

What's that Stink?

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It was all new: such lush vegetation, leaves the size of elephant ears, trees taller than the tallest barn in Saskatchewan, maple leaves big as my head, cedar boughs the diameter of a small yard, and a river wider than any I'd ever seen. I watched as my father cast a fishing line into the Skeena River, a short walk from a picnic area beside Highway 16 where my mother was setting up lunch.

The air was fresh and wet unlike the dry prairie I had known for my first eleven years, and this close to the Pacific Ocean into which this great River emptied the air was also salty, but as I sat there on a stump watching my father reel in and cast his line, every few minutes from the west a stinky breeze blew by that felt wrong in the middle of this seemingly pristine nature.

"What's that smell?" I asked my father.

"Shhhh," he said, "I'm fishing, I don't know. Go ask your Mom.

I walked back up the forest path from the river to the picnic spot.

"Mom, what's that stinky smell that blows by sometimes?"

"I don't really know," she said, just as a breeze carrying the stink blew by. "It might be from the pulp mill."

"My friend Alvin, who lives in Port Edward says that people are getting sick from the smoke from the pulp mill."

"Where's Port Edward," she asked.

"It's close to the pulp mill." A lot of Indian people live there. Alvin told me his family are a part of the Nisga'a Nation."

“I thought we were all in Canada,” my Mom said. I didn’t know what to say about that and I thought, why is it that adults never seem to know what they’re talking about.

I walked back to where my father was fishing and sat down in a small hollow between roots of a maple tree and watched the mighty river, felt the force of all that flowing water while enjoying nature’s quiet peace.

I imagined my legs becoming the tree roots beside which they rested, reaching down into cool wet earth and into the river with my toes splitting off into multiple rootlets. Water flowed past and cooled my soles. And I fantasized my body and arms becoming tree trunk, branches, and leaves, reaching high into sky. As I enjoyed that feeling of becoming a tree, I wondered, if I can be this tree, maybe this tree can feel me. Then I saw a salmon jump up out of the water. As I watched my father reel it in, my eyes strayed to the other side of the river where I noticed a clump of trees turning brown and red. A little way upstream another bunch had died; all that was left were trunks and branches.

Finally the fish was reeled in to the shore where my father clubbed it and removed the hook from it’s mouth. “An eight pound Steelhead,” he proudly told me.

“Why are all the trees across the river dying,” I asked.

“I don’t know he said.”

“I’ll ask my friend Alvin tomorrow at school,” I said. He seems to know a lot about what’s going on around here. His grandfather tells him everything – his grandfather and his old uncles. He calls them, ‘his elders’.

The next day at school, my Science teacher brought in copies of the Prince Rupert Herald. A picture, taken from the air, on the front page showed the pulp mill with it’s smoke being blown East in a widening arc over the rain forest bordering the river. Through the thin layer of smoke , patches of dead and dying forest showed up red and grey, in contrast to the lush green of the remaining healthy growth. The headline read, ‘Columbia Cellulose Denies Responsibility.’

Our teacher read us the article. Company scientists claimed that the trees were dying because of an insect infestation that had nothing to do with effluent from the mill, and that they were developing a pesticide that would deal with the problem. The same story also carried a

statement from a UBC Botanist who claimed that the only reason the bugs were able to kill the trees was because the chemicals in the pulp mill smoke weakened the trees defences against the invading bugs.

When the teacher asked us what we thought, I said, remembering the stink and the dead trees from yesterday, "I think the company scientists are liars. Look at the picture. Everything is green everywhere except downwind from the pulp mill. I don't think that's a coincidence."

Alvin spoke up. "When a lot of people in Port Edward started getting sick, the company sent in some doctors and the doctors said we were just getting sick from a bacteria. My grandfather told me that before the pulp mill stink, nobody had ever had problems breathing and trees had never died the way they are now. I think the doctors were also lying."

"I studied chemistry at UBC," Miss Parker, our teacher said, "I never learned very much about pollution, but when I saw this in the paper last Friday, I phoned one of my teachers, and he told me that pulp mill pollution has chemicals called volatile organic compounds and when smoke with those compounds lands on leaves, it damages the leaves ability to breathe. Leaf breathing is called photosynthesis and when they can't breathe they die."

"That's what my uncle told me, that the trees couldn't breathe that smoke," Alvin said. "My grandfather said that we had been living here for thousands of years and nobody remembered that our people ever got sick lungs or that so much of the forest had ever died before the pulp mill stink came."

Looking back on that day, I realize that that was the beginning of my awareness of the environment and of how humans damage it. It was also the beginning of an awareness that scientists can be bought by industry and big money, but it also began my fascination with science. Though science can be bought and misused, in the end peer reviewed work usually ends up with giving us a closest approximation of truth as understood by mind and body, though not necessarily by heart and spirit. So called "scientists" working for cigarette companies claiming that nicotine was neither harmless nor addictive, have been thoroughly debunked. They went on to work for the petroleum-carbon industries to cast doubt upon global warming and climate change and that doubt has also been debunked. Other than right-wing property supremacists and their unconscious republican sycophants, most of the world believes the evidence.

I also wonder, as I remember that I once wondered if a tree could feel me, whether or not our Earth Mother knows that in order for life to continue, she has to burn and kill off swaths of humanity, has to storm, cyclone, tornado, and virus us into extinction in order for the rest of life to continue. She is tired, after millennia of feeding and looking after us, of our failure to acknowledge her gifts, fed up with our lack of gratitude, so her immense ability to nurture and create now turns to destruction.

