity. Enjoy the glorious season of autumn. But it's been a week. A week of unexpected, challenging responsibilities, the loss of a dear family pet, and the resulting sadness, frustration, and brain fog that comes from all of that. I've had to put my passion for TheParkNextDoor on hold a lot this year, for various reasons, and, honestly, some days that just makes me crabby and depressed.

No matter how I try, I can't seem to take this mission to the next level - which is simply to share with more people the beauty of all the green spaces in Wisconsin, and maybe cover some of the expenses of doing so by selling some prints on my [Fine Art America](#) site. I keep plugging on. Trying to at least get out occasionally to a familiar park, or sneak in a new one. But, I'm not gonna lie, it has been more of a challenge this year than I would like.

I've dedicated a good portion of my remaining energy this past summer to cultivating the garden in our backyard. And I have been gifted with some surprises that have managed to sustain me on days where I am weary of things. I had doubts that I could grow anything from seed, and it turns out, happily, that I can. So, I'm going to put that in the win column. Even if I did make plenty of mistakes.



Calendula flower in full bloom.

Just sitting on the patio on a decent day, looking out across the garden, watching the birds come and go, and the advent of flowers rising from dirt, has been a saving grace on many days this summer. So, I'm going to step away from this doom and gloom and share some of the unexpected pleasures that have buoyed me up when I feel I'm drowning.

Did you know that Calendula blooms open in the morning and close at night? I had no idea. It's as if they know to rest, that they are versed in self-care. They have been one of the best surprises in my garden this summer.

I've never grown them before, I sowed my flower garden late, and now they are finally blooming. Little by little. I wish I had planted more of them. Next year I definitely will.

The spring migrants seemed to bypass us this year, and the fall ones so far, too.

But there have been a couple hummingbirds hanging around all summer, buzzing my head on occasion while working in the garden.

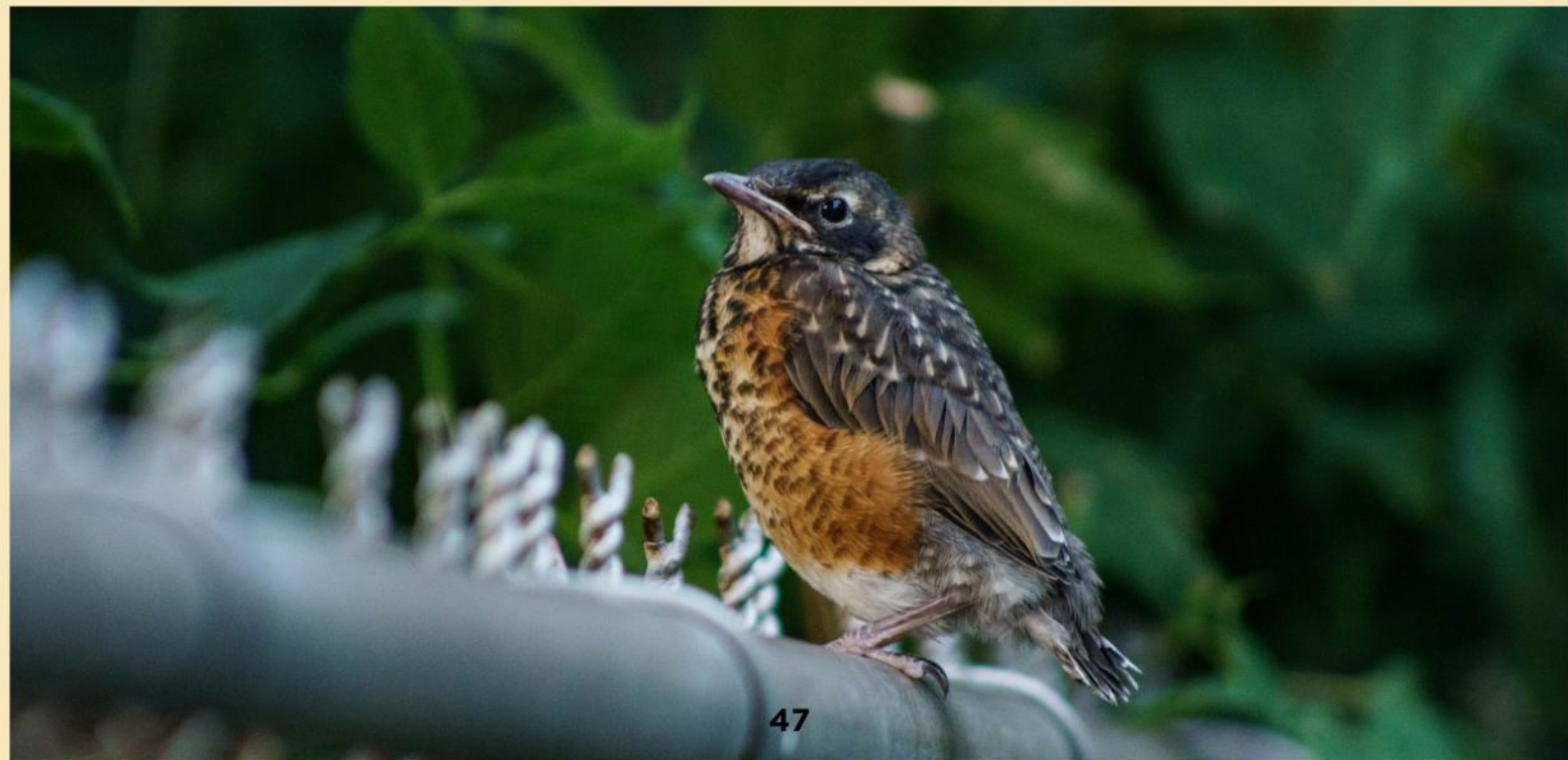
And plenty of other pollinators visiting, too. It's good to know we are doing our part to feed the bees and butterflies, and more.

