



Heartbeat of the Forest



by Kathleen Preece

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"à Refaire" (let's do it again)

We've been the 'Dovetail Team' for many years now. In fact, Dovetail celebrated a 20-year anniversary in 2023. To be honest, in recent years team members have been 'two-dimensional' - many of us never having met face-to-face despite the intense collaboration we share on projects.

Our respective offices are nestled into many corners of the world: the bays of California, the mountains of Vermont, the boreal forests of the northern Midwest, the hills of France. We meet monthly, virtually, separated by computer screens.

With each virtual meeting we 'dovetail' on projects via the insights and direction of President Katie and our board of directors. We have collaborated on topics related to trade policy, workforce needs, bioenergy, old-growth forests, carbon markets, regenerative agriculture, green building, and many other issues.

We thought we knew one another rather well, despite our separation by geographic distance and computer screens. During our monthly meetings, Sarah always speaks quietly from her home in California, some 2,000-plus miles from my own office in the Midwest. Her eight-year-old daughter is asleep during her mom's early morning connection to the team meetings. We all feel a bit hushed when Sarah joins in.

Mike sits in front of his computer desk in Vermont. From the looks of the backdrop of his screen, we can imagine he just summited a peak in the Green Mountains.

Gloria's exuberant laughter always fills our respective offices. We get glimpses of her unique home on the edge of northern Minnesota's Cedar Lake near Ely. She looks settled in, like a treasured easy chair.

Maria and her room-encompassing grin would melt a snowstorm (of which there are few in her Savannah, Georgia setting).

Harry hunkers down in front of his computer, headphones on, geographically nestled on a plateau in Virginia, somewhere between the Blue Ridge Mountain chain and the Appalachian Mountains.

In contrast to most of the other team members' respective time zones, Ed has nearly a full day behind him from his office in France. His computer monitor reveals the darkening of the end of the day, even though many of us are opening curtains to a sunrise as we connect to the meeting. One of his twin children is typically on his lap, accompanied by a teddy bear.

We all contribute to one another's Dovetail research and lives through this virtual reality. Some team members provide ideas; others do the fact-finding and analysis. Some of us do the writing and others edit for accuracy and punctuation. When we contribute to a writing, we add our names as authors. We celebrate and applaud one another. It's been a virtual and heartfelt team effort.



"The strength of the team is each individual member."

-Henry Ford

But virtual became reality in August 2024 when the Dovetail team convened for a retreat, in person, along the shores of a northern Minnesota lake in the Superior National Forest. The intent for getting together was to do some strategic planning.

We did some of that. But the agenda was punctuated by laughter and sweat, and cabin-cooked meals, and gatherings around a bonfire, early morning canoe paddles, late-night loon music – and face-to-face conversations. We became three-dimensional for three days.



We went to the woods early one morning, committed to improving access along a local community trail. There is where we heard one another's heartbeats – in three dimensions. The Hidden Valley lies in the Superior National Forest and boasts a trail system run by a nonprofit. The trail transects private, state, county, and federal lands. The Dovetail team, equipped with pruning shears and saws (and gloves and safety equipment, thanks to Dovetail team member Eliza and Mike Running, the volunteer and trail coordinator with the US Forest Service), attacked a three-mile loop that often gets missed in routine trail cleaning and clean up.

Mark and Harry bull-dozed their way down the trail, making it rather difficult for those of us who followed in their footsteps to brag that we, too, had cleared any of the brush!



Maria's golden smile shined through as she stood knee deep and stuck in northern bog muck. Nia demonstrated that a person can just plop down in the brush and take a nap amidst the sweat and flies that three-plus hours of trail-brushing evokes. And Gloria proved she can cry palpable, three-dimensional tears when moved by the camaraderie of team members.

Back at camp it seemed natural to see one or two big, bouncing, confident and happy dogs on the heels of Teresa, (or else searching desperately to find out where she had disappeared to).

And who knew that Eliza and Harry could combine culinary talents to display a four-course meal using cabin utensils and backwoods cookstoves?

We have returned to our virtual screens. But the abstract has evolved into the tangible. When we power up, Harry's morning ritual on his 100-acre farm to care for his sheep is more visceral, as are the thoughts he shared about the importance of being a good listener and a person of humility. He suggested that "with great power comes great responsibility."

We will picture Katie harvesting 300 pounds of carrots from her family garden that spans generations. (And we thought she had 'resolve' as leader of the Dovetail Team!) Respect has grown even deeper because now we know she replanted carrots and cucumbers on that family farm THREE times as she attempted to overcome the poor growing conditions of a very wet spring.

Having Dovetail founder Jeff Howe, and the earliest associates Steve and Jim, participate in the retreat brought not only a dimension of the past, but a direction for the future work of Dovetail, like taking on the misrepresentation of forests in the U.S. Years ago, Dovetail established the practice that if we couldn't resolve our viewpoints on an issue then the team let it go; we would give the topic more time and space. Genetically modified trees is a topic we let go, but perhaps it's one we are ready to talk about again in light of bringing together all of our science to address the threat of climate change and rising mortality risks for tree species. And we need to continue to lean into the business of addressing the misinformation, misunderstanding, and missed opportunities that arise from not knowing and seeing the world as it really is today. There is tremendous hope and opportunity just beyond the doomsday headlines and win-lose narratives that can prevent us from bringing our heads, hands, and hearts to the work of this moment.

In 20 years, "Today's kids are going to be thought leaders, leaders in community and legislators," advises Steve. Jim reminds us of a long ago quote attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you in trouble, it's what you know that just ain't so."

Dovetail board member Marcella joined the retreat and urged members to join traditional organizations as a means of evoking change in demographics and leadership.

The respective visions of Dovetail's team members will resonate in Vermont's mountains, and the Midwest's pineries, and the bays of California, as we become two dimensional again.

Who will forget Gloria's advice to "'be patient.' And to "Help create a safe environment so that others can speak their truth."

Jim suggests: "Nothing is impossible if you don't have to do it yourself."

Special thanks to members of Team Dovetail for their notes and conversations that made this piece possible, as well as to interns Sarah Beth and Seamus McCarthy for capturing many insights, through their one-on-one interviews with members of the Dovetail Team.



Mike may or may not be summiting a mountain in Vermont. But we will remember his words of wisdom: "Learn how to write well and remember that listening is not just waiting for your turn to talk."

In the end, after all of this - what's up for the Dovetail team?

Katie gives her counsel, simply: "Be happy. Show up and participate, drive projects forward or just be here. Know your own sense of what you want to do."

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Some heartbeats are only a murmur, like the ones you hear in an office setting. But sometimes they are more of a 'pounding' than a murmur; like the kind you experience around a campfire, or when joining arms and flexing muscles to clear a trail that runs through the Superior National Forest.

Granted, the retreat was just 'human' kind of stuff . . . sharing thoughts about our respective personal lives, becoming three dimensional.

Bottom line: We figured out we were not the 'Dovetail Team.' We are Team Dovetail.

Game on!