

Forestry^{The}Source

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Forestry as a Vocation and the Responsibilities of a Calling

Editor's note: This essay is a version of the powerful, thought-provoking plenary address given by Marianne Patinelli-Dubay at the SAF National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 31, 2019.

By Marianne Patinelli-Dubay

“Do your work and I shall know you.” Here, the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson is asking us to consider work as both a duty and a calling. He argues that we are fundamentally compelled towards work that is already in us to perform. It is as if our potential for certain work resides in the soul and, like desire, the drive towards this work is woven into the fabric of the individual spirit, such that we are drawn forward towards an occupation as life-work.

Emerson compels us to search ourselves to discover on an essential level what our work is, what we are talented for, and how to devote those qualities to a purpose. We are asked, in Emerson's petition, to search and to know ourselves, to identify our work, and then to perform it with a dedication that is akin to a calling.

Philosophers after Emerson will have much to say about a calling and the quality of a hand-to-hand relationship that is implicit in the call and response. The image of



Plenary speaker Marianne Patinelli-Dubay at the SAF National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 31, 2019. Photo by Jolea Brown, creativephotographyllc.com.

handedness is not accidental, and actually, it suits our theme here today quite nicely, because whatever else we get around to, we are here to talk about forestry, a fundamentally practical vocation more embodied than abstract, more earthen than ethereal. The call, however, is just an opening; your response is meant to take the form of a life. Without the response of “yes,” the call is mere vocalization—it is the word thrown over a canyon that we recognize in its return from deep time as a modulation of our own desire, our own response. There is recognition in the echo of reply, and there is an obligation, if we follow Emerson, to gather it up and to do

something. Stanley Cavell describes this as “remembering who or what you are before you are known to the world.” Here, he says, in “the advent of vocation, the calling and the response are one” (Mooney 2009, pp. 100–101). It is perhaps the first relationship that we undergo, and it mirrors the basic rhythm that will organize the rest of our lives: the search and the discovery of a life enacted in service to what we come to know we are meant for.

Just as we field the call to draw it down in and close towards the body, where we can handle it and shape it into what we need it to be, a similar thing happens with the known land. In proximity, the ground or abstract geography changes from space or a vast unknown location, to a place that denotes the familiar, the known, and the beloved. In popular philosophical literature, this idea is perhaps first and most beautifully illustrated by Henry David Thoreau, a surveyor and woodsman himself who marveled in equal measure at the forest floor as at the stars, who takes up residence in a cabin he built himself on the shore of Walden Pond. “The proper placement or setting of the self” as Thoreau shows us, informs an “intimate address,” and in the telling of this fine attachment to a small woodlot “we are informed of mood, insight and place as their contours arrive in his articulations” (Mooney 2009, p. 93). Thoreau shows us how space becomes place when it is bound by the intimacy of landmarks and contours with names that we come to know, and when it is populated by stories that we tell from within. There is a solemn regard for the landscape that attends some people’s notion of the home place, and often these same people make their lives and their livelihood on the land. So it makes perfect sense, actually, that life and work become lifework and the shape of the landscape contributes to the shape of the individual, such that to take the person out of place is to

undergo a wrenching. While I’m not here to talk about home *per se*, I am here to talk about what it means to be in a field, to call yourself a forester and to inhabit that identity—to find home there. And if I have learned anything about foresters, it is that they have a strong attachment, a fidelity to being a forester.

Fidelity to an idea, commitment to an ideal, to a way of being and a way of operating in the world—of identifying a career as a place, a field, home. At a certain point, how we understand ourselves, where and what we inhabit, the roles we choose to occupy, all become integral aspects of the same person. In this positioning, the individual in the field becomes one coextensive persona. Recognizing that this is a sensibility common to foresters is useful as I consider how to address themes like ethics, behavior, and right-doing among you. Recognizing who you are based on what you have brought down and in, what you hold to, is essential in order for me to achieve any real understanding about how to reach you.

The Cadence of a Life

I began by drawing the concept of home into forestry as a profession to try to communicate the connection between who we are, where we are, and what we do in the real sense of how we spend our lives. I do this in order to close the conceptual distance between how we spend our lives and profession or vocation as a home-place. In his essay “Walking,” Thoreau writes about man as an inhabitant who is “part and parcel of nature,” and of the saunterer who is at home everywhere—in every forest, every clearing. In what has been called a “mobile meditation of place,” we work a question out by living it out, in place, and over time we become the rhythm of this philosophy that is at once in place and on the move; embodied,

it becomes the cadence of a life (Mooney 2009, p. 89).

