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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT ASHEVILLE

Letters from East Asheville

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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BY

Thomas Maycock

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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The act of writing is inherently presumptuous. Outside the narrow confines of a personal diary, the decision to put pen to paper implies some expectation that others will find the words to be of value. Writers of serious novels aim high, intending to grapple with hard questions, seek deep meaning, or deliver powerful emotional impacts. Novels require a significant commitment on the part of readers, who in turn hope that the rewards will be commensurate with the investment. Poetry also places unique demands on the reader, as extracting meaning and value requires a certain level of attention and engagement.

At first glance, the personal essay as a form seems relatively modest in comparison. The stakes are usually lower, and the author only asks minutes of a reader's time, not hours or days. In reality, though, the personal essay is just as audacious as any other form of creative writing. There is, in fact, something particularly egotistical about the personal essay. Writer E. B. White put it this way in the foreword to a collection of essays entitled *Essays of E.B. White*:

The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest. He is a fellow who thoroughly enjoys his work, just as people who take bird walks enjoy theirs. Each new excursion of the essayist, each new "attempt," differs from the last and takes him into new country. This delights him. Only a person who is congenitally self-centered has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays.

White softens his point here, as he so often does, with humor, but the words ring true. But if it is indeed presumptuous to assume that everything one thinks about will be of general interest, what really matters is the intent. There is a place and time for polemics, but the best personal essays arise not from a desperate need to tell or instruct, but from a desire to share and connect. The essay is an opportunity for an author to say “here’s something I’ve been thinking about, or here’s an experience I’ve had, and because we all share the common experience of being human, I think you might find my experiences and my insights to be interesting, amusing, or thought-provoking.” Still, with a world full of great and serious novels tackling the big questions, why would any reader (or writer) invest time in a personal essay—a form that seemingly promises much less?

That question began to trouble me shortly after deciding to complete my MLAS studies by writing a collection of personal essays. My confidence took another hit when my initial research turned up a recent piece in *The New Yorker* by Jia Tolentino entitled “The Personal Essay Boom Is Over.” That article generated a lot of discussion and several responses, including “Two Paths for the Personal Essay” by Merve Emre in the *Boston Review* and Soraya Roberts’ “The Personal Essay Isn’t Dead. It’s Just No Longer White” in *The Walrus*. These debates were interesting and helpful in some ways, but certainly not encouraging. In the decades since I was first charmed by the “familiar” essays of Joseph Epstein (a former college professor of mine), the fortunes of the personal essay had apparently waxed then waned, largely as a result of the Internet’s insatiable need for content and the seemingly endless supply of writers (or want-to-be-writers) willing to fill that need. Decades of too many essays from white men with opinions

and too few from women and non-white writers may not have helped the situation. Perhaps the world did not need any more personal essays, at least from me.

I found my way out of this crisis of confidence by remembering that my favorite personal essays are those that engage rather than dictate and invite the reader to take part in a shared intellectual journey. Whether that journey is ultimately worthwhile depends in large part on the skill of the writer, but perhaps more than any of the other literary forms, the essay offers the potential of creating a connection between reader and writer. The boom may be over, and the world already may already have more than enough personal essays, but aren't we are better off with too many attempts to communicate than with too few?

The essays of E. B. White, written over many decades and largely for *The New Yorker*, were the most direct inspiration for this collection. Although White is best known today as an author of children's books and as co-author of a famous English style guide, he was one of the great masters of the personal essay. He blended sophistication, clarity, and humor into an elegant yet plain-spoken style. His writing revealed a curious mind at work, constantly observing, and seeking to understand, the world around him. He wrote about everything from the small details of life on his farm in Maine to the great political, social, and environmental concerns of the day. He had strong opinions and did not shy away from sharing them, but he did so without pontificating.

The other spark for this project was an essay I wrote for a creative non-fiction class earlier in my MLAS studies. Entitled "Searching for Oteen," the piece explored my longtime fascination with the idea of neighborhoods and how moving to Asheville from a Chicago suburb was influencing my sense of place and belonging. With so many people relocating to Asheville

in recent years, I felt there was an opportunity to explore how the transition was affecting me and to try to say something interesting about how Asheville itself was changing. The title of the

project, “Letters from East Asheville,” borrows from White’s recurring series of columns that appeared in *The New Yorker* under the title “Letter from the East.”

Two of the pieces explore how life in Western North Carolina is altering my sense of connection to the natural world. Another piece delves into the murky waters of climate change politics from one person’s perspective, highlighting Asheville’s unique role in the world of climate science along the way. The repercussions of the election of November 2016 weigh heavily here (and on some of the other pieces as well). The other three essays deal more directly with experiences as a transplant to the city of Asheville.

While I made no conscious effort to emulate White’s style or tone, his writing undoubtedly influenced the resulting text. The aforementioned Joseph Epstein was another influence, although in complicated ways. Epstein is a gifted teacher of English literature, and my two courses with him—and the works I read in those courses—continue to resonate with me decades later. I first discovered Epstein’s personal essays a few years after graduating, having been previously unaware that, like White, he was regarded as a master of the personal essay. Epstein is a gifted writer and a stylist of the first order. His prodigious familiarity with English literature informs virtually all of his work. His literary essays are particularly effective as a result, but so too are his “familiar” essays, blending memoir and commentary to inform and entertain. At his best, Epstein is brave, revealing, and thought-provoking.

He is, I fear, less effective when writing about issues of politics and culture. Epstein and I lean in different political directions, making it difficult to fairly evaluate his treatment of these topics. But his writing in these areas often comes off as too self-assured, too easily dismissive of differing views and the people that hold them. I owe a huge debt to Epstein, and almost certainly

would not have written this collection of essays had it not been for his influence as a teacher and as a writer. But one of the lessons I've tried to learn from years of reading Epstein is to try to take a different approach in expressing strongly held opinions.

I continued to read other essayists while working on this project and am happy to report that rumors of the demise of the personal essay may have been somewhat premature. There are great essays being written, and I still enjoy the pleasures of time spent with writers who have interesting stories to tell and an ability to tell those stories with craft and style. Along the way, I had my first encounter with David Foster Wallace, through his collection entitled *Consider the Lobster*. It goes without saying that Wallace was a complicated person, and strong opinions are much in evidence throughout those essays. His approach to literary matters differs wildly from that of Epstein, but he is no less compelling in writing about writers and language. His prose style and comedic gifts are so dazzling as to be intimidating. I do blame the incursion of footnotes into one of my pieces directly on Wallace's influence, and the length of two of my pieces may have something to do with his willingness to stretch the limits of the essay form. Mostly, though, his work was a reminder of just how good an essay can be.

And so I join the ranks of other essayists by asking readers to devote a small amount of time to (mostly) small pieces about (mostly) small ideas, in hopes of engaging in a conversation of sorts.

### **Reconnecting**

My wife Ann and I were downstairs watching television when we heard the THUMP from somewhere outside. The cat and I raced each other over to the sliding glass door that opens on to the back yard. I flipped on the outdoor light and saw our hummingbird feeder lying on the ground, dislodged from its hanger on the deck above. A little confused and feeling a rush of



adrenaline, I headed up the stairs and over to the door that leads onto the deck. I hit the light switch on the wall, illuminating the small deck but not much beyond the wooden railing at its perimeter. Nothing there. I slid open the door and leaned forward for a better look.

That's when I heard the slow, deep exhale of breath. Although I've never heard a black bear exhale from up close before, I somehow knew instantly that was exactly what I had just heard. It was somewhere close. Very close.

I leaned back and slammed the door shut. "That was dumb," I thought, as a second, stronger wave of adrenaline began to flow. I could see the deck was empty except for our table and chairs. The bear might have been standing on the stairs leading down to the back yard, just out of sight to my right. Or maybe it was somewhere just below me, picking through the remains of the hummingbird feeder.

I paused for a moment to think (better late than never).

Ann had joined me now, and we decided to head down the hall to the bedroom window overlooking the back, figuring that it was a safe distance from both the deck and the ground below. We slid open the window and looked out. With no moon overhead and in a neighborhood blissfully free of streetlights, we could barely discern the outlines of the trees as our eyes adjusted to the darkness. We looked at each other in amazement when we heard a curious mix of

grunts and chirps and coos and chattering coming from somewhere up in the stand of trees in the middle of the yard, maybe thirty feet from our window.

We pulled out a flashlight and scanned the copse of pines and oaks. A pair of eyes glowed back at us from partway up the tallest of the pine trees, near the long, arching branch from which our other bird feeder hung. The eyes began to move down the tree, and soon a shape emerged from the bushes below—a just-less-than black outline against the black background. It was a bear cub, probably less than a year old. We heard more scrabbling of claws on bark and saw the flat silhouette of a second cub descend from the same tree. Together, they ambled away from the house and down the hill towards the river that wraps around our neighborhood.

The exhale I heard had not come from either of those cubs. It must have been the mother bear that I heard breathing. I was pretty sure I had been closer to that bear than any I had seen in any zoo, and certainly in the wild. But I never even caught a glimpse of it. Maybe it wandered off before the cubs, or maybe we just didn't see it follow its cubs to the river.

Ann and I wondered about the noises the cubs had made up in the tree. Were they scared? Talking about us? Calling for their mother? I'll never know, but in discovering that cubs communicate in this way, we had learned something surprising and new about these reclusive, part-time residents of our neighborhood. It wasn't the first such lesson I had learned since moving to Asheville, in the mountains of western North Carolina, several years earlier. As I looked back on the experience on that moonless night, I began to realize just how much my perceptions of the natural world had changed.

I grew up in the suburban outskirts of Omaha, Nebraska. Our house sat on a corner lot at one edge of a housing development, bordered on two sides by an empty field that stretched for two or three hundred yards and ended at a line of trees running along a small ravine that used to be a railroad line. In the eyes of a young boy, that unremarkable chunk of property served as a

vast, undiscovered prairie, the trees at its edge a dark, foreboding woodland. There were several narrow dirt footpaths that my small legs could walk, bike, or explore for hours. It felt completely apart from the things of man, but (usually, at least) not so far that I couldn't hear my mom calling me home for dinner. My closest childhood friend lived a few doors down, and we would spend hours exploring that field. When we got brave enough to try following the that wrapped around the edge of the field to loop back to the other end of my block, we were gone just long enough for my mother to be angry with me when I finally got home. That slightly illicit but successful outing produced an intoxicating mix of pleasure and fear, not unlike the reaction to hearing a bear exhale a few feet away.

As a young boy, I was learning some of the basics of biology in school, but I was learning more in my back yard and in that field. I was watching caterpillars morph into butterflies, digging in the dirt to see what lived there, being chased by bees through the tall grasses of late summer, having unexpected snake encounters, and staring up at winged seed pods helicoptering their way to the ground from maple trees that towered above me. It wasn't a rural upbringing, and my family wasn't the outdoorsy type, so there were more than a few gaps in my experiences, but that field and its plants and animals were a part of daily life, at least when the weather was nice.

As I grew older, that field gradually receded from daily experience and eventually became just part of the scenery, an overlooked backdrop to the busy life of a teenage boy. The flowers still bloomed in spring and the grasshoppers continued to screech their way through the long summers, but I stopped paying attention. I eventually left for college and spent the next twenty-five years living in Evanston, Illinois, just north of the Chicago city limits, where my slow withdrawal from the rhythms and small details of the natural world continued.

Some changes were obvious. Losing the stars and the planets was one of them. The City of Chicago illuminates itself with tens of thousands of high-pressure sodium lights, filling the night sky with a distinctive orange glow. Add to this the lights from millions of homes, businesses, cars, and billboards, and the stars are rendered almost entirely invisible. There was no point in retrieving my old telescope from my mother's basement. I would have had to drive an hour or two for a decent view, and who had the time? That was just one of the compromises I accepted in exchange for the seemingly limitless possibilities of life in a big city. If the lights of stars and galaxies were awe-inspiring to the young boy, so too were the lights of the city viewed through the windows of an elevated train for the young man. Entombed in that ever-present glow, I had even managed to forget just how bright a moonlit night can be. A full moon rising over Lake Michigan was a beautiful sight, but its illumination was no match for a city whose light switch is always on.

Other losses were less obvious. The big seasonal cycles were noticeable enough—the grass in the narrow strip of land between our condo building and the street would slowly green up each spring. Trees went through their annual cycle of leafing out, turning shades of red and yellow in the fall, and then shedding those leaves as winter set in. But the fallen leaves would disappear at an utterly unnatural pace, cleared from lawns and hauled away by landscaping companies almost before they hit the ground. The planters and flower beds around our condo building were the talk of the neighborhood, but the flowers appeared and disappeared abruptly, not according to some natural rhythm, but rather whenever my wife and the other members of the building landscaping committee had time to make a run to the nursery and do some planting.

Wildlife sightings were, to say the least, limited. There were always pigeons roosting under the el tracks and sea gulls at the beach along Lake Michigan. Robins were pretty common during the warmer months. There might have been songbirds around, but whatever morning

music they might have made was drowned out by the sounds of a city coming alive—the hissing brakes of a bus stopping at our corner and the loud roar as it drove off again, the groans of the garbage truck in the alley straining to lift a heavy dumpster, and pedestrians walking to work just outside our bedroom window.

Squirrels were ever-present, and we did have the occasional raccoon on our back steps looking for an open trash can. Once, we saw a family of foxes—a mother and her pups—in the yard of one of the posh mansions on the lakefront. Urban coyotes are apparently a thing now, but we never encountered one.

In retrospect, this disconnection from the stars and planets, plants and animals, and the slow changes of the seasons came at a significant cost. But the city offered many riches in exchange. On any night of the week, some of the best jazz musicians in the world were a train ride and a few dollars away. The supply of food and art and culture was endless.

Big cities don't have a monopoly on creative energy, but sheer numbers and density create unique collisions of attitudes, opportunities, and outcomes. In "Here is New York," E.B. White suggested that "A poem compresses much in a small space and adds music, thus heightening its meaning. The city is like poetry: it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines." I think that's about right. That compression produces all manner of extraordinary experiences.

But sometimes you need to decompress, so Ann and I would usually aim our vacations in the general direction of "back to nature," which usually meant a long drive to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. We made that trip at least once a year for more than a decade before we eventually decided to relocate to the area.

We would hike just about every day, enjoying the mountain air, the scenery, and the peace and quiet. But these outings were relatively brief and mission-driven, our attention focused

on the panoramic vistas or waterfalls waiting at the end of the trail, the intoxicating fall color display, or the expansive purple blooms of Catawba rhododendron in May and June. Although we learned a lot over years of return visits, we remained ignorant of all the changes that took place each year while we were back in the big city.

Eventually, we decided that the ratio of 1 week in the woods to 51 weeks in the city was a bit backwards for our tastes. So, after a fair bit of soul searching and a whole lot of job searching, we landed in Asheville, a small city that seemed like it might be just big enough for us. Before long, I was taking the first tentative steps back into a world I had, without realizing, left behind as a boy on some unremembered day when I last ventured into that empty field in Omaha.

We moved to Asheville in late fall, and soon found ourselves spending time outdoors during the winter, a season we had never experienced here. The southern Appalachians are home to a bewildering variety of deciduous trees and lush undergrowth. In the warm seasons, the trails wander through dense, magical forests that hide the rest of the world from view. But in winter, when the leaves are down, everything changes more fundamentally than I could have imagined. Distant views are revealed through the bare branches, and the coves and valleys seem exponentially larger when the views are unimpeded by leaves.

Then came our first full spring in Asheville. Aside from the roses of summer, I thought wildflowers bloomed for a few weeks in spring and then that was the end of it. But here in the Southern Appalachians, spring is just a showy, fast-paced overture that precedes a months-long symphony of color and surprise. At first, this proved problematic. When we went hiking, my wife would stop seemingly every few feet to take pictures of some new flower I didn't recognize. I was still mission-oriented, hiking to get into better shape or to reach some destination, and the frequent stops were exasperating.

But it wasn't long before I began to share her enthusiasm for the ever-changing display of wildflowers. I learned to look down, not just ahead, to notice the small things. If you had asked me 10 years ago whether I knew the difference between a pink lady's slipper and a painted trillium, I would have told you that I didn't know that much about women's shoes. Now, I not only know the difference between the two but can offer tips on when and where to find each of them, and many more varieties, along a variety of trails near Asheville.

I also know that in June and July, another variety of rhododendron light up entire sections of forest with huge pink and white blooms, every bit as striking as the purple flowers of late spring. I also learned that these rhododendron don't all bloom every year, so while some years are pretty, some are breathtaking. And some years the blooms come early, while in others they come later. You miss a lot if you only visit these woods a few days a year.

