

## Heavy Footfalls (or, Take A Hike)

Go take a hike."

Little did my dad know, back when I was a kid and in his hair, that these loving and teasing words would mean so much to me and that I would follow them so literally.

To spend some time—which is not given over to chores and business—outdoors is to allow the mind a break, to set the soul at ease, and to gain a little perspective on and knowledge about ourselves, our immediate surroundings, and the world around us.

Each day, each season has its own special treasures so that no two walks, even if taken on the same route, at the same hour, are ever the same. One morning the trees are bathed in soft pink light, while the next they shimmer in gold; Monday's concert by the cardinals might be replaced on Tuesday by a bluebird duet; the sun may bake your back today, but tomorrow the wind will slice through you like an icicle through fresh snow. And behind any given rock or at the base of a tree might lie a tender blossom, just waiting to reveal its lovely secret to those who don't hurry blindly by.

Besides beholding the marvels of Nature on which to feast the senses, being outdoors can also help develop an appreciation for our place and size on this planet. For me, walking very early in the morning, in the hush of dark under a velvet heaven pinpricked with stars, is an incredibly humbling experience. Peering into the inkiness, I feel so little under the vast sky, and amongst the silhouetted rolling hills and towering firs, which I know are but a speck in the scheme of this planet and beyond. It is an honor—and there is gentle reassurance—to stand in that place, just as it is when on a mountaintop surveying what seems to be forever. And I realize, in both cases, there is a force or set of forces far greater than I am small.

But should ever I feel trivial or that I can step without consequence, I need simply to hear the crunching of gravel beneath my feet (which, to my dismay, can shatter the silence) to realize that yes, I may well be an intruder in this land that we too often claim as ours. The scattering of birds or the ducking of a coyote as I pass are strong reminders that I not only share, but have an impact upon, the ground on which I stride, and that I am the interloper on this stage.

Each of us should recognize that our every footfall makes an impression upon the Earth and Nature. Walking on delicate moss instead of a rock can

irrevocably bruise it; a careless brush by a laurel or an alpine pine can fracture one of its twigs as easily as snapping a pretzel. Consciousness is required to adopt the "leave no trace" approach to being in the wilderness (or any place outdoors). As tiny as we are, under the endless canopy of sky, we are also Gulliver in each Lilliputian ecosystem. Our actions do matter. We cannot shrug off our responsibility to respect the fragile life around us.

It is this dichotomy of scale, that strikes me when I'm off on that hike or walk—the awareness that at once I am both a mere fleck in the universe and gargantuan in the world. And so the questions are raised: Where do I fit in and just what is "my size" in the scheme of things? Can I summon the valor to act in accordance with that size in a way that will have rightful impact? Can I recognize that just as my deeds and thoughts are not dwarfed in vastness, neither do my treadings yield only heavy-handed damage? These queries do not overshadow my pleasure to be out amongst the plants and critters and earth, they fully enhance it and give pause for thought.

So "go take a hike" or a stroll or merely sit outside . . . (I was going to say "When you have the time," but instead, *make* the time. It is well worth it!) . . . and take a moment to see how *you* feel!