

Meeting Bear

By Peggy Logue

I was celebrating the year of my 60th birthday and wanted to do something challenging and memorable—something that would push my boundaries. I chose to go to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness with my 20-year-old son as guide. He had been there twice, once as a leader, and would be leading another group later this summer. Why couldn't he lead us?

It took a year for the idea to become a reality. I had to carry it in my heart, voicing it to no one until I confronted my fears and concerns. I worked through some of them but knew others would be faced in the field, in person. I had to be willing to take that risk.

One of my fears was about being in the wilderness in a soft-sided tent where there were bears. I knew there would also be wolves but I did not fear them as much. I have been in bear and wolf country before; I love and respect both animals. Earlier this summer while observing wolves in the Lamar Valley in Yellowstone, we watched a grizzly saunter along the meadow and then disappear into the woods. Unaware that we were there, she was clearly visible to us through a spotting scope. In grizzly country you are not permitted to camp with a soft-sided camper.

In the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, we would be in bear country in tents—my sons in one tent and Jerry and I in another. We could be attacked at night, my imagination told me, by a bear roaming around looking for food. Fear filled my heart as I imagined what could happen. Would I want to put my family in that kind of danger?

The confusing thing is that I was going to a wilderness area to see wildlife in their natural habitat. I wanted to experience the “wild”-ness, solitude, and connection. I feared the very thing I wanted to experience.

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The first night we camped at the outfitters' base at Moose Lake, a beautiful campsite with a camp store and adjacent restroom and shower. It

was dark when I decided I needed to use the bathroom, the last facility we would see for six days. When I heard a rustling noise as I started walking toward the store, I clapped my hands together to scare away the raccoon or possum. As I neared the building I saw a huge shadow on the ice chest and with one more clap of my hands a very large black bear ran off like a puppy into the woods. We had been told that there had been only two bear sightings all summer, and those were far removed from where we were and where we were going to be. Seeing this black bear stunned me. I decided that I didn't have to go after all, and quickly headed back to the safety of my tent!

I couldn't believe what I had just seen. We had been snug in our tents, unaware, while right outside was a black bear foraging for food. I told Jerry what I had seen. He was almost asleep.

"Oh, yeah," he said, not at all interested.

"I did! I saw a bear on my way to the restroom." I yelled to John and Mike that I had just seen a bear.

"A bear?" Mike responded.
"Yes! Over by the store!"

No more sounds. They didn't believe me.

I began to doubt myself about what I had seen. It had happened so quickly. But I knew I did see a bear and that we had not taken precautions. We not only didn't hang a bear bag, we left food out as well as other scented items like toothpaste. I was sure the bear would be back. Ours was the closet campsite to the store, which was about 70 yards away.

Jerry mumbled something to me and I said, "Either you didn't hear me or for some reason you have no concern that there is a bear out there."

"Yeah! Just write about it in your journal!"

I was feeling dismissed. "Why are you having trouble with this?" I asked. "I saw a bear and we left food out."

“Okay, I thought you were just making up a story!” He rolled over and went to sleep.

The problem was mine to deal with. I was the only one on guard. I could not sleep. I had known we might have these encounters here, and an encounter had occurred. I was afraid to put in my earplugs, which I brought as a defense against snoring. I listened and listened for sounds of the bear. Instead I heard the alluring chanting of the loon. That beautiful haunting sound reassured me and I began to drift off.

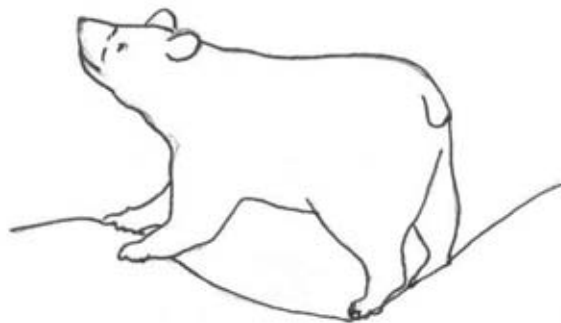
The next morning the young man who was to lead us to our wilderness entry point brought our food and canoes. I asked, “Was there a bear here during the night?”

