

by
DICK ANDERSON

Seeking *the* Silence

*Wilderness solitude
opens new doorways
into the self*

I WAS 56, happily married to the woman I'd met at my 50th birthday party, father to three wonderful grown children and—in our now-blended family—delighting in my wife Janet's equally wonderful grown daughter. Raised in Midwestern farm country, I was living a comfortable existence in Washington, D.C., long since adapted to the constant tumult and jerky rhythms of big city life.



Yet here I was, standing in my bedroom that evening more than a dozen years ago and announcing to Janet, “I’ve got to go to the wilderness. Alone. It’s been something I’ve been carrying in the back of my mind most of my life, and if I don’t do it now, while I’m still able, I’ll never do it.” Now, if this sounds like something very akin to a midlife crisis, then—looking back on it—I’d have to say, as clichéd as

that sounds, there’s some truth to it.

But there was more to it than run-of-the-mill midlife angst. I felt that my busy life had nearly swallowed this transplanted Iowa boy whole. It was as if, in the words of the old Tennessee Ernie Ford ballad, I owed my soul “to the company store.” Like so many of the people I knew, I’d slipped into some sort of Faustian bargain, in which the seductions and satisfactions of my

regular routine had removed me from feeling I had any connection to the natural order of things. Sure, my life was full, but maybe too full—like a warehouse continually being restocked until it was bursting at the seams.

At the same time, having come to within hailing distance of the age that my father, the longest-lived of the Anderson men, had died, I felt ever more keenly the temptation to keep

any awareness of my own mortality at arm's length by stuffing my life with ever more activity. But I'd begun to suspect that, at least in my case, life could be too full, and perhaps it was time to clean out the clutter and create some personal space.

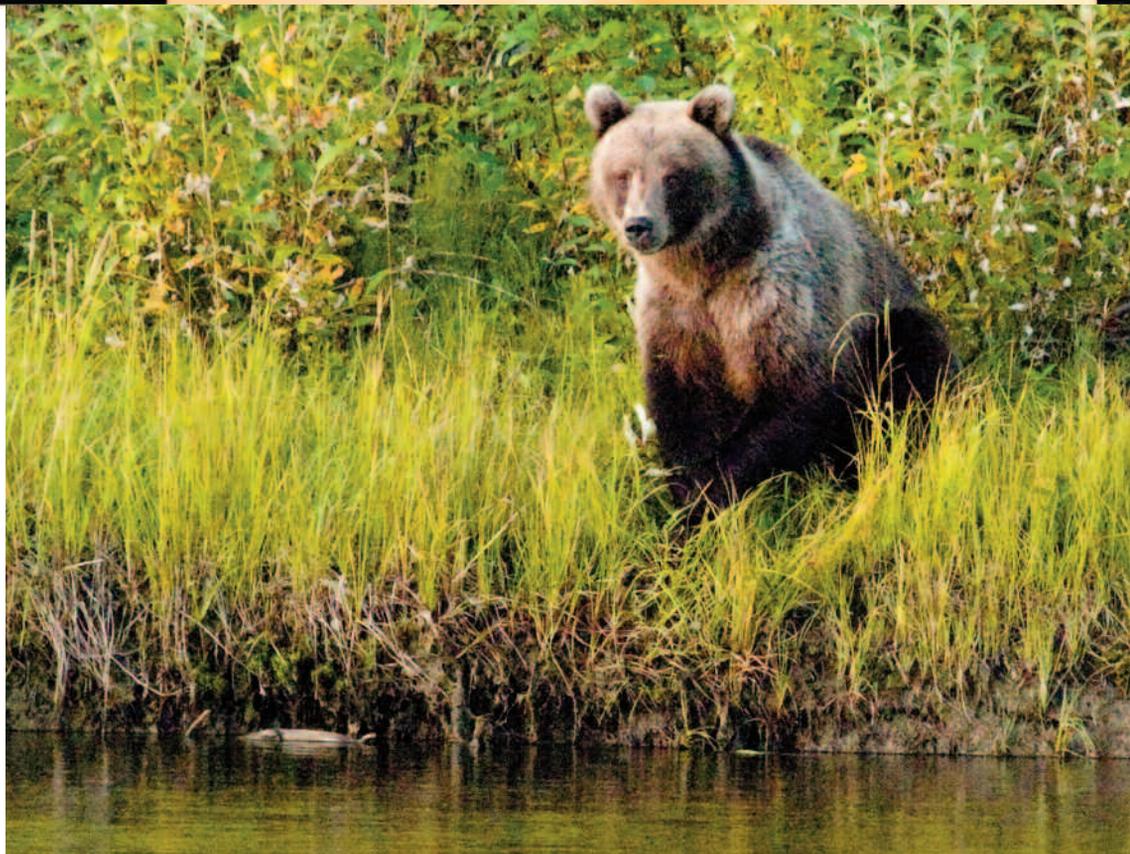
There was also that little voice inside that had never gone away. It was the voice of the 10-year-old son of my fundamentalist minister dad, who'd fantasized over and over about that biblical passage telling the story of Jesus' going into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. How cool would that be?! All by yourself in the wilderness. Just you and your thoughts—and, of course, the lions and bears and wolves.

