

Kathleen Caprario

In August, 2015, Kathleen Caprario spent ten days as an artist in residence at the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest. H.J. Andrews is a 16,000-acre ecological research site in Oregon's beautiful western Cascades Mountains. These notes were made during that time of reflection and research.

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Decomposition and renewal. That's what it's all about. What is considered waste and detritus is the foundation for succession, the new, the future. What is old, then dies and, in its demise, becomes repurposed, reborn and the basis for future generations of life and biological innovation. That's what I call "karma" in action. Transformation, metamorphosis, symbiosis, interdependence—they're all there and richly in play. But what if we don't understand or perceive that value? What if we can't see, can't hear or appreciate the benefit because of our limited set of experiences, interests and values?

Value is based in an understanding and recognized benefit that awards merit. The patterns and systems in nature that we understand are those that are generally found useful to humans and thus valued. Those patterns and systems that can be perceived in human terms, produce human benefit, create human profit and can be controlled by humans are most valued.

But, what if the greatest value to be had is beyond the scope of human understanding, a quick reward and the individual experience? What if the benefit is not always immediate and conspicuous but sustains humanity, just the same? We often do not recognize the systems and patterns of organization in nature; patterns that have a scope and duration that is outside of our generation's lifespan or cultural aesthetic. We may have the ability to look back far into the past but are limited in imagining the future. How has that lack of long-range vision influenced the criteria used to assign value? Who has traditionally and culturally made that determination? Is the matrix for assigning worth outdated, false or corrupt? Who do we value and does the system through which we evaluate and consider merit favor certain groups and points of view to the detriment and exclusion of others, including the environment?

Perhaps a entire new system for cataloging and assigning merit should be developed that reflects heretofore under represented groups and global concerns. We must question every assumption of merit and understand the groups and points of view that have traditionally benefitted from past systems, as well as our own assumption of and complicity in those systems' persistence.

How can we determine a new, more inclusive and true value system, a system that extends over generations and is inclusive? How do patterns—of human behavior and of the physical world—encode the systems of interdependence that social groups and their successful habitation of the environment, depend upon? Can we value beauty and curiosity as a useful and a critical part of being human?

Can we?