

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #15
September 2020

from
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Beets are always on my summer and autumn menu.

ORDINARY PLACES, ORDINARY THINGS

The day after I sent out my last periodical letter I received a letter from a subscriber, a friend of 40 or so years ago with whom I'd had only minimal contact since, simply because our lives have followed different trajectories. He told me that sitting in his electric wheelchair, confined to a long-term care facility, he had begun his day travelling – by means of my photographs and writing. Although I felt happy about my small contribution to his life, what gave me more joy were his words, "As I enter a NEW phase of my life" There was not a hint of self pity in his letter, but a subtle suggestion that something new was opening up. He seemed to be indicating that his new home was a place of opportunity.

Time and again in workshops and elsewhere I have expressed my firm belief that the best place in the entire world to see (and to make photographs) is wherever you are. However, the same goes for life in general. The challenge we all have, not just in seeing and making photographs but also in daily living, is to stay fresh, to be fully present to our usual circumstances. It means consciously reminding ourselves "I ain't seen nothin' yet" about the familiar room in which we are standing or the favourite chair in which we are sitting. Home is usually the hardest place to see well, because we have observed everything repeatedly and feel no need to examine carefully any more.

It's perfectly natural to become more alert when we change habitats – a survival mechanism. But, the more familiar we become with our new spot, the less we tend to observe it carefully. Everything becomes ordinary again. Boredom is a frequent result. Yet the self-isolation necessitated by Covid-19 that has been an emotional challenge for many has become an opportunity for others. They've discovered home.

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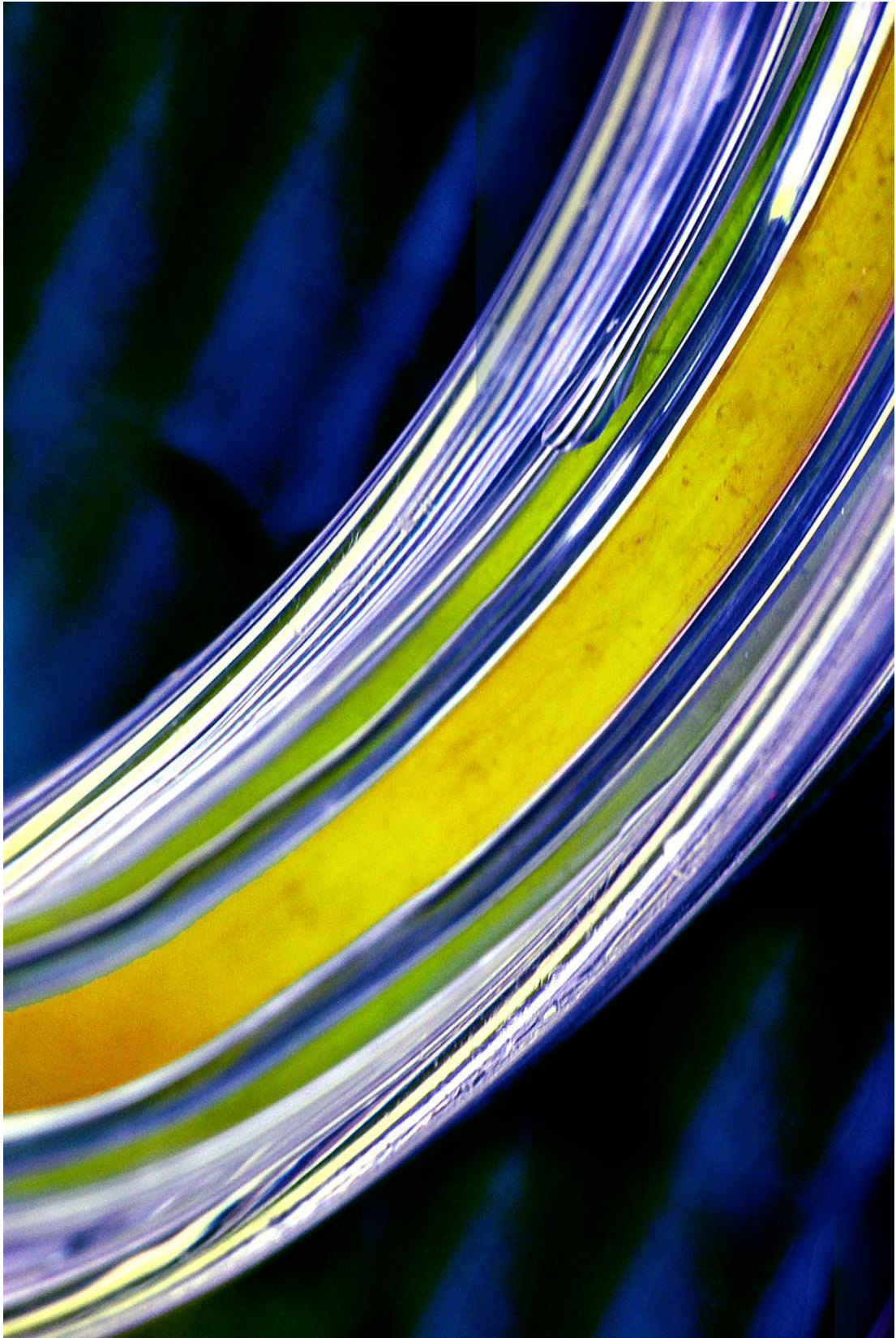
"Think today is just another ordinary day? You woke up. Your heart's beating. You can talk to anyone. You can try anything. Your day has infinite potential.

