

MAPLE NATION: A CITIZENSHIP GUIDE

There's just one gas station in my community. It's right there at the stop-light, also the only one. You get the picture. I'm sure that it has an official name, but we just call it the Pompey Mall. Coffee, milk, ice, dog food, you can get most anything essential to life at the mall. Duct tape to hold things together and WD-40 to get them apart. There are tins of last year's maple syrup, which I pass up, since I'm on my way to the sugar house where new syrup awaits. The clientele runs largely to pickup trucks and now and then a Prius. There aren't any snowmobiles revving at the pumps today, because the snow is just about gone.

Since it's the only place to fuel up, the lines are often long and today people stand outside in the spring sunshine, leaning against the cars, waiting their turn. Conversation, like the shelves inside, tends toward essentials—the price of gas, how the sap is running, who's got their taxes done. Sugaring season and tax season overlap around here.

"Between the price of gas and the tax man, I'm just about bled dry," Kerm gripes as he replaces the nozzle and wipes his hands on greasy Carhartts. "Now they want to raise taxes for a windmill down to the school? All on account of global warming. Not on my dime." One of our town officials is ahead of me in line. She's an ample woman, a former social studies teacher at the school, and does not hesitate to wag a finger in the banter. She probably had Kerm in class. "You don't like it? Don't complain if you're not there. Show up to a damn meeting."

There's still snow under the trees, a bright blanket beneath the gray trunks and the blush of reddening maple buds. Last night, a tiny

sliver of moon hung in the deep-blue dark of early spring. That new moon ushers in our Anishinaabe new year—the *Zizibaskwet Giizis*, Maple Sugar Moon. It is when the earth starts to wake up from her well-deserved rest and renews her gifts to the people. To celebrate, I'm going sugaring.

I received my census form today; it's on the seat beside me as I drive out through the hills toward the sugarbush. If you took a biologically inclusive census of the people in this town, the maples would outnumber humans a hundred to one. In our Anishinaabe way, we count trees as people, "the standing people." Even though the government only counts humans in our township, there's no denying that we live in the nation of maples.

There's a beautiful map of bioregions drawn by an organization dedicated to restoring ancient food traditions. State boundaries disappear and are replaced by ecological regions, defined by the leading denizens of the region, the iconic beings who shape the landscape, influence our daily lives, and feed us—both materially and spiritually. The map shows the Salmon Nation of the Pacific Northwest and the Pinyon Nation of the Southwest, among others. We in the Northeast are in the embrace of the Maple Nation.

I'm thinking about what it would mean to declare citizenship in Maple Nation. Kerm would probably answer with two terse words of resentment: pay taxes. And he's right, being a citizen does mean sharing in the support of your community.

Here it is, almost tax day, when my fellow humans are getting ready to make their contribution to the well-being of the community, but the maples have been giving all year long. Their contribution of limb wood kept my old neighbor Mr. Keller's house warm all winter when he couldn't pay the oil bill. The volunteer fire department and the ambulance squad as well rely on maple contributions to their monthly pancake breakfast, to raise funds for a new engine. The trees make a real dent in the energy bill for the school with their shade, and, thanks to big canopies of maples, nobody I know ever pays a bill for air-conditioning. They donate shade to the Memorial Day parade

every year without even being asked. If it weren't for the maples' ability to break the wind, the highway department would have to plow snow-drifts off the road twice as often.

Both of my parents have been active in their town government for years, so I've seen firsthand how stewardship of a community happens. "Good communities don't make themselves," my dad said. "We've got a lot to be grateful for, and we all have to do our part to keep it going." He just retired as town supervisor. My mom is on the zoning board. From them I learned that town government is invisible to most citizens, which is perhaps as it should be—necessary services are delivered so smoothly that folks just take them for granted. The roads get plowed, the water is kept clean, the parks are kept up, and the new senior citizens center finally got built, all without much fanfare. Most people are indifferent, unless their self-interest is at stake. Then there are the chronic complainers, always on the phone to contest the tax levy, and also on the phone to object to cutbacks when the same tax levies fail.

Fortunately, there are those in every organization, few but invaluable, who know their responsibilities and seem to thrive on meeting them. They get things done. These are the ones we all rely upon, the people who take care of the rest of us, quiet leaders.