Somehow at 56, I still sensed that the mountains, lakes, rivers, and valleys might hold the answer to some yearning—some ageless longing that stirred me to my depths. That yearning had never really left me. It had been there all these years—like an unnoticed passenger in the back seat of my mind.

So a dozen years ago, I began making an annual two- to three-week pilgrimage into the wilderness, leaving my city life completely behind to strike out for the unknown, to reacquaint myself with the rivers, mountains, and lands that we share with fellow creatures, and—in this vast expanse of silence—to do something I don't normally do in my busy life: just stop and listen.

Discovering My Old/New Self

In August of 1998, I set out on my first extended-wilderness trip to Minnesota's Boundary Waters. Despite my regimen of distance bike riding and occasional visits to the gym, I soon learned that I wasn't quite ready for the rigors of the



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journey. It took only two portages to realize the physical price I'd paid for spending decades of my work life staring into a computer screen. Hauling two 50-pound packs and a 65-pound canoe—plus paddles and miscellaneous gear—over trails sometimes as long as half a mile—was a formidable undertaking for a glorified desk jockey. I had to make three separate round-trips, trekking over root-stubbed, rock-strewn trails, which were frequently overgrown with low-hanging branches—first taking one pack plus the paddles, then the other pack, and finally the canoe.

However, as I dragged myself over these portage paths, I rediscovered just how dogged I could be—which is something I'd first learned as a 17-year-old gandy dancer, earning my college tuition by swinging a 16-pound hammer and a pickax, digging out creosote-soaked railroad ties for the C B & Q Railroad in those sweltering Iowa summers. Our crew had a saying back then: "Take it one tie at a time." In other words, keep your head down, keep your ass up, and just keep slogging. Now, as a much older man, this doggedness really came in handy. Although exhausted after my first portage, I felt pleased with my accomplishment. It was as if my younger self had given my older self the gift of persistence.

At the end of each portage—there may have been as many as three or four that day—even though I lay splayed out on the ground, gasping for breath and sweating, I couldn't keep a smile off my face. I loved feeling surrounded by a silence so vast that the noise of my city life was already hard to recall, a silence tailor-made for getting beyond the chatter of my thoughts—or, perhaps, getting to a place where there was no thought at all. Despite sore feet, mosquitoes, and blisters, my spirit was definitely on the mend.

In the days that followed, the rhythm of paddling hour after hour often felt like a kind of meditation unlike any I'd experienced in the quiet of my bedroom, or even in a community of like-

minded practitioners. Paddling and drifting into an emptiness of time and space, I found myself trying to make as little noise as possible, just gliding along like the hawks that swirled above me, riding the thermals.

In the years to come, I journeyed farther and farther into the hinterlands, seeking even more isolation in the wilds of Quetico, the lakes of northern Quebec, and the isolated waters of British Columbia. During all this time, Janet never questioned my extended absences. Though she missed me and was concerned for my safety—especially since I traveled in areas where there was no mobile or landline service available—she nonetheless respected my wish for this kind of solitude.

Indeed, solitude was very important to me during those first few years, even though, at times, it could feel daunting. I still remember staring at the receding caboose of a train that had dropped me at the edge of a lake in the Canadian wilds, surrounded by my gear. It would be 10 days before a bush pilot would meet me at our agreed-upon location (long before GPS was commonplace), nearly 100 miles distant. I summoned my fortitude, loaded my gear into the canoe, and set off. I was told that ax blazes on the trees would mark my portage trails. What I wasn't told was that those blazes were many years old and had weathered nearly to the color of the surrounding tree bark. It was a trip in which I learned to heighten my watchfulness and trust my compass readings.

But if the solitude presented challenges, it also was the setting for experiences that the city could never duplicate: the wolf loping along the shoreline that stopped and gazed at me curiously for fully a minute before continuing on his way; the beavers that frequently frolicked alongside my canoe; the otters who popped their heads above water quizzically and comically (looking for all the world like nature's version of Whack-A-Mole); and the bald eagles that would precede me down-

river, wait for me to catch up, and then lead the way again.

