

Remembering Steens

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by Gail Balden

Time for “smares” or “no mores” as my grandson calls them when they’re gone. You never know what kids are going to say. One friend told me about her granddaughter who when asked by her mother about bad words the girl wasn’t supposed to say, told her mother “sunny ditches.” When asked why that was bad, her daughter reminded her that when the sheep got out and were running all over the place, her mother ran after them calling in an angry voice “those sunny ditches!”

A reverence for childhood. That’s the best description of the book, *Simplicity Parenting* by Kim John Payne and Lisa Ross, who suggest that kids today have too much: stuff, choices, information and too little time, which has created children who are anxious and unsettled. Their blueprint for change includes streamlining the home environment, establishing rhythms and rituals, scheduling downtime and scaling back on media and parental involvement. I’m disheartened to discover that according to psychologist David Elkind, kids have lost more than twelve hours of free time a week over the last twenty years.

Free time is what I relished most during a weeklong camping trip to Eastern Oregon earlier this month. The denim sky, peppered with tufted clouds, a buttermilk sky, my Georgia friend would call it, was like an upside down bowl under which we gazed at the panoramic view for miles. The view alone seemed to require the slow, long, even breaths yoga teachers ask of us. We didn’t need weather forecasters at the base of Steens Mountain where we settled at Page Springs Campground sixty miles south of Burns. We could see weather coming. The rumble of the thunderstorm we saw building in the southern skies after a dinner out at the French Glen Hotel arrived at dusk just as we settled in for the evening. Nature’s light show gave a doozey of a performance, a dramatic showstopper with many curtain calls. I’d have been more excited about the show if I hadn’t been scared I’d be struck by lightning.

Life at Steen’s Mountain came down to simple rhythms and routines, much like I imagine it’s been for generations of ranching families to this day: in bed by dark, up at first light, with most of the day spent outdoors surrounded by cattle, horses, owls, raptors and an assortment of migratory birds, antelope, and deer. The same deer that cause me distress at home by eating my garden, I find charming as mother and babe wander through our camp to meander in the creek

and munch on riverbed plants. After simple one-pot meals, easy to fix and clean up, I spend most evenings just gazing at Golden and Bald eagles soaring on thermals above the stony cliffs. Mostly I savor all this space, this wide-open geography to sink into. Isolated as we are, with spotty cell phone coverage, no television, no distractions, there's just the time being. It's a space and place of not doing. Like summertime used to be for those of us old enough to remember endless summers with freedom to do whatever we wanted.

Gearing up for summertime with the grandchildren, I'm in my Nana mode and it's tempting to cram their visits with memory-making activities. But then I remember Steens Mountain and vow to give them space, downtime, islands of calm, time to explore the forest, and a wide-open place to just be. They won't be getting *One Minute Bedtime Stories* from me.

Raising children has always been the hardest job there is and seems more so in today's anxious times. As a grandparent I like the idea of helping children reclaim their childhood so they can know that joy and freedom so many of us remember and carry with us to this day. Recently, when adult conversation not suitable for kids came about, I was delighted to hear the mother of our five-year old grandson say to him, " earmuffs." Up his hands went to cover his ears until it was time for him to listen again. A simple thing, but it's a start.