

AXIS MUNDI

I have a rock. The Alaska State Park Service holds title to it, but it's mine. Squatter's rights. Anthropologists talk about the primal human intuition of connectedness – the axis mundi – the centerpoint of the earth. Axis mundi, the path along which the sacred and the secular, the infinite and the temporal play like interlocking, cosmic spirals of DNA. Life. Universal and specific. The axis mundi exists at the most sacred place on earth. There are many such places. I have a rock.

The Eagle River valley is a glacial gash in the Chugach Mountains just north of Anchorage. Rolling high ground precedes the abrupt terrestrial assertion of the mountains themselves. A community of thirty thousand or so has congregated on the west end, at the mouth of the valley. From the high ground of Eagle River it's easy to see Cook Inlet and the newly-formed peaks of the Talkeetna and Alaska ranges. West, across the inlet, is the reposing monolith locally referred to as the Sleeping Lady. The vast expanses of light and texture echo the laughter of creation. Facing west takes you into the outward, sensual, exterior world. My rock is east of here. It resides in the realm of solitude and contemplation and peace. The interior, natural world. Like the journey to many sacred places, this one begins at the end of the road.

The end of the road is a parking lot twelve miles from the community of Eagle River. The last two miles of road leading here were finally paved a couple of years ago. The parking lot was paved last summer. The Park Service maintains a Visitors' Center here. The building is a log cabin. Inside are wonderful displays describing the wildlife and habitat of the valley. A split-rail, cedar fence encloses two sides of the open area behind and on the south side of the cabin. There is a large cedar deck appended to the rear of the building. Later in the summer there will be telescopes on tripods, so that visitors can watch groups of Dall sheep high on the sides of the adjacent mountains. For the more adventurous, guided tours with pack llamas traverse the route from here across the ridges to the north. At the end of the rail fence, beyond the deck, is the beginning of the visitor's trail. It was also paved three or four years ago. Foot traffic on

the nature loop trail is heavy. The asphalt is an improvement for this short segment. Like the portico to many sacred spaces, the loop trail is a transition area.

For many of the summer visitors who come here this is part of a first, perhaps once in a lifetime, trip. Visitors are not usually difficult to recognize. They're the folks wearing ski parkas in July. It's curious. The attitude toward people coming to Alaska on a trip is different than anywhere else I've ever been. Although tourism is a principal industry of the state, those of us who live here do not generally consider these people tourists. Not tourists as in tolerated intruders. The folks who come to be with us are visitors. Visitors in the familial sense. Many, in fact, have family here. So, it is the connectedness of human beings which draws them. Those who have been involved in the combat fishing for King and Red salmon on the Kenai Peninsula are likely to refute such an assertion. But that's a different world, with different rules. Here, at the end of Eagle River Road, the attitude and atmosphere are conducive to family and laughter, absorbing and being absorbed by the multisensory delight of creation.

It's early afternoon. The end of May. Eighteen hours of daylight. Springtime in the subarctic. Parking my car in the Visitors' Center lot, my first thought is to check the "bear board." The park rangers maintain a listing of critter sightings on a plexiglas board just inside the door of the Visitors' Center. The building is locked. Budget cuts. Nuts. Lots of running feet from behind the cabin. School bus parked at the edge of the lot. Field trip.

Returning to the car I pull out my light-weight parka, day pack and towel. The park isn't necessary here in the warm, still afternoon sunlight, but it will be where I'm going. I unsnap my belt buckle, open my day pack, remove the holstered pistol and leather cartridge loops. The holster I belt to my left side, pistol butt forward. The cartridge loops go on the right. I load half a dozen bear rounds into the magnum, holster it and secure the strap. Folks from down south and local ecological purists are

usually surprised by or disdainful of carrying firearms on a walk in a park. Life teaches different lessons to each of us. I have had to play the unwinnable game of “If Only.” I have no intention of doing it again. Here in the transition area with attractive displays and asphalt and a log cabin, with its exterior varnish glistening in the sunlight, people tend to have only a dim awareness that, once you leave the nature loop, you are confronted by real life.

I have the utmost respect for anything with teeth, hooves or fingernails bigger than mine. I consider myself extremely fortunate that, although there have been a few occasions here in the park when my hand began to ease toward the pistol grip, I have never had to draw it. Given a choice, I will consistently choose cowardly, sniveling, prudent retreat as the most expedient alternative.

Rebuckling my belt, I slide my arms into the parka sleeves, then through the pack straps. I slip the holster farther back on my belt and pull my parka around to conceal it. There’s no sense drawing attention when I walk through the running, laughing children. Hat on. Towel around my neck. Ready.

Around the end of the cabin, coarse gravel grating and crunching under my feet. Sunlight. Running children. Laughter. Past the bird feeders to the end of the rail fence. Beginning the descent toward the valley floor. Moderately steep incline. The kind that retired folks will use to stop and admire the scenery two or three times on their way up. Alder and birch provide the ground cover. To the right, half way down the hill, stands a lone cottonwood tree. Its top was blown out several years back. New growth has reemerged, twisting and extending toward the sky like a gnarled deciduous arm.

