In the Shadow of the Cedars: the Spiritual Values of Old-Growth Forests

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Ways to Value a Forest

Last on everyone’s list of the values of old-growth forests—after goods, services, information, and cultural, recreational, and scenic values—is the sometimes vexing and usually undefined category of spiritual values. Yet old-growth forests hold particular value for the human spirit, the imagining and feeling part of the human mind. The challenge is to articulate, in secular terms, the sources of an ancient forest's spiritual values and their importance to human thriving. When the presence of spiritual values may be the best reason to conserve a forest, it will not do to be silent or confused about what those values are.

For well over 200 years, Americans have valued forests as a means to the accumulation of personal or corporate wealth and the satisfaction of human material needs. A sign nailed to a sturdy Douglas-fir on an interpretive trail near my town identifies those values exactly:

- Birth date: 1942
- Diameter at breast height: 36"
- Height: 124'
- Board foot volume: 1060 bf
- Number of 8'2" × 4's: 208
- Rolls of toilet paper: 6890

As children file by on their field trips, they learn to equate the value of a forest with the sale price of the material goods that can be extracted from the felled trees.

More recently, attention has been directed to another set of values, the ecological utility of the living forests—to shade streams, provide habitat, filter water, store carbon, modulate temperature variations and climate change, and so on in a long and life-sustaining list of ecosystem services.

Then there are the cultural values that assess the usefulness of forests to varieties of human well-being, beyond the accumulation of wealth. Recreational and scenic values fall in this category—means to the ends of human health and happiness. Here also are the spiritual values of forests, their power to lift and enliven the human spirit.

In the temperate rain forests of America’s Pacific Northwest, near my home, the old-growth groves speak with uncommon power to the imagining and feeling part of the human mind. They have the power to make a person fall silent with wonder and gratitude, to deepen a person’s connections to the wellsprings of life and death and mystery. All these qualities strengthen the spiritual well-being of the person who walks in the shadow of ancient cedars.

Like its material and cultural values, the ancient forest’s spiritual values can be understood as instrumental values. Instrumental value is the usefulness of the forest as a means to a further end—in this case, to the sense of spiritual well-being that humans seek. Philosophers point out that forests may also have intrinsic value. Intrinsic value is the worth of the forest as an end in itself.

But the presence of intrinsic value in the ancient forest is controversial. So, I begin with a focus on instrumental value. What are the qualities of old-growth forests that most powerfully lift the human spirit? Or, put baldly, what explains the utility of old-growth forests for human spiritual thriving?

Spiritual Values of Old-Growth Forests in the Pacific Northwest

Old-growth forests are old, and, at least in the Pacific Northwest, they are tall, complex, unspoiled, quiet, beautiful—and all of these at once. These are their sources of spiritual value.
Continuity of Ages

In the old-growth forests of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in the Oregon Cascades, hemlock saplings grow toward light shafting through cedars that have grown in this place for 500 years. The great age of the trees is impressive, but so is the vigor of the saplings, and what most impresses me is the gathering of generations, the unbroken span of ages throughout the forest. In contrast to the history-denying tree plantations of uniform age and simultaneous death, the ancient forest speaks of continuity, of the past that nourishes the present and of the future that will grow from this ground in good time. Hundreds of years of history are written in tree rings, shelf fungi, broken limbs, crumbling soil, and sword ferns shading the places where death and life cannot be distinguished.

Here is where one can feel the deep history of the forest and the continuity of new life. There is comfort in this, to feel oneself, like the ancient trees, linked to past and future, part of the stream of living things in which nothing vanishes, but grows from death into life again. In an old-growth forest, people can find comfort in the immortality of substance and the constancy of change, can sink roots into the assurance that they came from the Earth and will be folded back into it. There is value in the awareness of the continuity of life. And there is a cautionary wisdom: because the present creates what is to come, careless decisions now will shape a precarious future.

Great Height

On a rainy day along Lookout Creek in the Andrews Forest, the ancient cedars reach into low clouds. Their mass looms solid and black. How trees can grow this big is beyond me. In fact the whole forest is beyond me, and surely that is part of its spiritual value. “Man” is not the measure of these trees—we humans, our bodies scarcely taller than the ferns that hide their boles, our arms too short to even approximate their girth. And how can we claim to understand this extravagant growth, when each new scientific discovery lengthens the ridgeline where science and mystery meet?

