

The Giving Place: Catoctin Mountain Park

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“...well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting.
Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.”
And the boy did. And the tree was happy.

—Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*

For centuries, humans have taken from the land now known as Catoctin Mountain Park, 70 miles northwest of Baltimore, Maryland. The earliest people hunted and gathered in what we believe was a sustainable manner, leaving the land as they found it. Mostly. Even they came to see it as having untapped potential. The Native Americans quarried stones that they could make into tools to further change the world. And so it began, with each wave of humans extracting something they thought they needed—or at least wanted—in what became a kind of ecological, landscape-scale version of Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*.

After the Kittocton people left, or were more likely driven from, this land, European settlers arrived and saw Catoctin Mountain as a forest that needed to be cleared for farming—and not long after, a good place to hide their stills for converting grains into moonshine. Others regarded the trees as a source of lumber and as raw material to fuel ironworks. In time, the land was seen as a secluded place to secretly train young men for war. A few imagined it as a retreat for presidents and world leaders. Yet others saw its potential as a sanctuary for war weary sailors and marines. Later, the land was understood to be in need of reforestation—and thus an opportunity for unemployed men to engage in meaningful work. Then it became a place for people to escape the cities to fish, hike, and camp. Later, it became a setting for environmental education, as well as a living laboratory to study the workings of the natural world.

Today, having come to understand that the Earth is being transformed by human activity, that preservation cannot keep the planet from changing, and that all microbes, plants, and creatures are being shaped by our species, we find ourselves in the “Era of Re-” (eschewing anything so egotistically grandiose as “The Anthropocene”). This word-forming prefix is probably 6,000 years old, rooted in Proto-Indo-European language, and variously evoking a sense of “anew,” “again,” “against,” “back,” “turning,” and “undoing.” In social terms, we are appreciating the importance of respect, pondering the payment of reparations, and arguing over

who is in charge of recollecting. And in an environmental context, we advocate reduce-reuse-recycle; ecologists pursue restoration, reclamation, and remediation; activists reproach, resolve, and revolt; politicians reward, restrain, and reform; educators remember, recount, and revise; eco-theologians speak of reincarnation, renunciation, and reverence; and the public retreats to nature for recreation and relaxation. And so, as the artist-in-residence at Catoctin Mountain Park, I chose to reflect on this place as a historical-contemporary archetype of “re-” during my own revitalization and recovery from the world of airports, highways, and cellphones.

With my conceptual muse chosen (I extemporaneously picked an “re-“ word each morning that felt like it had creative, catalytic potential), the question became one of restraints. How should I restrict myself in terms of a daily reflection on this land and its inhabitants (I’ve learned that constraints foster creativity)? The locus of industry that triggered the remaking of the land was the Catoctin Furnace, where ore was blasted into pig iron for 130 years. To fuel the inferno required an acre of forest be cut and transformed into charcoal every single day. For a century, much of the grueling work at the furnaces was done by slaves, until it became cheaper to pay deplorable wages to immigrants. America must surely regret the destruction of land and lives. And so, I decided that each day’s reflection would have exactly 271 words to honor and remember the 271 Black men and women whose blood, sweat, and tears—along with the forest—fueled the furnaces.

May 8

Rebar (n.)

also *re-bar*, “steel reinforcing rod in concrete,” 1961, from *re(inforced)* bar.¹

Getting from the grasslands of Wyoming to the forests of Catoctin Mountain Park meant passing through cities. Across the nation, spring is heralded by the blossoming of urban construction, as reliably as the blooming of wild geranium, nodding trillium, and violets at Catoctin.

Foundations, bridges, and walls are festooned with emerging thickets of **rebar** to increase the tensile strength of concrete. These ribbed, steel rods are the builder’s version of a plant’s sclerenchyma which assures the pliable sturdiness of stems. We don’t often appreciate the elegant, internal engineering that provides strength and pliability for skyscraping towers and towering trees. This led me to wonder what framework of ideas lies within the conceptual structures of ecology and environmentalism, without which science and activism would be as brittle as concrete or as vulnerable as the growing tips of plants.

As for ecology, “big is different”—we can’t predict or explain the living world by reducing systems to their parts, particularly when we take into account complex human interests and values. Unlike in physics, the fundamental units of ecology are highly variable and historically contingent. As such, the ductile answer to all ecological questions begins with “it depends.”

With regard to environmentalism, problems are interrelated. Although nothing is solved in isolation, supple strength means that doing the right thing anywhere is likely to have positive consequences everywhere. We live on a planet of finite resources, with anthropic humility being in desperately short supply. In short, without Nature, we are doomed; without us, Nature will be fine.

And so, to build a structure that supports human flourishing, pour a foundation of knowledge reinforced with wisdom.

