

Inclinations

By Tim Baehr

Yellow Wildflowers

The yellow flowers glowed under the canopy of trees and shrubbery. They stood at the tops of slender stalks, which leaned out over the path and toward the sun. Many flowers lean or turn toward sunlight; there's even a scientific term describing the phenomenon: heliotropism (from helios, the Greek word for sun, and tropos, to turn). Heliotropes (naturally) and sunflowers are notorious for this ability - in fact, the Italian word for sunflower is girasole, "sun-turner."

But even the little woodland plants had the idea. Something else caught my eye, too: The plants appeared only at the edge of the woods. Beyond this edge, this border, was a path, and beyond the path was a large pond. Why were they not growing on the other side of the path, even closer to the sun and not challenged by the shade of the trees?

A possible answer is that the flowers needed to live on the edge of two systems, shade and sun; and while they might need the sun, they also needed the protection of the shade for their roots. Firmly rooted in the shade, they had to incline toward the sun to complete their life cycle.

Life Cycles

Inclinations, or leanings, are part of our human life cycle, too. We have such expressions as "he's inclined to anger" or "she has leanings toward studying medicine." It's a fairly common turn of phrase.

Sometimes we need to resist our inclinations; sometimes we are advised to give in to them. Resisting anger, or at least chronic anger, is mostly a good thing. Giving in to an inclination toward good (medical school), is usually seen as good. The situation is more complicated than that, however. Someone who never gives in to anger may not act in the face of atrocities or may eat himself up from the inside with suppressed rage. Someone who is inclined toward good but impossible acts may lead a life of frustration. A person may be inclined toward medical school but have poor grades and worse study habits.

Thinking of the little yellow wildflowers, maybe we need to understand our inclinations in terms of roots and borders. After all, an inclination means that we're leaning away from a fixed point and often crossing a border to do so.

Some Questions

What is the relationship between my inclinations and my roots? If I am chronically inclined to anger, does giving in to the inclination uproot me from my cooler, shady moorings? Without some sort of restraint, my anger can burn me to ashes. Can I strengthen my character - my roots - so that my inclinations make my life more interesting, but not miserable? Can I make my anger more focused and productive and less damaging? If I have an inclination toward medicine but no solid intellectual foundation (roots again), I will be lost and wither in medical school. What other ways can I fulfill the inclination? What roots can I discover so I could find fulfillment in medical assisting, volunteering at a hospital or clinic, and so on?

Where does the border figure into this? If I were a sun-loving plant growing in the middle of a meadow, I would have no inclinations. I would grow straight toward the sun, or turn my head (like a sunflower) to face the sun. A border implies difference, and perhaps change. For the little wildflower on the path, the border was a necessary ingredient to its ecology. It couldn't survive only in the woods, and it couldn't survive only in the sun. It needed the difference, the contrast.

What are our borders? What borders are good to cross, and what borders must remain in place for our own well-being?

Are the roots sometimes a problem? Is an inclination so strong, and so worthy, that it must uproot me to be fulfilled? What if I have an inclination toward exploring my spiritual side, but fear the risk of uprooting my traditional upbringing? What if I have an inclination to fight poverty in the inner city or the Third World, but fear uprooting my entire life and perhaps abandoning my parents and friends? Each of this kind of challenge is unique; only the person experiencing it can resolve it. But I think if we look around, we'll see many people rooted in fear yet leaning painfully toward the sun of their liberation and fulfillment. Entire lives can be spent this way, sitting on the border of a new way to be.

Inclinations and Art

Finally, sometimes an inclination remains just an inclination, not demanding or inviting change. It's a way to lean into another environment without becoming totally a part of it. Our little yellow wildflower does this. A sailboat leaning into the wind does this, riding the tension between air and water. We may be inclined to infatuation with a possible new career, or a possible new lover, and we may have these sensations without abandoning a good job or a good partner. The infatuations may even make the roots stronger or revitalize the whole organism.

We may have inclinations that are futile but carry with them a sweet melancholy that crosses over into art, as in this Pablo Neruda love poem (my translation):

Leaning into the evenings...

Leaning into the evenings, I cast my sad nets
at your oceanic eyes.

My loneliness, waving its arms about like a castaway,
stretches up and burns there in the highest beacon fire.

I send red signals over your absent eyes,

which surge like the sea at the shore of a lighthouse.

You only keep watch in the darkness, my distant woman;
in your gaze the frightful coastline sometimes looms.

Leaning into the evenings, I fling my sad nets
at that sea that shakes your oceanic eyes.

Night birds peck at the first stars,
which sparkle like my soul when I love you.

Night gallops by on her shadowy mare,
scattering blue spikeflowers over the countryside.

Author information

Tim Baehr has been an elementary textbook contributor, technical writer, indexer, and editor for over 40 years. He is currently the publisher of Menletter, a free, noncommercial monthly journal of articles, essays, and resource information aimed primarily at men (www.menletter.org). He has taught business writing at the Harvard University Extension school and this fall will be teaching short fiction at the Senior College at the University of Southern Maine in Portland.

Biography

Tim Baehr grew up in Ohio and Michigan, attending the University of Michigan and majoring in linguistics and psycholinguistics. He has lived in New England since 1969, first in Massachusetts and since 2007 in Maine. He has three grown sons and two grandsons. He lives with his wife in Portland.