My Onondaga Nation neighbors call the maple the leader of the trees. Trees constitute the environmental quality committee—running air and water purification service 24-7. They're on every task force, from the historical society picnic to the highway department, school board, and library. When it comes to civic beautification, they alone create the crimson fall with little recognition.

We haven't even mentioned how they create habitat for songbirds, and wildlife cover, golden leaves to shuffle through, tree forts and branches for swings. Centuries of their falling leaves have built this soil, now farmed for strawberries, apples, sweet corn, and hay. How much of the oxygen in our valley comes from our maples? How much carbon is taken from the atmosphere and stored away? These processes are what ecological scientists term ecosystem services, the structures and functions of the natural world that make life possible. We can assign an

economic value to maple timber, or gallons of syrup, but ecosystem services are far more precious. And yet these services go unaccounted for in the human economy. As with the services of local government, we don't think about them unless they are missing. There is no official tax system to pay for these services, as we pay for snowplowing and schoolbooks. We get them for free, donated continually by maples. They do their share for us. The question is: How well do we do by them?

By the time I get to the sugar house, the guys already have the pan at full boil. A forceful plume of steam billows from the open vents, signaling to folks down the road and across the valley that they're boiling today. While I'm there, a steady stream of people drop by for conversation and a gallon of new syrup. As they step into the shed, they all stop right at the door; their glasses fog up and the sweet aroma of boiling sap stops them in their tracks. I like to walk in and out over and over again, just for the rush of fragrance.

The sugar house itself is a rough wood building with a characteristic vented cupola running its length to allow the steam to escape. It whooshes up to join the downy clouds in a soft spring sky.

The fresh sap goes in at one end of the open evaporator and moves along channels under its own increasing gravity as the water is boiled away. The boil at the beginning is wild and frothy with big random bubbles and more sedate at the end as it thickens, moving from clear at the start to deep caramel at the end. You've got to take the syrup off at just the right time and density. Let it go too far and the whole affair could crystallize into a delicious brick.

It's hard work, and the two guys watching and testing have been here since early this morning. I brought along a pie so they can grab forkfuls every now and then, between tasks. As we all watch the boil, I ask them my question: What does it mean to be a good citizen of Maple Nation?

Larry is the stoker. Every ten minutes he pulls on elbow-length gloves and dons a face shield before opening the door to the fire. The heat is intense as he adds another armload of three-foot lengths of firewood one by one. "You've gotta keep it boiling heavy," he says. "We do

it the old-fashioned way. Some folks have gone to fuel oil or gas burners, but I hope we always stick with wood. It feels right."

The woodpile is easily as big as the sugar house itself, stacked ten feet high with cord upon cord of dry split ash and birch and, of course, good hard maple. The forestry students cut and gather a fair bit of the wood from dead trees along all of our trails. "See, it works out good. To keep the sugar bush productive we thin out the competition so our sap trees can grow a nice full canopy. The trees we thin out usually end up right here, as firewood. Nothing gets wasted. That's a kind of being a good citizen, isn't it? You take care of the trees and they'll take care of you." I don't imagine there are many colleges that run their own sugarbushes, and I'm grateful that ours does.

Bart sits by the bottling tank and chimes in: "We should save the oil for where we've got to have it. Wood can do this job better—and besides, it's carbon neutral. The carbon we release from burning wood for syrup came from the trees that took it in, in the first place. It will go right back to them, with no net increase." He goes on to explain that these forests are part of the college's plan to be totally carbon neutral: "We actually get a tax credit by keeping our forests intact, so they can absorb carbon dioxide."

I suppose that one of the features of being a member of a nation is shared currency. In Maple Nation, the currency is carbon. It is traded, exchanged, bartered among community members from atmosphere to tree to beetle to woodpecker to fungus to log to firewood to atmosphere and back to tree. No waste, shared wealth, balance, and reciprocity. What better model for a sustainable economy do we need?

What does it mean to be a citizen of Maple Nation? I put this question to Mark, who handles the finishing with a big paddle and the hydrometer to test the sugar concentration. "That's a good question," he says as he pours a few drops of cream onto the boiling syrup to quell the foam. He doesn't answer, but opens the spigot at the bottom of the finishing pan, filling a bucket with new syrup. Later, when it has cooled a bit, he pours out a little cup for each of us, golden and warm, and raises his in a toast. "I guess this is what you do," he says.

"You make syrup. You enjoy it. You take what you're given and you treat it right."