Now that's something to celebrate!" *Lori Deschene*

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Wet plastic lying on a building site



Reflections in the handle of a beer mug

**“Small minds are concerned with the extraordinary,
great minds with the ordinary.”** *Blaise Pascal*

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“The ordinary is the divine.” *Cynthia Ozick*

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In the general area of Shamber's Bluff it's usually possible to find somebody who can do whatever you need done, so I take my 28-year-old Toyota Tercel (which seems to run on air) for its biennial inspection or whatever medicine it needs to A and K Auto (a car mechanic's repair shop up the road about nine kilometres). Al Dempster is the A of A and K; I've never met K and don't even know if he/she exists, but it doesn't matter. Neither does the lack of a place to sit and wait, because I can always check out the four or five non-functioning vehicles (all younger than mine) rusting away behind the building. A recent visit was particularly memorable; besides having a great chat with Al and coming home with a perfectly humming vehicle, I also brought back with me a series of photographs made of a car "waiting for Godot" behind Al's shop. The above image is one of them. Al should be charging at least \$20 admission for the privilege of observing the "found art" on his premises.

Remember, the best place in the world to see is wherever you are.

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“The purpose of art is not a momentary injection of adrenalin, but is rather the gradual, life-long construction of a state of wonder and serenity.” *Glenn Gould*

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“You can find something truly important in an ordinary minute.” *Mitch Albom*

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I’ve had a wonderful young man helping me with outdoors work this spring and summer. He’s just 16, is unfailingly cooperative and polite, and has an incredible work ethic for one so young. Also, he knows so much about machines that, I’m reasonably certain, he could build a tractor without any help or guidance.

However, he knows nothing about plants, indeed they barely register on his consciousness, except for trees and grass. Everything else is nameless for him and falls in the only other category he knows – weeds. This acute deficiency in his education has led, alas, to a couple of accidents (from my point of view,) such as his heaping firewood on top of a rhododendron that I had been carefully nursing back to health and driving a tractor over part of a flower bed. He would never have driven over a hammer or a wrench.

Unfortunately, this ignorance about plants is typical of a huge swath of Earth’s population, even though none of us would be here had plants not prepared the ground for us. In MAKING EDEN: How Plants Transformed a Barren Planet, scientist David Beerling tackles the matter of plant blindness (PB) head on, defining it as “an inability to see or notice plants, leading to the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs.” He adds that PB is an anthropocentric ranking of plants as being inferior to animals. Here’s part of the Amazon description of the book.

