

The Forestry *Source*

News for forest resource professionals published by the Society of American Foresters

From *The Forestry Source*, June 2020. © The Society of American Foresters, eforester.org

The Wrestling: Ethics in Forestry

By Marianne Patinelli-Dubay

In the wild brush and wind of Montana, philosopher Henry Bugbee stood for what it means to live out life's fundamental questions, hip deep in a trout stream, fly rod in hand. He wrote that philosophy will not be set up like the solution of a puzzle, worked out with all the pieces lying there before the eye. It will be more like the clarification of what we know in our bones. In this way, Bugbee prepares the ground for a distinctly American, and quintessentially Western, ethical map of the world that follows respect through obligation into the body of humility. Always he instructs us to proceed through experience as naturally as a current carves and then accommodates itself to the shape of the North Fork Coeur d'Alene, the Big Wood, and the Bitterroot Rivers.

“As we take things, so we have them” (Bugbee 1957, p. 59). Here Bugbee turns our attention from acquisition to beholding by the simple addition of a word: *as*. To say “we take things, so we have them” is to state the obvious, it is the language of the base, or the rough, character of need and gain, a transaction that is a real and fundamental aspect of forestry. But he writes, “As we take things, so we have them,” and by balancing this gesture of intent on the front end of an otherwise primal truth, he calls us to attend to the way we are morally



A portion of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, an 1861 mural by Eugene Delacroix in the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. Image: Wikimedia Commons, tinyurl.com/tp96vm4.

positioned in the act of taking. This small inclusion draws us into considerations that run deeper than harvest, commodity, and yield, beyond conditions and access.

Your willingness as foresters to adopt a righteous posture from the outset, to

embrace and struggle toward the correct end, is the first and the strongest muscle that the body of ethics within the profession can flex. Ethics can appear straightforward when the situation is simple and when codes of conduct point the way, or ethics can be uncertain and contested when the questions lead where the code or the rules fail to guide. In these latter instances, we find ourselves far along the path toward right-doing, left alone to determine the good within the constraints of the possible. In this moment, ethics is demonstrated through our behavior, in how we stand in the difficult landscape of right-doing within the field of what we care about. Given the regularity of this occurrence, your relationship with the profession's philosophical, as well as its practical complexities must become something as natural as your grasp of a tool, as personal as your stride, and as common as your familiarity with a woodlot.

I recently participated in a workshop conducted by the University of Arkansas, during which one question asked of students was whether a particular cut could be considered high-grading. The answer sounded something like the way an artist gathers elements and makes spatial estimates to organize visual information into a composition. The instructor addressed the need to understand the history of how that landscape had been managed in the past and then, taken together with adjacent landscapes, the answer of whether or not the prescription constituted high-grading might change. I was fascinated, but he didn't seem to think this way of moving around the question sculpturally was extraordinary. So I thought, "Maybe this is simply what an ethical question sounds like in the language of forestry; it is the way a forester moves through a woodlot in and among characteristics and possibilities, following the rich contours and robust edges that management leaves on the land. It is

drawing the forest out in space, and over time, settling on a quality of address, deciding how to position yourself within the question. Here within the landscape, you will decide what a management technique means after it has been mapped over the geography of historical treatments and flourishing. Only then can we weigh profit against harm according to ecological, silvicultural, and ethical standards."

Through a slow accounting of your objectives, you will adjust and correct for deficiencies, you will measure and determine the righteousness of a technique based on the quality of your motivation and your vision for the landscape over time. Ethics, like forest management, is tilling; it is what Henry Bugbee calls *spade work* that yields, and it is the goodness of the yield that is revealed in the moment when it is ready. Ethics, Henry Thoreau declared, is "daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world!" In the midst of this ecstatic moment he asks: "Who are we? Where are we?" (Thoreau 1988, p. 95), putting a spin on the classic questions that have driven ethical inquiry for millennia, namely: Why am I here? And how should I live? And, importantly, how should I position myself as I take up this question, because it matters not simply *where* we stand but *how*; more than *what* we say, it matters *to what end*. The watchword is attentive, responsive, the tone is careful (Mooney 2011, p. 5), and the body is inclined. Inclination is a disposition and a gesture, it is a way of carrying oneself into a circumstance that requires attention. You are talking to me, and I am inclining toward you in order to hear or perhaps to struggle with you, and "in certain struggles, there comes a time when the confrontation becomes an exchange" (Chrétien 2003, p. 4). This drawing down and in toward right-doing and reconciliation is gestural, it arcs toward

intimacy, and thus it gives way and is ethical at its core.