¹ The etymologies of the conceptual “seed” words in these journal entries are taken with minor formatting changes from the Online Etymology Dictionary at etymonline.com. As with places like Catoctin, words have stories; their origins and histories can be evocative.

May 9

Recreate

“restore to a good or normal physical condition” after weakness or exhaustion, 1530s, from Latin *recreatus*, past participle of *recreare* “to refresh, restore, make anew.” Earlier it meant “refresh or cheer” (late 15c.); the intransitive sense of “refresh oneself” is by 1520s; that of “take recreation” is by 1580s; also *re-create*, “to create anew, make again,” 1580s, from *re-* “back, again,” here, “repetition of an action,” + *create*.

In 1928, Americans needed to escape the grind of the Great Depression. They needed to **recreate**. And so, an insightful and compassionate government developed Recreation Demonstration Areas—“giving places” that provided meaningful work for unemployed men and soothing sanctuaries for city folk. Catoctin Mountain Park was a refuge where exhausted people could come to re-create themselves—at least for a few days.

I’m not sure what anyone was thinking would happen 95 years later, when busloads of 4th graders arrive almost daily. Maybe being a kid hasn’t changed entirely (digital devices notwithstanding). Put 9-year-olds into a forest and they’ll amble (along with saintly patient NPS rangers), shout (despite the admonitions of chaperones), and learn “important” lessons about nature (at least when paying attention, which is really hard when searching for salamanders, telling stories about wild animal encounters, turning sticks into spears, and pondering scat).

Catoctin is a land made anew, desecrated and re-created by the continuing labor of hardworking people. And watching students and teachers, I sensed a release from the weariness of the classroom. Learning multiplication, fractions, spelling, and punctuation is essential but draining. With the school year ending and summer coming, nowhere promises or provides a renewal of the human spirit like a forest filled with manic chipmunks, thumping woodpeckers, and a picnic-area panicked frog that miraculously managed to survive a stampede of 102 tennis shoes.

And, like the children, I recreate and re-create in this place, albeit rather more sedately—rising with the sun, slowing my pace, paying attention, breathing deeply, taking long hikes for their own sake, and being playful (peeking under rocks and logs is like playing hide-and-seek).

May 10

Revitalize

“put new life into, restore vitality,” 1840, from re- “back, again” + vitalize.

Vital

late 14c., “of or manifesting life,” from Latin *vitalis* “of or belonging to life,” from *vita* “life,” related to *vivere* “to live,” from PIE root gwei- “to live.” The sense of “necessary or important” is from 1610s, via the notion of “essential to life” (late 15c.).

This morning, I watched a black swallowtail butterfly **revitalize** herself, resting in the sun and slowly pumping her wings to get the solar-heated hemolymph flowing to her muscles. The thought of having a night-cooled body being infused with sun-warmed fluids was enough to make me wish I was poikilothermic. So I pursued the nearest approximation, turning my dorsal thorax to the sun and soaking up the rays. My sore back (National Park Service mattresses are less than luxurious) was soothed, my body revitalized.

I started paying attention to moments in which life was restored to me: the stretching of hike-stiffened muscles upon waking, that first cup of steaming coffee, those initial steps on the trail up to Thurmont Vista, the gulps of electrolyte-infused water, the peanut-butter-and-green-olive sandwich (protein, fat, salt, and carbs!) along a brook, the steamy water washing away well-earned perspiration, a cup of Irish Breakfast tea warming my innards before bed. It’s not as if life ebbed between these occasions of awareness, but the busy, buzzing brain easily forgets about being alive. So it is that sensuality is vital to revitalizing.

I wonder if the forest feels more alive after a rain or if a meadow sighs with satisfaction on a sunny day. Such mystical imaginings of a “life force” were dismissed by serious biologists more than a century ago. Today, we dress the mystery of life in the respectable scientific attire of “emergence” (in which the functions of complex systems are unpredictable and inexplicable based on their component parts). Doubting that the felt-sense of revitalization can be reduced to biochemical terms, I relish the experience of *élan vital*.

May 11

Respire

late 14c., respiren, “breathe, draw breath,” from Old French *respirer* (12c.) and directly from Latin *respirare* “breathe again, breathe in and out,” from *re-* “again” + *spirare* “to breathe” (see spirit (n.)). Formerly also “to rest or enjoy relief after toil or exertion” (1590s).

Spirit

mid-13c., “animating or vital principle in man and animals,” from Anglo-French *spirit*, Old French *esprit* “spirit, soul” (12c., Modern French *esprit*) and directly from Latin *spiritus* “a breathing (respiration, and of the wind), breath; breath of a god,” hence “inspiration; breath of life,” hence “life.”

