THE WAY IN THE WOODS

A week with Edwin Way Teale

BY KATHERINE HAUSWIRTH

In August I joined a small circle—artists in residence who each spent a week living and creating at Edwin Way Teale's former home in Hampton. This 168-acre memorial sanctuary, which Edwin and his wife Nellie named Trail Wood, arose from former farmland. It encompasses forest, meadows, ponds, streams, and a network of winding trails. Edwin's office in the white Cape Cod house is preserved just as he and Nellie left it, filled with an impressive collection of books and mementos from the lives they largely spent outdoors. Edwin died in 1980, Nellie 13 years later. Their haven—one that they longed for and sought for years—has been a Connecticut Audubon property since 1981 and has hosted visual artists and writers every summer since 2012.

The summer before last, a bookstore owner in Woodstock, New York, listened to me talking excitedly about Trail Wood and the residency I was hoping to win. This spurred him to climb up into his attic and rummage around, emerging with a slightly musty but well-preserved four-volume set of Teale's *The American Seasons* (Dodd, Mead, 1976): one delicious book for each season, chock full of Edwin and Nellie's travels around the United States and expertly crafted prose about the natural world. *Wandering Through Winter* (Dodd, Mead, 1965) won Teale the 1966 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction.

The set includes a thin biography of Edwin, and in it, I was tickled to read that he declared himself a naturalist at age 9 and by age 12 had changed his middle name from Alfred to Way. Edwin felt his full given name was "too commonplace for a future Thoreau" and instead adopted his Grandfather Way's last name as his middle name. This boy already knew he would immerse himself in nature and write about it. And, an inspiration for any writer, he found a way to do it. Every year, he remembered his personal "Freedom Day," the day he broke away from a salaried magazine job and started his freelance photography and writing life. When he began his time at Trail Wood he was, as they say, living the dream.

Sadly, most of Edwin's 31 books, reflecting a unique and riveting mix of accurate science and genuine, childlike delight, are out of print. Many friends, upon hearing that I'd won my residency, followed their hearty congratulations with a short pause and then a polite question. Who was Edwin Way Teale, exactly?

When I pulled up the long Trail Wood driveway to meet Rich Telford and Vern Pursley, the residency coordinator and property caretaker who gave me my orientation tour, I soon made my own short pause, followed by a polite question. They advised me to drive around the bend and park under the catalpa tree. I paused; my mind whirred nervously: I had no idea what a catalpa tree was. By asking them, was I about to reveal that I was not a "real" naturalist?

I've read enough about and by Edwin Way Teale that I feel comfortable calling him by his first name, and I assume that he would not have judged or berated me for my limited knowledge of flora and fauna. His writings reveal a deep sense of unabashed joy and enthusiasm for observation and learning. Many people wrote to him asking about the natural world and his books, or asking to visit. His responses were kindly. I've detected no trace of arrogance despite his obvious expertise. His zeal lives on at Trail Wood, embedded in the ripples in the waterways, the insects' buzz, the woodchuck perhaps descended from the very one he wrote about, and the big, bean-like pods of the iconic catalpa that graces his yard.

At Trail Wood, I became a naturalist through my questions. The sight of even a common gypsy moth had me peering and tracking and researching in a sort of timeless bliss. One question led to another and another.

Top right, a boardwalk protects a wet area. Bottom right, a trail led the author to the beaver pond.
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Top, Edwin Way Teale's writing cabin overlooks a pond.

Above, Edwin Way Teale joyously listed his property's 25 ferns.

One of Edwin's late-July entries in *A Walk Through the Year* (Dodd, Mead, 1978) affirmed my keen interest and questions. He knew so much at that point, having published about two dozen books, but he noted gleefully, "Again I am encountering something new beside the pond." He returned to Nellie at the house and viewed the "tiny, flat, rounded objects" he'd found underneath a 14-power magnifying glass. Edwin discovered that he had found pill clams. Then came the questions: "Why this sudden population explosion? Why on this particular summer?"