During our first year in Asheville, my wife bought me a bird feeder for Father's Day. Song sparrows were our first visitors, and we named one regular customer Bert. Bert and his friends were soon joined by chipping sparrows, finches, cardinals, blue jays, and more. We added a hummingbird feeder and waited impatiently. After a few days, when we'd about given up, the first ruby-throated bird appeared. We stared out our kitchen window in silent awe. Eventually several hummingbirds began making regular stops at our feeder, and would even zoom in just over our heads on evenings we ate dinner out on the deck.

One day, much to her horror, my wife discovered that our upstairs neighbor's cat had ambushed one of the sparrows (we fear it may have been Bert) as it visited our feeder. This prompted the installation of an elaborate decorative trellis as a defensive perimeter. The cat would still sit on one of our deck chairs and stare at the feeder trying to formulate a way to circumvent our efforts, but to the best of our knowledge, the birds ate in peace. Nonetheless, the guilt of accidentally exposing my new feathered friends to danger weighed heavily. In less than a

year, I had gone from barely noticing the birds around me to being deeply invested in the health and well-being of a host of familiar guests.

Just beyond that deck was a big yard with an unused fire pit and two overgrown garden plots. Ann soon turned the fire pit into a wildflower garden, and eventually added vegetables and flowers to the other plots. My father's parents had maintained a large garden, so garden-fresh fruits and vegetables were a vague childhood memory, but in recent decades, the closest we came to garden-fresh was a visit to the weekly farmer's market or Whole Foods. Tomatoes didn't fare well that first summer in Asheville—too much rain—but everything else thrived. We enjoyed fresh peppers, squash, and lettuce for months. I was stunned by how quickly vegetables grew and ripened, and by how much food we could grow ourselves for the cost of a few seeds and some sweat equity.

After moving to a woodsier neighborhood across town, where we were told bear sightings were common, we set that hummingbird feeder up on rail of the second-floor deck, confident that it was too high for a bear to reach. It didn't occur to us that a bear might climb the stairs up to the deck, or that a momma bear might stand on two legs to reach the feeder from below. At least we were smart enough to hang the other bird feeder well out on the branch of a tree.

My wife was the first to encounter a bear in the woods. It happened while she was out walking alone on a trail south of town. She retreated briskly in the opposite direction, and ended up going miles out of her way to take a different route back return to her car. These days, though, after a dozen or more bear encounters in the wild, we view these experiences as small gifts, not something to fear.

This past spring, Ann and I went for an early evening walk along a river near our house. This was an area where we had encountered bears several times in the past, and it was getting



near twilight, so we knew a bear sighting was a distinct possibility. We made sure to speak loudly, a common tactic to avoid startling a bear. But I was still surprised to see the tiny bear cub appear above the knee-high plants just on the other side of the river. I was even more surprised when I realized the mother bear was just ahead of the cub, maybe fifteen feet from us. Aside from that moment in the doorway to our deck, this was the closest I had been to a bear in the wild, and the cub was the youngest I'd ever seen in person. We started backpedaling slowly, but realized the bears were headed that same way, so we stopped and tried to look non-threatening. The bears started moving away from us, towards the hill behind them, but the mother was not happy to have us so close. At one point, she stood up on her hind legs, turned, and stared directly at us—quite a contrast to the usual experience of seeing only a bear's hindquarters as it runs away. We decided to continue moving on in our original direction while keeping a close eye on the two bears. After several more pauses to look back at us, they eventually headed up the hill and out of sight.

I don't think we were ever in any real danger, but this was the first time we had made a bear feel threatened or protective. It was and still is my favorite bear sighting so far, but it was also a reminder that I am still a relative newcomer to these woods. I have rediscovered many things, but I am constantly being reminded of all the things I never knew.

## Encounters

When is a coincidence a coincidence, and when is it just statistics in action?

That question came to mind four years ago at a trailhead parking lot near the Blue Ridge Parkway, about an hour from my home in Asheville, North Carolina. My wife Ann and I had just pulled into the parking lot when a colleague from work and his wife parked in the spot right next to us. We couldn't have synchronized arrivals this well if we had planned it. We hadn't planned it, and yet there we were, arriving simultaneously at one of hundreds, if not thousands, of possible hiking destinations within an hour's drive of Asheville. Pure serendipity. We spent the afternoon hiking together, and the entire outing was all the more enjoyable as a result.

How unlikely was this random encounter? The trail itself is fairly popular, easily accessible from the Parkway, and offers a large parking lot, bathrooms, and several acres of picnic grounds. All four of us like to hike, and it was a beautiful Saturday in summer, so the fact we all chose to take a walk in the woods that day was unsurprising. But our choice of destination was essentially random. No particular event or circumstance led us both to pick that particular trail on that particular day. Our time of departure was also random, and that timing was critical. If Ann and I had arrived ten minutes earlier, we might have completed the entire five-mile loop hike and headed for home without ever knowing that Scott and his wife had been walking the same path, perhaps just a few hundred yards behind.

I know enough about statistics to understand that events that may seem spectacularly unlikely are often more probable than we tend to assume. Flip a coin enough times and you'll probably get "heads" several times in a row. Go hiking often enough, and there is a chance you'll run into someone you know. In an article in *The Atlantic* entitled "Coincidences and the Meaning of Life," Julie Beck explains the phenomenon this way: "If enough people buy tickets, there will

be a Powerball winner. To the person who wins, it's surprising and miraculous, but the fact that someone won doesn't surprise the rest of us."<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, that experience in the woods added to my growing sense that these chance meetings were happening more and more often. Something fundamental about the raw numbers governing these experiences had changed for me. The dice were now seemingly loaded in favor of the unexpected.

In one sense, that "something" was obvious. Two years earlier, Ann and I had moved from a suburb of Chicago—the third largest metropolitan area in the country—to the 12th largest city in North Carolina. I understood that moving to a much smaller city would alter the frequency and nature of my social interactions, but I had no real idea how that would play out.

*We are walking on Lexington Avenue in downtown Asheville, on our way to one of the monthly outdoor concerts that takes place during the summer. Suddenly Ann stops, turns, and says hello to someone sitting in the open window of a restaurant. It's Michelle, the young woman who lived in the apartment above us for a few months when we first moved to town. We haven't seen in her in about a year. We catch up for a few minutes, and are happy to hear she is doing well.*

I should have seen it coming. A year before we moved, we visited Asheville on a scouting mission and met with Hal, a local real estate agent, to get a feel for housing prices and neighborhoods. As we toured the town, Hal kept pointing out people he knew—a friend walking down the street, another friend sitting in a restaurant's outdoor patio, and so on. I just assumed it was because he was a realtor and meets new people almost every day as part of his job. I still

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Beck, "Coincidences and the Meaning of Life," *The Atlantic*, February 23, 2016.

think that's part of the explanation—his social circle is undoubtedly much larger than mine. But it's really about numbers and geography.

Anthropologist Robin Dunbar has suggested that the human brain is only capable of maintaining meaningful social connections with about 150 people (a quantity now commonly referred to as the “Dunbar number”), which, not coincidentally perhaps, was roughly the size of communities back in our hunter-gatherer days.<sup>2</sup> Various surveys of U.S. residents suggest that we each know, on average, somewhere between 290 and 600 people.<sup>3</sup> Suppose I knew 150 people in greater Chicagoland fairly well and was acquainted with another 450 or so—that's 600 out of roughly 9.5 million people, all spending their time at hundreds of different neighborhoods, movie theaters, restaurants, stores, streets, and sidewalks. Aside from some friends and neighbors living in our condo building and a few other friends that lived nearby, most of the people I knew were spread over hundreds of square miles of suburbs, generally 30 or 45 minutes away by car or train. It's no surprise that coincidence-caliber encounters were incredibly rare—perhaps a handful in two decades, if that many. So rare, in fact, that it never occurred to me that such encounters could ever be common.

With about 88,000 residents, Asheville is not large, but it is not tiny either. It's bigger, in fact, than the Chicago suburb we used to call home, which has a population of about 75,000. With another 200,000 or so living in the suburbs, small towns, and rural areas around Asheville, you have a substantial number of complete strangers. And when we arrived in Asheville, aside from Hal the realtor, we only knew one other person who lived here. It was like going from a handful of needles in an entire farm field worth of haystacks down to one needle in a single haystack.

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<sup>2</sup> Aleks Krotoski, “Robin Dunbar: We Can Only Ever Have 150 Friends at Most....” *The Guardian*, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Gelman, “The Average American Knows How Many People?” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2013.

That would change though, and more quickly than I expected. I had left a tiny company in Evanston—it peaked at five employees total—to work for an organization with hundreds of employees here in Asheville. Within weeks, I knew a dozen people well, 20 or 30 others reasonably well, and could put names to the faces of another 30 or so, leaving another 200 in the organization that I hadn't met yet but would soon start to recognize. Now, six years later, I probably know at least 300 people, maybe more.

*We first met Brett and Holly at the annual neighborhood picnic. They had relocated to Asheville from Indiana a few years ago, but just moved into our neighborhood a couple months earlier. A few weeks after the picnic, we are leaving the Trailhead Restaurant in a small town called Black Mountain, about 12 miles east of Asheville. As we walk towards our car, the sidewalk is deserted except for one couple walking towards us. It's Brett and Holly, on their way to eat at the Trailhead.*

OK, so I know three hundred people—that's enough raw material for a good coincidence or two. Here's where geography comes into play. Compared to Chicago, almost everyone I know here lives relatively close to me. Many live in my neighborhood. Others are just a few miles away. Even the most far-flung are no more than 30 minutes by car. And unlike in a place like Chicago, we all tend to be drawn to a single geographic center—Asheville itself. Even the hiking trails are relatively close together by comparison.

While Asheville has more than its share of restaurants and music venues, along with the usual proportion of shops and movie theaters, the total number of public gathering places is microscopic compared to a place like Chicago. Suppose two people in Asheville decide at the exact same moment to go out for pizza. They have some good places to choose from, but there is at least a chance they will end up at the same restaurant. By contrast, if two residents of the Chicago metro area decide to go out for pizza at exactly the same moment, the chances of them

winding up at the same restaurant are probably infinitesimal. Even if they both limit their options to Pizza Hut locations (an utterly inexplicable choice if you live in Chicago, but bear with me), there'd still only be a one-in-twenty-nine chance of ending up at the same Pizza Hut.

*One summer weekday evening in Asheville, Ann and I arrive at a local movie theater complex to catch a show. It's a "small" film that has been out for weeks, and it's a work night, so we expect a small crowd. And the crowd is small—maybe 10 people in total. One of them is a friend from work and another is his wife.*

The only thing more surprising than the frequency of these unexpected rendezvous has been how much I enjoy them. I'm a reasonably social person, so I welcome a chance to catch up with someone I haven't seen in a while, or to get to know someone better. These encounters happen so often—once every couple of months, sometimes more—that I now find myself worrying about people that I haven't run into in a year or more. Did they move away? Are they OK? Is failing to run into them some sort of anti-coincidence? An un-coincidence?

Perhaps these feelings shouldn't be surprising if, as Rachel Dunbar suggests, evolution has hard-wired our brains to expect, even desire, close connections with small "villages" of 150 people or so. I may be responding to a newfound feeling of being more connected to a tribe of familiar faces rather than continually being confronted by a sea of strangers.

Like many others, I've done my share of mental hand-wringing about the new era of remote interaction via social media and what it will mean for our society, particularly for kids who never knew a world without smartphones. Much has been written lately about the fact that Americans increasingly prefer to live in areas where they are surrounded by people of like minds. That transition may be driving some of the political and cultural discord currently dominating life in America. The definitions of stranger, friend, acquaintance, and familiar face may be changing in a fundamental way, with unpredictable consequences.

*Ann was sitting at the Charlotte airport waiting for a long-delayed connecting flight back to Asheville. Like everyone else at the gate, she was minding her own business rather than interacting with strangers. But when the gate attendant announced that the inbound plane they were waiting on had been struck by lightning, the dynamic changed and conversations began, including one between Ann and Melissa, the woman sitting next to her. Melissa and her husband Brian had moved to Asheville just a few months after us. Not long after their flight home, a friendship was born. Brian played drums for a local band, and one Friday evening Ann suggested that we go see his band play for the first time. I mentioned that the band that practices in our neighborhood every Tuesday also had a gig that night. Our neighbor Sid played bass in that band, and we'd been feeling a little guilty about not having made it to one of his gigs yet. We briefly debated which band we should see that night. Then a mental wheel clicked into place. A few quick text messages to Melissa confirmed it: our friend Brian's band and Sid's band were, of course, one and the same.*

The likelihood of these congenial chance encounters must follow some sort of bell curve, with megacities like Chicago at one end, where they are practically unheard of, and Asheville somewhere in the happy middle of the curve, where encounters are uncommon but not unexpected.

What about the thin tail at the other end of the bell curve—towns so small you can't help but run into people you know every day?

Case in point: Dunlap, Iowa, population 1,042 (and shrinking).

My mother grew up in Dunlap, and every other Sunday my parents and I would make the hour-long drive from our home in Omaha to visit her parents. The continent-spanning Lincoln Highway runs right through the western edge of town. For those not continuing on to Chicago or New York City, a right-hand turn just past the funeral home and the Catholic church would take

you down main street. My grandparents' house was a half block off main street, across from the high school. A block or two back on main street was the family business: a combination egg hatchery and creamery, and, in later years, a flower shop.

My grandfather Archie was gregarious and always smiling, with an infectious laugh and an ability to make others laugh as well. Through the lens of my childhood eyes, Archie represented all that was good about small-town farm country. I loved hanging out in that old shop on main street, exploring the mysterious dark corners of the storage rooms in back. I even enjoyed hanging out in the flower shop, watching my mother, my grandmother Vera, and the flower shop's one other employee prepare arrangements before holidays. Just about everyone in town was a customer one way or another, and nearly all the farmers in the county were both suppliers and customers.

Archie died when he was 71, a few months before my 12th birthday, but I can still picture him greeting customers with a laugh and a smile. Perhaps he had an enemy somewhere, but I doubt it. Everyone he encountered seemed happy to see him, and vice versa. For Archie, unplanned encounters with friends and neighbors were a daily occurrence, but I suspect he enjoyed them just as much as I do now.

Life was more challenging for Vera, particularly in her last decade living alone. Although certainly capable of laughter, she often exuded worry and disappointment. Where Archie was unfailingly welcoming and amiable, Vera defaulted to slightly harsh and mildly judgmental, with a talent for playing the martyr. My mother says Vera never really approved of her marriage to my father, despite the nearly universal opinion that my father was as decent and honest a man as you would ever care to meet.

Without Archie's lightness of being to balance things out, my visits to Dunlap became more and more unpalatable. As a teenage boy, just about anything would have been more



interesting than spending a Sunday afternoon in a tiny farm town. My father and I would bond over our mutual, unspoken efforts to avoid unpleasant interactions by gluing ourselves to whatever sporting event we could find on television.

It was during these later years that my sense of life in a small town changed. As far as I could tell from the stories Vera delivered in her typical passive-aggressive tone, everyone knew too much about everyone else's business and had entirely too much to say about all of it. I began to imagine that residents would pass each other on the street, say a friendly word of hello, but then mutter a nasty, disapproving comment or two to their spouse as soon as they had moved out of earshot.

The lesson here, I suppose, is that how we feel about interactions, planned or otherwise, with friends, neighbors, and strangers has everything to do with our own outlook on life and how comfortable we are in our own skin. Some of this is under our control, but some may be just how we are wired.

Archie probably would have been miserable living in a big city, where almost everyone was a stranger, while Vera might have been better off with a little more anonymity. Given that I carry a bit of Archie and a bit of Vera around with me every day, perhaps it makes sense that Asheville suits me well. I am comfortable in a crowd of strangers and don't mind a bit of anonymity here and there, yet am always pleasantly surprised to see a familiar face at an unexpected time or place.

Asheville is booming and has been for most of this century. The population has grown by roughly 20,000 in the last two decades. Much has improved, but much has changed, and surely some things have been lost. The character of the city has changed noticeably just in the six years we have lived here. I often wonder what long-time residents think of all of this. Are these chance encounters I enjoy so much happening comparatively less and less often for them? Do the

crowds of strangers walking the streets of downtown mean that they are less likely to bump into a friend they haven't seen in a while? I can only hope that our arrival, and that of so many other newcomers, has not significantly diminished things for those who remember a smaller, more familiar, more coincidence-rich Asheville.

