

David's Story: A Child's Lesson

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In 1984, we finally accumulated the financial resources to purchase a new home in a suburban neighborhood, just three miles from where I worked as a botanist at the Morton Arboretum, near Glen Ellyn, Illinois. We were thrilled. The home had a lawn, a street tree (Marshall's Seedless Green Ash), a couple of shrubs (Tall Juniper), and lay within safe walking distance from the grammar school. We had arrived! The American dream was ours! Our son, David, was 8 years old; daughter, Susanne, was 12 years old.

As time wore on, however, and I engaged in an attempt to understand the nature of our relationship with the land, I came to understand that each such home essentially was a mini-corporate campus, with each owner the "CEOlet," if you will. Each had its own drug-dependent rug that required 26 mowings per year, turf-builder with pesticides, and no other living thing. Our culture's infrastructural aesthetic demanded it and local ordinances essentially required it.

The lawn turned most of the rain that fell upon it into a toxic ooze that was designed by clever engineers to accumulate with waters from other such lawns and debauch as warm run-off to the nearest catchment. There, it flowed with other such waters into mighty torrents, held over briefly in a detention basin, then "released" at a clever rate into the Du Page River. The river, soon swollen with such waters, flowed headlong to the Des Plaines River, which was pregnant with even more volumes of the filthy fluid.

The Des Plaines, along with similarly afflicted sister streams, flowed to the overworked and beleaguered Illinois River. This once beautiful river not only received the suburban and urban waters, but was choked and befouled to an even greater proportion with agricultural sediments from industrial-scale row-crop agriculture—cascading off of soil now depleted of soil organic matter. The muddy slurry flows all but unnoticed into the might Mississippi River, already no stranger to such abused waters. The fetid fluids flow unceremoniously pass St. Louis, Memphis, Vicksburg, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and finally empty their choleric bowel movement into the Gulf of Mexico.

Such waters began as cool clean rain over the great interior of North America, which receives an average of about a million gallons of water per acre per year—about as much as returns to the air potentially as evapotranspiration. Since the arithmetic here is fairly balanced, and since much of what rains we transform into filth, and since evapotranspiration does not stop, we are forced to mine water from deep beneath the ground for all purposes—even to irrigate the drug dependent rugs and farmlands that treat the gift of rain so contemptuously.

I so desperately wish that this was the only revelation that crystallized in my mind; the solutions, while daunting, are relatively easily conceived, so long as we “get our minds right” and address the fundamental issues, which are largely technical, political, and economic. As I explored the issues of water, however, my son, David, was worrying with other things, but I had no idea what was going on in his young mind until he left home.

After having lived in this subdivision for 12 years, David decided to join the United States Marine Corps. His mother and I were concerned variously over this circumstance, but it was what he wanted to do, so we supported his decision. Early one morning in March of 1996, a Marine sergeant came to our door and politely but dutifully led David away to San Diego, California, where he was to endure boot camp. As it happens, eventually we came to see the Corps as having been a great asset to David. He was taught manners, self-respect, self-discipline, and justifiable self-confidence—but he was still David. Fortunately, he served between the two wars with Iraq.

On this crisp morning, however, we wanted only to stay with him for just a little while longer. So inclined, we ambled as if by instinct to his basement room, that we might contemplate the leavings of our beloved adolescent boy; nay, young man. One would have to have parented a teenager to understand the scene within which we found ourselves.

Where to begin? Being scientifically trained we engaged the process of an archaeological dig, initially a forensic assessment of his short time at the local community college. Actually, there was only trend evidence of his tenure there, but there was statistically significant evidence that he had attended the local high school. As we worked carefully through the strata, we unearthed numerous wadded-up homework assignments, many of them never having been submitted. There were notes from young girls, replete with circle-dotted i's and presented in the distinctive penmanship so characteristic of their gender. Their language and allusions, however, sometimes caused us to blush, being of a generation where even the word “pregnant” was represented as “p.g.”

