

Talk by Bonnie Henderson for North Coast Land Conservancy's celebration of National Estuaries Day

Neawanna Point, Seaside, Oregon

Sept. 26, 2009

I saw a calendar at a friend's house the other day, with pictures of wonderful places from around the world. Each month featured one of the "1000 Places to See Before You Die." Have you seen that calendar, or the book that it's based on? I've seen it but haven't wanted to open it. I realize my head is already full of lists of places I want to see, though I've never written them down. There's the list of far-away places I hope to see some day: Antarctica; Kyoto, Japan; northern Scotland. And then I have this mental list of experiences I always try to squeeze in before summer ends: a peek into a tidepool during one of June's extra-low tides, and a wildflower hike somewhere in the Cascades, and morning of huckleberry picking at Mount Hood. But the list I realize I've been working down most assiduously, is my mental list of places I haven't seen yet but know exist on the Oregon coast, places that I've glimpsed out a car window once or a hundred times, places I've seen from a dock or the end of a beach or around the bend on a trail I didn't follow all the way. Places not very far from here, and not too different from this place. Most of them, I realized as I thought about talking today, are on estuaries.

Places like Blind Slough on the lower Columbia River. Something had drawn me year after year to the farm roads along the sloughs east of Astoria, and several times I'd stood on the dock at Knappa and looked up the slough and wondered what's around the bend, and longed for a canoe and the right companion and decent weather and a favorable tide. All those things finally came together last spring, when my partner and brother and I launched a canoe and a kayak on bank next to the dock and rode the tide up Blind Slough, ducking into Gnat Creek Slough and Grizzly Slough, past float houses and brooding Sitka spruce swamps and farmer's fields. That inky water we floated on could have fallen as rain in most of Oregon or Washington or British Columbia. Nothing disturbed its smooth surface, sparkling with May's low-angled sunshine, but the odd alder leaf or catkin or duck feather and our own paddles, slicing rhythmically.

And the Nehalem River. Do you wonder, as you cross that long bridge over Nehalem Bay and glimpse the river between buildings as you follow 101 through the town of Nehalem, what's upstream, where the river winds away from the town and toward the farms where the valley narrows to a point at the foot of the Coast Range? Here's a snapshot of what we saw on the Nehalem's North Fork when we finally got out on it in a canoe. Huge trees, some growing out of the remains of other trees, trees so big they nearly formed a cathedral arch over the narrowing river. A little wake of water that revealed itself, with a loud splash from a huge flat tail, as the nose of a beaver. And a common loon, big as life, floating and diving and surfacing and finally laughing out loud before lifting off the river and winging downstream.

Then there's Tenmile Creek, the Tenmile Creek that empties into the Pacific between Reedsport and Coos Bay. It wasn't even on my list; I was only vaguely aware of its existence until I reached it on a long hike down the coast. It was the right place to stop, so I set up camp on the sand not far above the high tide line and listened and watched all night as thunder crashed and lightning struck all around, and in the morning I rose to a mist so thick it was hard to tell what separated beach from creek from sky from ocean, all of them a soft, wet gray.

And then there's the Necanicum. I was lucky to be in Seaside a couple of weeks ago on a glorious sunny day, a "bluebird day," as Neal Maine called it, so I ditched my indoor plans and rented a kayak at

the hostel and headed south, dodging the nylon lines holding crab pots hanging from the bridges. A party of ducks exploded into the air just south of Avenue U, and every so often a leaping salmon broke the water's surface. The familiar sight of Tillamook Head loomed above the creek, but it looked different, almost new, from this angle. The water was murky with algae and with human leavings, and its surface was speckled with the first brown alder leaves and the occasional duck feather. Marsh grass streamed like mermaid's hair. Even in the midst of busy Seaside, within earshot of highway 101, the tidal river felt timeless. I could almost hear the echoes of pleasure parties boating by lamplight under wooden bridges, could imagine a herd of elk crossing silently in the night, where the creek ran shallow and rocky.

When we talk about estuaries, it's usually in ecological or biological terms: about cycling of the tides flushing the estuary with freshwater and pushing in salty seawater, about the productivity of the estuarine food web, about the rich variety of habitats that exist here in constant flux.

But that's really not what draws me to estuaries. I like how they look, the water silvery or black, edged with saltgrass and pickleweed and spruce and alder. I like the changing bird show, every day and sometimes every minute something different landing to float and feed. I like how estuaries smell, and I like the words we use to describe how they smell: Briny, brackish, fecund. I like the pace of change in estuaries, how you can actually see the tide rise and fall if you're patient enough. I like the sense of worlds colliding; I know it's happening there, under the water, and I see evidence of it in the tidal rips that soldier upstream in a rising tide. I like the respect they demand; you don't want to venture out onto an estuary without an awareness of the weather and the tides and your own capabilities, and limitations.

There's a spiritual element here, of course. Long before I ever heard the term "old growth forest," I knew that kind of forest by another name: cathedral forest. That's what my father called them, and that's literally what they were to him.

I get that same sense in estuaries. For what is reverence, really, if not patience, and humility, and awe?

One day after I paddled up the Necanicum, I took a walk with Neal Maine into the Sitka spruce swamp at Circle Creek, behind the land trust office. We tramped out past the barn, and through an opening at the edge of the field we stepped into the shadow of the spruces. "Feel that?" he said, beaming. It was a hot day, but just inside the forest it was at least 20 degrees cooler, like stepping into a walk-in refrigerator. Actually, it was more like stepping through an invisible portal and into an alternative universe. Neal starts pointing things out to me: the roots that spread out like octopus arms, just below or even above the ground. The nurse logs and cut stumps nurturing one or a half-dozen trees. The red-legged frogs disappearing with a leap into the undergrowth. An entire community of trees, all growing out of the same nurse log, that had been blown over and uprooted in the 2007 storm, and the skunk cabbage bog that had already established itself in the black earth where the roots used to be, and the orange shelf fungus now growing on the roots.

We walked farther into the grove, and he sighed in contentment, and looked around, still beaming. And he told me about an article he had read some years ago, an article titled "My Psychologist." In it the author described what a good listener his psychologist was, how much help the author always got from a visit to his psychologist. The punch line: It turned out his "psychologist" was a tree. "A tree!" Neal laughed out loud, shaking his head. He didn't have to say it: we both knew the feeling.

We continued through the grove and out into the open field and back into another grove of trees, this time alders growing alongside the creek. And he began reminiscing about the time, not so many years ago, when he'd spent an entire day in this very grove, just sitting, then hiking around a little, then sitting

some more. The land trust was deep into negotiations to acquire this 365 acres at the base of Tillamook Head, and it had turned into a political quagmire. In two days he was going to have to make a phone call to either recommit fully to the fight to preserve Circle Creek or—what seemed the prudent and possibly only choice at that point—to give it up and focus on more doable projects. That day up Circle Creek, all alone with a whole grove of “psychologists,” was all it took. Monday morning he picked up the phone. “This land isn’t worth a million dollars,” he reported. “It’s worth a billion.” One year later, Circle Creek had been preserved, in perpetuity.

To listen deeply is to love. Maybe the trees were listening to Neal that day. But I know Neal was listening to them. There are many good reasons to preserve the health of estuaries and the watersheds that feed them, easily summarized in the fact that life as we know it on this planet depends upon functioning estuaries. But knowledge, alone, doesn’t seem to be enough to drive humans to act. Love is what does it. All those places--Blind Slough, the Nehalem, Tenmile Creek, the Necanicum, Circle Creek— have been preserved in part because someone went there and listened and loved and felt compelled to act. In doing so, we save not only the planet, we save our deepest selves.