

How I Found Inner Peace

By Roger O'Keefe

My spiritual journey began in 2012 in earnest. For three years and two months, I lived alone on ten acres of private woodland on the Animas River, north of the old mining town of Durango. My house was built long ago, at 7,500 feet, and was designed to feature stunning vistas of the Animas Valley. This vibrant valley overflowed with life. All manner of things grew there — and I was no exception. The valley became a place of tranquility and spiritual expansion for me — it was calm and peaceful, its silence interrupted only by the occasional, hushed sound of a falling Ponderosa Pine bough.

Aptly named “Place of Water,” the Animas River snaked through the expansive valley. My view was virtually unrestricted, showcasing 280 degrees of natural beauty. To my left the horizon gave way to the deserts of the West. Directly ahead the Northeast horizon yielded to the dustpan-shaped slopes at the southernmost point of the Rocky Mountain range. The Rocky Mountains rose directly before me — they were dramatically steep, majestic, and proud. These geological wonders constantly changed color according to the angle of the sunlight (thanks to

gases trapped in their rock some twenty-five million years ago). Their wintery slopes held the distinction of accumulating the highest annual snowfall in the State of Colorado.

My floor-to-ceiling living room windows overlooked the valley's lush floor: the river, the sheer cliffs, the mountaintops. Deep in the woods, I was surrounded by a young, thick forest brimming with flowers, insects, birds, and animals. In the summer, I slept with my curtain — less windows open to the pristine air, inviting the moon and sun in. At night, the river's loving melody sang me into a deep sleep. I lived a simpler life in that sacred place, and it was there that my spiritual journey began.

In many ways, the five physical senses we rely on so acutely define who we are — they help us to identify the “I am” of our daily reality. In that serene locale, I learned to rely primarily on my sixth sense — my intuition — and in many ways, it became my identity. More than that, I learned to flow with the rhythms of that wild place, and day by day, I found myself relating more to the Oneness of my surroundings than to the separateness of my “little self,” my “ego.”

It was as though an overarching consciousness (of forest, valley, river, and mountain) welcomed and embraced me as part of a greater whole — I realized that that “larger self” is who I truly am, indeed, that is who we all truly are. There is no separation, no place where we end and “the other” starts, whether that “other” is a person, a mountain, a tree, an animal, a waterway, etc.

We are all a part of a Oneness. So, I feel in some ways that I must apologize for the use of “the first person” here. But such is the way of language ... there is no way to convey as sense of this larger “otherness” experience without the first-person pronoun. Hence, while it is the “I” that is Roger who is writing this remembrance of those happy days, it is the part of “me” that has no “I” who truly experienced the magic of the Rocky Mountains and its wonders.

It was not long into my spiritual journey that I began to understand the importance of a good ear. Recent ear surgery had left me unable to hear for over a week — and that type of silence was unsettling. When my hearing returned, I learned how to listen to a “good silence” so I could commune with nature. It was equally important, I concluded, to have a good ear, an appreciative eye, and a lively curiosity for investigating the science behind everything I was seeing in the valley.

I was immersed in — no, steeped in — nature. The Rockies had become for me the body of our universe’s soul. With regards to the passage of time, I might as well have been in heaven. My mission was to live in the moment, being 100 percent authentic. This positive self-talk helped me to continuously move past the less than authentic parts of myself. Old habits die hard. I spoke to the universe; like saying Amen after a prayer.

Thanks to thirty-six years of practice, I was well — versed in that singularly important skill: not thinking. For most of us, not thinking for a prolonged period of time is difficult. I meditated almost every day. The internet greatly facilitated my scientific intellectual pursuits. I genuinely enjoyed reading most everything I could find on Quantum Physics. The valley offered me solitude, simplicity, stillness, and a feast for the senses: fresh, clean mountain air; birdsong; soothing river sounds; and fragrant forest scents. The aspen and pine were infused with wisdom. I watched attentively when the wind blew through the trees. I marveled at how the universe’s infinite quantum vibrations played out across and through the pines’ needles, and how the always-shimmering, always colorful, waxy, aspen leaves did the same.

