

July 2008

One steamy July afternoon about 12 years ago, I quietly stood aside from the cheerful, energetic sounds of camp-in-session and listened closely to the reedy, downward-spiraling, ethereal flute-like song of the Veery, a sound so present in the Ajawah atmosphere as to easily go unnoticed from its low, always concealed location. In still concentration, I peered into the shadowy margins of the forest hoping to glimpse this never-seen camper hopping on a log or foraging for insects under fallen leaves, when a fellow walked into Camp and introduced himself as an independent forestry specialist. He announced that he wanted to talk to someone about a problem he'd noticed with our trees. The Veery fell silent as I turned my attention to the visitor and listened to his pitch. He worked to educate me about the limitations our forest was suffering from decades of neglect and how he could help us realize our property's "potential" through selective logging. When I didn't show sufficient interest, he pushed harder against my ignorance with his professional recommendations and moral suasions. He scolded that we didn't understand modern forest-management theory; that we should clean out the dead-stands, snags, and fresh deadfall that were going to waste; and to maximize board foot ratios, we should thin the healthy, mature oaks and maples that had grown out-of-plumb. As his frustration flushed, it belied his professed motivation. He had said he was interested only in the wellbeing of our trees, but what he wanted for his concern was to take ownership of the wood.

The logger's capacity to see a tree as something other than a source of individual gain was disabled by personal greed and ill will. Unless these scales were to fall from his eyes, blindness will prevent him from seeing deeply into the forest—its quiet beauty, subtle processes, and immaterial worth.

Beyond the narrow range of his obstructed perception was an evolved, thriving ecosystem in harmony. Without the dead-stands and snags, silence would replace the Taiko drumming of the Pileated Woodpecker quarrying the resonant trunks; the Barred Owl, Eastern Screech Owl, and Wood Duck would no longer have a place to make their homes; and the Nuthatch would not have a source of beetle grubs for sustenance through the season. Without the deadfall, the soil would not be renourished, and the Trillium, Dutchman's Britches, and Fiddlehead fern would dwindle in the anemic, glacial sand plain; the Eastern Cottontail would not have adequate cover for its winter den; and the Foxfire fungus would no longer glow eerily at night. Without the tall canopies of the mature oaks and maples, the annual Broadwing Hawks would catch their voles and raise their young elsewhere; the disembodied song of the vireos and warblers—high and out of sight—would go mute; and the reaching limb's graceful, sweeping dance with the wind would cease.

No, there was no unrealized "potential" in our forest and the ignorance was not mine, but that was beyond the ken of the determined logger. As he turned and strode away shaking his head in disbelief, the distinctive sounds of an active, joyful camp returned to my ears, and I felt a sense of gratitude for the logger's visit, coarse arrogance and all. His presence had prompted an Ajawah moment to open, and my appreciation for the life indwelling to be renewed. To see but a tree is to see the forest; to see but a part is to see the whole. And, although it can't be known by sense of sight, to hear the song of the Veery is to trust in the truth of its presence.

– Dan Hess (at Ajawah from 1968-2001: camper, cub counselor, cub chief, swim instructor, beach director, trip leader, craft director, maintenance man, cook, off-season caretaker, board member)