

Forestland Legacy Story: Hesperides: Wisdom Center for Inner Excellence

~ Every setting (natural and otherwise) is an island in the stream of life ~

Judy and I visited the Wisdom Center for Inner Excellence on April 6 and 7, 2016. I offer my reflections and observations from what we hope is the first of many such sojourns. The WCIE promises to open eyes, heart, mind, soul, and spirit to the wonder, beauty, awe, and magic that lie within each participant who enters the WCIE realm. The experience will motivate all to really look, truly see, deeply feel, and consciously act to better ourselves as well as the world in which we live, learn, serve, and lead.

Island in the Sky

Mount Marshall stands 3,368 feet tall, a sentinel along the northern Blue Ridge. It is prominent from our Wisdom Center sun porch view to the WSW across the fields. Our perch atop Viewtree Mountain (1,050 feet) sits 500 feet above and a couple of miles west of Warrenton, Virginia, accessed via Hesperides Road's multiple switchbacks climbing from Bear Wallow Road. Twelve line-of-sight miles from us, Marshall's nearly one-half-mile vertical advantage draws our view. While spring's green graces Viewtree's hilltop yellow poplars, we can see that the verdant colors reach only Marshall's lower slopes.

Neighboring Mount Marshall may outrank us, yet every topographic feature east of Viewtree to the coast lies vertically subordinate. We stand alone. Last evening's southeasterly winds raked our promontory, the first significant barrier across hundreds of miles of coastal plain and piedmont fetch. The wind seemed delighted with the Viewtree challenge. As we descended the old logging trail through the east side forest, the persistent summit gusts quickly subsided to a gentle breeze as we descended. The gale remained above us. Even from Bear Wallow Road we

could hear the ridge top torrents. I suppose the wind saw no need to torment the lower slopes; she had spring work to do delivering warm wet greetings to points north, including my then-home in New Hampshire. Just two days earlier, winds from another direction (and a prior season) blanketed our New England home with more than half a foot of snow.

Viewtree Mountain was an island in that evening's river of air rushing to the north. Imagine turbulence around rocks in a tumbling stream; we overnighted on the rock, the air frothing around the buildings and through the gusty yellow poplars, oaks, walnuts, and white pine. The wind rose occasionally to 40 miles per hour. However, more importantly, it was helping propel spring northward.

Through these transition seasons spring advances at some 100 miles (or 800 vertical feet) per week. Solar incidence and sun angle assist, complement, and magnify the wind. Keene, NH, is four seasonal progression weeks north of Warrenton; my near-Keene house was at 900 feet elevation and measured nine inches of snow the Sunday and Monday prior to our Wednesday hike. Marshall Mountain, with its vertical superiority, lags three seasonal weeks behind the center, hence its green-deprived upper slopes and summit.

What led me to the center? A dear mutual friend and colleague brought Judy and me together with the center's founders on this midweek overnight sandwiched between two three-day transformational leadership workshops. We intended to delve deeply into whether the center might find incremental value by more mindfully and intentionally adopting and incorporating elements of nature-inspired learning and leading. Founder Jeff Patnaude and I did just that, stimulated in part by our Wednesday afternoon stroll through field and forest. We wandered and wondered. Jeff's education and lifelong practice focused on mind, heart, soul, and spirit. My training and much of my experience found me in nature, deeply influenced by—and oriented

to—the environment. Both of us found application and lessons in our respective immersions for living, learning, serving, and leading. Hence, our worlds swung into mutual orbit and resonance.

Transformational leadership here at the center operates in a human dimension, embedded in its physical setting, across time, proceeding inexorably at 60 minutes per hour. Aldo Leopold saw the invisible applications of nature to living and observed,

“Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television.”

I subscribe to the truth that we must deeply see the multiple dimensions in which we live, learn, serve, and lead—see them through the lens that is nature based. How many of Jeff’s dedicated workshop participants measure the passage of the seasons, or even of time, in miles of latitude or vertical feet per week? How many are blind to the natural world? Can they expect to see within themselves if so much of the outer world lies hidden or obscured? What else are participants missing?

