

A Song for the Asking
The Electronic Newsletter of
EarthSong Photography
and

EarthSong Photography Workshops: Walking in Beauty

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Hello to All:

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Cannot Get There From Here

There is a distinct possibility that from the vantage point on which I stand this morning I could become guilty of hypocrisy, so let me be quick to say outright that I am not opposed to all roads. In fact some of my best friends are roads, and,



perhaps, therein lies the problem: how I can like some roads and not all of them. Isn't there some sort of unhealthy discriminatory result to be had from such a position which cannot be supported by logic, or otherwise? But I'm way out in front of myself, so let me get back to things more immediately at hand. **Unicoi** was the name it came to be called, derived from the **Tsalagi** word "unega" meaning "white." To what this "white" initially referred is unclear: perhaps to the fact that it had been built and used primarily by white men, or possibly that its route through the high mountains on what is now the Tennessee-North Carolina border meant that it passed through areas often subjected to snow and frost. It has also been suggested that its steps took it, as well, through several of the Tsalagi "peace" towns, and, thus, it had earned the epithet. As with much that is historical, what we

have is largely of the nature of conclusion, and the facts remain obscured, meaning that much of our present perspective on things past, and therefore our behavior with respect to that past is predicated on matters of which our understanding is, at best, unclear.

If I had to decide, based on what is before me this morning, I would be forced to go with “snow and frost”, for what spreads away from my eyes reminds me that this winter has been an unusually cold one, probably the coldest overall in my memory of these old mountains; and I can’t help but wonder about the winter of 1819-20 just after the Unicoi Road, or, as it was more properly known, the **Unicoi Turnpike** opened for business. There was no National Weather Service then, and perhaps the details of such things didn’t seem important enough to keep with accuracy in those days. What can be known is this: for more than a thousand years – long, long before a white man ever looked on it with a commercial glint in his eye – it was a path that was known by other names. It was called the “Overhill Trading Path” and the “Tellico Path”, and it was a path called Unicoi long before it was a road of that designation; so the explanation that it was built by white men seems the least plausible as a name source. It was an integral part of an



intricate system of footpaths used by First Americans from back in the dim mists of time to carry trade goods, to hunt, as well as to wage war and conduct the other affairs of diplomacy; to travel from place to place as humans have always done for no other reason than to make known to themselves the wonders and great beauty of the wide world they live in.

In more recent historical times, the extended path, of which Unicoi was a portion, had its southern terminus far to the southeast on the coast at what is now Charleston, South Carolina. At its northern end, on the Little Tennessee River at the confluence of the Tellico and not far from where their combined flow merged with the mighty Tennessee, were the great villages of **Tanasi** and **Chota**. The Unicoi Path, itself, had earlier connected these villages, as well as the neighboring metropolis of **Great**

Tellico, with other Tsalagi settlements in the piedmonts of today’s South Carolina and Georgia; and between these neighboring communities in the Plains

of Tellico, the route was also a portion of the **Warrior's Path** that ran from the southwestern-most communities of the Nation all the way into what is now southwestern Virginia and beyond, to the country of the **Shawnee**, more often enemies than friends.

Georgia's Unicoi Gap, where I now stand, is on a great watershed of the Blue



Ridge Mountains. Behind me, to the south, near the base of this ridge, the waters of many small seeps and springs come together in the flow of one of the South's great rivers, the Chattahoochee, which, after an initial turn to the southeast, will run up against the western slope of the Gainesville Ridge and be spun to the southwest, slicing

diagonally across North Georgia to form the boundary with Alabama before absorbing the Flint on the Florida border and becoming the Apalachicola to enter the Gulf of Mexico in a great fecund bay teeming with marine and estuarine life of many species. Unicoi Gap is the lowest point along this section of the Blue Ridge for many miles – a way through.

Looking north I observe the trickling beginnings of another great river, the Hiwassee, which I have known and loved for many years. As it originates in

Georgia, I choose to use Georgia's spelling rather than that of her sister states Tennessee and North Carolina (Hiwassee).

The drainage of the Hiwassee is a meandering transect through northeast Georgia, across southwestern North Carolina, and into southeastern Tennessee before joining its waters



with those of the Tennessee. Today much of its course is across a series of high valleys of rich agricultural productivity and punctuated by a pair of recreational lakes built by the Tennessee Valley Authority to bring cheap electricity not only to the citizens of Appalachia, but equally to the production of aluminum in Alcoa,

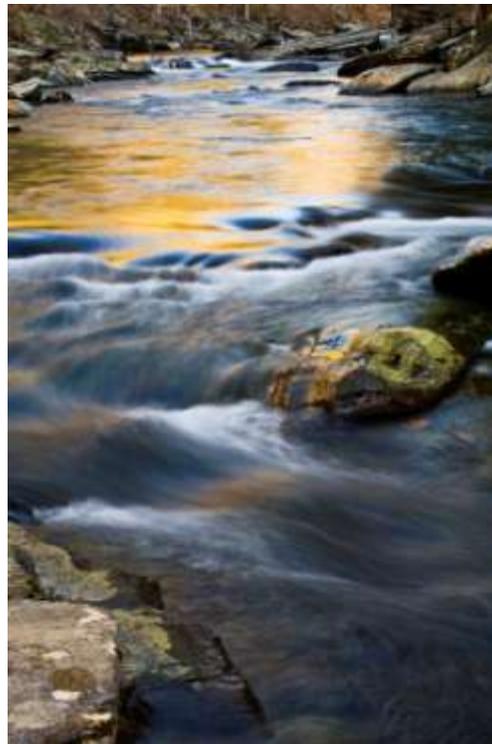
Tennessee, and the output of the atomic city of Oak Ridge. How completely different this trace would have appeared to the countless Tsalagi who transited it



season upon season, generation after generation, before the coming of the Europeans; different even to the determined pioneers of the Appalachian Wilderness who came in the name of private property or in the name of the things the land could offer up.

