

The Value of a Tree

A sermon by Douglas Justice

November 23, 2014

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My mother grew up in a small town on the Plumas River in northern California. I remember before I can remember, her introducing my brothers and me to the beloved steep mountain slopes and exotic, fragrant conifers of her childhood. Her ancestors crossed the United States on the Oregon Trail in the 1850s—in covered wagons, no less. Her grandfather and his brothers homesteaded on a mountain in California where they operated a small timber company, and this is where my grandfather was born—on Peckinpah Mountain in the middle of a forest.

My dad, who is still very much interested in trees, as some of you may know, grew up on Salt Spring Island, where the family made a living farming. He was there because in 1884, my great grandparents, the Beddis family, homesteaded on a few acres they dubbed “The Wilderness.” Times were tough for farmers, even before the Great Depression, and my great grandfather and his brother supplemented the family income as carpenters, building churches both on Salt Spring and

close by on Vancouver Island. They used the old growth Douglas fir and red cedar timber that was growing all around them. As a teenager, my father tried his hand at logging these great trees on Vancouver Island. He remembers having to cut notches above the wide buttressed trunks of giant red cedars for the springboards on which they had to stand to fell the trees. My dad and his brothers also harvested and sold cascara bark from the local forest. There was a large apple orchard at the Wilderness and later, on other hardscrabble farms and orchards on Vancouver Island. Somewhat miraculously, a sizeable remnant of the original apple orchard at the end of Beddis Road survives to this day.

I grew up thinking about trees. Sugar pine, Laxton's Progress, incense cedar, Jonathan, arbutus, King of Tomkins County, Shasta fir, Rhode Island Greening, Garry oak and redwood. When I recite the names, I hear my parents' and my grandparents' voices. I understood these words. I understood that these trees were important. At the age of ten, I was astonished to learn that none of my playmates knew the names of even the most common plants. Trees are things all people can recognize, but for most urban and suburbanites, they are background objects, barely animate. For me, trees have always been alive and changing, imbued with the stories of my family. For my parents, and especially for people on the land, trees were the touchstones of life, commodities of sometimes brutal

necessity, but always things of enormous value and often, objects of reverence and beauty.

What is the value of a tree to a culture? There are many examples from around the world, yet in this culture, the stories are seldom heard. Those of us who have had the good fortune to learn something of our local First Nations will know that the red cedar is known as the tree of life. In her book *Cedar*, the great storyteller Hilary Stewart explains why, as she describes a particular day in the life of a family:

“In a small clearing in the forest, a young woman is in labour. Two women companions urge her to pull hard on the cedar bark rope tied to a nearby tree. The baby, born onto a newly made cedar bark mat, cries its arrival into the Northwest Coast world. Its cradle of firmly woven cedar root, with a mattress and covering of soft-shredded cedar bark, is ready.

The young woman’s husband and his uncle are on the sea in a canoe carved from a single red cedar log and are using paddles made from knot-free yellow cedar. When they reach the fishing ground that belongs to their family, the men set out a net of cedar bark twine weighted along one edge by stones lashed to it with strong, flexible cedar withes. Cedar wood floats support the net’s upper edge.

Wearing a cedar bark hat, cape and skirt to protect her from the rain and the cold, the baby's grandmother digs into the pebbly sand of the beach at low tide to collect clams. She loads them into a basket of cedar withe and root, adjusts the broad cedar tumpline across her forehead and returns home along the beach.

The embers in the centre of the big cedar plank house leap into flame as the clam gatherer's niece adds more wood. Smoke billows past the cedar rack above, where small split fish are hung to cure. It curls its way past the great cedar beams and rises out through the opening between the long cedar roof planks. The young girl takes red-hot rocks from the fire with long tongs, dips them into a small cedar box of water to rinse off the ashes, then places the rocks into a cedar wood cooking box to boil water for the clams her aunt has gathered.

Outside the house stands a tall, carved cedar memorial pole, bearing the prestigious crests of her family lineage. It has been raised with long, strong cedar withe ropes and validated with great ceremony. The house chief and noblemen had taken out their ceremonial regalia from large storage chests of cedar wood, dancers had worn cedar wood masks adorned with cascades of soft-shredded cedar bark, and performed in front of screens made of cedar planks. Guests had been served quantities of food from huge cedar wood bowls and dishes, wiping their hands clean on soft-shredded cedar bark.