Feathered Friends and Fellow Viewtree Inhabitants

I saw no bird feeders or nesting boxes atop the Center’s Viewtree Mountain paradise. I thought again of Leopold, “One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring.” I wondered how workshop and retreat participants might truly engage and immerse in their Blue Ridge foothill mental, emotional, and leadership retreat without having a sense of the harbingers that ride the spring winds northward, in some cases, from thousands of miles into Central and South America.

I pondered how workshop participants at WCIE could possibly comprehend their fleeting and fragile place in this world without knowing what fellow Earth inhabitants—without benefit of technology and with body mass no greater than a few grams—risk to fully advantage their brief avian breeding season in far northern latitudes. The tools of survival, sustainability, and fecundity are written by eons of striving, learning, and recording; their DNA is rich with lessons learned.

I urged Jeff over predawn coffee Thursday to consider adding another dimension to his ridge top curriculum. Erect some bird feeders and keep them filled; place a few nesting boxes around the property. Install a few outdoor microphones and pipe the music of joyous feathered migrants and residents into the gathering spaces at the center. Jeff so eloquently quoted to me over our second cup of coffee, “Faith is the bird’s predawn voice, assuring us that once again today, the eastern sky will soon brighten.” Leadership is in part faith; even the birds know this! Why waste the wisdom of nature at a center that occupies an island in the stream of life? Employ nature’s ways. Otherwise, we just as well house participants at an airport hotel: let them leaf through nature photography books, show them some beautiful nature videos, read a few relevant quotes, and send them on their way.

If instead, they come to the island, I implore that we immerse them in every sense of the term. Don’t waste a moment or miss an opportunity. Birds—especially our intrepid, intercontinental migratory friends—bring deep instruction and inspiration. What rich return on an investment in a few hundred pounds of seed and the labor to keep the feeders stocked! Add a score of nesting boxes across the ridge top, and chronicle the tale of life and renewal on the island. Our intention underlying the addition of feeders and nesting boxes is to attract these fellow Earth citizens to the center, to ensure that our human guests witness firsthand our place *in*

nature, not apart from it. The purpose is not to feed the migrating birds who are quite capable of sustaining themselves, but to feed and fuel the hungry souls and intellect of center participants.

We can welcome these feathered friends to our daytime lives at the center, and observe them firsthand. Our nocturnal neighbors will generally, with the exception of a rare daytime sighting, remain beyond our experience. However, we can bring even these into view with a handful of strategically placed trail cameras, triggered in darkness by the nighttime wanderers. Digitally recorded at the center, the images every morning will further demonstrate that we are not alone. We are never truly alone. Let the Wisdom Center for Inner Excellence remind us of our inter- and inner-dependence in all that we do.

On a stroll, we neared the eastern end of the hilltop meadow and saw an immature bald eagle lift from its tree perch at the edge of the field. It was carried into the wind with strong and confident wing strokes, passing over and beyond the woods. We reveled at its appearance, wishing it had soared and lingered a bit longer. Had we not ventured into the field, and instead stuck to the paved access road, we would not have seen this magnificent young avian predator. I had suggested the woods route, fully anticipating that we would see more in this deeper immersion into the outdoors. Exploring nature and its lessons is a contact sport. Likewise, living, learning, serving, and leading work best in full and positive contact, face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder.

The Forest's Story

The forest we entered tells its story willingly to those who can comprehend its language. Nearly forty-four years beyond my forestry bachelor's degree and three decades since earning a doctorate in natural resources management, I can read and speak the language fluently; though I admit to some rustiness from the twenty years since I left my almost daily woodsy classrooms

and laboratories! The tales are poignant and compelling. For example, the logging trail and scattered cut stumps, now weathered and decaying, signal the timber harvesting from nearly ten years ago. Amazingly, the canopy gaps from tree removal have already filled, testament to the remaining trees' hunger to reach for more sunlight by extending branches into the temporarily sun-filled openings. Hence, the demonstrated meaning and merit to the old saw, "Nature abhors a vacuum."