In the fall, the changing colors of the aspen often took my breath away. Fall was a time of great reflection, a philosophical time. The moon was exceptional, as were the stars at that time of year. With each passing day, I could see my breath more and more in the chilly air. Steam rose

regularly off the brook, stream, river, lake, and pond at dawn — a signal of what was to come: biting frigid winter winds, freezing snow, and a struggle for survival that not even the birds would stick around for.

Every fall, when the birds flew south, large flocks darkened the midday sky. They rested comfortably in the property's trees before continuing with their journey. And every fall, the winds would come up suddenly and blow thousands of delicate, dry leaves high up into the air, where they would swirl about in a dramatic dance of color and movement — I never tired of it.

I never tired of the wildlife's autumn antics either: Bears climbed my pear tree and pulled fruit down by ripping the branches away from the trunk. They were on a quest to consume massive amounts of calories every hour. The deer followed the bears but had little success with the hard, green pears that lay scattered about on the snow-dusted ground. The squirrels chit-chatted nervously and scurried about hiding nuts randomly. Furry brown rabbits burrowed deep into their warrens.

Deer modified their daily routines eating earlier in the day because of the advance of winter. Bucks mated incessantly. The young bucks fought, antler to antler, snorting steam and twisting their necks powerfully, their horns sometimes locked for an hour or more. Often, in the late evening or just before dawn, the crystalline air would be broken by the elks' distinctive, deep-throated bugle calls. Elk were decidedly smarter and more powerful than deer: their herds ran close together, in tight-knit precision, charging forward in a V-shaped formation, making it virtually impossible for enemies to pick off the weaker ones who ran safe several rows in.

But it was not all my own private nature-fest in the autumn. Deer and elk hunters swarmed the woods on Polaris ATV's, sporting orange vests, and armed with bottles of whiskey. Wispy columns of smoke dotted the mountaintops and revealed their whereabouts. The muffled sound of

a spent rifle would hang in a thick fog made cold and mysterious by the dark mountainside. The fog was on-and-off-again and often was followed by a brief, wet snowfall. Off in the distance, thick columns of white steam shot high above the mountain tops, thanks to the old west black train and the recent changes in weather up on the pass above Silverton.

The hunters were not the only visitors — fishermen too frequented the region. In the fall, the river no longer invited the determined among us with our rubber waders; shaky, cold-chapped hands; and handmade flies to fish in her waters. I would reluctantly take down the many hammocks I had strung here and there around the property, sad that I had to retire them to the shed for the winter. I also had to come to terms with the fact that I too would have to swap out my trusted dry Adams fly for the more seasonally appropriate wet sculpin.

Once the other anglers were gone, there were still occasional hikers trekking through the area enjoying the natural splendor of the valley before the snow set in. Much of the fall I spent hiking out the back of the property. The property's ten acres of private river abutted an additional three-miles-long, one-mile-wide stretch of untouched dry riverbed and flowing river terrain.

On the other side of the stream was the Animas River which flowed on the far side of a vast dried-out riverbed. This riverbed was cut just once — in one extremely wet year in the region's recent past — by waters that had overflowed a half mile or more from the main artery of the river.

My hikes were epic and provided an unusual glimpse into this once-underwater terrain. I followed each of the grooves the water had carved over sand, dirt, and rock; the weathered lines in the face of the riverbed told the story of the river's past. The utter solitude and roar of the nearby river enchanted me.

