

The Clan of Revellers

In Wendell Berry's poem, "To Know the Dark," he invites readers to discover that "...the night, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings." Over the past year, I have spent many nocturnal hours in the company of beavers, and have become better acquainted with the blossoms, songs, wings, and feet of the night, especially the huge webbed hind feet of the beavers. The beavers now inhabit Lake Dismal, a tiny pond almost a mile into the woods. Since the beavers are nocturnal, I either arrive at dusk and walk home in the dark, or hike down in the dark, sleep by the pond and walk home the next morning. I find that I no longer use darkness (an abundant condition these days) as an excuse to stay indoors.

My new attitude toward darkness brings many rewards. This week, for example, I set out after work to spend the night on the shores of Branch Pond in the Green Mountain National Forest. This exquisite pond is a short hike from the access road, and has a few campsites along its shore. I planned to meet a friend there, and since it was midweek in November, we'd likely have all of that wilderness to ourselves.

After a long drive on a narrow dirt road, I stepped out into a spectacularly moonlit night and saw the approach of my friend's headlights. The nip in the wind might have been unsettling, but I knew we would stay warm carrying the canoe and camping gear down to the pond. I also knew that my friend had packed a wall tent with a woodstove. With such luxuries at hand the breeze was simply invigorating. When it teamed up with water and moonlight to send silver sparkles racing across the pond, it was exhilarating.

An even bigger treat awaited just after dawn. I climbed out of the tent, coals still glowing in the woodstove, to find the ground brightened by tiny pebbles of snow. Some ducks drifted into the sunshine along the shore, and while I tried to identify them with binoculars, some decidedly un-ducklike shapes swam through my view—otters! The three otters fished their way closer, their heads popping up briefly, before diving gracefully again. At last one of them discovered me and reared her head and chest out of the pond. She emitted a watery



huff and dove again. Now all three otters were alerted, and swam by the campsite, bobbing up and down watchfully.

I always hope to see otters when I am near good habitat. They have a contagious joie de vivre. I can't even think about otters without smiling. I was especially pleased to see otters this week, since the Earth's clan of revelers recently lost a star. I had the great pleasure of working and playing with Deb Smith for fifteen years at the Bonnyvale Center. Deb had a genius for joy. I have sometimes wondered if she might be part otter, though whether sea otter or river otter I couldn't say. She spent many hours by the West River, but she loved the ocean best.

The thing that first impressed me when I met Deb was the way she inhabited her body; head to toe her movements, gestures and voice were tools of lucid expression. Deb was not one to simply observe that a particular day was beautiful, she would close her eyes, stretch her arms wide, draw in a deep breath, and then sweep a great

armful of that day to her torso and hum with the pleasure of it. And all kinds of days were beautiful.

My role at BEEC does not involve groups of children. I am paralyzed with terror when faced with a group of young people and information to convey. Not so the other Ms. Smith. I would watch, enthralled, as she made herself little one moment and big the next, then turned into a butterfly or a honeybee, all the while maintaining contact with the entire group and with each child. Her abiding sense of wonder was infectious, and no child every made an unimportant discovery while in the field with Deb. As I look through all the photographs of Deb and children in the BEEC archive I find her fully engaged in each one, head to toe, whether in a moment of playfulness or earnest exploration.

It seems especially unfair that Deb's body betrayed her. I remember the night she told the other BEEC women,

Joan and me, that the cancer had returned. Once we recovered enough to talk, Deb stamped her foot on the ground and told us "I'm right here! Right now!" That was how she intended to proceed with her life. Although that marked the beginning of her last year, a year that brought sickness and pain that I can't begin to imagine, she managed to remain stubbornly in life and fully Deb until the end.

In Deb's memory, I'll try to take a more active role in the Clan of Revellers. I'll need your help to fill the gap she left. I recommend paddling across Branch Pond in the moonlight. All you'll *really* need to do, though, is to head outdoors with a sense of adventure and warm clothes. Don't be put off by darkness; after all, the night, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.