A little farther to the east and downslope we intersect many former main canopy trees lying prostrate, as northerly winds tossed them toward the south, root balls lifted from the then-moist soil. The derecho that tore them from the ground several summers ago had already traveled hundreds of miles before leaving its Viewtree calling card. Now, nature will once more fill the canopy voids, even as the downed branches and wood reenter and enrich the soil that nurtures the survivors. Evolution assures that those remaining know what to do, how to exploit the blessed incremental sun energy and supplemental soil nutrition. Any enterprise should anticipate and prepare to mine advantages and opportunities, both those that are anticipated as well as those that are unseen.

Cursory examination would lead one to conclude that the life (the emerging green), death (the blow-down and other woody debris scattered across the forest floor), and dynamics of the forest (leaves, nuts, and other annual deposits) occur where we look and see, walk, and appreciate. However, even with all the clear above-ground evidence, fully seventy-five percent of forest carbon turnover is subsurface, occurring out of sight, where the vibrant cycles and streams of life rev and teem year-round. Fine roots, mycorrhizal fungi, and tiny flora and fauna constitute a thriving stew. Never a dull moment, even when the above-ground life sleeps under the Virginia winter's occasional deep snow and sub-freezing periods. The lesson: so much in life,

business, and even our individual lives, lies hidden. The real and essential functions are evident only to those who know where to look and what to seek.

As with any enterprise, nothing in the seeming timeless woods is static; nothing stands still. Even ancient forests are finite. The huge yellow poplars lining the center's moist and fertile concave slopes, the most favorable tree-growing environments on the property, are at least second growth. These fertile Blue Ridge foothills have been cleared, some more than once since colonial settlement. Man clears; nature reclaims. Of course, humans are not the only agent of forest removal. Derechos, massive coastal storms, thick ice, wildfires, and many other natural agents of forest disturbance have operated across the eons. Forests are prepared for man-caused disturbance because forest perturbation is natural. It predates humans' arrival in North America; forest disturbance occurred for millennia before *Homo sapiens* evolved on this fine Earth. Nothing is static; nothing stays the same. With careful study, we can resurrect a deeper story of the center's land history: a task for a subsequent visit.

We observed spring ephemerals in full flower (cutleaf toothwort, Virginia pussytoes, purple violet, may-apple, rue anemone, and others) exploiting the early season warmth in the nearly full sunlight available before the tree canopy leafed out. These opportunists complete their seasonal life cycle when they can, hence the term "spring ephemerals." Ecclesiastes nailed it, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven." Lessons learned are available only to those who look and see. Other lessons claim their own season. The circuit we walked offers chapters that ebb and flow seasonally and across time, year after year.

Walnuts, acorns, hickory nuts, maple samaras, poplar seeds, and many other signs and signals litter the ground; they speak volumes and fill long passages of lively prose. Deer trails, fresh scat, buck rubs, "bird peck" on hickories, fungal fruiting bodies, tree stem cavities, and

other ubiquitous evidence are there to those able and eager to see and discern. The lessons are easily interpreted, and imminently decipherable to those who know the natural tongues and observable syntax. One route to inner excellence passes through interconnectedness to the world we inhabit and the nature that sustains us.

Nature's Role in Jeff's WCIE Vision

Just 48 miles from our nation's capital, the center welcomes transformational leaders and mentors to contemplate and learn ways to change the world; this is Jeff's vision. Their journey toward a fulfilling and rewarding life begins long before they reach Viewtree Mountain. They come because they realize that the hilltop immersion avails them an inflection point, a gateway through which to seek inner excellence. The gateway triggers an awakening to the natural world that sustains, nurtures, humbles, and inspires. The experience at WCIE motivates all who pass through the Viewtree Mountain world to really look, truly see, deeply feel, and consciously act to better ourselves and the world in which we live, learn, serve, and lead.

