

## Chasing Irene

*“Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”*

– Howard Thurman, civil rights leader

What makes us come alive?

Danger, for starters. I certainly perked up when I learned that my plane was scheduled to land at Philadelphia's airport at the very hour that Hurricane Irene was due to strike the city. Six years earlier, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in the costliest natural disaster in American history, not to mention the 1800 people who died, and though I knew Hurricane Irene wasn't in the same league I didn't feel like taking a chance. So, I called up the airline and received permission to postpone my flight by twenty-four hours. Thankfully, as it turned out. Not simply because I was safe but because by traveling in the hurricane's wake for the next seven days, I had an unexpected opportunity to explore the things that make us come alive and contemplate what this might mean as we move further into the *Age of Consequences*.

Born in the mid-Atlantic Ocean on August 20th, 2011, Irene developed into a Category 3 hurricane as it moved west through the Bahamas. Although it lost strength as it veered north, the storm played a nerve-wracking game of nip-and-tuck along the eastern seaboard, forcing massive evacuations and countless business closings. In Washington, D.C., a major ceremony inaugurating a memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. had to be postponed. In New Jersey, the storm caused Atlantic City's casinos to shut down for only the third time in their history (the last hurricane to strike the Jersey Shore was in 1903). By the time Irene's eye passed over New York's Central Park, it had struck a patch of dry air and weakened to 'merely' a Tropical Storm. It drenched the city but didn't cause substantial damage. To New Yorkers it felt like a bullet dodged. In typical New York style, one resident later quipped that Irene was “just another storm.”

It certainly wasn't “just another storm” to residents of Vermont, however. Parts of the state were pummeled with as much as eleven inches of rain, turning mild-mannered streams into raging



**Hurricane Irene**



***Wilmington, Vermont, on August 28th***

torrents that knocked homes off their foundations and took giant bites out of roads. Cemeteries flooded, with caskets floating away. Three people died. Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin called it the worst flooding in a century. It was the same in upstate New York, which received over thirteen inches of rain from the storm. Gale-force winds flattened trees and toppled telephone poles like matchsticks. “We were expecting flooding, we weren’t expecting devastation,” said one resident. “It looks like somebody set a bomb off.”

By the time Irene dissipated its energies over northern Maine, it had carved a trail of destruction from Florida to Canada. At least fifty-five deaths were blamed on the storm. Approximately seven million homes and businesses lost electrical power. Extensive damage occurred along coastlines as a result of storm surge. Tornadoes spawned by Irene caused significant property damage. Dozens of rivers, spurred by a rainy summer that had saturated soils, reached one-hundred-year flood levels. One river, in Greene County, New York, reportedly reached the 500-year flood mark. The list went on and on. Ultimately, the price tag for Irene’s damage would reach \$15 billion dollars, making it the sixth costliest hurricane in U.S. history.

Despite the damage and the cost and the lives lost, however, there was a general sense that things could have been much worse. Flying into Philadelphia the day after the hurricane under azure skies, the only visible sign of distress that I could see from the air was flooding along the Delaware River. It didn’t look terribly bad – and it wasn’t. Taking a solid punch on the chin from Irene, Philadelphia had barely staggered. Sure, there were a lot of downed trees and electrical lines, as well as substantial water damage, but by the time the wheels of my plane touched down on the sunny tarmac, repair operations were in full swing. Humans were on the job. It would have been different if Irene had remained a Category 3 storm. Nevertheless, as the plane taxied up to the gate and I watched the beehive of activity all along the airport terminal, I thought, with some pride, about the amazing way humans rise to the challenge of emergencies. We’re fabulous short-term problem-solvers and things like floods and hurricanes bring out the can-do side of our nature.

Which made me think of Howard Thurman.

