

decay

It has been a while since I've walked into a patch of forest that has been left to itself. We humans don't care to leave things be. I wonder here, as I look at girth and height, as I have elsewhere throughout the forest, how old, how long a life, how far back in time do these trees have their roots. As I walk, my neck aches from all this wondering, from all this looking up. I stop to sit. Though the moss covered logs invite my rest, this is not such an easy thing, this sitting on a log here in these woods. A climb, a boost, a leap up is required to sit down. These are, after all, big trees alive or dead. Down the long length of this perch, all around and below me stretches a carpet flecked with every nuance of green. Small growing things: peat moss, club moss, liverwort and those of the *true* moss family (not to be confused with those posers clans, peat and club) offsetting effusive clusters of wavy fern greens with occasional specks of ochre and rust, pale blue and dots of demur off-white. Then there are the lichen: the dust, the crust, the scale, the leaf, the club, the shrub and the hair lichen hanging out with their cohorts, the algae. These patches of lichen stand out of the greenness, a variety of dustier, muted colors splotching the landscape, attaching themselves to the earthier tones of branch and trunk and rock. Amid all this green, the deep rich cinnabar color of freshly rotting wood crumbling and spilling from logs and stumps and the blackness of the almost soil that lays nearby, dramatically commands the eye to investigate. Elsewhere in the world death and decay never look quite this beautiful.

And so there it is, it's hard to ignore, there is as much death and decay going on here as there is life and growth. This, of course, is true of the world at large but here, I confess, I don't feel the need to avert my eyes. I can feel from this log where I sit, this mammoth moss-covered log, that it will be a long time before it sags and crumbles and disintegrates back into the earth. But how long? I suddenly want to know. How many years of my life can I or someone else return here to this spot and crawl up on this log to sit. With these huge old trees, is their decay span as long as their life span? Is there a proportion, any mathematic equation to calculate growth in life versus decay in death? Can I ask the question and receive an answer, how many years dead? I would guess, though I don't really know because I never thought to ask, that for each tree the years of decay are as marked with stages along a timeline as its growth is marked in rings. One thing is certainly evident from where I sit on this sun-speckled log, the decay of these trees involves a vast community of other living things.

This process of decay I can see quite plainly for myself here in this spot. Elsewhere, this would not be so, elsewhere decay is often simply not allowed. Decay is messy after all. It is a process we humans have little tolerance for. Ah, nature, it certainly is beautiful but h-m-m, it could use a little tidying up. So rake, chainsaw, pruning-shears in hand we get to work, we love those growing things but compulsively sweep away all things newly dead. Or maybe, just maybe, we are so frightened by our own mortality that any reflection of this in the world around us we care not to examine too closely. Though, we think of ourselves as highly evolved creatures, this fear of death traps our vision in a small stretch of time, a span so short that we see it as linear. Our eyes avoid the sweep of the curve

ahead, the curve in the life cycle that brings us around to death and into decay. We learn in school at a fairly young age that rotting plant matter creates new soil, a new cycle of life but we still rake it up, scrape it away, bag it plastic and toss it on the landfill. And it would seem our aversion to this process of decomposition manifests in not only how we relate to the natural world, but in how we lead our own lives.

It is within my narrow human perspective that I have been sitting in these woods thinking in terms of the timelines of death and life. I realize this linear way of thought indicates that my own sense of self ends with my death. What does that mean? It means I have not fit myself into any cycle, I do not see my death or my decay having any impact in the future unlike what I see all around me, below me, on this forest floor. After death, these trees mark time far into the future, they hold a place, create a spot for a large community of life to grow. How is it I should recognize these giant trees' purpose after death and not my own? It is very easy to see in this shady soft place that death does not stop life, it redirects, re-circulates it somewhere else. So the question is, back home, will I remember this? Will I walk the streets of my remaining years looking ahead only to that moment the bus, the bug, the blockage takes me down or will I occasionally think about sitting here on this big, dead tree wondering what trace I might leave many years after my death, what act or idea might regenerate from the life I have led. Is there something I might do or say, some words I might write on which a community might thrive decades into my decay? Clearly, I have some work to do and life, well life, is capricious so perhaps I'd be wise to get busy right this moment— after, that is, I figure out how to get down off this log.

Jane Coffey
September 12, 2007