Maple 7: The Tree of the Cave

T. P. Murphy

. . . the Maple seldom inward sound.

Edmund Spenser. *Faerie Queene* (I.1.81)

I don't know what I expected. I had been curious for a while about what seemed to be a small hole in the side of the seventh of the sugar maples in front of our house. It was as if, when the tree had been in a plastic state, a giant potter had gathered the bark into a small mound--just above an old target-like scar from an amputated branch--and then plunged a massive thumb into the middle of the mound. So I stood precariously balanced on the top step of a small stepladder leaning against the trunk of the sugar maple, the insides of my knees braced against the bark, chest close to the tree, face right outside the eight-inch wide hole, one arm steadying me, the other slightly above my head shining a flashlight into the cavity. Inside I saw a pond. Clear water a half an inch deep filled a small cavity carved into the tree, and below the water's surface, sitting on top of a mat of brown maple leaves that lined the bottom, were a wingless maple samara and some pine needles, an oddity since no pines were close by. As if this small body of water was not oddity enough.

Poised there, looking intently, I began to feel I could go into this cave. I anticipated the resistance as I waded through the standing water and entered into what seemed to be a secret place hidden inside the ordinary. That night as I lay in bed, beginning to dissolve into sleep, my memory of the experience seemed to clarify, the way a glass of water does as the suspended minerals drop to the bottom. The rough feel of the bark against my hands as I balanced myself against the outside of the tree became the feel of the walls inside the cave, and I held the flashlight in the air so I could see ahead of me, the flashlight's disk reflecting in the water below. Outside and inside blended, and what remained was only the image of the cave in the tree and my feeling that it was large enough or I was small enough to explore it.

Two days later, I mounted the ladder to explore the cave again. This time I stuck my finger into the pool of water, and the layer of leaves at the bottom gave a bit. When I broke off and pushed a twig into the leaves, the stick went down into about six inches of water, even deeper further back. So it was not a shallow cave with thin layer of water on the bottom, but a water-filled cavern going down inside the tree. My imaginary trip into the cave would have become a nightmare: I would have plunged in over my head, down into the cold, dark water. The leaves would have closed over me, my wet clothes would have weighed me down, and I would have had to struggle back up to emerge chilled and gagging and gasping.

Though it may have been a hostile environment for me, it was not for everything. Later, I put a drop of tree water a microscope slide, where I could see particles floating in it. Then as I put a small, thinner-than-paper cover glass on it, the drop of water flattened

and spread until it took on the square shape of the cover. I took the slide inside to look at it under the microscope. Like the imagination, a microscope reframes the real so that normal relationships are sprung, and as I covered one eye and became absorbed in what I saw under the microscope, I felt like I was flying over a coastline dotted with small islands, and distant, indistinguishable animals were moving through the ocean below. The higher the magnification, the narrower my vision and the more the three-dimensionality of what I was looking at made it hard to focus. I could not tell whether the small objects I saw were moving under their own power or were simply floating back and forth affected by the heat of the lamp and the tiny movements of the microscope on the table. At 750X magnification I had the additional problem of the fluid in my eyes being reflected back from the eye piece so that the ghostly floating strands that moved rhythmically back and forth as I blinked created more illusory movement. I abandoned the search for evidence of life.

I left the slide on the microscope's stage, however, and some days later, after I expected that everything would have dried up, I took one more look to see if anything interesting was there. At 400X magnification, as I moved the slide in slow, small increments, a sliver of faint green flicked by. I centered it in the round circle of vision and increased magnification. At 1000X the object filled the circle and resembled an elongated oak leaf. The points on the "leaf" were scalloped and some curved onto the body. Its detailed and delicate complexity surprised me. What was this tiny, pale green object doing down inside the tree? Though at high magnification it became nearly translucent, there was still a hint of green. Was it some form of algae trapped in a hidden pond living on indirect light? Did it hint at some hidden universe with 200-year-

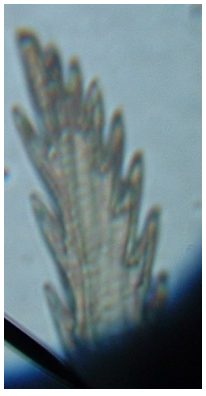

Figure 1. Leaf from tree cavity magnified 1000 times

old oak trees less than an inch tall? What was this green thing of the light doing out of place in the darkness?

