



Here we go Again!

Welcome - or welcome back! - to another year of A Story A Week. I hope that I can succeed in bringing you an enjoyable group of stories this year. I have no shortage of story ideas; I keep a pocket recorder at hand at all times to make memos to myself whenever I think of something that seems interesting, and it has become nearly full up! Let me browse through it to see which topic might serve well for this first story of the year ... yes, here's a good one - I was watching a spider weave her web outside my workshop window one day last fall, and seeing her made me think about the way we humans live ...

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The area just outside my large workshop window seems to be well-suited to spider web construction. From late summer into autumn there is always at least one large *joro-gumo* spider living there, and sometimes more than one. I leave them alone, as they catch a lot of insects, and they are certainly entertaining to watch while they work on their web construction and maintenance.

If these spiders were plants, they would be 'annuals' - they live out their entire lifespan in a single year, and leave eggs behind which hatch out the following spring. So the spider I see outside my window is probably the daughter of the one who was hanging there the previous autumn, and in turn, her daughter will hang there next year ... This really puts an interesting perspective on what life 'means'. From my point of view of course, these spiders are identical; there is nothing at all to distinguish one from the next. Each year's spider makes more spiders for the next year, and so on and so on, year by year. 'Success' for a spider means catching enough food to grow large and healthy, and thus leave as many eggs as possible, helping to improve the chances of 'success' in the following year. But if the only apparent reason for the existence of a spider is to make more spiders, then this is a very circular argument ... what kind of life is that?

And if we step back a bit and look at the world as a whole, are we humans actually doing the same thing - just growing, leaving children, then dying? Is that it?

If we look at the activities of most people, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that we are indeed no different. They grow food, or build structures, or work in any number of areas that support those activities ... digging minerals from the ground to make steel to make buildings ... building machinery for factories for building this and that ... Most peoples' work can be traced to the support of basic human needs. So that humans can flourish for the purpose of ... making more humans!

But there are some of us - and please understand that I'm winking at you as I say this - whose work seems to fall outside of this pattern. Making woodblock prints doesn't seem to have anything at all to do with basic human needs - prints are completely unnecessary for survival. So are woodblock printmakers such as myself completely wasting their time on an activity that does nothing at all for humanity?

Or is it that such things as art, the making of woodblock prints, the creation of beauty and pleasure ... are these things perhaps the extra 'level' that makes the whole thing worthwhile? They add meaning to human life over and above simple replication of the species. Without art, we are all just on that treadmill, repeating the cycle over and over and over again ...

What do you think?

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