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Beginnings: Sensing Boundaries

I do not understand fear and what it means to me. I have been in fearful situations and we will discuss one of them in a second. I do not understand nor expect anyone else to understand just why we are so fearful after such an intense moment such as war.

No one ever told me about the fear. I have been trained to deal with any and all situations that arise in a combat area but they forgot to talk to us, to train us on how to deal with the fear. My most relevant moment in dealing with fear could be one of my most memorable days in Iraq. We had just crossed route Irish into the downtown area of Baghdad, Iraq on what was most likely going to be just another routine patrol. For an hour or so all was quiet. We turned down route Poison into an area we thought we were welcome. What we found on this day was deserted streets and no one, not a soul to be found. The fear was creeping in. Slowly we cleared the route ahead of us and found what seemed to be another Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The fear was setting it's hooks. We called for route clearance and in fifteen minutes we had it. The route was cleared and we could move on. The fear was subsiding. We dismounted and moved along the street with Stryker vehicles as cover. Small arms fire erupted from the local Mosque and we could do nothing but sit there. You cannot return fire on a Mosque without proper authorization. We moved like a well oiled machine and made it back to the rally point. At this time we were congregated around the previous IED site and as luck would have it another, buried beneath the ground under the first IED, explosive had been set up. We did not see this one coming and it exploded just as we were mounting up. My Platoon Sergeant took the worst of it with a piece of shrapnel passing centimeters from his jugular vein. There were some concussions and some scrapes and bruising but nothing long lasting, nothing but the fear.

Although fear is always with me I have taken to throwing it to the wayside for a moment of peace. This ability to escape has brought me to new shores of fear, into unknown waters. I have never learned to cope with the fear and I have always thought my training would save me from the worst of it. I was wrong. I have found that although sometimes true these are misconceptions on fear.

No one ever talks about the fear in combat. It is an afterthought of something one experiences at their weakest moments. No one ever speaks of it and no one truly knows how to deal with it. It's not war that causes the fear it's the aftermath of conflict, the realization of one's mortality. I do not understand fear but I know how it works. I understand that it is a reaction to stimuli and our fight or flight response. I understand that it is fleeting and can be harnessed with the right tools. No one ever taught us this. I live in fear, now. Day in and day out I explore my readily available fear still to no better understanding. Why have I been cursed with this never ending fear? Here in lies the problem. How can I explore this phenomenon while always trying to classify it through appointments and therapy. I cannot.

Delicate Empiricism: Science as a Conversation

When we were asked to find a plant to commune with I was taken aback by the idea. I was shocked but already my brain was reeling. What plant should I choose? Where would I find the plant and would I actually be able to have a conversation with it? Questions bounced through my head. I was not meant to find my plant. No, I was meant to be called by a plant,

lured by something. I cleared my mind and let nature take its course. When my plant, the everlasting fir tree, chose me I was walking through the trails leading to the Organic Farm for the day of choosing. I was bopping along with my headphones in and my walk allowed and steady. I had an incredible urge to take my headphones off and just listen for a change. I did so and something called out to me. The birds were high over head and I had to crane my neck back to get a glimpse of their winged bodies. The canopy was thick and finding the squawking birds soon became bothersome so I moved on. Something called to me then something deep inside myself. I looked around and all I could see were tall fir trees on both sides of the trail. I was called to place my hand on one of them and in doing so my heart jumped. My heart jumped and soon slowed and beat in a rhythmic manner. My breathing slowed as well and I was linked to something inside of that tree. I had to go for class was about to begin but I was hard pressed to make it to class that day after such a powerful moment. Off to class I went. I rushed to class waiting for the moment I could step into the world and have a lasting conversation with something as real as Nature. We walked around the farm and saw many different plants and people were being chosen by these plants. The whole time we were touring I had a sense of longing to be out of the fences and into the open spaces of nature. I wanted to talk to the fir tree again. We were finished and told to go on our way and I rushed out of the farm and into the forest that surrounds it. I sat on a fallen log and reached as far as my heart would let me. As I was sitting there on my first visit a sense of calm washed over me and I began to furiously journal the experience.

By the next time we were able to sit with our new found friends I thought I had it wrapped up and in the bag. I sat in the forest this time. The rain fell and I was prepared for a conversation. Nothing happened and I was beginning to worry that I had done something wrong. I figured I would learn some of what I was meant to by just being there what I had to do was to listen and be immersed in the moment. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and listened.