Beginning in 1813, and by the summer of 1819, major changes were wrought upon this ancient footway. From the upstream-most navigable point on the Savannah River system, which is actually on one of its major formative tributaries, the Tugaloo, in present-day Franklin County, Georgia, and running all the way to Arthur Henley's ferry on the Little Tennessee River at ancient Chota, a group of Georgia and Tennessee entrepreneurs acquired permission from the Tsalagi to widen the path into a commercial roadbed, no less than twelve (12) and as often as possible twenty (20) feet wide.

In relating this change I am mindful of a story told by **Wendell Berry** in one of my favorite collections of his essays entitled *The Art of the Common Place*. The essay is titled "A Native Hill," and it relates his decision to return to his native Kentucky and forego a blossoming literary career in the bright lights, big city of New York. It is one of the most beautiful odes to place I have ever read. Not only had Berry chosen to return home to continue with whatever it was that he was to become, he had chosen to return to the very spot on the land where his ancestors had lived for generations and where he had spent his childhood. In "...Hill" he tells the story of the coming of the first road to that part of central Kentucky, and he uses these words: "The difference between a path and a road is not only the obvious one. A path is little more than a habit that comes with knowledge of a place. It is a sort of ritual of familiarity. As a form, it is a form of contact with a known landscape. It is not destructive. It is the perfect adaptation, through experience and familiarity of



movement to place; it obeys the natural contours; such obstacles as it meets it goes around. A road, on the other hand, even the most primitive road, embodies a resistance against the landscape. Its reason is not simply the necessity for movement, but haste. Its wish is to avoid contact with the landscape; it seeks so far as possible to go over the country, rather than through it; its aspiration, as we see clearly in the example of our modern freeways, is to be a bridge; its tendency is to translate place into



space in order to traverse it with the least effort. It is destructive, seeking to remove or destroy all obstacles in its way. The primitive road advanced by the destruction of the forest; modern roads advance by the destruction of topography.”

In offering these words I make no statement as to the need for a given road, nor am I speaking in abstract philosophical terms; I am using Wendell Berry’s comments to describe what I also believe to be a truth in our relationship to the natural world. Whether they are necessary or not, roads, by their very nature, are destructive of the land over which they travel; and even the incredible beauty of the Blue Ridge Parkway, or the Cherohala Skyway, is not exempt from this truth.



By the time the entrepreneurs who built the Unicoi Turnpike opened their tollgates for business in 1819, the path had been a conduit for trade between the Tsalagi and the colonists in the piedmont and on the coast for many years. It is recorded that the first white men known to have crossed the Overhill Trading Path

were traders from Charleston, South Carolina in 1690. They came on foot and leading pack animals laden with goods for which they sought skins and pelts, primarily deer, for the British markets in London and throughout the empire. The fact that more than a century later profit-seekers would be willing to go to

expense of widening the pathway into an actual road gives some indication of the success of the Unicoi Path as a route for commerce, though it is unlikely that its builders had much sense of it as a road from which the beauty of the mountains

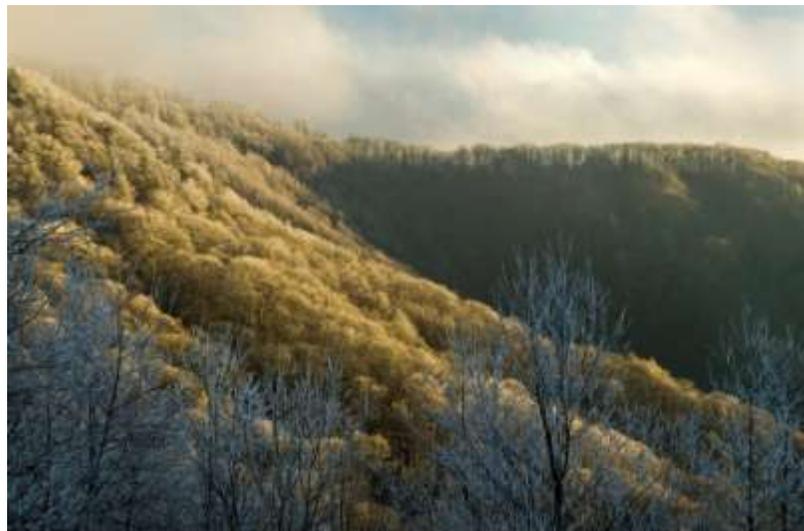


would be on display. Still, its place in the history of the Southern Appalachian Mountain region of the United States is well beyond secure, and the mystery to me is that so few people seem to know anything about it, for its role was anything but insignificant.

In 1756, in response to a perceived threat

from the French, who controlled the Mississippi River Valley to the west and who were involved in an intense struggle with the British for control of the continent, a company of British Regulars and two companies of South Carolina Militia, answering an entreaty from the Tsalagi, built a fort on the banks of the Little Tennessee River at the northern end of the ancient path near Chota. It was given the name Fort

Loudoun. It was the very first British outpost west of the Southern Appalachian divide, and during the four years of its existence, it played a key role in thwarting any French plans to expand eastward into the mountains. All of the building materials, other than the logs themselves, used in



Loudoun's construction, including the twelve cannons that were the fort's artillery, were carried on horseback over the Unicoi Path from the South Carolina Colony.

