

DESIGNING NATURE: A MEMOIR

by

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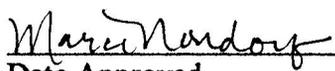
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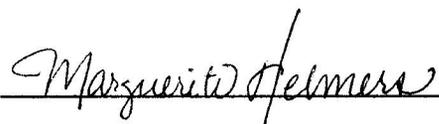
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
THE NATURE WRITING DILEMMA:
VIEWING NATURE THROUGH A CLOUDED SUBJECTIVE LENS

When I look for a modern prototype of nature writing, I look toward Edward Abbey's (1927-1989), *Desert Solitaire* (1968). In its introduction, he promises, rather grandly, "This is not primarily a book about the desert. In recording my impression of the natural scene, I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact" (xii). One might italicize the adverbs "not primarily" from that quote to underscore the many levels from which Abbey works in his nature-writing classic.

First of all, Abbey strives for the objective, unadorned detail of nature as he is able to see it, comprehend it, and then poetically describe it in minimalist prose. Second, he colors the Arches National Monument with an environmentalist's point of view, wondering how we can preserve such a majestic place for future generations. And third, he contrasts the short park season and humanity's limited lifespan to the seemingly eternal scale of geologic time. So rather than write a simple chronicle about a tourist season at a national monument, Abbey achieves something much grander using the simple tools available to any writer.

This is nature writing at its best.

I don't pretend to be at the same level as Abbey as I present my creative thesis for committee consideration. But like Abbey, I begin by saying this is not primarily a story about landscape design. I hope to describe the natural world with interesting facts and

stories, to consider my own professional responsibility designing and maintaining natural resources, and to wonder what deeper secrets nature keeps to herself.

Abbey's work, indeed the pages of the best examples of nature writing, lays bare the mysteries of nature, but, more importantly, also unveils truths about the writer and about society around him or her. Some think that Anglo-American nature writing began in 1854 with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, but the genre has a much longer lineage: county curates in England writing about the land such as Gilbert White (1720-1793); settlers and farmers in the New World such as Hector St. John De Crevecoeur (1735-1813) and John Leonard Knapp (1767-1845); explorers such as Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809); and naturalists such as John James Audubon (1785-1851) and Charles Darwin (1809-1882). Nature has been observed and reflected upon, and our proper place in it has been debated for hundreds of years in literature before Thoreau.

One of the earliest examples of nature writing that approaches profundity is found in a simple letter from country curate Gilbert White (1720-1793), who describes a magnificent oak that served as the home for a brood of ravens until it was cut down. He describes the tragic scene in reportorial simplicity:

“The saw was applied to the butt, the wedges were inserted into the opening, the woods echoed to the heavy blows of the beetle or mallet, the tree nodded its fall; but still the dam [the raven] sat on [the nest]. At last, when it gave way, the bird was flung from her nest; and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground” (34).

This White excerpt is, one would assume, an accurate eyewitness report probably penned the night after the incident. The straightforward narrative holds the interest of a reader from the beginning and ends with an anthropomorphic twist that gives the story maternal pathos. Literally, this is a story of a tree that was sawed down and that caused the death of a bird. After a more thoughtful reading, one might describe White's story as an archetypal tale of humanity's destruction of nature and of innocence. Nature writing reported honestly and clearly can evoke a significance that soars above simple facts and creates a personal revelation for the writer and the reader. That is always the test of great art. The challenge for a writer in this genre then is not only to write an interesting story but also to suggest themes that might underlay the structure of the story and connect it to the reader's life.

As I wrote the story, *Designing Nature*, I assumed my readers would not be landscape designers, but I did assume they had limited knowledge of home gardening and had some interest in what it might be like to work in the profession. Though my own point of view unavoidably colors the story, the foundations of the narrative are true and accurate observations. Any good story starts with the details.

The Rich, Complex Texture of Nature

Lawrence Buell, author of *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), quotes nature writer Barry Lopez, celebrated for his epic book, *Arctic Dreams*, who said nonfiction's credibility rests on the accurate reporting of the facts: "'Without direct evidence,' Lopez said, 'without setting up an experiment, one can only speculate.'" But even when that is done,

‘nothing -- no laboratory result or field-camp speculation -- can replace the rich, complex texture, the credibility, of something that takes place “out there”’ (93).

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), writing in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), advises the nature writer to first live in nature, to be immersed in its cycles and rhythms: “Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others... are often in a more favorable mood for observing her [nature]... than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectations. She is not afraid to exhibit herself to them” (136). Landscape designers, I think, might also be included on Thoreau’s list of those who “are in a more favorable mood for observing nature.” This profession, created in the 20th century by a middle class demand for residential gardens, combines horticulture, design, engineering, and soil sciences.

Aldo Leopold (1888-1948), woodsman, farmer, writer, and UW Madison lecturer, immersed himself in nature true to Thoreau’s advice. The first part of Leopold’s classic book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), begins with a January thaw: “Each year, after the midwinter blizzards, there comes a night of thaw when the tinkle of dripping water is heard in the land. It brings strange stirrings, not only to creatures abed for the night, but to some who have been asleep for the winter” (3). These are poetically written insights that set the context for his subsequent observations.

Leopold finds the tracks of a previously-hibernating skunk who was uncharacteristically roaming during this time of the year when he should have been sleeping: “His track [the skunk’s] marks one of the earliest datable events in that cycle of beginnings and ceasings which we call a year” (3). Leopold draws on his woodsman’s experience

and observation to not only recognize the tracks of the skunk, but also to recognize that this is an unusual event in January. He then uses his writer's sensibilities to wonder where the skunk is going and why.

Gifted nature writers, like Leopold, hone observational skills through scholarship and many hours "out there" in nature to train them to recognize telling details. The un-schooled would overlook the skunk tracks and in the hands of a less talented writer, the scene could become hopelessly sentimental. Naive observation is not enough to stand as an effective witness to the complex texture of nature.

Nature writers need talent and experience to resize the micro and macro realms of nature to human scale and comprehension. Without that resizing of reality, modern humanity, Thoreau said, becomes rather bewildered when cast out into nature: "If we go beyond our usual course [into unknown pathways]... we are completely lost, or turned around -- for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in the world to be lost... [such is] the vastness and strangeness of Nature"(111).

This bewilderment does not happen only along forested pathways. As a landscape designer, I have talked with many homeowners, dazzled by the "vastness and strangeness" of their own backyards. Where does the homeowner go for guidance: cookie-cutter how-to-books on the shelves of garden supply stores? trite cable television shows promising 30-minute makeovers? or neighbors no more credible than them? Bar coding the landscape as a commodity, as something that can be processed and shrink-wrapped, trivializes nature and lulls a homeowner into complacency. One should never be complacent while working in nature.

The enduring power of nature writing is in its combination of lyricism and data points, of journeying to natural worlds more felt than seen. The best writing paints the “rich and complex texture” of nature as nothing else can. It can inform, educate, and entertain. Its most important task, however, is to inspire.

Considering the Underlying Meaning of Things

At the beginning of the twentieth century, writer Mary Austin (1868-1934), opened up a new world, the American West, to Eastern U.S. readers of the *Atlantic* magazine. A series of articles became the basis of her classic nature book, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903). Austin writes simply but with powerful images: “Out West, the west of the mesas and the unpatented hills, there is more sky than any place in the world. It does not sit flatly on the rim of earth, but begins somewhere out in the space in which the earth is poised, hollows more, and is full of clean winey winds” (62).

In the introduction to her book, author Robert Haas says Austin’s sentences “have a biblical cadence that is perhaps faintly, grimly parodic” and notes that the authority of her words “come from an informed intensity of observation” (xxi). But intense observation, however knowledgeable and biblically written, still fails to impress skeptical literary critics who look for mystery more than substance. Lawrence Buell notes that while American nature poetry and fiction has been accepted by literary elite, nonfiction nature writing is relegated to “‘special topics’ courses offered as the humanities’ tithe to environmental studies programs... rather than as bona fide additions to the literature curriculum” (9).

Edward Abbey, anticipating that sort of scholarly snub of what he calls his “surface” writing style, says rather defensively: “It will be objected that the book [*Desert Solitaire*] deals too much with mere appearances, with the surface of things... For my own part I am pleased enough with surfaces -- in fact they alone seem to me to be of much importance. Such things for example as the grasp of a child’s hand in your own, the flavor of an apple... the bark of a tree, the abrasion of granite and sand, the plunge of clear water into a pool, the face of the wind -- what else is there? What else do we need?” (xiii).

Thoreau continues Abbey’s argument: “... all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (63). The description of the present moment, of the place upon which we stand and who we are, “full of clean winey winds,” is sacred to Thoreau, Austin, Abbey, and other nature writers because they know we need nature as our objective constant, our true north, an entity unconcerned about the underlying meanings of things.

I have a reverence for Thoreau’s “present moment,” a concept that is beyond day-to-day experience. When we think of the “present moment,” we bring along a recollection of the past as well as an anticipation of the future. To nature, on the other hand, the present is an eternal moment. We humans are drawn to the present moment, as moths to a flame, but lose our focus as we approach, because we are mortal and are not meant to be part of the eternal present.

The title of my story, *Designing Nature*, suggests a theme of not only designing nature through landscape plans, but of also being designed by it. The central narrative sums up my two-year employment with Schmalz Custom Landscape of Darboy, WI: I am hired, am trained, have some successes, suffer failure, and am fired. It is fairly straightforward.

But at another level presented outside the narrative, I reflect on how a nature-centric point of view is at odds with that of humanity. By using design as a recurring metaphor, I try to go beneath the surface detail of my story and consider what underlying natures affect our motivations. Nature is not just a pretty drawing on an oversized sheet of paper, but is an efficient internal purpose, a Galan race memory, ideal for optimal survival. These ideas, however, seem at first glance to go against the classic nature writers' claim for pure objectivity.

When Abbey asks, for example, "What more do we need?" he is being disingenuous. He knows he needs to give subjective human meaning to objective nature in order to understand it, and through that understanding to come to know himself. As befitting nature writing's legendary curmudgeon, he complains about this contradiction, but he does it, nonetheless.

Early in the book, *Land of Little Rain*, Mary Austin describes the faint water trails in the desert. To do this she asks the reader to imagine himself or herself lowered to the point of view of "the furred and feathered folk who travel them" (11). She writes: "Getting down to the eye level of rat and squirrel kind, one perceives what might easily be wide and winding roads to us if they occurred in thick plantations of trees three times the

height of a man. It needs but the slender thread of barrenness to make a mouse trail in the forest of the sod. To the little people the water trails are as country roads, with scents as signboards” (11).

So, even in Austin’s austere prose, while attempting a nature-centric description from “the eye level of rat and squirrel,” human comparisons of roads, plantations, country roads, and signboards are needed to understand and relate to nature. In Austin’s world, the tiny trail in the sod, unnoticed by a blundering gigantic human hiker, is a fully formed miniature world of furry Lilliputians.

As I wrote *Designing Nature*, I also strove for objectivity in detail and scene, but found that writing about landscape design projects pushed me away from pure descriptions of nature. As I imposed more and more layers of human psyche upon my text, was I overpowering a quieter message from nature by trumpeting the all-knowing human ego? Was I unmindful of tiny pathways that I not only did not see or understand, but risked trampling out of existence?

Narcissus Admiring Nature

Admittedly, we understand the world by comparing it to what we already know, and what we know best is ourselves. If we didn’t do that, our readers would have no point of reference, no context. Abbey’s determination to rely on simple facts to tell his story, to be purely nature-centric, runs into the very practical problem that any piece of writing contains conscious and subconscious choices by the author through every word, every sentence, every paragraph. Most nature writers, even Abbey, move away from the idealism

of nature-centric writing and fall back to human-centric writing in order to make the unfamiliar more familiar to the reader. Metaphors, a fundamental writing trope, are inherently anthropomorphic and stress humanity more than nature.

Thoreau, for example, compares a lake with a human face in a wonderful analogy in *Walden* calling the lake “the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature” (121). But then a few chapters later, as if embarrassed by his earlier lyricism, he counters that romantic image by a textbook-like description of a depth survey he made of Walden Pond in order to prove to himself and to others that the pond was not bottomless and thus could be objectively studied and understood. Poetics aside for the moment, he writes that the laws of nature are “our points of view” (188) and then imposes anthropomorphism by comparing human ethics with natural aspects of the pond:

“What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the law of average. Such a rule of the two diameters not only guides us toward the sun in the system and the heart in man, but draws lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of man’s particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character” (188).

The talented pen of Thoreau is able to bridge the gap between the soundings of a pond and the soundings of the human soul. By making the subjective choice to compare a man’s soul to Walden Pond, he seems to say that one can be as objectively and rationally studied as the other, as if our soul were no more mysterious than the muddy bottom of an inland lake. A reader might argue for uncertainty, that the human soul is not as easily

catalogued as the shifting bottom of the pond. We might say the soul is like nature in its profundity.

Annie Dillard, writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1976) as an homage to *Walden*, takes a similar though disturbing track when she compares the ordinary barnacle with human babies as she muses about the abundance and sameness of life: “My point about rock barnacles is those million million larvae ‘in milky clouds’ (to borrow Rachel Carson’s description) and those shed flecks of skin. Sea water seems suddenly to be but a broth of barnacle bits.” This is a telling detail of the reproductive prowess of the barnacle, but then she supposes: “Can I fancy that a million million human infants are more real [than barnacle babies]?” (168), and goes on to ask this metaphysical question about humanity's comparative rank in the universe:

“What if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles? I don’t know if each barnacle larva is of itself unique and special, or if we the people are essentially interchangeable as bricks... I have hatched, too, with millions of my kind, into a milky way that spreads from an unknown shore” (169).

Thoreau and Dillard reverse the practice of Leopold and Austin of using human characteristics to describe nature and instead use nature to describe human characteristics. One wonders if one metaphorical direction is more or less accurate and relevant than the other. If it is insightful to compare a lake to a human face, why wouldn’t it be as insightful to compare humans to barnacles? Both are abundant, reproduce freely, and are naturally limited to a specific ecological niche. In the eyes of God, which species is more

important? If God was forced to make a Solomon-like choice between the lad Narcissus and the flower, which would he choose?

