

Logging

The Nature of Nature, 1994

by Ted Kerasote

In a valley of quiet, we empty the sky, felling trees with horses, among a circle of sweat and friends. Some would call this logging. I don't know what to call it: life. . . building a cabin. . . being a mindful citizen of my home? I search for a name, using my hands and teeth, my nose.

The tinkle of the bell mare drifts down the slope, the hand-turned winch clicks, the heady, musty smell of working horses mixes with the odors of spruce and sun-warmed resin, huckleberries. Standing on the arch—the mobile winch that hoists one end of logs off the ground—Woody says, “Back,” to the two draft horses, their hooves the size of buckets. He wears a torn shirt and filthy jeans, gold-framed spectacles, and a hard hat shaped like the First World War helmets of American soldiers.

At his command, each horse takes a diminutive step backward, moving the arch into place. Woody wraps the horses' reins around a metal tender on the front of the arch, both designed and welded by himself, then jumps lightly from log to log like a marten, prying apart the trees with a pike and circling them with hook and chain. He moves with longtime practice and care. Across the valley, the hillsides rise to granite outcrops—meadow and aspen; meadow and conifers; meadow and sky, as empty and crystal blue as the sound of the bell. Here, on the north-facing side of Mosquito Creek, the fir and spruce rub branches, allowing only rough circles of light to pool on the forest floor.

After helping Woody top off the load and watching him drop out of sight down the skid trail with the horses, I walk back along our cut, through an old stand of lodgepole pines we are about to fell. White of bark, straight and tall, the trees have lost their green. However, unlike Yellowstone's lodgepole forest to the north, they've seen giving holocaust has seared their trunks, providing a blaze to pop their dormant cones and start a new grove, the centuries-old story of this firedependent species. In the course of time, they've simply grown old, growing and growing until their trunks have fattened to sixteen, eighteen, twenty inches in diameter. Such trees are no more than sticks in the Pacific Northwest, but here, in the high mountains of Wyoming, they're not only good-size-when it comes to lodgepoles, they're venerable. Woody has declared them the best house logs he's cut in the state.

Touching the trunk of the largest, I sight up to where its crown sways, slowly, gracefully, through the oh-so-blue sky. A slight breeze courses up there, eighty, a hundred feet off the ground. Down here, all is still. Once upon a time, the people who called this place home cut smaller lodgepoles into lengths of ten to twenty feet during the spring, peeled the bark, and set the poles aside. Come fall, the two-inch-thick trunks would have dried to a weight of only seven to ten pounds and would be stiff, strong, and virtually impossible to split. Lashed together and covered with buffalo

hides, they formed the framework of a tepee, hence the name lodgepole. The poles were also good for making a travois, which served as the means by which Plains Indians, journeying to the mountains for tepee fixings, dragged the bundled lodgepoles back to the prairies.

When the first settlers came to the Rockies, they used the lodgepole (*Pinus contorta*) for fencing corrals, and also for sheds, stables, and sometimes even for cabins, as I'm about to do. The naturalist Donald Culross Peattie recounts in his great work *A Natural History of Western Trees* that the species was also made into fruit boxes and telegraph and telephone poles. Bridge pilings, mine props, railroad ties. . . these, too, were once fashioned from this two-needled pine. In fact, across the next divide at Horse Creek, lumberjacks would fell lodgepoles during the winter, saw them into six-foot lengths, trim them square with broadaxes, then stack them near the frozen streams. During the spring spate, these future railroad ties were floated to the Green River, boomed (held by cables stretched across the creek mouths), and floated south when the water reached its best height.

So today, up here in Mosquito Creek, we stand in a long line of loggers. I rub my palms against the tree, put my nose into its bark and inhale. Dry for years, it has lost its scent. Then I wrap my arms around its girth, measuring its bulk. Having counted the rings of trees already down, I know that this tree is a little over a hundred years old, which is notable for the species but not senescent. Four-hundred to six-hundred-year-old individuals have been recorded. Still, compared with me this tree is an elder. It was a seedling before Wyoming became a state and before any white person homesteaded these valleys. It was already a little tree before my grandfather was born. It felt the ashes of the Katmai and Mount St. Helens eruptions fall

on its needles and heard the silent mountains fill with the coming of trucks and atomic bombs and jets. It has witnessed the trapped-out beaver return and four generations of humans making deer and elk into meat. It has been present as these valleys were clear-cut and then reseeded, and now it is watching us take out the standing dead, of which it is one.

Even though our logging is selective and horse-drawn, and completed in this circle of sweat and friendship, I'm not totally at ease with what we're doing-especially because the trees are old and ready to serve others besides me. Left alone, they might provide food and homes for sapsuckers, great horned owls, a small bear. If I were a member of the family U rsidae instead of a human, such a fallen tree would be a delightful smorgasbord of ants "and grubs, and, excavated a little, also a snug winter den. Eventually some of these trees would be split by lightning, others would be toppled by the wind; they would rot into soil. Our logging will short-circuit an entire community's changing shape, going on as it has done for eons.

