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The Flint Hills—Place and Thin Places: Creativity and Connection

H.C. PALMER

Wendell Berry wrote that his growth and effort to become a poet had “everything to do with discovering where one is in relation to one’s place (native or chosen), to its natural and human neighborhood, to its mystery and sanctity . . .” I believe this to be true for all of us who practice the art of our work or calling. Without relationship to place, we are not fully creative or connected.

My discovery of place began when my father drove me into the Flint Hills to Camp Wood near Elmdale. For two weeks in 1946, I roamed one section in the deep-rooted, tallgrass prairie that knits together the top layer of a 250-million-year-old limestone deposit. At Camp Wood, I learned to identify and name plants, animals and rock formations. Things like sideoats grama grass, Jerusalem artichoke, shagbark hickory, scarlet tanagers, five-lined skinks, massasaugas, chert and that Permian limestone. I learned I was connected to all of them. I learned I could create by writing or painting or braiding a lanyard or chipping flint rock, carefully to craft a tool or forcefully make fire. I discovered my consciousness and connectivity with the natural world at Camp Wood. It was inevitable the Flint Hills would become my place.

Presence in a thin place is a Celtic notion. It does not necessarily happen in our place, but is, for at least a time, where we are close to something more—where we touch the certainty of Being. I sensed momentary thin places when I was a Battalion Surgeon in Vietnam, then after the war and over the past 45 years at unexpected moments in various surroundings but most of the time, here in the Flint Hills.

A few years ago, Jane Koger invited me to walk through a quarter section of her native grass. It was in a wide creek bottom and until 20 years before had been a soybean field. After harvesting her last crop of beans, she decided to “let it go back”—not work the soil in any fashion—to see what would happen. The first few seasons, weeds like cocklebur and yellow top covered the field. But she was patient and sure enough, native grasses re-established and eventually grew to natural heights. We walked through grass almost two feet over my head—big bluestem eight feet tall, Indian grass, little bluestem and switchgrass up to my shoulders and on slightly elevated mounds, blue and sideoats grama grass above my knees. Smaller, less watered growths of buffalo grass were so lush I felt as if I was stepping on a giant sponge.

I was surrounded by grass as tall as the elephant grass in Vietnam. The wind was bending the long stalks then letting them go, much like the wash from Huey choppers flying in and out of a nearby landing zone. For a moment, I sensed I was back at war. But there were no rotor chops, no sounds from weapons and no men shouting orders or screaming. Without thinking to do so, I had focused on the quiet sound of wind brushing seed heads and leaves together and for a time, I was in a thin place.

No one can coerce or conjure another into a thin place. But every June for the last six years, because of the talents of many “Flint Hillers,” whatever barrier may exist is made more permeable by a celebration of Art and Being called Symphony in the Flint Hills.

How do they do it? It starts with imagination and people taking

charge. They write and draw the dream on pieces of paper. They enlist fellow creators—designers, architects, entrepreneurs, builders, poets, writers, landscape artists, country and classical musicians, cowhands, ranchers, prairie sages, chefs and other talented volunteers. They create an ephemeral city with streets of grass where buildings made of canvas border Main Street: classrooms, performance halls, cafes, art galleries, shops and information booths. They design a symphony hall for a special orchestra in a venue that is perhaps better than any other. Because they are like-minded and work in their natural neighborhood, they affirm the mystery and sanctity of place. Because they are artists, they carve holes into thin places.

Prairie restores, like the sod we trample this year or that 40-acre soybean field in a creek bottom. People create. We make art and do it authentically from our place and, if given the gift, inexplicably from a thin place where we may touch the finger of Being. Symphony in the Flint Hills draws us not only to the possibility, but also to the authenticity of place and thin places. And because art compels us to share, we invite our children, our grandchildren and friends. We pass it on.

H. C. is a poet and writer who first sang from the old hymn, “All Nature Sings and Round Me Rings the Music of the Spheres,” at Camp Wood when he was 10 years old. He still listens for the sounds of music in the Flint Hills. He is a retired Medical Doctor who lives in Lenexa, Kansas, with his wife, Valerie.