I pledge, as a nature writer, to objectively observe the truths of simple facts. However, I am also freed by modern conventions to comment on the world from my own point of view, as did Dillard. As Thoreau famously writes in *Walden*, even though the first person “I” may be omitted from writing, “it is, after all, always the first person [the writer] that is speaking.” Why do we do that? Thoreau answers, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience” (1). So even with academic horticulture credentials and landscape design experience, and the truest possible intention for observation, Thoreau warns I am still confined by my own body, senses, and mind to write about how I have personally experienced nature. Though my goal is to describe nature, I am really describing myself.

But when I imprint my own point of view upon nature, a gap yaws between nature as it is created in my writing and nature as it really is. This disconnect from nature is not unique to the last few decades. Wit and critic, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), writing the satirical 1889 essay, “The Decay of Lying,” observed, “people only discover in her [nature] what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of her own. [William] Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never really a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already written there” (717). Wilde says even when we say we are recharged by nature, we more often impose ourselves upon it, rather than objectively accept it as it is. Where-

ever we go, we cannot help but take our subjectivity along with us, or, as a modern wag puts it: “Wherever you go, there you are.”

As I began this project, I wondered how I could objectively and unobtrusively, understand nature without unconsciously inserting myself into the story. Early drafts of detailed natural exposition were horticulturally accurate but tedious. I rediscovered that even in a graduate thesis, everything I write is subjective, represents me, and tells the discerning reader who I am at one distinct point in time. To labor toward a purely objective product is nonproductive, and probably unsalable. Lawrence Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination*, points out that a nature writer, “is not going to be able to see or articulate the natural environment on its own terms. The constraint of human perception, and of art, makes zero-degree interference impossible” (81). No matter how hard I try to stand apart from nature, out of the picture, I will always creep back into the frame.

Tim Robinson, author of *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (2006), in contrast to the classic objective school of nature writing, is unapologetic when he describes nature in the context of human habitation and his own life. A mapmaker by trade, Robinson argues that the naming and remembrance of a place in human history signifies that place’s reality. Describing the western Irish coast, he writes, “... how intensively this shore, and indeed the intertidal zone all around Connemara’s labyrinthine inlets and archipelagos, was explored by human hands ... This repeated laying-on of hands, to me, is the human touch that has made such places holy” (246). From his point of view, the past intersects the present and points toward the future. A place represents not only itself, but also its own witness to history.

The place might be the Conemarra bog, Walden Pond, or a butterfly garden in Northeast Wisconsin. In all cases, the history that humans bring to the landscape defines that space as clearly as a plant tag tacked to an arboreal specimen. My perception of nature and those details I choose to include in my writing are tied to who I am as a landscape professional, as a native of Northeast Wisconsin, and as someone who has spent the last three years studying the Nature Writing genre. I am not sure I agree with Oscar Wilde that I only bring myself to nature, since there have been many discoveries in this project beyond who I thought I was. Yet, as I wrote *Designing Nature*, I found my writing becoming more personal and less objective. Encouraged in this self-discovery by my thesis advisor and by the writers that I continue to read, I find that my finished story is less a journal of landscape design than of life in Northeast Wisconsin at the beginning of the 21st century.

W.G. Sebald (1944-2001), a recent entry to the nature-writing canon with *The Rings of Saturn* (1999), also does not attempt to write objectively. In fact, his writing so confused his publishers that they labeled his book as “Fiction.” At the beginning of each chapter, Sebald diverges and enlarges on a walk, another common nature writing organizational structure, to include not only all of his personal history, but the last centuries of European civilization as well. Sebald fuses human experience with nature in a rather bizarre work that floats across both space and time.

Thoreau, very aware of order imposed by linear chronology, called time “but a stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains” (64). To Sebald,

time is not a linear stream but a whirlpool in which all events lie on top of each other swirling about a central core. As a traveler, unsure of his footing as he sidles along pathways on these concentric swirls, Sebald is apt to wander off the conventional timeline. That wandering, I think, is exactly the point. He sees the world “as no more than a shadow image of another one and far beyond,” which is very different from the crisp, careful descriptions of Gilbert White and earlier generations of nature writing. It is the difference between a Newtonian and an Einsteinian worldview.

I was so fascinated by Sebald’s nonlinear experimentation in narrative chronology that the first draft of *Designing Nature* was structurally modeled after *Rings of Saturn*: sharply episodic with few transitional elements. It was also almost unintelligible. I retreated from pure nonlinearity in later drafts, used the Schmalz story as the scaffolding, and only occasionally wandered out of the timeline. Yet those times when I did pull out of the narrative order were the times when I felt the most freedom as a writer. One always feels strongest when one is taking the greatest risk. I think that my later, post-thesis, writing may continue to see how far I can climb outside the narrative stream without losing cohesion of the work and the patience of the reader.

Fitting into the Continuum

At one time the purpose of nature writing was to open new worlds to readers, worlds that could not be explored except by experienced and hardy woodsmen, mountaineers, explorers, and graduate students. Photography, television, YouTube, and wireless over-

connectivity have made the once inaccessible all-too accessible. So, to remain relevant, nature writing has turned to other purposes.

Now nature writing has assumed the role of witness to the changes and effects of our voracious human intellect. As Edward Abbey feared in *Desert Solitaire*, a new road now allows visitors to view all of his Arches National Monument in one day within the air-conditioned comfort of their porky SUVs. The parks, he argues, should instead be preserved for those who want to exchange intercontinental highways “for an entirely different kind of vacation -- out in the open, on their own feet, following the quiet trail through forest and mountains, bedding down at evening under the stars, when and where they feel like it, at a time when the Industrial Tourists are still hunting for a place to park their automobiles” (51).

Designing Nature became a witness and reflection of how we (both clients and landscape designers) try to tame nature into geometrically perfect residential subdivisions. When one of Abbey’s motor tourists, or one of my nature-averse clients, assumes he or she can experience “out there” from the air-conditioned comforts of Wilde’s civilized cocoon, he or she is missing the point. Nature should not be a scorecard of how many national parks can be seen on a summer vacation, but how much we understand what we do see. The goal should be, to paraphrase a sundial motto in *Connemara*, “to look,” and this is what modern nature writing helps us do: to look at the familiar and realize how extraordinary it is.

What began as a comparison of a few canonical works of nature writing to my own creative work has admittedly become as convoluted as a chapter from Sebald’s *The Rings*

of Saturn: more philosophical than practical. But isn't that to be expected? The objective of nature writing is at its core as subjective as the experience, education, and inspiration of the writer. When I circle and circle the central point without inspiring a reader, I wonder if it is the model of nature writing that falls short, or just my own talent? I suspect it's my talent.

Mary Austin warns in the introduction to *The Land of Little Rain* that when we self-consciously seek out nature, the words that we use may not be those words spoken by nature itself. Instead of struggling with our limited human language, we need to accept that "there are certain peaks, canyons, and clear meadow spaces which are above all compassing of words... Guided by these you may reach my country and find or not find, according as it lieth within you, much that is set down here" (xxxvi).

So, we may not achieve all our goals when we write of nature, but that is a risk acceptable to a creative artist. Some truths may just not "lieth within" us. If that is the case, if we fall short of what we hope to achieve, perhaps we will just grant ourselves permission to pause and be witnesses to the rich, complex wonder of nature.

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Douglas Paul Landwehr

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story tells my true experiences working as a professional landscape designer. I began work as a designer in 2000, while I attended classes in horticulture at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay, and then worked for a year for myself as an independent designer. I was hired by Schmalz Custom Landscaping, Darboy, WI in August 2003 and worked there until June 30, 2005. After I left, I restarted and continued my one-person shop for three more years, ending my landscape design career in December 2008 when I began the English graduate program at UW Oshkosh.

Most of this story is based on my two-year employment at Schmalz. With one exception, the story is true. The bonfire scene at the beginning of Chapter Three is my brief nod to the fiction sub-genre of autobiographical fiction.

All the characters in this story are real people, though the names of my landscape clients have been changed to protect their privacy. Scenes, dialog, and detail are reported according to my memories, though some of the timeline has been condensed and rearranged to create a more interesting story.

FIVE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

The headline in the professional section of the classifieds of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* was short, to the point, and in bold Helvetica: “Landscape Designer.” The location of the advertisement was important to me. If I had seen a “Landscape Designer” ad posted in the skilled/semi-skilled section a few pages earlier, I would not have answered it. Such an ad in the skilled/semi-skilled section meant that employer was just looking for a strong back.

My dad pushed me to succeed in high school and then in college, because he said he wanted me working with my head rather than my back. Those who barely stayed awake in high school were the ones who relied on strong backs. They were the ones who sheepishly accepted their diplomas from the principal, and then walked back to their folding chairs on the gym floor, anonymous in a mass of primary color. From my earliest school memories, I was told by my mom and dad I was not part of that anonymous mass. I should be on the stage receiving honors.

The second line of the ad, “Minimum five years experience,” was problematic. I sort of met that qualification, though it depended on if you used a literal or figurative interpretation of the word “experience.” I did graduate with honors from the two-year program in Landscape Horticulture at the local technical college and had spent the following year building up a one-person landscape design business to semi-respectability and a little more than just part-time income.

So, even though I wasn't literally qualified for the job, figuratively I considered myself overqualified. I would bring more to any company than just lines of a resume under the boldfaced subhead, "Work Experience." That positive attitude had worked well during the twists and turns of my career. Horticulture was the just the latest stop on a path that had included managing a Catholic newspaper, installing digital publication design at a college, applying quality principles to a union print shop, and founding and running one of the twelve top B&Bs in the Midwest, according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

I did know the basics of residential horticulture. I could prove it by showing any prospective employer my own landscaped yard, which was only 45-feet wide, but rivaled the yards of neighbors many times my size. The front yard was landscaped to impress the world -- realtors call that "curb-appeal." In mine there was an extensive cottage perennial garden flanked by three matching Canadian climbing roses on pyramidal arbors. On the opposite side of the yard, the north side of the front walk, three dwarf cherry trees mirrored the rose triad. Peonies led into a small, private, backyard space.

The backyard, where I was sitting in sandals and shorts reading the classifieds, featured 28 roses in four groups of seven arranged in compass quadrants around a central concrete birdbath and enclosed within a circling flagstone walkway. An old Spartan apple tree, a Red Chestnut, a back border of staghorn sumac, and a cedar-shingled potting shed anchored the corner of the yard that was divided into an herb garden, cutting garden, and the beginnings of a Japanese garden under a stand of buckthorn. Eventually the entire backyard would be garden. Maybe the next year, I thought, if I limited the number of jobs I accepted.

As I looked at the landscape design posting, I was mildly interested in the position. There have been times when I really wanted a particular job. When I thought the job had been specifically written to suit my unique personality, skills, interests, and experience. Sometimes I got those positions, sometimes I didn't. In the cases when I didn't, that was probably for the better, since my imagined qualifications are often larger than my vocational potential.

I was only mildly interested in this position not because it wasn't a good opportunity with a good company (especially for someone just a year out of school), but because I was only mildly interested in the horticulture field itself. With some jobs I ached to get to work each day. They were a challenge, a competition, a creative display, and a promise of stepping up onto the stage. Horticulture, in comparison, seemed a little flat and common: I could do the work, and I was good at it, but there was no passion.

I started working in horticulture in a roundabout way. One year after selling the B&B, I was bored. I had wallpapered, I had painted, and I had hung pictures on all the walls of our new house. My post-innkeeper sabbatical was coming to an end, and I knew I had to get back to work. It was, after all, what one did.

Horticulture had always been a hobby as Nan, my wife, and I moved from house to house about the Green Bay area. The homes we bought came with landscaped yards that were, even to the eye of an amateur, dreadful: a few dwarf yews dotted about the house, a feeble maple dropping its leaves in late July, and scarcely enough river stone mulch to cover ripped landscape fabric sticking out against the poured concrete foundation. At each house we created and experimented with a series of increasingly intricate

and complicated garden designs. We visited garden centers and nurseries and explored public gardens for inspiration. When plants prospered, we celebrated. When they died, we dug them up and planted something else.

Every March and April, we would begin planning the growing season's projects. We worked as a team planning, planting, weeding, and watering in the weeks before our self-imposed Memorial Day garden deadline, lazed about during the summer heat, and then dusted off the garden tools once again in September and October before storing everything the eve of the first November snow. This cycle, dictated by the weather and by our work schedules, was no different than the cycles of thousands of other homeowners across the city. Nan and I were just a little better at it than most. Each spring I resolved to spend a little more time each day working in the garden. If a residential gardener was faithful to his chores, he could get a lot done by the end of the season. And, come each October, disappointed that I didn't spend as much time in the garden as I ought to, I thought, well, maybe next year. Gardens and spouses are surprisingly understanding.

Some people love to garden. They glow green. Each Saturday morning in the garden section of the *Press-Gazette*, I have read about some cheerful, red-cheeked homeowners who organize great works of experimental fiction in their heads during the time they spend in their garden, clipping and cutting, digging and dividing. In transcendental ecstasy, they flit from garden chore to garden chore and consider the sweat of their brow a personal blessing from nature. That's not me. I do not look forward to working in the garden; I look forward to enjoying the garden.

Each house and garden that we have owned has contained a particular space which has become my outdoor sanctuary. With my background in the Catholic press, a neighbor might think my backyard sanctuary could have connections to nature-based religious meditation: mystics (and the gardeners featured in the Saturday morning paper) seem to discover the presence of God in nature more than in other places. A backyard sanctuary might also describe a mini-nature reserve since the birds and bees are attracted to areas that attract people. If a gardener plans and provides cover, fresh water, and food, his or her yard will be filled with bumblebees, hummingbirds, and neighbors.

