

Wandering in Nascent Spring
April 2020

During the coronavirus quarantine, we who live in this high prairie town, mountain peaks to the west, forested foothills to the east, count our blessings. We have a place to go, where social distancing has never been an issue. Where an hour-long hike or day-long trek might yield one other person, or a family in the distance. Those who break the rule are the pups, galloping to new friends, tails up, sniffing intimately as they slow-walk in circles.

We have this place all year long. Every season. Weekdays and weekends. Even nights, if we can bear the chill. In contrast, the far, craggy mountains keep their distance. The snow, the drifts, the chance of avalanche make us think twice about heading to the peaks. We look eastward instead, to more benevolent settings. What our sons, as tiny boys, named “the little mountains.”

In early spring, just as a few robins flutter into town and begin their laughter-filled song, we pray that spring will come soon. It won't. We know we have April and May to sit through, and we squirm with impatience. We become growly. “We need to get outside,” we say. We've sat much too long waiting for the temperatures to rise above the teens, hoping for the wind to subside, hoping for the ice crust to turn to watery slush. We've sat too much through winter. We've sat through too much winter. And now, we sit through a pandemic.

To fool ourselves into believing warmer weather, we dress in too many layers. We overdo, but during our early spring walk, we delight to the experience of shoving gloves into our pockets, unzipping the coat that covers the fleece that covers the vest. Simply put, we want to sweat. Other people elsewhere are getting to sweat. Why not we?

Early spring hints at the very seasonal transition we have longed for. Early spring walks, though, have their dangers. Ice under fresh snow can cause a fall. A drift that looks packed easily gives way and twists an ankle or a knee. We don't know how far the snow-covered ice extends into the beaver pond, so we shout “Come!” to our Labrador, Chauncey, when he strays too close to the exposed frigid water. He returns reluctantly, confused. When will we sing out, “Go swim, Chauncey, go swim”? When will I sit on the sloping bank while John throws a retrieving stick to the deep middle?

We grab the dog leash and set out. Chauncey races far ahead, blasts into drift after drift, burrowing his nose into the deep snow, rolling and twisting on his back. We've learned our lesson: Hike into the wind for the first half of the journey. The wind will be at our backs on our return, when the waning-sun chill can cut that much further into our layers.

Halfway into our hike, I run to a friend. He towers above my head, three stories high, I estimate. His bulk of a trunk, straight and confident, must be a-yard-and-a-half in diameter. This is Tree, a healthy, huge, perfect specimen of a Ponderosa Pine. I stretch out my arms, lean my head into his bark. Laugh, reader, but I believe he returns the hug. I feel his warmth, I feel comfort from this splendid giant who lived when very few, if any, humans walked primitive trails in these little mountains.

We stay on the visible, wide trails pounded into easy access by skis, snowshoes, and fat bike tires. It is early April, and I refuse to drag out our snowshoes. “Where I’m from,” I tell my husband, “I’d have my surfboard out by now, well waxed for the long, hot summer—.” I go on and on. He’s heard all this every May and April since we married and settled into this high plains town. He no longer listens. I follow my tall husband and wild, happy dog, falling back a bit on the trail that we will stay on. We don’t veer off the trails in early spring. The sun shines one minute, the gray clouds gobble it up the next, and a quick blizzard, the temperature plummeting, sends a hiker into an unforgiving labyrinth. Solid ice is just underfoot of the new dusting of snow.

But isn’t this the season of awakening? Aren’t these walks of rebirth? Yes, the dangers still lurk, but isn’t something else happening? The warmth in late summer comes from the earth, but in early spring, the warmth beats on us from above. At particular spots where the trees part, we close our eyes and turn our faces upward. The black under our eyelids becomes a soft purple, and our shoulder muscles relax. I dare myself to squirm out of my thickly stuffed old ski coat, but no. It is only early April. I cannot spy the song sparrows, usually perched in the uppermost branches of the pine trees, as they erupt in twittering, trilling song.

Heavy layers of leaves, for months under snow, give off a sour-sweet smell as the ice pack thaws to brown juices that will stew in the coming months. It is too early for any change in the aspens, but as I pass them, gently touching their chalky bark, I could swear they’ve been lightly brushed by green. Green has definitely come to a willow branch here and there. At the ends of both aspen and willow branches, rust red buds appear as artists’ brush tips.

In some places on the most trafficked part of the trail, the snow is a light brown. Wait, that isn’t snow. That’s the earth, resurrecting. The next time we walk this familiar path, the brown stain will be wider, and soon, we will pull our warm-weather walking shoes from the back of the coat closet.

Far from us is our destination, the small parking lot where one picnic table remains. This area, once a thriving downhill ski area, is now only a trail hub and a sledding hill for families. I know the whiff I have caught of a campfire’s woodsmoke emanates from there. We might soon smell toasted marshmallows. Might there be mugs of hot chocolate? Might we want the joys of both seasons?