Drinking maple syrup gives you quite a sugar rush. This too is what it means to be a citizen of Maple Nation, having maple in your bloodstream, maple in your bones. We are what we eat, and with every golden spoonful maple carbon becomes human carbon. Our traditional thinking had it right: maples are people, people are maples.

Our Anishinaabe word for maple is *anenemik*, the man tree. "My wife makes maple cake," says Mark, "and we always give out candy maple leaves at Christmas." Larry's favorite is to just pour it on vanilla ice cream. My ninety-six-year-old grandma likes to take a pure spoonful once in a while, when she's feeling low. She calls it vitamin M. Next month, the college will hold a pancake breakfast here, where staff and faculty and families gather to celebrate sticky-fingered membership in Maple Nation, our bond to each other and to this land. Citizens also celebrate together.

The pan is running low, so I go with Larry down the road to the sugar bush, where a tank is slowly filling with fresh sap, drip by drip. We walk around the woods for a while, ducking under the network of tubes that gurgle like a brook, carrying the sap inside to the collecting tank. It's not the same plinking music of old-time sap buckets, but it enables two people to do the work of twenty.

The woods are the same as countless springs before this one; the citizens of Maple Nation are starting to wake up. Snowfleas pepper the wells of deer tracks. Mosses drip with snowmelt at the base of trees, and geese race by, their V in disarray with their eagerness to be home.

As we drive back with a brimming tank, he says, "Of course sugaring is a gamble every year. It's not like you can control the sap flow. Some years are good and some aren't. You take what you get and be grateful for it. It all depends on the temperature, and that's out of our hands." But that's not entirely true anymore. Our addiction to fossil fuel and current energy policies accelerate carbon dioxide inputs every year, unequivocally causing a global rise in temperatures. Spring comes nearly a week earlier than it did just twenty years ago.

I hate to leave, but I have to get back to my desk. On the drive home, I continue to think about citizenship. When my kids were in school they had to memorize the Bill of Rights, but I would venture to guess that maple seedlings would be schooled instead in a Bill of Responsibilities.

When I get home, I look up the citizenship oaths for various human nations. They have many elements in common. Some require allegiance to a leader. Most are a pledge of loyalty, an expression of shared beliefs and an oath to obey the laws of the land. The United States rarely permits dual citizenship—you have to choose. On what basis do we select where to invest our allegiance? If I were forced, I would choose Maple Nation. If citizenship is a matter of shared beliefs, then I believe in the democracy of species. If citizenship means an oath of loyalty to a leader, then I choose the leader of the trees. If good citizens agree to uphold the laws of the nation, then I choose natural law, the law of reciprocity, of regeneration, of mutual flourishing.

The oath of citizenship for the United States stipulates that citizens will defend the nation against all enemies and take up arms if they are called to do so. If that same oath held in Maple Nation, the trumpet call would be echoing through these wooded hills. Maples of the United States face a grave enemy. The most highly regarded models predict that the climate of New England will become hostile to sugar maples within fifty years. Rising temperatures will reduce seedling success and regeneration will thereby start to fail. It already is failing. Insects will follow, and the oaks will get the upper hand. Imagine New England without maples. Unthinkable. A brown fall instead of hills afire. Sugar houses boarded up. No more fragrant clouds of steam. Would we even recognize our homes? Is that a heartbreak we can bear?

It's a running threat on the left and the right: "If things don't change, I'm moving to Canada." It looks like the maples will have to do just that. Like the displaced farmers of Bangladesh fleeing rising sea levels, maples will become climate refugees. To survive they must migrate northward to find homes at the boreal fringe. Our energy policy is forcing them to leave. They will be exiled from their homelands for the price of cheap gas.

Maple Nation

We do not pay at the pump for the cost of climate change, for the loss of ecosystem services provided by maples and others. Cheap gas now or maples for the next generation? Call me crazy, but I'd welcome the tax that would resolve that question.

Individuals far wiser than I have said that we get the government we deserve. That may be true. But the maples, our most generous of benefactors and most responsible of citizens, do not deserve our government. They deserve you and me speaking up on their behalf. To quote our town council woman, "Show up at the damn meeting." Political action, civic engagement—these are powerful acts of reciprocity with the land. The Maple Nation Bill of Responsibilities asks us to stand up for the standing people, to lead with the wisdom of Maples.