*Postscript: On a rainy Saturday evening, with an essay on the pleasures of chance encounters nearly complete, I close my laptop and then Ann and I head out to catch some live music in West Asheville. On the drive over, part of my brain is still pondering the mysteries of these random meetings. We check in at the will-call door and begin walking towards the stage to find a spot. There, over by the wall, stand our friends Brian and Melissa.*

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### No Maps Required

The first few months of 2018 had been exhausting. A brutal work deadline left me with barely any time off in March and April. My wife Ann was back in school, preparing for a career change while still working full time. Meanwhile, the reality of the Trump administration had slowly settled into our conscience, producing a sense of mild existential dread punctuated by occasional bouts of rage and despair. By early May, we desperately needed to get away from the

world for a while. Our solution: throw the tent and a couple sleeping bags in the back of the car and head for a campground.<sup>3</sup>

Our destination was Standing Indian Campground in the Nantahala National Forest, about two hours and a world away from our home in Asheville, North Carolina. The campground is situated on the Nantahala River near one end of a long, narrow basin in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains, southwest of the small town of Franklin, North Carolina. The Nantahala gets its start far above the valley floor near the far end of the basin and is fed by numerous streams and creeks that flow down into the valley. The Appalachian Trail traverses the ridgelines of the surrounding mountains, making a U-shaped loop around the valley. Several trails connect the campground to the AT like spokes on a wheel, making this one of the few places where you can tackle a section of the that famous trail as a multi-day loop hike. Our plans for the week were less ambitious, but just knowing that a long, rugged section of the AT was within walking distance added a bit of mystique, a promise of adventure.

The campground gets its name from Standing Indian Mountain, one of the peaks traversed by the AT as it winds its way around the south end of the basin. The name supposedly refers to a Cherokee warrior who was turned to stone while standing sentry on the mountain.

Albert Mountain, another peak summited by the AT, rises to east of the campground. Fans of Bill Bryson's book *A Walk in the Woods* may recall that Bill and his friend Katz were chased off Albert Mountain by a blizzard. They landed in a bunkhouse at a now-closed private campground just a few miles from Standing Indian Campground. It occurs to me that they would have had a much better time if they had skipped the idea of hiking the entire AT and spent a few days car

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<sup>3</sup> That is how couples in car commercials on television go camping. While this particular outing was relatively spontaneous for us, it still involved advance reservations, a fair bit of meal planning, and two or three hours of packing. All of which would make for a terrible car commercial.

camping at Standing Indian instead. Of course, the world would have lost a great book in the process.

That surrounding wall of ancient mountain also meant we had no cell service. I'd been more or less glued to Twitter and online newspaper feeds ever since the election of November 2016, with almost every day bringing news of situations that seemed to demand my attention while simultaneously leaving me feeling utterly powerless. The idea of being disconnected from that endless stream of information was both welcome and disturbing. I wasn't sure the Republic would still be intact when we returned home on Friday, but for at least a few days, I would try not to care.<sup>4</sup>

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I have to confess to being something of a reluctant camper. I often spend the days leading up to a camping trip in a state of indecisive ambivalence and mild cognitive dissonance, trapped between anticipation of a pleasurable vacation and mild dismay about all the literal and figurative baggage involved.

Conventional wisdom tells us that moving is one of life's most stressful experiences, and what is tent camping if not moving, except that you are moving to a much smaller house, you will have to assemble that house yourself, you will have to leave most of your stuff behind, the kitchen will be located outside with no running water, and the bathroom (if there is one) will be, at best, some distance away, possibly little more than a deep hole in the ground, and shared with an ever-changing cast of complete strangers. All the while, you know that you will soon repeat the entire moving experience in reverse. If you are really unlucky, it will rain so much during

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<sup>4</sup> It remains unclear whether my awareness of the impending dissolution of the Republic would make any difference whatsoever. Perhaps it is exactly this sense of helplessness in the face of unfolding events that made blissful ignorance so refreshing.

your adventure that you have to set up your tent again in your garage or back yard to dry it out before packing it away again. Despite all that, I almost always enjoy the experience, and the worst day camping is better than the best day paying bills or folding laundry.<sup>5</sup>

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We arrived at Standing Indian on the Monday before Memorial Day weekend, hoping to avoid the crowds that would arrive with the holiday. Our first couple of days at the campground can best be described as pleasant but moist. The area gets a lot of rainfall under normal conditions, but it hadn't been a normal year: Asheville had already experienced its rainiest May on record, with almost two weeks still left to go in the month. The rain started falling sometime in the middle of our first night, and it continued non-stop until mid-afternoon on Tuesday.

Fortunately, we bring a fair bit of gear with us when we go camping, including a large canopy from REI. This thing is big enough to more than cover a standard-issue picnic table with room left over to fit a couple of camp chairs under its protective roof. I have a love-hate relationship with this canopy. It's heavy, it consumes precious room in the back of the car, we always spend at least 10 minutes sorting out how all the various poles fit together and another 20 minutes actually assembling the thing, all of which delays the serious, urgent business of relaxing.

Ann loves that canopy. For years, I would always try to convince her that we should leave it behind, arguing that it was too big and bulky, too much of a hassle, and too antithetical to the idea of being out in nature. But in the car it would go. Then we'd arrive at the campsite and I would suggest that we didn't need to set it up right away, because the weather was nice and we

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<sup>5</sup> This is not strictly true. The worst day camping can involve a wet sleeping bag, poison ivy, insect bites, drunken frat boys in the camp site next door keeping you awake all night, and intestinal distress that forces you to make multiple visits to a vault toilet that hasn't been pumped out all summer. Any sane person would prefer paying bills or folding laundry.

probably wouldn't need it. But up it would go. And then at some point during the trip, often on the first day, that canopy would allow us to cook and eat a meal in the middle of a downpour or to sit and read comfortably for hours shaded from the hot afternoon sun. And I would have to admit I was glad we had brought it. Every. Damn. Time. These days, when packing the car for a trip, I just pause to stare at the giant canopy bag for a few moments before shoving it silently into the car. And sure enough, on that first night in Standing Indian, that canopy was the difference between a warm meal eaten in comfort and huddling in the tent with nothing but cold granola bars while the rain pounded down around us.

When the sun finally emerged on Tuesday afternoon, we decided to head out for a hike. Unusually for us, we had arrived without good trail maps of the area (or even bad ones for that matter), partly because we were short on time to prepare before the trip, and partly because I assumed the campground store would have good maps for sale.

Unfortunately, the camp store didn't have any maps either. The camp host working the counter said the Forest Service was supposed to be providing new maps, but hadn't managed to get it done yet. I detected a certain "that's the federal government for you" tone. Possibly justified in this case, although I suspect the delays may have something to do with the fact that the Forest Service's annual budget is now almost entirely consumed by fighting bigger and more dangerous wildfires every year. But I kept that thought to myself and just thanked her for the double-sided photocopied page she offered us, which provided one- or two-sentence descriptions of the many trail options accessible from the campground.

With limited information to go on, we decided to try something called "Lower Ridge Trail." Our handy one-pager told us that Lower Ridge was one of the trails that led from the campground to the AT. It was already mid-afternoon, so we figured we probably wouldn't make it as far as the AT, but it sounded like a nice walk regardless.

As we left the campground, the trail ascended gently along a small stream, crossing it several times before turning away to begin a diagonal climb across a steep slope. The air was humid, making the steady climb feel like more work than it really was, but the late afternoon sun added a soft glow to the lush green ground cover and a bit of visual drama to the trees overhead. As we gained elevation, we quickly reached a section of trail that was rich with delicate Red Trillium in full bloom. We also found ourselves trying to avoid stepping on the many millipedes and snails who were sharing the afternoon walk with us.

Then we got to the even steeper switchbacks. The thing about not having a trail map, or even a detailed description, is that you really have no idea what happens next or what you might find around the next corner. Flush with the blind optimism of the ill-informed, we continued to slog our way uphill. Eventually, as if out of spite, the trail gave up on the idea of switchbacks and headed straight up a steeply ascending ridgeline. Tired but eager to get to the top, whatever the top might be, we eventually crested a ridge and were rewarded with a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. A large downed tree provided a comfortable seat for enjoying the view. We had only walked about two miles, but had climbed about 1,000 feet, with about 500 feet of that in the last quarter mile or so. We had earned the view.

Looking past the most distant ridge, we could see storm clouds rising above the mountains. I couldn't be sure they were headed our way, but suspected that we hadn't seen the last of the rain on this trip. We soon began to retrace our steps, thankful that the rain had held off long enough for a walk in the woods and eager to return to our campsite to enjoy a shower, dinner, and a nice fire.

After showering, we hung our sweaty clothes on a line to dry. This turned out to be a waste of time because the air was so humid that nothing would air dry. Regardless of fabric type, clothes and towels just seemed to maintain a constant level of humidity. However wet something

got, that's how wet it stayed. But the food was good, in the way that food cooked outdoors always tastes better than you expect. The fire was warm, and we had brought plenty of other clothes.

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Aside from a couple of trips to Colorado,<sup>6</sup> most of my camping adventures took place various State Parks in Wisconsin. As a long-time resident of a northern suburb of Chicago, Wisconsin was the obvious destination for "getting away from it all." The problem is that Wisconsin was also the obvious destination for millions of other residents of northern Illinois.

As a result, weekend camping trips to Wisconsin always started with a mad scramble to get out of work and on the road before the expressways north of the city were overwhelmed by suburban commuters and fellow weekend adventure-seekers. Even if we were successful in avoiding backups at the toll booths and clearing the border ahead of the mass of minivans and SUVs bound for dairy state glory, we would usually hit rush hour traffic in Milwaukee and at least one construction delay.

The drive to our favorite campground took about three hours, the last hour of which was spent unclenching from the harrowing experiences of the first two, as the landscape slowly transitioned from urban to suburban and then, finally, in a slow exhale, to small towns and the rolling hills of Wisconsin farm country. All the while, looming in the back of my mind was the knowledge that the traffic nightmare would likely be even worse on Sunday evening as we all fought our way back towards Chicago again.

Still, the pleasures outweighed the pains, and so we continued to make trips north.

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<sup>6</sup> Most of which were spent constantly having to sort through an SUV full of too much gear in a futile effort to locate the critical item needed at any given moment. I was younger and more foolish then and have since learned that having too much gear is worse than not having enough. The lingering trauma of this experience may explain my issue with the REI canopy.



Sometimes, it was just my Ann and me, carrying only what we could fit in a two-seat Mazda Miata convertible.<sup>7</sup> I always enjoyed these trips, but for Ann they were almost essential—she finds the simple act of being in nature rejuvenating, an absolutely necessary respite from the crowded, noisy, and artificial city.

We only went camping once or twice a year—much too infrequently for Ann’s taste. Perhaps that’s why leaving the campsite at the end of a trip was always a challenge. Even after all the gear was packed into the car, Ann would want to just sit for a while longer, sometimes hours longer, in a camp chair in the middle of the empty campsite, happy to extend her time outdoors as long as possible. I would indulge her, but often less than graciously. For reasons that utterly escape me now, I would often spend those precious, quiet moments feeling anxious about the drive home or oddly eager to re-enter the real world, which never turned out to be all that interesting in comparison.

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After another very rainy night at Standing Indian, the sun made an early appearance Wednesday morning, convincing us that we might fit in a longer hike before the next deluge. A serious hike normally involves a commensurate level of preparation, including having a good map, or at the very least detailed directions with landmarks and distances. We had three sentences on a piece of paper.

Perhaps I am gradually becoming more daring as I find myself on the far side of age 50, or perhaps the smoke from the morning campfire was impairing my judgment. Whatever the case, faced with limited options, I chose to ignore my usual risk-averse instincts and adopted my wife’s typical “everything will work out” attitude. And so it was that with nothing more than the

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<sup>7</sup> Eventually augmented by a hitch-mounted cargo rack to make room for the REI canopy.

encouraging but brief description in our photocopied trail guide to go on, we set out on the Park Creek Trail. If all went well, after about six miles we would encounter an intersection with the Park Ridge Trail, which would lead us back to the campground about four miles later. If all went less than well, there was a chance we'd wind up in Georgia instead.

After a short walk from the backcountry information shelter near the campground entrance, we began following the Nantahala River downstream. Is there a better sound than the roar of a small mountain river just beginning to gather itself together?

We soon reached the junction with the Kimsey Creek Trail, which branched off to the left—this was another one of the paths that led to the AT. I made a promise to myself that I would someday follow that trail all the way to the AT and make the 25-mile round trip to return to the campground via the Lower Ridge Trail. But today, a ten-mile walk was ambitious enough.

After a few minutes, we saw another sign marking a junction with the Park Ridge Trail. This was the endpoint of our hoped-for return route, and seeing it bolstered our confidence: as long as we could find where the Park Creek and Park Ridge trails met again at their opposite ends, we should be able to find our way back to this very spot, preferably before dark. We continued following the Park Creek path, gaining momentum just like the Nantahala beside us. You don't find tumbling, cascading mountain rivers like this in southeastern Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup>

It wasn't particularly warm, but the sun was shining and the air so thick with humidity that sweat began sticking to my skin, even though we were on a gentle downhill trek. After a quarter mile or so, the trail took a sharp left turn and headed slightly uphill to follow Park Creek itself, one of the many tributaries in the valley that contributed to the burgeoning Nantahala below.

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<sup>8</sup> And certainly not in Chicago, where the eponymous river was made to flow backwards, away from Lake Michigan. It does so very, very slowly.

All of the trails around Standing Indian Campground are marked with the same rectangular blue blazes. Ideally, each trail would have its own unique marking so you could be sure just which trail you were on. The ubiquity of the blue blazes was a bit confusing since so many of the trails here connect or intersect. But we knew that for the rest of the day these blue blazes would be our most valuable asset, so we were happy to take them for what they were.

The walking was relatively easy, as the uphill grade was much gentler than the steep switchbacks of Lower Ridge Trail. The trail was wide and smooth, suggesting that we were following an old logging road or railroad grade. No surprise, given that the campground itself sits on the site of what was once a logging company camp. Although the forest had been encroaching again for decades, the unnatural path was a reminder of the scope of the human footprint on this land. It's hard to know what this area looked like before being logged in the early twentieth century, but to my eyes it was now a classic wet Western North Carolina forest: incredibly lush, even jungle-like at times, full of thick rhododendrons, ferns, and other ground cover, with a mature, varied tree cover overhead.

The month of May brings a bewildering array of wildflowers to this part of the country, so we expected to see some on this walk, but what we got was more like a stroll through a lifesized wildflower guidebook. If it blooms in May in the southern Appalachians, we saw it on this hike, mostly on this section along Park Creek: Solomon's Seal and, for good measure, False Solomon's Seal; the lovely Dwarf Iris, with its deep blue and purple flowers splashed with yellow at the center; the aptly named Showy Orchids, with gaping mouths of purple and white; Squaw Root emerging from the ground in clusters like naked corn cobs; and a colony of Mayapple, their white flowers hiding almost out of site under their broad green leaves. The most memorable find was a lone Jack-in-the-Pulpit, unassuming but unmistakable once Ann noticed the elaborate green and reddish-brown shade it built over its small, spiky flower. These are

supposed to be fairly common in this region, but in many years of visiting and living in these mountains, we had yet to encounter one—or at least to realize we had encountered one. Before long, we found four or five more. I think my wife could have ended the hike right then and there and been utterly thrilled with the day. But at that point, we had only experienced a fraction of what this walk had to offer.

After following the creek for about thirty minutes, we reached a spot where the trail briefly rose up steeply to the right, taking us 100 feet or so above the creek below. As Ann stopped to adjust something in her pack, I took a moment to look down at the stream and across to the other side of this miniature gorge. Trees rose from twenty or thirty feet below me to stretch far overhead. The mid-day sun was pouring directly down onto the scene, filtering through the sparse canopy over the creek. The bright light caught two yellow-gold butterflies chasing each other in loops and circles, roughly at eye level but far from reach, well out over the water below. It was as if they were performing under stage lights. I was tempted to dig out my cell phone to take a photo, but I knew I had neither the skill nor the equipment to capture even a fraction of the beauty before me. I decided to just enjoy the happy accident of being in the right place at the right time.

As we continued our climb, the path became narrower and more overgrown. Clearly, this trail was not heavily used, at least not this early in the season. In fact, we hadn't encountered a single soul since leaving the campground. The trail crossed the narrowing creek a few times, and the route became less certain. But whenever we began to feel slightly unsure about our direction, another blue blaze would appear just ahead. The blazes were placed exactly as frequently as they needed to be. No more, and no less.

Suddenly there was motion ahead. Something with a big wingspan appeared briefly in the trees above and ahead. It was a large brown owl, reentering our line of sight as it landed on a

high branch maybe 100 feet from us. It paused a moment to look at us before taking wing again, effortlessly and silently navigating a maze of tree trunks as it receded into the forest. I think it wanted to make sure that we knew that it saw us, and that we knew we had no hope of following.

After a couple of hours, we left the last remnants of the creek behind and crossed a wellmaintained Forest Service road, another reminder of the human footprint in this area, not to mention the complex and sometimes contradictory missions of the Forest Service. As wild as these mountains can seem, there are limits to that wildness.

