



Mother and Child, Lookout Creek

## Ants Are People

My mother always says that people are just like ants, and the noted myrmecologist and conservation biologist, E. O. Wilson endured years of ignominy from his colleagues at Harvard for implying, in *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, that lessons learned from ants and other social animals could be extended and usefully applied to understanding the human condition. With all due respect both to my mother and my esteemed colleague, I think they got it backwards: ants are people.

What do I mean, ants are people? We see ourselves everywhere and in most anything. Geological features such as New Hampshire's Old Man of the Mountain are as well-defined in our imagination as the real faces carved deliberately onto Mount Rushmore. Moss-covered tree stumps conjure up the Madonna and Child. Common names for animals, plants, and even mushrooms are imbued with anthropomorphisms: Painted Lady butterflies, Monks-hood and Corpse flowers, and the Old Man of the Woods mushroom are but a handful of the innumerable *nom de plumes* we have bestowed on the Earth's diversity.

We go further. Animals and plants in films and cartoons, literature and music, and fine art are endowed with human characteristics. Pairs of large eyes replace myriad small ones or compound lenses. Pairs of arms and legs replace legs-only that come in more—sometimes many more—than two multiples of two. Not only do we fear for our own safety, we see fear as an explanation for interactions among different kinds of animals or animals and plants. No longer do animals show behaviors that are like fear; now we study the ecology of fear among them. And now we are ready to christen the time that we live in the Anthropocene.

Our explanations of nature's diversity and complexity have completed the transition from simile to analogy to metaphor.

Metaphors are useful heuristics, but the world around us is unnecessarily and unfortunately simplified when they are taken to be literally true. Ants are not people. Indeed, ants are no more like people than people are like ants. Infusing human characteristics into the world around us may make its complexity seem easier to comprehend, but taking the world for itself reveals remarkable and perhaps fundamentally incomprehensible diversity.

So put down the selfie-stick and leave Echo to Narcissus. Sometimes a tree stump is just an extraordinary stump.

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