Mineral Point

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Today’s prayer walk involves my wife, Shawna and me hiking in a new place that is very old. Although it’s our first time on Trail 82, the Mineral Point Trail, evidence points to larger cycles at work through expansive arcs of history.

The mountains have snow, several feet so far this winter and I don’t feel like skiing for a short timeframe late in the afternoon. Hiking seems in order, but most trails in the foothills are coated from last Saturday’s wet dusting of snow that froze into treacherous sheets of ice. Lake Pend Oreille has a way of moderating shoreline temperatures, so a hike along the lake will work great and not be too far to drive. Mineral Point Trail catches my eye as I scroll through the back of my mind. I’ve heard of it for over nine years of living here, but have never made it there, until today. It feels like such a relief to give myself permission to prayerfully enter one of the most beautiful corners of the world.

It is a little unnerving driving on an icy forest road, dodging holes and avoiding bumps, keeping the leased car, a silver Honda HRV, out of ruts and away from paint-scraping sticks poking in from edges of wooded embankments, all while not exactly knowing what it is we’re looking for.

“Did you see a trailhead? Maybe we passed it.” I say, voicing life’s uncertainties. “Oh wait, there’s a sign!”

A prayer walk is open to uncertainties, and includes travel time in the car. An unhurried pace, open to what presents itself, and a quieting of mind are all part of the intention.

We park in the small trailhead lot, gather our things, and then pass by the vaulted pit toilet, complete with hiker signs redecorated by bullet holes. We are the only ones here, and as we start hiking I glance at my watch. Somewhat surprised, I say, “It’s already 3:30! Only an hour and a half of daylight left. Let’s walk until 4:00 and then turn around.”

We hike along in mostly silence, except to point out what catches our attention, sharing excitement and the exploration of thoughts, but nothing dramatic or distracting.

Trail 82 winds through patches of trees, like large western red cedar in moist, shady ravines, and massive yellow pines holding the dry hillside and ridges. I notice a slight dusting of snow, but mostly the ground is exposed and traction favorable, just as predicted. Our tracks are the only ones, and given the timing of recent storms, it’s been several days since any humans have walked here. Coming around a quiet area of thicker trees and a large red cedar, I stop in my tracks and point my hiking stick toward a large bird taking off from the ground, flying around the backside of the cedar and landing on a different tree. Shawna doesn’t seen it, so I whisper to her and point it out.

“I think it’s a grouse, like a big Blue, Dusky Grouse.” I say. Unconvinced of my own observation, we sneak around the cedar for a closer look, but by then the bird moves farther up the hillside.

“It kind of looks like a hawk,” Shawna says.

We keep hiking a bit further on the trail. We stop at the top of cliffs overlooking a ravine and I wonder if we want to walk down there just to walk back up. I glance at my watch and it’s nearing 4:00, almost time to turn around, but not quite. The trail lures us and we go down. After a few more minutes of walking, we reluctantly turn around and begin hiking back. Closer to the area where the bird had been, I replay the scene in my mind. I remember thinking it was strange to have such a large bird on the ground, so I stop on the trail near that first sighting spot. Sure enough, it’s now obvious to me why the bird had been on the ground.

“Ah, it probably was a hawk. That’s why he or she was on the ground,” I say to Shawna. “Look around and see if you can tell where the bird had been. Remember, there is no snow on the ground,” I hint.

Camouflage is one of nature’s survival tactics. Blending into surroundings allow creatures to avoid detection from predators. Winter white fur helps rabbits like the snowshoe hare to blend in perfectly, unless it’s an open winter and the bare, brown ground is dominant. At that point camouflage has the opposite effect. Twenty feet off the trail, up a slight rise under overhanging branches of large trees, white fur is strewn around and about half a rabbit lay on the ground.

I ask Shawna, “Do you want a rabbit’s foot for good luck? Although this rabbit wasn’t very lucky.”

She says, “No.” Nodding her head side to side, she smirks because she knows I’d get one for her.

“Pretty tough winter for rabbits, but good for the hawk,” I say, trying to make an observation without judging whether this is good or bad.

