

Tradition & Faith Near 'Blueberry' Mountain

By Heather Wright
Sentinel Columnist

Standing in the cold New Hampshire waters, my relatives beside me with others on the shore, I had the opportunity to hold a baby in my arms and sprinkle holy water straight from Pleasant Pond onto his 10-month old head. It was sacred and earthy at the same time. I looked around at those gathered and realized these were my people. I've known them seven years. Each of them has accepted me into this large extended clan despite the fact that I was a mid-life bride to their father, son, nephew, brother, and cousin. Just as the small font of water that I pulled out of the lake is still a part of that larger body of water, I recognize my web of connection not only to those on the shore, but also to the generations of this family that have preceded us.

My husband spent his summers helping at his grandfather's farm in this small, colonial New Hampshire town. Both sets of his parents and grandparents had done so before him. It is a place for family to come, recreate, reconnect, and reminiscence. All are welcome. The weathered benches around the wooden picnic table where everyone gathers include all the new relations, boyfriends, and girlfriends that sometimes become husbands and wives.

There has been a lot of growing up on the lakes, for my stepson and stepdaughter and now mine as well, with canoeing, swimming, and late-night talks under brightly lit starry nights. Each year the homemade ice cream churn is pulled out, every child and adult given a turn to help crank up a sweet, cold treat. Fresh strawberries are thrown in for flavor. Most extended family trips include a hike up a nearby mountain, one of which my

stepdaughter in her early years named "blueberry" mountain. This favorite hike in August includes Ziploc bags to collect fresh blueberries in season. The bramble bushes crowd the summit with plenty of fruit to share.

Another family tradition is attending the New Boston Fourth of July parade. Seated on a certain section of the bridge each year, this extended family participates in an event that is a quintessential Americana celebration. The procession includes bagpipers, creative floats, Shriners' small-motorized cars, a Dixie band, colonially dressed militia pulling the Molly Stark cannon (before sounding it off on the town green), and ubiquitous water guns to spray the crowd and those on floats or in police cars and fire trucks. Everyone gets to play. Candy is thrown out for the children, who are often chided by parents to avoid the marching horses, as they dive to grab just one more piece.

The loons on our lake know the water is clean enough to continue returning year after year and raise their newborn. One stands at a ceremonial distance from the baptismal party, my 13-year-old serving as an acolyte, the proud parents and grandparents, me, and my 10-month old great-nephew. One of the faces on the shore is my husband. I smiled thinking this child in my arms through marriage made me a great-aunt. I thought I'd be much older to be a great aunt! I'm sure we all feel that way. As each new chapter of our life changes, we are still crossing between the world of what was before and what is yet to be.

When I held up this dear child and pronounced that "Alex is now a child of the covenant" to his relatives around him, including grandparents, great-



grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins, there was spontaneous applause. In the late morning sun, I looked around at each of the smiling faces and felt their incredible love for this little life and the bonds that hold us which are greater than each of us. Alex's face looked surprised and delighted by this resounding show of support. This joyous, unearned welcome, and his face of wonder in response, reminded me of God's free invitation, grace poured out, and what gratitude looks like in response. I prayed silently, "May I have little Alex's face in contemplating my own baptism." Although tears came to my eyes, I managed to complete the service and carefully hand him to his parents. Waist-high water requires a little extra care when it comes to officiating a ceremony.

We stood in the waters, celebrating a spiritual new birth. We were passing on the rich legacy promising to raise and support this child's growth in faith. He, like all of us in water and on shore, will grow up with the rich legacy of faith and family's traditions passed on from generation to generation.

The Rev. Dr. Heather Wright is executive director of the Greenwich Center for Hope and Renewal and the author, with George Faller, of "Sacred Stress: A Radically Different Approach to Using Life's Challenges for Positive Change."