A young slave woman coils two fresh diapers from soft-shredded cedar bark and goes to tend a crying baby, while the child's father prepares long, slender cedar withes to lash a stone hammer head to its shaft. When the hammer is finished, he uses it to pound wedges into a cedar log to split off a plank for a tackle box to fit in the bow of his canoe. He will use the other withes he prepared to sew the corner of the box once he bends the plank into shape. In a year or more he will make a cedar wood cradle in a similar fashion for his sister's new baby, when it grows too big for its woven cedar root cradle. He smiles at the reassuring cries of the newborn infant resounding through the forest."

As is so clearly described by Hilary Stewart's beautiful passage, these coastal people understood that they affected nature as much as they were affected by it. Culturally, ours is a more complicated ecology.

Complicated because with almost everything we do, our effect on nature is more far reaching, whether we know it or not.

Consider, for example, pencils. In grade school we were supplied with them, and most people over 40 years of age who went to school here will remember their smell. Before Wal-Mart, most pencils in North America were made from incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*), a tall, aromatic evergreen native to California and Oregon. The wood has the pong of

oregano and thyme with a hint of nutmeg and citrus, but the aroma of the living tree is even more interesting. In the fresh foliage I can smell both overripe and under-ripe banana, candied fruit, parsley and shoe polish. This was one of the trees my mother introduced me to. Hard to forget. Nowadays, kids are chewing on cheaper pencils from China that don't smell. What kind of trees do they use for pencils? I doubt that even the manufacturers could tell me.

Notwithstanding that modern societies easily succumb to the myth of lowest cost— which unfortunately translates in probably all cases into environmental degradation on some scale—think about the wholesale destruction of tropical forests to feed our need for cheaper paper and pencils, palm oil and patio furniture. It seems to me that for most cultures, there is at least some vestige of reverence for trees. John Muir, the activist, author and prophet-naturalist said “The wrongs done to trees, wrongs of every sort, are done in the darkness of ignorance and unbelief, for when the light comes, the heart of the people is always right.” He reminded us that “Most people are on the world, not in it — have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them — undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate.”

Muir spoke mostly of wilderness, but he also said “Everybody needs beauty... places to play in and pray in where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul alike.” In this he was advocating a point of view that had been increasingly understood by the psychiatric community of that time: that a simple landscape with trees can provide a psychological break from the stresses of everyday life (although it would not have been expressed in those terms). The Riverview Arboretum in Coquitlam, on the grounds of the now mostly disassembled Riverview Psychiatric Hospital, is what might be termed a gracious, healing landscape. What effect that institution had on patients I cannot say, but I know that to walk among the giant oaks, elms and lindens, many planted more than one hundred years ago, is both calming and exhilarating.

The novelist and poet Hermann Hesse wrote:

“For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone. They are like lonely persons. Not like hermits who have stolen away out of some weakness, but like great, solitary men, like Beethoven and Nietzsche. In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up

their own form, to represent themselves. Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured."

I had to teach a class on the morning of September 11th 2001. It was a plant identification course, and the first class of the term. I knew none of the students, and most were still unaware of what had happened earlier that day on the other side of the continent. I struggled to find words not only to express my own horror at the terrifying event, but to find some kind of relevance for a subject that might seem to some a triviality in the face of such an atrocity. I took a deep breath and explained that knowing about trees connects us with the natural world, the defenseless and beautiful, as opposed to the world of ideology, hubris and hatred. I wanted them to know that a tree is the embodiment of life, and that as future landscape designers, they would have the power to change people's lives with gardens and trees. And that the power to heal is the most effective antidote to barbarity and terror.

