

North Country Notebook

George Vukelich



The painful of minnows and I were heading out of the house the other morning, bound for our appointment with the Buddha at The-Bottom-Of-The Lake, when I turned on the radio for a weather report.

That blew the morning fishing altogether.

Not that the weather report was bad. It was good.

The trouble was that the program following was even better, and I was as solidly hooked as any walleye attracted to Dave Johnson's tip-ups.

The program was Margaret Andreassen's "Dialog" on WHA, with co-hostess Lynn Entine. Their special guests were naturalist Marion Moran and UW-Extension specialist Jim Peterson.

I put the pail on the floor and the coffee pot on high. It's as Steady Eddy keeps proclaiming on the Catfish Flats: *Some days you just know it's going to be good before the anchor hits the bottom.*

Marion Moran has to be the best nature walker since Henry David Thoreau. Her "Walks on the Wild Side" classes, offered through UW-Extension, take place all over the state, in all seasons, rain or shine, summer or snow. I've been with her on some of them, seeing the redtailed hawks; the Indian pipes; the plump deer, silent as shadows, only a stone's throw from Aldo Leopold's shack.

I remember the night walk in Cherokee Marsh when the class sat still as snow and, in the pitch darkness, heard Marion speaking the words of Chief Seattle about the foolishness of the white men. A walk with Marion Moran is more than a walk. It is a spiritual pilgrimage.

That's what Thoreau was talking about when he wrote "Walking" way back in 1862, probably the most widely quoted work on walking and the most eloquent summary of its pleasures and purposes ever—well, at least until Colin Fletcher came along in his Pivettas and started tramping through places like the Grand Canyon and the High Sierra.

Walkers in the days of Thoreau often used the word "sauntering" to describe their walks, and Thoreau believed that the word was derived from the French "*a la saint terre*," or, "to the Holy Land." True walkers, Henry David believed, were people who sought something *holy* in their walks.

The radio program was about outdoor activities for parents and children. It ran an hour, and people called in from all over the state.

You have to start the kids out at an early age, everybody agreed. The younger, the better.

"I have a grandson," Marion said, "two years old. I have him out in the winter snow, standing under the trees, looking up at the sky, catching a snowflake."

"I've been taking youngsters out," Jim said, "and they're developing a skull collection. They learn how to get the skull clean—you start a little colony of carpet beetles, carrion beetles, and then put the skull in with them. They'll clean up a squirrel's skull in six weeks or so."

Later, when a listener called in to suggest boiling the flesh off in water, Jim said that was good, except the cartilage got weakened and eventually disintegrated. The beetles seemed "more natural," and besides, he was doing it this way because he was learning about it right along with the boys.

They agreed that learning right along with the kids was perfectly acceptable, perfectly natural, but a lot of parents, including himself, like to stay "one page ahead." He chuckled when he said that.

"It's not so much what you *know*," Marion said, quoting Rachel Carson, "but how you *feel*."

She said the truth of that really came through on the night walks.

"We take kids out in the night," she said, "so they can *experience* the night. One of the things they learn is: You don't need eyes—another part of you comes into play."

The young, Sigurd Olson wrote in *Open Horizons*, "have a special faculty of listening and understanding and are conscious of the unseen. During my early years I instinctively sought out places where the feelings were strong."

One such place was a great pine near the shore of a lake, and young Sig curled up there on a bed of pine needles between two roots.

"I was part of the pine," he remembers, "and the pine part of me, for I could feel it move in the wind."

We're conditioned to use our eyes, Marion said, and we're conditioned to use words, to give everything a *name*.

She said that over the years she found that many students wrote down the plant names diligently, but really had a hard time recalling the color, the smell, the texture. So she devised a sneaky method of teaching.

"Close encounter with a plant," she said. "I have them smell it. Touch it. Experience it. The plant is not just a word then."

Names, Jim agreed, are secondary to the experience. *Awareness is important.*

"If you don't know the name of a plant," Sig Olson advised us all, "give it a name of your own."

"You don't normally meet anybody on the Catfish Flats," says Steady, "who says they're juggin' for *Siluriformes*."

Jim and Marion talked about catching snowflakes on glass and making casts of animal tracks, and Marion recommended a half-dozen nature books, including *Voices Of The Earth and Sky* and *Warriors Of The Rainbow* by Vinson Brown, "because the viewpoint of Native Americans is where it all began."

An hour was too short. They could have a long run as a team.

WHA hasn't had a better one since Friendly & Jerome.