

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

*The Rev. Dr. David Q. Hall*

### **When the Leaves Didn't Fall**

*-Why the oak tree holds tight to its leaves*

**A**s I write this story – as told to me originally by a member of the Grand Valley North American Indian Lodge over half a century ago – bright, crimson leaves are showing up on weak branches of soft red maples. And if the entire tree lacks vigor, it may become an early harbinger of the fall color show still weeks, a month or more, away.

The very name of the season soon upon us – “Fall” – comes, of course, from the annual falling of leaves from trees here Up North. But the sturdy oak trees hold on to their leaves with particular tenacity. The leaves will color, turn brown, even start to dry and curl.....but many still cling to the oak's branches long after winter snows have settled on the land and other trees are completely bare.

As they did for so many natural phenomena, Great Lakes tribes like the Chippewa/Ojibwa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi had a story to explain why the oak participated in this annual, autumn leaf-shedding so reluctantly.

One of the many spirits common to the Great Lakes Native American stories was the “Wood Spirit.” He was described as a tall, gaunt, grey, ragged old man who carried a plaited leather whip that he used to inflict punishment upon humans, animals, even plants, for various things he found offensive. Despite living in a domain of forest wonder and beauty, the Wood Spirit was consistently grumpy and irascible. Just the way he was, I guess.

The Great Lakes tribes understood that there were one or more sections of the vast northern forest and lake country that were sacred to the Wood Spirit, his special possession. He could be *really* grumpy about unauthorized trespass or use of “his” lands.

One year, late in summer – perhaps about now in the latter part of August – a severe drought had seized the Up North country. With ponds and water holes drying up, wild game migrated away from their usual habitat, the hunting grounds for the local village of Native American people. In a desperate attempt to find food, one young hunter ranged farther into the deep forest, came upon an almost dried-up stream, and crossed it.....even though he knew that the other side was land sacred to the Wood Spirit.

And sure enough, the young man hadn't gotten very far down a well-used deer trail before the Wood Spirit showed up! As usual, his ominous presence was *felt* before he was seen. Unfurling his dangerous whip, he came upon the starving deer hunter, who cowered in fear. In a terrifying, deep voice, the Wood Spirit passed sentence: “You have desecrated my land with your trespass. You will come with me and never return to your people and village.”

Much like the Old Testament people who were bold enough to argue, and try to barter, with God, the young hunter pleaded with the Wood Spirit. He had wife and children; they and the rest of his village were starving. Could he not at least have some time before being taken, to try to find game and food to save their lives? For someone so consistently

### Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

grumpy, the Wood Spirit could sometimes relent. And in this case, what difference would a few more weeks make, except to torment the man with anticipation? He declared: "You may do so. But when the trees have dropped their leaves, I will come for you."

Showdown temporarily averted, the young man went on, found game, returned to feed his family and others, and fall rains put an end to the terrible drought.

But the cycle of the seasons is irresistible, and fall colors moved on to falling leaves; and the successful hunter was ever mindful of his impending sentence. So in another act of desperation, one gorgeous autumn day he went out into the forest. He approached all the different kinds of leafy trees – the maple, the ash, the aspen, the birch, the wild cherry, the beech, every one that grows in Up North country. And of each he made the same plea, "Hold on to your leaves, so that I may not be taken by the Wood Spirit." But fearful, each in turn replied, "I cannot." Finally, he threw himself at the foot of the oak with his request. The oak simply said, "I will try."

On a cold, snowy, winter morning, the Wood Spirit came to his lodge: "Come, it is time." But the young man pointed off to the deep forest and proclaimed, "The oak still has its leaves!" Incredulous, the Wood Spirit whirled around, ran to the oak, and saw that it was true. With all of his authority, he commanded the oak to drop its leaves. Silently defiant, the oak did not. The Wood Spirit used that fearsome whip, but oak bark and wood is strong, so there was little effect.

Finally, out of his head with rage, the grim spirit climbed into the very branches of the oak and tried to tear at, and even bite off, the leaves. He could not. Even spirits can get exhausted, and he climbed down at last and "melted" into the surrounding thicket.

You and I can take note yet today, that the oak holds its leaves deep into the winter, and some can even be found on branches until the following spring. And look at those leaves: the lobes exist where the Wood Spirit took bites out of the leaves! And the young hunter will always be safe.