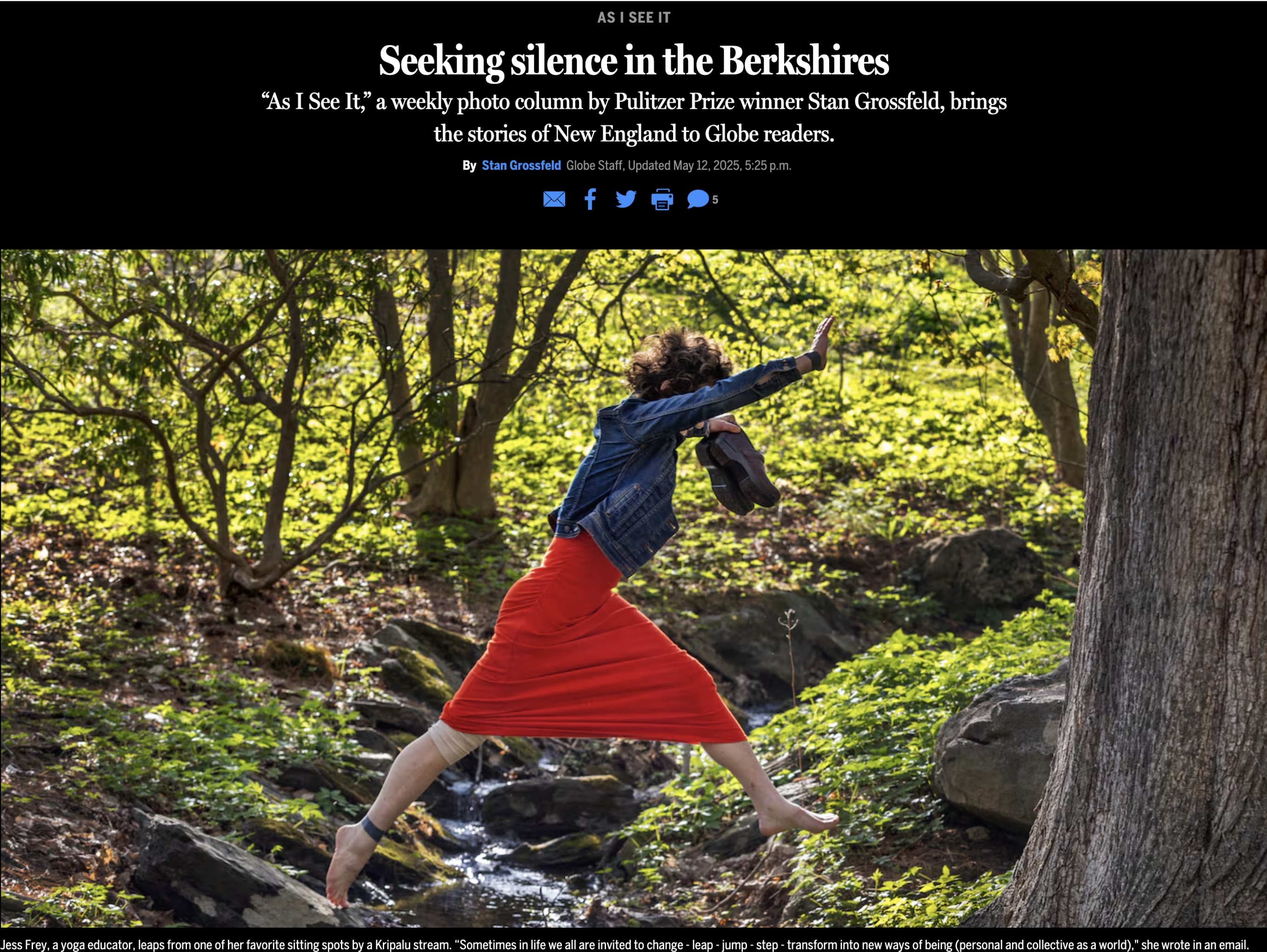
AS I SEE IT

Seeking silence in the Berkshires

"As I See It," a weekly photo column by Pulitzer Prize winner Stan Grossfeld, brings the stories of New England to Globe readers.

By **Stan Grossfeld** Globe Staff, Updated May 12, 2025, 5:25 p.m.



Jess Frey, a yoga educator, leaps from one of her favorite sitting spots by a Kripalu stream. "Sometimes in life we all are invited to change - leap - jump - step - transform into new ways of being (personal and collective as a world)," she wrote in an email.

STOCKBRIDGE -- *SHHHHH!*

There's too much noise. Too much *blah-blah-blah*. Fear and negativity abound.

I'm at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, the largest yoga retreat center in the United States.

Decades ago, I stayed here with my wife. She took a yoga class, I relaxed and read a book of quotes by my favorite Yogi.

It's 6 a.m. at Kripalu, and fog hugs the Stockbridge Bowl. The silence here is accentuated by the quiet unfolding of spring.

