

“Most Leaves Have Let Go, No Longer Shade” – from Late Autumn by Kevin Whalen

The autumn air was cold and crisp; the sky was cloudless and a simply astounding blue. I was in the side yard playing with our puppies, Odis and Georgia. Well, they are about as much puppies as I am a young man, but each of us does our level best to *not* act our ages. They are 13 and 12 respectively, so by the dog-to-man math, quite older than I (though I often tire far before they do during our walks in the woods). Odis likes to chase tennis balls, while Georgia prefers squeaky toys, so between the tossing and the tugging, we were all having young-at-heart fun, despite the long length of time we had already spent on this planet.

When we were all finally a bit tuckered out, Odis took and chewed on his soggy tennis ball among a pile of sun warmed leaves, while Georgia retired under the scented coolness of a Leyland Cypress tree where she worked to remove the plastic squeak box from her stuffed chicken. I laid back on the grass and gazed up at the extent of the universe that I was able to observe from that particular vantage point. I was able to see only a small amount of the vastness that was actually there, but off to the right a bit, my gaze did include the broad branches of a huge oak tree in our yard that had only a handful of leaves remaining attached to it. This tree is one of the largest in our yard, easily more than 70 feet high, and the leaves that were still a part of the tree were probably within a diameter of only about 15 feet of each other. I immediately took a deep breath and committed to staying right where I was until I distinctly watched the last leaf let go from that tree and fall. And just as I finished counting that there were exactly seven leaves still attached, the highest one released from its branch and drifted lazily to the ground.

For the first few moments, I stayed quite focused on the rest of the leaves, but soon my mind gently drifted to the coolness of the ground that was easing its way into my back and then to the slowly fading light of the late afternoon on this exquisite November day. I quickly shook my mind to re-alert my attention back to the leaves and was somewhat shocked to find that there were only three leaves left on the tree. How long I had been daydreaming, I do not know, but I knew that I could not allow my mind to wander off like that again. I recalibrated my concentration and with sharpened determination, kept a watchful eye on the trio of leaves still holding on.

My view stayed riveted on those leaves for several more minutes until Georgia ambled up to me with her cold nose sniffing and nudging and poking and licking and nudging some more to the point that I instantly moved from being mildly distracted and annoyed to bursting out in gleeful laughter in absolutely no time at all. Sitting up to better keep Georgia at bay, I quickly noticed Odis sniffing up into the air, then barking and running towards the far back wooded portion

of our yard, where I saw a young four-point buck flash its white tail at us and dart down the hill that sloped behind our house. Georgia then sprinted to the back yard as well, where they were both ultimately thwarted from their chase by the fence that surrounds our yard and is meant to keep the dogs in, but is just an easy, nonchalant leap for deer.

I looked back at the oak tree just in time to see a single leaf spiraling downward, half way to the ground, but also noticed that the other two leaves were still grasping their respective branches, perhaps ten feet apart high in the tree. I was encouraged and re-inspired by my good luck despite the recent self-inflicted and canine caused distractions. I took in another deep breath and settled upon the ground on my back once again to finally accomplish my goal. I decided to focus first on the higher leaf up and to the right of the tree, since it seemed that the higher leaves had been the ones that were falling first. Then, while intently staring directly at that leaf, I sensed a slight breeze and noticed a movement down and slightly to the left of the leaf I was staring at. I quickly shifted my focus there, only to see that this lower leaf had already fallen from its branch and was now at the beck and call of gravity. But, quick as a blink, while watching that leaf fall, I noticed a movement slightly up and to the right to the location where I had first been looking. Quickly directing my attention back to that spot, I found that the final leaf had already let go and was wafting its way ever so slowly down to earth. Despondently, I watched it first move to the right, then to the left, to the front and to the back, all the while floating down until I lost sight of it behind the Leyland near where Georgia's now squeakless stuffed chicken lay. My visual darting back and forth had caused me to miss seeing the final leaf actually dislodge and fall to the ground.

For the second time in about 10 minutes I burst into resounding laughter. I was laughing at my cockamamie resolution, my doggone dogs, my fickle attention span and at my hubristic denial of the natural worlds undoubtable ability to unfold its processes, both large and small, with absolutely no regard whatsoever to human plans, hopes or wishes.

I laid down back upon the grass and again gazed up at the extent of the universe that I was able to observe from that particular vantage point, but now was able to better see just how small a part of the cosmos I really was.