Because ethics is contact between you and me, between you and a landscape, it occupies the space between opposing, or divergent, objectives. In ethics, the space between must close in order for the struggle, like an embrace, to occur. Embrace is a gesture that we can envision to help us to understand the relational and the intentional quality necessary in the foreground of practical ethics. What I'm trying to get at, abstractly, is beautifully rendered in a painting by the French artist Eugene Delacroix (1861). It illustrates the posture of a struggle, the ordinary discord that finds us and draws us in without disclosing its purpose or loosening its hold until the moment we are changed in the throes and our identity is enlarged—we are released with an altered stride and a character that takes on a higher purpose for the wrestling. It sounds intense. But it is familiar to anyone who has negotiated contested terrain, calculating what they're in it for, what perseverance will cost, and whether the outcome is worth the price.

An Ancient Story

The artist depicts an ancient story so as to illuminate what it means to meet trouble and encircle it, to draw the unknown into the curve of the body, into the arc of personal understanding. Delacroix illustrates what it means to be changed, to be named, and to become known by the striving. In the story, Jacob is woken in the night by a winged assailant looking for a fight. The young man is brought into the wrestling, but first he removes his sword, and so the struggle takes place bare-handed. The weapon would require some distance to use effectively, arm's length at least, and holding the other at arm's length makes any wrestling, real or philosophical, impossible. Instead, Jacob

comes into his struggle with open hands. The ordinary insecurity found in the midst of a conflict depicted in Delacroix's rendering is easily made personal and relatable, for "Why does Jacob matter, if we cannot become him? Why does his angel matter, if he no longer has the force to assault us? What does this combat matter if it cannot take place this very night?" (Chrétien 2009, p. 8). And so it does, all the time the struggle finds us.

In the painting, the angel pulls Jacob in toward his body by the thigh, and the space between them closes, both are sure-footed now and locked in a chain formation with their single contour rising to the cupola of hands held up, fingers entwined (Chrétien 2009, p. 15). Whatever will come of the battle, it can only be well-fought, hand to hand. The proximity and attention of this encounter, the necessity of a hand-to-hand approach bears on our theme. Delacroix takes the physical measure of an abstract ethical struggle and reminds us that before we leap for answers to settle a scene, we must first position ourselves inside it, draw it close, understand our intentions, and mind how we stand. Thinking and then acting in this way, conceding that what we wrestle with, what wrestles with us, must be brought close onto equal footing and held long in such a way that makes estrangement impossible and puts resolution within reach.

The thick and deeply human, obligatory nature of ethics guarantees a struggle. Our task is to consider how we take up that striving without posturing, but simply by our natural gait, to work out a question that holds us, as well as benefit and harm in the balance. Often what passes for ethics is merely a code of conduct or rules governing particular behaviors. Such a code is necessary, but it is not sufficient. There is no real ethical certainty; there is, rather, a summons to take in the unknown, to take up the question, to wrestle it free of its

constraints and set it down on ground fairly earned. Whatever else anyone tells you, ethics lives in the questions and in our ability to think, to hold there and to struggle, rather than simply to conclude. At our peril, we imagine that a code of conduct or the rule of law alone will answer every call that reaches us. Some time ago, a student was frustrated that I'd been making this business about ethics much more difficult than it needed to be. He was 18, and I'm guessing had yet to be woken in the night haunted by a decision, struggling in the blowdown to find the middle way between how the world is and how it ought to be, and reconciling himself to what will be asked of him in the clearing.