On the other side of the road, the trail became a very narrow footpath slicing across a steep slope. We encountered more Red Trillium, probably at about the same elevation we had found them the day before. From here, the trail began to mirror the general path of the Forest Service road, which wound along about 100 feet below us.

A brief, steep climb brought us to what appeared to be the high point of the trail. I guessed that we had walked at least five miles. I had hoped we would reach the connection to the Park Ridge Trail—and the reassurance that would bring—before stopping for lunch. But we were tired and hungry, so we decided to rest for a while and dig out the sandwiches we had packed. By now, a thin layer of clouds had moved in, putting the entire forest in shadow. The effect wasn't one of gloom, but one of enclosure. It felt like the entire world was now contained within the bubble provide by the tree canopy overhead.

The peanut butter and jelly sandwiches tasted good, and my legs needed the rest. But I was also a bit uneasy, given that we had not yet reached the intersection with the Park Ridge trail that would carry us back to our campsite. We were clearly still on *a* trail, but was it the *right* trail? Could we have missed a turn somewhere?

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Many of our favorite camping trips in Wisconsin were shared with another couple, two of our closest friends. Most of those outings were to a state campground in the Kettle Moraine area of southeast Wisconsin, where the last ice age left behind a rippled topography of ridges, depressions, and small lakes. Our friends would tow their small pop-up camper while Ann and I tent camped. Together we enjoyed long weekends of pleasant conversation, good food, and relaxing hikes along the wooded trails. Some years, other friends would join us, but the four of us always managed to make the trip together at least once every year, despite our increasingly busy lives.

Being civilized creatures who enjoyed a good meal prepared by other people, once each trip we would venture to a supper club about two miles from the campground for dinner. When that supper club closed, the tradition evolved to include a longer drive to a restaurant called Schwarz's, home of the best steaks in the world, located in an unincorporated town called St. Anna. You might be thinking that driving 45 minutes each way to a restaurant in the middle of a camping trip is an abomination, a nullification of the entire point of camping. And you might be right. But then you probably have not enjoyed a drive down a deserted Wisconsin back road in a convertible, with the top down on a cool evening, surrounded by the night sky and rolling hills, your belly full of a perfectly prepared filet mignon and baked potato, the tannins of a glass of red still lingering on the palette, knowing that the journey would end around a glowing campfire in quiet conversation with good friends seen too rarely.

When we moved to Western North Carolina several years ago, I knew that annual tradition, and those friends, were among the things I would miss. And miss them I did. However, after living here for several years, my entire perspective on camping has changed considerably. Many of the small complications are the same, the packing and moving and unpacking and then packing and moving and unpacking again. But now that we live in the middle of the Blue Ridge

Mountains, we are practically “there” by the time we pull out of the driveway. And this can make all the difference.

There’s a really nice campground with a small lake and miles of hiking trails less than a 30-minute drive from our house in East Asheville, with most of that drive spent on the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway.<sup>9</sup> Within a two-hour drive, there must be dozens of campgrounds, and much of the journey to any of them can be spent enjoying beautiful mountain scenery.

And while parts of Wisconsin are quite lovely, especially in the fall, the vistas here range from charming to beautiful to spectacular. The wealth of flora and fauna found in these mountains is nearly unequalled. And even on hot summer days, the higher elevations usually keep temperatures comfortable, and nights are often cool, perfect for tent sleeping.

Good company, a good book, a comfortable hammock, a warm meal, and a roaring campfire can work their magic just about anywhere. But where campgrounds in the Midwest are usually just isolated islands of nature surrounded by farmlands, towns, and busy roads, campgrounds here are more like gateways to another world, often located well away from major roads and surrounded by thousands of acres of National Park, National Forest, or other wilderness areas, with an array of hiking trails just steps from your tent. Of course, that means there are more ways to get well and truly lost.

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I was pretty sure we weren’t lost exactly, but I also didn’t really have any idea where we were, other than several miles from where we wanted to end up. Refueled and only mildly anxious about our situation, we strapped on our packs, picked up our trekking poles, and pressed on along the ridge. Soon, the trail began to descend slightly. I sensed that the much-anticipated

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<sup>9</sup> Blue Ridge Parkway: 469 miles, zero toll booths.

trail junction was somewhere just ahead. Then Ann spotted the rusty shell of a very old truck, about 100 feet above the trail. It was sitting next to an even more rusted-out shelter of some kind. We soon realized that the truck was at the top of a short, almost completely overgrown offshoot of the Forest Service road below. Knowing we still had miles to go, we decided not to scramble up the hill for a closer look, but my guess was that the truck dated back to the 1920s, presumably the heyday of logging in the area.

These mountains are full of such small surprises. You'll be walking along, convinced that you are in virgin forest untouched by human hands and suddenly come across the remains of a stone dam or spring house. In some ways it can be jarring—that human footprint intruding on your sense of wildness and escape, but at the same time it is comforting to know that, left to their own devices, forests can recover quickly and even dominate the landscape again, if not without showing a few scars.

We began to descend back down to the Forest Service road, which formed a T with another gravel road. And there, just across the road, was the sign pointing us to the Park Ridge Trail. Our leap of faith had been rewarded with clear, well-maintained trail signage.

As the trail's name suggested, we were soon walking up and down the very narrow spine of a ridge. It felt similar to the glacially carved ridge trails back in the Kettle Moraine country of Wisconsin. But everything was scaled up here, the ridges rising much higher above the narrow valleys below. Glaciers moved a lot of rock in southern Wisconsin, carving lovely hills and valleys into the landscape, but millions of years of mountain building, continental collisions, and erosion had a much grander impact here.

As we scrambled over and around the remains of a couple of downed trees, I looked up and ahead along the ridge and realized that we had entered a graveyard of dead hemlocks, most still standing. These spiny corpses ranged 30 or 40 feet down the steep slopes on either side of



the ridge and ahead for at least a quarter mile or more. Broken, brittle branches littered the ground along the trail.

This was yet another sign of human influence on these seemingly wild lands, as these hemlocks were almost certainly the victims of the invasive hemlock woolly adelgid, a pest brought to North America from Japan that is causing a massive, rapid die-off of hemlocks across the southern Appalachians. The resulting changes to the forests and the life they support will be profound. The immediate effect on my mood was fairly profound as well. Cut down the trees and they will (probably) grow back. But introduce a pest for which they have no resistance and your results may vary. A blight wiped out the chestnut trees here before I was born, but the destruction of the hemlocks has largely taken place in the two decades I've been visiting or living here. Bad things can happen quickly. Not long ago, these hemlocks dominated this narrow ridge, and now they are all dead. What will replace them? And when?

They gray skies suddenly felt a little gloomier. Perhaps it was because there was nothing overhead now aside from the stark, naked spikes of dead hemlocks cut short in their reach for the sky. Ann and I talked a bit about the changes we had witnessed in our 15 years of visiting western North Carolina. We understood these woods a little better having lived here a while, and there is also more at stake for us now because it is our home. The sense of loss, and potential loss, was also an unwelcome reminder of the changes taking place in the world we had escaped from a few days earlier.

But our spirits were raised just a few minutes later when my wife quietly exclaimed "deer!" I glimpsed the bushy white tail bounding to my left, about 50 yards ahead. It quickly zigzagged its way through the understory, leaping over some of the downed hemlocks as it disappeared silently down the ridge. Deer are a common sight in Wisconsin and northern Illinois, but we rarely encounter them on the trails here in the southern mountains.

Soon, the trail turned to the right and began to descend. We entered another very different environment as we found ourselves cutting across the middle of a steep slope that rose some 300 feet or more above us and at least that far below. For most of our hike, we'd been walking through knee-high or higher plants, shrubs, wildflowers, and baby trees. Here, though, it was ferns. Ferns everywhere. Literally as far as the eye could see, upslope, downslope, ahead, and, soon, behind us as well. Trees were relatively sparse, just frequent enough to form a thin but continuous cover overhead. Aside from the ferns and a few tall deciduous trees, the only other features of the landscape were the carpet of brown leaves from the previous fall and the occasional large boulder permanently frozen in mid-tumble down the slope.

Before long, however, a new feature appeared on the landscape to our left: burn scars. At first, I thought we were looking at a single tree that had been hit by lightning, but we soon realized we were seeing evidence of a recent fire. I told Ann that I thought it was probably from a controlled burn, as the damage seemed minimal. Almost all the trees were alive and appeared healthy, despite the charcoal marks that rose a foot or so up the trunks of most of them. And clearly the ferns were thriving.

That's when we noticed another addition to the scenery: a bear cub hop-stepping its way up the hill just to the left of the trail. The second cub popped into view above the ferns a few feet ahead of the first. Then the third cub appeared in front of the other two. Finally, as we looked even farther up the slope, we saw their mother, who was leading the procession. All four were only about 100 yards ahead of us. Probably less. I'm fairly accustomed to bear encounters in the woods at this point, but it did occur to me that we were a long way from anywhere, and no one else in the world knew that we were out on this trail. The large sow paused to look at us. We paused as well, then started making noise, encouraging the little family to keep on moving. Mom took a few more steps as her cubs continued picking their way slowly up the hill. She stopped to

look at us again. Then continued on. Then she paused again, this time peering around a tree to keep an eye on us. This cycle repeated a few more times until all four eventually disappeared behind some rocks far above us.

Once we were sure the coast was clear, we continued on our way. Rounding a corner to the left, the forest began to change again, with rhododendron and mountain laurel reappearing for the first time in at least a mile. The fire damage was different here, more severe. Many of the rhododendrons were roasted and dead, and a number of trees had taken fatal wounds as well. There were signs of significant post-fire soil erosion, and I became less convinced that this was an intentional burn.

Wildfires raged throughout the southern Blue Ridge in the fall of 2016, as a month with virtually no rain during the warmest fall on record combined to turn the entire region into a tinderbox. Add in human stupidity and carelessness (including arson in several cases), and the result was dozens of fires, millions of dollars in damages, several injuries, thick smoke throughout the region for days on end, and 14 dead in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

I did some research after returning from our camping trip, and I'm still not sure whether we had walked through the remnants of a wildfire or a prescribed burn. One of the 2016 wildfires was located near that area, but the Forest Service had also done a controlled burn somewhere near there about a month before we arrived. Either way, fire—both wild and otherwise—will probably become a more significant factor here, as climate change raises the risks of wildfire and as the invasive pests introduced by humans bring rapid and disruptive changes to the composition of these forests. Managing those changes to keep forests healthy will likely only get harder.

Throughout our return trip on the Park Ridge Trail, the dependable blue blazes continued to serve as welcome but unobtrusive guides. But at least four or five of the blazes adorned the

sides of trees that now lay on their sides, some seemingly having died a natural death, others victims of the fire. Like everything else about this place, those blue blazes are fragile resources.

Lose too many of them in too short a time, and we might lose our way.

A short, steep descent along another small creek that feeds into the Nantahala brought us, finally, back to the intersection of the two trails and an easy walk along the river back to the campground. As our tired legs carried us up the last, steep hill to our campsite, I reflected on the walk. In just a few hours, we had experienced a good portion of the tremendous variety of landscapes, trees, plants, and animals found here in the mountains of my adopted home. I was grateful for the experience, grateful to those who carved and maintained the trails, and particularly grateful to whoever placed those precious blue blazes in just the right spots.

The hike had been surprisingly private. We had not seen a single person outside the campground. That might not have been true had we done the walk a few days later on Memorial Day weekend, but I suspect that even on the busiest weekends, you won't find too many people taking this long route. It has no overtly spectacular features to offer—no famous peaks, panoramic vistas, or breathtaking waterfalls. It simply returns you to where you started, several hours and many miles later. But the rewards are rich enough if you just enjoy the experience, unburdened by expectations of the spectacular. I do hope at least a few others follow this path each year, as it has many stories to tell.

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In the same chapter of *A Walk in the Woods* that recounts his hasty retreat from Albert Mountain, Bryson notes that “Distance changes utterly when you take the world on foot. A mile becomes a long way, two miles literally considerable, ten miles whopping, fifty miles at the very

limits of conception. The world, you realize, is enormous in a way that only you and a small community of fellow hikers know. Planetary scale is your little secret.”

Bryson was, I think, referring mostly to the community of Appalachian Trail hikers who traverse vast distances for months. But ten miles was pretty whopping in my estimation. I know that Ann and I glimpsed a bit of Bryson’s little secret that day.

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After a shorter hike on Thursday, the rains came pouring down again as we were finishing dinner. We had to forego the campfire, but spent a couple hours in chairs reading.<sup>10</sup> We fell asleep, yet again, to the sound of rain falling on the tent. Fortunately, it stopped by Friday morning, so we were able to tear down and pack the car without getting soaked. I knew that we would have to unpack a lot of that gear and hang it out to dry when we got home, but I really didn’t mind.

I was eager to get home, but in leaving behind these woods, birds, bears, butterflies, snails, and blue blazes, I knew I would be reentering a world where Twitter would bring me a near-constant stream of bad news—a world where a few oligarchs were doing everything they could to prop up the carbon bubble of coal and oil investments, consequences be damned; a world where a race was on to sell off and devour our public lands and where regulations protecting our air and water were viewed as inconvenience rather than profound wisdom.

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We spent the rest of the weekend hanging things up to dry in the garage, doing laundry, and slowly falling into the rhythms of everyday life. I do miss our friends and our old camping traditions, but I much prefer camping in these mountains. I don’t mind that they aren’t

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<sup>10</sup> Kept dry, of course, by that insufferably useful canopy.

completely wild and show the scars of human interaction. They are wild enough for me, and those scars are lessons waiting to be learned.

I want to return to Standing Indian sometime soon, but next time perhaps we will leave the car behind and head into the backcountry with only what we can carry in our packs. The canopy will have to stay behind, but I want to feel for myself just how enormous the world can be. I can't control much of what happens in the world around me, but I can control whether or not I make it to the top of Albert Mountain on foot.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Preferably not in a blizzard.

## Something in the Air

**November 3, 2017**

If you had asked my 40-year old self in 2007 how I might expect to spend my fiftieth birthday, the answer would not have involved eight hours in a conference room hunched over a laptop as my colleagues and I raced to make final edits to a draft of the official U.S. government report on climate change. It wouldn't have included a migraine headache or driving home in a haze of pain and nausea so to lie down for a while before putting in more hours of work on the computer.

My 40-year-old self would certainly not have guessed that I would go to bed early that night only to lie awake for hours wondering whether President Donald Trump (yes, self, *that* Donald Trump) would even allow us to release the report the next day. Trump's top priority, perhaps his only real priority, has been to undo all of President Obama's accomplishments (yes, self, the same Obama you voted for in the Illinois Senate race back in '04).

Climate change was a key issue for Obama, particularly in his second term. Despite an unfriendly congress, his administration made significant progress, including the release of the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan and contributing to the successful negotiation of the Paris Agreement—an international accord that aims to limit global warming to “well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and to pursue “efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.”<sup>12</sup> It's no surprise, then, that Trump has also made climate change a priority, but in a very different way.

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<sup>12</sup> UNFCCC, “Paris Agreement,” ([Bonn, Germany]: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015).

The next morning, one day into my 51st year and feeling the effects of the sleepless night, I drove into work at the federal building in downtown Asheville to help finish up a few final tasks. We were actually scheduled to release two reports simultaneously that morning— volumes one and two of the legally mandated Fourth National Climate Assessment. The first volume focused on the physical science of climate change and was now in its final form, after some two years of work and having survived multiple rounds of peer, public, and government review. The second, much larger, volume focused on current and projected impacts of climate change. This second volume was only in draft form, ready to be released for public comment and review by the National Academies of Science. The information contained in these two reports, documenting the science of climate change, the ways it is already affecting Americans, and how those effects may play out in the future, contradicts virtually everything Trump has ever said about climate change.

By around 9:30am, with all of our work in Asheville completed and the last files delivered to colleagues in D.C., I had an hour or so to revisit the scenarios that had kept me awake most of the night. What would happen if, at the last minute, the President sent word not to release the reports. The responsibility for making the websites we had built available to the public—or not—would fall to our friends Washington. How would they react to a command to stand down? And what would I do? Email a copy of everything to the *Washington Post* and hand in my resignation? Fortunately, no such word was given, no hard choices had to be made. The reports were released as planned.

It was perhaps no coincidence that this had all been scheduled for a day that Trump would spend on a plane to Asia. His Twitter feed remained surprisingly silent. “Fox & Friends” tends not to pay much attention to climate change, so Trump might not have even known about the report for hours, or even days.