As much as I missed Janet and would like to have called her to describe these events as they happened, I enjoyed relying on my own skill and resourcefulness, and chose to remain incommunicado.

Then came September 2001.

A World Turned Upside Down

"Are you Dick Anderson?"

This greeting by a Canadian Mountie came as an unexpected jolt. It was September 14, 2001, and I'd just emerged from canoeing a series of remote lakes in British Columbia and was unloading my gear for the last steep, uphill portage to where I'd parked my truck some 10 days before. The fact that this policewoman knew my name wasn't surprising, since all wilderness travelers were required to register with the park service, but it was troubling nevertheless. Had something happened to my family during my extended absence?

"I have some bad news. You might want to sit down," she advised with little fanfare. Then she continued. "Your country is at war, but we want you to know that Canada stands beside you!"

I was stunned. At war?! But I'd barely been gone for two weeks! She then proceeded to tell me that the Twin Towers in New York City, from whose rooftop I'd recently observed all the spectacular landmarks of Manhattan below, had been destroyed in a terrorist attack three days before, while I'd been obliviously canoeing the wilds.

Fortunately, she carried a satellite phone, which she offered to me, so I could call Janet. Unable to reach her, I called a friend who reassured me that Janet was fine (as fine as one could be in the aftermath of those attacks), and agreed to pass along a message that I'd call again as soon as possible.

Of course, 9/11 proved to be a watershed event for the entire world, and its impact on my trips to the wild was imme-

diate. While I'd been making my first foray into grizzly country, Janet had been part of a mass exodus from downtown Washington, D.C., while trying to sort out rumor from fact about the harrowing attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Though intending to go home, Janet decided to hang out in our Takoma Park neighborhood, seeking company, familiarity, and comfort. Friends had invited her over, knowing this was no time for her to be alone.

Clearly, my arrangement with Janet about being incommunicado on my expeditions was a thing of the past—my being unavailable at a time of such great uncertainty and distress couldn't bear repeating. My need to be present as a husband trumped any fantasy I might still entertain of being a solitary adventurer. We agreed that on all future trips, I'd carry a satellite phone, and we discussed arrangements for regular contact.

But that shift also contained the seeds of new possibilities for bridging my experience of solitude with my connection back home. One glorious September morning the next year, canoeing on Lake Beverly, a 20-mile expanse of water in Alaska's Wood-Tikchik wilderness, as I listened to an enthusiastic loon serenading its mate, I decided on impulse to share this lively cacophony with Janet. As it turned out, she was driving in her new car equipped to broadcast mobile-phone conversations through the speaker system. She laughed delightedly while the sounds of loons calling back and forth to each other filled her car as she drove down Massachusetts Avenue. Despite a separation of thousands of miles, we marveled at how the miracle of modern technology had created a long-distance moment of marital connection.

The Aging Kid

The year 2004 brought an abrupt, if temporary, halt to my expeditions. In the spring of that year, I received a diagnosis of late-stage prostate cancer. This

news wasn't easy to accept. I remember asking the doctor, much to Janet's consternation, if there was any chance I could postpone treatment until after my annual fall pilgrimage to the wilds. With remarkable forbearance, he informed me in no uncertain terms that this wasn't an option. And so, ending my dance of denial, I traded my sojourn in the wilderness for a radical prostatectomy.

I've been cancer-free since that time, and at my annual PSA check-up, I thank my doctor that his skill has helped make it possible for me to enjoy the adventure of life for yet another year. But make no mistake—the cancer is, for me, a vivid reminder of the vicissitudes of age. Each year, I return to the wilds keenly aware that there's no guarantee that I'll enjoy this privilege another season.

Close Encounter of the First Kind

Each year's trip is an adventure into the unknown. But, of course, the problem with the unknown is that, in addition to the prospect of excitement and renewal, it can contain dangers that you don't bargain for.

One bright Alaskan summer evening, I was about to prepare dinner when I saw them. About 50 yards upriver, two grizzlies—one a "blondie" with dark-brown legs and the other a chocolate silvertip—ambled toward me, as if they were pals out for a stroll on the riverbank in the late afternoon arctic sun. "Oh, my god!" I thought. Though I'd always realized that I could meet up with a grizzly out here in the middle of nowhere, somehow I'd never consid-



ered confronting two at once.

A few days before, a bush pilot had dropped me off at Walker Lake, an emerald jewel set in the tundra about a 100 miles or so north of the arctic circle. After negotiating the rapids of Kobuk Canyon, I proceeded downriver some 200 miles to the ancient Eskimo hunting ground of Onion Portage. My goal was to witness the caribou as they made their way across the wide shallows of the Kobuk on their yearly migration to their winter feeding grounds. During this entire journey, I'd spotted only three of the big bears.

