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Trees expand our spirits.

Tree Glory

You couldn't miss the enormous beech tree on I-95 southbound, on the right just before the Amesbury bridge. For years, we'd slow down to admire its massive trunk, its spread of thick muscular branches, the bark smooth and gray like the skin of an elephant. We would wonder at its life. What had happened under that canopy one, two or three centuries ago? It had thrived by the Merrimack River a long time – beech trees can live three or four hundred years. A friend had introduced us when we discovered a mutual enthusiasm for tree watching. We were heartsick when they cut it down to expand the bridge. It felt like losing a friend.

Just this weekend, a new tree friend. A local bakery, first-rate in every way, can hardly keep up with demand. You often have to park behind the building and walk a distance to the front door. Those parking spaces out back overlook less than first-rate real estate. At first glance it looks like woods, but then you realize it's an overgrown dumping ground of rusted out pick-up trucks and junk. But wait. There, a few yards in, you can make out the elegant shape of a birch tree, its graceful white trunk rising from the brush. A thing of beauty, a survivor. A reason to park back here. A tree to visit and look after.

Henry David Thoreau of Concord, Mass. loved trees, too. He looked after them too, as one tends to aging neighbors, and spoke of their dignity. Thoreau lived at a time of rapid deforestation. One by one he watched grand old trees fall. In a new book entitled *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*, Richard Higgins quotes from Thoreau's December journal, 1855:

“Every larger tree which I knew and admired is being gradually culled out and carried to mill. I miss them as surely and with the same feeling that I do the old inhabitants out of the village street....”

[Higgins writes, Thoreau] looked at trees, every day. He observed their shape, color, texture, and stance on his daily walks in Concord's woods and fields. He measured and sketched them, interpreted their expressions and appraised their character....The smallest of the oaks, the shrub oak, was a favorite [according to Thoreau] “rigid as iron, clean as the atmosphere, hardy as virtue, innocent and sweet as a maiden...[with its] scanty garment of leaves rising above the snow.” [The author writes that Thoreau] could embrace one – and he may have been as good as his word.¹

How *intimate* these writings, how deep this man's love for trees. We know the trees of our lives intimately, too, don't we? If we went around the room and each of us told of just one tree we've loved, we'd be here well into the day talking of the tree outside our grandmother's porch, with the long droopy bean pods; the soft moist floor of the pine grove where we used to hide and play; the climbing tree on the church path; the birch groves we'd visit every year cross-country skiing;

¹ Richard Higgins, *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*. Oakland: U California Press, 2017, 10.

and the maple that blazes every fall. We know our trees.

Many, though, are strangers to us. Just yesterday, our local paper carried a feature about New England's hop hornbeam tree, thought by some to be unremarkable. "Weed trees." Dover biology teacher Susan Pike disagrees.

No tree is unremarkable. Look close enough and all have their own unique charm....

[She quotes Charles Fergus, author of *Trees of New England*, who says its bark is]...like a wild animal's pelt...the kind of bark you want to reach out and run your hand over....The growth form of the tree [she says,] is lovely – upright and pyramidal...it will round gracefully with age, the pendulous branches tipped with the graceful hop-like fruits.... There is nothing unremarkable or weedy about this tree, [she says,] subtle perhaps, but not unremarkable.

[The hornbeam fruits resemble hops,] 'cone-like structures...each of which contains a nutlet...a small nut....As they ripen, the...[leaf that holds them] will turn brown and paper and gradually inflate like one of those origami balloons...and get carried away by the wind, bearing its...nutlet cargocool-looking," [she says. Birds and small animals eat them...and more!] Hornbeam means 'hard tree'....Harder than hickory or oak (it weighs 50 pounds per cubit foot!), second only to dogwood, hop hornbeam was used to make bows by Native Americans and such things as tool handles, ox yokes, fence posts and levers by colonists.²

Every tree has a story like this. A shape, a way of growing, a history, perhaps a character and surely a usefulness – if not to humans, to other creatures. Several recent books even claim that trees have a consciousness – an awareness of and what looks like cooperation with one another.

A recent study shows that the world has a mind-boggling 3.2 trillion trees – 426 per person,³ 60,000 species. New England has 86 species – 7 different Hawthorns, 14 maples, dozens of pines, 8 birch.⁴ Many have long lives. Poplars, maples, elms and pines live up to 200 years. Sycamores, horse chestnuts and hickory 300 years. Oaks and hemlock live upwards of 800 years. Imagine our very oak trees leafing out and dropping acorns during the Middle Ages! Imagine the same oak whose leaves we hear rustle in the fall gladdening the hearts of the first people who lived here.