On the parched side of the river, I examined things carefully: giant hollowed-out logs, live trees, and some dead ones. Most of the trees were permanently disfigured because of the constant force of the rushing waters. It was like a jig saw puzzle of different sized rocks all held in place at certain places like nodes on a web. These giant boulders and their massive weight put pressure on all the other rocks and forced them to stick together — like a gravitational glue. I scoured this shell of the river's former self meticulously. I found relics from another time buried in the parched earth: an old boot, a rusted belt buckle, a bike tire, a flipflop, a chipped blue tin coffee cup, a piece of yellow nylon rope, and several varieties of colored plastic bottles. The violent, rushing waters, though long since having receded, had carried each item down river.

Things here were topsy-turvy. Everything was frozen eerily in time. The once-barren riverbed now supported a variety of animals, plants, bushes, and various trees — smaller varieties, which grew at distinctly odd angles. The roots of uprooted trees dangled sideways in the air, pretending to not miss the soil in the least.

On many occasions in winter, I often drove up to the mountain's snowy passes at 10,000–11,000 feet after the roads were finally cleared. Thanks to my four-wheel drive Landcruiser with snow tires and snow chains I would eventually park outside the gate of several closed campgrounds and with the help of my Cabela snowshoes trekked even higher up into the mountains. I hiked to the highest elevations, where snow literally came down a few inches every minute or so. I marveled at the profound silence there — it was as if an expansive holographic blanket had muffled all noise in all directions — I knew it was a quietness rarely enjoyed by humans. That deafening silence had changed me. Covered in fresh snow, I sat extremely still, deeply touched by the serenity.

But even during such profoundly pleasurable experiences, I respected the power and overarching dominance of nature. I knew that Mother Nature was supreme — I was a tiny speck on the face of that vast white mountain — and she held my life in her hands.

When it came to survival in the Rockies, the gap between winter and summer was as wide as the Grand Canyon to my south. Those harsh winters challenged me to be extra self-sufficient: To survive, I had to prepare properly and execute effectively. The house needed to be winterized. Most every day there was snow to shovel and wood to cut and stack — the manual labor was exceedingly difficult. In fact, all types of work became treacherous in the rain, ice, and snow.

Travel in the winter was hazardous too. The Land Cruiser needed snow tires and winterizing; the margin for error on the winter roads was slim — one might easily hit a deer, get caught under a rockslide, or be stuck in a white-out. I had no choice but to respect Mother Nature in all her winter glory. I watched the weakest of the mule deer herd — one with a crippled hind leg — get picked off by cunning coyote. Another mule deer was prey for an (uncharacteristically) desperate (and hungry) mountain lion. I could not become weak like those mule deer. I could not be the skin-and-bones coyote, hunting anxiously for food. I could not afford to be the frantic, chirping squirrel, searching for buried nuts hidden under fresh layers of snow. Life-or-death circumstances were constant companions during the Rocky Mountain winters.

During my many winters in Colorado, I learned to count on myself. This resulted in an understanding within me that I was — that I am — capable. For the first time in my life, at the end of each day, I saw the tangible results of that day's manual labor. I admitted to myself, reluctantly, that all the non-manual labor (in and of itself remarkably arduous work) I had performed over forty years had shown no such visible, immediate result. I found great satisfaction using my hands, my back, and even the sweat of my brow amid fierce winter storms.

Winter brought abundant rain and snow to the valley. During rainstorms, I cherished my time inside. During snowstorms, often I sat next to the fire and sipped hot chocolate, watching from my living room windows as nature unleashed her fury. It was as if the strings of my guitar were stretched across these awe-inspiring, seemingly never-ending mountain-scapes. Whenever the universe strummed, I vibrated. Simultaneously, I shifted my complete attention to these new waves of energy. Her energy affected everything all at once. The sky grew closer, darker. The wind howled, twisting the trees into unnatural positions. On my roof, the rain played an all-too-familiar pitter-pat piece, as if it were a thousand orchestras all tuned to the same universal instrument. The symphonies composed on my roof during those storms were added to my soul library, along with my birdsong playlist.