During the American Revolution, as is often the case in the process of a nation's evolution, alliances had changed. The colonists and their overlords the British were the antagonists, with the Tsalagi caught in the middle. The upshot was that the Cherokee sided with the British and, thus, found themselves under frequent attack from the colonials fighting for their independence. The Unicoi Path

became a road that bore bloodshed to and from both sides of the mountains. Pioneer fighters of the likes of John Sevier led his soldiers on regular raids against Tsalagi villages along the Little Tennessee and lower Hiwassee River valleys. He even made a campaign against several villages on the south side of Unicoi Gap toward the upper Hiwassee's waters, using the old footpath as his route of march. The Tsalagi answered with warriors such as Dragging Canoe, Tsi'yu-gunsini, the son of Attakullakulla, who had always sought to be on good terms with the whites. Tsi'yu-gunsini's efforts to preserve his homeland have long earned him remembrance as one of the greatest warriors produced by the Ani-Yunwiya.



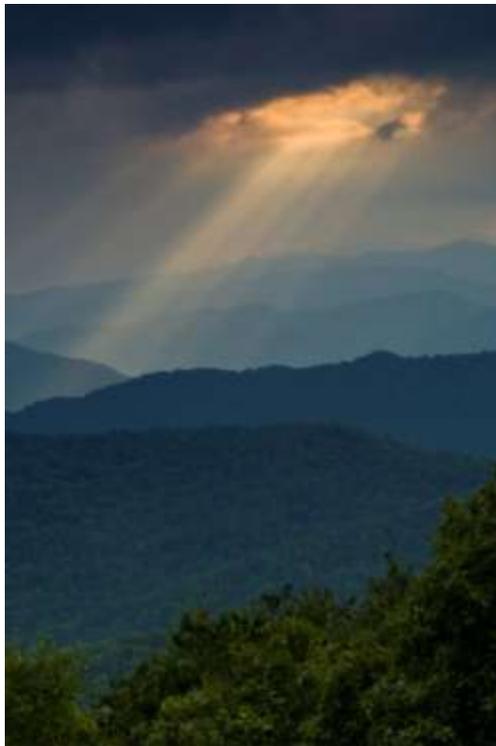
In all of these things the Unicoi Path was a living memory running along the ground, moving with the land and through the land into the vast echoes of time, each step a mantra, a reminder, a connection. And even though its character was dramatically changed once the trace was widened and the roadbed was installed, the turnpike continued to bear close witness to the everyday life of the surrounding place. As much as for any other purpose, the new road served as a way of moving livestock and other agricultural commodities from the fertile



Tennessee Valley area surrounding the growing town of Knoxville to the awaiting buyers on, or near, the coast: Charleston and Georgia's commercial centers of Savannah and Augusta. There is, though, a part of the history of Unicoi Turnpike that can only be considered with a deep sorrow. It

grew out of a greed so unspeakable as to be beyond rational words, and although the circumstances surrounding it would have occurred eventually – and, thus, the thing itself would have eventually occurred – it was also spurred on by the

discovery of that yellow metal which has always seemed to have so corruptive a power over the actions of men. More than twenty years before the Forty-niners flocked to the gold fields of the margin of California's Sacramento Valley and the adjoining Sierra Nevada, gold was discovered near **Coker (Coqua) Creek, Tennessee** at the foot of the great Unicoi Mountains. By the early 1830's several thousand diggers had invaded the land of the Tsalagi, seeking their fortunes regardless of the blatant trespass of which they were guilty, in violation of treaty. Unwilling and unable to contain or expel the ravenous hoard, the United States Government abetted by the States of Tennessee and, especially, Georgia, spurred its efforts to evict the Cherokee completely from their ancestral homelands, already much reduced by previous concessions. In March, 1836, the U.S. Senate ratified the spurious **Treaty of New Echota** authorizing the removal of the entire Nation to the Indian Country of the Oklahoma Territory. In all, some twenty-six forts were ultimately constructed in



to raid, ambush, and escape along.

which the Tsalagi were to be held awaiting deportation to the west. Several of these, including Forts Butler and Armistead were located along the Unicoi Road at present-day Murphy, North Carolina and Coker Creek; and, thus, for some 3,000 Cherokee the old roadway was the beginning of the "**Trail Where They Cried**", Nu na hi du na tlo hi lu i, known to history as "**The Trail of Tears.**"

Less than a quarter of a century would pass when armed conflict would, again, wind its way across the venerated path. This time white men would aim their weapons at each other, and brothers would seek to kill brothers. In the Southern Appalachians of North Carolina and Tennessee there were no army-sized engagements during the years of the Civil War, but guerilla bands terrorized each other and the local citizenry on both sides of Unicoi Gap, using the road

Eventually, it seems, human beings get tired of fighting with each other and turn to other pastimes, and with it all the old road ran its course. Even into the early years of the twentieth century, the Unicoi Turnpike received travelers going to and from the valleys of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina, and the piedmonts and coastal plains of Georgia and South Carolina; but new roads gradually superseded its value as a way to move commerce or people across the mountains and by the 1920's it had fallen into disuse. As farms expanded and forests regenerated the signs of the roadway ever having existed became more and more difficult to discern, until today its visibility can be found in only a few scattered places.



One of those is where my journey has taken me on this day, to the reconstructed presence of old Fort Loudoun at the watersmeet of Tellico and Little Tennessee and to the museum on adjoining Tsalagi

land that honors the birthplace of **Sequoyah, George Gist**, whom history records as the only member of an “illiterate” people to ever develop an effective writing system. I have followed the trace of the Unicoi Road from the crest of the Blue Ridge in Georgia’s Unicoi Gap to its northern terminus in the Tennessee Valley, and I have tried to be faithful to its route as nearly as I could, perhaps because roads seem to be a lot on my mind.

