Thirteen Sugar Maples; Or, Life in the Trees

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Introduction

> Physiological life is of course not "Life."
> And neither is psychological life. Life is
> the world.
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> Ludwig Wittgenstein

Don't I live in the great world? Doesn't the chain of events I hold between my thumb and index finger at this moment stretch back to the fall of Troy? Doesn't the struggle to find beauty and goodness and truth writhe across the floor of my front porch, and when I open the door, doesn't it reach in and drag me out and say, "Look, look at this. Where do you stand?" And the landscape is shot through with life and with all that makes life grand and noble and tragic. But this place where I live is not the Grand Canyon. The stream that runs through our hollow slips under US 6 and adds itself to Marsh Creek, which joins Pine Creek on its way to the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay. Many years ago the local Chamber of Commerce dubbed the Pine Creek Gorge "Pennsylvania's Grand Canyon." Certainly it is a pretentious name, but the contrast is instructive. The Arizona Grand Canyon is about shear angles, and layered rock, and desolation and the abyss. But the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon, true to its name, is largely about trees. The packaged views from the paved overlooks set the creek (which is bigger than some rivers) far below between tree-covered walls—green in summer, brilliant in fall, and camouflaged in greens and grays in winter. Though it is second and sometimes third-growth forest recovering from early 20th century excesses, scenes like this one, that people drive to see, seem to advertise some message about the untamed wild.

But I have long been drawn to the familiar, close-to-home nature—more of a John Burroughs than a John Muir--although it has taken me quite a while to understand the implications of that preference. One implication is that I have chosen to write about sugar maple trees, a familiar species whose life is often entangled with the affairs of humans. Another is that the essays are not about the sugar maple species; each essay is about one particular sugar maple tree on a particular hill in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania. And finally, like Wallace Stevens and his blackbirds, I know, too, that each sugar maple is involved in what I know.

Picture a man in his early forties standing on a hillside in autumn in northern Pennsylvania. On his left is a nearly one-hundred-year-old, two-storey farmhouse with a leaky, often-tarred roof and faded, peeling white paint on its aged clapboard siding. He and his spouse have just bought this place. The sun sets to his right and the combination of the angle and quality of the light makes each leaf of the mixed forest of maples, birches, and ashes on the facing hillside seem to stand out so that the effect of line and color gives him a mild aching just below the sternum and behind the eyeballs. He and his family have finished packing their small station wagon. His spouse and their three children—16, 13, and 10—have spent the weekend working on the house, removing water-stained drop ceilings and cleaning up fallen plaster. It is Sunday evening and they are about to begin the drive home to heavily developed Bucks County in southern Pennsylvania.

He still feels a bit giddy about owning two houses not just because no one in his family has done that before, but because of the symbolism of his situation: Thoreau suggests that it is fine to build castles in the air, but we must then put foundations under them. This is a dream placed on a field-stone foundation, an idea conceived almost two years before and beginning to take shape in the real world. Part of the ache he feels is that he must leave this dream place and return to the quotidian. Monday morning he will ride the train into Philadelphia, walk through a tunnel to his office and do a job that, while interesting, has begun to fade when compared to the bright colors of the decision that prompted the purchase of the house.

Every other weekend into the early winter, they will make the four-hour drive up and the four-hour drive back, sleeping in sleeping bags on the north parlor floor with the sagging ceiling braced with a large “T” made of 2 x 4’s, and working on the house to make it habitable. As he stands on the hillside in that golden light, he does not know that in the spring they will put their house in Bucks County on the market and it will sell, he will quit his job, and they will move--jobless--to this house. He also does not know that even before they move in, in addition to having a new roof put on and the house rewired, which they are planning on, they will need to have asbestos flooring removed, the pressure tank for the well replaced, and the water lines--which will all freeze up—replaced. That very weekend, lightning had struck the ground near the house and burnt out the well switch so that in the middle of the night the north parlor was filled with the smell of burning wire insulation and the hectic activity of sleepy people responding to an emergency.

But because the life in this place is based on a dream, all that reality will not undo it, and the whole place will be seasoned by the flavor of the decision to act freely. Though on the hillside in the first golden September he does not know it, for many Septembers after, the same feeling will quietly reappear with its ache of joy that brings with it the hint of loss: that there will come a September when he is not on that hillside. And further up hill, arranged along the road behind him and the house in a gentle "S" are thirteen sugar maples.