It is a space apart from work (though I must confess I do bring my laptop out on occasion) and from the hard edges of civilized life. You might hear television broadcasts leaking out from neighboring houses and Harleys rumbling on the road, but civilized sounds are in the background and can't compete with the wind rustling magnolia leaves, with birds gossiping in the honeysuckle, and with the quiet movement of clouds through the sky. In my backyard, I am calmed by the many shades of green that even color the deep shadows and am entertained by birds edging closer and closer to the thistle seed feeder, purposely placed too close to my chair.

A yard should fit the owners, and, in our case, this yard fits us. It was the reason I began a career in landscape design. One afternoon, about a month after we had moved into the house, I was tugging out a juniper bush from a sea of junipers planted by the previous bachelor-owner. A lady stopped on the front sidewalk and asked, "Who did your landscape design?"

"I did," I said.

“You should do this for a living,” she advised and continued her walk. I didn’t think much of it at the time, because both Nan and I had heard this comment before. Friends and relatives often mentioned that we seemed to have a special talent for turning a dull landscape into something interesting, personal, and unique. About the same time -- this was in the spring of 2000 – Lee Hansen, a friend and part-owner of a local nursery, told me that he was leaving the business to start a horticulture program at the technical college: “You should sign up to do landscape design,” he said recruiting for his program. “It would give you something to do.”

I knew I had a good design sense from previous jobs in publication design and had an interest in digital and distance technology that was beginning to transform most design and business careers, even horticulture, but I did not think I was strong enough in horticulture itself. Sure, I could plant a plant, green side up, water it and prune it, and replace it if it died, but I did not have the passion for plants. I did not glow green. Yet, I liked the idea of being part of the first class of a new program, and I figured I could muddle through the horticultural parts, since I was a fast study. For example, a year before Nan and I started the B&B, I knew nothing about the B&B business either and that venture turned out quite well. It’s amazing what you will try when you don’t know what you don’t know. Education now, passion later has been my strategy. So in 2003, one year after I received my Associate Degree as a Horticultural Technician, I found myself looking at a classified ad titled “Landscape Design” in the professional section of the classifieds.

I mailed in a cover letter and resume. Within a week, I received a call from a nice polite man, Lee St. John, who chatted with me a bit, and then invited me to Schmalz Custom Landscape for an interview. I had heard of Schmalz when I worked as a summer design intern at Vande Hey Landscaping in Little Chute, about 10 miles north of Schmalz. Vande Hey and Schmalz were two of the top design/construction firms in the Fox Valley of Northeast Wisconsin, but I had no preconception of Schmalz, other than being amused by its odd German name.

The nice man from Schmalz gave me directions to a one-story office building in Darboy, just east of Appleton, across the parking lot from the company's red barn garden center. It was a hot summer day, late July, and I weaved between dump trucks emblazoned with the Schmalz logo (the silhouette of a pine tree and the sun -- setting sun or rising sun I've always wondered) on the dark green doors of the cabs. The tires kicked up dust and stones in the gravel lot around the business office as the crews returned to pick up loads of mulch and other supplies for the jobs during the second half of their workday. The receptionist showed me into a conference room at the front of the building. The room was paneled like a suburban basement rec room. Blue-faded rummage sale prints hung in faux oak frames between the exterior windows that looked out over a cornfield across the county trunk road in front. Along the width of an inside wall, three gray filing cabinets provided additional job file storage for the receptionist, whose desk was across the hall. As I settled in, I imagined there weren't many meetings here, though there did seem to be a lot of jobs in the files. That was a good sign.

Lee St. John, CFO, HR, and all-around office manager for Schmalz, entered the room and started the interview. He reviewed the qualifications for the position in question: a full-time, 12-month landscape designer heading residential and commercial projects. That was odd. Most large landscape companies broke the design/installation process into a series of steps handled by specialized departments: sales might make the initial call, junior designers would measure the site and provide an initial design approved by a senior designer (usually a certified landscape architect), estimators priced cost from design elements, sales brought the design and estimate back to the customer, signed the customer, received a deposit, and then the installation was scheduled and overseen by the installation manager. Once installation was complete, accounting collected payment. At Schmalz, all those jobs were the responsibility of the landscape designer. What happened or did not happen was the responsibility of just one person.

I had a Master's degree in Business, so as if I were back in class studying process modeling and customer service, I asked Lee how this system worked for Schmalz. One-man shops are run this way but usually not multi-million dollar ones. The advantage to this model was the client had one contact; the disadvantage was that contact had to be a jack-of-all trades, part engineer and part plantsman, adept at estimates as well as smoozing the client: a horticultural sales and service superstar. This was a risky assumption and depended heavily on the quality of the designers. That's why the advertisement wanted five years of experience at a minimum. I was much more attracted to this sort of primo responsibility than I was in being a cog in a landscape machine. I smiled at the challenge, and Lee and I got on very well.

We were interrupted when the door to the conference room was pushed open by the black nose of a full-sized black poodle, which then walked in followed by a second poodle, same large size, only mocha brown. Lee rubbed the neck of the black poodle under a sequined collar. “How you doing, Blackie?” he said. Luke Schmalz followed his dogs into the room.

Luke, the owner of the company, was not a tall man, but he was large. By large I don't mean overweight or out of shape, though he was hefty. Rather, my initial impression was that he was large in the way that being at peace with one's work makes some people larger than they would otherwise appear out of context. For example, a banker seated behind his desk in a corner office seems large to those seeking a loan, a glassblower twirling molten glass at the end of a hollow tube seems large to gawkers at a summer art fair, and Luke Schmalz, second generation owner of Schmalz Custom Landscape, at peace and comfortable in the business that he had built up, also seemed large. Luke was stocky and solid, a German farmer's build, and dressed in a simple, short-sleeve button-down shirt with blue jeans and steel-toed work boots. The boots were dusty from being on worksites that morning. His handshake was firm, gaze open, but questioning. He took his place at the head of the conference table. Lee was on his right, and I was on his left.

Lee reviewed the interview up to date, and Luke glanced at my portfolio plans that I had spread out on the table between us. He let Lee continue to lead the interview. The poodles were stationed on either side of Luke, looking up, but whether they were waiting for a treat, or a pet, I couldn't say.

“You’ve done a lot. I can see that,” Luke finally said, following the sections of my resume with his finger. “Why do you want to do Landscape Design?”

“I like to draw in four dimensions.”

“Pardon?”

“Four dimensions. Landscape Design is the only art form that allows me to design in four dimensions: height, weight, depth, time. It combines my interest in science and art and gives me a chance to create a space that clients wake up to, walk up to, and live within every day.”

I had Luke’s attention now. This spiel was something I had refined after my clients also repeatedly asked why I was in Landscape Design. There are no new questions, only more interesting answers. Lee was my focus at the beginning of the interview, but he was an accounting guy and was more interested in sales closing rates than in design. When I talked with Lee, I talked business processes. When Luke and the dogs walked in, I knew he would be the one who made the hiring decision and was, I sensed, a brother designer, and, I hoped, he knew what I was talking about. If he didn’t, I probably didn’t belong there.

I still had the floor. Luke was a good listener.

“So when we design, what do we start with? A lot of a certain size and shape: length and width but also some rise and fall of the land with perhaps some existing trees, gardens or other structures. The home is, of course, the key design element we need to work around by using a full-palette of plants and hardscape to create an ever-changing

image. So, when I create a landscape design, I am working not only in height, width, and depth, but also in time.”

I didn't go farther, since I thought I had made my point. I even had the dogs' attention. Blackie came over for a scratch. If I really wanted to get esoteric, I might have presented my theory that landscape design was actually a transcendental offshoot of the avant garde style called Cubism, which developed at the same time. At its basics, a Cubist artist studies a three- and four-dimensional image and tries to render reality in all its complexities onto a two-dimensional canvas. In a literal sense, that is impossible to do, yet shifting perspective, overstating 3-D shadowing, and applying realistic techniques trick the eye into seeing a moment in time from all angles at once. To see this with a critical eye is an acquired skill. In the same way, a successful landscape design, a design that seems obvious once it is completed, should allow you to anticipate the entire design without actually seeing all of it. You should know what should be around the corner, even before you see it for the first time.

And, each time you see a landscape, I think it should look different, changing with the natural growth and death of living plants. Quality landscape designs are predictable, have patterns, but are never static. They combine the imagination and creativity of the designer, the skill and experience of the installer, and the quality of the material that is used. Landscape designs also, alarmingly to some, require acceptance that the completed project, seen five years later, will not always turn out the way the designer, the installer, or the client expects. Chance is part of landscape design, which makes the art form even more Cubist than Cubism. Chance is, by definition, undesignable.

But, since I instantly liked Lee and Luke and was growing more and more fond of the idea of working for this company, I didn't push my artistic theories any further than suggesting the use of the fourth dimension -- that was probably avant-garde enough for Schmalz.

We chatted a bit more, but the interview was complete. I had made my statement, and they had probably made their decision. Luke and the two dogs left. Lee finished up by giving me a few more details about compensation and said he would be in touch. Three days later, he called to offer me the job, and by mid-August, I was anointed horticultural sales and service superstar, and the first transcendental cubist landscape artist in Darboy.

THE RASPBERRY PATCH

One summer night, a few weeks past my ninth birthday, my mom announced at supper that I would be picking raspberries for my grandparents the next day. It would be my first job. I was excited about the announcement (I have always liked to be singled out) but was also a little worried: would all my summer freedom, blue-sky days, and public swimming pools be lost with this new responsibility? Would I ever just lie back on the grass and create stories from shapes of clouds? Would I become a drudge slogging each day to the raspberry patch, like the poor, black migrant cotton pickers I had seen on television?

On the other hand, even at age nine, I knew working was a part of life; that's what you were supposed to do when you were an adult: my father was a truck driver, and my mother worked afternoons in the local Five and Dime. Now, the oldest of my brothers and sisters, it would be my turn. I needed to grow up.

The next morning after breakfast, while my brothers and sisters were still peacefully asleep in the large bedroom we all shared, my mom and I walked to my grandparents' place, just three houses away. They greeted my mom with a hug and a smile. I received a hug from my grandmother, but not my grandfather – working men didn't hug. My grandmother wore a clean checked apron over a flowered housedress. My grandfather wore a white shirt buttoned all the way up to his knobby Adam's apple, and dark pants with suspenders. I wore a white T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. Each of us was in uniform.

The raspberry patch was a featured part of a large truck garden which spanned the width of the double residential lot and ran front to back from a half-dozen apple trees behind the two-story asphalt-shingled house to the beginning of the railroad's property about 50-yards to the north. Rather than mow a half-acre of lawn, the typical suburban backyard choice, my grandparents' planted a backyard of cabbages, corn, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, dill, horseradish, pumpkin, squash, strawberries, and raspberries.

This yard and garden had been the backdrop for many summer family picnics and Sunday dinners. Cousins played tag, hide and seek, and "Simon Says" in and out of the neatly hoed rows of the garden. Trampling through the vegetable patches, harming the plants that quivered in dread of our playful chaos, earned an immediate rebuke from parents, aunts, and uncles who took turns overseeing the weekend family circus.

Each of my mother's eight brothers and sisters were taught the basics of planting, weeding, hoeing, pruning, harvesting, and canning in that garden. Green Bay in the 1950s and 1960s was changing from a one-generation away from the farm small town to an urban entity, and once my cousins and I became city kids, we risked losing our connection to the land. This small-scale family garden was the last nod toward our farming heritage: lessons about the magic of compost and fertilizer, about working together as a family, and about daily duties in a garden.

As a nine-year old, still sleepy from the early morning call, that was obviously not on my mind as I pulled a battered straw hat off a rusty nail in the dusty one-stall garage to join my mom, my grandmother, and my grandfather in the side yard. Were they thinking about my first step toward more responsibility? I would guess so. A connection to the

land, even if it was just a family garden, seemed so important to my grandparents that one by one as their grandchildren reached a reasonable age, they were introduced to their heritage by helping with simple garden chores: in my case, picking raspberries.

My mom gave me a quick peck on the cheek and walked back home. After a berry-picking lesson, grandfather assigned me a row next to my grandmother. The berries, plump and dewy, were just ripe and pulled easily from the buds. It was important to let the berry slide smoothly off the stem so the fruit would not be crushed or broken. A sign of a good berry picker was clean hands. Mine were soon stained red and sticky with berry juice.

After I filled my first pint box, I brought it to my grandfather for inspection. “This box isn’t full,” he complained, comparing my box to a quartet of boxes already picked by him and my grandmother. The berries were barely up to the top wire of my box while the berries in the other boxes were nicely rounded. “Fill it up,” he said.

A little dejected but not discouraged, I returned to my row and heaped the box until the berries rolled off onto the dirt. My grandfather nodded approval, and I was given another empty box to fill. I filled that pint, a third and a fourth, when a revelation hit me: I would be paid for this work. At a wage of ten-cents a pint, I could make a whole dollar, if my math was right, which seemed like the wealth of nations to a nine-year-old boy who was gifted with a 50-cent allowance each Saturday morning.

As I was dreaming of how I would spend my loot on bubble gum and football trading cards, my grandfather came up from behind and jolted me out of my reverie.

“You’re cherry picking the row, boy.”

I looked up at him confused. Cherries? I was only nine years old, but I knew there were no cherries here. This was a raspberry patch. He firmly led me by the cuff of my T-shirt sleeve back to the beginning of my row. When he pulled back the leaves of the bushes and separated the branches, there was bunches and bunches of raspberries inside, still unpicked. Where had they all come from? I thought I had picked the bushes clean.

“Pick all the berries, boy. Not just the ones on the outside.”

To demonstrate, he reached into the bush with both hands, picking berries efficiently and cleanly, and dropping them into the box I had been working on. When my box was filled and nicely rounded, he took it from me.

“This one’s mine.” He gave me an empty box. “Do the job right, boy.”

Tears started to form in my eyes. A protest struggled in my throat, but I swallowed it back. That wasn’t fair. At least half that box, probably more, should have been mine. I thought those bushes had been picked clean. The berries clustered beneath the leaves had miraculously formed and ripened as I worked farther down the row. It wasn’t my fault. I was only nine years old. I looked to my grandmother for intercession, but she had her back turned pretending not to hear. Bottom lip trembling, forcing control on ragged breathing, I turned back to the bushes, continuing to pick more carefully though much more slowly than before.