During the dark winter months, those avian songsters were sorely missed. But when thin ice sheets began to break away from the banks of the river, and the days grew longer, the birds began to return to the river valley. First to arrive were the Canadian geese. A few smaller, brightly colored birds nested early, and they too established their presence vocally; chattering with conviction to protect their perimeters as they performed regular fly-by's. They were followed by blue jays and ravens. The resident hawks were roused when the voles re-emerged and scampered about on the melting snow.

I watched the arrival of all this spring activity with increasing delight — spring was a time of great connection for me. As the sun in the sky grew stronger, shaded snow gave way to melt and shoots of green began to emerge from the earth and the trees all around me. Spring called me out daily, simply to see what had grown since yesterday.

On my treks to investigate the springtime wonders that were appearing day-by-day, I did not have to travel far ... I often witnessed the miraculous reemergence of the region's wildlife

close to home. A fully pregnant marmot emerged from her winter quarters and sunned herself on a flat rock. Soon enough, her real work would begin, tending to her little marmots (which are little rascals, known to run amuck!).

Other babies were delivered close by my home too — one early spring afternoon a fawn, born very recently, came near enough for me to touch. Her fur was matted, she was still sticky with gel, and her legs wobbled. Much to her mother's chagrin, she checked me out while I napped in my hammock. Thankfully, the deer and I knew each other exceedingly well, though I could not say the same of the elk in the area — they were distant, reserved, and exceedingly hard to befriend.

But other hooved friends were not in short supply. I made a connection with the stallion in charge of a 100-head herd of painted horses. They ran about in spring with renewed spirit, taking dust baths on their backs in the midday sun. Once at dawn I experienced four hundred hooves pick up and bolt in unison; the ground beneath me shook for a minute or more. The sheer power in that moment changed me — in a good way.

On early spring mornings, there was never a shortage of wilderness-based entertainment for me. I was up at daybreak, tramping through the melting snow to favorite sites — like the small irregular-shaped pond I gazed out upon from my living room. On spring mornings, mist rose from the pond, and I would watch elder muskrats playfully instruct a pair of slick babies on the proper mechanics of swimming. The muskrat family lived comfortably in the shade of thick weeds in the first cove on the far-right hand side of the pond. Soon these sleek baby swimmers would be introduced to the brook, the stream ... and one day, the river. They dove awkwardly, creating symmetrical waves that unfurled toward the muddy banks. The pond was a peaceful place, its banks covered thickly in tall cattails and its surface covered with white and yellow lily pads. It

teemed with life and was a favorite hangout for larger waterfowl: They took good advantage of its mirrored runway as they landed and took flight.

The lake was like a signature for the seasons...reflecting Mother Nature's tones and tempers. On clear spring mornings, all her natural marvels unfolded under cerulean skies. On warm summer afternoons, gray rain brought thunder and lightning. I let her changing weather guide my actions and activities. In summers, I abandoned my spring "to do list" and became spontaneous. Untethered and free, I let the universe direct me as I typed the events of each day onto a blank page, spending my time outdoors as much as possible.

Summer was a time of wonder and imagination. I tracked all the nearby animals — who in turn tracked me. I relied heavily on my intuition (and trusted it even more in summer). It felt to me the other seasons required a greater degree of organization and numerous time sensitive tasks that required completion.

In summer it was like the universe relaxed and encouraged me to be free. Free of schedules and responsibilities. Free to do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted without concern. I was rewarded with a free pass from using the right side of my brain which resulted in many unexpected moments filled with awe, wonder and satisfaction. I completely trusted summer despite the bear cubs regularly flipping over my barbeque. The animals offered endless opportunity for entertainment and amusement.

One summer morning, I watched a big black bear swipe at a favorite log of mine; it had proven in the past perfect for storing my fishing gear the previous summer. My new buzzing neighbors had just recently showed up. Instantly, amber-colored bees swarmed the bear's snout. Undeterred and displaying his atrocious table manners, he dipped his giant paw into their waxy hive and drew out chunks, his paws dripping fresh honey. Honeycomb pieces tumbled from his

paw: They sparkled like golden nuggets in the sunlight. I felt sorry for that bear, yet he hardly acknowledged me — or the hundreds of angry stings. He obviously had great control of all of his senses!

