

December 2000

Dear Bob and Wendy,

Where are you? In Portsmouth? Boston? Timbuktu? Jack and I never left home in 1999. He made many improvements on the house and property and cut his usual quota of firewood. He also completely restored an old, worn-out (the floor was rotted out) Alaskan camper he inherited from his father. It's sitting on our Ford pickup now while he finishes up interior details. One "detail" is building a plywood and fiberglass ice box to replace the old propane frig that was not only dangerous but way too small. He's using the door to the old frig but the box now has room for two blocks of ice, a couple of gallons of milk, a bottle of wine and fresh vegies and sandwich makings. We plan to try out the camper this year on a trip to Seattle to visit one of my girls, her husband and my sister.

Today it's sunny for a change. We had a late spring, an early fall and lots more rain than normal. Jack just left to check out the creek. You probably remember my telling you, in previous letters, how he cut a trail back to the creek one year, made a footbridge across it another year and built a meditation deck next to the creek year before last. This summer he made a dam across the creek in order to amplify "the sound of water falling in drops." Now, whenever we walk out to the creek deck and sit down on our cushioned lawn chairs, the forest awakens within us, mundane thoughts flow downstream leaving our minds open and receptive to fully experience the present moment after moment after moment.

Jack's next forest project will be filling in a shallow section of the creek with concrete blocks so he can drive the jeep across to the back third of our property. He wants to open up a meadow area and build another meditation platform about ten feet up in one of the redwood trees. There are enough

fallen trees on the far side of the creek to keep both our wood stoves going for years. I look on these forest projects of Jack's as outer/inner work. The way I see it the forest reflects his unconscious mind. As he thins the trees and burns dead wood he begins to let go of old belief systems; as he builds trails and roads through the forest his neural pathways develop new connections; as he clears spaces for meditation his psychological shadows are exposed to the light of consciousness where they are more easily recognized. It's slow by satisfying work.

Yesterday, when Jack walked out the jeep road to see how high the creek had risen during the rain the night before, he surprised a large steelhead swimming in the deepened pool behind the dam. It disappeared into the shadows, but a half-minute later he saw another steelhead, up stream, leap high out of the water. It's spawning season.

Since ours is the only property within a mile that's not home to a couple of dogs and/or cats, our place is becoming a haven for more and more wild animals and birds. We feed dozens of birds every morning. At different seasons there may be blue jays, sparrows, bush tits, wrens, tanagers, flickers, chickadees, juncos, doves, towhees, quail, wild pigeons all jostling each other for bird seed on the deck and railing. The jays love cat food. At first the flickers were attracted only to the peanut butter and suet cakes attached to the trunk of one of our eldest alders but then they got up courage to join the others even though their beaks are not suited to picking up seeds. Of course there are hawks and swallows and ravens but they keep their distance. We even have weekly visits from a yellow-green parakeet that escaped from a neighbor's cage and seems to be making it OK outside. Our wild animals range from racoons, rabbits, possums, beaver and even an elk who was attracted by the fallen fruit of an apple tree.

One night, last spring, we heard a neighbor's dog barking. About a half-hour later Jack heard sounds he thought might be a coon trying to get into our garbage can. He grabbed a big flashlight and shined it out the bedroom window and was surprised to see nothing but a dark shadow. When the shadow moved he realized it was a huge black bear (its back as high as his shoulders). The bear was moving along the deck, a foot from the window, but when it saw the light it turned and jumped over the railing. When it lit it hit the junipers in the planter box next to the deck. Broke off the top half of the redwood box before disappearing into the darkness.

A few days later, when it was just breaking light and I was in the livingroom in the middle of my sitting meditation period and Jack was in bed, I heard a sound I thought might be Jack getting up. The next minute he rushed by me (naked) heading for the sliding glass door to the deck. On his way out the door he grabbed a couple of fist-sized chunks of quartz from his scale model ore car that sits next to the wood stove. He began waving his arms and shouting like a wild man. He heaved one stone in the direction of the garbage can and threw the second when he reached the end of the deck. By the time I got out the door I missed the bears. (Jack told me there were two.) Then, out from behind the storage building lumbered a big mama bear and her (I estimate) two-year-old cub. They disappeared down the jeep road to the creek. The experience had an archetypal quality to it--like a stone age "naked ape" chasing a couple of saber-toothed tigers away from his cave.

This year I discovered that there is a big difference in writing a book on what I know (have experienced) about Zen meditation (The Zen Environment was that kind of book) and writing one to explore what I don't know about it. My writing practice--working on ZEN WITHOUT A MASTER, journals and letters

to Zen friends, plus my daily sitting meditation, moving meditation (divided between an extra-slow-motion period of kinhin and bowing harmonized with breathing, and an alternative period of sensory awareness-type movements) some experimental breath work and everyday mindfulness practice, make up an inseparable whole. Each activity nourishes the others like a well-balanced diet.

I'm enjoying each part of this integrated meditative life. As my meditation develops new areas of focus my linear progress on the book slows from a turtle's creep to a snail's slither. The movement seems to expand in all directions rather than in a forward motion. At times I may be working on three chapters --trying to finish one chapter and going back to expand an earlier chapter and stuffing file folders on future chapters with notes. But when I return from my other activities to work on a segment of a chapter I find great satisfaction in teasing out new ways of describing the nebulous insights that arrive during the day: when I'm scrubbing out the toilet, making the beds, or shoveling out still-warm ashes from the wood stove. It's such a relief to realize that I can trust the process and not be bothered by questions about whether I'll live long enough to finish the book.

Jack just returned for lunch. He thinks there may be three steelhead in the pool. Gotta go.

*affectionately*

*Marian + Jack*

*P.S. I was so grateful to David Chadwick for his great book - Crooked Cucumber.*