**Community Life**

In his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Overstory*, Richard Powers creates a character, Dr. Patricia Weatherford, who uses science to discover the true nature of tree-life. Researching the chemicals produced by trees and released into the air around them, Dr. Weatherford verifies that “trees under attack pump out insecticides to save their lives.”

But she also discovers that “trees a little way off, untouched by the invading swarms, ramp up their own defenses when their neighbor is attacked. Something alerts them. They get wind of the disaster, and they prepare. She controls for everything she can, and the results are always the same. Only one conclusion makes any sense: The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are signaling. They’re linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other.”

“She can’t quite let herself believe. But the data keep confirming. And on that evening when Patricia finally accepts what the measurements say, her limbs heat up and tears run down her face. For all she knows, she’s the first creature in the expanding adventure of life who has ever glimpsed this small but certain thing that evolution is up to. Life is talking to itself, and she has listened in.

“She writes up the results as soberly as she can. Her report is all chemistry, concentrations, and rates—nothing but what the gas chromatography equipment records. But in her paper’s conclusion, she can’t resist suggesting what the results spell out: *The biochemical behavior of individual trees may make sense only when we see them as members of a community.*”**[1]**

In the novel her scientific colleagues studying plants and forestry resist and disparage her conclusion, but additional research confirms her discovery. The concept of ecosystems evolves in biology. And for those with ears to hear and eyes to see, life is always a community venture.

I suggest we use the phrase “living-world” to describe our “community of life” amidst trees and other plants, animals in the trees and on the ground, and also the interacting lives of all the tiny creatures underground, in the air we breathe, and in the water we drink. We might also recognize that our living-world is much more of a community that we realize.

Look around outside your home, and also inside your home,[2] and try to imagine the trillions of microscopic lives in your body that are assisting your body’s immune system.**[3]** Might we, like Patricia Westerford and also the author of *The Overstory*, be amazed and grateful for what evolution has created?

Nancy and I walked last Sunday among Iowa wildflowers, arising four to five feet high having evolved to compete with prairie grass for sunlight. Flowers, too, in our yards as well as in the fields around us, are communities that embrace us in their living-world.

**Every choice in our living-world is an eco-choice. May we delight in the diverse plant and animal communities in which "we live and move and have our being."[4]**

[1] Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (W. W. Norton & Company, 124-126).

[2] See Rob Dunn, *Never Home Alone: From Microbes to Millipedes, Camel Crickets, and Honeybees, the Natural History of Where We Live* (Basic Books, 2018). And <https://rtraer.com/survive/home-biodiversity.html>.

[3] See Will Bulsiewicz, *Fiber Fueled: The Plant-Based Gut Health Program for Losing Weight, Restoring Your Health, and Optimizing Your Microbiome* (Penguin, 2020). And <https://rtraer.com/revive/feeding-our-microbes.html>.

**[4]** Acts 17:28 in the New Testament of the Bible uses this phrase to refer to our life in our Creator God.