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Closing the Circle

Fatherhood rekindles in Franconia Notch

Christopher Johnson

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
—Robert Frost, from “Birches”



WE DROVE TOWARD FRANCONIA NOTCH IN NEW HAMPSHIRE'S White Mountains in our brand-new 1984 Toyota Corolla, spinning past towns with such evocative names as Winnisquam and Penacook—names that whispered the legacy of Native Americans in northern New England.

I remember that little Corolla with enormous affection, partly because it was so mechanically reliable but mostly because it transported our tidy nuclear family on so many adventures. It that period, when our children were growing up, we had almost no money, and Barbara and I were still young enough—in our 30s—not to give a damn about having no money.

Barbara and I were native Midwesterners. We'd moved to the Boston area three years before, and almost immediately New England had seduced us with its beauties, varied landscapes, tales, and mysteries. Colleagues at the Boston publishing company where I worked had raved to me about the extraordinary beauty of the White Mountains, and now, for the first time, we were conveying ourselves into this new landscape.

Another motivation propelled me north: my attempt to reconnect with our children, Matthew and Emily, who were respectively 10 and 7 years old. For the past three or four years, I had submerged myself in my editorial work in an increasingly obsessive and even feverish way, living a life driven by deadlines, budgets, performance appraisals, office politics, and sales figures. I do not plead to being special in this regard, as modern corporate life offers its rewards but extracts its pound of flesh in one way or another.

At an intuitive and unexpressed level, I worried I was not handling the pressures well and was, in fact, being consumed by them. I tended toward perfectionism, and I found it hard to talk about my anxieties. Without meaning to, I had cut myself off from Barbara and the children, who were gradually becoming strangers to me. Too many evenings I worked late, and by the time I barged through the front door, they were ready for bed.

Barbara worked, too, but she had found ways to maintain vibrant connections to our children. She was a teacher, but despite the demands of teaching, she attended the dance recitals, drove to the basketball practices, and went to PTA meetings. I admired her commitment, and in fact, we had talked about my need to figure out ways to strike a similar balance. At an intuitive level, I realized that, to get in touch with our children, I had to examine myself—honestly and forthrightly. What were my priorities? What

The Johnson family discovers granite ledges above Franconia Notch in 1984.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

was driving me deeper into work life and away from family life? And how could I find that elusive balance?

As a result, this journey into the mountains of New Hampshire carried expectations far beyond getting away from it all. North of Concord, New Hampshire, the terrain grew hillier. A few more miles passed, and then, far in the distance, I could see what looked like a gargantuan gray whale leaping in humpbacked glory out of the green background of surrounding forests. As I continued driving, that whale resolved itself into something more literal yet no less arresting—enormous gray slabs of granite reflected in the sunlight of a day that was as clear as the snap of an apple.

This, I knew from the map I'd memorized in preparation for our journey, was Franconia Notch. We were going to camp at Russell Pond Campground, south of the notch. But we all wanted to see what Franconia looked like, so we continued north on I-93 and entered the notch. We peered left, through the car windows, and spied the famed and gnarly Old Man of the Mountain—still intact in 1984—as he cast his keen eyes on the heavily wooded forests that paraded like toreadors across the rugged shoulders of the slopes.

The mountain struck me as a granite-encrusted guardian of the ages, holding secrets of the past even as it nurtured thick and indomitable forests in the present. Lining the east side of the notch was Franconia Range, a rugged geological line that formed, in succession, Mounts Flume, Liberty, Little Haystack, Lincoln, and Lafayette. We reached the northern edges of the notch, just east of the ski trails that spin down Cannon Mountain. The notch was narrowing, the mountains towered over us to the east and west, and shadows fell across the highway. I steered the Corolla off the ramp at Route 3, located the southbound entrance to I-93, and drove back through the notch, putting off our pursuit of adventure until the next day. We continued south to the campground.

We were inexperienced campers, but Barbara, the kids, and I raised the tent without too much trouble and without sniping at one another. We kindled a good fire and snarfed down our hot dogs and beans, after which we sat in front of the fire and cooked marshmallows. I said: "So what do you think, gang? Is this cool or what?"

"Yeah, it's pretty good," Matthew said.

"So what's up with you guys?" I asked. "How was the dance recital, Emily?" I'd had to miss it. Travel.

"It was good," she said. "But I was nervous."

"You got over it, though," Barbara said.

"I was nervous through the whole thing."

"It didn't show," Barbara said. "You did beautifully."

I'd seen the photos Barbara had taken—you know, the simple pictures that freeze our memories in time and have the uncanny ability to bring back to life those feelings experienced long ago. A chorus line of 7- and 8-year-olds, bedecked in spangled blouses and leotards, kicking high toward the sky and reaching for the stars.