1: I had to know what was going on in the plants mind. I had to know whom I was speaking to and why. I decided to do a quick internet search on fir trees of the Pacific Northwest. I also did and search on just what the fir tree has been doing for 6,000 years. Come to find out the Fir tree has been living and thriving for the past millennia.

2: I began to ask questions of the Fir tree. I was curious and I wanted to know more. I was seeing that I was being too focused and I was not letting the conversation take on a life of its own. On the second visit I had to check myself and stop asking questions and let the conversation flow naturally. I opened up my heart and let in the voices surrounding me. I was greeted with silence. I was not deterred though and I sat in silence under the dew drops. I was beginning to feel let down by the fact that there was no back and forth going on and then something happened. I got up and moved locations and spoke to anyone who was listening. I walked for a bit before I came upon a great thick trunk and looked to the sky to see that this was indeed a Fir tree. I sat at his feet and I waited.

3: I waited and again nothing was happening until I started to feel my emotions. I was washed over with a sense of calm just like my first visit. I sat in silence and felt for the opening in which I could converse but I held back thinking it was not my turn to speak. The sense of calm radiated through me and my heart beat and breathing slowed and all stress and anxiety was washed away. The ancients were about to speak. Emotions came flooding over me then. I ran the gambit of the emotional time line. Calm lead to anger which lead to sadness and then fear. There were a few more such as love and forgiveness. I was feeling

all of this in such an intensity it was a good thing I was sitting down. I was beginning to see that this conversation was twofold and not just me asking questions.

4: I noticed that the Fir tree was its own entity. I was the invader into his space and I should act with much respect and love. He has stood for hundreds of thousands of years and will be here when I am gone. I came to this realization on the third visit I had with the Fir tree. I came into knowing this partially on the second but could not grasp the idea until much later. When I sat with the Fir tree I treated him as an elder of my tribe. I treated him with the respect and admiration I would the President of the United States. I began to see that this being was a part of Nature as a whole and soon I saw myself as part of that whole.

5: I started to feel like I belonged with the Fir tree on the third visit. I would wait for the calm to wash over me and I knew that I had the attention of him, of Nature. I would soon start to talk about what has been troubling me and what has been going on throughout my life. I would do this and the Fir tree would listen whole heartedly. I would listen as well to what the Fir tree would have to say and he spoke through emotions. I would feel brought up when I would talk about negative feelings and I would feel calm the whole conversation.

6: The Fir tree has not changed much in the last 6,000 years and I do not think that my interactions with him have been that moving as to making him change. I do know that the course of my actions have lead me to think with more than my senses. I have been changed to think with my heart and to spread my heart strings to the maximum to feel all that I can feel.

7: I was feeling the world around me in our visits. I would sense all that Nature had to offer to me. The Fir tree gave me free reign to explore all that I had to. I asked other plants to teach me some of their wisdom and I asked Nature to show me something beautiful. It was at this point of asking for something beautiful that a lone Doe walked into a clearing near me. I was moved by this interaction with Nature and I knew that I was not there to only listen I was there to converse.

Engaging in Conversation

I choose a glade in which I am surrounded by the tall fir trees of the area. I sit with my place atop a fallen sentinel of the forest. It seems to have fallen due to some force of nature and not something man made. I am at peace here. I listen to the wind whispering through the tree tops and I set to my goal, to commune with Nature. I am calm now and I am sitting in something I have found very hard to achieve, silence. The presence of calm washing over me comes on as a tidal wave of force. I am writing everything in my journal and it seems that I am merely glossing over the basics.

Realization is upon you and you had only to ask.

I hadn't even thought of the question when the answer dawns on me. I am looking but not seeing and I am feeling but not *feeling* the world around me. I am brought into a place inside my mind. A private place. A place where silence resides. Now I am attempting to extend my heart-strings and truly listen. The wind whispers again and I hear the crunching of footsteps beside me. Invaders? No, they are but another presence in this vast world. Yet another voice to be heard. I am trying hard to understand the meaning behind this feeling and I am missing the point. I am here to feel the world. I am here to be one with the world around me. I can

feel the tree now. This tall fir tree among the even taller fir trees. There is moss growing and I am reminded that the name of this moss is "Old man's beard" and I am smiling. These great fir trees grow ancient and Nature shows us in its own way just how ancient these sentinels become.

