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Dr. Hayes

FW 101L

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There exists an intangible aura that transcends the outmost horizons of the natural world. Subtle yet distinct, it is the governing force of existence. Each culture defines this same phenomenon uniquely; I simply choose to call it life. I am an imperfect being, each of us are. Despite this, I attempt to make recognizing and respecting this greater existence a priority in my time on Earth. I realized at a young age that I was very different than my peers, though each time I fade into the woods, I become overwhelmed with a sense of belonging. Although I have learned to function in society, I understand I will never be capable of fully expressing my perception of the world in mere words, and I find this truth to be greatly humbling. I by no means had a hard upbringing, though I fully believe I would not be here today if it weren't for my ability to find sanctuary in the natural areas of the Earth. Nature saved me, and I have dedicated my life to returning the favor.

Early in my life, my family was fortunate enough to purchase a tract of land that backed up to the Prairie River behind our home. Though only 70 acres, that property was the world to my young eyes. I spent countless hours exploring its woods and water, and although I must have scoured every square inch of that land, to this day, I experience and learn something new each time that I step within its boundaries. I learned to hunt in its woods and fish in its streams, and in doing so, I learned to open my senses to the teachings of the natural world. It was there that I became fascinated by the interdependence of species and their environment, what I have now

learned to call ecology, and it was there that I first questioned where we, as humans, fit into this greater scheme.

Throughout my childhood, those woods were my safe haven. I was raised in the Catholic Church, though I feel that I developed a far more intimate relationship with my religion beyond church walls. Belief, to me, comes in recognizing your inability to define a phenomenon, yet knowing and accepting it to be true. The church seemingly had a definitive answer to each question that I proposed, and any thought that conflicted with their own was deemed fundamentally flawed. Nature gives no simple answers, offering only clues upon which you may draw your own inferences over time. Most fear what they do not understand. I recognize my incompetence, and find it humbling. If there is one thing that FW 101L has provided me, it is the belief that there are others like me in this world. I am passionate about science and passionate about faith, though I truly believe that I am incapable of uncovering all the secrets each discipline seeks to define. After hearing Dr. Hayes share his story of the Anishinaabe, I know that there are others like me.

As a student from a rural background living on a college campus for the first time, mitigating the effects of culture shock can be extremely challenging. Upon entering Baker Woodlot with FW 101L, I remember a wave of relief washing over me. Knowing that I would have the opportunity to escape the manic rush of campus, put my mind at ease. The morning was cool for late summer, keeping the mosquitos that had been utterly vicious throughout the season, relatively at bay. As we progressed along a ridge bordering a kettle hole swamp that formed a gap in the canopy above, I remember being asked to close our eyes and simply listen to the sounds of the forest for two minutes. Though I had done this countless times in the past, something struck me in that moment. While listening to the singing of the birds, the chattering of

squirrels, and the rustling of leaves in the summer breeze, I came to the realization that nature not only exists, but thrives in all corners of our world, even within the bounds of city limits. Looking back, I realize how incredibly naive that I was at the time. Having grown up far from reach of the sounds of passing cars and trains, I was surprised to find that at that moment, the sounds of natural world drowned out those of human activity.

Upon researching the history of Rachana Rajendra Neotropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary, also known as Baker Woodlot, I was deeply saddened to learn of tragedy in which it was formed, though equally inspired by the legacy it upholds. The loss of Rachana, so early in her life, is truly heartbreaking. Her presence within her family, community, and the world beyond will be remembered and cherished for generations to come. In her memories and physical memorials, such as the Neotropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary at Michigan State, Rachana's legacy lives on. As said by Chief Seattle, "There is no such thing as death. Only a change of worlds." Even in her absence here on Earth, Rachana continues to inspire members of her community in her passion for nature and compassionate spirit.

To truly experience life is to open oneself entirely to the speaking of the natural world. I regret to say that I never had the opportunity to meet Rachana, though I feel I have come to know a bit of her through her legacy, and feel that she fully embodied the ultimate meaning of life. In her time on Earth, Rachana recognized that in providing for and inspiring others, she was capable of creating something greater than herself. To this day, her legacy provides sanctuary for both birds that she loved dearly, and the humans that share in her passion for the outdoors. Over the past semester, I have treasured my time spent in Baker Woodlot, both in my classes and on my own. Although, in writing this essay, I feel that I have developed a renewed sense of respect for the area and all who call it home.

Today, as I seek a brief remission from the world, I again find myself in Baker, eyes closed, focused only on the sounds of the woods which surround me. As I sit, the stress of the often renowned “real world” fades to black, and in time, I open my eyes to find that I am not alone in my search for peace. Perched on the stem of a sugar maple sapling, a mere arm’s reach away, sits a male Downy Woodpecker in full plumage. For a brief moment, our gazes cross. With no words exchanged, we share an understanding, a mutual respect. Our search for sanctuary overlapped in space and time, and yet, nature afforded us each this gift. This is life. This is the legacy of the Earth. Through this legacy, Rachana, like many others, lives on.