A female Ruby-throated hummingbird feeding at the Honeysuckle Vine.



*It's the little things, like baby bunnies that run through the yard. Or hide out underneath the hostas on a hot summer day. I love that they feast on dandelion leaves.*

A baby bunny grabbing some shade beneath the hostas on a hot summer day.



A juvenile American Robin on a summer evening.







We've plenty of squirrels in the yard. They are always fun to watch. But this summer the chipmunks have ruled, when it comes to entertainment. We have a total of three that I've seen. One favors the leftovers from the bird feeders. The other two have taken to finding peanuts and sunflower seeds that I hide around the patio.

Recently, one of them has been visiting when I'm outside working, or sitting at the patio table. It took a while, but I've been able to get him to take a peanut from my hand. I love watching them stuff their cheeks full of peanuts before dashing off to stash them for the winter. And I've discovered my new favorite sound - the sound of peanuts rattling in the shell inside the cheeks of a chipmunk as it scurries off to hide them for later.

Recently I made a little autumn display with mini pumpkins on top of a flower pot and saucer. I filled it with peanuts and enjoyed the comings and goings of my two little friends as they stocked up. I'm going to miss them when they head into their burrows for the bulk of the winter, but at least I know they will be well fed.

This week, after my 13-yr old pet parakeet, Browser, passed away, I was devastated. It was sudden, and she has been with us a long time. She was an incredibly sweet bird. Tough, too. So it was quite a shock when she passed away so suddenly. I've been through this many times, and it really never gets any easier. In fact, each time I've lost a pet bird, I grieve all the others again. That's just the way grief goes.

So, when I stepped outside the next day, for a few minutes, in-between the raindrops, Buddy, one of the chipmunks, showed up. And I handed him some peanuts. He scurried off to hide them, and came back for more. We did this a few times. It didn't make me forget my loss, but it lightened the load for a bit. And for that I am grateful. 🍂





The Spectacular Senescence



Embracing The Autumn  
Of MyYears  
10.5.2023

Age is a funny thing. Our concept of it changes as we move through life. Decades ago, when my mom was on the cusp of her 60th birthday, I gave her a lot of grief. Teasing her about how old she was going to be.