Even for a fellow coming from 7,200 feet (where we scoff at the lowly elevation of the Appalachians), the hike up to Chimney Rock required me to rather abundantly perspire and deeply **respire**. The overlook from this high point was inspiring—the breathy term we often use to describe a stirring experience.

But catching my breath on the outcropping (and feeling relief after toil, per the meaning of respiration 400 years ago) while taking in the verdant view, meant inhaling the life-giving oxygen that had been released by plants and exhaling the carbon dioxide that my chlorophyllic companions require. I like the idea of respiration as the process of breathing in and out, in and out (hence, the “re-“), but I really love the root of the word which comes from Latin *spiritus* meaning “spirit”—the animating principle of animals or the breath of God.

I fantasize that my writing is a kind of respiration in which thoughts and feelings are breathed into the world, inhaled in by a reader, and then exhaled to their family and neighbors. I aspire to have my time at Catoctin Mountain Park be like the circular breathing of my friend Paul Taylor when he’s playing the didgeridoo with a magically uninterrupted flow of music.

In moments of naïve optimism, I even imagine that my words foster a believing and breathing together of writer and reader—a conspiracy. A Jesuit priest once described authentic religion as “a conspiracy of the good.” So, let us cherish the Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing mutualistic relationships of care and respect. In and out, in and out...

May 12

Recover

c. 1300, *recoveren*, “to regain consciousness,” also “regain health or strength after sickness, injury, etc.,” from Anglo-French *rekeverer* (13c.), Old French *recoverer* “come back, return; regain health; procure, get again” (11c.), from Medieval Latin *recuperare* “to recover” (source of Spanish *recobrar*, Italian *ricoverare*; see [recuperation](#)). The transitive sense of “restore from sickness, restore (another) to health” is from c. 1600.

To **recover** from rheumatism, take sassafras root bark; from dysentery, wineberry leaves; from headaches, bear corn; from constipation, mayapple roots, from upset stomach sweet-cicely tea. The Pilgrims brought dandelion to treat liver and kidney ailments—and this golden flower settled into the North American landscape with far less disruption than the Mayflower’s human cargo. Other medicinal newcomers have been equally pushy, including garlic mustard (for ulcers) and beefsteak plant (for asthma). Asking nothing in return, Catoctin gives us a botanical pharmacy today and provided a place for troops to recuperate during World War II.

While this land offers physical recovery, perhaps its greatest restorative powers pertain to spiritual health. In this verdant tangle of trees and trails, those who planned the park imagined that city dwellers from Baltimore and Washington would have their sagging spirits lifted. And today, there remains a therapeutic quality as the scent of loamy soil, the symphony of bird songs, and the coolness of elevation create an elixir to heal affluenza. COVID is waning, but a pandemic of consumption continues to afflict American society.

In nature, we regain a sense of material simplicity, a childlike appreciation of beauty, and an octogenarian sense of serenity. A dose of green splattered with a Jackson Pollock-like palette of wildflowers both calms a chattering mind and stimulates a dolorous soul sickened by concrete and steel.

At the end of a school visit, a child sighed, headed to the bus, and said, “Well, back to the real world.” I winked and told her, “No, *this* is the real world. You’re returning to a made-up world.” Her teacher nodded. I wished them well.

May 13

Relate

1520s, “to recount, tell,” from French *relater* “refer, report” (14c.) and directly from Latin *relatus*, used as past participle of *referre* “bring back, bear back,” from *re-* “back, again” + *lātus* “borne, carried.” Transitive sense of “bring (something) into relation with (something else)” is from 1690s. Meaning “to establish a relation between” is from 1771. Sense of “to feel connected or sympathetic to” is attested from 1950, originally in psychology jargon.

I can **relate** to a millipede obliviously meandering across a forest trail. These creatures did not evolve in a world of Vibram-soled boots. Of course, some creatures were prepared for the arrival of civilization, such as cabin-infesting carpenter ants and dumpster-diving raccoons. But I doubt that our evolutionary history preadapts us to flourish in digital relationships and virtual worlds. Empathy, not technology, lies at our core. This ability to be imaginatively, emotionally, even spiritually brought into relation with others is not just human but humanizing.

When my son was learning to talk, he used the pronoun “who” for all objects, such as the “blanket who I slept with” and the “cat who had stripes.” His language seemed to express a belief that he was immersed in a world of fellow beings. For him, nothing was a merely a “that” or an “it.”

At the Thurmont public library, I led a poetry workshop for children during which they were asked to find a natural object as the catalyst for a cinquain. One girl found a rock, named it Boris and wrote: “Boris / you are so old / you sound like a cello / and you taste like fresh, muddy dirt. / Content.” A tranquil stone? Indeed.