When my mom came to bring me home about an hour later, my berry picking pace had become positively pokey. I was only midway through my eighth box. A dollar seemed out of reach now, but my mom worked side by side with me to finish the long

row. Just like my grandfather, she was able to reach into the bush with both hands and quickly and cleanly pick the berries. I was impressed. When did she learn how to do that? We finished the eighth box, a ninth and finally, my goal, a tenth.

Picking for the day was done by mid-morning and would continue each day for the rest of the week. There was no hurry since the boxes were only sold casually to neighbors from a card table in the side yard. A hand-drawn sign, "Raspberries 25-cents," leaned against the table leg until all the pints were sold for the day. Then the sign was turned around. This was not a professional operation.

My mom pushed me forward toward my grandfather to receive my pay for the morning. He pretended to miscount my boxes and only fished out ninety-cents from his front pocket. I should have asked for the coin for the tenth box, but I couldn't speak and just stared at the coins in his outstretched hand. My grandfather scared me. He was a small-man, gruff and rough-hewn. At that time retired from the railroad and weakened from heart disease, he still radiated an internal energy, like an engine boiler building steam for a long run.

He looked at me with an intense squint as if he was deciding whether I was worth the effort to talk to. He looked to my mom -- who just said, "Pa" -- and discovered that he had miscounted and gave me a final coin, a shiny quarter: 10-cents for the tenth box, 10-cents for the box he had taken, and a nickel tip.

"I expect to see you bright and early tomorrow morning," he said.

My mom squeezed my shoulder.

"Thank you," I said, head still down, not meeting his gaze.

I turned to walk down the gravel driveway toward my house.

“Wait,” he said. I expected him to have second thoughts and take back the nickel tip. Instead he said, “Here are a couple of pints you can take back with you.” Surprised by this largesse, I mumbled thanks without prompting as I took one box and my mom took the second. I was even more surprised when he added, “I expect that you’ll get better, Douglas, but you did well for your first day on the job.”

HARRY LAUDER'S WALKING STICK

One late summer night a few months after the Schmalz interview, Nan and I gathered with my brother and sisters and their children around a small bonfire in my sister Cindy's yard. The night was cool, so we pulled up picnic tables and lawn chairs close to the flames of a wood fire that sparked up like a Roman candle on the Fourth of July. Marshmallows were roasting on long forks. Inexperienced grandnieces and nephews, most not yet in school, held the treats so far away from the flames that the puffs were as likely to be burned by starlight as by the fire. One of the moms volunteered to do the cooking, held two forks, and stuck four marshmallows into the flame. They soon caught fire, and when she withdrew them, a greenish flame engulfed the white cubes until the surface of the treat was a uniform burnt brown-black. After the marshmallows were gone, gossip traded, and work stories long concluded, the only sound was the hiss and pop of logs boiled, roasted, and burned by the dancing flames.

"If you were a plant, what plant would you be?" asked Cindy, ending the silence. Cindy was my youngest sister, grandmother of three of the preschoolers, and center of my family's hope and hearth. She always had a participation game at hand.

"I would be a rose," said Bailey, Cindy's oldest grandchild.

"Why a rose?"

"A rose is pretty, and soft, and smells good." OK, a safe answer. Bailey was entering kindergarten that year, so she was not going to lose points for originality.

“I would be a Christmas tree,” said Sarah, Bailey’s mom and Cindy’s oldest. “I would grow tall and straight and green. A family would pick me out, take me home, and decorate me with lights, and candy, and fruit, and everyone would say how I was the best Christmas tree they ever saw.”

“And then we would take you down, drag you out the door, throw you on the curb, and shove you through a shredder,” said Cory, her brother. Sarah threatened him with a marshmallow fork.

“Grandpa, what would you be?” Cindy asked Dad.

“I would be a picker bush, so everyone would leave me alone. When I wanted to go somewhere I would hitch a ride on the cuff of your pants.” Dad tries to play the role of family curmudgeon, but it really doesn’t suit him.

“Doug, what would you be?”

I thought for a moment. Because of my plant and design background, my answer would have to be horticulturally correct and clever, and anticipate smart comments from Scott, my brother, and the rest of the family who would not hesitate to catcall an inferior response. I had a responsibility to raise the standards.

“Harry Lauder’s Walking Stick.” As I planned, this answer stopped side conversations and drew attention toward me. If you don’t want me to show off, don’t ask me to play.

Harry Lauder is a contorted version of the American Hazelnut and, in my humble opinion, is underused in urban gardens. It is a true dwarf bush slash tree, growing only six to seven feet tall, though double that size in width so it appears round and full. Harry

Lauder grows in most soil conditions in Northeast Wisconsin, handy for our patchwork of native sand and clay backfill, and will tolerate a surprisingly wide range of sun or shade situations -- it's a reliable character actor in a residential landscape. The main trunk, branches, and even leaves are twisted and contorted into a signature shape that reminded its growers of the twisted, comical walking stick of the vaudeville comedian, Harry Lauder, thus its common name. Because of the irregularity of the branches and its indomitable nature, I place Harry Lauder at entry points of the front and back gardens of my clients for an interesting four-season focal point.

My family knew about this plant because I had recommended and planted it in each of their home gardens. They were Harry Lauder disciples, but I was the master.

“Does that mean you're crooked?”

“Does that mean that you run around in circles?”

“Does that mean you can't give a straight answer?”

“Typical German plants, wider than tall, just like you!”

And so on. The game continued to other players, but the new comments about Harry came at me throughout the night. At one point, Bailey asked to see the plant, and the two of us walked to the front of Cindy's house where a Harry stood, sturdy and vigilant. In the moon-light the shrub had a whimsical look as if it were the sentinel for a magical story. As if it was hiding the entrance to an underground burrow of secrets. Bailey touched the leaves -- shiny, crevassed, and crinkled -- and pulled back.

“It feels funny,” she giggled.

“They are the coverings for fairy wings,” I said, as we both reached out.

When my family lived on the farm, I was a little older than Bailey was at the bonfire and attended kindergarten and first grade about five miles down the road in Seymour. I assume our small dairy farm was a dream of my dad, the youngest of twelve who grew up on his family's dairy farm 20-miles west of Green Bay near the four-corner German Catholic town of Isaar. My mom, even working in her parents' large truck garden, was a city girl at heart but was somehow talked into this venture by my dad. They haven't talked much about the farm since it did not go well.

My memories about those two years are episodic without a clear connecting narrative line: riding on the red metal toolbox of the tractor as my dad plowed our fields in the spring, seeing the miraculous though messy birth of a new born calf, swinging from a rope from balcony to balcony in the hay barn even though I was warned not to, three-day snowstorms that left drifts far above my head as I followed my dad back and forth to the barn, finding the Christmas toy hiding place in November, and watching baby robins hatch from light blue eggs in a nest just outside my second floor bedroom window.

My first nature-memories are from that time. Perhaps landscape design was pre-ordained by a generational race memory for the land. I am not, after all, that many branches removed from the farm when you look at either my maternal or paternal family tree.

However, like Harry Lauder's Walking Stick, my whims and moods and even career choices have seemed to grow in one direction, turn ninety-degrees to another, then another ninety, and then double back. My career path careens, twists, and extends precar-

iously outside my protected central core, yet it seems I just can't stop wandering, reaching toward a goal that moves just out of reach. Occasional friends renew conversations with me asking, "What are you doing now?" because they know that it is probably different than what I had been doing the last time they saw me.

Others at Schmalz had a stronger, straighter path from the land to landscape careers. Travis, one of my fellow landscape designers, grew up on a farm in Illinois, where his parents still farmed. Jeff, another designer, directly entered and stuck with the landscape architect program at the University of Michigan. More than half the foremen and crew at Schmalz had owned or worked on farms and saw the landscape business as a natural extension of their background. As former farmers, they were ideal landscape workers used to changing weather and physical work, and they were great at repairing machinery in the field with a ball of wire and a ratchet hammer.

Luke identified with these workers. He grew up working on the sod farm owned by his father, Ken Schmalz, who also worked as a contract designer for McKay's Nursery. When Luke's dad was laid off from McKay's, Ken began making calls on his own and Schmalz Custom Landscape was born. During the first month of my hire, Luke and I traveled together. He taught me how he wanted me to work and what the "Rules of the Road" were, as he put it. He also talked about growing up on the sod farm: the long hours, preparing the ground, planting the seed, fertilizing, watering, and cutting the sod into strips sold throughout the Valley.

The youngest of the family, Luke helped his dad manage the landscape business when other siblings moved away from home into professional jobs. A sod farm and landscape business held no interest for them.

Luke apprenticed to his father as a designer, salesperson, installer, foreman, manager and inherited the business. He was able to bridge the gap between the blue-collar crews in the field and upscale clients at the conference table, growing the business into one of the largest landscape contractors from Green Bay to Fond du Lac with a fully-stocked garden center, innovative multi-acre nursery, five full-time designers, and twelve crews of three men working commercial and residential jobs each day from the end of the March to November.

Though Luke told me his father used fear and intimidation to get the most from his son, employees, and business, Luke himself seemed to want to be another, more considerate sort of manager and we talked about employee-centered management. Luke had the presence to physically intimidate someone if he wished, but his natural manner was soft-spoken, almost shy. Sure, he could erupt as could anyone trying to balance the sometimes conflicting demands of employees and clients, but I don't recall hearing him swear or lash out. When the situation was dire, he seemed the most centered. After he had to discipline an employee, he seemed more disappointed than vengeful, as a father might be for a son who did not properly learn the "Rules of the Road." Luke was a straight and true white pine in a northern forest of scrub brush, bending in the wind but always returning to the upright.

Yet, he kept a distance between himself and the rest of us. He was well liked by the staff and crews but never chummy. He never lingered for coffee in the morning or “shot the breeze” after the trucks were parked for the night. Any celebrations were held on the patio of the office, never at his house, though he only lives a mile away. I wondered, why?

In early December, a few weeks after the end of the season, Luke rented the local supper club, The Darboy Club, for the Schmalz Company Christmas party and invited 100 workers, spouses, and friends. During the first party that I attended, I took a break from open bar fueled talking, gossiping, and funny stories about jobs that year, and went to the main bar to have a drink. I was surprised to see Luke sitting at the bar all alone nursing a Brandy Old-Fashioned. I had not seen Luke leave the party. In fact earlier that night he had been as Fezziwig handing out holiday bonuses and gifts.

“What’s up, Luke?” I asked.

He said he needed a break from the party. The long oval of the walnut-stained bar was centered in the middle of the room. Heavy burgundy curtains darkened the light and deadened the sound from the noisy party. When you came into the supper club for dinner, this is where the hostess placed you for an initial drink or two until a table was “ready.”

“You should go back,” I said. “The guys like to have you there.”

“In a bit,” he said. I sat down next to him and ordered a merlot. We sat together, a bar stool respectively between us according to guy rules. His glass was still three fingers full, though he had eaten the two candied cherries.

“I don’t like to get too friendly,” he said, partly as an explanation for leaving the party, partly as an excuse. He sipped his drink. “You know, my dad once told me, ‘Don’t get too friendly. One day, you’ll have to fire everyone.’”

DESIGNS FROM THE ETERNAL NOW

During the winter downtime when I was still on salary at Schmalz but only required to come to the Darboy office a couple days a week for appointments and paperwork, I spent a lot of R&R at home in Green Bay. This quiet time offset the crazy, 24-hour schedule during the growing season. One day at lunch I played house spouse. I diced radishes and sweet peppers for a salad, waiting for Nan to come home. She had to work all year long: a steady salary in exchange for steady hours.

I heard a series of thumps on the mansard roof over the kitchen, and out the window I saw two flashes of gray blur from the roof and thump to the deck outside. I stepped forward, leaning over the sink, to see a squirrel spread eagle, stunned by his one-story fall, feet and claws extended into the deck boards as if to prevent another such tumble. Its aerial partner could not be seen from my sink-side vantage. The squirrel paused for a moment, puffing, and then scurried up and onto the waist-high railing of the deck which held a bird feeder.

The feeder contained safflower seeds, which, the package label told me, are a favorite of songbirds but do not attract squirrels. The squirrels did not read the package. Sitting on a 4-inch square post for the railing, white chest still heaving, tail twitching in a show of bravado, squirrel number one faced the house and defended its safflower feeder from competitors. But as it watched me watching, a red cardinal swooped in behind and snatched a few seeds.

As a professional landscape designer, I could understand how the squirrel felt. Surprisingly, the landscape business only let up a little during the winter months. We still had clients, just no installation jobs to manage. Most of the time, we were still running from client to job to drawing board back to client, frantically trying to stay upright and avoiding a fall. And when we did fall, as we all did at one time or another, we righted ourselves, gripped our wooden drawing boards, and tried to defend the jobs that we thought were ours. But when we turned our backs, startled by a threat in the window reflection, our gains were picked at by competitors. I don't think a little fear and competition ever hurt anyone. It kept us sharp and on our game. Those who were not able to keep up, or were not able to survive a fall, had to move on. There were only so many seeds in the feeder.

"Have you been saved?" asked an earnest, lean fellow who had been clipping a Japanese yew into a perfect sphere. He had stopped his work, walked to the front door, and held it open for me as I entered the offices of the Baptist church. "Do you know Jesus?"

I was here to talk about a landscape project, not reflect on my heavenly destination. "I'm here to work with Pastor Dan," I said. Ahh, his eyes shined, another convert for the pastor.

Pastor Dan, who did not ask if I was saved, was a practical man of God. He wanted a landscape that would give the backside of his church a professional, marketable image to those driving on Lombardi Ave. in Green Bay (many potential churchgoers) as

well as give him a quiet place to read and relax during the day. He needed a multi-tasking landscape design.