You see, I love these mountains as much as life. When I am in them, which I am in every moment possible, they are like a second skin that I wear – that enfolds every square centimeter of my body; that becomes the flesh and bone of my existence; that is the blood flowing in my veins. When they cry, I taste salt; and they seem now, to me, to be crying.

I do not exist in blind opposition to progress, but I very much exist in opposition to blind progress, and, as I write this, there are two roads in various stages of planning and/or implementation that will, in my mind, if they are ever constructed, or completed, wind – no, slice is a much more



accurate term – through these ancient hills as rank examples of blind progress. The first of these roads is a proposed interstate highway with the designation **I-3**, which is intended to connect three of the old Unicoi Road terminals: Knoxville,

Augusta, and Savannah, and the second consists of two pieces of a limited access four-lane highway with the appellation

“Corridor K”, an Appalachian Regional Commission route that is designed to link Chattanooga, Tennessee and Asheville, North Carolina, crossing as



it does some of the most sensitive, and beautiful, mountain lands in the entire region. One of these areas is the Ocoee Gorge section of the southeastern-most corner of Tennessee and the other is the Cheoah Bald area in Graham County, North Carolina, east of Robbinsville.

One of the possible routes for Interstate-3 would carry it over much of the course I have traveled today from Unicoi Gap in the Blue Ridge to Murphy, creating a four-lane, divided highway gash through the entire upper Hiawassee River Valley. Corridor K in Tennessee would destroy one of the most beautiful river gorges in the Southeast, a site that hosted the 1996 Olympic whitewater competition; and the North Carolina segment would, among other things, create a 2,870' tunnel under a mountain crossed by the Appalachian Trail and dump its concrete ribbons out into one of the most bucolic mountain valleys anywhere on earth. For what purpose? So that those who wish to do so can dart across the mountains in the isolation of their vehicles, like the 95% of the visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Park who never even get out of their cars as it is? These roads are certainly not needed for commerce. The vast majority of people who come to the mountains do so precisely to get away from the outrageous uproar of the nation's cities. They are seeking the solitude and scenery of these hills, and they certainly don't want to be reminded of the urban jungles they have temporarily escaped. The commerce that is needed here is that which supports the reason people come: the feeling of peace and the restoration of body and soul. For me the greater question is a much simpler one: Why do we seem so hell-bent determined to destroy the entire face of the earth with roadbeds? I believe that Wendell Berry's observations are spot on the mark: A road by its very nature is a resistance to the land. It cannot help but be destructive. It cannot do other than seek to remove whatever looms in its path and in so doing enact inalterable damage to the natural world through which it travels. It cannot in any way be mistaken for a thing of beauty and it cannot in any way enhance the beauty of the

land it traverses, especially if it is a multi-lane construct primarily designed for the abstractions of speed and convenience. Our existing roads could probably stand to be improved, but we certainly do not need more of them.



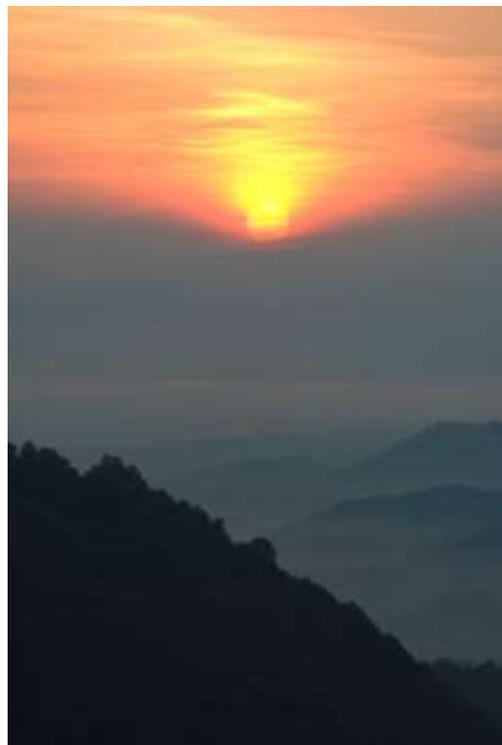
This country has been blessed with such tremendous natural beauty that it is almost beyond the mind's capacity to comprehend, or the senses power to appreciate. Such a diversity of form and abundance of life sometimes seems so immeasurable as to be unchanging and everlasting. From the tops of many of the highest peaks around, the mountains appear to be immutable – the same today as when the soldiers of Juan Pardo left them in 1567.

Do not allow yourself to be fooled. It is not true. I began coming to these mountains more than half a century ago, as a boy of eight; and I have lived in them now for more than a score. I have watched as the rolling countryside has disappeared to the

developer's dozier and the commercial interest. If the National Park Service ever announced that it would be willing for a road between Fontana and Cades Cove to be built over Gregory Bald, someone would start construction immediately. Such is our desire for gold.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that all change is bad, or that the progress of "civilization" is all wrong. We cannot turn back the march of time that brought us here. Technology has given us much that is good, and roads have allowed that good to become spread more equitably across the landscape. If it is uncontrolled technology, of which modern road building is surely an example, that has brought us to this place, then it is only the wise application of technology that will hold us back from the edge of the abyss into which we stare.

