

# A Refined View

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Signed,

## A Refined View

When I was in the sixth grade, my whole view of the world changed. After I complained constantly to my mother about headaches, blurred vision, and worst of all having to sit in the front row splash-zone of Mrs. Kapostasy's English classroom to see the chicken scratch on the chalkboard, I finally got an appointment at an optometrist. The diagnosis was just quickly determined – nearsightedness, or myopia. The doctor explained to me that the reason I could see objects close up but not far away was because my cornea (or in sixth grader terms, the clear jelly front part of my eyeball) was too curvy. Of course, during this whole explanation, I was anxiously waiting to be led over to the glasses display case to pick out my new accessory. From shelf to shelf, I tried on nearly every pair of glasses until I found a pair that sat perfectly on my round, tiny face.

Since my new glasses wouldn't be properly fitted with my personalized prescriptions for a month, my suffering through perpetual squinting ensued (to this day I blame my forehead wrinkles on my poor eye-sight). Finally, after an eternity of waiting, my glasses-fitting appointment arrived. I sat down at a small table covered in black velvet as a large woman waddled over to help fit the frames properly to my face. I felt awkward being so close to this stranger as I leaned forward to have the glasses placed on my face. The woman mumbled something and smiled, removing the glasses and disappearing through a doorway, saying she would be back in a few. True to her word, through my blurry vision I saw my brand new glasses twirling in the fingertips of the same lady as she moved towards me.

With each step I could see more details of the glasses frame until she gently placed them on the counter in front of me.

“I’ve just put the prescriptions in!” She sounded nearly as excited as I was for the new glasses. “Okay, here we go!” The woman and my mother began a countdown from five all the way down to zero. With my eyes shut, I spastically pressed the glasses to my face, fumbling with the arms and jamming one accidentally into my left ear canal. When the glasses finally rested on the bridge of my nose, I braced myself for the new world I was about to see. My scrunched up face relaxed as I opened up my eyes and searched around the room for things to look at. With every object I spied, I would pull my glasses down my nose and then slide them back up just to see the comparison, occasionally repeating the sequence just to reassure myself that the colored blob I just saw with my naked eye was actually what I now was seeing through the lenses.

On the walk out to the car, the first things I noticed were the trees. “The trees have leaves!” I blurted out. Even though I had known this tidbit of information, I was finally able to see the individual leaves without squinting my eyes and furrowing my eyebrows like I was so used to doing. From now on, I was going to see the world as it was, in clear and focused images. Or so I thought.

Eight years later, I made a trip to northern Michigan to take a semester at the University of Michigan Biological Station. My first day of class, which usually only entails a run-through of the syllabus, was not at all what I had expected. My classmates and I would be diving into field research, with very little training. And

by very little training I mean we were to look at three sheets of paper with different leaves taped on them. As I peered down at the sheets, staring at the freshly picked leaves of different types of trees, each labeled with their respective species name, I felt myself overwhelmed. There was no way a quick glance at these sheets would turn me into a botanist. Would I be able to remember the difference between the aspen leaves and the similarly shaped birch leaves, or red maples and sugar maples? Then I became worried my failure to classify trees would botch the entire collection of data. I reminded myself that there were three other group members I would be working with. Somebody had to be able to do this, I thought. On the drive to the Cedar Swamp, I tried practicing my classification skills, calling out in my head the names of trees with each passing glance at the many treetops we passed. Looking back now, I'm extremely thankful that my nearsightedness had been corrected, for these leaves were quite a distance up in the sky. When we began our data collection, I found that my group and I shared the same worries.

“Hey, Heather, is this a red maple?” I heard. I tried to recall the Toronto Maple Leafs blue and white jerseys with the maple leaf vignette in the center. Unfortunately, all I realized from this was that I was looking at a maple leaf; the jersey wouldn't tell me whether the red or sugar maple was 5 lobed.