We are ancient Jonathon. We have seen the comings and goings of the world and have chosen you to speak with if you are willing to listen. You will come to know us if you are willing to learn and you will be known to all of those that dwell beneath us.

I will know the secret of this communication. I am trying to move on to the second part of this exercise now and I am having trouble opening my eyes. I am covered in a gentle breeze and light fir tree needles shower my head. I have spoken with the trees around me on a level I don't quite understand yet. My eyes open and I am looking down at the ground. I am noticing the one thing that is at my feet, wood chips. They rest so peacefully on the ground that they almost seem serene. Small and larger still chips here and there laying on the ground and I know why they are here. They are here to nourish the ground with the nutrients they contain. The light brown and grey shows that they have long since been bereft of life. The dark grey shows me that once they contained life and that this happened to be their final resting place.

What once was is made whole again. The fallen feed the life of the whole as does everything. We do not sadden at such misgivings of death and life.

Still I am reminded of a graveyard. The silence seals this in my mind for I am thinking of this as the silence of death itself. But life brings me back to reality. I see that there is a relationship here where the fallen trees are the life blood to new life. The grey dead chips offer the cushion on which I sit and I am thankful. I like the life giving approach more so than the graveyard and I am enjoying the feelings I get when I think on this.

Realization and all you had to do was but to ask.

Exact Sensorial Imagination and Living Understanding

How can a phenomenon be explained by something that is supposed to underlie it and that is always less than the phenomenon itself? (Holdrege 27)

How can one explain the beauty of a moment without utterly destroying the moment itself? You cannot explain a moment without first understanding the moment in which you are in. I had this realization on my final visit with the Douglas Fir. I was never truly in the moment as it were. I would journal and try to capture everything I could but I never let my mind wonder onto whatever drew it. When I made the realization to be in the moment and not in a journal I began to see a whole new world. The grey, brown bark of the tree beckons to the weary as a place to rest your back. The thick, tall trunks reach almost to the edges of the sky standing as sentinels of the forest, protectors. There are very few branches hanging low enough for one to climb upon and the ones that are left are high in the canopy. I notice that the fallen needles cover the ground, just as they cover my car. They are peaceful here almost stoic in death. I look to the lower branches and find the needles bright and vibrant green. They are clustered together which took me for a loop when we started since I at first thought I was speaking to the Pine and not the Fir. The clusters of needles indicate just what type of tree it truly is which to me is the fingerprint of the Fir. There are also pinecones littering the ground along with the needles. They seem sullen and drained. Their brown is

now darkened by the wet rain and gives them a perpetual death look. They are not dead though they simply wait in silence for the chance to seed into another mighty Fir.

The needles, pinecones, trunk and branches all give a picture of beauty and a mythic presence. I am at once hurled back to thoughts of mythological Titans. The trees stand tall here and I am simply a passerby. I am so small in comparison and I am not a little person. The canopy blocks out most of the sunlight but few beams shine through. There is a shadow playing on the ground and I feel like I am dancing with the trees. I get up and move with the flow, back and forth, back and forth, I sway in the wind as the trees do. There is more to see here, much more, that my eyes and senses cannot register. I am recalling a memory of this single moment but it can never be the memory itself. There is beauty here if all you do is look and bask in the moment that is the here and now.

Douglas Fir - A Portrayal

The Douglas Fir or the *Pseudotsuga menziesii* happens to be a perennial plant which means that the Fir is an everlasting plant. This being said when you look into the plant or should I say when you make a cursory examination of the changes you cannot see much. The needles do not change much to the naked eye and the pinecones are an ever falling presence. However, if we look closely and if we have the tools to look as close as we need to we can see drastic changes in the biology of the plant.

The natural growing area for the Fir is somewhere in central British Columbia and extends south into the Pacific Coastal areas. The actual range extends from latitude 19 degrees to 55 degrees north. the growing area spreads in an almost "V" shape with some uneven sides with the longer of the legs stretching into the Rocky Mountains and further still into central Mexico for a range of over 2,796 miles. We can see that this plant has been anything but immobile. The "V" shape covers many, many states and stretches for hundreds of thousands of miles immersing itself into forests of all kinds along the range.

