

The Casual Alchemist

*Trail Markers for Spiritual Explorers,
seekers, elders, outliers, caretakers, the
wounded and the healing.*



Thin Places 2012/2013

*a term from Celtic spirituality --indicating places
in nature, and spirit, where the veil between this
world and the Other, is “thin” and offers a
different perspective.*

*Land Demands, Surrealism, The
Hudson River, Dark Sides, Raw Water,
Loose Parts*

FITZGERALD FALLS The Land Demand

Sometimes, the thin places find you. I've been writing about places to go where the feeling is *different*, charged in some way. Well, winter often switches that around. It often violates the most familiar places and stuns us with the feral, amoral nature of, well, Nature. Certainly the hurricanes and the flooding did that last summer, but it continues. This is my back yard and what's left of a 100+ year old maple after a blizzard. "Thin Places" can convey fragility, tragedy and

Thin places change. For several years, I'd been climbing the area around Fitzgerald Falls, off Lakes Rd on the Appalachian Trail at the power lines on the Chester-Greenwood Lake, NY border. After a short walk through some wetlands, the white blazes take you to the 25-foot falls. The local Indians considered the sound of rushing water the "voice of god."

But if you take the blue blazes, you go up to a ridge to a spot my hiking friends described as a old Indian sacred site. It was a circle of stones with an opening to the East. I was told that was the "eye of god." We would walk by this and nod on each hike. One year we went with a larger group of people. There were a few families with children who knew this story and also on this trip was a local native American. The teens had run ahead as we reached the stone circle,. They started shouting and waving.

And when the rest of us got there, we saw what had been an open circle of carefully placed stones, was now a pile of stones with beer cans and charred sticks with ATV and dirt bike tracks all over. We Anglos were incensed, shocked. Our native American friend looked and just said: “Oh, like Spengler says: ‘*The Land Demands*’”.



I have looked and looked and have never found that quote, but the lesson of that day was profound. Those dirt bike./ATV people had found and used that thin place for their own “ceremony” with fire, spirits and loud noisy machines... a real initiation. I was there recently and it’s still in use!

SELIGMANN FARM Surrealist and the Land

Sometimes the thin places are more a way of looking at things, than an actual place. There was a significant pocket of surrealist art-making in Orange County in the 1940s and 50s. It centered in Sugar Loaf at a farm bought by Kurt Seligman, a Swiss artist and member of Andre Breton's group of Surrealists who emerged just after, and in reaction to, the horrors of World War I. Breton described surrealism as "a tiny bridge over the abyss between dream and reality." It was a very hopeful art movement which believed that within every person is the capacity for wonder and play. Its purpose was to model a greater freedom of the human spirit through practiced contact with the unconscious. Frida Kahlo called surrealism 'the magical surprise of finding a lion in the closet when you were sure of finding shirts.' Seligmann and his wife Arlette donated their 55-acres to the "Citizens of Orange County." It's a beautiful almost garden-like setting with trees, water, farm fields and old structures and the graveyard where the Seligmans and the older farmers are buried beneath a huge ash tree. So the intriguing feeling of the place is a combination of its topography, farming history and the energy left there by such visitors as Marcel Duchamp (who shot three bullets into a small barn wall, Alexander Calder who worked on the very same etching press that's still there. *Who Knew!* More <http://surrealismorangecounty.blogspot.com/>

BEING WITH THE HUDSON RIVER

Plum Point

I have friends who are active in the Hudson: Tom swims in it every day, Mike wind surfs, Shari kayaks. I just get drawn to the River usually when I'm near it, crossing a bridge, in a town nearby. It beckons: "Hey, buddy, got a few minutes?" There's the smell, the colors, the temperatures, the wind or breeze and then there's the stuff, the foam, the bottles, pods and driftwood. Oh, the driftwood on its way from Somewhere to Elsewhere! It's dreamy, yet there's that ever so slight edge of dread. Will the River *get* me? It's that same thing that happens in the woods: a slight overlap of generosity and danger; indifferent beauty.

