When I heard about the Northern Woodlands Writer’s Conference in Fairlee, Vermont, my immediate reaction was, “this is why I came to UVM.” Opportunity. Opportunity for experiential learning and pursuing my education in the environmental field beyond the classroom. I considered the costs and benefits of going for a little while, seeing as it was the weekend after Parents’ Weekend and right in the middle of midterms. I decided, finally, that it was worth sacrificing study time and sleep because of the tremendous opportunity for growth and exposure.

At this point in my education, exposure is a huge driving force in the direction that I go in the next four years and beyond. To me, attending a gathering of naturalists that are writers, musicians, research scientists, artists and more, I may very well find that there is something specific in the environmental field that sparks my interest and passion. I may have a conversation with a research scientist that will inspire me to get involved in a specific project, or maybe listen to a speaker and be motivated to reduce my impact on the Earth and go vegan. These thoughts ran through my mind as I submitted my application.

And then the day came...just one too early. Somehow, I had it in my head that the conference was on Sunday, which technically it was, but we were attending on Saturday (for free thanks to the generosity of Dean Matthews). I got a call at 6:02am Saturday morning, after a long night (and early morning) of studying, asking me if I was still going on the trip; we were supposed to leave two minutes ago. Fortunately, I was able to talk them into waiting and got to the van as quick as I could. The day was a struggle, but that did not minimize how awesome the experience was.

One of the sessions I attended was on observing nature using different senses, where we studied trees visually and also were led by another attendee to a tree with our eyes closed and examined the tree through touch only. While on this section, I flipped over a decaying log and was startled to find a spotted salamander, the first I’d ever seen. Another attendee who was with me happened to be studying herpetology and told me that to see them at that time of the year, mid-October, was very rare. To make it even more exciting she went on an online map of Spotted Salamander distribution across Vermont and found that there had never been a documented sighting in Fairlee! That alone was worth the scramble at 6 o’clock in the morning, but my discovery was only a small portion of what made the conference so great.

The food was excellent, there was great atmosphere, passionate people, and the keynote speeches were very inspiring and really hit home. The biggest takeaway for me came from Bryan Pfeiffer’s keynote speech. In it he stressed the importance of being passionate about our work in the environmental field and devoting yourself to it. However, he also emphasized that we must also enjoy being in the environment and all that it has to offer us. Everyone needs to find a balance of saving and savoring.

He discussed an awe-inspiring moment when he was in Maine tagging Monarch butterflies before they migrated south. He walked into a field filled with upwards of 200 monarchs all flying around. Although this was an incredible opportunity for him to tag butterflies, all he could do was kneel in the grass next to his net and field equipment and just watch in awe as they all flitted around him. He could have feverishly run around trying to tag as many as he could for research, but in that moment his savoring of nature was so much more powerful, as it was a reminder to him of what he was fighting for. In my life, I have tried to put that into practice by taking walks in Centennial Woods or walking slower to look for birds on my way to class, reminding myself what we’re all fighting for…a healthy world.