

17 X 3 = 51

A Reflection on My Life from the Perspective of the Life-Cycle of Cicadas

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ME AGE 17



ME AGE 68

Fifty-one years ago, when I was seventeen years old—about to turn eighteen, graduate from high school, go to college, and leap into my adult life—I spent a night in the woods near my Bucks County, PA, home. It was a warm early June evening and I pedaled off with a bedroll stuffed in the basket of my bicycle to a little spot I had seen a few days earlier, next to a babbling creek below a field of just-sprouting wheat and a copse of young trees.

[When my parents gave me that Raleigh three-speed bicycle the year before, for my sixteenth birthday, I was appalled. A bicycle is the last thing a sixteen-year old boy who had just gotten his driver's license wants. By the time I was seventeen, however, I was happy that they hadn't gifted me with the car I had hoped for. I rode that bike everywhere: every weekday (weather permitting) on the five-mile trip from my Doylestown house to the new Central Bucks East High School in Buckingham, and all around the backroads of beautiful Bucks County. If it weren't for that bicycle I wouldn't have met Raymond Granville Barger, a (to my young eyes) wonderfully eccentric sculptor who lived, aptly, in Carversville and who constructed his massive metal abstract sculptures outside in front of his house; Barger was

always polite and welcoming when I pedaled down his dirt drive and quite happy to talk about his work.]

What I didn't know when I headed out for an overnight sleep-out on that June, 1970, evening, was that it was time for the Brood X cicadas to come out on the East Coast. These little insects spend seventeen years underground in a larval stage munching on tree roots, only to emerge in their adult forms for a single day of wild flying sex before their dying carapaces come crashing down to earth.

[It was a more innocent time back then, before the emergence of 24/7 news cycles. Unlike today, when stories about this year's pending appearance of the Brood X cicadas regularly pop up on my cell-phone news feeds, I doubt that the 1970 Brood X emergence had made the local news. And, besides, we teenagers didn't really read newspapers or follow the six-o'clock evening news on television. The only news we really followed were the horrible stories coming out of Vietnam. (The previous month, on May Day, we had felt like such grown-ups when we organized a Vietnam War protest at the high school; I remember leading my fellow students in a rousing chorus of John Lennon's "All we are saying is give peace a chance.")]

So I was unprepared, after spending that night out under the stars, to be awoken by what sounded like a helicopter hovering above me. When I opened my eyes, I was astounded to hear the loud, high-pitched love songs of the cicadas and to see that my bedroll was covered in little cicada carcasses. It wasn't until I had brushed myself off and biked back home, hearing and seeing cicadas all over the place, that I had a glimmering that I had experienced first-hand a miraculous event of insect biology.

And, as if to pin my experience to an entomological memory board, it turns out that Bob Dylan wrote a song about that night. He had been just across the Delaware River where he was to, reluctantly, receive an honorary Doctorate in Music at Princeton University. Dylan's "Day of the Locust" (changing cicadas to the more Biblical plague and coopting the title of Nathanael West's 1939 novel) is an attack on the pomposity of Ivy League academics ("The weather was hot, a-nearly 90 degrees/ The man standin' next to me, his head was exploding/ Well, I was prayin' the pieces wouldn't fall on me"). But the chorus to Dylan's "Day of the Locust" seems to have been written just for me:

And the locusts sang, yeah, it give me a chill
Oh, the locusts sang such a sweet melody
Oh, the locusts sang that high whining trill
Yeah, the locusts sang, and they were singin' for me...

Flash forward seventeen years to 1987. I'd gone to graduate school, spent four years studying in Greece, got married to a fellow grad student, earned my own Ivy League doctorate, and, after we returned to the US and had just finished our first, one-year, academic teaching jobs in northern New Jersey, my lovely wife and I had a baby boy, born in May, just before the cicadas were to come out again. But we didn't hear or see them because we were living just beyond the Brood X's northern range.

Now flash forward another seventeen years. It is 2004. In a mid-life crisis after my father died, I had left my tenure-track job in Boston and we had moved into my wife's grandmother's empty house in New Hampshire, where I had started to teach in a local high school. Our son was seventeen and about to head out to his college in California. Again, being now well north of the Brood X range, I again missed that "high whining trill."

One more seventeen-year flash forward, to today, still in the midst of the worldwide COVID pandemic. Three and a half years ago, my wife and I fled Trump's America and retired to live in Spain. We made a short return trip to the US two years ago to visit with our son, who is happily pursuing his career in Cambridge, Mass, and to see my eldest brother, who is back in Bucks County living in a retirement community. But even if we wanted to, it would not be possible to travel over there as we won't be getting our vaccines until June at the earliest. So I'll miss those cicada trills and dead cicada bodies once again.

Ever since I was a child and I used to play Hearts with my two older brothers, dealing out all the cards from a 52-card deck into three equal piles with one card left over, I've known that $3 \times 17 = 51$. I've now lived a full pack of seventeen-year cycles and am just completing the first seventeen-year cycle of my second deck. I don't know if I will live to see another seventeen-year cycle (I'd be 85), and I doubt that I'll make it all the way through this second deck of cycles (I'd be 103!). I am glad, though, that at least once in my life I've experienced cicadas coming out of the ground for their ephemeral mad dash at life. In the meantime, it's comforting to think about those Brood X cicadas back in Bucks County, molting into their adult forms and poised to climb out of the warming earth and take flight.

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