I thought that I was not alone in this. So a few months ago, through the adult ed program at Mount St Mary College in Newburgh, I offered a Sunday morning "course":

Join Rustic builder Daniel Mack on the banks of the Hudson River for a few hours of smart fun. We'll meet at Plum Point off Rt 9W at 10 AM and with a few simple tools and a good eye, build from the driftwood we find and collect there. You might make a bench or a sculpture. You can leave it there or take it home. Dan will teach about the various kinds of tools and techniques he uses to make driftwood creations.

There were about 8 of us. At Plum Point, just south

of Newburgh, there are 2000 feet of sandy riverfront in a 100-acre park, Some people jumped right in, literally. Others kayaked in from somewhere else. There were careful sharp-eyed beachcombers and burly log-loving guys..

We played and worked and played for a few hours and went home. Oh, we did leave something there to remind people of the greatness of the Hudson; of the delight of just being **WITH** the River for a while. It balanced and twirled in the wind. Sort of like the way we felt.



Dark Sides

There is always a dark side to special places. Those very same parks and preserves that awe us can also invoke dread. After Sandy, I visited a few of these places in the area.

Lewis Woodlands is that well-hidden park in the Village of Warwick. In Hurricane Irene, its sweet babbling brook, the Witches Brook, raged into downtown Warwick washing out roads. In Storm Sandy, a dozen of the already aged-out trees finally gave up. Broken and uprooted, they still now look like some steroid version of pick-up sticks. What was once a genteel estate garden with a gentle carriage path, now seems a derelict woodlot.

Warwick's Stanley Deming Park is the village playground with many big old brittle willow trees. During Sandy, one fell and demolished the pedestrian footbridge right near the swing set.

At the Fuller Mt Preserve a few very large and dramatic trees have uprooted in a scale worthy of The Lord of the Rings. A hemlock has blocked the blazed trail requiring some inventive bushwhacking and a massive forked pine has fallen across the creek creating an inviting bridge for the daring.

In neither of these places is this loss tragic. No lives were lost, nor homes destroyed. So a visit to these places allows for something subtle, dark and rare. It can be a physical, poetic experience. Just beyond the practical thoughts of clearing, restoring, replanting and repurposing the downed wood, there hovers the presence of the holy. I use “ holy” in the way theologian Rudolf Otto describes it as a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self". It's the experience of mystery: both terrifying and fascinating at the same time. So those downed trees, reshaped streambeds, crushed bridges and blocked paths are invitations to consider the amoral ferocity of nature and the relentless presence of change, endings and beginnings. You probably can't photograph it or plein air paint it, but you can feel it. It's that feeling of being alive –right here and now--and being grounded.

All this from a walk in the woods? Yes.

Raw Water

Once you start finding them, you can't stop looking for them. I'm talking about natural water springs. Our region is full of them. A spring is a place where water breaks forth and emerges onto the earth's surface. It may end up in a pool, a lake, a marsh, a stream or a steady flow of water from a hillside. If it's slow it's called a "seep".

There are several very public springs in the area. There's the Orange Turnpike Spring on that very same road between Monroe and Harriman near the entrance to Indian Hill. The Blooming Grove Spring is on Rt 208 near Clove Rd and the Sunoco station. The Raynor Spring is in Warwick at the corner of Brady and Cascade Rd. And there's a very beautiful spring and waterfall off Old Mineral Springs Rd on Mineral Springs Rd. between Central Valley and Cornwall.

Using these springs for drinking water is questionable. Local and County officials say the springs, sometimes called "raw water", are not routinely tested and there's really no way to protect them from groundwater runoff, microbes, viruses, or naturally occurring elements like uranium. Nonetheless, there are regulars at these springs who've filled up water jugs their whole lives.