We continue walking. Although human traffic is quiet over these few days, the creatures are quite active, repeating cycles of hunter and hunted echoing in this area over 10,000 years. Not worried about perspectives, they simply live in whatever form life chooses. Now the rabbit is part of the hawk. Someday that flying hunter will fall to the ground and its decaying body will feed the soils, nutrients taken up into plants, the underbrush then eaten by rabbits. In that circle, the hawk will become a rabbit, until snatched by talons of a future generation as life spirals on.

Mineral Point is on the north end of the largest and deepest section of Lake Pend Oreille, so wind storms from the south have miles of open lake, called fetch, to gain intensity. Slamming into the shore, brisking up the ridges, swirling into canyons, winds of winter storms and summer thunder events whip and twist towering trees. The living trees are gnarled, leaning, and flagged. The healthy ones continue into strength of girth, relentlessly growing around their unique scars. Many snapped trunks stand bald into the sky, tops laying nearby rotting on the ground. Woodpeckers do well in this protected area as the dead wood is left for insects to invade and large snags can actually host cavity nesting birds and squirrels. Recent storms left evidence of their intensity, for many of the downed tops show green needles on fresh branches. The deer were along the trail, it appears, because some of these cedar boughs are already trimmed.

Trees don’t have a choice to migrate, or the luxury of relocating if conditions change. Some trunks show burn marks. Many have holes from hungry woodpeckers excavating the bark, searching for insects in the soft, life giving cambium layer. A few toppled trees excavate massive root balls filled with rock and soil, some freshly crashed and others having laid there a while. Microburst wind blasts are selective, favoring one ridge with one storm and a few years later clearing out a gully of ancient creek-side dwellers.

Trail crews have cut open the path, the sawdust is probably a week or two fresh. We estimate one of the smaller logs to be 80 years old. I point out a hillside log with some icicles dripping water off the tips in the last sunrays of the day. Shawna takes a photo, trying to capture the shimmer. Ring after ring, trunks mark the seasons. Log after log, soil builds depth and nutrients; generations of forests inhale and exhale through life’s storms.

While the hare and the hawk are on the animal cycle, and the trees of the forest are on longer, plant lifespans, both are held as fairly fresh blips in the larger arc of geologic activity. The depth of the lake, the freshness of the water, the scarring of mountains and cliffs, ‘Ice Age’ encased this region a mile deep with landscape-designing flows.

Cataclysmic floods drained away retreating glaciers, shaping like a sculpture the artistic beauty we see today. Hundreds of generations of aboriginal Salish peoples perpetuated sustainable systems of hunting, fishing, gathering, and trade. In many ways, my presence here is an intrusion, an uninvited guest reaping the benefits of a place I did not sow. Yet here I am, by whatever accidents of history or providential hand, I am still a guest interrupting raptor’s dinner, disturbing woodpecker dancing around the trunk of western larch, Douglass fir, hemlock, birch, or spruce. The pines are patient as I rub their smooth, yellow bark in awe of their maturity.

My wife and I are guests in our brief years of walking on hillsides overlooking evidence of Earth’s contortions as the planet whirls through space chasing the sun around a dusty galaxy. That I have breath while stars birth is a miracle. That my body, made from stardust, can prayerfully stroll along a wooded pathway above the shores of waters that flow lifeblood of the planet is a testament of relationship and a reminder that competition isn’t the main driver of life, but collaboration is. Not one thing taking from other, but one thing yielding itself for another, as evolution shapes toward a greater good. Today’s prayer walk in a new place that’s very old is a gift.

Installing a hiking trail takes work. Bushes are clipped to ground level. Shovels, pics, axes, and Pulaski’s get shoved and swung to dig out roots and rocks until the area known as “the tread” is cleared. Over time, with each step, the tread gets smooth, and walkable, so compacted it becomes devoid of plants, weeds, and sticks. The ground becomes so hard even water runs over the top rather than soaking in as a muddy mess. But water is powerfully patient, and not easily deterred.

