

## A Sense of Place

*If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are. —Wendell Berry*

The phrase “sense of place” has become widespread in recent years. A Google search yields more than 300,000 hits. Sense of place is associated with nature journals, with regional literature, with activities for children or adults, with essays and poetry, with environmental science, with art, with religious and spiritual studies, even with popular mystery fiction (“wheredunnits”).

The concept of “sense of place” is simple. Each “place” on earth has certain physical features: rainfall, temperature, geology, topography, soils. Each place also has its associated living things: the native animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms that are adapted to local or regional conditions. People, too. Each depends on the others in some way.

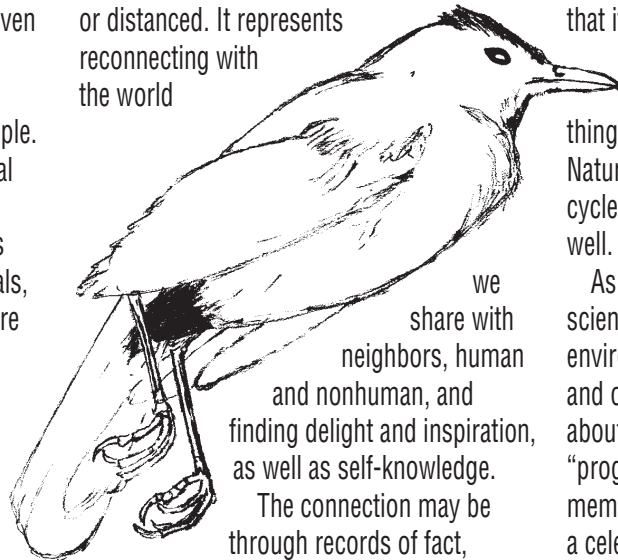
Place is sensual, full of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures peculiar to that place. The sensations have an emotional content. We exist in places and we imprint on them, subtly and subliminally.

We have distanced ourselves from the land—the balance between farm and urban populations shifted decades ago toward the latter—and technology of all kinds has further isolated us from nature, yet the land remains our source of physical sustenance, and provides other sustenance as well: People still take “breathers” or vacations to attend to basic sensations of place.

Heightened sensitivity to sense of place is correlated with rapid environmental change all around us, with enormous implications for both. Thinking about sense of place raises

deeper questions about ethics and spirituality, about transcendence of self, and especially about stewardship, the responsibility to preserve and pass on.

Sense of place reflects an ecological or holistic way of seeing, a desire to be “placed” in the world rather than displaced or distanced. It represents reconnecting with the world



we share with neighbors, human and nonhuman, and finding delight and inspiration, as well as self-knowledge.

The connection may be through records of fact, impressions, sentiments or reactions, but it is all about knowing where we live as well as the world as home. In a time of grave uncertainty about our environmental future, sense of place is a journey toward understanding the natural world and our place in it.

\* \* \*

The nature journal, one of the main connections with sense of place, has its origin in “commonplace” books that were kept by literate ladies and gentlemen. Their journals contained notes on weather, animals and plants, and included observations about crops, medicinal plants, experiments, recipes

and other techniques, drawings, and aphorisms. Some have become valuable as historical documents, setting down information about the movements and behavior of animals and the life cycles of plants in certain places and times.

A charm of the nature journal, however, is that it communicates not only facts, but also the sensory and emotional impacts of facts upon the observer. From the things observed, the observer is also known. Nature journals noted and predicted nature's cycles, but they were personal almanacs, as well.

As the Romantic period gave way to a more scientific and specialized approach to the environment, to botany, zoology, agriculture and other areas of natural history, writing about nature took a back seat to scientific “progress.” Nature writing often became a memorial of places that used to be, instead of a celebration of ongoing places.

Nature writing slipped into a niche where it wasn't considered interesting or important or profound. With some exceptions, it was ignored or disparaged in several important works about American literature. Until about 15 years ago, it was considered an academically risky pursuit. Joyce Carol Oates noted that nature writing “involves a painfully limited set of responses.” One need only read Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Barry Lopez or David Quammen to counter her evaluation.

Today the nature journal can still document certain cycles, but it is not as effective as a predictive tool, because all too often the frogs

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Children at three area elementary schools have brand new nature trails this year and students at a fourth school have become book publishers, all under the auspices of a grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to the Department of Biology at Sewanee. The grant, primarily for studying land use changes here on the Cumberland Plateau, included an educational outreach component.

