Rediscovery

Barely ten paces into the woods the world changes. I follow the faintly worn path to where it pierces the underbrush. Crossing from bright daylight into the mottled shadows feels like passing through a gate. On the outside, walking is a chore and rarely more than a means of transportation. Walking to and from classes, I am acutely aware of the network of paths I walk on — how one leads to another and another and so on, stringing together all of the places that I visit on a daily basis. Underneath the canopy of branches and leaves, the path is much less important. The trees mask the distant noises of people and traffic and the world seems to shrink. Faraway sounds fade away, replaced by the trembling of leaves in the treetops, the twittering of birds in the branches, and the frenzied rustling of squirrels in the underbrush. Everything outside of my immediate perception disappears and I am alone in that tiny world. And because being alone sometimes is a blessing, I welcomed my assignment to visit and observe a place of my choosing over a period of six weeks.

At first, when I approach my spot, all I can hear is the sharp crunching of my own feet, thoughtlessly throwing several generations of dead leaves aside. I come over the crest of the hill like a tiny tempest, round the bend and stop where the stone wall intersects my path. Here, a flattened knee-high stone rests against the trunk of a young oak. In the absence of my footsteps, a thunderous silence booms through the trees. The busy squirrels have covered my rock with bits of acorn shells again and I brush them
away with my hand, gently, so I don’t invade the silence. I sit down on the cold stone and immediately feel a chill that works its way up my spine, making me shiver, briefly but violently. For a moment, the only sound I hear is my own breath whistling through my nose. The cool air is refreshing, but it numbs my sense of smell and I start to sniffle. Gradually, the sounds that froze with my intrusion begin to return.

It happens slowly, almost imperceptibly. The slightest breath of wind traces my cheek and the leaves overhead begin to quiver. They graze across one another making a sound that reminds me of gentle waves sighing onto the rocky coast of Maine at sunrise. An acorn falls into the brush — sharp staccato. A few leaves cast off their moorings, looping and twisting down before skidding to a stop among older ones. A bird timidly sings a pair of notes from somewhere overhead. Sensing no menace, he sings again, confidently this time. A squirrel, which must have been frozen behind me bursts into action. I hear his claws scratch the bark of the slender tree as he scampers to the top — as easily as I walk down a hallway — and chatters harshly, seemingly scolding me for frightening him. I spin around to find the source of a series of harsh rapping noises and see a woodpecker hopping up the side of a partly fallen birch, pecking the trunk a few times whenever he stops. Around me, life in the woods returns to normal, and I realize something that surprises me every time it happens. I am invisible.

As far as this place is concerned, I am of little consequence. My entire world is limited to that which fills the small sphere of sight and sound around me. In that space, I feel enormous, like it’s my own private planet that I reign over absolutely. The fact that my presence is so easily ignored reminds me that I am a trespasser. In a strange way, feeling so large and so small at the same time cheers me. For me, it’s the ultimate reality
check. Realizing how little influence I have over a half-acre of forest gives me perspective whenever I start to take myself a little too seriously.

The perennial glide from late summer to early winter is the most indecisive of the seasons. In mid-October, wearing shorts and waking up to find the world coated with frost seem equally likely. Nevertheless, when seen over time, the beginning and the ending of autumn are always the same and the trend is downward as days shorten and temperatures grow colder. But temperatures and daylight aren’t the only things that slowly diminish. This downward slope is accompanied by a change in focus — a seeming reduction in the interrelatedness of things.

When I first visited my place in the woods, life seemed to have an external focus. I tilted my head back and looked toward the sky through the screen of leaves above my head. Each one was the most vibrant shade of green, only visible in leaves that are soaking up sunlight and churning out sugar as fast as possible. Merely seeing that magnificent color makes the energy radiating from each tree almost palpable, and I imagined that if I looked closely enough I could see the tiny shoots extending at the tips of the branches. The squirrels were absorbed with each other. I could see a pair of them from where I sat. Haltingly, they scampered along the ground, the leaves crisp under their feet. Then, one jumped onto a tree trunk, turned around and froze. They stared at each other. Neither one moved for a few seconds until, furiously, both climbed the tree, jumped from branch to branch, and came down a different trunk, only to repeat the process all over again. At the same time, a bird chirped over my shoulder and received an answer from somewhere up and in front of me. Each of these relationships changed fundamentally as fall progressed.
Nights grow longer at a rapid pace in late September. Within a few weeks, night grew long enough to remind the trees to prepare for a winter of sleep, and their focus changed. Only a month after I first visited the woods, it was an entirely different world. Each tree had gathered its last bit of energy and then drawn inward, cutting the now expired leaves loose. In the gentle breeze, hundreds of them fell down around me like giant pale brown snowflakes, lending a depth to my space in the woods that I hadn’t previously noticed. There were no pairs of squirrels energetically chasing each other. The only one I saw sat on a branch above my head, with his body hunched close together. He ravenously chewed on an acorn and tiny bits of the shell fell on my head, entangling themselves in my hair. Even the song of the bird overhead changed from a playful, inquisitive tone to an almost mournful one that no longer summoned an answering call. All around me, the nearing winter caused every creature to turn towards itself.

For me, autumn is a natural time for introspection — a mustering of strength to endure an arduous season. As the world pauses to reflect, then heads toward dormancy, it subtly reminds me of my own mortality. Not every tree, squirrel or bird survives until spring, and there’s no guarantee that I will either. There’s no sense in second guessing fate, but all the same I examine my life to reaffirm my priorities and make sure that I am still steering the right course — a course that makes me happy.

The feeling I am left with, though, is that of comforting insignificance. Heisenberg’s Principle may be correct when applied in quantum theory, but neither my presence nor my watchful eye influenced the slow drawing inward of the woods around me as they prepared for winter. If I had stayed at my desk instead of venturing out, the process would have gone on without paying heed to me. I feel a certain safety in this
knowledge. It takes the pressure off my life because it makes me realize that all I am required to do is live it. Whatever I do with my own existence, life as a whole will go on largely unmoved. Though these thoughts give me great comfort, it would be dishonest of me to omit the admission that I am not a perfect follower of my own philosophy. On my way out of the woods, curiosity got the better of me. In some way, no matter how small, I wanted to leave a mark on the world around me. With determination, I grabbed at a large dead limb at the bottom of the nearest tree, tore it off and threw it to the ground. The following week when I returned, I couldn’t distinguish it from any of the other brittle branches that snapped like firecrackers under my feet.