

KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE

By
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“You’re not having fun?” I whisper. Sad exasperation fills my ten-year-old daughter’s eyes.

“Mom,” Ellie hisses, “you’re all talking too much. We’re never going to see any animals.”

I guiltily slide my notepad and pen into my jeans pocket. Beside me is our guide. In answer to my questions, she has been explaining in detail the difference between slash and longleaf pines. I look around. The lead guide and two guides-in-training--all women--saunter several yards behind. Their voices seem abnormally loud in the quiet wood. Trooping directly behind us is a third trainee. She appears the perfect outdoors woman, from her khaki fatigues tucked into brown hiking boots, to her broad-brimmed safari hat, its leather ties hanging loosely under her chin. She is talking the loudest--a friendly, steady stream of commentary on the forest’s vegetation interspersed with praise for the splendors of nature and hiking. Occasionally she interrupts herself to enumerate the benefits of driving an SUV or to moan about her cranky refrigerator. Her companion, an elderly man, yet another apprentice, nods occasionally but never speaks.

We are taking a two-hour walk, guided by trained volunteers, through Brooker Creek Preserve in Central Florida. On this Saturday morning, Ellie and I are the only “members of the public.” I came to gather facts on Florida habitats for the novel I am writing. Ellie came to commune with nature. Instead, she finds herself on a research and training mission.

I glance at Ellie and see in her chocolate eyes the promise of tears. A mix of emotions rises in me. I want to hear more from our guide. My imagined masterpiece needs substance. I want Ellie to enjoy the hike. (“A *good* mother would put her child first,” admonishes a familiar, critical voice within me.)

I scan the forest as I take Ellie’s slender hand. The scaly, golden brown pine trunks shoot up like pillars some seventy-five feet before needle-covered branches jut out to form airy green

crowns. A russet carpet of dry pine needles covers the ground, speckled by patches of grass in those places where enough sunlight filters through. Here and there the forest floor is adorned with yellow tickseed--resembling miniature black-eyed Susans--and feathery dog fennel. Wax myrtle and yaupon holly, its berries just turning red, line the trail. The woods are beautiful, yet oddly silent, save for our voices and their echoes. Nothing shows itself--not a bird, not even a squirrel. The forest seems sterile. The unnatural stillness confirms Ellie's fears: For her, this hike is irredeemable. We are traipsing through nature rather than walking in it.

"I wish I grew up like you." Ellie jerks her hand from mine. "You got to roam through the woods by yourself--or with Chance. Bet he didn't talk all the time."

She's right on both counts. I grew up in an isolated community on the Potomac River at the edge of a 2,300-acre wildlife refuge in Northern Virginia. My friends and I ran free, our parents never worrying about kidnapers, child molesters or serial killers with penchants for teenage girls. I spent hours in the cool woods. I'd bridle my horse, Chance, swing up Indian style onto his high, bare back and set out on a silent meander through the dark forest. My mind would wander to such lofty questions as whether God really exists (and if He does, surely He would live in this wood, rather than the cold, stone church we attended Sunday mornings) to the more practical and pressing issue of why boys always called my friend Liz, but never me.

Yet the forest always reclaimed my attention. Chance and I might round the bend of a narrow deer trail and step into a sea of white myrtle, its tiny flowers like snow drops on its hunter green leaves, or I might spy a patch of fragile bluebells and imagine them homes to the wood fairies. I would touch the rein and Chance would stop and stand patiently as I enjoyed the buds glimmering in the individual points of sun that penetrated the dense canopy of oaks and maples.

On one afternoon ramble, Chance stopped with a jerk, swung his head high with ears pricked forward, and stood frozen at attention. His heart pounded beneath me. I waited, unsure, half

fearful, half wondering. The brush just ahead and to the right of the trail trembled, then out stepped a full-grown doe, not more than two feet from us. She stopped in the middle of the trail, raised her head in our direction--her long, velvety ears pointed skyward--and looked me in the eye. All movement, all breath stopped as we examined each other with placid curiosity. In that timeless moment, I felt one with Chance and the deer and the wood and the life force that moved through us all. Seconds seemed to stretch to eternity, then the doe lowered her head to sniff the trail. She gave us a desultory parting glance, then with a light step disappeared into the brush as suddenly and silently as she had appeared. Chance stood alert a moment longer, then lowered his head and resumed his amble down the trail.