When temperatures drop below freezing both day and night, frost crusts over the surface of bare ground. But water is also underneath, resting in small cracks and minute spaces between grains of soil. Even seemingly impervious ground is susceptible to heaving. When water freezes, it expands. Water, true to character in whatever form, follows the path of least resistance, so when ice develops, going up is sometimes the easiest direction to push.

Every so often along Mineral Point Trail, I notice the most beautiful, intricately-patterned displays of ice. Though only a couple inches in height, small but mighty crystals form columns intermingling like upside down chandeliers made of precious gems. Where the trail heaves I am careful to place my foot gingerly around the edges. It doesn’t seem right to hear crushing sounds of original artwork smashing underfoot.

The intensity of this process doesn’t go unnoticed. Lifting the path’s top layer of tread from below, ice reshapes the landscape, in miniature, like a throwback to the mountain-scraping glacial sheets, in macro, that stretched across the north. Striations across Canadian Shield, the Basin of Great Lakes, the rugged Rockies, the entire northern stretch of continent sharing unique features, many on display in this region in such dynamic ways. Walking in glacial lands, we benefit from the remnants – lovely lakes of fresh water, flowing rivers, wooded hills, inspiring mountains, and open valleys. The sound of ice breaking under my boot is a faint-yet-connected echo of calving glaciers and collapsing ice dams happening in this very spot with nothing but the perception of spacial distance and linear time creating not-always-accurate concepts of separation.

Being mindful of steps is a sign of respect, setting the tone in how to express and share humanity. The trail certainly has a human spectrum represented, from those who created it, pouring their sweat to etch a treaded path for the community to enjoy for generations. To those who abuse this privilege, like target shooters aiming for the hiker’s head painted on public signs marking the trailhead, or gunning the gas on whatever vehicle spin their wheels to dig donuts in the parking lot, creating holes in the gravel pad, now filling with icy water and muddy debris. Also the maintainers, who join clubs like the Pend Oreille Peddlers, combining efforts in fixing what’s broken and keeping trails nice for open and accessible cycling routs. This specific trail is dedicated to the memory of Brent “Jake” Jacobson, a 47 year old man who gave his life in the line of duty as a Forest Service law enforcement officer. Humanity, in its varied levels of consciousness and devotion, is well represented as the human drama plays out on the stage of cultural history. Walking on Trail 82, the Mineral Point Trail, the spotlight is now on us during this amazing symphony!

We stop briefly to see the picnic area. As a helpful steward I toss into the bushes bundles of broken branch debris. The tables are made of wood, two by ten slabs bolted to metal frames. They’re weathered, showing their age, but surprisingly lacking in graffiti or carved vandalism. A few charred rocks form a small fire ring that doesn’t look exactly official, but in other ways fits in to this setting where people gather to share special occasions. Telling stories around a fire is certainly a primeval rite of passage.

A few more steps down the main trail and we’re back at the car, still the only one in the lot and seemingly intact. We put our things in the back and as the car starts, a sense of relief comes because it’s beginning to get dark. Driving down the bumpy road, I try and avoid the big holes and sharp sticks. Shawna notices a dashboard indicator light come on, warning something about tire pressure. We stop and she’s content to watch me make the rounds as I kick the tires. Nothing visibly wrong, but a good reminder not to take anything for granted, and a frame of reference to appreciate how remote this area is.

Back in town, we stop by the tire shop and they adjust the air pressure and say it’s nothing to be concerned about, it’s all evened out now. Convenient that the pizza place is next to the tire shop, so we pick up ‘the special’ and head home. Sitting at the table, we’re thankful. We’re glad to have prayer-walked today, sharing ‘all sorts’ of time with each other and the larger structures of life. Gaining perspective on many aspects of the world and her benevolence, we toast to connection, collaboration, community, care, and love that shapes life in ongoing expressions. Here, now, we are always home. Perhaps as I dream tonight, maybe I’ll run with rabbits through the dark woods, dodging predators while we enjoy nourishment of tender growth from an ancient land, and both above and within us, the stars will shine, as cosmic and creature unite in cycles of life and death.

Remember you are stardust, and to stardust you shall return.