In the Pacific Northwest the Douglas fir has a relatively mild season with climate characterized by "mild, wet winters and cool, relatively dry summers, a long frost-free season, and narrow diurnal fluctuations of temperature." This being said the area in which the plant is located in the Pacific Northwest is a great place for the Fir to thrive and continue to dominate the forests of the area.

As we stand overlooking the vast expanse of the world

we are shown that the life we have chosen is one of solitude

we are alone in an ocean of community

The community of Douglas Firs is something of a hot point for this guy. We all know of the Fir because each and every winter there is an apocalyptic event that shapes what these trees mean to us. During the winter months of November to December Firs are harvested for the single use as Christmas trees. These trees are constantly dying and even though some people take time and care to keep their beautiful trees alive the holds of death are always there.

Misgivings of life and death are but an afterthought

We are stoic in are callings to the human experiment

We are proud to stand vigil in homes of the family

We are proud to stand as we fall into the abyss of death

The harvesting of the Christmas tree is not the only event that shapes the Douglas Fir. Right at this moment the Fir is being harvested for its wood in the ever continual logging process. Loggers come from all over to get at the vast forests of the Pacific Northwest and since the Fir is readily available it is seen as the prime tree to harvest. Loggers have taken to re-planting the trees when they have clear cut an area but when the logging is completed the damage has been done. The Douglas Fir does not produce pinecones, their main source of reproduction, until their 10th to 15th year of existence. Even though the Pacific Northwest sees relatively light frost periods the frost that is seen could have a damaging effect on the pinecones. The pinecones range from yellow to a deep red, from what I have seen the deep red is more prevalent. They are about 2 cm long and female pinecones are about a 1 cm longer. Pollination of the pinecones starts in March or April and in the warmer parts of the range as late as May or June. This means that all of the loggers newly planted trees have to stand for at least 15 - 20 years before they are even old enough to produce trees of their own.

The ancient Fir stands for all to see

We use it so casually

Walk through the forest and you will feel the heart strings of the Fir

Yet we slash and burn those that stand before us

We terrorize and come with axes, saws, and the right we think we have

The Fir is stoic and proud

All we do is cut it to the ground

For nothing more than some homes and firewood

But most of all we do it for a holiday.

As you can see the life cycle of the Fir is ever reaching the boundaries of human existence. During my short seven weeks or observation there has been no change. Needles have fallen and the pinecones have followed but the Fir is mighty and stands for longer than I have had time to visualize. The Fir has been here long before human kind and shall stand for longer still. Man, so it seems, is the hunter of this beautiful prey. Even the bark and whole of the plant is built for resistance being fire resistant but alas it is not man resistant and we can only destroy that which we think we conquer.

Come and sit with us. Learn from us for we have much to say.

Come and lean your weary back against our trunks and open your heart to our words.

We are forever moving into the vast unknown

We only ask you to follow as close as you can

And so I sit here with my back to the trunk of a mighty Fir

I listen and wonder what these ancient sentinels have to say

Come and sit with us for we have oceans to show you

Oceans of green and oceans of death

So I have sat. I have listened. I have seen the wounds and scars of the forest.

I have seen the ancients looming over the virus of man

And I have become one with gods of nature.

The Whole As a Part

I have seen might trees throughout my life. I have never taken the time to understand what these giant plant mean to the world as a whole and who they truly are. Over my time I have seen the Douglas Fir standing proud and tall for the world to see. Even though this day is full of the slow dripping dew off the branches of the small glade in which I sit the Fir has changed none. Still the branches high in the canopy hang loose and the needles grasp for the ever precious water there is no visual changes that I have been able to see.

I have opened my heart to this tree and it has shown me that even though there is no visual changes there are still changes none the less. Needles blanket the ground surrounding the tree in which I sit next to. There are pinecones sporadically littered on the ground as well and below that there are wood chips. Pinecones are meant for reproduction and even if one takes hole that one will grow into the mighty trees we see today.

Open yourself up to us

I place my hand on the trunk and I feel emotions washing through me. The trunk seems to shudder under my touch. I can sense the ever moving internals of the tree flowing through the inside. The water rushing from bottom to top feeding all that is part of the plant. There is a small cluster of some insects nearby and I am shown that these also have their part to play. The Fir is home to much more than green needles and pinecones. Birds flock to their tall branches, building nest inside the dense canopy. Here in this single tree we can see all the cycles of life. Form the birth of new trees to the death of branches. It should be said,

again, that the Fir is fire resistant and can withstand everything the world throws at it. Season play such a small role in the life of the Fir that winter storms, frost, or even unseasonable summers have little effect on the growing. The main element that is destroying these forests that have stood for millennia is the virus of man.