My concern is much more immediate. It is as the proverb says, "We have not been given this earth by our parents; we have only borrowed it from our children." In the simple act of appreciating the beauty of



nature around us, we come to understand the truth of this wisdom and to begin

to see that each of us has a role to play, whether large or small, in preserving this beauty, not only for ourselves, but for our children's children. Beauty is the light we hold before us to illuminate the dark corners of our baser tendencies, to tell us that we are, indeed, a part of all that we behold of the wonder of creation. Will another road reveal more than that?

What's Now?

Stillness Begins to Stir

(He) is a keen and delicate observer of nature – a genuine observer, which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness. He is familiar with beast, fish, fowl, and reptile, and has strange stories to tell of adventures, and friendly passages with these lower brethren of mortality. Herb and flower, likewise, wherever they grow, whether in garden, or wild wood, are his familiar friends. He is also on intimate terms with the clouds and can tell the portents of storms. It is a characteristic trait, that he has a great regard for the memory of the Indian tribes, whose wild life would have suited him so well; and strange to say, he seldom walks over a plowed field without picking up an arrow-point, a spear-head, or other relic of the red men – as if their spirits willed him to be the inheritor of their simple wealth.

- **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, writing in 1842, recording his first impressions of Henry David Thoreau, when Thoreau was 24, from **The American Notebooks**

I will long remember 2010 as the year that winter returned. There had already been a couple of dustings when, on December 18, 2009, a fierce storm blew into these mountains dumping up to 16" of snow in some locations, including Willow



Creek Gap on the Haywood-Buncombe County, North Carolina Line. Within a couple of days the temperatures dropped and there began a spell of cold weather during which daytime highs did not make it out of the 30's for nearly two weeks, nor out of the 20's for many of those days. Since that initial

storm, there seems to have been established a cycle in which a new round of frozen precipitation, mostly new snow, has fallen over some portion of Western North Carolina or Southeastern Tennessee about every 5-6 days and lower temperatures have been an ever-present fact of daily life.

I have read accounts in the histories and anecdotes of these hills describing winters when snows would begin in December and lie mostly unmelted on the

higher mountains until March, but I had no sense of what such an experience could be like until now; and learning to live with this face of a mountain winter has been an interesting experience.

The higher elevations of Great Smoky Mountains National Park have, indeed, often been a wonderland this winter, with the primary challenge being working with the wind that has usually accompanied the fronts.

What has been happening is one thing, but what is in store going forward is something else. Over the past several years March has been counted on for at least one, if not two, sizeable snowfalls, with another coming in early April and often accompanied by a late freeze with the potential to do considerable damage to budding plants, whose spring stirring seems to have come earlier by degrees year to year.

You may recall that I usually scout Cove Hardwood Nature Trail on the last day of February to gain some indication of how the season seems to be progressing. This year, I was a day late and Cove Hardwood was under a blanket of snow. It still is, but I



would be willing to bet that there is some stirring taking place. What I would also bet is that it is not nearly as far along as in recent years.

Spring will come, of course, but somehow I think it will arrive in a more timely fashion than has been its recent custom, and by that I mean that early flowers will likely appear during the first ten days of April rather than during the last week of March. The upside of this, hopefully, will be that if an April snow/freeze does occur, the early growth will be less severely impacted than has been the case in recent times.

On my scouting trip I could not find any indication of the early bloomers such as bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), nor any of the hepaticas, especially sharp-lobed (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *acuta*). It is this tiny flower that, according to mountain folklore, tells farmers to get ready for their spring

planting. In recent years I have found hepatica blooming on my February

scouting trip. Its absence is a good sign for a later bloom. Trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*), another early face, has green, leathery leaves that overwinter at ground level, so they can be seen year-round; however, there is no sign of the cream-colored flowers, but they will come in late-March. In fact, by the time another issue of “**A Song...**” comes along, nearly all of the early spring bloom will have occurred. Rather than trying to list even most of the blossoms



to look for over the next two months, I want to give you some resources that I would highly recommend become additions to your nature library. First there is **Wildflowers of the Smokies**, produced by the **Great Smoky Mountains Association**, with **Peter White** as lead author. The expanded version is an excellent volume to carry with you whenever you're in the woods of the Southern Appalachians. There is also **Great Smoky Mountains Wildflowers**, the



Revised and Expanded Fifth Edition, by **Campbell, Hutson, Hutson, and Sharp**.

This is another excellent and easily portable reference that I always carry whenever blooms are happening.

Wildflowers of Tennessee, **Jack Carmen's** masterwork, is

another wonderful resource. It is now available in a spiral-bound edition that makes it very user-friendly. Finally there is **Richard Smith's Wildflowers of the Southern Mountains**. All of these are with me when I travel during flower season. There are more specialized treatises on trilliums, orchids, and other families; and they can often provide greater in-depth information on a difficult identification question, but when vehicle space becomes a problem, the basic volumes serve quite well. All of these can be purchased at Park Visitor Centers.

This has been an El Niño winter, which has given the Southern Mountains a store of precipitation that has more than erased the drought conditions that have existed in recent years. With all the snow on the ground and the moisture in the ground, conditions are ripe, in my mind, for a significant spring flood, which I certainly hope does not occur; however, if precipitation continues at the present pace, such an event would not come as a surprise.

What this does mean is that there is plenty of water in all Smokies streams. The flow is exhilarating, but remember the awesome power of moving water when working around any sizeable streambed and be very careful of slippery rock surfaces.

Another portent of all this moisture and cold weather is, I believe, that moss on Smokies' boulders will be lush and green. Places such as Roaring Fork and Middle Prong of Little Pigeon in Greenbrier, as well as Middle Prong of Little in Tremont, especially its primary tributaries Lynn



Camp Prong and Thunderhead Prong, should provide excellent opportunities for the exploration of this potential. Again, remember that moss can often be unstable and slippery, so be cautious as you move about.