*Emergencies make us come alive.*

This is a good thing. If even half of what scientists predict about the future comes true, then crisis management will become a way of life for us, requiring as much can-do spirit as we can muster. I have no doubt we'll tackle each crisis with skill and gusto. This oddly hopeful feeling was reinforced as I drove north out of the city. Fields of twisted and flattened corn, piles of shattered tree limbs, and pools of flood water at creek crossings dotted the countryside, as if a gang of giants had stampeded across the land in a fit of chaotic anger. The blue skies overhead only added to the surreal effect. Still, evidence of recovery abounded. I saw crews repairing downed electrical lines and trucks hauling debris away. There was also heavy traffic on the roads – as if nothing unusual had just happened. It was another positive sign, I thought. For once, I was *glad* that a truck rode my bumper.

I had flown to Pennsylvania to visit the Rodale Institute, near Kutztown. Rodale is a well-known center of organic farming research and education and I wanted to interview Jeff Moyer, the long-time Farm Director, about an innovative farming practice that he had helped develop. It was part of a new book I had decided to write about climate and carbon [published in 2014 as *Grass, Soil, Hope*]. After the interview, I planned to head deeper into New England – *terra incognita* for this westerner. Despite having been born in Philadelphia and raised on a farm nearby for the first six years of my life (though not by farmers), I knew virtually nothing about this corner of America – a deficiency I hoped to correct. I called ahead to Rodale and learned that my designated greeter had been hit in the head by a piece of airborne lawn furniture during the storm. I already knew that Jeff had gone home to start the generator at his farm, which like thousands of other homes and businesses had become temporarily detached from the nation's power grid. So, after depositing my luggage in the guest house, I headed into town for a meal and a beer. That's when the idea of what makes come alive popped into my head again. It was the beer – not the liquid itself – rather the *idea* of beer. I'll back up.



**Rodale Institute**

While attending a conference the previous May, I heard a presentation by Katie Wallace, a young woman who worked for New Belgium Brewing Company in Colorado. Her official job title is Sustainability Specialist – no doubt a rapidly expanding career path for young people in the

*Age of Consequences* – which means she gets paid to help the brewery increase its recycling program, reduce its carbon footprint, expand its use of sustainably-raised hops and barley, analyze its water use, and generally make beer more earth-friendly. It's not a marketing ploy, she insisted. The company is dedicated to core principles, including fair wages, good working conditions, environmental stewardship, and sustainability. She admitted, however, when she took the job she asked herself a question: what does 'sustainability' actually mean? Doing research, she came up with a variety of conventional definitions, none of them particularly inspiring. She decided to reread New Belgium's published Principles, discovering this instruction: *Have Fun*. That's when a light bulb went off, she told the audience. Up came the next slide.

"It isn't sustainable if it isn't fun," she said.

She's exactly right. We can talk all day about "shoulds" and "musts" and "oughts" in relation to 'saving the planet' but in the end if we're not having *fun* while doing these things, we won't succeed. It doesn't have to be deliriously, Pollyanna-ish fun necessarily, but it does need to be upbeat and enjoyable. People will respond much more quickly to a new idea if makes them smile. Conversely, if it's seen as a chore, no matter how well-intentioned, or as an obligation (especially if someone else is doing the obligating), then it will likely never be fully embraced. Then there's the burnout factor. If what you're doing isn't fun, *you* won't be sustainable for very long. That's a condition I knew all too well. Of course, it's a lot easier to have fun when there's beer involved.

Ms. Wallace was also the source of the Howard Thurman quote, which I turned over in my mind as I drove into Kutztown. What makes us come alive, other than hurricanes and emergencies?



**Howard Thurman**

What motivates humans to go do good things? We know what motivates us to do *bad* things – greed, for example – but how can we inspire people to come alive with joy and hope? Other than drinking a lot of beer. And while I was thinking about it, what makes *me* come alive? Exploring did, certainly. For over fourteen years, I had explored a mysterious and fascinating land called *Quivira* and did so with gusto. It made me come alive. I was exploring new territory now, but it hadn't fired me up yet, not the way *Quivira* did. Maybe chasing Irene up the coast would help. Maybe among the flattened corn stalks and the broken branches left behind by the partying giants I could find what makes us come alive.