Reach ever higher into the sky

Reach to the expanses of your life

Flourish in the moonlight, in the sunlight

Dance with me in the rain for here

Here is the time of life when all is not lost and your slumber

Not disturbed. Open your heart

And you will see that we are forever.

The Unity of the Organism

I find myself alone in the wilderness. I am sitting peacefully on a bench made of some kind of wood. I am trying so very hard, since this has been early on in my observations, to find what Goethe calls "the pregnant point". I am sitting and there is a light breeze in the air. The air is crisp and cool and I noticed on the walk out here that the trees steam in the cool air. The steam rises casually off the tops of the trees and one in particular catches my attention. I look at the tree, up and down, and I see that there is no canopy on this tree. There is only a broken top where the weather or something just as powerful has torn the tree in half. Half, still this tree is more than 30 feet tall and I am nothing more than a speck in the distance. I cannot make it to this tree so I walk further on until I get to where I am, on a bench next to a trunk about the size of four men. I find myself caught up in the emotion of the moment.

Calm is what comes first and then fear. It is silent and there is no one around to see me. I let myself go. I let the emotions wash over me. I am stalled by voices in my head wanting nothing more than my attention. I try to block them out and live in the moment but they are persistent. I let the trees take hold of me. I let myself be guided by their touch and grace. It is in this moment that I see I have been classifying the Fir as something it is not. This tree is not a man, not something with male qualities. This is utterly female and I see, as I make this realization, that she holds me in her arms. I am shrouded in a sense of protection. I let myself go and I begin to cry. I begin to sob and tears roll down my cheeks. I write a bit and I see that I have written "She holds me close like a mother with her child. She shows me that life is not the terror I see but the hope I feel." I see at that moment that I am being embraced. I am being held in arms of the eternal and she cries with me. We both shed tears due to one another's pain. I cry all the harder and it takes awhile for me to collect myself. I open my eyes and wipe the tears away and I notice that the Fir has changed none. I have felt the touch of her and I have seen inwardly that she is my protector. This was the pregnant point that Goethe describes. This was my coming to terms with whom I spoke with. This was the moment I fell in love with the world.

Practicing Goethean Science

I am constantly hounded by the ever recurring question that is prevalent in all of my conversations with the douglas fir. What is fear and how do I manage it. Throughout my time with the fir I have come to notice some things that come up each time I am invited to have a conversation. Each time when I began I would feel a sense of calming emotions wash over me. Our conversation would lead into silence and then with the force of a hurricane I would be showered with every emotion I could handle. I even experienced fear while talking with the fir. I had been afraid of what the tree would ultimately tell me about myself and just what that would mean to me. I live with the fear and the anxiety that comes with it but when I was with the fir the emotions of fear would dissipate and become back ground noise or something for me to explore in the safety of our conversation. I would sit with the fir and with my fear and I would try and make sense of the moment.

Fear is something that happens to each and every person. I understand now that this is something I cannot let rule my life. During my time with the fir I have come to see that emotions are something to explore, to let one's self let go of the present and actually be in the now. I let these emotions flow through me and I have explored each in turn. I have learned from the fir that fear is simply an emotion not a life altering sense of dread. While sitting with the fir I was always in safe hands that would caress my limited knowledge and open herself to me as I did for her. The douglas fir has been a standing symbol of the forest legions. She has stood for millennia and fear has never crossed into her vision. She does not scare at the sight of axes and bulldozers and she does not flinch at the knowing that the holidays are coming. Each moment I am with her I let emotions wash over and through me. I have taken this into my life and by learning to harness these emotions I have become more aware of myself.

Fear is ever present in my life but now, as I did with the fir, I let it be harnessed into a sort of battle armor. I let the fear not control me but rather I am controlling it. I see that voices come from all over the place and now I am able to listen to these voices of Nature. I have been completed by these interactions with the douglas fir if it has been only a scant few weeks.

The edge is not the boundary, the boundary lies within us

extend your heart as far as it can reach

then reach further.

There is a waiting presence welcoming you

if only you can listen.