She was a good sport about it. Though she had her share of health troubles, she was doing pretty well, and her spirit was youthful. Her sense of humor strong.

But time travels on, and, sadly, she's not around to return the joke. A fact that hovers over my mind and heart a lot lately.



My mom: big hair, big heart.

So, here it comes: 60! It's not exactly a surprise. I've seen it looming in front of me for a while now.



Little me, in a pretty purple party dress

Some days I shrug it off. Some days I tally up the wisdom I've acquired over the last six decades (OK, most of that came within the past decade or so). Some days I panic. Some days I'm just a moody mess. Some days I wish I still had a pretty purple party dress.

In practical terms, I've arrived at this junction with most of my faculties intact. I even have a brand new knee. So, yeah, that's something.

Hey, I still have my own teeth. I'm putting that in the win column. I'm even managing to learn new things like gardening, and befriending chipmunks. More wins.

But there are days when the reality of age hits hard. The body aches, the brain fogs, the memory lapses. The idea of mortality becomes more succinct.

Finale' isn't just the end of a movie or musical or a good book. The End is not just words. The truth of the matter, some days, can cause me to break into an anxiety-ridden sweat.

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Other days the light hits different. I'm just me, trying to forge ahead. Trying to do the best I can at what needs doing in my little corner of the world. Taking care of those that need my help. Sharing what I've learned, what I love, with kindred spirits.

Marveling at the little miracles in the everyday. Trying, sincerely, to be kind, and helpful, and understanding. I'd like to have more of these kinds of days. It's something to aspire to, anyway.



THE END - Not just words.





The beauty of Autumnal Senescence is glorious.

Last year I learned a new term describing the process of the changing of the leaves - Senescence. In this case, Autumnal Senescence. The process by which the leaves change color in the fall.

As the long summer daylight wanes, and the temperatures cool, leaves naturally lose the chlorophyll that keeps them green throughout the growing season. As those fade, other natural pigments take over, and there's a new color palette in town. It's glorious.

It's a beautiful word, I think. Senescence. There's an elegance to it. It's simplest definition is to describe the process of deterioration with age. The changes to a biological cell as it grows older. Just as the changing seasons seem to mirror the seasons of our lives, senescence can define the process.

Just as we swoon over the newly born leaves in spring, fawn over the blooming flowers and trees in summer, we gaze in wonder at the changing autumn leaves. Revel in the crunch of them under foot as we wander about in September, October, November. Wouldn't it be lovely if we looked upon aging bodies and faces the same way, and marveled at them through each stage of life? Stopped looking away, or dismissing them as wrinkles appear, hair silvers, or age spots color our once youthful skin.

In all honesty, I'm still not going without my favorite lipstick. But, as I enter this new era, I'm going to try and remind myself to embrace the spectacular senescence at work. Autumn has always been my favorite season, anyway. I think my mom would appreciate that. 🍁



Here it is, 60.





MEXICAN HAT ROCK →

On The Road With Mom, 1995

12.01.2023



A road trip view of Monument Valley, Utah

She would be 86 today. My mom. Since August, coming upon the 13th anniversary of her death, I have been reflecting on some of our experiences together. Today, her 86th birthday, seems like an opportunity to share a short reflection of one of the more adventurous ones.

In 1995, my father's uncle passed away, leaving him a car. His uncle had lived in Los Angeles for decades, so the car needed to get from L.A. to Wisconsin, and my dad, who drove a great deal for his job, didn't want to drive it back himself.



A visit to Joshua Tree before heading east.

So, he offered to get my mom and I one-way plane tickets to fly out to Los Angeles, if we would drive the car back for him. Road trip? Yes, please!

In my young and single days, I would take road trips once or twice a year. Since money was tight, I would camp for lodging. Mostly state parks, or KOA campgrounds.