In Plato's parable of the cave in *The Republic*, the denizens of his darkened cave can see only shadows cast against a wall by firelight so they mistake the shadows for the real. If a few of them were removed from the cave, they would at first be blinded by the light. Eventually their sight would adjust and they would see the poor quality of their previous understanding of the world. But even more fascinating would be their return to the cave afterwards. Those returning enlightened ones would at first be blinded again by the darkness and ultimately less able to read the subtlety of the shadows than those who had lived only in darkness; they also would not take the shadows quite as seriously as their unenlightened colleagues.

That green photosynthesizing ur-leaf under the microscope was not as well adapted to the darkness as other microorganisms, who might live on rot; its vulnerability was its need for light, and its weakness came from its ability to do what none of the true cave dwellers could do: draw sustenance from light. Falling through the cave's false bottom, as an imaginary explorer, I might have drowned because of my ability to breath the air outside the cave.

But my chief response to the cave was less a sense of stifling enclosure than a sense of opening: I felt like I was penetrating the closed surface of something, moving inside of it into some mysterious, sacred place. Perhaps Plato chose the cave as a symbol of ignorance because the irrational, obscure oracles lived in caves. Raised a Roman Catholic, I had been a seminarian studying for the priesthood while the Latin rite was still chanted in ceremonies laced with incense. I am a Quaker now, and at meeting for

worship we wait together in silence for words to arise within us and sometimes through us to the others there. One First Day (i.e., Sunday, stripped of its reference to pagan sun worship) during meeting for worship, a verse from the Mass of the Ascension stuck in my mind: "*Viri gallilei, quid statis, aspecientes in coelum?*" It means, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing, looking up into the sky?" In one of the gospels it is spoken by an angel to the disciples, who have just watched Jesus ascend to heaven. It seemed to me to be a strange question since the answer is so obvious: they are staring into the sky because Jesus just floated out of sight. The angel's point, of course, is that there is no longer anything to see up there, that instead of looking up at the sky for the divine, they should be looking within. I rose from my seat in the silence of the Quaker meeting and sang my verse. After explaining it, I talked about how I had just today understood what that passage could mean on a personal level, how as I had sat in meeting trying to withdraw from the distractions of the day, trying to pull inside myself to the clear center of my mind, I had suddenly seen myself standing under a night sky. The canopy of stars above my head, though it seemed to be a container, actually opened out into space. The universe inside my head connected to a world beyond me: when I see myself clearly, I see aspects of others that I share. Walt Whitman, the worldly enthusiast says, "I am large, I contain multitudes." Emily Dickinson, the ghostly recluse, celebrates the huge capacity of the small human container:

> The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
>
> For – put them side by side –
>
> The one the other will contain
>
> With ease – and You – beside –

This sense of how going down inside the mind opens up a larger world resonated with my feelings about the hole in the tree, that it was both a way inside something but also, through my imaginative understanding of it, a way of opening up the tree. Both these powerful poets--the public, self-promoting Whitman, who published and republished his poems, and the private, self-effacing Dickinson, who bound her poems in small packages and kept them in her drawer—they both sensed that they were both individual and universal, that they were contained and containers. Perhaps that same paradoxical sense is what draws me to the cave as if it were a koan about light in darkness, about the infinite in a small space, about drowning in the universe.

One February winter day I went out to look at the cave in the tree. After I put the six-foot aluminum ladder up, making sure its feet went through the hardened snow crust to the dirt and sod below, I climbed up and saw that there was a thin layer of ice on the surface of the water inside the cave. I was able to break it with a small, dead stick; the ice was thinnest toward the back of the cave. Once I broke the ice, I began to smell the rotting rich smell of swamp. Again the cave became a separate world, a secret midwinter swamp, its own ecosystem warmed by its inhabitants.