In fact, in all my years of paddling and trekking the wilds of bear country, I could count on one hand all the grizzlies I've seen. Why are there so few? My best guess is that when you're moving through truly remote territory, where the animals aren't nearly so used to seeing a human presence, they'll respect and avoid you in much the same way you should respect and avoid them.

So you might understand why I was so surprised to encounter these two grizzlies traveling together. Now, I admit, it crossed my mind to hightail it out of



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there, especially since in all my years of solo canoeing in the wild, I'd never carried a weapon. You can feel kind of naked standing there with nothing in your hand but a camera! But I knew better. I wasn't about to run for my canoe. No way. I'd just look like prey to them. By the time I reached the canoe, they'd have closed those 50 yards in a heartbeat.

So the question was, as they sauntered closer and closer, when would they spot me? And then what? One thing was certain—it wouldn't take long to find out. Nothing here on the edge of the arctic tundra was going to obstruct their view of sand and rock and low bushes, a small divide of water, and a conspicuous man standing by his tripod.

At this point, the bears stopped, heads up, ears alert, and sniffed the air. Finally, they looked my way. Grizzlies have really poor eyesight, but it was obvious they could see me now—hunched behind my tripod, quietly trying to take a few photos of their approach.

I put my camera down and waited to see what would happen next. To my surprise, each bear made a separate decision. The "blondie" turned around and ambled back into the woods. That was the good news. However, the second bear continued in my direction until all that lay between us was a small, shallow stretch of water about 10 yards wide, and then another 10 yards of open ground. He started across the stream toward me. Still I watched, keeping my breathing as quiet as I could, willing myself to be patient and calm—all the while never breaking eye contact with my advancing companion.

When he got about halfway across the stream, he climbed up on a small boul-

der and perched there on all fours, looking me over more carefully. He sniffed the rock and then he looked at me. Then he sniffed the rock again, and looked at me. I thought, "That's the rock I was sitting on just this afternoon when I was taking a bath. With my luck, it's his favorite fishing rock." We must have stood there for 10 or 20 seconds (which, in bear-staring time, is approximately a lifetime), never breaking eye contact. Then—finally—I had an idea. I remembered hearing that, sometimes, if you make yourself tall and large, you can discourage a bear from further investigation. Now, how to make myself tall and large?

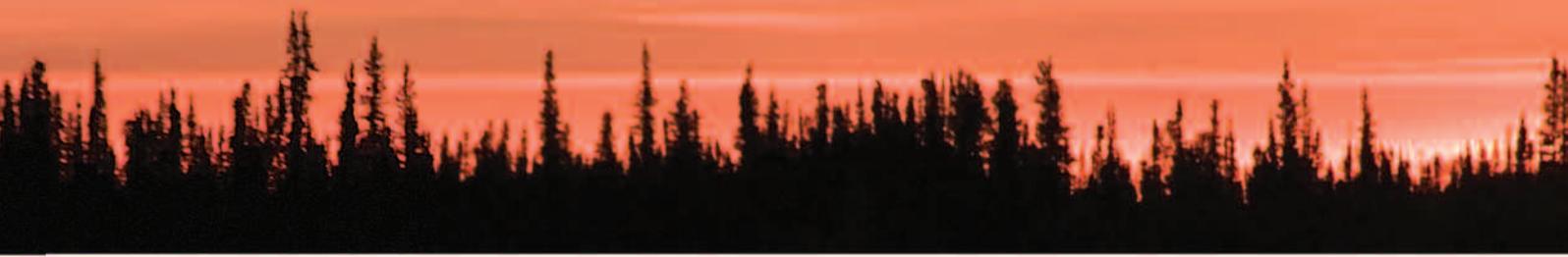
Slowly—never taking my eyes off my visitor—I reached over and grabbed my canoe paddles. Gripping the shafts with both hands, blades flailed out on either side, I slowly, slowly, trying not to spook my visitor, raised them as high as I could above my head, extending myself to my full six feet, two-and-a-half inches. "Maybe his eyesight is bad enough that he'll think I'm a moose," I told myself.

We stood there, thus linked, for perhaps 15 more seconds. Clearly, he was gauging whether his curiosity was worth the risk of a closer encounter. Finally, he pivoted around on the rock, displaying his hindquarters. It wasn't lost on me that he felt comfortable enough to turn his back on what might have at first seemed to him a potential threat. He casually recrossed the stream, slowly ambling into the woods on the other side. I let out a big sigh of relief, collecting my thoughts, canoe paddles now lowered.