There is palpable wisdom in the woods: powered by the ages and reinforced by the ebbs and flows of energy, life, and seasons. Our fellow journeyers (human, other fauna, and flora) enrich our lives and accompany our own passage through time and space. Our inner examination returns dividends only when we also focus outwardly, and understand and appreciate the world around us, manmade and natural. And what better place to ensure bridging internal to external than this special wind stream island, which Jeff describes in Celtic terms as a "thin place," an environment where Heaven and Earth intersect. Judy and I felt the "thin-ness." Countless leaders have as well.

Nature offers lessons for those willing to pay attention and to behave in accordance with what they have learned. Nature based leadership examines how leaders can learn from nature's

lessons. I am excited by the prospect of partnering professionally with the WCIE at a “thin place” just 48 miles from Washington D.C. The landscape beckons, offering exquisite elements for integrating nature’s lessons with inner discovery and exploration. Nature-inspired learning and leading workshops, intensives, and courses delivered onsite at WCIE will provide easy access and the perfect environment for participants from the DC area, and from across the globe.

Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* offers fitting closure to these reflections:

“A March morning is only as drab as he who walks in it without a glance skyward, ear cocked for geese. I once knew an educated lady, banded by Phi Beta Kappa, who told me that she had never heard or seen the geese that twice a year proclaim the revolving seasons to her well-insulated roof. Is education possibly a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth?”

Awareness of nature and our place within nature adds greater worth to living, learning, serving, and leading. Nature-inspired learning and leading instruct us that life is best experienced when we do not stick to the paved access road. Find escape occasionally from the stifling suffocation of a well-insulated roof. Insist upon a literal and metaphorical glance skyward, ear cocked for geese.

Forestland Legacy Story: Jasper Fly Nature Preserve

We cannot afford ignorance of our place in the world

Our Earth is home to countless special places. Every one I've visited reveals its story and stories. I'm blessed to read those stories in the land, climate, and ecosystem. Toss in some local perspective, history, and interpretation from someone intimate with the parcel and its traditions, familial history, and passed-along-legend, and the stories become volumes.

I visited such a place, The Jasper Fly Nature Preserve, in Maury County in south-central Tennessee along the Duck River, about half-way into its 269-mile journey from headwaters to the Tennessee River. Elevation on the property rises from ~550 feet at the river to a little above 700 feet on the ridges. My host, Dr. Mark Fly, is an environmental psychologist at the University of Tennessee Institute for Agriculture in Knoxville. Mark spent his first 12 years at the still very rustic cabin where we two over-nighted September 7, 2016. The farm has been in the Fly family for almost 100 years (1919). Mark is the kind of host and guide who opens every portal for truly experiencing a place. The Preserve is indeed a special place!

Mark attended the summer 2015 Conservation Psychology Institute at Antioch University New England (AUNE), where I then served as president. I spoke to the participants about the fledgling Nature Based Leadership Institute (NBLI) we were establishing at AUNE. Mark became one of the 15 NBLI co-founders. We've stayed in touch since then. He called me mid-August 2016 to invite my participation in a project he is co-leading in Maury County, which he still considers home. We both believe that Divine Providence drew us together. He knew through our NBLI Founders network that the Antioch System had eliminated its five campus presidents and their local Boards, and that I had relocated from New Hampshire to our eventual

retirement home in northern Alabama, just 85 miles from the emerging project site. Not long after I arrived here, another natural resources project in Alabama connected me to one of Mark's UT graduate student advisees from a few years ago. When I mentioned this connection to Mark via email, his mental light bulb flashed to invite me to Maury County, Tennessee! I am engaging via my Great Blue Heron (Nature-Inspired Learning and Leading) consulting firm. The great blue is my 20-year-deceased Dad's avatar. I see the appearance of a great blue as Dad visiting, and thus a positive omen. He greets me often, presenting himself at times far too powerfully timely for mere coincidence. The great blue is my personal totem, emblematic of what I view as my clan.