Emerson writes that we are the place we alertly traverse (Mooney 2009, p. 12), and it is both the quality of alertness and the intention of being in it that together draw us towards our highest task. Our highest task in this field of forestry is evenhanded, in that it is about taking or harvesting, and equally, it is a matter of tending to the leavings.



Forestry is done well or successfully when we fully consider what we will have from the land on balance with what we will leave, because what stays behind and what is seeded determines the flourishing of the whole system. Henry Bugbee might have been talking about your profession when he wrote that “our whole lives may have the character of finding that anthem which would be native to our own tongue, and which alone can be the true answer for each of us to the questioning, the calling, the demand for ultimate reckoning” (Mooney 2009, p. 93). And so as long as there have been woodlands, there have been those of us

who are called to them. The forests, like a siren call, to those among us who have always belonged to them, as well as to those of us who think we are on a different path—right up until the moment when we are brought to confront an alternate set of questions, of woodlots and the living systems to which they cohere.

When I began to do the work that brings me here, to align philosophy and ethics with forestry, I had really no understanding of forestry, and I knew even less about whether I would have anything useful to say to actual foresters. The truth is that I had never learned how to make philosophy a real concern, something felt, held in the hands, shaped into a practical instrument and wielded. I have spent the past several years learning the proportions and the boundaries of this particular alchemy, at the same time I have begun to learn who foresters are, what they need and what they will usually tolerate. In a way, philosophy and forestry have developed together for me, such that now they share a contour. What I have learned about philosophy and forestry together is that they are both fully realized in process, and that process is at its best in the thick emergent dimension (Mooney 2006).

Philosophical and Ethical Questions

The join, then, between good philosophy that casts a light on good forestry is in the doing. In a way, I have learned a great deal about the heart of philosophical practice by learning something about the heart of forestry. And it is incumbent on foresters now to take up the deeply philosophical and ethical questions of their vocation in order to realize and to more fully understand the beating center of their own field. I know how to carve up the great book of philosophy, how to craft it into a tool that can be placed into the trust of men and women with the authority to go out into the

harvest, onto the landing, back to the mill to do great harm or tremendous good or any variety of things in between. To any philosopher resisting the utility of philosophy, to that person, I say scoundrel. I say dilettante. And to you, to the practicing forester, the manager, the natural-resources professional, it is incumbent upon you to take up this tool with all the patience and the certainty with which we naturally handle something that has been shaped to fit your grip. To those of you who don't take it up, I say scoundrel. Dilettante. It has been my work to draw towards the highest aspects of my own field in order to draw towards the highest aspects of yours, to bond them together, stronger and better for it.

And so I have come to understand philosophy's fundamentally grounded purpose and the immediacy of ethics as it lands with the men and women who both steward and extract, who care-take and profit by the forest. Yet ethics is a concept that has been hollowed out by ordinary usage, so that at this point it sounds very important and very simple. It is the quintessential example of a word that we allow to define itself, and we are generally satisfied that if we can use it in a sentence and having named it by its name, then we have discovered something profound such that we can now move on to important other matters. This disconnect has twofold to do with our thin grasp of what ethics is and a narrow sense of the real urgency with which responsible foresters require it.

Despite its abstract qualities, ethics at its core is a breathing encounter. It is me standing in front of you or you standing on a woodlot, but in either case, it begins with a meeting, a recognition of the other followed by an opportunity or an opening. The opportunity that follows the encounter might come in the form of a request, a demand, or, in the case of a forester alone on the landscape, it may just be what artists have

said about a painting in process—that, at a certain point, the image simply demands to be made. In your case, a forester will make a series of calculations based on what she knows the landscape needs or what she needs to do for it, as she determines her next move. What does the forest system want? What does the landowner want? What does the mill want?—and how can I integrate all of these often divergent desires into what I ultimately decide to do? And let's not gloss over the role of desire that resides quietly here, because as a fundamental aspect of the human condition, desire is what brought us here in the first place. Consider that we don't enter a career or ask a question or pursue a possibility that is not first infused with our desire to know, to be alongside and to understand, to gain or to manage loss.

In a way, it is desire that troubles the ground, because it is the pull that we abide and the pull that we sometimes have to subdue in service to right doing. In all of its forms, it plays a role in the struggle. Ethics is a turn that requires that we assume an intimate position, it is “transferring oneself in thought and feeling into another human being” (Mooney 2009, p. 103). So we find ourselves in the thick of an encounter, drawn into the contested terrain of decisionmaking and calculation. This landscape with all its trouble has been the tension that has infused our human operations since the dawn of time. This notion of a space between two poles represents the valley between desire and attainment, between what we want and what we will do to get it, and much has been written about the quality of this struggle in the language of ethics.