Berra, that is.

Desperately seeking silence, I enlist the aid of Jess Frey, a Kripalu yoga educator, life coach, and artist who conducts the silent retreats here.

Frey offers me sage advice on remaining silent for 24 hours and an opportunity to talk with the 28 participants after their five-day silent retreat ended.

Kripalu is a no-frills yoga and meditation center in the Berkshires. They have no TVs and serve healthy meals on the magnificent grounds overlooking Lake Mahkeenac, aka the Stockbridge Bowl. Cellphones are banned in public places.

Welcome
Kripalu
Silent
Retreat

Jess Frey (center) finishes teaching a five-day silent retreat along with co-presenter Sudha Carolyn Lundeen (right). "Silence is a pathway to reconnection - a homecoming- a pathway of presence and connection in a busy, challenging, chaotic, distracted world," says Frey.

"Listen to your inner voice, not your voicemail" is one of their popular sayings.

Frey says the silent retreat is "medicine for the soul." Being silent slows you down, allowing participants to find their own wisdom through all the noise.

"We meet our body through movement, we meet our breath through different breathing experiences," she says. "It's learning to meet life in more intimate ways."

Frey encourages kindness and curiosity to help overcome fear, anxiety, and anger.

Jess Frey at the Grandmother Tree, She says she was listening to the land and opening a connection to the larger ecosystem we are part of.

"I actually see this time for all of us to be an opportunity to wake up and become the people that we need to be, to pave a new way. And that's hope. That's a possibility."

Silence can stir waves of emotions.

"I guarantee you tomorrow people are going to walk away with a little bit more hope for themselves, hope in humanity and hope for the state of the world."

She says that happens one heart at a time.

Lightness and darkness on the edge of a forest and the swaying branches, all things usually overlooked in a busy life.

"Choose love," she says. "Drop by drop, that's where change comes from. The ripple. So, we've got 28 people in here right now rippling love. That's huge."

She offers hope to this visitor who has the elasticity of a tire iron and the attention span of a goldfish.

"You don't have to do yoga to meditate. To me, anything that cultivates connection and presence is meditation," Frey says.

The accommodations at Kripalu are clean and simple. Designated areas are for silent reading and journaling.

She suggests getting out in nature and walking the trails to soothe what the Buddhists call "monkey mind"- the constant restless brain leaping from thought to thought, like a monkey swinging from branch to branch.

"Go find the Grandmother Tree," she says.

Soon, I'm lying under the old Camperdown elm, grafted from Dundee, Scotland. It is huge and gnarled and reaches outwards in all directions.

I lie down on the soft, damp earth and stretch. The world is coming back to life. Ants scurry along its limbs; birds sing, clouds float by. I listen to my heartbeat and take note of the ravages of time on my bones. Like the emerging flowers, my shoulders are slightly bent toward the sun.

At the end of a five-day silent retreat, the participants gather and describe what they've learned.

I feel serene and calm.

Not speaking to anyone but Frey is easy. I didn't miss my phone or small talk. I stopped the multitasking of my mind. I've learned that a smile is worth a thousand words. Just relax. Breathe. Appreciate the beauty that surrounds us.

Julia Golier of Westchester, N.Y., also loves the majestic old tree. We talk about it the next day after their silence was broken with hugs and thanks.

"The Grandmother Tree was amazing, wasn't it? And just seeing how it branches and then the gnarled parts, you know, like, we're all kind of gnarled in some places and branching out in others. I was identifying with the Grandmother Tree, honestly. And it was so beautiful."

