

At Pin Oak

Frank and I took the dogs to Pin Oak Lake this afternoon and ran into God.

Now, God is a personage I don't really believe in. I'm not a church-goer, not even a Christian. When a devout friend of mine asked me what turned me against God, though, I was shocked. I said, "I don't think I've been turned against God."

She said, "But you don't believe in God."

But I believe in something. "I think you and I have a different vocabulary for spirituality," I said. And we left it at that.

Today, however, I wasn't thinking about God or faith or anything else. I was thinking about the beautiful day: the bare branches of the trees, the sere grasses with their spiky seedpods, skeins of geese overhead, the hint of apple cider in the air.

Romeo loves the fall best. His German shepherd/Saint Bernard coat is so thick and heavy he spends summer parked on the air conditioner vent, but in the autumn, he comes alive.

He has been whining since we crossed Broadway on our way east. He knows where we're going, and he's been looking forward to it. He can barely control himself as we drive past the bison and elk farm. He doesn't care about elk; he just knows we're almost there.

When we arrive at last, dog and boy spill out of the van and disappear over the hill while I am still locking up. The dog dashes ahead, prancing in front, his eyes intent on the stick in my son's hand. He is in mid-flight by the time the stick leaves Frank's grasp, and back in a flash begging him to throw it again.

For Romeo (and Frank) the best part of the Pin Oak routine is the romp at the sandy beach. Frank throws the stick far out into the lake and Romeo plunges in, slapping his paws against the water as he tries to keep his head up so he can see the stick. When he lunges for it and turns back, he is silent as an otter cutting through the still water, leaving only a tiny wake.

The sun is neon orange, low on the horizon behind him, and the water is an abstraction of orange, yellow, blue, and silver, Romeo's head silhouetted against it like the black trees against the glowing sun.

"I still think he could swim all the way across."

"Probably," Frank agrees.

"Hey," I say. Even at 46, I am still the instigator, the one most likely to egg someone on to do something slightly reckless. "I'll go across and call him. You stay here."

Romeo and Frank emerge from the weeds as I reach the dock. It looks a heck of a lot farther than it did from the other side. But when Frank tosses the stick, the dog swims toward it — and me — and I call him.

"Bring me the stick, Romeo. Come on, good boy, bring it to me."

As he cuts through the water, I keep up a steady clapping along with my encouraging patter: “Come on, buddy, good dog, you can do it, Romeo, good dog, bring me the stick.” He swims on. A few feet from the dock, he falters, starts to turn back, but realizes he’s closer to me now than he is to Frank. And he makes it, plunging up out of the water and onto the rocks, stick still held fast. He plants his four legs wide and shakes the lake from his coat in a shower of orange and blue and yellow and silver before coming to me for his well-deserved praise.

“I knew you could do it!” I say. “Good boy!” He wags his water-logged tail (which has a sticker branch tangled in it) and kisses me.

Later that night, I stand on the back deck and it occurs to me that our day’s adventure has been about belief. Romeo couldn’t swim across Pin Oak Lake. It’s ridiculous. It’s too far. What if it’s too deep? He could only do it because I believed he could. That’s faith in a nutshell — the idea that someone on the other shore believes in you, and is waiting to welcome you home.

~ Olive Sullivan

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