His frustration was youthful and also a result of efficiency training and a learned disposition to answer questions, to solve problems, to settle dust, to demonstrate knowledge, and to do a job. Yet ethics in forestry is often a subtle tension or an uncertainty that runs beneath an otherwise straightforward technical problem. Moral questions live inside technical ones, and they must be addressed carefully alongside the functional concerns at the surface. Ethics tries to "catch what it is to live, to live ... well among others, to acknowledge ... backdrops of contingency and necessity, tempering all action and passion; what it is to be rooted in earth, poignantly aware of heritage, birth and tomorrow" (Bugbee 1953, p. 4).

Enduring Questions

If the enduring questions handed down by the ancient philosophers lead with "How should I live?" questions that in Thoreau's revision become "Who are we?" then addressing these questions with the integrity and the patience of open-handed struggle requires a qualitative sensibility, patience, and the willingness to hold fast in an

attentive attitude in the face of the unknown, perhaps even the unknowable world. Aristotle would say that the measure of such a thing occurs at the far end of the long throw of time, over the course of a life. Virtue for Aristotle, like ethics, is a behavior that emerges out of an attraction to the beautiful in service to the fine, the noble, and the useful. He draws a relationship between ethical, or virtuous, action and a craft wherein "nothing should be taken away and to which nothing further should be added." The balanced accomplishment is abiding with harmony, offered up in utility—this is craft.

In a similar way, Henry Bugbee could have been talking about foresters when he wrote that "a craftsman may respect his tools and his material even to the point of revering them. A man would be but a casual seafarer or mountaineer if he did not come to respect the sea, or the mountains" (Bugbee 1953, p. 2), the forest and the land as a whole. Not incidentally, these qualities, taken in careful measure, also characterize a life, and so it is on the mature end of time when the presence or absence of such things, like the results of a harvest, can finally be evaluated. Gifford Pinchot understood exactly the need for forest management that held to these principles, as well as to the belief that time was the horizon over which it would all flourish and fruit.

Together here we are bound by a promise, within a profession that needs more from us than to simply go through the motions of acting in accord with the behavior of care or the mere procedure of right-doing. When we come face-to-face with a question whose answer holds destruction or flourishing in the balance, our profession needs men and women competent to travel into the territory of ethics unafraid to be taken up in the struggle, to make good and hold fast, to become fluent in the language and the behavior of felt concern. Each profession

constitutes a practice, and each practice is directed toward a purpose: yours is marked by the burden of safekeeping within the tradition of cherishing. Foresters must go beyond codes of conduct, straightforward calculations, and the illusion of simple solutions to go instead into the real and unresolved terrain of ethics. We go in search of insights, to position ourselves within questions that are essential to natural resources management, including how obligation entrains respect, to discover for ourselves the role of personal integrity in the field, and to consider humility as a feature of right-behavior. Thank you.

This is an edited version of the keynote address by Marianne Patinelli-Dubay at the 19th Annual Foresters Forum in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in February 2020. Patinelli-Dubay (mpatinelli@esf.edu) leads the environmental philosophy program at the 15,000-acre Huntington Wildlife Forest, a property of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She focuses on developing educational programs in ethics that apply directly to foresters and land managers. She is chair-elect of the SAF Adirondack chapter and chairs the national History and Philosophy Working Group.

Acknowledgments

This is an edited version of the 19th Annual Foresters Forum Keynote Address given in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The Forum is sponsored and hosted by Northwest Management Inc., and this paper is dedicated with gratitude to Vincent P. Corrao, president, and Mark Corrao, managing partner.

Literature Cited

- Bugbee, Henry. "The Moment of Obligation in Experience." *The Journal of Religion*, 33, 1, 1953, pp. 1–15.
- _____. *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form*. University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis, Fordham University Press, 2003.
- Mooney, Edward F. *Lost Intimacy in American Thought, Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2009.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Maine Woods*. Penguin Books, 1988.