

A Walk in the Woods

November 2006

Let me tell you about two ways to walk in the woods. My family loves nature hikes – all right, *Wes and I* love nature hikes and our kids have stopped resisting being dragged along. I particularly like going out to Eau Claire Dells east of town, and I try to go at least four times a year – once in each season. In early spring the break up of the ice over the waterfalls is full of drama. Later in spring, the trilliums are so plentiful they spill into the ditches along the highway passing by. In summer, watching the water move past those warm rocks is hypnotizing. In fall, the colors are so luscious I want to drink them. And in winter, the snowflakes in the hemlock branches are like lace.

Wes and I have walked in the woods since we first began dating. He is a botanist and worked as a camp naturalist as a student, so I have learned a great deal from hiking with him. I can tell trees apart by leaves or bark. I can recognize the different families of plants, and call many by Latin names. I know how dogwood leaves veins run, and at least one edible mushroom. The woods are so much richer when you train your eyes to see the details and differences in what might otherwise be a sea of green. I love this kind of walk in the woods – a walk of discovery and wonder.

Then there are the other kinds of walks we end up on. Wes is a member of the Friends of Rib Mountain, and one of the projects he has taken on there is helping eliminate invasive species. In case you aren't aware, invasive species are plants (or insects or animals for that matter – but let's focus on plants) that have been introduced from another country or climate. Because they have no natural predators or diseases in this neck of the woods, they will take over, and out-compete the native plants until there are no more natives left – only a monotonous expanse of one kind of plant. When Wes is on an invasive species hike, we only look for one thing. You got it – those weeds. When we roam the little patch of woods behind our house, we often do so doubled over, plucking out buckthorn seedlings. We follow along waterways, watching only for the telltale magenta flame of purple loosestrife. We hike the trails of Rib Mountain with our eyes peeled for the dread garlic mustard. We often see plenty of what we are looking for – and nothing else. These are walks of woe.

The exact same stretch of path can make for a depressing and back-breaking walk, or it can make for a delight-filled and spirit-lifting walk. It depends on what you are looking for. In this season of thanks giving, I want to encourage you to take some wonder walks through your life. Yes, we need to take weed-walks in our lives, or the bad habits and poor planning and conflicts can take over. But if that's all we ever look for, that's all we'll ever see. At least in this month of giving thanks, be sure you look beyond the invaders at your feet, and look around and up. You will find that thanks and wonder spill from you without forcing them – they are simply called forth by the wonder you see, because you looked for it.