In the afternoon, NOAA hosted a conference call for the press featuring one of the authors of volume one and the Chair of a committee overseeing the project. Several reporters asked whether there had been political pressure to change the content, to soften conclusions. The answer was no, there had been no such pressure, but the reporters were skeptical and struggled to understand why the administration would even release something like this. They weren't the only ones. A chapter exploring the challenges of limiting the amount of future warming had to be revised extensively once Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, but to the best of my knowledge, no scientific findings were suppressed or altered due to political influence. I sometimes wondered if that was because this administration simply wasn't organized enough to orchestrate such a thing.

The *New York Times* rushed out a story with the headline "U.S. Report Says Humans Cause Climate Change, Contradicting Top Trump Officials." Kudos to the copy editor for saying it all in eleven words. The story provided some useful behind-the-scenes context for those of us working outside the Washington political bubble, noting that "responsibility for approving the report fell to Gary D. Cohn, director of the National Economic Council, who generally believes in the validity of climate science and thought the issue would have been a distraction from the tax push, according to an administration official with knowledge of the situation."<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the only thing saving us from the suppression of important scientific facts had been the administration's desire to enact a massive, deficit-busting tax cut for the wealthy.

How the hell did we get here? How the hell did I get here?

To be clear, I'm not on the front lines of the fight against climate change. I'm just in a small communications bunker somewhere safely in the rear guard. My job is to help translate the

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa Friedman and Glenn Thrush, "U.S. Report Says Humans Cause Climate Change, Contradicting Top Trump Officials." *The New York Times*, November 3, 2017.

complex, often obscure, and sometimes syntactically mangled writing of atmospheric scientists, oceanographers, biologists, geologists, health experts, and others into language that politicians, planners, and, ideally, everyone else in the country can understand. The goal is to facilitate informed decisions, and to raise awareness.

To quote Ronald Reagan, I'm from the government, and I'm here to help.

Reagan described those as the “nine most terrifying words in the English language.” Yet in April of 1988, it was Reagan—usually no friend to environmental causes—who signed the Montreal Protocol, an international agreement to phase out the use of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs. He wasn't just from the government, he was the government. And (in this one instance at least), in the face of an emerging global-scale crisis, he was here to help.

Some fourteen years earlier, two University of California scientists—Mario Molina, an immigrant from Mexico, and F. Sherwood Rowland—had published a paper in *Nature* reporting their discovery that CFCs could damage the planet's protective ozone layer, thereby threatening the health of people, plants, and animals.<sup>14</sup> This discovery would literally change the world, in part because the two scientists realized the importance of their findings but also because they realized the importance of communicating those findings to the world.

Molina and Rowland met with some resistance from other scientists and even firmer resistance from well-funded industries who saw a threat to their corporate bottom lines. But Molina and Rowland were ultimately proven correct, and, in 1995, both were awarded Nobel Prizes. Their 1974 paper notes that their research was supported by a grant from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. They weren't from the government exactly, but they were funded by the government.

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<sup>14</sup> Mario J. Molina and F. S. Rowland, “Stratospheric Sink for Chlorofluoromethanes: Chlorine AtomCatalysed Destruction of Ozone.” *Nature* 249 (1974).

A cynic would note that Reagan's decision to support the Montreal agreement followed the decision by Dupont, the biggest producer of CFCs in the world, to change its position on the issue—from opposing the ban on CFCs to favoring it. Dupont may have acted altruistically, given the recent discovery that damage to the ozone was occurring much more rapidly than expected. Or they may have been operating purely out of economic self-interest—they knew the days of CFCs were numbered and by 1988 were well-positioned to be a major supplier of the chemicals that would replace CFCs.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case, in this instance Reagan was acting on the counsel of his advisors, who were in turn acting on the best information science had to offer at the time.

Nineteen eighty-eight was also a pivotal year for climate change. That summer, NASA scientist James Hansen gave his now-famous testimony before a Senate committee arguing that it was “99 percent certain” that humans were having a noticeable effect on global temperatures.<sup>16</sup> In December of that year, the newly formed Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, was charged by the United Nations with producing periodic, comprehensive scientific assessments of the state of knowledge about climate change and possible options for responding to the challenges it posed.

For many, there was hope that the Montreal Protocol would serve as a model for future international agreements to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Global warming was a slowermoving problem than ozone destruction, but also a more difficult one to solve: finding alternative refrigerants was much easier than completely revamping the world's energy system. But the need

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<sup>15</sup> James Maxwell and Forrest Briscoe, “There's Money in the Air: The CFC Ban and Dupont's Regulatory Strategy.” *Business Strategy and the Environment* 6, no. 5 (1997).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Shabecoff, “Global Warming Has Begun, Expert Tells Senate.” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1988.

for action was becoming clear, even among many Republican political elites, including key players in George H.W. Bush's administration.<sup>17</sup>

In 1990, Congress passed the Global Change Research Act by a unanimous vote and President Bush signed it into law. The act established a program office for advancing the understanding of global change and called for quadrennial assessments of climate change science, similar to the global reports to be compiled by the IPCC, but with a national focus.

### **Spring 1997**

#### ***Chicago Tribune, Letters to the Editor, By Gerald M. Freeman, April 22, 1997***

*WILMETTE – While skidding my way downtown recently, I thought it bizarre that large segments of the American public still believe in global warming when in Chicago the temperature was 22 degrees; Duluth, 12; Fargo, 9; Pittsburgh, 20; Albany, 19. Des Moines was balmy at 27. And this in April.*

*Wind chills reached 70 below in the Midwest this winter, killing tens of thousands of cattle and forming ice covers four feet thick. There have been countless power outages, snowbound motorists and disrupted businesses and schools. But the swelter freaks have convinced Congress to budget \$2.1 billion annually to study global climate change. Many environmentalists and these political swelter freaks react harshly to criticism because their predictions of imminent catastrophe, even without scientific foundation, reap significant rewards. "Even truth gets drowned when gold comes to the surface," the proverb says.*

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<sup>17</sup> The National Security Archive, "U.S. Climate Change Policy in the 1980s," The George Washington University; Timothy Cama, "Memos Show Bush Advisers Worried About Climate Change." *The Hill*, December 3, 2015; Joby Warrick, "Reagan, Bush 41 Memos Reveal Sharp Contrast with Today's GOP on Climate and the Environment." *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2015.

***Chicago Tribune, Letters to the Editor, By Tom Maycock, May 3, 1997***

*EVANSTON — Gerald Freeman finds it “bizarre” that anyone could still believe in global warming in light of the recent severe winter and cold spring. If we are asked to view our recent weather patterns as useful scientific evidence against a global warming trend, what are we to make of the heat wave of 1995 that killed hundreds of Chicagoans? The answer, of course, is that short-term localized weather patterns such as these tell us very little about long-term global weather trends (emphasis on the global). In other words, please don't assume that global warming doesn't exist simply because you had to wear a heavier jacket this morning. Money spent on research into how human activity affects our weather is money well spent. Perhaps Mr. Freeman would prefer that we save a few bucks and simply consult the Old Farmer's Almanac?*

“Swelter freaks”?

I'm not sure what it was about Freeman's letter that motivated me to fire off my own letter to the *Tribune*. Probably the combination of condescension and ignorance (or is it dishonesty?). Being wrong is one thing. Being wrong, insulting, and arrogant all at the same time is particularly annoying.

As best I can remember, I first learned about global climate change from Carl Sagan, via an episode of his television show *Cosmos* broadcast in the fall of 1980, a few weeks shy of my 13th birthday. With his gift for making science both comprehensible and compelling, Sagan explained how a runaway greenhouse effect on Venus had turned that planet into a kind of hell, then he artfully transitioned to a discussion of the effect we were having on our own home planet, including potentially altering its climate through deforestation and burning fossil fuels.

At the time, it was Venus, not Earth, that fired my imagination. I hoped to follow in

Sagan's footsteps and unravel mysteries of the solar system and the universe. Still, his warning about the damage we might be doing here on Earth wasn't lost on me, perhaps because the wisdom of taking good care of our only home seemed so obvious.

But, having discovered in college that the mind-bending, bleeding-edge mathematics required by modern theoretical physics were not my strong suit, I more or less stumbled on a career as a technical writer for a software company, and there I stayed for many years. I continued to pay attention to the issue of climate change, talked about it with friends at times, tried to minimize my own energy usage, and even fired off one cranky letter to the *Tribune*. It wasn't the least I could do, but it was close.

### **November 6, 2012**

An election day with personal consequences. Three weeks earlier, I had left a comfortable job and my home of more than twenty years to take a new position as an editor for the third U.S. National Climate Assessment. I work for a university, but the job is funded by a grant from the federal government. Although the federal law enacted in 1990 called for these assessments to be produced every four years, only two had been released to date. In the interim, fossil fuel companies and others had been funneling vast sums of money through free-market think tanks and other organizations in a concerted and effective disinformation campaign aimed at casting doubt not just on the science of climate change, but on the scientists themselves.

In 1997, President Clinton signed the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty aimed at reducing global greenhouse emissions. With no prospect of success, the administration never submitted the treaty for Senate ratification. In 2000, the Supreme Court decision that put an end to *Bush v. Gore* also put on hold any hopes for aggressive action on climate change by the United States, and, in many ways, the world. George W. Bush's administration buried the results of the first U.S. National Climate Assessment, released in 2000, and essentially refused to produce the

legally mandated second assessment until after losing a lawsuit. Suppressing information to justify inaction. Another eight years of wasted time.

My preference for Obama over Mitt Romney had almost nothing to do with concern for my own job security, but I can't deny that it was on my mind. The moving truck with all our belongings hadn't even arrived in Asheville yet, and a Romney victory might not bode well for the project I came here to work on.

Obama's victory in 2008 had raised hopes for all of us who cared about this problem, but the results during his first term had been disappointing. Obama understandably expended a great deal of political capital on health care and dealing with the financial crisis, but tepid support for international negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009 and for a cap-and-trade bill here at home in 2010 led to failures of both efforts. Climate change was, it seemed, not viewed as a winning issue by Obama's first-term advisors, who had their eyes on securing a second term.<sup>18</sup>

Romney's own position on climate change had evolved, or rather de-evolved, since his days as governor of Massachusetts. In the twenty-first century, the idea of conserving the planet we share and securing a safe environment for future generations has somehow become incompatible with what it means to be a Republican, or a conservative.

At the GOP convention, Romney derided Obama's promises to "slow the rise of the oceans" and "to heal the planet," his visible and audible smirk eliciting knowing, robust laughter from the partisan crowd. To be fair, Obama was guilty of some hubris in making those promises, but at least he understood the gravity of the problem. Unfortunately for Mitt (not to mention millions of people up and down the east coast), Superstorm Sandy struck just days before the election. An effective pro-Obama television commercial blended Romney's derisive comments

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<sup>18</sup> William Marsden, *Fools Rule: Inside the Failed Politics of Climate Change* (Knopf Canada, 2011).

and the approving laughter of convention attendees with stark images of Sandy's devastating impacts. Climate change may have made Sandy stronger and may have affected the rare and particularly damaging path it took, but, at minimum, the impacts of Sandy were significantly worse as a result of decades of rising sea levels.<sup>19</sup>

With Obama securing a comfortable victory, and with no more elections left for him to win, I hoped for more aggressive approach on climate change in his second term. I also hoped our furniture would arrive soon.

### **Spring 2013**

I finally got around to reading the book *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, which detailed the organized and well-funded efforts over many decades to cast doubt on the scientific evidence for a range of public health threats and environmental problems. According to the authors, the very same disinformation tactics developed by the tobacco industry to deny the link between smoking and cancer were later used to try to discredit the scientific evidence related to the ozone problem and the threats of acid rain and climate change. Creating skepticism and uncertainty was the goal. Destroying public trust in science itself was the price to be paid.

And it wasn't just the tactics that were the same: some of the very same people who worked to deny evidence about the dangers of second-hand smoke were among those leading similar disinformation campaigns about climate change and other environmental problems. I could not understand what motivated these people. Were men like Fred Singer, Fred Seitz, and

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<sup>19</sup> T. Knutson, "Appendix C: Detection and Attribution Methodologies Overview," in *Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I*, ed. D.J. Wuebbles, et al. (Washington, DC, USA: U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2017).



others just greedy, willing to take cash from the tobacco and oil industries, consequences be damned? Or were they so blinded by political ideology that they truly believed the lies they told?

Most of the folks from those tobacco wars are gone now, but Singer, now in his 90s, still turns up at some of the lunatic fringe climate denier events, and some of my colleagues have encountered him in person. My own father, a lifelong smoker, died at age 56 from lung cancer when I was just 18. I sometimes wonder what I might do if I met Singer in a dark alley somewhere. Would I react violently? Would I strike the first blow for my father, the victim of the carefully calibrated addictive nicotine content of his cigarettes and the disinformation campaign that delayed awareness of just how deadly those cigarettes were? Would I strike a blow for the lingering damage all that second-hand smoke I inhaled might have done to me, or for the countless others who have died and will continue to die from smoking? What about those who have already been injured or killed by climate change, or the generations who will pay the costs of dealing with a problem we should have started solving decades ago?

More than anything, I'd just like to ask him how he sleeps at night.

### **August 8, 2013**

Today, Obama awarded Mario Molina, co-discoverer of the effect of CFCs on stratospheric ozone, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

### **May 6, 2014**

My colleagues and I gathered around a table in a conference room, keeping watch from a distance over the release of the Third National Climate Assessment. We were dialed into a conference call with project leadership in D.C., ready to help with any technical problems. The materials we've worked so hard on—downloadable PDFs, web pages, infographics, and scientific figures—had been out of our hands for a week, bundled off to federal contractors who were responsible for standing up the website and making it available to the world.

At the appointed hour, the website went live and the press embargo was lifted. News spread quickly on social media. The website was a relatively daring exercise in visual storytelling, the kind of thing the federal government normally just doesn't do. Designed in part by a contracting firm and in part by our team in Asheville, the site quickly garnered praise in the climate-aware corners of Twitter.

As recently as a few weeks earlier, we had been uncertain about what this day would look like. The White House had not yet decided how much attention to give the release of this report, no doubt engaged in some complex political calculus. Eventually, by which I mean at nearly the last possible moment, the administration decided to do major media push, with a focus on TV meteorologists—a group generally viewed as trusted, unbiased sources of information. National figures like Al Roker and Ginger Zee along with meteorologists from several major TV markets were invited for a series of one-on-one interviews with Obama in the Rose Garden.

Later that afternoon, we gathered around a TV to watch C-SPAN's coverage of a media event at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. The session included panel discussions from some of the report authors interspersed with comments from White house advisor John Podesta, John Holdren—the President's science advisor, and Kathy Sullivan, ex-NASA astronaut and current head of NOAA.

Podesta had high praise for the report website. With the botched rollout of the HealthCare.gov website a few months earlier still fresh on everyone's mind, he drew laughter from the crowd by saying "who says we can't build a great website here at the White House?" Over the next few days, stories in the press, in blog posts, and on social media noted that, for a report of this type, the assessment was unusually readable and accessible, the graphics relatively clear and understandable. The labors of our small team of science writers, editors, and graphic

artists had not gone unnoticed. I heard Obama and others in the administration recite verbatim language written by a friend and mentor. The high point? That was probably seeing Stephen Colbert devote an entire segment of his show to the report.<sup>20</sup>

I had done a lot of things in my first forty-five years. Much of it had at least been interesting, some of it mundane. But, that week, perhaps for the first time, I felt like I had contributed to something truly worthwhile. Whether any of the work really mattered, however, depended on what happened next—what people, especially our political leaders, did with this information.

### **August 2015**

My cell phone buzzed. My friend Allison from EPA had sent me a cell phone video she took of EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy signing the Agency's new Clean Power Plan, designed to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Years in the making, the subject of more than four million public comments, and three hundred pages long in published form, this was the signature climate change achievement to date by any U.S. administration.

Later that day, President Obama addressed a gathering in the East Room of the White House. I tuned in online. Obama noted that, by definition, most of the issues he dealt with were tough problems—they wouldn't get to his desk if they were easy to solve. He then said that "most of the time, the issues we deal with are ones that are temporally bound and we can anticipate things getting better if we just plug away at them, even incrementally. But this is one of those rare issues, because of its magnitude, because of its scope, that if we don't get it right, we might not be able to reverse. And we may not be able to adapt sufficiently. There is such a

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<sup>20</sup> The Colbert Report, *The Word – F\*\*K It* (2014).

thing as being too late when it comes to climate change. But that shouldn't make us hopeless. It's not as if there's nothing we can do about it. We can take action."

The idea that we can be too late is only partially true. Climate change is not a binary phenomenon. But there are changes we may not be able to adapt to, lines we do not want to cross, and potential tipping points we do not understand. The difference between difficult problems and potential catastrophe depends on what we do in the next few years to decades.