I stared high up at trees trying to look at the leaves. First, I tried to narrow down my choices of classification. Are the leaves heart-shaped? Hand-shaped? Do they mirror each other on either side of the branch? From there, I would look at the bark. Is it like puzzle-pieces? Smooth? Or do the layers of bark seem to pile on top of each other? Bark turned out to be not so much help in sorting the trees; they all

looked so similar to me. I would blurt out a name, "Aspen!" A pause followed, as I saw everyone in my group ponder the true identity of nature's giant before us.

"Cathy," someone wailed, like a small child, "can you come and help us?"

"Are we really supposed to be able to figure out what the hell kind of tree this is?"

Only the word of a professional biologist would confirm our uncertainties about the classification. Surprisingly, nearly every tree we named was correct. "Yes, yes," said Cathy, "good job! That's an aspen. You see the heart shaped leaves?" After victoriously thrusting my clenched fist into the air and shouting, I stared at the leaf, and connected the shape with my past ski trips to Aspen Mountain and the logo of the resort to help me remember. Our data would be fine, I assured myself.

At the end of class, after the van returned to the gravel road of the Bio Station, I began walking back to the tin shanty that I call my cabin. Halfway through my walk, I had an epiphany. Usually when walking, I always find my eyes glued to the ground (I blame it on years of fearing that I would break my mother's back if I stepped on a crack). But on this particular walk, I found myself staring straight up into the tree canopy. Something had changed in my brain and I could feel it, but couldn't quite place my finger on just what it was. When I walked under a tree, I stared specifically at one individual leaf, and then another, and another. The trees were no longer just maples, or aspens, or birches. They were the separate leaves that made up the tree. I was seeing the details in the bark. My eyes stared at the thick, brown, layered sheets of bark of a sugar maple tree and then at the papery and pale bark that covers a trembling aspen.

“Whatchya lookin’ at?” asked Sydney, my new roommate.

“Uhhh,” I could feel the heat in my face as blood rushed straight to my head. Just great, I thought, now I’ll be known as *that* kid who stares at trees (little did I know that this was quite a common occurrence on our wilderness campus). I worried Sydney would run off and tell the friends she had already made how much of a freak I was. “I’m just checking out the trees.”

“Tell them hi for me!” her voice faded out as Sydney continued on down the road.

This was the first moment of the summer that I knew my vision was changing again.

Days passed by, and I found that my new sightseeing abilities only allowed me a detailed look at trees. My English class fieldtrip to Hartwick Pines State Park was yet another perfect arena to practice my freshly matured eyes. I was sent off into the forest, alone, just to simply observe, maybe take a few pictures, and perhaps take a bit of my allotted time to write in my journal. At every step, I would pause and stare up at the trees. Hemlock, I would say to myself, and then continue on down the pine needle covered trail. I decided that since I had my camera with me, I should attempt to capture the beauty of the park to share with my mom back at home. She has always loved it when I return home from any vacation with pictures of my day-to-day life. By looking through my eyes, she gets to live a new and unconventional life so different from the suburban Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, routine that she has become used to. When I watch her flip through my slideshow of photos, I get a

sense of how she must have felt when I first got my glasses. I can see her eyes widen as she experiences the beauty of a new image or a new place, her smile growing as I explain where I was and what I was doing.

In a sea of different shades of green, an out of place iridescent blue caught my eye. The fluttering wings of what I later discovered to be a black swallowtail butterfly flew in an erratic pattern causing me to occasionally lose sight of the insect until I could again spy the aquamarine floating in the air. The butterfly finally settled on the leaf of a small woody plant. I noticed a large chunk of the right wing of the butterfly was missing; a square of the fragile wing looked like it had been ripped off by a predator. Now was my chance to capture the exquisite color of such a beautiful creature. I raised my camera's viewer up to my eye and with my elbows tucked closely into my chest, so as not to shake or disrupt the photo, I positioned the butterfly in the right third of my frame and focused the image. Through the lens, I could see magnified details of the blue that first caught my eye. The wings were broken into sections by raised veins and I could see the tiny hairs covering the tops of the wings. I raised my finger to press down on the shutter button. When I lowered the camera from my face, the black swallowtail had already disappeared. To me, the shutter sound was hushed by the high-pitched buzz of cicada and the songs of unseen birds. To my butterfly, who hears noises by sensing the fluctuations in sound vibrations in its wings, the shutter must have made a thunderous clash signaling danger that sent the blue-tipped wings again off into the forest. I watched as the butterfly continued deeper into the forest and was reminded of my own journey.

