LET’S GET THIS PARTY STARTED

Three minutes. Hardly more than the blink of an eye. But after a long, dark, Puget Sound winter, the three additional minutes of sunlight we get each day now feel like salvation. And three minutes here, three minutes there…pretty soon you’re talking real time. By the end of the month, our days will be nearly an hour and half longer. Which means the morning school bus will no longer arrive in pitch-black night, the sun will clear treetops to the south and we can see out into the woods during dinner. Small things, really, but like those three minutes, they add up.

There’s no question winter here can take a chunk out of you. Not like the extreme cold of the upper Midwest or round-the-clock darkness of Alaska might, but rather the opposite. Here, it’s a general lack of severity—the monotonous, flat gray skies and constant drip-drip of misty rain—that erodes the spirit. The short days limit outdoor activity and weather frequently reduces our inclination to venture out anyway. Time passes in a slow-motion slog through gloomy halflight. Inertia sets in.

Back in the days when successful foraging meant the difference between life and death, late winter was a time of hunger as fat and food stores dwindled. If you didn’t put up enough salal-berry-and-suet logs, dried salmon or deer jerky the year before, I imagine it would have been a long, desperate wait for spring bracken shoots and the herring run.
Today, our situation isn’t nearly so dire, at least not in a physical sense. Yet, I can feel our spirits growing thinner and weaker as the gray days and long nights accumulate.

We spend spring, summer and fall, trying to fill in the missing chunk winter takes from us. In a good year, with bountiful sunshine and blue skies, we fill it in and then some. But the surplus is never wasted. Our memories of long, warm, happy days are stored like fat cells to sustain us through the next winter. And now, with another winter drawing to a close, we’re anxious to start replenishing our emotional reserves.

Those three little minutes mean something: We’re over the hump. We’re going to make it. Spring will, in fact, arrive.

There are other signs, too: A thick yellow dusting of alder and cedar pollen on car windshields; miraculous, bright green buds along the spindly length of last year’s lifeless, brown raspberry canes; purple splashes of crocus pushing up through soggy earth. And perhaps most importantly, the moon lines up to pull seawater away from shore for the year’s first daylight shellfish tides.

It might be a stretch to call February spring, with its heavy cloud cover, rain and occasional snowfall, but we don’t care. Spring is on the way, which is almost just as good. And like all creatures waking from hibernation, we’re hungry.

There’s a decent tide this afternoon, and I’m busy rounding up our clam and oyster gear. Wait, that sounds too organized. What I’m really doing is thrashing through the garage, searching for items I put away in specific places last year so they’d be easy to find. Great plan. Only now I can’t remember where those specific places are.

After much rummaging, four pairs of knee boots are lined up in the back of the car, along with a stack of five-gallon buckets, several mesh bags, and…I can’t find the
oyster knives. As I dig through more buckets and bins, Skyla comes out of the house wearing my rubber shucking gloves, a slender six-year old girl with enormous, make-believe monster hands. She’s clowning around, chasing three-year old Weston, who shrieks in half-mock terror, trying to play along with Big Sister but unable to hide a touch of real fear. As they sprint past me on the gravel driveway, Skyla shouts over her shoulder “Daddy, don’t forget gloves for me and Weston!”

I finally locate the oyster knives, inexplicably stashed in a drawer full of screwdrivers, and grab a four-tined cultivator on my way back to the car. It’s been dry all morning, but now that we’re almost ready to go, it’s raining. I head back into the house to track down our rain gear.

The kitchen is in turmoil. Stacy’s packing the requisite piles of kid snacks and trying to match plastic containers with lids to hold our catch, while reminding the kids they need to go to the bathroom before we get in the car. We are not a well-oiled machine. In fact, pulling it all together for the first big family outing of the year has taken the better part of the morning. It briefly crosses my mind that I could have run out to the flats by myself, made a quick, efficient, solo harvest and returned home by now.

