

## December 2009: Meditations on Beavers

Not long ago, my mother called me, very upset. The night before, a beaver had chewed down a tree in her back yard. And not just any tree—a beautiful flowering crabapple she had been given several years ago in memory of her mother, Louise. We called it “the Louise tree.” When the beaver ventured up the lawn within ten yards of their bedroom window, brandishing its oversized incisors, the Louise tree was laden with bright purple fruits. My mother and I had recently expressed hope that the crabapples would sustain some birds this winter—a pretty flock of grosbeaks or waxwings, perhaps. Now it was felled, beyond saving.

My parents live on the Megunticook River, and this wasn’t the first time beavers had raided their yard. One night my mother woke up my father urging him to go outside because she could hear a beaver chopping down a large maple tree on the riverbank. She was afraid the tree would fall on the house. That time, at least, my dad successfully warded off the relentless arbivore; the tree is forever dented where the beaver started chewing, but still standing. My parents did lose a few other trees over the years—a popple here, a birch there. But not one as special as the Louise tree.

I tried to comfort my mother, urging her to leave the tree in the yard so that the dried fruits could still provide winter nourishment for a foraging flock of birds. She accepted that to an extent, hoping that at least her tree would offer one final bit of good.

It turned out, however, that the final bit of good the tree had to offer was not for the birds. The next morning my mother called again, in even greater distress. The beaver had returned to the scene of the crime and carried off the Louise tree. No fruit for the birds. Nothing left but some wood chips and a trail of drag marks in the dead leaves piled on the lawn.

I tried again. Think of the beavers, I urged my mother. Think about the strength of that one big rodent swimming downriver with a whole tree, how that tree will nourish a family of beavers through the winter in their lodge.

So now I’m thinking about the beavers, to comfort myself too. I’m imagining how beavers spend the winter. Contrary to what some may believe, beavers don’t hibernate under the ice. (They also don’t eat fish.) But we don’t see them slipping around on top of the ice like otters either. When they get iced in, they spend the cold season inside their cozy mud and stick lodge. I remember reading in one of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* books that the severity of winter could be predicted by how thick a layer of mud the beavers slathered on to cover and insulate their lodge. For the beavers’ sake, I like to think this old wives’ tale carries some truth.



Photo by Karl Gerstenberger.

A beaver lodge is a marvel of animal engineering. It has more than one underwater entrance, an air hole at the top, and a dry place for sleeping and hanging out. I've heard that it can be big enough for a person to stand up in. The beaver's food stash—trees—is under the lodge on the bottom of the pond. Because of this, they must build a big enough dam to create a pond deep enough that it doesn't freeze solid, so they can get to their food source all winter long. It's also key that the beavers amass a large enough cache of trees to get them through the winter. If they run out of trees, they're kind of stuck. The Louise tree could be crucial if this winter is a long one.

Beavers mate for life, so I can't help but think of benevolent Mr. and Mrs. Beaver in the frozen world of C. S. Lewis's Narnia, tucked safely away with their goodly stash of trees. And with their entire family. Young beavers stay with their parents for two years, helping to raise the new kits, collect food, and repair the dam and lodge. During the winter, the whole beaver family is stuck underwater in the lodge: parents, yearlings, and kits, up to six or more animals. It makes me claustrophobic just to think about it. I had to share a bedroom with two sisters growing up, and that was hard enough. At least we weren't stuck in a mud hut with our parents, forced to swim through frigid water whenever we wanted a meal. But it works for the beavers.

The image of that severed crabapple down there in the beaver lodge actually does make me smile. For the beavers, who won't truly see the light of day till ice out, those fruits will hang off the branches underwater like Christmas ornaments, or like holiday candy for a hungry beaver. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Narnia was under a curse so that it was always winter but never Christmas. But for these beavers, I imagine a small holiday when they eventually eat the Louise tree. And when they resurface in spring, when we stand at my parents' picture window and watch the tell-tale, v-shaped wake widen behind the swimming creature, hear that tail slap, we'll know that that beaver was

probably nourished by my mother's tree and a perhaps a little bit of my grandmother's memory.

Come spring my mother and I will get another flowering crabapple tree, plant it together on my grandmother's April birthday, and protect it in some way from the beavers. We'll set up protective wire cylinders around the trunk so it will be safe. The beavers will still cull some of the trees in the yard if they need to—we can't wrap them all in cages—but the new Louise tree will flourish to one day bear fruit to feed the birds and bring my mother more joy.