DEEP THOUGHTS AND SHALLOW THINKING

Six Big Lessons for Small Minds

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL EDGE: VOL. IV

Carlton N. Owen
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Six Big Lessons for Small Minds

1. Think big.
2. Take time to appreciate the numenii and numenon of life.
3. Recharge your batteries.
4. Small things add up.
5. See through others.
6. Open your eyes.

I've always been awe struck by folks that can string words like pearls. It doesn't matter whether they are spoken or written. Words are powerful. They can have power for good or for evil. They can change people and our future.

I don't begin to put myself in the league of America's great conservation thinkers and writers. In fact, putting these words on paper has been one of the most difficult things I've ever done. Not that the writing was that difficult—-it was. It's more the thought of how shallow or how far short these thoughts fall from what I'd like to say. The lessons—or just thoughts—that I share here come close to my deeper, inner meanderings. They are neither perfect nor complete. But then, God isn’t finished with me yet.
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**The World’s Oldest Profession**

Before you get any ideas about not letting your children read this, let me explain… Foresters and wildlife biologists in the United States generally trace their roots to Gifford Pinchot, “the father of forestry in America” and Aldo Leopold, the “father of American wildlife management.”

Leopold was a forester as well with great understanding, concern, and uncanny insight into wildlife and wildlife habitat needs. If we go back even further we can trace those roots to German foresters who had responsibility for “managing” the deer and other game associated with their lands.

But, neither Pinchot, Leopold, nor our Western European ancestors tell the whole story about the beginnings of the natural resources profession. As Paul Harvey is fond of saying, “And now, the rest of the story…”

We are told in the first chapter of the Bible that shortly after God created the Heavens and Earth and all that was in them – not bad for a single week’s work – he assigned Adam a couple of tasks. Notice this wasn’t punishment (Genesis 2:15). Adam was given a job to help fulfill his life.

In Genesis 5:24, we see that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden with two key assignments in his job description. First, he was to tend the garden. If you are a student of the Bible, you’ll know that Eden was a forest not a vegetable garden – thus Adam’s first job was as a forester. Second, he was to name and care for the animals. Contrary to the old joke, forestry quickly branched into wildlife management yielding truly the world’s two oldest professions.

Thus, it is clear that Adam was the first professional forester and wildlife biologist – “certified” by God no less!

**Life Lesson:** Think big. Yet, remember we are natural resources managers, not “THE” Natural Resources Manager.

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.”
— Henry David Thoreau

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**The Numenii and Numenon of Life**

Leopold in his essay, “Chihuahua and Sonora,” from A Sand County Almanac made reference to the philosopher’s use of the term “numenon” -- the “imponderable essence of life.” I’ve read that story more than once and reflected on it not a few times. I find that Leopold was right as usual… as far as he went.

In my experience there are two types of numenon. There is “The” numenon of life who in my way of thinking could only be God -- God the Creator with what one songwriter has called a “wild imagination.” Look at the diversity of bird life, the colors of the rainbow, or smell the air after a rain. Each speaks of the power, majesty and creativity of “The” numenon. As I’ve studied, read and listened, I know more today than I have ever known about God. But, that which remains to be known is truly imponderable. He alone is the essence of life.

Some will think I’ve gone to meddling at this point. Why would you want to “bring God into it”? First, I don’t think we can “bring God into anything.” He was here before we got here. Whether or not you choose to believe in the same God that I do shouldn’t drive us apart. For whether or not you believe in God, we both are placed upon a very small planet that abounds with what I’ve come to call “numenii” -- more definable than “The” numenon. But, still the spice that gives life its very essence. It is these numenii that make life what it is.

Some see it in a sunset. I’ve seen it in small things like the barn swallows that for several years nested under our carport. Too, I’ve had the privilege of seeing it in the lives of some very special people.

One of those “numenii” was Margaret Dixon of Terry, Mississippi. Margaret, one of the first female insurance agency owners in the state, was from a long line of farmers and merchants in the rolling country just
Dr. Tom Lovejoy of the Smithsonian guided a group of Champion executives to a research enclave in the heart of the Brazilian rainforest. The site, chartered 20 years earlier, is the center of extensive biodiversity research.

Forty-one kilometers down a dirt road north of the jungle city of Manaus sits Camp 41 — thus the name. It is a semi-primitive shelter/work station for a steady stream of researchers. Each has added to Lovejoy’s original vision -- study of forest fragmentation and biological diversity.

My boss commented that I was inordinately quiet during the visit and night spent suspended in a hammock surrounded by sounds of howler monkeys and rainforest. All I could say is that the place overwhelmed me far beyond natural beauty would suggest. It radiated a “sense of place.”

That “sense” was replicated at an 80-acre farm in the “sand counties” of central Wisconsin. The site the weekend retreat and family experiment of the Leopold family. Aldo Leopold, the “father of American wildlife management,” and his wife raised five children in a one-room, weekend shack built from materials scavenged from the landscape.

While the surroundings and shack are not unique, there is a “sense of place.” This time it was made tangible through the readings of Nina Leopold Bradley, Aldo’s middle child, a now 80-year old conservationist in her own right. As Nina read her father’s essays, her eyes sparkled and her words enlivened in ways that could not have happened elsewhere.

Life Lesson: Everyone needs a spot that provides a “sense of place” to recharge his or her battery.

“Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory.”
— Albert Schweitzer

“Life Lesson: Take time to appreciate the numenii and THE numenon of life.”

Margaret all in all was a totally common person. Hard working. Committed. Normal. But at the same time she was indefinable and beyond categorization. She was one of the special numenii I’ve been blessed to know.