*Food makes us come alive.*

I discovered this truth at the international Slow Food/Terra Madre gathering in Turin, Italy a few years ago and I saw it again at Rodale, whose motto is “Pioneering Organic Since 1947.” The Institute sits on 333 acres of a former industrially-managed farm that is now dedicated to a holistic world view based on *health* – soil, people, and communities. On Tuesday morning, I was scooped up by Jeff and driven to a government office near Harrisburg to attend a day-long Organic Farming 101 workshop, where Jeff was one of the instructors. It was a great class. I learned about recycling nutrients, encouraging natural predators to manage pests, increasing plant densities to block weeds – all integrated and interconnected. When livestock and poultry are added, the potentials rise even higher, due to fertilizing, grazing behavior, and culling unwanted plants. A lot of what I heard was technical but at its core was this message: *organic makes the land come alive*. This message was buttressed that evening as I walked through Rodale’s small on-site organic farm, which is open to the public. A mother and her two children were gathering fruit in the U-Pick-It section of the farm and I could tell even from a distance that they were smiling. The kids frolicked while their mother filled a basket with ripe fruit, a timeless image made more timeless by the lovely light of the setting sun. We spoke briefly – I asked if I could take a photo – and we concurred that fresh food is a good thing. And being outside.

This feeling was reinforced the next morning when Jeff and I discussed the no-till crimper that he helped to develop at Rodale. I won’t go into the details here. I’ll just say this: 5000 years of plowing to grow food was a huge mistake. By turning soil over and exposing microbes to the killing effects of too much heat and light, plowing destroys life in the soil – which is contrary to everything that organic stands for as a world view. That’s why many farmers now employ a no-till drill to plant their seeds. However, many of them also use pesticides and herbicides to control bugs, weeds, and diseases. It was an unhappy paradox until Jeff came up with a way to do no-till organically, using a large rolling, metal crimper to knock down the cover crop, keeping the weeds, bugs, and diseases way down. It was a brilliant innovation, and my hunch is that it will revolutionize agriculture someday. That’s because by keeping the soil intact it made microbes come alive!



***Rodale’s crimper***



***Jeff Moyer***

The world needs soil microbes, and lots of them. According to the United Nations, there will be nine billion people on the planet by 2050, which raises a serious question: how are we going to feed them without destroying what's left of the natural world, especially under the stress of climate change? It's not about poor people and starvation either. The food well-fed Americans eat comes from a global production system that is already struggling to find enough arable land, adequate supplies of water, and drought-tolerant plants and animals to feed seven billion people. Add two billion more –

of all income levels – and you have a recipe for a devastating raid on the natural world. Where is all this extra food and water going to come from, especially if the climate gets hotter and drier in many places as predicted? Organic, no-till agriculture is one answer. Healthy soil microbes is another. So too innovators like Jeff Moyer and the Rodale Institute.

Healthy food not only makes us come alive it *keeps* us alive as well.

*Liberty makes us come alive.*

Giving Boston a wide berth while driving north to New Hampshire to visit another farmer, I caught sight of a sign for the Minute Man National Historical Park. I veered off the Interstate and was immediately enmeshed in a thick tangle of SUVs, sedans and trucks that clogged every road. Where were they all coming from? Where were they going? At one point I needed to make a left-hand turn and waited patiently for a gap in the steady stream of traffic – but one never appeared! Amazed, I gave up and pushed on. Was it like this every day? Where did all these people live? How could they tolerate this grind-and-go existence? And why didn't they hit their brakes for a moment and let me make a left-hand turn? If this was the price of liberty, I wasn't sure it was worth it, I thought crankily.

I had freedom on my mind because I was trying to wend my way to the famous North Bridge near Concord, where on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1775, an assembly of American patriots, called Minutemen, fired the 'Shot Heard Around the World' at a column of British soldiers, formally igniting the American Revolution. A quick detour to the park's visitor center set the stage: the British Army had occupied Boston in an attempt to suppress a rising tide of rebellion among

American colonists. Receiving a tip that Minutemen were caching weapons near Concord, the British decided to act. Marching under the cover of darkness, they hoped to catch the Americans by surprise and confiscate the weapons. Unfortunately for them, a silversmith named Paul Revere made a daring midnight ride to alert the militia, spoiling the surprise. Roused, the Americans gathered at the bridge for a confrontation with the hated British. Soon, shots rang out. Perhaps bloodshed was inevitable, in any case the colonists' great struggle for liberty was officially underway.

