Quiet Moments

From Turmoil to Peace

David H. Swendsen

1969

Contents

A moment at dawn... 3
A moment in wilderness... 3
A moment in storm... 4
A moment of calm... 4
A moment at sunset... 5
A moment of darkness... 5
These moments can be yours... 6

No man can live a full life on concrete and carpets alone. Each must sometime steal a moment from the everyday environment of supermarkets, traffic jams, parking lots and city streets, to walk if only for a few steps where his tired feet can still touch the bare earth.

The price of a sunrise is only an hour's sleep. The expensive scent of fresh-cut hay costs only a deep breath in the right breeze. Your own handful of wilderness can be yours for the investment of a few minutes' driving time away from the expressway. In the outdoors, at least, the best things are still free.

Your wilderness awaits you, somewhere nearby, with a chance to help your thoughts escape from taxes, commercials, and the Top Ten Hits in the contemplation of something as simple as a raindrop or as vast as a range of mountains.

Take a little time now, and review with me some of my prize moments outdoors—the show pieces of a lifetime's collection. Open your mind to the sights and sounds and feelings and come with me in search of...

A moment at dawn...

"Getting up too early," comments Aldo Leopold in his classic *Sand County Almanac,* "is a vice habitual in horned owls, stars, geese, and freight trains. Some hunters acquire it from geese and some coffee pots from hunters. It is strange that of all the multitude of creatures who must rise in the morning at some time, only these few should have discovered the most pleasant and least useful time for doing so".

When you force yourself to beat the sun out of bed, and trespass drowsily into this brand new moment, you are entitled, for some reason, to feel wiser than those still caught up in their routine of sleep.

The versatile sun puts on its opening act each day on the stage of the whimsical eastern sky—a curtainless stage with no restrictions as to color or mood. Each is beautiful in its own way, but the true test of your suitability for early rising is your reaction to the dawn's kaleidoscope of sound effects. A woodpecker or a cougar in the mountains; ducks and geese in a marsh, thrushes and doves over the prairie, or bears in a remote tourist-area garbage dump.

But even dawn must die. Those who sleep through it get an undeserved little slice when they arise late from their beds, but the outdoor moment disappears too soon for all of us, and another day has just been born.

A moment in wilderness...

There is at least a touch of wilderness in every man, and sometimes the need to get away becomes almost overwhelming. Beyond the roar of the freeway and the fence at the end of the dead-end road, a tiny piece of wilderness can mean freedom.

Come slip away from the man-made world on the other side of the barbed wire, at least for this moment. Find a path, any path, and follow as it leads through the fragrant quiet of this unnamed, untamed place. Each careful step over fallen branches, growing things, and animal sign will lead you away from man-made noise toward the quiet made by God.

I cherish each wilderness moment of my life, especially one sunrise several years ago. Trout rod guiding the way, I waded carefully into a dark, inviting pool. 1 can still feel the thrill that crept up my mosquito-lotioned neck as I lured the big brook trout and hooked him on his favorite breakfast fly. But in a splash the fly dangled in a waiting willow and I had lost the monster more cunning than I. But no road yet leads the two miles to his pool, so I may have another chance to do battle— and lose honorably—again.

Trout rods and shotguns are not essential companions on a path to places like that. A son, a daughter, a camera—can preserve it forever.

A moment in storm...

Nature has many faces. Out of her limitless skies she can draw a moment to match any mood. We soon learn to accept most—the hot summer wind, the cold winter night; even the densest groping fog. We look forward to others—a brilliant frosty morning, or a summer afternoon's display of fluffy cumuli.

But one mood of nature will always drive the most urbane and civilized of men to feel the fears of his forebears. It is the absolute, windless, soundless, all-embracing calm before a storm, and then the terrible reality of the storm itself.

Crashing into a day's routine or thundering into a night's sleep, the storm tears off the benign mask and shows the awesome face of a real, cruel, violent nature. All the facade now thrust aside, the storm comes down with a display of splendor and power that is as fascinating as a snake but as frightening as an avalanche.

Sturdy trees bow until roots stretch past the breaking point. Water once still rolls and roars until spray stings your face. Rolling thunder, glaring lightning, and smothering rain turns all life away from the storm.

Then, just as suddenly, the storm is gone. Distant lightning and fading thunder tracks its movement toward the scarred horizon—not in retreat, but moving onward toward new conquests.

A moment of calm...

No living thing can stand as still as a watching blue heron. A moment of absolute, unmoving calm is much like the mood and stance of that waiting bird.