Entering The Jasper Fly Domain

Project endeavors delayed our post-dinner arrival at the farm until well past sunset. Rolling mixed farm and forest, and many twists, turns, and intersections in the south-central Tennessee darkness left me relieved that I would not need to self-navigate back to town. We paused briefly to unlock the property gate, and within a tenth of a mile stopped mid-way on the one-lane bridge crossing the Duck River, described glowingly on The Nature Conservancy's web site:

*Winding 269 miles through Middle Tennessee, the Duck River is one of the state's most scenic waterways. But there's more here than meets the eye. Underneath the surface, the river teems with an almost **unsurpassed variety of freshwater animal life**. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the Duck River is one of three hot spots for fish and mussel diversity in the entire world. It is generally considered to be **the richest river in varieties of freshwater animals on the North American continent**.*

A one-third, waxing crescent moon brightened the night, illuminating the calm water below, which seemed as though I could lean over the rail and touch its surface. Mark said, “This is a three-second bridge.” I asked for an explanation. “An item dropped from here takes three seconds to hit the water,” a reality belied by the moonlit impression of the water within reach. Mark had stood on this spot probably thousands of times. Yet my mind could not reject the moonlit illusion of surface nearness. My doubt would not leave me until the next morning when I saw its true distance, from the bridge and then from below while walking along the shore. As in all of living, learning, serving, and leading, we cannot always trust what we see through our own filters and illusions. Nothing beats having those with deep and intimate knowledge around us, guiding, counseling, remembering, and informing. We alone cannot know all, nor need we try. Others will always know more. We must learn to trust them. Only then can we lead and act effectively.

We drove another half-mile to the homestead across fields, shrubs and seedlings reclaiming abandoned pasture, and deeper forest cover. First a weathered barn greeted us, and then the actual old house, visible in the moonlight. We parked and carried our gear to the screened-in, north extension of the structure, a single-room width that had once been an attached chicken coop. The central structure, the prior living quarters, was stripped and without furnishings, not suited as sleeping quarters. I stashed my gear in the loft; Mark prepared to sleep on the open porch 100 feet from the old coop.

We sat on the porch, planned tomorrow, laid out project work that awaited us, marveled at the incredible star-filled sky, and mused about this farm, the land, its heritage, nature’s bounty, and Mark’s deep ties to this place. Without electricity, indoor plumbing (not even an outhouse), or modern conveniences, we felt more attuned to the farm’s 19th Century origins than

we did to the world we could hear occasionally on the main road a couple miles to the southwest, or the airliners that two or three times passed far overhead, their engine noise muted and distant, and noticeably trailing the visible flashing lights. We tried not to see the red light topping some kind of ridgetop tower a couple miles south. We heard a few crickets, a barely audible barred owl, and a barking dog or two, still agitated by the trombone blast Mark had sounded upon our arrival to apprise his neighbors of his presence. I interpreted the blow's real purpose as Mark alerting the ancients that the living bloodline had once more returned.

We turned in a little after ten, I climbing to my loft and Mark to the porch hammock. I drifted off quickly, but awoke several times to chorusing owls and to singing coyotes trekking across some far corner of the property. I awoke for good at 4:17, when I glanced at my watch to make sure the time was not at some barely-wee-hour point. Four is my routine time for starting the day. Normally, I go to my computer, catch up on writing or email, and then ride my exercise bike while reading, or watching the news. This morning on the farm, I dressed, descended the loft ladder, and bolted to the nearby woods line – did I mention that at home, I had a toilet just a few steps from my bed?!

