

The Soul of Strawberry: Reconnecting with Nature

By Ernest Morris III

Aldo Leopold, known as the father of ecology, promoted what he called “a land ethic,” which would address the relationship between humans and land. Leopold was a man before his time. Getting people to see land as a living, breathing entity—critical to the wellbeing of the earth and all that lives upon it—was his calling. His thinking, radical at the height of America’s industrial economy, is compatible today with those developing strategies against global warming, as well as with various back-to-land movements such as urban farming.

As a boy, growing up in the City of Memphis and spending summer months on my grandfather’s land in Eads, Tennessee, I experienced the difference between urban and rural America. Paved roads and highways in the city gave way to crunchy gravel or dusty dirt roads in the far reaches of Fayette County. In the city, we had next door neighbors whom we knew well enough but whom we also knew when to give some distance. In the country, on the other hand, there were round-the-way folks, who would have been offended by any attempt at distancing. Of course, also in the country, there was a preponderance of other animal life—pigs, cows, and chickens—that, sooner rather than later, would become a meal. When a city boy spends time in the country, one of the first heart-breaking lessons is not to become too attached to farm animals. In one way or another, one’s parents pass on the concept of the circle of life, and, for many people, unconscious acceptance of the idea that other animals exist for humans eventually turns into purchasing animal products from the grocery store with ne’er a thought of the place the animal-to-be-consumed has in the ecological chain.

America’s National Parks, especially those committed to wildlife conservation, as is Strawberry Plains Audubon Center, help reconnect people of all ages to the land, which, as Leopold knew, is not dead but alive with visible and “invisible” entities that keep the earth healthy. This may be one reason, among others, why “city air” and “country air” smell different.

At Strawberry, the scent of pine and decaying oak leaves on the forest floor mingles with micro-sounds made audible within this protected space. As one enters the animal and human sanctuary the Center provides, city noises such as from an occasional car traveling on Highway 311 are blocked out. My first time at Strawberry, where I looked to spend several months interning, I was enchanted and awed by its scale, which contributes to it feeling like a world apart from the hustle and bustle of life in Memphis. Over the next few weeks at the Center, I would have to learn to transition from the City of Holly Springs, where I am enrolled at Rust College, to the world of Strawberry. For me, going back and forth between the two would be a cause for reflection on my childhood. The regular transition would encourage me to give some thought not just to what I value in the rural, in the natural, and in the city, but what the relationship is between these. Such a question takes time to answer, and I have gone about this challenge by giving into nature or reconnecting, as best I can, with the soul of Strawberry. On paper, I would jot down my thoughts.

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On first sight, I was visually astonished by Strawberry Plains. Touring the grounds, a sense of peace came over me as the breeze from the trees comforted me with a soft pat on the back. I saw mystical birds, small mammals, and even a few, what were they, amphibians? I tried to remember long-ago school lessons on the different classes and species of animals. My desire to remember grew more intense not because of a test to pass but because what my teachers had tried to teach me in the days when I was more interested in the sound of the last school bell of the day now, seemingly for the first time, had reason and meaning.

My thirst was quenched as information guides and details educated me on the beautiful creatures I was seeing. I started to daydream as I walked along the trails. The riches of the land paid great dividends to my imagination. As the trails combated with my gym-shoed feet and the whistles from leaves on the trees provided musical entertainment, I felt my heart, toughened by years of city living, soften. I felt, more gently than the scrape of wind at a city bus stop, a passionate breeze. Any man with a heart can feel passion; even compassion for the lives of those who once lived and created Strawberry as a place where weary souls could come for nature’s healing. There’s an old saying that is “Even though the body dies the soul lives on.” Humans make soul connections through conversation. The soul of Strawberry Plains reaches the soul of

man through the senses. With a gentle tug, she greets you and draws you in with her impressive presentation. As you follow her curves, you are blown away by her pampering and soft and alluring touch. Mesmerized by her beauty, she pulls you deeper into her midst, and before you leave your heart is kissed gently; I'd say that Strawberry Plains has an everlasting effect and an undoubted affection for those stopping by these woods.