I have studied Edwin's correspondence (meticulously preserved and housed at the University of Connecticut's Thomas J. Dodd Research Center) and found more of the same enthusiasm in letters to his friend, the writer Rachel Carson. He wanted to learn more about eelgrass and sea anemones, asking Ms. Carson for her help in this quest. In another letter, Ms. Carson recalls their discussion about why the conch shell seems to give off the sound of the sea.

Perhaps as a reaction to my experience at Trail Wood, which was as contemplative as it was active, I became very curious about Edwin's spiritual life. I found nothing on record to suggest that he embraced a specific set of beliefs. Recently, however, I heard an interview with social psychologist Ellen Langer that helped me give a word to this spiritual "vibe" I detect in Edwin's deliberately chosen, lively way of life, studious but also peppered with an enviable dose of delight. Ms. Langer's definition of mindfulness has little to do with meditation or yoga or prayer. She described it as "actively noticing new things," a state that "puts you in the present" and is "literally, not just figuratively, enlivening."

One can notice new things anywhere, but I did so alone at Trail Wood, free from the usual constraints of work and family responsibilities. My week was a festival of noticing, intertwined with bouts of trying to capture it in words. My mind filled with things that enriched and enlivened me. I took in my surroundings as Edwin did when he recorded his own experience. *Mind-full.* I wrote about the hummingbirds and their favored roses of Sharon, the sphinx moth and its affinity for the catalpa, the multihued abundance of mushrooms in the woods, the catbird who flew around inside the information shed at dusk, and the beaver in the far pond who finally revealed himself (or herself) early one morning.

The "Way" in Edwin's prophetic adopted name leaps to mind when I recall my week alone on his cherished preserve. I took a laminated map that showed me the way through Ground Pine Crossing and Fern Brook trails, to the Beaver Pond and to the Hired Man's Monument. Edwin's words—which I read at the start of my day while sipping coffee on the low slate stoop of his house—showed me the way to things that are too easily abandoned by the workaday world. I found the way to silence and observation with all senses. I found the way to noticing and then noticing some more, and recording something of what I thought I could be learning. I joyfully snapped countless photos and spent languorous hours in a hammock. I trekked, studied, wrote, and edited. I saw the way of stepping back and finding meaning in all of it—even in the bug bites, humid air, and achy limbs as I hiked yet another hour.

Edwin's life at Trail Wood, and my own weeklong sojourn there, may read as paradisiacal, maybe even escapist. But I think the true test of Edwin's words, my own scribblings, and a hallowed place like Trail Wood is how any of these experiences resonate out in the "real" world. This, too, is a mark of mindfulness, according to how Ms. Langer describes it: this finely attuned noticing, this present-tense, spirited way of approaching life is also sensitive to context. Case in point, this reality-bound paragraph at the end of *A Walk Through the Year*, following 365 delectable snapshots of creatures and plants and climate and seasonal cycles at Trail Wood:

> As I come to these final sentences, I sit here wondering if a time will ever come when such a book as this will seem like a letter from another world. Will the richness of the natural world be overrun, and more and more replaced with a plastic, artificial substitute? The threat is real. And the outcome seems to depend on the wisdom and courage and endurance of those who are on the side of life—the original, natural life, the life of the fragile, yet strong, out-of-doors.

Parade magazine hailed Edwin as the "press agent for Nature." Surely we could use him now, someone to show us the way to more quiet and thoughtful observation, more well-informed and truly effective conservation. We have his words, still so very relevant, as a guide. We have his place, Trail Wood, as a touchstone for reveling in the outdoors, for the spark we feel when we make contact with plants and animals and the elements.

After living at Trail Wood, I've decided that the best remuneration we can offer for places like it, and for people like Edwin and Nellie, is to join the ranks of "press agents," honoring these places with our time, transmitting our enthusiasm and joy, and acting on the protective impulse that their meaningful and mindful gifts engender.

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