

## A Sense of Place

As I moved from task to task, feeding barn-bound livestock on a cold, black December night, my ear caught the deep-throated trilling of a flock of sandhill cranes flying overhead, bound for warmer climes. I quit my chores and allowed for a momentary interruption of business in the name of connecting with the significant biological pilgrimage that was taking place in the skies over Plowshares Farm. Flocks of sandhills make this trip each year, passing over us on their winter journey south and then once again returning in the spring as they make their way back to northern breeding grounds, but the sounds of these particular birds passing in the inky December darkness indicated they were flying at a much lower altitude than usual. I scanned the moonless starry sky, scrutinizing Orion, Taurus, and the Pleiades for dark movement that might indicate the birds' location. As close as they seemed, I could not catch sight of them, but I wondered aloud, "Do they see me?"

That simple question led to deeper musings about whether, in their annual circling of the skies over this insignificant patch of central Kentucky hills and hollows, the cranes gained any sense of the life of this place. My imagination soared with them into the cold night sky. I heard the land speak to them in a passing breeze, telling them tales of life and death and of the woven tapestry of relationships that are lived out here in simple daily existence. My heart added a whispered hint of the connection I feel deep in the fiber of my being as my life intertwines with the boundless fecundity that marks the woods, fields, ponds, and streams of Plowshares Farm, my home for the past thirty years.

As much as I would like to believe the cranes share my sense of connection, it is not possible for them to do so without the ongoing immersion in this place that is a prerequisite for the development of such a vital bond. The fact of the matter is I have never seen sandhill cranes on the ground here. This is not their place. They have staked a claim in lands far from here. In their seasonal journeys, they are not much different from the passengers in the helicopters that sometimes fly over the farm. They see the place from an enviable perspective that reveals its connection to a much larger landscape, but they miss the ground-level intimacy that day-to-day sweat-inducing, heart-throbbing, soul-claiming engagement in this land allows. They are like thistle seed riding windy currents, passing by this place to land in another. I am the expression of a seed long ago planted in this rocky soil, sprouted and firmly rooted. I am fruit of this land, bearing elements in my being from every ancient ancestor whose flesh Earth repossessed upon death to feed the flowers and grasses, the birds, frogs and fishes, the people who eat of the garden's harvest. This is not just the place where I live, it is also the place that has taken up residence in me, coursing through my veins and resting in the marrow of my bones.

My lungs have been filled with vapors from the dissipated dew that once wet the pasture grasses that fuel the production of the milk I drink. My muscles, strengthened with the sacrificial flesh of grass-fed steer and lamb, have shouted with triumph as they worked the hoe down a long row of beets. I have tasted sunshine in a fleshy pink tomato, staving my hunger with its juicy goodness. I have plowed thick fescue sod, turning the heavy grass with a walking plow pulled by a team of willing Belgian horses while I walked in the newly cut furrow, the smell of verdant earth filling my nostrils. My daily interaction with this place has deepened my awareness of the intimate oneness of all living beings:

our undeniable dependence on one another, on Earth that sustains us, and on the Sacred Mystery whose presence saturates it all.

I am the April hillsides dressed in the soft green hues of leafing trees and trimmed with the delicate pink and white lace of redbud and dogwood blossoms. I am the unexpected hooting of the barred owl at noon asking the question, in true Kentucky fashion, "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?" I am the copperhead snake encountered on the sunny hillside or the two-lined salamander darting out from under an algae-coated creek rock. I am the soil of the garden plots: rich here where the cows fed one winter, shallow and stony in that stretch, heavy with clay on this end, crying for a more generous application of compost.

I have felt the biting wind of winter and mourned as ice-laden trees shed branch after branch, dropping them in explosive plunges to the forest floor. Spring has warmed me with a breeze through fragrant fields while the persistent call of a red-shouldered hawk punctuated the vernal sweetness. Summer has always set me to running, gardens calling for the seed, the hoe, and the bent backs of the harvesters in the rows. The coming of autumn's quilt-colored woodlands at the end of the seasonal cycle has invited a welcome melancholy stillness. Each of these experiences has left an indelible mark on my soul and imprinted this land upon my psyche.

I have travelled to Africa where the hillside farms of Rwanda turned my heart toward Kentucky. I have visited villages in Mexico and could not escape the constant reminders of the soil that runs in my veins. With each bloody birth, each bursting of bud into leaf, each Harvest Moon, each squirt of milk into the pail, my life has become one with the life of this land. A twenty-year immersion in the pulse of this place, its cyclical calendar of change and growth, its palette of life in astonishing diversity, its profound expression of our oneness in a complex web of life, has served as a crucible, firing in me a new and ever-growing passion for living in intentional relationship.

Such intentionality calls me to see more clearly my dependence on rock and soil, air and water, sunlight and the darkness of a moonless night. It ties me to all, even the red fox that preys on the chickens, the deer that feast on the garden's bounty, and the tick that partakes of my blood, leaving an itchy red calling card on my skin. It prompts me to reduce those barriers that prevent the cultivation of such connections, to be constantly conscious of my place and my role in this living web of relationships, to celebrate life but to recognize the necessary role that death plays in it all. On that day when death takes my hand, I will lay my body down in the nakedness of my birth and Earth will swallow me. The soil of this place will reclaim those ancient ancestral elements I have borrowed, and my spirit will live on in the orchard grass and mistflowers, in the grazing Jersey cows and in the drumming of the pileated woodpecker, resounding through the hollows like the beating of my heart in time with the pulsing rhythm of life lived well on Plowshares Farm.