For the road trip back from L.A., I asked my mom if she would camp with me. She was 58 at the time, and having knee troubles, but, surprisingly, she was game. We wouldn't camp the whole time, but part of the way back.



Mom wasn't a camper, but she was game to try.



The scene in Vegas, 1995.

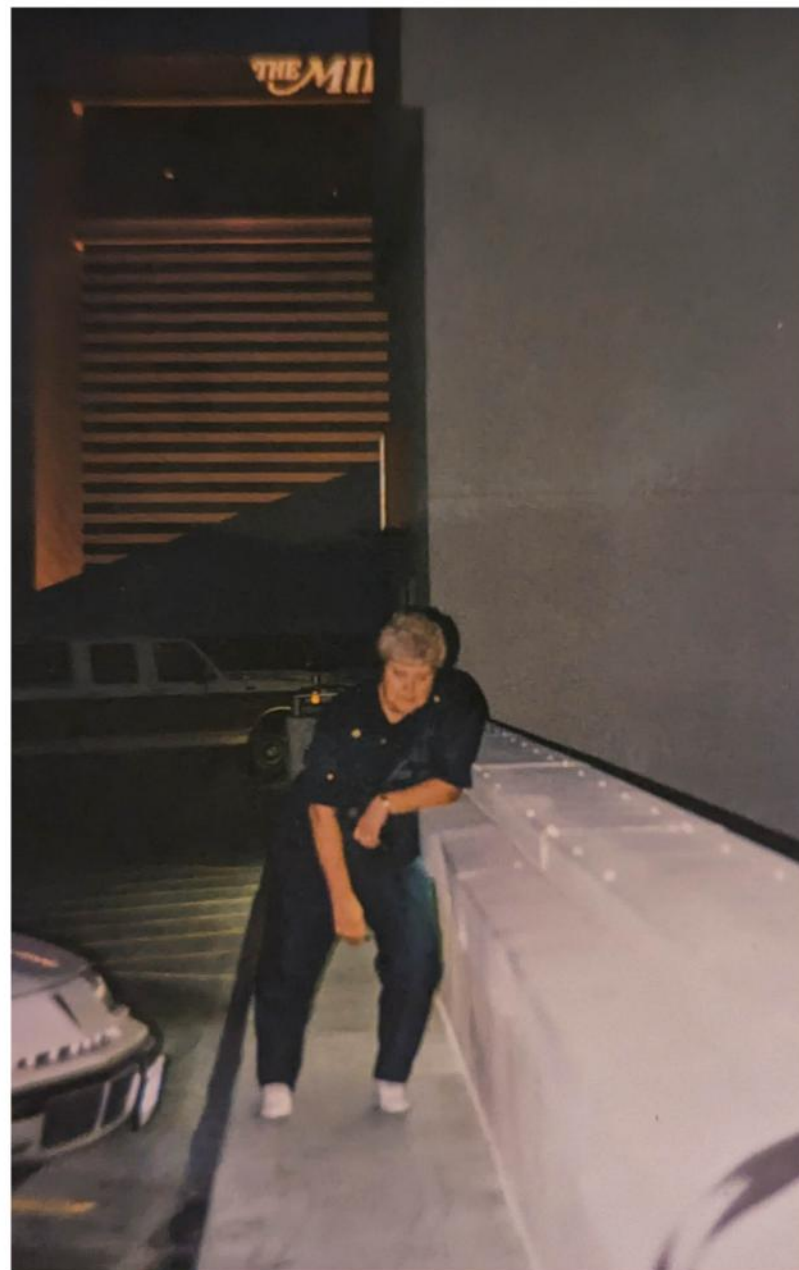
One of the prerequisites my father set for us, was that we were to take the southern route back to Wisconsin. Avoiding the mountains. And any chance of snow. We agreed. I lied.

We started back through through Nevada, with a one-night stop in Vegas. Driving into town, along the Vegas strip, I was overwhelmed by the lights and commotion. People were walking everywhere. So much pedestrian traffic in an unfamiliar place made me nervous.