Okay, having no computer prompted me to sit, watch, listen, and think deeply. My bench faced south, with a faint dawn gracing the horizon to my ahead left. I could see tree silhouettes against the sky, but no details. They would emerge later. A vague tree line framed the southern view. Our weather featured a stacked high pressure, with full subsidence, unseasonably warm days, and very low relative humidity. Thus, the stars could not have been more brilliant and sharp. I contemplated Carl Sagan's observation that we are but a mote of dust in the vast darkness of space, a concept stark and vivid in this predawn quiet. As I gazed into the heavens,

two shooting stars rewarded my patience and focus. They reminded me that we too-often are blind to the beauty, magic, and wonder surrounding us.

Henry David Thoreau said, “Yes I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can find his way in the moonlight, and see the dawn before the rest of the world.” I relished my 90-minute bench-dream. Like Thoreau, I never tire of watching dawn reveal secrets, invisible and unknowing in the night. The revelation is particularly fulfilling when, as here at the farm, I had arrived for the first time in total darkness. The tree silhouette yielded a 50-foot hackberry wrapped in Virginia creeper and poison ivy. The tree line transitioned to a forested ridgetop. In so many ways, we seem to arrive at many of life’s way-stations in a darkness of ignorance and unfamiliarity. We learn only over time that we actually saw little at the outset. Dawn comes in multiple dimensions, opening our mind, heart, body, soul, and spirit as we begin to truly see. Mere silhouettes and vague impressions eventually give way to sharper vision, understanding, and feeling. Snap judgments are always ill-advised. We must make sure the silhouette is a hackberry, the horizon a ridgeline, and the bridge truly a three-second drop to the river.

No spring feathered migrants intent upon amorous undertakings broke the pre-dawn silence; mid-September does not stir their passion. Barred owls continued to call even into the dawn. Perhaps theirs is merely idle chatter? One of the final morning owl calls drew a response – from Mark, who with dawn at full throttle decided himself to arise. With Mark’s emergence, a few crows began cawing and chatting, welcoming the landlord to the day.

Soon after, we headed into town and Doo-Dad’s for a Tennessee country breakfast, stopping first at the bridge, which revealed the Duck River at a sure-enough three seconds beneath us! Well, it is at least a two-second bridge. A rock, dropped from a position at rest (released from a hand grip) would fall 144 feet in three seconds; just 64 feet in two. I estimate

that the height (including the additional five feet (the position of Mark's releasing hand)) is between 64 and 144 feet above the water. To be fair to Mark, he actually said that it's a "three-second spit" from bridge to water. My calculation assumed virtually no air resistance to the rock; I am sure that air has far greater effect on released saliva. Another lesson from nature? Only that nature's rules and constants are, like all things in life, subject to variables and circumstances.

I have noticed that too many people never release their first impressions, clinging instead to original, poorly informed opinions and conclusions. We can impose filters that blind us to reality if we are unwilling to seek more complete data and understanding. Nature-inspired learning and leading involves translating the truths and absolutes surrounding us, and applying them to living, learning, serving, and leading.

Experiencing the Duck River

We enjoyed a hearty breakfast, perhaps to a fault. We arrived back at the homestead, regained comfortable seating for lofty discussion in the morning sun, and soon dozed as we digested our ample intake. We labeled the respite a power nap, from which we emerged ready to walk the trail along the river. Parking near the bridge, we descended the coarse boat ramp, crossed a slough on placed rocks, and walked among the young sycamores and willows colonizing a sandy island. Evidence of prior flood-stage violence suggests that once again a future surge will reduce these trees to broken corpses. Deer tracks and willow browse tell us we are not the only island trekkers. Raccoon prints and mussel shells enhance the visible story line of life along the Duck. We emerge at a gravel bar flanking the main channel just as a great blue heron flies downstream a few feet above the water. The great blue heron signaled my Dad's blessing of my being here, and confirmed that he remains with me. A heron fly-by always lifts me.

