

Cedar Hill

On stories, history, and walking the south trail around Cedar Hill golf course in Victoria, B.C.

Ghosts, and the stories they bring, are easy enough to find, if you allow yourself to listen for them. *Hearing* their stories, though, is somewhat harder. They whisper in the branches of trees, they slip past you on the breath of a breeze, palpable, yet somehow as elusive as a wisp of smoke.

The tangle of briars, bushes and blackberry vines that line the cedar-strewn path around the south side of Cedar Hill golf course feels different now than it did in the summer – the sweet exuberant fragrance of berries and warmth has given way to a more melancholy scent, somehow nostalgic, of lives melting back into the coziness of Earth. There is a sense of the plants folding in on themselves, getting ready for longer nights and frostier mornings. Stories change as much with the seasons as with the years.

I stop by a tall, wide, old fir tree, placing my hands on ancient rough bark. I can feel its calm, renewing energy soothing me, and I wonder again at the patience of trees. If the tree and I could speak the same language, what stories would this tree tell of the place it calls home?

Perhaps it would tell me a story of a few hundred years ago, before a path was cleared around and beneath it, when there were more treetops than rooftops, more carnivores than cars, more silence than city noise. The ghosts in the branches would nod in agreement and take me back to their reference points, before the golf course was carved into the meadows, a time when living things of all descriptions were welcomed on the slopes of their hill. What, I wonder, is the history of this place? What is its ecological and its cultural significance? Did First Nations people once hunt here? Did they gather food or medicine from the plants? Have people lived here in ways that were respectful of this place? Once it must have been wild. I long to know the stories that lie buried in the memory of the soil, that wait, folded into the trees and briars, for us to rediscover. Perhaps, one day, we will realise that life matters more than golf and bring the continuity of narratives back to life in this quieting place.

FINDING BALANCE

The trail is much quieter today – the songs and rustlings of the birds are muted by rain, and fewer people come by as I unhurriedly walk along the damp, dark red path. As always when I come through here, I find that after a few minutes my mind becomes calmer, my breathing deeper, and I am more attentive to the energies that surround me. Balance can exist, and be upset, as much in a person as in a place.

There may have been a time when at least some human inhabitants of this place thought that the balance found in nature was proof of the existence of a benevolent,

creative deity. For myself, I find this easy to believe when surrounded by the quiet energies of this place. I am drawn again to the old fir, patched with moss, deep seams stitched in its bark. I cannot believe that such beauty and strength came about only accidentally, or through brutal competition. It strikes me that as urbanization increased, belief in a divinely created and held balance of nature decreased. Creation and evolution may be the same thing under different names; in my heart, I feel a connection.

It seems that we only seek to preserve places in a natural state when we can accord them some degree of spirituality, or spiritual worth. But that worth has to belong to the *place*, or the things in the place, not to us. In other words, the value has to be intrinsic, not instrumental. Are we capable of placing intrinsic, environmental value above instrumental, anthropologic value? On a small scale, perhaps, although small scale isn't always enough to ensure ecological integrity, or spiritual value for that matter. If I thought that this tree would be happier if I went away, I would go. But what if *all* trees preferred solitude? At what point do human needs for built places supercede the rights of ecosystems with all of their floral and faunal inhabitants? How do we determine that balance?

In our scientific age, the prevalent mindset is more comfortable with ecological concepts that are more precise (and compartmentalized) than the "balance of nature." That phrase, they say, is for the poets. Yet the concept of balance in nature, and in all life, is essential and compelling.

As humans, we are not essentially any different from other creatures. We are all made of the same elements. Our place, then, ought to be as part of nature – not apart from it, nor above it as stewards or caretakers, but living in and with the natural, non-human, world. Yet we have so little regard for other (similar) lives that we think nothing of tearing them down to suit our needs (and greeds). As I walk along the Cedar Hill path, I muse again about the history of this place – about the long history of human encroachment, and whether humans ever managed to live peaceably within this beautiful environment. If there was such a time, it was long ago. We congratulate ourselves now, because we think that we have respected nature by leaving this little path, this narrow strip of "nature" around the edge of the manicured grass where some apparently find great pleasure in hitting a small ball a long distance.

In some ways, this place is sorrowful: it is only a remnant of what it once must have been. Yet, it is also hopeful: at *least* there is a remnant of what once must have been. I stop once more beside the old fir. This morning, there is a thin trickle of sap, as clear as the air, as poignant as a tear, luminous in the sun on the side of the tree.