In a forest that has grown to this grandeur, one comes into intimate contact with what is much more than human. The old-growth forest is graced by beauty we did not create, grown to heights we can scarcely fathom, and shaped by forces we cannot control, moving light and moisture and air on a scale we can barely measure. A forest of this height invites, maybe demands, humility.

It invites as well a sense of wonder—radical amazement at life on this majestic scale and in this microscopic exactitude. This often occasions an experience of the sublime, a mixture of fear and awe, to be in the presence of something that is both powerful and wonderful. In a secular world, stripped of all but material meaning, weary with worry, this encounter with the marvelous has great value.

I am not necessarily talking about God. Many people feel closer to their gods in an old-growth forest. John Muir wrote, “The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted.” But spiritual values should not be confused with religious; not all spiritual people are religious, and not all religious people believe in God. Outside of the context of religious practice or belief, people respond spiritually when they yearn for intimacy with what is so wonderful in the secular world that it lifts their hearts. Given this, wandering quietly through an old-growth forest provides what many seek: a secular spiritual practice.

Complexity

No bulldozed, laser-leveled, monocultured, Round-Upped plots of genetically identical, age-identical trees arranged in rows—an old-growth forest is complex, complete, and intricately interdependent. Ecologists speak of the structural diversity of the old-growth forest, its multilayered canopy, the shifting mosaic of windthrow and regrowth. They point to a diversity of species, life histories, populations, genetic information—from flying squirrels in their shredded-cedar dreys to mycorrhizal fungus among the roots.

An oversimplified forest plantation might allow one to think that humans are managers apart from and in control of nature, able to create isolated and efficient systems. But an old-growth forest, with all its parts in place and all its systems engaged, demonstrates the fecund interconnectedness of soil, climate, water, life histories, populations of plants and animals. The complexity of an old-growth forest invites us to ask how we fit into the Earth’s vast and complex cycles—not as managers, but as, in Aldo Leopold’s words, “plain citizens.” Huckleberries or humans, our destinies tangle with the hunger of squirrels and the thirst of great cedars—interdependencies that are complex indeed, and only barely understood.

This interconnection is important. In the intricate, life-giving relationships that link the destinies of people and places, we may find a stronger practical imperative to care for the systems that sustain us. In the complex relationships that fully create a forest, we may find a deeper and more complex vision of what it means to be fully human.

Tranquility

The old-growth forest trail in the Andrews Forest is the quietest place I have ever entered. When I sit on a fallen log to silence the noises my movements make, I can hear the flick of the stream across broken stone. Now and then, a vine maple leaf ticks against another, falling. But the forest hushes all the voices of the mundane world. Silence collects in the deep-moss banks. From soaring arches, light pours down as if from leaded windows, casting an amber glow on the trunks of ancient trees and the
buttressed stone. I hear a Spotted Owl hoot from far off, although I cannot be certain, in this research forest, if it is the owl itself or a biologist calling it in.

People call places like this “cathedral forests” for good reason—the soaring architecture of draped stone and silence, the felt presence of something beyond human knowing, the sense of belonging to a community of celebration. But I believe there is an even more important meaning to the metaphor. In medieval England when death was the penalty prescribed for every felony, felons could save themselves by many forms of pardon, notably by taking sanctuary in one of the great cathedrals. No pursuer, no king’s man, could harm a person there. Cathedrals were profoundly powerful places of safety and transformation. When they are protected, old-growth forests are our sanctuaries too. We come to the forest not as criminals, but as fugitives nonetheless, fleeing the relentless pursuit of the phone, the drone of traffic and computers, the artificial light, the pace of personal ambition. In the ancient forest we find peace and the chance to see the world anew. The transforming power of sanctuary is the peace in a place that is protected from plunder.

Natural Condition

An old-growth forest is the outcome of natural succession, not the product of human artifice or the aftermath of anthropogenic destruction. It is, in that sense, natural, original, wild, and self-determined. Many define an ancient forest in negative terms: It is a place that has grown to a great ripeness because it has not been cut down or burned up or trampled or harvested.