“Understanding the evolutionary history of our land flora, the story of how plant life emerged from water and conquered the continents to dominate the planet, is fundamental to our own existence. In MAKING EDEN David Beerling reveals the hidden history of Earth’s sun-shot greenery and considers its future prospects as we farm the planet to feed the world. Describing the early plant pioneers and their close, symbiotic relationship with fungi, he examines the central role plants play in both ecosystems and the regulation of climate. As threats to plant biodiversity mount today, Beerling discusses the resultant implications for food security and climate change, and how these can be avoided. Drawing on the latest exciting scientific findings, including Beerling’s own field work in the UK, North America, and New Zealand, and his experimental research programs over the past decade, this is an exciting new take on how plants greened the continents.”

Frankly, it’s one of those books that, if you’re reading it on your back deck and need to go to the toilet, you’ll probably take it along with you.

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“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.” *Lao Tzu*

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“The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.” *John Muir*



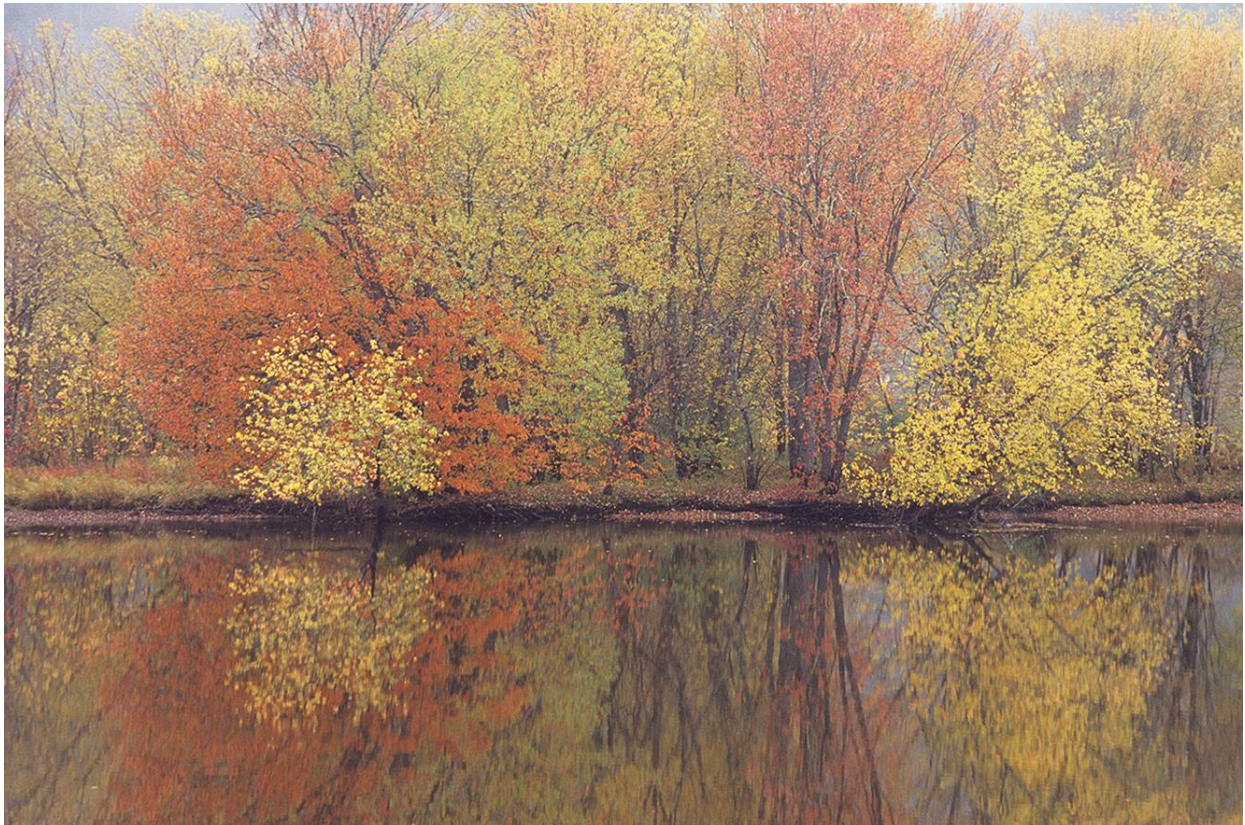
Living in the country, as I do, I find that there is nothing more ordinary nor extraordinary than the trees that surround me, but recently I realized that although I constantly admire their various structures and the communities they form and feel completely at home among them, I rarely stop to study the patterns in their trunks – their bark and the other plant species and communities that grow on them. So, a few days ago I decided to correct my oversight, picked up a camera with a short zoom lens, and started to examine the trunks of trees nearest my house. Here are a couple of images – some soft grey-green lichens on the cracked bark of a mature white birch plus a fantastic surprise on an old cedar, rendered even more beautiful by the texture of the bark.





