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[The Unloneliness of Being Alone]

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(Photo Credit: Christopher McDonald)

“There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, there is a rapture on the lonely shore, There is society, where none intrudes, By the deep sea, and music in its roar: I love not the man the less, but Nature more”

– George Gordon Byron

Grubby fingers slip over the smoothed edges of a decades old cannonball. Lodged within the brick and mortar of an ancient house, the cannonball glistens in the sun, rubbed slick by fingers of curious children. Little hands grip the edges of the ragged window ledges. Bright eyes peak into the hazy windows, searching for any sign of adventure lying within. This house made of stone, appropriately named, The Stone House, became my playground for the first years of my life.

With each season came a new game to play. Summers brought flowers and bugs to catch and to keep. Falls brought crisp leaves to play in and hay bales to play on. Winters brought sledding and snowball fights on the hills surrounding this old house. Finally, with spring came new life. As I grew, this view melted into the background of my mind, now more familiar to me than my own bedroom. As I explored every crevice of this place of history, my appreciation and curiosity for the land grew exponentially.



(Photo Credits: Christopher McDonald)

“In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion.”

– Albert Camus

In time my awareness became a larger part of my personality. This new awareness pushed me to study the places that I loved so much. Curiosity turned to morbid fascination as I educated myself on the history of these places I held so dear. Years of hatred, racism, and anger had come together in an epic battle. Despite this, I felt most calm when I walked these hills. It became an epic contradiction in my mind. I have spent my life exploring and loving what essentially is a graveyard. In a way the horrific nature of this discovery brought me greater appreciation of this land. Despite having walked these trails at least a hundred times, I always stop to read the plaques chronicling the history of this land. I felt privileged to be able to explore this land that held so many memories and emotions. People drive for hundreds of miles to see this place that I consider home. I have experienced the beauty of these hills thousands of times and remain in awe of it to this day. As I matured, I began to truly appreciate the time alone that this land afforded me. These woods became a solace to me in times when I most needed it.



(Photo Credit: Rebecca McDonald)



(Photo Credit: Christopher McDonald)

*“The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself”
– Michel de Montaigne*

In these hills, I found my outlet. The landscape provided me with a perfect artistic medium. I often spent my days rummaging through nature’s gardens, searching for the perfect acorn cap or sun baked leaf. This scarred land allowed me to turn it into something that I will forever treasure. When the stress and the frenetic pace of life became too much, I turned to nature to find calm. With this appreciation of what the woods could become, came the ability to spend hours on end truly by myself. I learned to not only love my creativity, but to give myself the opportunity to let it grow. I learned to look out at the world around me. Over the years photography has become my outlet, a way for me to express myself when words fail. I often found myself spending days in these fields, waiting for the perfect picture. This newfound hobby and appreciation for true beauty not only changed the way I saw the world, but it helped create a better relationship between my father and me. A man of few words and daughter with a dislike for expressing emotions created a relationship that often seemed distant. By finding something that we both loved, it allowed us to understand one another in a new way. I now had someone who appreciated and saw the beauty in this land just as I did.



(Photo Credits: Christopher McDonald)

“A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.”

– Arthur Schopenhauer

My deepest thoughts and inner conflicts often came to me while I explored the trails. I come from two families, one to which I am related by blood, while the other I am not. This genetic disconnect caused a rift; I grew up feeling like a black sheep. In a family of emotions shared, long hugs, deep religious traditions, and a southern background, I stood out. Unlike my family I am private, somewhat reserved, and extremely involved in and affected by the arts. I lived in a world of photographs, books, and quiet mountain nights, while they flourished in big family gatherings, church on Sundays, and stories from days past. I struggled against the heavy expectations placed on me and often felt like I did not have a place within this family. I defined my early teens by my constant efforts to find a place where I fit. I searched for the empty puzzle piece where I would fit, but never found it. The older I grew the more I learned to embrace my differences.



(Photo Credit: Christopher McDonald)

“How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself.”

– Virginia Woolf

Long walks in the woods sparked internal conversations about who I was. As time marched on, I came to deeply appreciate my differences. Instead of constantly molding myself to appear like the others, I chose to let my own unique qualities shine. Self-reflection and deep thought were huge factors in newfound confidence. By seeking beauty in nature, I was able to find it within myself. The land that I have known since childhood is now marked with memories. The trails of this place are laid out as a timeline of my short life. This place has now become a time capsule. Walking these trails takes me to places and memories from years past. I can walk these woods and understand how I have grown as a person. Within these woods I found magic that I fell

in love with. In a time of technology and a fear of solitude, I found a haven. I learned to get to know myself in these woods. With each year I understood more of who I am as a person. Because of this appreciation for solitude, I now know exactly who I am as a person and exactly who I want to be. Growing up on this land truly blessed my life. Without it, I would not be the person I am today.



(Photo Credit: Christopher McDonald)

What a lovely surprise to finally discover how unlonely being alone can be.”

– Ellen Burstyn



(Photo Credit: Christopher McDonald)

“Language... has created the word “loneliness” to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word “solitude” to express the glory of being alone.”

-Paul Johannes Tillich