

A Soul Cleansing at the Riverside

by Linda Lemaster

I had the opportunity to visit Camp Paradise in Santa Cruz today, Sunday afternoon, getting away from my bricks-and-mortar perch. It was so pleasant, I just wanted to share it with my friends and buddies. If only I were that good with words.

I went down to Camp Paradise with four local Quaker Friends, two of whom are my longtime friends, two of whom I was just meeting. Also, Carl W. joined us, and then Jim M. on his bicycle joined us too. Jim is staying there just now, which shows how poorly I've kept in touch with coworkers, because last time he and I talked, he had been in a much farther-out and also solitary nest.

Now Jim, too, is in the heart of this hub, which for some of us dreamers is a long-desired community. The people camping outside are maintaining a living community, sharing the cooking and gardening; true family living. Without stopping what they are doing, the campers welcome our caravan with smiles and open arms — that sounds like a contradic-

tion but did not feel like one.

It is heartening to see so many younger men there; some I remember as little kids in my neighborhood not very long ago — I could swear it was just yesterday. The younger guys have energy and enthusiasm. It seems to me many of them have been cut off from their so-called natural or "blood" families. But like the Vets at 5888, they arise into this brotherhood that becomes an even stronger tie. In this fellowship that becomes kinship, it seems like the young men were looking after everyone else.

This is a place I've often dreamed about. A man my age, half a century or so, carries in two big fish to fillet from the north; and up from the riversheen a young man carries in library books of poetry, reading Poe aloud in timing with his stride. In the same moment, young William, maybe three feet, four inches tall, dons boxing gloves and KO's his coach with three blows to the chest in a makeshift boxing arena.

Some other men, a little younger than me, stop their working to share their discovery with the rest of us — a broken tombstone dated 1928, uncovered but not

moved, found through their efforts to clean up years of neglect all along the riverbanks. Everyone is fascinated by this link with antiquity: hand-poured concrete with a fringe of seashells imbedded around the rim of the stone.

Here, in a casual moment on a sunny Sunday afternoon, before my eyes — here are all those young men I have been mourning, seeking and crying my heart out for, thriving alongside the broad zucchini leaves in this eucalyptus cathedral. Have I fallen into dreaming? No, this real life is happening. This is how natural humans live if given a chance. There are fewer women; most of them congregate with us visitors for a while, and we all wonder about harsher realities, and catch up on the news between our different worlds.

At a press conference for Camp Paradise last week, I met a family from our side of town, newly homeless, who told of how sadly and inexorably they'd lost their apartment, and then a job, just as their baby was about to be born. Like a baby born in a manger, light-bringer, the young family emerges stronger than they've ever been before; unknowingly

they help to heal my own old war wounds just because I'm present.

All they needed was a place to be still for three or four days — a 'time out' from serious worries, a time to focus on the newborn together. A skeptic, I believe with my sore feet and weary shepherding skills that have come to feel like hitting my head against a stone wall, that their future goal of finding a landlord who takes children may still be pretty grim. My thoughts are merely rational; I keep my doubts inside me.

Their simple dream, which should be everyone's birthright — a home here in the mother's hometown — becomes solidified and amplified through their mutual trusting and their just-discovered family at Camp Paradise.

And today, it's my turn: coming down to the riverside for a soul cleansing, and I didn't even realize I needed one until I was there in the leaf-dappled campsite and the magic of a sober and spontaneous community. There is something so wonderful here, it rekindles memories of my early childhood; there is an "open door" kind of family here.