

A Child's Wilderness: the Morton Arboretum

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When I was a child, growing up on the prairies of the Midwest, there was a place my friend Bill and I could hike to that was a world of its own. This is a story of that place, from a child's perspective.

Our home was 20 miles west of downtown Chicago in a cooperative housing development on the edge of the cornfields. It was an area where in my first memories -- say as a five or six-year old -- we spent more of the day running through the corn fields playing hide-and-seek than riding bicycles on pavement. At night our arms would itch from the razor cuts of the corn leaves. But running through those high fields of corn with the waving tassels on top must have been quite a bit like the kind of privacy and wilderness that was in the original prairies of tall grasses.

As we grew older and more houses sprouted up, "160 acres here, 160 acres there", the remaining cornfield behind our house became too small to play in. Physically the cornfield was shrinking, but then I must also admit that "the big tree" in an "island" in the cornfield had somehow also grown smaller. This in spite of the fact that the tree must have actually grown taller and broader with age. Perhaps the smallness of the back cornfield was more an issue of us growing older and having a wider view of the place.

We spent many hours following the banks of babbling creeks. It was always a circuitous process, walking from pool of water to pool of water trying to keep our feet from sinking in the mud, but feeling the need to visit each pool of water and look into its depths. Leading into each pool of water there would be a rapid or a small waterfall. We would float sticks through the rapids and find the best route as if the stick were our little boat. And each rapid or fall, even if just 12" high, could keep our attention for an hour.

Sometimes, we would leave the pond and instead of going downriver searching for bigger and better waters, we would go to the head of the pond and follow the little creek that leads in. These trips were always in search of the headwaters, the spring that fed our pond. For these trips we were usually less successful in keeping our feet dry and our pants clean. We would trudge around the swamps at this gentle height of land, trying to determine where the water comes from.

I think only once or twice did we find a veritable hole in the ground, a womb, out of which flowed a stream of water. I remember one: It was perhaps a foot in diameter and the water rose from the ground very gently. There was no roar or babble or bubbling, just a gentle upswelling and bulging of the surface, and then the water gurgled down the gentle slope and the stream began.

Blackbirds inhabited these swamps by the thousands, and at times there would be flocks of these birds flying over at sunset or just before sunset. It would be a stream of blackbirds like a river flowing through the sky. The stream might be 200' or 500' wide, with blackbirds perhaps every 10' or so, all flying in one direction. And the stream would pass overhead for perhaps 15 or 20 minutes, sometimes 30 minutes. Perhaps the most amazing part was that the birds seemed to be having fun and would form swooping motions as if mimicking the small creeks that we had followed during the day, they would swirl down from 150' to 50' and then swoop up again perhaps to 100' and then down to 25'.

On a flat prairie these kinds of motions become memorable for the rest of our lives. There are no mountains or volcanoes to look at, so we focus on what topography and change of life there is.

So as kids we often set off following the water courses of the land, the creeks and gullies and swamps. It was through these explorations that we discovered we could hike the four miles or so (as the crow flies) to an area that was not being planned for future houses and shopping centers, roads and schools. It was in this context, when I was about 10 or 11, that my best friend Bill and I hiked south and west to the Morton Arboretum on one sunny weekend day. By then there had been so much construction that we probably followed roads much of the way, but when we entered the arboretum we undoubtedly followed along the creek near the entrance. I don't much remember the hike to get there. But, what happened that day at the arboretum I will never forget.

As to the arboretum more generally, it was a large rectangle in shape, oriented east-west, cut in half by a north-south highway. The arboretum entrance was along the highway that cut through the site, at a low point where the creek flowed under the highway between the two halves. Most often, we would first enter the arboretum on the east side of the road, in the up-river section of the arboretum. Perhaps we avoided passing by the front gate-house to enter this way.

To children of our age, the overall layout of the arboretum was largely unintelligible. We didn't really have a map of it in our minds. Rather, it was the creek that we used as our reference as we wandered through the spaces. In my memory and with what I know today, I'm sure it was a carefully laid-out and landscaped environment.

There were some meadows areas shaped as kind of bowls surrounded on three sides by denser forests. There were some gently sloping areas that we had visited in the winter to ski down, because in fact there just aren't that many sloped hills to ski on in this part of the country. There was even a carefully designed gazebo or plaza constructed with white plaster or limestone monoliths which had the feel of being a ruins from some prior civilization. We inherently knew that it probably had nothing to do with the native Indians and more likely was a faked-up design relating to European home-lands much like the bank facade with Greek columns and pediments. But nonetheless, it provided a highlight and an identifiable place for two young boys to hike to and then beyond.

Winter was a glorious time in this part of the country and it lasted for a good number of months. The marshes and ponds froze over, which provided outdoor skating rinks that were as much fun as anything a child could do. But there also was skiing on the snow for an equally long period of time. Of course all the Norwegian blood in our family meant that there were plenty of old skis in our garage, but the problem was that there were no mountains. There were barely even hills steep enough to allow a skier to get any significant speed on skis.