Herbarium Director Jon Evans oversaw utilization of the grant. In the summer of 2003, he invited teachers from nearby elementary schools to a workshop on Place-based Learning. The nature trails were an upshot of that experience: the teachers agreed to recruit

## THE PLANT PRESS

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*Illustrations for the Sense of Place article are from Jill Carpenter's nature journal: catbird, reduviid bug, and morel.*

# The Herbarium's Educational Outreach

*If a child from Swiss Memorial Elementary School in Grundy County, Tennessee, tells you that his school is in the prettiest spot in the world, he's not kidding.*

parents and other volunteers to provide the labor, and Sewanee provided the guidance and funding. One year later, newly-mulched trails, complete with rustic seating and plant identification markers, wind through the woods and cross the creeks behind Sewanee, Swiss Memorial, and Tracy City elementary schools.

All three schools are blessed with beautiful woodlands. Oak, hickory, hemlock, and yellow-poplar are the dominant tree species. The ground is carpeted with partridgeberry, dotted here and there with wildflowers. Ferns hug the banks of streams, and each school even boasts a small population of pink lady's-slipper orchids. Children can now have first-hand science and environmental lessons right outside their backdoor.

Each trail is unique: a huge snapping turtle lives under the bridge on Sewanee's trail. Swiss Memorial's has a trailside cluster of picnic tables for small group or individual work; Tracy City's has a sign, made by the children, that proclaims that the trail is "dedicated to our two most precious resources: our children and our forest."

"It's important that school children come to appreciate the rich natural heritage of this place where they live. These kids will be able to explore nature without having to get into a schoolbus. Teachers can easily have a nature lesson any time during the day, just off the playground in our diverse Cumberland Plateau forest," explains Evans.

Teachers from one more local school, Coalmont Elementary, also participated in last summer's workshop. Their campus does not have an area suitable for a nature trail, so the grant was used to help Coalmont students put together a book. Their product, *Felix Grundy and the Grand Tour*, describes many points of natural and cultural importance in rural Grundy County.

For background research, the students took field trips to interesting places in their county,

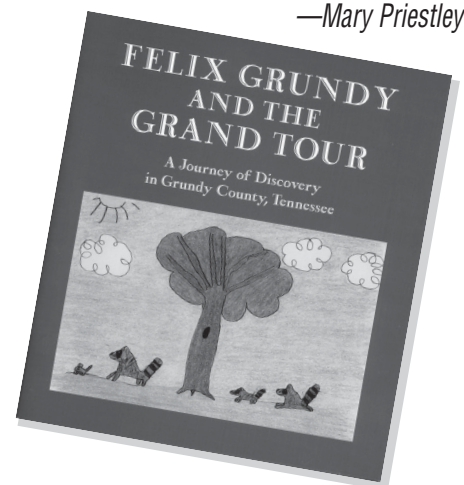
made journal entries, and drew pictures. They wrote stories about adventures that a country raccoon named Felix Grundy and his city cousin Taylor might have. Author Jill Carpenter used their ideas to put together a charming story, illustrated by the children.

Felix grew up in a cove called Fiery Gizzard; Taylor is from Nashville. At first, they don't think they have anything in common: he likes to climb trees, and she likes to visit the zoo. Taylor cannot imagine that there is anything worth doing out here so far from civilization. But when Felix is stuck entertaining this young city slicker, they find out that Grundy County is full of fun places to visit and things to do.

The book drew the attention of Lana Seivers, Tennessee State Commissioner of Education. She wrote, "What is equally as impressive as the journey [that Felix and Taylor take] in the book is the journey that students and teachers took to publish the book. . . . Also impressive is the creativity of the teachers who took learning outside the parameters of the classroom . . . The collaboration between Coalmont Elementary School and The University of the South is a wonderful example of providing opportunities to teachers and children."

*Felix Grundy and the Grand Tour* was designed by Latham Davis and published by Proctor's Hall Press. It is available for purchase at the University Book and Supply Store in Sewanee.

—Mary Priestley



# Summer Calendar of Events

## Botany 101

**Wed., June 23, 4 p.m. Yolande Gottfried**

Take a stroll through Abbo's Alley and learn (or review!) the basics of botany through the plants we encounter. The difference between gymnosperms and angiosperms, vascular and non-vascular, and evergreen and deciduous plants; the value of scientific names and how to know them; and even some principles of identification and classification—all will be revealed! Meet at the entrance to Abbo's Alley just past the Fowler Center on Texas Avenue for this short and easy walk.

