



My pipe is a fine companion to these outdoor jaunts. Yes, an old fashioned habit to be sure, a reminder of craggy sea farers or 1950's suburban Dads. But over time, I have found such an indulgence highly enjoyable, and for some reason, quite fitting when I explore my surroundings and desire a reconnection with the earth. I have seldom enjoyed a smoke indoors, and often will refrain if I am in proximity to any company outside of the immediate and knowing family circle.

My favorite construct is dark walnut burl, rolling slightly downward, like the tame and forgiving hill for a 5 years olds sled. It lessens the visual impact of, and distraction of, this container of tobacco hanging, annoyingly, at the corner of my sight lines. It has found a comfortable spot to the right of my mouth and feels horribly out of place in any other configuration.

To some, given the expense they can often incur, they reside in places of worship with like friends, lined up on richly grained oaken racks to display their artistry and variation to those that pass in view. Mine are relegated to a far more blue collar and utilitarian life – their character being developed and nurtured by the multitude of experiences and hard work they encounter. The few I have are pocked and scratched, dirtied by stone and earth. I readily pitch them to the ground without reservation if some urgent photograph or behemoth and ancient stone require my undivided attention. Yet, they don't seem to mind – oblige willingly – and seem to move through their life like me – with a few hard earned scars – but hopefully, with some added depth at such a cost.

I have found a fluid blend -molasses like in its sweetness - dark, sticky -with an aroma that lingers in abandoned spots. The harshness of unadulterated smoke can provide fulfillment – yet lacks that a quality that leaves impressions. I recall, some years back, the instigator of my habit (call it an unhealthy one if you wish – but I will not repent) – I used to take long walks along a street adjacent to a low slung, broad, and brick clad roofing factory. It was capped with a handsome peaked tower with a slate roof and cooper pediments – a formidable and striking watchmen upon entry through the tall railed iron gates that trucks flowed through like untiring ants. From its rear thrust an ancient singular smokestack. This is what a place of manufacture, that housed so many, so vibrant with activity and sound, should appear. The smells of tar were constant- and the machinery ran around the clock and was a contentious issue for neighborhood mixed with duplexes and small ranch homes.

About mid-way through my meanderings along this street, most often in the evening as the street lamps filtering down amongst a canopy of sidewalk maples, I passed an old-folks home. It was a simple structure – appearing to be a house fed on an overly rich diet that ballooned it girth beyond proper proportion. I found it a quietly nestled amongst the other homes – although I would think a home full of the feeble and elderly would not be a place one would find a challenging decibel level or trash strewn front yard. Some lawn ornaments in appropriate bad taste perhaps – but quiet nonetheless.

Outside of this facility, as predictable and reliant as the hourly sway of the factory gates – stood a gentleman at the edge of the shadows – smoking a pipe with a rich, invasive cherry-like scent. I passed him and was struck – both by his escapism and the intensity of the connection the reach of his smoke invoked. He was tall and slender, simply clad in a modest bland shirt and khaki like trousers – and his face would reflect the redness of the glow as he pulled out more taste. I do not recall a time when I saw him in full light – to truly see his features beyond the artist stroke of ember upon his face that lit his eyes – but I remember slick silver hair, a roman nose, high cheek bones – and a look of well worn wisdom.

Nightly he returned to repeat the exercise at the shadows edge – as did I – and I passed him again and again in my walks by the home that faced the high ivy walls that surrounded the factory. Quite unintentionally – he passed along a gift during those summer nights of heat, smoke, tar, and noise. Something traditional – something losing its place in the norms of contemporary life – and it descended to a place of embrace in my heart and practice that felt as, Dickinson so aptly described, “newenglandy”.

So as I stride along this well worn path, I must surely appear as a human locomotive to the flora and fauna of the trail – with small gray, sinewy puffs emitting above my head with startlingly persistent and regular rhythm. I will toss rationale to those who care, that it helps prevent the incursion of mosquitoes into my space, but I know full well it is one of those habitualized activities that we embrace over time – and that at some juncture, becomes ingrained to such a degree in our regimen, that to replicate the activity in its absence seems incomprehensible and incomplete.

