

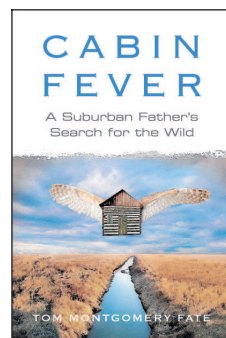
# Take thee to the woods

Stressed dad subscribes to wisdom of Thoreau

BY BARBARA MAHANY  
Tribune Newspapers

Tom Montgomery Fate was a self-described “harried and married 46-year-old father of three” when he took to the woods of southwest Michigan to build a cabin a few years back.

Until that two-hour drive, from the wild tangle of tools in his overpacked garage to the dappled light of a springtime meadow at the edge of a piney woods, his had been the frantic life that is so often synonymous with suburbia.



**“Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father’s Search for the Wild”**

By Tom Montgomery Fate  
(Beacon Press)

Thing was, he had just reread Henry David Thoreau’s “Walden,” a book he had picked up nearly 30 years earlier. His second reading, deep in the throes of family life, was the one that stopped him in his breathless tracks.

“I was struck by how much deeper the book struck me,” begins Fate, a Glen Ellyn resident who is the author of five books and a professor of English, as well as being the father of two girls, now 17 and 14, and a son, 10.

Particularly, he was struck by Thoreau’s invitation to live a “deliberate life,” an invitation at the core of Thoreau’s immortal line: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.”

“I went straight to the Oxford English Dictionary and looked up the word ‘deliberate.’ Its root is tied to *libra*, the two-pan scale of justice. A deliberate life, I realized, is a balanced life,” says Fate, whose most recent book, “Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father’s Search for the Wild” (Beacon Press), chronicles the life he found spending half his time in the woods and half in his suburban home.

## Choosing balance

If Tom Montgomery Fate has not found the secret formula for the deliberate, balanced life, he is a chief disciple of the search.

“It’s a choice,” he said. “Do you want a distracted life, or an attentive life? It’s not black-and-white. We make choices.”

With a duet of cardinals chirping from a branch above his head, he ticked through a list of the choices that might populate our every day: “Is it important to walk instead of drive? What about screen time? Do you awake early to carve out quiet time?”

“The rest of it is prioritizing, asking yourself, ‘Are the things that matter in our lives getting the time they deserve?’”

— B.M.

No surprise, he has been likened to a modern-day Thoreau, although he hardly pretends we all need scurry to the woods to stumble on our deepest bliss. “I’m not holding my breath thinking I’ve found it,” said Fate, sitting recently at the edge of another meadow near his home, this one dabbled with the end-of-summer golden hues that come with so many black-eyed Susans and nodding prairie grasses.

Clearly, it is in the woods that Fate, like Thoreau, finds that most essential balance. It is, for both, the antidote to madness.

For Fate, who grew up in Iowa, who spent his childhood days fishing at a nearby dam, or in a farmer’s fields detasseling corn and baling hay, the natural world has long been a place of wonder — and balance. And after all these years, he has not lost sight of what he finds in woods or meadow.

The wisdom he extracts from watching a swarm of black ants march across the soft hollow of a tree, a line he likens to “a sprawling prehistoric sentence.”

The inspiration he gleans from a fledgling heron’s first flight, “stroking the empty sky with the wild brush of her gray-blue wings.”

He finds poetry in a trio of towering trees, a beech in which he sees “a dino-



CAROL MONTGOMERY FATE PHOTO

Tom Montgomery Fate takes a walk in the woods with his son.

saur’s neck bending to feed in the canopy,” a cottonwood whose veined leaves “pulsate with life,” and a sycamore that’s “always losing its skin.” He most likes to visit “the elderly trio” in winter, he writes, when he “listen(s) to their creaking conversations as they scratch each other in the icy wind.”

“I don’t really have a prescription,” he says. “It’s like recognizing the choices, identifying the seeds of meaning in our lives and letting them take precedence, or letting everything else take precedence.”

What we need, all of us who yearn to strike this holy balance in our busy lives, is this, says Fate: “The prayerfulness you find in your cabin in the woods, you’ve got to learn to take to wherever you go.”

Indeed, this latter-day Thoreau leaves us with this most essential question: “How do those of us who live in a high-tech com-

## Local appearances

■ Tom Montgomery Fate will discuss his book, “Cabin Fever,” as part of a panel on memoir at 3:30 p.m. Monday at Columbia College, 618 S. Michigan Ave., second floor. For information, go to [colum.edu/cnfw](http://colum.edu/cnfw). The event is free and open to the public.  
■ Fate will be reading from and discussing “Cabin Fever” at 6 p.m. Oct. 27 at the DePaul Art Museum, 935 W. Fullerton Ave. For information, call 773-325-4778. Admission is free.

partmentalized world, how do we bring it — that prayerfulness — back to where we live?”

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