

20 December 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

After my father died, eleven years ago this month, it fell to me to sift through his photos. He'd amassed them over many decades. I made 'digital' copies of all of them. Most were 'slides' you could project onto a screen. (Do we have those anymore?)

### **Frozen in Time**

They divided themselves into two broad categories. One set of slides recorded those moments-in-time that Canadian families still share: birthdays and Christmases and cousins' weddings, camping trips and visits to relatives, 'first day of school' and graduations, houses once lived in, snow forts tunnelled out of snowbanks, 'the new bicycle', catches of fish held up with a toothless grin, vivid sunsets, and those striking vistas nature flagrantly offers for free, scenes so gratuitously beautiful that they ought to make hardened heretics re-think their atheism.

The other set of slides were a record of my father's work as a Forester in The Ontario Department of Lands and Forests. Some show massive logging machines in action. Their exotic-sounding names were really just descriptions of their functions: 'skidder', 'scarifier', and 'feller-buncher'. (The Marx Brothers would have made those into *real* names: "Hello, you have reached Skidder, Scarifier, and Feller-Buncher, Attorneys at Law, how may I direct your call?")

Other photos capture the smoke and flame (but mostly smoke) of forest fires, on the ground and from the air. There are photos of 'water bombers', bush planes like the 'de Havilland Beaver' (a classic), and now-defunct tree nurseries growing swaths of jack pine and spruce seedlings for Reforestation. Our Government used to care about such things.

One box held slides taken from the air, in winter, over the 'Hudson Bay Lowlands', the most remote region of our vast and beautiful Province. It was the early 1970s. My father had been commissioned to make an environmental study for a proposed Pipeline. These photos came from that long, cold exploration. His recommendation was 'not in favour' and the Pipeline wasn't built, though he never discovered if he was the cause.

Occasionally, the two categories were mixed up. I'd find a photo of my sister blowing out candles in a box of slides labelled "Camp 56, Clear Cutting, 1968". One of the boxes of his winter journey to Hudson Bay had a photo of me in it. Another mix-up. My father must have taken it on one of our many, many winter hikes.

You wouldn't know it's me. I'm about nine years old. I show up as a dark silhouette against a white background of snow, wearing an old pair of snowshoes and a thick woolen toque. But I know it's me. I'm attaching a copy here so you can see what I'm talking about.

### **"O Come Let us *Adorn Him*"**

This photo may have been taken in January or March, but in Canada, at least, it could be mistaken for a ready-made 'Christmas' scene.

I draw more to the ear than the eye. I'm not a strongly 'visual' person. (You'll have guessed as much, seeing how blandly I clothe myself.) But even *I* can see beauty in this scene – those dappled blue shadows; dark green conifer boughs adorned with intensely fresh snow; and a snowshoed path heading 'up' and 'ahead', inviting the viewer into an imagined future.

This photo, as much as anything, encapsulates why I'll never be able to enjoy an 'artificial' Christmas Tree. If ever I acquired one, my father would come back to haunt me. I strongly suspect he took that photo, not because I happened to be standing there shouting 'hurry up!', but for the beauty that surrounded me.

No one had a 'fake tree' (as we called them) in my childhood. Neither did we purchase a pre-cut Christmas Tree. We simply walked into the bush, chose one after much arguing, cut it down, and hauled it home on a toboggan. We brought its beauty into our little domestic lives, a talisman of Nature in honour of the God of Nature.

(I confessed this, once, to an Englishman, who gaped at me with the kind of horror his ancestors must have had for Viking vandals.)

Mind you, a gangly black spruce tree isn't as classically shaped as a cultivated 'Fraser Fir' imported from afar. We tried to hide our tree's 'worst side' against a wall. This only occasioned more argument. They were all 'worst sides'. Grown in the wild, our Christmas Trees were never pruned as they grew. But they were *real*. And they smelled as fresh as wilderness does.

"I never thought it was such a bad little tree," said Linus to the chronically-depressed Charlie Brown. "Maybe it just needs a little love."

Linus, you may remember, offers his beloved 'security blanket' (because *everyone* in 'Peanuts' is as neurotic as we are). He wraps it around the base of Charlie Brown's sad little tree, where gifts are meant to go. For that forlorn tree is a talisman of Charlie Brown's own soul, isn't it? It's how he sees *himself*.

But now, the other children, who'd made a point of meanly misunderstanding him, adorn his tree with lights and decorations. "Maybe it just needs a little love."

"The angel *adorns* the tree," I remember my mother saying. And so it does, lovingly, just as lightning-white snow adorns its boughs in the wilderness. I was five or six years old when she said this. I remember it because excitement had wound me up as tightly as a coiled spring. Santa was coming *and* Jesus would be born. Does it get any better than this?

That night, Christmas Eve, we sang "O Come let us adore him" in Church. Only I misheard it, in the way little children do, as "O Come let us *adorn* him." But doesn't my 'mistaken meaning' fit just as well?

"*The child wonders at the Christmas Tree,*" wrote T.S. Eliot in one of his lesser-known poems.

...For whom the candle is a star, and the gilded angel  
Spreading its wings at the summit of the tree  
Is not only a decoration but an angel."

### **More News**

Al McLean died peacefully at home this week. He was a man of quiet faith and an honest friend to many people. I'm not the only one who will miss him. I will remember Jean and her family in my own quiet prayers this Christmastide. I know you will too.

You'll know by now, also, that the Session decided we must close the Church building again. On the far horizon, we do see a hint of light in the promise of a new vaccine, but this damned pandemic is rather relentless. We cannot gather in the sanctuary until it begins to let up.

So, we'll have to worship together in our scattered way again. I will send a service for Christmas Eve/Day later this week. A happy, holy Christmas to you.

Yours in the faith,  
Andrew