A mature cedar provides a place of rest for a female luna moth

Three years ago on my birthday I decided to spend the day doing whatever mattered to me most – free of all human companionship. Early in the glorious afternoon I entered a forest trail behind my house and soon found myself “transported to another sphere.” In fact, no more than 10 minutes along the trail, I suddenly awoke to the fact that I had my arms wrapped around a towering birch and was calling out joyfully, “Thank you, thank you, thank you....” It was a totally unplanned, completely spontaneous act – and a very happy birthday.



Trees are utterly extraordinary, ordinary things to me and I’ve made friends with them everywhere I’ve travelled. Every now and then when I find myself in an urban situation where all visible plant life has been extinguished, I soon start to experience an acute and pervading deprivation. Plants matter to me – emotionally as much as physically – and I can so easily fall in love with a tree that I’ve completely lost track of my numerous “affairs.”

To visit some of the trees that have held me in their thrall or supported me along my way, please click on [TREES](#) and, if you haven’t already read Peter Wohlleben’s The Hidden Life of Trees, now is the time.

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“And the boy loved the tree... very much. And the tree was happy.”

Shel Silverstein

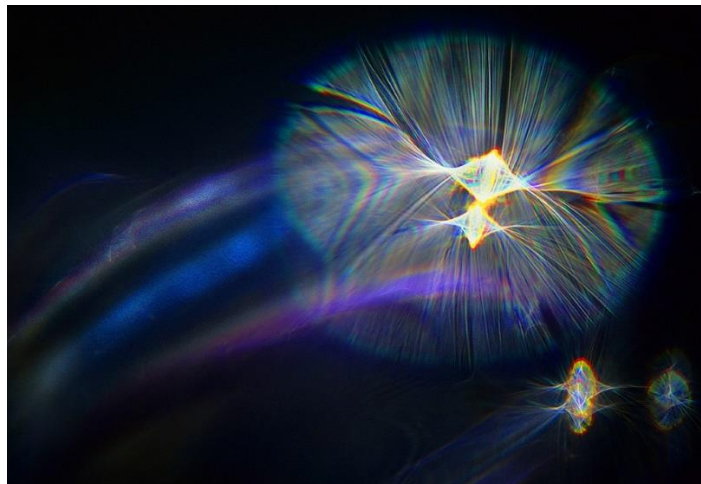
EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

In a previous letter I wrote about multi-disciplinary scientist Robert Lanza's book, Beyond Biocentrism, in which Lanza makes the scientific case that consciousness is *the fundamental reality*, not a creation of the brain, and that everything material and non-material is a manifestation or creation of consciousness. (You might say, then, that cosmic consciousness is another name for God.) The clear implication of this is that consciousness survives the death of the brain, which is what Christianity (though not all religions) has been claiming for a very long time. This is not, however, the same thing as saying that our personal ego survives death, although it may, but rather that the consciousness we now possess will continue to exist as part of the great ocean of cosmic consciousness.