One summer I had sharpened my own “sensory saw” with the help of “smell memory associations.” I hunted wild strawberries, huckleberries, choke cherries, ferns, pinecones, pine tree sap, pine needles, pine nuts, mushrooms, pond weed, bark, and leaves. I crushed all manner of stuff between my index finger and thumb and inhaled — and a slew of memories blossomed in my head in surprisingly rich detail. Each distinctive aroma possessed a “connective tissue” to my childhood home nestled in pine overlooking Lake Washington in Seattle Washington. To my childhood treks into the woodlands and meadow, my Aunt Ethel’s famous preserves and pies, overnight camping trips in remote locations with my father. All those woodland smells were added to my soul library.

I also sought out nature’s aromatic bouquet of wildflowers. Each forest bloom and field blossom were delicate, fragile, and distinctive. They exploded in myriad shapes, forms, and colors: purple, red, yellow, white, blue, green, and all the colors in between. On sunny days, the flowers’ freshly baked pollen attracted a variety of intriguing insects and colorful birds.

Summer brought brightly colored hummingbirds too. They flew at break-neck speed upriver — and even though they flew extremely low, and skimmed the water’s surface, they never once touched it. Able to unhinge their shoulders and hover, the hummingbirds were ridiculously aggressive, compulsive, and territorial. The sharp angles at which they flew created a three-dimensional chessboard in the sky on which they did combat for control of their perimeters. They were relentless in battle, flying upside down, talking trash, and never giving up, regardless of their

competitor's size. In my humble opinion they are the most versatile and skilled flyers among all of nature's flocks of winged and feathered species.

One summer morning, I had just finished a sunrise meditation when an enormous barn owl landed squarely inches in front of me. My prolonged stillness had lured this marvelous creature into my neighborhood and into my space. I marveled at its beauty: its wingspan, its squared, colorful feathered tail, its piercing yellow eyes. We sat together in stillness for thirty minutes or more. The owl stared intently at the meadow below. Suddenly, it took off high into the sky. Working itself into position in the stingy shadows cast by the clouds, the patient owl, with a perfectly timed descent, dove down and snatched up a shocked vole for breakfast.

That clever owl taught me about the benefits of patience and deep observation. During the early days of summer, I often stared carefully into the alcohol-clear, narrow brook near my house. Its transparency and purity made it inviting, and it called me to endless scrutiny of its features. I studied the brook's bottom — six to eight feet deep, it was lined with silt and leaves. The occasional bent branch protruded upward, providing coveted cover for some lucky trout. Early in the season, there was no significant hatch yet, but later, an occasional Brown or Rainbow fry swam leisurely by.

Still, all her breathtaking seasons and grandeur are stored securely in my "third eye" — all the memories of my time in the Rockies are immensely valuable and bring me peace even to this day.

I lived a simpler life in the Rocky Mountains for those three plus years. That time proved priceless — I became, consciously, part of the changing landscape as each season progressed. I learned how to be. I learned how to shift my attention quickly and at will, to focus deeply on the smallest of details. I learned how to be still, how to fall into rhythm with the flora and fauna. I

learned that the light in the sky is best immediately after a storm passes. I learned how to be happier with less stuff. I learned that we value certain things in the mornings of our lives — like possessing things. I learned that we value quite different things in the afternoons of our lives — things like just being. I learned that meditation is about losing stuff (as opposed to gaining stuff), and that the future never comes, and the present moment is all we have. That is a good reason to not hold one's happiness hostage for gratification at some fixed future date. I learned how to connect deeply with nature and how to find inner peace.

