

Leaving the woods on a pretty day

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I was cutting firewood on a shirt-off-warm, sunny afternoon last week when a breeze came up, and the saw ran out of gas. I flipped up my hearing protectors and took off my helmet.

Suddenly, the quiet in the fall hardwoods took over. No heard voices. No teenage boys roaring from no place to no place in souped-up trucks. No dogs barking out of boredom.

And then the gently persistent wind severed the ash leaves -- just the ash leaves -- all at once. They drifted in a slow-motion shower of golden petals, pitter-pattering as they landed like a soft rain.

You had to be there right then, at that moment. A few minutes on either side, and it would have been done without witness.

It was the right time for me to quit making noise.

I also wondered about the fair market value of that moment, as well as what I had paid.

Some people don't like fall because they associate it with the pending "death" of their flowers and gardens.

Trees are not dying in the fall, and they don't expire in the winter. They go to sleep. One year is their rough equivalent to one of our days; their winter is our night.

Because trees grow and age so slowly, it's hard to imagine them 100 years ahead. Today's one-inch-wide sugar maple sapling should be about 25 times wider and 75+ feet tall in 2113. Multiply a variant of that growth rate by every surviving tree in the forest.

If I had stood on this ground 100 years ago, I could not have imagined the subsequent changes. Perhaps one third of the trees then were chestnut, some four-feet wide—all gone to blight in the 20s and 30s. The hemlock—about half of them killed by the woolly adelgid. Today—more roads; more raptors; more deer; more bears; fewer pit vipers; same number of rocks.

Who in 1913 could have predicted the wars, television, computers, vaccines, vehicles and changes in politics and attitudes that would ensue? Women would get the vote; segregation would be outlawed; ethnic jokes would learn to stay within ethnic groups. Who can predict what things will look like 100 years hence?

What a great-great grandchild will see then in these woods is not what I see now, but no one will notice the woods-change from year to year. This is a savings account that grows at about 0.25 percent annually over a century. Patience is rewarded by the power of a relentless creep.

I'm always tickled by conservation easements that try to freeze forever the woods an owner sees today. Woods are not static and can't be made so by a document in a courthouse. Trees reproduce, get bigger, die, lose branches and fall over. Think of a painting that is added to and subtracted from imperceptibly—a touch here an erasure there every year.

An “old-growth” hardwood forest of 100- to 200-year-old trees would have the same kind of geriatric issues that would be found in a group of 100-year-old humans. Both are susceptible to disease, illness and breakage. As the giants die, fall over and decay, sprouts, saplings and young trees mix in where space has opened.

I've hiked through a patch of 300-year-old hardwood forest. The size of the battered survivors inspires awe but not more than that inspired by the wreckage and upheaval on the ground.

Trees are designed to reproduce themselves. If a tree's seeds don't germinate, it leaves nothing of itself except nutritious rot.

Humans, however, can take an heirless tree -- even a dead one -- and fashion it into objects that can last for millennia. No other species has learned to perform this trick.

Like apes and elephants, humans have few offspring but spend much effort, often decades and even lifetimes nurturing them—or at least being in occasional email contact.

Humans leave behind offspring, more often than not.

And then we leave them our things—genes, ideas, music, art, objects, money, property, writings, photographs, financial records, books, debts, memories, mittens, mistakes and hard feelings, to name just a few.

Of these, we have no say over what will be valued, overvalued and undervalued; what will be pitched; what will be ignored; and what will be misinterpreted.

Just what is the value to a child of a described moment in the woods?

I have a couple of pots and a clay lamb that my mother sculpted in high school during The Depression. I also have two sweaters and a ring she made for me, and a pair of argyle socks she knitted for my father who I suspect was afraid both to wear them and not wear them.

I have a book that a great grandfather wrote in a language I can't read, speak or understand. My grandmother referred to him as "The Tyrant," so I'm not inclined to find out what he had to say.

Anyway, I think it's important to leave children something you made from scratch, apart from things you did. They prove that you once made something tangible from nothing. I'm not sure why this might matter, but I don't think it can hurt.

Trees, turned into paper, used to be the medium for passing down ideas whatever their merit. Now, increasingly, it's pixels, electrons and code.

It's not the same, not as good.

Computer programs can represent what ash leaves falling in an October woods look like and sound like. But we should resist having programs that make it feel the same.

A moment like this is worth passing along.