We step into the realm of spirituality when we strive to know trees. An ancient tree, like a mountain or the ocean, reminds us of our mortality, and even the most un-spiritual among us feels the pull of the universe in the presence of vastness. Standing next to the nearly three thousand year-old Lulin sacred red cypress on a misty mountainside in Taiwan, I held out my hand to touch its mass. I felt no energy coursing through my fingertips, no electrical or metaphysical connection. I felt nothing, except a powerful sense of my own insignificance, and the overwhelming wonder of its astonishing biology and history. But most people are untouched by the transcendence of old trees because they have never had an opportunity to see, or especially, to touch them. Every year I plead with students, if they live in Vancouver, they owe it to themselves to travel to California to see the coast and Sierra redwoods—the tallest trees on earth and the most massive. They are two of the natural wonders of the world.

The intrinsic spirituality of trees is easily demonstrated through even young trees. The Japanese, who have, more than most cultures, celebrated nature's subtlety, and been able to distill beauty to its fundamental elements, took the cherry tree as a metaphor of life. In the flowers of the cherry we see not just beauty but the intrinsic poetry of birth, life and death. The first flowering cherries in Vancouver were planted in the 1930s in Stanley Park at the Cenotaph, gifts of the mayors

of Kobe and Yokohama, to commemorate Japanese Canadians who fought in WW1. In 1958, three hundred more cherry trees were donated by the Japanese consul, who described the gift as “an eternal memory of good friendship between our two nations.” Some of Vancouver's cherries are very rare. The original tree at the Cenotaph is known as 'Ojochin', which means lantern, in reference to its lantern-like, unopened flower buds. Though it is bent, it is healthy and still growing. It is an apt symbol in that a lantern is a beacon for those who have been lost. My father planted two common flowering cherries at home. One, 'Akebono', the daybreak cherry, he planted on the east side of the house. We all loved the way the early morning sun shone through the flowers, bathing us in soft pink light. The other cherry, 'Shirotae', opened its opulent, pure white, almond-scented flowers two weeks after. That was planted in the front yard where I could look down from my bedroom window, across its strangely flat, wide-spreading canopy. I was convinced that he had planted it so that the flowering would coincide with my birthday, which it always did.

In 2005, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival was born. Like similar festivals in other jurisdictions (Washington, DC; Tokyo; Macon, Georgia; Toronto), our festival unites citizens in happy celebration of a spectacular seasonal phenomenon. The foundation of the festival is the idea that

through the cherry blossom, people of all ages and backgrounds can celebrate a public resource. The festival is wildly successful, and it works merely because cherry blossoms are beautiful.

It must be obvious by now that I love to talk about trees. Let me finish by speaking about one of my favourite trees. The katsura (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) is a species native to China and to Japan, where it was first described by westerners. The leaves of katsuras are pleasingly rounded with regular, blunted marginal teeth and they are exceptionally waxy. They shed rain in rivers of beads but in the sun the dull waxiness seems to enhance the absorption and transmission of light throughout the canopy, rather than reflecting it away, so that standing underneath, the leaves seem to generate their own light. In autumn, the leaves ignite in fiery tones of yellow, coral pink, red and black-purple, often one branch at a time. If that wasn't enough to recommend it, the dying leaves smell of candy floss or ripe strawberries. For me, the scent is transporting. I once worked in a garden in southern England where it was against the rules to work if it was raining. I'm not kidding. Of course, in England, rain is mostly a fleeting phenomenon, not like it is here. Gardeners don't have rain gear, so the expectation is to take shelter in a shower. I was in the middle of raking leaves along a line of katsuras when it started to rain, so I propped myself against a Lawson cypress trunk, protected by its low,

dense canopy. This is where I slept, and where I dreamed of crème brûlée and being at home, because I grew up with a katsura tree in my back yard. I wasn't there long, but I can't look at a katsura without that memory rushing back, and I can't eat crème brûlée without feeling like a part of me is still sleeping, Rip Van Winkle-like under that tree, expecting to wake at any moment from this delicious dream.

What do trees give us? They give us a connection to the natural world, to beauty and to the poetry of life. They heal us, give us shade, food, shelter and tools. Trees bring us oxygen, and colour, fragrance and joy. Trees die and make the soil rich. They change the weather, bring us birds and insects, and other life. Trees inspire us, give us reason to care and make us humble. For me, trees tell me where I've been, and who I am.

Reading:

“The greatest delight...which the woods minister...They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me...”

Ralph Waldo Emerson