"I'm really sorry I had to miss it," I said.

"That's OK, Dad," she said.

I didn't realize until then how very sorry I was.

The children and Barbara continued to talk—about Little League games, guitar lessons, teachers. Me? I stared into the fire, feeling melancholy and a little sorry for myself. The children were inevitably starting to become themselves, and I knew in my rational mind that this was how it must be. But I was also feeling keenly the passage of time and the children's inexorable growth toward adulthood, and I felt I was squandering my precious time with them. A gray cloud hovered over me through the entire evening.

The next morning, we returned to Franconia Notch and started walking toward the Flume, a narrow chasm at the base of Mount Liberty through which the robust Flume Brook flows, creating a singular natural attraction of the White Mountain region. A gravel trail to the Flume wound through the woods for almost a mile, and we meandered along the trail. I looked at my three family members as if I were seeing them for the first time: Barbara with her large, soulful eyes; Matthew with his olive skin inherited from Barbara's family; Emily with her fair skin and blue eyes to match my family's coloring.

Matthew and Emily ran ahead of us and then waited for us to catch up to them. He pushed her, and she pushed back.

"Quit it!" she blurted with more than a pinch of grit.

"Make me!" he said.

She walked up to him and thrust her fist into his face, half-kiddingly. But only half. I was surprised to see how assertive she'd become in countering her older brother's teasing. The trail descended, and forgetting their little contretemps, they slid along the gravel and giggled.

Then, magically, as if nature had unloosed my imagination from its moorings, I suddenly felt as if I were seeing things through their eyes. As we approached the Flume, I felt a childlike suspense and some degree of

trepidation at the unknown. We heard the water roar. Trees hung over the trail and beckoned us toward an unknown fate. The intimidating growl of water came closer, sounding ever more menacing.

We entered the Flume. On either side of the chasm, granite cliffs soared to meet the sky, while the river poured its turbulent waters between those intimidating cliffs. We continued on the boardwalk along the left side of the chasm, and the water rumbled down rocks, broke against those granite cliffs, and careened along the boulders. The sensual impact was like poetry and music combined, so fluid and powerful was the sight.

When we emerged from the Flume, I felt as if my skin were being pricked by millions of darts of sensual experience. The children were excited, and for once I was noticing. “What’ll we do now?” Emily asked, eyes dazzled by the prospect of new and further adventures.

We looked at the map from the AMC *White Mountain Guide* and saw that a trail was located across the interstate. It climbed up the west side of



Emily, Matthew, and Barbara Johnson at Lonesome Lake. CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

Franconia Notch, carrying the adventurer to a place called Lonesome Lake. What a name! Of course we had to climb the trail. How could we not visit a place called Lonesome Lake?

We found the trailhead and started climbing. The trail followed an ancient bridle path that had been cut through the forests during the nineteenth century, ascending the southeast quadrant of Cannon Mountain at a moderate angle. We undertook three lengthy switchbacks and, after a little more than a mile, arrived at a junction of trails. There, we had magnificent vistas of North Kinsman and South Kinsman mountains.

We rested. The fact is that we were not used to hiking. We were woefully inexperienced. The climb was not really very steep, but Barbara and I were stumbling over rocks that protruded from the earth like the humps on the back of a dragon. I was wearing sneakers; Barbara was wearing Dr. Scholl's clogs; and the kids raced ahead, taunting us. "Hey, slowpokes!" Matthew yelled. "Yer gettin' old!" He laughed at us, and his sister joined in.

After two hours of ascending, we reached Around-Lonesome-Lake Trail. I was starting to feel engaged. "This reminds me of a movie," I said. "*The Lost World*. These explorers go to this part of South America where no one's ever been, and they find dinosaurs. Dinosaurs! This kind of looks like that—wild and remote."

"I want to see that movie!" Matthew said.

"So do I!" chipped in Emily.

"Look at the lake," I said. "Take it in." We looked out on the water, surrounded on all sides by mountains that reflected like huge emeralds in the placid surface. Wetlands lined the boardwalk around the lake, and they blended with the surrounding forests to form a dense green wall that felt like a jungle.

We reached the Appalachian Mountain Club's Lonesome Lake Hut, grabbed a table, and chomped on our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and apples. All of us fell silent and listened to the gossiping of squirrels and chipmunks outside the hut. We watched a duck land in the lake, interrupting the glossy surface of the water and sending ripples across the pond. "This is cool," Emily said. I was unexpectedly moved by her words. Cracks were appearing in the barrier that I'd built around myself.