On the trail that drops to the creek in the Andrews Forest, I can imagine myself following paths worn by the footfalls of people who have walked past these rough-barked trees for 500 years and have chosen not to destroy them. There are places in the world that no one has wrecked. An old-growth forest is living proof of the possibility of human restraint.

This is not a small thing. The presence of ancient, uncut forests provides a vision of what a forest can be if left to grow to its full beauty and ecological richness. Many people have never seen such a forest, mistaking tree plantations or third- or fourth-growth Douglas-fir stands for the real thing. Gradually, as the forests around us were stripped down and sold off, we accepted the degraded as the norm. Ecologists call this the sliding ecological baseline.

We acquiesce to a sliding moral baseline as well, asking less of ourselves as stewards of the land, expecting less of our leaders, excusing ourselves for the damage we do to the forests. So we find ourselves faced with a sliding baseline of hope, when all we can hope for is a compromise, a mitigation package, a delay in the destruction.

The existence of the old-growth forest arrests the sliding baselines—ecological, moral, and spiritual. It bears witness. Here is what a forest biome can be. Here is a measure of what can be lost when a forest is destroyed. Here is a measure of the enormity of the damage done in other places. At the same time, here is a testament to human restraint, in this place at least. And so finally, here is an example of what we might hope for: that we can save a place on Earth and in our lives for unspoiled beauty. Part of the great human project of learning to live on the land without wrecking it is protecting some places that are original and wild.

Beauty

There is a line drawn on the land at the edge of the Andrews Forest. On one side lies a steep hillside of stumps, dirt bulldozed into heaps and ditches, and beside the road the backseat of a car, riddled with bullet holes. On the other side, the uncut forest, filled with darkness at dusk, and the smell of warm firs. My friends and I sat on a stump big enough for all of us and wondered about beauty, another source of spiritual value in the ancient forest.

Beauty is a kind of wholeness, I believe, organic wholeness, as opposed to what is severed and ugly. The beauty of an ancient forest begins with wholeness of sound (the humming creek, the harmonic whistle of the Hermit Thrush), of smell (that dark and dusky humus, chanterelles under cedar boughs), and of sight (green sorrel leaves spread to the sky). Its wholeness, what Leopold called integrity, is systematic, a myriad of functions growing into and from a myriad of forms. The astonishing whole calls for celebration, the way music calls to us—beyond thought, a direct awareness of worth, an unmediated gladness.

The forest’s wholeness calls us to find within ourselves a wholeness of our own, a consistency of belief and action that we call integrity when we see it in a human being. If this is the way the world is, so astonishing and beautiful, then this is how I ought to act in the world—with gladness and celebration, with respect, with gratitude, with caring, that it might thrive. In this way the beauty of the old-growth forest can call forth what is beautiful in us.

The Intrinsic Value of Old-Growth Forests

This list of values takes us full circle, back to the initial distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value. The old-growth forest has instrumental values that fall in the category of spiritual values. I have explained six of them, six ways in which an old-growth forest does good things for the human spirit, that imagining and feeling part of the human mind.

But the forest has these instrumental values only because we believe it also has intrinsic value. Walking in an old-growth forest affects the human spirit in ways we judge useful, just because the forest is good beyond human hopes and larger than human aspirations. If the
forest were only a commodity, if it had no meaning beyond its usefulness to human ends, would its descending light and sweet dampness set us back on our heels? Would we feel the presence of something beyond human perception? Would we find peace there, in the shadows and birdsong?

I submit that an old-growth forest has worth in itself, worth beyond human uses. It is a manifestation of the “fierce, green fire” of life growing across the face of the Earth. Saving old-growth forests for their own sakes, for their intrinsic value as ancient communities of life, represents a novel moral achievement that goes beyond even the most sophisticated human self-interest.

When humans no longer inhabit the Earth or celebrate its beauty, light will still spike through ancient forests and moss will blanket hemlock roots. At each dawn the ancient forests will fill with what Robinson Jeffers called “the heart-breaking beauty that will remain when there is no heart to break for it.” Even in the absence of humans, that will be a worthy thing. It is good for us to know that.