So, what about that millipede? I can report that I gently nudged the creature, which curled into a defensive ball, off the trail. We can all relate to being unsure of the intentions of powerful beings who are prodding us in dubious directions. Catoctin Mountain Park is a fine place to curl up a while—and let the giants of wealth and politics pass by.

May 14

Recognize

early 15c., *recognisen*, “resume possession of land,” a back-formation from recognizance, or else from Old French *reconoiss-*, present-participle stem of *reconoistre* “to know again, identify, recognize,” from Latin *recognoscere* “acknowledge, recall to mind, know again; examine; certify,” from *re-* “again” + *cognoscere* “to get to know, recognize.” The meaning “know (the object) again, recall or recover the knowledge of, perceive an identity with something formerly known or felt” is recorded from 1530s.

I **recognize** aspects of Catoctin. Scrambling up Wolf Rock, I clamber across lichen-encrusted quartzite boulders punctuated by gnarled pines—and I am momentarily transported back to the mountains above my home. The ubiquitous dandelion, the bounding squirrel, the hunch-backed turkey vulture, the frustrated paper wasp trapped in my window, and the viny promise of summer raspberries are all known to me.

But perhaps I need to re-cognize or re-think what these organisms mean. Are they familiar friends who I should greet or ubiquitous creatures who I should dismiss as the biotic equivalents of Burger King in Thurmont (3 miles down the hill) and Laramie (1600 miles to the west)? Is seeing them far from home like hearing English on the streets of Paris? Should I be comforted or disturbed by cultural cognates like the letters carved into a bench at Thurmont Vista (surely there is a D who loves a G in every forest)?

There is something wonderfully unifying in recognizing that some rocks, organisms, and symbols connect us on a planetary scale. But we also crave places that are unrecognizable; otherwise, what’s the point of travel? And so, I’m energized by the novel trees and wildflowers at Catoctin. I imagine the same would be true of a time-traveling visitor who arrived after living through the devastations wrought by human industry.

Perhaps the journalist Sydney J. Harris put it best in terms of our conflicted desires regarding recognition and novelty in the world: “Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time; what we really want is for things to remain the same but get better.”

May 15

Recount

“to tell, relate in detail,” late 15c., also *recompt*, from Old North French and Anglo-French *reconter* (12c., Modern French *raconter*), from Old French *re-* “again” + *conter* “to relate, reckon.”

There it was, slithering across the trail, a coal-black snake with a lemon-yellow ring around its ophidian neck. Yellow on black, safe for Jack. Or is it black and yellow, kill a fellow? Or maybe yellow beside red, you’ll be dead? But there was no red—and no time to ponder venomous verse. This serpent was just inches from my ankle...

We love to **recount** experiences in nature, particularly when there is danger afoot (pun intended). The philosopher Richard Kearney maintains that telling tales is more vital to humans than eating, “...while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human [and sometimes wild].” I love recounting my brush with a mountain lion years ago. Other than man-eaters, no creatures provide richer fodder for storytelling than reptiles. Catoctin features turtles, lizards, skinks—and snakes, including timber rattlers around Wolf Rock and a resident copperhead down from my cabin.

Our citified society is hungry for raconteurs who can vividly recount their experiences in the wild, such as Jack London, Loren Eiseley, and Aldo Leopold. As important as the scientific counting and recounting of species is to understanding the loss of biodiversity, numbers nudge the mind, but stories move the soul. So what about my snake encounter?

Turns out that the viper was a young, northern ringneck snake. The normally secretive, utterly harmless, young reptile was about six inches long and doing its damndest to avoid my lumbering foot. Sometimes human foolishness is almost as good for a raconteur as natural peril. And so, at Catoctin: Neck is yellow, I’m a silly fellow.

May 16

Repurpose

“put to a new purpose,” by 1889, from re- “back, again,” here perhaps “anew,” + purpose (v.). Modern popularity dates from 1980s.

To **repurpose** seems to be the purpose of humans at Catoctin. Native Americans turned rhyolite into stone tools; dirt-poor farmers turned forests into fields; a sawmill turned trees into lumber; Civil War generals turned mountainous terrain into tactical assets; moonshiners turned grain into whiskey; colliers turned logs into charcoal; entrepreneurs turned hematite into pig iron; the government turned degraded land into a Recreational Demonstration Area; presidents turned “Shangri-La” into Camp David; the WPA turned American chestnuts into cabins; the CCC turned denuded land into a forest; the OSS turned a camp for children with disabilities into a clandestine, military training ground; public schools and Scout troops turned Camp Misty Mount into an educational setting.