Leaving the visitor center, I spotted a gap in the traffic, dashed into it, and headed for Concord. The weather was perfect. I stuck an elbow casually out the window as I drove. The park had a great story to tell, but it was difficult to cast my mind back two centuries amidst the high-



**Minutemen Statue**

priced homes, antique stores, and endless SUVs. I considered a stop in Concord, to soak up some colonial ambience, but I couldn't find a parking spot. I pushed on to North Bridge, a short distance to the west, where, at last, I found a bit of serenity. I climbed out of the rental and walked the short distance to the famous bridge, which earned its historical immortality mostly by being at the right place at the right time. It's a pretty spot, and as I mingled with two dozen other tourists I tried once more to cast my mind back to those revolutionary days, when the quest for independence, freedom, and liberty made *a lot* of people come alive.

It was hard. It wasn't just the peaceful trees swaying in a soft breeze near the bridge, or pleasant murmur of the creek as it passed underneath that interfered with my attempt to imagine the battlefield. It was the general feeling that the Revolution has stalled in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. American democracy is on the ropes, pummeled by the corrupting influence of Big Money, rancorous partisanship, poor leadership, widespread cynicism and stubborn indifference on the part of the public. What would the Minutemen have made of our political system today? Baffled, I bet. Maybe angry too. Most distressing is our inability to get meaningful reform through Congress, other than health care (controversially too). That's because Business-as-Usual rules. Wasn't tyranny the Status Quo in 1775? Didn't Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and fellow conspirators plot the ultimate reform by tossing the British out? Wasn't monarchy reformed with democracy? And wasn't the key to democracy the kind of guys who pointed their muskets at the hated Redcoats on the far side of North Bridge?

While eating supper in Providence, Rhode Island, later that evening, I read these words in the official National Park Service Handbook on the American Revolution:

*“Our historical sites are so focused on the War for Independence that they give the visitors little sense of the wave of reform that swept America even while the battle against England wore on... some of the most advanced reformist ideas came from the lower strata of American society. On farms, seaport docks, in taverns, and on streets, ordinary Americans were not only indispensable to the success of any reform movement but in many cases were the cutting edge of reform ideas.”*

Of reforms enacted at the time, the Handbook went on to say, two were crucial: (1) enabling ordinary men to become active political players, both as voters and officeholders; and (2) severing the right to vote from property ownership. These reforms opened the floodgates of democracy, and both were quite unpopular with the upper classes of American society, as you can imagine. ‘We the people’ began to think of themselves as the primary source of authority in the new nation instead of the elites, as well as the ultimate source of the nation’s laws via their elected representatives. It was certainly something new-under-the-sun and the average American citizen at the time knew it. “Poor people,” one eyewitness wrote, “enjoy the right of voting for representatives to be protectors of their lives, personal liberty, and their little property, which, though small, is yet, upon the whole, a very great object to them.”

The revolutionary struggle for liberty led eventually to a host of other important reforms, including ending the policy of imprisonment for debt, the phasing out of indentured servitude, the end of slavery (requiring a terrible war, alas), the creation of taxpayer-funded public schools, the enactment of women’s suffrage, the implementation of fair wages and working conditions for the laboring classes, the end of the poll tax, a loosening of divorce laws, and much more.

Many of these reforms spread around the world, of course, improving countless lives. Constitutionality, government neutrality in religion, the idea of inalienable rights of citizens, balances of power among governmental branches, limits to power, and other essentials flowed from the cloud of gunpowder discharged from both ends of North Bridge on that fateful day. Democracy had come alive. Was it still alive? It’s something to ponder as we move deeper into the *Age of Consequences* with its unavoidable conflicts over natural resource scarcity combined with the social and ecological stress caused by climate change. Undoubtedly, the issues of liberty, inalienable rights, fairness, the pursuit of happiness, and perhaps more struggles with tyranny, will move to the front burner once more. In many places around the world, they already have.