My daughter seeks this same unity on today's early morning walk--to be one with nature, rather than an invader. Ellie learned the difference from Ralph, the father of her best friend, Alexis. She'd camped with Alexis and her parents at various state parks. On those trips, Ralph taught her to walk in nature with quiet concentration and hushed admiration. With Ralph, she saw white-tailed deer at close range and traced their tracks. She watched a flock of wild turkeys forage for food not ten yards from her. She heard the chilling howls of coyotes. She learned to differentiate between raccoon and opossum prints. She stood close to the large, hairy, black-and-orange golden-Silk spider and, rather than squealing in fear, as is Ellie's wont, examined with awe its intricate web glistening in the early morning mist, with dewdrops hanging like tiny pearls on fine lace.

"I wish we had come on this walk with Ralph," Ellie whispers. I reluctantly give up my desire to conduct further research. I am frustrated that neither Ellie nor I will accomplish our goals today. I feel angry with Ellie for not having a good time, then immediately feel guilty.

"Perhaps we can get a bit ahead of the crowd," I whisper back. We step up our pace.

"Hold up!" the lead guide yells. "We going too slow for you?"

Her words are a lasso around my neck, jerking me back.

“No,” I say. “We were just trying to get away from the noise so we might have a chance to see some wildlife.”

The guide looks hurt, initiating a second wave of guilt.

“You want quiet?” says the perfectly outfitted guide-in-training. “We can be quiet.”

“Yes, we can be quiet,” the lead guide agrees.

For a few minutes they muffle their voices, until the trainee with the safari hat succumbs to boisterous excitement over the rose-colored trumpet flower of a glades morning glory and the lead guide loses herself in pointing out the difference between the black and yellow wing markings of the giant and the palamedes swallowtail butterflies. The noise level creeps up again.

Ellie throws me a dark look of despair. Her sun-streaked brown curls dance above her slender shoulders as she walks, seemingly mocking her stormy expression.

“These trails are well marked,” I say to our guide. “Can people hike here alone?”

“No. You must be with a guide. But you could train to be one. Then you could hike here whenever you wanted.”

I try to hide my disappointment.

“There’s a trail not far from here, off Lora Lane, you can go on by yourself,” she adds helpfully. “It’s about a mile, mile and a half long. If you go early morning or evening there’s a good chance of seeing wildlife.”

“Yeah,” says the vociferous trainee. “I took that hike the other morning and saw a fox squirrel.”

We trudge on in silence, Ellie with disappointment, I with dejection. Then an age-old parenting tool pops into my mind.

“Perhaps we’ll go for a snack when we’re done,” I suggest.

A slow smile spreads across Ellie’s face.

“Then can we go to Barnes and Noble?”

“Sure.” I am feeling better already. I toy with reinitiating my interview with our guide, but then grudgingly discard it. I don’t want to press my luck.

“Can we buy the book Ralph has? The one with the pictures and the animal tracks?”

“We’ll see.”

Later we find the book Ellie wants, the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to Florida*. As we flip through it, Ellie asks, “Can we go on the hike that lady told us about, the one without guides?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can we ask Alexis and Ralph?”

“Especially Ralph.”

My eyes meet Ellie’s and I see the return of laughter.

“Can we do it soon? Next weekend?”

“We’ll see.”

That evening I settle down to read *Care of the Soul*, where Thomas Moore notes that today’s fast-paced life is death to the soul because it doesn’t allow time for reflection. Living soulfully, Moore writes, requires “something as simple as pausing. Some people are incapable of being arrested by things because they are always on the move. A common symptom of modern life is that there is no time for thought, or even for letting impressions of a day sink in.”

I think of Ellie and her instinctive desire to pause, observe and reflect on nature and its inherent beauty and mystery. I put Moore’s book down and close my eyes, focusing on the day’s events. I think of our abortive hike and my frustration and irritation--much of it directed at Ellie. I open my eyes, reach for the phone and dial.

“Hello,” chirps a child’s voice.

“Hi, Alexis. Are you and your dad up for an early morning hike next weekend?”

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