I’m dubious of there being an intrinsic purpose in nature, or what the Greeks called a *telos*—a goal or direction of evolution and ecology (other than persevering, but even that’s questionable). I’m confident that our survival as a species is not the Earth’s concern. We are the meaning makers and purpose providers.

So, is there a best or higher purpose for Catoctin? Let’s nix converting a forest to charcoal to fuel a furnace to make iron into weapons of war, and taking away a camp for physically challenged kids so the CIA’s predecessor could train young men to kill. Maybe ethical pluralism—scientific research, artistic inspiration, and outdoor recreation might be complementary and commendable purposes.

Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* offers some answers. That mangled tree was exploited until it was just a stump, good for sitting and resting. Maybe that should be the goal of Catoctin—a place to relax, recover, recuperate, revitalize and reflect.

May 17

Reincarnate

also *re-incarnate*, “incarnate anew,” 1836, from *re-* “back, again” + *incarnate* (v.) or else a back-formation from *reincarnation*. As an adjective by 1829, “reincarnated.”

A ‘good’ environmentalist shouldn’t find the scent of commercially sawn wood to be tantalizing (timber operations being bad). So perhaps I shouldn’t have marveled at the reconstruction of the Owens Creek Sawmill. Although the 19th century mechanisms aren’t churning out lumber today, the mill seems like an organism in suspended animation.

While pondering the skills needed to **reincarnate** a machine, I drove past a freshly flattened squirrel, soon to be the nursery for blow fly maggots and their necrophagous neighbors. Death gives rise to life, from roadside to cosmic scales. The inimitable astronomer Carl Sagan reminded us that the elements composing our bodies originated from the deaths of stars.

Being incarnated stardust is rather more glorious than our biological reincarnation. My corpse will feed hungry soil-dwellers, whose nutritive remains might find their way into a raspberry bush, the fruits of which will be harvested by a summer visitor and added to a bowl of ice cream. Indeed, our bodies are constantly reincarnating, with some tissues turning over every few days.

We are spellbindingly connected to our ancestors through the marvel of molecular reincarnation. Around 8,000 BCE, Paleoindians arrived at Catoctin Mountain and discovered deposits of rhyolite, a wonderful material for making lithic tools. Imagine the first individual shaping a spear point and exhaling a breath of satisfaction with his work. Now, take a deep breath. It is virtually certain that you’ve inhaled a molecule exhaled by that Stone Age man. His particle is now in your body, where it might someday be passed along to a Carl Sagan of the future—or perhaps to an earthworm.

So it goes with reincarnation.

May 18

Result

Verb, early 15c., *resulten*, “occur as a result, arise as a consequence of facts, arguments, etc.,” from Latin *resultare* “to spring forward, rebound” (in Medieval Latin “to result”), a frequentative from the past participle of *resilire* “to rebound.”

Noun, 1620s, “action of leaping or springing back” (a sense now obsolete); 1640s, “outcome, effect, consequence;” 1650s, “decision, outcome of an action or process;” from result (v.).

There’s nothing like the Catoctin Furnace to remind one of the importance of producing a **result** in Western culture. Making stuff is the whole purpose of American industry, although virtual stuff is the product *du jour* (Note: this was written without ChatGPT). Originally fueled by charcoal processed from nearby timber, the massive furnace is a paradigm of productivity. Iron smelted from this masonry behemoth went into making cannons for Revolutionary War, classic Franklin Stoves, and iron cladding for the USS *Monitor*. Results matter! Or so we are told.

We want our lives to matter—and that means generating tangible results. The metaphysics of ecology has been expressed as *afficit ergo est*: It affects, there for it is. If to exist means to influence, humans needn’t worry about leaving our mark on the world. Instead, I wondered if it was possible live so lightly as to not matter—at least for a day.

And so, yesterday I walked tenderly on bare feet from my cabin and spent the morning sitting quietly under an oak tree doing my best to produce nothing more than a bit of CO₂, a shallow dent in the soil, and a snack for a sweat bee. Good intentions, but no good results— notwithstanding the bee. In the afternoon, I took an utterly inconsequential, virtually traceless hike (I admit to nabbing a granola bar wrapper from the trail, but I seriously doubt that any lives were affected).

In the evening, I concluded that a day without results is a serious challenge for a pathologically productive writer. However, I managed to put no words on a page. Until this morning.

May 19

Reduce

late 14c., *reducen*, “bring back” (to a place or state, a sense now obsolete), also “to diminish” (something), from Old French *reducer* (14c.), from Latin *reducere* “lead back, bring back,” figuratively “restore, replace,” from *re-* “back” + *ducere* “bring, lead” (from PIE root *deuk-* “to lead”). In Middle English largely with positive senses, including “bring back to virtue, restore to God; bring back to health.”