Less than a week before a second battle with cancer took her life, I lay across the foot of Margaret’s bed talking with her about life -- big things and small. As the pain and medication caused her to fade in and out, she made sure that she used her last time with me to remind me that I had been exceptionally blessed with a loving family and friends. Margaret was right once again and I’m very thankful to “The numenon” for letting me share time with a special numenii -- Margaret Dixon.

Life Lesson: Take time to appreciate the numenii and THE numenon of life.

“At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.”
— Jean Houston
**Just Two Old Apple Trees**

Once when on a visit to Champion International’s forest operations in Maine, I came across an odd sight. A crew preparing to aerially spray herbicide on a natural forest regeneration site had used large blue tarps to cover two trees in the middle of the area targeted for spray. In checking with George Motta, the operations forester, I learned that the tarps covered two old apple trees.

George and his crew had used a break in the action to cover the trees so they would survive the herbicide. Their goal, to leave the trees to provide fall and winter food to deer, grouse, and innumerable other wild residents of the area. Environmental activists might find this odd, but those two old apple trees became a symbol to me of what caring forest managers do everyday.

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Little actions when multiplied over decades and tens-of-thousands of acres all come together to make managed forests more than just fiber farms.

**Life Lesson:** Small things add up. If we only look for the “big hit,” we may miss the chance to have an impact.

“Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

— John Lennon

**A Pigment of My Imagination**

A few years back my adopted state of South Carolina was nearly torn apart by the Confederate flag which flew not only over the State Capitol dome, but also hung in the legislative chambers. After a couple of bitter legislative sessions, the flag was finally moved to a monument on the Capitol grounds – a compromise that was acceptable to most moderate South Carolinians (me among them), but is still the subject of debate and boycott by those claiming “Southern Heritage” on one side and by the NAACP on the other.

It was at the height of this debate that God spoke to me. No, I’m not talking Moses and the burning bush. Rather, I had a growing and overwhelming sense that I should somehow get involved in the debate. After some weeks of thought, I envisioned my church – a 100-year old Southern Baptist congregation that is as “white as the driven snow” – building a relationship with another church about two miles down the road that was as black as we were white. The goal being to “build racial bridges.” After discussing the matter with my pastor and receiving his support, I took the issue to our Deacon body. As Chairman at the time, getting the floor for the idea was easy; explaining it and selling it were another matter.

Yet, we did get going under the rubric “Deacons United for Christ and Community.” Several joint services and other activities and a few years later, the relationship is still a struggle on the part of both churches. Not so much because of racial or cultural differences – and there are many; rather, just because everyone is so busy. Yet, several deep friendships have emerged. Perhaps just as important, when faced with a debate I’m much more prone to think about another’s view on issues than ever before.

Taking the issue from generic to a professional scale, I had the privilege of meeting Harvey Gant, the first African-American mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, and a former candidate for U.S. Senate. I asked him why it was so difficult to attract African-Americans into forestry and wildlife. Without a moment’s hesitation
Faith in God is an important part of who I am not only as a person but also as a natural resources professional. I’ve read the Bible not just once, but many times over the years. Each time I read it, something new jumps out and my limited understanding of God grows just a bit.

The other day was a prime example. While doing my daily Bible reading, I came across Ecclesiastes 7:12 as if for the first time. In a single verse it perhaps summarizes my whole philosophy on resource conservation. “Notice the way God does things; then fall into line. Don’t fight the ways of God, for who can straighten out what he has made crooked?”

What if we were to truly “notice how God does things.”? Would we build in flood plains? Would we try to mass-produce everything? If we were to “fall into line” or to say it another way, “to work with nature instead of against it,” what would be the results?

Not only have Bible readings given me insight into God, but so too have my interactions with nature. I doubt that I am the only person who has struggled with understanding the concept of a “three-in-one” or Triune God. It was on one of my daily walks that God drew me a picture. He knew that it would have to be simple to get through to me.

It was one of those crisp fall mornings where you can readily see your breath. There had been a heavy frost the night before and now the sun was just peaking over the tallest trees. As I rounded the bend to take a footbridge across Gilder Creek, there was the answer to how God could be “One God in Three Persons.” As the sun hit the footbridge, the glistening frost mysteriously changed. Some of it melted and dripped into the creek below while still another portion turned immediately into vapor and wisped skyward. There it was, the perfect symbol of God:

- God the Father, the complex, solid, gleaming beauty depicted in the frost,
- There too was Jesus in “the living water,” and
- Yes, in the mist was the Holy Spirit, the “God in us.”

Life Lesson: To not believe in God I would have to close my eyes to all of nature.
Carlton N. Owen founded *The Environmental Edge, LLC* as a consultancy designed to “bring business and the environment together.” He has spent more than 30 years as a professional conservationist working both for industry and the environmental movement. He spent 11 years with Champion International Corporation where he rose to the position of Vice President-Forest Policy for the company’s 5+ million acres of U.S. forests. He has run two not-for-profit organizations — the American Forest Foundation and the Mississippi Wildlife Federation — in addition to spending 7 years with Potlatch Corporation. Owen holds a M.S. degree in wildlife ecology and a B.S. in forestry, both from Mississippi State University.

Owen has written dozens of professional papers and given literally hundreds of formal presentations on integrating conservation into economically viable businesses. He brings an effective writing style and a keen sense of humor honed over a quarter-century of life experiences to this latest challenge — a series of “life lessons” to help others in the conservation and business communities.

“God speaks mostly through routine things and in a still small voice.
But, He still speaks.”

— Carlton N. Owen