*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**A walk of discovery and reflection**

I will never grow tired of the incredible beauty and diversity of our farm.

Living in the Driftless Region gives us a plethora of habitat and geology from the spring-fed streams that run through our valley to the rocky outcroppings of our sandstone bluffs. In between are pockets of farmland, pastures and woods.

One of my great enjoyments is to simply walk the property with no purpose other than to clear my mind and escape from the cacophonous sounds of the world that seems to get louder every year even as my actual hearing capacity diminishes.

Even after five decades of exploration, I still find new discoveries or rediscover old ones that are put into a new perspective.

One day during the gun deer hunt this season I took a long walk when the action was slow. It was late November and the landscape was early winter bleak, but there were still remnants of green hanging on.

A north-facing slope featured green ferns that had not yet succumbed to the cold temperatures and carpets of green moss.

Moss grows all over the world — including Antarctica — where even in those harsh conditions and deprived of water for long periods of time, moss regenerates when the conditions are favorable.

I also found several logs covered with moss. The logs were leftovers from the last logging harvest done in the valley from about 40 years ago.

There is some truth to the lore that moss grows on the north side of trees, as that is more often in the shade and tends to be cooler and damper. But moss will grow nearly anywhere and has incredible longevity. Scientists have found moss on Elephant Island in Antarctica that is 5,000 years old.

Further up the hill is an old stone quarry. Not a commercial quarry by any means, but a place where shale was removed over the years to help stabilize the road that leads up the ridge. It’s a place where there is usually some standing water except for the extreme drought years, making it a favorite spot for wildlife.

A little further climb and I’m standing atop one of the scenic ridges, about 1,100 feet above sea level. The rocky outcropping is glauconite, also known as greensand for its dark color. It’s sandstone formed from a continental shelf marine environment hundreds of millions of years ago.

There’s an outthrust heading west that runs for a few hundred yards before narrowing to a point. It’s visible from the house and has been a favorite destination of mine since I was able to make the steep climb.

One year, my brother and I and a few cousins created a hideout underneath one of the rock ledges, which we enclosed with sticks.

The overhang extended back several feet, making it feel like we had our own cave.

It was also a spot where we “repurposed” items that were disposed of in the nearby town landfill. My brother and I would descend on the landfill on Saturday afternoons after it closed and find all sorts of interesting stuff that we could carry back to our hideout.

The rock ledge has partially collapsed on our cave, but the view is still spectacular. I sat for a few minutes and watched the sun slip below the horizon across the valley. I closed my eyes.

For a few moments I could picture a young boy with few worldly cares laughing while he scampered across the ledge, collecting rocks and sticks.

Still with my eyes closed, the older version of that boy smiled back.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*