Reuse

also *re-use*, “to use again,” 1843, from *re-* “again” + *use* (v.).

Recycle

“to reuse material,” 1922, originally of industrial processes; see *re-* + *cycle* (v.). Specifically of waste material reclaimed or converted into usable form, by 1960. General or figurative use is by 1969.

The virtuous triad of environmentalism is “**reduce, reuse, recycle**” with the implication that these processes align humans with nature’s way. Except this isn’t how the world works.

As for reducing, consider the oak (Catoctin hosts abundant oaks thanks to a replanting campaign nearly a century ago). Every few years, these trees produce an enormous bounty of acorns, which is “waste with a plan.” The overwhelmed (and presumably overjoyed) squirrels bury a ridiculous number of seeds, inevitably forgetting where some are cached and thereby assuring that a few (about 0.01%) will grow into oaks.

At least the profligate squirrels reuse their old nests, unlike most of the birds. Our feathered friends abandon and rebuild their nests like trust-funders trashing and buying condos. The birds have an excuse, however. Old nests are encrusted with feces and infested with mites and lice, while a “new build” is sure to be clean. And when it comes to efficiency, the internal combustion engine is less wasteful of energy than nature’s trophic transfer from plant to herbivore to predator.

Nature, however, is a manic recycler. The moist, deciduous forest of Catoctin is a veritable rot-fest. On my hikes, I encountered sheets of fungal mycelia composting leaf litter, rice-grain-sized termites munching fallen logs, Slim-Jim-sized millipedes delighting in detritus, and blow flies swarming raccoon feces (moving perhaps from a dead chipmunk to an equally malodorous nursery for their maggoty offspring).

Maybe the holy trinity of environmentalism should celebrate the not-so-supernatural change of waste into assets by saprophages, coprophages and necrophages—surely a harder sell to queasy humans, but the icons on those blue cans would be fun to redesign!

May 20

Restrain

mid-14c., *restreinen*, “to stop, prevent, curb” (a vice, purpose, appetite, desire), from stem of Old French *restraindre*, *restreindre* “to press, push together; curb, bridle; bandage” (12c.), from Latin *restringere* “draw back tightly, tie back; confine, check.” From late 14c. as “keep (someone or something) from a course of action,” hence “keep in check or under control, deprive (someone) of liberty by restraint” (1520s).

Defiance is my gut response when authorities attempt to **restrain** me. I know laws are important in a civil society, and I’m a fan of environmental regulation. I would gladly have the National Park Service track down Mick who carved his message of love for Debby into a beech tree near Hog Rock in 1997 (I doubt they’re still together which serves him right). When others are at risk, restraining liberty makes sense. Catoctin visitors are restricted in terms of driving cars (30 mph), gathering berries (half-gallon/person/day), and walking dogs (6-foot leashes). But...

Since the late 1700s, hardscrabble farmers had been converting grains into whiskey, which was much more transportable—and profitable. Many mountain people dodged federal taxes, operating their stills by moonlight. During Prohibition, the restraints became more severe—and enforcement more violent. On July 31, 1929, authorities raided the Blue Blazes whiskey still and in the ensuing gunfight a sheriff’s deputy was killed. All because the self-righteous decided to restrain the wicked (hypocrisy never being restrained in American politics).

That’s how it happened that I bought a pint of Maryland’s Sagamore rye whiskey, put it in my backpack on a cool spring evening, hiked to the restored (but not operating, of course!) Blue Blazes still after the park closed, and toasted the moonshiners. Okay, to tell the truth, I poured an ounce of the whiskey into a thermos of coffee which produced a drink less alcoholic—but must tastier—than cough medicine, which is allowed. It was a petty protest by a restrained rebel. But America’s Puritanical legacy gets under my skin like the barbed mouthparts of a tick.

May 21

Reveal

c. 1400, *revelen*, “disclose, divulge, make known (supernaturally or by divine agency, as religious truth),” from Old French *reveler* “reveal” (14c.), from Latin *revelare* “reveal, uncover, disclose,” literally “unveil,” from *re-* “back, again,” here probably indicating “opposite of” or transition to an opposite state + *velare* “to cover, veil,” from *velum* “a veil.”

Being middle-sized, diurnal, upright, above-ground, visually-oriented mammals we pay little attention to small, nocturnal, crawling, below-ground, olfactory-oriented beings, which is perhaps why we are so amazed when they **reveal** themselves. One key to such moments is prepositional pursuit. Look under, within, below, among, and beneath. Simply put, flip (and replace) rocks and logs.

