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When I left for the woods, friends compared me to Thoreau. Culturally, the comparison may have been apt. Thoreau went to the woods “to live deliberately” largely as a response to the second stage of the Industrial Revolution, when the familiar dimensions of time and space—of how long it took news to travel from New York to Boston, for instance, or how long it took to manufacture a shirt—were contracting. The Information boom of the late 1990’s had a similar effect: cell phones, handheld computers, social networking—all of it changed not just Americans’ daily lives but our sense of ourselves in time and space, how alone or un-alone we are, our sense of privacy and pace.

But my move to the woods wasn’t a cultural experiment. It was a personal necessity. Five years earlier, during my junior year at Harvard, a freak accident had blinded me in my right eye. During a pick-up game of basketball, as we scuffled for a rebound, a boy’s finger hooked behind my eyeball and severed its attachment to my optic nerve, the cable that connects the eye to the brain. The pain was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. There was nothing the doctors could do. The loss of vision to my right eye was permanent.

With vision in only one eye, there’s no stereopsis, no depth perception. And without depth perception, the world looked simultaneously flat and permeable, like I’d crossed the threshold into a fantasy land, where nothing was solid, including my sense of myself. I felt as though I’d been caught with a secret I’d forgotten I was carrying. I’d been harboring a double life—one for everyone else, and a different one for me. The one for everyone else was slightly too independent for my parents’ taste, but he was a son to be proud of—a Harvard student, a fine

young man, one who looked like Bob Dylan circa 1964, before Dylan went electric. Probably a future lawyer. At worst a journalist. And thanks to him, I didn't have to worry about the hidden part of me, the part that crept out while I was reading poetry in my dorm room or walking alone by the Charles River, the part whose deepest sense of meaning came from something I couldn't articulate, even to myself.

To compound my disorientation, after the blood dissipated, my eye looked as it always had. The gap between how I presented myself and how people saw me widened into a gulf. And the track I'd been on, which headed toward law school, and the old track of my thinking, which often allowed the comfort of achievement to substitute for meaning, and which had kept me from entering into the passing landscape to forge my own values, became impossible to live by.

I went to the woods because I needed to live without the need of putting on a face for anyone, including myself. I needed to be no one, really, while carrying the hope that my particular no one might feel familiar, might turn out to be someone I had known all along—the core of who I'd been as boy, the core of who I might become as a man. My plan was to find that core by returning to moments of wonder, of pure attention, to become aware of myself by the quality of my perceptions rather than by others' perceptions of me.

In the woods, I developed my own rituals. In fall, day after day, I crouched in the wet grass with the snails, trying to see as slowly as they seemed to. In winter, day after day, I snowshoed into the snowy trees and watched for chickadees, learning to let my eyes go soft, open to movement, rather than stalking branch to branch. I was learning to trust a more generous reality, one that allowed for all I could not see and all that could not be seen in me, one that didn't need hard lines or tracks to make me feel oriented. I became aware of a kind of spiritual

responsibility—the need to go far enough back so there would be nothing else waiting behind, the need to touch the hard edge of reality, and begin from there. For the deepest moments in life—for love, for prayer—we close our eyes. I wanted to see that way, always, even with my eyes open.

Time began to change. There was no clock in the house. No sense of time other than the daylight through the windows and my own sense of pattern—finding my hand on the kettle as it began to tremble, or stepping outside to find the sun a white hole above the highest spruce. I'd never given it much thought, but now clock time seemed bizarre, like we'd domesticated the Earth's motions, housed it in convenient cages, harnessed it as a farm animal to help with our daily work. No longer would I slip the turning of the Earth from my wrist.

I had almost no interaction with people. I had an agreement with a handyman who lived by the Canadian border—when there was a bad storm, he would plow. Sometimes he came; sometimes he didn't. I never called. When he did arrive, a few words about the weather felt like a heart-to-heart. Likewise, when I'd stock up on soup and bread in town, just seeing the cashier up close—the oval shape of her face, the almond shape of her eyes—felt like a revelation. I was what she was: human.

Deep in that first winter, I couldn't imagine returning to Boston. The loneliness had mostly faded—it was just a fact, a part of the weather. I felt at home, in a habitat that fit with my senses, as though some membrane had been dissolved: I was back in the world, rather than outside it. I even began to feel closer to friends. On rare phone calls from my friend Ray, who was in med school in New York City, I found myself listening the way I'd learned to watch for chickadees—not chasing, just picturing everything and letting my mind's eye go soft, until there

was movement in the picture, until the doubts Ray was confiding to me became clear.

But by winter of the second year, there were warning signs. I ate fewer meals. My snow-pants wouldn't stay on my hips. I didn't know it then, but I was down to 120 pounds, as opposed to my normal 155, which at 5'10" was already slender. The world beyond the woods kept pulling farther away. When the phone rang, I didn't answer. It seemed my body was falling and filling with the drifting snow, filling and falling with the changing wind. I felt as though my body had become an open doorway without a house, a doorway that was just a means of awareness for everything passing through it. I no longer spoke. No longer thought, other than in a kind of humming. Images drifted through me the way the reflections of migrating birds drift across a pond. It seemed the day was making itself aware of itself through me. That was all. I told myself this was progress. I was losing surfaces, losing form, which meant I was getting down to rock bottom, to something essential.