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Reading Article G2

Article #6: Excerpt from On Willow Creek

by Rick Bass

It's hard in this day and age to convince people of just how tiny and short-lived we are, and how that makes the wild more, not less, important. All of the hill country's creatures had helped me in this regard. It was along Willow Creek where as a child of nine or ten I had gone down with a flashlight to get a bucket of water. It was December, Christmas Eve, and bitterly cold. In the creek's eddies there was half an inch of ice over the shallow pools. I had never before seen ice in the wild.


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them? 

The blaze of my flashlight stunned them into a hanging kind of paralysis; they hung as suspended as mobiles, unblinking.

I tapped on the ice and they stirred a little, but still I could not get their full attention. They were listening to something else—to the gurgle of the creek, to the tilt of the planet, or the pull of the moon. I tapped on the ice again. Up at the cabin, someone called my name. I was getting cold, and had to go back. Perhaps I left the first bit of my civility—my first grateful relinquishing of it—there under that strange ice, for the little green fish to carry downstream and return to its proper place, to the muck and moss beneath an old submerged log. I ran up to the cabin with the bucket of cold water, as fresh and alive as we can ever hope to be, having been graced with the sight and idea of something new, something wild, something

just beyond my reach.

I remember one winter night, camped down at the deer pasture, when a rimy ice fog had moved in, blanketing the hill country. I was just a teenager. I had stepped outside for a moment for the fresh cold air; everyone else was still in the cabin, playing dominoes. (Granddaddy smoked like a chimney.) I couldn't see a thing in all that cold fog. There was just the sound of the creek running past camp; as it always has, as I hope it always will.

Then I heard the sound of a goose honking—approaching from the north. There is no sound more beautiful, especially at night, and I stood there and listened. Another goose joined in—that wild, magnificent honking—and then another.

It seemed, standing there in the dark, with the cabin's light behind me (the *snap! snap!*

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my father came out to see what was going on.

"They must be lost," he said. "This fog must be all over the hill country. Our light may be the only one they can see for miles," he said. "They're probably looking for a place to land, to rest for the night, but can't find their way down through the fog."

The geese were still honking and flying in circles, not a hundred feet over our heads. I'm sure they could hear the gurgle of the creek below. I stared up into the fog, expecting to see the first brave goose come slipping down through that fog, wings set in a glide of faith for the water it knew was just below. *They were so close to it.*

But they did not come. They circled our camp all night, keeping us awake; trying, it seemed, to pray that fog away with their honking, their sweet music; and in the morning, both the fog and the geese were gone, and it seemed that some part of me was gone with them, some

tame or civilized part, and they had left behind a boy, a young man, who was now thoroughly wild, and who thoroughly loved wild things. And I often still have the dream I had that night, that I was up with the geese, up in the cold night, peering down at the fuzzy glow of the cabin lights in the fog, that dim beacon of hope and mystery, safety and longing.

The geese flew away with the last of my civility that night, but I realize now it was a theft that had begun much earlier in life. That's one of the greatest blessings of the hill country, and all wildness: it is a salve, a twentieth-century poultice to take away the crippling fever of too-much civility, too-much numbness.

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