*Justice makes us come alive.*

The distance between the American Revolution and the American Industrial Revolution is short, both historically and literally – just 60 years and 50 miles. I’m referring to the distance between Concord and Lowell, Massachusetts, home to Lowell National Historical Park, where I made another quick stop. The park was created in 1978 to commemorate America’s role in the Industrial Revolution, which by the 1820s was roaring ashore from England. What I didn’t know was that Lowell was the first large-scale planned industrial city in American history. According to a brochure I picked up in the visitor center, in addition to being a “model city” and a major textile manufacturing center, Lowell ushered in a new era of mechanical innovation, gave rise to the modern corporation, and became a model (for a while) America’s new urban working class. It was also hailed as the ‘Venice’ of the United States for its canal system, used to power the mills.



**Lowell National Historical Park**

I also learned about Lowell’s prominent role in breaking the promise of American capitalism. In the early days, the city’s ten milling corporations staffed their thirty-two factories with unmarried Yankee farm girls lured to Lowell with promises of high wages, good working conditions, and a strict moral atmosphere. The promises were mostly true, at least for a while. It was a type of working class Eden, where hard work, enforced efficiency, and cutting-edge mechanization combined to make the owners of the mills rich. Even Charles Dickens was impressed. In 1842, the famous novelist visited a factory at Lowell and reacted favorably. “I cannot recall or separate one young face that gave me a painful impression,” he wrote later, “not one young girl whom, assuming it to be matter of necessity that she should gain her daily bread by the labour of her hands, I would have removed from those works if I had had the power.”

He should have looked harder. Conditions in the mills were tough. Girls worked twelve-hour days and averaged seventy-three hours a week – all while standing or sitting at machines that never ceased operating. The noise in the workrooms was described as “infernal” and the air was full of fibrous particles. The young girls worked year-round with very little time off, though brief vacations were possible if a group pooled their labor and met their quotas. Often, the girls sent

their wages home to their families, sometimes to support a brother's higher education. The girls paid rent to the mill owners to live in nearby boarding houses, six to a room, where they took their meals. Behavior was strictly regulated, as was a curfew. "Immorality" was not tolerated. Attending church on Sunday was a requirement.

This "Eden" didn't last long. In the early 1830s, mill owners in neighboring cities began to cut costs by hiring workers from the pool of newly arrived immigrants to America, who worked (and lived) cheaply. This put pressure on the Lowell corporations to cut costs as well or have their products undersold. A critical decision-point arose: cut worker wages or investor dividends? You know what happened. In 1834, the owners of Lowell's textile mills imposed a 15% reduction in wages. The Yankee farm girls promptly organized a "turn-out" or strike. This was a surprise to many observers since it was considered at the time "unfeminine" to create such a fuss. In any case, the strike failed miserably and within days many of the girls were back at work at reduced pay. The rest went home, disillusioned. When the mill owners raised the rents at the boarding houses two years later, the girls "turned out" again, this time with greater effect. This time, the mill owners relented and rescinded the rent hike.

The handwriting was on the wall, however. Labor and capital would never again enjoy a harmonious relationship in this nation. Eden's jig was up. The Yankee girls kept up their protests, including a demand for a ten-hour day, which the mill owners resisted mightily. The fight spilled over in all directions. Soon, it became a historical struggle between the rights of workers and the power of corporations, with consequences that are still with us today. As the Yankee girls proved, justice then, as now, is certainly worth coming alive for. Here are words from a Lowell protest song:

*Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I  
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?  
Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave,  
For I'm so fond of liberty,  
That I cannot be a slave.*