One of the wadded-up papers, when unfolded, revealed itself as a homework assignment, evidently an essay from the eighth grade stratum. It was in the 5-paragraph style, supposedly with an introductory paragraph, three expository paragraphs, and a summary paragraph. David had, indeed, disposed his words into five suitably sized clusters.

As I read through it, my heart was at once lifted and at once dashed. My eyes were forced to focus through a veil of moisture. I read it again. Then, again. This essay essentially was a poignant complaint. In it, David noted that all the trees and shrubs in our neighborhood were “not really alive, just not exactly dead.” He wrote that they were more like prisoners of war or concentration camp victims, growing there until they died and the warden replaced them, but that there were no “children” plants.

The only “free” tree, as he put it, was an old cottonwood tree that once grew near the grammar school, and at the base of which he and his little buddies no doubt drew a kind of strength from sitting against it. There, they probably smoked and read the wrong magazines. I have hypothesized the magazines, because we found them in several of the more recent layers. I plan to discard these popular publications when I am through examining their heavy insights into our culture.

David noted that, regularly seedling cottonwoods would emerge but that the adults would “mow them down and kill them.” Then, one day, the adults, cut down the cottonwood tree, he wrote, “because maybe a limb would fall on somebody.” That was the “last of life in our neighborhood,” he concluded.

How long had these thoughts fermented in his mind? I had no idea. I only know that I was devastated to realize that I, a biologist, had not appreciated the nature of the environment within which we had raised our children. What I long had known as an abstraction came to me like a bolt, painfully real. I realized that the way the world has worked from time beyond mind is that each new seed is born with a combination of genes that the earth has never seen before, or will ever see again. It is born into a time that has never been before or will ever be again. If it falls into a habitat nearly identical to the one into which the parent was born, it bears within it the necessary anatomy, physiology, morphology, and a thousand thousand things that science neither can see nor measure that enables it to be well suited to its place. With others of its kind, the aggregate population can respond to the subtle vicissitudes of changing times at the rate at which mountains rise and fall, and the earth can make itself fresh and new with each passing year.

It occurred to me that the hope of the earth is born again with each new child, each with a combination of genes that the earth has never seen before or will ever see again; born into a time that has never been before or will ever be again. If the child is

nurtured and healthy and learns the wisdom of the ages from the elders, with others of their generation they can respond to the subtle vicissitudes of changing times and the culture can make itself new again.

It this capacity for renewal, at the scale of time by which life cycles respond to cycles of the earth that we have designed away from our landscapes. We have declared the free living species native to our place as unfit to live amongst us. We have disengaged ourselves from their care and nurture, and uphold the great apartheid that we have arranged between ourselves and what our language calls “nature.”

The ultimate Narcissists, with a hubris that even the Greeks scarcely could have imagined, we have forsaken tomorrow for the perceived but ephemeral pleasures of the moment. Concern for our own children is progressively diminished, much less a concern for the choices that might be available to children seven generations from now. We can only hope that our challenge to the gods will go unpunished and that posterity will have the forbearance to understand and forgive, even as it struggles to survive in a horrendously depleted world.

Stressing on the nomenclature of cultivars, definitions of “native plant,” or remoteness of seed source in the context or landscape plantings ignores the essential nature of a sustained relationship with all of the life of our earth. Rather than parse the various and sundry attributes of “prisoners of war,” perhaps we should be more focused on stewarding what little remains of the earth’s living systems. I see little problem with nurturing a few pets or domesticating a few plants, but when we default the entire landscape to industrial-scale row crop, pavement, roof tops, and lawns with “plantings,” I believe we are challenging merciless gods. Perhaps, with our attention on the preservation and stewardship of remnant landscapes, we can, by degrees, extend these neglected, living systems into and among the places we work and play, live and pray, and in so doing become more mature and loving toward what once was an ineffably beautiful world—one not made by us but given to us by the Creator, The Maker of All Things, to love and care for.

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