Picks, Pulaskis, and Poems

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Over the past twenty-five years, I've served as scholar and discussion leader for a wide variety of Humanities Montana projects, but none so unusual—and rewarding—as my summer of 2007 with The Meaning of Service, a civic reflection program administered by Humanities Montana and the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC), with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. MCC enlists AmeriCorps volunteers into community service such as wilderness trail maintenance and tree planting in national forests, and these crews of hearty twenty-somethings live on the job in the wild for as long as two weeks at a time, swinging picks and pulaskis, rain or shine, eight hours or better per day. During long periods of isolation and hard work, it's understandably difficult to keep in mind the larger meaning of "community" and "service" when your back aches and swarms of black flies are feasting on your sweaty earlobes. So it's a good idea to take a break, chew on a handful of nuts and raisins, pause and reflect. It's a good idea to remember your physical hardships mean more than just another few miles of trail.

Friends ask me what I did last summer, and I tell them I worked for the Meaning of Service—it was my job to hike into the wild, track down a trail crew, sit with them in the middle of their workday . . . and read them a poem. This raises eyebrows. Indeed. A poem? What good might that do?

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," I read to a crew in the middle of cutting new trails connecting Heron Park, near Kalispell, to Blacktail Mountain twenty-five miles south. A coalition of Flathead Valley conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts had worked hard over a period of years to secure access to these lands from timber companies, the National Forest Service, and private owners. Not everyone wanted shared access; nearby landowners had been sabotaging trail construction and posting no-trespass warnings. The crew and I were perched where we could view the valley below, smoke rising from chimneys, a scatter of tiny vehicles moving up and down the roads. It was a crisp late-September morning with the aspens and larches already gone gold, and these volunteers were nearing the end of their eight month enlistment. We passed between us a thermos of hot chocolate and a box of cinnamon graham crackers, sipping and munching as we talked. (The MOS national office recommends discussions include food—a trick of common sense hospitality which wins the group's attention and opens folks to conversation.)

"What is it that doesn't love a wall?" one of the crew asked. "What does Robert Frost mean?" she added. Someone mentioned the Berlin Wall and a popular song celebrating its fall. Someone else said he was always curious when he faced a wall to know what was on the other side, and we all pictured the little boy peeking through a knothole to watch a ball game. Then one of us talked about invisible walls between strangers, how good it felt to surmount those walls and get to know someone better. Most agreed; the walls between strangers should come down. Others weren't so sure; they valued privacy, anonymity, a room of one's own where they were happy at times to close the door and shut the world out.

"Good fences make good neighbors," I repeated. But that's not always true, said a young man who had up till now been silent. The United States and Canada are good neighbors—without a fence. Then he went on: wasn't his crew in the business of tearing down walls,

crossing boundaries between private land and public land, linking people for the greater good of getting along together and sharing the splendors of these forests? This thought brought a long silence.

Why, said a new voice, were so many people in favor of building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico? Another long silence. As discussion leader I knew the group had glimpsed the depths of this issue, and I'd best keep quiet, let them find their own thoughts. Fear, someone answered. They're afraid of losing what they've got for themselves. Change, someone else said, change is always hard. And inevitable, said yet another.

Frost says his neighbor who advocates good fences is like an "old stone savage armed/ moving in darkness," I added.

"Sounds like the people who don't want this trail built," said a crew member. Then she added, "Maybe if I owned land near here and I liked the peace and quiet, I'd be afraid of change. I'd be afraid of a lot of people making a lot of noise and littering and tearing the place up." Ah, the enemy had become one of us, no longer a faceless malevolent abstraction. Opening this space to many could spoil it for those already living nearby. And now we talked about the practicalities of managing the trail once it was opened to traffic. Should horses be allowed? Dirt bikes? Snowmobiles? Would crews be needed to police the trail, prevent vandalism, keep the trash picked up? Who would lead? Who would decide?

"Now we're back to tearing down walls," a young man said, "we're tearing down the wall between us and our opposition." He went on, "That's the real challenge here; how do we live together? How do we respect each other's differences?"

I'll admit I've summarized our discussion here a measure more neatly than it happened, but the gist of it is what I hope to show. Like any good humanities discussion, we raised more questions than we answered. We concluded nothing, though each of us left with a wider understanding of the questions and the complexities of all things human. More than a decade back, poet Dana Gioia (who later became Director of the National Endowment to the Arts) published an essay, "Can Poetry Matter?" Yes, Gioia said, poetry can matter, but he added a list of cautionary advice to poets. Seek new venues for poems, was one bit of advice. Bring poetry to a broader audience. Connecting Humanities Montana with the Montana Conservation Corps does exactly that. I spent a summer reading poems to trail crews. "Poems?" friends ask, "What good might that do?"