## A Sense of Place

**Reading Wed., July 7, 4 p.m.**

### The Dead Plants Society

"A Sense of Place," work by Sewanee's Dead Plants Society, will be exhibited at Stirling's Coffee House Gallery during July. The show will go up June 27, with an opening reception Thursday, July 1, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. A reading about sense of place will be held at the Coffee House on Wednesday, July 7, at 4 p.m.

## Late Summer Wildflowers

**Sat., August 28, 8:30 a.m. Mary Priestley**

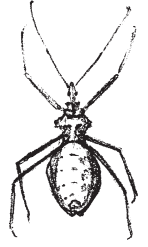
The Meadow Trail at the Visitors' Center at South Cumberland State Park is unique: it winds through a former golf course that has been converted to a flower-studded grassy meadow. Come see what's blooming; learn some names, ecological information, and tidbits of lore about these plants. The Visitors' Center is located on Hwy 56 between Monteagle and Tracy City. Phone 931.924.2980.

For more information about these events, contact Yolande Gottfried at the herbarium during working hours (931.598.1789) or by email at ygottfri@sewanee.edu.



## A Sense of Place *continued from page 1*

or flowers that appeared one year are missing the following year, fallen victim to roadbuilding or herbicides or development. Its current importance may lie in its value as a document of what existed in a certain time and place, of one person's emotional response to the process, and as a self-teaching tool for the journal keeper.



\* \* \*

What does "sense of place" mean when our place is Sewanee, organized around the cycling of the academic year?

Change seems to proceed slowly here, but it is inexorable. Development encroaches on all sides and continues within the Domain as the University grows, trees are lost, roads are widened, introduced plants compete with natives, deer explode in numbers and eat flower and vegetable gardens. Nature in Sewanee has a history along with that of the University: predator control, cutting and planting, creation of water impoundments, shifting of species.

Because the Domain of the University of the South is large, the backdrop against which the academic drama plays out is

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## Membership Application/Renewal

The Friends of the Sewanee Herbarium support the work of the Herbarium: education, research, and conservation. A \$10.00 annual contribution would be very much appreciated. The date of your most recent contribution is printed on your address label.

Name and Address (if different from that on the mailing label on the back):

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Amount Enclosed:  \$10.00  Other: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please make check payable to The University of the South. Gifts are fully tax deductible. Send to:

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735 University Avenue  
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Others who might like to receive *The Plant Press*: \_\_\_\_\_

**A Sense of Place** *continued from page 3*

sumptuously “natural.” It is easy to attend to sensations of place in Sewanee. The annual return of alumni is not to re-experience classwork, but to re-experience sense of place.

The natural environment becomes an integral part of each student’s education and a source of emotional connection, and perhaps the Sewanee experience imparts a frame of reference for place-based sensitivity in other environments.

For those of us who are here as residents, the opportunity exists to attend much and often. The formal journal may provide an important historical record of what and when. But there is value also in just attending. The value lies in the process, as life is in the journey rather than the destination. The pleasure is in the day-to-day. We can heed the

advice of the poets: listen, connect, marvel, wonder, see, smell the roses, fear not the natural world but fear for it.

To preserve places, we need to love them. To love them, we need to know about them.

\* \* \*

An exhibit on “Sense of Place” will go up at Stirling’s Coffee House June 27 and remain through July. It’s a collective work, by several members of “The Dead Plants Society.” Taken as a whole the exhibit provides a visual and narrative impression of change through Sewanee’s seasons.

The Dead Plants Society currently includes Jill Carpenter, Mary Davis, Carolyn Fitz, Diane Getty, Yolande Gottfried, Jim Ann Howard, Mary McCleaf, Mary Priestley and Lynne Vogel.

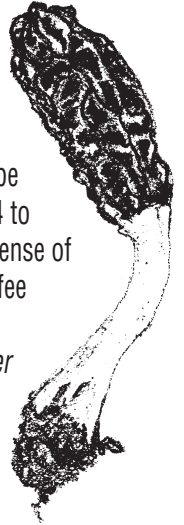
The group had its beginning two years ago with a nature writing workshop sponsored by

the Sewanee Herbarium, and has continued to meet weekly to work on nature journals, to practice drawing techniques, and to share observations. New members have joined along the way.

The women have varied backgrounds in art, science, education and writing, but converge in their interest in Sewanee’s natural environment. They work in ink, pencil, colored pencil, watercolor, collage, fiber and fabric.

An opening reception will be held Thursday, July 1, from 4 to 5:30 p.m, and a reading on sense of place is scheduled at the Coffee House on July 7, at 4 p.m.

—Jill Carpenter



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# SEWANEE

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