

## *Pedal, Paddle and Hike*

# On The Importance of Large and Small Things

By Trent Carbaugh

*Coddiwomple – To travel purposefully toward an as-yet-unknown destination, with a sense of adventure and exploration, focusing on the journey rather than the final goal. (English slang word)*

I love learning new words and coddiwomple is a new one to me that kind of embodies my philosophy of life, at least in my later years. But more on this wonderful word later.

Traveling on the towpath or just generally moving through life are affected by large things: those momentous decisions, uncontrolled catastrophic events or unanticipated accidents that occur and can change lives in unexpected ways. But not all these things are unwelcome.

When you are out on the towpath pay attention to those large, wonderful trees that are growing in most







places. Sycamores, beeches, oaks, hickories, silver maples, Paw Paws – the list can go on and on. Those trees are dependent on water, sunlight, and nutrients from the earth.

Trees are big things and as we now know, thanks to the work of Dr. Susan Simard and others, trees cooperate with each other by transferring these nutrients and various enzymes to each other. This is accomplished

through the mycorrhizal network, a system of fungi, sometimes of various species, that facilitate transfers for the price of a little sugar. Fungi are small things making life for the large things possible. When large trees die other fungi and slime molds take over to break down the dead wood into its constituent parts (mostly energy produced from photosynthesis, or to put it simply, stored sunlight) and distribute it around the forest floor for the use of young trees starting the cycle of life over again.





Small things helping big things and vice-versa. There is a lesson here should we care to pay attention to.

When you are out wandering along the towpath or floating on the Potomac you are surrounded by a bewilderingly huge amount of animal life. From microscopic organisms, insects, small rodents, reptiles, amphibians, birds, the occasional black bear, or the cattle and sheep on the surrounding farms, life is everywhere. Mosquitoes may be annoying, but they feed the bats and swallows, which in turn should keep the mosquitoes in check. That is if everything is working properly; white nose syndrome is killing off some bat species and the swallow population is, as are birds in general, declining for no yet discernible reason.

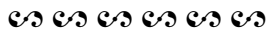
Nature seems to be a bit out of balance, there are a variety of reasons for this, most of them seem to be from the disdain that many folks have for the natural world. They are never in it; they spend their time closeted in

climate-controlled dwellings stuck to screens believing the lies they are told. They never venture out into nature or if they do it is in a very controlled way, then many of them chose to break the rules in place for their own safety and chase a bison or grizzly, or take a dip in the hot spring and wonder why they are broken or burned (and it's never their fault), just to get some social media attention. My perspective is a little different, but possibly we should let the bears eat a few these ignorant fools to help them survive hibernation.

We often encounter people who have an overwhelming desire to control others or to bend a narrative to re-enforce their own personal sense of entitlement or stroking their need for self-importance. This is an annoying quirk in human psychology and usually causes more problems than the perpetrator realizes. Unfortunately, most folks like this never learn that nature just doesn't really care.







The C&O Canal National Historical Park and the Potomac River drainage is one of those rare places where there is a fantastic blend of nature, history, and recreation in a concentrated area. It is also a BIG thing supported by little things. This is not to say that it is large in a physical sense, it is no Yellowstone or Yosemite; but it is large in a philosophical and spiritual way. It is a narrow strip of wonder; as Justice Douglas so succinctly put it "It is a refuge, a place of retreat, a long stretch of quiet and peace at the capital's back door-a wilderness area where man can be alone with his thoughts, a sanctuary where he can commune with God and nature, a place not yet marred by the roar of wheels and the sound of horns." There is a very good reason the Potomac is called the nation's river.

The great pioneering psychiatrist Carl Jung postulated the idea of a collective unconsciousness that all humans experience. It seems to me that everyone that has an interest in preserving the C&O Canal NHP and the Potomac River drainage (they are part of a whole) should use their collective unconscious superpowers and all get on the same sheet of music. Every organization, individual, and the National Park Service should be working together to do the best job possible so our grandchildren and theirs, and on down the line can enjoy the wonders we have had.

Our solar system travels through space in an elaborate spinning, spiral dance of the sun, planets, moons, and asteroids at 514,000 mph. This speed doesn't affect us very much, but the net effect is that we have sunrises and sunsets as well as the change of the seasons,





and you must admit that these are big things, often incredibly beautiful occurrences. And it happens every day without fail.

We are careening around the universe, and surprisingly not hitting things (at least not too often, sorry, dinosaurs) enjoying sunrises and sunsets, summer changing to fall, trees, and all those little things that contribute to the well being of all. Seems like a good system to me, it's up to us to be good stewards of the parts we affect.

So, this brings me to my new word coddiwomple. The world might be a better place if instead of always traveling "for purpose" either physically or intellectually, it might be wise, just every now and then, to wander about without a goal in mind. Pedal, paddle or hike, your choice, and simply enjoy and observe the nature and history around you. If you pay enough attention, you can, perhaps, learn to see the wonder of how it all works together by seeing not just looking.

The C&O Canal is a perfect place for coddiwompling ambitions, should you have any. You can wander about and marvel at the wonders of nature as well as the skill and determination of our ancestors. But please spare a thought for what you can do to preserve this great treasure for us and those that come after us. Please enjoy the accompanying photographs, they are all large and small things that can be found along the canal. Let's not lose them.

Due to unforeseen circumstances beyond my control, at least for the foreseeable future, this will be my final installment for *Pedal, Paddle, and Hike*. I truly hope you have enjoyed my articles as much as I have enjoyed writing them. I want to thank editor Steve Dean not only for the excellent job he has done as compiler and

editor of *Along the Towpath* but also for giving me the opportunity to write for such a fine publication, and along the way for becoming a good friend. Remember J.R.R. Tolkien's words "Not all who wander are lost." I wish you happy coddiwompling and please keep in mind getting lost sometimes is just as important as knowing where you are.

*Thank you, Trent, for sharing your knowledge, talent and humor by providing a diverse selection of content to Along the Towpath. You have been a pleasure to work with.*



#### References:

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*Trees, Fungus, and Complexity Science*, Trent Carbaugh, 2023, *Along the Towpath* Vol LV, Number 2

*Towpath Guide to the C&O Canal*, Thomas F. Hahn, 2015 revised edition.

*A note on photos – for this article, Mr. Carbaugh has opted to share a selection of images without captions of things seen while coddiwompling on the canal.*