The calculation and the struggle—What should I do? What can I do? What do I want to do?—has a grammar, and it carries with it a responsibility. Foresters, despite often imagining that theirs will be a solitary vocation, come to understand quickly that their work is inwoven in this way with

others, yet to a one I have been told that each went into the profession to be alone in the woods. This somewhat Thoreauvean ideal is upended in the daily thrum and rush of obligation and duty. Taking ethics seriously is akin to taking physical possession of these essential elements of the moral life wherein obligation and duty come to us like a loving burden to be carried “by the shortest route to its fullest significance” (Mooney 2009, p. 3). There is both an expedience and a gravity to this gesture, and it is necessarily practical. Because whatever else ethics is, it has to be functional so that we may correctly negotiate the array of possible courses one can take.

Ethics is a kind of thinking. Ethics is not a prescription. The real world cannot be reduced to a limited set of circumstances and equations that can be fitted with this or that stimuli and response. If ethics is an encounter, imagine also that it is as varied and unpredictable as every other encounter that courses through a life. The variability of this sometimes leads us to throw up our hands and declare that ethics is a waste of time. But that is not the answer, any more than to imagine that a code of ethics of the kind any worthwhile profession has, and certainly that the Society of American Foresters has, is sufficient. It is necessary; it is not sufficient. A code must not take the place of the practiced ability to think oneself through complex situations; it must not stand in for the courage it requires to look at a situation in the round, to see all of its dimensions and possibilities, all of the ways it might go well or not, who is likely to benefit or not, who will sacrifice or be sacrificed, and whether it is worth the cost.

Because a code is a groundwork, a beginning, and acting beyond the code does require a true north alongside “a radical openness to the address of another” (Mooney, 2009 p. 105). Being able to read where that needle points comes with time

and the thoughtful consideration of values, morals, and an understanding of care versus harm, the importance of degrees and character. Character matters because practical ethics is grafted onto the careful considerations that characterize a life—what the Greeks would call “the good life.” Theoretically, were we all equally invested in the pursuit of the good life (and by this is meant the virtuous life, a life of righteous thinking followed by justified action), the ethical move would not be easy, but it would at least be clear. Philosophers have long tried to square how the world is with how it ought to be, and we have struggled with how to do this in the midst of real constraints on agency or on what we actually can do to close the distance between how it is and how it ought to be, what we want, and what we’re willing to do to get it.

Doing the Right Thing

The ethical move, doing the right thing, is easy when “right” is clearly defined, when landowners, ecologists, mills, economists, foresters, biologists all agree about what the right action is and when you’re not left on your own to hold to the correct and unpopular position. Often though, doing the right thing also means doing the difficult thing. It means standing alone and holding your ground; it means being prepared to explain yourself. Whether or not something is ethical or right is layered, and we might ask whether determining if an action is right or wrong is dependent on the circumstances that compel it. Does the kind of need matter in how we determine what action is permissible or even forgivable? Is something less wrong if your behavior is in response to dire need, or is an action either wrong or right, regardless of the circumstances that compel it?

And because right-doing isn’t always a clear determination, often we are thinking through

shades of gray, like when your motivation for doing something is self-serving and your outcome turns out to be in service to a larger good. In this case, self-interest can become right-doing, but it begs the question of whether intention matters if the good outcome is only a coincidence of acting with selfish priorities in mind. Philosophy is the first discipline and ethics has evolved within it, within the larger culture, to encourage right-doing. Philosophy, and with it ethics, together comprise the original way of characterizing how we learned to question, to pursue, and to conclude, through critical inquiry and discourse. If philosophy is the first field, before knowledge was organized into disciplines, then it is easy to imagine that something like ethics or the virtuous life fell squarely within the concern of philosophers. It might be more of a reach to see how forestry lands there, except that forestry and land management are sciences and practices like any other, embedded with particular types of encounters and pursuits undertaken by people in the world for a purpose, hopefully for a good.

