

Grounding Virtue in Consulting Forestry By Marianne Patinelli-Dubay

“In taking responsibilities for our actions we have made our faithfulness in doing what we must a measure of ourselves, and that commitment is not a matter of willed decision but of standing by that measure and continuing to judge ourselves by it.”

– Alasdair MacIntyre from *Wilderness and the Heart*

Introduction

Years ago, my mother took to paddling the flat blue ponds of the North Country in a small handmade boat. Her canoe is a mustard color with oak gunnels and a thin red stripe around its somewhat wide belly. It is designed so that one sits on the floor, floating both above and beneath the water; the whole effect is like a Lilliputian gliding in a leaf. Osgood Pond. Floodwood. Church Pond. Bloomingdale Bog. When life’s seasons brought my mother beyond the easy reach of her ponds, she handed her little boat down to me. I named her Estelle and from then on it was only Clear Pond where I glided around learning its depths and where the boulders were submerged, the shape of the water's edge, and where best to come ashore if the weather came up to walk the trail home.

I was happy to slide out into the same small water day after day, the quiet bowl of my pond. I understood its parameters and learned to read what the sky foretold about the weather. Over time, I developed an instinct for knowing when to go and how long to stay before conditions shifted and became unfavorable; through repetition comes familiarity and through familiarity comes a natural sense of where the edges are. And then a few years ago, my husband and I moved out of the Boreal forest to a fertile agricultural valley with more fields, less

mountains, more light, and less water. We carried Estelle into one of the barns and I promised someday to find new water.

This story helps to illustrate that the necessary conditions for a satisfying float, and the circumstances that must be present to facilitate understanding and to enact virtue, are coincident. To accurately communicate the character of my canoe and our optimal circumstances as vessel and paddler, one must first have a sense of her lines and her capacity, what she can bear and what conditions she calls for in order to achieve her full expression alongside my own desires and competencies. In other words, Estelle and I achieve our most perfect expression when I have taken care to see that weather, mood, her sturdiness and water-worthiness, the course plotted, and my purpose in setting out all align. Likewise regarding virtue: to act correctly in a situation that requires honesty, courage, and a clear understanding of need versus desire means being able to live in the question similarly, to inhabit its slope and aspect, to read the atmosphere for difficulties that might be gathering, to know our own limits and those of others, as well as what we will need in the way of resources and reinforcement to identify and then do the right thing.

Like the contours or the boundaries necessary to facilitate a positive experience on the water, virtue -or practical wisdom- is similar in that it is best understood and successfully activated within clearly defined, well-known, and harmonious conditions. The more we understand about the boundaries of a situation and the circumstances necessary (either pre-existing or those that we must construct and manage) for it to be successful, the clearer the dynamics of the situation become and the better able we are to discern the proper action. Put another way:

“Practical wisdom involves attending to the concrete particularities of each case [...] In this sense, the person of practical wisdom, having developed a storehouse of knowledge that comes about through experience, is attuned to the relevant concrete particularities in each situation.

From the *2nd Edition Introduction to Consulting Forestry*, Forthcoming in 2023

Additionally, practical wisdom involves deliberating about whether a given end is worthy and conducive to a good life, both for oneself and for one's community (Beabout 420)."

These boundaries and the experience that is undergone within them outline a domain, a practice or an area within which virtue can be understood by its objective qualities. In other words, virtue wants specificity in the way my canoe and I want a certain kind of water.

Grounding Virtue in Consulting Forestry

I have written a fair amount about ethics and ethical decision making in forestry. Throughout, I have never once stated, either as opinion or impartial fact, what the ethical response to a given situation actually is. In a textbook I've written for resource managers, case studies written by working foresters are followed by a series of questions that are meant to guide the reader through several frameworks for ethical decision making. The intention behind this is to introduce students and professionals to a language of deep inquiry, to encourage the practice of reading a situation closely from a variety of standpoints, and ultimately to learn to settle on a set of approaches that cohere around the ethically correct way to reconcile the situation. This kind of exercise is the first order of ethical business.

The philosopher Luce Irigaray, writing about Martin Heidegger, claimed that what people missed about Heidegger was that his work began with a rootedness in the here and now. Ultimately, she affirms, he lifted out of the realm of the sensual and the sensible into abstract theory, which is often the focus of his contribution to the field. But Irigaray understood the importance of reintroducing the material world and prime matter as the vital landscape that anchored Heidegger's thinking. Similarly, focusing on virtue as a concept that has consistent traits, together with the material conditions in which it flourishes, is one way of reconstituting

virtue's ground and binding it together with forestry. By following this construction of virtue all the way down, we can move away from opposing accounts of what it is and avoid a muddle that is more likely to provoke apathy than fidelity. Instead, virtue conceived of in a grounded and more practical way can be identified by a set of qualities that are strengthened by their alignment, rooted in place, and free of contradiction.