Recently when I was poking through my bookshelves I came across Ervin Laszlo's The IMMORTAL MIND: Science and the Continuity of Consciousness beyond the Brain, a 2014 publication that states and describes the proposition that consciousness survives the death of the organism that possesses it (human, dog) with an example that anybody can understand.

Laszlo writes, "Consciousness is not part of the brain and is not produced by the brain. It is merely transmitted and displayed by the brain.... Let us return to the analogy of information transmitted by a radio.... We know that a radio *reproduces* the sounds of a symphony rather than *producing* that symphony. The symphony exists independently of its reproduction and continues to exist when the radio is turned off. Of course, when the radio is turned off we no longer hear the sounds of the symphony. But, this does not mean that the symphony would cease to exist."

The scientific basis for regarding consciousness as the fundamental reality is quantum mechanics. For many years I have been fascinated, not so much with the science, which began to be developed well over a century ago, as with its implications, which are vast. Both Lanza and Laszlo are students of quantum mechanics and devote a great deal of energy to explaining its implications for people with little or no background in the field, which includes most of us. But, hey! Yogananda and the great mystics have been saying this all along!



Summer 2020 at Shamper's Bluff

The summer is passing quickly, as Canadian summers do, and here on Shamper's Bluff, it's been notable for the absence of rain. Inadequate rainfall is never desirable for a Maritime climate, but observing the responses of both plants and animals to weather patterns and events is always instructive.

My rhododendrons and azaleas provide a good example. Last summer the plants received good rainfall regularly – every 10 days or so – and the moisture in the soil went deep. Their response was to put a lot of energy into developing roots, which was confirmed by phenomenal growth this spring. However, the flower bud set was not great, due to the energy diversion, so 2020 was not a banner year for blossoms. Now with prolonged dry conditions, the reverse is happening. Woody shrubs, such as rhododendrons and azaleas, interpret drought as threatening and, therefore, often set a large supply of flower buds for next spring. In other words, their aim is to produce lots of seeds, just in case this year will be their last. Of course, both visitors to the garden and I will marvel at the subsequent abundant bloom and call it “a great year,” but the plants themselves are simply looking after their own well-being and that of their community.

2020 has been a good year for birds here, announced early in the spring by the variety and volume of morning song. The endangered bob-o-links, goldfinches, and many other species flourished in the fields, which are never mowed before September, long after nesting is over. Tree swallows occupied every waiting box and successfully raised their young. Oblivious to my presence both pileated and downy woodpeckers showered me with wood chips from time to time, sparrows of all sorts abounded, and in mid August a pair of robins was busy feeding their third family for the year in a nest under my cottage balcony.

It may seem an early and precarious pursuit to be planning workshops for 2021 when no end to the Covid-19 pandemic is in sight and our best hope seems to be for a Canadian bubble. Even though the operators of our potential workshop sites want dates from my teaching partners and me now, there's more behind my planning than that. At this point I've completed enough ZOOM interviews and instructional sessions to underline what I already knew – workshops on-line are no substitute for ones on site, where participants are enriched by the sharing with other participants as well as with the instructors. An on-line workshop is a misnomer. It's usually just theory and instruction. Holistic learning involves actually doing.

So, rather than regarding the pandemic solely as a problem, it makes better sense to see it as an opportunity. Thus, when a particular invitation came my way, an invitation from a person I know well and a place I love to be, I quickly followed it up. The result is that I'll soon be announcing [on my web site](#) details for two self-directed workshops for 2021 (each for six participants) at Kingsbrae International Residency for the Arts (KIRA) in the magnificent 11-hectare/27-acre Kingsbrae Gardens in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. You read it here first.

Go well, everybody! Allez bien, tout le monde! Goed gaan, almal! FREEMAN

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