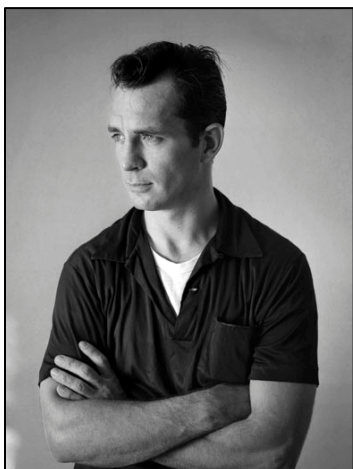


I left the visitor center and took a quick walk around the grounds, pondering what I had just learned. Peeking around tall brick buildings and into narrow alleys, I searched for a clue that might reconcile the revolutionary fight for liberty fifty miles away at Concord with the home-

grown oppression on exhibit at Lowell. I didn't find any. Lurking in the background, of course, is the 21<sup>st</sup> century corporation, with all of its attendant power and oppression. A lot of people had come alive in recent years in this particular fight for justice – and I admired them all.

*Creativity makes us come alive.*

I didn't realize that Lowell was hometown to Jack Kerouac, the famous 'beat' novelist of the 1950s and 60s. Of the more than thirty books of prose and poetry that he composed over his forty-seven year life, five drew on his youthful adventures in Lowell and the French-Canadian working class community he grew up in. I hadn't read any of them, I have to admit. I'm not a Kerouac fan, at least not of *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*, the only two books of his that I've read. I thought they were indulgent and prosaic, recalling Truman Capote's famously malicious insult of Kerouac's work: "That's not writing, that's *typing*."



**Jack Kerouac**

Wandering through the Kerouac display in the visitor center, however, I saw a different side of the writer. I saw a man possessed by his muse. He wrote and wrote and wrote. Words gushed out of him, into books, journals, letters, and poems. He couldn't help himself, no more, apparently, than he could stop consuming alcohol. He wasn't a calculating writer – like Capote – or overtly fame-seeking, like some of his contemporaries. He was a writer through and through. Words made him come alive – even if they also caused him to drink himself to death. His muse had him by his white T-shirt and wouldn't let go.

This thought stayed with me all the way to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where I stopped for a break. It was another gorgeous day, so I took a seat at a table outside a small cafe, where, to my surprise, I heard the pleasing sounds of a violin among the noisy traffic. Looking around, I saw a young woman in a dress and cowboy boots not far away playing against the red brick wall of a fancy store, her case propped open for donations. I closed my eyes and listened. The music she played was as sweet as the soft air, carrying my spirits up and out someplace, to spin and float in the bright light. It cut through the traffic like, well, a song. Music makes us come alive, no doubt about it.



**Street music in Portsmouth**

Over the centuries, I suspect, as many words have been written about the creative impulse in humans as have been composed about oppression and liberty. I won't repeat the arguments here, or add many words of my own, other than to say that music-making and other creative endeavors is one of the very best ways humans come alive. In fact, it practically defines us as human. That's why the prehistoric cave art of Europe resonates so well with us today – it touches something very deep in our spiritual and psychological core. Ditto with music, dance, sculpture, literature – as well as engineering, math, physics, and so on. We're an inventive species, obviously, and we've done some pretty spectacular things with our creative impulse, both good and bad. One of my favorite examples is Michelangelo, of Sistine Chapel and David fame, who epitomized the spirit of the Renaissance. What an extraordinarily alive person he must have been! But no less are the anonymous engineers behind the Apollo moon program, say. Imagine how alive they felt when Neil Armstrong kicked up a little lunar dust in July 1969.

All of this was very much on my mind over the next two days as I visited with Dorn Cox, a young, self-described “carbon” farmer on his family's 250-acre farm, called Tuckaway, near Lee. I came to see Dorn because he was doing very innovative things, including organic no-till



***Dorn Cox standing in a field***

agriculture – all while earning a Phd. When I caught up with Dorn, he stood in a hayfield behind a University of New Hampshire professor's house, spreading wood ash carefully among a grid of study plots. His dissertation research aims at figuring out the best way to turn a hayfield into a vegetable farm without tilling it. Actually, he calls what he does “beyond organic no-till” because it tackles a variety of 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, including renewable energy. For example, Tuckaway produces 100% of its energy needs on-site, from only 10% of its land. Dorn does it with biodiesel, canola specifically, which he and his family grow on the farm. Additionally, Dorn's sister and her husband are avid practitioners of horse farming, like the Amish, which is another form of renewable energy.