Today, I snacked beside a colony of termites steadfastly dealing with their overturned log. For all the people who hire exterminators, I wonder how many hiking homeowners have watched these creatures: snowy white (workers constantly groom one another amidst the dank soil and decaying wood), amazingly cooperative (termites exhibit the most complex form of sociality in the animal kingdom), and phenomenally symbiotic (they provide their gut microbes with a stable environment and a steady supply of food, in exchange for their tenants digesting the cellulose and feeding their landlords valuable sugars). Most people would be surprised by the revelation that the global biomass of termites rivals that of humans (meaning they outnumber us 15 million to 1).

When it comes to unveiling aspects of the living world outside of our daily experience, few of us are ready for epiphanies—including me. We are not typically prepared to process alien creatures and staggering numbers. But through the practice of looking in unfamiliar places, we can peek behind the anthropocentric shroud and foster biological humility. My Hindu friend was right when he gently assured me at a time of personal bewilderment: “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.” So it is that Catoctin is like a patient mentor—giving unconditionally, cultivating curiosity, and preparing us for revelations.

May 22

Reclaim

“Call out; call back a hawk,” hence “make tame” (mid-15c.), “subdue, reduce to obedience, make amenable to control” (late 14c.). The sense of “get back by effort” might reflect influence of *claim*. The specific meaning “bring waste land into useful condition fit for cultivation” is attested by 1764, probably on notion of “reduce to obedience” (perhaps from the image of taming wild animals) rather than a suggestion of a return to a previous condition.

Restore

c. 1300, *restoren*, “to give back,” also, “to build up again, repair; renew, *re*-establish; free from the effects of sin; bring back to a former and better state,” from Old French *restorer*, from Latin *restaurare* “repair, rebuild, renew.” This is from *re*- “back, again” + *-staurare*, not attested by itself but also in *instaurare* “to set up, establish; renew, restore,” etc., from PIE root *sta-* “to stand, make or be firm.” From late 14c. as “to cure, heal, bring back to a vigorous state;” of objects, beliefs, etc., “bring back to an original state or condition,” 1670s.

Repair

“to mend, put back in order, restore to a sound, good, or complete condition,” mid-14c., *reparen*, from Old French *reparer* “repair, mend” (12c.) and directly from Latin *reparare* “restore, put back in order,” from *re*- “again” + *parare* “make ready, prepare” (from PIE root *pere-* “to produce, procure”).

The (first and surprisingly Green) New Deal made a commitment to **reclaim** and **restore** land that had been exploited for decades on Catoctin Mountain. Farming, logging, and charcoaling had left a wasteland, but a Great Depression for the American economy was a great boon for the mountain. The WPA and CCC went to work. Young men planted thousands of trees, revegetated miles of logging roads, cultivated hundreds of acres to feed birds, and mended Owens and Big Hunting Creeks to foster fish populations.

Reclamation ecology has the goal of returning land to a “useful” condition through a kind of taming of nature. Today, the forests of Catoctin are not truly primal or domesticated. They are, in a sense, feral—that liminal state that is neither sufficient as wilderness nor suitable for extraction. But like the kids running amok on school trips at the Chestnut picnic area, they are reverting (or progressing?) to wildness.

I like to think of this place in terms of restoration ecology, the intention of which is to return an ecosystem to a vigorous, vibrant—if not original—state. We seek to **repair** the damage. And so, I’ll propose a more evocative term: *reparation ecology*. We are pursuing a kind of restorative justice, analogous to the emerging practice among people. Rather than punishing the wrongdoer (that would be humans in both ecological and social contexts), the goal is to repair the damage and attend to the needs of the victim, the community—and the perpetrator. And if we can recognize and reconcile the harms that came from enslaving land, perhaps we could ponder reparations for our fellow humans.

May 23

Regret

late 14c., *regreten*, “to look back with distress or sorrowful longing; to grieve for on remembering,” from Old French *regreter* “long after, bewail, lament someone's death; ask the help of” (Modern French *regretter*), from *re-*, intensive prefix + *-greter*, which is possibly from Frankish or some other Germanic source (compare Old English *grætan* “to weep;” Old Norse *grata* “to weep, groan”), from Proto-Germanic *gretan* “weep.” From 1550s as “to grieve at (an event, action, revelation of facts, etc.).”

I **regret** not looking at the map and trusting my memory that the in-and-out hike was 2 miles (it was 3, not a big difference, but wait...), assuming that the trail was basically flat (not so much), overlooking a trail sign (thereby adding 500 feet of elevation and another 3 miles to my hike), and leaving my backpack, water bottle, and hiking poles at the car (see my first regrettable decision). What I figured would be a 45-minute, pre-lunch jaunt turned into 3 hours without food or water. We might be sad or disappointed when things beyond our control go awry, but we properly regret adversity that didn't need to happen, had we made better decisions. I blame myself for the ill-prepared hike. I knew better.