Glen and Candace pull into the driveway right on time and we run out to meet them. Hugs all around. Between holidays, work and the usual winter malaise, we haven’t seen our old mainland friends in months. I laugh when Candace steps out of the car already clad in hip boots, but she’s not kidding. She’s ready. While we stand around in the rain catching up, I’m still going over my mental checklist. Then Gary and Kaia pull in with their boys, Finn and Beck. More hugs. More chaos. More happy, shrieking kids. I glance at my watch and give up on the mental checklist. Time to just start grabbing stuff
and throwing it into the car. When the pile’s big enough, I figure we must have what we need. We’ll meet the Sweeneys there, we’ve packed enough food and equipment for an assault on Mt. Everest, and the tide, as everyone knows, waits for no man. We strap the kids in and our moveable feast hits the road.

On the short drive to the beach, rain hammers the windshield in sheets and I start thinking I should have come up with a Plan B. Like bowling. On the hillsides there’s a new reddish haze of emerging catkins in the alder thickets and an optimistic cherry tree sheds a blizzard of pale pink blossoms in somebody’s yard. A blast of wind rocks the car. Spring *is* coming, just not today.

Skyla and I discovered our oyster spot shortly after Weston was born, on a day when we both needed a break from the isolation and intensity—Stacy calls it “the baby cocoon”—enveloping our house. We jumped in the car and headed to a popular oyster beach, only to find it picked over and nearly barren. We walked along the water, talked and threw rocks, but couldn’t quite escape the disappointment of a fruitless foraging mission. I remembered seeing an old timer earlier that morning, pulling on knee boots at an inconspicuous, brushy little parking spot a couple miles back, and thought we might check it out on the way home.

The guy was still there, returning to his car with a jar of shucked oysters and a bucket of steamer clams. When he saw us, he tried to hide his bounty, clearly unhappy that we’d found his secret spot. I pulled over and waved, and he ignored me, moving quickly now to avoid us. So I unleashed my secret weapon. It would take a hard heart to ignore a little girl in knee boots running up to see what you’ve caught. When Skyla told
him of our failed venture, his defenses melted away, leaving a friendly grandfather happy
to share the secrets of his no-longer secret spot. He pointed out where the clams lived and
told us that if we kept going around the corner, we’d find more oysters than we could
imagine.

    In the spirit of the old man’s willingness to share—begrudging as it was—we’ve
also shared this place with a few close friends. Out of respect for his initial secrecy,
though, and the knowledge that “private” places on public land can be quickly decimated,
we limit our sharing to those who understand the value of such things. In the years since
we first “discovered” this beach, the shellfish population has grown, and we seldom see
anyone else there.

    But this brings up some interesting questions. How much information should
anyone share? Where is the fine line between selfishness and necessary secrecy drawn?
In this age of population growth and limited natural resources, unspoiled places are a
precious commodity. I have a number of friends who would never dream of telling
anyone—not even their own mothers—where they pick mushrooms or catch salmon. In
one case, a good friend took me to his secret fishing hole, a place accessible only on foot
through several steep ravine crossings and nearly two miles of dense, thorny brush. When
we finally reached the river, we began hooking fish after fish right away. At the end of
the day, we lugged our salmon back to the car by the same brutal route. It was so arduous
and disorienting, I knew then I would never find my way back. Years later I discovered
you can actually drive directly to the spot from the other side, but on the day he brought
me, that fact must have slipped my friend’s mind. I completely understand.
On the other hand, in countless instances, I have benefited from the generosity of others. In fact, it’s humbling to count the number of times throughout my life when someone has risked sharing coveted information. But I like to think such information was earned through a building of relationships or some reciprocal benefit I could provide, and the understanding that secrets would be kept. Which brings me to this: Last year, after an oyster outing, the people we’d brought along came over for dinner with some of their friends, whom we didn’t know. Upon entering our house, one of the women introduced herself and said, “We heard about that great oyster beach…where is it?”