Have you ever been enclosed in a moment when God has willed that time should stand still? Such doldrums of nature in the outdoors find a sky suddenly empty of birds, inhabited only by clouds that themselves seem paralyzed. The animals of the forest seem to be holding their breaths—and you find yourself holding your breath, too. All the waters within whispering distance are abruptly recast as reflecting ponds, and even an outcast ripple dies before it can reach the opposite shore. All of the world seems to be suddenly hypnotized.

But then the snapping of a dry twig somewhere sounds like a rifle shot, ignorant of the rule of the moment. A loudmouth bluejay naturally seizes the moment to break the pact of silence. A flat-stemmed aspen follows suit with a rustling as the breeze comes up again. And as you begin to breathe again, you feel the wind touch your face. Returning, it touches the water and sends it hurrying back to normal, rippled life.

Then, with a sudden splash and a hoarse croak, the heron gives up watching, lunges into the stirring air and, transformed in that act into a thing of impossible grace, sails away over the moving treetops.

A moment at sunset...

No man can own a sunset. It cannot be touched or packaged, or taken home. It is a thing to be enjoyed, and the only way to spoil it is to miss it altogether.

Not all men will take the time to look in the right direction at the right time of the day. Ducks and geese and seagulls, much wiser than men, never ignore a sunset. And if you will follow their lead, and look westward about lamplighting time, you will see a display of colors and shadows that mere man can never duplicate.

Notice how fast the sun disappears once its feet are on the ground. In less than three minutes from touchdown, the sun crawls behind the hill, pulling its warming rays like a blanket behind it.

Some of Nature's creatures, hardly noticed in the bright light of day, cannot be ignored at sunset. The loon, possibly pleased with himself for getting through another day, laughs at the world from across the lake. The bass, slurping unmannerly along the shoreline, seem to prefer the insects of dusk. The deer, drawn by twilight clover fields, appear at the edge of the forest. But when the frog choir begins to sing in the nearby pond, you know the sunset can't hold on much longer. Another day has been put to bed, but you and 1, the loon, the bass, the deer and the frogs didn't miss this episode.

A moment of darkness...

It is a mistake to turn away from the dark and the intrigue of night. Darkness only frightens those who do not understand it.

How long has it been since you looked up into a limitless night sky, spread from horizon to horizon with uncountable stars? How long since, gazing into the vastness of the universe, you saw a flock of southbound geese silhouetted against the full moon?

To me, the night is a special time, when I can roll up in my warm sleeping bag out in the fresh, crisp air and listen thoughtfully to the sounds in the darkness. The tentative, amorous hoot of an owl, and the tentative, amorous answer. The surprising diction of a whippoorwill pronouncing his name. The singing frogs, a happy cricket, a distant coyote, maybe even a cowbell might join in the far-from-frightening chorus from outside your ruddy circle of campfire light.

There is a certain security in sleeping bags and campfires. You know they will guard your well-being long after your eyelids grow heavy from stargazing. And soon the darkness will turn to light. The sun will melt the stars and a new day will challenge the darkness. Before you can consider the darkness too long in your dream, the owl will cock his head to the new day, making dawning noises from behind the waiting hill.

These moments can be yours...

From dawn to darkness, and from calm to storm, they come and go, whether you and I are there to witness them or not. But enough of them, captured across the span of a lifetime, can fill it with the magic of the outdoor world.

The moments are life itself. Their value in a human life cannot be measured like caloric intake or insulin dosage, but they are just as essential as food and shelter to a full existence. They are fleeting things, however, and must be sought.

So don't wait until tomorrow. God made you no promise about a tomorrow here on earth. Take your own journey and find your moment, now.

Climb that hill you have admired from below. Look anew at the frost on tomorrow morning's sunlit trees, and turn your head toward tomorrow's sunset. Listen hard to the cry of tonight's lonely coyote. Turn your face, not your back, on today's storm.

Hold with steel-trap fingers every precious scrap of fading wilderness, whether behind your back yard or two thousand miles away. To save a wilderness place where we might someday grab an outdoor moment might cost us a few thousand kilowatts of power that we hardly need. It might make us sacrifice a few acres of parking lot space. It might force us back a bulldozer away from a dead end road.

But twenty years ago, Aldo Leopold pondered that, and wrote: "Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress did away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free".

Only time will tell if we are civilized enough to guide our bulldozers around the remaining islands of wilderness—the cushions between man's reckless paths of progress.

There is more to snow than shoveling; more to storm clouds than inconvenient rain; more to howling wolves than snarling teeth; more to hills than shortness of breath—and more to life than concrete and carpets.

Will you take a moment to find that out?

The Ted K Archive

David H. Swendsen
Quiet Moments
From Turmoil to Peace
1969

National Wildlife, December-January 1969, Vol. 7, No. 1.

www.thetedkarchive.com