GOING TO GROUND

Essays on Aging, Chronic Pain and the Healing Power of Nature

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“The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam.”
—Annie Dillard

Introduction

My thinking and writing about land and the non-human world have been evolving since I was five and really looked at the world for the first time. I was feeding chickens and the field beside me glowed emerald green in the late afternoon sun, and I fell in love with beauty and being needed by chickens. Although I had no language for it, I knew what beauty was.

I have been asking myself the same question, really, since that moment: What does it mean to live somewhere? What does it mean to live somewhere and also have a relationship with the non-human (and human) inhabitants of that place, including the water, the rocks, the wind, the weather?

I learned to read and write at six and instantly decided to become a writer because even then I knew that language was my world. I also spent my growing years farming with my family and living intensely with animals, in the wild places around our farm, and inside, reading, always reading, especially books about animals where the animals were always the heroes and the humans weren't much good.

Now I am seventy-two, still on the same land; I have written two books about land and living in place, and I am still thinking more intensely than ever about where I live. In the time since the last book, I have had two car accidents and the resulting brain injury has made me very ill and somewhat disabled and in chronic pain for the last seven years. In a sense the accidents threw me into another country, another way of being—they threw me into disability and into

age. Aging is a bigger identity crisis than being adolescent, but it is hardly talked about or written about. So, this book is about coming to terms with aging as well as making the long struggle to recover my sense of self, recover my ability to cook, clean, and shop, and more importantly, my ability to read, to write, to think deeply again. Chronic disease, chronic pain changes your sense of identity, changes the way you exist in the world, and yet some things are the same.

I garden, write, teach. I observe the world around me, both the human world and the non-human world. I was part of a very particular movement of people who deliberately tried to go "back to the land" in the late 1970s (well, I had never left), and I watched as that movement disintegrated. Now I am watching as one of my children becomes part of a new "young farmer" movement. But I am old. I try hard to not carp, and no one asks my advice.

I am also, of course, reading about and watching in the news the various scientists who are predicting with deep desperation and deepening pessimism the prospects of a world with increasing warming and disruptive climate change.

This new book is called *Going to Ground* because it is a series of essays about all these things: aging and living with pain; pessimism and hope; working with animals; observing the non-human world; the strange articulation of living somewhere between normalcy and apocalypse; the human inability to perceive the slow change of destruction and the same human easy ability to gobble away at the world without perceiving how much we change it as we do. I am so heartened by the new work and discoveries of the sentience, the intelligence, the communication, the cultures, of the non-human. This knowledge ultimately is what will turn our world back towards the light of care and understanding.

Rewilding

This spring I walked across the bottom field of my farm, crunching my way through the tall canary grass that had formed grey-green mats over the field and the baby fir trees, barely sprung from the wet ground and reaching for the light. Land everywhere records its history and then buries it. Buildings buckle and fall down; pavement cracks with fungi, and then grass and tall strong plants like thistles and burdocks appear, precursors to the forest that will one day grow there if the land is left alone.

I am watching the farm transform. Every day, I walk among ghosts: dead orchards, dead house, parts of machines. Old paths. Old ways. The old names we made as children. I will take them with me into the house of the dead.

I thread my way through towers of bright timothy, tansy, and burdock. The grass is high except for the places where the geese and elk have eaten their fill. But no one eats the tall grey grass going to seed. It should have been cut for hay, but my brother and I are now too old to do such work. My brother doesn't come to the farm anymore. He has turned away from the farm and from me, bitter at how much time and energy the farm and I demanded of him. He and my siblings grew up in a family where, if we got sick, my father said, "Go outside and work it off." I was ill and then my brother's wife as well. It was a hard time and the burden on him was heavy, too heavy.

So now there are no cows to eat the pasture down to its roots. There are no pigs joyfully rooting for mud. There

should be hay piled in the shed. There should be a bright rainbow of chickens happily chasing grasshoppers.

