

Landcestors

Scottish, Welsh, English, German, French, Dutch – McPherson, Montgomery, Baetz, Suydam, Dugdale, Holcombe, Michaux, and a blizzard of other names – that’s me. Basically, I’m a mutt. To be sure, such thorough blending in America isn’t unusual, but it can leave one feeling not without a country, but like someone without a culture. I’m continually envious of those who can trace their lineage back along a relatively clear path (though there’s always a rogue uncle or aunt who went “off course”). I’ve no clear ancestral celebrations or festivals that I can attend every year, no cultural songs to sing, dances to dance, art to make, architecture to visit, recipes to repeat. All in all, I have little to reconnect to and no real cultural values to embrace. Unless, of course, I wish to follow them all, in which case I would be a house-divided and not home much.

To add further sand to my cultural desert, I have no particularly strong religious lines – I’m not Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or even Christian – so I can’t honor Ramadan, have a bar mitzvah, revel in Buddha Day, or even truly appreciate Easter with a sense of “those are my people.” We went to four different churches when I was young, and by the time I left for college, we ended up in the fifth – agnostic. I now define myself as “spiritual,” which offers, like my ancestry, traditions galore, but no binding path.

I fell into the American melting pot, or at least all of my ancestors did. I’m diced into so many pieces that I’m like a conglomerate rock, a bunch of cultural debris loosely cemented together. The choice from there is whether I wish to continue to be randomly stuck together with other cultural bits in a disharmony, a jumble of fractured pieces, or if I want to find a way to become a fusion, an integration of those pieces.

For that integration to happen, however, we mutts need a touchstone, a way to connect to a personal lineage.

I think I’ve found a way. In a conversation, Tim Fox, an archaeological technician in the Oregon Cascades, called himself a “landescendant” of the area in which the Kalapuya Indians lived near his home in McKenzie Bridge, Oregon. I was struck powerfully by the term. Tim felt the way I

did as a European mutt – he described himself as a culturally lost soul. But he believed there was another way to be personally connected to the past which didn't require a bloodline linkage to the people who had lived there. His love of his home ground, his fascination with the historic use of the land, gave him what he called the sense of being a “land descendant.” He was linked to the past, and all the ancestral people who had lived there, via his reverence for the land itself. They all shared a common home.

Tim said this while we were standing at the junction of two creeks on an ancient campsite of the Kalapuya, a fact he discerned by the evidence on the ground – shards of jet black obsidian. The chips came from someone who had made tools from the obsidian, a volcanic glass that can be fractured into exceptionally sharp blades, a material so valued that the various tribes traded for it up and down the West Coast and even into the Midwest. Why the flakes were there and not somewhere else was historical speculation, but by reading topographical maps, Tim knew that an obsidian cliff-face was twenty miles away. The easiest way for the Indians to get there from their home in the Willamette Valley would have been to follow these creeks up to the ridgelines where the trees would be thinner and walking more effortless. He held the chips out to us and said, “Hold an artifact in your hand, you have a short story. Leave it on the ground, you have an epic novel – you have the interaction of people and place.”

He then went on to explain many of those interactions – what the Kalapuya ate, how they hunted, what they wore, how they collected plants.

We all want to be part of such an epic novel. We want connections to a line of people, as well as to the contours of land and water. As a mutt, my blended past may have its own epic qualities, but my story lacks a binding thread, an overall weave. Giving yourself to a place, marrying it, pledging your life to it, brings one into a long line of people who enacted their love for the same land. One joins a circling tradition of storytellers and explorers, seekers and seers, believers and doers.

Tim's work in the archaeology of the McKenzie River area places him in that circle, as I hope does my work as a naturalist in the Northwoods of Wisconsin. I try to live as closely as I can to

the traditions of knowing the plants and animals, their habits, life histories, interconnections, interdependencies, and future possibilities. While Tim and I don't directly depend on these species for sustaining our lives' physical needs as our landcestors did, we still feel a powerful connection to the land and a profound desire to be a part of the natural community of life.

I belong here, tied to Wisconsin's Northwoods, because of the relationships I have tried to create with the land and the water, the plants and the animals. Though an Ojibwe or Sioux may still have very mixed emotions about my European presence on what was their ancestral land and water, I hope they can see me instead as a "landscendant," by dint of my love for this place, too. I work every day to honor this place and all those who came before me on this land, a fact I don't think is lost on the ancestors of this site.

The Native tribes and I may not share a bloodline, but we share a landline, a riverline, a birdline, a treeline, a deerline.

I joyfully jump into this melting pot of landscendants, and bid all others who live in a place they love, too, to make their leap. To love a place deeply, peacefully, consciously, as intertwined and integrated as we can be whatever our genetics, can be a cultural tradition that we begin now and can carry on. While our bloodlines may appear to separate us, there are other lines by which we can live in unity, lines by which we can find common ground as humans tossed together in a time and place.

As a mutt, the landscendant line avails itself to me if I invest the time and love to earn it. Then, perhaps, I may be someone who becomes a worthy ancestor to generations of landscendants to come.

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