

Smoke On the Palm of Creation

- Douglas Campbell

In the hills and hollows of the Appalachians, on frigid winter nights when the sky clears and the stars gleam, when the creek ices over and every breath of wind ceases, a stillness and silence so complete descends on the land that your ears throb with deprivation and strain to catch even a faint swish of wind in the bare trees, the mournful questions of an owl on the ridgetop, or the low rumble of a jet far overhead. On such nights, so frozen and motionless is all the world, that despite knowing yourself to be essentially a rational person, you can find yourself wondering if Mother Nature herself has curled up somewhere warm and fallen fast asleep, or thinking that surely the earth has, for the first time ever, come to a momentary halt on its ceaseless journey through the solar system.

On just such a night I stepped out onto the porch of my little cabin in the West Virginia hills, with the aim of carrying an armload of firewood back inside. I closed the door behind me, shutting off the quiet music from my CD player. Shining down through the leafless trees and clear winter air, the full moon washed and lit the snow cover with flowing silvery light, and the only sound came from the porch floorboards creaking under my feet as I moved.

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Diverted by the special loveliness of the night, I stepped off the porch, followed by my two terriers, and crunched across the snowy yard, drawn by simply wanting to join in the wonder of it all, to be touched by the moon and let the silence amaze my ears.

Out beyond the dark weave of shadow cast by the hickory tree, I stopped and stood looking down the hollow with the moon behind me, my only company my own shadow on the snow and the terriers. With their unerring feel for the state of the cosmos, the dogs too felt the wonder. Instead of engaging in their usual tireless, zigzagging patrols, probing the surrounding terrain for the scent of a foolhardy raccoon or a wandering fox, they came and stayed quietly beside me, content to sit in the soft light and tune their keen ears to the silence.

I don't know how long we stayed there, motionless in the cold, moon-bright stillness, half-pleased and half-disconcerted by the sense that we three creatures were the only twitch of life on the whole nightbound planet. But when I finally turned to go back to the cabin, I was stopped and held by the most startling and riveting sight of that extraordinary night. From the crooked stovepipe that jutted above the roof peak of my cabin, a thick shaft of silver-tinted woodsmoke steamed upward, rising high into the cold, windless air, a billow of coils and curls that shone as they spun and rose, reaching to the moon's broad face and beyond, far into the clear light before vanishing.

When I saw that sight my skin flushed warm and shivery all at once, in a strange and sudden thrill of gladness. After having stood there in the moonwashed silence and starry vastness, after having felt my insignificance out on the cold, still palm of creation, when I saw that woodsmoke rising from my stovepipe I felt a surge of pleasure and gratitude from the knowledge that I had found for myself this little home, this niche in the world. The moon had its sky to soar in, the looming hills their bedrock to hold them, the trees their deep soil to root in,

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but I too had my familiar and welcoming place, a space of shelter and sanity, a refuge from the timed-to-the-minute life so many of us lead, with its ceaseless demands and all too frequent aggravations.

But more than that, in that rising smoke I saw unmistakable evidence that I was a presence in the world, a tiny one admittedly, and like all of us, as transient a presence on the palm of creation as that smoke in the moonlight, rising in its brief, shimmery glory before disappearing forever into a darkness where no eye can follow. But as I watched that smoke it was life, not darkness, that held my thoughts. Images of the past summer returned to me: of the trees, seeming almost to float as they fell to earth through July's heat and glare, and of myself, lopping off the limbs with the double-bit axe, then wrestling with the logs and dragging them to the cabin for the final sawing, splitting and stacking. Bathed in sweat, and driven by faith that my life would continue to unfold over changes and seasons yet to come, I had cut the wood that now burned. I had seen the need and done the work, and now, with the dangerous cold of that beautiful night held at bay outside the walls of my cabin by the fire in my stove, I was reaping my reward, the preservation of the vulnerable core of body heat on which my very life depended. And that knowledge made that flag of smoke an indisputable signal of my own life force at work, almost as if I were watching my heartbeat itself rising toward the winter moon in that visible, silvery thread.

It occurred to me then how rarely it happens in the complexity of modern life that we're offered such direct and simple affirmations of our own unique existence and the everyday courage and vision it requires. The specialization of the global economic machinery has turned most of us into role players, adding our bit to the accomplishment of some larger purpose, while

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almost never seeing the process in its fullness or to its fruition. As a result, we live for the most part far removed from the sources of the things we need and the results of the things we do.

We stayed there, the dogs and I, watching the smoke rise, enjoying the moonlight and silence, until I began to feel the cold creeping up through my boots, into my feet. I resisted breaking the spell of that perfect moment, but the time had come. We needed our warmth, needed our food and sleep. We crunched across the snow again, back toward the cabin and the light in the window.

Back inside, hungry and ready for dinner, I looked at the potatoes waiting on my kitchen counter. Where had they come from? I wondered. Mexico? Idaho? In the other room my computer glowed, waiting for me, for the touch of my finger, the mouse click with which I could choose “Pay My Bill” or “Buy It Now.” The screen would redraw and acknowledge my choice, but my part would end there, the rest of the process playing out unseen and far away, in some fashion I could only vaguely comprehend.

The terriers moved close to the wood stove, seeking its warmth, little puddles melting off their paws. I moved in close too, picked up another chunk of the oak I'd cut, and fed it into the stove, despite the fact that my cabin was already plenty warm. But feeding that stove felt like feeding my soul.

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Author Bio:

Douglas Campbell became intimately acquainted with the natural world and the breadth of its spirit while living for many years in West Virginia, in a rural cabin surrounded by 300 acres of forest. His fiction and poetry have been widely published and have won honors in numerous contests. Most recently, his story "Accidents" won the 2007 Flash Fiction competition held by Many Mountains Moving, a literary magazine based in Denver. Douglas now lives, writes, runs and plays his guitar in southwestern Pennsylvania.