His church was built on an oddly-shaped triangular piece of land between the very busy east-west street, Lombardi Ave., and a less-used access road to Military Ave, a north-south street. The back of the church fronted Lombardi, and, unfortunately, the front of the church, the side of the spherical Japanese yews, fronted only the access road. So, the side of the church that the congregation was showing to most of the world was its back end: a mix of chest-high chain-link fences enclosing primary-colored playground toys, dented metal air-conditioning units for the church proper, and an ugly prefab unit storing the riding lawnmower, rakes, shovels, and such. In addition, the building as was long and narrow as was the lot, which was close to 500-feet in length but often only 10-12 feet wide in the back. The church tabernacle was on the east end of the building, and additions had been periodically attached to it to create a 1950s motel-like look to adjoining offices, school, and daycare. The front was well maintained, but the back-end looked like, well, the back-end.

Back at my drawing board in Darboy after talking with Pastor Dan, the unifying theme of the design became obvious. I like it when themes make themselves obvious. A series of six-foot vinyl fences would match the building's paint color, and thereby disappear from view, hiding the storage shed, playground equipment, and utilities. It is always a good design idea to hide objects in plain sight. Then a gently winding path along the narrow causeway would lead from to the church side-door at the east end to the far west end of the building and around to the parking lot in front. Easy-to-maintain perennials,

small shrubs, and shade trees would provide interest for the walker, screening him or her from traffic on Lombardi, as well as softening the edges of the building from the viewpoint of motorists. Pastor Dan added a great idea to the initial plan: a 10-foot path extension that would connect the parking lot of an adjoining office building, thereby inviting the office workers there to enjoy the path and benches during their breaks, and, by familiarity, the services of the church.

The best designs, like this one, are the simple designs that satisfy the space and the function and seem to have been there all along. It's as if the designer and client peek into a creative dimension where the design happily exists, and just pull it out through a tear in space-time on the tip of a mechanical pencil. The best designs cannot be forced and overworking them usually deadens the inspiration. Find the design, stay focused, stay upright, and collect your seeds.

During the first few months at Schmalz when I followed Luke about, I was also informally apprenticed to Allan, another landscape architect on the staff. Allan had been at Schmalz for about five years. As we toured his jobs, I was impressed by his quality and creativity and told him so during a drive to Neenah. He had visited the creative dimension many times. He looked at me oddly and then looked back to the road he was driving on. At 75 mph you do not look away from Highway 41 for very long.

“You know, I always thought you were hired to replace me.”

I told Allan that that was unlikely since he was a productive and established designer -- the longest-tenured designer on the staff and a credentialed landscape architect.

I was a newbie, with hardly five years of experience. Why would I be hired to replace him?

He seemed relieved at hearing this, but said, “You know, you are always only one job away from being fired.”

I said I thought that was a little pessimistic, but since traffic picked up, we did not talk more about it.

One month later, Luke fired Allan. A job he was working on spiraled down into cost overruns and, even worse from my point of view, he stopped returning calls from a complaining client, who then went over Allan’s head to complain directly to Luke. When faced with an unhappy nonpaying customer, Luke made the only decision he could.

The very afternoon that Allan left, Luke talked to the rest of the design staff one by one. He calmly explained what happened and why he thought he had to fire Allan. Then, oddly enough, Luke asked if we had questions or wanted to talk about it more. By the time it was my turn to talk to Luke, he looked like he was the chief mourner at a wake of a dear friend. Even the dogs were gone for the day – a bad sign. His voice was soft, manner defeated. It was as if he lost the job, not Allan. When he asked if I had questions, I asked what he planned to do the rest of the day.

That surprised him, and he admitted he had not given it much thought.

“Go home,” I said. “You look beat. Put your feet up. Sit with the dogs. We can hold down the fort until tomorrow.”

Luke looked as if he wanted to say more but did not.

He left an hour later.

I have often thought about Allan's last job and about what vocational and personal demons might have forced him off the Schmalz roof as he scurried from job to job. When he landed the last time, he was not quite on his feet. I know it is a Western tendency to seek cause and effect in our lives when there is nothing but chaos, but I wondered what was the meaning to an event like Allan's dismissal? Was there a larger purpose than just satisfying a complaining client? What is the meaning of the jobs that go well and those that don't go well? Do we ever learn from the past?

In his article, "Being Somebody, Going Somewhere,"¹ Alex Gooch meditates on an essay by German filmmaker Wim Wenders, who confessed he had no interest in narrative stories, only images. "An image has no particular meaning," he said, "and it doesn't need one; it's not going anywhere, not leading to anything. It's sufficient unto itself." That's a very Buddhist idea, appropriate for a Buddhist writer in the Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle*, but, I wondered, might this also apply to life experiences as well as it does to avant-garde German filmmaking? Do our own personal images make any sense unknotted from the story line of our lives?

I lived on a farm when I was in kindergarten. I swung from a rope in the barn from hayloft to hayloft and did not fall and break my neck as my mother predicted. My cousin, some years older, living with us and helping on the farm, also swung from that rope but he fell and broke his arm. He returned to his home in the city, and my parents lost a helper. Did that rope cause them to lose the farm? Does any of that detail, acting

like the mythical wind off the wings of butterfly, affect who I am now? If it had not been for that rope, would I have inherited a farm rather than these questions?

The present, I admit, gets short shrift in a go go go world, but, paraphrasing Hemingway, life is just one damn thing after another. Right? Does it matter what the damn things are? Does it matter the order in which the damn things occur or how they are remembered?

Perhaps not, so long as we don't fall and break our necks, arms, or other important body parts. The Buddhist goal of enlightenment is a release from the daily drama that we drape around the shoulders of our own self-importance. Again, quoting from the Gooch article, "Enlightenment is a flight from the shifting, anxious, fundamentally dishonest ground of stories and the historical, linear narrative sense of time, to the pure wholehearted honesty of the eternal now."

Let's say Allan had been able to save himself from what Gooch calls the "shifting, anxious, fundamentally dishonest ground of stories." Once released from the "historical, linear narrative," what would he have based his existence on? Would he have kept his job at Schmaltz, or did the firing lead to better things for him? The Eastern philosophy of the "eternal now" is a tempting mind-game but while we play, won't the cardinal come in behind us and steal the safflower seed?

TRIMMING THE APPLE TREE

The Johnsons, my neighbors to the north, tacked up maple sap bags on their trees the first week in March. Some rely on the first sighting of a robin, some on the initial burst of the forsythia flower cluster, but I rely on the Johnson's sky blue bags as my first sign of spring.

The Johnsons, Brian and Sean, have a very simple landscape: grass shaded by groups of mature green ash, Norway maple, and crab apple trees; junipers and yews grouped around the foundation of their house; a series of globe arbors along the front sidewalk; and an impressive six-foot yew hedge separating our two yards. Mowing and some clipping is all the yard work they manage during most of the year -- they are both very busy professional people -- but every spring they still set-up the labor-intensive maple syrup production line.

The maple syrup started as an early spring project to get their three children out of the house after a long winter. Every family and home has some traditional jobs. Since the Johnson children are now young adults and have moved on to college, careers, and their own families, the children are no longer the reason for the maple syrup collection. Now it was just Brian and Sean checking from tree to tree and dumping bags of sap into five-gallon pails. Why did they still do it? They only get a few pints of syrup from the trees, and surely they have better things to do.

Somehow, over the years, the maple syrup production has become more important than just the sugary concoction. It had become a family and a neighborhood tradition. If

the Johnsons did not tack up the bags under the taps, the children would call home in a panic; the neighbors would wonder if something was wrong. The maple syrup authorities would have to be called. When traditions are not continued, it weakens the social contract we have with each other, a routine that brings order to otherwise hectic lives.

Appointment phone calls to the Schmalz offices were inconsistent in January and February, depending on the mood of the weather. My phone's red message light was rarely on. But, once the calendar turned to March, and the winter snow banks released their hold on residential yards, owners sensed spring in the air and made initial calls to us. These early appointments were important since they fueled our landscape machine for the first half of the growing season.

February and March is also the season of garden shows, of repairing the last of the equipment in the garage, of repainting the cabs of the trucks, and of bringing back the landscape crews to pot the bare root perennials and small shrubs that will soon fill the nursery and provide the plants for the year's designs. During this time of the year, our work schedules were makeshift since the business had not yet hit the steady pace that carried it from mid-April to November.

One of the designers' winter jobs was creating the exhibits and then manning the garden shows. This effort brought us mixed results. Though the largest show in the area, the WBAY Home and Garden Show in Green Bay, attracted thousands of prospects, most of the crowd just liked to see the indoor displays of landscape and flowers on a cold and windy March weekend. "Tire kickers" we called them, knowing they were not really se-

rious about contracting with us. They just wanted us to promise them that there were warm months ahead.

Jeff, one of our designers, had a theory about scouting prospects at these shows.

“I look at their shoes,” he said. “If the shoes are scuffed or in bad shape, I tell them to try Vande Hey’s booth. I will only talk to them if their shoes are shined.”

I spent the next four-hour slot at the show looking at the shoes walking by: work shoes, sandals, heels, chukkas, running shoes of all stripes (how do you polish running shoes?), loafers, and only a few dress shoes, though not many were polished. It had been snowing again. According to Jeff’s theory, there were no prospects here.

A pair of Nikes walked up to the booth beneath a dark blue running suit.

“Are you Doug?” said the Nikes.

“Yes, sir,” I said, looking up. Mr. Nike was tall, slim, and about a head taller than me.

“Lee Hansen said I should talk to you about my house. He said you are the best.”

Lee Hansen was my horticulture instructor at the technical college and still a good friend. I had visited with him earlier that night at the NWTC booth that still featured some of my superstar classroom drawings.

We chatted for a bit, exchanged cards, and I promised to call him.

The week after that show my time was still largely my own, and I had planned to spend one of my last free afternoons trimming the apple tree in our backyard. Any garden

chores that I could do at this time of the year should be completed, because in just a few weeks I would again be in squirrel mode.

The old tree was a Spartan variety, not suitable for baking, little use for wine (my father once tried it in a batch of mixed apples and never asked for more), and not great tasting right off the tree -- though a couple of early frosts can sweeten the apples and make them almost edible. Every summer and fall, rather than worry about an apple crop, I picked the apples off the tree when they were small and green, and later when they were large and red (a little smaller than an orange), tossed them into metal garbage cans and drove the cans out to the city yard waste dump. If I let the apples ripen, fall, and remain on the ground, the grass beneath the tree would be completely covered with apples and the yard a hazard of loopy hornets drunk on apple juice. Turning the apples to compost in the city compost piles was the most useful thing I could do with them. Once composted, they come back to enrich all of us.

So the tree's primary use was ornamental. During the odd years, white flowers in May covered the tree like a late season snow and the fragrance roused a frenzy of pollinating insects. The flowered tree made a great backdrop for Mother's Day family photos. During the even years, the flowers were only dart throws of white peeping from the gnarled and twisted branches.

The tree's use did not end with flowers, since later in the summer the dense green leaves provided deep shade for a couple of lawn chairs during hot afternoons, and the twisted, snow-covered branches in winter were a pleasant monochrome still-life seen from our kitchen window. And, a few years ago, I thought of another use for the tree. I

bought a small, one-rope swing for our neighbor's oldest daughter, but she was never able to manage the single seat and rope and kept falling off. Later that summer, when her parents built a gruesome, plastic, child-safe swing-set for her and her younger brother, I took the swing down. Some traditions just end.

So, the tools of the day included hand-pruners, branch pruner, and Swedish saw in addition to a six-foot stepladder and an aluminum extension ladder. My first job would be to clear the sucker branches that had unnaturally grown as straight verticals from the center of the tree. I had allowed them to grow because the neighbor's cable and telephone lines dipped through the tree from the power pole in my yard to the corner of their house. Cutting branches around power lines -- even cable lines -- was not my idea of a fun afternoon. After the utility company rerouted those lines, the tree was clear and the center could then be safely trimmed.

The job Mr. Nike had in mind was a gorgeous natural site above the De Pere dam on the Fox River, just south of the campus of St. Norbert College. The lot had river access and was one of a string of high-end river lots that ran from De Pere to Wrightstown. The gleaming, white, polished cut stone house overlooked a 30-foot bank above the river with unobstructed views to the north and to the west.

Mr. Nike, who was the owner, and I spent Saturday mornings in early spring looking at plans I had drawn during the week and walking across the lot that was at street level at the front door but then dramatically pitched down across a series of natural ter-

faces to the river. While most of the double lot was wooded, the south side, the only side with direct sunlight, was open, perfect to display a circular lawn and a rose garden.

I thought I had a suitable design of two distinct personalities for the house: one side formal and the other natural. Mr. Nike was an up-and-coming junior partner of a local law firm and liked the formal design to impress clients when they first arrived at his home. The natural side was my assumption that he really preferred the primitive and after wooing guests with classical European symmetry would blow them away with the undeveloped beauty of a pristine river wilderness. Chipped bark pathways would be cut into the hillside disturbing as little of the existing vegetation as possible and forming a skewed figure-eight with opposing paths meeting at the bottom of the eight at a boat landing, outdoor shower, and fire-pit on a cleared part of the shore.

The vision of a natural riverside was bold and quite different from those of his neighbors up and down the river who opted for the predictable grass lawn and a series of limestone terraces. Mr. Nike said he didn't want his yard to be like everyone else. Rather than strip the underbrush and replace it with alien, nursery-bred plantings (or worse, grass), we would use the existing vegetation as the dominant design feature. Rather than working against nature, we would pull out a design that would work with it.

I checked the initial designs with Luke Schmalz, who raised an eyebrow when I said that the owner wanted a natural landscape on the riverside. I said, "I know, I know, but this one feels right." If Luke sensed a problem, he did not bring it up. Luke and I carefully checked the estimate calculations with Lee St. John since a job of this size, well over \$120,000, could be risky to a landscape company of any size. A family-owned

company did not have the deep pockets of a larger company with multiple investors. Do well, and we make lots of money. Do not well, and, well, we didn't talk of that. Negative thinking was not encouraged. Luke said he thought this was a good plan and trusted me to carry it through.

Mr. Nike approved the plan, wrote a check for the deposit equal to half my year's salary, and, for the first time, I had the largest residential job on the job board.

