

I BELIEVE: 'The beauties of our past are still alive in unspoiled woods, hills and meadows'

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By George Petty

The Fringed Gentian

*Walking into the October woods I look
for the fringed gentian my grandfather loved
by the spring the years have covered over,
though I remember where it was. My wistful
mother said they survive even frost, blood blue
against the dead brown in high hidden meadows,
where she and my father tramped so painfully
toward their griefs, taking almost a century to leave me,
a grizzled child searching for a small joy in the leaves.
But, of course, it's not there, wasn't last year either,
though my cousin says he saw one near the swamp,
the seeds are tiny and easily wash that way;
and I push through thickets and blow-downs,
relishing the knocks and scratches, the stiffening gusts
and the crackle of coming frost that remind me I'm alive,
till standing in the muck, the cool fire of age
creeping slowly over my ankles, my fingers numb
like leaves dying back from the edges,
I believe my cousin never saw a gentian here,
and only I care that it might – must – have ever been.
It's not that I doubt there is one in these woods,
but that I know surely there is not,
and every year, following the old steps, I try to find it.
— George Petty*

I believe the beauties of our past are still alive in unspoiled woods, hills and meadows, those quiet green sanctuaries where we can recover ourselves without having to buy gas or turn on a light.

Scientists tell us that even in land that has been farmed, logged, lived on, or burned over, the seeds of old native wildflowers, shrubs and trees lie buried, waiting for the trouble to pass so they can grow again. Even if science didn't think so, I'd believe it.

Mostly because I've seen it happen.

Twenty-five years ago a group of my neighbors in Denville banded together to prevent developers from building condominiums in the forest around Bald Hill. They called their group POWWW, Preserve Our Wetlands, Water and Woods. Today, after a long patient struggle, 650 acres of the Beaver Brook watershed have become Morris County's newest forest park, Jonathan's Woods, named for Denville's last native American.

I roamed these woods when I was a youngster. I loved the freedom to delay and discover. Flowers, trees and animals were my companions, and I could drink safely from cool woodland springs and brooks. But every year new houses consumed the edge of the forest, detergent chemicals bubbled through the water, and one by one the flowers decided not to risk the air.

The preservation of Jonathan's Woods has given me another chance, right here near my back door. In the very same curve of the brook where I walked with my high school sweetheart, I am building a wildflower trail. With the help of friends in POWWW, we cut and drag away blowdowns, and pull out invasive species. We buy plants from specialized growers, who propagate them from wild seeds. We believe we can encourage our own seeds, that have survived under the leaves during history's turmoil, and are waiting there for the chance to bloom again.

It's not that we think the past was somehow more noble than we are. We know the early settlers struggled for survival, for wealth, for influence; they fought over land, a few owned slaves, in hard times they sold their woodlands to loggers.

But it inspires awe to see physical evidence in the woods of what they accomplished with hand tools and animal power; long stone fences to contain cattle, a test shaft dug in hard bedrock for iron ore, wagon roads over steep rocky hills, large old trees that once stood alone in an open field now surrounded by younger growth. Their lives were hard, and usually short; they cultivated simple homespun pleasures. We feel how easier and more convenient, how longer, safer and healthier are our gas and electric powered lives, all covered by medical and hazard insurance.

And yet we are so much the same; our heart beats, our breaths, our hungers and ambitions. When we walk through the quiet woods, the soft sounds of the rustling leaves are what those early settlers heard in the twilight of their day, whispering of our common humanity.

George Petty of Denville has been an insurance underwriter, airplane mechanic, airline flight engineer, union president, newspaper reporter, college teacher, tennis coach and a racing sailor. He is also the author of 'Hiking the Jersey Highlands,' published by the New York New Jersey Trail Conference. Through his varied career he has always thought of himself as a poet, even when the world required him to appear otherwise. His poems have been prize-winners in national contests and have been aired on National Public Radio, appearing in Water-Stone, Two-Rivers Review and "Boulder Field," a chapbook from Finishing Line Press, 2004. His work has taken him all over the world, but he has always come back to Denville, where he lives and writes today.