“Yes,” another young Minnesotan answered. “I just finished cleaning up her mess. She has come here several times this summer.”

They didn’t seem concerned about personal safety, but they knew if the bear got dependent on humans it would be bad for her as well as humans. She would have to be “put down.”

“Once more, and she’s dinner!” said the young blond-haired man with our supplies. When camping in the wilderness, it is for the bears’ protection as well as for humans’ to put food in bear bags and then hang them in trees. But the truth was now known. There *was* a bear in the camp and I had seen her!

The following night I had dream. In the wilderness I have found dreams and reality are separated by a thin line. Was I that much closer to living in the now and really being present? In my dream, I was camping in a tent around dawn. Others were up doing things, but I wasn’t feeling good and lingered in my bed. The others told me a bear was coming toward me and that she was okay. I was not to worry. They were watching from a distance. In the dream I could see things from all perspectives. I could see the bear walking all around my bed. I could see me in my bed, lying on my back with my eyes following the bear. The bed, raised high off the ground, was surrounded by a



screen like you might see on a safari in the African desert. She sniffed all around, then cantered off like a big puppy dog. She ran in the direction of other campers, with children who were playing. I felt concern at first then relief as I realized no one seemed afraid. They knew she just wanted to play and be with us. It was fun to see her playful spirit.

We spent our last day in Ely, Minnesota, walking the streets and visiting the shops. We saw a store called “THE BEAR CENTER.” Inside it, a friendly, handsome gentleman told us about a photo exhibit by Lynn Rogers, with a video we could see on his work with bears. We were so taken by the work of Lynn Rogers that we watched the whole video. It gave a different perspective on the tales of how dangerous bears are. We saw Lynn hand-feed bears, visit their dens, put radio collars on them without tranquilizing, sit and talk with them, and even apologize to them when he overstepped the boundaries. He has respect for bears and while cautious, he has overcome the customary fears.

We have been home for a few days. I had no idea the trip would be so bear-centered for me. When I sat down for lunch today, staring directly at me was the National Wildlife Federation’s August calendar picture of a grizzly sitting in a field of wildflowers. It was then I got the inspiration to write this story. She wanted me to write it.

Why is my experience important? It is an example of community. We are part of the Earth community, just like the bear and all other life. I came to the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area to experience the “wilderness.” I

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felt how separated I am from the wild. One night I was sitting out with my son looking at the sky. It was so full of stars and there was so much darkness. I felt a little uncomfortable and kept listening for sounds. I felt vulnerable. I felt fear of the wild. I was not relaxed as I am at home in my own yard at dark. The next day I thought about my fear and wanted to understand it. I came to recognize that I am a six-day visitor here. This land belongs to them. It belongs to the wild ones. It is their home. I am sadly estranged from it, yet my soul craves it. The bear in my dream was the bear I saw in reality. She came back to tell me she had no desire for my demise. She was there to play and share her home. She wanted to be with us in community. She wants

to be accepted and respected and she accepts and respects me. She showed me these things as she sniffed me compassionately in my dream.

Usually I pay attention to the animals that show up in my life, either in reality or in dreams. I believe they have something to tell me or teach me, but because of my fear, I forgot about that with the bear. Now as I reflect, though, I know she came with a special message. Bear medicine is powerful. It called me to introspection. I have made changes in my life and I am in need of the quiet place. That is why I went to the wilderness. The bear was telling me to go to my den. The wild is not only without, it is within. I need to go within to discover the wild in me. And I can do that anywhere. There I will connect with the other beings. I will feel no fear. At this level I am in communion with all.

I went to be challenged by wilderness, to expand my personal boundaries and to re-member. In meeting bear, I did.