If I were a smarter person, I probably would have had some diversionary, non-confrontational response ready, like directions to another, well-known public beach. But I’m not, and I didn’t. I stammered a bit, weighing the potential outcomes of various answers, and then just said, “I can’t say.” The woman roared with laughter at what was obviously (to her) a joke, then waited for my “real” answer. After an awkward silence of some duration, she said “Are you serious? You’re not going to tell me?” “That’s right,” I said, “I’m not going to tell you.” She looked like I’d just punched her in the stomach. Another long, uncomfortable moment passed. Then she said, “Well then, I’m going to take back the marmalade I just gave you.” To which I responded, as a way of explanation, “If you had foraged those oranges from a secret place, I would never ask you where it was.” By now, everyone in the room was watching and listening, and I’m pretty sure—at least in some cases—concluding I was an asshole.

But really, what else could I do? Did I have some kind of proprietary right to “our” oyster beach merely because I’d stumbled into the old man coming back to his car? Was I being selfish and paranoid? Probably. But, as our regional punk-poet laureate, the
late Kurt Cobain, reminded us in his paraphrase of a Nixon-era bumper sticker: *Just because you’re paranoid don’t mean they’re not after you.* Or your oyster spots.

In retrospect, I think the root of this conflict might be cultural differences between “city people” and “country people.” The woman, who was new to the area, had no concept of foraging beyond going to the store and buying the oranges she needed to make jam. I’m sure the idea that I would withhold a source of something she wanted seemed ridiculously provincial to her, just as I was offended by her presumption that I would freely share. The assembled crowd’s judgment fell into two categories—some rolled their eyes and looked at my rude response with scorn, while others—mostly locals who have their own information to protect—believed I did the right thing. Thankfully, Stacy was in the latter group. Still, the quandary of where to draw the line remains. I mean, kids everywhere are taught sharing is of utmost importance, right? Well, maybe not my kids.

When someone asks Skyla or Weston where they pick chanterelles, for example, I’m proud to hear them reply, “in the woods.”

When we arrive at the beach, the Sweeneys—Dan, Mia and their girls, Maren and Laine—are already there, pulling on boots and crowding under the raised tailgate sorting out rain gear. We’ve been fishing, hunting and foraging with the Sweeneys for years, and Maren and Laine are like doting older sisters to both our kids. Maybe it’s just a mood lift from the company of friends, but the rain seems to be letting up.

The tide is well out now, exposing a broad stretch of mud and gravel below the bluff where we’ve parked. Herring gulls ride the updraft, hovering in place like spindly white kites above the beach, and Skyla lets loose with a startlingly accurate gull cry. The
birds reply and Skyla answers back again. The familiar low tide scent—briny, fertile, sulphuric—fills the air, and we clamber down to the water with hurried anticipation. Last year, after the same kind of chaotic first-trip-of-the-year preparation, we arrived to discover water lapping at the base of the bluff, covering the shellfish beds. I had somehow, in my enthusiasm to start the season, misread the tide book. Thankfully, it was just the four of us then, so my embarrassment was limited to immediate family. But a screw-up like that stays with you, and I am relieved to see that today, I got it right.

We’ll pick oysters first. The clams are higher up the beach, accessible even on rising water, but the prime, smaller oysters lie along the low tide line and need to be collected right away. I pull on my gloves and gingerly walk across crunching masses of large oysters blanketing the beach. “Dad, where are our gloves?” Skyla asks, rifling through the bucket. Shit. I knew I would forget something. We are standing on hundreds of vertically growing oysters, their translucent purple-black, fluted edges razor sharp and pointed skyward. An ungloved fall means blood. Stacy and I hand our gloves to the kids, and they take off down the beach.

The adults spread out, searching. A majority of the oysters are either too big or stuck together in clumps, making them tough to shuck. The sheer biomass, though, is staggering. They are thriving here. Like most invasive species, these Pacific oysters, introduced from Japan in the 1920s, have taken well to conditions in their foreign home. Today, Pacifics are the dominant oyster in Puget Sound, having almost completely replaced the delicate, native Olympias. Disturbing as this may be, the good news is the aliens are delicious. When we’ve filled our mesh bags, we gather around a large boulder—our shucking table—and get to work. New oysters grow from “seeds” attached
to the shells, so, unlike commercially grown oysters, the shells of wild oysters need to be left on the beach to create the next generation. And so, the shucking begins.

