

# A PILGRIMAGE TO CIRQUE LAKE

Erik Fraser Storlie

. . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind . . . .

Henry David Thoreau

Suddenly I stood still, filled with the realization that I had no body and no mind. All I could see was one great Illuminating Whole, omnipresent, perfect, lucid, and serene. It was like an all-embracing mirror from which the mountains and rivers of the earth were projected as reflections.

Han Shan

Distant countries may be found within a few miles, or at most a hundred miles, of every woman, man, and child in the United States. These countries are the remnants of earth that have escaped the ages of Iron and Steel. Here the heart still beats of mountain, creek, prairie, plains, desert, river-way, and seashore. Such places are found in National, State, and County parks and forests. They are found in out-of-the-way private lands that have so far escaped destruction by logging, ranching, farming, or development.

These places are distant because some hardship is required to reach them. Like the pilgrims of old, we walk and carry a few things on our backs. The further we wander from airports, malls, motels, cafes, houses, cars, roads, and even trails, the more intimate we become with the earth as it once was.

Thoreau called it “wildness” and “the preservation of the world.” It’s unobstructed nature, the earth prior to human intervention, wilderness. It’s the earth’s original face. Here we taste an infinite variety and beauty that makes all nihilisms trivial and absurd. Simultaneously we touch the depth and magnificence of the human mind itself. For it is, after all, retina, optic nerve, visual cortex, and finally our own miraculous consciousness that forms itself into cloud, tree, rock, eagle, ocean, and buffalo.

Every year I go on pilgrimage to wildness. Last summer I hiked with two old companions, Tom Decker and Fred Hoffman, to Cirque Lake in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. It’s a tiny high lake cupped in the formation called the Cirque of the Towers.

It takes Tom, Fred, and me two days to reach the Cirque. At 62, 58, and 57, don’t compete with the gung-ho, twenty-something climbers who hustled past us, making the journey from their cars to the Cirque in a single arduous day. We hiked five hours the first day. On the second, we spent seven hours on a trail that labored up and down, snaked through boulder fields, and frequently lost itself on stretches of bare rock above chasms and cliff faces.

But finally we’re standing at 10,800 feet on Jackass Pass. We’re on the southern edge of this great amphitheater. It’s stunning. Looking a mile and a half to the north through thin, clear air, we see the twin peaks called Camel’s Hump on the opposite rim of the bowl. They rise to 12,500 feet. Behind us are the Warrior Peaks, ending in the feathery spires of War Bonnet Peak. To the left, a half mile distant and five hundred feet below us, a waterfall slides smoothly off broad, glacier-sculpted slabs of granite bedrock. The creek then gathers itself and runs on down into Lonesome Lake. Its western shore lies to our left, rimmed by high, sharp peaks. The

lake drains out to the east, forming the North Popo Agie River and flowing two miles down through Lizard Head Meadows and out to reach the Wind River, the Missouri, and finally the Gulf.

"That's got to be Pingora," says Tom, pointing toward a high, sheer tower that stands up from the west end of the lake. "That's a favorite of the climbers. You can see why. And there's the creek that cascades down from Cirque Lake." He points just to the left of the base of the tower, where a thin, white finger of water begins to thread down through steep slopes of rock and turf. It's a full mile away and straight across the valley.

"Incredible," says Fred. "Cirque Lake sits higher than we are here on Jackass. And look at that ring of spires flying off to the left of Pingora!"

"You can see why its called Cirque Lake," I say. "It rests in a high bowl at the end of the Cirque itself. It's in a little cirque within this huge cirque. Let's look at the map." I pull out the quadrangle, unfold it, and line it up with the terrain before us. "Listen to this," I say, and sing out the names of the peaks that soar around Cirque Lake. "Pingora, Wolf's Head, Overhanging Tower, Shark's Nose, Block Tower, Watch Tower."

