

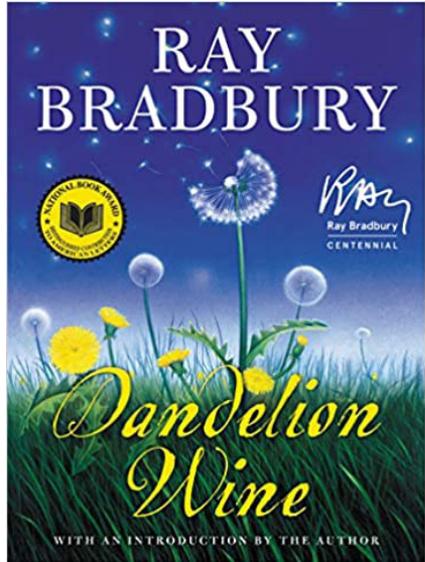
Mexico City and Bills Lake

No, this isn't a piece about migrant workers coming to Newaygo County.

Instead, it is about a portion of Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* wherein Colonel Freeleigh, an elderly, frail gentleman who is confined to both his nursing home and the bed within it, adopts an unusual vehicle to keep his "little gray toad of a heart" going. Since Mexico City was a favorite place in his life and since the story takes place before the advent of television and videotape, he makes long, expensive phone calls to a friend who still lives there. He asks his friend to merely place the phone on the window ledge so that the colonel can listen to the sounds coming from the plaza. He wants to hear common, daily, ordinary moments from a particular location where he had spent countless wonderful hours in his youth. He thinks: "When you are away from a [place], it becomes fantasy.....It is good to hear the sounds, and know that Mexico City is still there and the people moving and living...."

As a high school English teacher in Detroit who was very aware that the minds of most of my students were "out the window" (somewhere beyond the confines of the walls of my classroom), I often tried to use this vignette as a springboard to tap into their fantasies. Where, I used to ask them,

would you make the phone call if you were in Colonel Freeleigh's situation? If you were bedridden and elderly and had no prospect of ever traveling again, from where would you want to hear the sounds of a



cherished place?

Some students chose places that they *wish* they had visited but never had the chance. It was a kind of "Things I Wish I Could Do Before I Die" response. But not surprisingly, most kids, like Colonel Freeleigh, went back to the past. Some described school dances. Some portrayed slumber parties. Some remembered the sounds of the playground. And many remembered summer camp, not only for the sounds of the kids laughing and playing, but for the sounds of nature.

Of course, I was doing the assignment for me, not just for them. Because for me, the place where I would place the phone was invariably Bills Lake in Newaygo County. This is the place where my grandfather had built a summer cottage on Vanderstel Point sometime in the 1930s. This is where I first came in June, 1945 when I was but three months old. This is where I spent virtually all summer between 1945 and 1958.

A phone on the ledge of the cottage would have captured for me the sounds of waves lapping on shore, the quacking of the ducks, the murmur of fishermen late at night, and the rustle of the wind through the trees. I would close my eyes and see Deer Point, blood-red sunrises, and fishing boats dotting the landscape.

It was serene and heavenly and more importantly, a place I couldn't immediately get to because I was stuck in a high school classroom in the Big City, just as my students were.....and just as Chris Taylor, who lives in Los Angeles, was.

In slightly altered form, the Col. Freeleigh-thing happened this past summer to her. Having spent several summers at Bills Lake in the late '50s and undoubtedly enraptured with the same fond memories, she yielded to an impulse and made a wacky request to the long distance operator, pleading: "Let

me talk to someone who lives on Bills Lake." The operator put her in touch with Rev. Jerry Sewell of Bills Lake Baptist Church who in turn put her in contact with my neighbor, Pat Ericksen. After figuring out what Chris really needed, Pat told her: "I know just who you should talk to," and gave me, hours later, her phone



number.

Although Chris is young and effervescent, I immediately recognized a Col. Freeleigh opportunity. I called her back on a perfect summer's evening in July, introduced myself, and then began my conversation with the words: "Let me make your day."

I then proceeded to describe what I was surveying from my deck overlooking the lake. I was very specific, in part, to paint the picture and in part to reassure her that this was not a crank phone call. I described the play of the sunset on Deer Point, the fact that Tannewitz's Barn was still there, how the area once known as Swift's Landing had changed, and the scene where they

were taking down the flag at that very moment at VFW Camp Trotter. I included a description of the “diamonds” of sunshine on the water, the smell of campfires, the sounds of laughter that carry so far across a lake, and the putter of pontoon boats as they made their ritual circle in the evening.

Chris was beside herself with excitement. Like the Col. Freeleigh episode, the vehicle to get her here was the phone but the more important elements were her memory coupled with her imagination. She and her husband Randy, an assistant football coach at UCLA who played for both former Detroit Lions head coach Gary Mohler and present University of Michigan head coach Lloyd Carr when all of them were at the University of Illinois, slightly altered a family vacation in Muskegon to spend a classically beautiful July afternoon with us at the lake.

It was a sensory-filled time, one of which she couldn't stop gushing. There is little doubt that she spent a winter in Los Angeles often thinking about an afternoon last summer in Newaygo County.

The point of all of this is not

to merely evoke your own personal images, although such an endeavor might serve to create for you a relaxing period of meditation or an interesting topic for Saturday night party conversation. Instead, perhaps we should recognize that “Mexico City,” for some residents, is our own backyard and that what we have in the palms of our hands is heaven on earth. We become so complacent about what we have, so preoccupied with busyness, or so distracted with petty worry that we don't see the beauty of the forest surrounding us but instead dwell too much on the trees that we think need to be cut down.

In contrast, Col Freeleigh took “the long view,” both literally and figuratively. Most importantly, he did it because he didn't have much time left. After all, the story ends when Col Freeleigh dies while listening to the sounds of Mexico City and someone on the other end takes the phone off the ledge and hangs it up.

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