

Shutting out the 'shoulds'

If the truth be told, some of us have a tendency to "should" all over ourselves. You know what I'm talking about. I should do this and I should do that. I should try harder, work longer. I should eat less, exercise more. I should be more patient, less demanding. I should . . . well you catch my drift.

If there was a degree in Shouldism, I would hold a Ph.D. and have written the authoritative guide. I would be running a Center for the Treatment of Shouldism and be holding weekly meetings on the 10 steps. Because, after all, I should be doing more.

Last August, I ran away from Shouldism to seek refuge at a friend's cottage "up north." There were many reasons for my great escape, just one being that there in that lovely little cottage, on that peaceful little lake, the number of ways in which I could should all over myself was enormously reduced. In no time my few dishes were done, floor swept, wood brought in for the evening fire, and beyond that, what I did, I chose to do out of desire rather than guilt. Ahh! Such bliss!

There, in that wonderfully conducive-to-creativity setting, I could spend hours at a stretch on the sun porch, pickity picking away on the laptop computer, writing what won't be the great American novel, but what will be a story that satisfies an intense longing to be told. There, at The Cottage, I didn't have to tell myself that I should be doing anything except what I felt inspired to do. And when I returned home a week later (albeit reluctantly) I was rested, refreshed and reinvigorated.

After telling readers about that heaven-sent time in The Cottage, I was pleasantly surprised when more than a few folks asked that I write about it again whenever I chanced to go back. Might this be what some have described as living vicariously?

In mid-September, my sisters, mother and I left for the U.P. to attend a family gathering that occurs every year shortly before deer season at cousins' cottages along the Menominee River. It is a Latvian tradition of eating, laughing, singing, sharing and celebrating family heritage. I knew that I should go. But I also knew the route to Menominee County would take us within two miles of The Cottage. The call from the depths of my spirit to return to that little piece of heaven with my dog, surrounded by nature's nurturing majesty, was more compelling, I admit, than that to be at the reunion, much as I care about the people whose company I enjoy. My weary soul sought solitude.

I should go to the gathering. I should visit with relatives. I should . . .

The self-nagging went on until the very moment my family's car pulled away from The Cottage, leaving me, three days' worth of food, my computer and my dog behind. Then, as the sun slipped behind the birches, and my dog and I sat on an outcropping near gently lapping waters, there was serenity and self-acceptance. In the total stillness of that sacred space, even as I cried tears of release, I knew that I had respected my own needs instead of sublimating them to the shrill voice of Shouldism.

In marching to the bellow of the commanding officer within us, do we really ever feel we have done enough, been enough, achieved enough? The very things that we need to keep ourselves balanced are often the things we forgo, while pushing to pacify something or someone else or to strive for goals that even if we reach them, bring no authentic peace.

There are tasks we must perform to keep our families and communities functional and sustainable. But there is also a time when for our own good we must submit to the calling of the

inner spirit and the greater Spirit. That call often takes us to places of simplicity and solitude, close to water, woodlands and open spaces where the sounds we hear are those of the earth and her wild creatures.

We need these healing places and if there is anything we should do, it is to defend and protect them. They reconnect us to who and what we are and what matters.

Be still and know.

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