

“Grandma said I had done right, for when you come on something that’s good, first thing you do is to share it with whoever you can find; that way, the good spreads out to where no telling it will go. Which is right.” –The Education of Little Tree by Forrest Carter

The life and character of Rachana Rajendra, I believe, is so well exhibited in my favorite book, The Education of Little Tree. The story follows the life of a young Cherokee boy, Little Tree, as he grows up with his Native American grandparents. While I never had the pleasure of meeting Rachana before her tragic passing, in reading about her I felt that her life exhibited the same feeling of love, appreciation for the world around you, compassion, and selflessness that I felt the first time I read The Education of Little Tree. At such a young age, Rachana left a powerful legacy, not just because of the Bird Sanctuary that was endowed in her name, but also with the life she led. Just as she left us something good and pure to be shared with the Rachana Rajendra Neo-tropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary, her life and legacy should be shared and remembered as well.

Rachana loved the outdoors and had a passion for birds. She was one of those people that seemed like they could do it all; a great athlete, intelligent, a leader, and a selfless friend, daughter and sister that would put others before herself without a second thought. While her life was taken way too early, the person she was, and the things she did remain all around us. This is seen by every person who walks through the Baker Woodlot, whether they know it or not, they are touched by the life of this incredible woman as they share a moment of peace and calm with nature, and with her. As we enjoy this sanctuary, let us remember Rachana, and share in something that she loved, as well as keep her legacy strong.

We can learn a lot from Rachana and Little Tree when it comes to appreciating nature as a sanctuary. The both realized the beauty and awe of observing the outdoors, and spent their time learning from and enjoying nature. Often times we lose ourselves in the world-. With the stress of school and work, worrying about money, and all the responsibility we put on ourselves, we often forget to stop, take a breath, and look at the world around us. The Sanctuary gives us that clarity and time for ourselves. As one walks through the stands of ash and elm trees, for those precious moments a person has no responsibility but to themselves and the woods. They have no job but to discover, contemplate and learn. They gain a feeling and sense of unity and belonging that no amount of money can buy. The Sanctuary takes us away from our hectic and difficult lives, and gives us time for personal reflection, allowing us to put things in context. We are able to draw ourselves out of the trials and tribulations of our small little world, and the time gives us an opportunity for introspection and peace. Walking through the Sanctuary, it really hits you how broad and diverse the world is. In our society, where greed is so closely tied to success, we tend to think about only ourselves, and not our role in a much broader picture. In the Sanctuary, though, there is no way to fool yourself into thinking you are all that matters. This space of intricate interactions and grandiose beauty gives a person perspective, and offers them a chance to be a little more like Rachana and give up their selfishness for something that is bigger than a single life.

I find that a certain spirituality that comes from the reflection done in the Bird Sanctuary. Spending time among such diversity, such beauty, creates an intangible connection between one's soul and the natural world. A concept from The Education of

Little Tree that really fascinates me is the idea of “The Way” of the Cherokee. The Way states the interconnectedness of understanding the natural world and the role you have in it. You and nature are one and the same, and you hold the great responsibility of protecting it, to not exploit it, for it is a part of you and you are a part of it. We learn in The Sanctuary that by following The Way, one strengthens their soul. Although she was only thirty, I believe that Rachana *has* a very strong soul. While I can’t speculate on what happens after death, I can say that it is fitting that this strong soul, full of love and understanding, is now a part of a sanctuary for others that stands for everything she was in life. Her gift to us was this understanding and insight of The Way through the access we have to The Sanctuary. I feel that it is our duty to her, and to ourselves, to take the time to work towards understanding as well. Although there is an element of escapism when we visit the Woodlot, I believe that this spirituality of nature works to unify us as well. We come together in The Sanctuary through our individual experiences in it and what we learn about ourselves brings us closer to understanding others. Just as The Way guides us to learn from nature through understanding the world around us, this understanding also leads us to look out for one another and be compassionate, two traits that Rachana taught us to value.

I cannot imagine a better way to honor the memory of Rachana than having established this refuge for the wildlife and birds she so deeply cared about. We humans have not made it very easy for the other inhabitants of Earth to live along side of us, mainly because we like to believe that we have more of a right to live the way we want than any other living thing. But these selfish concepts of society are cast aside in the Sanctuary. There, there is no birth right and one’s life does not hold anymore intrinsic

value than any other. For wildlife, this is not simply just a sanctuary from the destructive habits of humans, it is an oasis. This speck of green provides a natural home for many plants and animals. As for the migratory birds that it harbors, it is a key place for rest and protection, which ultimately has an enormous impact of their survival. Although humans have changed Michigan, and the world, to an unfathomable degree, and in many respects, for the worse, the Sanctuary allows for a habitat that resembles how the land should look, and this is invaluable to the species of plants and animals that inhabit it. We often think of the woods as getting away from “the real world”, but for the species living in The Sanctuary allows for them to be in the real world instead of the concrete jungle that we have so feverishly, and without regards for the consequences, cut and cleared wilderness to build for ourselves. In the protection of The Sanctuary, wildlife lives as it should, without the threat of humans. Instead, humans come in without pride and a feeling of superiority, and within The Sanctuary there is an air of mutual respect and an equality of all life in nature.

The fusion of the human and natural world in The Sanctuary is something beautiful. It shows us that wilderness and human society are not mutually exclusive, and it serves as a constant reminder of why we fight for conservation and management of our natural resources. Furthermore, it is a reminder of Rachana and the way she shared her goodness to whoever she came across. The most powerful thing about a sanctuary is that is that even when we leave it, we take the lessons and discoveries we experience with us, and it becomes a part of who we are. Let us take it upon ourselves to take what we learn from Rachana’s life, and what we learn about ourselves in The Sanctuary, and carry it with us.