The trail splits just as it bends right. Hard right is the Rodak Trail. It continues, as an asphalt walkway, past interesting and informative signboards to the large bridge, deck and boardwalk built over the salmon stream. This nature trail is very popular with

visitors and families with small children. The salmon won't be spawning in the stream until August or so. The water is so clear now, though, that it's easy to see trout darting around. The view eastward from the stream is magnificent. Mountains. Sky. Snow, Avalanche chutes. Waterfalls. Alaska.

The other alternative, here at the trail intersection, is to step off of the asphalt onto the hardpacked, dirt trail. White arrows painted on a brown signboard point this way. Crow Pass/River Trail it says. I follow the arrows. The trail continues to descend. Down through oak and ferns and wild roses. A half a mile out I pass a landscape painter headed back to the parking lot. Canvas in his left hand. Tackle box full of supplies in his right. The smell of acrylics lingers on the trail like an industrial cologne. At the point where the trail bends right again a reminder of reality is posted. The sign is straightforward: "Bears present in area, take proper precautions." I have and I am. Solitude requires attention, not passivity.

A quarter of a mile farther and the trail is again intersected at right angles. To the right is the River Trail. An easy walk to the Eagle River itself. There's a damp, sandy stream bed down that way. I take my daughters there to teach them about tracking and see what animals are ambling about. It's fun.

This intersection is the demarcation point between transition zone and wilderness. Beyond is a portion of the Iditarod Trail. This section runs from Eagle River to Girdwood. About nine miles east and south, past The Perch, Dishwater Creek, Icicle Creek, Mt. Yukla, Twin Falls and Thunder Gorge is the fording site for the Eagle River. The trail then moves south, generally along Raven Creek, for another fifteen miles or so through Raven Gorge and Crow Pass. The Eagle Glacier is the source for the Eagle River. The glacier extends for miles beyond the headwaters of the river. Wilderness.

Curious. In all the time I've spent out here I've never seen bear scat on the transition zone portion of the trail. On a number of occasions, though, fresh, even steaming scat has lain in the center of the trail within fifty meters after embarking on the

Iditarod Trail. It's as if a primal courtesy is being extended. "Caution. You are now entering reality. Those interested only in information turn back here."

Adjusting a pack strap I enter the fringes of Her realm. Few animal signs on the trail. Only two or three human prints. None recent. Quiet. The trail has been eroded and tamped firm by years of foot traffic. The root systems of the trees next to the trail are shallow. The result is portions of the trail tangled by wooden cobwebs.

Walking. Listening. Settling in. The belligerent trill of a squirrel. A butterfly. Past the moss-covered boulders. Through the birch stand. Up there, on the hillside, beyond the comforting, spreading boughs of the lone spruce, is a downed tree. For me it is sacred ground. It is the place I go to bury something of value and bid farewell when one of my people dies. It is a place that I sometimes go when I need to recall family. The memories of my dad and two brothers are powerful there among the trees. Each time I pass this place, I pause to remember, and express my gratitude for their lives.

Winding on, the trail begins a gentle ascent. The vestibule. Rocks become stones on the trail. Boulders are stationed as sentries on both sides of the path. From the trail my rock is nondescript. It's not big as rocks go. Twenty feet above the trail, maybe. I step off onto the game trail at its base. Moose droppings all around. It's easy to see where the moose walk through the brush on their way to and from the river.

The top of the rock is an easy climb. Friends. My rock and I have come to know each other over the years. I know where to put my Ensolite so that my back fits the contours of the rock. The rock knows how to snug. The wind blows most of the time here. Skimming the glacier and channeled through the valley, it's cool. Across the valley, dark and pointed, individual spruce stands like sentinels among the birch. The waterfalls and swift-running streams of July and August are still frozen. White ribbons in the rock. Out there, beyond the hanging, corniced fields of white are other peaks: Mt. Killak, Polar Bear Peak, Old Soggy.

Settle in. Wait. The black, feathered sheen floats past: caw, caw, cawing.
The raven. Sacred among the ancient peoples. Wind. Sunlight. Waiting.

Her majesty is overwhelming. Wilderness is neither benevolent nor brutal. She is creatively, savagely benign. She is power and beauty, vista and detail, love and consolation, pristine and terrifying. She demands respect. In return She sustains, rejuvenates and reaffirms life. Of all my valued relationships it is this one with Her which is most profound. During the intimate conversations with the women of my life, we often communicate in incomplete sentences. Here, with Her, I commune with no words at all.

It was She who taught me that, when I exercised my right to scream at the lightning, I incurred the obligation to listen to the silence. So, when my exterior world becomes cluttered and noisy, I return to be with Her.

To touch Her.
To savor again.
the complexity of Her scent.
To enjoy Her alternating moods
of light and shadow.
To listen to Her
Sing and sign and moan.

She has protected me when I was cut off and exposed. She has held me in the utter anguish of my deepest sorrow. She has shown me happiness and delight. She has slapped me with blowing snow and stinging wind. She has stroked and caressed my neck with the softest, most tantalizing, whispered breezes. In total despair, when I knew that I owed the earth a body, it was She who reassured me and told me that there was no rush.

Companion. Teacher. Lover. Friend.

She is all of these.

She is Life itself.

It is to Her

that I will eventually return,

for no one knows me

as She does.

Her capacity for love

is infinite.

It is to Her

that I often heard dying men

address their final words,

“Oh, God. Oh, Mama.”