An oyster “knife” is actually more like a blunt, flathead screwdriver (So that’s why I stashed them in the screwdriver drawer…) made for prying rather than cutting. Holding an oyster with its flat side up, I push my knife into the back hinge, wiggle it to gain traction, and with a prying twist, separate the two shells. Then I run the blade along the top shell and under the oyster “body” to sever connective muscle. A quick tilt of the bottom shell and the oyster slides into my container. But everyone has their own technique. Stacy pushes the blade between shells along one side and works back toward the hinge. Candace goes caveman style and bashes them open from any angle. After the first few awkward efforts, the muscle memory returns and we’re all shucking efficiently. And in my gloveless case, bloodily. Lucky for me, my hands are so cold, I can’t feel any pain.

The kids are gathered off in the distance at water’s edge, turning over rocks and capturing the varied sea life they find. In their own plastic containers, they build elaborate homes for tiny shore crabs, sculpins and rock prickles. The big marine worms, with pincher jaws and hundreds of undulating legs along their sides are left alone, but the slippery, eel-like prickles are an endless source of wonder. Looking up from my work, I notice (with resignation) Weston already in the muddy water over his boot tops and hands bare. No sign of Stacy’s gloves anywhere. I stand and start to holler at him, but stop myself. He’s gleefully splashing and laughing with each rock the “big kids” turn over, and even from here I can see the huge smile on his mud-spattered face. I guess if we wanted him to stay dry and clean we’d have stayed home.
The rain has quit, but by the time we have enough oysters, the breeze is coming up, out of the north now and colder. The tide is rising, too. If we want clams, we’re going to have to hurry. With the long-handled cultivator, I dig into gravel up around the high tide line, moving along if there aren’t any clams after the first couple of digs. Glen hits pay dirt first and the kids crowd around, sifting through the coarse sand for hidden treasure. The clams here are native littleneck steamers, which in most areas of Puget Sound, have been displaced (much like the Olympia oyster) by invasive Manila clams. They’re both tasty, but people who eat a lot of clams generally proclaim the natives superior. I’m not sure I can tell the difference on the table, but it’s good to know there are still healthy pockets of the native species. We collect just enough to supplement tonight’s dinner, place them in a bucket with clear seawater so they can expel their sand and carefully backfill the holes we’ve dug.

It’s time to head home. The kids are soaked, covered in mud and hungry. More than a few small teeth are chattering. We gather them at the base of the trail for a quick and futile sand removal shakedown and equipment inventory. “Where’s Weston?” Stacy asks. I look up, scanning the beach, and there he is, waist deep in the icy water, facing away from us and heading out. The tide has come in, so he’s not very far away, but when I yell, he doesn’t seem to hear. Or he’s ignoring me. I wade toward him, stopping when the water threatens my boot tops. “Hey, bud!” I call with more urgency. I can see now he’s lost in another world, peering intently into the water and shuffling ever deeper. Whatever he’s chasing, it’s not moving toward land. Now he’s almost chest deep. I step forward and water pours into my boots, cold enough that I catch my breath. A shiver runs up my back. “Weston!” I yell as I reach him. He turns slowly and looks at me, his eyes
bright and smiling. “What are you doing out here?” I ask. “I’m trying to catch that crab but he keeps scooting away,” he says.

I throw him over my shoulder in a fireman’s carry and we splash onto the beach and up the trail. Water sloshes from my boots and streams out of Weston’s clothes down my jacket and pants. By the time we reach the car, we’re both soaked. “Oh, Weston,” Skyla says shaking her head in disapproval, “Oh, Weston…” He’s too busy laughing at his wrinkled toes to notice.

Back at the house, job one is mud and sand removal. The kids line up for the outdoor hillbilly shower—a hot water hose bib is surely one of humankind’s greatest inventions—then streak inside for dry clothes. Grown ups kick off boots and pile them with gritty, oyster-juice soaked gloves for a mass hosing down later on. Right now, we have to get busy in the kitchen.

