

Back to the Lake [by Adam Hlasny]

The drone of the outboard motor prevents me from hearing her joyous shouts, but I can see the ear-to-ear smile on my three-year old daughter Julia's face as we traverse Lake Winnisquam on this tranquil June morning. Winter has loosed its vise grip, spring's muddy days have dried up, and summer has finally arrived. As I glimpse Belknap and Gunstock Mountains standing majestically as silent sentinels over New Hampshire's fourth-largest lake, memories of boating with my parents and brother Evan come streaming back. Two-plus decades ago I was in this exact same spot, never contemplating the possibility that I would one day witness my own daughter enjoying Winnisquam's same transcendent beauty.

My dad (the captain of this multigenerational outing) slows the Boston Whaler down, its bow easing into the water as we approach the "Mosquito Bridge". I explain to Julia that we're about to go under the bridge we drove across that morning, noting that her smile hasn't faded despite our slower speeds. We languidly float through to the southern portion of the lake, and upon returning a genial salutation to a group of elderly boaters we stop off at the Winnisquam Trading Post to enjoy ice cream's frozen pleasures. A warm breeze grazes my face as I jump onto the dock, flip flops slapping against the weathered wooden planks. Julia doesn't even bother to remove her pint-sized lifejacket as she gleefully runs onto the grassy shore. I stop myself before asking her if she's having fun, her infectious enthusiasm answering the question for me.

After a circuitous decade during which I graduated college twice, got married, lived in four different states and became a father, the peacefulness of the lake represents more than a return to my New Hampshire roots; it is also symbolic of the timeless and comforting presence of nature despite the noise, literal and figurative, which surrounds it. Smaller and with less diverse amusements than Lake Winnepesaukee, Winnisquam is in my mind the perfectly-sized lake, especially for a family living year-round within walking distance of its shores, as mine did when I grew up.

This peripatetic decade of transitions behind me, I settled in Manchester with my wife Alyse and Julia in 2012. This technically makes me (*gulp*) a tourist here, not having called the Lakes Region home for over five years now. Growing up in a community dependent on tourism, I've oft contemplated its diverse effects (it was actually the topic of my master's research). Over the years I got used to the region's infrastructure groaning under the weight of tens of thousands of tourists from the states to our south, congesting the roads and waterways considerably from June through August. May and September were always my favorite months, as weather was generally favorable and crowds lighter. October saw an influx of foliage-fixated vacationers; by the time the leaves had fallen in November, the imminence of the cold season was palpable.

Despite my dislike of winter, as the years wore on the self-sufficiency and mental fortitude I gained from enduring this longest of New Hampshire's seasons became apparent. While cumbersome at times, the acceptance and embrace of the changing seasons led me to a remarkably profound appreciation of summer and the light of its glorious extended days.

I emerge from the store ahead of the others and return to the dock, nostalgia getting the better of me as I stare out to the gentle cobalt waves shimmering with the sun's golden reflection. The day has become hotter, the lake more crowded. Perfect moments out on the water (or in life)

never seem to last long enough. Realizing that life, like seasons in the Lakes Region, has its ups and downs, and that in a few days' time I'll be stressed out again with bills to be paid, a house to be cleaned, and abundant work to be done, I make a dubious attempt to bottle my current relaxed physical and mental state for future reference. I ponder the fact that the lakes and mountains will always be here waiting to comfort me as I struggle to reconcile the unpredictable and perishable nature of human life with the perpetual and magnificent natural beauty of New Hampshire.

Just as life is (momentarily) beginning to make sense, I am jolted out of my reverie by Julia's sticky hand on my leg, announcing that the rest of our motley group has emerged from the general store.

After 15 more relaxed minutes of snack consumption and genteel conversation, it is time to climb aboard our humble craft again for more sightseeing. Mom, Dad, Evan, Alyse and Julia hop aboard, as I clumsily shove us off. Dad invites Julia to join him at the helm, introducing another generation to responsible boating on the lake's resplendent waters. The vessel rocks gently, water lapping lazily at its flanks; to my left a loon dives elegantly for some lunch. As Alyse puts her arm around me and smiles, I realize that it's well worth enduring life's winters for its summers... especially if they're on the lake.