

Home

“As would most people in similar situations, we believed that we had acquired a farm. A sheaf of settlement papers and a new payment to make each month supported this conviction. It became clear before long, however, that the farm actually had acquired us.”¹

When I wrote that nearly 20 years ago, we were making the trek between town and the farm mostly on weekends and for holidays which we continued to do for another 15 or 16 years. During that period, I absolutely believed that I knew what the farm had acquired us for and spent the weekends madly rushing around trying to get a week’s worth of work done in two days. Those weekends gradually extended to three then four then sometimes even five days and, a few years ago, I moved here full time. My wife, Charla, still goes back and forth – unwilling or unable to break bonds with old friends, to give up commitments to service organizations and with primary responsibility for her 97-year-old mother – but, for me, this is home.

Once I was living here full time, it dawned on me that there isn’t a week’s worth of work, there’s a lifetime of work and it doesn’t have a beginning, middle or end. Fortunately, the farm – which we’ve named Three Hollows but out of habit still usually refer to as Flintstone, the name of the little town nearby – isn’t in much of a hurry. Life here is a series of cycles, not a project. The farm is teaching me patience which has not always been my strong suit. While I initially thought that I knew what the farm needed, I realize more and more that I don’t. Rather than trying to be a manager, I’ve become absorbed into the corpus of the ecosystem and its rhythms and play whatever role is assigned. I can’t honestly say that I understand how those instructions are transmitted to me but they are. Almost every day except when it’s too hot for me or the older dog, I take long walks in the woods and fields just to see and feel and appreciate and maybe to note one thing or another that I need to get around to sooner or later. But, as I said, the farm’s not in a hurry and neither am I. As am I, the farm is a bit unkempt and seems content to be so.

I don’t want to convey the impression that I’ve somehow morphed into another woodland creature living like a forest gnome with the deer and bears and squirrels. I haven’t and I’m not. I still come up with plans and projects to make life here productive and enjoyable for me and for my family. We put in a pool that our kids and grandkids love but that I rarely use. I’ve built more free-stacked stone walls and perennial flower beds than would be found on most New England farms. I’ve tripled the size of the vegetable garden, ensuring that we will have many times more vegetables than we can possibly figure out what to do with in perpetuity. We built a new “barn” which is really a workshop on the first floor with a studio for Charla on the second. We’ve almost completely renovated the mid-1800s farmhouse, put in a wonderful kitchen and added a soapstone stove for winters. My son, Jordan, and I built a fire pit to roast whole pigs and

¹ From *“Flintstone”*. American Nature Writing: 2001. John Murray, ed. Oregon State University Press.

lamb on and to keep us warm when I'm grilling outside in the winter. We refurbished the guest house and rebuilt the shed at the back of it which is the only remaining part of what had been the original barn and is now trying to evolve into a summer kitchen. We've made the place beautiful and welcoming and comfortable for family and other visitors. If I'm not careful, someone will call it an estate or a compound but it's not – it's my little world and I'm firmly anchored to it.

And it's a pretty self-contained little world. It's almost 200 acres, largely surrounded by a 50,000-acre state forest and at the end of a mile-long gravel road that runs through the property along a little creek in the first hollow. It's about as private as a place can be without being truly remote and isolated. Other than a casual nod or a peremptory greeting at the post office or country store, the only neighbors with whom I interact on a regular basis have four legs, forked tongues or feathers. Except with immediate family, I've never been particularly sociable and, as I've gotten older, I've become even less so. I'm not anti-social. I'm not a hermit. I just enjoy my time alone with the farm. I do have a couple of friends who I see once or twice a year and I enjoy those visits but I most relish having family come into – become part of – my world.

For more than 30 years, my parents, Helene and Herb (who, for reasons long forgotten, I have always called by their first names) owned and were owned by a beautiful and serene piece of land in a picturesque little New England town called Rowe in the Berkshire Mountains of northwestern Massachusetts. As I am anchored here, they were anchored there. They rebuilt and completely renovated the house which was built in the mid-1700s. Herb, a retired pediatrician, became a carpenter and handyman and landscaper. He built stone walls for raised bed gardens in which Helene planted perennial flowers. They put in a vegetable garden and a small orchard. They planted trees and tended the raspberries. From across the mill pond, the reflection of the house and gardens in the water was a perfect painting but one that changed – the palette, the light, the aura – hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute, through each season.