Still, I'm neither bird nor bear, and our species hasn't lived like these beings-seamlessly, totally within nature-for hundreds of thousands of years. This old tree will feel no rot, won't mingle its juices with the soil it has known. No sapsucker will tap on its trunk, no black bear fill its bole with soft hibernal breath. It will ride down the valley on Woody's flatbed truck and become the ridgepole of my new house, hear the laughter of children, parents, and friends, listen to banjos and Beethoven, smell baking potatoes, Christmas pudding, and shampoo, watch moose and deer nose to its grovemates on the lower courses of the house, and feel ravens walk upon its back, as they once did here in Mosquito Creek. It will shelter my world-a sheltering that is, by my lights, as necessary as the sheltering

of the bear. And I guess that the only way I can remain easy with its transformation from tree to human home is to be present as it happens, midwife as much as logger.

Above me, Tonio, Woody's helper this summer and also a naturalist from Costa Rica's Monteverde Cloud Forest, cajoles Milo, the huge chestnut gelding, backward toward a log. His voice, "Gee, haw, step," reminds me that I've been slacking off. Giving the tree a final pat, I begin to toss slash into piles, so that we'll have a clear trail to drag out the trees still to be cut. Four to six feet long, bristling with the jagged stumps of broken limbs, the slash needs both care and brute strength to move. I toss it downhill, wincing at what I'm crushing-willows, arnica, and beds of lush huckleberry-the bystanders and side-effect casualties of logging. But there is no clear spot of earth where the slash can be harmlessly piled. Vegetation covers the entire forest floor.

Those of us who divide the world into the sentient animal kingdom and the nonsentient plant kingdom might not give a second thought to crushing the undergrowth in this way as a by-product of logging-indeed, would never ascribe such anthropomorphic words as seeing, hearing, or listening to a lodgepole. By definition, the standing dead, as well as the live plants who inhabit our logging site and are destroyed as we cut skid trails, can't have such faculties or feelings, since they are nonsentient, nonfeeling. Investing them with such .capabilities, or even the sentience of the animal kingdom, is unscientific. If you are a writer and venture into this territory, you commit what the poet John Ruskin called "the pathetic fallacy."

This division, of course, is one way to understand the world. However, if you spend enough time outside, in landscapes that are quiet enough, you may begin to hear other voices.

Listening to the pines respire, the aspens confabulate, and the cottonwoods complain, you begin to wonder whether you are projecting your hopes and desires on the trees among which (whom ?) you walk. Are they mirroring your personality or do they have ones of their own? If, too, the hillsides nod as you walk home after a day's work, saying, "Together we have passed and loved and created another day," if you hear the kindly whisper of grass and the hum of starlight as you fall asleep under the dark sky, if the world starts to speak-and by this I mean not actual words but body language, as dogs and cats and bears have body language that can be read-then it becomes more difficult to apply the term "nonsentient" to all those who are simply not ambulatory. When you let yourself touch the pain and sorrow of live animals and trees as they become food and wood for humans, participating in that great mystery of recombination in which life dies only to bring forth new life. . . when you put your hands up to the elbows into the womb of nature through fishing, farming, hunting, logging, and tenderly caress the place from where life springs, lamenting as well when it departs its current shape. . . then truly is it difficult to reduce the world neatly into the quick and the dead, the knowing and the unconscious.

Granted, I've never heard broccoli scream under my chefs knife, as one of my more sensitive vegetarian friends has, but it has been clear for a long, long time that not only do elk prefer to remain elk instead of becoming each year my flesh and blood, but so too would my potatoes prefer to remain in the ground than go into my microwave, and lodgepoles would prefer to continue thrusting their crowns to the sky instead of supporting my roof. This understory of vegetation, I'm certain, would choose, if it could, not to be converted prematurely into duff under a pile of

slash.

For thousands upon thousands of years, other hunter-gatherers saw the plant and mineral kingdoms, not just the animal kingdom, as thus infused with spirit and consciousness. They asked the ash to allow itself to be made into a bow; they inquired of the mountain if it would allow them passage. The sky-centered religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam considered these people to be superstitious infidels and lost souls (although why talking to a mountain seems any more superstitious than talking to an invisible God in heaven has never made much sense to me). The Enlightenment, putting its faith in rational man, in progress and perfectibility, continued the disparagement of hunter-gatherers, because these earth-centered people believed in processes that science could not verify with its instruments. We have continued that disparagement, doubting a Bushman who can predict the appearance of an eland or an elephant from over the horizon, because we still have no way to measure what the Bushman does.

Only recently, as our recording devices have become more sophisticated-enabling us to hear the long-distance communication of elephants, for instance-have these nomadic people's keenness of observation and their enormous knowledge of the natural world been seen as rivaling or exceeding that of the most experienced field biologist and been given the respect they deserve. But the questions remains, How did they learn so much without radio telemetry, time-lapse photography, sensitive microphones-without even a ruler? The answer is hard for us to embrace. Such cultures differ from ours not in their lack of technology but in their immersion in quiet-a quiet that permits them to hear subtler voices than those which come to our ears. They live a-nong ellipses. . . a state we consider full of omission,

a leaving out, and that they see and hear as gravid with information.