"Well, let's get down and find a camp," says Tom. We don't have much light left. And I don't see many big trees. It'll take some doing to hang the food higher than a bear's teeth and claws."

We shoulder our packs and start down the trail. After a quarter mile, we turn off into a steep hillside broken by blocky outcrops of granite interspersed with snowfields and patches of green. We stop in a cozy meadow alive with springs and tiny streams. We pull food out of our packs, setting aside packages of beef stroganoff and chicken soup for dinner. Tom throws the rest of the food into a bag, grabs a rope, and walks off to hang it. Fred starts setting up the tent on a floor of soft turf.

I scavenge for firewood, then start a fire in an old fire pit on a rim of shelving granite that looks out over the huge bowl. On my right is an ancient whitebark pine. Honed by weather, it has no single trunk. Its many twisted branches, thick as my thigh, writhe like octopus arms around each other. It stands hardly higher than my head, hunkering below a granite block that breaks the killing winter winds. On either side of our hearth are convenient countertops, formed as the glacier sheared granite into plane surfaces 15,000 years ago.

Finally, chores done, exhausted, we eat a simple meal as darkness falls, leaning back against chunks of rock. Firelight flickers among the winding branches of our pine. Chilled by an icy wind that suddenly flows down the slopes from the Warrior Peaks, I scrunch in toward the dying embers, my knee stinging from glowing coals a few inches away. Fragrant wood smoke drifts up past my face and nose.

"No use adding more wood tonight," I say. "I think we'll all soon be in our bags." I hear grunts of assent.

"Remember the old Indian saying," says Fred. "'White man builds big fire. Stands far away. Indian builds small fire. Sits close.'"

"That's the sad story of modern civilization," adds Tom.

The next day we linger in camp till lunch time, then wander the streams and waterfalls below us down to Lonesome Lake. We fish the North Popo Agie at Lizard Head Meadows. Back at camp in the afternoon, I look for a meditation seat a hundred yards from the tent where a spring rises up at the head of our meadow. I find a slab of circular granite about ten feet long embedded in the grasses. Ice and gravity fractured it, then dropped it here. Its shape reminds me of a turtle shell. Earth has lodged and grass grown in a depression on the shell's rounded back. At the lower end, a chunk of rock sticks out to

form a triangular head and pointed nose. The turtle buries its snout in a small icy pool of clear rushing water surrounded by lush moss and grasses.

I make a cushion of my jacket and set it in the grass on the turtle's back. I rest my palm on the rock itself. It's warm and welcoming after a day in the summer sun. I stand and turn to bow behind me to the southeast toward Jackass Pass. The steep slopes are purple with lupine. I turn and bow northwest toward the cirque within the Cirque. Up there, I know, the goal of our pilgrimage lies hidden. I sit down, loosely crossing my legs and dropping my gaze down to the expanse of meadow. Rivulets braid themselves through a profusion of grasses, mosses, and flowers - asters, daisies, purple gentian. After days of walking through this rough terrain, my body is toned and supple. Muscle, tendon, ligament, and bone fall quickly, gratefully, into the ease of sitting meditation.

I shut my eyes, allowing silence to flow in from the immense bowl of air surrounding me. I mark the steady hiss of old age in my ears, year by year more prominent. I listen to the quiet dabbling of a little finger of water that springs out of the grass at my left hand. It spurts into the pulsing pool in which the turtle snuffles his nose. I hear a tiny music filled with an endless, liquid "elelel." And now, too, there is a stream of sibilants, a constant "shhh." And inside this are tinkling "t's" and the drip drop drip of "d's." Sound rushes through me. My body fills with sweetness. "A mantra," I think, "going on and on forever. Thousands of years before me. Thousands after."

