



MY MAINE

Vision Quest

The Maine Woods at Summer's End.

BY WENDY WEIGER

I arise at dawn to a perfect late-summer day. My little rental cabin is the only one on Mountain Brook Pond, and I am its sole human inhabitant. My fellow residents are two brown bats and a white-footed mouse, who are most likely sleeping after a busy night of hunting and foraging. The cabin stands under the sheltering limbs of neighboring trees—spruce, cedar, hemlock, balsam, maple. I step out the door and walk the short path to the dock, my way bordered by wild plants in fruit and flower. My eye is caught by the white of asters, meadowsweet, pearly everlasting; the dusty rose of Joe-Pye weed; the purple of heal-all; the yellow of goldenrod and a last lone buttercup. There are clusters of tiny red-orange bunchberries and the shiny red fruit of the painted trillium. The pond is like glass, without even a hint of wind to stir its surface. The morning mists swirl in their retreat; the small island at the north end of the pond, enveloped in a shifting misty veil, gives the impression of a mystical, other-worldly realm. The background buzz of crickets is punctuated by a brief, raucous quacking of ducks, the agitated chattering of a red squirrel, the splash

of leaping brook trout. The hum of a bush plane and the faint sound of a jet passing overhead remind me that I am not the only human creature on the planet. A waning half-moon shines high in a cloudless sky, and as I watch, the first rays of the rising sun touch the top of Elephant Mountain with a rosy light. The thermometer stands at 42 degrees.

I turn and go back into the cabin to prepare for 24 hours of outdoor fasting and meditation. I plan to spend a full day and night simply bearing silent witness to the unfolding drama of creation.

As I do my morning chores, the light on Elephant Mountain turns from rose to gold. I find that the water from the hand pump at the sink, carried by muscle power through a pipe from the pond, is so cold it hurts my hands. By 7:30 A.M. I am ready to begin my vigil, and I take up my post at the end of the dock.

As the sun makes its gradual progress across a brilliantly blue sky, I attend to the world around me. Beneath surface reflections of sky, mountain, and forest, golden waves of light undulate across the pond's brown floor. The wind comes and goes,

intermittently blowing its wrinkled curtain over the water's mirror. The wind, like a musician, draws sound from the land, making trees sigh and water lap; its cool brush against my skin is a counterpoint to the warmth of the midday sun. It carries the fresh spiciness of balsam and a moist rich scent from the pond that I can only describe as "living water."

Over the course of the day, various creatures make their presence known. Above my head, dragonfly pairs mate, delicate wings beating in a sizzling frenzy. Trout, less active at midday than at dawn, still occasionally mark the surface of the pond as they rise. Unseen woodpeckers hammer industriously into tree trunks, and the nervous laughter of loons drifts over from another pond.


As evening approaches, a cow moose appears on the shore near the dock. Over the next hour and a half, she will work her way across the pond, devouring aquatic plants as she goes, until she finally disappears into the woods on the other side.

As the cow begins her journey, the westering sun illuminates the water that drips off her ungainly muzzle each time she lifts her head. As she travels, the sun sinks below the ridge of Elephant Mountain. The pink tinges of sunset kindle, then fade. By the time she reaches the farther shore, she is shrouded in evening mists rising off the water. After the cow's departure, darkness and cold begin to settle in. The thermometer rose from 42 degrees at dawn to the upper 60s in the afternoon; now, with the sun down, the temperature is dropping inexorably back toward 42. Though I doze on and off during the night, I spend a great deal of time watching and listening, marking the slow turning of the planet as my pond moves into a new day. The night is nearly cloudless. The black sky is thickly strewn with stars, whose paler reflections echo back from the surface of the pond. As the hours pass, the Milky



Way and the Big Dipper slowly wheel around Polaris, the North Star. About 3 A.M., the moon rises in the east – still almost a half-moon, but noticeably smaller than the night before. Wraithlike mists swirl over the pond and envelop the dock, leaving minute chill droplets on every surface.

For long spaces, the only sound is the monotonous drone of crickets. Not even the faintest breeze stirs the trees. Occasionally, I hear the eerie disembodied cries that characterize the northern wilderness night: the hooting of owls, the ghostly wailing of distant loons, the howling of coyotes.

In due course, the eastern sky lightens as another dawn approaches. The unfolding of the new morning is much like that of the day before, clear and beautiful. As my 24-hour vigil nears its close, moose begin to appear. A cow and her two calves wander along the shore, then pass into the cover of the forest. One of the calves emerges from the woods opposite the dock to feed briefly at the edge of the pond, turning back when its mother's grunting call issues from the darkness of the trees. A childless cow enters the pond and heads out into the water to feed; a second lone cow soon joins her. Shortly after my 24-hour mark passes, the two cows amble off one by one. I leave the dock and return to my cabin, feeling surprisingly little need for physical nourishment despite my fast. I carry with me a gift: a sense of air, light, water, and earth whose fundamental nature is immense quietness. Though passing sounds ripple its surface, I know that the quietness underlies all, vast and immutable. 

Wendy Weiger is a physician who left the halls of academe for the wilds of northern Maine. She hopes to help others find healing outdoors and to inspire them to work toward healing our planet. This article is an excerpt from her upcoming book, *Earth Miracle: Why We Need Nature and Nature Needs Us*.