Dorn also views much of what he does with an eye to climate change. By purposefully increasing the soil organic content of the farm's soil over time, Dorn and his family are sequestering additional carbon dioxide in the soil, thus helping to mitigate in their small way the carbon dioxide overload in our atmosphere. Improving the organic content of the soil is also good



for their bottom-line, because they can grow more crops. In fact, Tuckaway is involved in a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, coordinating its work with other farms nearby. Dorn is also deeply committed to open-source knowledge-sharing, via the Internet. Nothing's proprietary – all knowledge and experience is shared openly and evenly with anyone who wants access and vice versa. It's a democratic way of making sure that everyone benefits.

Dorn's goal is nothing less than the revitalization of New Hampshire's moribund agriculture as a regenerative and sustainable enterprise, one acre at a time. Since the state currently produces only six percent of the food it consumes, this dream is a tall order. Dorn is undaunted, however. Tuckaway Farm is a passion for him, as well as a 'canvas' of sorts for his ideas and creativity. He loves what he does and clearly, what he is doing makes him come alive. It was all very exciting to see and hear and hopeful in so many ways. That's because it was the creative impulse at work, mixed with a healthy helping of democracy. Luckily for all of us.



All good stuff – but what made *me* come alive?

I hadn't settled on an answer yet, so I decided to keep following in Irene's wake by making a long drive to former family haunt on Deer Isle, in Maine's Penobscot Bay. For a brief moment in the mid-1960s, my parents owned a tiny patch of shoreline near the village of Deer Isle, which we visited occasionally from our home near Philadelphia. I had no idea how it came into our possession or why my parents picked Deer Isle of all places since we had no family roots in Maine. Perhaps my father wanted to play woodsman. I remember him chopping trees down on the property. Maybe the land represented some sort of dream of theirs, perhaps the dream of a vacation home (the tree-chopping suggests they had planned to stay in the East). I also remember my mother sitting ruefully on a rock near the water's edge, looking out to sea.

We only visited the property a few times that I can recall and I doubt it meant much emotionally to either my father or mother, at least they never said so. But the place stuck in my memory for some reason, perhaps because it belonged to us during one of the few happy periods in my mother's life that I witnessed. I knew she struggled all her life to find something that made her come alive. During the 1950s, she seemed to have her pick. She traveled, wrote, photographed, attended graduate school, worked and played, though I suspect her inability to settle on one activity



indicated a restless, questing heart as much as any drive for a career. Parenting certainly didn't make her come alive, as my sisters and I can attest. Writing did, however, as did traveling, but she largely abandoned both by the time I became a teenager. She wore her disappointment on her sleeve too. I think that's why the little property on remote Deer Isle has stayed with me all these years – it belongs to a period between alive and not alive in my mother's life. Did she come alive when they visited the property? Possibly – but I'll never know for sure.

I thought I'd go take a look.

It was nearly a mistake. Forgoing the more direct route up the Interstate, I opted instead for the scenic drive along Route 1, which I picked up at Brunswick after a quick stop for caffeine. The road looked intriguing on my map, bobbing and weaving among inlets, bays, and rivers. What the map didn't show was the bumper-to-bumper traffic *all the way*. It took me over six hours to drive the 100 miles to the island. I did the final twenty-five in a blur, partly because I wanted to arrive before the sun sank below the horizon for photographic purposes, and partly because my bladder was about to burst.

I didn't know where our little property was located exactly, but I came close enough. After prospecting among the stately homes and No Trespassing signs that blanketed the shoreline where I knew the land should be (garnering a glower from a homeowner in his well-appointed backyard), I headed to Stonington, the main village on the island. No new memories had come swimming back during my prowl, which wasn't a surprise. I did get to see unfamiliar trees and a pretty view of the sea, however, which added shapes and colors to my mental images of our time there. I wasn't disappointed, despite the long drive. I was hungry, though, so I headed into town for a meal.

