

The Forest:

I was sitting with the angels tonight. You may remember that I live with angels in the forest. We were having supper, sitting on the back porch, overlooking the woods. The subject came up about the places that people live. More to the point, how the places that people live help to define who they are. You can tell a lot about the residents of a place by the look and the style and the condition of the place. You may observe that it is messy or polluted or unkempt or chopped down. You might notice that it is ordered or clean or painted or pruned. You may see that the natural surroundings are in harmony with the human residents. Or it might be clear that the two forces are at odds with each other. Whatever it is that you see, it probably says a lot about the folks who inhabit it. If you see old refrigerators and rusting automobiles instead of dogwood and day lilies it tells you something about the life of the place.

When I look around at this place, I smile. It is a combination of orderly gardens and leaning birch, of unending ferns and yellow flag gone wild. It is a place where we have discovered hundreds of precious small trees and cut away endless buckthorn. In short, it is the forest of Houston County, Minnesota. It is replete with poison ivy and stinging nettle. It is abundant in Oak and Birch and Elder and Cherry. If you lived in space and looked down on this place it would appear to be the perfect oasis, a basin of freshly washed greens with winding waters running through it. You would want to settle.

This oasis is strong and self renewing. On a morning walk and looking from field to hilltop you can see the place breath. When left alone it is self sufficient. When coupled with its resident humans it can thrive as well. We are fortunate that our lovely land is so strong. We are lucky that it takes serious intent to hurt a place like this. You have to mess it up on purpose. It's important that we think twice about what we're doing when we want to remove a piece of it. And then, think again.

It is easy to see the forest as a source of revenue, valuable lumber. It is natural to see cleared land as more useful, home sites and all. The forest is generous and available for our material gain.

There is also the immutable, restorative beauty of the forest. What a battle. Both of these forces, the acquisitive and the aesthetic, are part of our wiring, essential and undeniable. Balance between the two is difficult but attainable.

In the forests of Houston County, MN you can stand in the same place ten days in a row and by simply turning around see something completely new every day. The variety is astounding. The canopy is ruled by overarching oaks and hickory and elms (what's left of them) and poplar and cottonwood. The under story is cedar and cherry and dogwood. The floor, my goodness, the floor is a riot of pinks and whites and ferns and berries and jacks in the pulpit. We stand in a wild, tall garden, cool and shady, yellow-green and dappled. It will be different in every changing light. You want to put your easy chair in the middle of it for breakfast, teatime and at dusk.

If you're lucky enough to have young children in your life make sure you take them into the forest with you. Watch their faces. Our grand daughter, who is six, goes in with me, and her expression of wonder is enough to make me sit right down and grin. She is headstrong and precocious and very much a handful. And, I tell you this; at ten paces into the forest she becomes reverent and awestruck. In those forest moments she is far away from Bratz and gossip and boredom. This is very good for her, very good for both of us. Children need story and magic and science and adventure. The tall, green forest gives these gifts without end.

A child standing in the woods is in a story of her own making. The set is there for her. The props and players are waiting. Be they giants or fairies the characters are in place. For a child it is no great leap to take on the forest magic, to go in, to leave time and details behind. Wide eyed and ready for anything they enter. They go in because they can see the things that most of us have put aside. They have not given up on stories and spirits. They enter the forest and the forest plays to them. We would be wise to follow.