The trail is rich in subtle sound. I lose such nuances as I often enjoin this parade with my children and the patter of their questions and observations fill the air with eager youth and inquisition. While I miss them terribly on this portion of my trip – the solo accompaniment of footsteps, deep breaths, and the light trill of my pipe magnify the warmth of such solitude. The adjacent marshes breed choruses of dragonflies and a high din of insects that seem to fluctuate in pitch and intensity with the heat of the sun as it meanders across the clouds. I am surprised – given the multitude of people in the general region that camp upon the surrounding lakes – that each venture on the trails finds so few people. I can often hike for hours with nary a single contact with another like soul.

Obviously, I would never complain of such a condition, but find the limited desire to investigate the very woods in which they habitate for these short spells, so reflective of the tenor of many “family campers”. They peer cautiously from the snack bars and souvenir shacks into the wilds – and limit their immersion to conveyance of suburban toys and tools onto a flattened patch of parched compacted dirt next to the roadside. But I will digress from this ranting path – so to the trail I return.

The wood swell like bay waves, building with rounded slowness and deliberate destination. They seem to ripple around these small mountains they surround – as if to pitch the undeserving back towards the world of pavement if they are unable to physically contend. It is a motion of physical balance to me – upper thighs to shin and calf with each upward and downward flow.

Sometimes a more aggressive vertical ascent will take these muscle regions hostage and beat them into submission without remorse – making one wonder what mental debilitation possessed the thought of walking up oversized granite boulders like a cat climbing a clock tower with a seeming endless coil of corners and unattainable ends. This may be my favorite way to immerse myself in the glories of Yankee woodlands – rapid but calmly paced, with swift movement of blood and tightened muscles, on reverberant terrain, just fast enough to keep a few steps ahead of hungry insects, but never so urgent as to lose the ability to connect sound with vision. To my right the wide tree-strewn expanses of marsh break along the edge of the path where brief openings permit. The matchstick horizon of haunted oak and maple look like a paradise for moose, deer, and beaver. I have often wondered how such trees come to reside in the middle of such a boggy place – for I have yet to see a single resident without its predictable slate gray trunk, bark-less, leafless, and branchless – all stunted at a similar height and clustered in a wide central swath. There must be a time when these noble vestiges displayed life amongst the forest. Or do the lily pads, frogs, brackish water, and legions of dragon flies, sprout from the earth to imprison the unexpected – now forced to be a theater prop for an all consuming visitor – while their friends and dry earth retreat to safe distance.

Towering evergreens surround – offering quick and ready cover from the concerns and fears of wildlife. Ladder like swamp flowers burst with sporadic oval white petals and yellow stamens and provide a pleasing, although assuredly unnoticed, border between the muddy flats to the thickly needled forest floor. At their base – a solemn yet curious frog peers from his half buried spot amongst the veiny, grass strewn muck.

Do they gaze in some interested fashion as there are new distractions to enlighten their lazy afternoon? Or do they see some cosmic disturbance and this aberration from their usual and comfortable environs? The latter I am sure – and given some days I have endured of late – I would find a day ensconced in mud – nary a movement – body immersed – except for my eyes to take in a moist, fragrant, lush, warm-winded afternoon – a welcome and enjoyable one indeed.

I march forward and away from the consistent melody of the swamp – my breath increasing in rapidity – causing a boost in the wafting trail of smoke rising beside my worn orange cap. Like an engine of steam in earnest – my output of light gray clouds echo in direct correlation with my focus. I suppose in some instances it can be used as a sign of warning, like the needle of a gauge ascending into a zone capped by red lines and diminishing time and space without combustion. But in these situations – it is building rhythmically with physical exertion – while I find my heart and spirit moving in converse – becoming more relaxed and at peace the harder I trod forth. I have often felt this a core of some puritan, genetic infusion – this mental contentment derived through toil – although gloriously free of the trappings of religious dogma that weighed my ancestors with heavy stones of community morals and assimilation.

I will tap it – often – and repeatedly to offset a heavy heart,  
excessive demands of work or a long overdue desire to feel my hands  
upon greenness – or to view a natural creation free of the mechanized  
influences of man.

It is here  
to urgently rest  
& wish.