Action had been slow in coming for this administration. But better late than never. I thought back to Carl Sagan, who died in 1996. Almost 35 years had passed since he first warned me—warned all of us—about this problem.

#### **April 4, 2016**

My colleague Jesse and I were standing under a balcony outside the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, looking across a secured drive at the West Wing of the White House. It had been cloudy all day, and finally the rains had come. Jesse realized he had forgotten to bring an umbrella and headed back inside to look for one at the Navy gift shop we had visited a few minutes earlier. I lingered on that terrace for a while, enjoying the first quiet moments of the day.

Getting to this point hadn't been easy. First came a year and a half of very hard work. Then a long wait to see if my name would bubble up far enough through the bureaucracy to receive an invitation. That invitation had finally arrived just a few days earlier, leading to a scramble to find an affordable flight and a hotel room in Washington. Finally, after arriving at the Eisenhower building, there had been a long wait in line to get through two security checkpoints, culminating in a close encounter with a large bomb-sniffing dog. Having successfully failed to arouse any interest from the dog and with visitor badge in hand, I was greeted by an enthusiastic "Welcome to the White House!" I hadn't really thought of the

Executive Office Building as being part of the White House, but I certainly didn't argue the point.

We were here for an event marking the release of an official U.S. scientific report on the impacts of climate change on human health. Jesse was an author on the report, and I had served as an editor and project manager for a team from Asheville who had spent close to two years helping turn the report from idea into reality.

The event, which drew a capacity crowd of about 250 people to the building's main auditorium, kicked off with a sort of fireside chat between White House science advisor John Holdren and EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy. Holdren and McCarthy had been key players in the Administration's efforts to address climate change, and while their exchange felt somewhat rehearsed, they both knew their stuff and hit all the key talking points. Holdren's measured, professorial nature was balanced by McCarthy's glorious Boston accent and her ability to be simultaneously easygoing and fiery.

Next up was a panel discussion featuring several authors of the assessment. The men and women on the panel had been strangers to me 18 months earlier but were now colleagues with whom I had spent countless hours on phone calls, webinars, and in-person meetings. They had all earned my respect.

As I listened, I thought about how the worst elements of the climate-denier blogosphere often demonized scientists like these as frauds and liars, deluded liberal mercenaries fabricating data and enriching themselves on government grants, hell-bent on destroying personal freedom. But on that podium, I saw intelligent, dedicated, thoughtful people who could be working on Wall Street or as attorneys or doctors, but instead spend countless hours on research, meetings, and writing, all with the goal of advancing science in the service of public good.

They talked about some of the obvious threats of climate change: higher temperatures will mean more people will die of heat-related illness (fewer will die of extreme cold, but that reduction will probably be dwarfed by the impacts of more heat). They discussed some of the less obvious threats, including elevated risks from various water-borne illnesses as a result of warmer waters and runoff from heavier rains. They explained the expected reductions in the nutritional content of some grains due to rising carbon dioxide levels. They talked about the mental health implications, ranging from the anxiety many people feel about the threat of climate change to the fact that medications used to treat anxiety and depression can make people more susceptible to the sort of heat-related illnesses expected to become more prevalent in a warming world.

The panel was followed by a speech from one of the Senators who has been most active on climate issues. I appreciated his enthusiasm, but he chose to inject some partisan humor that seemed inappropriate and even contrary to the premise of the entire event. Another panel discussion returned us to a properly apolitical tone, focused on the science and the useful things public health officials and others could do with the information in the report.

The afternoon concluded with closing remarks from Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. Murthy, a young Indian-American, began with some basic talking points, mostly recapping key findings from the report already discussed earlier. Soon, though, his message became much more personal, as he eloquently framed some of the ways that climate change can affect real people. After reflecting on his own upbringing, Murthy noted that he and his wife were considering starting a family of their own and that they were grappling with tough questions about the future their child would face in a world made more challenging by our ongoing, uncontrolled experiment to modify the planet's climate.

He concluded with words of hope and optimism, suggesting that we are responsible for each other, and that the world can get better, but only if and when people choose to make it so. He was, of course, preaching to the choir, but his approach and his sincerity captured the room. Murthy has the rare gift of making the end of a speech more powerful by getting quieter rather than louder.

Jesse told me later that the first part of Murthy's remarks were printed from a computer, probably prepared for him by an aide. But the section that had held an entire room in rapt attention had been handwritten in pen, clearly his own work.

As I stood on that terrace looking down at the West Wing, watching the rain fall, I thought back to Murthy's words. President Obama, who may or may not have been sitting in his office across the way at that moment, made hope and change the central themes of his 2008 campaign. That message had been compelling, for me and many others. But creating real change had proven difficult, particularly when a significant number of senators and congressman refused to acknowledge the most inconvenient of truths.

Later that afternoon, we all reconvened for a celebration at a nearby bar. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows facing the street, we saw Jesse walking towards the door. He was wielding a giant black umbrella adorned with the White House logo in stark white, big enough to be seen from twenty stories up. It was like wearing a t-shirt that said "I am a tourist!" on the front, except bigger.

At some point the discussion turned to Vivek Murthy. Several of us wondered (hoped, perhaps) that he might be a candidate for President someday. We were disappointed when a smartphone Google search revealed that he is an immigrant to this country, born in England to Indian parents, and thus ineligible for that office.

Much later that evening, I met my friend Allison, who had led the entire project, and her husband for a quiet dinner of good pasta and wine at a small neighborhood restaurant. We mostly talked about movies and books, as friends do, but there was an underlying sense of satisfaction, both for a hard job done well and, perhaps, for playing some small role in helping push the world in a slightly better direction.

### **January 24, 2017**

I was standing in a booth in an exhibit hall in Seattle at the annual meeting of the American Meteorological Society, part of a collaborative effort by several organizations based in Asheville to continue building awareness of the climate science and climate data expertise found in our small mountain city.

The exhibit hall was nearly deserted that morning, as the thousands of scientists and students were busy attending presentations, learning about the latest research in the world of weather and climate. My phone buzzed. It was Allison, my friend from EPA. She confirmed the rumor I had heard earlier—that EPA staff were now under a complete communications gag order. No social media, no interviews, no press releases, no blog posts. We both expressed concern about the array of communications materials on the EPA website related to the climate and health assessment released the previous spring. I told her that we might be able to host copies on our university institute's website, and we made plans to help secure what we could, just in case. Later that day, another text from Allison arrived, indicating that the entire climate change section of the EPA website was expected to “go dark” at some point.

Elsewhere in the hall, the NOAA and NASA booths were busy displaying the first public images from GOES-16, the nation's newest weather satellite, now in a geostationary orbit some 22,000 miles above the Earth's surface. GOES-16 carries an amazing array of new,



high-resolution instruments that are already revolutionizing the field of weather forecasting. The contrast between the best and worst that the Federal government can do was striking.

Three days later, I arrived at my office, groggy from a late-night flight and the three-hour time change. My Twitter feed exploded with news about a complete ban on travelers from seven Muslim countries. Meanwhile, GOES-16 was continuing to send back spectacular images of the entire western hemisphere. There were no borders visible on any of those images.

### **February 16, 2017**

I spent most of my work day watching a live stream of a day-long conference on climate change and human health. The conference took place at the home of Jimmy Carter's charitable foundation in Atlanta and was organized in large part by Al Gore's Climate Reality Project.

That wasn't how it was supposed to be. The Climate and Health Program at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had been planning the event for months, and many of the authors from the climate and health assessment were scheduled to attend. I had hoped to go as well. But a few weeks earlier, the CDC had cancelled, apparently deciding that hosting a high-profile climate change event was not in its best interest given the current political climate. A rumor was circulating that the entire Climate and Health Program itself would soon be disbanded.

Gore's group, along with the Harvard Global Health Institute and the Carter Center, had revived the idea, in scaled-back form. My colleague Jesse—proud owner of the giant White House umbrella, who splits his time between Asheville and the CDC offices in Atlanta—had secured a front-row seat.

Gore offered opening remarks and served as the master of ceremonies. President Carter himself made a brief appearance, still sharp and engaged at age 92. Carter had solar panels installed on the roof of the White House back in 1979, but Reagan had them taken down in

1986.<sup>21</sup> Other speakers, particularly those from the public health sector, offered informed, sometimes passionate remarks about the challenges and health threats of climate change.

The final speaker was Jerry Taylor, founder and president of the Niskanen Center, a libertarian think tank. Most other self-described free-market or libertarian groups, including the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, have spent decades funneling money into a steady stream of anti-science propaganda. In 2012, the Heritage Institute even put up a billboard in Chicago comparing “believers” in global warming to Ted Kaczynski, the infamous Unabomber. That same year, the Cato Institute produced a report called “Addendum: Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States” which copied, down to the last detail, the cover and graphic design of the second U.S. National Climate Assessment report (a document produced largely by people who were now my colleagues in Asheville and finally released in 2009 without much fanfare). The only thing different in Cato’s version were the manufactured data and dishonest conclusions.

Taylor himself spent nearly a decade at Cato as one of the institute’s most vocal critics of climate science. But he eventually began to see flaws in the skeptical arguments he had been touting for years. He recognized the building evidence that climate change was real, and that it carried risks. Ultimately, a conversation with Goldman Sachs partner and risk analyst Bob Litterman (who was actually a former partner of a former boss of mine) had led him to the realization that a true libertarian approach involved acknowledging risks and supporting marketbased approaches to mitigating those risks.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Juliet Eiplerin, “White House Solar Panels Being Installed This Week.” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> David Roberts, “The Arguments That Convinced a Libertarian to Support Aggressive Action on Climate,” *Vox.com* (2015).

Although Taylor and I differ on many issues, it was encouraging to be reminded that rational thought can sometimes overcome political biases. Policy choices are a matter of values and belief systems. But if we can at least agree about the facts at hand, we can have rational discussions about those policy choices.

### **February 17, 2017**

The Senate confirmed Scott Pruitt as the new Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, by a vote of 52 to 46.<sup>23</sup>

### **June 1, 2017**

Trump chose the Rose Garden for his announcement that the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Fortunately, the agreement is hard to unravel by design, and the U.S. withdrawal won't really be effective until at least November 4, 2020—the day after the next Presidential election. The decision reportedly came despite strong lobbying from several Trump advisors, including his daughter Ivanka and economic advisor Gary Cohn.

Only two other countries had not signed on to the agreement: Syria and Nicaragua.

### **November 7, 2017**

Syria announced it would sign the Paris Agreement. With Nicaragua having made a similar announcement a few weeks earlier, the United States became the only nation on Earth choosing not to be a party to the agreement.<sup>24</sup>

### **March 2018**

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt recently said that he isn't convinced that greenhouse gas emissions cause global warming. Nothing about this should be surprising. Pruitt was famous for

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<sup>23</sup> Brady Dennis, "Scott Pruitt, Longtime Adversary of EPA, Confirmed to Lead the Agency." *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Friedman, "Syria Joins Paris Climate Accord, Leaving Only U.S. Opposed." *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017.

suings the very agency he now runs during his tenure as Oklahoma’s Attorney General, and his ties to the oil and gas money of his home state are well known.

I had long assumed that Pruitt’s brand of climate denial was simple greed. I can at least understand greed. But for Pruitt, the reality seems to be deeper and weirder than that. According to a story in *Politico*, Pruitt said on a radio show he hosted back in 2005 that he doesn’t believe the scientific evidence for evolution, that our court system is an “imperialistic judiciary” and “judicial monarchy,” and that there is a divine right to bear arms.<sup>25</sup> He also said that extracting and using natural resources isn’t just a God-given right, it’s a moral responsibility: “The biblical worldview with respect to these issues is that we have a responsibility to manage and cultivate, harvest the natural resources that we’ve been blessed with to truly bless our fellow mankind.”<sup>26</sup>

Who am I to argue with God?

It doesn’t stop with fossil fuels, either. Last month, the EPA announced that it would shut down its National Center for Environmental Research. An article on *Forbes.com* noted that the research supported by the Center “helps keep arsenic out of baby food” and supports the “prevention and/or treatment of childhood asthma, preterm births, leukemia, immune system disorders, neurodevelopment problems, autism spectrum disorder and obesity.”<sup>27</sup>

Is Pruitt’s God truly OK with arsenic in baby food?

**March 7, 2018**

Gary Cohn announced he was stepping down as Trump’s chief economic advisor.

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<sup>25</sup> Emily Holden and Alex Guillén, “Pruitt Tapes Revealed: Evolution’s a ‘Theory,’ ‘Majority’ Religions under Attack,” *Politico* (2018).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Eric Mack, “The EPA Is Closing an Office That Helps Keep Arsenic out of Baby Food and Much More,” *Forbes.com* (2018).

Multiple news reports suggested that he had almost resigned months earlier in the wake of Trump's reaction to the racist march on Charlottesville. The papers also recalled Cohn's disagreement with the President on the issue of the Paris Agreement. Apparently, though, in the end it was the tariffs on steel that Cohn couldn't quite stomach.

### **July 5, 2018**

Scott Pruitt announced his resignation as head of the EPA, an event that had seemed both inevitable and impossible for months. Thanks in large part to old-fashioned investigative reporting, news of a new Pruitt scandal seemed to break weekly or daily, with each story of misbehavior more appalling, and sometimes more bizarre, than the last.

It turns out that Pruitt isn't just a deeply hypocritically religious zealot, or simply in the pocket of the oil and gas industry. Rather, he seems to hold a deep and abiding contempt for the fundamental precepts of public service, of good government, of public decency, and of concern for anyone other than himself. Perhaps, then, it is not so surprising that Trump—recognizing Pruitt as a man after his own heart—kept him around for more than a year despite behavior that would have ranked as a monumental embarrassment to any ordinary administration.

It's hard to know how much damage Pruitt was able to cause during his short tenure. The administration's efforts to unwind the Clean Power Plan will be stuck in mandated periods of review for years, and any changes will likely bring lawsuits from a variety of environmental and climate activist groups. Of course, simply delaying implementation of the plan counts as a win for Trump and his team. Other regulatory changes enacted by Pruitt will have more rapid and severe effects, and the departure of many talented career staff will leave the agency weaker for years to come, regardless of what happens in upcoming elections.

On the other hand, perhaps segments of the public will connect the dots between Pruitt's climate change denial and his knack for exemplifying everything that is wrong about corporate

greed and personal corruption. A recent Gallup poll indicates that 70% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 worry “a great deal” or “a fair amount” about global warming. While only 51% of that group believe that warming will pose “a serious threat” in their lifetime, a large majority understand that it is caused by human activities and that the effects have already begun.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps some of them read the first words of the Third National Climate Assessment, written by a friend of mine: “Climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present.”<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, Deputy Director Andy Wheeler has assumed Pruitt’s duties at EPA. Wheeler is much more of a Washington insider and thus may be more effective than Pruitt. Wheeler’s resume includes years as a lobbyist for the coal industry, and he used to work for Senator Inhofe, who in 2015 brought a snowball onto the Senate floor as a way to dispute the notion of global warming—in February.<sup>30</sup>

President Obama often quoted the line from Dr. Martin Luther King that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But as Vivek Murthy suggests, the future only changes for the better if we choose to make it so. There is such a thing as being too late.

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<sup>28</sup> Gallup, “Global Warming Age Gap: Younger Americans Most Worried,” (2018).

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Bump, “Jim Inhofe’s Snowball Has Disproven Climate Change Once and for All.” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2015 2015; Steven Mufson, “Scott Pruitt’s Likely Successor Has Long Lobbying History on Issues before the EPA.” *The Washington Post*, July 5, 2018.

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### **On the Advice of Counsel**

The bench seat at the back of the courtroom was hard and uncomfortable. It reminded me of the church pews I'd spent so many hours in as a young boy. As I waited for the judge to enter, the passage of time slowed noticeably. This is a true thing that happens, but perhaps only in churches and courtrooms—the result of some as-yet undiscovered law of physics. At least I was there more or less by my own choice, rather than as a hostage of my parents' concern for the well-being of my eternal soul. Still, I really didn't want to be there. And, in retrospect, I wish I hadn't been.

After 30 minutes or so, the judge finally entered. He started working through a list of cases to be heard that day, asking the attorneys for each case to provide a brief summary and an estimate of the time required to hear arguments. Two cases involved Mission Hospital, the local near-monopoly medical provider in the area. I wondered if patients were alleging malpractice or if the hospital was suing for nonpayment. It occurred to me that medical bills, or more precisely the inability to pay those bills, might constitute a substantial portion of civil court dockets in modern-day America. I wondered how many of Buncombe County's uninsured or underinsured



residents found themselves on these very benches each month, sitting next to middle-class residents whose savings had been unexpectedly overwhelmed by a five-figure out-of-pocket limit.

I looked at my watch and thought about the work I was supposed to be doing that day. Time started to slow down again.