We watched fish surfacing and top-feeding, but could not discern species or size. Far ahead, downstream Mark spotted an otter, swimming toward us, occasionally diving and then resurfacing ten feet further along. This particular Lutrinae swam on the opposite side of the waterway, eventually rounding an upstream bend out of our sight, bound for who knows where and for what purpose. We suspect the raccoon is not the only connoisseur of Duck River freshwater mussels. We both agreed that river otters symbolize a wildness that is reassuring, and somehow a throwback to pre-European Tennessee settlement. We both found spiritual lift in the otter's graceful and extended upstream passage. Yet another lesson – with eyes and mind open, we can see so much to brighten a moment, a day, our lives. Our world is rich with visual and other elixirs. Our walk along the Duck corroborated that Hampshire Academy (our visionary Tennessee project) is within easy access of extraordinarily fertile learning substrate. We decided that next time we will kayak this stretch of the Duck, another degree of familiarity not available from the shore.

We drove back to our overnight lodging, now intent upon touring the adjoining upland forest. We began with a look at the huge white oak standing west of the old cabin, full crowned and four feet in diameter chest height. The tree bore the signature of the long ago lightning strike that knocked out the north fork fifteen feet above ground level. The crown has long since recovered; from some distance even a practiced observer would not discern the former blow and damage.

Many of nature's organisms show resilience to adverse factors, masking well the signs of past trauma. I discovered the remnant scars by looking closely to confirm and interpret the very lightning-strike story that Mark already knew and had described the night before. Had he not related the lightning tale, I might have surmised wind or ice injury, or even mechanical damage

from the actions of Mark's predecessors. Once again, I benefitted from local knowledge and explanation. Even with its lightning-scarred past, the oak has fared far better than its companion homestead. Other manmade structures nearby, some built after an early 19th Century squirrel misplaced an acorn in the duff, free to germinate, take purchase, and grow into the yard oak, have since decayed, weakened, and fallen into their own rubble. We saw a Paulownia sprouting three feet from the center of such a pile. Nature pays no mind to man's feeble assertions of land-capture and dominance. We are all little more than creatures from the dust, paying homage to ourselves and somehow assuming that our works are permanent and lasting. Nothing is physically durable. Even our grandest feats of engineering will fade. Nature reminds us that all that we do is dust in the wind.

Touring the Upland Forest

We tacked a looping course generally to the northeast, then southward, and returning to the northwest. Our path wandered to a cool, shaded spring, where the family has secured 65-degree water year-round for two centuries. Massive yellow poplar and beech stand above the spring, and likely witnessed the first Fly spring-dipping as saplings. A long-rusted and twisted sheet of corrugated metal suggests that at one point the family had built a spring house, now rotted and part of the thick mat of remnant human architecture marking time.

Walking on, we paused at a concave lower slope that faced east, protected from the blistering direct summer sunlight, and blessed by deep, moist, and fertile soil. Poplar, oak, hickory, beech, hackberry, and other species reached tall and mighty, likely standing their ground for longer than 150 years. Some reaching higher than 120 feet, they offered deep shade, keeping the understory nearly void of seedling, shrub, and herbaceous cover. Individual poplars exceeded four feet in diameter breast high. Mark indicated that the County NRCS representative

told him there is no grove county-wide as impressive. In nature, as in life and business, location is a powerful determinant of success. We moved a couple hundred yards further, rounding an upper convex slope facing south. The species mix shifted to more oak, hickory, and Eastern red cedar; average tree heights fell shy of 50 feet; and coarse bedrock reached the surface over 20 percent of the area. The forest is probably of similar age to the cathedral-like stand, yet the location is far inferior. Nature sets limits via her constraints.

Likewise, living, learning, serving, and leading operate within bounds imposed by forces and factors beyond our control. Unlike Lake Woebegone, all of our women cannot be strong, the men good looking, and the children above average. Nature reminds us that nearly every attribute and feature is normally distributed. In every endeavor, nature-inspired learning and leading instructs that we are better served by striving to rise to our capacity. Not every swimmer can win 26 medals over four Olympiads!