After an hour, we left Lonesome Lake, tramping back on the boardwalk until we reached the trail. We started negotiating our way down the switchbacks that slowly lowered us, as if we were in a giant elevator. Then it

started to rain. My God, did it rain. The heavens opened like broken dams and let loose their fury upon us. In the distance, we heard the cannonade of thunder. All four of us started to run—as if we could outrun the raindrops! In five minutes, we were as soaked as geese. The thunder rumbled closer to us, and in the distance, we could see the phosphorescence of lightning.

Barbara's sandals were comically inefficient for running. As she clumped along in them, she laughed, struggling to keep the clogs from flying off her feet and into the surrounding woods. All of us laughed uproariously as the rain pelted us. We were delirious, out of our minds! We jarred down that mountain, which was like a sentient being, a huge beast that was alive.

Now the trail was muddy, and we slipped and slid. Because Emily was little, Barbara and I both grasped her hands. Barbara came to a large puddle and tried to jump over it, and I shrieked with laughter. Jumping over a puddle when we were sopping, as if we could get any wetter than we already were.

Finally we reached the bottom of that big breathing beast of a mountain, ran past the Lafayette campground, and found our trusty 1984 Toyota Corolla. I started the engine, turned on the heat full-blast to take away our chill, and we just sat in our little car and laughed with endless joy, as if it were the end of the world and we just didn't give a damn.

The next day, we went to visit Robert Frost's former home in the town of Franconia. Frost had actually worked the farm there. Our experience climbing to Lonesome Lake was still breathing inside me, and as I walked through the empty, ghostly house and looked down at manuscripts preserved under glass, I felt the reality of Frost's poems. This place, with Mount Washington visible in the distance to the east and a meadow rolling like a wheelbarrow in front of his house, was the *place* of Frost's poetry—his Delphic oracle. This farm had spoken to and through him, freeing him in some mysterious way to give expression to perceptions that had been inchoate and emotions that found their way out of his heart through the imagery of nature. His poems were themselves part of nature, so firmly lodged were they in the hard granite and forest-encrusted mountains of New Hampshire.

At the farm, I bought a copy of *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). I still have that volume. On the front leaf is our old phone number in Framingham, Massachusetts. Thanks to the memories associated with the day I bought it, it is one of my most treasured books.

We brought the book back to the campsite. We built a fire, cooked our hamburgers and our inevitable beans, and Barbara and I shared a bottle

of wine. Such a night it was! The stars blazed like tiny torches in the sky. The pines stood tall and proud, surrounding us as if we were in a cocoon formed by the mysteries of the night. The fire threw its warmth over us like Grandmother's quilted blanket. I took off my sandals and felt my bare feet against the pine needles that covered the chilly earth.

Barbara had an inspiration: We would read Frost's poems aloud. Matthew and Emily groaned. Poetry—yuk. "No, no," Barbara said. "We'll read them, and we'll rate them. We'll do the Siskel and Ebert thing—thumbs up or thumbs down."

I, ever the pedant, was thinking, "Who are we to judge Robert Frost's poems?" But I kept my mouth shut. Barbara started reading, in a voice that floated like silk through the night.

"Birches"—thumbs up.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"—thumbs up.

"The Road Not Taken"—thumbs up.

"A-Wishing Well"—thumbs down.

There were very few thumbs down. As Barbara read some of Frost's less-well-known but still sublime poems, something happened that was miraculous to me then and that I still feel 30 years later, as a grandparent to Matthew's children. I remember vividly that Barbara's voice shaped the poems with independent life, and they floated along the timbre of sound and took on a separate existence, surrounding us with their beauty and their meaning and their sound. The poems spoke of the sacred connections between humanity and nature that inform and enrich the love we feel for those who are closest to us—a love that Frost apparently had great difficulty expressing in his personal life. I understood then that Frost had expressed that love through his poems.

As I listened to Barbara read, I was silenced by the poems' beauty and depth, and I realized that, over the past two days, I had rediscovered our two children. I had come in from the cold. In a kind of exquisite miracle, we were completely together and unified as a family. Yet no one said a word. This unity existed in silence. I felt a closeness to them that was fed by the campfire, by the surrounding pines, by the incandescent stars, by the hooting of a distant owl.

Frost's poems floated above us and became part of nature. And in some way I didn't and still don't really understand, those poems pulled me from the separateness of the labors of my chosen profession, folded me once again

into the circle of our family, and bound us together in spirit for a shining and transcendent night in the midst of the glorious mountains of New Hampshire.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON is a writer specializing in conservation, forestry, and history. He wrote *This Grand and Magnificent Place* (University Press of New England, 2006) and, with David Govatski, *Forests for the People* (Island Press, 2013). Johnson is a frequent contributor to *Appalachia*. Visit him at chrisjohnsonwrite.com.