

Rachana Rajendra Essay

Sam Brill

“What nature provides is scale and context, ways to figure out who and how big we are and what we want. It provides silence, solitude, darkness: the rarest commodities we know.”

This quote is taken from Bill McKibben’s introduction to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Rachana Rajendra seems to have been able to discover this before her tragic death. Her life, although cut short, is an embodiment of values that are lacking in the culture of many people today, particularly on a campus like Michigan State University. She had those values of respect, determination, and empathy. Despite her short life, those values still manifest themselves among thousands of people who walk the paths of the Rachana Rajendra Bird Sanctuary each year.

There is a balance that should be sought after both by individuals and society as a whole. On one side we have “progress”: engineered innovations, new scientific discoveries, and proposed utopian social reform. We have the idea that we have limitless possibilities due to the human mind. On the other side, we have what is known as our “human condition.” Although we have a desire be conquerors, of both self and nature, we are drawn in awe of the inexplicable, the grandiose, the things that “are bigger than ourselves.”

Rachana seems to have found that necessary balance between utilizing our rationality, without ignoring the “soul”, that is, forgetting who Man is in Creation. Graduating from the University of Michigan with an engineering degree is a great accomplishment, one that is both respected and often envied by many. With this

prestigious degree, Rachana was able to get a head start on her career, evident in her earning the five awards from GTE while doing her training to get certified as an engineer. However, even in the hectic environment of going to a prestigious university and being recognized early in her career, it is evident she did not forget “the scale and context” which nature provides for us. This was manifest by her going to volunteer in the soup kitchen and also still feeling the love and respect for Creation exemplified by her passion for birds and nature.

I think one of the biggest obstacles we face in our fast paced, American culture is that of perspective. It is seldom debated that we are in, or on the threshold, of an era where people are more connected with electronic media than the environment around them. People are constantly being bombarded by messages of what is needed for happiness. There is no doubt that we live in a consumerist society. I do not want to demonize this mindset our culture has; one just needs to be wary when searching for truth and happiness in a society that tries to sell it. Rachana seems to have found the necessary balance when she described her pictured future as reading a book under a tree.

Nature is a way to circumvent this possible cycle of depression: one is not happy with the things they have, and so they buy more to try to fill that void of unhappiness. Nature gives us access to God, regardless of what our perceptions of Him are. “For His (God’s) invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made, so they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20) Nature is a way to figure out what is good and how to live in accordance to our “nature.”. As Bill McKibben stated, it puts

things in perspective; helps us to understand who we are in the scheme of things. The sanctuary on campus provides an opportunity to go out into a natural area and regain some perspective that may be lost during times of busyness.

I think it is highly appropriate that her name should mean “Creation”; it is no small accomplishment to maintain a love and respect for Creation while still trying to improve a society that is frequently destructive toward Creation. This is why despite her being a very successful woman in her career endeavors, she did not neglect the needs of the poor, nor did she take for granted the beauty of the Creation we have the privilege to witness and engage. She worked diligently in her personal, social, and professional life without forgetting why she was putting the work in and what was important.

I do not think the Rachana Rajendra Bird Sanctuary could have a better home than on Michigan State’s campus. College is a place of growth and discovery, both individually and for society as a whole. At learning institutions of all types there is a future orientated mindset. There is a message being sent to students of limitless possibilities; with the appropriate amount of effort, one can do and be whatever they want to be. Individually, students are trying to establish their own beliefs and ethics apart from their parents’ guiding arms, not to mention trying to find out what type of work they wish to devote a large part of their lives to. The Rachana Rajendra Bird Sanctuary gives students an opportunity to get a sample of Nature- the magnitude, the mystery, the complexity, the beauty- without travelling off campus. In an environment that puts enormous pressure on students to “be the best that they can be”, we have the sanctuary holding the voice of Nature saying, “The world is bigger than yourselves.”.

While I am a proponent of the view we have control over our lives, I also know I need a reminder from places like Baker Woodlot as to who I am in the scheme of things.

Another benefit the Rachana Rajendra Bird Sanctuary has for this campus is that Nature is a unifier of people from different backgrounds. Michigan State is a hub of diverse cultures, worldviews, and religions, mixing in an environment that is meant to stimulate intellectual growth and scientific discoveries. We take students from around the globe, as well as send students around the globe. The sanctuary provides an ability for people of different cultures to come together with a common interest. Nature, that is soil and earth, is the great unifier. "From dust to dust" as scripture says. Everybody is related to each other when we look at society from the context which Nature provides.

When I go into the woodlot and am in the midst of the serenity offered by the towering ash and beech trees, it is hard to harbor any feelings of anger, fear, hopelessness, or pride. I think it is a universal feeling, held consciously or unconsciously, that while in Nature, Man is unified with each other; all come from the same place and all go to the same place. I do not believe it is coincidence that when I moved into my apartment this year with a new roommate I had met only once prior, the first time we did anything together we went to the woodlot on campus.

I am grateful for who Rachana Rajendra was. As someone who had never had the opportunity to meet her, I can only imagine what sort of impact she would have had on those around her. Her determination, care for others, and love of Nature can be seen inside the sanctuary. Although she is gone, her character is embodied in the principles that Baker Woodlot represents, and therefore she will continue having a profound

impact on the thousands of students, parents, and faculty that walk those paths every year.