Sunrise and sunset during March, April, and May cover a broad range of times that see days get longer and longer, and, thus, sunrise becoming earlier and sunset being later as the days and months progress. From **March 1-13, sunrise** is from **7:04 a.m.** to **6:48 a.m.** and **sunset** is from **6:28 p.m.** to **6:38 p.m.** The **Daylight Savings Time** change takes place on March 14, so from **March 14 -31, sunrise** is from **7:46 a.m.** to **7:22 a.m.** and **sunset** is from **7:39 p.m.** to **7:54 p.m.**

In **April, sunrise** is from **7:21 a.m.** to **6:43 a.m.** and **sunset** is from **7:54 p.m.** to **8:19 p.m.**

In **May, sunrise** is from **6:42 a.m.** to **6:19 a.m.** and **sunset** is from **8:19 p.m.** to

8:43 p.m. These times approximate the sunrise at Luftee Overlook and the

sunset at Morton Overlook, and since you'll want to arrive at either of them at least a half hour early for the pre-dawn and late afternoon light, you should be safe within a couple of minutes either way. Remember that on March 31, Clingman's Dome Road is scheduled to reopen for the season, and for the first couple of weeks in April the parking lot at Clingman's is both a sunrise and a sunset location before the sun slips over the crest of the Smokies and graces Morton



Overlook with its presence. From then until early-September, The Dome should be primarily considered as a sunrise spot, and a good one at that. During March and early-April, Luftee Overlook is at its finest as a sunrise location. The solar disk may be in a more appealing position with respect to the valley during the winter, but with no color in the nearground foliage, it lacks the vibrancy then that it affords in early spring. In winter it offers the possibility of a



great black and white situation which should not be overlooked. For most of March, the sun shades to the right of the nearground ridge at the left of the overlook. After that – beginning in April – the sun moves further to the left behind the ridge and even behind the main crest of the

Smokies where Thomas Divide abuts the crest ridge. Thus, in March, Luftee and Clingman's are the premier locations for early and late light. Luftee is at nearly 5,000' and the parking lot at The Dome is about 6300', so the early and late hours can be quite chilly. Remember to dress accordingly with layers of good fleece and a warm hat or cap.

In my mind one of the terrific attractions of the Smokies in March and early-April

is the quality of the light itself. The haze that will begin to build once the new foliage starts to erupt has not yet become a factor, and so the light has a soft, but intense, luminance to it that is nothing short of spiritual.

The slumbering stillness of winter has held the mountains in its grip with a fierceness to which we have, of late, been unaccustomed. It is, however, not a novel act. These ancient hills have seen winter's ferocity over untold ages often to a degree that we humans cannot fathom, and they have survived. They will survive once again; and in the stirring that is their annual rite of renewal they will burst forth with a beauty of form that mocks the sleep of the cold and sings a song of activity in the face of immobility, of life in the face of death, and of joy in the face of adversity.

A Tip is Worth...?

Coaching the Artist Within

The loftiest work will always be the work that maintains an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending. Then, every once in a while, a new world appears, different from everyday reality, and yet the same, full of innocent insecurity, called forth for a few hours by the power and longing of genius.

Albert Camus

from the essay "Create Dangerously"

A life of creativity is much like any other life: at its best and in its finest moments it involves a fine balance between what is serendipitous and what is carefully considered and chosen.

When it was my good fortune to have an image honored in a way that was completely unexpected, a path was opened before me that led ultimately to this place where I now find myself. I could not have blueprinted this fortuity in any way, had I tried. Sometimes, I believe, plans belong to humans and sometimes they belong to the Universe. It is the planning that falls within the human sphere that I want to consider, once again, for a while.

We are now at the **fifth segment** of a five-part series of explorations on the nature of the creative process taken from **Eric Maisel's** classic study of striving to reach the highest expression of our creative potential, **Coaching the Artist**



Within. The previous four installments can be found in sequence in the quarterly issues of "A Song for the Asking" from 2009.

In this issue I want to talk about the **tenth** and **eleventh skills** Maisel discusses

in this wonderful book, which I would highly recommend be found somewhere on one of your bookshelves. **Skill #10** is described as “**Planning and Doing**”, and **Skill #11** Maisel calls “**Upholding Dreams and Testing Reality.**”

As an artist I find planning to be, perhaps, the most difficult part of my process. I am much better at doing; but doing in the absence of a carefully considered plan of action ultimately becomes a rather empty gesture, and I often wonder why it should be that the planning element seeks to elude me – or, probably more accurately, why I commonly seek to exclude it.

Maisel offers three phrases that, I think, once they are sufficiently fleshed out provide a good explanation: “**making mistakes, falling short, and hurting your heart...**” The reluctance to plan is apparently a common affliction among artistic sensibilities, arising from a host of fears – fear of making a mistake, fear of failure, fear of being rejected or otherwise hurt. The Diné people have an



expression, “Fear is a demon, he will kill you if he can.” And, while an actual murder may never be committed, if the result of fear is a paralyzing inactivity, then something akin to death has, nonetheless, occurred. As Maisel suggests, “We must overcome (these fears), transcend them, move past them, and argue ourselves into an affirmative, life-loving stance.” When we have given ourselves permission to do this, we likewise give ourselves the capacity to plan, to act on those plans, and to move forward into a greater creativity than we have known.

In order to facilitate this, a **five-part approach** may be helpful: **1. Let your short-term plan**, that is to say, what you are currently working on or toward, **be a simple one**: For example, “I intend to photograph every week.” The more complex you make your short-term plan, the more difficult it becomes to carry it into action.