Further down my walk, I crossed paths with my English professor, Keith. Both of us had wanted to see the tree stump graveyard where old growth white pine trees once stood, towering over the landscape. What I didn't know was that our hike would involve, in total, a five mile stretch of walking over wild terrain, walking up and down, around and through, until finally returning to the parking lot where we began. What I had initially thought was going to be a short walk through the park was soon to become a three-hour hike Saharan weather of northern Michigan summers.

Keith and I walked down the path. The sounds of our feet had, after minutes of walking together, formed a rhythm. My neck again strained upwards to the sky as I continued to look up at the branches of trees making shade for the understory below. Keith, being quite the bird aficionado, also had his eyesight directed skywards. For a while, we walked in silence. The rhythm of our steps kept us at similar paces. And then I heard a break in the tempo. It was like the bass drum disappearing from the beat of a song. Keith had stopped walking.

"Look up there, Jules." I could hear the excitement in Keith's voice. What he had tried to whisper instead came out at regular volume, if not louder; only it was softer in tone than his usual raspy tone. "You know what kind of bird that is?"

I looked everywhere above me for a glimpse of the bird. Nothing. All that I could see were branches jutting out in every direction in the sky. The silhouettes of leaves looked deceptively similar to the oval body shape of birds. After scouting each and every branch of each and every height of the tree, I still couldn't see the bird. I asked Keith to point up in the tree where he saw the bird. As I stood behind



his outstretched arm, his index finger shot an imaginary laser pointer to guide my eyes up in the branches of an aspen tree. Finally, I saw what he was talking about.

“Nope, no idea what that is, Keith. But I bet you know...” I responded.

“A cedar waxwing! Get a picture of that, will ya? I want to show the class next time we meet. You see that pointed crest on the top of his head? Oh,” he cried, “and check out that yellow tip at the bottom of the tail he’s got! See if you can get that in the picture.” I zoomed in as far as my camera could go and snapped four shots of the waxwing. Through my mechanical eye, I continued to stare at the avian wonder.

The head, a pale brown, gradually faded into a grey as my eyes traced down the back of the bird, and then to the yellow tips of the tail feathers. I noticed the superhero-like mask around the eyes of the bird, the black coloring intensified by a white outline. I couldn’t believe how soft the feathers of the bird looked, the edges blurred together like lines of a painting. I could see why Keith was so infatuated with birds. Their elegance was tucked away in the trees, out of sight, but there for the willing and skilled searcher to revel in.

As I sat in the car on the drive back from Hartwick Pines, I looked over the pictures I had taken from the day. Pictures of birds perched in trees, lichen crawling up the trunk of a tree and the injured butterfly settled on top of a leaf scrolled across my LCD screen. I then came across photos from the day before; landscapes, treelines, entire lakes. Yet again, my focus on the world had been narrowed. My eyes were becoming more patient and disciplined at searching. The day’s worth of hunting for the natural beauty that flooded the monotonous fields of the graveyard

had conditioned me. The smaller things were there; I just hadn't seen them until today.

The saying goes, "Don't sweat the small things." This summer, I decided that whomever coined this phrase had some serious vision problems. Until I was able to see the splendor that was covered up, overshadowed, by the larger pictures and larger objects, I too felt that the small things were insignificant. My glasses have given me the capability to see details, but my summer at the Biological station has provided me with the necessary skills to appreciate these details. It is not enough to be able to look at such small things – this only made me aware that the smaller things existed. I had to be able to pick out, like a "Where's Waldo?" book, from among the busier, larger world, these infinitesimal objects and see with my own eyes just how wondrous they truly were.

To the person responsible for the saying, "Don't sweat the small things," I say to you, sweat the small things in life, for often I find that they are the most beautiful.