Consulting Forestry Requires Virtue

This grounding or localizing can take the shape of an occupation or a professional identity that at once clarifies how one is known and, based on this, indicates what he or she should do in a particular situation. Best practices and codes of conduct instruct us in this regard and yet, every working forester knows that situations will arise that fall outside or between the lines of any predetermined code. In these instances, a clarification of virtue as an imbedded feature of consulting forestry can be useful. Consider it this way: if virtue is a fixed characteristic that is inextricably linked with one's professional identity, then in order to continue to affiliate with the profession, the virtuous behavior is non-negotiable even when circumstances make doing the right thing difficult.

In other words, the role of a consulting forester includes an implicit agreement to behave in a particular way such that the question, "What is the correct action for a person calling themselves a consulting forester?" encompasses its answer if we understand that "correct action" and "consulting forester" are the same. A forester who fails to respond correctly through her actions is not only falling short ethically, but she has also broken the bond of the guild.

Characteristics of Virtue and Forestry

To take up a particular role is to take up the virtues or the qualities that are written into its performance and the achievement of excellence in its name. If you are routinely called upon to speak up or act to preserve the integrity of your craft, your trade, and your industry; and if this action might have a negative impact on you, your relationships, or your ‘bottom line;’ then it follows that courage is a virtue that is written into the job of a consulting forester. Failure to behave accordingly or to willfully act against this virtue amounts to a denigration of the profession. “The exercise of a virtue exhibits qualities which are required for sustaining a social role and for exhibiting excellence in some well-marked area of social practice” (MacIntyre 187). This holds true even when we are under legitimate pressures stemming from the need to act in conflicting ways to satisfy other and/or personal obligations. This tension is one reason behind the extensive code that consultants must agree to for membership in professional organizations. The code is a detailed acknowledgement that the core concept of virtue “always requires for its application the acceptance for some prior account of certain features of social and moral life in terms of which it has to be defined and explained” (MacIntyre 186). In other words, we may agree that courage is a virtue, but only if we agree that courage is a necessary quality for a person who occupies a certain role in society. By this measure, virtues are aligned with the occupation of the individual.

Virtue as the True Aim

This role-specific way of understanding virtue requires us to identify the key social roles that a profession occupies, and the requirements attached to these roles that together should point to what he or she ought to do. ACF’s code is a clear and comprehensive statement that outlines

the group's expectations for how a consultant is meant to organize his or her professional life. These specific criteria and aims are nested within those of the profession more broadly. This twofold standard supports the idea that natural resource management requires unique management structures that are specific to the domain of consulting and that these standards of excellence also ripple out and hold within the larger and perhaps less specific domain of general professional forestry (Beabout 406).

Virtue as Forestry's Internal Good

Consulting forestry satisfies the criteria of a practice defined by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre as:

“any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity (MacIntyre 187).”

A practice like consulting has what MacIntyre calls internal and external goods. The external goods of a practice include the social, financial, and perhaps political benefits of the craft. The fruits of external goods are always a direct benefit to the practitioner in the form of compensation or advantage. In contrast, the internal goods of a practice are also the result of striving for excellence however the benefit, in this case, is shared among all of the practitioners by enhancing the overall character of the practice.

Virtue is directly tied to the achievement of the internal goods of a practice which “can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners” (MacIntyre 191). Here we put an obligation and a duty towards our fellows at the fore. In order to pursue excellence, one must humble oneself to the standards of a practice and

the excellences better known by those more masterful in the practice than oneself (Beabout 411). We do this recognizing that excellence is reliant upon achieving a unified field of tradesmen and women who hold the health and reputation of the industry as a primary objective. To sublimate the goods internal to the practice renders it pointless except as a device for achieving external advantage (MacIntyre 191). Without prioritizing internal goods, the practice is hollowed out and it becomes a mere vehicle of personal acquisition, benefit and gain. As a consulting forester, your primary interests ought to include a healthy relationship with colleagues, an ability to bring your personal desires into agreement with the good of your associates for the benefit of the craft, the ability to recognize what is owed to colleagues and clients, and to temper personal desire and greed by locating these ordinary human traits within an understanding of whether and how it impacts members of the guild with whom you share a common purpose.

In Conclusion

The necessary and qualifying traits of a consulting forester are virtuous as much as technical; they are about the operational aspects of the industry commensurate with an emphasis on the correct relationship between the people and the landscapes that you are responsible for stewarding. The robust internal goods of a practice, and the degree to which practitioners value them, is what distinguishes mere skill from the kind of craft that foresters are loyal to. Corruption of or within an industry can be consistently traced back to a creeping disregard for these internal goods and a failure to see that forestry is more than the sum of its technical parts.

Work Cited:

Beabout, Gregory R. *Management as a Domain-Relative Practice that Requires and Develops*

Practical Wisdom. *Business Ethics Quarterly* 22:2 (April 2012); pp. 405-32.

Irigaray, Luce. *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. University of Texas Press, 1999.

Kavanagh, Donncha. *Problematizing Practice: MacIntyre and Management*, *Organization* 20(1)
pp. 103-15. 2012.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: Third Edition*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Patinelli-Dubay, Marianne. *Practical Ethics: A Field Guide for Resource Managers*. Kendall
Hunt Publishing, 2023.