After using the hand clippers on the narrow suckers in the middle of the apple tree at home, I stood back to see where I wanted to make major cuts. The apple tree's natural shape should be horizontal, almost weeping, with an open center allowing the sun in. After spying my first cut, I placed the extension ladder up to a supporting branch, grabbed the Swedish saw, and began using a series of short cuts to work through the 3-inch branch. It came down. And the one next to it. I cleared branch debris away from the trunk of the tree and walked around it, looking again at its new profile after each cut.

I wasn't concerned about hurting the tree during this trimming. Even if I made a mistake, apple trees, and other shrubs and bushes, are surprisingly forgiving so long as you don't mortally wound them. In contrast, most of my clients were reluctant to take out more than a twig or two when they pruned for fear of harming the plant, when what the plant really needed was a reduction of up to one-half its size. An experienced gardener knows that aggressive maintenance helps the plant. Cutting out the oldest branches strengthens a plant, forcing it to grow stronger, younger branches which then resist disease. Letting it just grow may shorten, not lengthen its life.

Boldness is a survival advantage in nature.

After an hour of sawing, clearing, and studying the result, I was satisfied that I had brought the tree back to a state of happy apleness that was pleasing to me and healthier for the tree. The additional exposure to the sun would strengthen the tree and encourage new growth for the next two years until the next trim. I left the branches in the backyard until spring yard waste pickup by the city. The branches would give the chickadees and finches late winter cover between the bird feeders and heated birdbath.

Though I am not overly fond of garden work, completing this biannual job on a clear March afternoon seemed quite satisfying. Oddly enough even though I spent much of my professional landscape life outdoors, I didn't do a lot of landscape work, I hardly ever looked at the landscape with enjoyment, just clinical interest. I looked past the wonder of nature that flashed before me each day, and sometimes thought if I knew less about the processes of the yard and its plants, I would enjoy it more.

I walked to the front of our house after trimming the apple tree, looking for indicators of spring other than the Johnson's maple sap bags. The south side of our front walkway had melted away back to the grass, exposing the bark mulch. Yellow green shoots, the early probes of the King Alfred daffodils, pushed up through the gray and brown leaves from the previous fall.

Under the Harry Lauder shrub, I was pleased to see another dash of green standing out from the icy gray and brown. The green was the not quite frozen base of the perennial plant called pig squeak (rub the leaves together and the sound is like a pig squeak-

ing), which I planted late last fall between the driveway and our large perennial bed. It was good to see this new friend survive the winter. I hoped the pig squeak -- now uncovered by the snow and, thus, unprotected -- would survive the nightly foraging of the rabbits that are desperate for food at this time of the year.

As I surveyed other signs of my early spring garden, I heard a woodpecker. At first I thought it was across the street, but walking down the driveway toward the sound I saw a robin-sized bird about three-quarters of the way up one of our two twin ash trees. He (or she -- I'm not sure about woodpecker gender) was on the north side of a dead branch, split from the weight of an early season snowfall and hanging by only a strip of bark. In one-second spurts the black and white bird pounded in a blur of movement into the bark of the branch. Parts of the bark floated like down like shavings from a drill. He groomed his chest between poundings.

After I watched for a few moments, he flew to the ash on the other side of walkway, landed high, and let out a series of twitters before he again began walking backwards down the main branch. His head was always up as he backed down, looking ever so carefully into the folds of the bark. Finding nothing, he looped away in long curves across the street to the trees by the river. Was he heading south toward my River Job? I hoped so, there would be a lot of woodpecker food around that project, and I would like to see him again.

By St. Patrick's Day, two weeks later, the snow banks had melted, the maple sap ran its course for the year, and I was back to full-time status at Schmalz. I had enjoyed taking the time to watch the woodpecker hunt for food during that quiet afternoon, trim-

ming the apple tree, and even manning the exhibit at the garden show. Full-time again: I no longer had time to watch the birds.

THE APRIL SNOWSTORM

Nan arranged some miniature daffodils from the peony garden just before dinner.

“I wanted to pick them before the snowstorm,” she said, sorting the half-dozen blossoms into a small earthen vase. The primary-color yellow flower cups were no more than an inch across, set in an open spread of six lower petals arranged symmetrically below the cup. The yellow, spring-like arrangement was about hand high, a tiny replica of bigger cousins we saw sprouting along our backyard rose path.

“The snow starts tomorrow,” she reminded me.

I was now in full-time mode at Schmalz making sales calls and drawing designs. I had a winter of inactivity behind me and was eager to get to work. The River Job was my largest job, but I had many others already drawn and ready.

The next day, as Nan and I ate our lunch, I saw the first flakes of snow. I had completed the work I wanted to do that morning and had come home early to avoid the hurricane-like Midwest storm that was surging from the plains states. I didn't want to be on the road during an April blizzard. Nan, also anticipating the storm, likewise put in half a day though her commute was only ten minutes. Mine was forty-five.

The flakes, scouts for the main storm, blew right to left (from the north) against the dark, almost black windows of the Millers' house across the street. At first I only saw occasional white flakes against the dark uncurtained windows, but then, as the intensity increased, I could see flakes against the yews at the foundation of their house and then

against the lilac bushes that border their property. When Nan looked at the Weather Channel radar update, she said it should be snowing right now.

“1-3 inches today, 4-6 inches tonight and 1-2 inches tomorrow,” intoned the mechanical predictor on the 8s.

Temporarily freed from work and responsibilities, almost like school kids, we went for a walk in the neighborhood. We skipped down the front steps, arm in arm and sang, off key, but in unison, “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...” Corny, but that’s what keeps a couple together for 35-years. As cars drove by on still dry pavement, I thought for a moment that this display would make us look silly.

As we walked, we talked of work projects and other odd subjects that floated in and of our lives, like disconnected points of memory. Life is not a storm, but a series of consistent flurries at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At times there doesn’t seem to be a central story line that propels us in our lives. Sometimes the wind is in our face and sometimes at our backs. And, sometimes, we are becalmed.

I was happy doing landscape design and Nan was challenged in her work, but what would it all mean ten years later when we would make this same walk, along the same sidewalks. Would we be having the same conversations? By that time would the story of our lives seem to be written by an E.M.Forester protégé, as a series of logical events with strong thematic links? Would an omniscient narrator on the 8s tell our story in a clear, predictable story line to a future audience munching on a salad? Or would our lives be episodic and choppy as if written by Joyce, Stein and the modernists -- just a

lightly organized sequence of words and syntax? Would we be experimental theater, not a three-act play?

I suspect causality is a human habit. I doubt that nature cares about causality, since nature just is. It has an inherent honesty in its single-mindedness; that we, who depend on causality in order to survive, cannot comprehend. When we see the snow, we don't just enjoy it; we want to know when it will stop.

Pushing into our walk, going north into the snow, the flakes were pellets, light but sharp against our skin. "It smells like a thunderstorm," Nan said. She was right. There was an ozone tinge, a spring storm smell and taste to the snow that was now beginning to thicken along the edges of the sidewalks. Head down, no hat -- I never wear a hat because it brings bad weather -- we walked into the wind and snow.

Turning east, toward the neighborhood hospitals, the wind seemed less severe, though the snow in the grass increased in size of flake and in intensity. After we walked only about half a mile, white snow also formed on open ground on the north side of trees.

Our neighborhood walk took about thirty minutes and followed a large square route on the sidewalks of city streets in our historic neighborhood. Our walks were always timed: we have the thirty-minute walk, the twenty-minute walk, the fifteen-minute walk, and the "I need to get out of the house" walk around the block. Perhaps we are obsessed with time, but it helps put order into the day.

By the time we turned to the west, snow was heavier and gathering on the grass that had only recently turned green after a long winter. Both of my spring shoes leaked and both socks were wet -- it would be good to change out of them once we got back

home. When we reached our driveway, the snow covered the blossoms of early daffodils like white Amish bonnets.

“The weight of the snow is going to break the flowers off,” Nan said. “Maybe we should take a picture.” We went inside to brush off, hang up our coats and change into dry socks and slippers. We forgot about the daffodils.

Two hours into the storm, the flakes were larger, heavier, and the wind shifted to the west. The snow, swirling or coming straight down, no longer driven by a logical, directional weather system, danced on the wind first one way, then another. Branches of the trees were already bending under the snow. That is always a danger in the moisture-heavy spring storms, because a branch that has been weakened or partially cracked but not yet broken by an earlier storm may not survive another load. The city had just cleared branches lost from trees after storms in March. By the end of the week, the curbs would again be piled with the remnants of this April storm.

I was totally unoccupied and did not even check the Weather Channel for storm progress. As I sat looking out the window, I noticed snow changes our view of the world through a filter quite different from that of rain. Rain blurs our vision as if it were a one-dimensional downstage screen. Snow, on the other hand, provided a close, middle, and far perspective. Close-by individual flakes moved quickly across your view down from left or right or just down. A shift of wind changed their direction as if they were a flock of sparrows who had mislocated their leader. Sometimes the wind moved them quickly

past the branches, and sometimes the flakes fluttered, skipped a sidestep before resuming an earthward attitude.

At medium range, the flakes were individually distinct but also contributed to a screen fade of the scenery. While at a distance, when the individual flakes could not be distinguished, a patina of diluted white wash gently faded primary colors to shades of gray. The winter world reverted to the black and white sharpness of an Ansell Adams print. In a way, the snow simplified what we saw. It took away detail and focused our attention on form and shape. It forced us to see the whole, rather than minutiae.

Nan, under a rust red comforter, also watched the snow dance with the wind outside the front windows. She sat with Tucker, our butterscotch tabby cat, who is always ready to nap on an unoccupied lap. She had been reading a new biography of Lincoln in order to log a productive day off but had put the book down to just look outside. The snow was hypnotic as it changed form and direction. Both of us, native Wisconsinites, watched the snowfall as if for the first time. A storm forces everyone to slow a bit and just wait until the end. It forced us to put aside our lives and just be. It forced us to have the contentment of a tabby cat curled up on a warm lap.

Nine hours after the first flakes flew, 9 p.m., TV weather forecasters predicted the storm would soon wind down and head off to the lake for the night. Additional snow was still expected, but that might just be from drifting and blowing.

The next morning I blew out the driveway so Nan could get to work -- 9.9-inches of snow would not stop commerce in Green Bay. Then I shoveled off the porch and front

walkway to the sidewalk -- I would just call in to check messages that day and not attempt to drive to the office, so I wasn't in a hurry. On the day after a storm, highway ditches were filled with cars in too much of a hurry to travel back and forth between Green Bay and the Fox Cities.

As I finished shoveling, cars slogged by on the wet streets. Trees drip-dropped snow from their branches which then sprung up, as weary as us humans were from this 100-inch winter. Daffodils were totally covered, and, I hoped, protected. The tops of the snowberry and red branches of the dogwood bowed to the ground under the load of snow. I brushed them off the best I could. The tips were iced down, and if I forced them up, I would tear the branches from the growing tips.

After I closed the garage door and turned to go into the house to check the Weather Channel once again, a nesting pair of cardinals swung in from the north to sit on the cherry tree right in front of me. The male was bright red, while the female had more subdued colors. They turned to look at me, then the female flew into the next yard, twitting to herself. The male held his ground, eyes peering from behind a black mask. Seeing the cardinals reminded me that I needed to add safflower seed to the bird feeders off the back deck. This new snow cover would make it difficult for them to find food for the next couple of days, and they would need the seeds to keep themselves alive.

IT'S A VIBURNUM

“It’s a viburnum,” I said, not really looking at the shrub we had just passed on our noon walk. My mind was not on the walk. It was on the dozen or so designs I was working on at my Schmalz office.

Nan was a little exasperated but knew the drill. When I did not know the name of the shrub or if I just didn’t care to access my in-brain plant ID manual, I just said, “It’s a viburnum.” Actually, that is a good guess if the shrub wasn’t the obvious dogwood (leaf veins never reaching the edge of the leaf), lilac (smooth, heart-shaped leaves), or honeysuckle (small leaves up and down light-brown, viney branches). The viburnum genus covers an amazingly large range of shrubby plants from knee-high petites to 10-foot sentinels that arch over the sidewalk. And, as with any genus, there are so many varieties on the market and so many created each year by nurseries, that a popular catch-all plant ID guess, such as viburnum, stands the chance of being correct more often than not.

Those who don’t know this trick are astounded that I can narrow the name of the shrub with just a glance as if I am a horticultural superstar. If I’m feeling especially creative, I’ll make-up a viburnum variety name on the spot. I’ll say, “That’s a Judy Garland Viburnum,” “That’s a Deadman’s Tooth Viburnum,” or “That’s a Viburnum Viburnum.” What good is having all these years of landscaping knowledge if you can’t make things up occasionally?

Of course friends and family don’t understand that sometimes I just don’t care about the plants around me. Curiosity only goes so far, and there are limits to anyone’s

plant knowledge, and sometimes, I am just tired of having my work all around me. I suppose some would say I am being smug, or secretive, or just childish if I am unwilling to share my plant wizardry with mundanes. After all, they might think, why did I spend all those hours studying texts, photos, and field samples, if not to benefit them? They assume, incorrectly, that any two-year horticulture graduate can identify the specific plant sub-variety from remnants of bark that had been chewed, digested, and anally secreted by the northern gray squirrel.

“Ahh, a landscape designer,” says my new best friend at a dinner party. “Can you help me with...?” Maybe, maybe not. A landscape designer does know a great many plants and can even correctly pronounce with a flourish the Latinate genus/species identifier, which always impresses paying clients, but we don’t know them all, or even a significant majority of the plants that crop up along the foundation of the house, along riverside trails, or along the sidewalks of foreclosed homes. Sure, a reasonably well schooled horticulturalist knows the general categories of plants he or she is looking at, but, given the thousands of species that exist, knowledge is sometimes hit and miss.

I remembered one time a client asked me why a mature 30-foot tree on his forested lot was failing when the trees around it were doing fine. The ground beneath the tree had not been disturbed; it was getting as much sun as its healthy deciduous neighbors; and there were no obvious insect signs. I was stumped. The tree was just not doing well. I could not identify it, which didn’t help, though, fortunately, I didn’t call it a viburnum, because even this client knew viburnums don’t turn into thirty-foot trees.