2. Create a flexible long-term plan: This plan should be based on the creative mission you have set for yourself, and reveal something of your sense of

your creative journey. It should be festooned with signs that let you know if you are going in the right direction and where you are at a given moment. **3. Let your long-term be sensible:** If your plan is to make a vocation of your

creativity, can it support you? The creation of a plan is a high-spirited affair in which you readily acknowledge your passion, but if the reality of your journey in this moment is that your passion will not pay the bills, then it amounts to a wistfulness that cannot be sustained. In hard, cold terms, is your plan realistic?



4. Let the plan fit you: If you plan to photograph every week, can you set aside sufficient time to actually do photography in such a way that it is more than mere documentation and provides you with the circumstances to actually engage in creative work? In other words, if you can only photograph at noon when you have



the opportunity to photograph, even if the light at noon is more often provident than not, you are precluded from the richness of early and late-light opportunities. Does that fit with your idea of photographic creativity? The notion is straightforward: just be honest with yourself about what works for you and whether your

plan allows for your achieving it successfully. **5. Revisit your plans**

frequently: This applies to both your immediate plan as well as your long-term plan. Query yourself on your holding to both plans as set out, and if you find that you have deviated from either of them, recommit yourself to what you have established. Be realistic with yourself, and if a plan needs to be altered, alter it for the sake of providing yourself with something that you can achieve.

As Maisel points out, “The deepest fear about making plans is about taking action, period: that it won’t be the “right” action. And his suggested solution to

this dilemma is equally compelling, “What has helped me is to remember that not taking action is like killing my creative self and that accepting being creative



means making mistakes and messes.

Upholding Dreams and Testing

Reality is a full-blown analytical development of the sensibility of your plans as evaluated through your regular re-visitiation of them. What an ultra-fine and thin line it seems to be to walk between holding to your dream on the one hand and constantly checking reality on the other, and yet there is absolutely no escaping the necessity of doing both. For to be able to do both is to place

yourself squarely in the optimum living space for your creative soul, in the space where you can dream the art you wish to create and make it real in the arena of everyday existence. The dream is the desire and the passion manifest in flesh and bone and the reality is the hours spent learning the mechanics and chasing light and post-processing and printing and talking with

galleries and buyers. Creativity, itself, is the tension between the dream and

reality. The dream is the inner compulsion of what might be, the vision of the world in your mind’s eye, and reality is the manifestation of that compulsion in film or pixels. Without the dream your vision is a blank screen, an empty canvas; without reality there is no vision to be shown. The greatest obstacle the creative person must overcome according to Eric Maisel is the problem of too much reality.

While, on the one hand, reality must always be honored, it must never be allowed to run so far amok in your life that it crushes the dream within you. How delicate the balance that must be achieved in the name of creativity between the light and airy fragility of the dream you hold and the heavy ponderousness that reality can so readily become. Yet it is this very same reality that you must face each day, the matrix in which your dream must find its place.



Perhaps, though our desire may well be otherwise, the balance is optimally seen

as a dynamic and moving fusion, so that both can be embraced and accepted for what they are: one, a state that lifts our spirits to the heavens ; and the other an understanding of the material side of existence that reminds us of the humanity we share.

As for EarthSong...

Walking in Beauty

As I walk with Beauty,
As I walk, as I walk
The universe is walking with me
In beauty it walks before me
In beauty it walks behind me
In beauty it walks below me
In beauty it walks above me
Beauty is on every side
As I walk, I walk with beauty

Traditional Diné Prayer

It seems like months ago that I was writing here about the excitement I felt at the compilation and announcement of the 2010 EarthSong Photography Workshop schedule, and now it is actually here... time to go have an adventure. Before I get into that, however, there are a few events I wish to acknowledge, some recently past and some recently to come.

The **20th Annual Wilderness Wildlife Week** this past January was an excellent event, both the mini-workshop with **Kendall Chiles** and **Harold Stinnette**, and the audio/visual program which was done the night before. Preparing for WWW this year gave me the chance to create a half dozen new A/V programs on various subjects using an all-digital line-up of images, many never shown before. Of the several hundreds of images used in these programs no more than 4-5 were originally slides that had been scanned. The remainder all began life as digital files. I will be using these programs in workshops throughout the year and will also be using them for programs such as the one I'll be doing for the **Intentional Growth Center** at **Lake Junaluska, North Carolina** on **May 3**, as well as the **Transylvania County (Brevard, NC)**



Library on May 18 to celebrate **National Photography Month**.

I've also created several new instructional programs that I will be using in upcoming workshops and for venues such as **John C. Campbell Folk School**, where I will be teaching **April 25-May 2** and again **August 29-September 4**. I will be using some of them, as well, for the **Nature Photography Certification Elective Course** I'll be teaching for the **Sarah P. Duke Gardens at Duke University, May 6-7** and the **Grandfather Mountain (NC) Annual Nature Photography Weekend at Grandfather Mountain, June 4-6**. If one of these programs is in your area and you'd like more



information, just let me know and I'll be glad to put you in touch with the right people to get you involved.

Perhaps the program about which I am most excited is a completely new idea I've chosen to call "**On Being a Fussy Photographer.**" The concept of the program and the idea for the title came from one of my students and friend, **Jean DeKraker**, growing out of some time we spent together during a week at John C. Campbell Folk School last year. Over the course of the late fall and early winter I developed the idea further and ultimately created a program around the things Jean and I had discussed and done.