Now picture him in an airplane flying over Alaska in June. He has spent a week in Sitka in Southeastern Alaska at a symposium, and the flight back takes the plane north over the glaciers first. Below him, just outside some settled place, a glacier has stooped down between two mountains and laid its hand flat on the bare earth and tiny snowmobiles crease its palm going up onto the mighty arm and massive body in the distance hemmed in by the snow-streaked Alaskan mountains with their sharp, cruel edges.

The week he has spent on that narrow strip of settled land between the mountains and the Pacific Ocean has tuned him to a new landscape: standing in a dark rainforest of massive old-growth spruce and hemlock, some suspended on root stilts where the even more ancient stumps they had begun growing on had rotted away beneath them, while overhead, making specks of light leaking through the treetops strobe, bald eagles circle, numerous as crows, calling their high-pitched strangled cries to each other or at him; he does not know which. He has experienced days where there were no nights so that waking at 1 AM and parting the curtains of his room he could see in dusk, the mountain, its peak obscured by clouds, towering over the darkened storefronts. He has sat on rounded man-high boulders surrounded by sand at low tide as the moving water reasserts its claim and ducks bob and dive in the waves. On the day before he left Sitka, he had written in the journal now closed on his lap as he sits in the plane over the glacier, “I must be ready to look carefully at home because my newly cleaned eyes will fill with home quickly.” Driving up that Pennsylvania hill again, before he sees their house, he sees the clouds of sugar maple leaves supported by their pillars of bark and they are a revelation: he saw nothing like them in Alaska.

Finally, picture that man in a conference room in the science building on a college campus. A political scientist, a philosopher, a geographer, a biologist, and he, the literature representative, are discussing how to integrate the arts, the humanities and the social sciences into one course as part of the environmental studies program. They have already decided that the course should approach a topic from the point of view of the various disciplines, but the way each one has formulated the topics betrays the disciplinary orientation of the proposer: terms like “morality” and “natural resources” in the topic mean it has a built-in perspective. Working on an example, they have pruned the topic down to "Trees," figuring they have eliminated disciplinary orientation by simply stating the object to be examined.

The environmental studies minor requires science courses, and the school has many science courses in the curriculum with ecological approaches, but no non-science courses that explicitly combine other disciplines with an environmental focus. The biologist is there to keep an eye on the discussion. His presence stems from the concern, often expressed by the natural scientists involved in the project, that humanities and social sciences people cannot be trusted, that they will construct elegant theories about the nature of the world and then construe this world to fit the theories or seize upon disproved theories because they fit so well. The biologist has been participating in a good-humored way, and at this point he reminds them with some amusement that they may have eliminated their disciplines from the topic but not his. "Remember," he says, "First of all, a tree is a biological system, and before you can effectively deal with trees in any discipline, you must first understand how that biological system works." At that moment this literature representative has an epiphany.

Despite his concern for and interest in nature, when issues involving the natural world come up, he often feels like a poor step-child in the presence of those with scientific training and knowledge. In academia, the hard scientists seem to own the natural world so that for many people, nature and biology are almost synonymous. His scientific colleagues have so much relevant information about the world, an intimacy with the workings of nature and terms for describing things and parts of things. All of that is intimidating. But now he understands how he fits in.

"No, John!" he says with a bit more animation than he intended, excited about his discovery. "First of all a tree is a tree, a particular tree." And more than that, it is one individual tree in a specific place. He realizes he does not want to see a tree as “first of all” a biological system, regardless of the value of that approach. First of all, a tree is a tree. For the first time that he sees clearly that while science cannot draw a conclusion based on one tree, the artistic and humanistic disciplines can. Later that day when he pulls into the driveway at home, he will see sugar maples, each one different from the others.

Imagine then how for this man, shaped by these three conscious episodes and by who knows how many unconscious ones, his two landscapes—the metaphorical interior landscape and the external leaf and branch landscape--converged, and he began the work of translating trees into words and words into trees. These essays are experiments in engagement, attempts to read a particular landscape assuming not that the landscape is a metaphor, but that metaphor is one way to understand that landscape, and that some part of us--some synapses in our brain, some recesses of our minds, some twinges below consciousness—light up when we understand that landscape one tree at a time.