Finally, we found a parking garage, and, breathing a sigh of relief, I pulled into a parking spot. Then we headed out to the strip to join the rest of the tourists.

There would be no sleeping this night. We stayed up all night so Mom could get her fill of the casinos. I was dismissed so as not to curse her luck. Casinos are not my thing. I'm a very sore loser. I can spend \$20 on lipstick, no problem. But lose the same to a slot machine, I hang my head in shame.

While my mom tried her hand at the slots, I wandered, after midnight, around the closed and quiet shopping mall of Caesar's Palace.







The infamous Mexican Hat Rock formation in Utah.

Finally she took a break and we found a diner for a bite to eat. Then headed to The Mirage, where she tried her luck again, while I watched the preview video for Siegfried & Roy's show countless times until the sun began to rise.

Finally, in the early morning hours, she was ready to leave. We drove out of the city, headed towards the Grand Canyon, my mom chattering on about how much she despised the Circus, Circus casino. Apparently a bad memory from a previous Vegas trip.



"I can see it from here, look!"

Driving through Arizona, we arrived at the north side of the Grand Canyon after dark, missing the opportunity to revel in its beauty. Unable to find a place to stay at late notice, we drove on to Utah. Driving through the early morning hours to arrive at Zion National Park.

We were awed by its beauty, and got out to walk some of the trails in the stunning park, eventually camping somewhere nearby. I remember settling in early that night, being exhausted from Vegas, and all the driving.

The next day, driving through more of Utah, we stopped to marvel at the beauty of Mexican Hat Rock, and the landscapes of Monument Valley. And we found camping that night in Moab. The next morning we drove to Arches National Park, and then headed east, towards home.



Mom and I saw some pretty spectacular sunsets on our journey from L.A. to Wisconsin.



In this one, Camper Mom is smiling.

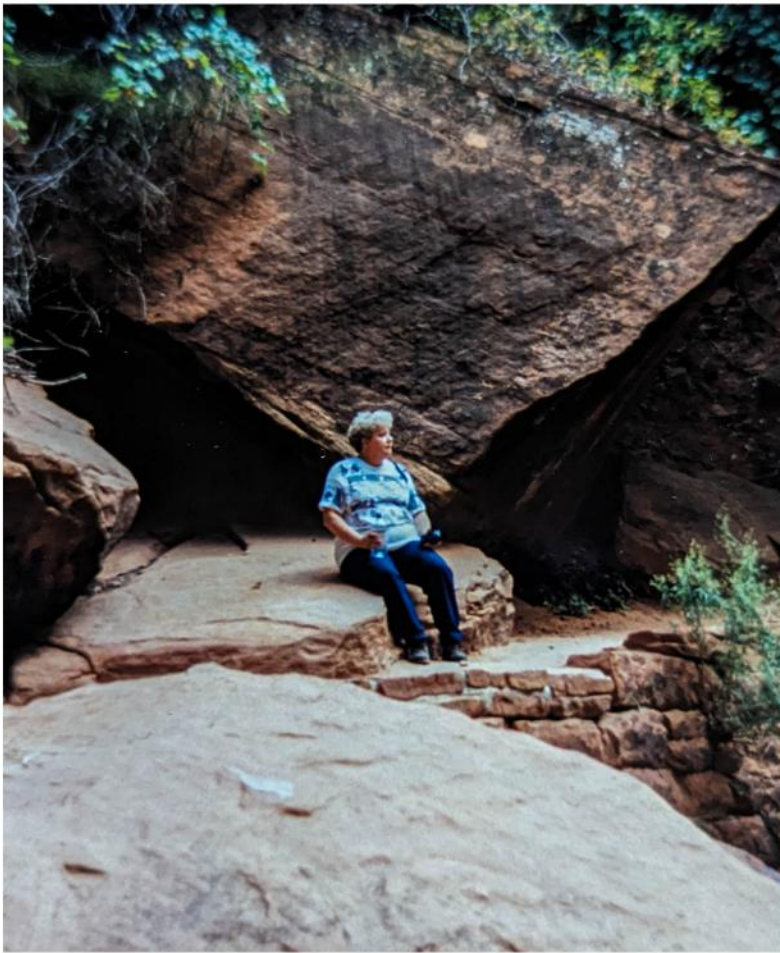
I know that I promised not to drive the northern route through the mountains, but it was late September, not December. I couldn't resist. I wanted to drive through the Rockies. So we did. And, as we drove through Colorado, and the Rocky Mountains, it began to snow.