I considered what had just happened. It was a striking reminder that my decision to venture into these wild territo-



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ries without a weapon and with only my skills to rely on wasn't to be taken lightly. True, this particular encounter had had a happy result, and it confirmed that I was willing to accept the consequences of my decisions. But my wife and kids and friends also had a stake in the outcome of those decisions. Besides, I wasn't a kid seeking new adventures anymore. When I began these trips, part of the appeal was testing my outer limits. And while I still enjoyed these challenges, I was now standing at the boundary of my seventh decade—and my focus had shifted to solitude, beauty, and arriving home safely.

Janet wasn't overjoyed when she heard of this encounter. And as much as my friends may have enjoyed listening to this story, she'd have none of it. Clearly, I'd reached another touchstone moment, and never again would I place myself in a situation fraught with such potential danger.

Later, in my travels down the Kobuk, I came across three Inupiat hunters, who invited me to join them for coffee. They'd just dressed a fresh caribou kill, its bloody scalped antlers lying on the sand to be picked clean in a day or two by the ravens—the river running red from the slaughter. Wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the name of their village, Noorvik—about 60 miles downriver—they were harvesting caribou for the coming winter.

We talked about the behavior of the grizzlies that I'd encountered. I described how the bears had displayed such curiosity, choosing to walk away once they'd satisfied themselves that no threat was at hand. This same striking behavior was later exhibited by a wolf as I journeyed along the Kobuk, and even more so by the caribou at Onion Portage. Fascinated with this information, one of the young men remarked, "We're hunters. Animals would never allow us to come that close. The instant they smell us or see us, they run."

In a typical gesture of Eskimo hospitality, they gave me a supply of dried whitefish, and we waved good-bye,

returning to our separate lives. By now it'd been three weeks since I'd arrived, the longest stretch of time I'd ever been "out there." And though I talked with Janet frequently on the satellite phone, I missed her and was ready to return to family and friends.

You Can Go Home Again

Coming back after a stay in the wilderness can be a difficult readjustment. I'd met up with my outfitter the night before, and he'd whisked me—his 75-horsepower Evinrude at full throttle—back to the bunkhouse, where I immediately fell into my bunk, physically and emotionally drained.

When I woke up the next morning, everything felt like sandpaper against my psyche. Not everyone was shouting, but it sure seemed like it. As I sat eating breakfast in the glare of the dining-room lights with country music blaring from the radio, I was unprepared to be so suddenly reimmersed in the cacophony of contemporary life. Looking for relief, I strolled down to the lakeside, seeking quiet. No luck. The bustle of the day had already begun, and outfitters revved up their motors as a group of fishermen clamored into the boats, coolers in tow, laughing and champing at the bit to get going early and catch the big ones.

I'd never considered the inside of a jetliner to be a place of sanctuary, but as we droned our way back to Baltimore-Washington International, I was glad for the respite. Breathing deeply, I closed my eyes and tried to recapture the calm of the wilderness. Disembarking and walking the long corridor back to the terminal, I spotted Janet peering through the crowd of passengers to find me. I waved both hands, finding the smile on my face reflected in hers. As I popped out of the corridor, we hurried to each other's arms and shared a long embrace.

"I suppose you're tired and would like to go straight home," Janet said. "No," I replied, "Let's celebrate!" and

we headed for one of our favorite restaurants, barely aware of the flow of rush-hour traffic that surrounded us. Once there, we clinked wine glasses. "Welcome home!" said Janet simply. "It's good to be back," I smiled—and I meant it.

New Horizons

As summer approaches, I'm beginning to pull out maps, gather information on the Internet, and turn my attention to where I'll go this year. By now, many of my friends know me as the "Alaska guy." (I've been there more than a half-dozen times thus far.) I'm almost afraid I'll disappoint them if I don't return there.

I've been easier on myself the last couple of years, just driving through the Yukon Territory one summer and staying in a wilderness cabin in Alaska's Tongass Rainforest, but this year, I'm ready to get back into my canoe. Sitting in a cabin isn't for me—I need to keep moving. And as I see 70 on the near horizon, I feel it's time for a change of venue. Maybe Hudson's Bay. Maybe Patagonia! A friend suggested New Zealand—but Janet would kill me if I went there alone.

Somehow, farther and more remote doesn't interest me so much anymore. I know what I can do (and it's more than I ever dreamed when I started these trips), and I know what's beyond my capacity, and I've learned to respect both. But wherever I decide to go, near or far, one thing is sure: it'll be wild, it'll be remote, and it won't be at all like the city. ■

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