We New Englanders can take our trees for granted. Many people live with so few. One summer we took visitors from Texas to a lunch spot on a country road in Maine. On the way, one of them cried out in amazement at the woods alongside us. "Look!" she said. "Look at the trees! They're so tall! Look how many there are in there! Big ones, and little skinny ones, too! Look how close they are to us! How amazing!"

² Susan Pike, "Hop hornbeams have their own unique charm," Nature News, *Portsmouth Herald*, 5 August 2017.

³ Kevin Dennehy, "Seeing the forest and the trees, all 3 trillion of them," Yale News, 2 September 2015, <https://news.yale.edu/2015/09/02/seeing-forest-and-trees-all-3-trillion-them>

⁴ Karen P. Bennett. UNH Cooperative Extension. List of New Hampshire Native Trees, 2014. https://extension.unh.edu/resources/files/resource000980_rep1106.pdf

Her joy was a wake-up call. I'd not seen – and in general *don't* see the green backdrop to our lives as particularly special, never mind a source of elation or “gladness,” Mary Oliver’s word: Trees “...give off such hints of gladness/...I would almost say that they save me, and daily.”⁵

If not poetry, beautiful prose gives us way to appreciate the glory of trees and how they do save us. The concierge in Muriel Barbery’s book *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* talks with a friend about Tolstoy’s novels. They take place...

...in Russia, a country where there are birch trees wherever you look....I do care about the birch trees....the swaying, rustling birch trees....[Recalling the conversation, she says] I felt light, so light...

...I get the same feeling when anyone talks about trees, any trees: the linden tree in the farmyard, the oak behind the old barn, the stately elms that have all disappeared now, the pine trees along wind-swept coasts, etc. There’s so much humanity in a love of trees, so much nostalgia for our first sense of wonder, so much power in just feeling our own insignificance when we are surrounded by nature...yes, that’s it: just thinking about trees and their indifferent deserving of life we can be, when we can honor this beauty that owes us nothing....[An awareness emerges for her.] I suddenly felt my spirit expand, for I was capable of grasping the utter beauty of the trees.⁶

No small thing, feeling one’s spirit expand.

Meanwhile, we drive the same roads everyday. Distracted by our devices and our busy minds, we can arrive at our destination and not remember a thing about the trip, right? It takes intention to *see* the trees on the roadside – the different species, their style and stance, their personalities. Not truly seeing them, we are missing out. As with human neighbors we wave to from our cars, we need to engage with them.

In the next few days, try it. Try it right now. Close your eyes if you wish and picture engaging with a tree. Reach out with your hand. Touch your face to its skin. Explore it –nooks and crannies, smooth or feathery. Breathe in its unique fragrance. Now lean into the tree. Feel its solidness. Strength. Sense into the roots deep beneath you. Look up, your back against the tree. Or if a pocket of peace might feed you, lie down under the canopy. Note the shape of your tree. Its leaves. The interplay of air and light.

Why would we not make time for this every day? We don’t need a blood pressure cuff to feel the impact of being in the company of this tree. No wonder that in Japan “forest bathing” – simply being around trees – was incorporated into a national public health program over thirty years ago. In an article tagged “Trees Please,” journalist Ephrat Livni writes that being in the presence of trees “is proven to lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduce stress hormone production,

⁵ Mary Oliver, “When I Am Among Trees,” *Thirst*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

⁶ Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. Éditions Gallimard, 2006, 169.

boost the immune system, and improve overall feelings of wellbeing.⁷

It's no wonder that many cultures have revered the tree. No wonder than Henry David Thoreau and his Transcendentalist peers found spiritual sustenance in their company. It's more than beauty, isn't it? More than gladness. More than wonder. Our reverence has a pleasing *humility* as well – not a trait our culture promotes. No, we're meant to individuate. Find our stuff and proclaim it. Be the man. Be the woman who roars. Listen to the humility of Mary Oliver:

I am so distant [she writes] from the hope of myself,¹
 [from the person I want to be]
 in which I have goodness, and discernment,²
 and never hurry through the world
³ but walk slowly, and bow often.⁸

Not measuring up to our hope of our ourselves, the person we mean to be, humbles us. Looking up into a tree humbles us, too. We might think, how small I am. My life will play out and disappear from this earth while you, great tree, you've been here a hundred years and may well be here another hundred.

Hold me, old tree. Let me put down my troubles and rest here a while in your strong presence. Will you bear my burdens a moment, please? Ah, relief. Comfort. Thank you, old tree. I am small. Grateful. Blessed.

May we reverence our trees and bask in their glory – humbled by their stature, awed by their life span and gladdened by their beauty.

So may it be.

⁷ Ephrat Livni, "The Japanese practice of 'forest bathing' is scientifically proven to effect your health," Trees Please, Quartz Media 12 October 2016, <https://qz.com/804022/health-benefits-japanese-forest-bathing/>

⁸ Oliver, *ibid.*