We returned, exiting the soil-poor, forested xeric site, and passing through a 50-plus year old abandoned pasture, dominated by scattered large cedars, aging and broken, several ice- and lightning-shattered, evidencing that these distributed senior-citizen-cedars invaded a still active, poor-site pasture many decades' past. Those remnant individuals grew isolated on the grazed hillside, separated by unimproved, still-active pasture for many years. The grazing ceased probably 4-5 decades ago, and the abandoned pasture began filling with the trees now fully occupying the hillside among the old cedar pioneers. One hundred years ago Mark's forbearers tended livestock on a breezy knoll, looking across many acres to the Duck River valley below. *To every thing there is a season.* The land lies silent beneath a vegetation cover that shifts wildly, yet predictably, over time. Nature moves inexorably forward, with or without the hand of man.

Back to the Homestead

We refreshed before leaving the farm once again, enjoying the warm breeze and watching the relentless passage of migrating yellow sulfur butterflies, making their way across the Jasper Fly Nature Preserve as they have for millennia. Some began their journey in Canada; most are headed for Central and South America. Their lineage has crossed over these hills since long before the Fly family left the Old Country. They will continue to do so perhaps beyond this new millennium we have so recently welcomed. Their season may extend far beyond our own human “dominance,” this era we are now so vainly terming the Anthropocene. Nature-inspired learning and leading cautions us that we are part of an intricate web, interconnected, and that we are fully dependent upon that rich web of life. We continue to effect deep change, blind to the consequences, at our peril. We must awaken to the possibility that some future yellow sulfur may migrate from Ontario to Colombia without seeing a single artifact of our prior human existence.

We headed back to town, grabbed lunch, and visited potential project partners at Columbia State Community College. Our project endeavors to establish a premier K12 school (The Hampshire Academy for Applied Science and Natural Resources) that can be a global exemplar. Hampshire Academy will apply proven effective elements of place-, project-, and nature-based learning from K through 12, and across the curriculum. The Academy will operate at the intersection of theory and practice, and will exemplify a spirit of education that is purpose-driven and passion-fueled. In part, an unwritten goal, implicit in all that motivates and propels Mark and me, is that yellow sulfurs will continue to traverse a landscape appreciated, understood, and nurtured by human citizens who make decisions informed by exposure to and

knowledge of nature, and an accepted obligation to leave the world a better place than they found it.

I close with yet another stark reminder of our human place in nature. I type these words Sunday, just three days after my Thursday return from The Jasper Fly Nature Preserve. I am distracted from my work by continuous itching from my waist band down to my ankles. I have obviously been too long since my days working and recreating in the southern summer woods. While on the Preserve I forgot about red bugs, AKA chiggers. These larval mites, nearly microscopic, cling to clothing, seek exposed skin, secure themselves with powerful jaws, inject flesh-mushing saliva, and feed for two to three days, all beneath our sensory radar until the itching begins. Mine did not begin until Friday afternoon. I am now at peak discomfort and irritation, humbled by my newly rediscovered place in the food chain, and piqued that I neglected to avoid exposure with just a few pre-walk, exterior sprays of insect repellent to waist, cuffs, and pants.

I neglected a lesson of southern summer woods-craft I learned long ago. George Santayana is often credited with observing, "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." I should have remembered; I am paying a price for failing to do so. I caution audiences frequently that we humans are not apart from nature; we are one with nature. Never have I been more intimately one with nature than at this moment. I am very uncomfortably hosting hundreds of tiny arachnid larva, a walking buffet, fighting the urge to scratch and feeling rather stupid.

Ignorance of our societal place in the world is not something we can afford. The consequences can be far worse for humanity than feeling stupid and uncomfortable. Nature-inspired learning and leading compels us not to lose our way in ignorance, blindness, and

arrogance. We get only this one chance to do it right. Pope Francis' 2015 Encyclical urges us to Care for Our Common Home. Nature based leadership, nature-inspired learning, and our vision of the Hampshire Academy share the goal of helping people, young and old, current and future citizens, practice informed Earth stewardship.

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