As we drove, and the snow picked up, getting heavier and heavier, semi trucks passing us by, regret nagged at me. Our conversation toggled between laughter and fear. My mother was convinced my dad would find out. This was long before cell phones, and YouTube or Instagram or Facebook.

But logic won out (and we were already in the midst of the snowstorm). Any snow on the car would be long gone by the time we returned to Wisconsin. Fortunately, within an hour or so, I pulled my grip from the steering wheel. We made it carefully through the snow, and back to drier weather, stopping for a break, and continued on our way.

We drove on through Nebraska, stopping here and there at some of the basic tourist stops along the way, and into Iowa. Driving through the night in Iowa, and up towards Madison, then further east towards Milwaukee.

The last 60 miles or so being the hardest, sleep-starved, road weary, and just wanting to get back to Wisconsin. When we got back to my apartment, in the early hours, I asked my mom if she wanted to stay. Get some sleep. She said no. It was time to go home.



Mom, taking a rest at Zion National Park.



Me, on the driver's side, somewhere in Utah.

We had a lot of fun on that trip. Laughed so much we cried. But, we were also pretty tired of each other by the time we got back to Wisconsin, and I fully understood why she wanted to wrap up the journey and sleep in her own bed.

As I look back at some of the photos of this trip I find myself so grateful that we had the opportunity to take the trip together. Never considering, at the time, that one day she would be gone.



I think back to those last few months, in and out of the hospital, struggling with the affects of the cancer in her body, and know just how brave she was. Not always a bastion of positivity, but good-humored none the less, she was courageous and resigned at the same time. Once, as she lay in her hospital bed, she looked over at me and said "I love you". It wasn't a new thing. She told us she loved us, all her girls, often. But this time it felt different. She really wanted me to take it in. Accept it. Hold on to it tight.

Looking at this last photo, I feel on the brink of tears. At the time it was simply a photo of her on the trail. A visual souvenir. Now, to me, it resembles something deeper. More profound. The look of someone looking back at someone they love, with love, and the knowledge that they won't be returning. Stepping into that light, wherever it may lead. ♡

*Happy birthday, Mom. Love you forever.*



12.21.2023

# Reflections On A Winter Solstice

A lagoon as smooth as glass reflecting the scene at Greenfield Park on the Winter Solstice.

December 21st. Winter Solstice. Midwinter. The shortest day of the year. The longest night. The first day of winter. No matter how you define it, it has arrived. I made a quick stop at Greenfield Park in West Allis today. The lack of snow and ice evident. Skies of gray overhead. No breeze to speak of. The lagoon was still, mirroring the sky above and the trees and pavilion surrounding it. It was beautifully striking. I stopped and took the photo above. It does not do it justice. Even so, it got me thinking.



A bit of nature right in front me along the walking trail around the lagoon at Greenfield Park.

Nature seems to reflect the best in us. The worst in us, too. As a human race, we live striving for balance. Forever teetering between awe and destruction. Just the existence of the human race wears on this planet called earth. But, like any other living creature, we do exist, and we deserve to continue doing so.

The beauty of this planet, from the mundane to the glorious, imprints on us throughout our lifetimes. Even on our most difficult days, the wonder of nature exists, surrounds us, in a myriad of ways.

Shaken by sorrow or worry, we may not be fully aware of the wild world around us. But if we step outside, or simply spend a few moments gazing out a window, chances are there will be something of nature in front of us. And a connection we share.

Even on busy city streets lined with buildings of concrete and stone, birds take flight. Insects tunnel. Seeds bust open and rise up through the sidewalk cracks.