Asking lodgepoles to allow themselves to be made into a house before felling them (even standing "dead" ones, for they haven't lost their spirit) is, I guess, my way into the renaissance of that tradition. Perhaps a better word than "living" would be "hearing"-hearing the spirit of the grand and imposing (these lodgepoles) filter down into the meek and innocuous, then turning that hearing into action. A few years ago, I began to put vegetable cuttings outside, and not solely for the utilitarian end of making compost for my garden. It seemed that the salad scraps were happier changing state in the grass around my cabin than in a landfill among unacknowledged trash.

"Wow!" say those who haven't watched the body language of the natural world express how it wishes to be treated. "This is far-fetched homage." Maybe. . . maybe. One can also look at the accretion of these small, heartfelt gestures-saying "Thank you" to the elk who becomes your winter's meat, bidding good-bye and hello to lodgepoles-as a way of moving through the world (what a Christian might call "soul," a New Age practitioner "aura," and a shaman "spirit") . . . a way of moving that is the real reason, not their stature or skin color, that no one mistakes a Sherpa or a Bushman for an American. The reverence that we enforce in our museums, concert halls, and places of worship these people of less compartmentalized cultures give freely to all their surroundings.

When someone from Western culture gives reverence to all in this way, he or she is often judged as slightly touched, certainly maudlin, not grounded. His or her beliefs, if carried out by many, are seen as leading to economic depression, entropy, the end of society as we know it. Again, that's one way to embrace the world. But a person

can admit that everything counts, withoUt simultaneously becoming inert. In fact, such an admission can make one more full. . . mindful. . . thoughtful. . . careful . . . which is another way of saying that one grows appreciative of the sacrifices being made to sustain life, and that by appreciating them more, one chooses wisely those sacrifices that must be made. Another word for this state of mind is compassion. Not surprisingly, the consumptive age in which we live is uneasy with the state of mind and heart that such words imply. With only so much space on our biggest hard disks, or in our walk-in closets, can any of us make room for a Father in Heaven or-closer by and more likely to be trampled by our thoughtlessness-the Mother under our feet?

Taking off my gloves, I touch the bank of swarded earth behind me. For a moment-the bell mare's tinkle floating down the mountainside, the thump of Milo's hooves in the soft undergrowth-I feel Her rich beneath us, valleyed and jagged with mountains to be sure, but on the whole curvaceous and breast-smooth, stretching away to the horizons . . . the Earth.

These days, in a retUrn to the animism that informed the cultures that preceded the pagan Greeks and Romans, we have begun to speak to Her: Gaia, Doni, Baba Yaga, Sedna, Mother. She has so many names, holdovers and extrapolations from all those peoples who understood paradise as right here in whatever Mosquito Creek they were logging, not above and not in the future. Myself, I haven't found a name I can truly speak to, though at times like this, when I have my hands resting upon Her understory and put my mouth in Her for a taste-leaf, grass, berry, earth-I hear my voice responding to my stomach with the sound nursing mammals make, "Mmmm." At such a moment, I think of Her as no more and no less than

this sound, “Mmmm.” First food, first warmth, first name, first mystery. . . our first and last resting place.

Bearded and slight, his blue eyes laughing, Tonio joins me on the skid trail. We wrap chain around a previously bucked log, then send Milo galumphing through the forest. In another moment, Woody appears with his orange chain saw, which all of us respect but dislike for its noise. He pulls the starter cord, and the high-pitched brrrrr-brrrrr-brrrrr rips through the forest. Manicuring the path toward the lodgepoles, concerned about the width of the trail needed to get these giant trees out with the twohorse team, he flicks the bar toward the base of a six-foot-high spruce, who has had the misfortune to grow too close to the path we have chosen. He decapitates it neatly at ground level, and before it can fall catches it on the bar while still holding down the trigger. The buzzing chain tosses the sapling aside like a child hit by a car. Without a glance to the spruce, Woody continues to move through the forest, swinging his scythe.

I walk ahead of him, coming at last to the big tree I lingered by. Staring up to where it writes upon the sky, I stretch up an arm and place my palm flat against its trunk. Cone. . . seed. . . tree. . . house.

Woody comes in, makes a wedge-shaped cut on the downhill side, aiming it for the trail we have cleared. Sawdust flies around his knees like wheat from a thresher. He moves to the opposite side of the trunk and makes the felling cut. For what seems like a moment held in amber—the crouching man, the orange saw, the flying sawdust, the white trunk anchored into a pool of sunlight—the tall lodgepole doesn’t move. Then it starts its slow silent arc through the canopy. I mark it: there against the sky; there beginning to sway; there swooshing, whooshing, crashing with

a mighty breaking of branches and a dull solid thud, bouncing once before coming to rest. Soil to soil. . . earth to earth. . . our brief and lovely shelter. Standing next to the stump, I look up and see a blue hole where a world just stood.