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Rooted in Place

by Connie Millar

Friends know that when it comes to geography of the heart, I am unwavering about one thing: “Mono Basin is the center of my universe.”

In the Basin, answers to the prickly questions that I ask about life’s meaning and identity become self-evident. When the rest of my world spins out of control, in the Basin I recover my stable axis. As with other lovers, I want to know every tree on the Basin’s skin, caress each rocky exposure, peer out from all vantages, and breathe in the aroma of piñon-pine and the acrid odor of the lakeshore. I am willing to cut my knees, burn my skin, strain my muscles, lose my way so that I will better know the Basin. Knowing and doing these, I want to take care of the Basin.

I am saddened by the growing disconnect between humans and their earth. The lure of technology and the demands (real or perceived) of work and social intercourse increasingly bind us to keyboards, lock us into vehicles, and surround us by city walls. In so doing we become conditioned to the drill of external stimuli, to speed, noise, and stress. In desperation, we turn to transient and superficial means of relief. Nature fades into a video screen. While I am heartened to see throngs of visitors to national parks and national forests, I grow grumpy at the demand for conveniences, heightened

security, and how-to guides just for stepping out of the car. Such increasing sterilization of nature distances us from direct experience of our homeland.

With distance comes a loss of sense of self, a personal and spiritual trauma. The sustenance humans have known for millennia through connection with naked earth withers. As a tribe, we drift, increasingly un-tethered to a reliable source of navigation, and our internal compasses point false directions. Without tasting, touching, feeling, and drinking deeply from a place we have learned to love, we lose desire to care for it.

The Mono Lake Committee, celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, provides an antidote for this malaise. Since its founding in 1978 by earth-walking, bird-watching, true-grit David Gaines, the Committee has connected us intimately to this place we call the Mono Basin. Day-by-day, around the seasons, and now through decades, the Committee reminds us of the timelessness and rootedness we find in the Basin. Demonstrating the primal connection between love and protection, the Mono Lake Committee has modeled a path of active, committed, and effective stewardship. Despite—or because of—its grass-roots heritage, the Committee has let nothing stand in the way of defending the lake, taking

on obstacles and institutions great and small with the fierceness of a mama bear.

The initial focus of Mono Lake Committee action was, literally, to save the lake. Starting in 1941, diversions of water to thirsty southern California had, by the mid 1970s, threatened to turn the lake into a dry playa, thereby rendering its unique aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems to oblivion. Through tireless efforts, across many years, and in seemingly endless legal battles, the Committee was the driving force that led to the historic 1994 California State Water Board Decision 1631. This Decision spelled out a strategy to recover and maintain a healthy lake ecosystem by setting minimum flows of rivers into the lake, limits on exports of water out of the Basin, and mandates for restoring stream and waterfowl habitat. So, here in 2013, we celebrate also the 19th anniversary of this remarkable Decision, and applaud once more the forces of love and commitment that the Committee harnessed to ensure this fate.

What makes me especially tender toward the Mono Lake Committee is the means by which it pursued the goal of saving the lake. Despite the inevitability of legal challenges and personal controversies, the Committee engaged a philosophy of win-win as its guiding motif. Rather than focusing just on the local prize (water to the lake), the Committee

determined at the same time to improve the situation in distant communities. Thus, for instance, the Committee advocated for and attained funds to purchase low-flow shower and toilet devices for Los Angeles residents affected by potential rises in water prices. In its conservation-education programs, the Committee targets young people from Southern California communities, seeking to re-connect them to the literal and figurative headwaters for their daily sustenance. In these and in many other ways, the Mono Lake Committee has worked to balance the needs of those whose lives might be affected by Decision 1631.

Knowing Committee staff personally through the years, and their deep and direct knowledge of the Mono Basin, I have witnessed first-hand the role that sense-of-place has played in the stories of the Basin. The individual and collective powers that have been brought to bear on efforts to halt loss of the lake’s water and restore its ecosystems find their source in the flap of a California Gull’s wing, shimmering of tufa against aquamarine waters, in the roll of a wave cloud over the Sierra crest, in the penumbra that rises as an evening embrace across the eastern sky, and ultimately in the sense of completeness that comes in knowing one’s place on earth.

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A mountain scientist, Connie’s research focuses on responses of alpine plants, subalpine forests, mountain mammals (especially American pika), and alpine geomorphology to historic and ongoing climate change in the eastern Sierra Nevada and Great Basin ranges. During winter months, she works out of her Bay Area office and lab. She migrates in the summer to her home in the Mono Basin, where she has been nurturing roots and chasing natural-history mysteries since 1977.



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