



Ed Hunt and his wife, Amy Hunt, at the Klickitat River.

Photos courtesy Ed Hunt

THE WILD PLACE OF OUR YOUNGER SELVES

Revisiting the settings of our youth can renew us

*And in my mind, I still need a place
to go.*

*All my changes were there.
—Neil Young, “Helpless”*

Sometimes you can be connected
to a place and returning to it can
renew you.

My family immigrated to
Washington state in 1978, packed into a
wood-paneled Ford station wagon driv-
ing across the country from New Jersey.

I like to joke that my parents saw the
movie “The Adventures of the Wilder-
ness Family” one too many times.

The course of our lives is guided by
events and decisions much more com-
plicated than that. Yet it would be futile
to gather all the scraps of circumstance
that led us from the suburbs of New Jer-

sey to — sight unseen — the rug-
ged architecture of the Columbia
River Gorge.

To a 9-year-old boy, our fam-
ily expedition from “flat land and
brown air” that spring seemed
like an endless summer vacation.

Salamanders in the spring
house. Hidden fields and arrow-
heads. Horseback rides along wind-
swept bluffs to abandoned farmsteads.
Evening walks with my father to the top
of the hill to count the pink mountains
almost close enough to touch.

When you are a child you experience
joy often, and appreciate it only rarely.

Each year I bring my family back to
the little town in the Gorge where I grew
from a child to a man. Even though I
lived nine years on the East Coast before
we moved there, I always say I “grew
up” in this place. I only lived there for
a dozen years. I have long since grown
much deeper roots in the rain-shadow
green of the Grays River Valley.

Yet the rings on my tree are etched
deeper and wider in those Gorge years
somehow. The decade between 9 and
19 is packed with so many changes —
including how we come to understand
the world as something greater than our
own experience — we cannot help but



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be changed by it. As much ram-
bling joy and adventure I had in
the hills around Lyle, Washing-
ton, I experienced just as much
fear, awkwardness and embar-
rassment and alienation. Yet that
has faded over time, wounds
have healed and joy remains.

It comes back to me on the
August wind.

Geologic suspension

We started a tradition — I don’t
know how it came to be — of having
our picture taken in a certain spot along
the Klickitat River. We’ve been coming
to this place since Lindsay was in dia-
pers. This year she is a senior in high
school.

The waters of the Klickitat are fed
from the glaciers of the mountains. Each
year I dip my hat in the cold water and
place it on my head, re-baptizing myself
in the moment of geologic suspension.

I can flip through the old photographs
and see our changes. The river is some-
times lower, sometimes higher, forcing
us to climb a bit more up onto the rocks.
Yet the hills are ageless against our
microscopic time lines. Years are sec-
onds to them, too numerous to bother
with counting.

Once upon a time I rode my horse
through these hills and knew the trails
without name. Once upon a time, my
sister taught me to drive along these
backroads. Here was the old junkyard
where my little league baseball coach
lived; here the school bus would stop to
the let the trains go by.

Gone now gone. Gone to a memory
that has to hold onto rails to steady itself
until it finds its bearings.

On a basalt plateau above the Colum-
bia River hides a curling trail that dives
into the scrub oak and yellow grass
and dares the great cliffs that judge the
changes in the windswept white-capped
waters. Catherine Creek is a little pre-
serve that was first set aside the year I
graduated high school. Before that we
called this place “rattlesnake flats” due
to the flattened fauna that littered the
asphalt of the long stretch of lonely road.

My father moved back to New Jer-
sey after just five years in the Gorge —
in some ways, against his will. Life had
other plans for him.

Yet each time he comes out to visit,
he brings his wife and kids and grand-
kids to Catherine Creek, to hike among
the wildflowers on the windy cliffs.

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TO APPRECIATE ALL THE DAYS THAT HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO US AS
WELL AS TO MARVEL AT OUR SURVIVAL THUS FAR.’*

Lia (left), the Hunts’ exchange student from
last year, and Lindsay Hunt at Catherine Creek.

