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Coming Home

In unexpected ways, a sometimes-harried urban yoga teacher rediscovers patience and contentment where the deer and the antelope play.

NEAR THE FOOTHILLS OF THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE at the end of a gently curving dusty road lies the Feathered Pipe Ranch, a secluded, rustic yoga retreat just outside Helena, Montana. I've been down this road every summer for 30 years, and every time I arrive at the end of that gulch, I feel my energy shift. I feel like I'm coming home or returning to a place that's both familiar and new.

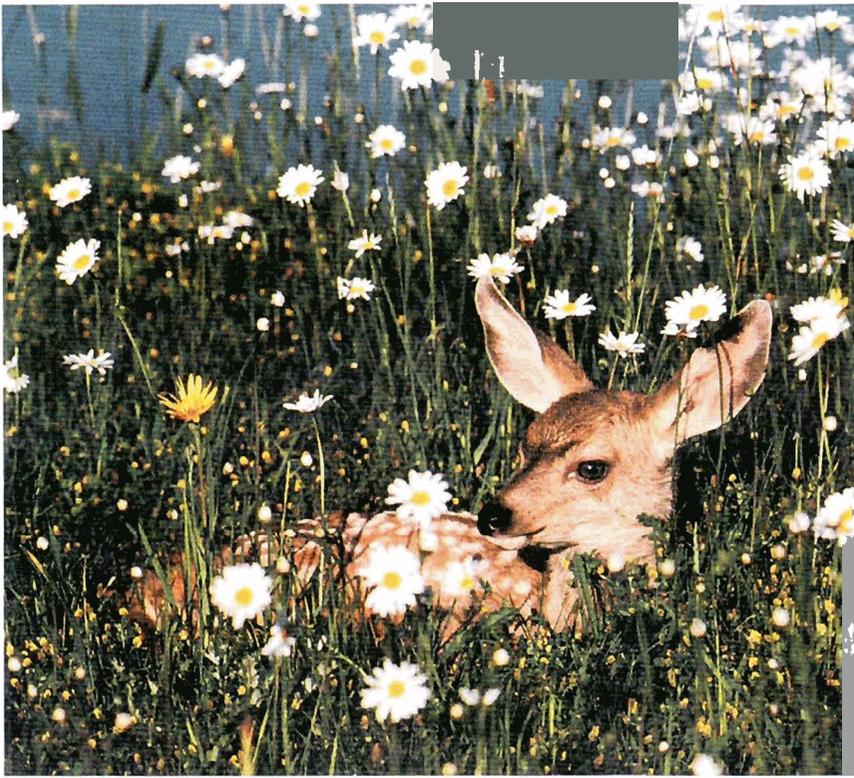
The trappings of my life back in San Francisco suddenly aren't so important. My cell phone and day planner no longer control me. The only things on my agenda are teaching, exploring nature, catching up with old friends, having fun, and eating good food.

I've been coming to the ranch since 1975, three years after my friend India Supera inherited the property and invited me to become a member of the original faculty. India had spent years as a renun-

ciate and suddenly she owned 150 acres and some buildings in the Rockies of Montana. And those buildings needed upkeep and taxes were due.

Not knowing what else to do, India and a few friends fashioned a traditional Native American sweat lodge, hoping the physical act of cleansing would stimulate a vision for the ranch's future. It worked. During the sweat, India envisioned a retreat that would facilitate spiritual growth for thousands of visitors.

That's exactly what it does for me each time I visit. Everything about the ranch supports my teaching: As I stroll across the lawn from my log



getting there

Impatient for your own lessons about patience? Here's what you need to know before you go.

PLACE Feathered Pipe Ranch
P.O. Box 1682
Helena, MT 59624
(406) 442-8196
www.featheredpipe.com

AIRPORT Helena, Montana;
Feathered Pipe shuttle to ranch

TIME June, July, and August

COST \$999 to \$1,850 (1 week of meals, lodging, classes)

LODGING Four-bed dorms (shared bath), tents, teepees, or yurts (all have beds, some furniture, lamp, and access to bathhouse). Double room, shared or private bath, \$200 and \$300/week, respectively.

MEALS Mainly organic and vegetarian. Chicken and fish options available at some of the workshops.

BONUS Massage, bodywork, sauna, hot tub

As we meditate in front of the windows, we're reminded of the beauty of nature and the benefit of quiet in our lives.

cabin to the yoga space, I'm always excited to teach, and since the practice room is the only place to be, my students arrive on time. The space is inspiring with the floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace that covers one wall, the balcony at the other end, and the long bank of windows that overlook the lake and mountains. As we meditate in front of the windows, we are reminded of the beauty of nature and the benefit of quiet in our lives. We're also reminded that we're OK just as we are, even if we can't touch our toes. It's what we learn on the way down that matters.

I look back at pictures of workshops from earlier years and smile as I remember how urgently I wanted students to "get" the poses. Now I feel differently. I think I was confusing discipline with ambition. I've come to feel that discipline is expressed not as ambition but through consistency. And that's what I try to instill in my students: consistency with asana, pranayama, and meditation every day. Of

course, it's a lot easier at the ranch, where everything seems clearer and simpler. The only things scheduled are yoga and meals.

In unexpected ways, I find the ranch's location to be a source of inspiration for my teaching. I remember one July many years ago coming up the road that circles the property and glancing up at the porch of the Honeymoon Cabin. There, lying on the couch, was a deer, fast asleep. Its head was supported by the armrest, its legs stuck straight out, and its bony spine nestled against the back cushions. I stood there in the warm sun absorbing that vision, celebrating its humor and uniqueness. When I related it to my students, I described how it had been a visceral reminder of how connected we all are.

Every night before I go to bed, I gaze upward at the sky wondering who else is looking at the stars. Did Buddha see them, too? Do the stars still live or is that just their now-extinguished light? Even unanswered, these questions comfort me

because they remind me of my individual place here on earth and how precious it is.

But as much as I love the stars, my favorite part of the ranch is the banister in the main lodge. It was made from a single tree that was planted and shaped for 20 years so it would grow to fit the curving stairway in the corner leading to the balcony above the main room. When I first learned this, I couldn't imagine being so patient. I don't even have the patience to stand in a grocery store line without complaining inwardly.

These days, I gaze at this banister with unabashed affection. Smooth and perfect, it supports each person who navigates the narrow steps. I'm comforted by what has become a symbol not only of patience but also of love. It reminds me that I have become more patient in my life, and I'm encouraged that growth is always a possibility for me, even now. ■

Judith Hanson Lasater, Ph.D., is a physical therapist, long-time yoga teacher, and author of several books, including 30 Essential Yoga Poses: For Beginning Students and Their Teachers. Visit her Web site at www.judithlasater.com.