Helene, who is a talented and nationally recognized artist (not always the same thing), approached Rowe (like us, they tend to refer to their home by the name of the town) as both a canvas and a stage. From the first time that she saw it, Helene had a vision of what she wanted it to be – aesthetically, socially and emotionally. She and Herb rebuilt and re-painted and reconfigured and decorated and furnished the inside and outside of the house, planted flowers and shrubs and trees according to her vision and wove themselves into the fabric of the community. They created – from their shared vision – what a century ago would have been called a family home. That construct seems to have been lost somewhere along the way – the idea that a place can be the center of existence for, the soul of, an extended family. I never lived in Rowe for more than a week but, until they moved away, I thought of it as the family home. Now, Flintstone has evolved in its place.

A few years ago, when the house and the 40-mile round trip to the grocery and the distance to their physicians in Hartford got to be too much for them, they sold their home and moved to Maryland where they're closer to my sister and me. When they left their home and friends (unlike me, Herb and Helene are very sociable), a palpable sadness settled over them both. They were adrift, their anchor chain had come loose. Over time, the sadness has eased a

little but a mist of longing and wistfulness still hangs over them. They moved into a delightful condo in the far suburbs of DC, decorated it beautifully, displaying some of their most cherished *objets d'art* collected over a lifetime of travel to all the corners of the world as well as a number of Helene's paintings, and have turned it into a truly warm and comfortable place. But, for them, I don't think it will ever really be home. It's not Rowe. They've sailed the ship that is their life together into a safe harbor and tethered it to a pier but their anchor is long gone.

Although Herb is 92 and Helene will be 90 this month, they still feel comfortable – or at least relatively comfortable – making the 100-mile drive from their house to the farm. I love it when they come, when they become part of my world, and they seem to love it as well. They're very comfortable here and we all enjoy the talks and food. Helene disparages my weeding and Herb give me advice about whatever project I'm working on or, more likely, thinking about. They particularly seem to enjoy the vegetables that I harvest from the garden. Helene has a preference for small food – quail rather than chicken, new English peas, small beets, tiny French green beans – so I actually separate peas and beans and beets by size when I harvest them and save the smaller ones for them to take back.

I spend a lot of time looking out of the kitchen windows, past the flower and herb and vegetable gardens, past what we call the upper field (a badly overgrown meadow trying hard to become part of the forest), past the woods at the edge of the field where our property joins Green Ridge and on to Polish mountain a mile or so to the west. The minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, day-by-day and season-to-season variations in the light and colors and textures give me a feeling of calm and belonging and wonder when I drink my first cup of coffee in the morning or my first glass of wine in the evening or, as is often the case, eat my breakfast or lunch standing up while peering out of them.

Helene also is drawn to the west-facing windows and I often find her looking out of them just as I do. She frequently paints what she sees from those windows and tells me what colors she sees that I don't but there's more to it than that. I think that she's looking past Polish Mountain and on to Rowe – the way a sailor squints at the horizon, not to see something on the horizon more clearly but to look over it to home. We haven't spoken of it in those terms but we don't really need to. I know the sense of belonging, of being part of something that you have only partially created, of being absorbed – of being home. And I know Helene. Somehow, when she's here, I feel that my sense of belonging, of place, of contentment, transfers subliminally to her and I like to think that it helps ease her longing for Rowe, even if just a little and for only a little while. For her 90th birthday, Helene requested that I find a rock in our creek that looks like it came from Rowe for her backyard garden in suburban Washington. Finding granite or basalt here is easier said than done where our dominant geology is sedimentary shale but I'll find one. A rock from Flintstone that looks like it came from Rowe will have just the right poetic symmetry to close the loop on what Helene sees when she looks out of the kitchen window.