The judge called out the next case on his list. A man rose at the front of the room and introduced himself as the attorney for the plaintiff. He seemed younger than most of his peers in the room, and his suit looked a little less expensive than those of the attorneys from Mission Hospital. To my right, one row ahead of me, the defendant stood and identified himself. He was an older man with graying hair and a longish beard, wearing jeans and a faded, button-down short-sleeve shirt.

The young attorney explained that he had first come before the same judge some three weeks earlier, at which time the defendant had not been represented by an attorney. Noting that the defendant was still lacking legal representation, the attorney said he would be seeking a summary judgment in favor of his client. He said the hearing should only take about ten or fifteen minutes.

I wasn't sure what "summary judgment" meant exactly, but it sounded ominous. I looked at the defendant, who was struggling to hear exactly what was being said from his position near the back of the room. The judge said "thank you" and made a few notes on his paperwork. The older man sat down slowly, seemingly a little confused.

A slight chill ran down my spine. I think it was the realization that there were people in this room with much more at stake than me.

A few months earlier, my wife Ann and I learned that a developer was planning to build a large complex of apartments and town homes on Moffit Hill, a small, forested ridge that sits just

across a small river from our house. The project would essentially flatten the top of the ridge to make way for more than 200 rental units and 300 parking spaces. This high-density complex would stand in stark contrast to the established neighborhood on our side of the river, which consists of about 100 single-family homes, mostly mid-sized ranches dating from the 1970s, all nestled in heavily wooded lots.

The apartments would only be accessible via Moffit Road, a winding, narrow two-lane road that runs right next to the river. At the far end of Moffit Road sits Eastmoor, a newer housing development where home prices currently range close to the half-million-dollar mark. The residents of Eastmoor were apparently none too pleased about the prospect of having a few hundred additional people and cars between them and the only way in or out. With only a stop sign at the intersection with the main road, residents already face delays trying to get to work in the morning. Aside from the potential for daily inconvenience, it wasn't clear that a single point of access would be sufficient in the case of a wildfire or other serious emergency.

What was clear was the threat to the local environment. The Swannanoa River, which wraps around our subdivision, bends back on itself again to make a mirror-image loop around Moffit Hill. Replacing forest cover with a large expanse of pavement would almost certainly result in more runoff into the Swannanoa during heavy rains, which would probably exacerbate the periodic flooding that already occurs downstream. It wouldn't do a lot for the already fragile water quality of the river system either. A lot of wildlife habitat would disappear as well.

So, it had been fairly easy to convince myself that the project was a bad idea. But the fact that the apartments would be built about 1,000 feet from my back yard was also making it hard for me to separate the logical from the emotional, the dispassionate from the personal. In the summer, when the trees are all leafed in, we probably wouldn't be able to actually see those apartments and cars. But in the winter, they would be clearly visible. And year-round, the added

traffic, noise, and light pollution would certainly reduce the sense of quiet and tranquility we feel here.

The desire to preserve that peace and tranquility wouldn't have been a problem, except for the fact that I routinely advocate for the development of denser and more affordable housing, here in Asheville and across the country, for reasons of both environmental and social sustainability. And I'm already on somewhat shaky ground here. After decades of living in multi-unit buildings in walkable urban areas, Ann and I now occupy a house with a two-car garage, a guest bedroom, and a home office in what looks suspiciously like a suburban neighborhood. Every destination involves driving. We try to keep our carbon footprint small, but it's nowhere near as small as it used to be. And now I was finding myself mildly dismayed at the prospect of a dense housing development intruding on my peaceful woodsy paradise. Was this legitimately the wrong place to build such a complex, or was it just too close to home? Could there be anything more hypocritical than uttering (or even more shamefully, just thinking to myself) those five deadly words: Not In My Back Yard?

Because the area was only zoned for low-density housing, the developers needed special permission from the Buncombe County Board of Adjustment to proceed. The opposition from area residents was surprisingly organized, including the development of a website complete with aerial photos of the area, copies of the development plans, and expert opinions opposing the project. Social media posts encouraged neighbors to attend the public hearing in a show of unity.

I skipped the hearing, unsure of what I would say, do, or even think. I lacked the courage of any possible conviction, I suppose. But I was quietly relieved when I heard that the Board denied the application for a conditional use permit, noting that the proposed complex would have been "detrimental to the public welfare or injurious" and would "change the character of the

surrounding area.” This was the best possible outcome: my quiet suburban existence would be preserved without having had to put my own conscience on the line.

Of course, the story didn’t end there. The developers filed a lawsuit in Buncombe County Superior Court to get the decision overturned. The Eastmoor homeowner’s association, other landowners on that side of the river, and several residents of my neighborhood filed a motion to join the County in defending the Board’s original decision. Still conflicted about the whole thing, but curious about the process, Ann and I decided to attend the initial hearing. With about three dozen area residents on hand in addition to the attorneys for this and other cases, the courtroom was filled to capacity.

When the development case was called, the attorneys for both sides jointly requested a delay of several weeks to give the judge time to review the details. The judge agreed and asked all parties to stipulate any facts not in dispute so that the next hearing could focus on the core issues. Less than 15 minutes after the judge first entered the courtroom, I was out the door and on my way to my office at the other end of downtown Asheville.

Which is how I found myself in the same courtroom again, some four weeks later. Ann had a conflict that morning, so I was on my own this time. As I sat on the bench thinking about exactly what the attorney had meant by “summary judgement,” the judge continued working through his list, making more notes. He then called up the first case to be heard. Both attorneys made a few comments, the judge said a few words, one attorney walked up to the clerk of the court to sign some papers, and it was done. I had barely heard what was said, but it was clear that someone had just won, and someone had just lost. It reminded me that there would be winners and losers in the development case too, and that I might be one of the losers.

The next case was called. The young attorney in the ill-fitting gray suit rose, moved to the front of the room, and laid out some paperwork. To my right, the older man—perhaps only in his

late 50s or early 60s, but you had the sense they had been hard years—stood and began to make his way down the aisle. He walked slowly and with difficulty, forearm crutches in each hand clacking on the linoleum floor as he made the long trek to the front in a series of lurching steps. He was followed by a slightly younger woman with shoulder-length blonde hair. She was carrying a small folder of papers.

The attorney began a quick description of the case. He explained that his client and the defendant had become friends. At some point, the two had mutually agreed that the plaintiff would move into the defendant's house to help take care of the home and provide some medical assistance to the defendant himself. The plan was for the defendant to eventually sell that home to the plaintiff.

Apparently, things went south pretty quickly. The defendant was behind on his mortgage. The plaintiff paid those debts, which amounted to something like \$15,000. The slight chill I experienced earlier was replaced by a creeping sense of dread. Fifteen thousand. That's serious money. And the defendant was sitting there with no attorney. Based on a quick, entirely superficial assessment of his appearance and manner and a middling familiarity with the socioeconomic and educational profile of Buncombe County, my guess was that he had a high-school education at best. I had no idea at this point who might be at fault, but I was pretty sure this guy was in trouble either way.

It got worse.

The defendant had apparently failed to appear at a scheduled closing for the promised sale of his home. The plaintiff changed attorneys at that point, and the new attorney—the one speaking now on his client's behalf—had organized a more thorough title search. That search turned up four judgments against the defendant, which constituted four liens against the property

totaling another \$15,000 or so. Then, somewhere around this time, the defendant had forced the plaintiff to move off the property.

The new attorney eventually filed a civil suit, which had led to the first hearing three weeks earlier. Lacking legal counsel at that first hearing, the defendant had been granted time to secure legal representation and, presumably, embark on the necessary steps for his defense.

I was mystified. Why was the defendant, who had been given a second chance, standing in front of a Superior Court judge without an attorney? Could he not afford one? Weren't there options out there for obtaining free legal assistance? Or was he just too proud to admit he needed help?

The plaintiff's attorney reiterated that he was seeking a summary judgment, and briefly explained to the judge what that meant. I wasn't sure the judge would appreciate having this young man explain the law to him, but the judge said nothing, and I realized that the explanation was for the defendant, and probably for the court record. If nothing else, the explanation was educational for me. As best I could tell, if the defendant had failed to submit any formal affidavits or enter into the record any other evidence disputing the facts claimed by the plaintiff, the judge would effectively be compelled to grant the summary judgment—the plaintiff would essentially win by default.

The judge made a few notes, but asked no questions. His expression was serious, but revealed nothing, at least to me. He turned to the defendant, who rose and began to tell his story. He explained that the plaintiff had moved into his home shortly before he—the defendant—had been released from some sort of in-patient medical care. He seemed noticeably vague about the specifics of that care, and I wondered if it might have been related to substance abuse. Or maybe he was just nervous and unrehearsed. He argued that he had been unaware of any scheduled

closing, and given that the plaintiff was living in his house, there should have been ample opportunity to inform him of the closing date and deliver the relevant paperwork.

The older man added that he had relied on the plaintiff as his transportation for access to medical care, but was now forced to rely on his sister, the woman sitting next to him now, for that transportation. He said he had only forced the plaintiff off the property because the plaintiff had been stealing from him. He noted that the liens hadn't come up until the plaintiff had switched attorneys. He actually acknowledged that the young attorney had just been doing his job, a job the first attorney probably should have done. He offered a general explanation for how these things happen—opportunistic lender offers a loan to someone in need of cash, a thousand dollars say, and then over the years the interest piles up beyond what you could pay back, and so on.

His voice slowly rose in pitch and intensity, more in desperation, or perhaps fear, than anger. He began to repeat himself, complaining several times that months had passed between when he thought an agreement was in place and the point at which the second attorney was hired and ultimately the lawsuit filed. But this was all exposition and explanation. There was no real defense, no counterargument or contradiction of any of the facts presented by the attorney. At some point, the defendant struggled to recall a date, and his sister pointed to some of the paperwork she had carried. He corrected himself regarding the date, and continued on.

It was around this time that I realized that the plaintiff, or plaintiffs, were in the courtroom as well, sitting just one row ahead of me and to my left. The man, dressed in a faded tshirt and jeans and about the same age as the defendant, had entered the room just as the session began, accompanied by a woman I assumed was his wife. She seemed somewhat nervous and a little confused. When they first entered, the man had pointed her to the open seat at one end of the bench to my left. When the judge was first reading through the list of cases, he had left his

seat to go stand near the wall at the left of the room, closer to the front. He was listening intently, eyes focused on the front of the room, straining to hear what was being said. Clearly, this was the case he had come to hear—it was his case. I wondered why he hadn't arrived early, worn slightly more formal attire, and accompanied his attorney to the table at the front.

Finally running out of steam and realizing he had been repeating himself, the defendant concluded by saying he wasn't denying the fact that plaintiff deserved some money back in compensation for paying the overdue mortgage bills. I think he honestly believed that all he needed to do was explain his side of the story to the judge and express his willingness to come to some reasonable agreement. He probably thought the judge would propose just such an agreement, some sort of payment plan accompanied by a stern lecture admonishing the defendant to do better in the future.

It's easy to dismiss this naivete as the mistake of a poorly educated man who had watched too many episodes of "The People's Court," but my own awareness of civil court proceedings was pretty much limited to watching "The People's Court" a few times myself. I would have assumed you could show up, make your case, have the judge weigh the evidence, and sort something out.

But I had listened carefully to the attorney's explanation of the summary judgment process. If I had understood that explanation properly, and I was pretty sure I had, nothing the defendant said had really mattered.

The judge had been looking through paperwork as the defendant spoke. He asked the defendant if he had filed any affidavits. The defendant stammered for a moment, looked briefly at his sister, and then said that no, he didn't think that he had. The judge explained that there were none in the record, but he wanted to be absolutely sure none had been filed. The defendant repeated that he had not filed any such documents.



The judge asked the attorney something that I couldn't quite make out. The attorney replied in the affirmative, handed some paperwork to the defendant and then delivered another copy to the judge. The judge looked it over briefly, signed it, and handed it to the clerk. I had expected the judge to ask the defendant if he understood what was happening. I expected him to explain his ruling to the defendant, to all of us. Too many hours spent watching "LA Law" I supposed.

What happened instead was that the judge called the next case. The defendant looked around in a moment of confusion. I think perhaps his sister understood. The young attorney gathered his papers and briefcase and began walking along the aisle to my left towards the door. The man who I assumed was the plaintiff returned to the seat next to his wife. Soon, the defendant, crutches clacking with each step, made the long walk down that same aisle, following the attorney towards the exit, accompanied by his sister. After a bit, the plaintiff tapped his wife on the shoulder and pointed her toward the exit.

The judge announced he would hear one of the short cases next, followed by one of the two-hour cases involving the hospital. It was clear the development appeal wouldn't come up until after lunch, and I had work that I had to get done. I edged my way out from the middle of the bench and walked out the door, powering up my cell phone to give Ann an update.

As I emerged from the courtroom into the lobby, I saw the young attorney sitting on a bench next to the defendant. The defendant's sister stood looking down at them. The attorney was holding a copy of the paperwork he had prepared, presumably the same papers the judge had just signed. Torn between a desire to respect their privacy and insatiable curiosity, I moved to the other end of the lobby.

As I walked past, I noticed that the attorney's hands were shaking as he pointed to the document. Perhaps the only thing worse than not having an attorney represent you in civil court

is not having anyone there to explain what had just happened to you. This was, I assume, a very uncomfortable situation for that young attorney.

I wondered if his hands were shaking out of fear that the defendant might become angry, or even violent. Or perhaps it was adrenaline. Was this the first time he had argued a case before a Superior Court judge, or the first case he had won in his young career? Perhaps his hands were shaking because he knew what the words in that document said, and what they meant for the defendant and his future.

I leaned against the far wall of the lobby and began composing my text to Ann, but soon realized I could still hear every word that was said. That paperwork, signed by a Superior Court judge, in a case whose outcome was determined the moment the defendant failed to hire an attorney, specified that the defendant had five days to sign over the deed to his property. The older man's loud exclamation of "What?!" confirmed my fear that he had left the courtroom having had no real idea of what had transpired in that quiet moment when the judge put pen to paper.

He was, understandably, agitated and upset, and asked loudly "But where am I supposed to live?" The attorney had no answer. The sister was trying to help make sense of it all. After a couple of questions, the attorney, with a nervous catch in his voice, explained that the defendant also needed to provide a "clean" title, meaning he would also have to pay off the outstanding liens on the property. He had five days to hand over his home *and* to cough up fifteen or sixteen thousand dollars.

Again, the defendant was stunned. More shocked than angry, I think. In the blink of an eye, he had lost his home and a considerable sum of money, money that I guessed he didn't have. They were all standing now. The defendant asked what would happen if he didn't turn over the

deed or pay the money within the specified five days. The attorney, that nervous catch there again, said they would be back here again, because the defendant would be in contempt of court.

Little more was said. The defendant, muttering angrily, began to make his way towards the elevators. His sister followed, still carrying her small folder of papers. Had that slim folder held any documents or information that might have mattered? Was there anything there that, if filed formally by an attorney, might have given the judge some leeway, some way to arrive at a less devastating outcome?

The plaintiff and his wife now emerged from somewhere down a hallway and began to confer with the attorney. The plaintiff had an intense, questioning look on his face. I think he knew he had won the case, but there was no smug satisfaction, no fist-pumping cheers of joy, no smiles, or tears of relief, just a focused interest on what the attorney had to say.

My text sent, I headed towards the elevator, but seeing the defendant and his sister about to enter the open elevator doors, I turned towards the stairs instead. I had intruded on their lives enough. I had witnessed a scene that deserved more privacy than I had given it. But I ended up arriving at the ground floor just behind them and followed them towards the exit. The sister paused to hold the door open for me as she walked out. I tried to think of something to say, but could only come up with a quiet “thanks.”

I began walking toward my office. It was around 10:30am on a warm, humid Monday in late August. With the busy summer tourist season over now and the workday well underway, the streets were relatively empty. A city employee was trimming grass along a sidewalk next to Pack Square Park. A delivery truck pulled up outside a restaurant and the driver was beginning to unload supplies. Two men in suits were walking the other way, towards the courthouse. An older couple stood at a corner studying a map of downtown, planning their next move. None of these people had any idea what had just transpired in the courtroom.

Not quite ready to go back to my office, I took a short detour to get a cup of coffee. The only thing I was sure of was that I had witnessed some kind of human tragedy.

Perhaps the defendant was a lifelong grifter, routinely skipping out on debts, and all too willing to fake a friendship and make promises he had no intention of keeping. Or maybe he was a simple man, routinely deceived by the unscrupulous, overmatched by life's complexities and now about to be homeless and broke. Were the plaintiff and his wife two Good Samaritans who found themselves trapped in a bad situation? Or were they the villains of the story, taking an advantage of an unsuspecting man in need?