But the tall grass has its own presence, its own multi-layered, multi-coloured, shape-shifting knowledge. Grass grows in order to be eaten, and it rarely dies except in severe droughts. All over the planet, in a process still not clearly understood by science, grass turns light into energy which becomes food for grazing animals. The tall gold-green-orange grass in my fields gulps down light. It mats the ground in the fall and makes shelter for mice and voles and earthworms and snakes. But grass is the precursor to forest and every spring, new green pine and Douglas fir shoots poke their noses through. Left undisturbed, this field in fifty years would be a huge forest.

How to feel about this?

Once the farm was all urgency and hurry; farm jobs don't wait. This sense of hurry-hurry has stayed with me all my life, through everything I've done, but now I don't hurry because I can't. So I watch and wait.

On the farm, we hurried to harvest it all when it was time: myriad fruits and vegetables, towers of food brought in and left to my hurrying mother to transform into food for winter.

The hay was cut according to the sun and the CBC weather reports; the sun had to stay for at least a week or longer so the hay would dry properly. Rain was sometimes a disaster, sometimes a salvation. Rain split and rotted the cherries, ruined the hay and took all the food value out of it. But rain was necessary for spring, for new grass, for the garden, for everything else. If rain didn't come, there was an elaborate system of sprinklers all over that ensured the farm's continuity as a green oasis The sprinklers had to be moved every day, usually by me.

I don't know how to feel about this either. I loved farming. I loved the days when the farm bustled with activity. The back door of the house slammed many times a day with people in and out, working, eating, talking and talking, the radio always on. I loved being part of it, being strong, never tired.

Often, on my last walk at night, I pass the other house, the old house in which we all grew up, empty now. When I die, it will have no one left who believed in its life. The many people who once crowded there are far away or gone altogether, and there's no life there now except in the summer when bats move in and explode out the broken windows at dusk.

So many things did live there once. The old house was built by Pierre Longueval, the original homesteader. He cut down huge cedar trees, milled the lumber, built the house room by room. But it was already old when we moved in, insulated with layers of newspaper and bits of sawdust.

All her married life, my mother wanted a new house. She hated the old gloomy house beside the highway because it was in a hollow beside the road and had no view and was always cold and damp. She longed for a place where she could cook and do dishes and still see the lake and the mountains because the older she got, the more rarely she went outside. She wanted to be able to entertain, although having people for tea or dinner made her nervous and afraid of their judgement. She wanted a new stove and new pots and pans. She wanted to be warm. All my life, my mother was always cold. Winter and summer, our father stoked the stoves all day for her sake.

But even though she didn't like it, when we were growing up, the old house rang with energy, shone with noise and colour—our parents, us, and the animals—cats and kittens, dogs, bats, and mice. The farm was like a model of all farms

through time, with many people in and out the door, serious about working; the man coming in the house at evening from doing chores, the woman's voice calling, the scents of roast beef and stewed chicken. At night, our children's hearts beat contentedly under the covers, the cold outside caught and held by the thin board walls.

There were places all around the house with names and stories, so the house had a map of its own. For us children, every place on the farm was marked by secret names, known only by us.

The farm is only a momentary clear-cut in the long vision of time. It carries the footprints of the present and the past, the men who sweated and killed things to make their place here. It holds the names of my father, his father before him, and Pierre Longueval.

Once the majestic sternwheelers rolled along the lakeshore; then a railroad crawled north, hammered down by hand, each railway spike, each tie, each rail, along the west shore of the lake. The mule track beside Pierre's house became a highway.

But this land also ate my father up, called him to work, stooped his shoulders and filled him with rage. This land would neither help him nor let him go.

And then, finally, my father's great gift to my mother—on top of the work on the farm and the work off the farm—he began building her a new house. My grandfather had died and left them enough money so that my father could buy a backhoe and build septic tanks and drain fields for other people. He began blowing up the basement for the new house when I was young; he drilled the holes with an ancient gas-powered drill, stuffed them with dynamite and stumping powder, and blew rocks all over the place. Then he cut down the trees to build a log house, peeled them and stacked them to dry.