In 1896, a scientist speculated that rising atmospheric carbon dioxide could increase the Earth's temperature, but politicians were blissfully ignorant. In 1938, the evidence was stronger but still questionable. In 1956, the link between carbon dioxide and global warming was made explicit. By the 1970s, the evidence was clear and governments could no longer “see no evil,” and by the 1990s only the willfully ignorant could deny anthropogenic climate change.

I don't think humanity was morally culpable for burning fossil fuels at the start of the Industrial Revolution and maybe not well into the 20th century. But today? Forget the self-aggrandizing Anthropocene, we are in the Age of Regret. We are disregarding maps, graphs, and signposts, leaving behind simple and reliable technologies, and blundering down a rocky trail hoping we won't be too desperately hungry and thirsty when we reach our destination. We know better.

May 24

Retire

1530s, of armies, “to retreat, draw back,” also, of persons, “to withdraw” to some place, especially for the sake of privacy; from French *retirer* “to withdraw (something),” from *re-* “back” + Old French *tirer* “to draw” (see *tirade*). The sense of “leave one's business or occupation” is by 1660s.

I don't particularly want to **retire**, although I'm half retired from the University of Wyoming which means that I work-for-pay one semester. Retirement provides an opportunity to pursue one's passions, and spending weeks as an artist-in-residence at national parks during my “off” semester is deeply satisfying. But so was being a professor, until universities adopted a corporate mindset. Where we once had students pursuing education, we now have customers paying for credentials. I am withdrawing from an institution where all relationships are transactional and community is a quaint anachronism. I look forward to privacy, to not being micromanaged and spreadsheeted.

I admire the volunteers at Catoctin who devote their time to a place that matters. It says much about our culture that “do-gooder” is a reproach, as if generosity and compassion were contemptible. A friend who is a spiritual counselor for hospice says that we die as we lived, whether with resentment or gratitude. I think retirement is a kind of passing away, or at least retreating from the economic battlefield where we exchanged our lives for money.

Watching ants, bees, wasps, and termites at Catoctin reminds me that social insects don't retire when they grow old—they might change their roles, but they keep on working. Could it be that they find their labor fulfilling, such that they are incapable of not contributing to the colony? They have a kind of universal basic income such that their needs are met unconditionally. What if human society was similarly structured? My prediction: There would be lots more people “working” in the National Parks, generous places where giving, rather than taking, is honored.

May 25 (back home)

Revise

1560s, “to look at again” (a sense now obsolete), from French *reviser* (13c.), from Latin *revisere* “look at again, visit again, look back on,” frequentative of *revidere* (past participle *revisus*) “see again, go to see again,” from *re-* “again” (here probably denoting “repetition of an action”) + *videre* “to see” (from PIE root *weid-* “to see”). Meaning “to look over again with intent to improve or amend” is recorded from 1590s.

Thomas Edison asserted that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. I’m no literary virtuoso, so I tell my students that good writing is 20% inspiration and 80% revision. To write is to **revise**. If we can see anew when we revisit the words, the prose gets better. Much like returning to a place. At Catoctin, I hiked along a stream until I found a large rock, hidden from view—an enchanting first draft.

Upon returning to my metamorphic tablet, I discovered a comma in the stream—a shallow pool behind a fallen log, where the water paused and dace darted. On another revisit, I found a parenthetical puddle with water striders skating over the surface. One afternoon, I plucked geological adjectives from the creek—colorful pebbles that, like their literary counterparts, tend to lose their appeal when exposed to air. Under submerged rocks, I discovered entomological footnotes—stoneflies and caddisflies. Some re-visions were more like re-listenings. Lounging on my sun-dappled rock, the burbling water was like an anaphoric poem, a sonic structure beginning each phrase with the same murmur but never exactly repeating a line.

I’ve revised this daily entry in my journal a dozen times, hoping that it will become more meaningful and evocative. But now, it’s just getting different each time, not better. I wonder how many times would I need to revisit *The Giving Place* before my streamside slab stopped getting better? Maybe as often as I’ve cracked open the brittle binding of *Leaves of Grass*—a poetry collection that Walt Whitman wrote and revised from 1855 to 1892. Perhaps that’s the answer: 37 years at Catoctin.

Afterword

There are lots of other “re-“ words that are fun to play with. I invite readers to choose one of these as a catalyst for imaginative mulling, intellectual pondering, and soulful meditating on a hike. To get you started, I suggest: rebel, rebound, recall, recant, recover, recruit, recuperate, reflect, reforest, refuse, refute, regain, regard, regroup, rehabilitate, relax, relieve, remediate, remote, renounce, renovate, repose, repress, reprieve, reproduce, resilience, resistance, resource, respect, restrict, return, reward, and review.