While Stacy builds a fire and Glen starts cracking beers for the crowd, I throw a big pot of Lundberg wild rice and chicken stock on the stove. Then I give the oysters a quick rinse and put them in a colander to drain. A sprinkle of garlic salt and cracked pepper and we’re ready to start production. First, a mix of flour and corn meal goes into one big bowl. Next comes a bowl of eggs whisked with milk. And finally, a plate mounded with panko, the light, flaky Japanese breadcrumbs. Then it’s just a matter of taking each oyster down the line in order, ending with perfectly breaded bivalves and dough-covered fingers the size of hammer handles. Meanwhile, kids are racing up and down the hallway with Maren Sweeney playing director and big sister to the whole careening brood. Candace has the big crab pot loaded with clams, butter, garlic, white
wine and parsley. A couple of big crusty loaves from the bakery up in Port Gamble are warming in the oven. Stacy’s tossing winter greens with dried cranberries, sunflower seeds and vinaigrette. Glen, Mia and Sweeney keep the oyster production rolling forward. Gary has a pan of mac and cheese going as an alternative for kids who might not be so enthusiastic about oysters.

If we’re going to get everyone fed, I’ll need to use the dreaded two-pan frying approach tonight. When the oil sizzles, I take a deep breath and start laying breaded oysters into the pans. By the time I fill the second pan, the first oysters are browning and ready to be turned. I have to move fast. Using long, bamboo chopsticks, I get into a rhythm of lifting, turning, pulling finished oysters out and adding new ones. As each oyster reaches golden perfection, I set it on a rack and drop another one in. I sprinkle the first full rack of hot oysters with a pinch of kosher salt and slide it into the warm oven next to the bread. Reaching into the oven takes me out of my rhythm, though, and on more than one occasion, I return to my turning duty a little late. The resulting darker-than-golden oysters are advertised as “extra crispy.” I’m sure a professional chef would find my task simple; for me, the frantic, two-pan dance is more than a little stressful. But man, does it smell good in here.

Stacy yells “Soup’s on!” and the feast begins. The crisp oysters burst with the briny flavor of the sea. Stacy’s made three dipping sauces: a sharp horseradish cocktail; creamy sweet-pickle tartar; and my favorite, a mixture of soy sauce, lemon juice and wasabi. We tear bread into thick chunks to absorb buttery clam broth and some use empty shells to spoon the broth directly into their mouths. A rich, citrusy amber ale from 7 Seas
Brewery down in Gig Harbor quenches thirst and complements the food. We are getting down to some serious eating now.

Much to the surprise of several parents, calls of “more oysters please” ring out from the kids’ table, even from the picky eaters. Nothing like a day of mud, water and weather to build a kid’s appetite, especially for food they helped gather themselves. The crowd is silent, save for the sounds of eating, for the first time all day.

And then suddenly, it’s late. Our friends rush to pack up gear and load sleepy, pajama-clad kids into cars for a mad dash to catch the ferry. Where did the day go? And for that matter, what responsible parent lets small kids stay up until eleven at night? “Bed time!” I shout to the kids while Stacy and I clear dishes and put away food. There are three oysters left on the rack, and I’m already planning the sandwich I will make with them. Skyla comes into the kitchen with her nightgown on and sleepy eyes. “I’m still hungry,” she says, spotting the oysters. “Hey, I’m saving those for tomorrow,” I say. “Please?” Like the old man at the oyster spot, I can’t refuse her. She grabs all three, then stands at the counter eating them from her hands.

I offer what’s left of the dipping sauces and she shakes her head, crunching through another bite. “No, daddy,” she says, “If you put sauce on the oysters, you can’t really taste them.” A purist. “Tell Chouinard I ate nine oysters tonight, okay?” she says, popping the last of them into her mouth. “Who?” I ask. “You know, your friend in Canada who always eats the crab guts and shrimp heads. He’ll be real proud of me.”

Later, when the kids are asleep, I step outside to clean up our gear. There’s a brisk chill in the air. I can see my breath under the porch light and water from the hose stings
my hands with icy needles. Winter isn’t over yet. But tomorrow we’ll have three more minutes of daylight, and that’s enough.