

“Gone Camping”

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First Parish in Wayland

Before I leave this community, I have heard there is a burning question some of you have. “Why, Stephanie, do you camp!?!” In answering this question, I hope you will hear not only something about me, but also something about life and land, quiet and community.

The federal government owns about 640 million acres of land in the United States, which is about 28% of the total land area. In Massachusetts only 1.2% of the Commonwealth is federally owned—places such as the Cape Cod National Seashore or the nearby Minuteman National Historic Park as well as property owned by the Department of Defense. As you head West, the percentage rises all the way up to Nevada where nearly 85% of land is federally owned. In addition to these federal lands across the nation, millions of acres are owned by state or local governments as well. For example, in Massachusetts, more than 15% of the state falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Conservation and Recreation. Within this land, there are more than 150 state parks, and you can camp in 27 of them. Since 2020, I have personally camped in 16 of these—many multiple times.

Of course, there are private campgrounds too. But I’m a public lands camper unless I’m in need of a campsite in a very particular place—like the KOA outside of Greensboro, North Carolina when I visited the site of the Woolworths’ Lunch counter sit-ins the next day. For me, camping and public lands are largely interwoven as part of the experience. When I camp, I seek to experience a wealth *we* own together. A wealth of land, of beauty, of spaces that cannot be reduced to any one private owner.

When I am not the owner of the land, my relationship to the space shifts. I am a visitor receiving the gifts of this one site for a night or three. I am transient within a park that is often decades old, among trees whose rings count to a century, and upon rock and soil formations dating to the last Ice Age. Camping does not just connect one to nature; camping connects one to an expansive sense of time.

The ways that time shifts when camping is part of what I find restorative about camping. At home, the tasks are endless. There is always something that needs to be cleaned, organized, fixed, weeded, or watered. But, when I camp, the number and scale of tasks shrinks way down. Suddenly making dinner is not something you have to do quickly between emails and a Zoom meeting. Rather, making dinner *is* the event. Start the fire and sit. Wait for the flames, for the coals to glow. Rise to chop some vegetables, prep the protein, and then start adding them to the cast iron pot to cook. Slowly. Carefully. Checking to stir once in a while

as you continue to sit beneath the canopy of sky or forest. Perhaps birds flit by. I might check the app on my phone to find out the name of the bird. Sometimes in Maine I see an eagle. Or, if I'm with a friend, we talk, we play Gin Rummy, we laugh. We sometimes just sit, quiet, together.

This is not to say that I don't also text friends or scroll through Facebook if I have a signal on my phone. Sometimes I've even been known to watch a video I've downloaded on my iPad...using headphones of course to not annoy any neighbors, human or otherwise. So, I'm not a tech-free purist. And, yes, of course, I've also spent many an hour reading on campsites too. Whatever it is that I am doing, the container of time in which I am living feels more spacious, less harried. It feels as if there is "enough" time and space in which to move and be. It feels simpler, balanced.

Slowing down to a simpler, balanced pace restores me. As I have [preached about](#), one of my concerns about how we live today is the ever-pressing demands of the attention economy in which we live. The endless streams of media intersect with age-old social networks of family, friends, and neighbors to generate multitudes of possibilities and expectations that exceed our capacities. Because we cannot in fact do it all, the competition for our attention is fierce and constant. For me, going camping is one way I've found to turn down all that noise.

And yet, I admit that camping takes energy too. There is the planning and packing. The travel and the set-up. With experience, many campers find their own system for these activities as they figure out just what you do—and do not—need along the way. For example, making a cup of coffee can be as simple as boiling water and adding a Starbucks instant coffee packet. Or some of us own a hand-operated burr grinder to create the perfect cup of pour-over coffee. And maybe sometimes we even use our battery-operated whisk to froth some milk. Or a digital thermometer to make sure the water is just the right temperature for green tea . . . and it doubles as a meat thermometer!

Yes, sometimes you do have to walk a bit to get to the bathroom where the cleanliness level can vary. And it's just a given that you're never going to find a campground bathroom devoid of all bugs. One just hopes that the biggest and hairiest bugs are not in fact lurking in the shower stalls. (Pro-tip...bring shower sandals when camping!) And yet, there is also a strange magic to those campground bathrooms. As you shuffle by other campers in their own disheveled, smokey clothes, you smile and nod. Sometimes you might chat about the weather or where you are coming from or headed to. There is a sense of shared experience that sheds layers of pretense found in swankier places. We proudly brush our teeth side-by-side without makeup, with sunburn or bug bites, and know that we have both chosen to be

here in this simplified way of being. Then, like making dinner, walking back to one's campsite *is* the event. Simply being amidst the trees and the other campers is all there is.

Despite such positive connections with neighbors, one of the most frequent concerns people express to me about camping is not wildlife, but other humans. Aren't I afraid?!? When I moved from tent camping to my little trailer, my mom was relieved. "Oh good," she said, "now you have a lock." And yet, in the 30 years I've been solo camping, only once did I have a neighbor that gave me pause. What I usually experience is the contrary—enormous friendliness and generosity. In my 20's, I was camping alone and struggling to get a fire started. I wandered to the retired couple at the next site and humbly asked for help. The man said he'd be over in a minute. He showed up carrying a bag of charcoal, dropped it in the fire pit, doused it in liter fluid, loaded wood on top of that, and tossed in a match. Ok, wow! Well, that worked. While I never replicated his approach to fire-starting, I deeply appreciated his generosity to help a stranger.

So many times, I have both received and offered all manner of help in campgrounds over the years. We have all been caught in a situation while camping for which we are not entirely prepared. We have all needed help from a neighbor. We are joined in an implied social contract in which we live side by side mindful that this space belongs to all of us and none of us. We are all transient campers crossing paths for but a time. I listen to the laughter of friends or the play of children. I watch people of all kinds as I walk by their campsite, or they walk by mine. I notice the political flags or bumper stickers for positions contrary to mine. Another camper compliments my politically progressive t-shirt and starts up a conversation. I notice which campgrounds attract more racial and ethnic diversity and which ones appear to have only white folks as if I missed the exclusionary sign at the entrance. Most of all, I become reawakened to a diversity of people beyond the familiar paths of my daily life. I pause to consider anew questions of what connects us and what divides us. I wonder who does and does not have access to this experience of camping on public land.

Camping is not for everyone. On the one hand, some people will just always prefer their Hilton hotels or their familiar home. On the other hand, some people will not feel safe in a majority white space with shared bathrooms, no locks, and political signs that signal risk if not outright racism. Still others camp not for recreational choice, but out of necessity for low-cost housing. Most campgrounds limit reservations to two-weeks so that sites remain transient rather than permanent residences. Without a doubt, I have camped beside families who are clearly living from the campsite. The simplicity and relative low-cost of camping which is a restorative experience for me is for others the best housing option they have.

For me, camping *is* a choice. It is a choice I make to be able to quiet the noise of too many demands, to enjoy the beauty of nature, to be reminded of the precious gift of this transient life, and to connect with others in a shared experience. Camping is not without its struggles, like any part of life. And camping is not segregated from the socio-economic issues that fracture and strain our nation. I do not camp to escape. I camp to remember what lies at life's core: food, shelter, beauty, wonder, and human connection. Grounding myself again and again in these, I return with a clarity to my relationships as a partner, mom, friend, colleague, and minister. My life's work, at its core, is to promote the flourishing of life—a life I often experience in abundance when I've gone camping.

Blessed be. Amen.