



FROM BRIGHT LIGHTS TO STARRY SKIES

Deborah Griffin

In the beginning

Primroses and violets. When I peer through the cotton wool of my memory that is how I recall the countryside of my childhood in Northern Ireland. Narrow country lanes bursting with jaunty yellow primroses pinpricked with the smiling faces of delicate violets. Memories made and sealed through visits to my grandparents in the deepest Armagh countryside and the grassy shores of Donaghadee. It is only several decades on, surveying the past from my vantage point in the Bathscape countryside that I realise how little I had appreciated what was under my young nose and how much I had turned my back on the glories of the rural landscape.

My roots burrow under Bath and weave their way back through the Welsh hills and valleys, dipping under the Irish Sea before climbing out at the mountains of Mourne making their way to Belfast. A landscape abundant with glens, loughs and vast green spaces but one which became less and less important to me as I grew up.

It was possibly an unfortunate camping expedition when I found myself being tossed around like a helpless beetle in an angry Irish storm when my view of the countryside took a turn for the worse. Or it was possibly in the stampede of life when 'outdoors' became a casualty. What I do know is that by my late teens, in true 'it's not you, it's me' style, I dumped the countryside and took refuge in the bright light of Belfast where the sights, the sounds, the smells of the city became my second nature.

Moving away

Moving to the 'Mainland' after university jolted me out of my armoured nest. My time and head space were consumed with the 'big stuff' - my new career, relationships, buying my first car, and just working out what it's like being in your 20s. In amongst all this commotion one aspect of my life that remained carefully preserved in the bubble wrap I had brought it over in was my city lifestyle.





Setting off (usually from Greenvale in Timsbury)




Heading for Radford



Skirting along Carlingcott



A long standing favourite walk to Priston



Despite my new home being in the Peak District, an array of firmly held beliefs were unpacked and proudly displayed on the mantelpiece – that the only reason to go for a walk was if there were shops to look at, there was no point of ‘growing your own’ when Tesco’s had done all the hard work and no activity should be entertained if it risked a bad hair experience. So, I closed the windows and drew the curtains on the countryside. It had become alien to me, I didn’t understand it, I didn’t know what to do in it, I worried about getting dirty, wet – or both. Daytime was to be endured until night time began and the bright lights came on.... and so, aided by my first ever car, I sought out the city lifestyle I was used to and continued with my urban traditions.

Growing up

It was through doing something I enjoyed that I gradually began to dip my toe back into the countryside. Running. Not everybody’s cup of tea but the point is I did enjoy it, I was quite good at it, and it was a wonderful way of making friends in this familiar yet strange place. It was the result of spending many, many hours in the gym pounding away relentlessly on a treadmill...or turbo bike, or rowing machine, or cross-stepper ...that I had slowly begun to question why I was driving through gorgeous countryside using up valuable time and money to get to a world that largely replicated things I could do outside? I couldn’t answer that easily and with my curiosity piqued I began to think about the countryside a little bit differently; somewhere that could be useful to me, something that could serve my purposes well, a place that would allow me to pursue what I enjoyed doing most.

I was prepared to give ‘outside’ the benefit of the doubt and so very gradually the barricades came down as I introduced myself (shyly at first) to the great outdoors and road running. Over time and seasons, ‘outside’ became my new training ground as I joined the world of running events, challenges and competitions.

A new relationship

Marriage and job relocation brought me to the South West. It seems bizarre now but I never actually thought of Bath in any other terms than the city. So I was amazed – blown away in fact - by the staggeringly beautiful countryside which wraps around it. As some of the big life stuff had begun to sort itself out, I had more time and space for exploring things that interested, inspired, intrigued me. And unexpectedly, one thing which became apparent was that it was the ‘outdoors’ bit of running I was beginning to enjoy more than the running itself. With the curtains opened a hint I started to notice and experience the countryside – the landscape, its residents, the ways of living, the traditions – warts and all. The joy of seeing the sun llluminate the pink ears of newly born lambs in the field next to us, the horror of witnessing a sparrow hawk ravaging a pigeon in our back garden and the humour in spotting a ram proudly displaying his raddle harness to mark his manhood. Without initially realising, my running slowed down as I deviated from road to field and began to explore the network of public footpaths where turning left instead of right and finding out what was around the corner became more important than speed or distance.





The journey continues

As I continue to run and continue to explore, I have learned more and more about the countryside and the natural world and how important we are for each other. Although I will never completely understand the whole bee thing, quite remember the difference between a toad and a frog or be able to recognise the various star constellations I do know that within minutes of being outdoors my spirits will be lifted and I will feel utterly rejuvenated – and that can't be underestimated. It could be that I'm just getting older but I believe that the sheer satisfaction of knowing there is more to discover and more to explore actually keeps back the years.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with gyms. There is nothing wrong with cities. Certainly there is nothing wrong with Belfast - I would encourage anyone to visit. It's just that it has taken me half a lifetime to un-learn some fairly well entrenched beliefs about the countryside and appreciate this wonderful resource outside my window. Rather than see it is something to shun, something to avoid, our relationship has blossomed to one where it is integral to my way of living ...and one where I feel a deep sense of responsibility towards this fragile treasure trove.

It took a few big life changes to shake up my long-held views of the countryside and break some well engrained habits. It's made me wonder - and hope – whether in the current situation there is an opportunity for us all to develop a new relationship with the outdoors; one where we can nurture new habits and try turning over different stones. Maybe we can start to think about taking the road less travelled by – that can make all the difference. (Robert Frost- a memory of English O level).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When not running, Deborah works for the University of Bath and is also Project Manager for the CPRE (Avon and Bristol) Starry Skies initiative.

