

A Country Year, Living the Questions
by: Sue Hubbell

Paper by: Dianna Higgs

for Tom Bailey
Wednesday, July 24, 1991

Sue Hubbell's "A Country Year, Living the Questions" takes the shape of a circle, the world perhaps, which continues in building pattern over her lifetime. Thus, it could be like the inside of a baseball: a continuous line which wraps itself around and around until a solid mass is formed.

This circular form is obvious with the fact that Hubbell starts with spring, continues through summer, autumn, winter and then returns again to spring. This is not only true for this particular year which she focuses on, but on previous years which she refers back to and on future years which she moves toward. Each year and experience that is added to the circle presents a guideline for the years to come. For example, in several instances, while Hubbell is working to prevent the damming of the river near her Ozark Mountain home, she refers back to a time when she helped start a labor union to try and stop a war. The worthy cause of preventing the dam was sparked and fueled by her past when she tried to prevent a war.

One might think that going around in a circle might prove monotonous, but not Hubbell. She doesn't take for granted what she experiences, even though it may be the same thing day in and day out. She looks at each new aspect and each new day as something significant to be cherished and remembered. She questions all, not for reasons of doubt but for reasons of learning and understanding: thus the subtitle of the book "living the questions."

Each new season brings something special: a new behavior for a particular caterpillar or bee; a new issue to be fought for or against; a new friend whether human, animal, insect or arachnid; a new day to learn and discover.

This latter item is the one that proves most important for Hubbell. Through her life in the Ozarks, she starts to look at the world in a magnified light. She experiences new things and every day resolves within herself the personal crisis of being divorced and alone in her mountain home. But she does not take this loneliness in grief, because while she may appear physically alone, she is in emotional company with nature. This, therefore, gives her a full and satisfied life as a human being and as a woman.

In one point in her book Hubbell clearly takes a stand for older women in the social scheme, defending her role as a beekeeper in the Ozarks. "Because our culture has assigned us no real role, we can make up our own," Hubbell writes. "Social rules are so flexible today that nothing we do is shocking...Provided we stay healthy and can support ourselves, we can do anything, have anything and spend our talents any way that we please." (p. 196). Hubbell's talents, which might prove insignificant to many, are really abundant. She has mastered all masculine the tools of the trade to survive on her own in the Ozarks: beekeeping, roofing, fixing "Press on Regardless," and numerous other jobs. This, again brings back the circle metaphor: a well-rounded woman, able to take on any task or any thing that is presented to her.

Hubbell does not want or need much to survive on her own in the Ozarks. She thrives on nature and its beauties. She does not take more than she needs and does not kill or injure at leisure. Her life circle is loose enough to allow change and exceptions but tight enough to keep her in order. At this point in her life, her circle must appear to be significantly large. Experience after experience, from piano lessons at the age of three to raising a child of her own to keeping bees in the Ozarks, builds continually to her life circle. She is not selective of her experiences, but allows for every minute detail to be counted and stored like a bee with honey. Each detail builds with the others, creating new experiences and thoughts which create new responses and ideas. It is a never-ending process that will continue until death. But for Hubbell, it will continue longer. Her book provides readers with a piece of herself, a piece that makes the reader ask and question "why" birds act in a certain way, "why" a particular plant grows in a particular area, "why" does anything happen the way it does. However, the reader's questioning goes beyond the usual answering to a point of applying those answers to a similar experience months or years from now. After reading "A Country Year, Living the Questions," the reader learns to distinguish those questions and begins to live them as well. Nothing is taken for granted, but is questioned not for reasons of doubt, but for reasons of learning and understanding.