

Carpets of Leaves

There is a section of track I walk most days where the forest floor disappears beneath leaves. Not scattered ones, but layers, overlapping, curled, damp, crisp at the edges, breaking down into something that no longer looks like a leaf at all. If you stopped and looked closely, you could almost trace time in strata: fresh fall on top, older ones below, and beneath that, dark soil made from what was once green and full of life. We step over it without ceremony. Yet this quiet carpet is a record of work done and lives completed.

Each of those leaves once stood high above the ground, stretched toward light, drawing energy from the sun and feeding it into a system far larger than itself. Through photosynthesis, that miraculous chemistry lesson most of us half-remember from school, they powered the tree. They helped build wood, extend branches, thicken bark, produce fruit, support birds, insects, and shade. They were not decorative. They were functional, essential, alive.

Then they fell.

There is no drama in their departure. No memorial. No marker to say, "This leaf sustained life for a season." Gravity takes over. The green fades. Structure softens. Edges curl. Moisture, fungi, bacteria, insects, the quiet workforce of decomposition begins its patient labour. The leaf that once captured light now feeds the soil. Nutrients are returned, redistributed, recycled. The forest does not waste. It is hard to walk through this and not feel the analogy pressing gently at the mind.



Human lives are not so different. We rise into our brief season of activity, do our work, sometimes visible, often not, and then we fall back into the systems that made us. We feed families, communities, institutions, ecosystems. We contribute in ways large and small, dramatic and ordinary. Then, one day, we are gone. Our names fade from daily conversation. Our roles are taken up by others. The system continues.

In a culture that prizes permanence, this can feel unsettling. We are encouraged to leave a “legacy,” to make a mark, to be remembered. Disappearance can be mistaken for failure. But the forest offers a quieter lesson: continuity does not depend on individual permanence. It depends on participation in cycles. The leaves do not fail because they fall. Falling is part of the design.

Carl Sagan’s observation that we are “made of star stuff” is often quoted with a sense of cosmic wonder. The atoms in our bodies were forged in ancient stars, scattered, reassembled, circulated through countless forms before becoming “us.” In time, they will move on again. The leaves underfoot are engaged in the same dance, only closer to home. Carbon, nitrogen, minerals, all passing through forms, none

belonging to any single one for long. What feels like loss from one perspective is transformation from another.

This does not diminish human meaning; it reframes it. Meaning need not be measured by duration. A leaf's contribution is not judged by how long it remains attached to the branch, but by what it enables while it is there. Shade. Growth. Habitat. Energy flow. Soil formation. Life for others. Perhaps our lives are similar. The value may lie less in being remembered forever and more in what we feed while we are here: children, ideas, communities, acts of care, systems of knowledge, environments that outlast us. Influence can be quiet and still be real.

The forest floor also reminds us of humility. The leaf that once occupied a prime position in the canopy eventually lies level with all the others. Status dissolves. The hierarchy of height disappears. What remains is shared contribution to the next cycle. In this, the leaves are democratic. And yet, there is beauty in the falling too. Sunlight filtering through autumn foliage, the rustle underfoot, the rich smell of earth, decay is not merely functional; it is aesthetic. What we call "ending" is often another phase of creativity. Fungi form networks. Worms aerate soil. Seeds find purchase. New shoots rise.

We are accustomed to stories of upward motion, growth, achievement, ascent. The leaves tell a different story: one of return. Of release. Of trust in a system larger than individual ambition. They suggest that stepping aside is not always a tragedy, but sometimes a necessary generosity. Walking on that soft, layered floor, I am reminded that existence is less like a monument and more like a conversation. Each participant speaks for a time, then yields the space. The conversation continues, enriched by what came before. We are, like the leaves, temporary surfaces on which sunlight briefly rests.

And that may be enough.