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THE MEANINGFUL LIFE

How I Found Self-Healing and Wholeness by Trekking into the Wild

SHE FOUND SUCCESS —LIKE HER FATHER — IN ACADEMIA.

BUT SHE FOUND HER TRUE LOVE — AND REDEMPTION — IN NATURE

By Wendy Weiger



Photo by graphixart

At the age of twenty, I was a budding scientist at the top of my Harvard College class.

My life to that point had been shaped by my father, a research physician who valued scholarly achievement above all else. He made it clear that my aptitude for math and science obligated me to pursue a career in academia. I owed it to the world. If that was not where my heart lay, then it was my heart that needed adjusting, not his expectations. I strove to live up to the high standards he set for me, his only child, whatever the cost.

During school breaks, I leased a horse at a farm in Maryland, not far from my parents' home in the Washington, DC suburbs. I spent my days roaming fields and woods and streams. While I was riding, I felt more alive, more joyful, than I ever felt in a lecture hall or laboratory. Back then, it never occurred to me that joy should be an integral part of my life, rather than something I tried to squeeze in at the margins of the daily slog.

Life With an Erratic Father

As I toiled away at my books, my once-brilliant father gradually unraveled, crippled by bipolar disorder. In his paranoia, he amassed an impressive firearm collection, which escalated the danger of his mood swings to potentially lethal levels. A few days before Christmas of my junior year in college, my mother and I were sitting together in my room when he suddenly appeared, pointed a gun directly at us, and threatened to kill us both. Moments later, he ambled off again without pulling the trigger.

Through all the drama, my mother remained strong. She was an unfailing source of unconditional love for me, even as she tried her best to keep herself safe and to guide my father to effective treatment. But at the end of my junior year, my mother came suddenly, perilously close to death. Without warning, an aneurysm in an artery at the base of her brain burst open, flooding the space around her brain with blood. After risky emergency surgery, she lapsed into a coma that lasted several days. Losing her seemed unthinkable. I remained in a numb state of limbo until, to my great relief, she awakened.

Four months later, I was home for a visit before the start of my senior year. My mother was still recovering from her surgery. One terrible afternoon, my father sat down on the edge of my bed and put a shotgun in his mouth. This time he pulled the trigger.

Transcending Tragedy Through Nature

The foundation of my world cracked. Though I continued on my previously planned academic trajectory, working toward both an M.D. and a Ph.D., raging emotional waters threatened to suck me under and drown me. There were some periods of reprieve: with friends, with family, and especially out in nature.

One magical evening, camping with my mother on the wild shores of Lake Superior, I experienced a timeless moment that is forever woven into the fabric of my spirit. I felt myself dissolve and become part of all that was around me: the rocks beneath me; the water before me; the vast, quiet night. My mind expanded into a sense of peace was both liberating and

strengthening. In that moment, my heart first heard the call that would eventually transform my life — but I was not yet ready to grasp its full significance.

Seven years after my father's death, I learned that a beloved aunt was dying of ovarian cancer. The impending loss opened the floodgates of all the pain I had tried so hard to suppress. I plummeted into a dark depression. I contemplated following my father in suicide. But I did not really want to die. What I wanted was to find a reason to live. I took the summer off from the lab where I was working and went home to Maryland. As I helped to care for my aunt, I began intensive psychotherapy.

In between therapy sessions, I returned to the rural trails I had ridden before. The burden of my pain lifted as I allowed the landscape to absorb me. I reveled in hot sunlight and cool shade, in the vibrant growth of woods and fields, in the glowing colors of wildflowers, in the clear brown water rippling and gurgling its way down streams.

As I let go of past and future, the Earth gathered me into her calming embrace. My heart opened to the natural miracles that surround us, and my stifling soul began to breathe. The brief but powerful sense of union I had felt on the shore of Lake Superior was maturing into a deep connection with nature that would sustain me for decades to come.

Leaving Harvard for the Woods of Maine

In the fall, I went back to Harvard, but with a new spirit. I hoped to share the healing I found in the natural world with other struggling souls. But as I completed my degrees and moved on to postgraduate medical research, I realized that nature itself was in dire need of healing.

I was shocked to learn that our careless use of natural resources could doom half of Earth's species to extinction. Despite our technological achievements, we still depend on healthy ecosystems for life-support services as basic as air to breathe, water to drink, and food to eat. When we kill off other species, we undermine our own. Over time, I came to understand our growing environmental crisis as the biggest threat to public health that humanity has ever faced. In the words of eco-theologian Thomas Berry, "We cannot have well humans on a sick planet, not even with all our medical technologies."

So, at forty-two, I left Boston's halls of academe and moved to the wilds of northern Maine. My plan was to write a book that would guide readers to a deeper, more joyful connection with nature: both to renew their own well-being and to inspire them to take action to heal the Earth. I saw my calling as the practice of medicine in a broader sense.

Getting to know my new backyard was both challenging and exhilarating. The Maine Woods offer millions of acres of rugged mountains, tumbling streams, and clear lakes — home to moose and lynx, boreal birds and brook trout. I learned outdoor skills including backpacking, whitewater canoeing, and snowshoeing. As a middle-aged woman, I found there were ways to work around my physical limitations. An instructor patiently taught me how to lift a canoe from the ground up to my shoulders by rolling it over my hip. I broke backpacking trips into segments

that were shorter than the mileage covered by twenty-something hikers, and I took more breaks to enjoy the views along my way.

Over the years, I've trekked hundreds of miles up mountains and down rivers, and earned my license as a Registered Maine Guide. For me, the first steps or paddle strokes on a long outdoor journey are among life's greatest gifts. Nothing equals the sense of pure, wild freedom as my spirit reaches forward, anticipating the adventures ahead. And I find compensation for the rigors of the trail in what I like to call "alternative luxuries": the cozy warmth of a campfire at night, the dawn chorus of songbirds in the morning, a swim under a gaspingly-cold waterfall on a hot sunny day.

When a massive development proposal threatened my chosen home, I dove into activism, coordinating a grassroots advocacy group through a years-long battle. We couldn't afford to hire legal representation, so I put in many long days and even longer nights, learning skills usually practiced by attorneys as best I could. In the end, the efforts of our group, working in conjunction with several allied organizations, contributed to significant improvements to the original proposal. Nearly 400,000 acres were placed under easements that will protect the land for generations to come.

A New Journey at 57

Now, at fifty-seven, my journey continues. I'm heading back out of the woods into the wider world, book manuscript in hand, seeking a publisher. I'm starting a nonprofit that will share the connection-with-nature practices I describe in my book. I plan to offer nature-focused workshops in which I'll guide participants in mindful experience of the wild — fully engaging their hearts, minds, spirits, and senses — and invite them to join me in Earth-centered meditation and celebration. This spring, I'm hiking along the American Discovery Trail between Delaware and West Virginia, teaching and learning as I go.

At an age where many people are looking toward retirement, I'm just beginning a major new phase of my life's work. The uncertainty of what lies ahead undeniably feels scary at times. But — even though the trail may be rugged — I find purpose in trekking toward my next goal.

In the woods that are so dear to my heart, trees continue to grow throughout their lifespan, even into old age. I take them as my models, and look forward to my future growth.