

Confusion

By T. P. Murphy

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

-Walt Whitman. "Song of Myself"

As I paused outside the back door of the house, I heard a wooden thunk, and after a brief interval, another thunk. It was a gentle, unassuming sound, and it could have been a loud noise far away, except that another thunk was followed by the close and intimate sound of something granulated falling on dry leaves. I looked up and saw, hanging off the side of a sugar maple tree twenty-five feet away, a pileated woodpecker. These are large, impressive birds, with black bodies almost a foot and a half long, a wingspan close to a yard, long necks, a slash of white on the head and neck, and a bright red cockade. While the bird continued to work the tree, I slipped quietly into the house and back out, equipped with binoculars. Through them I could see that the red on the head really did look like a cockade on a hat--fine, fuzzy feathers arranged in a bunch that stuck up above

the close cap of black feathers surrounding them. Later, my *Sibley Field Guide* made clear this was a female, since the red on the male continues down between the eyes. I watched her at the top of the sugar maple’s rotten central trunk, as she worked on poking yet another hole in it. She poke-poked and then flicked some of the beak dust away so it too crackled on the leaves fifteen feet below her. She then moved around the trunk, and I tried to shift position to keep her in sight. When she had moved to a point on the tree where I could see only the edge of her body, she began to poke with intense attention, so intense that as I watched astonished, she fell off the tree. She went out of sight, but immediately in a flurry of wings, she popped up out of the undergrowth and flapped onto an upper branch of a nearby hemlock. She seemed as stunned as I was, but after a short pause she flew back to the sugar maple, from which, after a few desultory pokes, she flew off.

It is a thrill to have a pileated woodpecker—which Sibley says is widespread but uncommon—in the neighborhood, but it is a bad sign for the sugar maple that attracted its attention. The pileated likes rotten wood and much of upper part of the central trunk, which is broken off at the top, is rotted with half a dozen large holes and some smaller ones. The largest hole shows the characteristic elongation of a previous visit by a pileated. One year, when the trunk was just a bit longer, a family of flickers nested in the tree. I would see a head framed in their home hole from time to time, but I was never aware of a family of them around the house the way I am when, for example, the rose-breasted grosbeaks fledge. But the trunk has deteriorated since then and the sunlight shining out the hole shows the roof is now gone from the flickers’ cavity. That truncated central trunk is encircled by a crown of long thin branches that begin below it and overtop it. The

effect is like a child’s primitive tree—lines drawn from the top of a rectangular trunk, no hierarchy of branching from large to small, old to young.

The tree is clearly dying. Others of the sugar maples have large dead trunks and branches; two guys missing some fingers removed a large dead branch from another sugar maple that threatened the house. But the rotted central trunk is not the key piece of evidence that this maple is sick. The evidence is in its sparse foliage and the tree’s love affair with fall. It puts on fewer leaves than the other trees: when the others are so full that the branches beneath the leaves are obscured, this tree’s leaves are clearly arranged along the branch spines and there are great gaps between porous tufts of leaves. Each year fall colors come to it earliest and the leaves fall from it first. I call it “The Tree of Confusion” because there is no sense of order in the branches, and, because the branches are always visible, the disorder is never hidden beneath the skirts of leaves, rounded to a smooth shape by the sun, and combed in concert by the wind. The tree stands exposed and confused.

But of course, a close examination of the crown of a healthy tree shows that the solid surface of leaves is even more complex and confusing than the branches of this tree. Beyond that, when the trees are bare, the hierarchical branches of the other, healthier trees are even more complex in their arrangement. But that is just the point. The complexity of leaf and branch in the healthy trees seems part of a larger whole into which the detail is absorbed. The Tree of Confusion has begun to lose that part of its complexity that draws together its parts so that like a simple ice surface on the pond, it breaks into shards and exposes the penetrable water below. The tree is losing control. The human brain in the thrall of dementia simplifies its branching network of neurons so the person

becomes more confused as the surface of experience gives way. Here is the same process in the shock of branches in this tree

Once the tree’s center of gravity begins to give way, the tree itself can become elusive. Because deciduous trees grow and lose leaves, the definition of a tree has always been a problem for me. When a tree has surrounded itself in its blanket of leaves, that is the tree. When it loses the leaves, in one sense it has shrunk back to its branches, but in another, it has expanded to include the ground around the base of the tree. When the sugar maples around our house are shedding their yellow, orange and red leaves, and half the leaves cover the ground under the trees completely and half the leaves are still up in the trees, I can stand on the leaves and under them and feel like I am suspended in some imagined place, as if I were an idea that occurred to the trees one autumn afternoon. A deciduous forest in late fall seems like a forest not so much because of the bare branches overhead but because of the dried leaves underfoot, the trees’ way of laying claim to the place, making it not so much theirs as them.