Rather than admit that I did not know why the plant was dying, I told this particular client, in a reasonable tone, “You know, sometimes the tree just gets old and declines. Plants, like all living things, have life spans. They are long-lived, but are not eternal, and this one, unfortunately, seems to be at its end.”

The client was satisfied with my explanation -- after all, I was a professional landscape designer. But I was still curious about the tree so I asked Luke, who had a job down the street, to drive by this site, take a look at the tree, and give me his evaluation.

Later that week he stopped by my drawing board: “It’s an elm.”

Oh. The morphology was now clearer. In the 1970s and 1980s Dutch elm disease, carried by an ill-tempered insect that jumped from tree to tree, wiped out most of the elms across the country. Wisconsin landscapes were devastated since this tree had been over-planted as a preferred street tree. Streets that one year had an arching, mature elm canopy; the next year had small maple, gingko, and tilia replacements with twin iron stake supports as large as the new trees. It would take a generation to regain the mature beauty of the elm. Dutch elm disease taught designers and city forestry departments not to rely on a single plant, a monoculture, in the urban landscape.

My client’s tree was an elm survivor. It had eluded the insect and disease but was now a victim. The reason I did not recognize the tree is that when I took woody plant identification in 1999, elms weren’t part of the list because there were so few still alive. Luke didn’t mention it again, but he probably questioned my plant ID skills and horticulture credentials. When he went to school in the 1970s, elms were a popular and salable

tree. When I went to school thirty years later, they were all dead. Lee Hansen did not spend a lot of time on the identification of dead trees.

Gaps in knowledge are not just from the plants you may or may not have learned when you were in school. Gaps can also come from disuse and from spending too much time with a favorite list of trees, shrubs, and perennials. Every spring, for example, I needed to relearn the plants that I knew cold back the October before. Even though I designed, specified, and priced plants all winter long, plant ID skills would get rusty. The next spring, a few afternoons in the nursery brought me up to plant light speed, and, to be painfully honest, it doesn't take a lot to impress clients. Clients assume the best because they want to be working with someone who has in-depth knowledge and experience. Come to their front door on time, in clean clothes, with a clipboard and a name badge, cape neatly pressed, and they assume even more.

But behind the name badge, most professionals live with a little fear. A horticulture instructor, who was a legend in our local plant community, once confided to me that he was always worried about how little he really knew about plants and horticulture.

"One day," he said, "someone is going to find out that I don't know as much as they think I know." Isn't that the truth in almost everything? We assign expertise depending on our expectations and hopes and forgive all but the most serious faults with the professional people we work with.

RED MESSAGE LIGHTS

First interviews with clients often end up at their kitchen table. Before that we spend time in the yard, walk about the house, and get to know each other. In the end, however, the real discussion takes place at the kitchen table where they seem to feel the safest within the walls of their own house. It is at this family gathering place most clients told me they wanted a natural yard without knowing what they were asking for. I have wondered what it might have been like to pursue this statement to its logical end. I imagined at times saying to them:

“You want a natural yard? So does that mean you want to plow under your bluegrass lawn? As you may know, bluegrass is one of the most highly genetically engineered plants we have in the landscape. It is as fake as those gnomes around that god-awful gazing ball. It is also a plant that leaves a carbon footprint the size of Lambeau Field in addition to demanding your time for weekly mowing; four times a year fertilizer treatment with nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium; and deep watering when August skies dry up.

“You want a natural yard? So does that mean you are willing to put up with thistles, diuretic berries, and rabbits creating more rabbits under your deck in the winter? Does that mean you like ant colonies in your basement, groundhogs in your vegetables, and gypsy moth caterpillars munching through your trees like a high school football team through an all-you-can-eat buffet? Will you push a rotary mower, ban power tools (in-

cluding the beloved man-toy chainsaw) and, as an added human sacrifice to the Wisconsin winter, trade in the 30-inch, two-cycle snow blower for a sturdy shovel?”

Of course I wouldn't actually say this, unless it was the last job on the last day that I planned to do the last landscape design. And, even then, I would probably resist temptation, though it would be fun to bash those gnomes into unrecognizable pieces. I know when a client says “natural,” they don't actually mean natural. What they mean is they want a design and plantings that mimic natural, so long as the mime agrees to behave according to the script -- no improvisation, no working outside the imaginary box.

It is as if my clients consider nature an unruly child who needed to be coddled, pampered, and dressed in shiny Sunday clothes to meet distant cousins. Unfortunately, nature, which at first shine seemed proper and well behaved, quickly becomes disobedient and impossible to manage without constant supervision. The tiny sprig of a morning glory that looks so delicate and fragile in May becomes an invasive overpowering kudzu-like creature casting tendrils of finger-thick vines and smothering leaves across fences, roses, and up the trunks of innocent maple bystanders.

While the child/nature quickly outgrows the boundaries we put upon it, it secretly delights us with its untamed independence. That is its attraction. While we recognize that a civilized person is bound by a stiff-upper-lip code of proper etiquette, nature, in contrast, is a glimpse of youthful freedom and wildness that we think we desire but know we do not have the courage to follow. Yes, I know clients dream of a natural yard, but they would not think of living in one.

The blinking red message light on the telephone console demanded attention most mornings when I first turned on the lights to my office. It was a message from a client who had a question, a concern, a problem. The voice message was left the night before at 9 p.m. Could I call back right away? I spent a lot of time at the Schmalz office, but I did not sleep there.

Sometimes you go a little crazy with that little red blinking light. There are clients who have reasonable questions about designs, and contracts, and timing. Then there are clients who crave attention more than action. Each of the designers at Schmalz had a different way of dealing with telephone messages. Travis, who had a private office not a cubicle, shut his door, turned off his lights, and quietly wrote down the messages. Jeff, working out of an open cubicle, replayed the messages full-volume on speakerphone, so everyone could hear the complaint. Then he talked back to the recorded voice message, ridiculing it, imitating the voice, and then cussing it out. I suppose it made him feel better, though it raised the blood pressure of everyone around him.

I followed the Travis strategy of quietly taking down the message and quickly returning the call, though I did leave my lights on in the office while I did it. I knew that delaying a call would only make an anxious customer more anxious. An anxious customer makes you more anxious, and I tried to prevent self-anxiousness. Most of the time I was able to answer the questions, but I still hated seeing the blinking red message light on the phone in the morning.

One April morning, after a late night finishing details for the River Job, Mr. Nike left a blinking red message: rather than have natural cut stone steps leading from the

middle floor to the lower level, could the treads be grinded smooth? He had parents who would be visiting and didn't want them to stumble on the uneven surface of naturally quarried rock. Twin iron railings would also have to be attached.

I returned the call. Sure, I could do that.

A week later, I had a blinking red message from Mr. Nike: rather than have the second level backyard sitting area in mulch, could it be planted in grass instead? Perhaps there was enough sunlight in the area to grow a shade blend that a neighbor told him about. If not, perhaps we could take out a tree or two to open up the lawn to the sun.

I returned the call. Sure, I could do that.

A week later, another message: rather than have the entire riverbank in natural undergrowth, why not take out only half of the low brush and replant it with yews, and hosta, and ferns.

I returned the call. Sure, I could do that. A "hot" mixture of Round Up (doubly concentrated and triply lethal) applied to existing brush, ferns, and undergrowth might be able to clear the hillside, though a proper application and reapplication cycle would take ten-days, and we didn't have that much time. Mr. Nike wanted the project done by the Fourth of July, and it was already the first part of May. However, if we brought in a tractor with a plow attachment, we might be able to dig deep enough to clear the hillside of most of the roots of existing brush. Brush that did survive could be hit again with hot Roundup sprayed from a backpack.

Landscape design is always a balance between nature and control, between what is real and what is artificial. A well-considered design that is in proportion to the size of the lot, to the existent buildings and to the maintenance capabilities of the client/owner creates a predictable and manageable space that may not be natural but will give a very nice imitation of it. That is what most of my clients settled for. They realized there were limitations to what could be done. When we do not understand the limitations of the land and of ourselves, then we run into trouble.

Nature will always try to creep into our civilized and digitally controlled world. All the tools, techniques, and spot herbicides that we wheel out of the garage on the weekend are our weapons not to control nature, but to keep control of the space we have carved out of nature. We borrow our space for just a little while. When we allow nature too much freedom, we will eventually lose control. If we do not mind the loss of control, then, yes, we would be willing to live with a “natural yard,” but that is not usually the case.

On the other hand, wishing for a natural yard assumes that we have a natural space to begin with. Most of the land in Wisconsin has been farmed, forested, or otherwise managed for decades, certainly since the beginning of the 20th Century. Natural planting, when most of our subsoil in cities and subdivisions is artificial, water colored construct, is unnatural. We overlay our homes, businesses, and schools on soil that has been stripped clean of natural vegetation and hundreds of years of topsoil. Only rarely does a designer have the chance to work on a site, such as the River Job, that still has a breath of wildness within it.

The interior of River Job house was almost complete, and the Nike family would be moving in soon. One Saturday morning, Mr. Nike proudly showed me freshly painted rooms on the ground floor of the two-story house: formal dining room, open kitchen with granite countertops, informal dining room and family room. Cardboard and plywood covered tiled areas of the foyer and bathrooms. Masking tape hung in strips from doorframes and window ledges. Carpeting would be laid the next week.

“Come look at the shower,” he said.

One quarter of the ground floor was the master suite. The walls of the oversized shower in the master suite were tiled with flat stones that had been lightly sanded to show coral and fossil remnants of sea creatures. Each tile was a museum piece in itself: unique, historic, fascinating, and expensive. The tile work itself was meticulous and, once sealed, would make a unique wall covering as precious as a natural history exhibit.

As we walked out of the bathroom into the master suite, Mr. Nike’s wife was looking out the ceiling-to-floor windows open to the river. I rarely saw her, and as she turned to speak to her husband, she paused, puzzled as to why her husband was showing the landscaper her bathroom and shower.

The next day, the red message light blinked with more changes to the River Job.

I looked at the erased and redrawn plan taped to my drawing board. The River Job kept pushing other jobs off to the side as changes were added and the estimate adjusted, usually upward. As a joke, Luke gave me the electric eraser once owned by his dad. The River Job was not only costing me a lot of time, it was also taking time away from

other projects and other clients. If I could have concentrated on this one job, life would have been easier, but I had had a lot of appointments over the winter, and my work list showed 40 other jobs in various stages of design, estimation, and approval.

What I was most concerned about was that the original undisturbed natural look of the River Job began to look more and more disturbed. A design can be refined with changes, but after a long series of revisions, after one too many facets had been cut, the drawing no longer has the quality of the original theme, and became instead a disjointed, disassociated, Frankenstein-like conglomeration of good intentions. Rather than just be a concept, an overworked design loses its original rhythm and melody and becomes just noise.

A week away from beginning to build the project, I found that rather than working with nature, we were straightening its tie, combing its hair and trying to teach a wild river site how to become a suburban ideal of a natural landscape. But just as you cannot place a truly natural design onto a suburban lot, you cannot place a suburban ideal onto a truly natural site.

I should have called the question, asked another more experienced designer for help, or brought in Luke. But I didn't do that. Too much of my ego had been drawn into the plans. Asking for help would be admitting that I couldn't do the job and that I didn't belong on the stage with the other superstars.

Instead I adapted to the changes and hoped for the best. I put the electric eraser under the drawing board.

I ordered perennials bred for tough shady conditions. These highly engineered nonnative plants needed additional watering, weeding, and fertilizer. Yet, Mr. Nike thought they seemed more “natural” than the plants that had existed on the site for generations.

A sprinkler system would be installed to keep the new plants and lawns green. Replacing all the natural vegetation, which had lived on the hillside for decades, with nursery-grown plants would exponentially multiply the amount of maintenance that the landscape would require. Completely killing the former vegetation, eradicating long-established roots, would take years. Artificiality comes with a cost. A low maintenance, natural site would now require the weekly services of a gardener just to keep nature from retaking the riverbank.

As I said, nature and natural are relative terms. Relative, but not really related.

Understand nature, yes. Work with nature, yes. But never assume that you can control nature, because when you do, when you comfortably sit at the kitchen table and exchange sweet cakes with the cousins, you then look out your window and see the child nature running across the landscape naked and laughing.

Another blinking red message appeared on the answering machine.

THE RIVER JOB

Though it seems natural today that our yards are displays of well-kept gardens and useful “outdoor rooms,” this has been a relatively recent landscape development. When my grandparents moved from the farm into the city, houses and apartments were comparatively dismal. Residential yards, like my grandparents’, were judged for their functionality not their curb appeal. Truck gardens able to provide extra food for large families were preferred rather than fussy plantings of roses and viburnum. Even public spaces were functional, low maintenance, and had low design expectations.

For example, the first public spaces that were formally and beautifully landscaped were cemeteries. Now, of course, the word cemetery brings to mind Arlington-like neat rows of white crosses, clipped grass beneath arching oaks, and small personal flower containers on single leg supports. Cemeteries are situated on the outskirts, or what were once the outskirts, of cities. Before that time, graves were dug in the city proper next to the churches. You can see that in historic cities on the East Coast, such as Boston, where the resting place of founding father Samuel Adams lies in a small graveyard next to a Starbucks and a subway entrance. As cities grew, the need for more gravesites overwhelmed churchyards, and the cemeteries were moved out of the city.

The first large cemetery placed outside a city was surveyed in 1801 on the outskirts of Paris. In 1832, English Parliament outdid the French by sponsoring a ring of

seven private rural cemeteries around the city of London, known as the Magnificent Seven. Leading citizens of Boston and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society designed Mount Auburn Cemetery near Cambridge (1832) and were soon followed by Laurel Hill in Philadelphia (1836) and Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn (1838).ⁱⁱ

Historians have pointed out that landscape design, as we know it began in the public memorial gardens where couples would take a carriage ride or romantically stroll hand-in-hand. It was not uncommon for families to travel to and picnic upon the graves of parents and grandparents. Landscape designers, such as Frederick Law Olmstead, saw the public's interest in natural spaces and parkland and thought this need might be satisfied in a less morbid setting.