I find that these ideas and concepts are of very broad general application to a great many people on their creative journeys and I am very excited about sharing them. I've just completed the initial offering of this

program, which was done as a two-day event for the **Land of Waterfalls Camera Club in Transylvania County, North Carolina**, and **John C. Campbell Folk School** has already added it as a weeklong class to its **2011** schedule.

As you can see, it's been a very busy winter and now it's time to take the show on the road. I'll be leaving the mountains on May 7 headed south for the first two workshops of the season, **Savannah, Georgia** and **Charleston, South Carolina**. I'm really excited about both of these events. I last did a workshop in the Low Country in 2008 and have not had the chance to return until now. Charleston is one of the most beautiful cities in the country, and the opportunities for creativity are boundless, from the natural settings of the Audubon Swamp and Magnolia Gardens to the formal beauty of Middleton Plantation, from the swamps and savannas of Cypress Gardens to the ornate architecture of the Battery and the Rainbow Row, from Angel Oak to Ashley

River, Charleston is an image that beckons to be made. Though this will be my first workshop in Savannah, it is hardly a city that is



foreign to me. Being a Georgia Boy by birth and having family roots in Georgia's



Coastal Plain, I have spent quite a bit of time in its oldest European-founded community. If there is a rival for the beauty and charm of Charleston, it is to be found among the squares and cemeteries, the marshes and the plantations, the barrier islands and beaches of Savannah. If you weren't able to be with us this year, there's always 2011.

After we've availed ourselves of the best of the Southeastern Coast, we'll be returning to the mountains for the wonders of my backyard. The annual **Smokies Spring Workshop, April 10-16 at Smokey Shadows Lodge in Maggie Valley, North Carolina** is shaping up to be a wonderful event. As you may have inferred from my comments in the "What's Now..." section of this



newsletter, I'm expecting a spring bloom in these hills that will more closely mimic historical trends of the mid-20th Century rather than the past decade. If I've anticipated correctly, the flowers of the first two weeks of April will be magnificent, and with the water levels in the streams and the

incipient spring green coming in all wrapped up in the wonder of April light, it will be quite a show.

There are some spaces still available in this workshop, and it's not too late to join us. If you are interested, contact me at don@earthsongphotography.com, or at **(828)788-0687**. You can also go to www.EarthSongPhotography.com to see the information there, including a downloadable registration form.

As if the Smokies themselves weren't enough of an attraction, our venue for the workshop, **Smokey Shadows Lodge**, is a treat all by itself. A rustic (but very comfortable) chestnut log and native stone structure built in the early-1950's,

when craftsmen were still diligent in their work, Smokey Shadows sits at nearly 4500' above **Maggie Valley**, looking out to **Soco Gap** where the Blue Ridge Parkway crosses US 19 and where the survey began that created **Qualla Boundary**, home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. It will be the perfect place from which to launch our adventures into the amazing places that are **Great Smoky Mountains National Park** and the southern end of the **Blue Ridge Parkway**.

The next stop on our workshop circuit will take us to another of my very favorite places, **Mount Desert Island** and **Acadia National Park**, the jewel that is the

rugged beauty of the Downeast coast of **Maine**. The **Spring Acadia Workshop** this year is **June 12-18**. Since I began doing two workshops each year on Mount Desert Island and in Acadia, I have come to love this wonderful location very deeply for many reasons: the landscape is absolutely beautiful, the diversity is



amazing, the light is awesome, the people are marvelous, and the food is excellent. What more could be wished for as the location of a photography workshop? Did I mention that the historical breadth and depth of the place is intriguing?

We will be working out of the **Seawall Motel** in **Southwest Harbor**, where our hosts, David and Vickie Lloyd, are just other members of our family who make us feel at home in everything they do.

And, again, there is additional information at www.EarthSongPhotography.com, including a downloadable registration form. Of course, you can reach me at don@earthsongphotography.com, or at **(828) 788-0687**.

There are a few additional words I would like to say on behalf of Mount Desert Island in spring: lupine, ferns, rocks, wildflowers, oceans, tidal pools, lighthouses, mountains, granite cliffs, glacial lakes, wetlands and marshes, sand beaches, birch trees, working fishing harbors, and lobster. "Nuf said?

There is one other workshop I want to mention in this newsletter because it's never too early to begin thinking about leaf season. In 2002, I began visiting the **Upper Peninsula of Michigan** because I had heard it has great fall color. What I discovered is that saying the UP has great fall color is much like saying that Michael Jordan was a pretty fair basketball player. There is great fall color, and then there is the UP. I have returned to the UP every year since that initial

visit, began leading workshops there in 2006, and see no end to the affair. If the



UP were only about color that would be reason enough to go often, but this land of the Anishinabe (Ojibwe) is so, so much more. Let me



offer you this for your consideration: Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Hiawatha National Forest, Ottawa National Forest, Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park, Falls, the southern I've just started. The words, and what is few people seem to better for the making workshop experience



Keweenaw Peninsula, Bond shore of Lake Superior; and UP is beautiful to me beyond equally amazing is that so know that it exists. All the of a great photography that you'll long remember.

The people are truly wonderful. This year I'll be doing the **Awesome Upper Peninsula Workshop** with my good friend, **Kendall Chiles**. The dates are **September 26- October 2**. This year we will begin in **Houghton, Michigan** near the base of the Keweenaw Peninsula and remain in that location until September 29, before moving to **Munising, Michigan** to end up with the beauty of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and Hiawatha National Forest. More information can be found at www.EarthSongPhotography.com, or by contacting me at don@earthsongphotography.com, or **(828) 788-0687**.

Until next time, may the Spirit of Light guide your shutter release.

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Sunrise, Racquette Lake, Adirondack State Park, New York