

Traveling Close, Very Close, to Home

By SUZANNE BERNE;
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THE first time I realized that it was possible to travel at home, I was 6 years old and standing in the linen closet of a rented house on Cape Cod. It was an old drafty house by a bay, full of camphor-smelling eaves and corners and unexpected doorways, and one foggy afternoon I slunk about the shadowy upstairs picturing myself in the Black Forest. My grandfather had been to the Black Forest, and from his description I envisioned a mossy, Grimm's-fairy-tale sort of place, not so different from the dark upper hall with its peeling fern-colored wallpaper. That afternoon it had taken me an hour to reach the linen closet, which served as a remote Bavarian castle, and by the time I finally arrived after hiking through the hallway I was worn out. When my mother found me recovering by the pillowcases a few minutes later she asked what I'd been doing, and I told her: "Traveling." She seemed to accept this statement at face value and, from that moment on, so did I.

What I discovered from those foggy afternoons was that home can be a wide and varied place, and that a person may be a seasoned traveler without necessarily leaving the backyard. While some believe traveling means going far away -- imagining that a trip to Bangkok is travel while a trip to the park is not -- others recognize that travel, like relaxation, is mostly a state of mind. The wanderer wanders wherever he is. Naturally, the inverse must also be true. Just as some people can't relax, some cannot travel, no matter where they find themselves. Look at the commuter who drives 75 miles a day, then says he hasn't gone anywhere in months. Or the business person who flies to Rome and then never leaves her hotel. And what about the delicate soul who ventures forth only when the weather is clement, the accommodations posh, the sights acclaimed -- is this travel, or resting away from home?

Travel, in my opinion, is one part locomotion and three parts the desire for discovery. It should set the mind going. Which is why a stroll around the block can be as invigorating a journey for the determined discoverer as a junket around the globe. To know one place well is to travel deeply, continuously. To know one place altogether is impossible; it can take a lifetime, after all, to navigate an acre if you proceed inch by inch. Not that most of us will ever roam that closely, but the opportunity is there. Consider Emily Dickinson, who rarely left her house and yet traveled so extensively inside of it that critics are still retracing her footsteps. A poem about one of her adventures begins: I started early, took my dog, And visited the sea; The mermaids in the basement Came out to look at me.

Dickinson is, perhaps, an extremist, the domestic equivalent of Marco Polo. Yet one doesn't have to be a recluse to voyage at home. While he lived at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau treated his visits to nearby Concord Village as if they were brief sojourns on the Continent. "It was very pleasant," he notes, "when I stayed late in town, to launch

myself into the night, especially if it was dark and tempestuous, and set sail from some bright village parlor . . . for my snug harbor in the woods." He called the scatter of ponds around Concord "my lake country," and there he wandered, viewing the flora and fauna, keeping a record of strange sights, his Grand Tour on the banks of Walden. One afternoon he might watch ants battle by his woodpile, emerging as shaken and excited as any foreign war correspondent; the next he might sit by the railroad tracks, sniffing the cinder-struck air, musing on the vagaries of international commerce based on a whiff of salt fish. "I have traveled much in Concord," he observed, and it's hard to think of anyone who has ventured farther.

Some of the most stirring travel accounts I've ever read, in fact, have been written by people who stayed right at home. Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac," his description of 12 months on a Wisconsin sand farm, treats each season as its own location, with its own particular attractions, citizenry and customs. He pays special attention to the trees he encounters on his rambles, and reports the startling news that, "There is much small-talk and neighborhood gossip among pines," surely as intriguing a bit of information as anything in Frommer's.

A quarter of a century later, Annie Dillard describes her exploration of one "rather tamed valley" in Virginia with a gusto that makes Lewis and Clark seem timid. "It's all a matter of keeping my eyes open," she writes in "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek." And so she turns a morning's saunter into a trek, with starlings, frogs and praying mantis egg cases crowding her rural landscape like so many exotic acquaintances. "I would like to know grasses and sedges -- and care," reflects Dillard. "Then my least journey into the world would be a field trip." Once while crouching on a log she became so bedazzled by a spot of Tinker Creek that she fell in.

Keeping one's eyes open, occasionally falling in astonishment into a creek or a gutter, obliges one to recall that adventure happens in small places as well as large. "I explore the neighborhood," declares Annie Dillard, with the same passion Columbus must have felt when coming upon the New World. At heart, an expedition is no more than a trip undertaken to see or do something -- and what that something is usually matters less than the spirit in which the trip is made. Which is not to say that journeys to France and Peru and the Grand Canyon aren't wonderful, or that everyone should stay at home all the time. Only that where one lives should be treated with the same inquisitiveness as anywhere one might go.

IN my own case, although I no longer travel by way of linen closets, I do wander locally for most of my excitement. This has a bit to do with economic considerations, but even more to do with my conviction that if a second look reveals more than the first, then a daily look will reveal something new every time. So I take the same route on my afternoon walks, examining the houses I pass with clinical interest, noting a new garage door here, a bed of pansies there, admiring a weathervane, trying my best to comprehend the inhabitants through their domiciles much as de Tocqueville sought to comprehend America through its politics. To hear another language, I traipse down to the Armenian markets not far from my house and listen to the clerks yell over vat-sized bowls of olives. When I am feeling especially venturesome, I climb into the car and drive

to a nearby meadow that has a few wild animals, a sketchy stream and a cool fringe of oak forest. These are places I have come to love partly because they are familiar, but mostly because I've learned to see them in detail.

Of course, noting detail enlivens travel afar as well as at home. Last summer, I visited friends on Deer Isle, a chip of an island off the coast of northern Maine. Half swallowed by pine trees, their cottage perched on a rocky spur overlooking a scatter of smaller islands and beyond, the sea. At night we sat on their porch, watching the sun set over the water, feeling those black pines close in behind us, admiring and dreading the moment when the sun slipped past the brim of the world and left us alone in the dark. On those nights I couldn't help thinking of earlier residents in this lonely place, especially the fishermen's wives. So often solitary, an ocean at their doorsteps, trees at their backs, those women must have braced for the evenings, watching the same light vanishing. How far they must have traveled. Because it seems to me, finally, that travel truly lies in yearning, the outward gaze that lends one the hope that anything may still happen, that there is so much yet to see.