About eight feet above the cave was a small hole in the side of the tree angled upward: it looked like a round, open mouth of a face looking up to the sky. Once a branch must have grown out of that hole and now it was gone, and the fungus that caused the wood to rot would fight it out with the tree's ability to heal itself to see if another cave would form. The same battle was in various stages all over the tree. One stub, perhaps four inches thick with bark puckered around it, was once a branch. All together, ten

branches on the main and secondary trunks of the tree showed what that missing branch would have looked like before it fell off—a gray, barkless, jagged-ended stick with no side branches jammed into bark-covered collar that clasped its base.

About twenty feet above the ground, two of these dead branches protruded from the bark so that their swelled bark collars were joined at the edges, and the bone-bare dead branches both curved like slightly asymmetrical halves of recurve bows, producing a pair of horns about six feet from tip to tip. Reared up high in the air, they made me think of the monstrous Minotaur, with the upright body of a man and the head of a bull. In Greek myth he lived on Crete inside a maze so complex that he was unable to escape. Each year twelve young Athenians, six male and six female, were sent in tribute to the king of Crete to be released into the maze to feed the Minotaur. One year, the hero Theseus volunteered to be one of the group. The King of Crete's daughter was quite taken with Theseus and gave him a skein of thread that he tied to the opening of the maze. He went into the maze, killed the Minotaur and then found his way out by following the thread. Finding the way in also meant finding the way out.

But the significance of the maple's Minotaur horns is rooted in the cave: the sugar maple is a big tree with something rotten at its heart, and the tree can strike out from that rottenness. Even now, on the back side of the tree, a large branch hangs over the road--a ragged, ten-foot long, dead hulk a foot in diameter at the base, tapering almost to a point; pock-marked with one- and two-inch diameter holes; and at the base hollowed out and missing one side so the branch is supported only by its outside edge, attached at two points. It also leans on another smaller, live branch so it is just a matter of time till it goes. When it does fall, it will do little damage, hitting the road and breaking up into

several rotted pieces. Though the hollowing out of the tree from the cave is small now, considering the tree's substantial girth, this is the main trunk of a fifty-foot tall tree, and if the rotting continues so that the tree becomes hollowed out, then it will weaken the tree not far from the ground, not far from the house.

People cut down large trees because they fear them, fear what is going on inside them that they cannot see, the darkness within. It is a cliché that we fear the unknown, the opposite of the fear of clichés, which is the fear of the too-well-known. Even a sound tree, given the right combination of rain and wind or ice and snow, may come down like Zeus's lightening bolt and gash a roof, collapse a wall. In a universe so full of the unknowable and the uncontrollable, it seems reasonable to exercise power over objects we own that may threaten us. However, often there is no way of knowing if the threat is real or simply the shadow of our own thinking. On the outside of the dark cave of our refrigerator--which is powered by lethal electricity and contains chlorofluorocarbons, mildly toxic chemical compounds that contribute to ozone depletion--we have a quote from Aldo Leopold: "Too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run." This is true even on the semantic level since safety is a negative term: it is the absence of danger, like a cave in which to hide, a hollowing out of danger from which protection is needed. Each effort to increase safety involves defining something else as danger so that excessive concern for safety transforms the sugar maples around our house into threats. A concern for safety increases danger until paralysis sets in, or until trapped in darkness we kill what we don't understand.

As I write this, the dangers of the cave for me are imaginary. I have been watching it for a number of years, and the opening is very slowly closing. Now I can

push a stick down nine inches into the water near the bottom lip of the cave, but the top of the cave is closing in, two curved drapes meeting along a seam. This is a particularly wet summer and even in mid August underneath the outer lip of the cave the bark is dark with the overflow. In a few years perhaps the hole in the tree's side will close, the moisture trapped inside will be absorbed and the pocket will be simply that, a large imperfection in the wood. It is easy to forget the tree's own will to live, to forget that some mechanism in the tree knows this cave is a violation, a secret place, a way into the tree that threatens its survival. And in the slow time that is life for the maple trees, it is covering itself. All living things die, but they also affirm life. If I choose to believe in the triumph of tree rather than of rot, perhaps I am believing in shadows, perhaps in the light. This sugar maple tree will not live forever, but it is alive, and the struggle is everything.