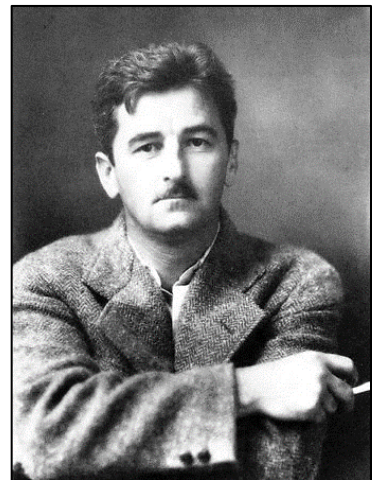
I found a table on a restaurant patio overlooking the bay. I heaved myself into a chair, ordered coffee to gird myself for the long drive back to my hotel in Portland and turned to watch the day slip into evening. It was extraordinarily pleasant out, still, warm, and peaceful, marred only by a long string of profanity uttered by a crew hand unloading a fishing boat nearby. It was an amusing juxtaposition to the art galleries and upscale restaurants that surrounded me. When the swearing ended, I soaked up the silence, relaxing for the first time all trip, it felt like. The lack of relaxation was my fault – I push and push and push myself all the time, such as driving six hours through insane traffic to have a cup of coffee by the sea. It was part of the questing gene that I inherited from my mother, I suppose, along with the need to write. My thoughts drifted back to Mr. Kerouac and the restlessness that defined a generation – my mother's generation. They were

only a few years apart in age and I think they shared similar dreams and frustrations, and perhaps demons. One wrote, one wanted to. Both were restless and both came alive for a while under the gaze of the same uncompromising muse, who I'll call... *Irene*.

The particular type of rootless, restless questing that came alive in the 1950s and 60s, fueled by various cultural disharmonies and cross-currents that Kerouac sensed early on, and my mother experienced firsthand, is alive and well today. That's because the disharmonies have only grown bigger and more consequential, which means the questing is more necessary than ever. I know the feeling – I've been on a restless quest for most of my life. The actual object of the chase wasn't always clear to me except it involved asking questions and seeking answers. And expressing them as creatively as possible. It's what makes me come alive. The quest has one Rule: Obey the Muse. Ok, a second: Don't Forget to Have Fun.

Preferably without the alcoholism.

In the *Age of Consequences*, we need as much creativity as we can muster. We'll need it not only to handle emergencies, produce fresh food, ensure liberty and fight for justice, but because we'll need songs to keep our spirits up, writing to share stories, and *typing* to get it all down for others to read. As for me, hurricanes and other emergencies aren't my thing. I wasn't destined to be a farmer or rancher either, despite my huge admiration for everyone who grows our food and takes care of our land. Liberty and justice? Yes – but I'm not made of the sterner stuff required of activists. As I discovered, I'm not genetically predisposed for repeated tilting at windmills. Writing is my genes, however – and not just my mother. In the 1980s, thanks to an aunt's sleuthing, I learned that William Faulkner is a not-too-distant cousin on mine on my father's side (to my mother's chagrin). I confirmed the relationship during a visit to Faulkner's home near Oxford, Mississippi, a few years ago. This knowledge has been a secret source of inspiration for me. Sitting there, smelling the salty air of the harbor, I decided to embrace my roots. I raised my coffee cup in a toast. "To Irene, the Muse of restless writers."



**William Faulkner**

I gazed across the darkened bay. Lights twinkled in the distance. A crescent moon hung suspended over the shrouded outline of an island. It was time to hit the road. I finished the coffee and took one last look. There's one more thing that makes us come alive, I thought: horizons. The need to see around the next bend. To hit the road. To chase a dream. And to never stop.

Irene would understand.



All photos by Courtney White.

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My Story / Chasing Irene