

EASING INTO EASEMENT

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The question was: What made you decide to do a Conservation Easement?
Well...

“Life is what happens when you’d made other plans” I have interpreted to mean that Life sometimes sets you down a path you’d never meant to take, or even imagined. So it was with my journey toward a Conservation Easement.

I was eight when my parents drove from Cleveland, Ohio to Mt. Shasta, California and returned having made a down payment on 800 acres of Mt. Shasta land. Two years later we moved here but nothing was done with the land until 1969 when 200 acres were sold to finance building a home on it. I took no interest in it until 1980 or thereabouts. I’d been living elsewhere; Berkeley, D.C., the West Indies and Canada but returned when my parents needed care. When they needed institutional care, we hadn’t the funds for it. I ordered an appraisal of the land and was told a timber appraisal was also needed. Being a tree hugger I balked but the appraiser explained that as an antique car, though you may choose not to drive it, has more value if it runs, the board footage in the forest was value that needed to be included. He also said I could stop being concerned about having to sell a portion of the land to finance my parents’ care. That did it.

Being handed stewardship of a piece of the earth is a substantial obligation and I was totally unprepared to shoulder it. My primary concern was “First Do No Harm.” Despite my lingering reservations, Hal, the first Registered Professional Forester (RPF) applied for and got a lifetime Non-Industrial Timber Management Plan (NTMP). Within strict constraints, it allows me to harvest timber, thin, maintain roads and perform related work for the maintenance of a healthy forest. It was a wise move, since harvest permits have become much more difficult and expensive to acquire.

After years of neglect, the first harvest was lucrative and my parents’ care was assured. A couple of rough and disrespectful loggers were hired in ensuing years but with no lasting harm and I learned to be more discriminating. For the most recent necessary harvesting, one forester friend introduced me to another, Mike, (an attractive, gentle-hearted man with whom I fell briefly in love). After talking with him and learning that he shares my appreciation and respect for the earth, I hired him. Both he and the company with which he works have the integrity I value in working with the earth. I was sent both a botanist and wildlife biologist to survey other life forms. The biologist knew where best to place the owl nesting boxes I’d bought and where not to log to safeguard any nesting goshawks. I’d found trustworthy partners.

There are several springs on the land and Mike suggested that we expand a couple of them to create wildlife ponds. So we did! Judging by the footprints, they seem to be much appreciated, and it has given me great pleasure to not only protect and preserve the land for the wild creatures but to maybe improve habitat. Fish and Wildlife are pleased.

I resisted moving to the inherited home until ten years after my parents “graduated.” Once here, the earth began to work its magic. Animals have always been my friends, teachers, healers, playmates and family but my love for the earth came stealthily. A line from David Frazier’s “13 Moons” describes it: “We live in such a habitual state of inattention that when something grabs us and shakes us into consciousness, what we perceive appears sacred.” Indeed. I awoke to discover a love of the earth so deep it sometimes brings tears.

I became aware of how, when I’m feeling disconnected, a walk through the forest provides emotional nurturing. The trees are role models for flexibility, dancing with the wind but steadfast. The seasons are more visible; tiny white, yellow, lavender and blue wildflowers in spring; wild sweet pea in summer (a weed, but so pretty!), golden maple leaves both canopy and carpet in fall. Constant evidence of wild neighbors: bear, deer, the rare bobcat, a lion whose presence is known only by a footprint or scat, evening coyote calls, owl hoots on forest walks, the fox who could be called for treats and sat only three feet from me, ears in constant motion. Ubiquitous, busy blue jays and squirrels. Snakes, lizards, tree frogs and the raccoon who found its way into the kitchen through the dog door. All precious.

I share the Native American belief that all beings are one spirit and address them as All Our Relations. Nature is my connection to what they and I call Spirit; a source of wisdom, knowledge, comfort and challenge and is where I go when I need clarity. Left alone, she’d remain in perfect balance.

As an only child with no heirs and facing inheritance laws, how could I ensure that this land and its inhabitants were safe from defilement when I graduated? In 1967 I had a dance with cancer which threatened to graduate me before I’d had time to prepare. The Shasta Abbey agreed to accept the land but although they share my love and appreciation for the earth they lack the knowledge or experience to manage it. When you love something or someone you want what’s best for them regardless of any potential cost to you. The perfect solution was needed and the Siskiyou Land Trust provided it with their work on my behalf to establish a Conservation Easement. It’s been a long and complex journey but unquestionably worth it. An easement will protect the land and animals I love...forever!

In planning for my own “graduation” all that matters to me are the land and animals. Everything else is just “stuff,” some very nice, to be sure, but just stuff. The family animals have loving homes to go to and the easement cares for the land.

In reading “The Forest Lover” by Susan Vreeland, I learned a Kispiox Indian word which describes my feeling for this piece of the earth so I’ve given it that name.

ILLAHEE: Land that gives comfort.

So the answer to the question is: LOVE.