On the Tree of Confusion, not just leaves but branches too die and fall off, catching in the tangle of other branches so that there are always a few hanging in the tree like lines drawn across the other branches. A larger branch simplifies by gradually losing its twigs and smaller branches, which rot and fall off, until the branch is like a pole and it too begins to fall in pieces to the ground where it joins the leaves to continue its quiet process of rotting down. One day a long piece lost its grip and shattered on the road beneath the tree. I cleared the pieces off the road, tossing them into the leaves beneath the tree, but I saved a piece: about a foot long and two inches in diameter. Held in the hand, one side of the cylinder had a white-washed background with off-white fungal extrusions

which under a magnifying glass looked like an aerial view of an excavated ruin, with worn-down walls of open chambers, clustered with streets and alleys. Rotating it through a narrow strip of bark brought a shag carpet of blue-green lichens to the top. They were brittle rather than soft like a carpet; like the shapes in Caldor sculptures--leaf-like but improbably shaped, asymmetrical with lobes connecting with other lobes--they crowded together and curled away from the surface. Lichens are fascinating anyway because they are two symbiotic beings joined together: algae and fungi. So a lichen is a relationship, a combination. When the branch was attached to the tree and these fungi and lichens were attached to it, integrated into its cells, digesting its substance into themselves, were they also part of the tree? Are they still? Does disconnecting the dead branch from the tree change its nature?

One day I cut down a woody weed that was competing too successfully with some of the other plants growing at the edge of the yard near the Tree of Confusion. Once I cut and dragged the sprawling weed away and looked into the space created by its absence, I was surprised to see that the ground beneath the Tree of Confusion was covered with sugar maple seedlings and even a few saplings. This was in August when the leaves on the larger tree had begun their own autumn, fading and forming clusters of red and yellow leaves, but in its dappled shadows, floating above the soil in slender stalks was a bright green layer of maple leaves. I pulled up a seedling that measured about eighteen inches from root to top leaf, cut the stem—thin as a drinking straw, it seemed too delicate to carry the word “trunk”—and with a magnifying glass and some close attention, I counted five rings; it was five years old. Sugar maples are shade tolerant but when shaded they grow slowly, biding their time.

Long before I noticed the seedlings, I realized there was a tree growing up into the crown of the Tree of Confusion. I had noticed it one day when I was taking heart at the presence of some strong green-leaved branches in the dying tree, but when I looked more closely, I saw the leaves were on the branches of another tree. Its trunk, about 7 inches in diameter was rooted six feet from the base of the larger tree and rose about 6 feet until the main trunk angled to one side and two long thin branches arched away at a right angle to each other. The trunk then split in two, one section shooting straight up twenty feet into the air and the other arching up and away. This splayed shape makes no sense by itself but makes perfect sense when the tree is seen in its context, shaping itself to survive in the other tree’s crown. There is one point of conflict where one branch is scarred from rubbing against the larger tree.

The Tree of Confusion is not only most probably the younger tree’s genetic parent but also its environmental master. Even after the older tree is gone some sense of its shape will live on in the negative spaces of the younger tree. Gradually the new tree will reshape itself as the old tree shrinks and fades into the landscape, but the master will live on as an echo in the shape of the younger tree, sounding forward through its history. The Tree of Confusion will live on in its disciple.

As the tree spreads out into the landscape—in the bodies of animals and other plants, in its offspring—in one sense its own order becomes more confused, orbiting around new centers so that it descends into the chaos from which it was created. But we all fall apart. We can disappear just by thinking about ourselves. One breathing meditation uses the Sanskrit phrase “Ham Sah,” which translates as something like “I am that.” As I breath in I say “Ham,” “I am,” and I think of how the atmosphere I breath in is

now becoming part of me as my lungs extract oxygen which turns my blood bright red. I am the air. As I breath out I sigh “Sah,” “that,” and I think of how the carbon dioxide and other elements that were part of my body are now separate from me, are no longer “I” and are now “that.” Of course the whole sentence encapsulates the problem: If I am that, where am I, where is the line between me and the rest of the world. The cloud of myself I have breathed out grows and eventually touches other beings and they too make it part of them and release it in various ways so we disappear into each other.

We bear witness to the passages of each other through the landscape, like pebbles tossed through the surface of the water, raising a splash and then radiating our ripples outward, like the sugar maple rising out of the earth and then settling gently back into it. It scatters its seeds which scatter their seeds and rise and fall in their turn. The sugar maple’s dying draws the woodpecker and the bugs and the lichen and the fungus and it lives on in them gradually losing its focus. It falls apart into them and they become part of it, the greater chaotic sugar maple, until the Tree of Confusion embraces the whole world, and the world and the tree are one.