Why hadn't the judge thrown the defendant a lifeline, found a way to soften the blow, or at least taken the time to explain what was happening? That's the way it would work on TV. Then I remembered that the same parties had appeared before the same judge several weeks earlier. I could only hope that during that earlier appearance, the judge had strongly, sternly, and with great empathy, done everything he could to convince the defendant to secure the services of legal counsel before the next hearing.

I thought about the judge, and his air of quiet resignation as the plaintiff's attorney approached his bench, those sheets of paper in hand. The saddest truth is that, as shocking as it was to me, this case was probably utterly unremarkable in his experience. This sort of thing probably happened weekly, or even daily.

I thought of the defendant, wondering again why he had not hired a lawyer. If he couldn't afford one, is our social support structure so broken that no free help was available? Did he just not understand the necessity? Was he too proud, or too stubborn?

I thought of the attorney. He had done his job. He had prevented his clients from purchasing a home with a bad title. He had won the case they had paid him to win. His cut might pay for a nicer suit. Perhaps in a few years he would be one of the high-paid attorneys

representing Mission Hospital or other deep-pocketed clients. I had no idea whether he had secured justice and righted a wrong or had helped take advantage of an innocent man in poor health. Perhaps neither was true. Whatever the case, I was sure he would not soon forget sitting next to the defendant, hands shaking, as he explained what the words on that paper meant. He could have been much more direct, much colder, but chose instead to explain things calmly and quietly. Whatever the merits of the case itself, I admired him for the way he handled that moment. I didn't envy him trying to sleep that night.

When I arrived at the office, I sat down with two friends to tell them about the experience. It made them sad too, which was in itself somewhat encouraging. A lot of bad things happen in the world. We could all do more to help prevent some of them, but at least there is empathy. I eventually made my way to my desk and tried to get some work done. My hands were shaking too.

I am embarrassed to admit that a sad irony of all this only hit me later. Whatever the truth of the matter (if there was even a single truth), one fact in evidence was that a man of apparently very modest means would soon, very soon, be looking for a new place to live. Probably someplace very affordable, whatever the hell that means. The planned development behind my house, which was to be called The Residences of Riverpark, complete with clubhouse, pool, woodsy setting, and easy access to both the Blue Ridge Parkway and downtown Asheville, would likely not have fit his, or perhaps my, definition of affordable. But the mere existence of more apartment complexes like this would put downward pressure local rental prices.

Exactly one week after the date on which the defendant was due to sign over his deed and several thousand dollars he probably didn't have, the Superior Court judge rendered his decision

in the development case. He affirmed the county Board's decision. Pending an appeal of some kind, it appears that the view from my back deck will remain undisturbed.

## Searching for Oteen

I live in a place called Oteen. Or somewhere just outside Oteen, depending on who you ask. Actually, most people you ask would say “What is Oteen?” That was my reaction the first time I heard the name. When someone local asks where I live, I usually answer “East Asheville,” even though the house my wife Ann and I share is technically just outside the city limits of Asheville, North Carolina. Sometimes, I will be more specific and say “Botany Woods,” which is the name of our housing development. But most folks from Asheville won’t recognize that name, so East Asheville serves as the most reliable shorthand.

*“I am fairly new to Asheville, 5 years. I hear people say Oteen and I generally think East Asheville but I really am not sure the exact area.”*

— *Linda, Parkway Forest*

Soon after moving across town from the west side of Asheville, a friend told me that I actually lived in an area known as Oteen. The name was new to me, but given my long fascination with neighborhoods, I began to wonder if Oteen might offer a welcome sense of identity, history, or character. The answer to that turns out to be surprisingly complex.

I grew up in a nameless suburban neighborhood on the far north edge of Omaha, Nebraska. It was a nice enough place, with its single-family ranch houses and quiet streets that my friends and I would roam endlessly on our bicycles. But as I got older, I found myself envious of people who lived in real neighborhoods with famous, evocative names like SoHo, Little Italy, the Lower East Side, or Haight-Ashbury. We were too far north to even be considered part of unfamous North Omaha, so we’d have to resort to sad phrases like “on the far north edge” to explain where our house was located. It was inconvenient, and lacking in any sort of cultural flair (even such cultural flair as someone in Omaha might aspire to).

*“When I think of Oteen, I think of the hospital not the community because I am 79 years old and remember when that was the name of the hospital.”*

— Janice, *Botany Woods*

From Omaha, I landed in Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago, where I spent the next 25 years. Sadly, Evanston also lacks distinctive neighborhood names, at least that anyone bothers to use. But there, right on the other side of Howard Street, was Chicago, with its glorious array of neighborhoods: Edgewater, Old Town, Wicker Park, Rogers Park, Park West. Each had its own distinct character and identity. When you knew that someone lived in one of those neighborhoods, you knew something about them, what kind of house or apartment they lived in, and how they lived. At least I could indulge a little by generally describing myself as living in Chicago to outsiders.

*“[Oteen] was a little unincorporated neighborhood between Asheville and Swannanoa, kind of like Haw Creek, but maybe a designated zip, like 28805. I don’t know how its ID fell out of use. The VA does still use it though. It has been a vague thing, even to people born in Oteen!”*

— Katheline, *Swannanoa Valley*

Eventually, Ann and I landed in West Asheville—a rapidly gentrifying part of town across the river from downtown. Finally, a neighborhood with a capital N and a real, if evolving, identity. West Asheville was the last part of the city to begin recovering from Asheville’s long period of economic hardship. But, by 2012, it was home to an evolving mix of long-time residents, hippies and hipsters, artists, working professionals, couples with small children, and a growing array of restaurants, bars, shops, and music venues. That recipe for trendiness, located on the edge of already trendy Asheville, earned West Asheville a brief write-up in the *New York*



*Times*. I took pleasure in being able to say to a local that I lived in West Asheville. Finally, I was living in an area with a little cachet.

Soon, though, a quest for more living space and a quieter lifestyle led us to move to the east side of town, just outside the city limits. Botany Woods (the one in Asheville, not the one in, for example, Greenville, South Carolina, Jonesboro, Georgia, or Conquerall Mills, Nova Scotia) is a lovely little neighborhood (lower-case n), but the name is just something a developer came up with decades ago. It is just one of many similar developments in the area. It has no particular ethnic or cultural identity, no food scene—no restaurants for that matter, or shops, or bars—just houses. Our only cultural landmark is a Little Free Library.

*“We’ve lived here since 1999...but I’ve heard the ‘Oteen’ name ever since we moved here. The area that encompasses Oteen doesn’t seem to be well-defined, but to me I’ve always thought of it as being centered along US 70 starting somewhere around Gudger’s Bridge (which crosses the Swannanoa River) and ending in the vicinity of Pomodoro’s [restaurant]. But that’s just based on my perception. As a kind of funny side note, people used to call the Swannanoa Ingles ‘Swingles’ and the Oteen Ingles ‘O’Tingles.’ My husband and I still use those names to distinguish between the two stores.”*

— Carol, Swannanoa Valley

Aside from the name sounding like a two-year-old mispronouncing Ovaltine, the first problem with thinking of Oteen as home is knowing what, or where, Oteen is exactly. You can type Oteen into Google Maps and it will direct you to the general vicinity associated with the name—an area north and south of Tunnel Road, centered on the large Veterans Affairs hospital

complex that sits at the intersection of Tunnel and Riceville Roads. *“I would define Oteen as going from the Sonic [restaurant] to the [Blue Ridge] Parkway on Tunnel Road, and from the Nature Center to where the Parkway crosses Riceville Road.”*

— *Mary, Parkway Forest*

However, unlike many other sections of Asheville, Google doesn't actually display the name Oteen on the map. Other areas nearby, like Azalea and Oakley, get labels, but not Oteen. The name does appear on a couple of road signs pointing to interstate ramps in downtown Asheville, promising drivers that Oteen lies somewhere east and encouraging the curious to seek it out. Unfortunately, once you take that eastward leap of Interstate faith, nowhere will you find a corresponding “exit here for Oteen” sign. Do tourists ever find themselves in Charlotte before realizing their quest for Oteen has gone amiss?

*“I lived in Oteen (Parkway Forest) for 17 years. In my opinion, Oteen goes down [Highway] 70 (Tunnel Road) from the I-40 exit 55 intersection (Holiday Inn) to the intersection with Maple Springs (Sonic/Bell Elementary). Just including maybe the 1/4 mile north & south of 70. Once you pass Sonic, everything to your left is Beverly Hills & everything to your right is Haw Creek. It's all East Asheville, though.”*

— *Scott, Haw Creek*

Asheville is home to the Biltmore-Oteen Bank Building, completed in 1928 at the height of the city's first boom period. A lovely Georgian-style structure, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. The name promises a connection to the famous Biltmore Estate and the Vanderbilt family. Sadly, though, the building is located in Biltmore Village, not Oteen. No help there.

*“My husband’s family has lived in Parkway Forest for more than 50 years. I’ve always thought the community got its name from the then Oteen Veterans Administration Hospital (now named Charles George).”*

— Sharon, Bull Mountain

The name Oteen apparently originated with the Oteen Hospital, the forerunner to the current VA facility. The hospital was built in 1918 as an Army facility for treating tuberculosis victims. It was one of TB sanitariums and boarding houses operating in Asheville at the time, thanks to the assumption that the clear mountain air was beneficial for those suffering from the disease. A book on the history of the Swannanoa Valley credits the name Oteen to Colonel Henry Hoagland, who chose it “because it was an American Indian word meaning ‘chief aim,’ and it was ‘the chief aim of every patient to get well.’”<sup>31</sup> I’m not sure where that falls on the spectrum between genius and cheesy marketing slogan, but the name stuck, and eventually became associated with the surrounding community.

*“My grandfather was housed in the VA hospital for eight years immediately following WWI. My father, who was a boy, remembers that they stayed in Asheville and would take a buggy to Oteen to the hospital to visit him.... The old buildings still have the porches on the ends where the improved patients lived during the warmer months so that they could ‘take the healthy mountain air,’ which was about all they could do for TB patients in those days. The more critically ill were in the rooms nearest the center of the buildings (closest to the nurse’s stations) and as they improved they ‘graduated’ further down the halls until finally moving out onto the sleeping porches. My father told me that the ride from Asheville to Oteen was long and there was*

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<sup>31</sup> Standaert, Mary McPhail and Joseph Standaert, 2014. *Swannanoa Valley*, 128 pp. Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, South Carolina.

*very little in between except woods and a few farms. Oteen was definitely a separate community and not considered part of Asheville in those days.”*

— *Bill, Botany Woods*

The facility itself has a fascinating history. While a modern hospital building dominates the landscape now, many older structures are still standing, including two large dormitories for nurses dating from the 1930s. One, which was home to African-American nurses (who cared for the African-American patients), was recently restored and serves as the home of the western branch of the North Carolina state archives and history department. The other building is just now undergoing restoration to serve as a mental health facility for veterans. That building had been semi-famous locally as the site of ghost stories thanks to its decrepit appearance. Other buildings were sold and converted to apartments a number of years ago.

*“I say I live across from Oteen out Riceville Rd., Riceville being another historical village, but even smaller and more rural. I was surprised to learn that the Post Office in the Ingles shopping strip across from the VA hospital refers to itself as Oteen. I’ve also noticed that many people refer to where I live, three miles behind the VA Hospital, as Oteen and don’t know about Riceville’s history.”*

— *Bernadine, from Green Meadows*

Thomas Wolfe, Asheville’s most famous native son, actually lived in a cabin in Oteen for a time during his last visit to the city in 1937. The cabin still exists, barely, although restoration efforts are underway. Wolfe wrote extensively in *Look Homeward, Angel* about the many TB victims he encountered growing up at his mother’s boarding house downtown. He may himself have died of TB, possibly contracted at that home, so perhaps it is fitting that he spent some of his time living in an area named for a TB facility. However, it may be telling that Oteen’s

second-most famous landmark is not famous at all, is in disrepair, and will forever exist in the historical shadow of the famous boarding house downtown that now serves as a museum. Still, it seems that Wolfe thought of himself as living in Oteen, at least for a while, so that's something.

One of my neighbors speculates that the association of Oteen with TB might be one reason why the name was never as widely used as it might have been, and why it has fallen out of favor over the years:

*“Remember that the VA was built as a tuberculosis sanatorium, not as a general hospital as it currently exists. For many years, Oteen was synonymous with the hospital, because quite frankly there was little else out here, and the folks in Asheville, who certainly were cautious about contact with TB before the advent of antibiotics, were no doubt happy to distance themselves physically and ‘culturally’ from Oteen. After WWII and the advent of antibiotics the TB-centric role of the VA hospital evolved, Asheville grew eastward, and the separation between the two communities evolved as well. I expect that as new people moved into the area they were happy to be more closely associated with Asheville than with the historic role that the VA hospital played in the dark times when TB was mysterious and basically incurable. Not wanting to be associated with the horror of TB may have played a significant role in the loss of Oteen as a place name.”*

— Bill, Botany Woods

The hospital itself no longer even bears the name Oteen. It was renamed as the Charles George VA Medical Center in 2007, honoring a Cherokee from the Eastern Cherokee Reservation west of Asheville. George, a private in the Army, threw himself on a grenade in Korea in 1952, saving the life of two comrades. Years before the hospital was renamed, areas generally identified as “Oteen” were annexed by the City of Asheville in two chunks, one in

1973, and another in 1988, further erasing the word from official records.

*“25 years ago, right near the Blue Ridge Parkway entrance in East Asheville, I remember a dingy little structure that was called the ‘Oteen Motel.’ It looked like it had been there for 50 years. It was torn down in the late 90s and now there is a car wash there.”*

— *Katheline, Swannanoa Valley*

The U.S. Postal Service still identifies its facility in the strip mall across the street from the hospital as the “Oteen Post Office,” but its street address is Asheville. With few, if any, places or institutions still bearing the name, Oteen may continue to fade from use.

*“It definitely seems like the Oteen designation is used less than it was when we first moved here, though I still hear it fairly often. I’m guessing its usage will probably continue to decline as more and more new people move here, and the line between Oteen and East Asheville continues to blur.”*

— *Carol, Swannanoa Valley*

Part of the issue here may be that Oteen is defined primarily by its center point—the hospital that no longer even bears its name. Unlike most famous urban neighborhoods and some of the better-known sections of Asheville, Oteen’s edges are undefined, with inclusion a matter of opinion based on perceptions and a vague sense of proximity to that center point.

*“I absolutely do (or did) identify as living in Oteen. My conversations regarding my home would generally go like this (with locals):*

*Q: Where do you live? A: East Asheville. Q: What part of East Asheville? A: Oteen. Or: Q:*

*Where do you live? A: Parkway Forest. Q: Where’s that? A: In Oteen, across from the VA.”*

— *Scott, Parkway Forest*

I have resigned myself to the fact that Oteen does not and will not satisfy my lifelong desire to live in a hip, well-known neighborhood. Oteen will rarely, if ever, be mentioned in the

*Asheville Citizen-Times*, let alone in the *New York Times*. It's not even a reliably useful way to tell locals where I live. At least my wife and I shared a couple years of glory, thanks to our time in West Asheville (actually East West Asheville, but that's another story). Although I will probably never identify myself as an Oteen resident, I am a bit saddened by the thought that the name, which still holds meaning for longer-term residents, is slowly receding from memory, even of those who live here now.

*"I suspect the reason for names of small-ish communities around Asheville had everything to do with the railroad. It didn't come through our part of the county until 1879 or so, well after folks had started settling. Black Mountain was originally called Gray Eagle; the area around what is now Warren Wilson College and the eastern end of Riceville was called Denmark. Once the little stops along the way to Asheville were eliminated, I guess these names were no longer necessary."*

— *Diane, Botany Woods*

On the other hand, I've also realized that the concept of small-n neighborhoods is not to be overlooked so easily. Surrounded on three sides by the Swannanoa River, with only one way in and out, Botany Woods is nothing if not defined by clear boundaries. It has a sense of enclosure, of place, maybe even of belonging. Neighbors say hello when out walking their dogs. We have monthly happy hour get-togethers and an annual picnic. Someone recently took the time to repaint the sign marking the entrance to our small-n neighborhood.

Barring some sort of spectacular true-crime spree or other source of unwelcome national notoriety, Botany Woods will never, ever be written up in the *New York Times*. It is, nonetheless, a pretty nice place to call home, even if Facebook thinks I live in Oteen.

*“One attribute of modern life is that real neighborhoods can overlap with virtual neighborhoods, thanks to websites like NextDoor.com, which serve to facilitate communication among neighbors. Or, in my case, to crowdsource opinions and ideas about where we live. Thank you to residents of Botany Woods and other parts of (maybe) Oteen for sharing their thoughts and memories.”*

*— Tom Maycock, Botany Woods (Oteen?)*