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Autumn on the Mountain

Leaves of deciduous trees and bushes among the evergreens at 6,000 feet in the Sierras where I worked began to turn a hundred shades of colors that spoke to me of winter coming to the mountains.

I climbed into my sleeping bag. Hours before daylight, I woke, cold. Stars shone bright and cold in the clear sky above me. I wondered if it was worth getting up, digging out my long underwear, putting it on, and climbing back into bed. I decided it wasn't. I had read that being a little cold was good for a person, and I kept that in mind as I coiled into a ball and went back to sleep.

At daylight, I grabbed my clothes and dressed quickly. I broke the thin layer of ice on my water and cooked my breakfast on a two-burner gas stove, grabbed tools, and walked down the steep slope to continue work where I had left off the day before.

I covered ground methodically and left a line of thin cotton string to define where I had worked. I dug out currant and gooseberry bushes (ribes) as I went. The bushes are intermediate hosts for blister rust, which kills sugar pines. Destroying the bushes stops the life cycle of blister rust and protects sugar pines, a source of lumber.

The Forest Service issued invitations to bid on removing the ribes from areas of 20 to 120 acres, and I bid and got some of the contracts. The work started when leaves grew on the deciduous trees and bushes in the spring and ended when the leaves dropped in the fall.

I had had a crew, but everyone else had gone back down into the Sacramento Valley to go to college.

I wasn't going back to school that fall. I had worked in the mountains three summers. I found it harder every year to return to densely-settled areas and go through the daily routines of highly civilized classes. When everyone else left the summer means-to-an-end work behind, I stayed, already beginning to suspect that the work, or more accurately, the mountains and forest where the work took place, were becoming an end in itself for me.

Dogwood leaves turned bright red. Aspen leaves turned

yellow. Leaves on the ribes bushes turned red and yellow.

The bushes were large and dense just below the logging road, around the curve from camp. I was sure that seeing that area of huge bushes had encouraged other bidders to bid high, but I had looked at the rest of the lot, and I saw many acres free of ribes, kept my price lower, and got the contract.

I worked in that area an hour or two every morning, splitting the crowns of large bushes with an axe and prying the pieces out with a rabbit-eared pick. Then I headed down into the steep canyon where the bushes were smaller and much farther between.

I worked several acres through the middle of the day. Down in the canyon, with a clear, cold creek running in the bottom, the sun left early. I worked my way back up to the top and dug bushes in the heavy concentration until almost dark, then headed for camp.

That was the first time I had been alone for that long. I felt as at home alone on the mountain as I did anywhere in the world. But sometimes I was filled with deep, uncomfortable longing. I had given up campfires. I cooked my meals and heated dish-washing and bath water on my gas stove.

Campfires restricted my vision to the circle of light cast by the fire. Without a fire, I sometimes saw nocturnal animals, an owl briefly silhouetted against the sky, a flying squirrel gliding from high in one tree to another tree. I always saw stars or clouds shifting dark masses across the night sky.

Fighting the feeling of longing at dusk, I built a fire and sat close to it. Maybe the warmth helped, a little. I was short on groceries, so the next morning, I drove 21 miles of gravel logging road to town and mingled with my fellow humans. The feeling of longing was dulled in the noisy, busy, diurnal activities of acquiring groceries and gasoline, but it wasn't cured.

On the way back to camp, I planned. I needed supplies that would be cheaper in the valley. If I worked full-speed from daylight to dark for two days, then left at dusk, I could spend the morning hours before daylight and all of one day in the valley, while only a few more leaves fell to the ground.

I bought enough supplies in the valley to me last until the end of the job, but the trip down into the valley and communicating with friends and family, while rewarding, did not much assuage the feeling that resided, hollow and asking for attention, within me.

I left to return to the mountains earlier than I had planned. Up in the foothills, I stopped for a drink of water at a spring that had been captured and piped to exit near the road. The sun set.

There was no traffic. I was above the busy, mechanical sounds of the densely inhabited valley.

Geese flew in an orderly formation above me. They spoke among themselves about their plans and destinations and bid goodbye to the valley and the mountains. They were headed south, and then I understood. From deep within me, a voice seemed to say, "Go with them. Fall is upon the land. Spread your wings and fly south with the migrating birds."

I had largely withdrawn from human company and had lived and worked where deciduous trees changed color and dropped their leaves for winter. Animals gorged on the wild autumn harvest, adding layers of fat for their winter sleep. Other animals gathered and stored, to have supplies through the winter, and many of those who did not hibernate or hoard moved to lower elevations or traveled far south.

I saw all the preparation around me and knew at a level before thought that it was time to prepare for changing seasons.

Understanding the hollow, lonely feeling inside me didn't completely alleviate it. But it did turn from something that ate at my substance because I didn't know what to do about it, to a creative, driving force that added energy to my day's work. Yes, the seasons are changing. I won't fly south. I won't hibernate, but I am preparing, and leaves that blow past my face in ever-colder mountain winds tell me, keep moving; five more acres completed today is that much closer to fully prepared.

I shared the mountain and the changing seasons with wildlife. I shared the urgent sense around me: Are we ready? I wore long underwear to bed. I wore heavier clothing on cold mornings and cold afternoons, and I worked most daylight hours. I finished removing ribes bushes from 120 acres of wild forest, gathered and packed and drove down the mountain back to the valley.

The lot passed inspection, and paperwork ground through slow processes until a check for my work emerged and reached me in the valley. I understood and used the deep, driving feeling brought to me by changing seasons. I understood more about life and complex connections between different manifestations of life than I ever had. I understood the possibility for deep empathy between different forms of life better than I had before I worked on the mountain that summer. Because I understood more about my connection with all life, I understood I was never alone. Life all around me touched me deeply every moment of my existence.

I had shelter and supplies. I watched the mountains, where I had recently been, turn white as snow drifted down and piled deeply. I was ready for winter, with money stored up for the

beginning of winter, and far more important, with new depth of appreciation for all life added to my life.