Yet when we begin a discussion around forestry that draws back thousands of years into an entirely different discipline as our starting point, the predictable question is: What does this have to do with forestry? The answer is that this is the origin of your field inasmuch as your work is bound by individual and collective agency, personal integrity, the common good, natural rights, fairness, care. Of course, the historical and philosophical approaches to ethics were not developed with the situational issues that foresters encounter in mind. Indeed, they were narrow, by all accounts, yet the limited range of these lenses is not reason to remove their handed-down wisdom from a contemporary exploration of ethics. In fact, I contend that doing so reduces our understanding of ethics to a surface treatment of do's and don'ts and

prescriptions that can't possibly address every situation. Distilling down liberates the individual from the need to think for him- or herself and to fully understand the fundamental complexity of situations. If we dig back into the origins of ethical thinking, and if we begin to understand what kind of language we need in order to address ourselves correctly to the world, we might become the thinking beings that we profess ourselves to be. We might learn to generate an inner life that manifests itself in the world. For the development of a rich interior landscape is not an end in itself, but it is fully achieved when alignment is brought about as a life that is at once attentive to and greater than our own self-interests. You are moving between these modes all the time when you're faced with a situation that isn't simple and includes competing priorities, differing needs. Ethics in forestry operates in the interest of facilitating clarity of thought and the personal, societal, and ecological implications of what it will mean to follow certain pathways of thinking into action.

I don't have to tell this audience that forestry is an industry and, as such, foresters are in the business. Forestry is, therefore, complicated by a series of inherently and nearly incompatible characteristics that can be reduced to, yet also must transcend, economics. Forestry is extractive, and it demands the long view to ensure that the landscape can recover and flourish for the sake of the stand and the soils, wildlife, human life, and water quality that depend on forest health and on land health. Forestry is an industry, and yet it requires sometimes making a decision contrary to your personal economic gain in service to the greater good and the long-term benefit of the system. Forestry is perceived as an individualistic profession, and on a daily basis the average forester encounters a range of situations that require tremendous facility in dealing fairly

and effectively with people. Foresters, whether working for an agency, for a mill, as a consultant, will need to navigate the fraught terrain of human communities. The human communities that a forester is negotiating between lie within the thick interior of her personal life, obligations to self, to family, and moving out from there to the landowner, the supervisor, the mill, and further still to take into account the public. Often it is this more-remote edge of obligation where great harm can be done to professional reputation, in the case of a cut that people don't approve of, that they find aesthetically unappealing, or that negatively impacts public lands, wildlife, and the larger system. As if in reply, Edward Mooney writes "nothing will come of trying to rub out disorder through crafty explanations. We proceed in courage, perhaps in prayer, against the sharp grain of suffering" (2009, p. 51).

I have come to believe that the work of forestry situates individuals within a most-compelling set of ethical tensions and sufferings. I don't know that I would have continued to do this work had foresters not been so drawn to reconciling these considerations. Forestry is practical; it is a trade from a time when we understood the trades as a craft in the sense of fulfilling one's purpose, from a time when a trade, a craft, and a calling were the necessary components of a life. Yet something about forestry seems to catch practitioners unaware. Foresters know something of the life they are walking into, and they're walking into it for the love of the forests, to be in and among the trees, to manage for an abundant future landscape. What they sometimes don't know is how their vision will be tested. How they will be tested beyond how well they understand the landscape, but more often how well they understand themselves. As much as we would like to fit all of this neatly into a

formula, this is not life, and it is not the life of a forester. Your path is both craft and calling, and like the inner life that must turn out in the world, the purpose of craft is to be of use, to be functional and practical and good. And so your work develops within the framework of economics, yet it wants for more than the frame is built to allow. I call on you to hew the frame and to understand the dimensionality of its real complex ethical and philosophical boundary.

First, love wisdom. In this twofold gesture, Plato begins with love and encloses wisdom inside, a simple turn that invites us into a life governed by love and guided towards wisdom. For a forester in the 21st century, this ancient command signifies an approach that takes the world up whole, in an attitude of wonder and in such a way that is dedicated to ethical inquiry, right in the place where we stand. This is forestry as lifework, to be taken in hand and felt in the bones. This deeper consideration of right-doing than codes of conduct and rules of behavior can provide addresses instead the radical necessity of respectful communion. In the process, we are reminded that we have not merely fallen together for a shared professional purpose, but that we are gathered together with the expectation that we will stand attentively in relationship with the forest and the life that it sustains. I have seen a glad desire for this among foresters who live these questions all the way down. They are at work within the soft horizons of the northern boreal forests, these deep and cool woodlands alight with the whimsy of birdsong, and in the open face of the high-desert Southwest with its smooth cliffs, their pintuck folds delicate, vast and red. Just as Plato enfolded wisdom inside of love, forestry is a vocation enfolded within a geography of belonging, grounded in obligation and enriched by the wisdom native to woodsmen and women.

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