But there's much more to springs than just water for drinking. Maybe because we humans are 90% water when we are born and as adults we are still about 65-70% water. Many traditional societies honored springs by making offerings to them or considering their waters healing to bathe in. In Goshen, there was the famed Cheechunk Spring, a mecca for visitors in need of the healing waters.

On a more practical level, most dairy farms had springs and "spring houses" to cool the milk. Borden Dairy, once in the village of Warwick, used the spring of Spring Street for cooling its milk. That spring is still running today, from the property of St. Anthony's hospital under a few Warwick streets. Street names are often the clues to what beneath

So, thirsty or not, hunting natural springs can bring you in touch with history, mystery and the powers of hidden water. Please comment and share your experiences of spring waters with us. What have you found?

Be Alert!

Sometimes special places just appear or seem to find you. It's that moment when the light is right, the mood, the whatever... and then, what could be seen as ordinary, casual or accidental takes on that "ah-ha" or special meaning. It's a combination of what's out there and what we bring to the moment. We often discover a story or part of a story that interests us because it's a part of our story.

Here are three such places which struck me. What I like about these kind of thin places is that they will not be there for very much longer. The sun will come out, or the rains, the street sweeper, the



janitor. You become aware that you are seeing a fleeting moment. That's a very alive feeling.

This first one is just a record of another presence in my yard; a reminder that I don't really "own" my land as much as I might like to think; that I get visited.

The next is one of those street thin places. There are a lot in New York City. This was in Warwick on a Sunday morning after a Saturday night near some

bars. So what's the Story? Is there a one-gold sandaled graffiti artist planting weeds other places?



The next one is something I wait for and it happens

maybe twice a year. Sometimes it's with snow, sometimes with rain. It's usually early in the day, when there is light, but not much hot sun. There's the moment when temperature, shadow and light conspire to make a moment of beauty and illusion



Actually, this is what haiku is about. There's a direct, momentary observation of nature-now and then some awareness of how it is like or unlike your experience and then the snap of the shutter and somehow the ordinary becomes special. You must have a few of these in your cameras. Share them?

Making Place

“Placemaking” is figuring out ways to build and rebuild spaces so that they enhance human experience. One such recently-charged place is Grasshopper Grove, a ½-acre pre-school Nature Play area at the 175-acre Hudson Highlands Nature Museum in Cornwall, NY

Nature Play is one of the responses to that catchy phrase Richard Louv coined a few years ago: “*Nature deficit disorder*“. It implies that children (and adults too) are missing out on some very basic human nourishment by the increasing time spent indoors, with technology or even outdoors in highly organized leisure and sports activities. Humans are genetically built for life with nature.

Nature Play areas have been the reaction to the colorful, plastic, cushioned directive playgrounds found in most communities and schools. Nature Play leans more towards the unstructured and disordered. Yes, there are things to do at a Nature Play area, but it is also just a nice place to just *BE* and see what happens.

Grasshopper Grove is the first such place in the Mid-Hudson region and even among other Nature Play areas it is special in the great number of special features it offers. They range from the simplicity of a dirt pile and logs to climb and jump on to a rustic gazebo and Adirondack trail hut. But the heart of all this is what’s called “*Loose Parts*”, just an area

that has stuff in it: bark, branches, log ends, pine cones, driftwood...whatever is found around. Loose parts honors a very old and nearly forgotten human skill. All people, children and adults, can figure things out. Just show them the stuff and they'll find something to do with it. Nature Play areas return the experience of real play and appropriate risk to a child's life.

Although Grasshopper Grove is called a pre-school play area, everybody can enjoy being there for a remedial dose of the playful and the natural. There's watching, admiring, exploring and the Nature Museum has another 175-acres to explore right in the shadow of beautiful Schunemunk Mountain. Just go. It's open weekends till 4pm. There's a \$3 fee and a friendly "greeter" there to help people find many ways back to nature.
<http://www.hhnaturemuseum.org/>