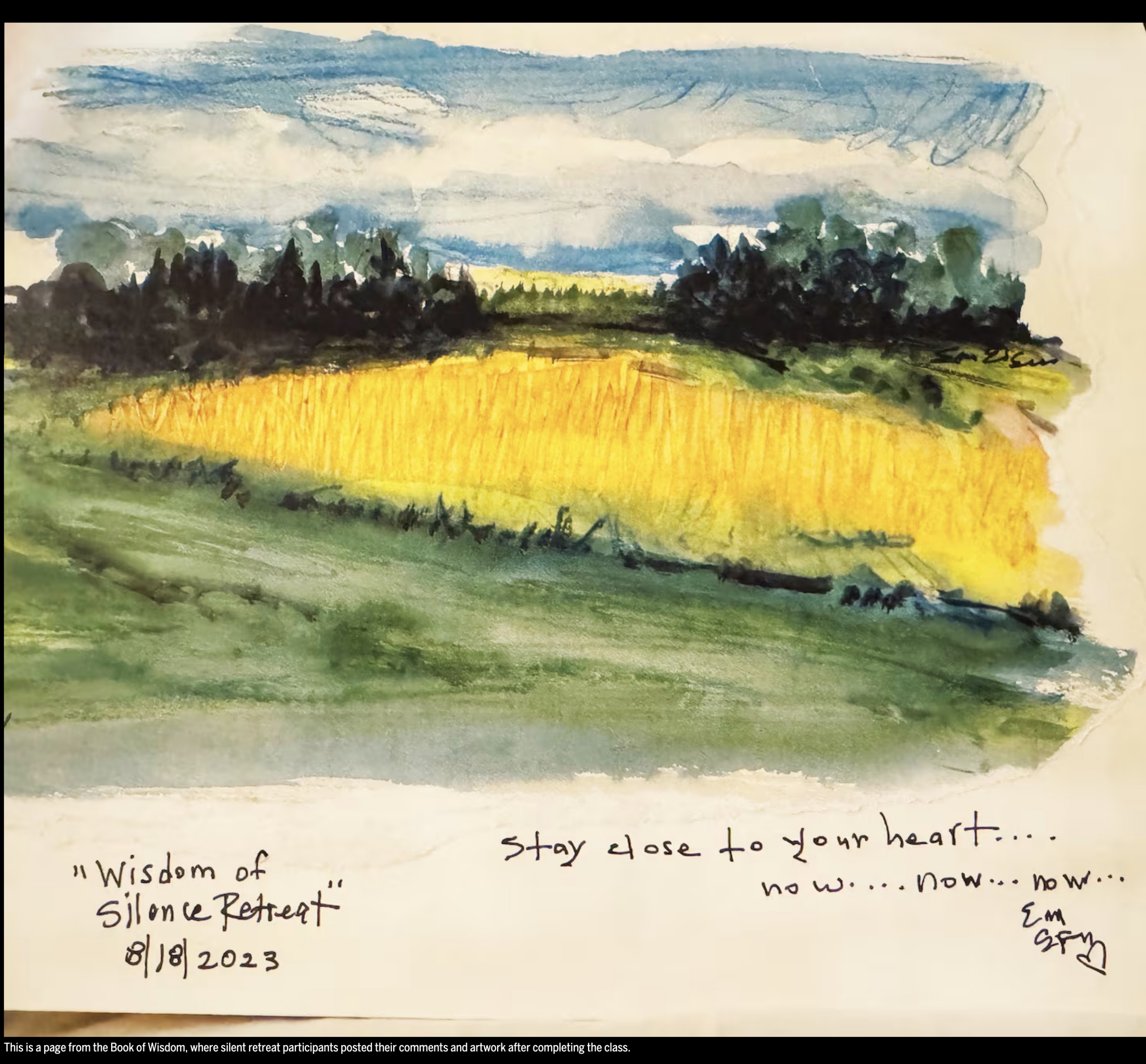
Frey hugs Julia Golier of Westchester, N.Y., who found the silent treatment renewing.

Silence for five days was "remarkably easy," she says.

Golier signed up for many reasons. She's a VA psychiatrist and treats vets who have PTSD. She calls it an honor to work with these brave survivors.

"There's just a lot of stress in the world, in my personal life, in my work life. And I just felt like I couldn't think anymore. I just felt bombarded by the world. When I was out in the woods doing this nature meditation, it felt like the joy and curiosity that you have in childhood, that gets squished and conditioned out of you. I felt it kind of resurging. And I hope it sticks.'"

Clare Murray Volo of Syracuse, N.Y., works at a retirement community. This is her fifth silent retreat.



"Wisdom of Silence Retreat"
8/18/2023

Stay close to your heart...
now... now... now...
Em

This is a page from the Book of Wisdom, where silent retreat participants posted their comments and artwork after completing the class.

She lost her father after her first retreat and her mother died soon after her second.

"Once I was no one's daughter, in essence, I had to find who I was. Silence helps to clear everything out so I can actually hear myself speak and remember who I am," she says.

Somehow in the silence, people of all ages and backgrounds bond.

"Community happened very, very strongly with no words spoken," says Volo.

A silent scene to ponder at Kripalu. My favorite quote: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt." This quote has been widely credited to Lincoln, Twain, and Confucius, but its real source is unknown.

"We did a wisdom walk. Instead of searching for what needs to be found, you allowed it to come to you."

Listening to the wind and watching the gentle waters lap onshore at the lake, I in my own wisdom walk brought back a greatest hits flashback from 24 million minutes before.

On Aug. 21, 1979, as I had just summoned the nerve to go skinny-dipping in this very lake, the sweet sound of Joni Mitchell doing her Tanglewood afternoon soundcheck danced through the pines and wafted across the water. It gave me goosebumps.

Thomas Ramirez steadies Elina, his baby daughter, as she steps into the Stockbridge Bowl.

Back in the present, Thomas Ramirez carries Elina, his baby daughter, to the water's edge and gently lowers her down. She hesitates for a moment and then, trusting her dad, takes a big step.

There's a splash, and the tiniest ripple spreads out from the shore.

Not a word is spoken. Everybody just smiles.

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