The arboretum provided a solution to this problem in two regards. First, there was a north-facing bowl-shaped space that did have a reasonably good drop to it, perhaps a total of 40 feet, which in Illinois almost classifies as a mountain. Our family used to come over in the winter and use it quite often. Equally fun was to use the roads in the arboretum for skijoring. For this we would tie a rope onto the bumper and use the car as a towing vehicle for a skier holding onto the rope. The skier then would hold on tight and be pulled along the side of the road in the fresh snow, much as waterskiers do on lakes. When you pass a meadow on the side of the road the skijorer could pull to the side and dig his ski edges in and scoot out far to the side of the car and then flip direction and come back in again. It was delightfully entertaining, and I hope the families and kids are doing this still today, though I imagine it's been outlawed. We always knew that running into a fence would not be pretty for a skijorer, but it never happened to anyone in our direct knowledge.

The places we liked best were the places where we could be on our own. There were a few wild areas that didn't have good paths and that weren't mowed meadows. We would inherently search these places out and spend most of our time poking around in them.

This worked well until I had an experience that was probably the scariest one of my whole life, even to this day. We had gone to the lower river part of the arboretum and found an old section of heating duct or other rectangular box-shaped piece of sheet metal. It was approximately 6 or 7 feet long, 18" wide and 12" high, and it was like a big box with the top open. We hypothesized that it might float and that we could fit in it and go down the creek. Thus we proceeded to put it into the water and get a few sticks so that we could paddle it or push it along. We found that it worked pretty well and that we were able to maneuver the craft down the creek bit by bit.

It was while we were on the shore stopped for a short rest, probably patting ourselves on the back that we had been so successful in this little adventure, that I noticed two men walking down a path somewhat above and on the other side of the creek from us. We didn't think they could see us and they were intently talking to each other as they were walking along.

As they got closer I could hear them talking about how they planned to kill someone. It was hard to hear exactly what they were saying but there were certain words and phrases that came through the bushes and trees and into my ears and they sent a cold chill through my body.

To this day I can't remember any of the specific words or phrases but I remember being as scared as I've ever been since. I don't think that I thought they were planning to kill us, but I surmised that if they knew we had heard what they were saying that they would undoubtedly want to kill us too, since we would be witnesses to the discussion. They went on their way further down the path and finally disappeared from view and I said to Bill that we had better go right to the police or some other authority to try to prevent this murder.

I'm not sure if Bill heard the words and phrases that I had heard. I don't remember him being quite as sure that he had heard the planning of a murder but he didn't hesitate to run along with me as we traced our way back to the park entrance, this time ducking through shrubs and keeping ourselves hidden the whole way, racing as we went.

I don't remember too many of the details after that, but I think we talked to my parents on the phone and they came over. We talked to the arboretum security force and maybe the local policeman. I think we drove around with them a little bit looking for the two men, who we never found.

I'll never know whether there was an actual murder being planned, or whether the ears of a young boy canoeing down a prairie creek took a few words and imagined them to be more than they were intended. But the point is that this is the kind of thing that happens in arboretums. They are places where the fantastic seems possible. This is the reason we make parks that have some wilderness left in them. It is so that we have a place to go and have an adventure.

As we design our parks and arboreta, it's important that they have their little meadows and ecologically correct plantings, but it is perhaps more important that we leave some wild and chaotic portions with creeks and swamps. These are the places simply for our children to have adventures. The corn fields are all gone today. It would probably be a five mile drive to find a corn field the size that used to be behind our backyard. But the Morton Arboretum is still there. It's all we have left. So let's manage it for its many purposes, but let's not forget that it's also for the children who need a place to experience a private world, a wilderness for

adventure, for experiences that can help us define our lives and stay with us for the rest of our lives, as mine has now been with me for the last 35 years.

What was the death that I heard murmured beside the stream? Whose was it? Was it the death of the stream that was being gobbled up by housing developments and shopping centers? Was it the death of the child inside of me turning into a man?

Perhaps, this experience and story is but a reoccurrence of one from the Greeks and before. Now, 35 years later, I go to a concert with my 10 year old son and listen to George Frederick Handel's *Acis & Galatea* and hear a song written in 1750 about a child growing up in the prairie.

O, the pleasure of the plains!
Happy nymphs and happy swains.
Harmless, merry, free and gay,
Dance and sport the hours away.

In this operetta, the story unfolds of Acis, a shepherd boy who is in love with Galatea, a nymph. However, the boy is killed with a boulder thrown by Polyphemus, the giant who is in love with Galatea. But Galatea with her magic powers turns Acis into an immortal -- a prairie stream -- and thus the song closes:

"Hail! thou gentle murm'ring stream,
Shepherd's pleasure, muses' theme
Through the plains still joy to rove
Murm'ring still thy gentle love."

With this short history of a boy's remembrances of the Morton Arboretum, that stream is brought back to life. I have not visited the arboretum in 30 years. But in me, I know the stream lives on immemorial.