I look down smiling on my bubbling spring. For long minutes I watch the water float through my gaze, then swing my eyes back to the grass, a patchwork of many greens. Some clumps have blades as soft and fine as babies' hair. Near the turtle's nose, where spray leaps up, the grass is coarse, the broad blades drenched with trembling droplets. Everywhere, woven through the turf, tiny ferns raise their triangular fronts, and below them the buds of mosses cling to crumbs of moist soil. Higher up, on the tops of little hummocks where the summer sun has already dried out the soil, drought-resistant grasses, tough and wiry, turn to brown and gray.

I breath deep into my belly. My head is sky, my feet are earth, my buttocks granite. My mind and body fill with the great cirque, taste its eternity. Every passing season is a heartbeat, each revolving year the ebb and flow of breath.

Then I think I hear Tom or Fred hailing me. I raise my eyes, look about, and find only a tiny gnat flying around my head. It's no bigger than a pinhead, but its buzz, here in this amphitheater of rarefied air, sounds almost like a distant human shout. Slowly, I look up across a mile of air to the thin white thread of water plunging down from the base of Pingora, then beyond to the wild circle of peaks beneath which Cirque Lake lies.

"It's the Grail," I think. "Surely at that last Passover supper, the gods transformed the vessel from which he drank. Those dull disciples saw him raising to his lips an ordinary cup. But Jesus, amazed to find he drank sweet wine from a bowl of mountains, knew suddenly he could bear the torture of the cross. Or, maybe, after all, it's the jagged dome of some ancient buddha's skull. Left over from an age when the buddhas were all giants. And this precious relic was carelessly dropped, lost by some thoughtless disciple."

The next morning dawns clear and fine. As we cook breakfast over a small fire, we plan our pilgrimage, "We can pack a lunch and head up later today," I suggest. "You never know what weather might roll in tomorrow. We're only in the Cirque for three more days."

"Fine with me," says Fred.

"Let's get with it, then, right after breakfast," says Tom. "No shilly shallying and fussing

with gear.”

An hour later we’re dropping down four hundred feet to cross over a wide, mushy meadow that lies on the flank of the broad waterfall. We balance from stone to stone through the shallow waters at its top, then start up the drainage on the other side. Caught on the precipitous hillside, the waters pulse and flow, pooling between lips of rock and turf. I lose myself in the twisting watercourse, balancing step by step close to each quivering pool.

“Come on, Storlie,” Tom yells, after half an hour of slow progress. “Shake a leg. At this rate, we’ll never get there.”

“We’ll want some time to hang out up there,” says Fred.

“Okay, okay,” I say. “But remember. Once there, I expect you guys to join me in a nice swim.”

“I seriously doubt it,” says Tom.

“Maybe,” says Fred. “I reserve judgment.”

Fred and Tom move on ahead of me up through steeper and steeper rock. Now the water leaps in cascades from pool to pool. Flowers – red, pink, blue – luxuriate wherever soil has lodged in clefts of stone.

Then suddenly we’re at the top. Cirque Lake is a thousand feet long and half that wide. It’s held by sheer granite cliffs and steep boulder fields. At the far end a great snow field sweeps down from cliffs and into the water. Dozens of icebergs, each a few feet high, float lazily, their whiteness turning to a glacial blue in the depths. Mirrored at our feet on the tranquil surface, the peaks soar in a circle around our heads.

Hot, sweaty, I quickly start pulling off my boots, then my clothes.

“You’re nuts,” Tom says. “What do you think that floating white stuff is out there?”

Fred laughs. He sits down and begins unlacing his boots. “Come on, Tom. After five days, you need this bath.”

Naked, we enter the water quickly, walking out on big slabs of shelving granite. If we hesitate, we’ll never do it. We scream as we hit the water, the echoes flying back and forth in the circle of peaks. Within a minute, we’re stretched out on flat rocks in the sun - chilled, numb, and panting.

“God, we’ve done it,” I say. “We’ve found the Grail. What a day. What a beautiful day.”

Tom agrees, “It’s hard to top.”

“And right now,” says Fred, “it’s time for lunch.”