While I have experienced some of the most beautiful natural spaces in the United States, I continue to find myself drawn to the bits of wilderness within the cities and suburbs. As a city dweller, I am constantly amazed by the wild spaces and wildlife around me.



Something as simple as a fallen autumn leaf can connect us to the natural world around us.

Observing the natural world during moments of my daily life makes an impression. Memories of significant moments in life, good or bad, are often accompanied by recollections of the sounds of birds singing, or leaves rustling on trees in the breeze. Was the sun shining, was it raining, or snow-covered and shivering cold?

These sights, sounds, and sensations are not just fodder for a good tale. They are the realities of life we can all relate to.

These are real and true things we share. No matter who we are.

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I don't have much opportunity to travel far at this point in my life, though the desire is there. But for now, appreciating nearby nature is my priority. And my pleasure. It helps me to understand that our local green spaces serve great purpose.

To me, to my community, to the wildlife community that depends on it. These spaces are just as important as state and national parks. We depend on them. And, in kind, they depend on us, too. 🍂



The beauty of nature  
is ours to share.

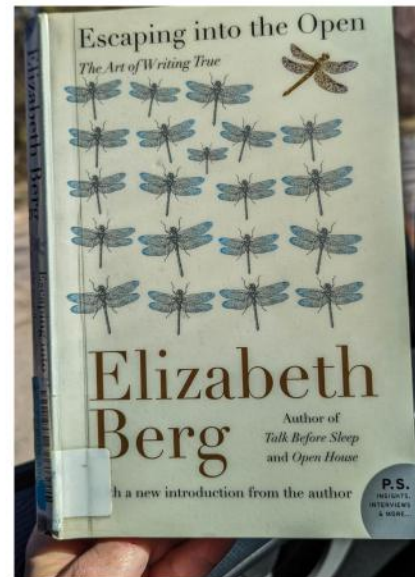


It was a perfect day to read at the park, windows open.

I'm a morning dawdler. If I don't have a specific appointment to meet, it takes me forever to get out of the house and on my way. But today the sun was shining brightly, and I was hungry. So I took a book, picked up some coffee and breakfast, and headed to Greenfield Park to see what was going on.

The slightly warmer temperatures and the glistening sunshine definitely brought folks out to the park. Plenty of people were out walking; with their dogs, with friends, with their headphones on.

It was nice and cozy in the car, so I put the window down a bit and read a book while enjoying my breakfast. As I read, sounds drifted in through the open window.