For most people, living a simpler life (for whatever period of time: a day, a week, a month, a year or two) is not particularly practical. But I do think that living life as simply as possible is the way to get the best out of life — and the best way to find the path that will lead us to where we are meant to go. And where are we going, really? It often seems to me that in the event we do not know where we are headed, any path will get us there. In my humble opinion, most of us do know, deep inside, where we are headed. Sooner or later, we are all going to ask ourselves the question of our lives: “How, exactly, do I find inner peace?”

If we want to answer that question (how to find inner peace), then we might be... fortunate and get to take a crash (immersion) course (as I and others have) at some point in the future. Realistically, however, the odds probably are against that. In lieu of a crash course, it might be wise to start (or to continue) taking baby steps toward inner peace under the increasingly popular banner of “stress management.” Perhaps we start with a regular meditation practice, frequent walks, and hikes in nature as time permits. The occasional retreat or camping trip at weekends can prove valuable in the initial steps of a spiritual journey. New to meditation? Several apps are available on the internet to help seekers get started, and low-cost Transcendental

Meditation classes are offered nationwide. (Noise reduction ear buds and headphones prove useful in our noisy world.)

When it comes to the journey of spiritual growth, it seems to me that it matters little where we find ourselves on the continuum — it is all relative. In any event, we never really “get there” because “inner peace” is not a noun, it is a verb. Regardless of how deeply or frequently we meditate, or how sincerely or often we connect with nature, we do not “arrive” and celebrate a “finish.” The key (perhaps) is to be headed in the right direction all along, as much as possible, and of course, in the right way.

We already have the answers we seek within us. Each of us has a nature we are born with, and part of self-reliance is knowing who we really are. Often, we are odds with our true selves, but there is no point in arguing with reality. We must accept that “This is who I really am.” We must embrace ourselves, go with it, and be lived by our true nature.

This understanding/acceptance of self is critical to one’s own self-reliance and finding one’s inner peace. One’s genuine voice is an outcome of exercising one’s authentic self.

Self-understanding is increased with self-reliance. Within the first year I had learned how to fix everything I owned. YouTube videos were important in gaining this expertise. A requirement for any future purchases included my ability to fix it except for my laptop computer which I simply ordered online and replaced. I also learned many wilderness survival skills on the internet and practiced them regularly in the forest around me. I felt like I could handle anything that came my way.

We can look forward to great satisfaction once we have come notably closer to achieving inner peace. Likely that realization will simply cement our commitment to continuing a practice

anyway — not because we need to practice necessarily (or practice as much at that point) but rather because it feels so good!

In Colorado I forgave myself, everyone, and everything in my life. I became increasingly grateful for those things I still possessed and, more importantly, I became exceedingly grateful for my rich life experiences.

My last realization in the valley was that there are three things universally that we all share in common. First, we do not want to always be struggling in our lives. Second, we all want to find inner peace eventually, and thereby make sense of our lives. Last, we all want to be loved. As to the second thing, well, this was my way.

In that exquisite place in nature, my spirit awakened, I found inner peace, I had made sense of life, and I discovered who I truly am. I discovered the sooner one aligns one's authentic self with one's soul the better. I realized that I am complete: that in fact we are all born complete.

I hope that sharing my experiences on my journey through the wild Rocky Mountain forests will help you to find your own path forward — to your authentic self, and inner peace.

We would do well to always to keep in mind that, sadly, there are no shortcuts to inner peace. We can, however, take solace in the fact that once we find ourselves closer to our inner peace, it can never be taken away. No matter what happens, regardless of what life brings our way, we need only to redouble our efforts and take a few minutes to reconnect to our inner peace.

We all likely recall having played “tag” as children. Remember how we would run back to home base to avoid being tagged? It was only there that we were “safe.” Our existing (albeit corroded and rusty) connection to our own spiritual home base requires our sincere attention. While floating in the ether of our own inner peace, we discover that our true selves are safe, we are content with our lot in life, and we are sure of who we really are.