City parks, county parks, private parks, and public parks soon dotted cities. The search for a natural space moved from large public sites to estates of the wealthy, then to upper and middle class lots, and then to anyone who was able to plant seed, water, and mow. What was once a privileged memorial for the dearly departed became an expectation of middle-class homeowners. The environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s expanded the do-it-yourself ideal of homeowner landscaping, as did the increase and specialization of garden stores and nurseries.

As incomes rose, do-it-yourselfers found they had the money to purchase design, installation, and maintenance services from landscape contractors. Once neighbors saw improvements next door, they also wanted to purchase those services. At first, contrac-

tors, like Ken Schmalz, Luke's dad, had limited knowledge and a truck, but later generations developed horticultural knowledge and created an industry. Expectations of what landscape design can do remain high, and, as professionals, we profit from those expectations when the job goes well.

The River Job, the largest job I had ever attempted, had swirled down into a pit. When construction began in April, the crews had not settled in: new crewmembers worked for a few days and then left, so the foreman worked shorthanded until replacements were found and then they left – not everyone hired had the requisite strong backs. Materials were delayed; designs continued to be changed by the beat of the red message light; and it rained for 10-straight days. After the first couple of days of working in the clay muck, I pulled the crew off the site and loaned them to another designer, Travis, who was working on a drier site. Neither Mr. Nike, nor I, was proud of what the project was turning into, yet I thought he still trusted me, the professional, and the horticultural superstar. That narcotic belief dulled me to the only end this story could have.

When conditions dried and we were ready to restart, Mr. Nike asked to see Luke instead of me or the crew. Ok, I thought, I would probably be pulled off the job, onto other ones, and even felt relieved. I would be punished in design purgatory for a while competing with Vande Hey for lawn estimates in Kaukauna but would eventually work

my way back up the ladder. You learn from your mistakes, right? There is always a reason why something happens.

The morning after Luke's meeting with Mr. Nike, Luke came to my cubicle to talk. The dogs weren't with him.

The job was a disaster, he said, and he was going to personally take over the design and installation, salvage some respect for the company and try to avoid a lawsuit. He said the foreman would be "kicked in the butt." I expected all of this and nodded.

He was not angry, just very sad, and spoke in low tones. "You were in over your head, Doug, and you should have asked for help. I'll have to ask another foreman to take on the job and work overtime to get this done, and the only way I can show I am in charge is if you are gone. I don't want you working for me any more."

I was a child in the raspberry patch once again: that wasn't fair. I did what I was supposed to do, followed all the rules, and didn't know there were still berries under the leaves. I thought I zapped them with hot Roundup from my backpack. After Luke walked back to his office, I quickly typed out a two-paragraph resignation message -- no need to prolong the inevitable -- and left the office. As I drove back home, I called Nan and told her I had been fired.

"Thank God," she said, adding, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

She met me at home, and the two of us decided to return to Darboy to clean out my office. Luke was gone for the morning, but Lee St. John, polite and courteous to the last, helped Nan pack up my office as I made notes in job files. I dropped off a few important client files with Travis. I'm sure my other forty-odd jobs would be divvied up among the other designers. I trusted Travis to handle these.

"Was it my fault?" Travis asked, thinking about the borrowed crew which helped him complete his job on time. What he was really asking was, "Am I in danger too?" The lights were not on in his office this morning.

"No," I said. "It wasn't you."

Out of the office and on our own, Nan and I pushed the last box in the back of car. Jeff drove up in a cloud of gravel and dust.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he said. "If I can do anything for you, let me know."

I was now beyond words. I had kept up a stoic exterior in the office, but could not maintain the mask much longer. I tried to answer, sucked breath, but could only punch him on the shoulder.

We started to drive home north on a four-lane country highway that connected one, small, nameless burg after another. One-story strip malls of struggling look-alike businesses with faded American flags in the corner of their windows huddled next to residential developments newly emerged from the mud of farm fields. In between, remnant fields served as unofficial borders between rival communities. I never did learn where

the boundaries of one village and municipality ended and another began. At one time that seemed important -- to know where the boundaries were. Now, it seemed, I wouldn't have to.

Nan asked, "Do you want me to drive?"

"No. I'm fine."

You wouldn't think that living in Green Bay would make me feel like a foreigner in the Fox Cities, but I was. As we drove home, I needed to reconnoiter my way down the road, like a mutt finding its way home through a vaguely familiar forest by remembering the trail of landscape design jobs that I had pissed on in the last two years. On the right, for example, I planted two new lawns last year one after the other: one neighbor watered faithfully and her yard looked very good this spring -- check it off as successful. Her neighbors left for a couple of weeks last August trusting the watering to nature. A predictable summer drought killed the new grass seeds. Check it off unsuccessful. I always wondered why the two neighbors didn't cooperate. They seemed like friends, but as soon as the grass went down, the barrier went up: this is where my yard starts and this is where your yard ends. This is green. This is brown. This is living. This is dead. Have a nice day.

Near the southern border of Little Chute, about 10 minutes from my ex-job and 35 minutes from my future, I saw a police car with lights flashing behind me. I pulled over to let him pass, but, to my surprise, he also pulled over, behind me.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?” the officer asked.

Because I just lost my job? Because I just cost a company thousands of dollars in discarded perennials and hundreds of wasted man-hours? Because I couldn't handle a client who couldn't decide if he wanted to be disturbed or undisturbed? Because I couldn't make the red light stop blinking? Because I couldn't control the Weather Channel forecast on the 8s? Because I finally ran up against the barrier of not knowing what I didn't know, and discovered I really did not have any fucking business designing nature?

“No, officer, I don't.”

“You were driving 36 miles per hour in a 25 mile per hour zone.”

Within a two-mile distance, the speed limit on this country highway dropped from 55-mph, to 45-mph, to 35 mph, to 25 mph. I was a few blocks into the 25 mph zone. I had driven this road at least twice a day for the past two years and had never had a problem. Of course, up to that day, I had never been fired either. It had been a day of firsts.

Nan probably should have been driving after all.

I wondered if there were a point ahead where the speed limit dropped from 25 mph to 15 mph, to 5 mph and then to zero. Was there a zero zone ahead where all the cars were dead still, trapped by the traffic engineer's legally binding judgment of safe speed? We all trust the professionals after all. What if the professionals told us conditions did not warrant any speed? What if drivers and passengers, obedient to authority, respecting their own boundaries, sat quietly in their cars, unable to move ahead? Windows rolled

up, AC cooling until the gas tank finally runs dry. What happens then? Do the people get out? Are the cars left to rust on the road? Is asphalt poured over them and a new zero-mph zone created over a little rise in the road? That would be a true urban cemetery where viburnums could be the plant of choice.

The officer walked back to his car to check to see if I was a mass murderer with an outstanding jaywalking warrant.

“Tell him what happened to you today,” Nan said.

What could I tell him?

Officer, I'd like to tell you about two neighbors who wouldn't water each other's lawns. I'd like to tell you about mutant riverbank underbrush that can't be killed by "hot" herbicide. I'd like to tell you about the narcotic I've been sniffing called self-importance. I'd like to tell you about a naked child I just saw running down the center of the road laughing. No wait, Officer, don't go, how about a cup of coffee? I would like to tell you about how I just went from 55 to 45 to 35 to 25 to zero.

DESIGNING NATURE

In summer, the explosion of life created raindrops on a sunny day at the lagoons of the bay shore park. Thousands, perhaps millions, of insects dove and touched the smooth surface of the water and for an instant disrupted the surface tension creating a dimple. Not large enough to break through, the insects dipped and rose, dipped and rose, taunting the fish beneath who lunged up and out of the water, twisting and turning in the air, and splashed down on its sides.

Losing a job is a lot like death, your death. One goes through the predictable grieving steps from shock and denial, pain and guilt, all the way to adjustment, acceptance, and hope. In the months after I lost my job at Schmalz, I was up to the second step: pain and guilt. Hope was still years off. Nan, family, and friends were supportive, but much of the time I was on my own and found myself at places I had denied myself, such as the shore of this lagoon at a city park, watching and waiting. Waiting for what? I didn't know. My narrative line had stopped. My life was an intermission of unconnected images, as I waited for the next feature film to start.

I had been trained as a designer to see detail, to see patterns and colors and opportunities that my clients overlooked. Now, I turned that training to sights around me, such as noticing the dimpled surface of the water and the lunging fish on a quiet summer afternoon. Other than a few cars passing on a road behind me, the only other sound was the "woof woof" of the air rushing through the wings of a goose skimming the surface of the

water. The goose flew so close to the water that a reverse reflection upside down goose flew along with it. Neither the real goose, nor the reflected goose, seemed to fear the water. I once had that kind of confidence. Does the goose ever miscalculate? Does it ever unintentionally drag a wingtip in the water, spiral down, and lose itself in its own reflection?

Once the goose passed, there seemed to be no movement of the water at all, no waves, no current. Just glassy stillness. A lagoon with no destination, no plans. You might say the water is stagnant, as if there was no purpose to its existence. What might it say when it goes home for the night? “Hi Honey, I’m home.” “What did you do today?” “Nothing. No purpose. I was stagnant.”

Yet the surface impression of stagnation hides a micro-design of intense natural activity: the processing of sunlight, nutrients and water into sugar and then cell structures; the feeding of microorganisms on those plant cells; the feeding of insects on the microorganisms; and the feeding of fish on the insects. The fisherman to my left, barefoot, with a lazy line cast onto the water, sought to complete the final link in the food chain. For the lagoon, stagnation actually means production.

But I am a blundering fool stumbling through nature and cannot see the intricate balance that keeps all of us alive. I only believe what I can see. I could see the wooded bank across the lagoon, so that I could believe in, but if I looked lower into the water and focused only on the reflection of the wooded bank, my beliefs changed. The dimpling of

the water created dark blue fireworks of sky between the solid green cedar and maple branches. If I looked casually at the reflection, my mind's eye saw trees as it thought they should appear.

But then, if I focused tightly on the reflection, discounting my brain's tendency to apply order to disorder, there were dizzying strobes of greens upon green. Shifting, overlapping, the fluidity of water blended the hard belief of the real into an impressionist's vision. Is what we think we see real, or is reality something else? A breeze created knife strokes of color that were very Van Gogh, but without the madness. Madness is manmade. Nature is not mad. In fact, I might say nature is the opposite of madness. Madness is action without purpose (or inaction without purpose), and nature always has purpose. Even the stagnant lagoon had purpose.

After Nan and I got home from Schmalz and unpacked the car, she helped me pack for an unexpectedly extended vacation in Door County. Nan, Val (our sister-in-law) and Nan's mom, Edith, had been vacationing in Door County the first part of that week. I had not planned to join them until the weekend. But plans had changed.

For the first time since I was nine-years-old, I had a completely free summer. The future was a fluid reflection of possibility on a dimpled surface. Nan still had a steady job with benefits, so our financial security was not an issue, but my emotional and vocational security was. I could not imagine being at home for an extended period of time, stagnant, purposeless. I was too much Western and not Buddhist enough. I would restart

my one-man landscape design business, of course, but what little passion I had for the horticulture profession had been washed down the banks of the River Job. I needed to find another creative outlet.

Five years in landscape design taught me both the limitations as well as the joy of shaping the natural world. I understand now I did not design nature as much as temporarily worked alongside it, discovering secrets that it allowed me to see. In order to work with nature, you must surrender your ego that is the source of creativity. I thought I was a superstar, able to form nature in a drama of four dimensions, but was really barely able to conjure a two-dimensional pencil drawing while fighting off an old-fashioned electric eraser. I had only been able to glimpse at the dazzling rightness of a design, which pushed me to larger and larger projects until I eventually touched my own limits, spun down, and crashed.

During the vacation, our family drove to Sunset Park in Fish Creek. At the end of a dead-end road, a circular stone and mortar seawall encloses a small lawn and park where tourists, like us, set up lawn chairs facing the western horizon of the bay. A series of stone steps curves down to the bay shore, a mix of boulders, stones, and pea gravel. A stone skipping contest occupied bored teens dragged to the park by their parents. A bus from the Door County Ghost Tour Company pulled up and told the story of a brother finding a

drowned older brother on these rocky shores after a tragic shipwreck in the Bay of Green Bay. Then the bus moved on.

At dusk that night, the western sky was painted with a horizontal band of clouds and most of the sky overhead was a darkening. The moon assumed its predicted place at the zenith along with the evening star. The sun inched down, as if reluctant to leave, knowing there was more work to do, and painted the horizon clouds with reds and purple, and even a puzzling shade of green.

This daily change from day to night catches our imagination. Each sunset during the tourist season when the sky was clear, large crowds gathered at this perfect viewing spot for this moment. Our problems, feuds, battles, and worries seem trite compared to this celestial display of nature.

Our satellites and space station circle overhead, and we have put our technology on the Moon, Mars, and Venus, but I still do not think we understand our place and importance. As we waited in the park, the rotation of the earth tipped us away from the power of the sun, the source of life. During the day we might preen and puff out our chests, and say what good boys and girls we are, but we fall woefully short of relevance compared to natural cycles around us. Though we think we are standing strong and upright, we are already horizontal, at rest in relationship to the sun.

This night the lower horizon was clear of clouds. The sun sank beneath the far trees of Chambers Island across the bay until only the top arc of light remained. The teens stopped skipping stones. The air at that moment was still as if everyone collective-

ly held their breath, silhouetted into monochromatic uniformity against the sunset. The sky darkened more. Above, more bright stars hurriedly popped out, eager to be wished upon.

Then, just as the last bit of yellow, the last direct rays of light, dipped below the horizon, the far western sky contained all the colors of the world, all the images of the past, and all the joy of future hopes for just one moment.

The crowd applauded.

END NOTES

ⁱ Alex Gooch, "Being Somebody, Going Somewhere." *Tricycle*, Spring 2011, pp 55.59.

Print.

ⁱⁱ Barlow, Elizabeth. *Landscape Design: A Cultural and Architectural History*. New

York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001. Print