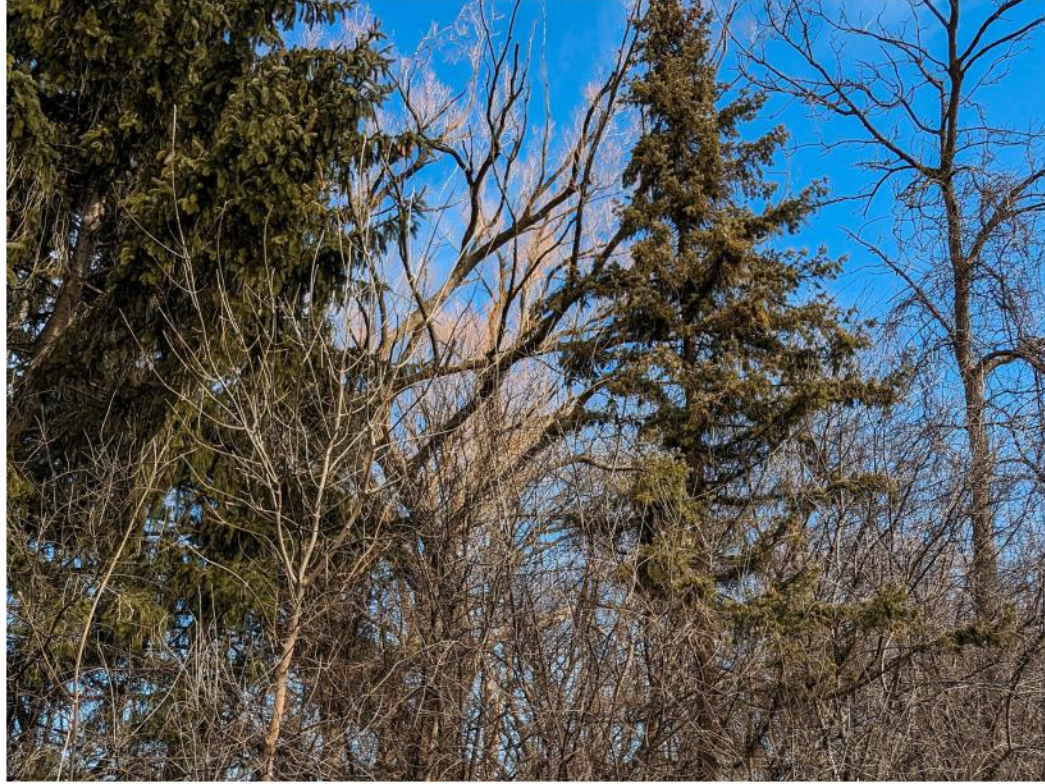
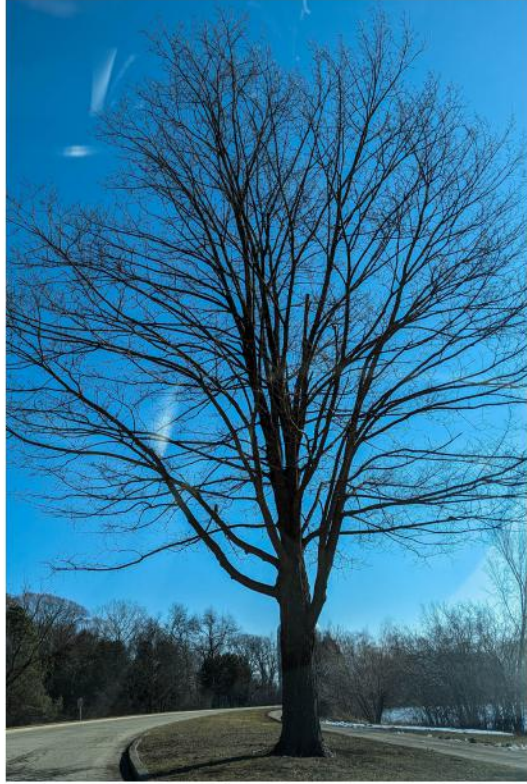
It was a perfect morning for a good read in the winter sun.



A spunky red squirrel .

The whirring and reprimanding sounds of a tiny red squirrel as it hopped from branch to branch in the hardwood trees across the way. The rolling "churr" of a red-bellied woodpecker and the honk of a white-breasted nuthatch as they climbed branches in search of a snack.

Somewhere in the mix of trees and evergreens I could hear finches bickering back and forth. A very animated conversation, it seemed. Moving overhead, a chickadee cast a shadow as it flew from the tree on the curb, to the evergreens.




Amid the hum of traffic from the nearby highway, and the passing cars along the parkway, I heard geese in the lagoon honk to each other, gliding along in bits of open water.

A house sparrow sped by, the furious flutter of its wings whispering in my ear, then foraged beneath a tree on the muddy grass and high-tailed it back to an upper branch of an evergreen along the lagoon. Starting a nest, maybe? It does seem a bit early, but...

Just before I left, I heard the call of a cardinal. I looked, but I couldn't see it. It's song was unmistakable, though.

The perfect song for such a sunny day. 🐦



A paved walking trail winds through a lush green forest. The path is made of grey asphalt and is bordered on the right by a rustic wooden fence made of horizontal logs and vertical posts. The trees are tall and thin, with dense green foliage overhead. A street lamp is visible in the distance. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

*“A few minutes in nature  
is a worthy prescription  
for enduring what ails you.”*